

A Biblical Form of Preaching and Teaching

This lesson will present a method or form of teaching that is actually taken from the Bible itself, and will be useful not just for pastors, but for parents, and even for our individual scripture studies.

Neh. 8:5-8 – “And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: And Ezra blessed the LORD. the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ... and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

First, they “read in the law of the LORD distinctly”.

This means they simply read the actual text of the scriptures (specifically the law of Moses) as written in Hebrew.

Secondly they “gave the sense”.

During their time in Babylonian captivity, they had picked up Chaldee or Aramaic as commonly spoken languages. While some of them no doubt could still understand Hebrew, it was probably necessary or at least helpful to translate it into their common language for understanding the actual text.

Today we would also include “exegesis” as a part of giving the sense of a text. This is a relatively technical study of words, definitions, and historical and cultural context, using Hebrew and Greek lexicons, word studies to understand them from the various places in which they are used, or comparing commentaries, etc. The purpose is to understand the actual text as fully as possible, as it was originally spoken and written, and how it would or should have been received by the contemporaneous hearers.

An example of this would be to explain that the Greek word for “baptize” does not mean to sprinkle, to pour, or “to get wet”, but “to immerse”. Likewise, it is helpful to know that “strait” does not mean “straight”, or that there is a difference between confessing sins and confessing Christ publicly as Savior.

And then they “caused them to understand the reading”.

Besides a simple reading and translation, it was necessary to explain the text, to put it into understandable terms that could be applied in their situation. Today we would begin by paraphrasing – putting into our own words any part of the scriptures that may be confusing, misunderstood, or mysterious. This is encouraged even when dealing with interpersonal relations, system design, putting together contracts, etc., to help eliminate misunderstandings, and to expose hidden assumptions. One person says what they want, and the system designer says “What I am hearing you say is ... Is that correct?” Of course, in the case of paraphrasing scripture, God does not speak audibly and say “No, that is NOT what I meant.” It is up to us as listeners or readers to compare the paraphrase with the actual text, and judge whether the paraphrase is accurate or not.

But beyond paraphrasing, we try to give further teaching on the meaning of a text in non-technical, easily understood language, especially concentrating on the practical application of the verses being read. This practice is called exposition, or “expository preaching”.

An example would be Psalm 23. First we simply read it exactly as written. Then we give the sense of any words that may be necessary, like shepherding, rod and staff, anointing of the head, etc. Then we continue with lessons on how to live Ps. 23 in our everyday life, and how to experience the rest, confidence, peace, and protection that is implied in the literal words. This is an expository “sermon” – we read it, we explain the relevant concepts, and then we cause the listeners to understand it and exactly how it applies to them, “where the rubber meets the road”.

This pattern of reading a verse or verses, then giving an explanation of the meaning of the actual text in its original context, and then an exposition in how to apply the Word to our own lives and situations, in our own culture and society, has been followed by preachers and teachers all through church history. In examples like Jonathan Edwards, a preacher from New England in the 1740’s, this practice is very clear and distinct. In fact it is also the way parents teach their children. For example, we read a verse in Proverbs, then put it into our own words

so the kids can more readily understand it, and then discuss ways to put it into practice in our family and individual lives.

What are some cautions in all this?

1. Today almost no one, even preachers, reads the original languages fluently. This has been addressed through history by making translations into the common languages. This has been very good and necessary for evangelism, because we cannot expect people to be able or willing to learn a foreign language before they are even converted. It is also necessary for subsequent spiritual growth, because people need to be able to read and understand God's Word themselves, without relying on a priest teaching from a Latin Bible.

Until the last 50-75 years, most translations were done with the goal of making translations as accurate as possible. Since then many of the newer versions value understandability above accuracy, even going so far as to incorporate slang or American idioms as a substitute for literal meanings.

Admitting that there is no exact, one-to-one translation from one language to another, different translators will always come up with slightly different versions. For this reason many translations have been the work of teams of translators, working together to deliver the best translations possible, trying to minimize any sectarian views of the translators.

2. The plague of modern day Christendom is a plethora of Bible versions that claim to be translations, but are in actuality extremely loose translations combined with the "translators'" own ideas of what the verses "should have said". I would like to believe that this is done with good intentions, but am not really so sure. In fact, I believe that the motivation behind many of these "translations" is geared so much towards "understandability" at the expense of literalness that they cease to really be Bibles at all. They are really commentaries masquerading as Bibles. This is not only dishonest, but is a serious danger to both readers and translators.

A prime example of a paraphrase is the Living Bible, very popular in the 70's, and the predecessor of the NLT. Mr. Taylor did not even use the original language texts, simply rephrasing the American Standard Version of 1901 into his own words. I used it for a while, but finally decided it was so watered down that I needed a real, authoritative Bible. The Living Bible seemed to open the gates for all the versions we have today, ranging from literal translations to "thought-for-thought", "idea-for-idea", "dynamic equivalence", and paraphrases.

The danger is not that we paraphrase (as I have stated, it is fairly necessary in explaining and teaching from the Bible), but in presenting the paraphrase in such a form that it seems to be, or presents itself as an actual Bible. This is to replace God's actual revelation with men's own interpretations, sometimes right and sometimes significantly wrong. People assign to the paraphrase a level of authority and confidence that is not justified.

Mt. 5:18 – "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."

The word "jot" is "iota" in Greek, or "yod" in Hebrew, which are both very small letters in those alphabets. "Tittle" means the smallest stroke of a pen that distinguishes one letter from another. We even today use the word iota. E.g. "But did he care? Not one iota". The obvious meaning is that God inspired the Word right down to the smallest degree. Not general ideas, but individual words to such an exactness that not a single letter will be unfulfilled.

Rev. 22:18-19 – "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book."

I believe that the devil himself is behind a lot of this, because when faced with so many English translations that are so fundamentally different, these are the actual results:

- a. Many or most hearers get such a loose attitude towards scripture that it loses real authority. This version says this, but that one says that, so what are we supposed to believe?
 - b. It allows preachers who are not “valiant for the truth”, when faced with a difficult or unpopular or problematic portion of scripture, to go version-shopping to find the one most fitting to their use.
 - c. It makes it less likely that people will follow along in their own Bibles as the preacher speaks, because if he is reading in one version, it will generally be quite confusing to follow along in another version. Many or most people don’t even bring a Bible to church anymore. Why bother?
 - d. People are robbed of the responsibility of reading and interpreting the scriptures for themselves. As the Bible was not meant to be filtered through “priests” (as was done in the Roman Catholic church), so should it not be filtered through the additions, deletions, and modifications of all these hundreds of versions.
3. Many of these versions are de facto denials of the idea of verbal plenary inspiration of the scriptures. Here is a definition taken from BibleHub.com:

“Verbal Plenary Inspiration refers to the view that the words of Scripture are fully (plenary) and divinely (verbal) inspired by God. Every word of the original writings is considered God’s true revelation, without error in all that they affirm. This position emphasizes that God directed the human authors so that what they wrote is precisely what He intended, though their distinct styles and personalities remained evident.”

2 Tim. 3:16 – “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

2 P. 1:20-21 – “knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

What is a better approach?

While we recognize the need for explanations and commentary and paraphrasing to help understand the Bible, they should not be put into the text itself. We have Hebrew and Greek texts that are reliable, but they obviously need to be translated into other languages so all peoples can hear and receive, not just the gospel, but all of God’s revealed truth. For this purpose, we should aim for the most accurate and reliable translations possible, with no extraneous additions or modifications. We should get the Word in our own languages as straight and true as possible, and leave its interpretation and application to pastors, teachers, and each individual believer, trusting the Holy Spirit for guidance.

As there are occasions where the translator may think readers may misunderstand the literal translation, his explanations can be put in footnotes as helps. References or short quotations from external works might be added, but these should be kept to an absolute minimum. Fuller expansions on particular topics can be put in short essays interspersed in the text, as is done in the ESV Study Bible, but should never be treated with the same authority as the actual text. Keep the actual text as accurate as possible and leave the commentary to separate works.

Pastors and teachers and parents should present the Word as Ezra did – “Here is what the Bible actually says. Here are the context, definitions, and explanations of words or phrases, and here is what it can mean in actual day-to-day living.” Then give the people the responsibility to verify the reliability and accuracy of those interpretations.

We even have this as a Biblical precedent and example:

Ac. 17:11 – “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

Note: Some examples of literal English translations are the KJV, NKJV, ESV, and NASB. None are perfect, but should be used with diligent study and teaching.

Sunday school teaching notes are available at: howardslackteachings.com