

PREACHING IN A SECULAR CULTURE

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

This article outlines four ideas that in my experience are at the core of preaching effectively in a secular culture. If you seek to communicate the gospel to both the Christians and non-Christians in your midst, I encourage you to pursue all four elements in your own preaching.

1. PREACH TO CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS AT THE SAME TIME

THE GOSPEL IS THE ROOT OF BOTH JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Much of modern church-growth literature presupposes that we cannot minister to both Christians and non-Christians at the same time.¹ In this view, “evangelistic” messages call upon non-Christians but bore Christians, and “teaching” messages appeal to Christians but confuse, bore, or offend non-Christians. This means a church may have to settle for one approach or the other, and as a result they may be limited in their biblical faithfulness as well as their reach.

Some churches have tried to solve this problem through distinct “seeker services,” held at a different time than discipleship-oriented services. But this approach has not been without problems: many seekers stay in the seeker services long-term, never getting fed more challenging material. And since the majority of attendees at the seeker services are usually Christians, the believers get stuck in elementary Christianity as well.

I believe the problem is theological, not methodological. Indeed, it is impossible to combine Christians and non-Christians in a coherent way *unless* the preacher and leaders understand that the gospel is not just the way people are justified, but also the way they are sanctified. You see, the typical approach to the gospel is to see it as the ABC’s of Christian doctrine, or merely the minimum truth required to be saved, but to rely on more “advanced” biblical principles for progress in the Christian life. If that were the case, then we truly could not focus on both evangelism and spiritual formation at the same time. However, Martin Luther understood that the gospel is not only the way we receive salvation but is also the way to advance at every stage in the Christian life. This is why the first of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses was “All of life is repentance.”

Jonathan Edwards, in his *Religious Affections*, argues that belief and behavior are inextricably linked and that any failures in Christians are due to unbelief. The antidote to unbelief is a fresh telling of the gospel.

Preaching, therefore, is not *either* for evangelism *or* edification, because all of us have the same underlying problem. If a sermon is Christ-centered in its exposition and application, and if it is oriented toward dismantling the unbelief systems of the human heart and toward retelling and using the gospel on the unbelief, then it will be illuminating to non-Christians even though it was aimed primarily at Christians.

WORKING IT OUT

We live in a society in which people are skeptical of any kind of truth at all. In contrast to earlier eras, which accepted revealed truth or honored reason and scientific truth, many people today can’t simply receive a set of teachings without seeing how Christianity “works,” how it fleshes out in real life.

1. See also Timothy Keller, “Evangelistic Worship” (2001), redeemercitytocity.com.

This has implications for all of us. For Christians who are surrounded by today's secular culture, it is important to hear the preacher dealing winsomely and intelligently with the problems of non-believers on a regular basis. This helps them address their own doubts and is also excellent "training" in sharing their faith. The evangelism programs of earlier eras do not always adequately prepare Christians for dealing with the wide range of intellectual and personal difficulties people have today with the Christian faith.

In a similar way, when the preacher speaks to believers, the non-Christians present come to see how Christianity works in real-life situations. For example, if you are preaching a sermon on the subject of materialism, and you directly apply the gospel to the materialism of Christians, you are doing something that both interests and profits non-Christians. Many listeners will tend to make faith decisions on more pragmatic grounds. Instead of examining the faith in a detached intellectual way, they are more likely to make a faith commitment through a long process of mini-decisions, by "trying it on" and by seeing how it addresses real problems.

PRACTICES OF PREACHING TO SECULAR PEOPLE

Some practical tips for preaching:

- + **Solve all problems with the gospel.** In this way, non-believers hear the gospel each week and believers have their issues and problems addressed with the beauty of the gospel.
- + **Beware of assumptions.** Do not assume that people all have the same premises. Avoid exhorting point D if it is based on A, B, and C, without referring to A, B, C. Constantly lay groundwork statements about the authority of the Bible or the reasons we believe.
- + **Engage in apologetics.** Try to devote one of the three or four major sermon points to non-believers. Keep in your head a list of the most common objections people have to Christianity. More often than not the sermon text has some implication for how to address those objections.
- + **Provide applications for both parties.** When providing sermon applications, address both non-Christians and Christians, almost in a dialogue with them. For example, "If you are committed to Christ, you may be thinking this, but the text answers that fear." Or, "If you are not a Christian or not sure what you believe, then you surely must think that this is narrow-minded, but the text speaks to this very issue."
- + **Be authentic.** Young, urban, and secular people in particular are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of artifice or glitzy showmanship. Beware of sermons, or anything in the worship service, that is too polished, too controlled, or too canned.
- + **Be conscious of alienating language.** Secular listeners will be turned off if they hear the preacher use non-inclusive gender language or make cynical remarks about other religions or use religious jargon, language that only Christians understand.
- + **Expect, and respect, doubt.** Always treat people's doubts about Christianity with respect. Beware of ever giving the impression that Christianity is devoid of doubts or that only less-than-intelligent people would doubt its truth. It is important to acknowledge the presence of doubters, to say in effect, "I know this Christian doctrine sounds outrageous."
- + **Address the wider community.** Be mindful in your demeanor and preaching of the needs and concerns of the wider community, not just the Christian community. Show how the grace of God favors the poor, marginalized, and outsiders. Celebrate deeds of justice and mercy and common citizenship in the community.
- + **Draw on cultural references.** Manhattanites do not know or trust the Bible very much, so it is important for me to know their cultural references, read what they read, and answer the questions they are asking from the Bible. I generously document and support my points with corroborating opinions from the very books and periodicals that New Yorkers read. Often I can show them how the Bible was addressing these issues long before the contemporary authority did.

- + **Read across the spectrum.** If you read just one perspective on a subject, you tend to be naive and overconfident. If you read a second, contradictory perspective that deconstructs the first view, you become cynical and discouraged. But if you read a spectrum of four or five different perspectives, you find your own view and voice and often get rather creative ideas. I regularly read different viewpoints and imagine what a conversation about Christianity with the writer might sound like.

2. PREACH GRACE, NOT MORALISM

WHAT DRIVES THE HEART

Let's look at an example of a problem you might address with a secular audience: dishonesty. How does the gospel answer this problem and how does it work out in real life?

Jonathan Edwards identified two kinds of moral behavior: "common virtue" and "true virtue."² The "common virtue" of honesty may be developed out of *fear*, either societal ("If I lie I'll be caught and exposed") or religious ("If you are not honest, God will punish you"). It could also be cultivated by *pride*, which again could be cultural ("Don't be like those terrible dishonest people") or religious ("Don't be like those sinners; be a decent and godly person").

By no means does Edwards intend to be scornful of common virtue. Indeed, he believes in the "splendor of common morality" as the main way God restrains evil in the world.³ Nevertheless, there is a profound tension at the heart of common virtue, because if fear and pride are what motivate a person to be honest, but fear and pride are also at the root of lying and cheating, it is only a matter of time before such a thin moral foundation collapses.

Thus, common virtue has not done anything to root out the fundamental causes of evil; it has restrained the heart but not changed the heart. And this "jury-rigging" of the heart creates quite a fragile condition. Indeed, through all the sermons and moral training you received throughout your life, you were actually nurturing the roots of sin within your moral life. This is true whether you grew up with either liberal or conservative values. The roots of evil were well protected beneath a veneer of moral progress.

So what is the mark of honesty as a "true virtue?" It is the commitment to truth and honesty not because it profits you or makes you feel better but because you are smitten with the beauty of the God who is truth and sincerity and faithfulness. It is when you come to love the truth, not for your sake but for God's sake and for its own sake. True honesty grows when you see him dying for you, keeping a promise he made despite the infinite suffering it brought him. That kind of virtue destroys both pride (Jesus had to die for me!) and fear (Jesus values me infinitely, and nothing I can do will change his commitment to me). In this way my heart is not just restrained, but rather its fundamental orientation is transformed.

THE SIN BENEATH THE SINS

Underneath all of our behavioral sins lies a fundamental refusal to rest in Christ's salvation. According to Martin Luther,

All those who do not at all times trust God and... trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep the [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments... combined.

And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are measured and directed, so also its work, that is, the faith

2. Martin Luther, *Charity and Its Fruits, Concerning the End for Which God Created the World and The Nature of True Virtue*.

3. Paul Ramsey, "Editor's Introduction," from *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol 8: Ethical Writings* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr, 1989).

*or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured.*⁴

Luther says that if we obey God's law without a belief that we are already accepted and loved in Christ, then in all our good deeds we are really looking to something more than Jesus to be the real source of our meaning and happiness. We may be trusting in our good parenting or moral uprightness or spiritual performance or acts of service to be our real and functional "saviors." If we aren't already sure God loves us in Christ, we will be looking to something else for our foundational significance and self-worth. This is why Luther says we are committing idolatry if we don't trust in Christ alone for our approval.

The first commandment is foundational to all the other commandments. We will not break commandments two through ten unless we are in some way breaking the first one by serving something or someone other than God. Every sin is rooted in the inordinate lust for something which comes because we are trusting in that thing rather than in Christ for our righteousness or salvation. We sin because we are looking to something else to give us what only Jesus can give us. Beneath any particular sin is the general sin of rejecting Christ's salvation and attempting our own self-salvation.

THE GOSPEL VS. MORALISM

Thomas Chalmers wrote this:

*The best way of casting out an impure affection is to admit a pure one... It is only when, as in the Gospel, acceptance is bestowed as a present, without money and without price, that the security which man feels in God is placed beyond the reach of disturbance. Only then can he repose in Him as one friend reposes in another... The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.*⁵

Before I understood the premise of heart affections and the power of preaching to uproot and reorient our affections, my sermons followed this approach:

- + Here is what the text says
- + Here is how we must live in light of that text
- + Now go and live that way, and God will help you.

I came to realize over time that I was doing exactly what Edwards said would not work. I was relying on fear and pride to prompt obedience to God. Although I was doing it indirectly and unconsciously, I was employing preaching to trick the heart instead of reorienting the heart.

I have come to realize that my sermons need to follow a different outline:

- + Here is what the text says
- + Here is how we must live in light of it
- + But we simply cannot do it
- + Ah—but there is One who did!
- + Now, through faith in him, you can begin to live this way.

In nearly every text of Scripture a moral principle can be found, shown through the character of God or Christ, displayed in the good or bad examples of characters in the text, or provided as explicit commands, promises, and warnings. This moral principle is important and must be distilled clearly. But then a crisis is created in the hearers as they understand that this moral principle creates insurmountable problems. I

4. Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works* (1520).

5. Thomas Chalmers, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection", from *The Works of Thomas Chalmers* (New York: Robert Carter, 1830) vol. II.

describe in my sermons how this practical and moral obligation is impossible to meet. The hearers are led to a seemingly dead end, but then a hidden door opens and light comes in. Our sermons must show how the person and work of Jesus Christ bears on the subject. First we show how our inability to live as we ought stems from our forgetting or rejecting the work of Christ. Then we show that only by repenting and rejoicing in Christ can we then live as we know we ought.

CASE STUDIES

Let's look at a few examples. For example, let's say we want to use the text on David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18-20 to talk about friendship. We might describe two marks of a true friendship: friends always let you in and never let you down. Friends are transparent and open with one another, and are also committed to serving one another's needs.

If you end the sermon saying, "Now go and do likewise," you have preached a moralistic—and unrealistic—sermon. You have not uncovered the real barriers to friendship: *fear* (of vulnerability) and *pride* (inferiority or selfishness). These rooted sins in my heart make me a poor friend or keep me from making and keeping friends.

So how can I overcome these deeper sins and become a true friend? Only through seeing Jesus as the ultimate friend (John 15:12-14) and by looking at the cross, the ultimate act of friendship. Jesus "let us in." How much more vulnerable can you get than what he did there? His arms are open to us. They were nailed open for us. Until you see and grasp deep down this ultimate act of friendship, you will never be a friend to others. Only the cross can give you the security to be open and vulnerable to others but also the humility to serve others rather than your own selfish desires.

Or take the 2 Samuel text on King David and Bathsheba. We can easily yield insights from the passage about the dangers of sexual temptation or moralize about the seductiveness of physical beauty, and relate it to the culture we live in today. Pornography, eating disorders, and adultery can all be linked to the danger of making an idol out of beauty. But how do we end this kind of sermon: "Go and be careful"? This exhortation might be technically correct, but it is hardly adequate.

Instead, you can start with the moral principle, but then go a few steps further:

- + **How we must live.** The power of physical beauty over us must be broken. Look at the devastation in our society and in our lives. The inordinate focus on image and beauty distorts women's view of themselves and demoralizes aging people. It sabotages men by cheating them of great prospects for a spouse, who are overlooked for superficial reasons, as well as by causing them to substitute pornography for real relationships. What must we do? Don't judge a book by its cover. Avoid pornography. Focus on beautiful character qualities in others instead of physical traits.
- + **But you can't.** You know as well as I do that this is not possible. First, we desire physical beauty to cover our own sense of shame and inadequacy. Second, we are afraid of our own mortality and death. Evolutionary biologists and Christians agree that the desire for physical beauty is a desire for youth, and its hold over us is so great that we will never overcome our problem simply by trying harder.
- + **But there was One who did.** There was one who was beautifully sinless and perfect and enthroned in heaven, and yet who willingly gave it all up to take on the "very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2). He became ugly, "despised and rejected" (Isaiah 53) that we might become beautiful in God's sight and get the only beauty that will really last (Colossians 1:22; Ephesians 5:27).
- + **Only now can we change.** Only as we see what Jesus did for us will our hearts be melted and freed from the belief that we can judge a book by its cover. Only when we embrace the beauty of eternity with him can we be freed from our fear of mortality.

3. PREACH CHRIST FROM EVERY TEXT

RICH, NOT ROTE

It is now commonly understood that preachers must put the individual text into its whole-Bible context and preach Christ from every part of the Bible. Though I am a fierce proponent of this view, there is a danger that our preaching of Christ in every text will become a rote, intellectual exercise that merely rehearses the entirety of biblical theology; that may begin to sound the same every week; and that may omit an application to the listener's heart. The preacher's goal is not an intellectual or abstract one—rather, the goal is to change hearts with the gospel.

Old Testament professor Tremper Longman compares reading the Bible to watching a movie in which the shocking conclusion is so startling that it forces the viewer to go back and re-interpret everything he has already seen. The second time around, now that you know the ending, you can't help but interpret every statement and every encounter in terms of the ending. You can't not think of the ending any more when you watch the beginning and middle of the movie. The ending sheds light on everything that went before.

Similarly, once you know that all the lines of all the stories and all the climaxes of the inter-canonical themes converge on Christ, you simply can't not see that every text is about Jesus. For example:

- + Jesus is the true and better Adam who passed the test in the garden and whose obedience is now imputed to us (1 Cor. 15).
- + Jesus is the true and better Abel who, though innocently slain, has blood that cries out for our acquittal, not our condemnation (Heb. 12:24).
- + Jesus is the true and better Abraham, who answered the call of God to leave all that was comfortable and familiar out of obedience to God.
- + Jesus is the true and better Isaac, who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was in the end sacrificed for us all. God said to Abraham, "now I know you love me, because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love, from me." Now we can say to God, "now I know that you love me, because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love, from me."
- + Jesus is true and better Jacob, who wrestled with God and took the blow of justice we deserved. Now we, like Jacob, only receive the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.
- + Jesus is the true and better Joseph, who sat at the right hand of the king, and used his power to forgive and save those who betrayed and sold him.
- + Jesus is the true and better Moses who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord, who mediates a new covenant (Heb. 3).
- + Jesus is the true and better Job—the innocent sufferer who then intercedes for his foolish friends (Job 42).
- + Jesus is the true and better David, whose victory against Goliath was imputed to his people, even though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.
- + Jesus is the true and better Esther, who didn't just risk losing an earthly palace but a heavenly one, and who didn't just risk his life but gave it—to save his people.
- + Jesus is the true and better Jonah who was cast out into the storm so the rest of the ship could be brought in.

There are, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: It is either about me or about Jesus. It is either advice to the listener or news from the Lord. It is either about what I must do or about what God has done.

Jesus is the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the Lamb, the Light, the bread. The Bible is not about you—it is about him.

In 1 Peter 1:10-13 the gospel is stunningly described as something that “even angels long to look into.” After all these centuries, wouldn’t the angels have the gospel down pat? Why would they love to look into the salvation of God? Because it is endlessly rich. There are endless implications, applications, and facets to it. We have just begun to scratch the surface.

4. AIM AT THE HEART (NOT THE EMOTIONS, OR EVEN THE MIND)

AFFECTIONS VERSUS EMOTIONS

It has been said that the heart is not so much the center of emotions as it is the control center of one’s personality, where you make your decisions and decide on the direction of your life. No one expounded this in greater detail than Jonathan Edwards, and one of his most enduring contributions is his *Religious Affections*. Instead of accepting the typical Western division of will versus emotions, Edwards gave a more central place to the heart and spoke of the heart’s “affections,” by which he meant “the inclination of the soul” to like or dislike, to love or reject.

The affections are, of course, related to emotions, but they are not the same thing. For example, we feel the *emotion* of anger when we are insulted, because we have set our *affections* too fully on our own reputation, human acclaim, or approval. The affections are what Edwards called the most “vigorous and sensible exercises” of the heart; and in the Bible true religious affections are called the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-26).

Edwards’s contribution is especially important regarding the unity of the faculties. He refused to pit one’s understanding and one’s affections against each other. Gracious affections are raised up only when a person has a spiritual understanding of the true nature of God. In other words, if a person says, “I know God cares for me, but I am still paralyzed by fear,” Edwards would reply that you don’t really *know* that God cares for you, or the affection of confidence and hope would be rising within you.⁶

USEFUL VERSUS BEAUTIFUL

Now we can see how important this is for preachers. If Edwards is right, there is no ultimate opposition between “head” and “heart.” We must not assume, for example, if our listeners are materialistic that they only need to be exhorted to give more. Though guilt may help with the day’s offering, it will not alter one’s life patterns. If people are materialistic and ungenerous, it means they have not truly understood how Jesus, though rich, became poor for them. They have not truly understood what it means to have all riches and treasures in Jesus Christ. It means their affections are causing them to cling to material riches as a source of security, hope, and beauty. Thus in preaching we must present Christ in the particular way that he replaces the hold of competing affections. This takes not just intellectual argument but the presentation of the beauty of Christ.⁷ Edwards defined a nominal Christian as one who finds Christ *useful*, while a true Christian is one who finds Christ *beautiful* for who he is in himself.

This understanding profoundly affected Edwards’ own preaching. In one of his sermons, he insisted that “the reason why men no more regard warnings of future punishment is because it doesn’t seem real to them.”⁸ This was, for Edwards, the main spiritual problem and the main purpose of preaching. The goal of our preaching is not just to make the truth *clear* but to make the truth *real*. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in an article on how Edwards affected him, wrote:

6. Two great places to get a short, readable explanation of Edwards on the Affections are: the “Editor’s Introduction” in J. Smith, H. Stout, K. Minkema, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (Yale, 1995). and Sam Logan’s article on preaching and the affections in Samuel T. Logan, ed., *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986). The summary in this section follows closely the *Edwards Reader*, pp. xix-xx.

7. See “A Divine and Supernatural Light” , pp. 111-114 and “The Mind” , pp. 22-28 in *Reader*.

8. Wilson H. Kinnach, “Jonathan Edwards’s Pursuit of Reality” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* ed. Nathan O. Hatch, Harry S. Stout (Oxford, 1988). p. 105.

The first and primary object of preaching is not only to give information. It is, as Edwards says, to produce an impression. It is the impression at the time that matters, even more than what you can remember subsequently. In this respect Edwards is, in a sense, critical of what was a prominent Puritan custom and practice. The Puritan father would catechize and question the children as to what the preacher had said. Edwards, in my opinion, has the true notion of preaching. It is not primarily to impart information; and while you are writing your notes you may be missing something of the impact of the Spirit. As preachers we must not forget this. We should tell our people to read certain books themselves and get the information there. The business of preaching is to make such knowledge live.”⁹

BRINGING TRUTHS HOME

This concept is not just Edwards’ innovation. The Bible itself is not a series of didactic essays but an enormous collection of diverse literary forms: stories, poetry, dramas, apocalyptic visions, all different ways to bring truths home to the heart.

By way of example, a recurring biblical theme is our sinful tendency to “forget” the Lord and our need to “remember” him, his laws, and commandments. This is not a matter of intellect and information. The problem is that the information we already know becomes “unreal” to us without continual covenant renewal ceremonies.

In 2 Peter 1:8-9 we read that we need to “grow in goodness, self-control, perseverance, kindness, and love” and that the person who is not growing in these things “has *forgotten* that he was cleansed from his past sins.” Peter does not say that a lack of growth in character is a simple lack of willpower or commitment, nor does he admonish his readers to try harder. Rather, he says they have *forgotten* that they were cleansed from their sins. This cannot mean that the people had lost mental awareness that they had been forgiven. It must mean that, as Edwards says, they had lost the “sense on the heart” of the costliness of grace. It wasn’t spiritually real to them, and they were not being affected by the truth.

A second example is Psalm 103, which is not actually a prayer but rather a sermon to the soul. David is addressing his own heart: “*O my soul, forget not all his benefits.*” David knows that the glories and benefits of salvation have become unreal to his heart. He knows he tends to forget. Psalm 103 is an example of what 2 Peter 1:8-9 says we all must do. We must preach the gospel to ourselves. We must go back to the gospel and make it real to our own hearts.

FIRE THE IMAGINATION

The aim of preaching is not just to stir up feelings but to illuminate the imagination with truth. Imagination or illustration refers to the preacher’s ability to evoke mental images in the mind of the listener. For example, when we use the word “justification,” no mental picture is evoked in the hearer’s mind. But when we speak of “our advocate pleading his finished work before the bar of God,” we have elicited an image in the mind of the audience. We are stirring up the imagination and warming the heart.

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul gives us a remarkable example of what we’ve been saying. He wants the people to give an offering to the poor, but he doesn’t put pressure directly on the will (“I’m an apostle and this is your duty to me”) or pressure on the emotions (stories about how much the poor are suffering). Instead, Paul vividly and unforgettably says, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” In this way, he is calling them to remember (“you know the grace of our Lord Jesus”) and uses a powerful image, bringing Jesus’ salvation into the realm of wealth and poverty. He moves them by a spiritual recollection of the gospel that

9. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Jonathan Edwards and the Crucial Importance of Revival,” an address delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conference of 1976.

asks them to think on Jesus' costly grace until they are changed into generous people by the beauty of the gospel in our hearts.

If you have been preaching (or even hearing sermons preached) for long enough, you know that you cannot aim at the heart of the listener without having the gospel work anew in your own heart every time you preach. Call yourself to remember the gospel; aim the gospel at your own affections first; and you will be well on the way to reaching others.

Copyright © 2005 by Timothy Keller, © 2011 by Redeemer City to City. This article is adapted from a leadership training session in 2005.

We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don't charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.