

Michigan Expositor's Summit – 2024
Preaching the Difficult Books of the Bible

Introductory Considerations

Presuppositions and Commitments

1. I presuppose an “originalist hermeneutic”¹ and thus, employ a dispensational interpretation of Scripture.
2. I am committed to expository preaching and thus, advocate the *lectio continua* method as the primary approach to preaching.

A Rubric for the Hermeneutic/Homiletic Task

Proper preaching requires proper answers to three questions.

1. What is the Bible's metanarrative?
2. What contribution does this book of the Bible make to the metanarrative?
3. How does the sermon text advance the message of the book?

Sources of Difficulty

There are many elements that contribute to the complexities and difficulties of particular books: genre, elevated language, etc. Proper training in the mechanics of exegesis should equip the preacher to overcome these difficulties with varying degrees of proficiency. However, the difficulties are insurmountable if the preacher fails to establish answers to the three questions in the hermeneutic/homiletic rubric.

For the purposes of this conference:

1. A common failure to understand the Bible's storyline increases the difficulty of preaching through Revelation.
2. A common failure to understand where the book fits into the metanarrative increases the difficulty of preaching through Ecclesiastes.
3. A common failure to understand how the book fits together to create a unified message increases the difficulty of preaching through Proverbs.

¹ Mark A. Snoberger, “Refining Dispensational Discourse: Reconsidering Four Common Expressions,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 27 (2022: 15-30).

Supplementary Resources

The QR Code below provides access to a folder that contains several documents that I found helpful in preparing to preach the three books under review in this conference. In addition to articles, you will also find a collection of sermon outlines for Proverbs and Revelation (you may use them for ideas), and a few sermon manuscripts as examples. I have also provided a 160 page Bible study on Ecclesiastes based on sermon series prepared 30 years ago.



Preaching an Expository Series Through Proverbs Michigan Expositor's Summit – 2024

Introduction: Many Christians and preachers make it a practice to read the book of Proverbs regularly. Some lay out a monthly reading schedule—one chapter for each day of the month. Many select favorite proverbs to memorize. They find it a delightful resource for personal meditation. But personal is the key word. The thought of a sermon series that leads a congregation through the book is hard for them to imagine. Perhaps this workshop can convince the reluctant that our congregations need to hear Proverbs.

1. Reasons many preachers avoid Proverbs

1.1. Many consider it more conducive to topical preaching than *lectio continua* preaching.

This assumption springs from uncertainty regarding the structure of the book. A sermon series cannot follow the “continuous reading” approach to preaching if the preacher is unsure of how the book fits together. If the preacher sees Proverbs primarily as a collection of random wisdom statements (at least in chapter 10-31), he will be inclined toward a brief topical series that builds sermons from individual proverbs or clear collections (e.g., Proverbs 31:10-31). However, as discussed below, Proverbs is surprisingly agreeable to *lectio continua* preaching.

1.2. Many are secretly skeptical of its message because some proverbs seem to promise more than delivered in actual experience.

It is an interpretive mistake of the first order to treat Proverbs as a collection of divine laws or promises. The one who does so not only misrepresents the author's intention, but sometimes even unleashes abuse against his listeners.²

Thankfully most preachers conclude that biblical proverbs are not concrete promises. They preach them as general principles. That is a better approach, but not without its own pitfalls. If the text teaches a general principle, one could expect a given outcome *most* of the time. Yet in experience, we see in various times and places, the expected outcomes are rare. It is difficult to preach a book when it fails to deliver the results the preacher expects. But the problem is not with the text but with the interpreter's understanding of the text and the subsequent expectations he creates for himself and the congregation. A different way of thinking about Proverbs is in order.

1.3. Many find the challenge of Hebrew poetry daunting.

² A classic example of this occurs in relation to Proverbs 22:6. This proverb will be explained below.

We live in a culture that devalues poetry. Few people read English poetry for its literary appeal and aesthetic beauty. In such an environment, the thought of studying poetry written in a different language, employing dissimilar literary features is not only daunting, some might find it unnecessarily difficult.³

Yet poetry, as any art form, has the potential to shape a message in such a way that it targets the affections. Poetry communicates in ways that prose cannot reproduce. Its abundant use of metaphor and symbolism, as well as unique structure serves to touch our affections. Herein lies the value of biblical poetry: *it expresses truth with beauty and thus involves the entire personality of the reader*. This is why God chose to give large sections of his word in poetic form.

Yes, the forms and metaphors of Hebrew poetry can be daunting, but preachers must not avoid large swathes of biblical text for their own convenience. Fortunately, many resources are available to help the struggling preacher freshen up his skills—at least to the point at which he can interact with the best commentaries on the text of Proverbs.⁴

1.4. Some consider the message of Proverbs moralistic rather than gospel centered.

Is it legalistic to teach Christians behavioral norms from the Old Testament? The development of godly character is true evidence of “fear of the Lord.” No one should conclude that a focused interest in following the guidance of biblical wisdom is legalism. Those who reach such a conclusion have larger theological issues to work through and, frankly, should not be preaching until they resolve matters pertaining to biblical sanctification. The pursuit of godly behavior is not legalism.

2. Reasons you should preach Proverbs

Proverbs belongs to Israel, but Paul used it for training in the Christian churches (2 Timothy 3:16). We should do the same for at least three reasons.

2.1. Proverbs shows our church members the inseparable relationship between spiritual life and godly behavior.

Early dispensationalists rushed to find discontinuity between the testaments. In their enthusiasm, they sometimes manufactured differences where none actually exist. The

³ T. David Gordon makes an astute assessment that helps explain why many preachers struggle with exposition—and especially poetry. “Culturally, then, we are no longer careful, close readers of texts, sacred or secular. We scan for information, but we do not appreciate literary craftsmanship. Exposition is therefore virtually a lost art. We don’t really read texts to enter the world of the author and perceive reality through his vantage point; we read texts to see how they confirm what we already believe about reality.” *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2009), 49. This means that preachers must work hard to overcome the prevalent literary malaise.

⁴ William E. Mouser, Jr., *Walking in Wisdom: Studying the Proverbs of Solomon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983) is a helpful and readable review.

work of the Holy Spirit in salvation and subsequent sanctification is one of those areas. The by-product of this is a belief (still with us in some quarters) that Old Testament saints were neither regenerated nor indwelt by the Spirit. This is a theological oddity that, thankfully, is losing traction.

Part of the debris left by this bit of errant theology is the conclusion that believers in the church age are saved and sanctified in a different way and so Old Testament instructions in godly living have little value for the church. It is true that the church is not a new Israel, but the regenerate, spirit indwelt people of this age have much to learn from the instructions that God gave to his people in the Old Testament—people who were also regenerate and indwelt by the Spirit of God. The message of Proverbs was for those marked by “fear of the Lord” in that age. We who fear the Lord today can learn from it.

2.2. Proverbs helps our church members learn practical skills of biblical obedience.

As will be discussed below, the very idea of “wisdom” is bound up with the concept of skill. The subject matter of Proverbs is broad. It does not promote specific trades or vocations; it is not preoccupied with the function of government nor religious practices; it shows no interest in society’s caste structure. Instead, it shows the path of skillful (wise) living at a personal level, applicable for all who fear the Lord.

2.3. Proverbs gives our church members biblical language for training a new generation.

Proverbs has the earmarks of a manual for parents to use to train their children (see below). Preaching the book helps our people understand it, and understanding deepens personal obedience. But it also inspires parents to take up the role of the author—the father who labors to pass on these truths to his son. Think of the many lines of text embedded in our memory that help shape our own pursuit of godly living. Here are just a few:

1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
 fools despise wisdom and instruction.

3:5-6 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
 and do not lean on your own understanding.
 In all your ways acknowledge him,
 and he will make straight your paths.

3:9-10 Honor the LORD with your wealth
 and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
 then your barns will be filled with plenty,
 and your vats will be bursting with wine.

3:11-12 My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline
 or be weary of his reproof,

for the LORD reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.

6:10:11 A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man.

11:16 A man who is kind benefits himself,
but a cruel man hurts himself.

12:15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes,
but a wise man listens to advice.

24:27 Prepare your work outside;
get everything ready for yourself in the field,
and after that build your house.

3. Proverbs' place in the big story of Scripture

3.1. Proverbs is Old Testament Wisdom literature

Three of the Old Testament poetic books belong to the subcategory of Wisdom literature. They are:

Job
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes

Wisdom literature is found in many ancient cultures. It is practical in its focus, dealing with personal responsibilities rather than corporate or national responsibilities. It falls into two categories of thought:

“Lower” Wisdom—Practical, how to live day to day (Proverbs)

“Higher” Wisdom—Philosophical, how to answer life’s big questions (Job, Ecclesiastes)

The distinguishing characteristic of Old Testament wisdom literature is its emphasis on “fear of the Lord.”

“God used the sage’s keen observations of creation and humanity and his cogent reflections upon them, informed by faith in Israel’s covenant-keeping God, to produce the wisdom literature.”⁵

3.2. Proverbs teaches personal “torah living”

Those who feared the Lord lived according to torah, so in the Old Testament, obedience flowed from faith, just as in the church age.

Six times the book of Proverbs employs the term תּוֹרָה (*tôrâ*) in connection with the father’s teaching. Proverbial wisdom is never mere fatherly common sense. It is instruction derived from biblical truth. E.g.,

Proverbs 28:4

⁴ Those who forsake the *law* praise the wicked,
but those who keep the *law* strive against them.

Proverbs 29:18

¹⁸ Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint,
but blessed is he who keeps the *law*.

Other terminology supports this connection. For example, The term, מוֹסֵר (*mûsār*), occurs 31x, variously translated “discipline,” “instruction,” or “correction.” The prophets employed in diatribes against Israel’s failure to listen to the words of the Lord. See Jeremiah 35:13.

Another term, מִשְׁוָּא (*mišwâ*), though only used 3x (6:23, 13:13, 19:16), makes a very clear connection between the teachings of Proverbs and Torah.

Proverbs 13:13-14

¹³ Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself,
but he who reveres the *commandment* will be rewarded.

¹⁴ The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,
that one may turn away from the snares of death.

Compare this with the use of the same term in Deuteronomy 11:26-28:

²⁶ “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the *commandments* of the LORD your God, which I command you today, ²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the *commandments* of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 55.

3.3. Proverbs is a training manual designed to help Israel fulfill her educational mandate

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 laid the foundation for Israel's educational mandate. The book of Proverbs lays out the practical lesson plans. The first part is framed as a father's instruction to his son. Note the repetition of "my son" that marks off the addresses throughout the first nine chapters. The interpreter should carry this theoretical setting throughout the entire book, treating the first nine chapters as a prologue that sets the context for teaching from the collected proverbs that begin in 10:1. The content originated in the court of Solomon, but with the clear intent of use outside the court. The pedagogical tone is common rather than royal (with the exception of the words of Lemuel's mother recorded by him in 31:1-9). Clearly, the responsibility for moral training of the child lies with the parents (primarily the father, but also with the mother [4:3-4, 6:20, 31:1, 31:26]).

4. Understanding the message of Proverbs

Identifying the subject of Proverbs, along with knowledge of its genre and structure will lead the interpreter to a brief, clear, and accurate summary statement that is useful in preaching from the book.

4.1. The subject of Proverbs

As indicated above, the dominant themes of the book are wisdom and fear of the Lord. These should not be separated and treated in isolation. We may consider the words individually but must remember that the concepts combine together to form the single subject of the book: the wisdom of those who fear the Lord (1:7, 10:9).

4.1.1. Wisdom

The term for biblical wisdom (*חֵכְמָה* *hokmâ*) appears 37x in Proverbs. It is a multifaceted concept that applies knowledge to the skillful accomplishment of a task; hence, it can be translated "skill" or "ability." A primary example of this usage is found in Exodus 36:2.

² And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the LORD had put *skill*, everyone whose heart stirred him up to come to do the work.

4.1.2. The fear of the Lord

Fear of the Lord, the frequent refrain found throughout the Old Testament (Deut. 6:1-2; Josh. 24:14; Prov. 1:7; Isa. 29:13), identifies the genuine child of God. Proverbs uses the phrase as a descriptor the way we might speak of a "believer" or "follower of Christ." The true believer in the Old Testament was marked by fear of the Lord that resulted in obedience to the torah.

Fear of the Lord sets a two-fold *inclusio* in the book. It marks off the prologue (1:7-9:10) and then encloses the whole book using 31:30. This *inclusio* also functions to unite the twin themes of fear of the Lord and wisdom—the former is essential foundation of the latter (The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge/wisdom, 1:7, 9:10).

4.2. The genre of Proverbs

Misguided use of Proverbs often stems from a failure to understand the genre.

4.2.1. Proverb defined

One might say that a proverb expresses a general truth. Almost all who listen to our preaching are familiar with a proverb in some form. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” It is a brief, memorable statement that presents a general truth as a maxim. A proverb *is* a general truth; however, biblical proverbs are more than *mere* general truths.⁶ Waltke explains,

“in English a proverb refers to a short, pithy saying that has popular currency, but the *māšāl* refers to an apothegm that has currency among those who fear the LORD.”⁷

The theme “fear of the Lord” marks the unique nature of biblical proverbs. These are not the product of human rationale or experience and, therefore, optional. Human wisdom will shift and change if it does not produce the expected results. In contrast, biblical sagacity marks a path of obedience that the righteous follow even if it does not bring us to the outcome we desired. “We do this because it is right.”

A qualification is in order.

4.2.2. A proverb is not a universal promise: Proverbs 22:6 as an illustration

Some preachers have caused unnecessary heartache and division in their churches by preaching Proverbs 22:6 as a universal promise.

Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.

They preach that biblical parenting methods will always produce the right outcome. Some temper that by interpreting the second verset to mean that even if

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this lecture to review the structural elements of Hebrew poetry. Most commentaries assume that the reader has some familiarity. If you need to refresh your memory on these matters, several helpful books on the subject are available. A useful, yet simple work is Mouser’s, *Walking in Wisdom*, cited above.

⁷ Waltke, *Proverbs*, 56.

the child strays from the path of wisdom, he will eventually return to it. The result promise/absolutist approach is that parents of wayward children bear a double heartache—grief over their child and shame that comes from believing their own parenting errors produced the child’s sin. That hurt is further compounded by public shame that comes from judgment made by others, whether or not it is spoken.

This is a gross misuse of the biblical text. The proverb can be interpreted in two ways and neither of which will yield the kind of preaching described above.

Interpretation 1: Positive—General truth

A common interpretation is that 22:6 is positive instruction to parents to guide their child properly with the expectation that their child will follow their guidance throughout life. It allows for exceptions to the stated outcome in verset b—a fact born out in Scripture. This is an acceptable use of the proverb genre.

Interpretation 2: Negative—Irony

The positive interpretation of this verse (guidance to parents resulting in positive effect on children) has a long history in English translations, probably due to the fact that it fits the tone of similar proverbs. However, the verse contains a translation issue that is largely ignored. A more literal translation of the first verset reads:

Train up a child according to his (own) way;

Some interpreters suggest that this means parents should provide training that considers the natural tendencies and interests of the child as they design their training plan. Surely this is an exercise of reading modern Western ideals back into the world of the text! Solomon, who frequently mentioned liberal use of the rod, did not seem to share our interests in parental sensitivity.

A better way to understand this text is to treat it as irony. In verse one, Solomon presents counsel to the parents that is the opposite of what he actually intended. An amplified paraphrase suggests that the intended meaning was more likely a threat than a promise.⁸

Go ahead and train up a child according to his (own foolish) way;
(and here is what you will find): even when he is old he will not
depart from (that foolish path).

⁸ “Threat” is the description assigned by Dan Phillips in *God’s Wisdom in Proverbs* (Woodland, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2011). His third appendix, pp. 353-379, “Proverbs 22:6—Promise . . . or Threat?” presents a convincing argument (at least from this preacher’s perspective) and is worth the price of the book.

Someone might object that Proverbs do not employ that kind of irony. It is true that Solomon used it rarely, but he did use it. For examples see: 19:27 and 31:6.

4.3. A summary statement

Several elements of the book combine to provide a summary statement (viz. a declaration of the book's contribution to the biblical storyline). The practical nature of Proverbs, combined with its emphasis on skill, torah, and the fear of the Lord, yields this summary:

Proverbs teaches God's people the skill of applying biblical truth to the details of life.
fear of the Lord wisdom torah practical living

5. The structure of Proverbs

5.1. The outline of Proverbs

The Message of Proverbs A Simplified Outline⁹

Part One: A Structured, Unified Lesson in Wisdom

I. Introduction (1:1-70)

- A. The title (1:1)
- B. The intent of the book (1:2-6)
- C. The theme of the book (1:7)

II. A father's appeal: Acquire wisdom (1:8-9:18)

- A. Avoid the snare of bad company and easy money (1:8-19)
- B. Lady wisdom calls (1:20-33)
- C. Treasure wisdom (2:1-22)
- D. Follow the way of wisdom (3:1-35)
- E. Pursue righteousness and avoid seduction (4:1-27)
- F. Resist the folly of adultery and delight in marital faithfulness (5:1-23)
- G. Four admonitions (6:1-19)

⁹ The author drew several ideas from more than one source when developing this representation. Especially helpful was the broad structure proposed by Dr. Robert McCabe, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

1. Avoid debt (6:1-5)
2. Avoid laziness (6:6-11)
3. Avoid troublemakers (6:12-15)
4. Avoid all the things God hates (6:16-19)
- H. Two speeches: The high cost of adultery (6:20-7:27)
- I. Lady wisdom calls—again (8:1-36)
- J. Epilogue/Summary (9:1-18)
 1. Listen to wisdom’s call (9:1-12)
 2. Resist folly’s call (9:13-18)

Part Two: Collected Sayings that Teach Wisdom

- III. The first collection: Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)**
- IV. The second collection: Sayings of the wise (22:17-24:34)**
 - A. Thirty sayings of the wise (22:17-24:22)
 - B. More sayings of the wise (24:23-34)
- V. The third collection: Proverbs of Solomon collected by Hezekiah (25:1-29:27)**
- VI. The fourth collection: Sayings of Agur (30:1-33)**
- VII. The fifth collection: Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-31)**
 - A. The good king (31:1-9)
 - B. The valiant wife (31:10-31)

5.2. Homiletic structures in Proverbs

Contrary to common assumptions, the book of Proverbs provides a clear path for *lectio continua* preaching requiring only a little creativity. The path is obvious in the first nine chapters. It is a little less obvious in chapters 10-31, but a closer look shows the way forward.

5.2.1. Chapters 1-9

Some call the first nine chapters the prologue. It prepares the audience to focus on the proverbs contained in chapters 10ff. It falls into two parts.

5.2.1.1. Introduction to the book

The first seven verses of the book inform the reader of:

- The identity of the author 1:1
- The intent of the book 1:2-6
- The undergirding principle 1:7

5.2.1.2. Appeals from father to son

From 1:8 through 9:32, the book contains about 15 addresses directed from father to son.¹⁰ Each appeal is a contained unit suitable for a sermon text.

5.2.2. Chapters 10-31

The seemingly random nature of the collections that begin in 10:1 at first glance seem to defy organization into a well-ordered preaching plan. A closer look reveals, for the most part, that these collections bear the marks of an editor's hand.¹¹

5.2.2.1. Poems and sections

While many proverbs stand alone as terse maxims, others are part of larger poems. A few of the most obvious are

23:29-35—a warning against wine

30:1-33—the words of Agur: a single poem with clearly defined segments

31:1-9—the words of Lemuel's mother to her son

31:10-31—the song of the valiant wife

5.2.2.2. Collections identified by application of poetics

Poetics is the literary analysis of the text that identifies intentional connections between verses. The connections can include similar ideas/metaphors, repeated words, syntax, and sounds. Individual verses intentionally juxtaposed create a larger poetic structure.

Adele Berlin explains that “‘poetics is to literature as linguistics is to language.’ In essence, poetics is the grammar of literature. Its value to hermeneutics cannot be overstated. We must first know how a text means before we can know what it means.”¹²

¹⁰ The final tally depends, in part, on how one treats the collection of four appeals in 6:1-19.

¹¹ 25:1-29:27 makes it clear that some editorial work has been done. This section of Solomonic proverbs was collected and organized long after Solomon's death. Other parts of the book show signs of thought organization. Nothing precludes the assumption that Solomon himself oversaw much of the editing process.

¹² A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), p. 15.

For example, see Waltke on the chiasm embedded in the song of the valiant wife.

Sometimes the literary structure is obvious, such as:

24:30-34—the sluggard
26:1-12—the song of the fool
26:18-28—the whispering deceiver

Other times the structure is less obvious since some of the markers are lost in the work of translation. The following are examples of such literary structures:¹³

10:1-16
10:17-32
11:1-8
11:9-14
11:16-22
11:28-31
Etc.

6. Practical suggestions for preaching Proverbs

6.1. Create a well-organized preaching plan

- 6.1.1. Work systematically through the book, employing all the various structures (as discussed in 5:2).
- 6.1.2. Include sermons based on individual proverbs.

Select a few key texts such as:

16:20
17:17
20:29
27:6

When preaching single proverbs, make thematic connections with the larger “story” of the book. Emphasize the fear of the Lord.

¹³ For an explanation of the features of Hebrew poetry that bind these verses together to form a single unit, refer to Waltke, *Proverbs, in loc.*

6.1.3. Include topical/thematic sermons.

This common way of preaching from Proverbs is an appropriate approach when handled judiciously. Select a few proverbs that deal with the same topic but that have unique nuances. Structure the sermon to highlight the nuances in order to give a broad understanding of the topic. Several resources are available to help approach the collections thematically.¹⁴

The sermon series may ask and answer the question, what does “the fear of the Lord” look like in relation to:

Our character
Our children
Our enemies
Our friendships
Our neighbors
Our money
Our parents
Our plans
Our reputation
Our speech
Our sobriety
Our work

6.2. Invite the audience into the world of the text by using the perennially relevant portrait implied by the characters involved.

Participants in the “story” of the book:

- The wise—see them travelling the path of wisdom
- The fools—see them travelling the path of folly
- The son (the “simple,” lit., “open”)—see him standing at the crossroads
- The father—see him pleading with his son to choose the path of wisdom

6.3. Avoid “Wisdom Christology” in Proverbs 8:1-36

It is tempting to connect Christ with “Lady Wisdom” as described in chapter 8. Though there are significant similarities in the description, the differences make it both exegetically and theologically impossible to equate the two. Attempts to do so open the door to further error. Past attempts to read Christ into Proverbs through this passage have emboldened radical feminist interpreters to argue for a female manifestation of Christ.

¹⁴ Alan Ross provides an extensive and useful topical list of short sayings in the introduction to his commentary on Proverbs in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5, pp. 897-903. *Proverbs for Practical Living* (1991) is a self-published work compiled by Curtis Martin and categorizes the proverb collections according to useful topics.

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Preaching an Expository Series Through Ecclesiastes

Michigan Expositor's Summit – 2024

Introduction: The book of Ecclesiastes evokes a variety of responses when it comes up in casual conversation among preachers. Some profess love for the book as the focus of a preaching series while others cringe at the very thought. Despite the differing viewpoints, the Scriptures declare that this book “is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). We should preach the message of Ecclesiastes. The question is, how should we approach it? Perhaps understanding the reasons many avoid the book would provide the first step toward preparing to preach from it.

7. Reasons many preachers avoid Ecclesiastes

Most objections to preaching an exegetical series through Ecclesiastes stem from three broad problems.

7.1. It is hard to understand how Ecclesiastes fits into the biblical storyline.

The determination of where and how a book fits into the biblical story is essential to sound exegesis. It is also essential to accurate and interesting preaching. The truth is that simple, carefully packaged, easily dispensed summaries of the biblical message have become the stock-in-trade of many expository preachers. But a book like Ecclesiastes does not fit neatly into our preferred “Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation” soundbite-styled breviaries.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that the Scriptural story is not simply linear, but more like a richly textured tapestry. The preacher needs to struggle through details to arrive at firm answers to difficult questions about Ecclesiastes. These questions fall into two categories.

7.1.1. How does Ecclesiastes fit the biblical storyline *chronologically*?

Questions of authorship and date of writing (generally speaking) will determine what a preacher does with this book. The almost¹⁵ univocal voice of scholars among the people of God throughout history declared that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, probably near the end of his life. This consensus began to crumble under a relentless barrage from critical scholarship that arose in the nineteenth century. Today the dominant opinion—even among most conservative scholars—is that Ecclesiastes was written in the post-exilic era, probably between 250 and 350 BC. However,

¹⁵ Martin Luther expressed misgivings about Solomonic authorship. We should probably remember at this point that he also referred to James as “an epistle of straw.”

there are several modern scholars who have mounted convincing (as least for this preacher) arguments for Solomonic authorship.¹⁶

Three observations are in order:

- 7.1.1.1. Preachers should be wary of jettisoning conservative conclusions held for millennia in favor of novel ideas arising from historical criticism.
- 7.1.1.2. Preachers who reject Solomonic authorship effectively emasculate the message of the book.
- 7.1.1.3. Preachers who embrace the “king fiction” literary form (often used to explain why the author sounds like Solomon), reduce the book to pseudepigrapha.¹⁷

7.1.2. How does Ecclesiastes fit the biblical storyline *theologically*?

Preachers who settle the question of Solomonic authorship still have to work through what Solomon meant in the book. In various places, the content of the book seems to be at odds with the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. For example, what does the preacher do with:

- An admonition to be neither overly righteous nor overly wicked? 7:16-17
- A statement that the dead know nothing, so a living dog is better than a dead lion. 9:4-5

Or what about the theme of the book? Do we really preach that everything is meaningless (1:2, NIV), or vain (KJV, ESV), or absolutely futile (NET)?

Does the Bible not elsewhere establish God himself as the standard of righteousness to which we should aspire (Matthew 5:48)? Does it not commend those who shun all evil (Job 1:2)? Do we not preach that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8)? Does Paul not assure his readers, “that in the Lord your labor is *not* in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58)?

To say that it is hard to understand how the book fits into the biblical storyline does not mean that it is impossible. Suggestions will be made below with a focus on the book’s

¹⁶ Archer, Gleason, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994); Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993); *Ecclesiastes*; Stafford J. Wright, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*.(Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), *et al.* See especially, Robert V. McCabe, “Pondering the Authorship of Ecclesiastes,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 20 (2015): 3-20.

¹⁷ “King fiction” is the label used for the literary device employed by the unknown author of Ecclesiastes. This theory is assumed as fact in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton, : Crossway, 2023), 302.

place in the storyline (point #3 of this outline). Some of the theological difficulties will be addressed in the section #4.

7.2. Ecclesiastes still suffers from an errant assessment of some biblical critics, including many early dispensationalists.

As critical theories of authorship began to win the day, a few conservative scholars (e.g., Hengstenberg, Delitzsch, Leupold) embraced a negative understanding of the message of the book. Some conservative interpreters concluded that the unidentifiable author was a skeptic, or at least wrote from the vantagepoint of a skeptic. I. C. Scofield ensconced this view in the study Bible that bears his name.

“THIS is the book of man “under the sun,” reasoning about life; it is the best man can do, with the knowledge that there is a holy God, and that He will bring everything into judgment. The key phrases are “under the sun”; “I perceived”; “I said in my heart.” Inspiration sets down accurately what passes, but the conclusions and reasonings are, after all, man’s. That those conclusions are just in declaring it “vanity,” in view of judgment, to devote life to earthly things, is surely true; but the “conclusion” (12:13) is legal, the best that man apart from redemption can do, and does not anticipate the Gospel.”¹⁸

Elsewhere, Scofield compared the inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the canon to the inclusion of the words of Satan in Genesis 3:4.¹⁹ Dispensational schools such as Dallas Theological Seminary championed this view, making it the interpretive norm among dispensationalists for many decades.

7.3. Ecclesiastes does not fit neatly into current fads in preaching:

Fad is a decidedly uncomplimentary term when used of preachers, but few preachers are impervious to strong waves of opinion and practice that threaten to sweep them along. Two such waves that I consider faddish serve to diminish interest in Ecclesiastes as a preaching text.

7.3.1. Christ in every text

“Christ-centered preaching,” better described as “Christ in every text,” is a fad that grew out of an ecclesial controversy in the Dutch Reformed Church in the Netherlands in the 1930s.²⁰ It found a comfortable home in the history of redemption teaching of Gerhardus Vos and was popularized in the teachings of Sidney Greidanus, Graeme Goldsworthy, Edmund Clowney, and Bryan Chapell, just

¹⁸ *The Scofield Reference Bible*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), 696.

¹⁹ Scofield Bible Correspondence Course, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1959), 2:302.

²⁰ Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Wipf and Stock, 2001).

to name a few.²¹ Their strong influence has succeeded in convincing most preachers—especially young preachers—that Christian preaching has not occurred unless the preacher uncovers a direct connection between a sermon text and Jesus. No preacher would deny the important role Jesus plays in the unfolding story of the Bible, but that differs from making Jesus the subject of every Scripture text.

That is an untenable homiletic practice in much of the Old Testament, but especially in Ecclesiastes—despite claims to the contrary.²² If a preacher assumes he must find Christ in each pericope in Ecclesiastes, he will soon weary of the search because Christ is not just elusive, he is absent from the book.

7.3.2. Gospel triumphalism

Twenty years ago, Carl Trueman suggested that the idols of the prosperity gospel have seeped into evangelical churches.²³ The tone of our worship services provides the evidence. “Worship leaders” largely ignore Israel’s hymnal, the Psalter. Trueman suggests the exclusion is intentional because lament does not fit into a “diet of unremittingly jolly choruses and hymns” that dominate our worship services and “create an unrealistic horizon of expectation which sees the normative Christian life as one long triumphalist street party.” Even in conservative churches, hymns of lament produce a measure of discomfort and a service of lament (think Good Friday) becomes intolerable to many.

Preachers suspect that Ecclesiastes will prove a shock to the system of Christians who expect to be “happy all the day.”

8. Reasons you should preach Ecclesiastes

Solomon holds two thematic poles together in tension throughout Ecclesiastes, one negative and one positive. These two poles, seen in the light of our current context, provide strong reasons to preach Ecclesiastes to our people.

8.1. Ecclesiastes exposes despair as the stock-in-trade of every pagan worldview.

The negative thematic pole exposes the realities of life in a sin-cursed world. If what we see is all there is, despair is the inevitable conclusion.

8.1.1. Its message subverts the unfounded optimism of secular modernism.

²¹ For a brief but useful critique of this movement, see Richard Mayhue, “Christ-Centered Preaching—An Overview,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* (Fall 2016), 151-160.

²² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010).

²³ Carl Trueman, “What Can Miserable Christians Sing,” in *The Wages of Spin: Critical Writings on Historical and Contemporary Evangelicalism* (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2004), 157–163.

In our eagerness to decry postmodernism for its obvious flaws, we often fail to see the failure of philosophical modernism. The “good old days” were marked by pagan reliance on human reason and progression. Solomon sets the record straight on human achievement: in the end, nothing matters, nothing is gained.

8.1.2. Its message unmask the unbearable outcome of postmodern deconstruction.

Postmodernism offered a needed corrective to modernism’s reliance on human reason. However, its absolute relativism and the resulting forces of deconstruction bequeath to its adherents nothing more than extreme isolation and a suffocating sense of insignificance. This is exactly where Solomon takes the reader of Ecclesiastes. How ironic that modernist and postmodernist end up in the same place.

8.1.3. Its message shatters the thin veneer of respectability afforded the health and wealth gospel.

The prosperity gospel attracts professing Christians with a Golden Calf that promises material blessings such as money and good health. These together give the worshiper happiness. Hardly a church goes unaffected by the seduction of the Calf, at least to some degree. But no one has wealth and achievement to rival Solomon. Yet he concluded that satisfaction was unattainable in these things, akin to trying to “shepherd the wind.”

Therefore, Ecclesiastes has apologetic value.

8.2. Ecclesiastes pierces the darkness of despair with the light of divine hope.

Solomon’s positive thematic pole mitigates—even transforms—the despair of life.

8.2.1. It is a message of realism: It frames the Christian worldview in the context of our fallenness.

Solomon’s frank and open presentation of life in this fallen world is refreshing realism. It neither ignores nor glosses over the reality of sorrow and pain life brings.

8.2.2. It is a message of faith: It tempers the consequences of living in this fallen world with the faith that accompanies the fear of the LORD.

Solomon repeatedly reminds the readers that the horizons of human experience do not define the totality of existence. The LORD transcends our experience and brings inscrutable joy to those who fear him.

9. Ecclesiastes’ place in the big story of Scripture

Both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are Solomon’s contribution to Israel’s wisdom literature.

9.1. OT Wisdom Literature: Answering big questions

Regarding the nature of wisdom literature, see the presentation on Proverbs.

9.2. Ecclesiastes and Proverbs: Living under Torah

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are not antithetical but complementary. Both books advocate for life lived under Torah, but with an important difference. Whereas Proverbs describes the skillful choices one makes when guided by Scripture, Ecclesiastes challenges misconceptions that often accompany wise living. Those who make right, biblical choices often have expectations regarding the outcome those choices *must* bring. But real life in a sinful world rarely meets those expectations. It is the dilemma Asaph faced in Psalm 73. Righteousness should bring blessing—as defined by the one who obeys Torah. But often the righteous one does not see or experience the blessing. To remedy his disappoint, he needs the broader perspective that Asaph gained when he went into the sanctuary. Ecclesiastes faces unmet expectations with hard realism, but then Solomon escorts the reader into the presence of God to find the solution: joy in God regardless of what we experience.

9.3. Liturgical use of the Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes plays a role in the liturgical use of the Megillot, five scrolls assigned to be read in connection with the five Jewish feasts. Many Jews read it on the Sabbath during Sukkot, the feast of Tabernacles. This is a joyous holiday during which people live outside in temporary “booths,” or tents, to commemorate Israel’s flight from Egypt and subsequent sojourn. Some have suggested that reading Ecclesiastes on this joy-filled occasion is an intentional juxtaposition of joy and skepticism. A better explanation would be that Ecclesiastes, just like the “booths,” serves to remind the worshiper that joy does not reside in the creation but in the Creator whom we fear (adore).

9.4. Summary statement:

Ecclesiastes calls us to trust God though we cannot understand what he is doing; by this faith, those who fear the God find joy in the midst of a world broken by the Fall.

10. Understanding the message of Ecclesiastes

Repeated themes, both words and concepts, help the preacher construct a coherent understanding of the message of the book.

10.1. The dominant theme: הֶבֶל (*hebel*)

The Hebrew word הֶבֶל (*hebel*) makes the dominant theme of the book unmistakable. It appears 38x in the book (based on the MT), just over half of the 73 occurrences in the entire OT.

It occurs five times in 1:2 and three times in 12:8 to form an *inclusio*, bracketing the message of the book.

The word carries several nuances, depending on context. *hebel* has been variously translated: meaningless (NIV), vanity (ESV, KJV), futile/futility, NET). The literal concept refers to a breath, wind, or vapor. However, in Ecclesiastes the word appears as a figure of speech. Solomon used it to communicate several related ideas.

- Like a vapor (breath), nothing lasts.
- Everything (both people and possessions) is unreliable--they disappear like a vapor. Cf. Psalm 62:9
- Endeavors are futile, they have no lasting effect.
- Pursuits are frustrating; they set unachievable goals.
- What can be seen is deceitful; it disappears as you grasp for it.
- Meaning is incomprehensible, puzzling. This is the most common way Solomon uses the term.

It is a mistake to apply one meaning for *hebel* in all of its various contexts. The common emphases of the term are “unsubstantial” and “incomprehensible.”

10.2. The programmatic question that sets the trajectory of the book (1:3)

Ecclesiastes 1:3 (ESV)

³ *What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?*

The term יִתְרוֹן? (*yitron*), used 10x and translated “gain” or “advantage,” would function well as an accounting term. It points to what is left on the last line of an accounting sheet: the *profit*. Solomon’s question assumes the answer, “nothing!” When human beings come to the end of life and tally the profits and losses, they find nothing left of enduring value.

This makes Ecclesiastes seem a dark and troubling book that communicates only despair. However, a closer look reveals a positive vantage point.

10.3. Other essential themes and elements that shape the message of Ecclesiastes

10.3.1. Perspective: “Under the sun”

Verse 1:3 contains the phrase, “under the sun.” It is the first of 28 occurrences in the book. It describes the perspective from which Solomon analyzed life. It is both expansive (covering everything open to human analysis) and limiting (confining analysis to the sphere of human experience).

10.3.2. “Fear God”

Solomon punctuated his analysis of life “under the sun” with calls to fear God. This refrain appears 6x throughout the book: 3:14, 5:7, 8:12 (2x), 8:13, 12:13

10.3.3. Six joy-filled, God-focused refrains: 2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–19; 8:15; 9:7–9

Without a transcendent perspective, life would be dark indeed. But throughout the book, Solomon tempers the bleak outlook with faith, reminding the reader that human experience is not the totality of existence. He calls those who fear God to affirm his presence in all things and to seek his good gifts as the basis of joy in this world.

Our understanding of the author's intended meaning turns on the relationship between 1) the dark or difficult texts and 2) the joyous theological texts. Solomon demonstrates that life without God can never have meaning, but with God meaning and satisfaction are possible. Life may be enjoyed truly, even if not completely. As noted above, it is best to think of the book as realism tempered with faith.

10.4. The denouement

The final section of the body of the book (11:7-12:8) combined with the epilogue (12:9-14) bring the reader to the “untying” of the knotted themes. This conclusion neither resolves the enigmas of life nor the mystery of the future, but it identifies the essential ideas that give firm guidance for a course of action:

- Live with judicious joy in the midst of *hebel*
- Remember the reality of judgment
- Display fear of God in Torah living

10.5. Two problem passages:

As noted above, some preachers avoid preaching through Ecclesiastes because they can't figure out what to do with certain “problem” passages. Two of the most notorious are 7:16-17 and 9:4-6.

Two recommendations:

First, approach the texts with the expectation that a positive solution exists. If you assume that none exists, you will never find one and probably settle for Scofield's view. Second, enlarge the exegetical exercise well beyond the difficult verses.

10.5.1. The problem of the “golden mean” (7:16-17)

Ecclesiastes 7:15–17 (ESV)

¹⁵ *In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.* ¹⁶ *Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?* ¹⁷ *Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?*

This passage is part of a section (7:15-29) in which Solomon builds a case that we cannot comprehend the relationship between righteousness and God's justice. One inscrutable element is the fact that righteousness does not guarantee blessings. One key to understanding it comes largely from 7:15: the righteous sometimes die young while the wicked sometimes live long. We should read verse 16 as an implication of that observation. The fact that righteousness does not guarantee long life should force us to examine our motives for doing right.

Most of the interpretive approaches fall into three categories:

- The “golden mean” (or middle)—few interpreters hold this; utterly incompatible with biblical norms
- A warning against *self*-righteousness—fewer hold this; out of step with context
- A warning against pursuing righteousness for the wrong reason.

This viewpoint finds support in the Hebrew word translated *destroy* (16). It appears five times in the Old Testament. In the other four occurrences the word is uniformly translated *astonish*. That same idea makes perfect sense here: “Why cause yourself to be *astonished* or *amazed*?” The line of thought seems to be something like this: “Don’t think that doing right will obligate God to bless you. Don’t think that doing right will cause God to give you long life or any other blessings so that you stare in amazement when the cancer comes. Do not think that your preoccupation with righteous deeds will prompt God to pour out blessings upon your life.”

On the other side of the coin *do not be overly wicked*. If we lean away from false motives for doing what’s right, he seems to say, “Don’t fall off the fence on the other side. If you don’t get what you think God ought to give you, do not react to perceived injustice with wickedness.

Avoid both extremes. We do not do what the Bible tells us to do just because we think it is the path to long life, or an easy life, or business success, etc. We do it because God requires it.

10.5.2. The problem of the living dog and the dead lion (9:4-6)

Ecclesiastes 9:4–6 (ESV)

⁴ *But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.* ⁵ *For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.* ⁶ *Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.*

This paragraph is part of a larger section that deals with man's inability to control his future (8:16-11:6). The subsection 8:16-9:10 underscores the certainty of death.

Solomon's contrast of a living dog and a dead lion only presents interpretive problems if we impose our theological presuppositions on the text, thus making Solomon address topics beyond his intended discourse. Specifically, Solomon did not intend to speak of the afterlife. His comparison between the dog and the lion is constrained by his stated perspective: what he could *see* under the sun. So long as there is life, there is hope—hope for joy, accomplishment, understanding. But once anyone dies, they no longer interact with other people or things under the sun.

11. The structure of Ecclesiastes

The Message of Ecclesiastes A Simplified Exegetical Outline²⁴

This outline breaks down the text of Ecclesiastes shows the flow of thought throughout the book. It also breaks it down into units intended to serve as sermonic texts.

- I. Introduction: Life is incomprehensible because human achievement brings no ultimate gain. (1:1-11)
 - A. Title and subject of the book (1:1-2)
 - B. Introductory poem: There is no ultimate gain because nothing ever changes. (1:3-11)
- II. **First Discourse: Empirical demonstration that human achievement brings no ultimate gain. (1:12-6:9)**
 - A. Evidence from Solomon's personal quest for ultimate gain (1:12-2:26)
 - 1. He did not find it in wisdom. (1:12-18)
 - 2. He did not find it in pleasure. (2:1-11)
 - 3. He did not find it in folly. (2:12-23)
 - 4. His recommendation: Enjoy life. (2:24-26)²⁵

²⁴ The author drew several ideas from more than one source when developing this representative outline. Especially helpful was the broad structure proposed by Dr. Robert McCabe, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, in his unpublished class notes.

²⁵ This is the first of six passages in which the author interjects a positive statement calling the reader to joy in the midst of the pain of life—a joy that comes from knowing God (2:24-26; 3:12-14; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10).

- B. Evidence from the incomprehensibility of God’s providential oversight. (3:1-22)
 - 1. Man has limited understanding of God’s providential plan for the details of life. (3:1-15)
 - 2. Man has limited understanding of God’s providential plan for execution of justice. (3:16-22)
- C. Evidence from the ubiquity of hard times. (4:1-16)
- D. Evidence from the unreliability of wealth (5:1-6:9)
 - 1. Wealth can be easily lost. (5:1-9)
 - 2. Wealth can bring disappointment and misery, apart from God. (5:10-20)
 - 3. A warning regarding the pursuit of wealth (6:1-9)

III. Second Discourse: The challenge of godly living in the face of life’s incomprehensibility. (6:10-11:6)

- A. Transition: Man can neither change the past nor predict the future (6:10-12)²⁶
- B. Man cannot comprehend the plan of God (chapters 7-8)
 - 1. He is ignorant of the significance of adversity and prosperity (7:1-14)
 - 2. He is ignorant of the significance of righteousness and wisdom (7:15-29)
 - 3. He is ignorant of the administration of divine retribution (8:1-15)
- C. Man cannot control his own future. (8:16-11:6)
 - 1. The wise remember the uncertainty of death. (8:16-9:10)
 - 2. The wise know their ever-present limitations. (9:11-10:1)
 - 3. The wise value wisdom over folly. (10:2-20)
 - 4. The wise work diligently despite ignorance of the future (11:1-6)

IV. Conclusion: Enjoy life in the fear of God. (11:7-12:14)

- A. A call to live joyously and responsibly (11:7-12:8)
- B. Final advice in view of the lessons of this book (12:9-14)

²⁶ This transition (6:10-12) functions well as the introduction to the sermon on 7:1-14.

12. Practical suggestions for preaching Ecclesiastes

12.1. Settle the question of authorship

12.2. Privilege the theological texts.

The theological texts chart the course through the dark waters of the book. They should not be treated as incidental expressions of obligatory piety; make them stand out in your preaching. And above all, do not treat them as intrusions of Greek philosophy!

The theological texts are not concessive Epicureanism.
The theological texts are not sidebars of Stoic resolve.

12.3. Tell the story of Solomon, treating him as both foil and protagonist.

This is a captivating autobiography in which Solomon seems to play two roles. In the first role, he was everything that most people believe would bring satisfaction and happiness: rich, brilliant, charming, powerful, successful in everything he tried. This self-description revealed that none of those things were profitable; they could not provide true enrichment. This account of Solomon's life serves as foil for Solomon the narrator. As he narrates, Solomon interjects the necessary elements of the story that he learned and that the readers also must learn: the world is broken by the Fall. It will remain frustrating and incomprehensible. But you can still find joy in life if you trust God and keep his commandments.

12.4. Do not look for Jesus in Ecclesiastes.

Instead, listen for echoes of Solomon in the NT. For example:

- Mark 8:36-38
- 1 Corinthians 15:58

12.5. Preach with pastoral interest

It is easy to allow taxing exegetical work to draw the preacher into the minutia of the study so that he forgets the purpose of the preaching for which he prepares. Preach with pastoral care and concern. This means establishing the discipline of setting aside the work of wordcraft at regular, planned intervals to contemplate the relationship that exists between the text and our people. It also means devoted intercession for them.

For helpful articles and a complete Bible study based on a sermon series from Ecclesiastes, see the supplementary resources folder.

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Preaching an Expository Series Through Revelation

Michigan Expositor's Summit – 2024

Introduction: The thought of preaching through the book of Revelation can create a sense of simultaneous excitement and anxiety. The thought is exciting because the book provides the final chapter to the biblical story—our story. Yet, the thought is also overwhelming because the book seems to present an undecipherable tangle of ideas framed in mysterious symbols. Consequently, some preachers avoid the book. Worse, some preachers take on the task without adequate preparation. Not preaching Revelation is preferable to preaching Revelation badly. Fortunately, those are not the only two options.

1. Reasons many preachers avoid Revelation

At least five obvious problems contribute to anxiety over preaching through Revelation. Preachers affected by any of these problems can and should rectify them.

1.1. Too many preachers suffer from millennial confusion.

Millennial confusion does not describe a demographic malady but a theological deficiency. Amillennial? Postmillennial? Premillennial? There really is a difference between them and the differences are very significant. Yet many hold their chosen position with a light grasp. Some even conclude that a millennial position does not even matter—“we will find out when we get there!”



But if believers want to understand what God is doing in history, the Bible's teaching on the millennium does matter. The first element of a valid biblical philosophy of history is that “it must contain an ultimate purpose or goal for history toward the fulfillment of which all history moves.”²⁷

²⁷ Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990), 2.

This is not merely a matter of intellectual curiosity. Confusion about where the world and God's people are headed has significant implications for the church right now.

- Is the church's mission "incarnational" or proclamational?²⁸
- Is Satan bound during the church age?²⁹
- Do Christians work to establish theocratic rule on earth today (theonomy)?³⁰

The next problem is conjoined with this one.

1.2. Too many preachers follow the crowd on kingdom issues.

Popular preachers and authors present a smorgasbord of options regarding the nature and purpose of the kingdom. How one views the kingdom will (in large part) determine one's theological conclusions regarding the millennial question. Even among those who fall into the premillennial camp, divisions remain: covenant premillennial? Dispensational? In recent decades many have moved toward mediating positions: progressive covenantal and progressive dispensational. The idea of an inaugurated kingdom (already/not yet) has won the popular vote in recent years. When surveying all these options, one must remember that no one finds truth by counting noses.

To navigate through the myriad of options, the preacher should ask and answer at least four questions.³¹

1.2.1. How does language function?

Far from being extraneous, this concept lays the foundation for all biblical interpretation. If the Spirit of God spoke univocally (a single voice) through the human authors, then the storyline of Scripture moves inexorably to certain conclusions. On the other hand, if Scripture has a *sensus plenior* (fuller sense) then floodgates of interpretive possibilities are opened. Covenant theology in all its manifestations rests on the hermeneutics of a *sensus plenior*.

1.2.2. What is the central theme of the Bible?

²⁸ "Incarnational" is a neologism popularized by John Stott to describe the mission of the church. It paved the way toward the inclusion of social transformation as part of the gospel itself. See Gary T. Meadors, "John R. W. Stott on Social Action," *Grace Theological Journal* 1.2 (Fall 1980): 129-147

²⁹ Consistent with his "realized millennial" stance (a version of postmillennialism), Jay Adams denied that demon possession could ever have any bearing on counseling in the church age because Satan currently is bound. See, *The Time is At Hand: Prophecy and the Book of Revelation* (Timeless Texts: 2004).

³⁰ Two groups of Christians advocate for theonomy: theological advocates see it as the necessary goal of their postmillennialism (R. J. Rushdoony, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, Doug Wilson, James White, etc.) and populist advocates who believe God has tasked Christians to save America (Christian nationalists).

³¹ These questions establish a starting point and set a trajectory for the interpreter's path. However, the path followed leads far beyond the scope of this workshop.

Does the Bible have a central, unifying theme? Most agree that it does but defining that theme has proved difficult. Is it Christ? Is it the gospel? Is it kingdom? Is it glory? Or is it something else? Most opinions fall into one of these suggestions. Some prefer a combination.

Those who embrace covenant theology tie the story of the Bible to the history of redemption. They believe in the dubious idea that there exists in the eternal Godhead a covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*). It ties the glory of God to the salvation of man. Therefore, covenant theologians easily truncate and minimize the Bible's robust teaching on the subject of Kingdom.

Many dispensationalists connect the Bible's central theme with kingdom. God is achieving his own (ascriptive) glory through his rule over creation. In the beginning, he assigned his image bearer the authority and responsibility to rule as coregent. Adam rejected God's plan and failed in his responsibility. The coregent became a rebel. Yet, God still rules his creation to display his glory. His display of glory through his rule is tied to progressive revelation. The apex of his glorious rule will be the future kingdom when he rules through the perfect coregent, Jesus Christ. So, history is moving from *creation* to *recreation*. In the future Kingdom, God will receive ultimate, undimmed glory.

God's rule (kingdom) as the unifying theme of Scripture 1) encompasses all humanity, 2) extends to all sentient beings, 3) and unites all eras of history. It also exalts Christ as the mediatorial King of Israel and properly explains salvation history as an essential component of what God is doing to populate a kingdom for his glory.

In summary: The Bible moves from creation to recreation. In the time between, God progressively glorifies himself through his rule over the world. This progression will climax in the restoration of the heavens and earth under the rule of Israel's King, God's perfect coregent.

1.2.3. What is the nature of God's covenant promises?

Most Bible students equate the concept of covenant as a promise, agreement, or commitment. This superficial reading of the term does not accurately represent the judicial complexities of the idea in biblical contexts.³²

Here are four important observations about biblical covenants:

³² Roy Beacham, "Ancient Near Eastern Covenants," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 15:1 (Spring 2011):110-128.

- There is no biblical evidence of an eternal covenant of grace within the Godhead. Therefore, salvation is not the unifying theme of Scripture.³³
- With the exception of the Noachic covenant, all the Old Testament covenants were made for Israel: Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New. The first laid the foundation of God's relationship with Israel; the subsequent three fleshed out the details of the three promises contained in the Abrahamic covenant (land, nation, blessing).
- The covenants include unilateral and eternal promises.
- There is no biblical evidence that the promises made to Israel were nullified or reassigned to the church.

Therefore, there is a future for national Israel. This is why Israel has prominence in the book of Revelation.

1.2.4. What role does Christ play in the unfolding of God's plan?

Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament promises that move in a specific trajectory from Eden to New Jerusalem. The Scriptures introduce him in the rather cryptic *protoevangelium* (Genesis 3:15). His identity (broadly speaking) becomes clearer as revelation progresses: Son of Abraham, Judah, and David. His roles take on clearer definition, as well. Israel's messianic expectation anticipates:

- The perfect Prophet who speaks for God (Deuteronomy 18:15; cf. John 1:21)
- The perfect Priest who brings men to God (Psalm 110:4; Zechariah 6:13; Isaiah 53)
- The perfect King who rules for God (Genesis 49:10-11; Acts 2:30-31)

Christ's work as Redeemer was essential to God's plan, but not the ultimate goal (1 Peter 1:10-11). God's rule through his perfect mediator has always been the ultimate goal. For this reason, the Apostles expected Christ to fulfill the kingdom promises immediately following his resurrection. History is still moving toward that end (Acts 1:3, 6; 28:30-31).

1.3. Too many preachers find interpretation of symbolism a formidable task.

³³ See R. C. Sproul, "What is the Covenant of Redemption?"

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-covenant-redemption>. In this post, Sproul asserts authoritatively that, "the covenant of redemption is intimately concerned with God's eternal plan. It is called a 'covenant' inasmuch as the plan involves two or more parties. This is not a covenant between God and humans. It is a covenant among the persons of the Godhead, specifically between the Father and the Son." However, Sproul does not offer one shred of scriptural evidence that such a covenant exists. Instead, he offers passages that describe the interaction between Father and Son in the provision of salvation, but a plan or promise or an activity do not constitute a covenant.

Revelation is apocalyptic literature. Of this genre Grant Osborne correctly states,

“apocalyptic literature represents one of the most fascinating and yet most mystifying portions of Scripture. When studying Daniel or Revelation, readers feel they have been transported into a fairy-tale world of myths and monsters, a Tolkien-type panorama of fantasy. The unreality of the symbols and the constant shifting from one mysterious scene to another is greatly confusing.”³⁴

Resources are available to help the interpreter navigate the confusion.³⁵ Here are three foundational ideas that will ground the research.

- The elements of the symbols refer to things or ideas commonly available to the original readers.
- Most of the symbols found in Revelation are drawn from the Old Testament (thus, see 1.4 below).
- Authorial intent is bound up in the symbols. John understood what they meant, therefore, the key to understanding lies in the text of Scripture.

1.4. Too many preachers fail to establish a sufficient Old Testament foundation.

As noted above, Revelation draws many symbols from the Old Testament. It quotes or alludes to the Old Testament hundreds of times, even apart from symbolic literature.³⁶ The Old Testament connections are neither incidental nor coincidental; they are intentional. The first step in preparing to preach the book of Revelation is to increase familiarity with the Old Testament, especially Daniel, Zechariah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

1.5. Too many preachers react against eschatological extremism.

An aversion to preaching from Revelation sometimes results from associating prophecy with extremist behavior on the part of a few Christians. Some Christians “go to seed” on the subject of prophecy; it becomes the topic of every conversation. Preachers of a certain age might call this the Jack Van Impe effect! Others are not only obsessed but also gullible; they follow every bizarre theory that comes along.

Do not allow extremists to shape your preaching schedule. Instead, correct their errors with a balanced, exegetical preaching plan.

³⁴ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 275.

³⁵ The included bibliography identifies several useful works that will help the interpreter work through the maze of ideas.

³⁶ For a list of Old Testament quotations and allusions, see Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 104.

2. Reasons you should preach Revelation

Many good reasons exist for preaching through Revelation. Here are three.

2.1. Revelation presents the final chapter in the biblical story.

Who would read an engrossing novel only to set it aside without reading the final chapter? But ignoring Revelation is worse than failing to finish a novel. It is the final chapter in the divinely ordered account of the history of the universe! How can we ignore it? This is certain: our people want to know what it says.

2.2. Knowing the final chapter of our story orients the Christian life.

Our people not only *want* to know what Revelation says, they *need* to know.

2.2.1. The expectation of Christ's return has a purifying effect in the Christian's life.

1 John 3:1–3

¹ See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

2.2.2. The expectation of Christ's return motivates faithful service.

2 Timothy 4:8

⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

2.2.3. The expectation of Christ's return fortifies the hope of vindication and relief for the persecuted.

2 Thessalonians 1:6-8

⁶ . . . God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

2.3. Revelation itself promises a blessing to those who read it, hear it, and obey it.

Revelation 1:3

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

The pronounced blessing is undefined, but perhaps the greatest blessing we gain from reading and hearing the book comes from its exalted view of the Triune God. All the themes of Scripture converge in Revelation to present a breathtaking portrait of his eternal, sovereign rule. And through the eyes of faith, we know that we belong to him forever.

3. Revelation's place in the big story of Scripture

3.1. This book is God's final word to humanity.

Revelation's place in the big story is fairly obvious, even if the significance of some details of the book are not readily apparent. It is the last book in the canon of Scripture, authored by the last living apostle, describing the final moments of history, and completed with a warning against adding to or taking away from its words.

3.2. All Scripture moves toward the consummation in Revelation: God's rule over a redeemed people in a kingdom set in a new creation, a rule mediated through the glorified Christ, the Son of David and Second Adam.

The storyline of Scripture moves from creation to recreation. This movement is far more complex than God's "simple plan of salvation."

The Fall dethroned God's coregent (image-bearer) and sent moral shockwaves throughout the universe. Creation itself now groans for redemption (Romans 8:19-22). At the gates of Eden, God promised to raise up a "seed" from the descendants of Eve who would defeat the evil one and set things right (Genesis 3:15). This promise set the trajectory of the biblical story. Over millennia, the story recounts God's rule mediated through flawed men as they awaited the coming One. God graciously chose and redeemed Abraham, promised to him a land, nation of descendants, and that his offspring would bring blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3). From him God raised up a nation, gave them a land, and promised them an eternal King. At just the right time (Galatians 4:4-5) God sent the promised One, but when the King came to his own people, they rejected him and crucified him (John 1:11).

The irony in the story is that the rejection and crucifixion of Christ was essential to the fulfilment of God's kingdom promises. Christ's death provides redemption for all who trust him, thus populating a future kingdom. Christ's resurrection and exaltation guarantees that he will return in power and judgment to defeat the evil one, conquer all his foes, and establish the promised kingdom—all for the eternal glory of the Triune God.

In the meantime, Christ is calling out people from among all nations, making them citizens of the future kingdom. We, the church, spend this age proclaiming the message of the King, calling all people to prepare to enter the kingdom through repentant faith in the King.

To this end we work and pray:-

- Thy Kingdom come.
- Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.

4. Understanding the message of Revelation

Effective communication of the message of Revelation from the pulpit depends on the preacher's ability to map a clear path through the book. Here are points of emphasis to keep in mind.

4.1. The book is the Revelation of Christ, but . . .

The opening verses center attention on Christ who is the central figure in chapter one. However, the glorified Christ thematically is connected with the Father and the Spirit. It seems that the revelation is a -message given by the Father to be delivered by Christ to his churches (1:1-8)

Toward the end of the book, Christ will remain the focus, but not independent of the Godhead. He is the Mediatorial King.

4.2. A programmatic verse

The Lord's instructions to John in 1:19 establish the flow of thought through the book.

¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

"The things that you have seen"	Chapter 1
"Those that are"	Chapters 2-3
"Those that are to take place after this"	Chapters 4-22

4.3. "Those [things] that are:" Christ's last words given directly to his churches.

The Lord dictated seven letters to John to deliver to seven historic churches that existed in the Roman province of Asia (the western side of modern Turkey). They were real churches with real problems. Each letter followed a similar format:

- Introductory description of Christ, the Author
- Evaluation of the church's virtues and failures

- Counsel for change, including a path for change, consequences for disobedience, and words of encouragement
- Promise to the church: blessings for those who persevere

4.4. “Those that are to take place after this:” are developed in three parts.

4.4.1. A vision of wrath: seals, trumpets, bowls (chapters 4:1-19:10)

The major feature of this section is a series of seven acts of God that pour out wrath on the world for its rebellion. The predominate cycles of seven acts are:

- Seven seals
- Seven trumpets
- Seven bowls

From Daniel’s prophecies and the Olivet Discourse, it is apparent that the wrath unleashed in this section of Revelation describes the horrors of the Tribulation Period. The wrath-filled events seem to gain momentum because the seventh seal *is* the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet *is* the seven bowls.

4.4.2. A vision of judgment (19:11-20:15)

This second vision has four major features.

- Christ’s victorious return
- The rebellious world defeated at Armageddon
- Christ rules for 1000 years
- The final battle
- The great white throne of judgment

4.4.3. A vision of Glory (21:1-22:5)

- New Creation
- New Jerusalem
- New Throne

Note: in the New Jerusalem, Israel and the church are united yet remain distinct (21:12-14)

4.5. Summary statement:

Christ, who came once in humility to die for sin (viz., the Lamb), will come again in glory to put an end to sin; those who persevere in faith despite affliction will share his wondrous glory in his eternal kingdom, but those who oppose him will suffer his terrible wrath.

5. The structure of Revelation

This simplified exegetical outline breaks down the book into homiletic units. They are small enough to be manageable but large enough to allow the preacher to move through the “forest” without getting lost among the “trees.” The outline yields a preaching plan with 42 sermons.

Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb Exegetical Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–8)**
 - A. Prologue (1:1–3)
 - B. Greetings and doxology (1:4–8)
- II. “Things that you have seen:” Vision of the Son of Man (1:9–20)**
- III. “Things that are:” Letters to the seven churches (2:1–3:22)**
 - A. To Ephesus (2:1–7)
 - B. To Smyrna (2:8–11)
 - C. To Pergamum (2:12–17)
 - D. To Thyatira (2:18–29)
 - E. To Sardis (3:1–6)
 - F. To Philadelphia (3:7–13)
 - G. To Laodicea (3:14–22)
- IV. “Things that are to take place after this:” Wrath, judgment, and glory (4:1–22:5)**
 - A. Vision of Wrath: Seals, trumpets, and bowls (4:1–19:10)
 - 1. Seven seals (4:1–8:1)
 - a. Preparation for judgment I (4:1–5:14)
 - 1) The throne in heaven (4:1–11)
 - 2) The Lamb and the scroll (5:1–14)
 - b. The first six seal judgments (6:1–17)

*The first interlude:*³⁷ 7:1–17

³⁷ The late Dr. Ed Williams, former Bible professor at Maranatha Bible College, identified three sections in Revelation’s unfolding description of events in the Tribulation Period as “interludes,” or pauses in the progression of the story. These pauses allow the author to give sweeping panoramic descriptions of

1. *144,000 sealed (7:1-8)*
 2. *The great multitude in white robes (7:9-17)*
2. The seventh seal/seven trumpets (8:1–14:20)
 - a. Preparation for judgment II (8:1-5)
 - b. The first five trumpets/the first woe (8:6-9:12)
 - c. The sixth trumpet/the second woe (9:13-21)

The second interlude: 10:1-11:14

1. *The little scroll (10:1-11)*
 2. *The two witnesses (11:1-14)*
- d. The seventh trumpet/the third woe (11:15-19)

The third interlude: 12:1-14:20

1. *The woman and the dragon (12:1-17)*
 2. *The first beast (13:1-10)*
 3. *The second beast (13:11-18)*
 4. *The redeemed and the Lamb (14:1-5)*
 5. *Judgment announced (14:6-13)*
 6. *Judgment executed (14:14-20)*
3. Seven bowls (15:1–19:10)
 - a. Introduction to the bowls of judgment (15:1-8)
 - b. The seven bowls of judgment poured out (16:1-21)
 - c. The bowl judgments explained (17:1-18:24)
 - 1) Babylon destroyed (17:1-18)
 - 2) Response to the destruction of Babylon (18:1-19:5)
 - a) The response of the wicked (18:1-24)
 - b) The response of the redeemed (19:1-5)

simultaneously occurring events. This author does not know whether Dr. Williams coined this terminology or borrowed it from another source, but it is a useful device.

Transition: Preparation for Christ's return: Marriage supper of the Lamb (19:6-10)

B. Vision of Judgment: The return of Christ and the consummation of this age (19:11–20:15)

1. Christ's appearance and victory (19:11-21)
 - a. King of Kings described (19:11-16)
 - b. Armageddon (19:17-21)
2. The eternal defeat of evil (20:1-15)
 - a. Satan bound (20:1-3)
 - b. The first resurrection (20:4-6)
 - c. The final battle (20:7-10)
 - d. The Great White Throne of Judgment (20:11-15)

C. Vision of Glory: The New Heaven and the New Earth (21:1–22:5)

1. The new creation (21:1-8)
2. The new Jerusalem (21:9-27)
3. The new throne (22:1-5)

V. Conclusion (22:6–21)

- A. Promise and blessing (22:6-17)
- B. Warning and benediction (22:18-21)

6. Practical suggestions for preaching Revelation

6.1. Consider taking your congregation through a study or sermon series in Daniel to prepare them for Revelation.

John Walvoord was right, Daniel is “the key to prophetic revelation.” A brief sermon series coupled with a Sunday School study or series of supplemental reflections during Sunday evening services would be a great benefit to get your congregation ready for an extended series through Revelation.

6.2. Keep the point of the letters written to the churches in front of your congregation.

Jesus did not reveal the prophetic details of the consummation simply to satisfy speculative curiosity. The letters to the Asian churches reveal Jesus' specific concern for them: perseverance in faith and service to the very end. The concern of the glorified Shepherd of the sheep is *pastoral* and so should our preaching be.

- 6.3. Do not make the pre-tribulational rapture of the church a major theme in your sermon series.

This suggestion does not mean that the preacher should not mention the rapture or that it is unimportant. But the book of Revelation does not make much of it. Instead, it focuses the readers' attention on the events leading up to the return of Christ during the tribulation period. This has two effects. First, knowing that vindication followed by victorious glory is coming provides the best form of encouragement for beleaguered saints. Second, the focus serves as a warning to those who would fail to persevere (those whose professed faith is not genuine).

Speak to the rapture issue when preaching 3:10. Explain the absence of the church in chapters 4-19. Then focus on the things Revelation focuses on and paint a portrait of the fallen world in dark hues. Too much emphasis on the rapture tends to minimize the seriousness of many of these texts. Instead of a healthy grief over human depravity and corporate sin, the listener is more likely to think something like, "It sure is great that we won't be there."

- 6.4. Serve up a weekly feast but don't give your people a cook's tour of the kitchen.

Some passages in Revelation will tax the preacher's exegetical and theological skills. After working hard to understand the complexities of a text, we all want to present all the details of the study process to the congregation. It gives the preacher a sense of satisfaction to put his work on display, but he seldom notices the eyes of his people glazing over! Keep it simple. Give them just enough information about the hermeneutic method involved to help them see how you arrived at a conclusion, but not so much information that they become distracted from following the story—or worse, give up on it altogether.

To mix the metaphors, a significant part of the preacher's job is to determine what portions of his work he must leave on the cutting room floor.

- 6.5. Judiciously maintain a commitment to originalist hermeneutics.

What did John intend to communicate? What did the original readers understand his words to mean? The answer to these questions is our concern. Do not allow a commitment to wooden literalism to impose meanings on the text that John did not intend. There is symbolism in Revelation and the original readers knew that.

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