

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Enhancing Church Health through Sermon Preparation

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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The transformative power of the Word of God is vital to the health of the church. Today, many churches in the Original East Texas Baptist Association see a considerable decline in church membership and the development of disciples due to man-centered preaching. The goal of this project is to align and realign pastors with expository preaching. The Supremacy of God, the scriptural foundation of preaching, evaluating preaching, and the original writer's intent are essential for God-centered preaching. The research methods of this project challenge preachers to pay close attention to the biblical text and expose truths that promote personal growth and enhance church health. This project will influence others in this field by reviewing and refining some traditional sermon preparation methods and exploring new approaches to sermon preparation. Professions of faith in Jesus Christ and retention of disciples are the measurable aspects as they relate to expository preaching.

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Abbreviations

OETBA Original East Texas Baptist Association

Chapter One: Introduction

The result of preaching should be moving people away from a people-centered agenda and onto God's plan. The Bible is the story of God's love for lost sinners. God has entrusted preachers to retell the story of redemption to fallen humanity. The church is the bride of Christ, and preachers must inform her of her duties and responsibilities to Christ so that she may be presented in white or blameless before Him (Eph. 5:25-26). Some people in society have attempted to define the truth by reading their lives to the scriptures and insisting that the scriptures validate their self-imposed truths. The proper response is dying to oneself and allowing the scriptures to transform the person.

Many have suffered for proclaiming the name that is above every name, but the Gospel has thrived. Today's church climate is somewhat different from the time of our forefathers. Church history reveals the birth of revivals and councils that convened to discuss various disagreements concerning biblical doctrines that seemed to divide the church. Generation by generation, humanity has become increasingly wicked, which has produced this post-modern mindset of comfortable Christianity that exists to fill parishioners' pockets through the so-called prosperity gospel while their souls starve to death. John MacArthur warns against allowing culture to influence the church because churches should look to the scriptures and change the culture. Issues such as social justice and economic status should not dictate preaching, but preaching should change the culture.¹

Although society at large can be positively affected by the church as "salt and light" of the social conscience, social redemption is not the plan of God; social replacement or possessing

¹ John MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 4.

a social view from the scriptures is the ultimate plan of God. The mandate of the commission is to make disciples, not to change or make society better. Society is made better by the Holy Spirit's transforming power and by the function and work of the church in the world. The goal of making disciples cannot otherwise be achieved without the Holy Spirit's ministry and the articulation coupled with the explanation of the word of God. Christian immaturity plagues many black congregations because even though many have been converted, they have not yet been disciplined because often times raised sermonic voice tones and spiritual entertainment often do not produce disciples. Although culturally, most black people in America have been exposed to the church arena much of their lives, culturally, the degree of their spiritual maturity as a community has been greatly retarded because of the lack of sound teaching.

The Original East Texas Baptist Association (O.E.T.B.A.) of churches and other churches in Tyler, Texas, have been inundated with the mode of preaching that champions topical presentations that fail to expose the heart of the text.² With the pressure of declining memberships, many pastors in this area have resorted to topical feel-good sermons aimed at increasing memberships. Joel Breidenbaugh writes, "When biblical authority declines, preaching's decline must naturally follow. The only way for preaching to recover the necessary ingredients of doctrine and exposition completely is to maintain a high view of the scriptures."³ The Sovereignty of God diminishes in messages that foster a low view of God; as a result, the preaching fails to point the hearer to God.

² Conversation with area pastor, December 1, 2019 (All conversations and interviews are confidential.).

³ Joel Breidenbaugh, *Preaching for Body Building: Integrating Doctrine and Expository Preaching for the 21st Century* (USA: Renovate Publishing Group, 2016), 144, 147.

Ministry Context

For many churches in the O.E.T.B.A, Sunday morning sermons are surface level for the most part. Sinners live in the real world, and only the truth of God's Word from the lips of His preacher will cause them to see the need of a Savior. Congregations gather and worship together each Sunday, but if the worship service is people-centered and focused on what they can do for themselves, the congregation will never truly experience the life-changing power of God.⁴

The norm in the O.E.T.B.A is to read passages but fail to reveal the original writer's intent for the passage. People are seeking liberation in various areas of their lives. In attempting to accomplish this goal and offer that liberation, preachers tend to talk more about individuals doing better or getting ahead in life. Still, parishioners neglect to make God the champion of deliverance. With this mindset, a person sets out to live life based on his ability and not God's promises and indwelling power. When things do not happen the way the individual intended, discouragement can set in, and the individual may begin to doubt God, which could lead to church decline. Many pastors and preachers tend to follow a personality other than Christ because following Christ would mean to desire truth that only study and conviction of the Holy Spirit can reveal. For many, the focus is on sound and not substance. The need for congregations to respond with affirmations of "Amen" in many church settings has contributed to enlarged egos.⁵ Biblical preaching is defined by its substance and not by its shape, its content and not its contours, its facts, not its forms.⁶ James Cone writes, "The cross is a paradoxical religious

⁴ Interview with visiting pastor, July 14, 2019.

⁵ Comments from select area pastor, October 30, 2019.

⁶ Breidenbaugh, *Preaching for Body Building*, 45.

symbol because it inverts the world's value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first shall be last.”⁷

Pleasant Grove Baptist Church of Tyler, Texas, where the author has served as pastor for seventeen years, was historically a group of emotionally-driven worshipers rather than scripturally based worshipers. This tenure began by embracing the emotional trend of charismatic worship as an indication of good preaching. Throughout the pastorate, the author has noticed a distinct change in the church's response to evangelism and discipleship. The history of Pleasant Grove includes a list of preachers who contributed much to the church's early growth. There was much emotionalism during this time. Some emotionalism in the early to mid-1900s was due to slavery and the denial of African Americans' constitutional rights. The idea of teaching with clarity was often drowned out by the preacher's sermon sound of liberation to an oppressed community. The author does not deny the impact of oppression on the church but sets out to highlight the biblical text applied by the Spirit of God as the only real means to liberation. Various pastors in the area have been guilty of tiptoeing around the heart of the scriptural text to possibly make people feel good rather than challenge them to grow.

In the O.E.T.B.A, the pursuit of emotionalism is a norm in various pulpits. After visiting various worship services in the area, pastors left the services with a void that only a faithful exposition of the text can fill. For a select few, these experiences have become a challenge to do better research and a more in-depth study of the text and to learn more about the expository

⁷ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Oasis Book, 2011), 292.

preaching method.⁸ Wayne McDill encourages the researcher to dig deep into the truths of the text exposing the intent of the original writer.⁹

Additionally, some preachers concentrate on outer appearance, the need to dress like a preacher. Too much attention to one's attire should never replace preparing to share the Gospel in its rarest form. It is truth and not the latest trends that causes congregants to grow and function in the church and world in a way that is considered a biblical response to life. According to Ephesians chapter six, the pastor's real strength comes when he is clothed with the whole armor of God.

Statement of Problem

Churches are declining in record numbers in this post-modern age. Based on Barna's most recent data, in almost four of 10 cities (38%), Americans are active churchgoers, slightly more (43%) are unchurched, and around one-third (34%) are de-churched. However, there are significant variations among American cities.¹⁰ The great exodus from the church may be due to "watered-down" sermons. The problem is that shallow sermon preparation and the lack of attention to the biblical text produce sermons that could lead to a decline in overall church health. Many sermons have become people-centered and less God-centered; as a result, preaching in many circles has become more about fame and self-promotion. Andy Stanley suggests that preachers should create environments that enhance the message before the people

⁸ Interview of minister's conference, January 10, 2020.

⁹ Wayne McDill, *12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015)

¹⁰ "Church Attendance Trends around the Country," *Barna: Cities*, (May 2017): 43. Accessed January 18, 2020, <http://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

hear the sermon.¹¹ This viewpoint can lead to worship only enjoyable if the proverbial bells and whistles of attractive props are present.

Perhaps an understanding of the history of the black community needs to be incorporated into why the appetite for a tingling message instead of a technical message is so prevalent and popular in the black culture. The issues of oppression and the denial of reading opportunities have generated a substitute for learning doctrine with sincere and passionate worship absent of scholarship. Beginning in the 19th Century and continuing, black people have become more educated. Therefore, many are interested in information and have an intense curiosity and desire for biblical teaching, but typically they are more comfortable and more emotionally attached to their traditions. Culturally, the black church in America can be described as the church with more emotionally driven services. In contrast, the majority of white culture churches can be described as technology-driven.

Topical preaching or preaching that looks for scripture to support a preconceived idea, which is addressed in greater detail later, has its place only if God and His attributes are the topics. One of the major sins of a dying church is the neglect of theological teaching. If a church member does not understand the basics of scripture, he is often hampered in his witnessing. Those who do not comprehend the scriptures can have trouble remaining obedient. Biblical illiteracy runs rampant in floundering churches. Since the people of the church do not understand the foundation of their faith, they stand on shaky ground and falter during the time of trouble.¹² Preaching that is consumed with humanity as the topic invites people to look to themselves for

¹¹ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*. (Nashville: Zondervan, 2015), 9, <https://app.wordsearchbible.com>.

¹² Thom Rainer, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Company, 2008), 19.

what only God can do. In this context, man is exalted above God and has become so spiritual that he can speak his realities into existence. When sinners come to Christ or the church, they are looking for something real; truth and not lies; God and not us. This watered-down approach has become the norm for many churches in O.E.T.B.A, which gives evidence of poor sermon preparation and a lack of passion for preaching the biblical text.¹³

The exaltation of humankind is the groundwork for a low view of God. Humans, at best, can invent, whereas God creates. The message which the Christian preacher proclaims is a given message. He does not have to create it. God revealed it before spinning worlds were spoken into existence. Every basic idea which the Christian preacher needs, God has provided for Him. To be sure, he must interpret, apply, and illustrate, but does not have to create.¹⁴ God has not called preachers to the business of inventions; instead, God has called preachers to faithfully herald the scriptures through lips that are guided by the Holy Spirit, and a confession of faith in the finished salvific work of Christ. In the Apostle Paul's mind preaching did not consist of someone discussing religious inventions (1 Cor. 2:2). Instead, God himself spoke through the preacher's personality and message to confront men and women and bring them to himself.¹⁵ The prophets who received the authentic original message through "Direct Revelation" only needed to declare their message. The contemporary pastor-teacher today must proclaim the original message as it relates to this generation. Being so far removed from biblical languages and early English common terminologies, today the message requires clear explanations and applications to make the message relevant.

¹³ Interview with local pastor, January 20, 2020.

¹⁴ John Albert Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 2012), 18, <https://app.wordsearchbible.com>.

¹⁵ Haddon W. Roberson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.

Preaching that does not have God as the center encourages society to look to itself as the source of salvation. The Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” Without a clear view of the scriptures, this wayward humanity will never see God, as Isaiah says, “high and lifted up.” Church services are comprised of those who have accepted Jesus and those who are lost. Those who know Jesus need clear biblical exposition for instruction and encouragement while living in a fallen society. Those who are lost need a clear biblical explanation so that they may come to know the God of the scriptures in a personal way.

Discipleship is illustrated in the calling of the first disciples in Luke chapter five. The men had tirelessly worked all night but had not caught any fish. Jesus gets into Simon’s boat and asks him to thrust out a little from the land, and he sat down and taught the crowd from Simon’s boat. Jesus did not choose to teach from the boat of an individual who had a successful day. Jesus used the boat of a failure to instruct the crowd. It is only by the truth of God that losers and failures become disciples and followers of the Lord Jesus. After Jesus finishes instructing the people, He instructs Simon Peter to launch out into the deep to acquire a great catch of fish, which is only supposed to happen at night and in shallow water. They ensnared such a great multitude of fish that their nets began to break, and their boat started to sink. Simon Peter sees the great multitude of fish and immediately voices his unworthiness. It is at this point that Jesus clarifies the call of evangelism and discipleship to Simon. Simon Peter would cast the net of the Gospel and catch men as he followed Christ.

Statement of Purpose

The church’s health depends on sound biblical teaching and preaching as the product of careful sermon preparation aided by the Holy Spirit. This project aimed to provide data

concerning the norms of preaching in the O.E.T.B.A. of churches. Then, this project trained preachers in exegetical sermon preparation that produced God-centered messages. By God-centered preaching, the writer intends that God must be at the center of the interpretive process of the scriptures. This project impacted participants churches by improving church health through expository preaching. This project introduced practical approaches that encouraged depth in understanding the biblical text and sharing that message in a way that encourages a Spirit-directed examination of oneself and spiritual growth. Pastors implemented the exegetical process and logged the results in a sermon notebook. This project clarified the foundation of preaching by encouraging preachers to become exegetical in the interpretation of the original writer's intent and build a bridge from the message to the original audience to the listener today. The bridge connected the historical culture of the biblical text to the culture of today. Furthermore, this project argued that the scriptures are God's very Words, and attention to the details of the text is a must if the congregation will have a biblical response. This project brought attention to the weakness of watered-down preaching on sermon preparation and its impact on disciples who, when walking in obedience to Christ, make healthy churches.

Thesis Statement

This project will show how properly preparing the sermon, exegeting the original writer's intent, preaching for a biblical response, and focusing on the supremacy of God will create better church health and disciples who are obedient to Christ (Matt 28:20). This project argues that the decline in church health is ultimately due to sin, but indirectly due to a congregation's low view of God often as a result of watered-down preaching. This project explored the short-term and some long-term effects of expository preaching in order to strengthen the local church through sound preaching, research, and the development of exegetical skills. Furthermore, this project

utilized worksheets and sermon aids to direct the preacher toward Christ-centered preaching and away from preaching that is man-centered.

Definitions

Church Health

The Word of God preached unapologetically is the most significant determining factor of church health. Church health is the state of the church as a result of the declaration of biblical truths. Paul tells Timothy in his second letter, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. 2 Timothy 2:3 declares, “Instead, to suit their desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. “Churches that have a Word deficiency will naturally have a health deficiency. Church health is measured by making disciples rather than numerical attendance. A disciple is one whose life, head, heart, and hands, is transformed to be more like Christ.

Topical Preaching

Topical preaching is preaching that searches the scriptures for support of a preconceived topic rather than allowing the Scripture to reveal the topic. To preach topically, the preacher must come to the text with his mind already made up about what it says.

Expository Preaching

Expository preaching is exposing or unpacking the biblical text. The exegetical approach explores the writings of God and looks beyond the current state of man in search of the intent of God through the lens of his redemptive plan. Uncovering the biblical text is a method that recognizes the authority of Scripture and is faithful to God’s message. It is a sad fact that when a

preacher rejects the sound authority of God's Word and instead allows culture to be the final authority, he succumbs to a spiritual malaise that manifests itself in subversive liberalism.¹⁶ Liberalism elevates human reason and current culture over the authority of the Word of God. This theory of acceptance corrupts the mindset in that it produces an arrogance that is prideful and not humble to accept correction. This idea of toleration opens the door of commercialism. That is, trying to make the Gospel attractive to contemporary culture to gain more customers, where the main presentation of the Gospel is so convoluted with secular issues that the listener misses out on the truth. A great gulf exists between the text and the audience. This gap in cultures makes it necessary to build the proper bridge founded on having the clarity of the original author's intent. To grasp God's Word, we must understand the meaning of the text in context and apply that meaning to life. Context takes two primary forms: literary context and historical-cultural context.¹⁷ The most important principle of biblical interpretation is that context determines the meaning.

Discipleship

A disciple of the Lord Jesus is one who practices or lives out the teachings of the scriptures. Jesus said in John 8:31-32, "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Discipleship is grounded in the truth of the Word of God. One cannot be a follower of Christ while living a life dictated by the world's systems and ways. This manner of life causes the world to see Christianity as cheap-grace. "Cheap grace" is preaching forgiveness without

¹⁶ Stephen F. Olford and David L. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 40.

¹⁷ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 116.

repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, and grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ. Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field, for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ's sovereignty, for the sake of which one tears out an eye if it causes one to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ, which induces a disciple to leave his nets and follow him. Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again—the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock.¹⁸ Paul talks about walking in the Spirit in Galatians chapter five, where he reveals the characteristics of the flesh in verses 19-20. To walk in the flesh encompasses a life that gives its allegiance to the pleasures of this age. The feelings and emotions of the flesh become the guiding light of the soul, leading to destruction. Discovering God's truths is essential to developing a relationship with God and maturing as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. In Galatians 5:22, Paul lists the attributes of one that walks in the Spirit or after Christ. This list includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul catalogs the traits of those who are followers of the Lord Jesus. He informs his readers that those who belong to Him have been crucified with Him. Salvation is truly free, but one must remember that discipleship costs. Followers of the Lord Jesus should learn the discipline of denying oneself and hating this world's ways which is in opposition to Christ and instead cling to the Master without apology. Discipleship involves the process of sanctification, which takes time but produces mature disciples.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Costly Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 44-45.

The Supremacy of God

The supremacy of God in preaching will determine the level of understanding conveyed through the preaching moment. Sovereignty calls for allegiance to God, and what He is saying through the writer is paramount to any other influence that may arise or already exists. Simply put, it is God's divine prerogative to be right in His actions and intentions toward humankind. In other words, God's sovereignty is never a matter of debate when His Word is the subject matter. For the Scripture to have preaching value and for the preacher's text to become God's message, faithful interpretation is essential. To understand and apply the text by its real meaning is one of the preachers' most sacred duties. Preachers stand before the people for the very purpose of teaching and advising them out of the Word of God.¹⁹ Concerning God, Isaiah 46:10 declares, "declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose."

Limitations

This study sought to evaluate the norms of poor sermon preparation and its effect on church health. This study also measured retention of churchgoers and how a steady diet of biblical truth affects church health. Every church did not respond the same way, and the results varied from church to church. Two-thirds of the churches in the Original East Texas Baptist Association primarily have congregants that are sixty-five years old or older. The proposal challenged those congregations to develop a multigenerational body of believers. Further, this project revealed expository preaching as the pathway to church health.

¹⁹ Broadus, *A Treatise*, 22.

Additionally, this study considered the effects that living in a fallen society has on sermon preparation. By depravity, the author means the inherent curse of sin and death as a result of the Fall in Genesis, chapter three. The writer's research unmasked how God's redemptive plan, through the Lord Jesus Christ, rescued from the eternal penalty of sin those who are predestined or belong to Him. Redemption is through Jesus Christ only, which would explain the hatred that Satan has for the redeemed. Revelation, chapter twelve, explains why Satan's hatred for the church is so aggressive. Verses seven through ten unveil information concerning the war in heaven between Micheal, the warring angel, and Satan. Satan is defeated and cast down to earth from heaven. The narrative reveals a woman who represents Israel. The child in the text is Christ, who is born of a virgin. Satan planned to kill Christ but could not, and for this reason, Satan hates all who belong to Christ.

The process of sermon preparation is hindered at times by the evil that Paul refers to as "spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). Procrastination, selfish pride, arrogance, people-pleasing, and laziness are all tools that Satan uses to hinder proper sermon preparation. According to Genesis 1:27 and resulting from his hatred for God, Satan desires nothing more than that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is stomped out by the evil of this perverse age. The scriptures declare that humanity is born with the propensity to sin (Ps. 51:5), and all sin is in direct opposition to God. Satan uses the vague and shallow words of those who claim to be God's representatives to disrupt and attempt to turn people against God. The problem of unprepared and dysfunctional messengers can more accurately be attributed to their sinful nature of pride and self-exaltation, along with a willingness to compromise and appease the people instead of pleasing God.

Delimitations

This project targeted African American pastors of the Original East Texas Association, but the results are applicable across ethnic and denominational lines. This study covers various preaching methods, but expository preaching is the targeted approach to enhance church health. All pastors in the O.E.T.B.A did not consent to participate in this project. This study taught preachers a method of building a bridge from the text to the modern-day hearer. This study did not attempt to build a bridge from the hearer to the biblical text.

Literary context relates to the particular form a passage takes, the literary genre, and to the words, sentences, and paragraphs that surround the selected passage.²⁰ It is dangerous to ignore the surrounding context of a passage, and this danger aids the argument that preachers should avoid topical preaching. The best commentary on Scripture is the Scriptures; failure to consider the context results in the influencing of extra-biblical material. Flawed interpretation distracts from God's supremacy in the minds and hearts of the listeners (2 Peter 1:21).

Generally speaking, the historical-cultural context involves the biblical writer, the biblical audience, the biblical language, and any historical-cultural elements touched on by the passage itself. The historical-cultural context relates to just about anything outside the text that will help the preacher understand the text itself.²¹ Because God chose to work through human authors as the immediate instrument of His inspired Word (2 Tim. 3:15-16), information and understanding

²⁰ Duvall and Hays, *Grasping*, 150.

²¹ Ibid, 118.

of the human authors will shed light on the culture in which God revealed His Word through them.

One of the significant reasons the Bible is difficult to understand is that it is an ancient book. Moses wrote the first five Old Testament books around 1400 B.C. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, was written by the Apostle John around A.D. 90. So some of the books were written about 3400 years ago, and the latest one written about 1900 years ago. The chronological gap in writings suggests that in hermeneutics, scholars must seek to bridge several gaps posed by having such an ancient book.²² Navigating the gaps and building the proper bridges from the ancient text to modern-day society must have biblical authority as the foundation.

Understanding the author's original meaning and the objective of his message to the biblical audience is essential. The background and condition that generated the need for the message are paramount in making the text relevant and appropriate to all people of every generation. To meet a specific human need the preacher should study and conduct in-depth research to ensure that the message accurately displays the original writer's intent. The people only need the basic understanding of the issue or problem that God was correcting in those original communities. The cause is always sin; therefore, there is no need to diagnose. The consequences or impact of sin on their personal lives (blessing or curses) are always the contrasting reactions to God's Word as it was upon the original audience. As in Acts 6 the problem with the daily distribution of resources perceived as partiality caused a problem. From this text, preachers could incorrectly preach against racism or discrimination. In the food pantry of today's church there is no justification for bias because there is but one Lord, one faith and

²² Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: Victor Publishers, 1991), 16-17.

one baptism. The primary point is to correctly preach from this text that church leaders should not be taxed with performing a menial task. Instead, they should focus on preaching and teaching.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The Supremacy and Sovereignty of God

For the Word of God to be active and to improve church health, the supremacy of God must be the basis for the interpretation of scripture in sermon preparation. C. Ash alludes to this point and argues for sermons to reveal the God-breathed intentions of the text (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Pragmatism and consumerism are enemies of biblical theology and produce a high view of humans that results in having a low view of God.²³ God is sovereign, merciful, and just. God has the right to do what He wills with whom He chooses at any time that He deems necessary. Preaching that fails to accurately reveal God's supremacy produces a low view of God in the church and thereby causes a decline in church health. The results of intellectualism are the hinge for which pragmatism hangs; people-centered preaching measures effectiveness by results that the physical eye can only see. Jared Wilson tackles what he calls the seeker-friendly approach and argues for a Christo-centric argument of the text. He says it's my contention that when the church is run as a provider of spiritual goods and services, and slowly stops asking, first, "What glorifies God?" and begins asking more and more, "What do our customers want?" what the customer wants becomes more central in the life of the church. The functional ideologies of pragmatism and consumerism erode our theology, which becomes more flexible and less faithful.

²⁴ If the mindset during sermon preparation feeds on the needs of the congregation as opposed to the supremacy of God, the guiding light of the sermon is not God's Word. Roy Zuck argues that

²³ Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 107-108.

²⁴ Jared Wilson, *The Prodigal Church: A General Manifesto Against the Status Quo*. (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2015), 73.

interpretation is key to expository preaching. He states that reverence for and interest in God and His Word is essential to interpreting the Bible accurately.²⁵ Any interpretation that does not make God the priority is erroneous. The interpretation method directly reflects the preacher's overall approach to the Bible. When it comes to biblical interpretation, intuition and feelings will rule the sermon if there is no skirmish with God's supremacy in the text. Further, people-centered presentations of the gospel put God on trial and attempt to make Him prove himself right by answering in a favorable way to humanity's immediate circumstances.

Society-Driven Sermons

The peer pressure of society urges the preacher to address current issues to bring a sense of immediate comfortability. The prophet Jeremiah faced this society-driven concept in Jeremiah, chapter 28, where Hananiah prophesied that God would bring back the vessels of the Lord's house and the people within two years. God sends Jeremiah to confront Hananiah and tells him that because he has made the people trust in a lie that He would remove him from the face of the earth. In Jeremiah, 29:11, God, through Jeremiah, says that He knows his intentions for the displaced Israelites. God, through Jeremiah, tells the people that they would be in Babylon for seventy years but that their Babylonian experience was not the end. Jeremiah informs the Israelites or Judah to be more specific that God planned to prosper them and not harm them. God's thoughts and the scriptures are the same; to remove one would be removing them both. The supremacy of God demands that God's thoughts concerning humanity rule the sermon, not humanity's thoughts toward God and the world.

²⁵ Zuck, *Basic Bible*, 23.

Thom Rainer reveals that preaching is the main reason the unchurched returned to the church. According to Rainer, the evidence is clear. The church and its teachings are a major reason people return to church. They are a major reason people never leave the church. And those who are not taught the depths and riches of God's Word are the most likely to enter the ranks of the "de-churched." The younger adults of today want deep biblical teachings. They want to hear the whole counsel of God. They want to hear truth, even if it makes them uneasy and uncomfortable.²⁶ The attention span for many of those who attend church is concise, so the preacher must reveal God as supreme to ensure the hearer can recall God as supreme in every area of life. Conversely, the people-centered approach avoids concentrating on the message of the scriptures. The aim of this approach is not to offend the unchurched. In this way, a preacher who relies on this will possibly reel people in with fancy quotes and the latest trends but typically fail to offer a faithful exposition of the passage.

The scripture must have a theme, and that theme is Jesus Christ, according to J. A. Broadus.²⁷ Without the supremacy of God, preaching has no legs to stand on because if God does not reign, Christ has not risen. In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossian church, he says,

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. (Col 2:1-6)²⁸

²⁶ Rainer, *Essential Church*, 196.

²⁷ Broadus, *A Treatise*, 22.

²⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the English Standard Version.

In the text above to describe his desire for the Colossians to know the mystery of God, which is Jesus Christ, the Apostle uses the Greek noun “*αγωνα*,” which translates struggle in English. The word initially was derived from the name of the place where the Greeks assembled for their Olympic games, a place where they agonized in wrestling and footraces, where they fought to win. Paul had been agonizing, fighting for the Colossians with everything he had.²⁹ The word emphasizes the application of one’s power for the achievement of a goal. The Apostle’s work was not merely a fulfillment of an obligation. The work involved toil and hardship, but what mattered most was the imperishable goal in Christ. The object of the struggle was that the gospel of Christ is spread. It is not primarily a striving for the perfection of the individual, a private salvation, but of the salvation of God’s elect. The proclamation of the divine message leads to conflict with the opponents (2 Cor. 7:5).³⁰ Amid the climate of false prophets and personal attacks for his faith, Paul’s earnest desire was that the Colossians know the mystery of God, which is Christ. The place of agonizing for the preacher is with the scriptural passage. The effects of depravity bring pressure to compromise the truth because of personal struggles and the peer pressures of life. The supremacy of God in the Scriptures will help the minister navigate the tensions of the biblical text.

Sin and Sermon Preparation

The selected literature reviewed in this project failed to discuss in detail the pitfalls of preaching that minimizes the sovereignty of God. The literature revealed the need for a Supremacy of God mindset in preaching but failed to clearly state that often the root cause is

²⁹ R. Kent Hughes. *Colossians and Philemon: the Supremacy of Christ* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 52.

³⁰ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 647.

watered-down preaching, which is sin and lack of proper sermon preparation. The preacher's view of God will likely determine the view of God for the congregation, and if he has a high view, the view that sees God as supreme and sovereign, the church will see God as Isaiah says, "High and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1). Sovereignty is a part of the subject of supremacy as well. God's supremacy defends His right to do as he pleases with creation. Hershael York comments on the preaching passages that display the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. Salvation is a gift, and the only response to salvation is the response that God has placed in the believer (Eph. 2:1). When approaching the text with the sovereignty of God in mind, the text will draw any lines that need drawing concerning sovereignty and human responsibility.³¹ For this project, the research did not delve directly into the effects of the depravity of man on sermon preparation and exposition. The preacher orates the gospel to fallen humanity. This writer's current survey of literature revealed a gap in the area of knowing how to recover from depravity issues. More research needs to be conducted on the motivation to study, moral issues that influence a preachers' sermon, depression and church culture challenges.

This project addresses how a focus on human responsibility can invade the sovereignty of God and lead to a low view of God in the church. The supremacy and sovereignty of God are especially crucial in salvation passages because salvation must have a source, and the low view of God will lead to a works salvation hinged on human responsibility and effort. In salvation, if, at any point, human responsibility takes over, God is not in control. In *Understanding Theology*, R. T. Kendall recalls two iconic figures, Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards. Martin Luther in

³¹ Hershael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 21.

his treatise *Bondage of the Will* argues against freedom of the will and he suggests that humanity is enslaved by sin and to sin.³² Jonathan Edwards, in his treatise, *Freedom of the Will*, insists that man is free to do what he wants to do, but what does he want to do? He loves darkness rather than light; man hates God and will always choose the path contrary to God.³³ For a contemporary audience, free will means that salvation is strictly by choice in confessing Jesus Christ. While free will applies more to the choice of humanity in salvation, it negates God's prerogative in salvation. Scripturally, free will can function only under the umbrella of God's supremacy and sovereignty, because in reverse order, salvation would be considered a reaction or afterthought to sin. In his work *Christian Theology*, Millard Erickson writes that God's plan relates primarily to what God Himself does in terms of creating, preserving, directing, and redeeming. It also involves human responsibility, but only secondarily, that is, as means to the ends of His purposes or as results of actions He takes. He goes on to say that God's role here is to decide that certain things will take place in one's life, but not to lay down commands to act in a certain way.³⁴

God's Sovereignty in Salvation

The concept or doctrine of predestination is apparent in scriptures. In Ephesians, Paul writes that "He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of His will (Eph. 1:5). God has the right to save those whom He desires within the scope of His sovereignty. Isaiah declares "The LORD of hosts has sworn: As I have planned, so shall it be,

³² R. T. Kendall, *Understanding Theology, Volume Two* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000), 275.

³³ Ibid., 275.

³⁴ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 325.

and as I have purposed, so shall it stand that I will break the Assyrian in my land and on my mountains trample him under and his yoke shall depart from them and his burden from their shoulder. This is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back” (Isaiah 14:24-27 NASB)? The sovereign God of the universe wrote the story of redemption, and in love, He predestined the sending of His only son to die to redeem man. When the issue of predestination and free will is the topic of discussion, one must consider whose love is being displayed in scripture. God acted alone in the redemption of man and accomplishes His Will for man.

Influences on Preaching

A preacher’s sermon will be influenced by something, whether it is culture, personal status, or the scriptures. John MacArthur warns against allowing culture to influence the church, but instead the church should look to the scriptures and influence the culture. Issues such as social justice and economic status should not dictate preaching but the opposite.³⁵ Intellectualism is the birthplace of culture. Humanity bypasses faith in God and looks to prove concepts by an extensive study. In the Apostle Paul’s day, the dominant culture viewed Christianity as foolishness. Paul writes, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than man.” (1 Cor. 1:25, NASB) Philosophical depth pale in comparison to the wisdom of God. Paul defended the gospel against the charge that it is inferior to this world’s wisdom. He did not attempt to argue that the message of Christ is erudite, nor did he seek appreciation and esteem from the world’s scholars. Instead, he conceded that the gospel is utter foolishness from

³⁵ MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, 4.

the perspective of human wisdom.³⁶ The contemporary climate has not abandoned a distorted view of the gospel. With the rise of postmodern thinking, just as in the fundamentalist Charles Spurgeon's days, society is openly embracing liberalism and world wisdom. Fallen humanity will never find its way back to God without the mystery of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Sovereignty in Salvation

The literature mentioned the topic of liberation theology but addressed it from an ethnocentric viewpoint. Roy Zuck asserts that liberation theology interrupts much of the Bible from the vantage point of the economically and politically oppressed.³⁷ The writer contends that the Bible is "liberation theology." It is God's deliverance plan from sin for the sinner. With so many influences in society, preachers must guard themselves against the societal pressure of allowing culture to dictate biblical interpretation. Jesus is the only pathway of liberation from sin, and the oppressed and the oppressor alike must bow in submission at the foot of the cross. A people-centered approach to preaching will cause people to manufacture self-made and society-generated liberators. Joel Breidenbaugh argues that preaching must have the scriptures as the foundation of truth. He says the problem with allowing culture to influence preaching is that cultural trends dictate relative truth.³⁸ Sermon preparation is either a roller coaster ride governed by people who claim to be wise in their own eyes or a submissive bowing of oneself to the Word of God in recognition of the supremacy of God. Human wisdom leads to a "cross-less"

³⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Book, 1993), 108.

³⁷ Zuck, *Basic Bible*, 58.

³⁸ Breidenbaugh, *Preaching for Body Building*, 144, 147.

Christianity because the evil heart of men cannot fathom the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for the sake of evil men.

Andy Stanley's approach is somewhat different in that he says that other influences, such as the history of the church, should be allowed to help shape the church's theology. Every church has its way of doing things. And for the most part, it works. Consequently, change is rarely perceived as a solution. In most cases, change feels like an interruption. An expensive interruption to something that is perceived as fine the way it is. An interruption with no guarantee at the end; only promises and wishful thinking. So, a typical church system will "unconsciously conspire to maintain the status quo and prevent change." The history of the church can affect the way the preacher shares the gospel if he gives too much attention to the way things have always been done and the people are resistant to change.³⁹ The researcher contends that if history has failed to show patterns of applied biblical principles, its influences could be detrimental. Also, the sermon preparer must weigh the traditions of the particular church against the Bible. If the tradition is not anchored in sound biblical principles, it will adversely affect church health.

The Pragmatic Preacher

Asking or polling the congregation concerning what they want to hear is a huge mistake, and it is the hallmark of Pragmatism. According to Jared Wilson, pragmatism reasons that God's ability to use anything means man's freedom to use everything. Pragmatism treats church methodology like a vending machine. Francis Schaeffer has said, "The Christian life, true

³⁹ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, Ch.7 p.2.

spirituality, can never have a mechanical solution. The real solution is being cast up into moment-by-moment communion, personal communion, with God himself, and letting Christ's truth flow through me by the agency of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁰ God-called proclaimers must focus on who called them more than their physical assignment or location in ministry. Warren Wiersbe argues that the scriptures should be allowed to speak freely and that the truth not be blocked by cultural influences that push for the agenda of humanity.⁴¹ The authority of the Scriptures should be the influence behind every presentation of the Word of God.

While attending a National Baptist Convention, the researcher recalls Dr. Mack King Carter, saying, "You cannot out preach your life." Few understand the struggle of unrighteousness (humans) preaching righteousness (Christ). Preachers, for many, are living pictures of the scriptures that often fail to accurately depict a scriptural life. King David opens Psalm 51 by asking God to be gracious to him. It is not just a random plea, but instead, David is heartbroken because of his behavior and the events concerning Bathsheba. Throughout David's life, he wrote approximately 74 Psalms,⁴² but he writes no psalms during the interval following Nathan's confrontation (2 Sam. 12:1-13).⁴³ David lost a child, but worse than that, God was not speaking through him. In Psalms 32:3-4 David describes his feelings after his sinful act; he was silent. With the passion of a broken and contrite spirit, David cries out for mercy in the first verse of Psalms 51. Comparatively, the preacher desperately needs to hear from God, and God's silence is more convicting to a God-called preacher than a mother's gaze of disappointment at a

⁴⁰ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 53.

⁴¹ Warren Wiersbe and David Wiersbe, *The Elements of Preaching: The Art of Biblical Preaching Clearly and Simply Presented* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 53-54.

⁴³ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible* vol.18, *Poetry: Psalms Chapters 42-89* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 57.

disobedient child. After a lapse in judgment in the moral life, recovery begins with repentance. The minister must humbly cry out to God in full admission of the sinful activity and ask for the mercy of God (1 John 1:9). As preachers study the Bible, the aim must not be merely to preach to the congregants and thereby miss the necessity of personal growth and development. The minister must discover what God also says to him concerning the passage. Sin can hinder the sermon preparation process by distracting the proclaimer from his obligation to pay fervent attention to the biblical text. In the recovery process, preachers must consciously be aware of their frailties and remember the pain that ensues from the lack of fellowship with God.

During the Civil Rights Movement, the African American preacher's prominence was in direct correlation to his work in civil rights. Some would frown on this, but one must remember that preachers preach from where they are. All preachers are susceptible to becoming a product of their environment. It is an error to allow that environment to have too much of a voice in the sermon. Concerning the pulpit, H.B Charles Jr. says, the herald was on assignment to deliver the message of the king. It was not his message. Moreover, he did not have editorial authority over it. He could not change the message to suit the crowd. Neither can the preacher today. The pulpit is not the place for personal testimonies, political speeches, group therapy sessions, motivational talks, self-help advice, worldly philosophies, or scientific theories. The pulpit is the throne of the Word of God. Therefore, the sacred text must be the priority of preaching.⁴⁴ Regardless of the culture, if the sermon is deemed God-centered then the biblical text must always take center stage. To help the audience understand and appreciate the appropriate and possible application of the message, it may at times be helpful to include such things as personal or cultural references.

⁴⁴ H.B. Charles Jr., *On Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 16-17.

These can be helpful in making contact with the listeners and identifying with them by noting similar life experiences. However, these things must never become the theme or focus of the message or the means to achieve the desired objective of knowing God's truth and power. It is easy to say that expository preaching is the answer to the issues previously mentioned. However, an investigation that lacks application and prayer will always lead to a lackadaisical way of thinking that could influence how the preacher presents the gospel. The point of preaching is to proclaim Christ not the preacher's personal life or cultural trends.

Evaluating Preaching

The sermon evaluation process should not be contingent on the congregants' immediate response but on faithfulness to textual exegesis, through which the Holy Spirit cultivates the soil of the heart. The writer contends that attention to crowd response does not lead to God-centered presentations of the Gospel. Herschel York advocates for preaching that produces life change.⁴⁵ Along those same lines Roy Zuck says a preacher's scriptural application should be based directly on the meaning and relevance of the text to its original audience in light of the purpose of the book. Solid interpretation is the only adequate basis for relevant application. If a text is misinterpreted, then the application may be faulty as well. Interpretation asks, what does the passage mean? Application asks, what does the passage mean to me? If the preacher has not accurately determined the passage's meaning for the initial hearers, he may not accurately apply that meaning to today.⁴⁶

The Sermon and Sadness

⁴⁵ York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 11.

⁴⁶ Zuck, *Basic Bible*, 282.

What exactly is a life change? The Word of God will confront the hearts of the deceitfully wicked and cause them to turn away from their sins. There can be no change of heart without the pure Word of God explained under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Life change also involves looking to the scriptures as the determiner for morality and direction.

The literature revealed a small amount of information concerning preachers who are depressed as a result of measuring their sermon's effectiveness by the number of people in attendance or the encouragement from the crowd while preaching. If ministers have ever been discouraged because of the crowd's lack of response, then the motive behind preaching should be questioned. Carelessly preaching a passage can lead the congregation to false assumptions concerning God's character, timing, and will. The writer's position is that an unclear exegesis of the text creates false hopes in the minds of the listeners and fosters a low-view of God. Warren Wiersbe questions one's motive to preach. His point is that either it is because one has something to say or that one wants to say something. Preaching the text purely means the preacher has something to say, but if the text is not the focus, the preacher is merely saying something.⁴⁷ Ministers are ambassadors of the kingdom that will last perpetually. Gardner C. Taylor⁴⁸ says that ultimate authority belongs to God and preachers are his ambassadors. Preachers bring to a recalcitrant creation the promises and the ultimatums of God.⁴⁹ The minister who seeks self-worth from the encouragement of congregants opens the door of depression. The proclaimer should make God the source of encouragement. The call of preaching is a gracious gift from God

⁴⁷ Wiersbe, *The Elements of Preaching*, 40-41.

⁴⁸ Taped interview at Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn, New York.

⁴⁹ Cleopus J. Larue, *Power in the Pulpit* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 146.

to the minister. Affirmations of “amen” from the congregation should never overrule the “amen” of God! When preachers are faithful to declare the Word of God, God is pleased (1 Thess. 2:4).

Eloquence is not necessary for good preaching, but remaining faithful to the biblical text and preaching the truth that brings conviction is, according to John Broadus. He states that the preacher should preach or write so that his congregation understands what he says and writes. Clarity means writing or speaking in such a way that no reader or hearer can misunderstand. In other words, the message is transparently clear.⁵⁰ Because cultures vary, more research on the idea of eloquence as it relates to preaching is needed, and research is also needed to show how other cultures respond to ministry context. Discipleship and evangelism are paramount to any outward measure of the effectiveness of the sermon. The goal is not to manufacture quick results but lasting change that enhances church health. Joel Briedenbaugh says that preaching should be inform the mind, convict the heart and advocate for overall life change.⁵¹ The preacher should also ask himself if he is maturing as a follower of Christ, and are the people better as a result of a steady diet of the Word of God. The key to analyzing the results of effective preaching is not the number of names on the church roll but in the regenerate hearts that are willing to submit to biblical teaching as disciples.

The Original Writer’s Intent

Handlers of the sacred writ should understand that God is the original author of the Bible. It is vitally important that the sermon display what God is conveying and not what the preacher

⁵⁰ John Albert Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012), 211.

⁵¹ Breidenbaugh, *Preaching for Body Building*, 144, 147.

wants to say. On this subject, Herschel York asserts that the meaning of the text is not hidden, but discovered. Discovery only takes place when time spent with the text is a priority.⁵² As mentioned earlier, the concept or message does not need creating during sermon preparation. However, the minister should take time to investigate the passage and discover the original intention of God. The Apostle Paul declares that “All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:16-17). Since God thought it necessary to write, the proclaimer should find it necessary to investigate and expose the true meaning. One must be faithful to the message God has entrusted to one and seek to proclaim it comprehensively so that it can become the source of strength for the future growth of the church.⁵³ Real church growth and church health happen through explicit declarations of the gospel that produces disciples. The Apostle Paul writes, “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The preacher should sense accountability to divine truth, which should thus dictate the preaching ministry.

In modern times sermonizers are perceived as intelligent because they complicate the message by straining the text for ideas that are not textual at all. The ultimate authority behind expository preaching resides not in the preacher, but the biblical text.⁵⁴ At all costs, the minister should resist the urge to be the hero in the preaching moment and be careful to maintain Scriptural integrity throughout the sermon. The intellectual age asks for information, and some

⁵² York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 24.

⁵³ Olford and Olford, 83.

⁵⁴ Robinson, *Biblical*, 7.

preachers feel the need to pull from the proverbial hat the rabbit of secret information that God has only revealed to them, attempting to appear super-spiritual. Ministers must remember that God never contradicts His written Word with some modern-day prophecy.

The discovery of the original intent reveals the text as enriching to the preacher and the people. Wayne McDill argues for a program of expository preaching that does not search the Bible for sermons but one that seeks the original intent of the passage. He says that in expository preaching, the preacher's first aim is to discover in the selected text the text writer's intended theological meaning. Some preachers tend to search the Bible for a sermon and hope for something to leap out that will be preached. However, a program of expository preaching calls for the preacher to aim for a clear understanding of the text writer's meaning. Only out of that theological message can he properly preach an expository sermon.⁵⁵ Searching the scriptures for sermons can lead to topical presentations of the gospel, especially if a current situation or event brings on the search. Employing a systematic or expository approach that encompasses the entire thought or point of the text will allow the scripture to reveal to the preacher the issues that need addressing as he proclaims the gospel before the congregation.

In his book *Deep and Wide*, Andy Stanley writes that preachers should create environments that enhance the message before the people hear the sermon. "Presentation is what determines interest. Content is often secondary. As we pointed out, it is not the content of a standup comedian's routine that engages us. It is the presentation."⁵⁶ Stanley's view is problematic because the preachers' responsibility is to build a bridge from the text to the people.

⁵⁵ McDill, *12 Essential*, 8.

⁵⁶ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, 9.

This bridge must have biblical truth as its foundation. The bells and whistles of society will never substitute for biblical preaching and teaching. Stanley's view also prefaces the feelings of the group. To the contrary, preaching is not a matter of feeling; it is a matter of allowing God to penetrate the heart of the people with His Word. Stanley also suggests that when the preacher approaches the pulpit, the message has more to do with presentation than with content.⁵⁷ Presentations of the gospel should be thermostats that determine the climate in the room and not thermometers that can only measure the temperature of a room.

A common struggle for pastors is crafting and presenting their sermons in a way that provides the relevant application to the hearers. When the message fails to communicate applications and achieve relevancy in the lives of the hearers, the sermon becomes lost in translation.⁵⁸ Wilson suggests that the attractional (people-centered) church model advocates for good advice rather than the gospel.⁵⁹ Wilson also contends that expository preaching trusts the content of the Word to transform the lives of the hearer. The charismatic church community feels that God is speaking some new oracle every day, but God has given permanent form to the truth in the scriptures. Preaching has the unique power of breaking people. Faithfully preaching the Word of God will convict even the vilest sinner and bring him to repentance. The preacher, in his message, must demonstrate the victory of God and His Spirit-Given Word over any worldly view that may exist.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 102.

⁵⁸ Tony Evans, *The Power of Preaching: Creating and Crafting Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 73.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*, 81.

In faithfully preaching the message of the text the responsibility of life change is moved away from the preacher and placed on the Word of God.⁶⁰ Through ordinary men, God wrote timeless oracles of truth to transform humanity. These men were not without faults and failures, but God used them despite their failures. The scriptures do not rest upon the character of these ordinary men, but rather on the character of God.

Conclusion

This writer concludes that an over-dependence on human desires results in a low view of God. Preaching that will have a biblical result demands the supremacy of God. To champion human capability, apart from God, is to reduce the awesomeness of God. A low view of God is the result of the exaltation of man. The gap concerning eloquence or impressive speech revealed the need to look at the various cultures of the church. Impressive speech does not guarantee accurate biblical interpretation. Preaching has an actuating element, but the effects of eloquence can vary across cultural lines. Depravity is real, and the preacher communicates in a fallen age. However, this depravity should not become an excuse for encouraging a low view of God through poor sermon preparation and exposition. The minister's charge is to point people to Christ and Him alone. Overall, the literature sheds considerable light on the subjects discussed. However, more in-depth research concerning the mentioned gaps could help to further clarify the harmful effects of watered-down preaching and the benefits of expository preaching.

Theological Foundation

The theological foundation section examines the theological support of the project. The Old Testament, Jesus, and the New Testament aspects of preaching will be considered. In a

⁶⁰ Craig Brian Larson, *The Preacher's Tool Box: Inspirational Preaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 76.

sermon presented at The Christian & Missionary Alliance General Council in North Carolina in 1997, John Piper mentions reading an article about scientist Charles Meisner. Meisner recalls that:

Albert Einstein, who died in 1955, said, ‘I do see the design of the universe has essentially a religious question that is one should have some kind of respect and awe for the whole business. It is very magnificent and should not be taken for granted.’ I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religion, although he strikes me as a very religious man. He must have looked at what their preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined, and they were just not talking about the real thing. I guess that he simply felt that religions he had run across did not have proper respect for the author of the universe.’⁶¹

It appears that Einstein, whom Meisner suggested was a spiritual man, looked at nature and noticed the creative work of God and felt as if preachers were not talking about the same God that was revealed in nature. Preaching, at its core, demands the undressing of the scriptural text and the revealing of God as supreme. Like miners in a cave, preachers should dig deep into the Word of God’s reservoir to uncover the truths of Scripture. Critics’ comments should serve to convict the lazy and untethered preachers and rekindle their thirst for discovering God’s glory in the text.

Additionally, biblical preaching, at its core, also centers on the person of Jesus Christ, the crucified, yet living Lord. Exegesis is a careful explanation of the meaning of a given text. The term comes from a Greek term, *exēgēsis*, which means “explanation.” Exegesis involves analyzing a text in its historical, cultural, and literary setting with concern for its lexical, grammatical, and theological content. The exegete focuses primarily on explaining the author’s

⁶¹ John Piper, “The Supremacy of God in Preaching,” (sermon delivered at the Christian & Missionary Alliance General Council, Charlotte, NC, May 27, 1997).

message to their original audience. In a real way, exegesis is the foundation for both biblical theology and systematic theology.⁶²

For the sake of painting a mental picture, picture a well of water. The content of preaching is God as He has revealed Himself in the scriptures. Diving into a well seems foolish, but to honestly know what lies at the foundation of the well, one must dive in. Faithful biblical preaching through Jesus Christ aims to draw out of the text God's purposes for the earth. The Old Testament looks forward to Him, and the gospels tell His story. The epistles look back to Him, and the book of Revelation speaks of His return.

In the Old Testament, the prophets/preachers read God's Word to the people with clarity and conviction. Nehemiah asserts:

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra, the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it, all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also, Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. Men and women and all who were able to understand" involved the entire community, including young people and children. (8:1-8)

⁶² Roy Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press. 1994), 12.

The Jews became known as “the people of the book.” The Old Testament emphasizes that all the people know and use God’s Word, not just the priests and leaders. Early Christians adopted this same principle. The principle changed as time went on; fewer and fewer people had access to the Bible. The Protestant Reformation, with its emphasis on *sola scriptura* (on the Bible as the *sole* authority for faith and practice), returned to the biblical principle that every believer should read Scripture as God’s Word for their lives.⁶³

The passage opens by informing the reader that the people gathered together as “one man,” according to the ESV (Neh. 1:1). The Israelites saw the need to hear God’s Word together and in unity. Before Nehemiah had the opportunity to execute his plans, the people began to gather for the religious activities of the seventeenth month, Tishri, during which the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles transpired.⁶⁴ Now Israel could safely gather behind the reconstructed walls without the fear of enemy attack. Nehemiah was in full support of those who gathered for religious activities (Neh. 10:1). After thirteen years of becoming a teacher of the law, Ezra, the well-known priest and scribe, emerged as the outstanding religious leader.

The place of gathering was the city Water Gate. Nethinim were servants, and they cared for the gate. In scripture, water is symbolic of the Word of God, which is Christ. The Water Gate was a cleansing and refreshing place as the Word of God is to sinful humankind. “How can a man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Your Word.” (Ps. 119:9) One does not read of any repairs being made here after the destruction of Jerusalem, only that the Nethinim dwelt

⁶³ Mervyn Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* vol. 10, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 224.

⁶⁴ Samuel Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*, 5th ed. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 273.

over against the water gate. Possibly this port needed none. At any rate, that of which it speaks needs not be repaired, for the word of God liveth and abideth forever. All of man's vain assaults upon it have left it uninjured and unchanged. Believers are called upon to defend it, contending "earnestly for the faith" (Jude 1:3) once for all delivered to the people of God, but it would be impiety to attempt to patch or improve it.⁶⁵ Israel had improved the city, but only the Word of God could improve them. The supremacy of God and the Word of God are the same; they need no repairs.

The Bible was not written just for the priest and pastors to understand, but all believers must seek to understand the Bible. No one can force a person into understanding, but the function of preaching involves making the passage so apparent that it is easily understood. Ezra did not speak flattering words that eclipsed from the intellect of human wisdom; instead, he mounted the pulpit with the Word of God. Preaching and responding to the Word of God is a part of the worship of God. The people cried out for The Book; they were not interested in life stories, the latest political news, cultural intelligence, church gossip, opinions, or ideas. Ezra read to this anticipating crowd of worshippers from the morning to the evening. The pulpit is the throne of the Word of God. Therefore, the sacred text must be the priority of preaching.⁶⁶ In response to the opening of The Book, the people lifted their hands and bowed their faces. The people were not worshipping The Book, instead, they showed great reverence for the God of The Book. Biblical preaching points people away from themselves and idols and to the Creator of the Universe.

⁶⁵ H.A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Nehemiah* (New York: Loizeaux Bros. 1913), 44-45.

⁶⁶ H. B. Charles, *On Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 17.

Nehemiah writes, “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood the reading.” (8:8) Ezra’s congregation was no longer familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. They needed expositors. Ezra was a renowned teacher of the law, and people trusted that he would explain the scriptures faithfully. Although not recorded in Ezra or Nehemiah, it is most reasonable to assume that Ezra had in previous years assembled the people to observe the feasts and seasons.⁶⁷ These people were returning from captivity, and they had forgotten the sayings of the holy scrolls. The Law was not only read but explained to ensure that the people grasped the meaning. These may also have been translations from Hebrew to Aramaic. The doctrine of the perspicuity (clarity) of scripture is that the things necessary for salvation are understood from the Bible without special techniques or higher education. This truth does not eliminate the need for the faithful exposition of the Scriptures by trained persons. So, as preachers of the Word of God, the task is to unfold the truth in language people can understand, “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” (1 Cor. 2:4)⁶⁸

The New Testament also displays expository preaching by Jesus Christ. Our Lord is the Prince of expository preaching. As the Prince of all expositors, He expounded the truth and illustrated His points. With absolute authority, He adopted the customary method of reading and exegeting the Scriptures. (John 1:18) Jesus consistently expounded the Word of God to hungry hearts, whether in the synagogue, a home, on the hillside or from an anchored boat.⁶⁹

In the infamous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7:29), the Savior, in the presence of a great crowd, goes up into the mountain and sits down. The Bible declares that His followers

⁶⁷ Shultz, *The Old Testament Speaks* 5th Ed., 273.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 70-71.

⁶⁹ Ash, *The Priority*, 71.

came to him, and He taught them. In verse 2, the Greek word ἐδίδασκεν, which is the English word taught, is in the imperfect tense. The imperfect verb tense is where the writer portrays an action in process or a state of being that is occurring in the past with no assessment of the action's completion.⁷⁰ The teaching of the Lord was not just a one-time teaching occurrence. Jesus begins with nine announcements of blessings. The word blessed in the original Greek means happy or fortunate. The reader would assume that something good which appeals to the emotions and feelings of man would follow. The qualities that God approves are explained in two sets of four, describing respectively one's relationship to God and one's relationship to other people (see also 22:37–40). He approves those who relate to him by admitting their spiritual poverty and mourning over their sin, humbly seeking spiritual fullness (5:3–6). He approves those who relate to others mercifully and purely as peacemakers, even though such people have undergone persecution for their righteous behavior (5:7–12).⁷¹ Keep in mind that the Bible is expositively declaring the Word of God to man. It is God's Word concerning Himself through Jesus Christ inspired through ordinary men to humankind. The Bible identifies what God approves, and in order to inform people correctly, preaching must clearly convey God's Word. Notice some brief comments on Matthew 5:3-4.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God." He is referring to those who recognize their wickedness. This statement strikes at the heart of Jewish pride and arrogance, and Jesus did not water-down His words to accommodate His audience. The next verse goes beyond merely acknowledging the wickedness and emphatically

⁷⁰ M.S. Heiser and V.M. Setterholm, *Glossary of Morpho-Syntactic Database Terminology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press. 2013), 48.

⁷¹ David Turner and Darrell Bock, *Matthew and Mark*. vol. 19 *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 80.

declares that true repentance is not absent of remorse over the sin. Those who repent at the Kingdom's message (Matt. 3:2; 4:17) acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy and rejoice in God's blessings of salvation.⁷² Mourning over sin only occurs when the sinner by the Holy Spirit's conviction sees himself as lost and unable to save himself.

The Apostle Paul declared, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The Apostle Paul was adamant about sharing Christ and only Christ. The apostle whittles away at the notion of the superiority of human wisdom, which produces a low view of God. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth:

And I when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. ⁶Yet among the mature, we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"—¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 1 Corinthians 2:1-10

The city of Corinth was the capital of Achaia, located at the southern tip of Greece. It appeared almost like an island, lying on a narrow strip of land only four to five miles across. Its shores provided two natural harbors, one on the east coast and the other on the west coast. With all shipping from East and West harboring there, Corinth was a commercial paradise. All commercial traffic traveling by land from North and South also chose to pass through the city. The city had a large population, a real mixture of nationalities including Greeks, Latins, Jews,

⁷² Turner and Bock, *Matthew and Mark*, 80.

Egyptians, Syrians, and Asiatics. The large population and material prosperity made the city a sports-minded center. Considered the most important athletic events even more prominent than the Olympics, the Isthmian Games were held in the city.⁷³ Corinth was also morally corrupt. Material prosperity and traveling merchants made for a spirit of partying, drunkenness, and all sorts of immoral living so much so that the city's very name, "Corinthian," became a by-word for evil and immoral living. Even the worship of the residents centered on the great goddess of love, Aphrodite. The temple housed 1,000 sacred prostitutes.

Corinth was an intellectual and cultural center, as well. Personal development and pleasure were the pursuits, whether pursued culturally or recklessly and immorally. There was little recognition of law, except the law of a man's desires.

Paul seeks to call to the Corinthians' remembrance how he shared the testimony of God on his first visit to Corinth. Paul says that he did not come to them with "ὑπεροχή," lofty speech or high status. (1 Cor. 2:1) He is making the point that the message to them was not about eloquence or status but the testimony of God, not his opinion. Knowing his audience's moral climate, Paul pens these words with Corinth's intellectual pride in mind. This straightforward expository approach was and is necessary when preaching to a morally corrupt culture. Paul writes that he has decided not to preach to impress but that his singular focus is Jesus Christ. Again, in contrast to "the wise" in Corinth and the church, who could expatiate endlessly on all sorts of subjects, all Paul was concerned about was "the cross of Christ." (1:17)

On first observation, this may seem relatively narrow and limited. After all, Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth and would have engaged in pastoral work alongside evangelism. 1

⁷³ Alpha-Omega Ministries, *The Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible: Galatians-Colossians* (Chattanooga Leadership Ministries Worldwide, 1996), 3.

Corinthians 1:10–4:17 itself demonstrates, for Paul, even the most practical ills, such as divisions and problems of leadership in the church, come to resolve by focusing on the cross. For Paul, Christ crucified is more than just the means of forgiveness and salvation; instead, it informs his total vision of Christian life and ministry.⁷⁴ Church health leans on the source of the churches’ nutrition. The apostle was determined to share Christ in the most exhibited fashion because speaking the truth of Jesus Christ is how the Holy Spirit operates through the preacher in the church. Human wisdom, at best, can only produce a low view of God. A low view is in utter contrast with the way that God reveals Himself in scripture. In verse five of Corinthians chapter two, Paul mentions that his purpose is that their faith does not rest in man’s wisdom but God’s power. The English word dynamite is derived from the Greek word δύναμις. It means the display of power or divine ability. Apostle Paul declared that faith in human wisdom leans on human ability, whereas faith in God rests on His supernatural ability. The mention of the Corinthians’ faith in 1 Cor. 2:5 is the first specific reference to their faith in the letter. The parallel between “faith” in 2:5 and “boasting in the Lord” in 1:31 is instructive to Paul’s meaning of “faith” in this context. To “boast” in the Lord is to depend on, to trust, to declare one’s allegiance, and to rely upon Him. To trust in the wisdom of men is a dead-end street, a guaranteed failure.⁷⁵ 1

Corinthians 2:5 is a perfect example of what expository preaching does. Expository preaching moves the listener away from a people-centered agenda and to a God-centered purpose. Paul displays that the well in which preachers must draw from is God’s Word or God’s wisdom and not human wisdom. According to Paul, preaching is imparting the secret and hidden wisdom of

⁷⁴ Roy Ciampa, & Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 114.

⁷⁵ Mark Taylor, *The New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 81-82.

God, which God decreed before the ages for the believers' glory (1 Cor. 2:7). Some of the Corinthians, no doubt, had been carried away with the sweetness of persuasive words that made them in awe of human intellect. Paul desired that the church would be in awe of the greatness of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the mystery of God revealed to humanity as the only means to salvation.

The Apostle Paul challenges his understudy, Timothy, to “divide the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15) accurately. Paul was encouraging Timothy to passionately cut a straight line as a commissioned handler of the Word of God. Stephen Olford comments that the closing statement, “rightly dividing the word of truth,” perfectly defines expository preaching. While difficult to translate into English, it essentially means “handling the word of truth aright; declaring the word of truth without distortion; rightly administering the word of truth; holding a straight course in the truth; giving the truth a right of way.” This definition renders the verb as “the skillful application of parts or aspects of truth adapted to affect persons, especially in need of instruction.”⁷⁶ In contemporary terms, Paul was encouraging preaching that yielded to the scriptures. The only way to cut a straight line when it comes to the Bible is to trace the line that God has drawn by His Word.

In Acts 13: 16-41, the Apostle Paul demonstrates a powerful exposition of God's Word as a guest at the synagogue in Pisidia:

¹⁶ So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand, said:
“Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. ¹⁷ The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. ¹⁸ And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. ¹⁹ And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. ²⁰ All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them

⁷⁶ Olford and Olford, *Anointed Expository*, 72.

judges until Samuel the prophet. ²¹ Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²² And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' ²³ Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. ²⁴ Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. ²⁵ And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' ²⁶ "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. ²⁷ For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. ²⁸ And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹ And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. ³² And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, ³³ this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." ³⁴ And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, "I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David." ³⁵ Therefore he says also in another psalm, "You will not let your Holy One see corruption." ³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷ but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. ⁴⁰ Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about: ⁴¹ "Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.

The Apostle does not mix or water down his words for his audience. Paul reminds his listeners of

God's faithfulness to their ancestors and then reminds them of Jesus's lineage through David.

The apostle affirms that the believers serve the risen Savior. Unlike anyone in Earth's history,

Christ remains exclusively the one who was dead, but yet lives forever. Christ is the way of

salvation, and forgiveness of sin resides in none other. Paul quotes Habakkuk 1:5 and urges them

not to reject the message because to do so would usher in God's judgment. Preceding the

sermon, Paul and Barnabas engage in spiritual warfare when they encounter opposition in

Paphos. Elymas, the magician, who was accompanying the proconsul Sergius Paulus, opposed

Paul to block the Word of God. Despite the opposition, the Bible reveals that the proconsul heard The Word and believed.

It was customary for the local synagogues to open their doors to visiting rabbis. Paul shared common knowledge of the Old Testament with his audience in Pisidia. Paul stands and addresses two groups present; the men of Israel and those who fear God (Gentile proselytes). The apostle begins his address by appealing to the history of Israel and their deliverance out of Egypt. Notice that the apostle is careful to draw his audience to the fact that God had multiplied them while in Egypt, and it was God who led them out. Viewing history as purposeless appeals to sinful people since it grants them the freedom to do as they want with no fear of accountability to a divine moral judge.⁷⁷ Paul exposes God as the source of history and through history reminds his audience of their accountability to God. God cared for His people in the face of their rebellion, enduring their sin because they had a crucial role to play in His plan for history.⁷⁸ The apostle goes on to remind them also of God exercising patience with their forefathers as they wandered for forty years. He also recalls the destruction of seven nations to give them land to occupy in Canaan. By God's mercy, Israel was elected as His children, obtained an inheritance in Canaan, and given rulers and kings. The mention of Samuel would remind them of Israel's request for a king, and God gave them Saul. Paul moves directly to the fact that God removed Saul from office after his disobedience and made David their king, concluding Paul's brief overview of Israel's history and allowing him to move straight to Jesus and the gospel. Paul

⁷⁷ John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts*, vol. 2, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

closes this first section of the sermon with a conflation of words from 1 Samuel 13:14 and Psalms 89:20.⁷⁹

The introduction of King David opens the door for Paul to explain further God's plan to bring the Savior Jesus Christ through David's lineage. Verse twenty-three ties together Paul's first two points. Historically, Jesus was the offspring of David. Prophetically, He was the one whom, according to promise, God brought to Israel as a Savior. He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah. In Him, and God's promise in the Old Testament realized.⁸⁰ The stiff-necked Jews, according to Stephen (Acts 7:51), had rejected Christ. With intelligent scholars instructing the people, somehow, they had failed to accurately teach Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The people of Jerusalem should have known from the Scriptures the coming betrayal of the Messiah, and they should have recoiled from involvement in such wickedness. As in Acts 2:23; 3:17–18 and 4:27–28, the paradox is that “acting in ignorance” and intending to get rid of Jesus, the people of Jerusalem played a destined role contributing to the exaltation of Jesus as Messiah.⁸¹ The sovereignty and supremacy of God are once again made evident in the sermon. God even uses wicked/lawless men to accomplish salvation “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” (Acts 2:23) God's plan was unfolding just as He had spoken it through the prophets. Paul concludes his sermon by quoting Habakkuk 1:5, “Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.” The Jews thought that the murder of Jesus

⁷⁹ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles. The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 388.

⁸⁰ MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament*, 22.

⁸¹ Peterson, *The Acts*, 390.

was the answer for whom they believed was false prophet gone out of control. In reality, God used the Jews to show them their wicked purpose in His redemption plan. Ironically, this is the same time that the gospel is opened to the Gentiles. The gospel is not subject to the control of sinful humankind, but the gospel is to be handled by preachers who will tell it like it is!

Paul was devoted to the truth of scripture regardless of the response of the audience. As Paul and Barnabas were leaving they “begged them” to come back the next week. The whole city showed up to hear The Word. Once again, opposition arose because the Jews were questioning the teachings of Paul and Barnabas. The Bible exposes the beauty and opposition associated with expository preaching.

In Acts 2, Luke paints a beautiful picture of expository preaching and its effect on church health. Luke writes, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”(Acts 2:42) Just as Jesus had instructed the apostles, they passed along that instruction to the new believers. In keeping with Jesus’ teaching to them (chap. 1), this would have included such subjects as repentance, his resurrection, the Old Testament Scriptures, the Christian witness, and indeed their reminiscences of Jesus’ earthly ministry and teachings.⁸²

Faithful exposition of the Word of God is vital to church health. The Word of God is the church’s foundation, and without it, the church ceases to be biblical. Jesus died for the church, and to “neglect the sincere milk of the Word of God,” as Peter calls it in 1 Peter 2:2 is to mock the sacrifice that Christ made on Calvary for His bride. She needs the truth!

⁸² John Polhill, *The New American Commentary, Acts* vol. 26, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 119.

After receiving the Gospel the new converts also had great fellowship (Acts 2:46). The word *κοινωνία*, which Luke uses for fellowship, is a favorite word of Paul's, though this is the only time it appears in Luke's writings. Its basic idea is sharing, but it also denotes intimacy and participation in life. It is used nineteen times in the New Testament and indicates that the church used it for the unique sharing that Christians have with God and other Christians.⁸³ The church that does not value sharing is a self-centered church. People-centered presentations of the gospel teach people to be selfish and devalue the relationship with God and their neighbor. Fellowship speaks of unity as a community, endeavoring for one cause and having all things in common, as Luke says in Acts 2: 44.

The breaking of bread is also an aspect of fellowship. Scholars have disagreed on the exact meaning of this breaking of bread because of the definite article before bread. Breaking bread describes an ordinary meal initiation in the Jewish fashion of breaking a loaf with the hands and giving thanks to God.⁸⁴ The term "The Lord's Supper" did not occur until Second Century A.D. by Ignatius. The reality of Christian fellowship found expression from the earliest times in the ordinary activity of eating together. Undoubtedly, these meals had a unique character because they were associated with teaching, praying and praising. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts Acts 2: 46 and this gladness resulted in praising God, Acts 2: 47. Perhaps as they gave thanks for their food, they also focused on the person and work of the Lord Jesus. They reminded one another of the basis of their fellowship in him.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ajith Fernando, *Acts, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 120.

⁸⁴ Peterson, *The Acts*, 161.

⁸⁵ Peterson, *The Acts*, 161.

The final component of this great movement was that the church was devoted to prayer. Prayer in Greek is the plural word προσευχαῖς, which means that they prayed intentionally for various personal and communal needs. Sadly, prayer is much neglected in many churches today. Programs, concerts, entertainment, or the testimonies of the rich and famous draw large crowds. Prayer meetings, on the other hand, attract only the faithful few. That is undoubtedly the reason for much of the weakness in the contemporary church. Unlike the early church, many have forgotten the Bible's commands to pray at all times (Luke 18:1; Eph. 6:11) and to be devoted to prayer (Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2).⁸⁶

Theoretical Foundation

The Bible reveals God's love for people seeking a plan to have a relationship with Him. Matthew records:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' (Matt. 16: 13-18)

The religious elite repudiated Jesus (Matt. 16: 1–4); the disciples lacked sufficient faith in him to understand his most basic warnings (Matt. 16: 5–12). However, now, informed by Jesus' works (Matt. 14:33) and perhaps by a new understanding of Jesus' role concerning their people's religious establishment (16:1–12), the disciples are on the verge of a new level of understanding

⁸⁶ John. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament*, 84.

revelation.⁸⁷ Jesus led the disciples out of Jewish territory into the pagan city of Caesarea Philippi. In this strange place, Jesus offers revelation in the form of a question. “Who do men say that I am?” The disciples’ response displayed the traditions of their community, for they answered John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the Prophets. The disciples’ answers were typical Jewish responses.

Jesus then asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Impulsively Peter exclaims, “You are the Christ, Son of the living God.” It is not enough to know Jesus as a mere prophet. He is the Christ; the exclusive Savior of the universe. The undisputed champion of redemption. An outsider knows Him only as a prophet, but those that follow him closely know Him as the Christ. The Church’s foundation is the Word of God, and the Church will prevail because the Word of God will never fail. Preaching that does not argue for Jesus as the Christ is not preaching at all. If anyone should know who Jesus is, His Church should, drawing from a steady expositional diet of the Word of God.

The Bible announces an explicit identification of Jesus Christ, and it gives instructions to follow Him. Following Him leads to salvation, discipleship and healthy churches. The Bible is the authoritative Word of God enacted in the lives of humanity. Undoubtedly there is agreement that the Bible exposes God’s love, a relationship with Him, and a plan for man, but the processes of exposing this truth may differ. Don Sunukjian writes, First, a topical message, as all good preaching, attempts to communicate a single idea — one central truth, one dominant sentence that expresses the sermon in a nutshell. Second, this central truth comes from several different passages, each of which genuinely addresses the same specific subject. At this point, many

⁸⁷ Craig. Keener, *Matthew, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, vol. 1, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 83.

topical messages go biblically astray, as the preacher makes a passage speak about a subject other than the one intended by the original writer. Expository preaching seeks to expose the original writer's intent. "All preaching must be expository, in the strict sense that preachers must bring out of scripture what God by his Spirit has breathed into scripture. If preachers fail to do that, they may be no better than idle dreamers of dreams (Deut. 13:1) and their sermons of no more value than any other human opinions."⁸⁸ The expository preaching style has a direct impact on church health. The results are either quickly revealed or revealed throughout the life of individuals in the church by regenerate hearts that follow the Lord Jesus.

Churches use a variety of ways to gauge church health, both intentionally and unintentionally. The God-called pastor is concerned about the church and, at times, frustrated by the lack of participating disciples when it comes to ministry inside and beyond the four walls. The Bible cautions believers about walking by sight and not by faith. (2 Cor. 5:7) The ability to count people does not guarantee the presence of regenerated hearts. Measuring the effectiveness of discipleship by sight only considers what the eye beholds, but the eye cannot discern changes in men's hearts. Pastors are not immune to the temptation of deciding the health of their churches based on immediate sight. But in doing so, they miss out on the invisible changes that only happen through expository preaching God's Word.

Reggie McNeal of Leadership Network states that the typical metrics in the church can lead to wrong behavior, "The old church scorecard of how many, how often, how much—measures of church activity—is counterproductive to participating in the missional renaissance.

⁸⁸ Ash, *The Priority of*, 107-108.

The old scorecard keeps us church-absorbed. As long as we use it, we will continue to be inwardly focused, program-driven, and church-based in our thinking.”⁸⁹ The measurement of church health cannot rest solely on the results of tangible interaction. Traditions die hard in the church and must be checked by the Word of God if they will have a biblical result.

When it comes to collecting data to gain a feel for church health, many churches are unclear about what data is meaningful to their ministry. Some churches measure their effectiveness by the number of people that attend Sunday school each week and assume that numbers equate to active disciples. That parishioners are present is encouraging, but does it accurately measure church health or mean that attendees are true disciples?

Giving is another means that churches use to measure church health and growth. This post-modern age pressures the church to associate success with money instead of biblical stewardship. There is a tendency to pay close attention to the bottom line while neglecting faith confessions in the Lord Jesus. Budgets and finances play their part in the church’s life but are not accurate indicators of church health. Pastors can always see the numbers on the financial reports, but the motive behind the giving can vary, and impure motives sometimes are hidden. Biblical giving is the consequence of obedience as an act of worship to God.

Functioning ministries are another visible indicator that many pastors use to evaluate church health. While outreach ministries are vital to the church, one must consider the bait of outreach. The church’s main attraction should be the Word of God, and not the flashing lights and smoking mirrors of people-pleasing church services. Evangelism is one of the most essential yet neglected ministries in the church. Many churches only consider evangelism when the

⁸⁹ Mike Bonem, “Measuring what Matters,” *Christianity Today*, (2014), accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/spring/measuringmatters.html>.

number of congregants begins to decline, and rather than doing evangelism as a biblical mandate, it becomes a desperate mission. In desperation, churches become tempted to share a people-centered presentation of the gospel that prefates social status or self-promotion. Healthy churches are concerned with sharing the truth of Jesus Christ and not succumbing to society's pressures.

There has been much debate over the function of baptism throughout church history. Some churches use the sprinkling method, while others believe in total immersion, which is the author's conviction. Baptism does not save anyone. It is symbolic of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Rom. 6:4). Once a confession of faith in the Lord Jesus is made, the church baptizes the individual according to Matthew 28:19. It is tempting to say that everyone immersed in the water comes up saved, but under which Christ are they baptized? Erroneous interpretation and exposition of the Bible lead to false confessions in a people-centered Christ. Immersing an individual does not mean that a change of heart has taken place. If baptism is a measurement tool used by the church, it would be a possible measurement of confessions of faith, not discipleship, since it takes place after the initial confession of faith.

This project seeks to reveal discipleship as the actual measurement of church health. Parodically, discipleship is simple, but the accompanying practice is complex (Luke 6:47). To be a follower of Jesus is simple in that individuals have a script that details how the disciple should walk in this corrupt age. The complexity comes when individuals must prioritize their lives as disciples and reserve lordship only for Jesus Christ. Expository preaching and teaching will produce disciples and thereby improve church health. Luke records Jesus saying:

²⁶ If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For

which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26-33)

Jesus uses confrontive language to describe what it means to be His disciple. He says that a disciple must hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters. The Greek word μισεῖ is translated hate in English and means a severe dislike. From Matt 10:37, one understands that this means to “love [one’s family] less.” It is a word of comparison. This is evident from Gen 29:30–31, where Jacob’s greater love for Rachel (29:30) is phrased as (שָׂנְאָה) hating Leah (29:31, RSV). Compare also Deut 21:15–17, where the same love-hate dichotomy is used. ⁹⁰ Christ declares that discipleship starts with allegiance to Him as a priority. The church contains members that are in love, but the question is with whom? The application here is that loving someone more than God is evident when an individual seeks to please that person at the expense of making God of less importance. Individuals should remember that God does not allow disciples to have anyone or thing in the place that only He can occupy.

Many parishioners are content with a surface relationship with God in the church but long for deep intimate relationships with others. Disciples choose the way of life laid out in the scriptures. A person who commits themselves to Christ will develop a greater love for both neighbor and family, although at times loving and following Christ may be seen as renunciation,

⁹⁰ Robert Stein, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture, The New American Commentary vol. 24* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 397.

rejection, or hate if the family does not share the same commitment to Christ.⁹¹ The Apostle John writes, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35) Individuals develop earthly bonds with a family that can be broken and twisted into hatred and even death. The bond with Christ is a spiritual bond and more durable than the earthly bond. Undoubtedly, life will always lead individuals to the crossroads of choosing between being a people pleaser or a God pursuer. A disciple learns to choose his or her relationship with Christ over earthly relationships. Expository preaching sets a person up for genuine heart change. A change of heart leads to committed disciples who value their connection with Christ over earthly relationships and improve church health.

In John 13:27, Jesus says that whoever does not take up his cross and follow him cannot be his disciple. The aspect of hating one’s family is only the first step to discipleship. Again, by comparison to one’s love for God, all other relationships pale into insignificance. Jesus now says that disciples follow Him. Making up the mind to do a thing is good, but if the actions do not follow the change of mind or heart, the realization of the change will not be apparent.

Discipleship is not a disorganized plan of following Jesus. Instead, it is an intentional following according to His plans revealed in His Word. Having a home built is a high aspiration, but if the house’s construction does not follow the plans drawn by the architect, the house will not stand for long. For individuals to know what a disciple of Jesus Christ is, there must be an

⁹¹ Stein, *Luke*, 397.

explicit declaration of the plan. The grace of Jesus is evident in preparing His disciples for this word by speaking first of self-denial. Only when one has forgotten himself completely, when one no longer knows himself, only then are believers ready to take up the cross for His sake. When His disciples only know Him, they also no longer know their own cross's pain. Then they see only Him. If Jesus had not been so gracious in preparing his followers for this word, then they could not bear it. However, this way, He has made believers capable of hearing this hard word as grace. The Word meets believers in the joy of discipleship and confirms them in it.⁹² Society has taught individuals that the difficulties of life are the crosses they bear. Sadly, the crosses of the age have nothing to do with the cross associated with discipleship. Church health is hanging on the hinges of the Cross of Calvary, and a church that does not preach Christ in the purest form will not make disciples.

Expository preaching is concerned with the heart of God and declares the Word of God in harmony with the Will of God. Preaching that respects the supremacy of God prepares the church for better church health and people-building ministries. People-centered sermons fail to make God the “Big Idea,” or central focus of preaching, and the church that has a small god will see swells, but never real growth in discipleship. Every problem a person has is related to the person's concept of God. If an individual has a big God, he will have small problems. If an individual has a small God, he will have big problems. It is that simple. When God is big, every potential problem becomes an opportunity. When God is small, every problem becomes an

⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Costly Discipleship*, 86.

obstacle.⁹³ Good preaching is expository preaching that makes a big deal out of God as He has declared himself in Scripture.

Prayer

Prayer is a crucial component of expository preaching. What is prayer? Prayer is communicating with God. It is important to note that prayer is a dialogue as opposed to a monologue. In other words, prayer is not all about talking to God, but it also allows God to speak. How then does He speak? He speaks through His Word to the heart of the believer. The Psalmist declares that the Word of God is “hidden in his heart.” (Psalm 119:11) The original Hebrew word (סֵתֵר) commonly translated hidden is better translated as treasured. It means to hold something as valuable and precious. As pastors communicate with God, the Word of God becomes more precious and ministers to the preacher while he is in prayer.

Prayer will also assist the minister in the art of slowing down. With so many daily responsibilities tugging at preachers, it is easy to become so busy that prayer time is limited and, in many cases, non-existent. Those who have left the deepest impression on this sin-cursed earth have been men and women of prayer. The scriptures reveal that prayer has been the mighty power that has moved not only God but also people. Abraham was a man of prayer; and angels came down from heaven to converse with him. Jacob’s prayer was answered in the wonderful interview at Peniel, which resulted in his having such a mighty blessing and softened his brother Esau’s heart. The child Samuel was given in answer to Hannah’s prayer; Elijah’s prayer closed up the heavens for three years and six months, and he prayed again, and the heavens gave rain.⁹⁴

⁹³ Walter A. Henrichsen, *Disciples are Made not Born: Making Disciples out of Christians* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975), 41.

⁹⁴ D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer: What Hinders It* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1885), 7.

The list goes on of examples of biblical characters who thrust themselves at the feet of God in prayer. The saints of old often sang a song proclaiming that, “Jesus is on the mainline; tell Him what you want. His line is never busy; tell Him what you want. Call Him up and tell Him what you want.”⁹⁵ Of course, this song was a cry for needs to be met as slaves hoped for a better day, but these slaves wanted God to show up. Prayer should be a petition asking that God show up or manifest Himself through His Word.

The superficial results of many ministries, the deadness of others, are to be found in the lack of praying. No ministry can succeed without much praying, and this praying must be fundamental, ever-abiding, and ever-increasing. The text and the sermon should be the result of prayer.⁹⁶ One of the most significant errors in ministry is to desire quick results with minimal effort. Lazy minds toward God and ministry usually result in a superficial mindset of false expectations. God has the plan, and a failure to communicate with God fosters self-derived results for ministry. To men who think praying their primary business and devote time to it according to this high estimate of its importance, does God commit the keys of his kingdom, and by them does he work his spiritual wonders in this world. Great praying is the sign and seal of God’s great leaders and the earnestness of the conquering forces with which God will crown their labors. The preacher’s commission is praying as well as preaching. The mission is incomplete if those two crucial elements are left unattended. The preacher may speak with all the eloquence of men and angels, but unless he can pray with a faith that draws all heaven to his aid,

⁹⁵ Dwight "Gatemouth" Moore, Rev. Gatemouth Moore and his Gospel Singers, 1960.

⁹⁶ E.M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1999), 38.

preaching will be “as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal” for permanent God-honoring, soul-saving uses.⁹⁷

There are several areas that prayer should encompass. First, adoration is defined as the act of rendering divine honor, including in it reverence, esteem, and love. It signifies to apply the hand to the mouth, “to kiss the hand;” in Eastern countries, this is one of the great marks of respect and submission. The importance of coming before God in this spirit is great; therefore, it is so often impressed upon one in the Word of God.⁹⁸ Adoration acknowledges the supremacy of God and declares that there is no one like Him. It is respect for the rulership, reign, and sovereignty of God.

The second vital element of prayer is confession. The righteousness of man devoid Christ is a filthy rag before God. (Is. 64:6) No preaching moment is ever the result of worthiness or sinlessness. Preachers must remember to confess their sins in prayer before God to approach the pulpit as one forgiven rather than the prideful disposition of the self-righteous. Failure to do so will result in condemning sermons that lack conviction and make the preacher the sermon’s hero.

Thirdly, thanksgiving is a must in prayer. The preacher should be thankful that God has called, chosen, and commissioned him as His mouthpiece. God has chosen preachers based on His sovereign will, according to His eternal plan of redemption. The preacher should also be thankful for health, family, resources, and people to whom he shares the Word of God. The failure to be thankful stems from a self-deserving attitude that robs God of His goodness to the individual.

⁹⁷ Bounds, *Power*, 38.

⁹⁸ Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 19.

Fourth, forgiveness is difficult at times but essential to healthy prayer life. A significant ministry error is preaching that encourages congregations to let go of past hurts while the preacher simultaneously holds on to the personal hurt within himself. It is easy to lie to people, but honesty with God about personal life is vital and paramount in prayer. The weight of an unforgiving heart will eventually affect the preparation and presentation of the sermon. The preaching moment should never aim at getting even with someone who has offended the preacher. However, the preaching moment should be filled with Biblical clarity to fix and free both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Fifth, every prayer uttered by a preacher should include a plea for faith. Sharing the Word of God concisely brings with it a certain tension from without and within. From without, society attacks the preacher because he, by the Spirit of God, disrupts fallen humanity's chaos with the truth of the Word of God. From within, the preacher must allow the Word of God to transform him and avoid becoming a castaway, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:27. Every minister should pray for faith not to sell out to the day's cultural pressures and the heart's internal wrestling to compromise truth. A preacher that does not have a healthy dependence upon God will not be able to resist the temptation of watered-down preaching.

Sixth, ask God what He wants to say through His vessel. One tendency in determining what to preach is only to select comfortable texts. The preacher should pray for the boldness and courage to preach texts that challenge his weaknesses. Preaching about getting a blessing is easy, but sermons about self-discipline and submission are needful, although the reception may seem slow.

Lastly, the preacher should pray for humility. It is easy to become overwhelmed with others' kind words concerning the preaching moment and rob God of glory through selfish pride.

The only superstar in preaching is Christ, and He alone deserves the glory in preaching. Prayer does not mean bringing God down to man's thoughts and purposes and bending His government according to foolish, silly, and sometimes sinful notions. Prayer means that man is raised up into feeling, into union and design with Him; that man must enter into His counsel and fully carry out His purpose.⁹⁹ Preaching is about God's glory as opposed to the preacher's popularity.

Praying leaders enlist praying followers. Pastors and preachers should pray not only because the Word of God demands it, (Luke 18:1) but also to model the Biblical mandate for their congregations. Preaching that sets the church ablaze for God only comes through a preacher on fire for God, which starts in prayer. In the first chapter of Acts, Luke writes about receiving power after the Holy Ghost has come upon them and then witnessing in their city, surrounding cities, enemy territory, and the world. As mentioned earlier, the original Greek word for power is a word from which modern society derives the word dynamite. Ignited dynamite causes an explosion. The point is that believers cannot cause an explosion for Christ in their homes, regions, enemies, and world except there first be an explosion within themselves. Likewise, preachers must witness the explosion to have a passion for sharing the Word of God without apology.

Additionally, prayer is intercession. As preachers pray, the congregation should be included in their petitions to God. It is hypocritical to want to see a change in the people but not want to pray for them. Biblical pastor-preachers seek to partner with their congregations in prayer.

⁹⁹ Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 102.

Chapter 3

Description of Research Methodology

Intervention

This project was born out of the personal experience where the researcher who functioned as project facilitator felt as if he was not in tune with the scriptures enough to help people grow and observe the various preaching models in the East Texas area. This study evaluates the norms, both cultural and associational, of preaching and takes a hard look at the sermon preparation process. Biblically-based preaching is concerned with accurate interpretation and not the aesthetics of this post-modern culture.

The researcher served as the facilitator of this project. The idea or process of beginning the project started before the host enrolled in the D.Min. program. For years the idea or concept of the effects of watered-down preaching existed. This concept became a burden on the facilitator's heart and the topic of many discussions among association pastors. The facilitator approached O.E.T.B.A.'s moderator and asked for permission to engage pastors in the association as a target group for the project.

Preparation

Enhancing church health through an expository preaching project aims to expose the original writer's intent by enlisting local pastors to preach God-centered sermons across ten weeks. The requirements to participate included being 18 years of age or older, pastoring a church in the O.E.T.B.A, and possessing at least three years of pastoral experience. The project facilitator serves as the director of the Congress of Christian Education in the O.E.B.T.A. Elderly pastors who have pastored their churches for twenty-five plus years make up most of the pastoral population of the O.E.T.B.A. When approaching a targeted group for the study, a concentration was put on pastors who had pastored at least three years. The pastors who were selected had no formal theological training and, for the most part, little secular education beyond high school. Various conversations about preaching in the area occurred between some of the targeted participants and the project facilitator before the project's inception. There was a growing frustration with watered-down, man-centered preaching that minimized God's sovereignty because of its negative effect on the church. These conversations revealed the need for a project of this nature. Some preachers experienced difficulties finding sermons, and some complained that many texts were too problematic and difficult to understand. This led to a method of sermon preparation centered on people's needs rather than explaining the biblical text. At various associational meetings, the question of church growth was always present. The encouragement in most meetings was that pastors get a good handle on reaching more people by implementing new programs or strategies. However, if reaching more people is not a product of a proper understanding of the biblical text, it will only lead people to be uninformed concerning what God requires of their lives as followers of Christ. The problem with the concentration on church growth is that it neglects an in-depth look at the root cause of the great exodus from the church in this post-modern society and proposes a diet of bells and whistles in order to maintain and add to

church membership. When preacher/pastors learn the proper means and mode of sermon preparation, the result will be churches that hunger for God's Word.

The selection of possible participants came through the facilitator's observance of sermons at association meetings and visits to area churches. In these settings, the prevailing norm was sermon presentations of reading the biblical text but failing to address it in an expositional way and sermons that incited affirmations of "amen" but lacked biblical conviction. As in virtually all communities, the East Texas area holds several pastors in high esteem for their preaching style. This unchecked esteem has generated a concentration on style and voice inflection while failing to give attention to substance. The writer contends that this mindset leads to idolizing men and man-centered presentations of the Gospel. The writer suggests that this mindset also leads to a lack of hermeneutical and homiletical accuracy. Various one on one conversations revealed an over-concentration on closing a sermon and that too much detail would render the sermon boring and ineffective. This only confirms an attentiveness to the feelings and emotions of the audience. Preaching that is only aimed at hitting areas of people's interests does not manifest an attempt to expose the original writer's intent. Every preacher is known for some function that he does while preaching. The problem arises when the function only brings personal popularity and fails to produce biblical clarity.

Additionally, many pastors purchase sermons at conventions instead of doing the hard work of prayer and personal sermon preparation through exegetical study. It would seem as if the preachers were overly concerned with looking around instead of looking up to God through sermon preparation. For the most part, the project participants are pastors of small churches who seek to create an emotional buzz during the preaching moment in hopes of gaining more

attendees. Church growth is not bad, but it must focus on the quality of disciples and not the quantity of attendees.

Project Objectives

The project's first objective was to foster relationships with the group to create an atmosphere of openness and honesty concerning sermon preparation and preaching. The facilitator made it clear that this was a project where all would learn and improve because it challenged all involved to look deeper into God's Word. The desired outcome was that preachers develop or better maintain a firm grip on biblical accuracy in interpretation.

Second, the project worked hard to expose participants to exegetically engaging the text before consulting commentaries personally. The group was honest about a heavy dependence upon commentaries. The group had replaced searching out the scriptures with consulting the thoughts of men who were theologically off base in some cases. The introduction of the spiritual discipline of spending time with the text took place during Orientation.

Third, the project attempted to steer the group away from the notion of church growth and align them with the idea of church health. There existed a focus on numbers correlating to a healthy church. This focus could result in discouragement because the average church in the O.E.B.T.A. consists of about twenty-five members. This project was concerned with church health by way of a steady diet of reading, studying, and applying the Word of God.

Fourth, this project proposed a systematic approach to sermon preparation. Project worksheets introduced a pattern to follow that would produce God-centered sermons. The worksheet involves observing the text, word studies, contextual investigation, relating the text to the

contemporary audience, the faith element, and a manuscript template. Studying in an organized fashion was not a strong point among the group, making a systematic approach necessary.

Fifth, getting participants to become writers was important. There existed a need to write out thoughts about the text to narrow down the text's presentation. The encouragement to write also will aid in retaining information about the selected passage. Writing sermon manuscripts also helps distinguish what is urgent from what is important, but not necessary to make the point clear.

Sixth, the project sought to preach God's whole counsel and move away from only preaching comfortable passages. The Bible's miracles are the most preached among the group, and a challenge to preach beyond miracles was issued.

Lastly, the project argued for study and preaching that exposes the heart of the original writer's intent. This objective sought to produce God-centered sermons that maximized the supremacy of God.

The Intervention

The pre-interview served to discover the methods of sermon preparation that participants were currently using. The researcher sought to obtain a clear view of individual pastors' thoughts of sermon preparation and learn how they came to their preferred process.

Interview Questions

IQ1- Please explain the experience of being called to preach.

IQ2- How familiar were you with the scriptures when you were called?

IQ3- How do you feel about the supremacy of God in preaching as it relates to your view of the text?

IQ4- What influences your preaching?

IQ5- How often do you evaluate your sermons, and what criteria is used to do so?

IQ6- What is your definition of church health, and how is it measured?

IQ7- How do you approach sermon preparation, and what are your primary tools?

IQ8- How is the original writer's intent exposed in your sermon preparation process?

IQ9- What is expository preaching?

IQ10- If you could change one thing about your sermon preparation process, what would it be?

The intervention activities took place at the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church youth building. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines, participants were seated six feet apart, wore face masks, and used hand sanitizer as they entered the building. Additionally, temperatures were taken, and brief health questionnaires were filled out. The classroom setting included books, Logos Bible software visuals through projection, and handout materials. Participants received a project notebook for their keeping. The coordinator stored all hard copy forms in the top file cabinet drawer of the coordinator's office inside Pleasant Grove Baptist Church. Only the coordinator had access to the file cabinet, and the forms and all personal information was shredded at the project's completion. A scan disc flash drive was used to store electronic information and only inserted into the Lenovo desktop computer in the coordinator's office. Files were deleted from the thumb drive after data was analyzed. The coordinator's office has locks on both doors, and only the coordinator has access.

The participants attended an orientation meeting to discuss the project's details and familiarize themselves with the new process. A detailed explanation of the project was vital because of the preacher's sensitive nature when addressing sermon preparation. The proposed approach did not aim to offend any preacher concerning his approach to sermon preparation. However, due to the nature of the project, prideful resistance was inevitable. Navigating through this issue proved difficult, and restating the project's purpose and coaching the group was paramount to completing the project. Body postures changed with the unveiling of the project, and a sense of uneasiness was apparent. The facilitator left much space for questions throughout the orientation process on Monday evening before week one and often asked the participants to clarify their understanding of the project by restating the information. A communication gap existed because some participants attempted to understand and explain the project through their current sermon preparation practices instead of paying attention to the project's systematic approach. Some participants thought that the project was a class and wanted their sermons graded. However, the facilitator firmly reminded them that the project's goal was to help them expose the original writer's intent, and they would receive coaching along the way.

The project unintentionally produced an accountability element because those with genuine hearts earnestly wanted to become more biblically accurate preachers. An invitation was extended to twelve pastors to participate in the project, but only eight committed by signing consent forms. The consent form was very detailed concerning the nature of the project and included an outline of expectations and a time frame for completing tasks. A video recorded interview took place at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church to determine the participants' current sermon development, study process, and preaching style (see figure 1). Post project interviews took place on Zoom for all but one pastor due to internet issues.

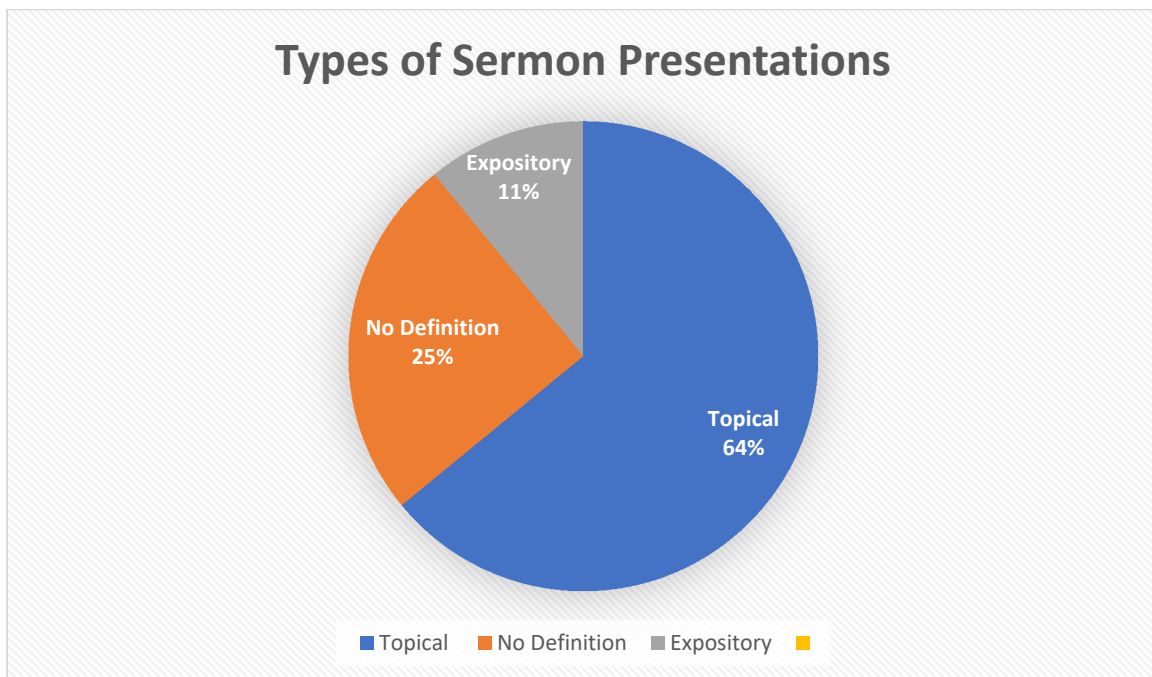


Figure 1.

Post Interview Questions

PIQ1- What are your thoughts about expository preaching and how it affects church health?

PIQ2- Would you say that poor sermon preparation is partially responsible for poor church health and decline?

PIQ3- How has your approach to sermon preparation changed, and what new tools have become primary tools?

The project included preparing and preaching ten sermons across ten weeks using the provided method. This objective introduced a methodical, predetermined calendar of selected texts (see appendix 1). The calendar included preaching through the book of Philippians, selected

passages from the first four chapters of Mark's gospel, John chapter six, and Revelation chapter twelve. Six participants struggled to embrace this idea of planned preaching because they felt that it was somewhat unspiritual. Through encouragement and explanation, after week one when the pressure of not knowing what to preach the following Sunday was relieved, the participants embraced the process. The project utilized inductive Bible study worksheets that focused on the selected text. Participants compiled the information from the worksheets and wrote sermon manuscripts. Pastors tuned into weekly Zoom meetings each Tuesday from 6 to 7 pm. to track progress and ask questions concerning the project's methodology.

Weekly Zoom Meetings

The weekly Zoom meeting offered the participants an opportunity to ask questions concerning the project and break the project down into smaller pieces to ensure clarity. Week one highlighted the subjects of prayer, spending time with the text, and diagramming. Week two focused on recapping the previous week and textual observation questions. Group participants were familiar with the normal who, what, when, where, and why of the text, but this observation process involved observing culture, theological themes, references to the Old Testament, repeated words, and the supremacy of God as well. In week three, a clarification of the method and textual observation questions took place. Word studies was also introduced. Week four focused on a preliminary understanding of the biblical text through observation, word studies, and contextual investigation. This week also included formulating a sermon thought derived from the text. Week five was designated for hands-on coaching and prayer. In week six, the participants were allowed time to work independently, and no Zoom meeting took place. Week seven focused on building a bridge from the biblical audience to the contemporary setting. Week eight dealt with the faith appeal, developing and clarifying sermon divisions which exposes how

the text builds one's faith in God. Weeks nine and ten encompassed developing manuscripts and correcting earlier manuscripts using the proposed method.

Zoom Session Questions

ZQ1- How did last week's lesson affect the sermon preparation process?

ZQ2- Are there questions concerning last week's lesson?

ZQ3- How will last week's lesson be used to better the sermon preparation process in the coming weeks?

Church Member Group

The pastors selected three church members who were eighteen years old or older to journal about their spiritual growth each week as their pastor preached the Word of God. The pastors compiled a list of participating church members' names and email addresses. Consent forms were sent by email, and participating church members were asked to sign and return them to the facilitator within twenty-four hours. Church member requirements included completing a pre-project questionnaire, attending church at least three to four times each month, taking sermon notes, and journaling about their spiritual growth throughout the process. The facilitator emailed post-project questionnaires to the participant members and asked them to reply within three days.

Member Pre-project Questionnaire

MQ1- How long have you been an active member of this church?

MQ2- Would you consider yourself a student of the word of God or someone that rarely reads the Bible?

MQ3- How motivated are you to be a part of your church's evangelism and discipleship ministry?

MQ4- Do you consider yourself to be growing spiritually? How so?

Church Member Journal Criteria

CMC1- Pray for your pastor each week.

CMC2- What areas are you challenged to grow in?

CMC3- What is the Word of God motivating you to do for Him?

CMC4- What principle from the sermon can be applied to your life immediately?

For church members the focus was on their personal growth throughout the process and not an attempt to grade their pastor. Church member participants completed an end of project questionnaire that focused on their spiritual growth and response to work in the church.

Church Member Post-Project Questionnaire

PCM1- Have you noticed a change in the way that your pastor presents the gospel?

PCM2- Are you challenged to grow and be more active as a result of that growth?

PCM3- What has changed in your response to life since having The Word of God explained in a different manner?

PCM4- Are you motivated to assist in the ministries of evangelism and discipleship?

Summary

The pre-interview sessions with pastors exposed sermon preparation practices that focused on reading commentaries and Saturday night study times. The pastor group was familiar

with the term supremacy of God, but not all prepared with the concept in mind. As for the original writer's intent, the pre-interviews revealed that many felt they were already competent in that area. Concerning church health, the overwhelming majority defined it numerically by stating that more people in the pews equated to a healthy church.

All church members responded that they were active weekly attendees of Sunday morning worship. There was not a high percentage of them that read their Bibles daily. None of the churches involved in the project had functioning evangelism or discipleship ministries. The church members were either stagnant in their spiritual growth or experienced burnout with the church.

Orientation

The project began with Orientation one week before the project start date. The purpose of this study is to train preachers to systematically approach preparation in order to produce God-centered sermons that enhance church health. Orientation started by first defining church health. As mentioned earlier, the norm in the O.E.B.T.A. conversation among pastors was church growth strategies that did not consider sermon preparation. Clarification of the distinction between church health and church growth became the over-arching theme of discussion. Church growth can be overly concerned with quantity but neglect quality.

Church growth is the natural result of church health. However, the church is only healthy when the message is God-centered, and the preacher explains God's message for His people. Healthy churches cannot emerge from messages that come from man-centered preaching that fosters a low view of God. The measurement of church health has everything to do with the parishioner's view of God. Pastors must uphold God's supremacy in the preaching moment by

clearly showing through the presentation of the text that God has power over all situations and circumstances. The essential message of the Bible is that God is, that God can, that God will, and that God has already. These are indicative statements.¹⁰⁰

The orientation meeting also laid out the project's timeframe and a day to day sermon preparation schedule. The expectation was for participants to preach ten expository sermons across twelve weeks. A preaching calendar was provided by the facilitator, which displayed the selected texts to be preached. After prayer and much consideration, the facilitator selected Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, select passages out of Mark's first four chapters, John chapter six, and Revelation chapter twelve. The idea was to preach whole units rather than fragments to get the full plot and understanding of the message. The John six and Revelation passages were added to include different genres. The initial response was that somehow pre-selected passages were unspiritual and that preachers relied on the Holy Spirit to give them passages to preach. Participants learned that expository preaching focuses on the immediate text's details and context, and it is how Jesus taught and preached. First, preachers are delivery boys that only have what the sender has sent. Let the text speak! Second, preaching acknowledges the Trinity and respects all three persons in the Godhead. It demands the supremacy of God (2 Cor.4:5). Third, preaching builds a bridge from the original audience to the contemporary audience. Fourth, preaching refuses the notion of satisfaction with cloudy thinking. Haddon Robinson says, "When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer with a word from God but only with another word from men."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 196.

¹⁰¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 7

The Orientation familiarized the group with the project's process and procedures and was a precursor to the further explanation and weekly Zoom meetings. The participants were confronted with clarifying their sermon preparation methods and encouraged to embrace new concepts. The group seemed to gain a better understanding of the project through Orientation, but some failed to understand its purpose. The project relied heavily upon *Wayne McDill's "12 Essential Steps for Great Preaching"*.¹⁰²

Textual Analysis and Structural Diagram

On week one at the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church youth house at 7 pm, the lesson focused on analyzing the selected text and the structural diagram. Expository preaching is methodical. It looks for the main idea as a whole before making assumptions concerning the text. Selecting text is a problem area for many pastors, and the norm in the O.E.T.B.A is to ignore textual unity and preach short passages that do not encompass the entire thought of the writer. The author taught that the entire unit or thought of the chapter or section should be kept in mind when approaching a particular text, keeping textual unity intact. It is said that a text without a context is a pre-text. Sadly, this is how many erroneous doctrines get their start. This idea was foreign to the group of pastors, and the group struggled to engage longer passages. Only getting part of the story inevitably leads to doctrines that are not biblical at all. Discussion among the group revealed little concern for textual unity and that knowing what to preach was a matter of relying on the Holy Spirit, which would mean that methodical preparation was somehow unspiritual. Not much attention was given to punctuation and structure in their personal sermon preparation models. Preachers must remember that the original text of scripture did not include

¹⁰² McDill, *12 Essential Skills*.

the benefit of chapters and verses, so the end or beginning of a chapter does not always constitute a complete thought. Textual units are most easily identified by the presence of themes, which can be seen by observing repeated words or phrases. Other shifts can indicate a move to a new unit. The author may change the grammatical subject, genre, time and location, actor, verb tense, mood, person, and number. Some authors use words or ideas as bookends at the beginning and end of a unit. Others use certain words or phrases throughout a book to mark the beginnings of units such as addresses ("brothers"), commands, or connectives.¹⁰³

The expository approach involves inductive research of the text. By inductive, the author means that the student should dive into the text instead of merely dipping the proverbial toe into the text's water. A fundamental principle for useful research is the use of the primary document. This principle seemed to shock several participants because their norm was first consulting commentaries. The Bible is the primary document for sermon study. Inductive Bible study begins with what the text says and involves a careful and systematic examination. What someone else thinks it says is secondary and given consideration in a later stage, after the preacher has observed what is in the text and systematically raised questions that come to mind about it.¹⁰⁴ Acquiring a firm handle on the text allows the Holy Spirit to illuminate the text and purpose in the preacher's mind and heart. The preacher must approach the text with an open mind in order to glean what the original writer is saying. Reading the text repeatedly to the point of reciting it is crucial to this step in the sermon preparation process. The inductive model was a radical shift in the approach to the text for the group due to their previous mindset toward sermon preparation.

¹⁰³ McDill, 12 *Essential Skills*, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 16.

Structural Diagram

The structural diagram helps the sermon preparer see various text relationships and paints a visual word picture. Additionally, a structural diagram is a phrase-by-phrase chart of the text using the exact word order in the translation. Its purpose is to show in graphic form the relationship of various ideas in the text. To create a structural diagram, one must construct the structural diagram by copying the text wording in order, one phrase at a time. Beginning with the first independent clause (a clause that can stand alone), main ideas are set to the left and subordinate ideas to the right. Then one must vertically line up equal ideas. Connectives are set apart in brackets. With the structural diagram, the Bible student can better recognize and identify the rhetorical function of the text's various phrases.¹⁰⁵ Please note that this process takes practice, and the preparer will become more efficient with the continued implementation of the method. While performing this task, the sermon preparer must follow the following steps.

First, copy the exact wording of the text in the translation of choice. It may be handwritten or copied from a program and pasted into a word document.

Second, identify the first independent clause in the text and write or paste it on the far left of the page. Each new clause in the text will need to be placed on the left margin as well. An independent clause is a clause that can stand alone.

Third, place supporting clauses or phrases under the words that they modify. Placing them under the words they modify will show their relationship to the independent clause's word.

¹⁰⁵ McDill, 12 *Essential Skills*, 18.

Fourth, write all direct quotations on the left margin as well. Even though the dialogue in a text may be part of a paragraph that includes such introductory words as "he said to him," or "and he replied," place the words of the quotation to the left margin. These direct statements are complete in themselves, even though they are a part of the narrative. They do not modify "said" or "replied" like other modifiers.

Fifth, place connecting words in brackets for emphasis. These words connect various clauses in the text. Some examples are and, but, therefore, if, and so that.

Sixth, underline verbs that emphasize roles or actions in the text.

Seventh, highlight words that have theological significance.

Lastly, draw lines to show the connection between words with phrases that are separated by other words. Connect the subject with verbs and verbs with other verbs.¹⁰⁶

With these steps completed, the preacher will have a greater understanding of the text's keywords and relationships, which will lend great insight into the next step. The structural diagram proved difficult for the entire group because of a lack of understanding of identifying independent clauses. Some one-on-one coaching sessions helped the group better understand how to identify independent clauses and other grammatical and punctuation issues. The coaching sessions used zoom as the technology platform for meeting together.

Observation

A Zoom chat in week two covered the fundamental skill for biblical interpretation: observation. All other skills depend on it. Preachers miss a great deal of the Bible due to hasty

¹⁰⁶ McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 26.

and careless examination of the biblical text. Preachers need to beware of preconceptions. The first task is observing the text and discovering what the Bible has to say, which is why a structural or textual diagram is essential. Observation is carefully combing through the text in a systematic way that exposes God's timeless truths. It is uncovering what is there, exposing the light in the text instead of bringing one's ideas that may be light to the preacher but fail to look to the text's light. Textual observation involves asking the right questions concerning the text. Of course the usual questions of who, what, when, why, and where are important, but other questions are essential. The group was asked to further expand their observation process by asking the following questions. In what culture is the text written? What words are repeated? Are there multiple speakers? How does the text display the supremacy of God? Is there tension in the text? Are there benefits for the speaker? Are there benefits for the listener? Is there a reference to the Old Testament? Are theological themes present? Is the speaker addressing a specific people or people in general?

The observation process came with some ease for the group because of some familiarity with the concept. Observing the text served to give them another step to take, a more profound step into sermon preparation.

Word Studies

Week three focused on word study techniques. The group had no formal training in the original languages. The facilitator presented a worksheet to help them navigate the language gap. Word studies are a critical component of textual analysis. Since the Bible was not originally written in English, students could not avoid the language gap. A little Greek and Hebrew in the minds of the preacher can be dangerous. For instance, the New Testament was written using approximately 12,143 different English words translated from approximately 5,437 different

Greek words.¹⁰⁷ One could easily look up the root of a word and give a faulty interpretation of a text without correct word study. Once the preacher has a handle on the text structure he must give attention to specific words and the relationships between them. Word studies can help the expositor determine the text's literal meaning by revealing the simple, direct, obvious, and literal sense of the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences of the passage. One should never minimize the use of a particular word. Irving L. Jensen writes:

Just as a great door swings on small hinges, the important theological statements of the Bible often depend upon even the smallest words, such as prepositions and articles. Using another picture, one writer has said that as the smallest dewdrop on the meadow at night has a star sleeping in its bosom, so the most insignificant passage of scripture has in it a shining truth.¹⁰⁸

The minister should observe the word's function, identifying the part of speech. An examination of the root word lends more extraordinary insight into the word studied. The preacher should also pay attention to how the author uses the word. The tense and mood are essential to how the meaning of a word is derived. The mood is a property of verbs that shows the mood or attitude of the speaker. The mood denotes whether the speaker is asserting a fact, asking a question, expressing a condition, or giving a command. There are three primary Greek moods: indicative, which states a fact; imperative, which issues a command; and the subjunctive, where the action is objectively possible but not reality. The Greek tenses tell if the word was spoken in the past, present, or future.

There should also be special attention given to the context of the passage because context helps determine meaning in many cases. Finally, use the word in a contemporary sentence.

¹⁰⁷ Notes from Introduction to New Testament Greek Class taught by Dr. Jim Shine at BMA Seminary in Jacksonville, TX, 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Jensen, Irving L., *Enjoy Your Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 99.

Conversations concerning word studies revealed a lack of understanding of the Greek language due to not taking a class or studying it. Some admitted that they regularly verbalize the Greek word in sermon presentations but failed to understand its pronunciation, usage, and etymology.

My students did not have a working knowledge of the Original languages, so the facilitator suggested a method for those who do not have a working knowledge. The facilitator suggested the following resources that may benefit the preacher in word studies:

- The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words¹⁰⁹
- Word Studies in the New Testament¹¹⁰
- Word Pictures in the New Testament¹¹¹
- Greek to English Interlinear Bible¹¹²

In summary, the sermon preparer must first, identify the word. Second, determine the original language of that word. Third, pay attention to the sources' use of the word. Fourth, consider the context to ensure studying of the correct meaning because the word may have multiple meanings. Lastly, use the word in a contemporary sentence.

Contextual Investigation

¹⁰⁹ James Strong, *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, Nelson Reference & Electronic Pub., Revised edition (Nashville: June, 1996).

¹¹⁰ Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1946).

¹¹¹ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930).

¹¹² Robert K. Brown and Phillip W. Comfort, *Greek to English Interlinear Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990).

In week four, the pastor group met at the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church youth house. The meeting began with reviewing the structural diagram guidelines, observation worksheet, and word studies. Following the review, the contextual investigation technique was introduced. The contextual investigation considers what bearing the context has on the immediate text. In this portion, the goal is to correctly see the text within the section, chapter, and Bible context. The sermon preparer must synthesize the meanings of the word studies and write how they contribute to the passage. Then he must discover the historical/cultural setting of the text. It will not be easy to convey an accurate message without understanding the text's background. Participants were instructed not to attempt to interpret individual verses in isolation from their context. As mentioned earlier, a text out of context is a pre-text. Both the immediate context and the inclusive context must be carefully examined. The Bible is one book, and understanding the full context, including the Old and New Testaments as the text may demand, is crucial. This investigation studies the literary, cultural, and language gaps of the text. It seeks to build a bridge from the setting of the text to the contemporary audience. Given the group's background of preaching topical sermons, the context was not a significant concern. One participant remarked that he was unfamiliar with the context of many passages because he rarely reads whole chapters or prepares sermons in an expository fashion. This comment made the need for the project even more apparent in that it exposed a somewhat man-centered concentration because failing to understand the context potentially leads to faulty interpretations of the immediate text. Man-centered presentations disturb church health because they are not faithful to the scriptures. The facilitator also asked the group to develop what they felt was the main idea or sermon thought for the selected passage, which the facilitator covered in greater detail in week seven.

Relating the Text to the Contemporary Audience

In week seven, through a Zoom chat, the facilitator introduced the concept of relating the text to the contemporary audience. The human element is the human condition that corresponds to the truths that are presented in the text. The factors of human experience may be described plainly in the text or only implied. The sermon preparer must distinguish the elements of human experience mentioned directly in the text as they pertained to the original textual setting. He must also identify the human issues suggested in the text by implication as the writer addresses problems of their day. He must then summarize the concepts from the text that will become the main ideas of the sermon. Participants were instructed to use the following categories to describe the possible experience of the person who needs to hear the message of the text as a remedy for their needs, while being careful to consider the symptoms of trouble that the person is experiencing. First, remember that preaching confronts problems that people are having resisting the evil one, the trouble of submitting to God in some area of life, or some possible sickness. Second, ask what the underlying assumptions are concerning the issues that humans experience. Third, what consequences does the text highlight as a possible result of the response to the trouble. One must not lose sight of the text's teaching point by working out through human reason what is already worked out in the scriptures. The point is not to come up with a new answer but to discover the answer already declared in the text. Last, consider how the suffering person feels at this point. The inability to feel the pain or struggle of others indicates a heart that is not close to Christ. The ability to identify with the suffering reveals a heart that knows the blessing of being forgiven and the glorious majesty of God's grace. The preacher can not forget that this is but one step in the sermon preparation process. It should not override the theme of the text in any way. This step should not be concerned with application, yet the text's application is a product of understanding the original author's intent to the immediate audience. Participants

three and five were somewhat carried away with the sermon's application aspect that they failed to derive it directly from the text. The goal is to build a bridge from the text to the contemporary audience on the foundation of biblical truths instead of feelings about humanity's current state.

The Sermon Thrust or Thought

Week seven's Zoom chat also covered information concerning the sermon thought. Stating the main subject of a Scriptural passage may be the most challenging area of sermon preparation. The sermon thought is the launching pad for the sermon presentation. This thought should be concise and broad simultaneously. Concise in that it should come from the text, but broad in that it should encompass the entire passage and can be broken down into small, more digestible divisions. The thought should answer the question, what is the overall theme of the selected passage? In week four of the project, students were challenged to formulate and clarify the selected passage's sermon thought for that week. The facilitator instructed them to avoid catchy phrases that failed to capture the text's overall teaching point. Broadus said, "To state one's central idea as the heart of the sermon is not always easy, especially in textual and expository preaching."¹¹³ To do the necessary word study, gathering the needed background data, and studying the contextual considerations is not difficult. However, to pull together in one succinct statement the essence of a paragraph of scripture can be a most rigorous assignment. Most pastors are extremely busy. They are preaching several times a week. That demand places severe strain upon the time available for preparation, and most find it challenging to find time to think through each sermon passage in this manner. Some preachers simply are lazy and refuse

¹¹³ Broadus, *A Treatise On*, 42.

to do the hard work of identifying the text's subject. The absolute necessity of doing this work is related directly to the nature of preaching itself. If the preacher's responsibility is to communicate what God already has said, then the central idea of any given sermon must reflect the central idea intended by the author himself.¹¹⁴ The aim here is to be clear in one's mind concerning the thought to avoid striving for relativity that lacks proper text application. Participants typically thrived on developing catchy titles that set the tone for the message. Students gained a better understanding of the text by seriously pondering it to produce a central sermon thought. When it comes to the sermon thought, the group's prevailing mindset was to think of it in terms of individual words or phrases instead of complete thoughts. Group discussion revealed that developing complete sentences or thoughts was challenging because most participants were only familiar with one-word sermon topics and sermon division titles.

Proper organization is key to orderly unpacking the text in a way that enhances church health. Wayne McDill suggests that the homiletical or narrative plot encompass five phases: situation, stress, search, solution, and new situation.¹¹⁵ All textual genres have a plot, though some may be more apparent than others. Feedback from the group did not reveal a struggle to access the situation and stress of the problem, but the major hurdle was drawing the solution directly from the text without pulling in human reason. The facilitator reiterated the importance of a single idea of sermon thought directly from the text. Notice the following guidelines for developing the sermon thought.

¹¹⁴ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 129.

¹¹⁵ McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 242.

First, any single sermon should have just one prevailing idea. The points or subdivisions should be parts of this one grand thought. Just as bites of any particular food are all parts of the whole cut into sizes that are both palatable and digestible, the sermon points should be smaller sections of the one theme. Break the central theme into tinier fragments the mind may grasp and assimilate in life.¹¹⁶

Secondly, an idea needs both a subject and a complement. If the sermon thought is foggy and hard to express, it may not be an accurate representation of the sermon's subject, which flows from the original writer's intent. A subject cannot stand alone. Alone it is incomplete and needs a complement or modifier. The complement completes the subject by answering the question, "what am I saying about what I am talking about"? Before the project, to the contrary, most participants were developing strong titles in their estimation, and they were satisfied with foggy interpretations.

Thirdly, discovering the sermon thought does not end the process of crafting sermons. The sermon's body must restate the thought, explain the thought, prove the thought, and apply the thought. Sermon divisions are used to break the sermon down into digestible pieces and bring greater clarity. The sermon thought must be explained! What does this mean? The sermon thought should flow from the original writer's intent and expose the meaning of the text.

Lastly, the sermon thought or thrust should produce an interrogative that the sermon thought answers clearly and concisely. One participant added that identifying the sermon thought helped him see the text as a whole instead of in choppy fragments.

¹¹⁶ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 17-18.

Sermon divisions are the working parts of the sermon, where the sermon thought or thrust becomes clear. The sermon preparer should prayerfully divide the verses of the passage into digestible chunks for clarity and explanation. Each sermon division should be written and stated in a complete sentence. As stated earlier, participants saw sermon divisions in terms of single words and not complete thoughts. The single word approach narrowed down the ability to explain the division's theme from a panoramic viewpoint. These small nuggets contribute to the full explanation of the sermon thought. Not all text will require three divisions, while some text will require more. Every sermon division should include an explanation which is explaining the general principles of the immediate verses. Argumentation is defending the validity of scripture and the principles discussed in the text. Every sermon division should include an illustration; this helps to paint a clearer picture of the text. Application is where the how-to of the text is explained. In relation to life principles, it answers the question: What is the listener to do with the text?

Faith Element

Through a Zoom chat on week eight, the facilitator introduced the faith element exercise. This exercise endeavored to emphasize the importance of building faith in God in the participants and those to whom they preach. It showcases the character, capabilities, intention, and record of God as revealed in the scriptures. What is the sermon intended to produce in the heart of the listener? Prayerfully a growing faith in God is the objective. Faith is an intangible that manifests itself in believers' lives as the Word of God takes root in the heart. The aim of the faith element worksheet is not emotionalism but faith in God. The discussion led to a lengthy dialogue about faith in God since many admitted that they struggled to trust God consistently. The facilitator encouraged the group by sharing a testimony of personal growth in this area and

attributed the progress to submission to God in sermon preparation. For the facilitator, sermon preparation became worship, and God's Word changed his heart. Every sermon should invoke faith in God. Man-centered presentations cause people to look to others or themselves, while God-centered sermons challenge men to trust God. The text should be argued in a way that testifies to God's unfailing character. The group agreed that God was trustworthy but admitted that many times the focus shifted away from God's faithfulness and to being better humans.

Discussion amongst the group revealed a heavy reliance upon the closing or finishing aspect of the sermon. The closing portion of a sermon presentation in the participant group represented excitement and rejoicing. However, if that excitement and rejoicing do not come from God's supreme and sovereign ability, it will produce a man-centered concentration. Participants agreed with the facilitator's comment that closing sermons are easy for some because it is a moment to emotionally recap a personal testimony. Testimonies have their place, but they should illustrate the text, not become the text's subject. The facilitator challenged the group to preach in a way that engendered real hope and faith in God, not just for the sake of having faith but because God is real. The sermon should put the capabilities of God on display and lead all to understand that even when a situation looks uncertain, the listener can rely on the character of God to shine through. The group pondered this point of encouraging faith in the right place (God) and then highlighted some safeguards to put in place. How does the preacher create the safeguards? First, by acknowledging that God is sovereign and always right. If God is right, self-righteousness and idolatry are always wrong. Second, do not allow society to preach to the scriptures. Society may have a valid cry, but the scriptures must dictate the reply and remedy. This point struck home with the group because discussion revealed that many had succumbed to the pressures of civil justice and church demands. Third, remember that the best commentary on

scripture is scripture. Look for other passages that support the thought. Lastly, submit the thoughts to God in prayer and be willing to change the thought if it does not line up with the Word of God.

After the safeguards are set, the sermon preparer should identify the ideas about God that would plead his credibility in the text. These may be directly presented or only implied. The facilitator questioned the participants concerning their stance on God's credibility, and most replied that God is trustworthy, but they waiver in consistently trusting God as stated earlier. Secondly, trace from the text writer's material the theological assumptions behind his statements. Every instruction, interpretation, or application has its foundation in the person of God. For example, the imperative relies on the indicative. Thirdly, write the sermon thought as stated and test it for its faith element. Is it an active fact? Does it give the hearer assurance? Does it present a faith principle? Is it essentially theological? Does it use faith language? Does it claim the credibility of God? Fourth, check each division statement by the same tests. How does it measure up to the faith aim? Lastly, analyze the introductory and concluding segments for their faith element according to the tests above.¹¹⁷

Introduction and Conclusion

Introductions and conclusions were covered at the end of the Zoom chat in week eight and the beginning of the Zoom chat in week nine. The beauty of a home is rarely appreciated without some reference to the porch. The porch has a unique way of leading a person into the home as the introduction is a unique way of leading the listener into the sermon. The porch is where the door is, and the door is an invitation into the home. The introduction is the invitation

¹¹⁷ McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 192.

to come into the Word of God and be blessed by it. The introduction has two main objectives: to interest the hearers in the subject and to prepare them to understand the subject. An introduction must present some thought that is closely related to the sermon thought. It is the first layer of the onion of the sermon. It does not tell the whole story, but it engenders the appetite of the congregation. The introduction should consist of a single thought. It is not wise to create a porch to a porch.¹¹⁸ Avoid comprehensive concepts that turn into lengthy discourses that lead the preacher away from the sermon thought. The introduction must not seem to promise too much in its thoughts, style, or delivery. It should excite interest and awaken expectation, provided that the body of the sermon can meet the expectation. The introduction must be concise and timely. It is terrible to make people who desire to be in the house wait on the porch so long that they miss what is inside the home. Participants admitted that introductions were challenging to develop. The facilitator suggested that illustrations are another way of introducing the text and should only be used to illustrate the selected passage accurately. In week nine, the group discussed the harm of making false promises in the introduction and the entire sermon, for the most part. The facilitator stated that false promises make people doubt the credibility of God.

Summing up or concluding the sermon was also discussed in week nine. The conclusion of a sermon must restate what the sermon previously said. The facilitator instructed the group to avoid introducing new concepts at the conclusion of a sermon. The conclusion must be well-thought-out in light of the sermon thought. It should encompass a synopsis of the sermon divisions and an overall application element. A direct line of thought should flow through the sermon and culminate in a well-thought-out synopsis of the sermon. The conclusion should be

¹¹⁸ Boadus, *A Treatise On*, 104.

alive and energetic. Deep passion, thoughts that burn and strong words are the instruments required, whether the conclusion be a direct drive on the will or an appeal to the heart.¹¹⁹ While the exposition's development is still fresh in mind, immediately begin to formulate a summation. Traditionally called the conclusion, the sermon summation reinforces the sermon thought and reviews its relevancy. At this juncture in the preaching event, the listeners are deciding on the issues at hand. Like a lawyer during closing arguments, the preacher, as clearly as possible, will bring into focus one final thrust upon their minds and hearts; the timeless truths exposed in the message. Striking while the iron is hot, he must drive home the proposition and bring the message's whole thrust to bear upon the people.¹²⁰ The group ended the discussion in week nine by reviewing introductions and conclusions from participants' previously preached sermons. The review showed an apparent struggle to keep the sermon's unity intact from the introduction to the conclusion due to the lack of a grasp on one central thought for the sermon.

Preaching Narratives

The group discussed narratives on week ten at the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church youth house. Much of the Bible was written in narrative form. One of the obstacles of preaching narratives is the length of many of the stories. The researcher found that the group's main reason for avoiding narratives was because most of them only attempted to preach one to three verses each week and seldomly preached from the same passage. In identifying one tension in the text and ignoring the presence of multiple tensions in the narrative, preachers can become overwhelmed at times. Again the group discussed the importance of observation and gathering as

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

¹²⁰ Vines and Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit*, 207.

many facts as possible while paying attention to the entire passage's teaching elements. The facilitator directed study participants to subtract their own current personal tensions and focus on the textual situation. Diagrams may not help tackle a long narrative since the text's argument may call for latter verses first and early verses last. Narrative preaching reconstructs a sermon's content to follow a plotline that builds suspense until the sermon's point emerges, relieves the tension, and illuminates the truth. Instead of "telling them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them;" narrative preachers guide their listeners through a series of plot movements. It does not change the content of the sermon; it just restructures it.¹²¹

Writing a Manuscript

The group as a whole did not previously use the manuscript method before the project. The norm among the group only included skeletal outlines with little detail. The proposed manuscript format included:

- An introduction that includes a preliminary answer to the sermon question. It may also include an illustration that supports the sermon thought.
- Sermon divisions that include an explanation, illustration, argumentation, and application of each division's teaching point.
- Transition sentences to maintain the continuity of thought throughout the manuscript.
- A conclusion that sums up the teaching divisions and drives home the sermon thought.

Conclusion

¹²¹ Jared Wilson, *How to Write Narrative Sermons* (Fresno: Willow City Press, 2002), 3-4.

The methodology chapter aimed at outlining the research method used to answer the research question: What sermon preparation method can pastors in the O.E.T.B.A. use to produce God-centered presentations of the gospel that enhance church health? The questionnaire, interviews, and focus-group studies all conclude the need for training concerning crafting God-centered expository sermons. The local churches are struggling to find ways to maintain and grow their ministries and often resort to catchy phrases instead of a steady diet of God's Word that can only come from proper sermon preparation. Sermon preparation is a challenge because most pastors lack time and a methodical process of sermon preparation consumed with God's supremacy and sovereignty. The research suggests a lack of training in sermon preparation and today's fast-paced culture leaves very little time for sermon preparation.

The insight gained through personal interviews has helped formulate and clarify a systematic approach to sermon preparation that provided worksheets as a guide to exposing the original writer's intent. This researcher believes the approach introduced in this project will strengthen pulpit presentations and generate personal growth in the pews, equating to better church health. The next chapter contains the findings, discussions, and recommendations for enhancing church health through expository preaching.

Chapter 4: Results

The research findings and the project's implementation revealed that pastors were preaching on a surface level because of the lack of proper sermon preparation techniques and time dedicated to the preparation. Also, church member participants became more excited about hearing the Word of God preached, and they developed a hunger for Bible study. Due to the COVID19 pandemic and this project's nature, select pastors were challenged to preach to their congregations through social media platforms. Church members provided feedback from their virtual worship experiences. The Center for Disease Control regulations discouraged gathering groups of more than fifty people, which caused a panic among area pastors, and many shut down their churches, although only one church has over fifty active members.

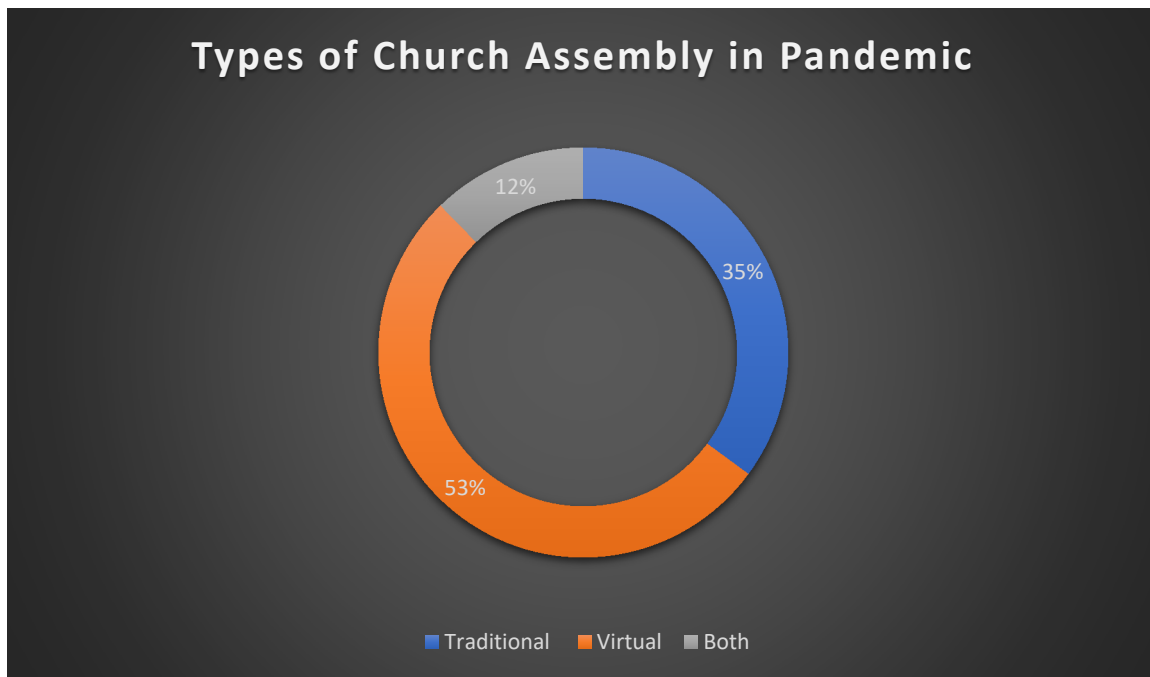


Figure 2.

The research also revealed a deficiency of time spent with the biblical text. Pastors often complained about their busy schedules and the lack of time to study God's Word thoroughly. The

overwhelming majority admitted to having a heavy dependence upon commentaries. These commentaries became substitutes for prioritizing time for sermon preparation. The research also revealed that their personal growth was not apparent, according to the comments of the group. Some significant areas of struggle were depression, lust, and anxiety. Due to a last-minute sermon preparation time, these pastors focused on quick means of maintaining and growing their churches through programs, but as a result, neglected spending time with the Word of God yielding growth in their personal lives. All but one of the participants had accountability partners or surrounded themselves with pastors to develop into mature Christians.

This project challenged participating pastors to preach expository sermons that enhance church health and focus on God's supremacy in sermon preparation and presentation resulting in better church health. Biblical preaching is intentional preaching. The preacher must intentionally study to expose the original writer's intent. God wrote the Scriptures with a redemptive purpose in mind, and preaching is scripturally declaring God's mind concerning his redemptive plan. Preaching that fails to capture God's heart is preaching that champions human responsibility over God's sovereignty. The church grows through a steady diet of God's Word preached by one who experienced the life-changing power of the Word of God. Church health is dependent upon consistently preaching the Word of God and voraciously declaring the Scriptures.

This project set out to interrupt lazy preaching that fails to do proper research that exposes the text and reveals the original writer's intent. A temptation associated with preaching is looking to society and asking, what should I preach that appeals to human interest and current events? That approach focuses on topics rather than the Word of God settled from eternity past. The sovereignty of God is the axis on which sound biblical preaching swings. If God is not

sovereign, the Scriptures have nothing to stand on. Preaching is not about whether or not the preacher agrees with the Scriptures; instead, it is about submission to God and an adherence to his will and purpose for humanity revealed through His Word. Man is born in a fallen state and sold to sin, but through the Word of God he can be raised to life in Christ. Only the truth of God's Word can awaken those predestined for eternity, and this takes place when that truth is declared. Participants took a long hard look at their sermon preparation practices and evaluated them based on the proposed project method. Is God truly sovereign if man dictates what he needs to hear in a sermon? By definition, the sovereignty of God argues for God's right to do and deal with His creation as He pleases without the interruptions and consent of humanity.

The churches of the pastors in this study have seen a decrease in church membership over the last decade. This fact has caused many who preach the Word of God to panic, and some even compromise on biblical truths to grow their church or maintain large memberships. In general, the O.E.T.B.A has witnessed a decline in attendance. Most of the churches that have remained are declining in church membership. Church growth that is a product of church health is not a push for quick results; instead, it depends on God through Biblical exposition to bring people to the growth journey. The implementation of programs and ministerial wisdom have had little effect on church growth. The writer contends that church growth should not result from panicking pulpiteers; instead, church growth is a by-product of church health. Emotion screams preach louder, but scripture whispers preach more precisely what God's Word says, and if the preacher becomes emotional, it is a result of a passion for the text. As stated earlier, the norm in the O.E.T.B.A. is for pastors to study another pastor's style or personality and imitate their preaching. It is dangerous to be more acquainted with a preaching style and be a stranger to the

text. Sound biblical exposition of scripture enhances church health by replacing society's lies concerning man's existence with the redemptive plan of God declared in scripture.

Expository Preaching's Effect on Church Health

The project revealed a deficit in understanding the true meaning of expository preaching. The group defined expository preaching as covering or mentioning a selected passage, but its definition lacked an in-depth investigation and exposition of the text. The group's common aim was to pattern themselves after their favorite preacher or saying catchy phrases that excited the crowd. Concerning the definition of church health, the pre-questionnaire revealed the overall understanding was that it equated to the number of people in the pews. The COVID19 pandemic was a culture shock for many because of its impact on small gatherings, while others were strictly virtual. Participant Two commented that his congregation was very unhealthy because the hunger for God's Word was absent. Participant Two came to this conclusion after taking part in this project, and he admitted that his sermons were surface level and did not accurately convey the original writer's intent.

A healthy church is a hungry church. The church must crave good health that only comes through God's Word. It seems that the pastor group understood topical preaching as the definition of expository preaching. Participant One was much younger and said that his idea of good preaching was exciting preaching that made people feel good. In the preliminary interview, participant one stated that in his congregation church health was poor because of the lack of participation outside of Sunday worship services. His church was financially focused but lacked motivation for hands-on ministry. When asked in the post-interview about the effects of expository preaching on church health, Participant One commented that he felt that expository preaching was a must to develop healthy churches. He stated that he felt that poor sermon

preparation was partially responsible for declining church health and attendance. When asked to elaborate on the project's implementation in his sermon preparation, Participant One stated that he was ashamed of past sermons that he preached because of the lack of a proper explanation of the text. Participant One also stated that the proposed method ignited a fire and passion for a deeper understanding of God's Word.

The facilitator asked the group how well the evangelism and discipleship ministries were functioning in their churches. The typical response was that those ministries were non-existent. In week three, the issue of evangelism and discipleship were discussed on the Zoom chat, which resulted in the realization that only one of the participants had a functional understanding of the terms from a biblical standpoint. It became apparent that the inability to define such terms indicates shallow study in sermon preparation. Healthy churches are informed churches, and by the aid of the Holy Spirit, God illuminates the text in the mind and heart of the preacher as they dive deep into the well of God's Word.

Focus Determines Outlook

When it comes to church health, the research and project's implementation showed an over-concentration and dependency on measuring the number of congregants who attend church each week. With the pandemic so rampant and a scramble to maintain their churches spiritually, emotionally, and financially, participants admitted to focusing on the pandemic in sermon presentations. However, they neglected to spend time with the text to preach hope in a pandemic. This very fact reveals the tendency to get off track looking around but not up in sermon preparation, and this only leads to man-centered presentations of the gospel. The project revealed that topical presentations of the gospel that focus on topics, instead of the text, result in quick fix sermons reminiscent of Hananiah's false prophecy that promised quick deliverance in Jeremiah

chapter twenty-eight. With so many who were honest concerning focusing on current events and people, it is a good thing that the project held participants accountable for looking at the text. Project info revealed four areas that influence their sermon preparation and presentation. (See figure 3)

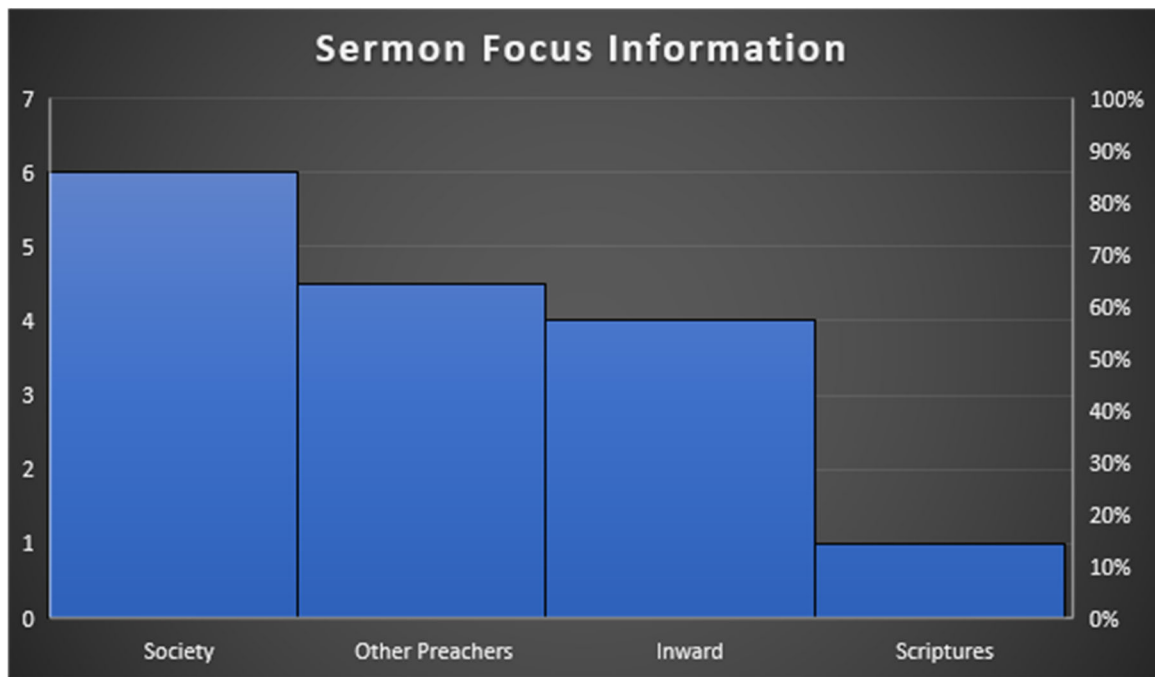


Figure 3.

Participant Five stated that he did not receive from his father in the ministry teaching about exposing the original writer's intent of the text. He felt that for his congregants he had to develop some exciting application that spoke to social issues but that were not necessarily derived from the scriptures. With so many areas of focus that neglect the scriptures, man-centered presentations of the gospel are inevitable. Those who were chronically inward-focused could only sing the blues of self-pity and depression in the preaching moment because they had not learned to allow the scriptures to speak to them. The project taught them to mine the text's

caves, and in doing so, the findings in the text would first speak to them and then through them as they presented the gospel before their congregations.

Every preacher has a preaching hero or a preacher for whom they hold a tremendous amount of respect. The implementation of the project exposed the fine line that exists between admiration and idolatry concerning this issue. Participant Three stated that before the project he had never fact-checked his favorite preachers' comments with the text. He figured that if the preacher said it then it must be textual. He reported that the project opened his eyes to the interpretation errors that some of his champions had committed in their gospel presentations. To be clear, it is not strange for pastors to admire those whom they feel are competent handlers of the gospel. However, admiration in the absence of accountability to the scriptures leads to idolatry. The interviews revealed that participants came into the ministry with little confidence in their ability to preach. As a result of this lack of confidence, they began to imitate the styles of other pastors with no real regard for substance.

The Supremacy of God in Preaching

It is interesting to note that in the pre-project interview all participants stated that they believed that God's supremacy was pivotal for God-centered presentations of the gospel. The consensus of the group was that it was a must for sound preaching. Strangely, most in the group held God's supremacy in high esteem but failed to prepare sermons with respect for it. In week two after seeing what a proper observation of the text entailed, Participants One, Three and Four voiced their frustration with their former sermon preparation process. Participant Six added that he was taught that God is supreme, but he never prepared sermons with that concept in mind.

In the post-project interviews, all involved displayed new respect for God's supremacy in preaching due to the inductive approach to sermon preparation espoused in this project. Sermons that respect the supremacy of God naturally reflect a sermon preparation process that goes beyond the surface of the text to expose the original writer's intent. The project centered on exposing the original writer's intent. In prior sermon preparation processes some seemingly viewed God's supremacy as out of sight, out of mind. That mindset contributes to a church having a low view of God. They prepared sermons seeking to engage the people's issues without pointing them to the One who can handle those issues. Participant Five pointed out that his congregation began to develop a higher view of God throughout the ten-week process. The passion for sharing the gospel was rekindled, and a hunger for God's Word increased. Each represented church saw a resurgence in the hunger for God's Word. The group asked the facilitator if they were allowed to verbally ask five members not previously included in the project to rate their encouragement to study the Word of God. (See figure 4)

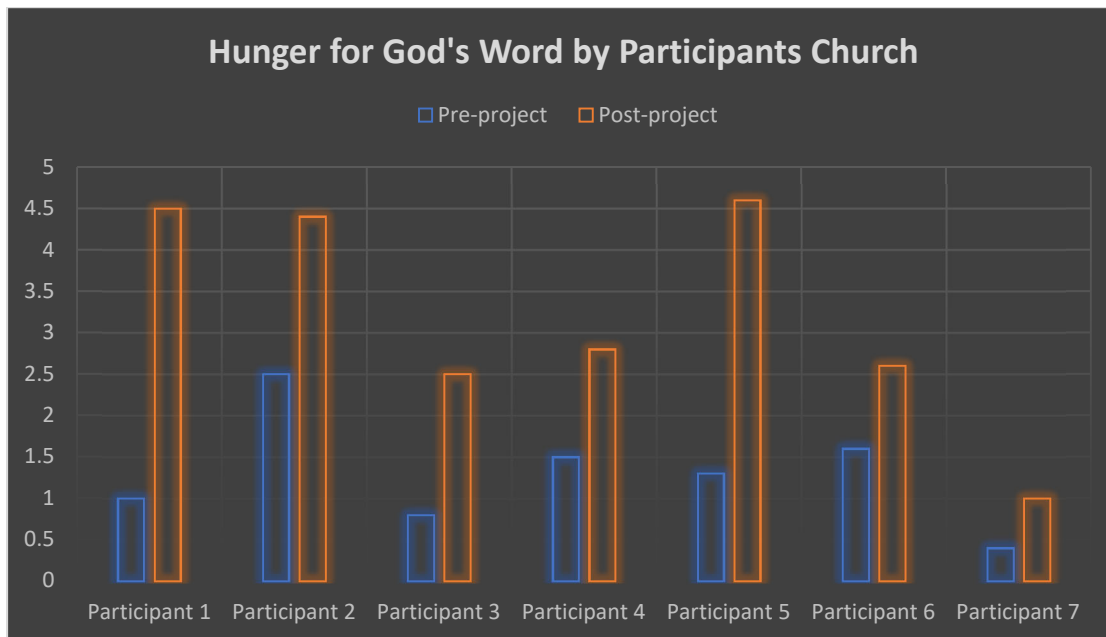


Figure 4.

The project participants saw a reigniting of the passion for Bible study and small group study both in person and virtually. Participant One stated that his focus was often on humanity's circumstantial concerns before the project, which revealed a man-centered approach to sermon preparation. Participant One also stated that respect for God's supremacy alleviated the need for sermon fillers to lengthen the sermon presentations.

Time Management

Can God be supreme to someone who does not have time for Him? It is no secret that preachers struggle with prioritizing their time to engage the text in an in-depth way. With family, personal, and church obligations, most preachers come to the sermon preparation process exhausted. The project results revealed that seven out of seven participants waited until Saturday night to study. All seven voiced frustration with this truth but lacked a solution to remedy the problem. God's supremacy helped with this issue because if God is supreme, His Word is supreme and should not be downgraded to a last-minute task. Participant Three shared his personal experience, which revealed his own tendency to doubt God in difficult times, and he commented that he saw a significant change in his trust in God when he engaged the scriptures daily (see appendix 2). The group agreed that this systematic approach helped them to manage their time more efficiently.

Not only is time management critical, but making the most of study time is also vitally important. Before the project, six out of seven preachers had no defined method of sermon preparation. The project worksheets enhanced the sermon preparation time because they provided a road map for participants to follow to gain insight into God's Word. Participant Two commented that his norm was reading through commentaries for hours only to be frustrated with not finding meaningful information that would produce sermons. The time management piece of

the project proved incredibly beneficial not only in sermon preparation but also in encouraging participants to plan their preaching. The preaching calendar took away the anxiety of scrambling to find the text at the last minute and failing to study them accurately because of time constraints. Participants Four and Six commented along the same lines by saying that the preaching calendar helped with time management and a focus on one line of thought throughout the series. Their congregations shared that they were easier to follow because they shared the following week's text with the congregation.

Preaching for Change

This post-modern society has produced measuring tools in the church that focus on tangibles and neglect the intangibles. In other words, if it can be seen, touched, or tasted, it is real and measurable. The project focused on getting results that may not be seen with the naked eye or experienced immediately, but ones that are manifested through heart transplants instead of facelifts. The facilitator grew to love expository preaching first, not because of the congregants' growth but the radical change that took place in his own heart. The group of pastors were questioned concerning their passion for preaching each week. The results were shocking because while ministering many of them battled depression and other major life hurdles. (See figure 5)

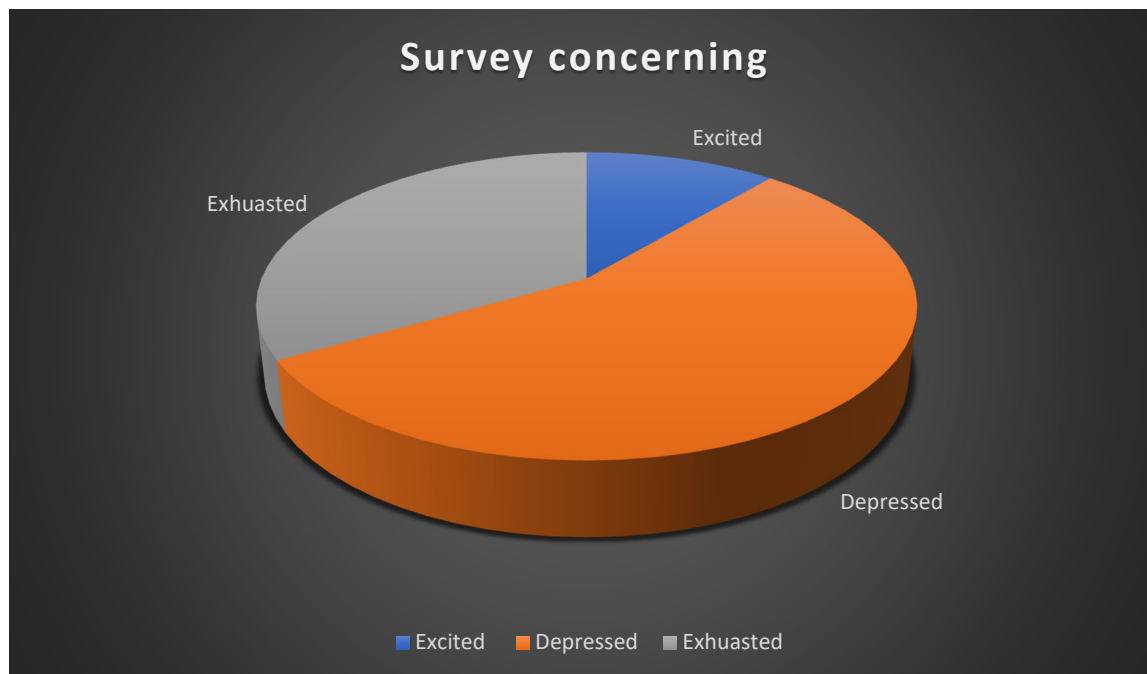


Figure 5.

All of the participants are bi-vocational. The project revealed that 56% of them were depressed as they approached sermon preparation and the preaching moment. This issue of depression is a crucial area to notice because if God is supreme and the Word of God true, the preacher may go through periods of depression, but after spending time with God in His Word, feel encouraged to move forward. Participant Two stated that he had lost his hunger for the Word of God and, at times, felt hopeless. He commented that the project forced him to spend time with the Word of God, and that he was healthier due to investing that time. He went on to say that he usually prepared for preaching, but now he prepares for change and preaching. Church health is consumed with life change as a result. In post-project interviews, the group agreed that their attention and focus centered on numbers and the bottom line. Participant Four even commented that part of his depression was due to financial pressures at the church during the pandemic. Church Member One of Participant Four journaled that he battled depression because of

comparing his life to others and that the sermon in week one from Philippians 1:12-18 challenged him to make a radical change in focus. Participant Four commented that the focus on the text helped him look away from the church's pressures. He expressed freedom in preaching because in sermon preparation he received strength from the text that spilled over into the sermon presentation. Participant Three shared that time spent in sermon preparation became his worship before worship service. He says that diving into the text challenged him to be a better man, husband, father, preacher, and pastor.

Fifteen out of twenty-one church members consented to journal and confirmed life change due to the project (see figure 6). The church member group journals revealed encouragement due to the sermons preached in the ten-week project. Concerning the hard times in life, one member stated that he was encouraged not to give up because of his children. He commented that he wanted his children to see Christ in him so that when the children grow up and face trials, they will look to God. Participant Four stated the project participants from his church were growing and motivated for evangelism and discipleship in a new way due to the changes in the sermon presentation resulting from the systematic approach to sermon preparation.

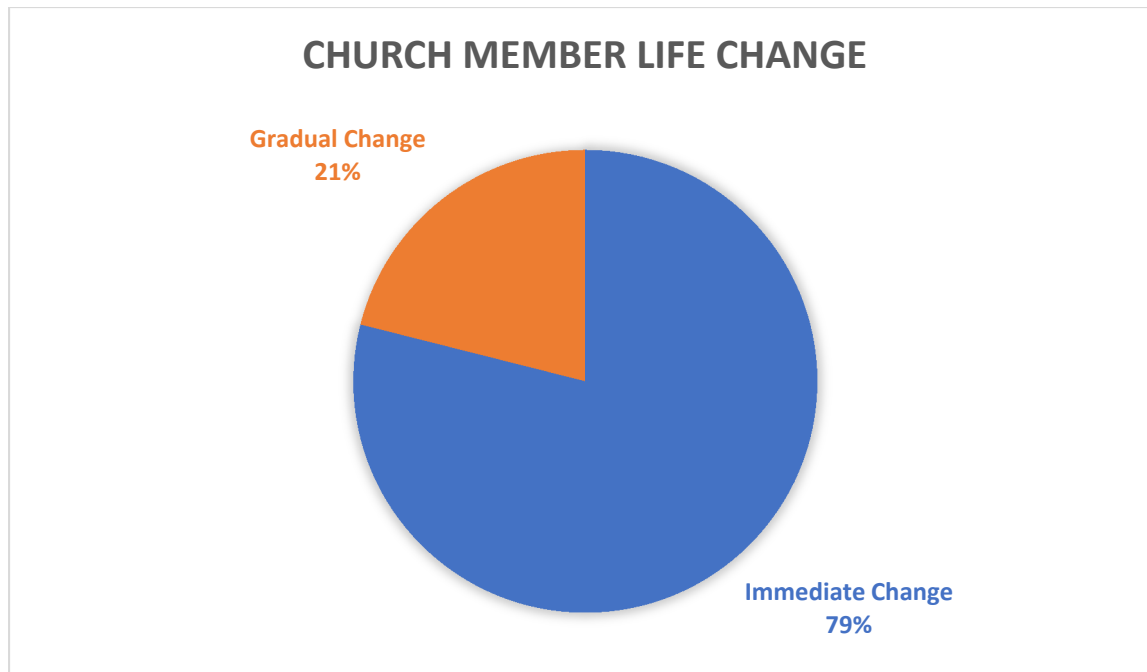


Figure 6.

The Fallout

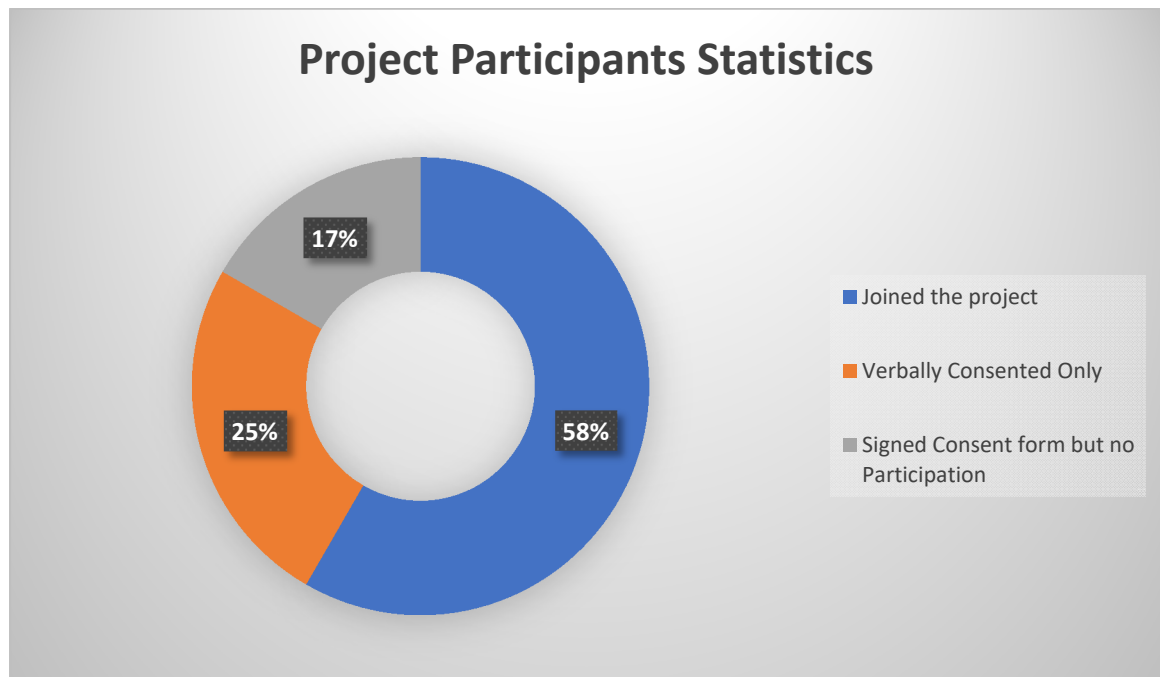
This section covers adverse responses to the project and the project's participation averages (see Figure 7). One of the pastors who consented to participate in the project stated that the project was ineffective for his preaching style and church. He decided to drop out in week three due to a failure to understand the project's purpose. This particular pastor saw the project as judgmental and suggested that it scrutinized his preaching style. In his mind, sermon preparation and exposition had nothing to do with each other. He was offended and argued that the study was ultimately an infringement on his preaching style. This objection caused a significant disagreement between the project facilitator and the pastor mentioned above. The participant refused to answer calls and text messages and told Participant Two that he decided to quit the project. No formal letter was received from this pastor stating his decision to discontinue the project. However, the facilitator reminded himself that a preaching project aimed at greater

clarity in biblical exposition would indeed be a form of spiritual warfare because of the change that comes with knowing God as He has revealed Himself in the scriptures. It is no secret that preachers/pastors are at times insecure concerning their preaching style, but such insecurities, which are likely the product of pride, have no place in the area of preaching. Pastors must remember to maintain a teachable heart drawn from the humility and submission to God, who graciously extended the call to the ministry. The pastor mentioned above called the facilitator several weeks after the project and admitted that his pride got in the way of his participation in the project.

One of the potential participants recently turned 18 years old and prided himself on sounding "like" a seasoned pastor. His reception was slow, and he eventually dropped out because he felt he had the fundamentals down to a science, and there was no need to learn more about the subject. His statement was the topic of discussion in several conversations among the group. Those who were older and pastoring longer were shocked by his comments since hearing him preach did not reveal a correct handling of the biblical text. This pastor came to orientation and verbally consented to participate but did not show up to any other meetings. In week five, his church reached out to the project facilitator. They asked how he was doing and informed the facilitator that their pastor told them that the facilitator helped him grow in his preaching. The facilitator was confused after hearing this information since the subject of the conversation had not participated since orientation. The facilitator did not want to hurt the pastor in any way but was honest concerning the pastor's lack of involvement in the project.

Two pastors verbally consented to participate in the project but failed to attend orientation or any zoom meetings. After the orientation, they contacted the facilitator several times asking if it was too late to join. The facilitator told them that they could participate for

knowledge sake but no project data would be considered at this point. The facilitator felt that these pastors wanted the information on preparing God-centered sermons but did not take an interest in the project. This reaction revealed the sense that they wanted results but lacked concern for learning how to properly use the project's tools.



Two pastors who had previously declined to be a part of the project asked to take part and began preparing God-centered sermons. From personal conversations with these two pastors, the facilitator learned that their sermon preparation practices did not include a conscious respect for the supremacy of God.

The Project Worksheets

The facilitator introduced the project worksheets at orientation. The group curiously began thumbing through the packet to see what it was all about. This action troubled the

facilitator as he was concerned that the group receive a thorough explanation before appropriating the concepts independently. After asking what project tools would become a permanent part of the groups' sermon preparation process, all members answered the word studies worksheets. Participant Three commented that he was surprised at how many texts he misrepresented because of a misunderstanding of words. Participant Seven admitted that he used Webster's dictionary to find definitions. When the facilitator introduced Greek and Hebrew dictionaries, Participant Seven also saw his mishandling of biblical texts. Participant Three stated that he felt the need to enroll in seminary after learning this process.

Commentaries

The use of commentaries is not a negative thing. It only becomes negative when pastors replace the scriptures with uninspired human thoughts. The pre-questionnaire revealed that the majority viewed commentaries as the starting place for sermon preparation (see figure 8). Participant Three stated that he always started with reading a commentary and not the text. The facilitator taught the truth that commentaries may be helpful and some even accurate, but they are not inspired. The research showed that an over-dependence on commentaries is why so much preaching that neglects doctrine exists because of the types of commentaries used by the group (see figure 9). The group's most widely used commentary was Matthew Henry Commentary.

Commentaries were also widely used because of the lack of time management concerning sermon preparation. Participant Seven stated that he prepares sermons within two hours each week. The facilitator discovered that he does this by restating large portions of commentaries in sermon presentations. Commentaries are a lazy preacher's salvation, but lasting growth and health come from personal interaction with the scriptures.

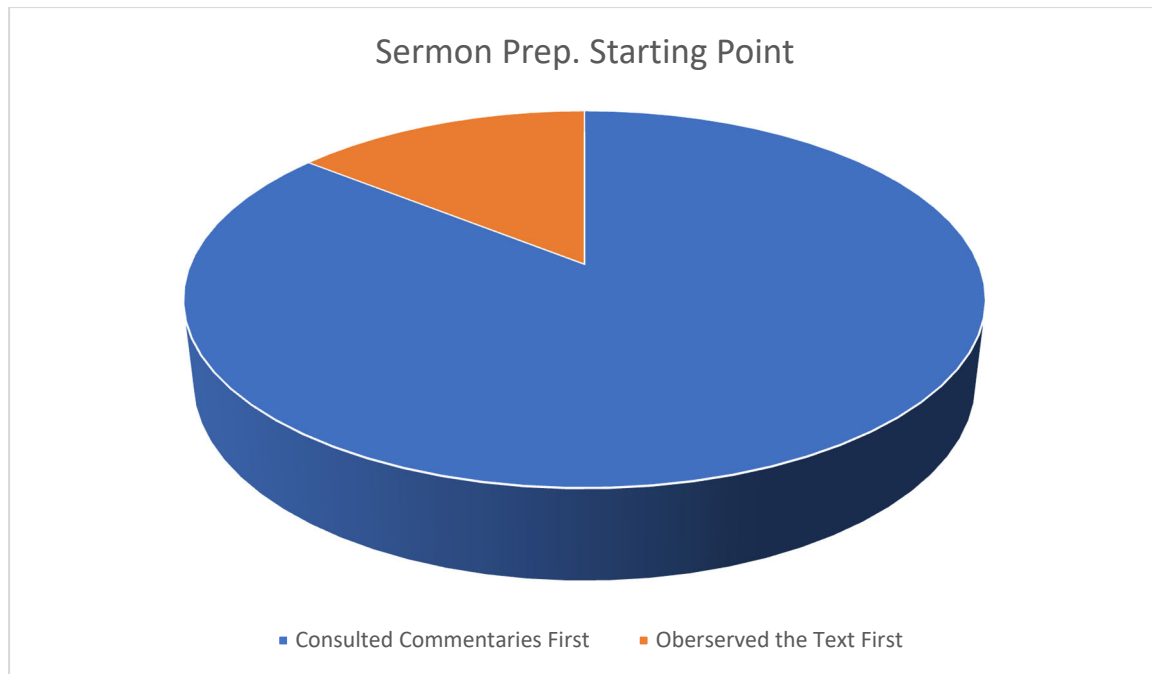


Figure 8.

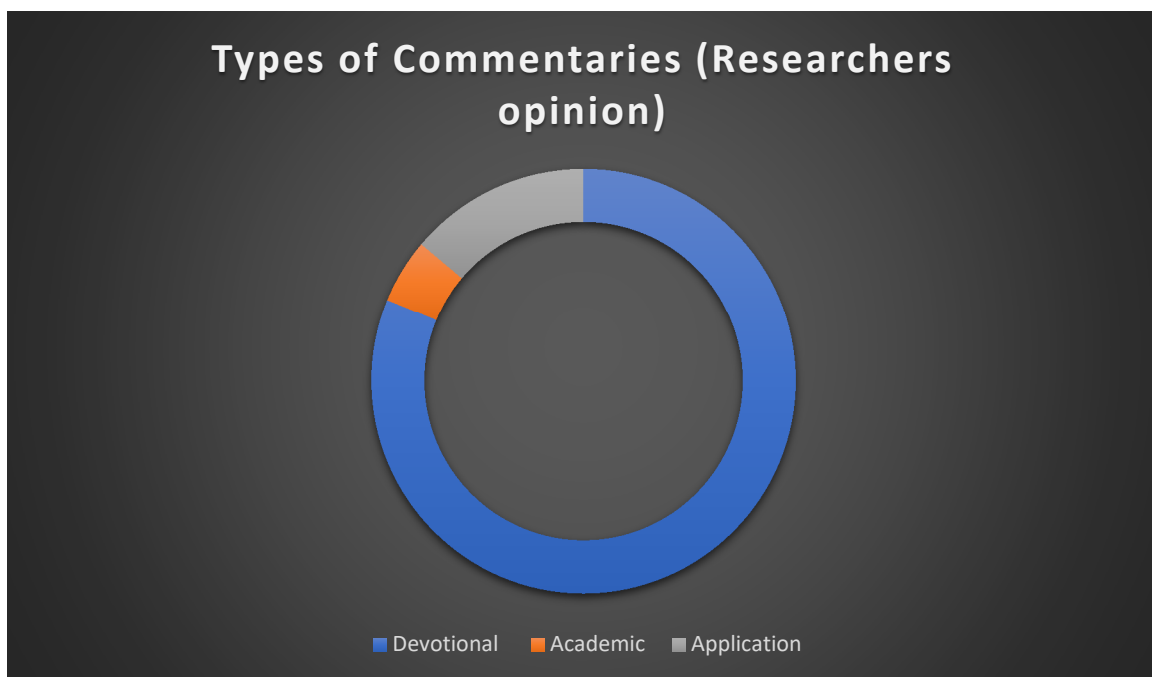


Figure 9.

Summation of Results

The facilitator's primary source of data focused on individual church members' responses when the project started. However, after working with the pastor group, the facilitator focused on more interaction with them and began logging data. The facilitator learned that the vast majority of pastors lacked a thorough understanding of what the facilitator would consider essential sermon preparation tools. The facilitator noticed that the group was comfortable thinking that they possessed a cursory understanding of the project and were anxious to get to work but wanted to do so by laying their sermon preparation ideals on the new concepts. This mindset alone was a red flag because this is precisely what they were doing in sermon preparation.

The group's understanding of expository preaching was also a crucial point. Without a guide, the group had developed a definition that misses the mark. The prevailing sermon preparation model focused on finding topics first and then finding scriptures to support the topic. In several Zoom chats, the facilitator also noticed that some got off course by talking about things that were not associated with that particular week's discussion.

Several pastors asked the facilitator to grade or offer feedback concerning their weekly sermons. The goal of the project was to sharpen participants' sermon preparation skills in order for them to more accurately preach the scriptures. Pastors focused more on presentation than on preparation, and this mindset, in the facilitator's opinion, led to man-centered presentations. At the close of the project implementation, the pastor's group concentration shifted away from human feedback. They developed a profound respect for faithfully declaring God as He has declared Himself.

Sound biblical preaching is essential to the health of the church. The church is the bride of Christ, and preachers must communicate with her with words that accurately display her husband's intents. The implementation of the project confirmed the researcher's thoughts concerning poor church health. Simultaneously, the entirety of the reason for poor church health can not be laid on the preacher. Preachers/pastors are responsible for providing sound doctrine that encourages the healthy growth and development of the church.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Because of today's unscrupulous society, enhancing church health through expository preaching is a challenge not only for the O.E.T.B.A. but also for all churches. Many churches in the East Texas area have somehow gotten lost in the maze of idolism and have decided that accurate church measurement is only realized numerically. So how does the East Texas Area recover from this lack of prioritizing sermon preparation and off-centered concentration on personalities that replaces the person of Christ?

The Way Back

The recovery process starts with repentance. No matter how prestigious the title or pious the position in the church, pastors must humbly go to God asking for forgiveness and realign themselves with God's priorities. The researcher is not isolated from this need for repentance since the passion for this project was born in part out of a place of personal discouragement due to neglecting God's Word. To come to this place of repentance, they must humble themselves. All pride, selfishness, and arrogance must be put away. To the Romans, Paul writes, "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Rom 2:4) God is kind and patient, and these attributes should not be taken lightly. God's gracious love should not become a license for self-fulfillment; instead, one should pursue Him more because He is kind and patient. Conversations with participant pastors revealed a sense of complacency and lack of urgency for serious biblical interpretation in sermon presentations; therefore, sermon preparation was not high on the priority list. The preacher who does not know and appreciate the power of God's grace despite his track record or character is a preacher with clean knees who knows nothing of bowing to God in submission and repentance. As preachers dive into the Word of God, the same Word that they

are preparing to preach to their congregations must be the same Word that transforms the preacher first. For some, preaching has become a Sunday morning showcase instead of a time of transformation by God's Word.

If church health is to improve, the church must see the power of God's Word displayed in preachers' lives. Transparency in preaching is not a call to highlight one's failures; it is a call to be honest with oneself concerning one's personal life. God's Word must be studied and preached in a way that convicts the preacher, and if need be, he comes down after the sermon to the altar in repentance for his sins. Sadly, many would rather be right before people rather than forgiven before God. Some simply are not humble enough to admit human error. The transparency of the preacher reveals Christ and the Holy Spirit on the inside working out of the preacher what sin has worked in. Preachers cannot forget that they are in the midst of a sanctification process themselves. Transparency is not always easy in the O.E.T.B.A. because the prevailing thought of ministers is that of wholeness is the absence of any failures. Even if the preacher is in some gross sin, he must put on the mask of wholeness instead of asking for God's help. The first conversation must take place between God and the preacher, and God will graciously extend grace in the areas where the preacher struggles. A preacher who loves God will feel the weight of his sins because he recognizes that his sin displeases God.

The researcher suggested that group participants find an accountability and prayer partner. The purpose of this is to build communication, accountability and fellowship. Every preacher needs someone who will encourage and pray with him each day. Prayer must also be personal work and prioritized daily.

The second step in assisting the church in recovering its health is spending time reading and meditating on the scriptures and sermon preparation. The preacher should not make sermon

preparation a substitute for personal Bible reading. Prioritizing time and organization will aid in this process. The rush to get a sermon prepared on Saturday night or Sunday morning becomes a bad habit and, eventually, a way of life. The stress and strain of everyday living will not vanish but is better navigated when the preacher prioritizes his time for personal growth in God's Word and sermon preparation.

Lastly, the text must be preached. The temptation to allow societal pressures and everyday issues to inform one's preaching will always be present. Church health is hinged on the Word of God as declared by the original writer. The Word of God is timeless; it transcends all generations and people. Sermon presentations must strive to reveal the heart of God and his love for wayward humanity. It is no doubt that the pastor participant group has a heart and zeal for preaching, but church health demands biblical truth as its foundation.

Analyzing Project Data

The project yielded ample information concerning the state of local churches as it relates to church health. The researcher noticed from reading the church member journals that several did not fully understand their task and attempted to do the project from their presuppositions of the guidelines instead of directly following the project guidelines. This mindset mirrors most of the pastor group's actions in that they attempted to do the project according to their perception.

The review of literature in chapter two revealed the supremacy of God as essential and paramount in preaching. The pre-project interviews revealed an acknowledgment of God's supremacy but a failure to respect that supremacy regarding sermon preparation, time management, and allowing God to be the singular influence in preaching. The project revealed a

heavy presence of so-called head knowledge or human wisdom but a lack of heart knowledge where preachers obey God.

Social justice has its place in the world, but it must never replace the scriptures as a roadmap to true human liberation which is found in Christ. It is easy to get lost in the maze of trying to correct society's ills and bring about change, but preachers must be faithful to declare the scriptures and allow the text to address this wayward society. James records teaching concerning true or pure religion. He writes, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world." (James 1:26-27) To bridle the tongue means to hold in check or restrain. God's Word is the restrainer of the preacher's tongue. Focusing solely on social justice will cause the preacher to say things that are accurate concerning the current state of the world but fail to highlight the answer in the Lord Jesus. The Bible teaches that the oppressed and the oppressor must bow in submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The aim of preaching is not to make right all the wrongs of the world but to lead the world to Calvary and redemption. (Eph. 1:7)

The researcher discovered intense participant insecurity throughout the project implementation period. For the most part, participants experienced these insecurities due to a lack of confidence in the text. Sadly, they were more fearful of being embarrassed than failing to capture the message of the text. The researcher identifies with the group in this area and set out to do away with these insecurities by correcting character flaws. Primarily, this was accomplished by the conviction of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God and additionally by embracing a time management process.

The researcher assumes that every preacher would like to do his best as he presents the gospel. However, when this leads to a performance for the sake of personal ego and audience response, the preacher has lost focus on the message. One of the great mistakes of preachers is to measure their effectiveness by crowd response.

A great deal of research and attention needs to be directed toward ministers starting in ministry. With the changing times, ministers need detailed instructions and critique upfront not to discourage but to help them develop healthy study habits. The foundation is vital to whatever ministry is being erected. The norm of O.E.T.B.A. conversation is centered on the issue of pastoring, but rarely is their in-depth conversation concerning sermon preparation and healthy study habits. The literature revealed large amounts of information about sermon preparation and its necessity for God-centered messages. Young preachers will eventually become pastors. Young preachers must be trained and taught the importance of applying the training.

A systematic approach is needful and helpful. The researcher was surprised by the absence of a systematic approach to sermon preparation. The researcher feels that this is directly a product of a lack of self-discipline. God-centered sermons do not fall from the sky. The preacher must intentionally prepare sermons with God at the center of his life and the sermon preparation process.

Gleanings from the Project

The researcher gained much insight and information from the project. The first lesson was in the area of spiritual warfare. Healthy disciples equate to healthy churches. If the church is evangelizing the lost, making and maturing disciples, it does so due to an understanding of the fundamentals of scripture. Acts 1:8 illuminates being a witness for Christ by the aid of the Holy

Spirit. Transformation takes place in the hearts of individual believers, and they are profoundly affecting their community for the cause of Christ. When people turn away from eternal perishing and to eternal life, the adversary is not pleased. The researcher learned that the preacher must persevere under pressure and persecution from the world, but God's presence and peace accompany the preacher along the journey. The researcher faced battles from without and within during this project. However, the researcher is grateful to God for a tremendous passion for exegetical accuracy and for an urgency to train preachers. The researcher also learned that improved church health might challenge friendships, but the preacher is called to preach the gospel regardless of the source of pressure.

The second lesson has to do with patience. It is easy to forget the struggle of getting to know God better and learning to prepare God-centered sermons. Living in a fallen society affords humans the pitfall of being judgmental and overly critical. Theology is more than a course or theme; it is an invitation to intimacy with God. God graciously continues to minister to the preacher even when he fails to prepare accurately. He is patient with the preacher, so the preacher who knows God's patience must share that patience with other preachers as they seek to become more accurate handlers of the scriptures. The resistance to a project of this type may be due to a lack of shared patience with fellow preachers.

The researcher's third lesson learned is to plan and lead vigorously. The project planning started in peace and calm, but the implementation of the project and final stages took place amid an overwhelming storm. The COVID19 pandemic greatly affected the project in that most churches shifted to virtual platforms, and anxiety among church attendees was high. The first reaction was to preach sermons about hope every week and give the people encouragement. The researcher was convicted during this time to stay the course that God had laid out for him. The

aim had to be meeting Christ in the preaching moment instead of merely encouraging the listeners. If the congregation encountered Christ, He alone was the encouragement to persevere during this turbulent time. The pastor group often commented that the preaching calendar held them accountable for staying on course and not allowing current events to dictate preaching. Planned preaching refreshed the researcher in knowing that sermons were not the result of current events and societal issues.

The researcher experienced the death of a dear friend and co-laborer in the gospel during the project's implementation. Pastor Rastus Perry and the researcher spent many mornings discussing the scriptures, and he expressed a need for formal training but could not attend seminary due to work restrictions. His death revealed a bond that resides in fellowship in the scriptures. The researcher learned that denominations do not determine biblical accuracy (although some seem more biblical than others). Together the researcher and Pastor Perry searched the scriptures even though they were from two different denominations. Also, the researcher learned that if the Christian believes that God is sovereign, he must look to the scriptures when facing the death of loved ones and preach Christ even if tears are present. The scriptures will minister to every wounded soldier if he will only look to Christ.

The pastor group expressed a need for more training on expository preaching. The researcher consented to host a workshop in the fall of 2021. The researcher plans to reexamine the project to ensure that it contains more easily understood worksheets for those who have no theological training. The researcher understands that every pastor will not participate but plans to help all that consent to take part.

Preaching Across Cultures

America is known as the melting pot of society. The history of this country reveals pilgrims that traveled to a distant land and settled it as their own. The diversity of the background of America breeds cultural differences that seem to divide. The question is, how does this country find oneness and wholeness? History reveals more pain than pleasure for others. The present age reveals more chaos than community agreement. The future looks to bring more tolerance of wickedness than truth. Where does one look? Who can make it right? Every preacher who mounts the sacred desk must submit to the supremacy of God and declare Christ as the only means of redemption for this perverse age. The problems of men are all the same across cultures. Humanity is weak and wayward in its response to God, and only the gospel can lead it to redemption in Christ.

Slaveowners employed circuit preachers to molest the scriptures, gain a firm grip on slaves mentally and spiritually, and teach them to obey their masters. The slaves often made differences between those who served in the house and those who served in the fields. However, the slaves sang songs of deliverance and freedom together on Sunday in worship. Slaveowners claimed to be Christians while treating slaves as only half-human, while slaves that claimed to be Christians allowed slavery and bitterness to divide their community. How can Christians in America recover from the continued impact of American slavery? Today the Sunday worship hour remains the most segregated hour of the week simply because some leaders only see color. Christ is white. Christ is black. Christ is Hispanic. Christ is Asian. Christ encompasses every ethnicity, but is Christ preached? Is He preached so that the business executive and the drug addict both see the need for him? Christ should be preached until all see themselves as equally in need of kneeling at the foot of the Cross, where the only color that matters is red.

Institutionalized slavery made division a norm in the American church that has not been overcome.

Future Research

Further research needs to be conducted concerning the history of the O.E.T.B.A. and providing training and scholarship opportunities for the current and next generations of pastors. The seminary does not call a person to preach; only God does that. However, the seminary can shape the preacher's theological ax and assist in the development of healthy sermon preparation practices. The association history revealed the birth of Christian education schools in the East Texas Area. The East Texas Baptist Association founded the East Texas Baptist Academy in 1905 under a freed slave, Reverend Cornelius Moses Butler. The school was accredited and remained open until 1971. Many local pastors and their members attended the school endeavoring to receive higher education and theological training.¹²² With such a rich history of education, it is painful to see such a large-scale lack of concern for formal theological training. As mentioned earlier, the researcher plans to offer training for local ministers several times a year and start the process of establishing a Bible college, seminary, or extension site in Tyler, Texas. Healthy churches are led by pastors who have become students of God's Word and who possess a passion for preaching the Word accurately. This school will not only provide theological training but also strive to improve literacy among local pastors.

The project confirmed and revealed many ideas and concepts concerning church health. One area that needs further research is identifying the apparent difference between numerical church growth and church health. For the most part, the project revealed that the participants saw

¹²² Conversation with Dr. Bobby G. Land Sr. February 12, 2021.

them as the same. Is the ego of individuals the passion behind such a push for measuring the church by physical tangibles while ignoring the spiritual intangibles? Correctly identifying the root cause will prove difficult due to the pride that exists among pastors. The problems that exist in the church are not problems with the building; instead, they are the problems of the people who gather at the building. Improved church health only comes by means of lives submitted to the Lord Jesus. The problem is that many people see the wretchedness of others, but when will people see their own wretchedness. The prophet Isaiah says, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. (Isa. 6:1) Scholars have commented that this verse is a time marker and reveals the death of King Uzziah. While this may be accurate, the researcher believes that it also teaches about vision blockers that people make for themselves when attempting to see God. Uzziah was perhaps the last great king of the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel prospered under his rule for fifty-two years, and the Philistines, Arabians, and Ammonites were brought into subjection.¹²³ Now with Uzziah dead, Isaiah indeed thinks that the good days are behind him. Then he has a vision of the temple. He sees God elevated and the temple is consumed or filled with God. A healthy church is a church that is consumed with God. It is a church that only has one big personality, God.

The researcher also feels that newly called preachers need more research and attention. Preaching is God's way of verbally sharing His intention for humanity with the world. When a preacher senses the call to preach on their lives, they need mentors to guide them in becoming competent handlers of the scriptures more than potentially becoming prestigious and popular pastors.

¹²³ J. Vernon McGee, *Through the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), 38.

The Conclusion

The researcher is humbled to have conducted this research project. The church is vital to humankind, even if wicked men think otherwise. The church must have truth at its core. Not merely self-derived truth, but the truth of scripture. The task of preaching should not be taken lightly or passively. Every preached sermon is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to share the gospel because the preacher will never preach on that date again. Preachers must believe the message that they preach, and by doing so, they see themselves in constant need of the Christ about whom they preach. Moreover, tenure does not exempt any preacher from faithful sermon preparation practices.

A concentration on church health will combat the pride that exists in many pulpits in the O.E.T.B.A because it focuses on the original writer's intent and challenges the individual to grow. A healthy church is an informed church where disciples emulate the life of Christ in the world.

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 21, 2020

James Johnson
R. Peter Mason

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-265 Enhancing Church Health through Expository Preaching

Dear James Johnson, R. Peter Mason:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission

Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix 1: Preaching Calendar

September 13, 2020	Philippians 1:12-18
September 20, 2020	Philippians 2:12-18
September 27, 2020	Philippians 3:1-10
October 4, 2020	Philippians 4:10-20
October 11, 2020	Mark 1:23-28
October 18, 2020	Mark 2:14-17
October 25, 2020	Mark 3: 1-6
November 1, 2020	Mark 4:30-34
November 8, 2020	John 6: 1-15
November 15, 2020	Revelation 12:7-17

Appendix 2: Consent Forms:

Pastor Consent Form

Title of the Project: Enhancing Church Health through Expository Preaching

Principal Investigator: James Johnson, Graduate Student, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be the senior Pastor of a local church that is a part of the Original East Texas Baptist Association, pastoring for 3 or more years, and be at least 18 years of age or older. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take the time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to improve church health by becoming expositors of the Word of God. This study takes a hard look at sermon preparation processes, tools, and techniques. This project aims to improve church health as a result of better sermon preparation.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Attend an orientation meeting. (1 hour)

1. Participate in a video-recorded interview. (1 hour)
2. Complete a pre-questionnaire. (10-15 minutes)
3. Create 10 expository sermons over a 3-month period using the worksheets provided and preach 10 sermons. (completing the worksheets, writing in the prayer journal, and taking notes in sermon notebooks will take 6-16 hours across 2 days per week. Writing a manuscript will take 4-8 hours across 2-3 days each week)
4. Participate in weekly zoom meetings each week for 10 weeks. (1 hour each meeting)
5. Complete a post-questionnaire. (10-20 minutes)

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are a closer fellowship with God, personal spiritual growth and development, a systematic approach to sermon preparation, enhanced church health and growth, and God-centered presentations of the Gospel.

Benefits to society include sinners converted to Christ, and believers being disciplined as the Word of God is preached.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- All information and identities of participants are considered confidential. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews are conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet and may be used in future presentations and studies. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy records will be shredded.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will need to pay for any study materials such as books and programs not provided in the project as needed.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as Congress president of the Original East Texas Baptist Association. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision of whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Original East Texas Baptist Association. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is James Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 903-520-9809 or pastorofpg@gmail.com. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Peter Mason, at rpmason@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix 3: Church Member Consent Form

Title of the Project: Enhancing Church Health through Sermon Preparation of Exegetical Sermons

Principal Investigator: James Johnson, Pastor, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a member of a participating church of the Original East Texas Baptist Association.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take the time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to improve church health by becoming expositors of the Word of God. This study takes a hard look at sermon preparation processes, tools, and techniques. This project aims to improve church health as a result of better sermon preparation.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete pre-project questionnaire
2. Pray for your pastor and church daily.
3. Attend church 3 or 4 times monthly.
4. Take sermon notes.
5. Keep a journal of notes and your personal spiritual growth.
6. Complete post-project questionnaire.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are a closer fellowship with God, personal spiritual growth and development.

Benefits to society include sinners converted to Christ, and believers being disciplined as the Word of God is preached.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

There are no risks associated with this project

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the documents. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- All information and identities of participants are considered confidential. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews are conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations and studies. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings or associational meetings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There are no costs associated with this project.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as Congress president of the Original East Texas Baptist Association. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, interviews will be confidential, and information will only be shared with consent. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision of whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Original East Texas Baptist Association. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is James Johnson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 9035209809 or pastorofpg@gmail.com. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Peter Mason, at rpmason@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

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