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PREACHING THE WORD IN AND OUT OF SEASON:
Sustaining the Lifelong Preacher

By

Daniel B. Ying

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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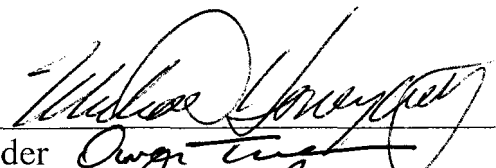
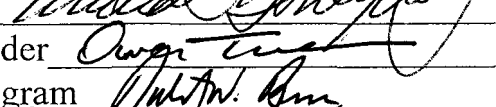
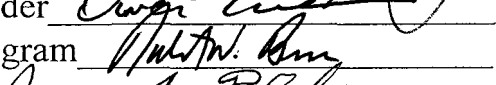
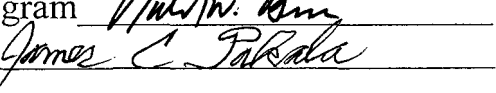
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in long-term pastorates. Veteran preachers face a number of unnamed and unaddressed challenges in sustaining their preaching ministries. Since preaching is at the heart of pastoral ministry, this issue is crucial for pastoral health and longevity. Also, since preaching is central to a church's spiritual well-being, this issue is also crucial for overall church health and viability.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with nine pastors from various denominations who served their congregations for ten years or longer. The literature review and analysis of the nine interviews focused on three key areas to understand in sustaining a preaching ministry: the challenges that expository preachers will face, the motivations that keep pastors preaching expository sermons over the long term, and the practices of those who successfully sustain expository preaching.

This study concluded that there are three necessary components to sustain expository preaching in a long term pastorate: the power of God and his word, a healthy and motivated preacher, and a growing and responsive congregation. Related to these three components, this study found that veteran preachers face three major challenges in sustaining their preaching ministry: the demanding nature of sermon preparation, the preacher's struggle with inadequacy, and a lack of response from the congregation. To address these challenges, this study identified the motivations and practices which contribute to sustaining a long term expository preaching ministry.

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Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Preaching occupies a place of primary importance in the work of a pastor. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a well respected preacher in London in the last generation, spoke of preaching in the highest terms: “To me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called...in addition to that I would say without any hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching.”¹ John Stott, another leading preacher in London from that same generation, asserted, “Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity is lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God.”²

This is not just a case of celebrated preachers expressing their personal bias and claiming importance for their own craft. The importance of preaching comes from the Bible’s own mandate. Jesus himself modeled a priority on preaching in his ministry. At the outset of his ministry, he issued his purpose statement in the following words: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”³ While Jesus befriended the lonely, healed the sick, and exorcised demons, among many other good things, he clearly put the highest priority on preaching. When the needy

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 9.

² John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), 15.

³ Luke 4: 18. All Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985).

crowds clamored for more miracles, Jesus told the disciples, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”⁴ So everywhere Jesus went, he taught. He taught the crowds, and he taught his disciples.

It should be no surprise that when Jesus commissioned his disciples, teaching was to be a major component of their ministry: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”⁵ What the disciples saw Jesus model in his ministry, they were to carry out in their pastoral ministry. This is exactly what is reflected in the account of the early church in Acts. Acts 2 summarizes: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”⁶ Preaching and teaching were not, however, just one activity among others. The apostles understood its primacy in their ministry. When the demands of other ministries threatened to divert them from their preaching ministry, the apostles appointed others to help, explaining, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”⁷ In a study on preaching in the early church, Steven Lawson points out that “the apostles’ ministry of preaching and teaching is mentioned more often than any other activity in which they were engaged. So overwhelming is this evidence that it can be argued that Acts is primarily a record of apostolic preaching and teaching.”⁸

⁴ Mark 1: 38.

⁵ Matthew 28: 19-20.

⁶ Acts 2: 42.

⁷ Acts 6: 2.

⁸ Steven J. Lawson, “The Priority of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Acts 2:42-47,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 630 (April-June 2001): 203.

To make the centrality of preaching in pastoral work explicit, the apostle Paul repeatedly enjoins Timothy and Titus, two young pastors he has left in charge of churches he planted, to teach the church. In the climactic, closing charge to Timothy, Paul writes, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.”⁹ One of the central instructions that Paul gives to Titus occurs in the middle of the letter and governs the second half of the letter: “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.”¹⁰ Both are to appoint other leaders in the church who are godly in character and able to teach. The primacy of preaching and teaching clearly emerges from the pages of the pastoral epistles, perhaps the clearest Biblical guide to pastoral ministry.

The primacy of preaching in pastoral work is important to clarify amidst the current confusion over the job description of the pastor. Is the pastor primarily meant to be a friend, a psychologist, an administrator, an entertainer, a CEO, or a preacher? Steven Lawson writes,

Many today, however, wrongly assume that a pastor is primarily a chief executive officer, whose first priority is vision-casting, strategy crafting, and image-shaping. But this emphasis dramatically opposes Paul’s instruction in the Pastoral Epistles in which he emphatically stated that, more than anything else, pastors are to be preachers.¹¹

This primacy of preaching in pastoral work is not only our biblical heritage; it is also our Reformation heritage. William Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, explains, “One of the major goals of the Continental Reformation was a sweeping reform of the clergy by making them primarily preachers. The Reformation rediscovered the

⁹2 Timothy 4: 2.

¹⁰ Titus 2: 1.

¹¹ Steven J. Lawson, “The Passion of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of 1 Timothy 4:13-16,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 633 (January-March 2002): 83.

reading and preaching of Scripture. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli all stressed preaching as a chief pastoral act.”¹² Moreover, it was reformers like Luther who defined the true church as a “congregation of the saints in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered.”¹³ Again, the central importance of preaching is expressed.

While the number of roles and responsibilities placed on the modern pastor continues to increase, Jackson Carroll still finds through his surveys that preaching and preparation occupy the largest percentage of how pastors use their time. In one study, he reports that the median number of hours spent at work each week for all clergy regardless of denomination and whether full- or part-time is forty-eight, of which twenty-two percent is devoted to preaching. This represented the largest portion of time allotted to any area of ministry, including worship leadership, administration, pastoral care, and evangelism.¹⁴ In other words, for working pastors, preaching typically receives the most time despite what is expressed about its place of importance.

From the congregational side, many decry the decreasing appetite for preaching today. In a preface to a book on preaching, Ligon Duncan writes, “There is significant pressure on the preacher to truncate and thin out his message, to entertain, to explore alternative media for the advancement of the gospel, and even to abandon historic modes of proclamation altogether.”¹⁵ Yet, Jackson Carroll still finds that in conservative Protestant churches, 64.5 percent of the average laity identify teaching about faith as the

¹² William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 141.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jackson W. Carroll, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 100.

¹⁵ Don Kistler, ed., *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), vii.

top priority of a pastor.¹⁶ Carroll writes, “If the senior pastor is a gifted preacher and a warm, caring pastor, she or he will be doubly appreciated; but for many large congregations, quality preaching and programs take precedence when they think of excellent pastoral leadership.”¹⁷ So there is debate over how much an average congregation values preaching in the spectrum of pastoral responsibilities. That, however, does not lessen the demonstrated primacy of preaching in the work of a pastor; an unresponsive congregation may only make it more difficult to maintain.

More specifically, many are making the case today that expository preaching in particular should be central to pastoral work. John Stott asserts,

It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course if by an “expository” sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, “exposition” has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view.¹⁸

In response to a perceived lack of expository preaching in churches across America, a steady stream of books has been written during the last few decades to convince and instruct pastors to preach expository sermons. To name a few, Haddon Robinson wrote *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* in 1980.¹⁹ In 1992, John MacArthur wrote *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*,²⁰ and in 1994, Bryan Chapell wrote *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*.²¹

¹⁶ Carroll, 119.

¹⁷ Ibid., 204.

¹⁸ Stott, 125-26.

¹⁹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching : The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980).

²⁰ John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1992).

²¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

Following this line of conviction, this research project will concern itself with expository preaching in the American pastorate.

The Problem Statement

No matter how clear the mandate is for a pastor to preach, and in particular to preach expository sermons, this does not necessarily mean that it will be easy. Feelings of discouragement are common in pastoral ministry. H.B. London, who has conducted lengthy studies and surveys of pastors, notes that about forty percent of the participants in his surveys have considered leaving their pastorates during the last three months. Although they may not follow through, London concludes that their consideration of the notion is evidence of a significant level of dissatisfaction in pastoral ministry.²²

In another survey of five thousand randomly selected pastors, London found that after the issue of balance, the second greatest challenge pastors face is “the difficulty of motivating people to live consistent lives and to help the church accomplish the Great Commission. Pastors are frustrated because people seem apathetic.”²³ Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger concur.²⁴ They asked pastors to describe their main feelings and motivations when they decided to, or were required to, leave local church ministry. The third most common response, mentioned by twenty-one percent of the respondents, involved the feeling of “being burned out, discouraged, stressed, or overworked.”²⁵ As a follow up, Hoge and Wenger presented the same respondents with twelve possible reasons for leaving local church ministry based on their past research. They found that

²² H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Risk: Help for Pastors, Hope for the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 25.

²³ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁴ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 35-36.

²⁵ Ibid.

fifty-eight percent indicated that being drained by the demands placed on them was a significant factor in their decision.²⁶ All these findings point to the fact that pastoral ministry is not easy.

While these surveys and studies do not specify the causes of discouragement and burnout, evidence suggests that pastors regularly struggle with discouragement in the preaching task. Christopher Day, who studies the teaching profession, makes the following statement as a widely accepted fact: "It is little wonder that teaching in the 21st century is rated as one of the most stressful professions."²⁷ John Stott makes a similar statement for preachers: "The pastoral ministry of regular preaching and teaching is extremely exacting. It demands much time and energy."²⁸ If the work of preaching and teaching is so rigorous, it is not a surprise that preachers encounter difficulty and discouragement in the task. This is the confession that one frequently finds in books written by preachers on preaching. Let the voice of various preachers make the point:

That I've been granted the gift of preaching has been confirmed over and over again, but that has been countered by an abundant measure of conflict and heartache. I've been swollen with pride and anesthetized by depression. When I read books on the inner life, I sometimes fear that I haven't reached even the starting line, much less made any progress in the race.²⁹

Nothing in my life is for me more exhilarating or more enjoyable—even when it drains all my energies dry—than preaching. There is no place on earth I would rather be than in the pulpit. Many of my happiest moments have occurred there. I wouldn't exchange my divine call to preach for anything. That's the testimony. Now, the confession. There is nothing in life I find more difficult and even, at times, tormenting, than sermon preparation...I could count on the fingers of one hand the times I have

²⁶ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁷ Christopher Day and Qing Gu, "Variations in the Conditions for Teachers' Professional Learning and Development: Sustaining Commitment and Effectiveness over a Career," *Oxford Review of Education* 33, no. 4 (2007): 424.

²⁸ Stott, 121.

²⁹ Edward K. Rowell, *Preaching with Spiritual Passion: How to Stay Fresh in Your Calling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 24.

glided through sermon preparation. To apply somewhat loosely the words of a hymn, I may never have climbed the “steep ascent” of the pulpit through peril, but I nearly always do so through toil and pain.³⁰

I love preaching. I hate preaching. The best description is Jeremiah’s: It is like fire in the bones. It is holy work and dreadful work. It exhausts and it exhilarates, kindles and consumes. On Mondays, I am charred remains. The hotter I burned on Sunday—the more I preached with fiery conviction and bright hope—the more burned to the ground I am on Monday. I’m restless, but I don’t have initiative to do anything or, if I do, the energy to sustain me in it. I’m bone-weary, suffering what the desert fathers called *acedia*: an inner deadness from the hot sun’s scorching. But then Sunday comes, and the bones burn again. I am once more a firebrand freshly hot in the hand of God...So I love it, and I hate it.³¹

There will be times in your ministry where you will be tempted to give up on preaching. Seasons of blessing come and go and are often as unpredictable as the weather. The one predictable thing is that sooner or later you will experience times of drought in your preaching. For weeks or months you will open the Scriptures and preach with passion and fidelity, and yet, little or nothing will seem to happen in the lives of your listeners. There will be no rain of blessing. No spiritual fruit bursting forth in the lives of your listeners. No observable results. During these times you will, as I have, begin to think about investing your energy in other things.³²

Most of us preach in gatherings that are smaller than we would wish and tougher than we might have hoped when we entered pastoral ministry. Sometimes we are jaded by opposition, or by defections, or just by the sheer unrelenting slog of church leadership. There is a voice on our shoulders who whispers as we prepare, and then as we preach, “Is it really worth it? Why not busk it this week? Who would notice? After all, you’re fooling yourself if you think you’re doing anything significant.” The devil will throw at us every distraction and discouragement in his arsenal.³³

Even with a clear mandate and strong convictions, preaching is hardly without difficulty. In a lecture on Biblical convictions for preaching, Michael Bullmore cites the

³⁰ Richard Allen Bodey, ed., *Inside the Sermon: Thirteen Preachers Discuss Their Methods of Preparing Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 27-8.

³¹ Mark Buchanan, “Backdraft Preaching: You’ve Got to Reignite the Flames Sunday after Sunday,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 105.

³² J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching: Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 12.

³³ Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 12.

following quote from Bruce Thielmann as an accurate reflection of his own experience in preaching: “The pulpit calls to those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors and like the sea it batters and bruises and does not rest. To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and to know each time you do it, that you must do it again.”³⁴ Bullmore witnesses to the unrelenting nature of Sundays when he must preach: “They are like waves on the shore: They just keep coming.”³⁵

In recent years, Denise George has surveyed pastors across the nation by asking them to respond to a number of questions such as: “What is your greatest joy? Frustration? Disappointment? Fear? What do you wish your church members knew about you, your faith, your finances, your struggles, your hopes, dreams and expectations?” She was surprised by how many pastors responded to the survey and poured out their hearts. In 2009, she published her findings in a book entitled, *What Pastors Wish Church Members Knew: Helping People Understand and Appreciate Their Leaders*.³⁶ One of the chapters in the book is entitled, “Preaching to you is the hardest thing I do.” In this chapter, she reports how many pastors confessed to her that preaching was both the most enjoyable and the most difficult part of their job, “a huge responsibility for them and a great pressure on them.”³⁷ Why do pastors feel this way? She cites a number of reasons in the pastors’ own words:

How frustrating and challenging it is to have the task of providing an engaging, Spirit-filled message each week while my church members compare my preaching to the best and brightest preachers on TV and

³⁴Michael Bullmore, “Five Convictions About Preaching without Which One Should Not Preach,” Recorded lecture, mp3 format (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Denise George, *What Pastors Wish Church Members Knew: Helping People Understand and Appreciate Their Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

³⁷ Ibid., 137.

radio! I feel as if I have to compete with them to keep my congregation's attention.

I greatly feel the frustration of preaching my heart out for these past fifty-two years, and seeing so little change among the people, even though I try to prepare well—both the sermons and myself.

I struggle with my own lack of spiritual maturity when I preach, and I allow myself to get discouraged when I don't see much response to my messages.³⁸

Some of the specific challenges that pastors report facing in the pulpit include “keeping sermons fresh and yet Scripturally based, preparing sermons that meet the spiritual needs of the congregation, preaching week after week without becoming dry, and being evangelistic in their sermons while still teaching mature Christians.”³⁹ One common note that resonates within all these challenges is the challenge of preaching to the same congregation week after week for any considerable length of time. For some, preaching simply becomes a grind. Chris Erdman recalls a period when he used to work so hard on his sermons that frustration and anxiety would build up:

Come Saturday night, I'd be so uptight that I was frankly no fun to be around—*every* week. Weekends were a drag for my family because I was a preacher. But finally, after long years, I came to a point of crisis when I realized not only that this grinding away at the text felt like it was all wrong, but also that I could not be a preacher this way and be a husband and father—or a human being, for that matter—much longer.⁴⁰

Likewise, Craig Loscalzo articulates the haunting questions that rattle around in the hearts of many preachers: “How do I keep my preaching fresh and vital? Is my preaching more than an act of futility? How do I find something new to say every

³⁸ Ibid., 138-39.

³⁹ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁰ Chris Erdman, *Countdown to Sunday: A Daily Guide for Those Who Dare to Preach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 33.

Sunday?”⁴¹ Loscalzo points out that this fear is compounded by the responsibility for some to preach two or three times a week to the same congregation as well as the unspoken expectation that each sermon be the equivalent of a home run in baseball. One of Loscalzo’s friends confided to him that he became a dentist instead of a pastor because “he could not face having to prepare a ‘term paper’ every week for the rest of his life.”⁴²

When weekly preaching is added to the list of responsibilities expected of pastors, sustaining a preaching ministry begins to feel like a heavy weight that can eventually drag one down. Even the most experienced pastors are not exempt from this challenge.

After two decades of pastoral ministry, John MacArthur writes:

The big challenge facing me now is not just in the area of interpretation, but in communication. I have been at the same church for more than twenty years, so I have to fight to keep from falling into a pattern of similarity. It is a challenge for me to stay fresh, and not just say the same things over and over in the same way.⁴³

Even the celebrated Charles Spurgeon confessed to fellow ministers, “I suppose you do not think *that I ever get dried up* and find it difficult to say anything fresh in my sermons; yet so it is. Think, dear brethren; I have already so many volumes of sermons in print. It grows harder to say anything new as those volumes increase.”⁴⁴

Sustaining an expository preaching ministry is a significant and central challenge not just for pastors but for the health of the churches they serve. John Stott writes, “I believe in preaching, and I further believe that nothing is better calculated to restore health and vitality to the Church or to lead its members into maturity in Christ than a

⁴¹ Craig A. Loscalzo, “It’s Monday, but Sunday’s Coming: Keep Vitality in Your Preaching,” *Review and Expositor* 90, no. 3 (June 1, 1993): 383.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ MacArthur, 334.

⁴⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry : Addresses to Ministers and Students* (Lexington, KY: Bibliobazaar, 2008), 161.

recovery of true, biblical, contemporary preaching.”⁴⁵ Yet there seems to be a gap in the literature because nothing thoroughly addresses how to sustain an expository preaching ministry in a long-term pastorate. From the educational realm, Rosetta Cohen observes that “there is surprisingly little that has been written specifically about the lives of veteran teachers in urban classrooms, partly perhaps because so few of those teachers exist.”⁴⁶ Similarly, why is there so little focus on veteran preachers who have stayed in one church for the long term? Is it because so few of them exist? Most of the books on pastoral ministry that discuss long-term pastorates address only general endurance in pastoral ministry. Most of the books on expository preaching present a model for how to preach expository sermons, but do not focus on how a pastor can sustain an expository preaching ministry over the long haul. How do the practitioners themselves do this? What challenges have they negotiated? What motivates them? What practices have they adopted?

The Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in a long-term pastorate. In order to research this area, there are three areas that are important to understand: the challenges that expository preachers will face, the motivations that keep pastors preaching expository sermons over the long term, and the practices of those who successfully sustain expository preaching. With this in mind, three research questions will guide this study:

⁴⁵ Stott, 338.

⁴⁶ Rosetta Marantz Cohen, "What It Takes to Stick It Out: Two Veteran Inner-City Teachers after 25 Years," *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 15, no. 4 (August 2009): 472.

1. What challenges do pastors face in sustaining expository preaching?
2. What motivations help pastors sustain expository preaching?
3. What practices help pastors sustain expository preaching?

The Significance of the Study

By all accounts, preaching is one of the most important and challenging tasks faced by pastors. There is an ongoing need to train and improve the preaching in North American pulpits. Because of this, a number of resources are available to train prospective pastors in how to preach generally, and more specifically in different genres of Scripture, styles of communication, and settings. What seem to be lacking, however, are resources to equip for the long haul those who provide a steady diet of expository sermons to their congregations. There are challenges inherent in preaching itself, compounded by additional challenges in the task of preaching to the same people over a long period of time. Added to this are external challenges that come from preaching in the cultural context of North America. This study will seek to identify and name the challenges of expository preaching in long-term pastorates as they are experienced by those in that context. This promises to be a valuable asset for young pastors who are preparing for a lifetime of ministry and for more experienced pastors who are in danger of exhaustion.

In order to address these challenges, this study will explore the motivations and practices that have helped expository preachers maintain their joy and vitality. This information will be vital in helping to establish and sustain expository preaching in pulpits across North America. John Stott observes, “True Christian preaching (by which I

mean ‘biblical’ or ‘expository’ preaching) is extremely rare in today’s church. Thoughtful young people in many countries are asking for it, but cannot find it.”⁴⁷

Last, this study can provide guidance for congregations seeking to understand the pressures their pastors face and to encourage them in handling those pressures. While this study focuses on the motivations and practices of the pastors themselves and not on the impact of their relationships with their congregations, there will be implications that can guide congregations that wish to help their pastors sustain a preaching ministry. When preaching lives up to what God designed it to be, it is both glorious and powerful. Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong cite the third stanza of a poem from the African American writer James Weldon Johnson entitled “Listen, Lord—A Prayer” that gives expression to the pathway to powerful preaching:

And now, O Lord, this man of God,
Who breaks the bread of life this morning—
Shadow him in the hollow of thy hand,
And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.
Take him, Lord—this morning—
Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
Pin up his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth—
Beating on the iron heart of sin.
Lord God, this morning—
Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
And let him look upon the paper walls of time.
Lord, turpentine his imagination,
Put perpetual motion in his arms,
Fill him full of the dynamite of thy power,
Anoint him all over with the oil of thy Salvation
And set his tongue on fire.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Stott, 92.

⁴⁸ L. Gregory and Kevin R. Armstrong Jones, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 105.

At the end of the day, this study aims to help expository preachers move toward the vision of this kind of preaching.

Definition of Terms

Expository Preaching: An expository sermon is one which draws its content, shape, and purpose from a biblical passage understood in its biblical context and which applies its message to the lives of the hearers.

Long-term Pastorates: For this study, long-term pastorates will be defined as a pastorate in the same local church for ten years or longer.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in a long-term pastorate. Since preaching is part of the core calling of pastors and yet is very demanding, this is a crucial issue for pastoral health and longevity. Preaching is a major component determining a congregation's spiritual well being, so this is also a crucial issue for overall church health and viability. Yet there is not much literature that comprehensively addresses this issue in a concentrated way.

There is a wealth of literature on expository preaching, most of it focusing on how to preach expository sermons in various genres of Scripture and to various audiences. Authors have also written a wealth of material on sustaining pastoral ministry, most of it focusing on pastoral ministry more broadly, instead of expository preaching in particular. The educational field has produced several works on sustaining veteran teachers, although these obviously do not directly address expository preachers. However, sprinkled through the literature on expository preaching and sustaining pastoral ministry, there are sections that shed light on the issue of sustaining expository preaching. Since there are parallels between sustaining veteran teachers and sustaining expository preachers, some of the literature written on the former topic applies to the latter. Thus, the three areas of literature that will be surveyed in this literature review are expository preaching, sustaining pastoral ministry, and sustaining veteran teachers. They will be reviewed for insights applicable to sustaining expository preaching in long term

pastorates, particularly in the three areas defined by the research questions: the challenges of sustaining expository preaching, the motives of sustaining expository preaching, and the practices of sustaining expository preaching.

The Biblical Perspective on Sustaining Expository Preaching

Before surveying this literature, it is important to note that the Bible itself addresses the topic of sustaining expository preaching. There are, of course, many promises that the Bible offers, as well as disciplines that the Bible enjoins, that apply to sustaining an expository preaching ministry. These will be mentioned in the sections on the motives and practices of sustaining expository preaching below. Two principle characters in the Bible who are called to persevere in preaching the word of God, even through difficulty, are Jeremiah, a prophet in the Old Testament, and Timothy, a pastor in the New Testament. There are clear parallels between these two men. Both experience a clear calling from God to serve as messengers of his word. Both feel young for the task they are called to perform.⁴⁹ In speaking God's word to God's people, both must say difficult things. Both face suffering and opposition in fulfilling their callings, yet they must persevere. Both serve as Biblical examples of how to sustain a ministry of preaching God's word over the long haul.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah served as a prophet, delivering God's word to his people, for more than forty years from 627 BC to sometime after 586 BC. It was a tumultuous time to be God's messenger. During these years, Assyria, the superpower to the north, was falling apart. Babylon, situated to the east attempted to take advantage of the resulting power vacuum, and Egypt in the south tried to block Babylon's efforts. In the middle of it all was the tiny

⁴⁹Jeremiah 1: 7, 1 Timothy 4: 12.

nation of Judea, wrestling with its own political instability and uncertainty. During Jeremiah's ministry, the nation had three different kings, Josiah the reformer, Jehoiakim the tyrant, and Zedekiah the puppet king. Philip Ryken writes that Jeremiah "was prophet during the cold November winds of Judah's life as a nation, right up to the time God's people were deported to Babylon. Jeremiah himself was exiled to Egypt, where he died."⁵⁰

What enabled Jeremiah to remain faithful to his calling to deliver God's word to his people for so long and through so much difficulty? The account of Jeremiah's calling in Jeremiah 1:4-19 is illuminating. Jeremiah's ministry begins when God calls him, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."⁵¹ This significant moment for Jeremiah would serve as a touchstone for his entire ministry. When God tells Jeremiah that he "knew" him before birth, the Hebrew verb refers not just to intellectual knowledge but to personal commitment. J.A. Thompson comments, "If ever Jeremiah in later days were overtaken by despair he could know that the divine purpose for him reached back before his birth."⁵²

When God tells Jeremiah that he is "set apart," the Hebrew verb used has the basic meaning of being holy. When God declares something holy, he is reserving that object for a particular task. It is God's choice that makes Jeremiah holy and set apart, not his intrinsic qualities.⁵³ Moreover, when God tells Jeremiah that he "appoints" him as a

⁵⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Courage to Stand: Jeremiah's Battle Plan for Pagan Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 9.

⁵¹ Jeremiah 1: 5.

⁵² J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 145.

⁵³ J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 49.

prophet to the nations, the Hebrew verb describes not just any appointment, but a specific assignment to a particular task.⁵⁴ Because of God's call, Jeremiah knows he has received a particular appointment to be a spokesman for God.

The impact of God's calling in Jeremiah's life cannot be underestimated. R.K. Harrison writes, "God assured the prophet that he was predestined for his task, a factor which formed the basis for his unshakable conviction that his mission was indeed of divine origin."⁵⁵ Indeed, God's call gave Jeremiah's story deep significance and meaning as part of God's larger redemptive story. Derek Kidner comments,

To be told, *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you*, was to be given at once a new center of gravity, away from his sole self and from the confines of the immediate scene, back to the Creator himself and to the master-plan...lest it should ever seem to Jeremiah that his sensitive and vulnerable nature was a cruel accident. He was handmade for his task.⁵⁶

God's calling to Jeremiah provided the anchor that would keep him steady throughout a turbulent forty year ministry.

However, when God initially called him, Jeremiah protested: "Ah, Sovereign Lord,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.'"⁵⁷ Like Moses and Isaiah before him,⁵⁸ Jeremiah tried to disqualify himself because of his inadequacies. But God, just as with Moses and Isaiah, would hear nothing of it: "'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the Lord."⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Thompson, 146.

⁵⁵ R.K. Harrison, *Jeremiah & Lamentations*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 48-9.

⁵⁶ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 25.

⁵⁷ Jeremiah 1: 6.

⁵⁸ Exodus 4: 1-17, Isaiah 6: 5.

⁵⁹ Jeremiah 1: 7-8.

If God's call was a potent force to uphold Jeremiah during his ministry, God's promise of his presence was every bit as powerful. Tremper Longman observes of Jeremiah, "In his weakness, God will make him strong. In God's economy, it is not one's inherent strength, abilities or credentials that count, but rather God's presence. For that reason, Jeremiah is not to be afraid to go to the people with God's message."⁶⁰ Just as with Abraham, Moses, and Daniel before him, Jeremiah did not need to fear because God promised that his own presence would go with him. Of course, this did not mean that he was exempt from facing suffering, only that God would protect him through it. As Kidner succinctly puts it, "For Jeremiah or for us, his way in general is not to stop the fight but to stand by the fighter."⁶¹ Jeremiah was sent out to speak God's word armed with the promise of God's presence, just as centuries later, Jesus would send out his disciples to preach the gospel armed with the promise, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁶² This enabled Jeremiah to remain faithful to his call.

After God promises his presence to Jeremiah, he initiates a powerful symbolic action: he reaches out his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth. Then God explains the significance of this action: "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."⁶³ God consecrates Jeremiah's mouth in order to communicate that Jeremiah's words will not merely convey human opinion and thought, but nothing less than God's own words. This, of course, gives Jeremiah added confidence

⁶⁰ Tremper Longman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 22.

⁶¹ Kidner, 28.

⁶² Matthew 28: 20.

⁶³ Jeremiah 1: 9-10.

as he begins his ministry because he will be delivering a divine message.⁶⁴ Thompson even suggests that “Yahweh’s touching of his mouth was reminiscent of the promise of Deuteronomy 18:18 ‘I will put my words in your mouth.’ The identification of Jeremiah with that promised successor to Moses must have increased the prophet’s reassurance.”⁶⁵

Jeremiah needed the confidence that he was delivering God’s own words or he would never have wanted to be faithful to his calling. The message that Jeremiah delivered to God’s people was largely a message of judgment (to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow), even though there were glimmers of hope (to build and to plant). Because of the difficulty of being a prophet of doom, there were times that Jeremiah wanted to quit. Yet, what kept him faithful in those moments was the nature of God’s word. For example, Jeremiah acknowledged: “But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”⁶⁶ The divine compulsion of God’s word overcame his human reluctance.

God assured Jeremiah of the efficacy of his word by showing him the branch of an almond tree in Jeremiah 1: 11. What was the significance? God explains, “You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.”⁶⁷ In Hebrew, the word “watching” sounds like the word for “almond tree.” Longman explains, “The almond tree was the first tree to blossom after winter. The point is that God is watching over his word. He will accomplish it. This oracle serves as a warning to God’s people who hear of God’s

⁶⁴ Longman, 22.

⁶⁵ Thompson, 149.

⁶⁶ Jeremiah 20: 9.

⁶⁷ Jeremiah 1: 12.

coming judgment on their sin, but doubt that he has the will or the ability to effect it.”⁶⁸

The reason why Jeremiah could faithfully deliver God’s word to the people, even though it was a difficult word, was the confidence that it was God’s effectual word, which God himself would fulfill.

Even though Jeremiah was equipped with God’s call, God’s presence, and God’s word for his ministry, he still encountered personal struggle. Jeremiah is unique among the Old Testament prophets because of the degree to which he revealed the turmoil of his inner emotions: “I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me.”⁶⁹ “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?”⁷⁰ “I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.”⁷¹ This demonstrates that Jeremiah was faithful to his ministry through much inner turmoil and struggle. This is why God says to Jeremiah at the outset of his ministry, “Get yourself ready!”⁷² The Hebrew word can be translated as “brace yourself” or literally “gird your loins.”⁷³ Thompson explains,

There is no disguising the torrid experiences that lay ahead. These needed to be faced as resolutely as a man preparing for battle faced possible dangers, or with the determination of one who faced a task which involved physical exertion. Long flowing dress which would hinder freedom of movement needed to be tied up around one’s waist. With loins girded men were prepared for the challenge ahead.⁷⁴

To be faithful to God’s call, Jeremiah would need a commitment enabled by God.

⁶⁸ Longman, 23.

⁶⁹ Jeremiah 11: 9.

⁷⁰ Jeremiah 15: 18.

⁷¹ Jeremiah 20: 7b-8.

⁷² Jeremiah 1: 17.

⁷³ Thompson, 155.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 156.

Certainly, Jeremiah would struggle, but greater than his own struggles and doubts were God's calling, God's presence, and God's word. Indeed, in the narrative of Jeremiah's call from God, the last word is a strong reassurance of God's presence: "“Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.”⁷⁵ In the strongest terms, God promised to equip his servant to face hostility with the best promise ever, the promise of his presence. “Why is the prophet so resilient?” Longman asks. The answer: “God tells him I am with you and will rescue you. This is a variation of the covenant theme. God is with his prophet to protect him and to see that his prophetic word will come to realization.”⁷⁶ God's call, God's word, and God's presence sustain Jeremiah's preaching ministry.

Timothy

Like Jeremiah, Timothy faced a daunting challenge to preach to God's people. Timothy was a native of Lystra and an early convert in Paul's ministry. Timothy went on to become a missionary companion on Paul's travels and was with Paul during Paul's first imprisonment. After Paul was released, he left Timothy in Ephesus as a pastor to the fledgling church to deal with heretics who were undermining the church, to order the church's worship, to select its first elders, to preach and teach the apostolic faith, and when Paul was about to be martyred, to preserve the apostolic faith for the future. It was a tall order for a relatively young man. John Stott comments, “Humanly speaking, Timothy was hopelessly unfit to assume these weighty responsibilities of leadership in

⁷⁵ Jeremiah 1: 18-19.

⁷⁶ Longman, 24.

the church.”⁷⁷ He was still fairly young, especially in light of the church leadership responsibilities placed on his shoulders.⁷⁸ He was also prone to illness, and Paul had to recommend certain treatments for his ailments.⁷⁹ In addition, he was timid by temperament⁸⁰ such that Paul had to urge the Corinthians when Timothy was with them, “See to it that that he has nothing to fear while he is with you.”⁸¹ Stott concludes, “This, then, was Timothy—young in years, frail in physique, retiring in disposition—who nevertheless was called to exacting responsibilities in the church of God. Greatness was being thrust upon him, and like Moses and Jeremiah and a host of others before and after him, Timothy was exceedingly reluctant to accept it.”⁸² What then enabled Timothy to remain faithful to his calling to preach the gospel to the church in Ephesus? Paul’s two letters to Timothy provide a window into Timothy’s preaching ministry.

In 1 Timothy 4, Paul writes to Timothy, “If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching you have followed.”⁸³ The phrase “brought up in the truths of the faith” has in view the nourishment essential for a minister to be able to instruct others. In fact, the verb is a present participle, which indicates not just nourishment in the past, but continual nourishment.⁸⁴ John Stott comments, “Behind the ministry of public teaching there lies the discipline of private study. All the best teachers have themselves

⁷⁷ John Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 19.

⁷⁸ 1 Timothy 4: 12.

⁷⁹ 1 Timothy 5: 23.

⁸⁰ 2 Timothy 1: 7-8, 2: 1, 3: 12, 4: 5.

⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 16: 10.

⁸² Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 20.

⁸³ 1 Timothy 4: 6.

⁸⁴ George W. Knight, III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 194.

remained students. They teach well because they learn well.”⁸⁵ As an illustration of this principle, commentator Philip Ryken shares “how the best Bible teachers never lose their passion for Bible study:”

I saw this firsthand when I spent several months with William Still, a Presbyterian pastor who preached for more than fifty years at the same church in Aberdeen, and whose ministry led to a recovery of evangelical faith in the Church of Scotland. Mr. Still was well into his eighties at the time I met him, and still preaching twice every Sunday. As we sat in his sitting room every morning I would ask him questions about piety, ministry, and theology. Often we hit upon a line of inquiry which merited further investigation. We would pull out our Bibles, or he would dash off to the next room to get a book off the shelf. In the thrill of the chase, Mr. Still would exclaim, “We’re still learning, aren’t we, Philip? We’re always learning!”⁸⁶

In order to sustain his preaching, Paul encourages Timothy not only to be a lifelong student, but also to pursue godliness: “Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.”⁸⁷ Godliness pertains to reverence for God, so the godly person is someone who places God at the center of every area of life. The need for Timothy’s godliness must have been important to Paul since the word for “godliness” appears a total of fifteen times in the New Testament with nine of them occurring in this letter. Why is godliness so important for Timothy, the pastor and preacher? Philip Towner explains,

The first requirement for an effective ministry is an exemplary Christian lifestyle. On one level this holds true particularly for those who, like Timothy, find themselves in leadership positions in ministry among those who are older and (perhaps) wiser. Nothing bridges the generation gap in the church like the spiritual maturity of the younger. At a more important

⁸⁵ John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 116.

⁸⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 170.

⁸⁷ 1 Timothy 4: 7.

level, nothing proves the veracity of the gospel as well as evidence of its life changing power.⁸⁸

This is why effective ministry and godliness are inseparable. Paul makes it clear, however, that godliness does not happen automatically. This is why Timothy must actively train himself for godliness and seek to “set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”⁸⁹ Nothing will undermine one’s preaching more quickly than an ungodly lifestyle. This is why Robert Murray M’Cheyne, a Scottish preacher in the 1800’s, once declared, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.”⁹⁰ So it was for Timothy.

With the foundation of godliness in place, there is motivation from one’s giftedness. Paul says to Timothy, “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.”⁹¹ Though Timothy’s gift is not specified, it is clearly given at his commissioning for ministry and therefore connected to his pastoral responsibilities. John Stott suggests the plausible notion that “Timothy’s gift was his teaching ministry, together with the authority and power to exercise it.”⁹² Paul is urging Timothy to remember his calling through the prophetic message, his equipping through the spiritual gift, and his commissioning through the elders laying their hands on him. Remembering these things, comparable to the modern idea of ordination, are the “sure anchor that holds during the howling storms of ministry.”⁹³ For Timothy to give up preaching and leave the pastoral ministry would be to negate his own ordination. John Newton once wrote of pastoral ministry that “the

⁸⁸ Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 109.

⁸⁹ 1 Timothy 4: 12.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Ryken, *1 Timothy*, 184.

⁹¹ 1 Timothy 4: 14.

⁹² Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 122.

⁹³ Lawson, “The Passion of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of 1 Timothy 4:13-16,” 89.

man who is once moved by the Spirit of God to this work, will prefer it, if attainable, to thousands of gold and silver; so that, though he is at times intimidated by a sense of its importance and difficulty, compared with his own great insufficiency, yet he cannot give it up.”⁹⁴ This calling and gifting by the Holy Spirit and confirmation by the church is, according to Paul, encouragement for Timothy to remain faithful.

All these exhortations to Timothy are calculated to sustain his pastoral ministry in Ephesus. However, it will not be easy. Paul makes it clear that persistence in preaching will require concerted effort. He says, “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.”⁹⁵ The verb “be diligent” can also be translated “be wrapped up in these things” or “devote yourself to them,” phrases which seek “to capture in English idiom the total involvement and intensity of the exhortation.”⁹⁶ In order to sustain a preaching ministry in Ephesus, Timothy cannot treat preaching as a hobby. Preaching and pastoral ministry must be a total life commitment. This is warranted when eternal futures are at stake. Paul says to Timothy, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”⁹⁷ Timothy is not able to save himself or his hearers, rather God through the gospel saves. But Timothy will give evidence of his own salvation through his perseverance, and God will use him to save others as he perseveres in preaching the gospel. Philip Ryken comments, “Paul wanted to be sure that Timothy’s work was not in vain, as it would have been if he were to give up and quit before it was

⁹⁴ Quoted in Ryken, *1 Timothy*, 188.

⁹⁵ 1 Timothy 4: 15.

⁹⁶ Knight, 210.

⁹⁷ 1 Timothy 4: 16.

finished. Souls perish for lack of sound ministry.”⁹⁸ This is the profound necessity of Timothy’s preaching, and therefore cause for his perseverance in it.

2 Timothy 4:1-8 are some of the last words that the Apostle Paul writes before he dies, and they represent his final charge to Timothy. The specific content of the charge appears in verse two as a series of five imperatives and a qualifying prepositional phrase: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” George Knight comments that “the first imperative ‘preach the word’ plays a dominant role, not only by being first but also by being amplified by the second imperative ‘be ready in season and out of season’ and by the prepositional phrase with ‘instruction’ at the end of this verse.”⁹⁹ The verb “preach” is the verbal form of the Greek word for a herald who carried the responsibility of public proclamation, so the verb carries the meaning of proclaiming something aloud in public.¹⁰⁰ Paul is calling Timothy to publicly proclaim, that is, to preach, God’s Word, which for Timothy consisted of the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul just finished reminding Timothy in 2 Timothy 3 that all Scripture is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”¹⁰¹

If the other imperatives are to be read in light of this main imperative to preach, then Paul is calling Timothy to preach the Word all the time, no matter whether the times seem good or bad, and that work will involve correcting, rebuking and encouraging. John Stott comments, “The same charge is laid upon the church of every age. We have no

⁹⁸ Ryken, *1 Timothy*, 191.

⁹⁹ Knight, 453.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ 2 Timothy 3: 16.

liberty to invent our message, but only to communicate ‘the word’ which God has spoken and has now committed to the church as a sacred trust.”¹⁰²

What should motivate Timothy to fulfill this charge? Commentators point out three motivations in these verses that Paul provides for Timothy. The first appears in the preamble to the charge in verse one. The second is in verses three and four which are introduced with an explanatory “for,” giving the reason for the preceding charge. Likewise, the third motivation is in verses six through eight which are also introduced with an explanatory “for,” providing further reason for what has been said in verse five, a reiteration that Timothy should persevere in his preaching and pastoral ministry.

Articulating the first of these motivations, Paul writes, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge.”¹⁰³ Paul reminds Timothy that his charge to persevere in preaching God’s word comes with divine affirmation. Stott comments, “Perhaps the strongest of all incentives to faithfulness is the sense of a commission from God. If Timothy can only be assured that he is the servant of the most high God and an ambassador of Jesus Christ, and that Paul’s challenge to him is God’s challenge, then nothing will deflect him from his task.”¹⁰⁴ Commentators note that when one adds to this the reminder of Christ’s return, judgment and establishment of his kingdom, there is strong incentive for steadfastness in ministry.¹⁰⁵

For the second motivation, Paul describes the cultural context of Timothy’s preaching: “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine.

¹⁰² Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 106.

¹⁰³ 2 Timothy 4: 1.

¹⁰⁴ Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 110.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”¹⁰⁶ Essentially, Paul prepares Timothy for the times when no one will be interested in his sermons. In fact, they will turn their ears away! They will be much more interested in their own intellectual novelties and find teachers who tell them what they want to hear. The logical response to such a situation could be ceasing to preach. But Paul says the situation should have the opposite effect on Timothy. It should actually strengthen his resolve to preach: “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”¹⁰⁷ Stott comments,

Those difficult days, in which it was hard to gain a hearing for the gospel, were not to discourage Timothy; nor to deter him from his ministry; nor to induce him to trim his message to suit his hearers; still less to silence him altogether; but rather to spur him on to preach all the more. It should be the same with us. The harder the times and the deafer the people, the clearer and more persuasive our proclamation must be.¹⁰⁸

As the third motivation, Paul reminds Timothy that he is about to die:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store 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 longed for his appearing.¹⁰⁹

Paul writes these verses as yet another reason that Timothy ought to persevere in his ministry. First, Timothy’s perseverance is the response to God’s commission and Christ’s return. Second, Timothy’s perseverance is the response to a callous culture. Third,

¹⁰⁶ 2 Timothy 4: 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ 2 Timothy 4: 5.

¹⁰⁸ Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ 2 Timothy 4: 6-8.

Timothy's perseverance is the response to knowing that Paul was bringing his ministry to completion, was about to die, and was handing the baton of guarding the gospel to him. Commentators point out that surely Timothy's heart would be moved by reading these verses, a personal and heartfelt appeal that Timothy follow in his mentor's footsteps. If a crown awaited Paul for his perseverance in ministry, then the same would be true for Timothy.

Scripture shows that Timothy's preaching ministry was to be sustained by his own continued learning, by his development of godliness, by remembering his calling and gifting through the Holy Spirit, and by his sustained and total commitment to the task. He was fueled by three motivations: God's commission and Christ's return, the cultural challenge, and the inspiration of following in Paul's footsteps. Both Jeremiah and Timothy serve as representative Biblical examples of how to sustain preaching ministry over the long haul. We now turn to the larger body of literature to survey what it has to contribute to our study of how to sustain expository preaching in long term pastorates.

The Challenges of Sustaining Expository Preaching

This research project is important because the literature identifies a number of challenges to sustaining expository preaching. The first area addresses the demanding nature of the work itself. The current cultural climate in America also makes expository preaching difficult. Third, challenges often arise from congregational dynamics in the congregation. Fourth, challenges emerge from a preacher's own heart that threaten longevity in the pulpit. Finally, there are the challenges of suffering that result from preaching. We now turn to these areas.

Challenges from the work of preaching

The work of preaching is not easy. Broadly speaking, preachers share a lot in common with teachers, and some researchers in the area of education have observed that “one of the most difficult, stressful occupations today must surely be that of the classroom teacher.”¹¹⁰ Two researchers in particular note, “More and more school districts across the country are scrambling to find teachers to fill vacancies in the classroom. Even when districts are able to hire teachers, estimates are that as many as 50% of teachers exit the profession within their first 4 years in the role.”¹¹¹ There are similar echoes when one listens to the voices of preachers. Stephen Brown, a pastor for twenty five years and now a radio broadcaster, seminary professor and author, writes,

Many things can turn ministry into a weekly grind. Boredom. Too little time, too much to do. Limitless small problems that inflict death by a thousand cuts. Occasional crises that overwhelm. Where can we find strength to plug away at ministry week in and week out? In particular, how can we find energy and creativity to preach effectively for decades on end?¹¹²

The work of preparing to preach and preaching is difficult and demanding, even for seasoned pastors. Stott, a veteran expository preacher, says, “The pastoral ministry of regular preaching and teaching is extremely exacting. It demands much time and energy in study.”¹¹³ Peter Adam adds, “Preaching is such a demanding activity. I am never sure

¹¹⁰ Mary Clement, “Rejuvenating as a Teacher,” *The Educational Forum* 63, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 322.

¹¹¹ Charles S. Hausman and Ellen B. Goldring, “Sustaining Teacher Commitment: The Role of Professional Communities,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 76, no. 2 (2001): 31.

¹¹² Stephen W. Brown, Haddon Robinson, and William Willimon, *A Voice in the Wilderness: Clear Preaching in a Complicated World* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1993), 134.

¹¹³ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 121.

whether it is the preparation or the presentation which is more demanding!”¹¹⁴ Ed Rowell candidly testifies:

Passionate preaching is itself physically draining. To invest so much energy and emotion in study, then to funnel that distillation of soul into a single event is to invite an emotional and spiritual crash. Delivering the message two or three times in multiple services simply raises us to a greater height from which to fall later that day.¹¹⁵

In a lecture on preaching, Michael Bullmore, who taught preaching in seminary for fifteen years before twelve years of pastoral work, witnesses to the fact that preaching is hard work: “it batters and bruises and does not rest.”¹¹⁶

According to pastors, part of what makes the work of preparing to preach so difficult is the limited time available for the task. Gary Kinnaman and Alfred Ells write, “Shepherding a church in today’s world is extremely difficult. It is hard to meet the complex personal, relational, and organizational challenges clergy must face.”¹¹⁷ They go on to list a diversity of responsibilities that a typical pastor must master to be successful, such as leading, supervising, offering pastoral care, educating, and resolving conflict.¹¹⁸ In the midst of all these responsibilities, it is difficult to find adequate time to prepare the sermon. Denise George confirms this in her pastoral surveys: “most pastors wish they had more sermon preparation time. They need regular and uninterrupted solitude to pray, read, study, and write sermons that will proclaim God’s Word to their congregations, yet time for such is always limited by many other pastoral duties during the week.”¹¹⁹ When asked about the greatest challenge in maintaining an expository preaching ministry,

¹¹⁴ Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 9.

¹¹⁵ Rowell, 64.

¹¹⁶ Bullmore.

¹¹⁷ Gary D. Kinnaman, and Alfred H. Ells, *Leaders That Last: How Covenant Friendships Can Help Pastors Thrive* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 28.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹⁹ George, 142-43.

Erwin Lutzer, pastor of The Moody Church for forty years, says, “Of course, the greatest challenge for a pastor is always one of time—time to do the study that is needed to present expository messages that are relevant and healthful...studying often gets pushed off into the margins of my life and time schedule.”¹²⁰

Additionally, preparing sermons is challenging because of the amount of material over which a preacher needs to gain mastery. There is not only the ancient text and culture; there is also a constantly growing amount of information in the present. For this reason, J. Kent Edwards writes, “Those who will dare to declare the Word of God this week will face unprecedented challenges. It may be tougher to preach today than ever before...As preachers, we have more information to deal with than ever before.”¹²¹ For all these reasons, preachers are challenged by the work of preaching itself.

Challenges from the culture

There are also challenges to sustaining a ministry of expository preaching that come from the current American culture. T. David Gordon observes that the North American culture in general has become increasingly “aliterate,” by which he means people who can but do not read.¹²² He argues that this cultural shift makes expository preaching difficult:

[T]o preach the Word of God well, one must already have cultivated, at a minimum, three sensibilities: the sensibility of the close reading of texts, the sensibility of composed communication, and the sensibility of the significant. Without these, a person simply cannot preach, any more than he could if his larynx were removed or he were utterly illiterate. But our present culture does not cultivate any one of these sensibilities, and pre-

¹²⁰ Personal correspondence from Erwin Lutzer to Daniel Ying, September 1, 2010.

¹²¹ Edwards, 3-4.

¹²² T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2009), 37.

ministerial candidates, or ministers themselves, must undertake their cultivation if preaching is to be rescued from its present moribund state.¹²³

A number of writers have also noted that as the culture becomes increasingly postmodern, and therefore dismissive of statements of absolute truth, it becomes less receptive to expository preaching.¹²⁴ Greg Heisler says, "From a postmodern perspective, preaching is seen by many as rationalistic, elitist, and authoritarian. In a culture that worships at the altar of relativism and idolizes ideas that do not offend anyone, there is little tolerance for any preacher to be so bold as to proclaim, 'Thus says the Lord.'"¹²⁵

Then there is the challenge of technology, which often sets expectations for the local preaching pastor extraordinarily high. London notes that because technology has made the best ministry resources so readily available, "by the time parishioners come to church on Sunday, many have already heard magnificent religious music and the most talented preaching in America."¹²⁶ Moreover, technology has produced multi-media presentations that can make preaching as a form of communication seem increasingly archaic. David Jackman, a minister in England for fifteen years before becoming a teacher of preachers, says, "Compared with the discovery and discussion methods of the classroom, the pulpit monologue can appear outmoded and ineffective. Multi-media presentations look much more exciting than preaching. Visual images and sound-bites are much easier to recall than reasoned arguments and careful persuasion."¹²⁷ With the advent of such technology, some might consider abandoning preaching in favor of modes of communication that seem to connect more effectively with the modern person.

¹²³ Ibid., 106.

¹²⁴ David Jackman, "Preaching That Connects, Part 1: External Connections: Strategy and Resources," *Trinity Journal* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 5-6.

¹²⁵ Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 8.

¹²⁶ London and Wiseman, 38.

¹²⁷ Jackman: 9.

At the same time, a series of scandals has eroded the North American public's trust in ministers. London observes that "in light of these moral breakdowns, pastors should not be surprised that society no longer reveres them as shapers of conscience or communicators of values. Like it or not, millions view ministers as trifling, demagogic, self-seeking, lazy, or even immoral."¹²⁸ Listeners may not take pastors seriously or trust what they have to say about morals, values, and life. This general cynicism can undermine the confidence with which pastors preach. There was once a day when pastors, as the best educated and most respected members of their community, also served as community leaders. This is no longer the case. Edwards frankly states, "While a certain amount of respect may be accorded to the preacher within the Christian community, it is notably absent in society. Preaching is not a culturally prestigious occupation."¹²⁹ For all these reasons, American culture does not make it easy to be a preacher.

Challenges from the congregation

This leads to the third area of challenge for expository preaching: pressures from the congregation itself. Because of the culture of choice and the growing desire for mega churches, congregants often evaluate pastors based on how well they lead the church into numerical growth and financial gain. Carroll notes:

Membership and financial growth statistics become major barometers that lay leaders, denominational officials, and clergy themselves use to assess effectiveness. Clergy are regularly asked, "How large is your congregation?" Or, "Is your congregation growing? By how much?" To be sure, those in growing congregations feel that their work is affirmed by such growth, but in situations of stasis or decline, it is more difficult for pastors to feel positive about their work.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ London and Wiseman, 44.

¹²⁹ Edwards, 9.

¹³⁰ Carroll, 55.

This requirement to preach sermons that will increase membership and giving will pressure any pastor.

Moreover, the new culture of choice has spawned a consumption-oriented mindset that has infiltrated the church. Carroll observes

Ministry itself has been transformed into a commodity, a service to be purchased...Congregants see themselves as consumers of ministry and the pastor as the dispenser of the religious wares...Laity choose churches on the basis of need fulfillment rather than as a context for being in ministry. Failure to fulfill the [laity's] needs will result in a request for a new pastor, or a shopping trip to a nearby religious outlet.¹³¹

Congregants, as consumers, come to expect pastors to specialize in every area. This has particularly deleterious effects on preaching. Edwards writes, “The pressure to be everywhere and everything to everyone has never been greater. Our consumer mentality demands top-flight service from its paid servants. And this is the enemy of good preaching. It has never been easy to preach, but it is especially tough today.”¹³² It does not help that through modern media, the average congregant is exposed to the finest preachers of the day. Edwards frankly tells pastors, “You are not the best preacher your people have listened to this week,” and the result is often that “people in the pews want the same electronic perfection projected by the religious superstars of our day.”¹³³

At the same time as some observe impossibly high standards for preachers from congregants, other writers note the decreasing appetite in the North American church for expository preaching. J.I. Packer, a renowned theologian, comments, “Topical preaching has become a general rule, at least in North America. Sermons explore announced themes rather than biblical passages. Why is this? Partly, I suppose, to make preaching appear

¹³¹ Ibid., 51.

¹³² Edwards, 8.

¹³³ Ibid., 6.

interesting and important in an age that has largely lost interest in the pulpit.”¹³⁴ He points to the low expectations many listeners have for sermons. Can these differing viewpoints be reconciled? Regardless, whether a congregation has impossibly high standards for preaching or a growing disinterest in preaching, both attitudes imperil the preacher’s longevity with that congregation.

Perhaps the most disheartening impact that a congregation can have on a preacher is the lack of any response at all. Through a questionnaire given to five thousand randomly selected pastors, H.B. London found that second to the challenge of maintaining balance in ministry was “the difficulty of motivating people to live consistent lives and to help the church accomplish the Great Commission. Pastors are frustrated because people seem apathetic.”¹³⁵ Likewise, Denise George was told by many pastors in her survey that after preaching their hearts out in the pulpit, they stepped down to greet church members and visitors and encountered either criticism, no comment at all, generic responses like “good sermon, pastor,” or not so much as a smile, just a blank expression.¹³⁶ This lack of response can cause a crack of doubt to appear even in the strongest of pastoral resolve. Ed Rowell gives expression to what many pastors do not dare admit to thinking:

Sometimes the doubt comes and goes like a mountain spring shower; other times cynical moods settle in like a gray, claustrophobic Chicago winter. In spite of the “nice job” and “good message” heard at the door, sometimes you look around and wonder, *Is anyone’s life being changed here? Are we really making progress?* Even if there is evidence of change, is preaching really a part of his transformation? Or is it mostly because of his twelve-step group? You know good and well that most people would rather lie like a rug than hurt your feelings. It’s not hard to reach a toxic

¹³⁴ J.I. Packer, “Introduction: Why Preach?,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1986), 4.

¹³⁵ London and Wiseman, 25.

¹³⁶ George, 145.

level of cynicism. I can come to believe that I am preaching to fools who just don't get it. Worse, maybe I'm the biggest fool for wasting my life preparing messages that don't make one slight bit of difference in the lives and hearts of people. While I'll never breathe a word of such doubt to a soul, that is my deepest fear, my greatest insecurity.¹³⁷

By their expectations and response (or lack of response) to sermons, a congregation often has the power to derail their pastor's preaching ministry.

Challenges from a preacher's own heart

The fourth area of challenge for sustaining expository preaching in this literature review comes from the pastor's own heart. There is a similar dynamic that happens among classroom teachers. Parker Palmer, a seasoned teacher and educator, writes, "Many of us became teachers for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for some subject and for helping people learn. But many of us lose heart as the years of teaching go by."¹³⁸ For preachers, it is the same. David Hansen writes, "Preaching wanes even when you take good care of yourself. Theology grows stale. Sermons get predictable. Instead of a joy, preaching becomes a burden."¹³⁹ Somewhere along the way preachers can lose heart.

This challenge from a preacher's heart can take many forms. It can take the form of one's own expectations. Rowell observes, "Most preachers face their toughest critics when they look in the mirror. Even more relentless than the ever-approaching Sunday are personal expectations. Those who become chronically weary often swing for the fence

¹³⁷ Rowell, 35.

¹³⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 17.

¹³⁹ David Hansen, *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry without All the Answers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 100.

every time they preach.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, perfectionist preachers quickly become discouraged preachers, undone by their own expectations.

A preacher’s heart can also be filled with unbelief. John Stott asserts, “The contemporary loss of confidence in the gospel is the most basic hindrance to preaching.”¹⁴¹ If there are no deep convictions about the gospel, there will be no confidence in the pulpit to proclaim that gospel. This is the root of many of the problems in preaching today, says Stott. What is the cure? “We need to regain our confidence in the truth, relevance and power of the gospel and begin to get excited about it again.”¹⁴² But a lack of Biblical conviction in the preacher’s heart is a barrier to a sustained preaching ministry.

Many writers also observe that pastors struggle with feelings of fear and inadequacy. The sources of these feelings vary. Denise George quotes the sentiments of some pastors from her survey:

I feel I need to be better prepared to teach. I have a difficult time reaching young adults in my church. I wonder if my preaching is effective.

My church thinks my preaching is too old fashioned and not up-to-date. I sometimes wonder if they’re right.

I strive to be relevant and reach people but, at the same time, I want to be biblical. That creates a lot of tension in my pulpit.¹⁴³

Kinnaman and Ells note from their surveys that when the congregation expresses dissatisfaction, or organizational problems arise, pastors often struggle with inadequacy and fear failure. They report that ninety percent of the clergy in their survey report feeling “inadequately trained to cope with the high demands of ministry” while half of them feel

¹⁴⁰ Rowell, 69.

¹⁴¹ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 83.

¹⁴² Ibid., 85.

¹⁴³ George, 140-41.

“unable to meet the current demands of the job.”¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the most common source of fear and inadequacy stems from comparing oneself to the best preachers on television or the radio. Erwin Lutzer, speaking as a pastor, says, “All of us have feelings of inadequacy. And we are not helped when we are compared with the television preachers who are able to draw large crowds and money. Though our faults are well known to our congregation, the people hear of only the successes of radio and television preachers.”¹⁴⁵ Likewise, even Haddon Robinson, one of the most respected preachers in America, can reflect, “When I was in seminary, celebrated preachers spoke in our chapel... After hearing these preachers, others were inspired. But I walked out of the service wanting to quit.”¹⁴⁶

Likely the most subtle challenge arising from the preacher’s heart is what some writers label drift. This can be a drift into boredom, stagnation, and restlessness. Craig Larson observes that slowly but surely, this pastoral drift takes place over time and causes one’s preaching to grow stale. He writes:

At first it may not seem like any big deal. Things will pick up; something will come along that will revive our work. We may busy ourselves with outside interests. We may even ponder resigning our church and finding another that will show greater appreciation. We may quit giving our best in sermon preparation. We may cut back on the work no one sees, such as extra reading and spiritual disciplines. We may stop believing that God will do something significant through us and our church. Boredom truly is the subtle, sworn enemy of faithful perseverance. It can be deadly.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Kinnaman and Ells, 31.

¹⁴⁵ Erwin Lutzer, *Pastor to Pastor: Tackling the Problems of Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 60.

¹⁴⁶ Haddon W. Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 109.

¹⁴⁷ Craig Brian Larson, *Staying Power: Encouragement for Pastors to Persevere* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 148.

Another form of pastoral drift happens when performance replaces ministering and teaching. It is easy for teachers in general to get more caught up in impressing their students than helping them learn. For example, Parker Palmer confesses:

That is how it sometimes is for me. Driven by fear that my backstage ineptitude will be exposed, I strive to make my on-stage performance slicker and smoother—and in the process, make it less and less likely that my students will learn anything other than how to cover up and show off. I conceal my own heart and am unable to weave the fabric of connectedness that teaching and learning require.¹⁴⁸

Likewise, it is very easy for pastors to slip into people-pleasing and allow the pulpit to become driven by the whims of the people.¹⁴⁹ Preachers are not immune to these subtle temptations of the heart, and they can undermine their ministry over the long haul.

Challenges from suffering

The last area of challenge to sustaining expository preaching involves suffering. David Jackman notes that faithful preaching cannot go unchallenged. If it is one of the principle means that God uses to advance his work in the world, it will invariably encounter opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the more effective the preaching ministry, the fiercer the opposition will be.¹⁵⁰ Peter Adam agrees: “For most of us at the present time, our suffering does not take dramatic forms. But it would be hard to imagine that we could engage in the kind of ministry that Paul describes without some kind of suffering.”¹⁵¹ What might this suffering look like? Albert Mohler, president of Southern seminary, shares a testimony:

This work of preaching has a nasty way of getting one into trouble. It seems that the more faithful one is in preaching, the more trouble one encounters. You preach the Word, you speak the truth of the Scriptures, and the next thing you

¹⁴⁸ Palmer, 29.

¹⁴⁹ Larson, 84.

¹⁵⁰ Jackman: 4.

¹⁵¹ Adam, 170.

know, you are on the front page of the newspaper, or sitting in front of a group of agitated deacons or elders; even the youth group is up in arms about whatever you said. Conflict and controversy are always hard, and it often seems that they are almost directly correlated with faithfulness in preaching. The harder you work at faithfully preaching the Word of God to your people, the greater risk you endure.¹⁵²

More subtly, there is a suffering that preaching entails that does not come from the world, the flesh, or the devil. It is loneliness. Michael Bullmore shares, “I have never been more lonely than when I am preparing sermons. Never. It is for me an extremely lonely occupation. There are hours when I have to fight a very strong temptation to just go and seek out the company of someone and I am under orders to stay here in this lonely place.”¹⁵³ The suffering that comes from preaching, whether caused by loneliness or opposition, is never easy. When added to the challenges enumerated above, this challenge to sustaining expository preaching in a long term pastorate becomes truly significant.

The Motives for Sustaining Expository Preaching

In light of the challenges of sustaining expository preaching, what will encourage pastors to keep on preaching? John Stott answers, “The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology.”¹⁵⁴ J. Kent Edwards agrees:

The secret to preaching perseverance—and eventual excellence in preaching—lies in knowing *why* you preach. You will continue preaching in season and out of season if you understand the theological imperative of biblical proclamation. The techniques of rhetorical flourish will not sustain your ministerial dry spells. Gimmicks won’t work. Theology will.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² R. Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 146.

¹⁵³ Bullmore.

¹⁵⁴ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 92.

¹⁵⁵ Edwards, 12.

Developing strong motivations about preaching is crucial to sustaining a ministry of expository preaching over the long haul. Yet the literature indicates that this is the precise area in which many preachers have lost their grip. Greg Heisler observes,

Preaching has lost its theological mandate. Consequently, we have replaced preachers with speakers because we are told people want dialogue without doctrine and talks without truth. Theology is out, storytellers are in, and as a result we are seeing an entire generation of preachers who are more driven to be effective communicators than to be Spirit-empowered preachers.¹⁵⁶

What are the convictions and motivations that will sustain an expository preacher over the long term? The literature suggests that there are seven areas: convictions about God and his word, convictions about the power of the Holy Spirit and scripture, God's command to preach, a preacher's calling and equipping by God, the transforming power of preaching to change people and cultures, convictions about preaching and the health of the church, and the privilege and the passion of preaching.

God and His Word

The place to start a theology or rationale for preaching is with convictions about God himself. John Stott explains, "Behind the concept and the act of preaching there lies a doctrine of God, a conviction about his being, his action and his purpose. The kind of God we believe in determines the kind of sermons we preach."¹⁵⁷ What God undergirds a ministry of expository preaching? It is the biblical God who acts and speaks. The God of the Bible not only reveals himself through his deeds, but also through his words. The consistent record throughout Scripture is that God communicates with his people.¹⁵⁸ If God does not speak, then there are no grounds for expository preaching: "Any human

¹⁵⁶ Heisler, 8-9.

¹⁵⁷ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 93.

¹⁵⁸ Adam, 15-17.

ministry of the Word depends on a God who is not silent. If God is dumb, then we may have a ministry of words, but not of the Word, God's Word."¹⁵⁹ The enterprise of expository preaching clearly begins with the fact that God himself speaks and communicates.

However, many writers point out that this alone is not enough to sustain expository preaching. One must also believe that Scripture is God's written word. One must believe that God inspired the human writers of Scripture so that the words of Scripture are not only human words, but also at the same time God's word.¹⁶⁰ Because Scripture is God's own inspired word, J.I. Packer can even say that Holy Scripture is "God Himself preaching... The Bible text is the real preacher, and the role of the man in the pulpit or the counseling conversation is simply to let the passages say their piece through him."¹⁶¹ Indeed, unless one believes that Scripture is God's written word, there will be no confidence in preaching the Scriptures. J. Kent Edwards explains,

The importance of the doctrine of inspiration for the preacher cannot be overemphasized. The verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture means that whatever the original author of the biblical text wrote to his original audience is true. It is utterly, totally, and completely reliable. As a preacher, this means that I can stake my personal reputation upon what it says. It means I speak with confidence and authority into the lives of my listeners as well as to society at large. Inspiration gives us a boldness that is critical to the preaching event.¹⁶²

R. Kent Hughes, a pastor at the College Church in Wheaton for twenty seven years, adds,

"To my knowledge, no one does regular expository preaching who does not hold to this

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶⁰ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 97.

¹⁶¹ Packer, 17.

¹⁶² Edwards, 17-18.

high view of Scripture—that it is God’s inerrant Word.”¹⁶³ If the Bible is God’s inspired, written word, then there is a divine foundation for preaching.

But still more conviction is needed to sustain preaching. One must not only believe that God inspired Scripture, one must also believe that God still speaks through Scripture. This is the witness of Scripture itself. Michael Bullmore points out that Hebrews 3: 7 says, before quoting Psalm 95, “So, as the Holy Spirit says.” The writer of Hebrews uses the present tense with the conviction that the Holy Spirit is presently speaking through Psalm 95.¹⁶⁴ Likewise, each of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 ends with the phrase, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The apostle John wrote these letters months earlier on the island of Patmos, but had the conviction that as they were read to various churches, the Holy Spirit would speak directly to them.¹⁶⁵ The implications for preaching are breath-taking: When the word is truly preached, God himself is speaking. After quoting 1 Thessalonians 4: 9 and 2 Corinthians 17:20 as evidence, James Daane says, “This should be enough to convince anyone who honors the Bible that God himself is present and actively speaking his Word in every authentic pulpit of the church, whether occupied by the most extraordinary or the most ordinary preacher.”¹⁶⁶

Finally, many preachers find the efficacy and power of God’s word to be a strong motivation to persevere. Many preachers point to Isaiah 55:10-11, a promise that God’s word will not return to him void, as the cornerstone of their confidence in preaching.

¹⁶³ R. Kent Hughes, “Restoring Biblical Exposition to Its Rightful Place: Ministerial Ethos and Pathos,” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 83.

¹⁶⁴ Bullmore.

¹⁶⁵ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 102.

¹⁶⁶ James Daane, *Preaching with Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 14.

Commenting on this promise, Packer says, “With this knowledge supporting them, it is the way of real preachers to show themselves undaunted and unsinkable.”¹⁶⁷ Hughes puts it this way, “No one will give his life to biblical exposition who does not believe in Scripture’s potency—that it can cut through the hard, white bone and running marrow of any soul and work salvation.”¹⁶⁸ In his book *The Glory of Preaching*, Darrell Johnson expresses the following confidence about what happens when a person preaches:

Whenever a human being, Bible in hand, stands up before a group of other human beings, invites the gathered assembly into a particular text of the Bible and as faithfully as possible tries to say again what the living God is saying in the text, something always happens. Something transformative, empowering, life-giving happens.¹⁶⁹

Edwards draws out the implications for the preacher: “The conviction that there is nothing more powerful than the word of God is critical for effective long-term preaching.”¹⁷⁰ Albert Mohler amplifies:

It cannot be a fierce determination alone, however, that strengthens us for the lifelong work of preaching. The stakes are much too high and the perils much too deadly for that. Instead, our perseverance in the task of preaching must be based on God’s promise that He will, by his own power, make the preaching of His word effective.¹⁷¹

How does God make his word effective? Through the power of the Holy Spirit. Greg Heisler wrote his book *Spirit-led Preaching* with the conviction that many preachers have become so Word-focused that they have neglected the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching. He writes,

Nothing short of a renaissance of the Holy Spirit’s role in preaching will save powerless pulpits and sick churches from ineffective kingdom

¹⁶⁷ Packer, 28.

¹⁶⁸ Hughes, 84.

¹⁶⁹ Darrell W. Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God’s Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁷⁰ Edwards, 23.

¹⁷¹ Mohler, 147.

ministry. In this book, I am not advocating replacing the emphasis on the Word with an emphasis on the Spirit. I am advocating adding the Spirit's emphasis to the present emphasis on preaching the Word.¹⁷²

Heisler points out that the Holy Spirit is too vitally involved in every aspect of preaching to ignore: the Holy Spirit inspires the Biblical text, converts the preacher to faith in Christ, calls the preacher to preach the Word, develops the preacher's character to live the Word, illumines the preacher's mind in study, empowers the preacher during proclamation, testifies to Jesus Christ, opens the hearts of those who hear, applies the Word to the listeners' hearts, and produces lasting fruit in believers.¹⁷³ What does this mean for preachers? "If our hearts are deeply convinced that apart from the Spirit's empowerment our preaching and our message are powerless, then we will be burdened *as a way of life* with absolute dependence upon the Spirit of God for all things."¹⁷⁴

A number of other preachers provide testimony that their confidence in preaching stems from a belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. David Jackman says that the biblical preacher's first confidence is that the word will do its work "because the Spirit of God still takes the Word of God to do the work of God and to create the people of God."¹⁷⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the highly admired pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for almost thirty years, says,

Look at the task, look at the state of the world, look at the modern mentality. Without believing in and knowing something of the power of the Spirit, it is a heart-breaking task. I certainly could not go on for another day but for this. If I felt that it was all left to us, and our learning and our scholarship and our organizations, I would be of all men the most miserable and hopeless.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Heisler, 10.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 133.

¹⁷⁵ Jackman: 11.

¹⁷⁶ Lloyd-Jones, 315.

Indeed, Tony Sargent makes the case that Lloyd Jones' preaching cannot be separated from his convictions about the Holy Spirit. It was his dependence on the Holy Spirit that carried his preaching along with power and authority.¹⁷⁷

Charles Spurgeon also gives witness to his dependence on the Holy Spirit to sustain his preaching:

To us the presence and work of the Holy Spirit are the ground of our confidence as to the wisdom and hopefulness of our life work. If we had not believed in the Holy Ghost we should have laid down our ministry long ere this, for "who is sufficient for these things?" Our hope of success, and our strength for continuing the service, lie in our belief that the Spirit of the Lord resteth upon us.¹⁷⁸

Some have said that as gifted as Spurgeon was as a preacher, he still used to say to himself over and over again as he climbed the stairs to his pulpit, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost..."¹⁷⁹ Conviction about the Holy Spirit's ability to invest power in every aspect of the preaching event can sustain preachers.

The Command to Preach

Preachers also report that God's clear command to preach motivates them to stay at the task. After pointing to John 21:15-17, Acts 6:2-4, and 1 Timothy 4:12-13, J. Kent Edwards writes, "I preach because God does not speak of biblical proclamation as an optional extra. It was not a temporary activity. Scripture explicitly and implicitly

¹⁷⁷ Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing: The Preaching of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 281.

¹⁷⁸ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 185.

¹⁷⁹ Related in John Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), 118.

commands us to proclaim publicly the word of God. We cannot choose not to preach.”¹⁸⁰

Likewise, Albert Mohler comments,

Preaching did not emerge from the church’s experimentation with communication techniques. The church does not preach because preaching is thought to be a good idea or an effective technique. The sermon has not earned its place in Christian worship by proving its utility in comparison with other means of communication or aspects of worship. Rather, we preach because we have been commanded to preach.¹⁸¹

Elsewhere he adds, “The act of preaching would smack of unmitigated arrogance and overreaching were it not for the fact that it is God Himself who has given us the task.”¹⁸²

Preaching is not just a bare command. Some preachers recognize that God has commanded preaching because it uniquely and powerfully communicates his word to his people. J.I. Packer points out that much of the Bible’s content is preaching, that is, sermons on paper. So to preach the Bible is simply to stay true to its character and allow people to hear the Bible as it is meant to be communicated. Packer writes, “By preaching the Bible, one makes it possible for the thrust and force of ‘God’s Word written’ to be adequately appreciated, in a way that is never possible through any type of detached study, or any kind of instruction in which a person speaks for or about the Bible as distinct from letting the Bible speak for itself.”¹⁸³ Packer goes on to note a number of communication advantages that a monologue, often seen as a hindrance to learning, actually has over other forms of communication.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Edwards, 28.

¹⁸¹ Mohler, 39.

¹⁸² Ibid., 42.

¹⁸³ Packer, 18.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 21-23. Packer points out that a monologue has the ability to build a sense of the greatness of the topic or enumerate reasons or points that develop a cumulative impact in a way that ordinary conversation cannot. Moreover, with the unction of the Holy Spirit, a monologue allows for “a more intense, dramatic, and passionate way of speaking about the awesome realities of spiritual life and death than everyday speech would sanction.”

J. Kent Edwards identifies the incarnational nature of preaching as an advantage. He writes, "Preaching is the killer 'app' because it is incarnational communication. The very best way to communicate a message is to do so in person. I say this because live personal communication is the way that God chose to express himself."¹⁸⁵ How does this encourage the preacher? Edwards continues, "The best sermons preached this Sunday won't be delivered by airbrushed superstars via satellite to a waiting world. The sermons that will touch lives most significantly this weekend will be preached by local pastors who know and are known by their congregations."¹⁸⁶

In person preaching by local pastors has its advantages, but at the end of the day, what keeps many preachers going is that they have received a divine command:

"Preaching is hard work. The preacher is often tempted to become dispirited. He needs powerful incentives to strengthen his flagging soul, and there is no doubt that he can find one here. St. Paul certainly did. He was a steward of God's mysteries...The gospel was a sacred trust committed to him...he must show himself worthy of this trust."¹⁸⁷

A Preacher's Calling and Equipping

A number of pastors ground their preaching ministry in a sense of divine calling. After studying the Apostle Paul's encouragement to Timothy to persevere in his ministry because he had been given a gift (1 Timothy 4: 14), Stephen Lawson writes, "If one is to persevere in biblical preaching, he must know he has been sovereignly gifted by God. He must preach with a sense of destiny in his life."¹⁸⁸ Tony Merida says, "The work of

¹⁸⁵ Edwards, 37.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸⁷ Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*, 23.

¹⁸⁸ Lawson, "The Passion of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of 1 Timothy 4:13-16," 89.

ministry is simply too demanding to enter it without a sense of calling.”¹⁸⁹ Greg Heisler similarly adds, “The preacher’s ‘staying power’ week in and week out must be grounded in a clarion call to preach the gospel.”¹⁹⁰ A biographer of Charles Spurgeon says that a strong sense of call is like “a deeply anchored ship in the midst of the wind and waves,” and he adds Spurgeon’s own words, “Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable; he must preach if he has the call of heaven.”¹⁹¹

Part of the compelling nature of God’s call is not only a call to preach, but also a call to a particular place. In general, Jay Kesler, a noted Christian leader and author, points out the importance of local ministry in contrast to notoriety as a preacher: “I try to remind myself that the key to an effective ministry is not how large it gets, but how local. Unless it touches specific people, no ministry can ever be successful.”¹⁹² Warren Wiersbe, seasoned pastor and author, says that one’s call includes not only who one is but also where one is, and that this is reason enough to keep preaching: “Knowing I am God’s man in God’s place of ministry has encouraged me to study harder and do my best work. When the harvests were lean, the assurance that God put me there helped to keep me going. When the battles raged and the storms blew, my secure refuge was ‘God put me here, and I will stay here until he tells me to go.’”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching: Declaring Scripture with Responsibility, Passion, and Authenticity* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009), 48.

¹⁹⁰ Heisler, 72.

¹⁹¹ Zack Eswine, *Kindled Fire: How the Methods of C.H. Spurgeon Can Help Your Preaching* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2006), 48.

¹⁹² Jay Kesler, *Being Holy, Being Human: Dealing with the Expectations of Ministry* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1994), 95.

¹⁹³ Warren Wiersbe, “The Patented Preacher,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 77.

The other compelling part of God's call that preachers note is the call to be oneself. God calls one person to a work and not another, and that is significant. Darrell Johnson explains, "When God wants to do a particular work among a particular group of people in a particular place, God calls a particular person with a particular ecology of personhood. Failing to honor who the preacher is may disrupt God's purposes."¹⁹⁴ How can knowing this help a preacher to persevere? Johnson answers,

In my experience, burnout in ministry does not result from overworking; burnout results from not honoring who we are and instead trying to be who we think we ought to be. And in my experience, joy comes by embracing who we are—though we are not everything we would like to be—and trusting the great Preacher to preach through the preacher he is making, redeeming and molding us to be.¹⁹⁵

Moreover, when preachers teach out of who they are made to be, they will be better teachers. Parker Palmer says, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."¹⁹⁶

The Transforming Power of Preaching

A number of veteran preachers talk about how they are encouraged when they see people transformed through preaching. Ed Rowell says, "Nothing has fueled my passion for preaching more than the profound belief that preaching really matters. God can use the sermon to bring about an incredible transformation in the lives of his people."¹⁹⁷ James Boice, the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for thirty two years, shares:

The best day of the week for me is Sunday...the thing that makes it the best is that I never know what is going to happen. I come to church. I do not know who is going to be there. I preach. I do not know all the

¹⁹⁴ Johnson, 174.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁹⁶ Palmer, 10.

¹⁹⁷ Rowell, 44.

problems of the people I am preaching to. I know some of them. I try to be as sensitive as I can, but the deep things in the heart one generally does not know. People sit and listen, each with his or her own problems, all at their own particular points along a line of spiritual pilgrimage. God takes the Word that is preached and speaks it to the heart and afterward somebody will come up and say, 'I don't know how you knew it, but what you said was exactly the thing I needed to hear. How did you know it? Did somebody tell you about me? Somebody must have.'¹⁹⁸

Martyn Lloyd Jones shares a similar perspective:

Another element in this romance of preaching is that you never know who is going to be listening to you, and you never know what is going to happen to those who are listening to you. It may be the turning point in somebody's life... Their entire life has been changed, and you have been involved in this and played a part in it. Is there anything in the world that compares with this? There is nothing—nothing at all.¹⁹⁹

To be able to play a role in the transformation of people's lives is thrilling for veteran preachers.

Moreover, it is not just the opportunity to see individual lives transformed that is empowering; it is the opportunity to see the world transformed. Darrell Johnson says,

I believe the preaching of the Word of God changes the world. I believe individuals, neighborhoods, cities, and nations are changed by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For in preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, it turns out that we are participating with the living God in God's ongoing transformation of the world.²⁰⁰

Viewed from this perspective, preaching has tremendous dignity and worth. Yet other preachers remind that this transformation takes time. David Jackman notes, "Pastoral preaching is committed to the long haul. It requires 'great patience and careful instruction' because life transformation takes time."²⁰¹ This means that the change in a

¹⁹⁸ James Montgomery Boice, "The Foolishness of Preaching," in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 42.

¹⁹⁹ Lloyd-Jones, 301.

²⁰⁰ Johnson, 7.

²⁰¹ David Jackman, "Preaching That Connects, Part 2: Internal Transformation: Pastoral Patterns and Practice," *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 202.

person's life may happen long after a particular season of preaching. This is cause for endurance. Craig Larson says, "God's Word has power long after we sow it...Because I believe in the enduring power in the seeds of truth, I can endure even in the seasons when I see little or no results."²⁰²

Preaching and the Health of the Church

Other writers note the importance of preaching to the health of the church as a motivating factor in preaching. J.I. Packer states, "It is thus abundantly clear that no congregation can be healthy without a diet of biblical preaching, and no pastor can justify himself in demoting preaching from the place of top priority among the tasks of his calling."²⁰³ John Stott adds, "the Church is the creation of God by his Word ... Not only has he brought it into being by his Word, but he maintains and sustains it, directs and sanctifies it, reforms and renews it through the same Word. The Word of God is the scepter by which Christ rules the Church and the food with which he nourishes it."²⁰⁴ If Scripture is this essential to the overall health of a church, then preaching becomes an activity of utmost importance and significance: The preaching of the Word is to a congregation as a pediatrician is to a growing child. This is again why "the chief responsibility of the pastor who 'tends' his sheep is to 'feed' them."²⁰⁵ And of course, feeding the sheep means teaching them. This gives the role of the pastor as preacher and teacher tremendous importance if a church is going to remain healthy.

This realization should motivate preachers. They contribute to the health of their churches through counseling, teaching, encouraging and challenging in their sermons.

²⁰² Larson, 127.

²⁰³ Packer, 23.

²⁰⁴ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 109.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

Craig Loscalzo says, “Keeping vitality in your preaching begins by discovering how much viable and crucial ministry you accomplish every time you preach.”²⁰⁶ How can this motivate a preacher to keep going? Christopher Ash answers:

There can be no substitute “for a Spirit-filled man looking men in the face and speaking the word of God to their consciences and hearts.” This ought to be a great encouragement to us as we prepare for Sunday. To the discouraged leader we should say, “There is no one who can bring the word of God to this flock as you uniquely are in a position to do.” To preach in this gathering of the local church is an awesome privilege. As we listen to you, we listen to him.²⁰⁷

The Privilege and the Passion of Preaching

Despite the challenges and hardships of preaching, a number of preachers ultimately refer to preaching as a privilege. The introduction to this study began with a quote from David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “To me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called.”²⁰⁸ J.I. Packer agrees. He writes, “Preaching God’s gospel and God’s counsel from the Scriptures was, and is, and always will be the most honorable and significant activity in the world.”²⁰⁹ Edwards reviews the noble lineage of preachers in Scripture, men in the Old Testament like Noah, Moses, Elijah, Jonah and others, and men in the New Testament like Jesus and the apostles. He comments, “When we decide to preach, we choose to walk a well worn path, one worn smooth by the giants of the faith who have trod before us. We are in good company.”²¹⁰ Being a preacher means being appointed by God to serve as his messenger. This fundamental reality fuels a preacher’s privilege and passion. J.I. Packer serves up this reminder:

²⁰⁶ Loscalzo: 384-5.

²⁰⁷ Ash, 43.

²⁰⁸ Lloyd-Jones, 9.

²⁰⁹ Packer, 29.

²¹⁰ Edwards, 28.

In Gustav Wingren's words, "Preaching is not just talk about a Christ of the past, but is a mouth through which the Christ of the present offers us life today..." "Preaching has but one aim, that Christ may come to those who have assembled to listen." To be the human channel of Christ's approach in this way is unquestionably a huge privilege, and no preacher can be blamed for feeling it so and making much of his role accordingly.²¹¹

The Practices for Sustaining Expository Preaching

Invariably, when preachers and teachers talk about what has sustained their preaching and teaching, they speak not only of the motivations that keep them in the pulpit, they also speak of various practices they have adopted which sustain their preaching. What are these practices? The literature suggests there are six areas: reading and studying, cultivating a preacher's spiritual life, cultivating a preacher's prayer life, finding a balance of life and rest, developing collegial support, and applying various practical tips.

Reading and Studying

Those who study the professional teaching profession find that ongoing learning for teachers can help them endure for the long haul. Two researchers, Christopher Day and Qing Gu, write,

Our research suggests that the provision of responsive and differentiated support to meet teachers' professional and personal learning needs at different times in their work and lives can help counter declining commitment trajectories, enhancing the continuity of positive development of teachers' professional commitment and, thus, their effectiveness.²¹²

Another researcher, Sonia Nieto, met with effective veteran teachers in the Boston Public School system to find out what keeps these teachers going in spite of all the challenges. She writes, "Developing the stance that teaching is an intellectual endeavor, one that

²¹¹ Packer, 27.

²¹² Day and Gu: 439.

needs constant nurturing and attention, is one such lesson...in the end, becoming and staying smart are part of the very fabric of the profession.”²¹³ Those who study long term pastoral ministry come to similar conclusions. Glenn Ludwig says that the key to long pastorates is the ability of a pastor to sustain a growing edge in ministry.²¹⁴ In their book on ministry, *Resurrecting Excellence*, Jones and Armstrong discuss the value of not just a learned clergy but a learning clergy. They suggest that learning should be a lifelong vocation that begins with formal seminary education and continues throughout pastoral ministry as one preaches.²¹⁵

Pastors who write about sustaining preaching testify in unison to the need to study. Stephen Lawson writes,

Pastors must guard against the seemingly endless, mounting pressures placed on them to sacrifice their study of the Word on the altar of their growing list of “priorities.” A shrinking study time may result in shrinking power in the pulpit...The day the preacher stops studying God’s Word, whether he realizes it or not, is the day he begins losing spiritual passion and vitality in his preaching.²¹⁶

Darrell Johnson recognizes that “the call to preach is the call to be a student of Scripture.”²¹⁷ Willimon adds,

It is essential that pastors nurture a life of study and reflection to undergird their preaching ministry...The work of communicating the gospel with the congregation on a weekly basis is too intellectually and spiritually draining to attempt to do it without regular contact with the wellsprings of inspiration that keep us alive as preachers. Thus, most good preachers find it essential to schedule certain times during the week when they engage in that difficult, solitary task of study.²¹⁸

²¹³ Sonia Nieto, *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 122.

²¹⁴ Glenn E. Ludwig, *In It for the Long Haul: Building Effective Long Term Pastorates* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 58.

²¹⁵ Jones, 112-13.

²¹⁶ Steven J. Lawson, "The Pattern of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Ezra 7: 10 and Nehemiah 8: 1-18," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158, no. 632 (October-December 2001): 457-58.

²¹⁷ Johnson, 198.

²¹⁸ Willimon, 155.

Stott clarifies what is necessary: “It will not be enough to skim through a few verses in daily Bible reading, nor to study a passage only when we have to preach from it. No. We must daily soak ourselves in the Scriptures.”²¹⁹

In particular, many write about setting aside a particular time and a particular place for study.²²⁰ Along these lines, Lloyd-Jones writes,

So I have felt always, and increasingly with the years, that one of the great rules for a preacher is to safeguard the mornings. Make an absolute rule of this. Try to develop a system whereby you are not available on the telephone in the morning; let your wife or anyone else take messages for you, and inform the people who are telephoning that you are not available. One literally has to fight for one’s life in this sense!²²¹

Likewise, Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, two seasoned preachers, write, “The place where we physically study is important. We may not have much choice, but, when we do, it is worth giving careful thought to it. We are all creatures of habit and are helped by atmosphere. If we associate a particular room, or even a table or desk with study, we will find study much easier when we come to it.”²²²

Also of great help to sustaining preachers, many say, is the practice of reading widely beyond the Bible. James M. Boice points out that “ministry should be educable and self educating. If it is, the preacher will continue to be fresh, alive, and interesting. If it is not, his material will soon run out, and the sermons will become repetitious and boring.”²²³ Boice suggests reading not only the Bible, but theology and history books and books of particular interest to the congregation. Haddon Robinson likewise urges that “Working pastors must try to make this broader reading a top priority, however difficult

²¹⁹ Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*, 30-31.

²²⁰ James Montgomery Boice, “The Preacher and Scholarship,” in *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. Samuel T. Logan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1986), 97.

²²¹ Lloyd-Jones, 166-67.

²²² Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, *On Being a Pastor: Understanding Our Calling and Work* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 104.

²²³ Boice, “The Preacher and Scholarship,” 95.

it may be.”²²⁴ Willimon counsels, “Read everything, and talk to everybody, and listen, too, noting how people speak and how they hear. And go to movies. I find it helpful always to have with me a little notebook where I jot down some interesting phrases, stories, and insights.”²²⁵ Again, why is this so important? Willimon explains that it is because preachers are wordsmiths who make their living through words and “if preachers are to be good talkers, we must first be good listeners and voracious readers.”²²⁶ It is also because reading widely stimulates the mind of the preacher: “The preacher is not meant to be a mere channel through which water flows; he is to be more like a well. So the function of reading is to stimulate us in general, to stimulate us to think, to think for ourselves.”²²⁷

Cultivating a preacher's spiritual life

Writers also say that the general nurture of one's spiritual life supports preaching and teaching. In the area of general teaching, Parker Palmer, a noted educator, reports that the evaluations of his teacher-training programs demonstrate that “if you educate teachers' hearts and souls, they deepen their relations with students, restore community with colleagues, embrace new leadership roles on behalf of authentic educational reform, and renew their sense of vocation instead of dropping out.”²²⁸ Likewise, Carroll reports that the ways pastors can increase their overall effectiveness include “regular disciplines

²²⁴ Haddon W. Robinson, “Required Reading,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 89.

²²⁵ Willimon, 156.

²²⁶ Ibid., 147.

²²⁷ Lloyd-Jones, 181.

²²⁸ Parker J. Palmer, “Teaching with Heart and Soul: Reflections on Spirituality in Teacher Education,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 54, no. 5 (2003): 384.

of prayer and meditation and taking advantage of continuing education and ongoing renewal.”²²⁹

Stephen Brown testifies to the impact of his spiritual life on his preaching: “I’ve preached when I didn’t have a vibrant spiritual life, and I’ve preached when I was experiencing God’s rich presence. The former is like peddling a one speed bike up a long, steep hill; the latter, like riding the wings of a dove.”²³⁰ One of the particular reasons preachers must deal with the state of their own spiritual lives is that “pastors carry issues from the past that affect their emotions and how they handle the weekly pressures of being pastors. Though we can deny them for a while, at some point we’re going to have to deal with them.” Brown shares that once he dealt with his past hurts, “I regained my equilibrium to perform active ministry for the long haul.”²³¹ Haddon Robinson writes, “The more full our souls, the more we can preach without running dry. Of the many spiritual disciplines that enlarge spirit, mind, and soul, we need to find the ones that benefit us the most.”²³²

What does this look like in practice? Dallas Willard suggests the following:

I encourage pastors to have substantial times every week when they do nothing but enjoy God. That may mean walking by a stream, looking at a flower, listening to music, or watching your children or grandchildren play without your constantly trying to control them. Experience the fullness of God, think about the good things God has done for you, and realize he has done well by you.²³³

He adds that “men and women in ministry who are not finding satisfaction in Christ are likely to demonstrate that with overexertion and over-preparation for speaking, and with

²²⁹ Carroll, 172.

²³⁰ Brown, 136.

²³¹ Ibid., 135.

²³² Ibid., 130.

²³³ Dallas Willard, “A Cup Running Over,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 73.

no peace about what they do after it.”²³⁴ Despite the benefits of spiritual health for preaching, however, it’s not easy to carve out the time for it. Preachers can spend time ministering to everyone but themselves, and the reality is that no one can tend to the preacher’s interior life but the preacher.²³⁵ It will happen when it becomes a priority, as John Stott argues:

There is no greater need for the preacher than that he should know God. I care not about his lack of eloquence and artistry, about his ill-constructed discourse or his poorly enunciated message, if only it is evident that God is a reality to him, and that he has learned to abide in Christ. The preparation of the heart is of far greater importance than the preparation of the sermon... We shall remember that the real preparation of a sermon is not the few hours which are specifically devoted to it, but the whole stream of the preacher’s Christian experience thus far, of which the sermon is a distilled drop.²³⁶

Cultivating a preacher’s prayer life

As a particularly important component of one’s spiritual life, many writers note the importance of cultivating one’s prayer life for a preaching ministry.²³⁷ Kent Hughes says, “I have said it many times: sermon preparation is 20 hours of prayer. It is humble, holy, critical thinking. It is repeatedly asking the Holy Spirit for insight. It is the harrowing of your soul. It is ongoing repentance. It is utter dependence. It is a singing heart.”²³⁸ Many preachers testify to the fact that the regular practice of prayer keeps them going in their preaching. After allowing prayer and sermon preparation to become inseparably intertwined, Ed Rowell says, “In those hours, day by day, God sustained me,

²³⁴ Ibid., 71.

²³⁵ Ludwig, 59.

²³⁶ Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait*, 76.

²³⁷ For examples of preachers who made prayer a priority, see James E. Rosscup, “The Priority of Prayer and Expository Preaching,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. John MacArthur (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992).

²³⁸ Hughes, 88.

empowered me, and renewed me to preach with hope and passion.”²³⁹ Darrell Johnson is equally clear about the relationship between prayer and preaching:

The life of the preacher is lived in prayer...It is this dimension of the preacher's life that keeps us going. If we can keep giving thanks for the signs of the kingdom in the lives of the people we serve, and if we can keep interceding for the fullness of the kingdom, we will have the vision and strength to keep announcing the gospel of the kingdom. It is when we stop giving thanks and interceding that we begin to lose the graces we need to keep preaching.²⁴⁰

Finding a balance of life and rest

Another important area of practice that writers mention as one launches into a ministry of preaching and teaching is the area of balance and rest. Educational researchers Christopher Day and Qing Gu note that the ability of the teachers they studied to sustain commitment over time depended on their ability to manage three dimensions of their lives: the personal (their lives outside of school), the situated (their lives in school) and the professional (their values, beliefs and policy agendas). They write, “At any given time, teachers were experiencing fluctuations of different intensity within and between them which affected the relative stability/instability of their identities...The capacity to manage the interaction between these, therefore, was key to teachers’ abilities to sustain their commitment and effectiveness.”²⁴¹

An increasing number of writers are focusing on pastoral self-care as essential to endurance in pastoral ministry. Peter Brain acknowledges the tendency many pastors have toward overwork, which, he says, leads to burnout, breakdown and damage to a pastor’s own health and effectiveness in ministry. Brain writes to pastors, “The ability to

²³⁹ Rowell, 121.

²⁴⁰ Johnson, 203.

²⁴¹ Christopher and Qing Gu Day, "Variations in the Conditions for Teachers' Professional Learning and Development: Sustaining Commitment and Effectiveness over a Career," *Oxford Review of Education* 33, no. 4 (2007): 424.

rest can help us to keep on course both by refreshing us, and by giving time for reflection that will enable us to check, and when required, rechart our course.”²⁴² Brain suggests two important forms of rest for pastors: first, holy days (the Sabbath rest of one day in seven) and holidays, and second, the rest that comes through reflection, whether through personal Bible reading and meditation or lunch with a colleague.²⁴³

Picking up on the idea of Sabbath, Johnson says, “Especially important for preachers are the disciplines of silence, solitude and Sabbath. Since we live by speaking, we need to periodically stop speaking to make sure we are not just talking in an attempt to shape and protect our worlds.”²⁴⁴ Silence means periodically ceasing from interaction to make sure one is not just going through the motions in communication with others. In a similar way, solitude allows for time to observe the state of one’s soul in ways that are not possible in the midst of social activity. Reflecting on the restorative side of Sabbath keeping, Rowell writes, “The Sabbath restores energy, hope and passion. Observing the Sabbath means refraining from the work that saps us of energy, hope and passion, Sabbath means putting the myth of ‘busy is better’ to death. It means a new way of thinking about time, priorities, and recreation.”²⁴⁵ Rowell encourages using the Sabbath not just for things that need to get done, like changing one’s oil or mowing the lawn, but for pursuing activities that renew one’s soul. For him, this means the cowboy sport of team roping! Even Martyn Lloyd-Jones recognizes that the mind needs rest and encourages recreational reading, the development of a hobby, or listening to music. Along these lines, he writes, “Anything that does you good, puts you into a good mood or

²⁴² Peter Brain, *Going the Distance: How to Stay Fit for a Lifetime of Ministry* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2004), 231.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Johnson, 194.

²⁴⁵ Rowell, 72.

condition, anything that pleases you or releases tension and relaxes you is of inestimable value.”²⁴⁶

Besides a weekly Sabbath, Ludwig encourages the value of a more extended sabbatical for renewal: “There is value of an extended time away from the demands of ministry that will nourish our interior life and refresh our souls. A sabbatical leave offers a wonderful opportunity to find our centers again and to be reminded of what is truly important and real in our lives.”²⁴⁷ Often, no one will offer pastors a sabbatical; it is up to individual pastors to take the initiative as part of their own self care.²⁴⁸

Developing collegial support

A fifth area of practices identified as fundamental to preaching and teaching is the development of collegial relationships. Harvey Alvy notes that providing collegial support in the form of an enthusiastic colleague who is mid-career can keep a veteran who is considering retirement in the ranks of active teachers.²⁴⁹ Most teachers are stimulated by working with others and benefit from the collaboration, he says. Alvy writes that “the social interaction of such activities may remind both veterans of the importance of community and the stimulating effect of collegial interaction.”²⁵⁰ Many other researchers come to the same conclusions. Nieto says that teaching can be a very lonely profession, but “when teachers develop allies, they remain fresh, committed and hopeful.”²⁵¹ Clement says that “the absence or presence of an effective support system is the most important factor in managing job burnout...A support group consists of

²⁴⁶ Lloyd-Jones, 183.

²⁴⁷ Ludwig, 61.

²⁴⁸ Rowell, 75.

²⁴⁹ Harvey Alvy, "Teachers Veteran and Novice: Preventing the Loss of Wisdom in Our Schools: Respecting and Retaining Successful Veteran Teachers," *Phi Delta Kappan* 86, no. 10 (2005): 765.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Sonia Nieto, "From Surviving to Thriving," *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 5 (2009): 12.

colleagues and friends who meet specific needs, both professional and emotional.”²⁵²

Because of this chorus of united voices, Day and others can report, “It is now the ‘received wisdom’...that collaborative cultures enhance teacher participation and that they are likely to lead to and sustain teacher commitment.”²⁵³

Jones identifies the same dynamic for pastors. He says pastors need a lifetime of learning that includes not only a “robust catechetical process at the beginning of a Christian journey” but also “a sense of the ongoing need for mentors and apprentices at every step of the way...because all disciples, pastors and laity alike, are joint learners seeking to learn from Christ.”²⁵⁴ The community and encouragement that collegial relationships can provide cannot be underestimated, writers say. Kinnaman and Ells report that “people who burnout live isolated, unhealthy lives, making them more prone to failure”²⁵⁵ yet “seventy percent of those in ministry report they do not have someone they consider a close friend, someone who could serve as a confidant during times of difficulty.”²⁵⁶ They conclude:

Isolation and lack of an understanding friend deprive us of the God given outlet for stress in our lives and can lead to burnout and even failure in ministry. We need to overcome our fears and isolation through healthy peer friendships. We need to develop friendships with others in ministry and go out of our way to maintain them.²⁵⁷

Applying practical tips

Finally, many writers suggest various practical tips that help to sustain preachers over the long haul. There are too many to list here, but representative tips include the

²⁵² Clement: 322.

²⁵³ C.W. Day, B. Elliot, and A. Kington, “Reforms, Standards, and Teacher Identity: Challenges of Sustaining Commitment,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 21, no. (2005): 571.

²⁵⁴ Jones, 106.

²⁵⁵ Kinnaman and Ells, 37.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

need to take a long term view of one's ministry. In answer to the question, "What abiding lessons would you teach men who are committed to expository preaching that will sustain them for a lifetime of ministry?" John MacArthur answers,

Go in with a long term perspective. My dad said to me years ago, 'I want you to remember a couple of things before you go into the ministry. One, the great preachers, the lasting preachers who left their mark on history, taught their people the Word of God. Two, they stayed in one place for a long time.' These were two good pieces of advice.²⁵⁸

Rowell adds, "We can forget the efficacy of consistent preaching intentionally focused over the long haul... While one sermon may occasionally be the catalyst for change in someone's life, more often lasting change is the result of a steady diet of biblical challenge and encouragement."²⁵⁹

Other writers suggest the development of a preaching plan. Loscalzo says that this takes the guesswork out of weekly sermon preparation and keeps the preacher and the congregation growing through exposure to systematic teaching from Scripture.²⁶⁰ Haddon Robinson says that a preaching schedule allows a preacher to work ahead on sermons in "ten day cycles" that allow more time for reflection, directed reading, rearranging and polishing.²⁶¹

As far as gathering fresh ideas and illustrations for preaching over the long haul, Loscalzo recommends looking at the world with a "homiletical eye" and keeping a preacher's journal where one can keep track of observations of people, billboards, television shows, movies, and the newspaper. He says, "Your preaching will be fresh

²⁵⁸ MacArthur, 347.

²⁵⁹ Rowell, 70.

²⁶⁰ Loscalzo: 387.

²⁶¹ Haddon W. Robinson, "Busting out of Sermon Block," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 537-38.

with contemporary illustrations, a key insight for keeping vitality in your preaching.”²⁶²

Stephen Brown suggests that preachers should not be afraid of borrowing from other preachers, a help to find fresh illustrative material and ideas.²⁶³ Brown also says that preachers should not be afraid to repeat sermons, as “most people don’t remember,” “there’s turnover of people,” and “a lot of material is too good to be used once.”²⁶⁴ In general, Brown suggests finding wise shortcuts that will help preachers keep up their strength for preaching in the midst of their busy schedules.

Conclusion

This chapter has been a review of the literature about how pastors can sustain expository preaching over long term pastorates. First, the Bible was explored to see how it addresses this question through the representative examples of Jeremiah and Timothy. Then the literature on preaching, pastoral ministry, and teachers in education was reviewed to examine its response to the three research questions that have guided this project: What are the challenges of sustaining expository preaching? What are the motives that sustain expository preaching? What practices sustain expository preaching? Various themes emerged in this literature review that served as section headings under each research question. The themes of this literature review can now be compared with the findings from the rest of the research study. In the next chapter, the methodology of this research study will be explained.

²⁶² Loscalzo: 387.

²⁶³ Brown, 137.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in a long-term pastorate. Three areas have been identified that are important to understand: the challenges that expository preachers face, the motivations that keep pastors preaching expository sermons over the long term, and the practices of those who successfully sustain expository preaching. These areas led to the three research questions that guided this study:

1. What challenges do pastors face in sustaining expository preaching?
2. What motivations help pastors sustain expository preaching?
3. What practices help pastors sustain expository preaching?

Because it is necessary to understand the perspectives of pastors who have been able to sustain preaching in a long term pastorate to answer these research questions, it was decided that a qualitative study would be pursued.

Design of the Study

Since the research design of this study follows a qualitative approach, it is important to understand the nature of qualitative research. In *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, Sharan B. Merriam describes qualitative research as “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”²⁶⁵ Qualitative

²⁶⁵ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 6.

research is built on the view that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds.”²⁶⁶ Therefore, Merriam identifies five key characteristics of qualitative research. First, it is important to understand the topic of study from the perspective of the participant, not the researcher. Second, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Third, qualitative research involves *fieldwork* in which the researcher travels to the setting of the study for first-hand observation. Fourth, qualitative research is inductive in nature in that theories are built as the researcher goes along rather than deductive research, in which one tests pre-existing theories. Fifth, the result of a qualitative research project is a rich description of words and pictures that capture the process, meaning and understanding of the topic of study.²⁶⁷ Through qualitative research methods, one is able to “simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved.”²⁶⁸

In order to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in long-term pastorates, qualitative research methods held decided advantages over other research methods. Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, the study is flexible and emergent and thus able to discover and understand the motivations, thoughts, and behavior that underlie a particular process. This was ideal for discovering how pastors feel about their preaching, what challenges them, what motivates them, and what keeps them going. It allowed the researcher to follow wherever the interview led and explore new areas that these pastors raised even if the researcher had not foreseen them.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 6-8.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

While quantitative research is able to identify large trends, it is not suited for discovering the details lying beneath those trends. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is designed to “gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved.”²⁶⁹ This fit well with the nature of studying the process of how pastors sustain preaching in long term pastorates. Qualitative research enabled the researcher to dig to a much greater depth beyond the level of actions and behaviors, to the thoughts and motivations of individuals. Gathering this level of data was essential to this research project.

The qualitative researcher does not enter into research to test concepts, hypotheses, or theories, but to ask questions and inductively build an understanding of how a particular process takes place.²⁷⁰ Qualitative research allows the researcher to deal with ambiguous situations, play the role of a detective, “to search for the clues, to follow up leads, to find the missing pieces, to put the puzzle together.”²⁷¹ Again, this was ideally suited for this research project. When approaching long term pastors to understand how they sustain expository preaching, the researcher needed inductive questions, not deductive ones. There were no proposed theories being tested, only a search to understand the thinking, motivation, and practices of long term pastors. By design, qualitative research allowed for personal observation and interaction with these pastors, enabling honest inquiry, a willingness to follow wherever the facts led, and gradual discovery of answers not imposed by the researcher.

Finally, a qualitative study better delivered the anticipated benefits of this study. It was hoped that this research project would provide guidance for young pastors

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 45.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 20.

preparing for a lifetime of ministry and encouragement for more experienced pastors in danger of burning out. For this purpose, the “rich description” that qualitative research results in more powerfully addressed this aim. In qualitative research, “words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon.”²⁷² When it comes to guidance and encouragement, words and pictures often communicate far more than statistical figures. For these reasons, qualitative research was determined to be best suited for studying how pastors are able to sustain expository preaching in long-term pastorates.

Interview Sample

In order to find interview subjects, the researcher used the following criteria: pastors who fill the pulpits in their churches most Sundays out of the year, who preach mainly expository sermons, and who have served in their church for ten years or longer. In order to broaden the applicability of the study, the researcher also aimed to find pastors who served various sized churches across different denominations. The commonality, however, had to be the criteria stated above. The researcher contacted local pastors and seminary professors for recommendations and reviewed his own network of pastoral acquaintances.

When a list of potential interview subjects was developed, the researcher sent out letters of introduction explaining the nature of the research project and requesting participation. A week after sending out this letter, the researcher followed up with a phone call to find out if the individuals were willing to participate in the research project and be interviewed. After all of the follow up phone calls, nine pastors had agreed to participate in the research project. Some lived in rural areas, and some lived in metro

²⁷² Ibid., 8.

areas. Some pastored relatively small churches; some pastored relatively large churches. Some were solo pastors; some had a multiple pastoral staff. However, all were expository preachers who had been preaching to the same congregation for ten years or longer.

Interview Design

The researcher travelled to the churches where the interview subjects were pastoring and conducted the interviews on site. All nine interviews were conducted within a time period of three weeks. In advance of the interviews, the researcher sent each interview subject a background questionnaire that requested information about the size of the church, the demographics of the congregation, the frequency of preaching, the length of time at the church, the staff situation, and the sabbatical policy, so that the interview responses could be contextualized. Before the interview began, the researcher had the interview subject fill out a consent form in compliance with the research guidelines at Covenant Theological Seminary. The interviews took between forty-five minutes and an hour and half, depending on how much time the interview subject had available.

The interviews followed a semi structured format. Merriam describes this approach:

In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a highly structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.²⁷³

²⁷³ Ibid., 74.

The following questions served as the interview protocol:

1. What has kept you going all these years in your expository preaching?
2. What have been the greatest challenges over the years to maintaining your expository preaching ministry?
3. Can you remember any times that you were discouraged in your preaching? What was the source of the discouragement?
4. What has most motivated you over the years to keep preaching (especially in times of discouragement)?
5. When you have been discouraged in your preaching, how have you worked through it?
6. What are the most helpful things you do to keep yourself refreshed and vital in your preaching?
7. What advice would you give to a young pastor just starting to preach to help him endure?
8. If you could start your preaching ministry over again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently based on what you know now?

Because the interviews followed a semi-structured format, some questions were left out or asked in a different order, depending on the nature and direction of the interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed as soon after the interview as possible. The researcher studied the transcriptions of the interviews using a constant comparative method. Merriam defines this method as follows:

The basic strategy of this method is just what its name implies—constantly compare. The research begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated.²⁷⁴

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. It focused on pastors who practice expository preaching. There are many pastors whose preaching is mainly topical—they tend to preach sermons driven by a topic, rather than a particular text. Topical preaching

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 159.

can be done in a biblically responsible way and has unique challenges, but it is not the focus of this study.

Due to the constraints of time and money, this study was also limited to nine pastors who minister in the metro area of a large Midwestern city or in the surrounding state. That means this study will not necessarily be universally applicable to all times and situations. For example, expository preaching in other parts of North America or other countries may present uniquely different challenges and require a different set of motivations and practices in order to sustain. Because of the limited scope of this study, readers must determine for themselves how much is applicable to their particular situations.

This study was also limited by the availability of the interview subjects. Most of the pastors who were contacted had very busy schedules, and in some cases, they were reluctant to provide extensive time for an interview. In one case, the allotted interview time was forty-five minutes. Most of the interviews lasted one hour, which is what the majority of the pastors could allow. A few of the interviews approached an hour and half. Because of this time limitation, not all the topics raised by the interview subjects could be explored in great detail.

Finally, this study was conducted from the standpoint of the pastor's own perceptions and perspectives. Congregants were not interviewed for their perspectives. The role the congregation plays in helping a pastor sustain expository preaching was not explored unless the interviewees themselves mentioned this aspect as being of particular assistance to them. While there may be application to congregations hoping to better support their pastors, the focus of this study was limited to the pastors.

Biases of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. In light of this, some challenge the trustworthiness of qualitative research, raising the questions of the validity and reliability of the instrument since researchers bring their own biases, assumptions, and worldviews into their analyses. In order to address this concern and enhance the internal validity of research, Merriam suggests that the researcher's "assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation" should be clarified at the outset of the study.²⁷⁵

Accordingly then, this researcher was an evangelical Christian who is sympathetic to expository preaching. That means the researcher was biased toward seeing more pastors preach expository sermons. Such a bias could have led to minimizing the challenges and inflating the motivations of expository preachers. However, that would not ultimately have been in the best interest of the enterprise of expository preaching. Therefore, an aim to help expository preachers sustain their preaching led to a greater honesty about the challenges and a greater motivation to uncover the best motivations and practices.

Also, this researcher was a pastor with more than ten years of experience in pastoral ministry. That brought certain biases to the interview process with other pastors, but it also brought greater clarity in asking crucial questions as well as greater comprehension of the answers given.

Conclusion

The methodology described in this chapter supported the purpose of this study, which was to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in a long-term

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 202-205.

pastorate. The study was a qualitative research project that utilized semi-structured interviews with nine different pastors, and the interview transcripts were studied using a constant comparative analysis. Despite the limitations and biases of the study, richly descriptive data was gathered in answer to the research questions of this study. The findings from the interviews will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in long-term pastorates. In order to research this subject, there are three areas that are important to understand: the challenges that expository preachers will face, the motivations that keep pastors preaching expository sermons over the long term, and the practices of those who successfully sustain expository preaching. Accordingly, the three research questions that guided this study are:

1. What challenges do pastors face in sustaining expository preaching?
2. What motivations help pastors sustain expository preaching?
3. What practices help pastors sustain expository preaching?

In search of answers to these three research questions, nine pastors, who have all served or are currently serving in a long term pastorate and who mainly preach expository sermons, were interviewed for this study.

Introduction to Research Participants

While their names have been changed in order to protect their identities, the nine research participants will be briefly introduced. It is important to understand the ministerial context of each research participant so that their comments can be more accurately understood. This brief introduction will also allow comparisons to be made between those serving in similar contexts and contrasts to be made between those serving in differing contexts. Understanding the various ministry contexts of the research

participants will also define the frame of reference for this study, which helps to determine the applicability to the reader. For some readers, the pool of research participants will seem narrower and thus applicable to a small group of preachers. For other readers, the pool of research participants will seem broader and thus carry more general applicability. Accordingly, each research participant will be described in terms of their church context, their preaching patterns and their church staff situation. These areas have been chosen because they have a potentially significant impact on one's experience of expository preaching.

Peter has been serving as the senior pastor of a PCA church in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city for sixteen years.²⁷⁶ The main responsibilities of his position are preaching and discipleship, and he devotes about thirty-five to forty percent of his time to preaching. The average attendance of Sunday morning worship services is 180 people, mostly Caucasian with a diversity of ages. Peter devotes about fifteen to twenty hours to sermon preparation per week, and he preaches twice on Sunday, typically for forty Sundays out of the year. He serves with three other pastoral staff members at his church and receives three to four months of sabbatical every seven years.

Gordon served as the senior pastor of an Evangelical Free church in a medium sized Midwestern city for nineteen years, but retired from active pastoral ministry eleven years ago in order to join the faculty of a seminary.²⁷⁷ When he started at the church, it was just a church plant with seventeen families, but it grew to around 450 people under his leadership. The main responsibilities of his position were preaching, sharing oversight with the elders, equipping elders, encouraging worship teams, and serving on the

²⁷⁶ PCA stands for the Presbyterian Church in America denomination

²⁷⁷ Evangelical Free stands for the Evangelical Free Church in America denomination.

missions committee, yet about sixty percent of his time was devoted to preaching. This translated to about fifteen to twenty hours of sermon preparation per week. The congregation was made up of well educated, largely Caucasian, middle class families with young children and young singles. Gordon preached twice each Sunday and for about forty-five to forty-six weeks out of the year. He worked with four other ordained staff members at the church. He also had one apprentice who earned a Masters of Divinity by the time he left the church, and had only one summer sabbatical during the duration of his ministry. He did, however, receive two weeks of overseas ministry leave every second year. Gordon is a seasoned preacher, altogether having served as a preaching pastor for twenty-five years of his life.

Len has served as the senior pastor of an Evangelical Free church in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city for twelve years. He describes the main responsibilities of his position as preaching, pastoral care and leadership, and he devotes twenty five percent of his time to preaching. The congregation averages one hundred and seventy-five to two hundred in attendance on a Sunday morning and is made up of well educated Caucasians from multiple generations. Len usually devotes twelve to fifteen hours to sermon preparation each week, and he preaches once on Sundays, for forty-six to forty-seven Sundays out of the year. He serves with two and a half other pastoral staff members, and has not received a sabbatical in twelve years of ministry. Len is a seasoned preacher, having served as a preaching pastor for a total of twenty six years out of his life.

Scott has served as the senior pastor of a Southern Baptist church in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city for seventeen years.²⁷⁸ The main responsibilities of his position include preaching, teaching, overall leadership and staff oversight, and he

²⁷⁸ Southern Baptist refers to the Southern Baptist Convention denomination.

devotes forty percent of his time to preaching. He describes his congregation as middle class people of mixed ages with some racial diversity. The average attendance at the Sunday worship service is three hundred and fifty to four hundred. Scott is able to spend twelve to fifteen hours in weekly sermon preparation. He preaches once a week for about forty-six weekends out of the year. He serves with four other pastoral staff members and has not taken a sabbatical in the duration of his ministry at the church.

Matt has served for the last twelve years as the senior pastor of a non-denominational church near a small Midwestern city. The main responsibilities of his position are leading the church, leading the pastoral team, teaching and preaching, and providing pastoral care. He is able to devote about twenty five percent of his time to preaching. The congregation, “largely Caucasian tending toward educated professionals and covering a broad age range,” averages one thousand in attendance at Sunday services. Matt is able to devote twelve to sixteen hours to sermon preparation, preaches once per Sunday and usually preaches on forty-four Sundays out of the year. Matt serves with eight full time pastoral staff members, one resident, and two interns. He enjoys an annual three week pulpit break as well as two extended retreats for planning, reading and praying each year.

Chris has served for the last fourteen years as the senior pastor of an Evangelical Free church in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. His main job responsibilities include preaching, leading and mentoring, and he is able to devote twenty five percent of his time to preaching. His congregation is primarily middle to upper middle class Caucasians and averages 1750 in attendance at weekend worship services. Chris typically devotes fifteen hours to sermon preparation every week and preaches the same sermon

three times in a weekend. He preaches thirty-eight Sundays out of the year, with occasional guest preaching on off weekends. Chris serves with twelve other pastoral staff members at his church and is able to enjoy a four month sabbatical after seven years of service. When interviewed, Chris had just taken a sabbatical a few months earlier. He is a seasoned preacher, having served as a preaching pastor in two long term pastorates for a total of thirty years.

Brad is the senior pastor of a PCA church in a medium sized Midwestern city, where he has been serving for seventeen years. He describes the main responsibilities of his position as “preacher-leader-shepherd” and devotes eighty to ninety percent of his ministry to preaching. He describes his congregation as “college educated, semi-multicultural, employed and inter-generational.” The average attendance at the Sunday worship services is three hundred to three hundred and thirty. Brad typically devotes over fifteen hours to sermon preparation every week²⁷⁹ and preaches twice on Sundays for forty weeks out of the year at his church. He will also preach eight times a year in other places. Brad serves with three other pastoral staff at his church and is allowed a sabbatical of two months every five years. However, Brad only had a short sabbatical after ten years, another abbreviated one after fourteen years, but looks forward to a regular sabbatical in his nineteenth year of pastoral ministry.

Wade has been serving as the senior pastor of a PCA church in a small Midwestern town for the last seventeen years. He describes the main responsibilities of his position as preaching, administration, men’s discipleship, training, teaching adult Sunday school, leading two small groups, and planning. He reports that twenty five

²⁷⁹ Even though Brad said that he devoted eighty to ninety percent of his time to preaching, this is how he reported how much time he spent in sermon preparation each week.

percent of his role is devoted to preaching. His congregation is “quite varied in age, education level, religious background, economic level, and theological understanding.” The average attendance at their Sunday worship service ranges from one hundred and forty to two hundred. Wade typically spends twelve to eighteen hours a week in sermon preparation, preaches once a week, and usually preaches forty-four Sundays out of the year. He serves with one other full time pastoral staff member, one part time staff member and one tent-making staff member. Wade is a seasoned preacher, having served a total of thirty-four years as a preaching pastor. But he has not had a sabbatical during the duration of his ministry, and there is no official sabbatical or study leave policy at his current church.

Wayne is the senior pastor of a PCA church in a small Midwestern city, where he has served for the last ten years. Prior to these last ten years, he served as the senior pastor of another church for thirteen years. Before that, he served the same PCA church where he is currently serving for a sixteen year period. This means that Wayne has been uniquely called to the same church on two separate occasions. Altogether, Wayne has served the PCA church where he is currently serving for a total of twenty six years, divided into two seasons of ministry. The main responsibilities of his position are pastor-teacher-administrator, and he is able to devote fifteen percent of his time to preaching. Wayne describes the current composition of his congregation as a “cross section with fewer young, mostly Anglo.” The average attendance at the Sunday worship service is fifty. Wayne reports that he typically spends eight hours in weekly sermon preparation, preaching once a week for forty-six weeks out of the year. He is the only pastoral staff person at his church and has been granted only one special sabbatical during his ministry

since there is no sabbatical or study leave policy at his church. Wayne is a seasoned preacher, having served as a preaching pastor for a total of forty years.

In summary, all of the research participants are expository preachers who have served at least ten years in one church, with six of the research participants having served *more than fifteen years in one church*. With the exception of one participant, all are currently serving in the long term pastorate that was the focus of the interview. The one exception to this is the interviewee who is eleven years removed from his long term pastorate, but during these eleven years he has actively taught preaching in a seminary setting. In total years of experience as a preaching pastor, all but one of the research participants have fifteen years or more of experience with five of the research participants qualifying as very seasoned preachers with twenty five or more years of total experience. All but one of the participants make preaching the focus of their pastoral ministry and devote at least twenty five percent of their time to preaching. The typical time allotted for weekly sermon preparation ranges from one participant who spends eight hours a week, to five participants who spend twelve to fifteen hours a week, to three participants who spend over fifteen hours a week. All the congregations represented in this study are composed of mainly middle class Caucasians, with a sprinkling of some ethnic diversity.

The research participants preach in a range of thirty-eight weeks out of the year to forty-seven weeks out of the year. There is also a range of church sizes represented in this study. There is one small church of less than one hundred attendees. Six of the churches represented fall into the category of a medium sized church (one hundred to five hundred attendees). Two of the churches represented fall into the category of a large church (more than five hundred attendees). Among these churches, a variety of denominations are

represented: Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Free Church in America, Southern Baptist Convention, and non denominational. The research participants also report a range in the sizes of their pastoral staffs. One participant is a solo pastor, and the rest of the research participants serve on pastoral staffs of various sizes, from two people to twelve people. Among the research participants, there is also a range in sabbatical practices from no sabbatical, to a sabbatical every five or seven years, to, in one case, an annual sabbatical plan.

Among the research participants, there is ample evidence of a wealth of experience in long term expository preaching. Both commonality and diversity are represented within this wealth of experience, as described above. With this orientation to the research participants now complete, the interview data which answers the three guiding research questions will now be presented.

The Challenges of Sustaining Expository Preaching

When asked to identify the challenges of sustaining an expository preaching ministry over the long term, two of the pastors expressed that they did not experience significant challenges. Reflecting on his nineteen years of pastoral ministry, Gordon revealed,

For me, it never felt like [preaching] was a problem. You know, it's kind of like a marriage, when you've found the right person, it's not like what can I do to make this fun, it just is. So for me, it was always fun, always challenging because there was always another part of the Bible that I didn't understand or I didn't think the people understood, or needed to hear from, and I would just go on to the next book.

Gordon, however, was eleven years removed from his long term pastorate, and some of the difficulties of sustaining a preaching ministry may have faded from his memory.

Similarly, however, Wayne, who is in the midst of his long term pastorate, could not

readily identify challenges that he has faced in his current preaching ministry. He reasoned,

Every pastor has that weekly deadline that he has to deal with. And so I can say, “Oh no, here I am again. I’ve got to get on the stick here and do my Scripture study, and do my exegetical thinking and all of that.” So that is kind of a challenge. But on the whole, God has given me the ability to rally to that challenge, and I haven’t found it to be a burden.

Yet at the same time, Wayne is aware of the challenges that some pastors face in preaching. He acknowledged, “I’ve talked to a few ministers that just could not handle [the preaching], and they ultimately got out of the ministry because it was too much pressure every week.”

Chris understands these pressures of a weekly preaching ministry. When asked about the parts of preaching that require work for him, he asked incredulously, “The *parts* that require work?” For Chris, preaching is hard work from beginning to end. But he doesn’t feel that the challenges of preaching are any different for a long term pastor than for a short term pastor. Preaching is hard work every week for both a new pastor and a seasoned pastor. Chris reflected,

Is [preaching] different because you’ve been in one place for a long time? My answer to that is, I honestly don’t think so. I can’t think how it’s different or how it would be different if I was in another place because to me that’s the nature of preaching. This is not giving a lecture. This is not even giving a talk. This is not even giving three lessons that you can get out of a passage of Scripture. It’s the product of the impact of the Word of God in your own soul that’s then being translated to the lives of the people that you love. So my question is, how would that be different?

The only way preaching would be easier with a different pastorate every five years, Chris says, is if he basically preached the same five years of sermons over again. But contemplating that scenario, Chris says, “I don’t think I could live with myself if I did

that.” For him, the challenges of preaching relate to the nature of preaching itself and not specifically to a long term pastorate.

But the other six pastors could readily identify challenges that they have faced in expository preaching related to their long term tenure. And Chris does acknowledge the existence of challenges in preaching; he just doesn’t relate them to the length of his pastorate. The challenges that were identified through the interviews fall into four general categories: feelings of inadequacy, difficulties of sermon preparation, lack of response, and emotional weariness.

Feelings of Inadequacy

When asked what discourages him in preaching, Peter reflected on his first three years of preaching: “I’d come home [after preaching] and I’d sit in a room, my bedroom upstairs, and I’d kneel beside the bed and cry every Sunday and pray...because I felt like such a complete failure in every regard. And I still do sometimes.” While those feelings of complete failure have come less frequently now that he has been preaching for seventeen years, Peter still expressed why he gets discouraged by his preaching: “It’s never what you hope it would be—or I guess sometimes it is, that’s an overstatement—but there are lots of times where it’s not what you hoped it would be, and so there’s disappointment and discouragement right at the end of the work week.” The other struggle in his preaching that Peter confessed is what he referred to as the “sin of comparison.” He explains:

I’ll never be an Alistair Begg. I’ll never have the insight of Keller, just won’t ever have it. I’ll never be able to put things like Mark Driscoll. I won’t be that hip, ever. So then the thing you wrestle with is, will I be content being the pastor of a church of one hundred and eighty until I die? Is that good enough? Is it OK to be the pastor of a small church for the long haul? If you never write a book and no one ever knows [me], is that

OK?

Peter doesn't struggle with whether God has called him to a preaching ministry. He struggles with contentment in a call to pastor a small, unknown church. This struggle stems from trying to measure up to more gifted and well known preachers with larger ministries.

Gordon identified this challenge as the "superstar challenge." He explained that "the prevalence of some very able people and the widespread use of multi site can make a younger preacher feel like 'there's only fifteen guys in the country who can really do this, and I'm not one of them,' so they get discouraged or they get swallowed up." Scott also experiences an aspect of this pressure. He currently feels challenged in the area of "preaching in a way that is genuinely helpful to the people who are there." He said that the struggle to bring the world of the Bible and the world of today together is the eternal challenge of the preacher. When asked if that task has gotten any easier over the years, Scott reflected,

Do you know for the seventeen years that I have preached regularly, I would say about the first eight years the task of preaching overall seemed to get easier, by which I mean it took me less time to prepare the sermon every week. And ever since then, it's actually seemed to get harder. Not so much in terms of time. The amount of time has sort of leveled off, and it's pretty much the same, consistent amount of time...But that aspect of really trying to take that passage and in an expository way open it up in a way that the Lord would use to work inside the souls of the hearers, that seems to get harder.

What explains why, contrary to expectations, preaching has gotten harder and not easier for him? Scott says,

Part of it is higher expectations on my part. I think part of it honestly is that more and more people in evangelical churches like ours are listening to people on the radio preach or now they can download sermons. They can download Tim Keller, and they can download John Piper, and they

can download Mark Driscoll. And they can download D.A. Carson talks...I think there is an expectation within the congregation that's probably rising as well concerning the overall quality of the preaching in its applicability and the preacher's ability to hold the interest of the congregation throughout the sermon.

Scott feels the pressure of trying to match up to the "superstar" pastors to whom he *knows his congregation is listening. This is what makes preaching more difficult for him.*

Wade has been preaching for a total of thirty four years, with seventeen of those years at his current ministry, yet he admits, "Preaching is not an easy thing for me. You know, you would think after thirty four years that you just sit down and crank something out, but it doesn't work that way, not for me. It's always been a struggle. Up until maybe about seven or eight years ago, I would get violently sick every Sunday morning." What makes Wade feel especially inadequate for the preaching task is when he thinks about how many people are in his congregation investing a half an hour to listen to the sermon. As a good steward of that time investment, he wants to give them "something that will really help them throughout the week." But he often feels like he comes up short: "It's not often that I leave the pulpit and say 'Yes!' I'm always like, 'I could have said that differently or maybe this would have been more effective.'"

Scott gets discouraged almost every Sunday after he preaches. After the adrenaline rush of preaching, he finds himself on Sunday afternoon thinking, "I've just preached the worst sermon that's ever been preached on the face of the earth." He adds, "I know that I'm going to think that. I can wake up on Sunday morning and say, 'By two o'clock, I'm going to think this sermon was terrible.' So I am my own worst critic." What causes Scott to come to this regular conclusion about his sermon? It is because, like

Wade, he thinks about the sermon after it is preached and feels that there were things that he should have said but didn't or things that he did say that he wishes he could re-phrase.

Likewise, Len struggles with discouragement in his preaching when he feels "really badly about not saying something right." Recently he made a doctrinal statement in a sermon, but he said, "it bothered me for a week whether that had been stated precisely enough." The area of chronic discouragement for Len, however, is trying to preach shorter sermons. His sermons typically last forty minutes or longer, and he has been challenged by his leaders to preach shorter sermons. It is a goal that he also feels would make him a more effective preacher, but it has proved a very difficult habit to break. He reports, "Quite often, most weeks, when I leave the platform, I give the benediction, and I walk out. I look up at that clock, and it just frowns at me. I feel like it's a person up there, like a critic. I get so tired of that, that I haven't been able to lick that." Just two weeks prior to the interview, Len preached what he thought was a well-planned, well-structured sermon but ended up discouraged at the end: "I didn't notice when I started, but I know when I ended. And I just went home crushed because I thought it was too long... That's the most chronic sphere of discouragement for me." Len says that the greatest challenge he faces as a veteran preacher is trying to break out of patterns that have become habitual. He explains, "I think every pastor who has preached a long time is likely to have systems that work really well...but the downside is, it's just like your marriage or anything, you get in ruts of how you've done it and it's very hard to break out of those patterns. I can't do it." This leads to feelings of frustration and inadequacy.

Whitewater Rafting: the difficulties of sermon preparation

When asked about the challenges that they encounter in preaching, a number of the veteran preachers talked about the hard work of sermon preparation. Chris, who has been preaching for fourteen years in his current church and thirty years overall, describes his experience of sermon preparation every week as being like “whitewater rafting.” He says, “There’s this stretching of your soul, this sweating, both internally and sometimes externally over, is this thing going to come together?” He adds, “I don’t find [preaching] any easier now than at any time previously. I candidly still say to my wife quite regularly, ‘Well, by the grace of God we survived another weekend.’ And I feel that quite honestly every weekend.”

What contributes significantly to the intensity of sermon preparation for Chris is that he does all of his real sermon preparation on Friday and Saturday and has to preach on Saturday night. He purposely does his sermon preparation late in the week because he thinks of it “as the difference between preparing a salad and preparing a hot meal. You can prepare a salad in advance and stick it in the fridge. But a hot meal has to be brought to the boil, and there’s something about a message being brought to the boil within the soul of the speaker that works for me, within that time frame.” Chris describes the aim of sermon preparation as “seeking to build the sense of the thing within yourself” so that the Word “has to become in some sense incarnate within the preacher.” Doing this in a compressed period of time frame dials up the intensity. Chris plainly says of his sermon preparation, “I don’t expect it to get easier.”

Matt also does most of his sermon preparation at the end of the week because he finds “a benefit of the close proximity between the getting of the burden and the

unleashing of the burden on Sunday.” But this compressed time frame again can increase the pressure, and Matt can be tempted to feel weary when he has to interact with lengthy commentaries. After he has identified a sermon idea, he then wants to “do due diligence” and read at least one or two commentaries. For example, he shares,

I’m wading through R.T. France right now on Matthew, and that’s time consuming. And I can sometimes be tempted to fly through that too quickly and not benefit from that stage. I’ve got this much time, and there are thirty seven pages of close reading, and I can’t skim this. And I need to at least read one careful exegete carefully. I typically like to read two, but I’ve got to read at least one. So that can be a little daunting. I can feel like I’m not sure I have time for this. That’s a place I can feel a little weariness or weakness or temptation.

Len is even more candid about the demands of sermon preparation. He shares about writing articles, “People will say [to me], ‘Do you like writing?’ And I go, ‘No, I like to *have written*.’ I feel the same way about sermon preparation. I really get tired by it, but I like it when it’s done.” Len adds,

I’ve always said that there are pastors who preach because they love to study, and there are pastors who study because they love to preach. I study because I love to preach. If it was in me to plagiarize, that would really be a sweet thing, because just give me a script, I love being in front and telling. But it won’t work; I can’t even preach my own old sermons, let alone somebody else’s. But the study part is hard.

Other pastors identify specific parts of sermon preparation as challenging. Wade says that the challenge for him is not understanding the text, but communicating it:

How do I boil it down in such a way that people have pegs to hang things on? I work very hard on coming up with an outline that is memorable to people and trying to keep fresh in terms of illustrations that communicate. Application is obviously so crucial, and I’ve come to realize over the last five years or so, that I think where the church, where pastors, where teachers, where we’re falling down, is failing to do what I call “connecting the dots.”

Wade goes on to explain that the connection between the sermon text and daily living is not always very clear. So this is where he has recently focused and struggled in preaching: “How can I target the application of the message throughout the week with people?” Scott concurs with this challenge. He desires to preach “in a way that is genuinely helpful to the people who are there.” He says, “That’s always a challenge. It’s always a challenge to divide the word of God rightly week after week. I really feel the burden of getting the passage right.” On another area, Brad talks about the challenge of preaching difficult texts. He says that the benefit of expository preaching is that you don’t just have to come up with the latest issue to get everyone’s attention. But the challenge is having to preach the next passage, which happens to be very difficult. Brad says of expository preaching, “It’s kind of unpredictable and requires you to work hard and see the overall plot and message of the Bible and how that fits into the context. You have to work hard, and passages aren’t always easy.”

Why aren’t people changing: the lack of response

Half of the pastors shared that one of their common struggles in preaching is not seeing Scripture impact people’s lives to the desired degree. Scott admitted that he has high expectations. Since his hero in ministry is Jonathan Edwards, Scott has done a lot of reading about the First Great Awakening in America. He says the result is, “I long for God to bring awakening to his people. I long for him to bring spiritual renewal to the church. And so I think there’s something within me every week that says, ‘Perhaps the Lord might use this sermon to awaken his people.’” Though Scott has seen God use his Word in the lives of the congregation, he says, “I haven’t seen large scale revival by any stretch of the imagination, and as a consequence, there’s some discouragement in that.”

Brad also has a heart for revival: “My longing is for revival to break out every Sunday through the means of expository preaching.” When it doesn’t, Brad says that he tends to respond with self critique: “If I just work harder, if I just perform better, I can somehow make this happen. And so I think early on [in my ministry], I was more prone to that in seasons where it seemed like God wasn’t doing too much.”

Matt has similar hopes for the impact of the Word. But for him, it is not attached to the revival but to the power of the Word: “Because I know God’s word is powerful, I know the Holy Spirit is present, so sometimes you expect results far more dramatic than you see.” When there are no visible results of the sermon, Matt can wonder whether Scripture is having the degree of impact that it should have. He doesn’t blame the congregation; he puts the responsibility on himself. He asks himself, “Am I not yielded to the Spirit as I should be so that the Spirit’s presence and power is somehow inhibited by my sin or my intruding myself too much in this process?” This is the same reaction that Wade has when the sermon seems to bear little fruit in the congregation. He says, “There are a lot of times I think to myself, ‘Is anybody listening? Is anybody really remembering? Or applying?’” When he thinks this, he is not upset at the congregation. Rather, he says, “It’s a frustration of thinking, there’s got to be some more ways to be more effective, and I’m always looking.” When there is a lack of response, Wade assumes that he is not communicating as effectively as he could be, and it leads back to feelings of inadequacy.

Peter identifies the expectation that people will change quickly in response to his sermons as one of the mistakes he’s made in his ministry. He calls it “the overestimated short term impact” or “the short term effectiveness of preaching.” It is the mentality of “if

I'm preaching well then people are going to change." But Peter says that just doesn't happen, and "we're very good at overestimating how effective we are." He has caught himself thinking, "Hey, I've preached on that. Why aren't people changing?" This mentality is one of the challenges he has had to work through.

Emotional Weariness

Six of the nine pastors interviewed talk about experiencing an emotional weariness either presently or at some point in their preaching ministry. Len is in his twelfth year at his church, and he confesses, "What I'm feeling this year is just an emotional weariness. The last two to three weeks, I've just thought, 'Oh, I wish I didn't have to preach this week. I'm just tired of the grind. And I'd be happy to put in the same number of hours if I could just do something else for a week.'" Likewise, Brad is very honest about his emotions when it comes to preaching: "Some people love it. I wish I did. But for me, I go through that every Saturday night, Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon, recover, and then move on. For me, it's actually a relief, at least at this church, that I don't have to preach until next week. That sounds terrible, but that's true."

While Matt loves to preach at his church, at the same time, he is honest about the cost of preaching: "Sermon preparation is hard work. It's costly labor, very costly labor, both in terms of the raw energy and effort that you have to put forth, but also emotionally. It's costly. And in the middle of it, you can sometimes make the mistake of thinking, 'Oh, I've got to do this again next week, and the next week.'" Matt says that he made the mistake recently of calculating how many more sermons he has to prepare if God answers his prayer of twenty five years of ministry at the church. It's about six

hundred more sermons. Emotionally Matt says to himself that he doesn't think he can do this. He says, "Oh, I wish I hadn't [counted]."

In a previous pastorate of sixteen years, Chris says:

I remember times when I literally had to haul myself down to the church to go and preach, just feeling such a wretchedness, perhaps even a discouragement or depression. I don't mean in a clinical sense, but a darkness. Spurgeon used to talk about the black dog. I've experienced a lot of that. I think some of it is Satanic. I think the reason I say that is because the times when I've felt that most acutely have been times when there has been particular poignancy around the preaching of the cross or spiritual conflict, so I don't want to take that lightly. And then just your own circumstances, your own tiredness sometimes, and then sometimes just the difficulties of what is going on in the life of the church, the broader issues that you're facing, the critical decisions, and it weighs so heavily on your shoulders.

Likewise, Wade had a previous pastorate of seventeen years where he was preaching every Sunday, fifty two weeks out of the year. He says, "That was too much. I was burned out. I was exhausted, and I just wanted to get away." And so, due to emotional burnout, Wade not only left that pastorate, but he also left the ministry for about six months.

Thus, these are the four areas of challenge that the nine pastors identify in their interviews: feelings of inadequacy, the difficulties of sermon preparation, the lack of response, and emotional weariness. While the nine pastors are willing to be honest about the challenges they face in preaching, they all seem more eager to talk about the motivations that sustain them in preaching. The focus will now turn to this area.

The Motivations to Sustain Expository Preaching

All nine of the pastors were eager to talk about the motivations that sustain them in their expository preaching. In fact, Chris got tired of talking about the challenges of preaching to the point where interjected,

Now, I don't want to be directing [this interview] because you've got your own set of questions, but can I just say something else because I just want to keep the balance? We've talked about the strain and all of that. I really, really would want to balance that by saying, all that's true. Now here's something that has to be given equal weight...

And Chris went on to talk about the privilege of preaching. This is one of the motivations, which will be discussed below, that keep these pastors preaching. All the pastors have a lot to say about what keeps them preaching week after week. Their answers fall into seven general categories: a supportive congregation, leaders who encourage, God's call, the privilege of preaching, God's faithfulness, seeing people change, and modeling for others.

A Supportive Congregation

When asked at the beginning of the interview what has kept them preaching for so many years, a majority of the pastors were quick to talk about how supportive their congregations have been. This clearly emerged as a major theme of the interviews. The pastors are grateful, and in some cases deeply moved, by how receptive their congregations have been to their sermons. Explaining why he has been able to stay at his church for the last sixteen years, Peter says, "Part of it is, I'd say, is the body here is a very warm, supportive body." He proceeded to pull out a large file folder of encouragement letters and cards that he has received from members of his congregation. He says he gets so many cards that he can't keep them all. On the tenth anniversary of coming to the church, the congregation threw a surprise party for Peter, flew in family members, and did version of the old TV show "This is your life" in honor of Peter. Peter was so encouraged that evening that he wept. He says, "The people here bend over backwards. Occasionally you get people making inquiry, 'Do you want to come work at

another church?’ and I always say, ‘No.’ I have no interest in leaving here. Even though it’s a modest size church, I love it here. I just love working here.”

Likewise, Gordon reflected on why he stayed at his church for nineteen years:

The primary factor was the people. They were wonderful people who were in that clime and that size church and were just inordinately grateful to have someone who took the word seriously. I was really putting my oar in, I think. So they were very thankful for what I brought to it at the human level.

Gordon mentioned that he also kept a file of *encouragement letters and notes* that he would receive from the congregation. There were days that he would go back, pull them out, read them, and be encouraged all over again. He shared that the congregation was also “committed and realistic. They didn’t expect me to do things that were impossible; where I’m afraid some churches don’t quite have that buck nailed down...I was privileged. I had time to study, and I had people who appreciated it...They were just happy for me to be ‘this one thing I do’ kind of pastor.”

Matt is also fueled by his congregation’s hunger and appreciation for God’s Word. When asked what keeps him going after twelve years of preaching, he says,

Another thing that really helps you keep going is when you see the church loving the Word. And God has done a work here such that on Sunday mornings, I just marvel at the privilege I have of standing up and seeing people eager to hear God’s Word. They’ve experienced the goodness of the Word. They know it’s going to be good. I’m not talking about my preaching. I’m talking about God’s Word being good. And they know it’s going to care for them, so they’re eager to hear it. So it’s easy for me to keep doing that. So you see, it’s not just the preacher, it’s the role of the church and their embrace and their convictions about expository preaching.

Wyatt expressed a similar sentiment when he explained what keeps him going in preaching: “As I self-critique my ministry, I see a lot of flaws. But one thing that I think

the people continue to come to is the preaching of the Word. And they are attracted by grace to the preaching of the Word. That's what sustains me."

Brad feels a sense of privilege at serving a congregation that has stuck by him for seventeen years. Of the church, he says, "They've only been good to me here." In particular, Brad is grateful that the church was willing to receive him as their pastor right after he graduated from seminary. He says,

It's like you've played basketball a few times, you can imagine trying to shoot with your opposite hand for the first time...and now this poor congregation has to put up with you. They have to really be fed through your performance which really is new, and I think, "Wow, what a wonderful congregation that has seen my progress...And they've learned to pray for me and speak to me and help the process." It takes a village, not totally, but it takes a community to put up with and pray for and forgive and believe the best about and help a pastor along and be supportive.

Wade finds preaching to be such a struggle that he got ill on Sunday mornings up until about seven or eight years ago. Since then it has improved. What has made the difference? Wade explains, "Part of it was just finally an understanding or realization that these people do love me and they're with me in this." It is not as if the congregation warmed up to Wade over time. Wade says that the congregation has always supported him; he was "just too stupid or hard-headed to figure that out." For most of the pastors interviewed about what strengthens them in their preaching ministry, one of the first areas that comes to mind is a supportive congregation.

A Winning Team: having leaders who encourage

An equally prominent theme in the interviews is having leaders who encourage. Many of the pastors underscore how much having leaders who support their preaching ministry enables their longevity in ministry. Reflecting on thirty years of preaching

divided into two long term pastorates, Chris says, “Guys move on because there’s trouble in the church. If there is stability within the church, and there is a core of godly men who are with you and around you and for you and to whom you’re accountable, and the Lord has put together a team, why would you leave a winning team?” Chris clearly has enjoyed this type of supportive camaraderie in both of his pastorates. He testifies, “It’s been a huge part of why we stayed so long that the Lord has granted us in measure happy relationships and a core of good and faithful men who have been a team.” He added later, “I don’t think ministry’s sustainable in the long term without [these kind of men in leadership].”

As significant as the support of his congregation is, Peter says that his elders have been an even bigger reason that he has been able to endure in his preaching ministry. “They’re very unified, and probably more importantly than that, the session here is also very committed to the right kinds of things. So they’re mature Christian men who have a good philosophy of ministry who really support the pastorate. I have never, never in sixteen years felt like they were questioning in their support of me.” In particular, Peter says that the elders are “very committed to carefulness in the pulpit.” They listen to sermons besides Peter’s because they enjoy and appreciate preaching. They give Peter feedback, accountability, and support in his preaching. They agree with Peter that “preaching needs to be get the pastor’s first, best attention every week, so the most important fifteen to twenty hours of preparation are going to be for the sermon.” Working hand in hand with the elders like this enables Peter to sustain quality preaching.

Matt also deeply appreciates the elders of his church because of the accountability they offer to him. He says, “There are people here who would throw me out if I did

something different [than expository preaching], for which I'm very grateful. There's a team of elders here who would say, 'Hey, what are you doing? You're not being faithful...' So it's not just me. It's the elders and the church." In addition to accountability, Matt says the elders offer support: "They are very encouraging men. They bear the load with me in that way. I'm very grateful for that."

Beyond accountability and support, Brad says, "I couldn't keep my head without my elders." There is a very practical way that Brad seeks help from his elders. He explains:

When I sense there's a Satanic battle or I may be vulnerable to one while I'm preaching, and I sense I could get discouraged, or I may tend to project bad thoughts on the listeners, when I sense this kind of temptation, I've noticed that others aren't thinking any of these thoughts or going through my experience. I'll pull aside an elder or two, right after the second service and just have them tell me objectively what's going on. And I'll confess what I think is going on, and they are true to tell me this and that in a very objective way, which allows me then to renounce these ridiculous thoughts that I think are Satanic or from my sinful nature, to receive the truth, to let it go, and go home to love my wife and children and grandchildren without a focus on myself, my performance, or all that spinning around in my head.

A common thread among all these pastors is the sense of being upheld and supported by wonderful leaders.

God's Call

Almost all of the pastors interviewed spoke of God's calling into pastoral ministry as a motivating factor for sustaining their ministry. Describing times when he has been so discouraged that he had to drag himself to church to preach, Chris says, "At these points, what can you do, except say, 'God has called me to do it' and gut it out. I don't know anything else to do." For Chris, being called to preach means, "I've been trusted to do this. And the bottom line is that I cannot let the people of God down. And I cannot let the

devil win. And I have a steward, and I have a trust here, and others have gone through far worse. I'm not in prison." For Matt, a calling to preach is primarily an accountability to God. He says that what motivates him is the attitude of "I'm responsible to [God] here." He explains, "Even if I don't feel like doing this, I cannot not do this. So there's a fear of God, a healthy fear of God that I really believe God has called me to do this, and if I don't do it, I have him to answer to."

For Len, the call to preach is a calling unlike any other calling, and this calling makes it very difficult to do anything else. He explains,

Calling is a really big deal to me. I simply don't agree that my calling as a pastor is the same as a guy's calling to be a chemist...I think that I'm captured. I think I am pressed into happy, but prisoner service. This isn't a choice that I get to make. I've often thought, I could see myself not being a pastor. But I cannot imagine myself not being a preacher.

Brad struggles in his preaching ministry with whether he is the most qualified person for the job. He says that he always wishes someone else could come along and fulfill the pastoral ministry at his church much better than he does. But what keeps him going at the end of the day is a recognition that God has called him to his church: "I'm called here, so I've stayed the course."

Likewise, Wade has known his struggles in the pastoral ministry, but when asked what motivates him to keep preaching, he answers, "Probably the number one thing is a certainty that God has called me to do that." He remembers when he felt a strong calling from God thirty four years ago that drew him into the ministry. It was a decisive turning point:

My whole life has been not wanting to be a pastor. I grew up in a church situation where pastors weren't treated real well, and so that's really stuck in my mind. I never wanted to be a pastor, and I can remember when I really felt very strongly God calling me. Basically, I tried to bargain with

God and said, “OK, I’ll give it five years.” Well, it’s been thirty four years now. So it’s never been, “I really want to do this.” No, it’s an “I know God’s called me to do this, and I must do it” kind of thing.

Similar to Brad wondering whether there are better people to fulfill his pastoral responsibilities, Wayne can be intimidated by preaching to people in his congregation who are smarter than him. But he is strengthened for this task by God’s calling. Wayne tells the story of another pastor who was preaching to a congregation where many were more educated than him. This pastor was really bothered by this until one of his congregants, who found out about how his pastor was feeling, made an appointment to speak to him and said,

I understand your potential for intimidation, but I want you to understand that we come to sit at your feet. And if we sit at your feet, we’re sitting at the feet of Jesus. You are the one who has studied the passage through the week. You’re the one who has prayed over the passage, and you’re the one that’s prayed for us. You’re the one who has the Holy Spirit unction to preach, not us. We come to be fed. And it doesn’t matter what kind of degree we carry. You’re the expert, and you’re God’s choice to present that passage to us.

Not only was this pastor encouraged by these words, but Wayne himself is encouraged by them. It is a sense of God’s call to preach and to preach to their particular congregation that enables many of these pastors to overcome doubts and fears and sustain their preaching ministry.

The Privilege of Preaching

In addition to a sense of God’s call, most of the pastors interviewed go out of their way to talk about the sense of privilege they feel as preachers. There is a recurring wonder among these pastors that they get paid to preach God’s Word. When Peter feels discouraged about preaching, he lays out for himself the foundation for preaching. He reminds himself that God exists, that he is good and loving, and that he has spoken in a

book the exact words that he wants communicated to people. Peter says, “So then with that truth in front of me, there’s this sense of privilege that you have: ‘Wow! I get to do this. I actually get paid to be able to open God’s Word and preach it.’” Peter says that this thought brings you right back into the study because you want to see what God has said so that you can preach it. Likewise, Gordon reflects on his nineteen-year ministry of preaching with these words: “It’s an enormous privilege. I think the privilege of being prayed for by people, of being paid, such as it was, to soak myself in Scripture almost every day of my working life, it’s just an unspeakable blessing.” In giving advice to young preachers starting out, Chris counsels,

Take delight in the privilege of [preaching]. Regularly say to oneself, “I am actually being paid money to study the Word of God which is the supreme joy if I was doing it on my own time. Here I am, it’s Friday morning and people are working so that I can sit here with these books and pray and fill my soul with this in order to preach to people.” That is an immense privilege, and to have that spirit of thankfulness and to keep that refreshed is, I think, really important.

At a deeper level, Chris observes that preaching is really a privilege for his own good. He explains:

I think that this preaching is the greatest privilege of my life. I, with fear, sometimes wonder what kind of Christian I would have been if the Lord had not given me the privilege of being a preacher. Because this forces me into Scripture with a depth of engagement that is, I think, different from what would happen if I wasn’t forced in this way. Being in the middle of the life of the church is enriching, because of pastoral ministry, in a way that my life would never have been enriched if I didn’t have this privilege. With all that’s been said about the stretching, there’s a deep thing that comes, a broadening of your life, an enriching of your life. You know, the Lord said, “My food is to do the will of the Father who sent me.” And I always remember Warren Wiersbe commenting on that verse years ago when he said, “Always remember, ministry is nourishing. It’s my food. So don’t start bellyaching about it because it’s hard. This is food to you. And this nourishes your soul.”

Len also pulls himself back from complaining about his job by reminding himself of the privilege of preaching:

[Preaching] is a gift to me. What a privilege that I don't have to sell widgets. I get to do something of supreme importance. So quit your complaining, and go do your job. This is a privilege, don't ever think this. And there were times that I'd think, "Well, if I just had more people..." but then I think, "You are lucky. If you got to preach to twenty, count your blessings. This is a wonderful calling."

For the pastors interviewed, this sense of privilege in preaching is also something that grows stronger over time. Matt says of his preaching,

I still love what I do. Every week, I love it. I'm thankful for that...It is regularly one of the sweetest joys. I'm profoundly aware of this and probably more now than I was five, ten years ago, of what a privilege it is, that I get to have this time that the people of this church and the other elders of this church want me to go off and be with my Bible and study and come back and share with them what God has poured into my heart and my mind. The awesomeness of that privilege I feel more now than I did five, ten years ago. I love this work.

This attitude is the same thing that sustains Scott in his preaching. When asked what has allowed him to continue preaching for seventeen years, he says,

The first answer is that the Lord has given me a real love for it. I genuinely enjoy preaching more than any other aspect of this position...I love the Bible, I do. I love the Bible. I think it was the baseball player Lou Gehrig who marveled that the New York Yankees would pay him to play baseball. Sometimes I feel a little bit guilty that I'm paid to study the Bible.

And so he returns to the common theme among the pastors: the privilege of preaching and getting paid to do it.

God's Faithfulness

Besides the privilege of preaching, another aspect of preaching that comes more clearly into focus through longevity is God's faithfulness. A number of the pastors testify firsthand that after all their years of preaching, they see how God is always faithful to

help them prepare and deliver sermons. And in time, they have learned to depend on God's faithfulness to sustain them despite the struggles they encounter in preaching. Len says that though one feels the relentless pressure of preaching Sunday after Sunday, "God will help you. You'll get it done. I don't care if you have your headaches or you're tired or it's not coming. It'll get done...I'll feel the tension, but I don't get worried like I used to. I know this will come together. And if it didn't, then I'll get up and say it didn't. It's not the end of the world." Len shares about experiences where he was tired and asked God to help him with the sermon preparation, and God brought to mind a lucid, clear outline for the sermon and allowed the sermon to come together without the usual *turmoil*.

Matt also experiences God's faithfulness in specific areas. One area of particular struggle for him used to be in writing out the sermon. He loved studying and researching the text, but he "dreaded the hard work of writing." God has demonstrated his faithfulness to Matt specifically in this area:

Now I really look forward to the writing part, and it's because this is a place where God has shown himself most visibly to me in the study, where I will find ideas, phrases, ways of saying things, that are coming, unbidden. In fact, for a while, I was keeping a little notepad next to me and just putting a mark every time I sensed some particular provision from God in the form of a way of saying something. That has been such an encouragement to me that having done the work, now the Spirit inhabits that somehow. And I've learned to trust that if there's an idea brewing, go with it, write it down. God is giving you momentum here. It's the closest thing I've ever experienced to what Peter talks about when the writers were being borne along, carried along. And I feel that in the writing. Obviously, I'm not claiming anything like that in terms of inspiration for my sermons, but I feel that work of the Spirit. That has sustained me so much in sermon preparation.

Because of this experience, Matt has learned to rest in God's faithfulness for his preaching ministry. Explaining what motivates him in preaching, he says, "It doesn't take

me long to go to, ‘God, you have proven yourself faithful over and over and over and over again. I know you’re going to be faithful again, so in that confidence, I press on. You’re going to supply. Help me. I need your help. I know you’re going to supply.’”

After thirty years of preaching, Chris says that God’s faithfulness has come into clear focus. Every week, preaching is like whitewater rafting for him, yet he says, “There comes a point where you’ve got to say, ‘The Lord has never failed me,’ and that’s one of the things that I think is important to say to younger preachers. Guys are scared of it: can I do this? Will I survive?” But Chris considers himself living evidence that God is faithful because he has been faithful to Chris for thirty years.

Seeing People Change

Those pastors who have seen their people change in response to God’s Word are tremendously motivated by this. Peter underscores that the change in people’s lives is usually a very slow process, yet he says, “I have seen again and again and again where if you just give people time, and they’re immersed in a culture of grace, and they’re around God’s people, and they hear Christ-centered preaching, they do change. The gospel takes root and that’s cool to see.”

When discussing what keeps him at the task of preaching, Brad tells stories of changed lives that he has witnessed. On one occasion in his ministry, he travelled abroad to speak at a pastor’s conference in the Congo. He shares,

There was a Wednesday night at a church that I really think I was in my first revival. I had one translator, and off on a text I went with this pastor that I really connected with...and on Wednesday night, in the middle of nowhere, a very awful place really, conditions wise, in a little church, packed at three hundred—it would have been packed at two hundred—I preached my heart out. That time was so remarkable, I cried with joy. I didn’t want to come back. And that keeps me going—the number of people that evidently, as far as I know, were born again there.

There was another time when Brad received a phone call from a college student in a place that he had just preached. The student said, “I just want you to know that I thought I was a Christian, but when you were preaching, I know I was born again. Everything’s changed.” Brad cried with thanksgiving and said, “Wow! I want to keep on going.”

Undergirded by a theology that Christ died for his specific sheep and that the Holy Spirit will pursue and regenerate those sheep, Brad says, “I can have hope that on every future occasion, someone might just be born again. And that is joy. That’s a joyful thing to be a part of that.”

Even after thirty four years of preaching, Wade still experiences struggle in preaching weekly, but what gets him back to his desk on Monday morning is even a hint that his sermon has made an impact on someone’s life. On Sunday afternoons, Wade is usually in no mood to preach again the following week. But on Sunday evenings, Wade leads a small group where he is able to hear congregation members talk about the sermon. He says that he often walks away from those times saying to himself, “Well, OK, at least they’re hearing some things. I guess, I’ll try again next week...” Wade also says that there are times when he is preaching, and he looks out at the congregation and,

You see the light bulb go on..., and it’s that little flicker that says they caught it. That’s exciting. And for other people to say, “You know I’ve been thinking about what you said...” And oftentimes, it’s like, “I said that? I don’t remember saying that.” And it could have been maybe a year ago or a half year ago that I might have said that. And it stuck with them. And I think, “Oh, OK, they’re listening. God is still using it. God is still working. And I see people changing. And I don’t always know that that’s because of my preaching. But I see people changing... Those are the things that probably keep me going.

Not all of the pastors talked about seeing their people change, but those who did found great motivation to continue in their preaching.

Modeling

A final motivation, mentioned by those who were either in larger churches or in churches strategically placed near a seminary, is the opportunity to model faithfulness in preaching to the next generation of preachers. This is what motivated Len to pastor a church near a seminary. He says, “The thought of being the model preacher, even in a small church, gripped me. I’m sure it was a word from the Lord.” Every year, he prays that God will send some students to his church who want to be preachers, and his aim is “to be a model of the heart of the preacher, the passion for, the excitement for, the skills sets, the approach, the illustrations, everything...My first front is to feed the flock. But this other part, when I’m tired, and when I’m looking at structure, these things drive me.” Len hopes that the students who sit under his preaching ministry will walk away feeling that they have seen a model of the kind of preaching ministry to which they aspire. He finds this “highly motivating.”

Chris pastors a church of 1750 with twelve other pastoral staff members. He finds great blessing in “having a group of younger guys who are aspiring to preach and are preaching here at [the church].” Chris meets regularly with them to discuss various books they read together. Of that time, he says, “I think there’s a stimulus and encouragement. It makes me more reflective on what I’m doing rather than just doing it.” Matt pastors a church of one thousand, but the modeling that motivates him is very personal: his own fifteen year-old son sits in the front row on Sunday mornings listening to his sermons. Matt says of his son,

He sits in every Sunday, in the front row, and watches his dad. And he loves his dad and he prays for his dad very, very purposefully...He has a very tender heart. Whether or not God is going to call him into ministry is beside the point. But if he does, man, that just functions as a motivation

for me. I'm training up, whether it's my son or somebody else's son, I'm training up the next pastor of this congregation. And so that's a huge motivation for me.

Again, not all of the pastors are in a place to think about modeling preaching for other pastors in training, but those who are see this as a great motivation to maintain faithfulness in their preaching ministry.

The Practices for Sustaining Expository Preaching

The last area on which the interviews shed light is the practices that long term pastors find most helpful in sustaining their expository preaching. The pastors interviewed had no difficulty talking about what they have done over the years that has most refreshed them, but their answers diverged here more than in the previous two sections. Here pastors did not have a great many practices in common. The ten practices described below, however, are common themes among at least three to four of the pastors. They are described in the general order that the preachers who were interviewed might have experienced them.

Having Mentors

Three of the preachers who seemed the most encouraged and refreshed in their ministries talked about the value of having good mentors. After graduating from seminary, Gordon had the opportunity of serving as an intern to John Stott in London. He learned from watching him, interacting with him in a reading group, and sitting in staff meetings with him. He says the major things he learned from John Stott are “just the example of godliness, of humility, and his keen, analytical mind. He knew how to take apart a passage and just make it crystal clear.” When Gordon recently read John Stott's book *Between Two Worlds*, he says, “I was astonished at how much I had just gotten into

my bloodstream from him and from that [internship] that I thought was my own thinking. It was uncanny. So the influence was pervasive and enormous.” Gordon realizes how blessed he is to have had John Stott as a model for preaching.

When asked what kept him preaching over the last thirty years, the first thing Chris talks about is the influence of role models on his life. His role models have had long term pastorates: his own pastor was at only two churches for the duration of his pastoral ministry. Chris also identifies Martyn Lloyd-Jones as a “huge influence” in his life and asks, “How long was he at Westminster Chapel?” Lloyd-Jones served at Westminster Chapel for thirty years. So Chris concludes, “I guess models are a very large part of it. And expectations really come from that. It would have never been in my mind that I’d be likely to be in seven places in twenty five years.”

Brad also reflects on all the role models that he has had over the years. There was one who he says “loved me and discipled me, and I watched him preach his heart out.” In seminary, Brad learned from all of the faculty and the area pastors. At another point, Brad had Alistair Begg as a role model and watched him persevere in ministry. One conversation with Alistair Begg about running the race of ministry left him moved to tears. Brad says, “I thank God for all the pastors and preachers I admire, that model and have ran all these years...I couldn’t do it without other role models and people helping me.” For these three pastors, having strong role models early in their ministry careers shaped their expectations and laid a foundation for a lifetime of preaching.

Even those pastors who didn’t have mentors like those described realize what they have missed. When asked what advice he would give to a young preacher who wanted to sustain a long term preaching ministry, Len says, “I feel badly. I’ve never had a

preaching mentor, a guy I know who I could talk to directly. I wish more guys had that.”

When asked about what he would change about his preaching ministry if he could do it all over again, Scott says,

I know one thing that would have been really helpful is if I had a mentor in preaching early on. That would have been immensely, immensely helpful...I didn't have a close relationship with somebody who was a good veteran preacher whom I could give, well back then, it would have been a cassette tape of the sermon and say, “Would you listen to this and would you critique this?” I didn't have anybody like that. I think that would probably have been of more benefit than any other single thing. Probably still would be.

Finding a Good Match and Training the Congregation

Those pastors who seem most happy and content in their pastoral ministries enjoy warm, supportive relationships with their congregations. When asked for advice on how young pastors can prepare themselves for a lifelong preaching ministry, Chris responds, “It's a little bit like asking the question, how would you help a guy who's saying, ‘How can I have a long and happy marriage?’ The first answer is choose the right wife. I think that is a huge part of the answer, and we haven't really talked about that.” To explain further, Chris says,

There is a matching that the Lord brings in the happiest of circumstances between the man and the church, and where that's the case, there's a matching of personality and character. There's something about the ethos of the man and the ethos of the church that clicks because the senior pastor and the preaching pastor is in a real sense the face of the church. And if you have a face that doesn't fit the body, then the head's going to come off because the people are going to say, “That's not who we really are.” Whereas if the people are listening to what's being said in the pulpit and they say, “Amen to that, I wish that was more true of us,” then there's some sense of that. I've been blessed with that in two places. Again, if you have that, why would you leave that? That's a huge piece. And I'm not sure that one can quite put that into words. You look at your marriage and you say, “Why is it that it works between you and your wife?” I don't know. Usually you can say some things, but there is a gift of the Lord—

that's a match there. And you see it more ten years down the line than you saw it at the time. But that is a huge thing.

Whether or not this “match” can be determined before accepting a call to a church, a number of the pastors talk about how they try to cultivate this “match” with their congregation. Peter says that he communicates to his congregation why he does expository preaching at the beginning of a new sermon series. Matt explains that it will be very difficult to sustain an expository preaching ministry if “your people aren’t convinced that this is what should be happening on Sunday morning.” So he says, “Part of your task is to teach them that this is what’s supposed to be happening on Sunday morning and then doing it in such a faithful way that they say, ‘Oh yes, we see that what he said about expository preaching is in fact true. We’re growing from it.’” So Matt has been explicit with his leadership about this commitment to expository preaching. And then he communicates that commitment to the congregation as a prelude to sermons, in membership classes, and as a defining value of the church. Matt also encourages all the pastoral staff to communicate this commitment so the result is, “it’s a team project. And every guy on this team is committed in their own venues to communicate a high regard, not just for God’s Word, but for teaching, and the importance of that in the life of the believer.”

After explicit promotion of expository preaching over seventeen years, Brad says about his church, “It’s become a value. And the people we have here, what my assimilation pastor says which is always hard for me to believe, [are] primarily here...because the Bible is preached. They can count on the Bible being opened...The Word has a primacy in this congregation’s corporate worship.” Essentially what Brad and these other pastors are doing is training a congregation’s appetite so that the congregation

appreciates a pastor with commitments to expository preaching. This is how, in Chris' terms, the "head" can nurture and train the "body" so that there is a good "match."

Watch the habits you're forming: Developing a good sermon preparation strategy

A number of the pastors in this study talked about the study habits that are developed early in ministry. When asked what advice he would give a young preacher starting out, Len says, "Watch the habits you're forming, because once they're formed, you can't get out of them." Earlier in the interview, Len shared about some frustrating preaching habits he had formed that he found very difficult change. Likewise, Matt stresses with young preachers starting out "the importance of good habits, good habits of life, and good habits of study, and good habits of ministry organization." He explains that this is important, "because you can have the best convictions in the world, but if you don't execute wisely, you're going to wear yourself out."

Along the lines of specific beneficial habits to develop, Matt says,

I think having a sermon preparation strategy is huge. Now everybody has one, but having an explicit one. I do pretty much the same thing all the time. That helps me. And I know pretty much where I'm going to be relative to the passing of the week, so that if I'm behind, I know I've got to move a little faster. And if I don't, I'm going to put myself in a tempting situation...so organization is a huge piece of keeping yourself from discouragement.

Matt went on to explain in more detail where he needs to be with his sermon preparation by Thursday afternoon, and Friday morning, and Saturday morning, and Saturday evening. In fact, he says, "One of the first things I do on Friday morning is I write out my sermon preparation schedule. It's the same all the time, but I write it out so that I can remind myself that these are the steps I need to take... That little practice really helps me stay on schedule." Having a sermon preparation strategy seems to be a given with all the

veteran preachers. Whether they prepare their sermons early in the week or late in the week, they all have a regular “delivery system” that they follow all the time.

In addition to developing good sermon preparation habits, other pastors talk about developing habits in maintaining Biblical language proficiency. Scott says that if he could start his preaching ministry over again, he would have studied Hebrew earlier because he had already been preaching from the Old Testament for ten years before he studied Hebrew. He says, “I do think the languages are important.” Gordon had proficiency in the Biblical languages early in his ministry, but he let his language skills fall into disuse. He says it took him three years of hard work to get his language ability back to the level where it was useful. As a result, he says, “I would say to a seminarian, don’t let that happen. Keep it up, and then you’ll have it your whole life... That would be something that I learned the hard way that I counsel people to do right from the beginning.” Forming the right habits early in ministry is very helpful to sustaining a preaching ministry because having to change bad habits later is not only hard work, it is often discouraging.

Cultivating healthy rhythms of work and rest

Of all of the practices that the pastors mentioned, cultivation of healthy rhythms of work and rest is one of the few practices that almost all of the pastors identified as important to sustaining one’s preaching ministry. A number of the pastors talk specifically about making sure to take one day off per week. Scott’s day off is Friday, and he says, “The church leadership instructed me from the beginning that unless it is genuinely an emergency, you don’t do anything church related on Friday.” Scott says this

is an important way that he avoids burnout and would counsel a pastor in training to “really take a day off when you take a day off.”

Matt started taking his day off seriously after the first three years of his pastoral ministry, during which he didn’t really take a day off. His wife confronted him on his disobedience to God in this area. Matt tells what happened next:

So we decided to make a change here, and I started taking this idea of a day of rest seriously. That’s a huge piece of sustaining pastoral ministry over time. If there is a failure there, typically what’s underneath that is self-sufficiency, thinking that it depends on your hard work to get the ministry done rather than trusting God and trusting his wisdom of a day of rest, which is not just about physical rest, it’s about humility. So underneath that self sufficiency is pride, thinking that if I just do more work, everything’s going to be fine. So, rest is huge piece. I take Mondays off, and they’re really a day off.

For Wade, taking his day off seriously has made the difference between burnout and sustaining his pastoral ministry. Reflecting on his first pastorate, he says, “I think one of the reasons why there was burnout was I was not good at taking that day off during the week...because God has gifted me with a persevering, plodding, kind of personality and physical make up, I can keep working, and working and working.” So even though it is a still a struggle sometimes, Wade takes his day off, and his wife holds him accountable to it. Wade’s counsel to others in this area? “Really, really try to guard that day off. Just get away. Do anything else. And maybe you’re working out in the yard, praise God for the beauty of nature. You’re working on woodwork? Offer it to the Lord and enjoy it.”

In addition to taking a day off each week, a number of pastors also talk about the importance of not over-working the other days. A sabbatical that Peter took helped him to make some important changes in the number of hours he works in a week. He says, “I’m working about forty five hours a week now. Before, it was probably seventy, not because

I had to, but because of some identity problems I had related to that. I would say that now I hang on to ministry a lot less tightly. It's not who I am as a human being...working less is actually a step of faith." He says that with his new work hours, ministry is in the proper perspective.

When asked about what would help a young seminarian avoid burnout, Scott also talked about avoiding long hours of work. He confesses, "I have probably worked through the years more hours than I should, but that was the way I started off...to a seminary student, I would say, 'Be better than I was. And be willing to draw the lines and say, "no" better than I was willing.'" Interestingly enough, even Scott's elders have been concerned over the last five years that Scott works too much and have been encouraging him to cut back on the hours that he is at church.

Wayne says that there was a season in his ministry where he was "losing weight, getting very discouraged, spending too much time away from his family, pretty grumpy at home, and just not doing too well." One day he was praying and he recalls,

I had this strong impression that if I worked half as hard, the church would probably make more progress. And that was a very liberating thought. Work half as hard, and the church will probably make more progress. Now, what was behind that was God is sovereign. He's going to use me as a responsible servant, for sure. He's not going to use me if I'm irresponsible. So I've got to be responsible, but there's no point in killing myself.

This was a liberating moment that turned Wayne around. He says that the church started to make steady progress after that. He "cut back on his work hours, but cut up on his prayer time." He says that it was his "conscious dependence on God rather than just work, work, work, work, work" and "that probably more than anything else kept me from burnout in those early years."

Besides taking a day off and working reasonable hours, a number of the pastors talked about the importance of vacations and sabbaticals. When asked what helps him keep his freshness in preaching, Peter's answer is vacations. He says, "I know the guy that preceded me said he never took his vacation. I've taken every week and wanted more." Peter currently receives four weeks of vacation and a one week study break each year, and he will typically use all of it. In addition to this, Peter receives a three-to-four month sabbatical every seven years. His most recent sabbatical provided restoration and recharging, and even his fellow pastoral staff observed that Peter was much more relaxed when he returned.

Of all the pastors, Matt has the most well developed sabbatical policy that follows an annual rhythm. He has a three week pulpit break every summer where he doesn't have to preach and can catch his breath. In addition to this, he has two extended retreats each year, one in the spring and one in the fall, which he devotes to long-range sermon planning and simply time to get away to think, pray and read. He says that this schedule of breaks "saves a lot of wear and tear," and that without them, he would burn himself out.

Indeed, those pastors who have regular vacations, breaks, and sabbaticals seem the freshest, while those who haven't been able to get a sabbatical talk about how much they need one. Len hasn't had a sabbatical in twelve years and is in line for a sabbatical. But the challenge is that his assistant pastor just tendered his resignation. He says that a break would "help me a lot" because of the "spiritual drain" and the "weight of spiritual responsibility." He recalls a short break recently and what it did for him: "I remember in June I had a couple of Sundays where I was working, but I had someone come in [to

preach], and it was like a party in my head. It really was. I was like, this is great. I can go home. I don't have this pressure." Likewise, Wade hasn't had a sabbatical in seventeen years. He has had more breaks than in his previous pastorate, where he burned out, because he has more associates to whom he can pass off the preaching. He says, "That has helped me to be a little fresher." But he still says, "I think I would like somewhere along the line, three or four months where I could just get away and do whatever I want to do, read to my heart's content, travel, whatever it may be." For all these pastors, regular breaks, whether a day off, a vacation, a retreat, or a sabbatical, have been instrumental in keeping them fresh in their preaching.

Spiritual communion and prayer

Three of the pastors specifically speak about the importance of prayer and their personal communion with God in sustaining their preaching. Len says one thing that has kept him preaching is recruiting people who promise to pray for the preaching three to four times every week. He promises them that he will not ask them to do anything else if they will commit to praying. He says, "I call it Aaron's army because I always think of myself more as an Aaron than a Moses as the spokesman. I don't have the strong leadership skill of a Moses." He typically recruits for this prayer team in the spring, and he will write to them four times a year with his prayer requests about a new series, his current challenges, or the like.

Scott says that his personal time of communion with the Lord is vital for dealing with the discouragement that he experiences in preaching and getting him back into the study. He says,

The Lord is good. He comes Sunday evening. He comes through my devotionals Sunday evening, through my devotionals Monday morning. I

run six mornings a week, generally speaking, and I pray when I run. And the Lord really works in that time to sort of pick me back up off the ground and encourage me and get me ready for Monday and the week to come.

Brad has also experienced regular discouragement in preaching ministry. He says, “My disposition is that of a Jonah. I have tried to quit. I have tried to flee...every Sunday in some ways. Although preachers are given to hyperbole, I do think I’ve regularly wanted to, in the folly of my own heart, find a greener pasture somewhere.” So what has kept Brad in his preaching ministry? He says, “Not just the gospel but the experience of the gospel in a real communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Brad preaches the doctrines of justification and adoption to himself, which leads into prayer. The first part of his prayer time is to receive and listen. He says,

I will sit before the Lord in an experiential way and say, “Well, Father, what did you think of that?”...One thing I really do picture him in light of the gospel smiling at me...I’ll rest and sense his delight and smile: There’s mercy. Don’t have a trophy award ceremony and don’t have a funeral over it. Just let it go. Cast the seed. And we’ve got more to do today. More seed to cast...So keep on. Rise up. Keep it going.

In general, Brad says that in his communion with God, he tries “to think God’s thoughts out loud and have communion with him rather than just having a merely intellectual approach that says, ‘the gospel is true.’” For those pastors like Brad who speak about their communion with God, it as a crucial part of what sustains them for long term ministry.

Reading and continuing education

Besides cultivating rhythms of work and rest, the other practice that sustains preaching which most pastors have in common is reading and continuing education. Peter says that one of the keys to sustaining his preaching is feeding his soul and reading

widely. For six years, he studied philosophy on the side, and now he's studying law. He says, "All that stuff keeps the brain thinking in new areas." Peter gives examples of how he finds insights and illustrations for his sermons from his reading in law. When asked what disciplines are important for seminarians to prepare themselves for a long term preaching ministry, Gordon says first, "Read widely so that you really understand the world into which you're speaking." Len adds, "Preaching calls for broad thinking." So he draws out the implications: "Do not just read theology books. Go to plays or read novels or poetry or history or something so that you are savvy to language and the human condition. It stuns me, when I'll ask a pastor, 'What are you reading?' [and they say] 'Well, I'm not reading much.'"

Chris also says that one of the major things that keep him fresh and vital for preaching is reading. He shares the benefit of this:

I had a sabbatical during the summer, and I gave myself to reading Puritans. I'm finding more and more help from reading guys who had depth because the only way to sustain ministry is to have some kind of depth. And the only way to develop depth is to live in the world of those who had depth. And that is a joy to my soul. It's a blessing to my soul, and I have to keep making time for it.

Wade also draws direct benefit from reading. He says, "I find that when I do read, Man! It gets my creative juices flowing. And I'm excited about things. I get insights, and I think, Oh yeah! I want to share that. But if I don't get the opportunity to read, the well dries up." Elsewhere in the interview, Wade adds, "Reading is probably the biggest thing to keep me fresh." And he doesn't just read theology. He enjoys reading history and biography and various periodicals.

More broadly than reading, three of the pastors spoke of various forms of continuing education that have helped them sustain their ministries. Peter says that one of

the helpful things for him has been attending an annual workshop on Biblical exposition. Brad attended the same workshop and mentioned a few times in the interview the encouragement and teaching from the workshop that has stayed with him over the years. Len talks about how joining the homiletics society has helped him: “The homiletics society just helped give me a new frame of reference. New people to talk about, new things to think about, that didn’t directly pertain to this week’s sermon, but just made me more thoughtful about preaching.” The common theme among all these pastors is that they find ways to continue to feed their minds and hearts with new ideas which help them to keep their preaching fresh.

Circles of commitment: developing support networks

A number of the pastors talk about the importance of having various people around them who support their preaching ministry. Matt describes these support networks as “circles of commitment” and he reveals, “I’m glad for them. It’s not just me.” First, a number of pastors talk about the value of their wives. Matt says of his wife, “Even though she doesn’t necessarily understand all the mechanics, she’s pretty good at understanding the mechanics. And she doesn’t know all the details, but she knows well enough that she’s a wonderful prophetic ally. She helps me. She’s also there for support. She is a helper in my entire life and so in this area as well.” Matt adds even more significantly, “There is something about her presence in my life that motivates me to be, God uses that in almost an intangible way, a better man. It motivates me to be a better pastor. She’s that kind of presence in my life.”

Wade’s wife also plays an instrumental role in his preaching ministry. Because she is astute theologically, Wade says that she will always read his sermons on Friday or

Saturday and give him feedback and help him think of illustrations. Wade says of his wife, “It’s a team. I don’t know that I would be able to do preaching real well if it weren’t for getting that kind of feedback from her. So it’s very much a team effort.” On a broader level, Brad says that his wife knows the cycle of struggle he goes through in preaching. And he says, “She’s good enough to have put up with it for all these years. She still encourages me.”

Second, two of the pastors talk about cultivating the support of their leaders. It has already been discussed how many pastors are motivated by leaders who encourage them. However, two of the pastors speak specifically about how they seek to cultivate this. At a recent elders’ retreat, Matt gave his elders an article to read on expository preaching because it supplied them with categories and a framework to understand expository preaching. He did not do this to win praise from his elders, but he reported that, nonetheless, they responded by saying, “Thank you for doing this! We see what this is talking about happening in our church. And yes, we’re committed to this. Keep doing it!”

Wade also cultivates a close relationship with his elders. In this area, his counsel to younger pastors is:

Trust your leadership of your church. Share your life with them. Do things outside of ministry with them. Go to ball games with them. I don’t golf, but occasionally I’ve gone golfing with some of the elders, some of the men in the church. Do fun things with them. Trust them. Find at least one man on your session who you sense really cares about you, and let him mentor you also. And trust him and ask him to give you the feedback you need from the congregation...My best friends here are some of the elders here. I think that’s crucial for a young man to have that.

Third, some pastors talk about developing broader support networks outside the church. Matt says that it is important to have allies in expository preaching. He says, “If you can’t find them in your church, find them outside your church. Get to be part of an

organization like the Gospel Coalition. And get in conversation with other guys so that you're sustained in your convictions. You need someone local to sustain you in the hard work." Scott has joined a prayer group of about seven or eight pastors where they end up talking about preaching quite a bit. He's only been a part of that group for the last eight years, and wishes that he had that group much earlier because it has been "immensely helpful." In sum, it is evident that these circles of commitment, whether it is wives, elders, or other pastors, function to sustain these pastors in their preaching ministry.

Pastoral Ministry

When talking about disciplines that help a pastor sustain a long term preaching ministry, only two pastors mention pastoral ministry. Perhaps the pastors of smaller churches took this element for granted since they were naturally engaged in the lives of their people. But what these two pastors say seems significant enough to mention in this study. Identifying disciplines that are important for seminarians to sustain their preaching, Gordon, a seasoned pastor and now seminary professor, specifically mentions only three disciplines, one of which is pastoral ministry. He says, "Visit in people's homes, because in visiting people's homes, you see them as they really are." Chris is even more specific and emphatic about the importance of pastoral ministry for preaching: "I think pastoral ministry is a huge part of sustaining a preaching ministry." He is very influenced by a story that Warren Wiersbe once told. Wiersbe was invited by a church to be their Sunday preacher only. The church promised him that he would not have to deal with the board, officiate at funerals, carry on pastoral visitation, or administrate. All he would have to do is show up on Sunday and preach. Warren Wiersbe said that he couldn't do that. They didn't understand this response, since by that time Wiersbe was a

seasoned pastor and had written numerous books, so they extended the offer again. This time Wiersbe responded, “No, you don’t understand. I *can’t* do that. Preaching by definition is to people, and I cannot sustain an authentic preaching ministry if my life is not engaged with these people.”

Perhaps Chris was specific in mentioning this area since he pastors a church of 1750 members, and he says that he actually has to fight for time with people in the congregation since he has a larger staff and can be insulated from pastoral work. He explains,

I have to go out of my way just to make sure that I am sufficiently engaged with people to keep my feet on the ground and my preaching fresh. I go and visit people not because it’s good for them, because other guys can do that as well as I can. I do this because it’s good for me, because I will dry up if I’m not doing some weddings and some funerals...engaging with people in the reality of life and in the real questions of life.

For example, Chris shares that he and his wife will intentionally decide to spend ten evenings with people who are new to the church, and they will send out a hundred letters of invitation so they can be involved in people’s lives. Chris says, “If I don’t intentionally keep doing things like that to get in the mix with people, then I will become removed and the preaching will dry up.”

Sometimes this pastoral ministry directly contributes to the sermon. Chris shares about a recent forty five minute phone conversation he had with a congregational member who was struggling with whether commitment to a ministry in the church would hurt his family. Chris was preaching on loving God with all your heart from Deuteronomy the next week, and he suddenly realized that this phone conversation brought real life clarity to the sermon: Is loving God with all my heart going to hurt my

family? Or is stepping back from loving God going to hurt my family? Chris says, “I didn’t plan that, but without it, the next Sunday’s sermon would have been greatly impoverished.” Chris is evidence that pastoral ministry can be a huge boon to sermon preparation.

Taking on New Challenges

Five of the pastors interviewed specifically talked about how new challenges in ministry helped to keep them fresh in their preaching. Peter said that his sixteen year tenure at the church has not felt like a long time in part because of the encouraging elders. He added, “But the other reason for the longevity thing is the church has grown, so the ministry has changed, so there’s always something new coming up. It’s not the same old thing.” Peter mentions that before building their own facility, the church had to move frequently, and since then it has been expanding to two services, hiring new staff, and taking on new missions. He says this keeps the challenge new for him.

For Len, the new challenges have been specifically in the area of preaching. He says, “There was a sense as I got into my forties, of [a need to] try hard things.” Len intentionally decided to preach areas of Scripture that are daunting to preach. For example, he did a series of sermons from 1 Chronicles and most looked forward to preaching the genealogies. Why? He explains, “Because I thought nobody will preach this, and if I can see what God is up to here and really not just be a curiosity, but really find the message that the Scripture has in this, that would be really fun.” More recently, Len has been challenged to incorporate power point slides into his sermon. He says, “That has given me a fresh thing to think about...It has stretched me a little bit. It’s been an area I’ve learned about and I feel like ministering and the creative part has been good

for me.” Taking on these new challenges in preaching clearly invigorates Len’s preaching.

Three of the pastors interviewed talk about how involvement in missions has kept them fresh. Brad says, “I’ve been intentional about missions. I went to Laos and the Congo this year...I do evangelism and preach here and there, and I just think it’s not about me anymore.” It was in the Congo that Brad experienced a small revival in response to his preaching, described above, which really motivated him to keep going in his ministry. Wade shares that even though he hasn’t had a sabbatical in his seventeen year pastorate, he does work with a mission agency where he will get away once or twice a year for two to three weeks at a time. He says, “It’s extra work to get ready for that, but I do find that being in a totally different context, I’m freed from some of the day to day pressures of administration and shepherding, and that’s been helpful.” Similarly, Wayne has been taking regular missions trips to Africa, and from that he has developed a micro-loan ministry to address poverty there. He says that this new ministry challenge has kept him energized in his pastoral ministry.

Maintaining Physical Health

This last area of practices that sustain expository preaching in long term pastorates was specifically mentioned by three of the pastors interviewed. At the end of his interview, Peter mentioned physical fitness as one last practice he would recommend to maintain vitality in preaching. During the middle years of his pastorate, he wasn’t disciplined in this area, and he weighed too much. He says with humor, “You know when you get up to preach and you’re out of breath, it’s not a good sign.” As to the value of physical fitness, Peter observes, “I think you have physical energy to do the job. But I

think emotionally it helps you, too. It releases endorphins. It helps burn off some of the little day to day frustration things. And I think if you're able to combine it, it is a nice complement to your devotional life."

Scott runs every morning, and he identifies this as one of the most helpful practices he does to keep his preaching fresh and vital. He says, "The running early in the morning is really refreshing every single day. I'm not sure I've ever experienced a runner's high, but even so, I know I really enjoy it." He runs from 5:30 to 6:30 in the morning in a forest preserve near his home, and he gets to watch the forest preserve go through seasons every year, which he finds very refreshing. In addition, Scott benefits from praying when he runs and, on a fundamental level, from staying in shape and "the stimulation of endorphins that comes with it."

Brad is also a regular runner. When asked for advice to keep younger preachers sustained for ministry, he says, "Health. Eat well. Consider a good, healthy diet. Really consider an anaerobic, rhythmic way of living that includes exercise so that your digestive and your respiratory systems are doing well." For Brad, running regularly not only brings physical benefit to him, it also has become an empowering metaphor for his ministry. Once when he was running in the Boston Marathon, he struggled with thoughts of quitting. But by God's grace, he says, he came up over the last hill, he saw his family eating Culver's hamburgers and milkshakes, and he crossed the finish line faster than the time for which he was aiming. He says,

The thought occurred to me, this is so much life and really racing in ministry and really for me, the primacy of expository preaching. You can't quit until the end. But in heaven, you're permitted to quit and see your family... We'll rest and the work will be done. But now we can't quit. So now at age fifty, it's like I'm half way. It's been a great race, but I think of ways to keep on going.

Brad's experience is a reminder that sustaining expository preaching in a long term pastorate is not a sprint; it's more like a marathon. Through the interviews with nine pastors who are running this marathon, it has become clear that there are common challenges that even veteran preachers will face. There are common motivations that keep veteran preachers in the race. And finally, there are common practices, like training disciplines for runners, that help veteran preachers stay fit for the task of preaching for the long term.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study is to determine how pastors can sustain expository preaching in a long-term pastorate. While there is a wealth of resources on how to start an expository preaching ministry, there is a dearth of resources on how to sustain an expository preaching ministry in a long term ministry. This study seeks to fill this gap in resources by providing insights on how pastors can sustain expository preaching, both for new pastors who seek to last for the long haul and for seasoned pastors who find their energy depleted. As the literature review and the interview findings demonstrate, veteran preachers face a number of unnamed and unaddressed challenges in sustaining their preaching ministries. But since preaching is challenging work that is at the heart of pastoral ministry, this issue is crucial for pastoral health and longevity. Also, since preaching is central to a church's spiritual well-being, this issue is also crucial for overall church health and viability.

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What challenges do pastors face in sustaining expository preaching?
2. What motivations help pastors sustain expository preaching?
3. What practices help pastors sustain expository preaching?

First, the current literature on expository preaching, sustaining pastoral ministry, and sustaining veteran teachers was reviewed for insights into these three research questions. Then interviews guided by these three research questions were conducted with

nine pastors who have been serving their congregations for ten years or longer. The pastors served in different denominations and different demographic settings, but were united in their commitment to expository preaching. Their answers to the three research questions were analyzed and presented in the last chapter.

Conclusions

Both the literature review and the interview data demonstrate that veteran expository preachers face challenges in sustaining their preaching. Speaking of preachers who write too many sermons in the wee hours of the morning due to pastoral demands and who suffer from exhaustion, Lillian Daniel, a regular contributor to the *Journal of Preachers*, says, “Lay people might be shocked to discover how many clergy live on this hamster wheel, in which preaching has been stripped of both its joy and its privilege.”²⁸⁰ Aspects of this struggle were expressed through the interviews, whether by Len, who said, “The last two to three weeks, I’ve just thought, ‘Oh, I wish I didn’t have to preach this week. I’m just tired of the grind,’” or by Brad, who said, “For me, it’s actually a relief, at least at this church, that I don’t have to preach until next week. That sounds terrible, but that’s true.”

This study identified a number of challenges that veteran expository preachers face, ranging from weariness on the part of the preacher to lack of response on the part of the congregation. This study also identified numerous motivations and practices that can sustain preachers over the long haul. However, at the conclusion of this study, it is helpful to identify those challenges, motivations and practices that are most common and strategic to pastors. If there is to be longevity in the pulpit, it is crucial to prepare

²⁸⁰ Lillian Daniel, “The Preacher,” *Journal for Preachers* 33, no. 1 (Advent 2009): 33.

preachers for the challenges ahead and find motivations and practices that address these challenges.

After comparing the literature review with the interview analysis, it is the conclusion of the researcher that the most salient challenges, motivations and practices for sustaining an expository preaching ministry can be grouped into three areas: God and his word, the preacher, and the congregation. It is no surprise that preachers themselves are a main component in sustaining expository preaching. But what the literature review stressed as a main component, in addition to preachers, is the power of God and his word. In addition, the nine pastors interviewed stressed the role of the congregation as a main component in sustaining expository preaching.

It can be argued that these three areas—God and his word, the preacher, and the congregation—are essentially the basic components of a vital and effective preaching ministry. Put another way, there are three parties required to sustain a preaching ministry, making a preaching ministry more of a triologue than a dialogue. If any of these parties are absent, an effective preaching ministry cannot take place, because the preacher and the congregation alone lack divine power. God and the congregation alone lack a human messenger through whom God can speak. God and the preacher alone lack a listening audience. Therefore, these three components act like a three-legged stool. Take one of the components away, and the stool cannot stand. If God is present but not relied upon, or if the preacher is present but depleted, or if the congregation is present but not attentive, the sermon will fall short. Like a stool with one leg shorter than the others, the preaching ministry will be wobbly and unstable.

If these are the three basic components of a vital and healthy preaching ministry, then it is logical that the challenges to sustaining preaching are essentially the challenges to keep these three components—God and his word, the preacher, and the congregation—equally active in the sermon. Accordingly, the motives and practices that prove to be most strategic in sustaining expository preaching are those which strengthen one of these three major components.

The Challenges of Sustaining Expository Preaching

The literature review and the interview findings support the idea that the challenges faced by veteran preachers have to do with the three components, God and his word, the preacher's own heart, and the congregation. While other challenges might be experienced based on one's individual personality or circumstances, the most common challenges to pastors in sustaining their preaching ministries can be boiled down to three challenges, one regarding each component of a preaching ministry.

The Challenge from God and His Word

The main challenge for sustaining expository preaching in the area of God and his word is the difficult and demanding nature of sermon preparation and delivery. As mentioned in the literature review, God tells Jeremiah at the beginning of his preaching ministry, "Get yourself ready!"²⁸¹ In the Hebrew language, this phrase means "brace yourself" or literally "gird your loins."²⁸² Because of the opposition he will face in delivering God's word, Jeremiah will need to fortify himself. For Jeremiah, a lifelong preaching ministry will not be like an easygoing stroll in the park, but rather like a soldier maintaining vigilance in the midst of battle. Just because God calls and equips a person to

²⁸¹ Jeremiah 1: 17

²⁸² Thompson, 155.

be a preacher, it does not mean that preaching will be easy. On the contrary, both the literature review and the interview analysis provide ample evidence of the fortitude and industry required to sustain a preaching ministry. Regarding a preaching ministry, Paul counsels Timothy to “be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.”²⁸³ Paul is reminding Timothy that an effective preaching ministry cannot be pursued with a half-hearted attitude, but will require his full devotion and commitment. Simply put, a lifelong preaching ministry is not for cowards or for the indolent. It is a calling that requires courage and hard work.

John Stott, a veteran expository preacher, reflects, “The pastoral ministry of regular preaching and teaching is extremely exacting. It demands much time and energy in study.”²⁸⁴ Michael Bullmore adds that preaching “batters and bruises and does not rest.”²⁸⁵ The nine pastors interviewed couldn’t agree more. Chris summarized the way many felt about sermon preparation when he said, “There’s this stretching of your soul, this sweating, both internally and sometimes externally over, is this thing going to come together?” Because of its turbulent and demanding nature, Chris memorably likened sermon preparation to “whitewater rafting.” It varied where individual pastors found sermon preparation to be the hardest. Some found the process of exegesis and the close reading of technical commentaries to be wearying while others found the searching for fresh illustrations or appropriate applications the most demanding. But the common thread among all the pastors was the experience that studying God’s word in order to preach is hard and demanding work.

²⁸³ 1 Timothy 4: 15.

²⁸⁴ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 121.

²⁸⁵ Bullmore.

Because of the exacting nature of sermon preparation over the long term, it is easy for pastors to feel that their well of creativity is running dry or their emotional tank is being depleted. At some point in their ministries, most of the pastors interviewed experienced some sort of fatigue in their preaching. Len captured the feeling common to pastors when he explained, “What I’m feeling this year is an emotional weariness. The last two to three weeks, I’ve just thought, ‘Oh, I wish I didn’t have to preach this week. I’m just tired of the grind. And I’d be happy to put in the same number of hours if I could just do something else for a week.’” The issue is not that pastors do not love preaching or that they don’t see it as a privilege. Rather, it’s that preaching requires an intensity that is wearying over the long haul if there is no break. This weariness is often an unintended consequence of long term expository preaching.

Although some preachers are so gifted that preaching seems to happen easily and naturally, the demanding work of preaching is not reserved for lesser gifted pastors. No less than the celebrated Charles Spurgeon writes,

If any man will preach as he should preach, his work will take more out of him than any other labour under heaven. If you and I attend to our work and calling, even among a few people, it will certainly produce a friction of soul and a wear of heart which will tell upon the strongest. I speak as one who knows by experience what it is to be utterly exhausted in the Master’s service.²⁸⁶

Likewise, the equally respected preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones testifies, “The preacher is a man who is attacked on many sides, and perhaps his greatest danger is the danger of becoming discouraged and depressed, and of feeling that he cannot go on any longer.”²⁸⁷ The Apostle Paul says of his pastoral ministry, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To

²⁸⁶ Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry: Addresses to Ministers and Students*, 103.

²⁸⁷ Lloyd-Jones, 118.

this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”²⁸⁸ The Greek word “labor” that Paul uses refers to hard work and toil, and the Greek word he uses for “struggling” is the root of the English word “agonize.” Paul testifies to the same hard work of proclaiming Christ. By all accounts, the difficult and demanding work of sermon preparation and preaching is one of the main challenges of a long term expository preaching ministry.

The Challenge from the Preacher

Another central challenge to sustaining expository preaching over the long term comes from the preacher’s own heart. It is the struggle against feelings of inadequacy. The authors reviewed and the pastors interviewed for this study identified this as a common struggle for preachers. Researchers Gary Kinnaman and Alfred Ells place a statistical figure on this struggle when they report that ninety percent of the clergy in their survey describe feeling “inadequately trained to cope with the high demands of ministry,” while half of them feel “unable to meet the current demands of the job.”²⁸⁹ Likewise, seasoned preacher Erwin Lutzer speaks for many pastors when he says, “All of us have feelings of inadequacy.”²⁹⁰ Of the pastors interviewed, Peter captured this struggle most vividly when he said of the first three years of his preaching ministry, “I’d come home [after preaching] and I’d sit in a room, my bedroom upstairs, and I’d kneel beside the bed and cry every Sunday and pray...because I felt like such a complete failure in every regard. And I still do sometimes.” Scott echoed the same sentiment when he confessed that he often thinks on Sunday afternoon, “I’ve just preached the worst sermon that’s ever

²⁸⁸ Colossians 1: 28-29.

²⁸⁹ Kinnaman and Ells, 31.

²⁹⁰ Personal correspondence from Erwin Lutzer to Daniel Ying, September 1, 2010.

been preached on the face of the earth.” While there are different degrees of this struggle, this study concludes that it is a common struggle among long term preaching pastors.

What is the source of this inadequacy? This is where experiences diverge. Some preachers feel inadequate because they preach in the shadow of more gifted and well-known preachers. Modern technology has only exacerbated this situation since now even the rural congregant has access to the best preaching in America. J. Kent Edwards expresses this difficulty best when he frankly tells pastors, “You are not the best preacher your people have listened to this week,” with the result being that the “people in the pews want the same electronic perfection projected by the religious superstars of our day.”²⁹¹ To put it plainly, superstar preachers often make ordinary preachers feel inadequate. More than one of the pastors interviewed mentioned that they will never measure up to the Tim Kellers and the John Pipers of this world, and they must come to terms with that.

Other preachers feel inadequate because they are saddled with more pastoral demands on their time than they can reasonably fulfill. Again, Edwards expresses this challenge best when he says, “The pressure to be everywhere and everything to everyone has never been greater. Our consumer mentality demands top-flight service from its paid servants. And this is the enemy of good preaching. It has never been easy to preach, but it is especially tough today.”²⁹² Erwin Lutzer shares that he feels a time crunch because of the many pastoral demands, and “*studying often gets pushed off into the margins of my life and time schedule.*”²⁹³ Lutzer gives voice to a common experience of many pastors that even the most rigorous study disciplines can mitigate but not completely eradicate. It is not easy to balance being both a faithful preacher of God’s word and a compassionate

²⁹¹ Edwards, 6.

²⁹² Ibid., 8.

²⁹³ Personal correspondence from Erwin Lutzer to Daniel Ying, September 1, 2010.

pastor to God's people. Both require lots of time. Because preaching preparation can easily get sidelined by urgent pastoral ministry, the end result is that the sermon is not as polished as it could be, thus contributing to a preacher's sense of inadequacy.

Still other preachers feel an inadequacy that stems from their own expectations. Ed Rowell writes, "Most preachers face their toughest critics when they look in the mirror. Even more relentless than the ever-approaching Sunday are personal expectations. Those who become chronically weary often swing for the fence every time they preach."²⁹⁴ As stated earlier, perfectionist preachers can quickly become discouraged preachers, undone by their own expectations. This seems to be what, in part, leads Scott to feel every Sunday afternoon that he has just preached the worst sermon on the face of the earth. Every Sunday, he hopes that God might use the sermon to bring spiritual revival to the congregation. When that doesn't happen, there is disappointment accompanied by feelings of inadequacy. Scott is clearly not alone in having high expectations for what the sermon might accomplish, as other pastors expressed the same hopes. Certainly, there is legitimacy to anticipating the power and efficacy of God's word, but the effects are often not immediate. When too much is expected of any one sermon, the degree of expectations harbored before the sermon anticipate the degree of inadequacy experienced after the sermon.

Finally, the inadequacy that preachers experience flows from the challenge of being both faithful to the Biblical text and relevant to the congregation. Scott expressed this challenge well when he talked about "that aspect of really trying to take the [biblical] passage and in an expository way open it up in a way that the Lord would use to work inside the souls of the hearers." In this respect, Peter acknowledged that "there are lots of

²⁹⁴ Rowell, 69.

times where the sermon is not what you hoped it would be.” Indeed, fusing the two horizons of the Biblical text and the contemporary world is an unending task and can never be accomplished perfectly by imperfect preachers in a fallen world.

Thus, committing oneself to a lifelong preaching ministry means inevitably coming face to face with one’s own inadequacy. Even the skilled and seasoned preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, wrote near the end of his life, “Any man who has had some glimpse of what it is to preach will inevitably feel that he has never preached. But he will go on trying, hoping that by the grace of God one day he may truly preach.”²⁹⁵ In fact, Lloyd-Jones goes so far as to describe a sense of inadequacy as part and parcel to a call to ministry: “There is in you a sense of diffidence, a sense of unworthiness, a sense of inadequacy.”²⁹⁶ Indeed, speaking of his gospel preaching ministry, the Apostle Paul said, “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?”²⁹⁷ That explains why Paul approached preaching with a sense of weakness, fear, and trembling.²⁹⁸ When the eternal stakes of preaching are considered, is anyone really sufficient to be a preacher? In this respect, a certain sense of inadequacy will always accompany a lifelong preaching ministry and present a perpetual challenge. In fact, the day a person begins to feel completely adequate for preaching is the day that person ceases to understand the purpose of preaching.

Feelings of inadequacy are a common challenge to preachers and come from a myriad of sources. A preacher may be impervious to the threat of superstar preachers, yet

²⁹⁵ Lloyd-Jones, 99.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁹⁷ 2 Corinthians 2: 15-16.

²⁹⁸ 1 Corinthians 2: 3.

still experience the inadequacy that flows from contemplating the high call of preaching itself. Regardless of the source, if these feelings of inadequacy are improperly handled, it is not difficult to see how they can result in a preacher wanting to give up preaching altogether.

The Challenge from the Congregation

The third main challenge to sustaining expository preaching over the long term comes from an unresponsive congregation. Ed Rowell expresses this challenge to the preacher when he reflects, “Sometimes the doubt comes and goes like a mountain spring shower; other times cynical moods settle in like a gray, claustrophobic Chicago winter. In spite of the ‘nice job’ and ‘good message’ heard at the door, sometimes you look around and wonder, *Is anyone’s life being changed here? Are we really making progress?*”²⁹⁹ Through her surveys of pastors, Denise George confirmed that this lack of response from a congregation presents a widespread challenge to pastors. She discovered that many pastors were particularly disheartened after preaching their hearts out in the pulpit, to step down to greet church members and visitors and encounter either criticism, no comment at all, generic responses like “good sermon, pastor,” or not so much as a smile, just a blank expression.³⁰⁰ Indeed, half of the pastors interviewed for this study shared that one of their common struggles in preaching is not seeing Scripture impact people’s lives to the desired degree. What these pastors have in common is an expectation that God will use his word to bring spiritual maturity and renewal to his people. When that doesn’t happen as promptly or to the degree anticipated, they feel disappointment.

²⁹⁹ Rowell, 35.

³⁰⁰ George, 145.

It should come as no surprise that the lack of response from a congregation presents a challenge to preachers. Everyone hopes that the main work they do, whether sweeping floors or starting a business, is meaningful and will positively impact people's lives. It is no different for preachers. While a cold, unresponsive congregation can leave even the most passionate preacher dejected, an enthusiastic and spiritually hungry congregation can fire up the most discouraged and tired preacher. Martyn Lloyd-Jones testifies to the important contribution that congregations can make to good preaching. He writes,

Any man worthy to be called a speaker even on secular matters—politics and so on—knows something about this, and has often experienced that a meeting has been made by the responsiveness of the audience he has been addressing. This should happen much more in the case of the preacher. Thank God, it often occurs that when the preacher, poor fellow, is at his worst for various reasons—perhaps has not had time to prepare as he should have done, or various physical factors and other things may be operating to militate against the success of the occasion—the responsiveness and eagerness of his congregation lifts him up and enlivens him.³⁰¹

Thus, the congregation plays a larger role in an effective preaching ministry than one might initially realize. Indeed, Christopher Ash states that “the hearers contribute to the sermon almost as much as the preachers.”³⁰² He cites 2 Timothy 4: 3-4, where people do not put up with sound doctrine but instead gather around themselves preachers who tell their itching ears what they want to hear. Ash concludes, “It is very hard to be a faithful preacher in a congregation like that.”³⁰³ While an enthusiastic and spiritually receptive congregation can be a great boon to a preacher, a cold and unresponsive

³⁰¹ Lloyd-Jones, 84-85.

³⁰² Christopher Ash, *Listen Up! A Practical Guide to Listening to Sermons* (Surrey, UK: The Good Book Company, 2009), 28.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 29.

congregation can be a great challenge. Despite one's convictions and gifts for preaching, it is difficult to persevere in preaching to a congregation that does not respond.

The Motives that Sustain Expository Preaching

If the central challenges to sustaining an expository preaching ministry can be summarized by the demanding nature of preaching God's word, inadequacy experienced by the preacher, and lack of response from the congregation, then the motives that sustain expository preaching should address these challenges. This is exactly what this study finds. The three areas of motivation that have emerged from this study stem from God and his word, from a preacher's own life, and from the congregation. The following pages will describe these motives and explore how they address the challenges of sustaining an expository preaching ministry.

Motives from God and His Word

In the area of God and his word, there are three related motives which sustain expository preaching. Except for one pastor interviewed, these motives were strikingly absent from the interview data, yet the literature review convincingly demonstrated how foundational they are to sustaining an expository preaching ministry. First, one must be convinced that scripture truly is God's word. How can one preach scripture with any confidence if scripture is only human words written by human authors? It is the doctrine of the divine inspiration of scripture that provides the foundation for faithful expository preaching. Before Paul charges Timothy to preach the word, he reminds Timothy that "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every

good work.”³⁰⁴ The fact that scripture is God’s word provides the foundation for Timothy’s preaching ministry. Likewise, at the outset of Jeremiah’s preaching ministry, God touches Jeremiah’s mouth and says to him, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth.”³⁰⁵ The significance of this action is to convince Jeremiah that he will not be delivering his own human opinions but God’s divine words. This knowledge kept Jeremiah preaching despite great hardship and opposition. The divine compulsion of God’s word repeatedly overcame his human reluctance.

Without a belief that scripture is God’s word, it is very difficult to sustain confidence in preaching. Edwards says it best:

The importance of the doctrine of inspiration for the preacher cannot be overemphasized. The verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture means that whatever the original author of the biblical text wrote to his original audience is true. It is utterly, totally, and completely reliable. As a preacher, this means that I can stake my personal reputation upon what it says. It means I speak with confidence and authority into the lives of my listeners as well as to society at large. Inspiration gives us a boldness that is critical to the preaching event.³⁰⁶

R. Kent Hughes adds, “To my knowledge, no one does regular expository preaching who does not hold to this high view of Scripture—that it is God’s inerrant Word.”³⁰⁷ Without a conviction that scripture is God’s word, a preacher doesn’t have anything of eternal value to say. It is knowledge that one is a herald of a divine message every time one preaches the content of scripture that can sustain a long term preaching ministry.

Second, one must be convinced that God still speaks through his word in order to sustain a long term preaching ministry. This conviction provides an even stronger incentive to preach than the mere believing that scripture is God’s word. When one

³⁰⁴ 2 Timothy 3: 16-17.

³⁰⁵ Jeremiah 1: 9.

³⁰⁶ Edwards, 17-18.

³⁰⁷ Hughes, 83.

realizes that God's voice is heard when scripture is faithfully preached, there is a powerful motivation to continue preaching. Scripture itself presses home this reality. As explained in the literature review, Hebrews 3: 7 says, before quoting Psalm 95, "So, as the Holy Spirit says." The writer of Hebrews uses the present tense with the conviction that the Holy Spirit is presently speaking through Psalm 95.³⁰⁸ Likewise, each of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 ends with the phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The Apostle John wrote these letters months earlier on the island of Patmos, but had the conviction that as they were read to various churches, the Holy Spirit would speak directly to them.³⁰⁹ James Daane draws the conclusion most clearly: "This should be enough to convince anyone who honors the Bible that God himself is present and actively speaking his Word in every authentic pulpit of the church, whether occupied by the most extraordinary or the most ordinary preacher."³¹⁰ What happens when preachers realize that God himself is speaking through the words of the sermon as they are faithful to the message of scripture? They are motivated to keep on preaching.

When asked what keeps him preaching, the first thing that Matt talked about in his interview was his conviction that scripture is God's word, and that God speaks through his word:

I think the thing that keeps you going first of all, is a Biblical conviction that this is all rooted on fundamental convictions that the Bible is God's word...the conviction that God's word by its very nature is empowered by God himself, that God is present in his word. So if we're faithful in preaching God's word, we can count on God's promise to be faithful to accomplish his purposes. In other words, God gets his work done in the world through his word. So I get to hide behind the word every Sunday. I

³⁰⁸ Bullmore.

³⁰⁹ Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 102.

³¹⁰ Daane, 14.

like that image. It's very safe in one sense to be there. I don't have to try to persuade. I don't have to try to convince. I just need to be faithful.

If God is present and speaking in the sermon, it invests the sermon with great weight and significance. In Matt's words, it allows the preacher to hide behind God and his word in a way that takes the pressure off the pastor to make something happen. It is not incumbent upon the preacher to be novel with scripture, only to be faithful to scripture.

This leads to the third motivation, which relates to God and his word. In order to sustain a long term preaching ministry, one must be convinced that the Holy Spirit will make the preaching of God's word powerful and effective. Frequently repeated throughout the literature on preaching is the following promise from Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.³¹¹

This is a bedrock promise that has sustained many a preacher through periods of discouragement. God's word comes with God's promise that he will make his word effective in the lives of his people. This was the point of the almond tree branch that God showed Jeremiah along with his promise that he is "watching to see that my word is fulfilled."³¹² The almond tree was the first to blossom after the winter, and God was assuring Jeremiah in both picture and word that he will bring his word to fruition. This promise of God's work through his word instills confidence in the preacher.

In his book *Spirit-Led Preaching*, Greg Heisler aptly underscores how God accomplishes this work through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is vitally involved in every aspect of preaching and the response to preaching: the Holy Spirit inspires the

³¹¹ Isaiah 55: 10-11.

³¹² Jeremiah 1: 12.

biblical text, converts the preacher to faith in Christ, calls the preacher to preach the word, develops the preacher's character to live the word, illumines the preacher's mind in study, empowers the preacher during proclamation, testifies to *Jesus Christ*, opens the hearts of those who hear, applies the word to the listeners' hearts, and produces lasting fruit in believers.³¹³ It is helpful for preachers to remember that the effectiveness of the sermon ultimately rests on the Holy Spirit. He is the one who enables both the preacher to preach and the listener to respond. This is why Charles Spurgeon was reputed to say to himself over and over again as he climbed the stairs to his pulpit, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost..."³¹⁴ As a reminder that the empowering agent of the sermon is the Holy Spirit, this would be a salutary practice even for today's preachers. For in the *final analysis*, as Albert Mohler says, "Our perseverance in the task of preaching must be based on God's promise that He will, by his own power, make the preaching of His word effective."³¹⁵

This is an antidote to the feelings of inadequacy with which preachers struggle. Preachers can begin to feel inadequate when they place too much pressure on themselves to produce an effective sermon. When they remember that scripture is God's word and that God still speaks through his word and makes his word effective through the Holy Spirit, preachers can shift their confidence from themselves to God and his word. An effective sermon does not depend on the adequacy of the preacher, but on the adequacy of God and his word. Because of this, even the weakest and most ordinary pastor can preach a powerful sermon because power does not come from the preacher.

³¹³ Heisler, 4.

³¹⁴ Related in Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*, 118.

³¹⁵ Mohler, 147.

Motives from the preacher's life

In the area of the preacher's own life, there are three motives that emerge as having particular ability to sustain an expository preaching ministry. First, knowing that one is called by God to preach enables one to persevere in preaching even through hardship. This was true for both Jeremiah and Timothy in the Bible. God called Jeremiah to be a preacher with the following words, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."³¹⁶ The knowledge that his ministry was divinely purposed was of inestimable value for Jeremiah and allowed him to persevere through a forty year ministry filled with hardship and opposition. While modern day preachers may not have as dramatic a calling from God as Jeremiah, they can be assured of their divine calling by experiencing a God-given desire for pastoral ministry, recognizing their God-given gifts for pastoral ministry, and receiving the approbation of the church for pastoral ministry.³¹⁷

Likewise, Timothy received a divine call to preach the word, and Paul reminded him of that responsibility in his final charge: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word."³¹⁸ John Stott's comments on the significance of these words to Timothy should not be missed by the preacher who wants to persevere in ministry: "Perhaps the strongest of all incentives to faithfulness is the sense of a commission from God. If Timothy can only be assured that he is the servant of the most high God and an ambassador of Jesus Christ, and that Paul's challenge to him is God's

³¹⁶ Jeremiah 1: 5.

³¹⁷ See Edmund Clowney, *Called to the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 68-90 for further explanation.

³¹⁸ 2 Timothy 4: -2.

challenge, then nothing will deflect him from his task.”³¹⁹ Making the same point more forcefully, John Newton writes, “The man who is once moved by the Spirit of God to this work, will prefer it, if attainable, to thousands of gold and silver; so that, though he is at times intimidated by a sense of its importance and difficulty, compared with his own great insufficiency, yet he cannot give it up.”³²⁰

The significance of God’s call to sustaining a long term preaching ministry is borne out in both in the literature review and the interview findings. Many writers agree with Tony Merida when he says, “The work of ministry is simply too demanding to enter it without a sense of calling.”³²¹ Indeed, writers refer to God’s call as the source of staying power in ministry—the anchor which holds one firm in the midst of stormy times. The pastors interviewed for this study experience the same. In fact, almost all of them spoke of God’s calling into pastoral ministry as a motivating factor for sustaining their ministry, particularly in hard times. For Chris, it is the secret to persevering through difficult times: “At these points, what can you do, except say, ‘God has called me to do it’ and gut it out. I don’t know anything else to do.” For Matt, it is what keeps him accountable: “Even if I don’t feel like doing this, I cannot not do this. So there’s a fear of God, a healthy fear of God that I really believe God has called me to do this, and if I don’t do it, I have him to answer to.” For Brad, it is the key to his seventeen year ministry at his church: “I’m called here, so I’ve stayed the course.”

The significance of God’s call for these preachers extends not only to being a preacher but also to the place of ministry and their own personality in ministry. When God calls preachers, he calls them to a particular place. Understanding this is the key to

³¹⁹ Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, 110.

³²⁰ Quoted in Ryken, *1 Timothy*, 188.

³²¹ Merida, 48.

staying for the long term. Warren Wiersbe says it best, “Knowing I am God’s man in God’s place of ministry has encouraged me to study harder and do my best work. When the harvests were lean, the assurance that God put me there helped to keep me going. When the battles raged and the storms blew, my secure refuge was ‘God put me here, and I will stay here until he tells me to go.’”³²² Similarly, when God calls preachers, he calls them to be themselves, not to try to be someone else. Again Wiersbe expresses it most compellingly when he writes:

During the past twenty years, I have been immersed in studying the lives of famous preachers of the past. Most of these ministered during the Victorian Era in Great Britain, a time when the pulpits were filled with superstars. If there’s one thing I learned from these men, it is this: God has his own ways of training and preparing his servants, but he wants all of them to be themselves. God has put variety into the universe, and he has put variety into the church. If your personality doesn’t shine through your preaching, you’re only a robot. You could be replaced by a cassette player and perhaps nobody would know the difference... The essence of what I am saying is this: You must know yourself, accept yourself, be yourself, and develop yourself—your best self—if preaching is to be most effective.³²³

There are many important things preachers need to know to sustain their ministry, but not many are more important than God’s call to preach, God’s call to a particular place, and God’s call to a personality—one’s own, to be the person that God has uniquely made one to be. There is nothing more discouraging than wishing one was somewhere else, trying to preach like someone else, yet ultimately being doomed to failure. Likewise, there are few things more encouraging than knowing that you are God’s person ministering where God wants you to be.

Second, knowledge of God’s continued equipping for preaching is another motivation for sustaining a preaching ministry. For Jeremiah, the most empowering

³²² Wiersbe, 77.

³²³ Ibid., 76-77.

words from God after the divine call was the promise of God's presence. This was the closing note when God called Jeremiah to begin a preaching ministry. God declared, "Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."³²⁴ There is nothing more empowering in the midst of a preaching ministry than for preachers to know that God himself is with them and is helping them.

Many of the pastors interviewed have learned this by experience. They point to specific moments when God helped them through an especially difficult part of sermon preparation or a particularly difficult season of ministry. Over time, this experience builds confidence in God's faithful equipping that sustains their preaching ministry. Matt has learned to pray regularly, "God, you have proven yourself faithful over and over and over and over again. I know you're going to be faithful again, so in that confidence, I press on. You're going to supply. Help me. I need your help. I know you're going to supply." Chris concludes from his experience of God's faithfulness, "There comes a point where you've got to say, 'The Lord has never failed me,' and that's one of the things that I think is important to say to younger preachers." A confidence about God's continued equipping for preaching is a sustaining motivation to continue preaching.

Third, reminding oneself of the privilege of preaching also sustains preachers for long term ministry. Nearly all of the pastors interviewed explicitly expressed wonder at the privilege they have as preachers. Gordon spoke for all of them when he said of preaching, "It's an enormous privilege. I think the privilege of being prayed for by people, of being paid, such as it was, to soak myself in Scripture almost every day of my

³²⁴ Jeremiah 1: 18-19.

working life, it's just an unspeakable blessing." Furthermore, Chris explained how to turn this privilege into a motivating factor to persevere:

Take delight in the privilege of [preaching]. Regularly say to oneself, "I am actually being paid money to study the word of God which is the supreme joy if I was doing it on my own time. Here I am, it's Friday morning and people are working so that I can sit here with these books and pray and fill my soul with this in order to preach to people." That is an immense privilege, and to have that spirit of thankfulness and to keep that refreshed is, I think, really important.

Indeed, it is very difficult to remember the privilege of preaching and harbor discouragement at the same time. Either the privilege will drive out the discouragement or the discouragement will blind one's eyes to the privilege.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Preaching is the most amazing, and the most thrilling activity that one can ever be engaged in, because of all that it holds out for all of us in the present, and because of the glorious endless possibilities in an eternal future."³²⁵ Charles Spurgeon is reputed to have said, "If God calls you to preach, don't stoop to become a king." If preachers can genuinely come to feel these same sentiments, it is an enabling force for longevity in ministry. There is an internal compulsion for a preacher who loves to preach, who feels the privilege of it, and who sees the significance of it. The challenge, of course, is not losing sight of this. The difficult and demanding work of preaching can overwhelm a preacher like the sheer face of a mountain that rises up before a novice climber. Just as climbers who lose sight of the peak and forget their purpose can grow fatigued, so preachers who lose sight of why they preach can easily succumb to emotional weariness. What is the antidote? In part, it is remembering the call of God to preach, the faithful equipping of God, and the sheer privilege it is to be a preacher. With eyes properly focused, God can enable preachers to scale mountains.

³²⁵ Lloyd-Jones, 98.

Motives from the congregation

While the literature review did not mention the congregation as a motivational force for the preacher, this was a major theme in the interview analysis. When the interviewees were asked what kept them going in their ministry for the long term, one of the first things that came to their minds was encouragement from their congregation on two fronts—from the leaders of the church and from the wider congregation. First, a majority of the pastors interviewed stressed how crucial it was to their endurance in preaching that they were surrounded by leaders who encouraged and supported them. In most cases, they had elders who were just as committed to expository preaching as they were, who cheered them on in the task, and who gave them helpful feedback when appropriate. In fact, speaking of his elders, Matt said, “There are people here who would throw me out if I did something different [than expository preaching], for which I’m very grateful.”

Beyond this, Brad paid great tribute to his elders when he said, “I couldn’t keep my head without my elders.” His elders do what friends and partners are supposed to do for one another in ministry. When surrounded by such leaders, it is not difficult to understand how pastors are much more able to persevere in their preaching ministry. Chris expressed this motivation most memorably: “Guys move on because there’s trouble in the church. If there is stability within the church, and there is a core of godly men who are with you and around you and for you and to whom you’re accountable, and the Lord has put together a team, why would you leave a winning team?” Indeed, why would anyone want to leave a winning team? This is the motivation that godly and encouraging leaders can provide for a preacher.

Second, almost all of the pastors interviewed spoke eagerly and often of how encouraging their congregations have been and how that support has enabled them to sustain their preaching ministry. Many of the pastors keep *file folders near their desks* which are filled with encouraging notes from members of their congregation. Moreover, many of the pastors were effusive in their gratitude for such warm and supportive congregations. Matt expressed how a congregation that is spiritually hungry for the word can fuel a preacher: “Another thing that really helps you keep going is when you see the church loving the word. And God has done a work here such that on Sunday mornings, I just marvel at the privilege I have of standing up and seeing people eager to hear God’s word.” What effect does this have on the longevity of a pastor? Peter provided the answer without hesitation, “I have no interest in leaving here. Even though it’s a modest size church, I love it here. I just love working here.” When a congregation embraces a preacher and expresses appreciation for the sermons, it is dynamite for a preacher’s soul.

Even more than general congregational appreciation, however, seeing congregational members respond to sermons and change is like doubling the dynamite. Martyn Lloyd-Jones expresses it best:

Another element in this romance of preaching is that you never know who is going to be listening to you, and you never know what is going to happen to those who are listening to you. It may be the turning point in somebody’s life... *Their entire life* has been changed, and you have been involved in this and played a part in it. Is there anything in the world that compares with this? There is nothing—nothing at all.³²⁶

In the interviews, the pastors who spoke about seeing people change as a response to their preaching were clearly moved by wonder and joy, like Lloyd Jones. Brad is perhaps the best example. Once after preaching, he received a phone call from a student who said, “I

³²⁶ Ibid., 301.

just want you to know that I thought I was a Christian, but when you were preaching, I know I was born again. Everything's changed." Brad's response? He cried with thanksgiving and said to himself, "Wow! I want to keep on going." That is the effect that *witnessing lives transformed by the preached word* can have on pastors. Preachers hunger to know that their preaching is making a difference in the lives of the listeners, so when they see evidence of it, they experience great joy and renewed energy for the task of preaching. Indeed, there is almost nothing that brings greater joy to the heart of a preacher than to see lives transformed through God's word. Erwin Lutzer, who has been preaching for thirty years at the Moody Church, says,

The best motivation [to keep preaching] has been the knowledge that the word of God changes people...I love to see lives transformed by the word of God. When I receive feedback from the people of the congregation, or for that matter, from those who listen on the radio, it gives me great encouragement and motivates me to continue to preach and hopefully to do better year after year.³²⁷

Since one of the major challenges to sustaining expository preaching is an unresponsive congregation, it should be no surprise that one of the great motivations to sustain preaching is a warm, supportive, and responsive congregation, both on the part of the leaders and of the average member. Those pastors who minister in this kind of environment are often the most happy and content pastors. Like Peter, they typically say of their church, "I love working here. Why would I want to leave?"

The Practices that Sustain Expository Preaching

Again, if the central challenges to sustaining an expository preaching ministry can be summarized by the demanding nature of preaching God's word, inadequacy experienced by the preacher, and an unresponsive congregation, then not only will the

³²⁷ Personal correspondence from Erwin Lutzer to Daniel Ying, September 1, 2010.

motives address these challenges, but so will the practices. This study concludes that there are three areas of practices that sustain expository preaching: those practices which strengthen one's relationship with God and his word, those practices which strengthen the preacher, and those practices which strengthen the congregation. These practices aim squarely at addressing the central challenges of sustaining an expository preaching ministry.

Practices that strengthen one's relationship with God and his word

There are three practices which strengthen one's relationship with God and his word that have emerged from this study. The first and most foundational practice is the cultivation of one's spiritual life as a precursor to one's preaching ministry. Warren Wiersbe aptly reminds preachers that "preaching is not what we do; it's what we are. When God wants to make a preacher, he has to make a person, because the work we do cannot be isolated from the life we live."³²⁸ Preachers who do not have a vibrant relationship with God and his word become human pundits masquerading as spokespeople for God. John Stott drives home the importance of a preacher's own spiritual life most forcefully:

There is no greater need for the preacher than that he should know God. I care not about his lack of eloquence and artistry, about his ill-constructed discourse or his poorly enunciated message, if only it is evident that God is a reality to him, and that he has learned to abide in Christ. The preparation of the heart is of far greater importance than the preparation of the sermon... We shall remember that the real preparation of a sermon is not the few hours which are specifically devoted to it, but the whole stream of the preacher's Christian experience thus far, of which the sermon is a distilled drop.³²⁹

³²⁸ Wiersbe, 78.

³²⁹ Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*, 76.

One particularly important part of preachers' spiritual lives is their prayer life.

Kent Hughes says it well, "I have said it many times: sermon preparation is 20 hours of prayer. It is humble, holy, critical thinking. It is repeatedly asking the Holy Spirit for insight. It is the harrowing of your soul. It is ongoing repentance. It is utter dependence. It is a singing heart."³³⁰ Indeed, the pastors interviewed confirmed that regular communion with God helps them to work through discouragement and renew their hearts for preaching. Scott is representative when he testified,

The Lord is good. He comes Sunday evening. He comes through my devotionals Sunday evening, through my devotionals Monday morning. I run six mornings a week, generally speaking, and I pray when I run. And the Lord really works in that time to sort of pick me back up off the ground and encourage me and get me ready for Monday and the week to come.

Cultivating one's spiritual life is not only healthy for pastors, it also impacts their preaching. Greg Heisler challenges preachers by saying,

Preaching is not so much about you preparing a sermon to preach; preaching is about God preparing you—his vessel to preach. Let me challenge you to allow God to prepare you through kneeling in the power of his presence through unceasing prayer. Allow God to prepare you by soaking in the glory of his Word through diligent study of the Bible. Allow God to prepare your character through repentance, cleansing, and living above reproach before the Lord. Then you will find yourself walking into the pulpit as a transformed, Spirit-filled preacher who delivers a burden, not a sermon; who expresses convictions, not opinions; and who preaches to please God, not an audience.³³¹

As Stephen Brown vividly shares, "I've preached when I didn't have a vibrant spiritual life, and I've preached when I was experiencing God's rich presence. The former is like peddling a one speed bike up a long, steep hill; the latter, like riding the wings of a

³³⁰ Hughes, 88.

³³¹ Heisler, 15.

dove.”³³² If prayer is “the splicing of our limp wire to the lightning bolt of heaven,”³³³ then staying in close communion with God is the key to experiencing supernatural power in the pulpit. When empowered by God this way, endurance in preaching becomes a lot more viable. The challenge for most preachers, of course, lies not in knowing the importance of regular communion with God, but in practicing it. Greg Scharf, a pastor for twenty five years and now a seminary professor, adds, “The danger for most preachers is not deliberate coldness toward God, but the almost imperceptible drift against which the writer to the Hebrews warns (Hebrews 2: 1).”³³⁴ The question that must be put to preachers on a regular basis is, do they want to be peddling up a long, steep hill in their preaching, or riding on the wings of a dove? Preachers neglect their spiritual lives to their own detriment.

Second, those who are able to sustain a long term preaching ministry have developed an effective sermon preparation strategy that guides them every week leading up to Sunday, like an elite athlete’s regular pre-game preparation. Everyone agrees that studying scripture in preparation to preach is hard, exacting work. The preacher who engages in this work haphazardly will not last long. The hard work of scripture study requires developing and following a weekly sermon preparation strategy. Will Willimon exhorts preachers in this area:

It is essential that pastors nurture a life of study and reflection to undergird their preaching ministry...The work of communicating the gospel with the congregation on a weekly basis is too intellectually and spiritually draining to attempt to do it without regular contact with the wellsprings of inspiration that keep us alive as preachers. Thus, most good preachers find

³³² Brown, 136.

³³³ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), 53.

³³⁴ Greg Scharf, *Prepared to Preach: God's Work and Ours in Proclaiming His Word* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2005), 41.

it essential to schedule certain times during the week when they engage in that difficult, solitary task of study.³³⁵

The veteran preachers interviewed for this study varied in whether their sermon preparation was weighted towards the beginning of the week or towards the end of the week. However, it was notable that whatever they did for sermon preparation, they did consistently week after week. This emerged as an important part of their longevity. Knowing where they needed to be with sermon preparation at each point in the week helped these veteran preachers to gauge their time usage so that they stayed on track for Sunday. Falling too far behind in sermon preparation week after week is a recipe for discouragement. Thus, for young preachers just starting out, it is important to establish good study habits early in ministry and develop an effective sermon preparation strategy. Matt warns, “You can have the best convictions in the world, but if you don’t execute wisely, you’re going to wear yourself out.”

Good study habits are an essential practice for preachers who want to endure.

John MacArthur describes the disciplined and single-minded mentality required:

Fling him into his office. Tear the “Office” sign from the door and nail on the sign, “Study.” Take him off the mailing list. Lock him up with his books and his typewriter and his Bible. Slam him down on his knees before texts and broken hearts and the lives of a superficial flock and a holy God.

Force him to be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God. Throw him into the ring to box with God until he learns how short his arms are. Engage him to wrestle with God all the night through. And let him come out only when he’s bruised and beaten into being a blessing.

Shut his mouth forever spouting remarks, and stop his tongue forever tripping lightly over every non-essential. Require him to have something to say before he dares break the silence. Bend his knees in the lonesome valley.

³³⁵ Willimon, 155.

Burn his eyes with weary study. Wreck his emotional poise with worry for God. And make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God. Rip out his telephone. Burn up his ecclesiastical success sheets. Put water in his gas tank. Give him a Bible and tie him to the pulpit. And make him preach the Word of the living God!

Let him be totally ignorant of the downstreet gossip, but give him a chapter and order him to walk around it, camp on it, sup with it, and come at last to speak it backward and forward, until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity.

And when he's burned out by the flaming Word, when he's consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him, and when he's privileged to translate the truth of God to man, finally transferred from earth to heaven, then bear him away and gently blow a muted trumpet and lay him down softly. Place a two edged sword in his coffin, and raise the tomb triumphant. For he was a brave soldier of the Word. And ere he died, he had become man of God.³³⁶

When preachers adopt this mentality, they will become like John Bunyan, of whom Charles Spurgeon once said, "Prick him anywhere; and you will find that his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his soul is full of the Word of God."³³⁷ The sermon preparation disciplines that pastors establish are significant for the long term vitality of their ministry.

The third practice that strengthens a preacher's relationship with God and his word for the long term is the discipline of reading. Wade testified, "Reading is probably the biggest thing to keep me fresh." Expressing the sentiments of other pastors interviewed, he said, "I find that when I do read, Man! It gets my creative juices flowing. And I'm excited about things. I get insights and I think, Oh yeah! I want to share that. But if I don't get the opportunity to read, the well dries up." The other pastors

³³⁶ MacArthur, 348-49.

³³⁷ Quoted in Lawson, "The Pattern of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Ezra 7: 10 and Nehemiah 8: 1-18," 455.

interviewed were equally clear about the importance of reading to maintain their freshness as a preacher. They especially noted the value of reading broadly, from books written by Puritans, to books on history, novels, plays, or contemporary periodicals. All this reading helps to keep fresh ideas flowing into a preacher's mind which, in turn, brings insights into Scripture. Peter shared how his study of criminal law gave him new insights into the temptation for Timothy to be ashamed of the Apostle Paul's imprisonment.

In order to become a learned clergy member, one must be a learning clergy member.³³⁸ This entails taking on the posture of a lifelong student. Seasoned preacher Haddon Robinson says, "Working pastors must try to make this broader reading a top priority, however difficult it may be."³³⁹ Why should this be a top priority? Will Willimon explains it best: "The preacher is not meant to be a mere channel through which water flows; he is to be more like a well. So the function of reading is to stimulate us in general, to stimulate us to think, to think for ourselves."³⁴⁰ A broad reading plan not only stimulates and exercises the mind of the preacher, but also fills up the well of ideas from which a preacher must regularly draw. Perhaps this is why the apostle Paul, even as he was in prison facing his own death, gave the following instructions to Timothy: "When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments."³⁴¹ Charles Spurgeon comments on this:

Even an apostle must read...He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into the

³³⁸ Jones, 112-13.

³³⁹ Robinson, "Required Reading," 89.

³⁴⁰ Lloyd-Jones, 181.

³⁴¹ 2 Timothy 4: 13.

third heaven, and yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books! The apostle says to Timothy and so he says to every preacher, “Give thyself unto reading.”³⁴²

To put it directly, a preacher who wants to endure and remain fresh must make time to read. Along with cultivating one’s spiritual life and developing a sermon preparation strategy, reading strengthens a preacher’s relationship to God and his word.

Practices that strengthen the preacher

When it comes to the person of the preacher, this study concludes that there are three practices which strengthen the preacher and therefore contribute to sustaining the preaching ministry. First, having a mentor during one’s developing years as a preacher is of inestimable benefit to sustaining a long term preaching ministry. What was the impact on Timothy, a young pastor in Ephesus, from the instruction, guidance and model of the Apostle Paul? A price tag cannot be placed on this experience for Timothy. It was invaluable to his pastoral and preaching ministry. Paul gave Timothy wise encouragement to persevere in his preaching like “Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”³⁴³ But it was because Paul was his mentor and could point to the model of his own life and say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith,”³⁴⁴ that these words would have a particularly powerful impact on Timothy. Indeed, the pastoral epistles stand as a testimony to the benefits that flow from a mentoring relationship.

Those interviewees who had mentors early in their ministry appeared to enjoy greater stability in their ministry because of this influence. Chris is representative. When

³⁴² Quoted in Johnson, 200-201.

³⁴³ 2 Timothy 4: 5.

³⁴⁴ 2 Timothy 4: 7.

asked what has kept him preaching for the past thirty years in only two churches, the first thing that came to his mind was the impact of the mentors he has had in ministry. He explained, “I guess models are a very large part of it. And expectations really come from that. It would have never been in my mind that I’d be likely to be in seven places in twenty five years.” In a subtle, but powerful way, good mentors set ministry expectations, which are a significant determiner of how one goes about and feels about ministry. Interestingly, even those who did not have a mentor were aware of what they had missed. Len said, “I feel badly. I’ve never had a preaching mentor, a guy I know who I could talk to directly. I wish more guys had that.” Scott chimed in, “I know one thing that would have been really helpful is if I had a mentor in preaching early on. That would have been immensely, immensely helpful.” Their voices are a testimony to the value of mentors to sustaining long term preaching ministry.

Second, this study has found that maintaining a proper balance between work and rest keeps the preacher vital and therefore sustains the preaching ministry. This theme did not emerge as a strongly in the literature review as it did in the interview analysis. In fact, this was one of the few practices that almost all of the interviewed pastors mentioned as important to sustaining their preaching ministry. It begins with taking a day off once a week, not just to perform household chores but to *enjoy restful and refreshing pursuits*. Matt articulated what a number of the pastors came to discover about the value of a day off:

I started taking this idea of a day of rest seriously. That’s a huge piece of sustaining pastoral ministry over time. If there is a failure there, typically what’s underneath that is self-sufficiency, thinking that it depends on your hard work to get the ministry done rather than trusting God and trusting his wisdom of a day of rest, which is not just about physical rest, it’s about *humility*. So underneath that self sufficiency is pride, thinking that if I just

do more work, everything's going to be fine. So, rest is huge piece. I take Monday's off, and they're really a day off.

To neglect a day off over the long term is to flirt with burnout, as a lot of the pastors learned by experience.

As an important corollary to a day off once a week is the discipline of not over-working during the rest of the week. For a number of the pastors interviewed, the natural drift of pastoral ministry tended towards working too many hours. The reasons for this were many, but the end result was the same: it was unsustainable. Wayne describes what happened to him by admitting that he was “losing weight, getting very discouraged, spending too much time away from his family, pretty grumpy at home, and just not doing too well.” While over-working can easily be rationalized as sacrificial service to God, Scott unmask it for what it often is—dependence on oneself instead of on God. He says that for him, “working less is actually a step of faith.” So both taking a day off and not over-working the rest of the week is an expression of one's faith in God and a way of maintaining the balance of life that God intended. By all accounts, preaching means hard, demanding work, but it does not mean over-work.

Besides a weekly balance of work and rest, it is also important to maintain a longer term balance between work and rest through vacations and sabbaticals. Glenn Ludwig says it best: “There is value of an extended time away from the demands of ministry that will nourish our interior life and refresh our souls. A sabbatical leave offers a wonderful opportunity to find our centers again and to be reminded of what is truly important and real in our lives.”³⁴⁵ The pastors whose churches provided them with regular vacation and sabbaticals came across as the most renewed when talking about the

³⁴⁵ Ludwig, 61.

task of preaching. On the other hand, those who were overdue for a sabbatical admitted feeling more fatigue and were more conscious of the “spiritual drain” and the “weight of spiritual responsibility” in ministry. If one of the main challenges of a long term preaching ministry is the demanding work of sermon preparation leading to emotional fatigue, then a natural antidote is a weekly day of rest and a sabbatical plan. Sabbatical plans may vary, but what is important is that a sabbatical plan exists.

Connected to this and worth mentioning in this conclusion is the value of maintaining one’s physical health for longevity in the pulpit. Though this was hardly mentioned in the literature review and only a minor theme in the interview analysis, the value of basic physical fitness is hard to deny—you have to have the physical energy to do the job. Greg Scharf fills the literature gap on this area through a chapter entitled “Preparing your Body to Preach” in his book *Prepared to Preach*. In it, he says:

Our goal is a responsible stewardship of the bodies God has given us so they may be useful in his service as long as he is our master. That means fitness for the task. You may not be fit enough to run a marathon, but you must be physically fit enough to preach. You and I need stamina, energy, concentration, and voice...In the long-term, take care of your body; build it up so you will have the necessary strength. Employ a judicious combination of exercise, moderate diet, and sufficient rest.³⁴⁶

Indeed, those interviewees who exercised regularly testified to the invigorating benefits to their overall health which translated to more energy for preaching.

The third practice, developing a support network for the preacher, also addresses the emotional weariness that is a danger for long term preachers. This was the main insight that emerged from the literature on veteran teachers. Because of the research of people like Sonia Nieto who found that “when teachers develop allies, they remain fresh,

³⁴⁶ Scharf, 88.

committed and hopeful,”³⁴⁷ Christopher Day reported, “It is now the ‘received wisdom’...that collaborative cultures enhance teacher participation and that they are likely to lead to and sustain teacher commitment.”³⁴⁸ This insight is clearly applicable for pastors in light of Kinnaman and Ells’ finding that “seventy percent of those in ministry report they do not have someone they consider a close friend, someone who could serve as a confidant during times of difficulty.”³⁴⁹ If preachers are in a demanding profession and yet do not have close friends or confidantes, it is no wonder that they are at risk for burnout. Emotional weariness doubles in weight when you face it alone rather than with the support of colleagues and friends.

This is why the interviewed subjects spoke of the tremendous value of support from their wives, fellow leaders and fellow local pastors. Matt described these support networks as “circles of commitment” and said of them, “I’m glad for them. It’s not just me.” Preaching can be a lonely profession because of the long, isolated hours spent in the study. A support network can balance this out and make all the difference. If one of the components of sustaining a long term preaching ministry is a healthy and refreshed preacher, then practices which strengthen the person of the preacher, like having a mentor, balancing work and rest, and developing a support network, make an important contribution.

Practices that strengthen the congregation

This study has identified one of the main challenges of sustaining a preaching ministry to be an unresponsive congregation and one of the great motivators of sustaining

³⁴⁷ Nieto, "From Surviving to Thriving," 12.

³⁴⁸ Day, Elliot, and Kington, "Reforms, Standards, and Teacher Identity: Challenges of Sustaining Commitment," 571.

³⁴⁹ Kinnaman and Ells, 40.

a preaching ministry to be a supportive and responsive congregation. This begs the question, what should preachers do who minister more to the former than the latter? Are they trapped? This is why Chris, one of the interviewed pastors, underscored how important it is for a pastor to choose a congregation wisely. He likens it to the prerequisite of choosing the right wife if you want to enjoy a long and happy marriage.

Of a similar dynamic in ministry, he says:

There is a matching that the Lord brings in the happiest of circumstances between the man and the church and where that's the case, there's a matching of personality and character. There's something about the ethos of the man and the ethos of the church that clicks because the senior pastor and the preaching pastor is in a real sense the face of the church.

Erwin Lutzer, who has had a long preaching ministry at one church, echoes this:

If you ask the question, how I could stay at The Moody Church for more than thirty years, the answer I would give is that there was a good symbiotic relationship between me and the congregation—in other words, I met their expectations, evidently, and they in turn responded to me in a way that was encouraging and helpful. So based on this good relationship, it has been a long marriage.³⁵⁰

Those interview subjects who enjoyed supportive relationships with their congregation largely seemed to have those good relationships from the early days of their ministry.

Yet, those who lack a supportive congregation should not throw up their hands and give up. Three basic practices emerged from this study that can help strengthen a congregation. First, preachers can train their congregation to *grow in their appreciation of* expository preaching. This study has already demonstrated that an unresponsive congregation poses a great challenge for the preacher. That's why Matt says, "Part of your task is to teach them that this is what's supposed to be happening on Sunday morning and then to do it in such a faithful way that they say, 'Oh yes, we see that what

³⁵⁰ *Personal correspondence from Erwin Lutzer to Daniel Ying, September 1, 2010.*

he said about expository preaching is in fact true. We're growing from it." A number of the pastors interviewed shared how they teach their congregations the value of expository preaching at the beginning of sermons and in membership classes, and how they seek to inculcate the value of expositional preaching among the leaders and the other church staff members. Unfortunately, this author is not aware of much literature that focuses on training a congregation to listen to sermons other than Christopher Ash's booklet entitled *Listen Up!* and a chapter in Greg Scharf's book *Prepared to Preach* entitled "Preparing the Congregation to Hear and Obey God's Word."³⁵¹ However, any investment in training a congregation to develop an appetite for expository preaching will likely prompt greater responsiveness in the congregation which, in turn, will encourage the preacher and promote longevity in the pulpit.

Second, pastoring the congregation is closely connected to effectively preaching to the congregation. As Ian Pitt-Watson says, "Preaching divorced from pastoral concern is blind. It neither knows what it is talking about nor to whom it is talking."³⁵² Jeffrey Arthurs concludes, "Nothing can replace living, working, playing, grieving, and praying with the 'audience.'"³⁵³ Making the same point, Chris told a memorable story about how Warren Wiersbe was invited by a church to be their Sunday preacher only. Thinking that they were relieving him of unnecessary pastoral work, they couldn't understand when he declined their invitation. Wiersbe explained, "No, you don't understand. I *can't* do that. Preaching by definition is to people, and I cannot sustain an authentic preaching ministry if my life is not engaged with these people." It is the pastoral work that brings you in

³⁵¹ See Christopher Ash, *Listen Up!* and Greg Scharf, *Prepared to Preach*, in the bibliography.

³⁵² Quoted in Jeffrey Arthurs, "Preaching Life into the Church," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 54.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 56.

touch with the heart issues of the congregation. If one's preaching regularly engages these issues, it is a lot more likely that the congregation will be both engaged and responsive.

Third, pastors must pray for their congregations. Ultimately, only God can change hearts, making the stony ground fertile, so the first and final recourse must be to prayer. This study has already revealed the need for preachers to pray for themselves and for their sermon preparation. Here is a call for preachers to pray for their congregations as well, that they would become the kind of spiritually hungry and responsive congregations that help to sustain long term preaching ministries.

A Final Word

How can a pastor sustain expository preaching in a long term pastorate? In the final analysis, it takes the power of God and his word, a healthy and motivated preacher, and a growing and responsive congregation. In the longest and best preaching ministries, the three components are wondrously united. Understanding the challenges that weaken these three components, the motives that flow from them, and the practices that strengthen them will help preachers sustain a vital expository preaching ministry. Preaching is the most noble and worthy of pursuits because, in John Stott's words, "it is an enormous privilege to be a biblical expositor—to stand in the pulpit with God's Word in our hands, God's Spirit in our hearts and God's people before our eyes waiting expectantly for God's voice to be heard and obeyed."³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ John Stott, "A Definition of Biblical Preaching," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 29.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher hopes that this study is a helpful beginning to determine what sustains expository preaching in a long term pastorate, but it is far from perfect or complete. In order to verify the broader relevance of this qualitative study, it would be of further interest to follow with a quantitative study that tests these conclusions in a sample size of greater statistical significance. Also, it would be enlightening to study whether the conclusions of this study hold true for preachers who preach mainly topical sermons or in what manner they differ. In order to locate the findings of this study in the context of pastoral ministry in general, it would be helpful to research what other pastoral responsibilities can contribute to emotional weariness and discouragement besides preaching.

Additional research could build on this study by exploring models of rest and sabbaticals for pastors. Among the nine pastors who were interviewed for this study, there was a broad range of sabbatical policies, from no sabbatical policy to a well-developed sabbatical policy, but little consensus about what should go into a fruitful sabbatical. Since rest and sabbaticals are instrumental in keeping preachers fresh, a better understanding of why, how and when sabbaticals are best practiced would benefit both pastors and laity in the local church. This study also identified the value of a consistent sermon preparation strategy for long term vitality in the pulpit. Among the pastors interviewed, however, there was a variety of approaches ranging from preparing early in the week to preparing later in the week. More research could be done on various models of sermon preparation and the comparative benefits of each.

Another area where the literature on preaching is limited is in understanding the role of the congregation in effective preaching. More research could be done on how the congregation influences the preacher and vice versa, and more strategies and resources could be developed for training congregations to listen to and benefit from sermons. In addition, this study identified a recurring challenge for today's preacher—pressure to measure up to superstar preachers whose sermons are readily accessible through modern technology. Underlying this challenge is a common assumption that the recording of an eloquent, well known preacher is better than the live preaching of a less eloquent, but local pastor. Both preachers and congregations operate under this assumption, whether it is right or wrong. More research could be done on the comparative benefits and shortcomings of listening to a local preacher in the context of a congregation and listening to the recording of a nationally known preacher in the context of one's own home. The findings could go a long way toward helping local pastors understand their strengths and spiritual opportunities in order to *capitalize on them*.

Last, more work could be done on how the findings of this study impact the way that seminaries prepare their students for longevity in a preaching ministry. Most seminary preaching courses understandably spend a majority of time on how to begin a preaching ministry. Are there ways that seminaries can better equip their students to sustain their preaching for the long haul? Any further insights in this area will bring great benefit not only to pastors themselves, but also to the churches they pastor, and to the advance of the gospel worldwide.

APPENDIX A

BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRERESEARCH PROJECT ON SUSTAINING EXPOSITORY PREACHING IN LONG TERM
PASTORATES

Name: _____

I. CHURCH BACKGROUND

Church where you have been serving:

Your position at the church:

What are the main responsibilities of your position?

What percentage of your role at the church is devoted to preaching?

How would you describe the demographics of the congregation you are serving?

What is the average attendance at your weekend service/s?

II. PREACHING BACKGROUND

Length of time you have been serving in your preaching role at your church:

Total number of years you have served as a preaching pastor (including your current ministry):

How many hours can you typically devote to sermon preparation in a given week?

How many times do you typically preach on a weekend for your church?

How many weekends out of the calendar year do you typically preach?

III. STAFF BACKGROUND

How large is the pastoral staff at your church?

Does any of your staff assist you in sermon preparation and in what capacity?

What is the sabbatical/study leave policy of the church?

APPENDIX B

RESEARCH SUBJECTS CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Daniel Ying on _____ . I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to: explore how pastors can sustain expository preaching in long term pastorates
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include: guidance for young pastors who are beginning their ministry and encouragement for experienced pastors who are in danger of dropping out.
- 3) The research process will include: a qualitative case study, interviewing seasoned expository preachers about how they are sustained in their weekly preaching ministry.
- 4) Potential discomforts or stresses: reminders of discouraging or emotionally stressful seasons of ministry, probing questions about one's preaching experiences
- 5) Potential risks: none identified
- 6) The results of this study are confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the project/dissertation.
- 7) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the study.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one and return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Dr. Robert Burns; Institutional Review Board; Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Telephone (314) 434-4044.

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