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PRESENTING EVERYONE MATURE IN CHRIST:
EXPLORING HOW PASTORS
INTENTIONALLY HELP CONGREGANTS
TOWARDS SPIRITUAL MATURITY THROUGH
THEIR PREACHING MINISTRIES

By
Mark Goudy

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

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Abstract

Preaching in the context of a worship service is often marginalized or overlooked as a key disciple-making strategy among believing congregants. Further, the perception of many pastors is that their preaching ministries often have little, significant impact for good upon the spiritual growth of those regularly listening. The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors intentionally help their congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries.

By means of qualitative research methods, eight proficient, preaching pastors who endeavor to help their congregants towards spiritual maturity by their preaching were interviewed regarding the purposes, principles, and practices of their preaching ministries. The review of literature and analysis of the interviews failed to identify preaching strategies or practices that ensure the growing spiritual maturity of congregants. Nonetheless, a number of prominent, common themes were noted as being crucial for motivating and empowering congregants towards spiritual maturity by preaching. These included an in-depth proclamation of the gospel; application that focuses on the heart; a gospel-centered hermeneutic; a balanced diet of expository material; a broader goal of building a mature, united church; and a believing expectation of pastor and people meeting and worshipping God as the word is preached. The study also revealed that the preachers' effectiveness in their preaching ministry was also enhanced as they learned from other effectual practitioners, as they continued to desire to grow spiritually themselves, and as they humbly acknowledged to their congregations their own on-going struggles and constant need of God's sustaining grace in their lives.

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I have learned so much from this experience, for which I am deeply grateful. I thank God for his gracious call to serve and proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ’s grace. In consequence of this study, may many, or maybe even just a few preaching pastors and congregants alike, grow in their understanding and appreciation of the gospel

of God's grace, may their hearts be captured and captivated with the wonder and beauty of Jesus, and may their lives reflect more of Him as they live for his glory, now and for eternity.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Church Pastors frequently minister with the awareness that many of the believing congregants within their churches struggle in their progress towards spiritual maturity. This was clearly confirmed in a recent study that Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago conducted. Renowned worldwide for its discipleship programs and its stated purpose of seeking to “turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ,”¹ the Willow Creek leaders commissioned an internal survey of members and attendees to determine which of the church’s many activities and programs most effectively cultivated individuals’ spiritual growth.² Keen to help members grow further in their faith, in their love for God, and in their love for others, the church leadership assumed that increased participation in church activities resulted in moving people towards spiritual maturity. In their own terms, “Church Activity = Spiritual Growth.”³ Through the survey, they wanted to know which activities were most productive in order to focus greater attention upon them.

The survey unexpectedly revealed that actively participating members were not maturing spiritually as well as the leaders had thought. In fact, results showed that their Church Activity Model for Spiritual Growth was largely ineffective in stimulating

¹ Willow Creek Community Church, “Willow History,” [willowcreek.org](http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/willow-history), accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/willow-history>.

² Cally Parkinson, and Greg Hawkins, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Revealed About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 9.

³ Ibid., 16.

heartfelt love for God and one's neighbor. Despite active participation in a range of church activities, many respondents stated they felt spiritually dissatisfied or "stalled"⁴ to the extent that a significant number were seriously considering leaving the church altogether. Over the next few years, other congregations in the Willow Creek Association participated in the survey revealing similarly disappointing results. Clearly, the Church Activity Model by itself was ineffectual in stimulating spiritual maturity.

Others have echoed what Willow Creek discovered. The late Dallas Willard, academic philosopher and noted author on Christian spirituality, wrote that

*the central problem facing the contemporary church in the Western world and worldwide, [is] the problem of how to routinely lead its members through a path of spiritual, moral, and personal transformation that brings them into authentic Christlikeness in every aspects of their lives, enabling them, in the language of the apostle Paul, "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1 NASV).*⁵

James C. Wilhoit, Professor of Christian Formation and Ministry, agrees. He argues, "Although formation describes the central work of the church, and despite a plethora of resolutions, programs and resources, the fact remains that spiritual formation has not been the priority in the North American church that it should be."⁶

Christians struggle to grow spiritually, even at church, and many church leaders feel confused regarding how to help. This confusion deepens as opinions differ among conservative evangelicals regarding both the nature of mature Christian discipleship and

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Dallas Willard, "Foreword," in *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered*, by James C. Wilhoit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 9.

⁶ Ibid., 15f.

how it is best achieved. Some emphasize small groups,⁷ others emphasize individual mentoring,⁸ while others prize worldviews as key to growing spiritually.⁹ Consequently, varying and sometimes opposing models for Christian maturity are extolled. As local church leaders seek answers for helping their congregation members mature in Christ, a primary, God-given tool for helping believers grow spiritually is tragically overlooked.

In the range of contemporary works consulted in preparation for this study that highlighted a variety of methodologies for cultivating spiritual maturity, authors gave little or no consideration to the regular preaching ministry in weekly congregation worship services as a means of effecting spiritual maturity among Christians.¹⁰ Yet, Paul preached Christ with purpose, saying, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”¹¹ By preaching, Paul determined “to present everyone mature in Christ.” He explores a similar theme in Ephesians 4:12-13. Such exhortatory directives flow from the risen Christ’s authoritative commission to his apostles to “make disciples of all nations, [by] baptising them in the

⁷ Bill Hull, *Seven Steps to Transform Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1997), 135; see also Colin Marshall, *Growth Groups: A Training Course in How to Lead Small Groups* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 1995).

⁸ Jim Petersen, *Lifestyle Discipleship: The Challenge of Following Jesus in Today’s world* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 29.

⁹ Charles Dunahoo, *Making Kingdom Disciples: A New Framework* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005).

¹⁰ See, for instance, the scant or absent references to preaching as a means of God’s grace, in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005); John MacArthur, *Keys To Spiritual Growth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001); and Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014).

¹¹ Colossians 1:28.

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [and] teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”¹²

Problem and Purpose Statements

Even though evangelical and reformed theology advocates the necessity of preaching in connection to the maturing process of Christians,¹³ it must be noted that few discipleship models give any serious attention to the corporate maturing and edification of the local church as a whole, or of preaching’s role in a gathered congregational context as a means to encouraging spiritual maturity.

Several reasons explain this absence. First, not everyone shares an exalted regard for preaching. Many on the fringe of church circles, that is those attending services periodically or with a nominal commitment to Christ or the church fellowship, hold preaching in low esteem.¹⁴ Preaching continues to attract widespread criticism as an out-dated, authoritarian, and ineffective mode of communication, particularly from some within mainline denominations.¹⁵ There are even some within today’s church leadership who consider preaching to have a spiritually detrimental effect on otherwise enthusiastic adherents.¹⁶ Second, not every preacher who values the necessity and primacy of

¹² Matthew 28:19.

¹³ Michael J. Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 23; Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Expositor Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 71; Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 167; Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 187-190.

¹⁴ Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, Proclamation Trust (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 17ff.

¹⁵ Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching*, 33ff.; Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness*, 189.

¹⁶ Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching*, 36.

preaching recognizes the role of preaching for spiritual formation. Preaching's role in discipleship is a presupposition that pastor often overlook.¹⁷ Third, even preachers who recognize the role of preaching for maturing believers in Christ, may have little skill or training in bringing this role to bear well on their ministry.¹⁸ Fourth, preachers encounter listeners who are not prepared to see the preaching moment as a means for their spiritual growth in Jesus.¹⁹

Writing over a generation ago, evangelical statesman and authoritative preacher John R. W. Stott confessed to being “an impenitent believer in the indispensable necessity of preaching both for evangelism and for the healthy growth of the Church.”²⁰ While God blesses and uses other transformative means to effect Christ-like change in people's lives, such as small groups, mentoring, and church programs, Stott's sentiment hold true in today's church: preaching is indispensable for evangelism and spiritual growth. While preaching's importance has not diminished, the church's valuation of preaching has. Fabarez declares, “If preaching is intended to change lives, then it is missing its mark in the modern church.”²¹ Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how evangelical and reformed pastors intentionally help their congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries.

¹⁷ Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 14-19.

¹⁸ Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), xiv, 39.

¹⁹ Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan*, 44; Matthew 13:13-23; James 1:22-25.

²⁰ John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder Paperback, 2014), 9.

²¹ Fabarez, *Preaching That Changes Lives*, xiii.

Research Questions

Inconsequential and ineffective preaching often leaves congregants unmoved and, possibly even, resentful of hearing their pastor's sermon; however, there are other churches where the senior pastors are clearly functioning as life transforming and church renewing change agents, spearheaded through their expository preaching ministry. Often, in churches that emphasize the necessity and priority of expository preaching along with a variety of other word ministries, these teaching pastors are conspicuously experiencing clear signs of authentic individual and collective spiritual maturity, healthy vitality, and attractive vibrancy among congregants. With a desire to understand more fully how preaching stimulates spiritual growth within God's sovereign providence and purposes, the researcher identified proficient preachers who value the role of preaching in spiritual formation/maturity. To learn from these experience preachers, the researcher then conducted interviews with them, exploring their beliefs and practices. The following research questions guided this learning process:

RQ 1: In what ways does preaching in a worship service intentionally further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

- a) What are your general objectives as you preach in a worship service?
- b) What do you consider to be defining characteristics of Christian believers who are progressing towards spiritual maturity?
- c) How does your understanding of how Christian believers grow in spiritual maturity influence your preaching ministry?
- d) In what ways and to what extent is the role of preaching distinctive in helping congregants towards spiritual maturity?
- e) How does preaching relate to other disciplines of the Christian life which encourage growth in spiritual maturity?

RQ 2: What are the content emphases of sermons that are intentionally designed to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

- a) What factors determine which biblical texts are chosen for these sermons?
- b) What biblical themes or doctrines do pastors intentionally emphasise or revisit in their sermons to help congregants towards spiritual maturity?
- c) In what ways do other teaching programs within the life of the congregation complement your preaching ministry?

RQ 3: How do pastors intentionally design the application portions of their sermons in order to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

- a) What general approach do pastors adopt in their applying sermon texts to congregants towards spiritual maturity?
- b) In applying sermons for obedience, how do pastors avoid being heard as merely prescriptive or moralistic?
- c) In a preaching context, how do you help congregants understand the life-application relevance of more difficult, but important, theological concepts?
- d) Through their preaching, how do pastors seek to encourage congregants who show little interest to grow in spiritual maturity?

These questions explore the interviewees' understanding of the process of Christian spiritual maturity and how it may be reflected in individuals' lives and in the corporate fellowship of a congregation. The first question explores pastoral understanding of the distinctive purposes of preaching and general objectives for their congregation through their preaching. The second question considers what biblical material pastors expound upon and/or regularly revisit in a worship service context to help the church mature. The third question examines the pastors' methodology in applying sermon texts to congregants' lives that will stimulate spiritual maturity and Christlikeness.

Significance of the Study

Each new generation brings its own peculiar challenges and objections to ministry. Proclaiming propositional truth and expecting the listener to respond submissively is not culturally fashionable. Many within today's churches, at least in the researcher's context, respond to their pastor's regular preaching jadedly. Discipleship curricula designed for individuals or groups are often promoted and adopted as an independent disciple-making strategy with little or no resonance with the on-going Sunday preaching ministry. The accepted perception is that such group ministries or mentoring methods are invariably more effective in growing disciples than listening to sermons. As a result of this negativity, a growing number of professing believers and their pastors are questioning the value of preaching as a valid and uniquely strategic method of motivating and stimulating spiritual maturity, or they are uncertain as to preacher's role within the life of the church. This study seeks clarity on the nature and purpose of preaching within the spectrum of word-centred ministries in the regular pattern of the local church. This study, therefore, hopes to offer encouragement to struggling, preaching pastors who are losing confidence in their preaching or who are questioning the value of their preaching to effect spiritual transformation in the hearts and lives of those listening to them.

Second, the apostle Paul clearly believed in the efficacy of Christ-centred proclamation and teaching to effect spiritual maturity in the lives of believers as he shows in Colossians 1:28. However, many pastors are not seeing such preaching-induced transformation among church members. This study identifies and clarifies hindrances to

effectual preaching for spiritual growth. The study then suggests a more productive way forward.

Third, the researcher expects that common patterns of methodology and emphases of content will emerge from the pastoral interviews. These patterns of methodology and emphases will help pastors who desire to similarly encourage a growing, spiritual maturity throughout their own congregations. The researcher further hopes that preachers will give more conscious, enlightened, and purposeful consideration to their craft. Pastor and seminary professor, Dan Doriani, highlights the often overlooked reality that many preachers, even effective ones, operate instinctively and give little attention to improving their skills through a deeper understanding of the underlying theory of preaching or reflect upon their sermon application. Fearing that the practices of excellent preaching might be lost without inquiry, Doriani writes, “Given that the knowledge of the masters may be unvoiced and semi-conscious, we owe it to the church, and even to the masters themselves, to distil their secrets and bring them to awareness.”²² The researcher desires that this study will bring such unvoiced secrets of effective, life, and church transforming preaching to light. The researcher thus shares the aspirations of preaching tutor Simon Vibert, who critiques exemplary preachers so that, “...preachers and listening congregations will have a better sense of why it is that some preachers connect hearers with God, inspiring, encouraging and motivating them to authentic Christian living, and enabling them to leave with a sense that through the preaching they have indeed met with the living Lord.”²³

²² Dan Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 31.

²³ Simon Vibert, *Excellence in Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 13.

The researcher prayerfully hopes that preaching pastors and their congregations will experience spiritual renewal and revitalisation through Sunday sermons which, owned and blessed by God, will build his people up in Christlikeness and deepening faith, persevering hope and steadfast love.²⁴

Perhaps through this study, fewer churches (and preachers) will be, to use Dallas Willard's words, "distracted from the central task of teaching their people how to live the spiritual life in a way that brings them progressively to enjoy the character of Christ as their own,"²⁵ Perhaps, discouraged pastor-teachers will have their confidence in the power of preaching to change people's lives for God's glory restored and renewed, and may be better prepared, equipped and enabled to labour to that holy end.

Definition of Terms

Evangelical—a trans-denominational movement within the broader family of adherents to Christianity, united in belief and commitment to the Bible's supremacy, authority, and sufficiency as the revelation of God's word, works, and will in all matters of faith and practical living; the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, who made atonement by his substitutionary death for human sinfulness, thereby enabling people to be reconciled and restored to God by his grace alone; the necessity of conversion, whereby under the sovereign supervision of the Holy Spirit, repentant sinners personally and consciously respond to this good news with faith in Christ, are incorporated into fellowship with other believers, evidence their conversion by a growing Christ-centeredness and Christ-likeness, and endeavour to witness to Christ to others through

²⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1:3-5.

²⁵ Willard, "Foreword," 15ff.

evangelism and deeds of loving-kindness. Evangelical Christians believe that their expression of the faith stands in direct continuum of original, orthodox New Testament Christianity.

Reformed—within the broad evangelical movement, reformed Christianity embraces a particular theological perspective, articulated principally by the sixteenth century church reformers, primarily John Calvin and Martin Luther and their successors, in which the sovereign, antecedent and gracious activity of God in all matters of providence and human salvation is given due, and in their understanding, rightful biblical prominence. This perspective has been historically expressed in such documents as the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (Anglican/Episcopalian), the Westminster Confession and Catechisms (Anglican/Presbyterian), and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, and is reflected in contemporary doctrinal summaries such as the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition.

Spiritual maturity—is viewed from a biblical, particularly reformed, evangelical Christian perspective. Spiritual maturity arises from a living relationship with God through union with Christ. It is manifested externally as a growing, Spirit-enabled, heartfelt obedience and conformity to God's word and will, leading towards Christlikeness in observable character and in selfless loving and serving relationships towards others; and internally as a deepening Spirit-motivated, empowered and directed repentance, faith, contentment, joy, worship and love focussed on God through Jesus Christ.

Preaching—in this study, preaching is the regular exposition and proclamation of biblical truth and its application, in the context of a church worship service, to a particular congregation.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how evangelical and reformed pastors help congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. This literature review seeks four goals: to summarize homiletic literature on the nature, purpose, and significance of preaching; to survey biblical-theological teaching on the efficacy of preaching and its relationship to Christian spiritual maturity; to examine the biblical content and themes that effectively promote spiritual maturity; to survey best practices for preachers to apply biblical truth to the lives of listening congregants. As these themes dovetail, a measure of overlap of authors' perspectives will be reflected in this literature review; nonetheless, each goal will be explored accordingly.

Definition and Purposes of Preaching

In exploring how pastors help congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries, reviewing how pastors view preaching and what they expect their preaching to accomplish will help facilitate understanding.

Professor of Preaching and Communication at Northern Seminary, Chicago, Michael J. Quicke notes the Apostle Paul's reference to "prophesying"²⁶ in a local church situation. Quicke correlates this prophesying to preaching because its intelligible speech aims for people's corporate "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."²⁷

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:3f.

²⁷ Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching*, 23.

Similarly, Anglican academic, Peter Adam, focussing on Ephesians 4:12f, notes the corporate “building up” as a result of the preaching ministry in a church setting. In consequence, Adam defines preaching as “the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for serving, unity of faith, maturity, growth, and upbuilding... The main purpose of preaching is the edification of the body.”²⁸

Historically, the seventeenth-century Westminster divines held to a high view of preaching and its transformative role in the life of individual believers and congregations. The Larger Catechism answers Question 155, “How is the word made effectual to salvation?” saying,

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of building them up in grace and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.²⁹

The divines believed that God could and would use preaching to bring spiritual renewal in believers’ lives. In contrast, contemporary pastors often look to a range of other spiritual disciplines or methodologies to accomplish the same.

In a recent monograph, Scott Gibson, Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Cornwall Theological Seminary affirms, “We preach to help disciples mature... The aim of preaching is to help Christ’s disciples grow and so we want to be intentional about it.”³⁰ Gibson comments on Paul’s exhortation to Timothy to preach the word in all

²⁸ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 71.

²⁹ Free Church of Scotland, *Confession of Faith*, 98.

³⁰ Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan*, 14.

circumstances, noting how the context demonstrates scripture's sufficiency to teach, rebuke, correct, and train disciples of Jesus.³¹ He writes, "Growth of the believer is an ongoing expectation... Preaching is a means of discipleship, a shaping of men and women into the people God wants them to be – growing, deep believers able to face the world in which they live because they have been nurtured to do so by the Word."³²

Gibson shares the opinion of those³³ who maintain that preaching in a church worship service on a Sunday "is not all of what it means to shape believers in Jesus Christ, but it certainly is integral, and its role in discipleship is a presupposition that is often overlooked."³⁴ Gibson believes that it is "tragic"³⁵ that many pastors in today's churches, uncertain as to the nature and purpose of preaching, have lost confidence in preaching to nurture believers, and thus, they turn to other means.

Preaching offers more than its pragmatic usefulness, even for making disciples. In the estimation of some, the stakes are much greater. Westminster Theological Seminary professor, Michael Horton argues,

...preaching is not an indifferent medium that just happened to be available in the era of Jesus and the apostles but can be replaced by more effective media in our day. There is something intrinsic to the preached Word that makes it essential to the ministry and mission – indeed, very existence – of the church. It is a Word from God, through an authorized messenger, unlocking prison doors.³⁶

³¹ 2 Timothy 3:15-4:5.

³² Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan*, 17.

³³ Phillip D. Jensen, and Paul Grimmond, *Archer & the Arrow: Preaching the Very Words of God* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2010), 15f.

³⁴ Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan*, 18.

³⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁶ Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 167.

In Romans 10:14-17, the apostle Paul underlines the importance of preaching for the furtherance of the Christian mission and the strengthening of the faith of believers. Reformed theologian Klaas Runia examines Romans 10 and concludes, “Preaching is as necessary for the Christian faith as breathing is for the life of man. Without the preaching of the gospel there is no faith.”³⁷

Quicke agrees with Horton regarding the necessity of preaching for the spiritual vitality of the church. He writes,

Ineffectual preaching has dire consequences for God’s church and mission in the twenty-first century. A crisis in preaching means a crisis in the health and life of the local church. Of course, local churches live and die for many reasons. Strong churches with authentic worship and vital mission core owe much to factors such as gifted leadership, spiritual vitality, prayer, vision, and above all the grace of God. But preaching has primary responsibility, and when it is weak and sick, the local church and its mission are weak and sick.³⁸

These authors clearly understand preaching to have a highly significant sine qua non role in the spiritual vibrancy and health of local congregations.

Regarding the nature of preaching, preaching professor and author, Haddon Robinson defines expository preaching as “the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.”³⁹

For Robinson, preaching’s purpose is ultimately the application of biblical truth to lives of those listening. Sensitive to the congregation’s “hurts, cries, and fears,” the

³⁷ Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1983), 24.

³⁸ Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching*, 34.

³⁹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Expository Preaching: Principles and Practice*, 2nd rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 20.

preacher studies the scriptures so that he may bring them to bear relevantly upon the people in the circumstances where they live.⁴⁰ In particular, Robinson believes that any “expository sermon, therefore, finds its purpose in line with the biblical purposes. The expositor must first figure out why a particular passage was included in the Bible, and with this in mind decide what God desires to accomplish through the sermon in his hearers today.”⁴¹

Pastor and former seminary professor, Dr. Bryan Chapell builds upon Robinson’s work and describes more clearly what it is that God desires from the preached sermon. Chapell contends that “God is active in his Word, convicting the heart, renewing the mind, and strengthening the will.”⁴² Therefore, the preacher’s concern is to be principally and compellingly transformative. Preachers must be more than doctrinally instructive, as necessary as that is. Chapell summarizes, “the primary goal of the Sermon is not to inform the mind, but rather to confront the mind and heart with biblical truths in order to conform the will to Christ’s purposes.”⁴³ Chapell distinguishes an expository sermon by the fact that “it [expounds] Scripture by deriving from a specific text main points and subpoints that disclose the thought of the author, cover the scope of the passage, and are applied to the lives of the listeners.”⁴⁴ Seminary professor, Darrell W. Johnson agrees with Chapell’s definition, and encourages his own readers to “[n]ote the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 26f.

⁴¹ Ibid., 109.

⁴² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 234f.

⁴³ Ibid., 234f.

⁴⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 132.

four verbs in the last sentence: expound, derive, cover and apply. All are governed by the one specific biblical passage at hand.”⁴⁵ Chapell’s use of “disclose” could also be added to the list.⁴⁶

Echoing Robinson, Pastors Dever and Gilbert, define expositional preaching as “preaching in which the main point of the biblical text becomes the main point of the sermon being preached.”⁴⁷ They believe that it is such preaching “that tends most to the health of the church and maturity of believers.”⁴⁸ However, Christian preaching, they maintain, has at its heart the desire to make a change both among believers and unbelievers, “of spurring believers on in their maturity in Christ and awakening nonbelievers to their need of a Savior.”⁴⁹ For these authors, preaching has two main aims: edification and evangelism.

Noted pastor and author, Tim Keller also advocates for this twin emphasis. Following a pattern established in the preaching ministry of influential Welsh preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), Keller believes that one of the characteristics of preaching “by which the Holy Spirit brings lasting change to the lives of individuals and to congregations,”⁵⁰ what Keller terms “Gospel renewal,”⁵¹ is preaching the gospel to

⁴⁵ Darrell Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God's Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 57.

⁴⁶ Ibid.; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 31.

⁴⁷ Mark Dever, and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2012), 36.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 50–52.

⁵⁰ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balance, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 77.

both Christians and non-Christians at once. He exhorts, “Don’t preach to your congregation for spiritual growth, assuming that everyone in attendance is a Christian; and don’t just preach the Gospel evangelistically, thinking that Christians cannot grow from it. Evangelize as you edify, and edify as you evangelize.”⁵² As gospel preaching points unconverted sinners to Christ to experience a justifying salvation, so, Keller argues, the same gospel preaching also sanctifies and edifies converted believers towards mature holiness and Christlikeness. Seminary professor D. E. Johnson summarizes Keller’s position, saying, “What both the unbeliever and the believer need to hear in preaching is the gospel, with its implications for a life lived in confident response to amazing grace.”⁵³

Evangelical Anglican theologian J. I. Packer defines preaching “not institutionally but functionally” and says that “any situation where it is possible to explain the Word of God and apply it, there is preaching.”⁵⁴ Packer’s definition is broader than sermonizing in a Sunday service, allowing for a variety of contexts in which preaching takes place. According to Packer, preaching can happen formally in a church service but also informally in casual conversations or counselling situations. Whatever the context, Packer states that the purpose of preaching “is to inform, persuade and call forth an

⁵¹ Ibid., 54ff.

⁵² Ibid., 79.

⁵³ Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 55.

⁵⁴ J. I. Packer, "Aspects of Authority" (lecture, Evangelical Ministry Assembly at St. Helen's Bishopsgate, London, 1986), 13.

appropriate response to the God whose message and instruction are being delivered.”⁵⁵

As such, preaching always aims at application. Packer continues, “As preaching is God-centered in its viewpoint and Christ-centered in its substance, so it is life-centred in its focus and life-changing in its thrust,”⁵⁶ with the appropriate response to such preaching consisting of “repentance, faith, obedience, love effort, hope, fear, zeal, joy, praise, prayer, or some blend of these.”⁵⁷ However, Packer is concerned that preaching is not simply understood as the authority of God presented as prescriptive moralism. He explains, “Preaching mediates not only God’s authority, but also His *presence* and *power*. Preaching effects an encounter not simply with truth, but with God Himself.”⁵⁸

Quicke’s description of true preaching shares Packer’s emphasis on God’s transforming presence in preaching and of its effect on listeners. Quicke defines preaching with respect to the dynamic impact the word’s proclamation has in people’s lives. His conviction is “that preaching is nothing less than sharing the in-breaking of God’s news to create new people in new community.”⁵⁹ At its best, Christian preaching “is a biblical speaking/listening/seeing/doing event that God empowers to form Christ-shaped people and communities... Preaching is about God communicating his will and

⁵⁵ J. I. Packer, “Why Preach,” in *Preaching: The Preacher and Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, ed., Samuel T. Logan (n.p.: Evangelical Press, 1986), 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9f.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁹ Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching*, 27.

purpose and immediacy to effect change. Preaching, at its best, is a God happening, empowered by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁶⁰

Quicke criticizes preaching models that view preaching merely as “a communication arc of 180 degrees with the Bible and listeners at two ends and a preacher making a connection.”⁶¹ He prefers a cyclical approach on the understanding that preaching

flows from God the Father, who addresses us in Scripture and in Christ, through the responses of the preacher and the people, and then back to God in the form of worship, witness, and service. It involves a movement through 360 degrees of eventfulness as God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – speaks through his Word *and* empowers the preacher *and* convicts the listeners *and* transforms the lives of the preacher and the listeners.⁶²

Johnson shares Quicke’s view that, in biblical preaching, listeners have a transformational encounter with the living God through the Bible text. Johnson believes that God uses the text to effect change in people’s lives. Johnson understands that, in expository preaching, the preacher participates with the risen Christ, through the Holy Spirit who “[engenders] an encounter with the Lord of the text in which the Lord announces news, good news which causes a shift in worldview, calling for a new step of trusting obedience; enabling us to do it, to actually live in the new reality opened up to us by the opening of the text.”⁶³

According to Johnson, every sermon ought to be about Christ since “the Holy Spirit has ‘breathed’ (2 Tim 3:16 NIV) the text to bring about an encounter with the Jesus

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 48f.

⁶² Ibid., 49.

⁶³ Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 75.

of the text.”⁶⁴ Proclaiming the good news of what Jesus has accomplished effects a shift in listeners’ faulty worldview, giving a correct perception of life’s truths and realities. Preaching that proclaims Christ’s true perspective requires that listeners change how they live, since they are called to a life of obedience stemming from faith in what God has declared. Johnson explains,

Every “do” of every text is but another way of [Christ] saying “Trust me”. Texts change lives, and preaching texts changes lives, because every text calls for a new step of trusting God by doing what God tells us to do... If the Word made flesh is speaking in the sermon – which he is doing if the sermon is faithful to the text – then what he says will happen. Again, his word not only informs, it performs, it transforms. The Holy Spirit, who breathes the text, breathes his power into us to live the text.⁶⁵

Authors and pastor trainers Tim Chester and Marcus Honeysett write that as God created the world through his word, rules over human history through his word, so “His kingdom now grows as we proclaim his word, calling people to the obedience of faith.”⁶⁶ Consequently, according to these authors, the measure of good preaching is not so much good Bible teaching per se but in good Bible living which results. Commentating on James 1:22 and James 2:17, 19, Chester and Honeysett emphasize the importance of doing the word that is heard. They state, “Maturity is about living out the call of Christ to be disciples and make disciples. You can consume all the church sermons you like and be just as immature at the end as at the beginning if all you do is passively listen.”⁶⁷ Like Packer and Chapell, Chester and Honeysett also believe that preaching goes beyond

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60f.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁶ Tim Chester, and Marcus Honeysett, *Gospel Centred Preaching* (Surry, UK: The Book Company, 2014), 5.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 20.

biblically-based, prescriptive, practical moralism. For Christians to change behavior, their affections—those motives which drive human behaviour and emotions, such as desires, convictions, hopes, fears, longings—must be engaged. Thus they affirm, “The goal of preaching is to capture the affections of our hearts for Christ so that lives are changed so that God is glorified.”⁶⁸

Pastors and authors Josh Moody and Robin Weekes concur. They believe that the “goal of preaching [is] to captivate people’s hearts with the beauty of Jesus.”⁶⁹ They define preaching as “the God-ordained means by which He meets with His people through His Word and by His Spirit in such a way that His people’s eyes are opened to see Jesus and by captivated by Him.”⁷⁰ These authors believe that transformative preaching must engage people’s hearts and not just their minds. In conversion, spiritually blind eyes are “opened so that we can see the beauty of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”⁷¹ Therefore, Christian growth “is then about having the eyes of our hearts opened more and more... And God has ordained preaching as an integral way in which that happens.”⁷²

In his book on church renewal, seminary professor and missions leader C. John Miller devotes a chapter to the unique role of preaching in the revitalization and maturity of the congregation. He understands “preaching by faith [to mean]... that through the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8, 25.

⁶⁹ Josh Moody, and Robin Weekes, *Burning Hearts: Preaching to the Affections* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christians Focus Publications Ltd., 2014), 33.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 25, 37.

⁷¹ Ibid., 37.

⁷² Ibid.

humbling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have seen the Christ of the Scriptures, and we have fearlessly handed on to our hearers what we have seen.”⁷³ The purpose of preaching Christ, often born out of the preacher’s personal cost of “humbling pain,” is that “of bringing Christ to them and them to Christ. The goal is to change them by the power of the gospel.”⁷⁴ Miller believes that this “preaching the doctrine of the Cross... has power to dissolve the characteristic features of the ingrown church. Its inward-looking clubbiness, its holier-than-thou defensiveness, and its indifference to welcoming the lost cannot survive the proclamation of Christ’s world-embracing love.”⁷⁵

Bryan Chapell agrees, “preaching that stimulates ever greater love for God drives the affections of the world from the heart so that it beat ever stronger for God’s purposes.”⁷⁶ As preachers help listeners more fully understand the sufficiency, efficacy, and majesty of God’s grace towards them, then they are more willing and able to obey God out of love for him. Thus, “consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ is a preacher’s primary instrument to stimulate a passion for God and his ways.”⁷⁷

For Chester and Honeycutt, preaching that captures the heart’s affections for Christ means,

Proclaiming God’s word in such a way that God’s people see God’s greatness and rejoice in his total supremacy; presenting the *light* of God so that, through the Holy Spirit, people might get taken up with the *person* of God; speaking the words of God to extend the reign of God in people’s hearts so that they yearn with

⁷³ C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 121.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁶ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 326.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

David: ‘as the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants after you’ (Psalm 42v1); proclaiming good news of peace with God so that rebels submit to him and enjoy him for ever; presenting the surpassing treasure of God so that people love him more than life; leading people in the ways of God so that – taught, corrected, reproved, and trained in righteousness – we might be equipped for every good work.⁷⁸

Life transformation occurs when Christ captures and captivates hearts through preaching brings glory to God. For Chester and Honeysett, this is the true goal of preaching. They explain, “God is glorified when hearts are set on fire for him and his truth. God is honoured when hearts are changed by the Holy Spirit through the word. God is magnified by lives that demonstrate that they delight in all that he is and all that he does. This is how God is glorified in sermons, talks and Bible studies.”⁷⁹ Mere obedience to God’s will and word does not, by itself, bring glory to God. As influential pastor and author John Piper writes, “the glory of God does not reflect brightly in the hearts of men and women when they cower unwillingly in submission to his authority, or when they obey in servile fear; or when there is no gladness in response to the glory of their king.”⁸⁰ For Piper, the implication for preaching is plain,

When God sends his emissaries to declare, “Your God reigns!” his aim is not to constrain man’s submission by an act of raw authority; his aim is to ravish our affections with irresistible displays of glory. The only submission that fully reflects the worth and glory of the king is glad submission... Therefore, the goal of preaching is the glory of God reflected in the glad submission of the human heart.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Chester, and Honeysett, *Gospel Centred Preaching*, 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁰ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 28.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Similarly, in addressing preachers, Chester and Honeysett write about the importance of preaching in order to help listeners grasp the ultimate purpose of preaching. Very often, listeners will want the sermon to relevantly and practically address the issues and problems of contemporary living from a biblical perspective, offering direction and assistance as to life and lifestyle choices in a world that is often either indifferent or hostile to Christians' needs and concerns. In contrast, Chester and Honeysett suggest that when listeners' eyes are lifted above their present experience to the transcendent glory of God, then life and its problems are seen in their proper perspective,

Our job is to preach the glory of God for the glory of God. The glory of God is both the content and goal of our preaching. Life is not about me. And preaching is not all about addressing my needs... We're to lift people's sight above the horizons of their small me-centred world to see the majesty of God. But here's the thing: the glory of God is the water that truly satisfies and the rock upon which we can build our lives.⁸²

Biblical-Theological Background of Preaching

The biblical-theological premise for preaching has a varied, strong foundation. The historical precedent and practice of Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, with whom contemporary preachers stand in direct continuum,⁸³ provide direct biblical exhortation to engage in preaching for evangelistic and edificatory purposes.⁸⁴ Furthermore, God specifically called, equipped, anointed, and appointed people to preach in order that the kingdom can spread and deepen in people's hearts.⁸⁵ Most importantly,

⁸² Chester, and Honeysett, *Gospel Centred Preaching*, 29.

⁸³ Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 2:14, 40-42; Acts 4:2, 29, 33; Acts 6:3-7; Acts 8:4; Acts 14:1-3, 21; Acts 15:36; Acts 17:1-3; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-8.

⁸⁴ 2 Timothy 4:1-2; Romans 10:10-17.

⁸⁵ Matthew 9:35-38; Matthew 10:7; Matthew 28:18-20.

God himself accomplishes his will through the means of his word as the psalmist proclaims, "...He spoke, and it came to be."⁸⁶ As preachers faithfully proclaim God's word, by the Spirit, God then speaks freshly through that word to fulfil his purposes in people's lives. This section will explore these biblical-theological themes in more depth.

Preaching's Role

Peter Adam identifies three theological foundations that undergird preaching's primary role among the variety of individual and public word ministries practiced and modelled in the Bible. Adam says, "the belief that *God has spoken*, that his words remain powerful, and that without this historic revelation of God in words there can be no ministry of the Word."⁸⁷ From the Bible's opening verse, God is a speaking God who acts creatively, powerfully, and effectively through his words. Humankind, made by God in his image, is given the capacity to receive, comprehend, and respond to the words that God says.⁸⁸ Jesus frequently says, "It is written,"⁸⁹ demonstrating that God speaks authoritatively, and hearers must live in obedient conformity to God's word. Jesus is also clear that his own teaching⁹⁰ does not originate with himself but is from the Father. Jesus' own disciples recognize the authentic voice of God in Jesus' teaching, and they saw how Jesus passed onto them the Father's very words.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Psalm 33:9.

⁸⁷ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 15.

⁸⁸ Genesis 1:26-29; Genesis 2:16-17, 23.

⁸⁹ Matthew 4:4, 6, 7, 10.

⁹⁰ Matthew 5: 21-22, 27-28, 38-39.

⁹¹ John 7:16; John 8:47; John 14:10; John 17:8.

To say, “God speaks,” is anthropomorphic language to describe the broader truth that God communicates, whether by words, dramatic signs, or ecstatic visions, in such a way that humanity is able to understand him.⁹² That God spoke through his Son references Jesus’ teaching and also Jesus’ miraculous signs, suffering, death.⁹³

Since God has spoken to reveal himself, then “the way people respond to God’s words is the measure of their response to God.”⁹⁴ To reject God’s words is to reject God. Both testaments are awash with warnings against natural human defiance and the consequences of disobedience..⁹⁵ The Bible also recounts the blessings that accompany trusting acceptance and obedience to what God has said.⁹⁶

God’s word is, however, not merely authoritative, commanding the attention and obedience of the created order. God’s word is itself inherently powerful to accomplish God’s will, both in nature and in human lives. Chapell highlights the power of God’s word to create light and material,⁹⁷ to control weather patterns,⁹⁸ to convict of the human heart of sin,⁹⁹ to perform and fulfil God’s purposes,¹⁰⁰ and to override human weakness

⁹² Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 13:1-11; Ezekiel 4:1-13; Hosea 1:2.

⁹³ John 2:11; Mark 15: 33, 38; Romans 1:4.

⁹⁴ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 25.

⁹⁵ Deuteronomy 28:1, 15; 1 Samuel 15: 22-23; Matthew 7: 24-27; Mark 8:38.

⁹⁶ Deuteronomy 4:1-2; Psalm 1; Proverbs 7:1-3; Isaiah 66: 2; Matthew 11:28-29.

⁹⁷ Genesis 1:3; Psalms 33:9.

⁹⁸ Psalms 147:15-18.

⁹⁹ Jeremiah 23:28f.

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah 55:10f.

and actions carried out with improper motivation.¹⁰¹ Chapell thus concludes that it is “the Word preached, rather than the *preaching* of the Word [that] accomplishes heaven’s purposes.”¹⁰² Preachers and orators may influence or even manipulate listeners, motivating and moving them towards lifestyle changes by the very power of their rhetorical technique. However, such superficial change is incomparable to the deep and lasting effect brought about through the activity of God through his word preached.

Chapell continues,

Preaching that is true to Scripture converts, convicts, and eternally changes the souls of men and women because God’s Word is the instrument of divine compulsion, not because preachers have any power in themselves to stimulate godly transformations... [Re Rom. 1:16] The gospel’s force lies beyond the power of the preacher. Paul preaches without shame in his delivery skills because he trusts that the Spirit of God will use the Word the apostle proclaims to shatter the hardness of the human heart in ways no stage technique or philosophical construct can rival.¹⁰³

John Stott highlights the vital importance of the self-revealing nature of the true, living, redeeming God through historical deeds and explanatory words as “the foundation on which all Christian preaching rests.”¹⁰⁴ He continues, “We should never presume to occupy a pulpit unless we believe in this God. How dare we speak, if God has not spoken? By ourselves we have nothing to say...Once we are persuaded that God has spoken, however, then we too must speak. A compulsion rests upon us. Nothing and nobody will be able to silence us.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Philippians 1:18.

¹⁰² Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 27.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 27f.

¹⁰⁴ Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 96.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Adam's second theological foundation for preaching is "the belief that in his revelation in history God has also preserved his words for future generations. It is on this basis that our teaching and preaching are based upon the Bible."¹⁰⁶ God's words, intended for the original hearers, retain the same revelatory and moral authority for future generations of readers and hearers.¹⁰⁷ Hence, the New Testament writers can view the Old Testament as a divinely preserved record of God's revelation,¹⁰⁸ finding its fulfilment in all that was accomplished in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.¹⁰⁹ The New Testament authors also recognize their writings as the authoritative preservation of God's final revelation of Jesus Christ¹¹⁰ that serves both contemporary and future generations. John Stott states that it is only this concept of Scripture as "God's Word written," in which God's actions are recorded and his own verbal explanation of such activity is written down, that facilitates "God's particular revelation [to] become universal, and what he did and said in Israel and Christ be made available to all people in all ages and places."¹¹¹

Chris Green, theological tutor and author, similarly argues that this nuanced, biblical view of inspiration infers that, what God said in the past to the original hearing and reading audience, he also intended to communicate to every contemporary generation

¹⁰⁶ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15-16.

¹⁰⁸ Luke 24:44; Romans 3:2; Romans 9:4.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 26:54, 56; Luke 4:21.

¹¹⁰ Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; Colossians 4:16.

¹¹¹ Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 97. The phrase "God's Word written" comes from Article 20 of the Church of England's historic 39 Articles, which affirms that "it is not lawful for the church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written."

down the centuries to the present day.¹¹² Green explains, “God had both audiences in mind... Scripture is God’s *then* which he preserved for us *now*.”¹¹³ Green, therefore, challenges the popular model of Bible application, in which the modern preacher attempts to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the today’s society in order to make the Bible relevant to modern listeners. He contends that the popular model fails to account for both God’s initial inspiration and active sovereignty through his word. Green writes,

If that is true, a radical principle emerges. There is *no great gap* to be bridged, because *God had this Sunday, this congregation and this sermon in mind* when he inspired the original passage. In that case we need never worry about making the Bible relevant. It *is* relevant, because of the character of the God who inspired it, and has particular relevance every time we open it.¹¹⁴

Adam’s third foundation of word ministry is the awareness that “preaching depends not only in having a God-given source, the Bible, but also a God-given commission to preach, teach and explain it to people and to encourage and urge them to respond. The origin of the ministry of the Word is that God has given his words to his servants to pass on to others.”¹¹⁵ For support, Adam cites the example of Moses. He notes that Moses, first, speaks for God as an intermediary between the Lord and the people at Sinai.¹¹⁶ The pattern of word ministry is established, “God gives his words to his servant,

¹¹² Green, *The Word of His Grace*, 118.

¹¹³ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 99f.

¹¹⁴ Green, *The Word of His Grace*, 119.

¹¹⁵ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 37.

¹¹⁶ Exodus 20:18-19; Exodus 34:34.

who is to pass them on to others.”¹¹⁷ Moses also writes down the words of God. After God gives Moses the ten words and the terms of the covenant, “Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord”¹¹⁸ so that later generations would know God’s covenantal expectations. Moses is thus the first writing prophet. Moses then reads the words of God, reading the book of the covenant in the hearing of the people¹¹⁹ and reciting the song he has written.¹²⁰ Furthermore, as preacher, certain characteristics emerge of Moses’ preaching as recorded in Deuteronomy: his sermons are an exposition of the law given earlier on Sinai;¹²¹ he applies the text to the assembled people, explaining what it will mean for them to adhere to the covenant in the promised land; he exhorts the people towards obedience.¹²² Thus the pattern of explanation, application, and exhortation is established in the spoken ministry of Moses, the “paradigm prophet in the Bible (Deut. 18:14-22).”¹²³

Chapell notes a similar pattern in Ezra as he expositis the word to the people when they return from Babylon: Ezra first read the word; then he explained it; and Ezra also helped the people understand its significance while exhorting them to live in light of the information taught.¹²⁴ This “[p]resentation of the Word itself, explanation of its content,

¹¹⁷ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 37.

¹¹⁸ Exodus 24:4.

¹¹⁹ Exodus 24:7.

¹²⁰ Deuteronomy 31:30; Deuteronomy 32:44.

¹²¹ Deuteronomy 1:5; Deuteronomy 5:1-21; Deuteronomy 29.

¹²² Deuteronomy 4:1; Deuteronomy 6:13; Deuteronomy 8:1.

¹²³ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 40.

¹²⁴ Nehemiah 8:5-8.

and exhortation to apply its truths composed the pattern of proclamation”¹²⁵ is a model that Chapell finds reoccurring in the ministries of Jesus,¹²⁶ in Paul¹²⁷ and in Paul’s instructions to Timothy.¹²⁸

Sidney Greidanus, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, highlights the nature of apostleship as certified and representative. Greidanus states that, as God sent apostles to proclaim his word, so the “apostles represented God himself as they proclaimed his word.”¹²⁹ Some of the words used in the New Testament for preachers and preaching reflect this dynamic, primarily keryx (herald) and its derivatives.¹³⁰ The heralded message did not originate with the herald but with their master. Hence, in delivering the message, heralds represented their master who had sent them. The same idea lies behind Paul’s use of ambassador (presbus)¹³¹ to describe his and his fellow preachers. Ambassadors speak and act only as authorised representatives of the one who commissioned them. In his preaching, as Christ’s ambassador, Paul understands that God himself is present, speaking and making

¹²⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 86f.

¹²⁶ Luke 4:18-29; Matthew 28:19-20a.

¹²⁷ Acts 17:1-4.

¹²⁸ 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:2.

¹²⁹ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 4.

¹³⁰ See also Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 135f. Stott also refutes the idea that *kērrusō* in the New Testament entirely connotes evangelistic preaching to unbelievers, arguing that the practice of preaching to an assembled Christian congregation was established in the Old Testament, continued in the synagogues and was adopted and adapted by the Christian apostles. *Ibid.*, 122.

¹³¹ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

his appeal for spiritual reconciliation directly to those listening.¹³² Preaching in today's world, therefore, is not simply faithfully communicating the teachings of a collection of well-preserved ancient documents. Rather, evangelicals believe that through scripture, "*God still speaks through what he has spoken...* it is a living word to living people from the living God, a contemporary message for the contemporary world."¹³³

Furthermore, Paul's Pastoral Epistles especially give instruction to Timothy and Titus regarding how first century congregations should be governed, directed, and encouraged to thrive in a post-apostolic era. These churches faced insidious false teaching from within the family of Christian churches, general growing opposition against the churches from society, and the ever-present danger of sinful behaviour arising from within the heart of every believer. Therefore, the Apostle Paul directs that the ministry of the word be guarded against spiritual corruption and be the means by which the churches, under God, may flourish and grow. Elders are to be appointed¹³⁴ who faithfully and diligently preach and teach God's word to the people.¹³⁵ Through these elders, God's presence and authority is mediated.

Preaching tutor, Christopher Ash, has written to revive discouraged preachers and instill them with confidence that, through preaching, "men and women can hear the voice of the living God from your mouth."¹³⁶ Ash argues "for the priority of preaching as the

¹³² Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 4.

¹³³ Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 100.

¹³⁴ Titus 1:5; cf. Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

¹³⁵ 1 Timothy 4:6, 11-15; 1 Timothy 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Timothy 4:2-5.

¹³⁶ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 9.

vital life of the church.”¹³⁷ Ash recognizes that most within the wider church do not hold this high view of preaching nor of its singular importance to a congregation’s vitality. Instead, churches tend to prefer a more egalitarian view of preaching alongside other Bible-teaching ministries. Nevertheless, developing his argument from selected expositions of Deuteronomy, Ash contends that the “authority of God [over Israel] was mediated not by the written word, but by the written word *preached*... The law was written by Moses ... [but] it was to be read and preached in every generation by the prophets.”¹³⁸ He continues,

God did not just give [Israel] a book. He gave them preachers of the book so that face to face they could be taught, challenged, rebuked and exhorted to repentance and faith... The preaching of the prophets was gradually collected so that the written word grew. But at every stage God governed his people by those who preached the written word, not just by the written testimony in the ark or on scrolls.¹³⁹

Within the Bible’s developing redemptive-historical framework, Ash argues it is the preacher of the written scriptures (the logical authority of God in the church), who as the genuine successor of the apostles, who now through his preaching mediates the practical authority of Christ the (true) prophet, in the church. He explains,

Under the new covenant we submit to Christ by listening to Christ’s preachers. It is by listening that we model submission... [which] is not the same as discussion. Discussion is comfortably in line with the spirit of the age. We are happy to discuss and interpret... But – dare I say it – God does not want to know what we think. He wants us to know what he thinks.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 26.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

Why should God's authority be mediated through the written word preached, and not just through his written word? Because, writes Ash, listening to an authoritative human speak is culturally non-specific, requiring only the ability to listen and understand. Interactive Bible studies, personal Bible reading, and one-to-one discipleship mentoring are in many churches "the normative way for Christian people to hear the word of God... may have unwittingly alienated the illiterate, the functionally illiterate, the less educated, those less confident in studying [and discussing] a text."¹⁴¹

New Testament Words for Preaching

The use of thirty-three New Testament words have been identified as describing the diversity of activities to express the general idea of preaching¹⁴² or rather to describe the various modes of ministry of the word of which preaching is but one expression.¹⁴³ These New Testament words include categories such as information (or instruction), declaration, exhortation, application, and persuasion. Chapell suggests that all ministries of the word can be viewed as forms of preaching, diversity of approach arising because of the need "to speak in a manner appropriate for the truth being presented and the situation being addressed."¹⁴⁴ Conversely, Adam represents those who view preaching as but one form among other equally valid and important forms of word ministry.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴² Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 3:703; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 96f.

¹⁴³ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 75.

¹⁴⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 95.

In unpacking seven of the major words and word groups used in the New Testament to denote preaching,¹⁴⁵ Johnson dismisses the notion that preaching merely implies the delivery of an oration. He highlights the dynamic richness of meaning and diverse purposes of the preaching moment conveyed by these verbs, in which God is at work in the word preached and by which lives are consequently transformed as God's purposes are fulfilled. In summary, Johnson lists the main preaching verbs, the passion that is intrinsic in each verb and the intended outcome in those who hear,¹⁴⁶

Evangelize (*euangelizō*): the passion is joy; the hoped-for outcome is to “receive Jesus” and enter into his new-world order.

Herald (*kēryssō*): the passion is truth; the hoped-for outcome is to “hear Jesus” and trust this new reading of reality.

Teach (*didaskō*): the passion is understanding; the hoped-for outcome is to “obey Jesus” and to do what he tells us to do.

Exhort (*parakaleō*): the passion is freedom; the hoped-for outcome is to “follow Jesus” and walk with him in a new way of living.

Prophecy (*prophēteuō*): the passion is revelation; the hoped-for outcome is to “see Jesus” and live a new life in light of him.

Confess (*homologeō*): the passion is “no choice but to speak”; the hoped-for outcome is to “join Jesus” and see if you too can find in him a rock on which to stand.

Witness (*martyreō*): the passion is life; the hoped for outcome is to “live Jesus too” and see if he does not do for you what he has done for me.

Johnson believes that while any one of these verbs may be predominant in a particular sermon, nevertheless as the biblical text is opened up and the preacher accurately reflects the bent of the text, “God speaks through all these verbs, or more

¹⁴⁵ Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 79ff.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 98f.

precisely, God speaks in all of these verbal ways. God therefore transforms human lives through all these ways of communicating the gospel.”¹⁴⁷

In addition to verbs that convey the richness of meaning for preaching, there are a variety of New Testament images which describe the ministry of the word, “sowing the seed, treading out the grain, the harvest, planting the seed, watering the seed, providing milk, providing solid food laying a foundation, being a father, work, giving birth, the fight, demolishing, making captive, tearing down, building up.”¹⁴⁸ As in Johnson’s critique of preaching verbs, Adam notes that “the point of these images is that ministry of the Word is exercised to some purpose. It is not mere teaching; it is teaching which achieves the purpose of God in changing people’s lives.”¹⁴⁹

The Context of Preaching

Regarding the place and purpose of preaching in the context of a local congregation, in his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul highlights the relationship between teaching pastors and their role “*toward* the equipping of God’s people *unto* a work of service *unto* building up the body of Christ.”¹⁵⁰ There is acknowledged disagreement among commentators as to what Paul is saying about pastors’ role. Some commentators contend that Paul outlines a threefold, pastoral role: equipping or preparing God’s people, works of service, and building up the local church. Other commentators argue that, through their preaching and teaching, pastors equip people to do the works of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁸ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 76.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 204; Ephesians 4:12.

service that the body may be strengthened. This is by and large the more popular contemporary interpretation. However, in either case, the purpose is the same: pastors-teachers are God's gift to the local churches that the believing people may become mature, growing together in relational unity and corporate understanding of the content of their faith as together they "grow up into [an experiential knowledge] of Christ,"¹⁵¹ thereby becoming increasingly conformed to the image of Christ. In this understanding,

preaching is essentially a corporate activity and its most useful aim is corporate edification... This means that the sermon's focus of address is most appropriately not individuals and their needs but the needs of the congregation as a whole. This is not to say that individuals may not be greatly helped by the sermon, but its primary aim is the welfare, obedience, holiness, godliness and good working of the congregation.¹⁵²

In summary then, Adam defines preaching as, "the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for service, unity of faith, maturity, growth and upbuilding."¹⁵³ While he maintains preaching is "central to our ministry,"¹⁵⁴ since pastors are obligated to participate in the broad spectrum of ministry activities such as "convert unbelievers, train people in ministry skills, and disciple and counsel individuals with the Word of God,"¹⁵⁵ Adam implies that preaching, as a formal monologue, does not allow for congregational interaction and individual engagement that these other pastoral duties require. On this reckoning, of necessity the pastor must engage in a variety of word ministries in order to fulfil his

¹⁵¹ Ephesians 4:13.

¹⁵² Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 70.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

pastoral mandate of equipping the people of God for works of service and the maturing of the body as Paul outlines in Ephesians 4:13.

In contrast, others maintain that the natural consequence of having the preached word in its rightful, primary place with attention in the congregation's hearts and lives results in progressive maturity for church members. The preached word, therefore, enables church members to fulfil their ministry roles of evangelism, counselling, leadership preparation, discipleship training among themselves as they build each other up in and through Christ. Preaching tutor Christopher Ash argues, "...the weekly gatherings of the local church to hear the preached word should be understood as the primary dynamic and driving force of church life, alongside the gatherings for corporate prayer. All other contexts in which Bibles are opened, read or discussed, have a supportive rather than a normative role in church life."¹⁵⁶

Spiritual Maturity and Preaching

In seeking to understand more fully how preachers might preach more effectively to help congregants towards spiritual maturity, this section the review of literature will consider spiritual maturity from a reformed-evangelical perspective. Specifically, this section explores the dynamic of spiritual maturity, the motive and means of spiritual maturity, and the biblical content or focus of sermons considered indispensable to promote and stimulate spiritual maturity.

Seminary professor Dennis E. Johnson believes that the goal of preaching must be to have a transformative impact among the listeners. In asking, "What is *effective* preaching?" Johnson responds to his own question, saying, "can only be answered when

¹⁵⁶ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 99.

we understand the *effect* that preaching is supposed to have.”¹⁵⁷ Johnson considers the Apostle Paul’s description of his own preaching and teaching ministry in Colossians 1:24-2:7 as encapsulating other New Testament themes. Focussing upon Paul’s stated purpose, “that we may present everyone mature in Christ,”¹⁵⁸ Johnson expresses the apostle’s aim as, “not merely to convey information but to be instrumental in God’s effecting transformation of the most radical and comprehensive sort in the hearts, lives, and relationships of those who hear his preaching.”¹⁵⁹ Paul’s design is not simply to produce a church of theologically literate believers, but, through preaching Christ, he “seeks to recreate people into the image of God, so they enjoy God’s presence in unashamed purity, serve his will in unreserved love, express God’s justice and mercy in relationships with others.”¹⁶⁰ According to Johnson, preaching “progressively conforms hearers of the Word to the image of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit... preaching’s mission is nothing less than the *complete spiritual maturity* of those who hear the apostle. This goal of maturity [Gk. *teleios*] is defined by the absolute perfection of Christ himself.”¹⁶¹ While maturity towards Christlikeness is an on-going process,¹⁶² this reference in Colossians 1 has an eschatological dimension, when, through the completed

¹⁵⁷ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 62.

¹⁵⁸ Colossians 1:28.

¹⁵⁹ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 64.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 65f.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁶² Philippians 3:15.

sanctifying work of the Spirit, fully matured believers will be presented to Christ as the fruit of his apostolic labors.¹⁶³

Johnson's exegesis of Colossians 1:28 leads him to conclude that "preaching prods us towards the goal of perfection not by moving our gaze away from Jesus to other issues but by driving our exploration deeper into Christ, who is the manifold wisdom of God."¹⁶⁴ Preaching that stimulates the maturity of individuals and congregations does not move beyond the gospel into the practical areas of the Christian life, as is often supposed. Instead, preaching draws out more fully the implications of living in union with Christ by faith. Johnson continues,

the same gospel that initially called us to faith is the means that perfects us in faith. As surely as Christ's obedience, death, and resurrection constitute the all-sufficient, once-for-all ground of our justification by faith, so also Christ's righteous life, sacrificial death, and vindication in resurrection power are the fount from which flows our sanctification by faith as we grow in grace. The preaching that matures and edifies, no less than the preaching that evangelizes and converts, call believers not 'beyond' the gospel to 'deeper mysteries' ... but more deeply into the gospel and its implications for our attitudes, affections, motivations, and actions.¹⁶⁵

From his study of spiritual awakenings and revivals, church historian, Richard Lovelace resonates warmly with this perspective when he writes, "The proclamation of the gospel in depth is the most important condition of the renewal of the church."¹⁶⁶

Packer writes pastorally about the nature, necessity, characteristics, progress, and ultimate goal of personal sanctification. While justification is entirely and exclusively God's work in believers through Christ, "in sanctification, which is God's work within us

¹⁶³ 2 Corinthians 11:2.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 68f.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 145.

from which our holiness flows, we are called to cooperate actively with God.”¹⁶⁷

Cooperating with God for spiritual maturity requires Christians to have a conscious and trusting awareness of God’s purpose and strategy for their life. Packer elaborates, “So the divine agenda for the rest of my life on earth is my sanctification,”¹⁶⁸ meaning, “increasing conformity to the image of Christ.”¹⁶⁹ Packer calls this,

being conformed to Jesus’ righteousness and holiness, his love and humility, his self-denial and single-mindedness, his wisdom and prudence, his boldness and self-control, his faithfulness and strength under pressure – [this] is the sum total of the ‘good works’ for which Christians have been created (that is, re-created) in Christ (Eph. 2:10). It is also the ‘good’ for which in all things God works in the lives of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).¹⁷⁰

This growing Christ-likeness is evidenced through an outward demonstration of sincere obedience, arising from the internal change of heart due to the regenerating action of the Holy Spirit. In regeneration, God changes believers’ former, sinful, self-seeking, self-serving, self-driven, self-deifying nature so that, as regenerate believers, their “deepest desire (the dominant passion that rules and drives us now) is a copy, faint but real, of the desire that drove the Lord Jesus. That was the desire to know, trust, love, obey, serve, delight, honour, glorify, and enjoy his heavenly Father – a multi-faceted, many layered desire for God, and for more of him than has been enjoyed so far.”¹⁷¹

The desire that Jesus has for his Father, the Christian now has for both Father and Son. Packer reasons that the “natural way for Christians to live is to let this Spirit-given desire

¹⁶⁷ J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Holiness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992), 45.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 60. See also Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10

¹⁶⁹ Romans 8:29.

¹⁷⁰ Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 60f.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 83f.

determine and control what they do, so that the fulfilling of the longing becomes the mainspring of their life.”¹⁷² Spirit-given desires result in conformity to Christ.

The implications for a preaching ministry are manifold. God’s moral law remains Christians’ rule; God’s incarnate Son becomes their model;¹⁷³ preachers will be careful to articulate clearly the relevance and application of specific biblical commands and principles to life situations. Nevertheless, Packer argues that mere exhortation to “be like Jesus” or to “obey the Law” will not facilitate the Spirit, whose goal is to reproduce in Christians “the God-oriented desires, aims, attitudes and behaviors seen in Christ’s perfect humanity.”¹⁷⁴

Chapell similarly affirms that effective communication of the gospel is obstructed by preachers who “mistakenly make moral instruction or societal reform the *primary* focus of their messages.”¹⁷⁵ Where preachers advocate the reform of human behavior through self-reliant moral improvement—even inadvertently—as the cure for the sickness of human sinfulness, then they present a pharisaical message that is contrary to the gospel. By and of themselves, human beings—even true believers—are incapable of achieving divine approval or purposes, but entirely dependent upon God’s mercy and power provided through Christ “to be what he desires and do what he requires.”¹⁷⁶ Such sermons are what Chapell terms “The Deadly Be’s,” and are often accompanied with applications encouraging listeners to “be like,” and/or “be good,” and/or “be

¹⁷² Ibid., 84.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 19.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

disciplined.”¹⁷⁷ Though well-intentioned, such sermons inevitably “present godliness as a product of human endeavor... No message is more damaging to the true faith.”¹⁷⁸

Comprehensive spiritual maturity is not achieved by simply broadening the range of practical aspects of Christian living and applying them to the congregation. Preachers must recognize that they are powerless to preach effective, grace-filled, heart-oriented, life-changing sermons, if God is not active through the preachers’ mouth and in the hearers’ ears and hearts.¹⁷⁹

According to Packer, the reorienting struggle for holiness, Christ-likeness, or spiritual maturity begins and must primarily be fought upon the battle ground of the human heart. Packer defines the heart as “the centre and focus of one’s inner personal life: the source of motivation, the seat of passion, the spring of all thought processes and particularly of conscience.”¹⁸⁰ Seminary professor and church pastor, Murray Capill distinguishes between practical application and heart application. Practical application addresses how people are to live for God, pray, witness, serve, lead, love, and so on. Heart application goes deeper, addressing those “underlying attitudes, mind-set, motivations, ambitions, character and goals” which have their roots in human hearts.¹⁸¹ In motivating believers towards a growing spiritual maturity, preaching must be aimed at developing godly desires, from which Christ-like living, faith-stimulating obedience, and selfless sacrificial service will flow.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 289–293.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 289.

¹⁷⁹ Murray Capill, *The Heart Is the Target* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), 40.

¹⁸⁰ Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 22.

¹⁸¹ Capill, *The Heart Is the Target*, 39.

Packer states that the cultivation of such desires occurs when Christians are helped to understand, appreciate, and implement the appropriate responses or “reactions that knowing God’s plan of salvation should call forth from me.”¹⁸² These committed, lifetime responses, which stimulate and foster spiritual maturity, include praise, gratitude, and zeal. Christians grow through praise, worshiping the great, awesome, redeeming God; this is the doxological foundation of holiness. Cultivating gratitude also leads to growth, giving thanks for the mercy and love of God, displayed primarily at the cross. Gratitude is the devotional basis for holiness. Similarly, zeal for the glory and exaltation of God—with the particular focus upon Christ—is the dedicatory basis of holiness. Zeal in believers means living naturally, in accordance with the desires of the new nature—the directional basis of holiness.¹⁸³ Packer affirms these as truths that all Christians need to learn in their head and then lived out of the heart. Clearly, this presupposes a teaching ministry beyond mere exhortation. In cooperation with the enlightening Spirit, the preacher or teacher must guide the listeners into deeper gospel truths so as to precipitate the kind of response that Packer believes will generate or stimulate a genuine spiritual maturing towards Christ-likeness.

Reformed theologian, author, and pastor, Sinclair Ferguson, agrees. He writes that union with Christ, as expounded by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6 is not only the foundation of sanctification, but it is in the understanding and “seeing oneself in this context that enables the individual Christian to grow in true holiness.”¹⁸⁴ Ferguson argues

¹⁸² Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 67.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 68ff.

¹⁸⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "On the Reformed View," in *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 59.

that appreciating the magnitude of what God has done for us in Christ “is itself adequate motivation for the radical holiness that should characterize our lives.”¹⁸⁵

Chapell concurs: it is the listeners’ apprehension of God’s grace in the redeeming work of Christ that provides “both the most powerful motivation and only true means of Christian obedience.”¹⁸⁶ Chapell believes that the identification and exploration of the “Fallen Condition Focus” of each text expounded—that is, the “fallen aspect of the human condition [that] needs to be addressed in order for God’s glory to be properly recognised and honoured.”¹⁸⁷ How God both responds and provides for that particular aspect of humanity’s sin in the gospel, personalizes the listeners’ constant need of God’s renewing and maturing grace, motivating them to glorify and enjoy him as Lord and Savior.¹⁸⁸ “Such preaching,” asserts Chapell, “returns preaching to its foundational function of transformation... Faithful preaching is the practice of pointing others to a provision beyond themselves so that they are able to do what God requires *and* what the regenerate heart desires.”¹⁸⁹

For the preacher however, Chapell concedes, “Consistently preaching the necessity *and* the proper motivation for holiness is one of the most difficult tasks that preachers face in every generation.”¹⁹⁰ Preachers and listeners alike easily drift away

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹⁸⁶ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 19.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 49f.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 309.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 313.

from heralding and practicing “grace-motivated obedience,”¹⁹¹ believing that, so long as obedience to God is satisfactorily modelled, then the motivation behind the obedience is of little consequence. When believers primarily obey God merely to avoid his displeasure or to gain his favor, then such obedience is not motivated by a desire to glorify God but to promote or protect oneself, an impure motive.¹⁹² When preachers use motives other than God’s grace to encourage listeners’ obedience—such as shame and fear—it is possible to produce an external, moralistic changed behavior. Yet, shame and fear leave listeners spiritually immature with little evidence of real spiritual growth. Where spiritually unhealthy motivation continues, the inevitable consequence among listeners will include patterns such as depression, addictive behaviors, or a growing disinterest in spiritual matters.¹⁹³

Thus, Chapell agrees with Packer regarding the goal of preaching—producing godly desires that result in grace-compelled holiness through an ever-growing and responsive understanding to God’s grace and glory in the gospel. He writes,

Thus it is the aim of God to renew the affections of believers so that their hearts will most desire him and his ways. The desires of new creatures in Christ Jesus can be rightly nourished only by the truths of grace. When preachers nourish these affections with love for God, new affections drive out the desires of the world and thereby strengthen the will to serve God rightly and well... These truths of holiness by grace teach us that, as counterintuitive as it may seem, nothing more powerfully compels holy living than *consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ*. Mercy acts as a lens for perceiving the fullness of the glory of God that prompts greater love for him – and hence, greater zeal for his purposes. Sermons of this sort not only empower God’s people for his purposes but also make

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 314.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 313. It is also possible for the preacher to attempt to properly motivate listeners towards a God-glorifying obedience by deepening the listeners’ awareness of God’s mercy and provision, and for the listeners to misunderstand and to still hear the preacher exhorting towards obedience from a moralistic standpoint, with similar negative results.

preaching itself the sustaining joy and glory God intends it to be for the proclaimer of his Word.¹⁹⁴

Resonating with reformed authors,¹⁹⁵ in his monograph on sanctification, New Testament scholar and seminary professor David Peterson seeks to challenge the prevailing but “inadequate” assumption among most conservative theologians that “sanctification is simply the process by which we become more and more holy.”¹⁹⁶ As a result of his own textual studies, Peterson concludes that “definitive” (or “positional”) sanctification—whereby God sanctifies and consecrates his people once and for all through Christ’s work on the cross—“is a more important theme in the New Testament than has been generally acknowledged.”¹⁹⁷ In fact, Peterson argues, when fully taught and rightly understood, it is this doctrine of definitive sanctification that is the basis and motivation for transformed holy living. Peterson encourages Christian believers to live in a holy manner that is consistent with their cleansing and dedication to God, which his Spirit has already achieved for them.

How does this practical, life transformation happen for Christian believers? The Spirit sanctifies and preserves God’s people in holiness, by the ministry of his word. Peterson surveys Hebrews, examining the definitive sanctification of God’s people through Jesus’ sacrificial death that cleanses and consecrates. Peterson concludes, “The sanctifying work of Christ in Hebrews has its *inward* as well as its *outward* aspects...

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 321.

¹⁹⁵ Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification*, 72.

¹⁹⁶ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 13.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 14.

When the message about his completed and eternally effective work is applied to the heart or conscience of believers, it brings about an inner conviction of forgiveness, acceptance and hope. A life of dedicated service or worship results.”¹⁹⁸

Drawing his observations from Acts 20 and 26 to close, Peterson writes,

As the gospel is proclaimed and faith is elicited, people are brought together into a sanctified relationship through Jesus Christ. As the word of God is applied to everyday life and relationships, believers are built up and sustained in holiness, until they are brought to share in that inheritance that God has in store for them. Paul’s exhortation in Acts 20 [v17-35] suggests that teaching about our sanctified status in Christ is foundational for pastoral theology and practice.¹⁹⁹

In summarizing, the Pauline references to a definitive sanctification in the heart and life of the believer, Peterson affirms, “*belief in the truth* [motivated and inspired by the Holy Spirit] is the key to profound moral and behavioural change.”²⁰⁰ He continues,

we may say that sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, creating faith in Christ through the preaching of his gospel. This work unites us to Christ, who is the source of our sanctification because of his redemptive work... The Spirit continues to use the word of God and the ministry of his people to one another to motivate and sustain them in a life that expresses their holy status and calling.²⁰¹

Thus Peterson highlights and agrees with others. He affirms that the ministry of the word builds up believers by nurturing, uniting, and strengthening them in order to preserve the church’s holiness. The ministry of the word keeps the church free from doctrinal error and helps it to stand firm against unfaithfulness and ungodliness.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 57f.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 62.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 57.

Writing about the progressive aspect of sanctification, Peterson cautions against embracing any idea of a stepped development of maturity, which might give the impression of a pathway that “can lead to ever-increasing measures of holiness. Such an approach creates unrealistic expectations and is capable of producing guilt and despair in those who do not perceive the evidence of such progress in their lives.”²⁰³

For instance, when authors Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson published *Move*, an in-house appraisal of the Willow Creek Church’s survey of the impact of Willow Creek’s teaching programs for spiritual growth, they acknowledged the seemingly irregular and unpredictable nature of Christian maturity. These authors affirm that “Spiritual growth is not linear or predictable [but] is a complex process as unique as each individual [progressing] at a pace determined by each person's circumstances and the activity of the Holy Spirit.”²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the presupposed paradigm of spiritual growth throughout the book is that of an onward, almost-programmatic progression of movements along the line of a spiritual continuum, in which Christians become increasingly Christ-centred in their beliefs, practices, activities and relationships.

While the Bible clearly envisions a process of spiritual maturing²⁰⁵ and unequivocally urges progress in godliness,²⁰⁶ contrary to the *Move* authors, Peterson argues, “Simply identifying sanctification with growth in holiness obscures the emphasis and balance of New Testament teaching.”²⁰⁷ Rather, the Christian’s responsibility is to

²⁰³ Ibid., 70.

²⁰⁴ Parkinson, *Move*, 26.

²⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; Hebrews 5:11-6:2.

²⁰⁶ 1 Timothy 4:7-10,15.

²⁰⁷ Peterson, *Possessed by God*, 70.

continue “exhibiting what we know of God’s character and will, motivated by the certainty of his acceptance, cleansing and enabling in Christ, together with the promise of entire sanctification when we meet him, face to face.”²⁰⁸ Recognizing that holiness is a divine gift, in “everyday terms it means being dedicated to God and separated from all that is sinful. This condition needs to be renewed and re-expressed every day, especially when testing comes or fresh challenges to please God confront us.”²⁰⁹ Faithful pastors will seek to motivate their congregants towards maturity biblically, by helping them to grasp all that God has done in and for them in the gospel, while at the same time teaching them to be realistic about their expectations of growth in spiritual maturity as they engage in the normality of spiritual warfare living.²¹⁰

Peter Nelson, pastor and adjunct seminary professor, also questions any model of spiritual maturity that espouses simplistic, linear, spiritual advances towards Christlikeness. Nelson takes apostolic exhortations to conform towards mortification of sin and Christlikeness seriously. Yet, he believes that many Christians have an inadequate understanding of the “rugged reality of indwelling sin.”²¹¹ Despite their early enthusiasm in spiritual progress, Christians often “misconstrue their vision of the Christian life,” leading to “misguided ambitions and unnecessary discouragement” and sometimes resulting in disenchantment and bitterness.²¹² Well-intentioned preachers and Bible

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 91.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 91f.

²¹⁰ Ferguson, *Christian Spirituality*, 60f.

²¹¹ Peter K. Nelson, *Spiritual Formation: Ever Forming, Never Formed* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 10.

²¹² Ibid., 2-5.

teachers can exhort listeners to lead God-honoring lives yet fail to present a realistic understanding of indwelling sin and of the need for a moment-by-moment faith in the finished and justifying work of Christ.²¹³ Presenting a simplified, easy sanctification can create unrealistic expectations of steady and progressive maturity, making listeners vulnerable to self-righteous pride or guilt-laden insecurity, and a host of other sinful traits that follow in their wake.

Therefore, with respect to the content of pastors' teaching or preaching that will effectively help their congregants towards spiritual maturity, congregants must be made aware of what Nelson calls the "paradoxes of spiritual formation."²¹⁴ By this, Nelson holds two hands in tension. On the one hand, disciples need a spiritual restlessness that zealously motivates them towards a deeper, never-ending experience of knowing Christ more fully and becoming more Christlike in heart attitudes and external actions, while at the same time becoming more conscious of the pervasive sinfulness in their life.²¹⁵ And on the other hand, disciples need a deepening restfulness through learning to be content in entrusting their life and the circumstantial details of daily living, including the frequent manifestations of their lingering, indwelling sin, into the hands of a loving, trustworthy God.²¹⁶ Nelson acknowledges there is a fine distinction between the "rightful sense of being content to live as a sinner while battling fiercely against acts of sin... and

²¹³ Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality: How to Live for Jesus Moment by Moment*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 69-70.

²¹⁴ Nelson, *Spiritual Formation*, 89ff.

²¹⁵ Philippians 3:8-10, 12.

²¹⁶ Philippians 4:6-7, 11.

misconstruing it can lead to calamity.”²¹⁷ Thus, the paradox of spiritual maturity: the more Christian believers long for a deepening relationship with the holy God through faith in Jesus Christ, the more they become aware of a lingering immaturity and indwelling sin. At a practical level, while increasing conformity to the image of Jesus is accomplished in the purposes and by the overseeing providence of God,²¹⁸ such progress is neither simple nor straightforward.²¹⁹

For example, Ash contends that natural, human resistance to God’s renewing activity, even in the Christian’s heart, means that

We need repeated preaching, because by nature we will never [continue to] repent and believe. We will “move on” from the simple gospel of daily repentance, daily taking up the cross, daily faith, to a supposed higher life, a more sophisticated life, some kind of super-spiritual life in which repentance and faith are too ordinary and simple to be practised. This is what will happen unless we sit under faithful preaching.²²⁰

Healthy spiritual growth cannot occur without Christians embracing a deep-seeded recognition of their need for the gospel and a faith-filled embrace of both justification and sanctification. As historian Richard Lovelace similarly states,

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God’s holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the level their lives are guilt-ridden and insecure. . . . “In order for a pure and lasting work of spiritual renewal to take place within the church, multitudes within it must be led to build their lives on this foundation. This means they must be conducted into the light of a full conscious awareness of God’s holiness, the depth of their sin and

²¹⁷ Nelson, *Spiritual Formation*, 96.

²¹⁸ Romans 8:29.

²¹⁹ Nelson, *Spiritual Formation*, 97-106.

²²⁰ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 60.

sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ for their acceptance with God, not just at the outset of their Christian lives but in every succeeding day.²²¹

Lovelace's thesis is that lasting spiritual renewal comes through an in-depth proclamation of the gospel, reflected in the preaching ministries of those pastors who are aiming for, and in significant measure seeing congregants and congregations grow in spiritual maturity.

Preaching Application towards Spiritual Maturity

With regard to helping congregants through a pastor's regular preaching ministry, Darrell W. Johnson of Regent College, Vancouver asserts,

God has certainly chosen to change the world through the ministry of preaching, through the exposition of biblical texts in the power of the Spirit who inspired the text... God saves the world through the cross and "through the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18). God saves the world through the event of Jesus' passion and through the preaching of that event. It turns out that preaching itself is a saving event.²²²

Johnson considers the account in Ezekiel 37, where the prophet is commanded to prophesy to the dead, decaying bones of the House of Israel that they might "hear the word of the Lord"²²³ and live. In Ezekiel's vision, the bones come alive again through God's word. Why did the speaking of the word have that effect, since the bones were dead, unable to hear or respond? Johnson answers, "It was because of the nature of the word. The word of the Lord is living and active, powerful and creative. The word of God

²²¹ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 101f.

²²² Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 7f.

²²³ Ezekiel 37:4.

not only informs, it performs, it transforms. The word of God makes things happen.”²²⁴

He further highlights the faith statement of the Roman centurion to Jesus recorded in

Matthew 8:8, “Just say the word and my servant will be healed,” and comments,

“Just say the word.” We preachers need to say that to ourselves and to one another regularly. For, as I see it, one of the greatest needs of the preaching ministry, in any era or cultural setting, is the continual recovery of confidence in the word of Christ. Jesus need only speak and something happens... When the Word is heard, something happens. That is, when the Word is understood and received and surrendered to, something happens.²²⁵

The something that happens, Johnson calls a “preaching moment,” that is, a “preaching-of-the-Word-of-God moment.”²²⁶ Those who experience this moment will leave the church changed. They are not the same people they were when they came into the service. They leave with

a clearer vision of the living God in Jesus (who, according to himself, is the subject of any text, and therefore, of any sermon of any text [John 5:39; Luke 24:27, 44]); a better understanding of the gospel of Jesus, the good news of what God has done, is doing and will do in Jesus; an ‘alternative reading of reality’, a different more redemptive way of understanding concrete circumstances, challenges and fears in their lives; a new way of thinking, feeling, acting and reacting shaped by the clearer vision, better understanding and alternative reading; a new power enabling them to walk into the new reality into which the preached text has brought them.²²⁷

²²⁴Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 25.

²²⁵Ibid., 27.

²²⁶ Johnson opens up the word “preaching” to include situations other than the Sunday preaching in a church worship service, such as midweek meetings in people’s homes or student ministry meeting on college campuses.

²²⁷Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 11.

Again, note the existential aspect of the transformative/sanctifying effect of preaching that Johnson highlights. Johnson helpfully clarifies the mechanics of how preaching encourages or stimulates spiritual maturity in listeners.

Chapell agrees with Johnson when he writes,

...preaching is not simply an instructive lecture; it is a redemptive event. If we think of the Sermon as a means of transferring information, then we will prioritize making the message dense with historical facts, moralizing instruction, and memory retention devices that prepare people for later tests of formal doctrine or factual knowledge... Our primary goal is not preparing people for later tests of mind or behaviour, but rather humbling and strengthening the wills of God's people within the context of the Sermon. Because God is active in his Word, we should preach with the conviction that the Spirit of God will use the truths of his Word *as we preach* to change hearts now! As hearts change, lives change – even when Sermon specifics are forgotten (Prov. 4:23).²²⁸

Chapell underlines the role of the preacher to motivate and help listeners progress towards a maturing, God-glorifying, Christ-like, holy discipleship by continuously drawing the listeners' attention to the wonder of God's grace towards them as revealed and demonstrated in the gospel. Chapell avoids mere exhortation to live righteously, expecting the listener to afterwards implement what has been prescribed in a sermon. Instead, he encourages listeners to respond to the gospel with loving obedience, flowing from a changed heart. He explains,

Because the redemptive interpretation of Scripture leads to sermons marked by consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ, hearts in which the Spirit dwells are being continually stoked with more cause to love God. This love becomes the primary motivation for Christian obedience as hearts in which the Spirit dwells respond with love for their Savior. For the believer, there is no greater spiritual motivation than grace-stimulated love – not fear, or guilt, or gain... And as our love results in discipleship that demonstrates the beauty and blessing of walking with God, greater love for him grows and stimulates even

²²⁸Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 235.

more desire for obedience... we delight to walk in his ways and serve his people, giving ourselves to the testimony of his grace and the purposes of his kingdom.²²⁹

Chapell's vision of spiritual maturity also recognizes the immense challenge that properly motivating listeners towards holiness presents to the preacher. He writes,

How preachers motivate others to be holy... is often the tell-tale sign of Christ-centered preaching. Legitimate concern for the necessity of obedience has historically caused much criticism of grace-centered preaching because it is difficult to remove obedience as a qualification for divine love without seeming to remove biblical standards of conduct as imperative for Christians. Consistently preaching the necessity *and* proper motivation for holiness is one of the most difficult tasks that preachers face in every generation.²³⁰

Doriani underlines the difficulty associated with properly motivating Christians to obey God and towards holiness. Doriani seeks to clarify "the ways of wisdom, trust, gratitude, merit, fear and love"²³¹ as motives for Christian obedience. Of these, only merit is an unredeemable motive for obedience since the other motives listed can equally and easily be twisted and marred for self-centred purposes. Nevertheless, these latter motivations, including fear, can be viewed as "honorable motives for obedience if they are chiefly responses to [God's] loving grace."²³² Like Chapell, Doriani believes that the application of scriptural truths to the Christian life to instill Christ-like obedience must begin with the understanding and appropriation of God's grace, "for grace is as essential to our sanctification as it is to our justification. Our disobedience condemns us, but

²²⁹Ibid., 241.

²³⁰Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 312-3.

²³¹ Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 6.

²³² Ibid., 7f.

without gospel motives, our ‘righteousness’ will too. Salvation is by grace from first to last. We never outgrow our need for the gospel.”²³³

At a practical level then, this raises issues of sermon application which Chapell regards as “the most difficult task of exposition.”²³⁴ He writes, “Until we apply a truth, understanding of it remains incomplete. This means that until a preacher provides application, exposition remains incomplete.”²³⁵ In fact, to minimize the application factor within a sermon “is unbiblical because it fails to equip God’s people for their service to him.”²³⁶ But application, argues Chapell, is not just an appeal to “be more like Jesus.”²³⁷ Instructional specifics, earthed in real life situations (the what and where of sermon application), motivated by grace rather than guilt, gain, or greed (the why of application), along with helping listeners understand where the enablement to obey what God requires and Jesus commands²³⁸ comes from (the how of application), are all requisite components of healthy, helpful application.²³⁹ For application, Chapell significantly emphasizes the “compelling power of grace. *In Christ-centered preaching, the rules of Christian obedience do not change; the reasons do.*”²⁴⁰

²³³ Ibid., 8.

²³⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 218.

²³⁵ Ibid., 213.

²³⁶ Ibid., 222.

²³⁷ Ibid., 290.

²³⁸ Micah 6:8; John 14:23f.

²³⁹ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 214ff.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 312.

In Doriani's technical treatment of biblical application, the author notes that the Bible itself generates truth-to-life application in seven ways: "through *rules, ideals, doctrines, redemptive acts in narratives, exemplary acts in narratives, biblical images, and songs and prayers.*"²⁴¹ While many biblical texts may well point towards application in more than one of these, Doriani asserts, "the chief task, then, is not finding something to say, but fingering one *chief* application that drives home the central theme of the text and arrays the sub-points around it."²⁴² All preachers tend towards legalistic prescriptive application; Doriani calls this tendency, "law," and the preachers who do so as "class four legalists."²⁴³ They reduce biblical motivation by considering other avenues of valid application such as character growth or development, goals or aspirations to pursue, and discernment to make good and wise choices.²⁴⁴ In all of this, Doriani asserts that the aim of Bible application is to fulfil the goal of redemption, enabling the hearers or readers to know, love, trust, and relate to God better and have their lives increasingly conformed or remade to the image or likeness of Christ.²⁴⁵ However, as other cited authors have also highlighted, Doriani maintains that one cannot become more Christlike without drawing personally from the resources Christ has provided, and to which—within a redemptive historical framework—all of scripture attests. Pastors that are genuinely sensitive and responsive to the felt-needs of their congregants can wisely use hearers' idolatrous

²⁴¹ Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 82.

²⁴² Ibid., 81.

²⁴³ Ibid., 280.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 98ff.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

desires for lesser comforts to re-educate them towards appreciating that their true and deepest needs are met in the redemption accomplished and fulfilled in Jesus.²⁴⁶

Jay E. Adams, pastor and homiletician, affirms the need for sermon application. He believes that, when preachers apply the text, hearers are, in some way, moved to perform what is required. He says, “Applying the truth of a passage then, also involves exerting pressure on the congregation to implement it... *application* is that process by which preachers make scriptural truths so pertinent to members of their congregations that they not only understand how those truths should effect changes in their lives but also feel obligated and perhaps even eager to implement those changes.”²⁴⁷ For Adams, application is more than simply informing the hearer what is required of them.

On the other hand, D. W. Johnson affirms strongly that “applying the text is not the preacher’s responsibility.”²⁴⁸ He believes that the biblical text will still have effect upon listeners’ lives, whether pastors give insightful application or not. Johnson teaches a robust understanding of the nature of God’s word. Citing 1 Thessalonians 2:13, he writes, “God’s Word not only informs the listener, leaving the listener to perform it; God’s Word performs, working in and on the listener... the pressure to apply is a modernist pressure, not a biblical pressure.”²⁴⁹ In other words, since truth is both self-authenticating and self-applying, the preacher “does not need to make truth work.”²⁵⁰ Rather, it will be the Spirit

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 302.

²⁴⁷ Adams, *Truth Applied*, 17.

²⁴⁸ Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 159.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 160f.

who will take the scriptural truth that has declared and will “form Christ” in the heart of the hearer as they are enabled to repent and live properly in the light of their new understanding of God’s reality.

The theological and practical tension that exists between these authors reveals a diversity of understanding as to the nature and purpose of preaching as a means of motivating hearers towards spiritual maturity which is at the heart of this study.

Summary of Findings

This research explored how pastors help congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. As a result of an extensive review of relevant literature, attention is drawn to the following, notable findings.

First, the foundation of Christian preaching is the biblical understanding that God continues to speak relevantly and with commanding authority to the contemporary world through the pages of his historic, written word—the Bible. The Bible reveals God’s nature, character, and will; it accurately preserves his words; it faithfully records and authoritatively interprets his creative and redemptive actions; it transparently declares his appeal to humanity; it effectively accomplishes his sovereign purpose in people’s lives. Christian preachers who proclaim this full-orbed, theocentric, biblical message, with its focus centred upon the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and who call upon listeners to respond appropriately with repentance and believing obedience, stand in the tradition of biblical prophets and apostles who declared God’s word.

Second, in effective preaching, the sermon is not merely biblically informative to the listeners, but sermons transform listeners spiritually. Ultimately, the efficacy of preaching for true transformation towards Christlikeness and delight in God does not lie

with the persuasive rhetoric or instructive application of the preacher, but God personally and actively engages with listeners through his word being faithfully proclaimed.

Preaching does not merely mediate the prescriptive authority of God through his word; it is also a vehicle for his immediate presence and power. Lives are transformed towards Christlikeness and spiritual maturity through a conscious repentance and an active trust in God's enabling to obey what he requires.

Third, under the seminal influence of recent and contemporary authors such as Richard Lovelace, Bryan Chapell, and Tim Keller, there is a growing appreciation for preaching which stimulates individuals and churches towards spiritual maturity.

Paradoxically, such preaching draws out the implications of living in union in Christ, what it means to live consistently with the believers' new identity and status conferred through the gospel. Thus, the gospel message is not restricted to the evangelism of unbelievers but is also the means by which believers are edified, being truly motivated and enabled to make progress in their Christians lives.

Fourth, such gospel-centred preaching also recognizes that the struggle for lasting change in people's lives is not won by just pleading for external behavior modification.

The battleground for holiness and maturity is the human heart. Preachers will help listeners towards Christlikeness by exploring and exposing the underlying sinful attitudes, ambitions, and affections rooted in hearts that give rise to sinful actions. Then preachers help listeners to understand and be apprehended by the grace that God has lavished on them in the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God will be glorified as Christians' hearts and affections are reoriented with a deepening

loving desire towards Christ and as lives increasingly reflect a growing delight in him by loving obedience to God and selfless sacrifice for others.

Fifth, the review also highlighted that Christian spiritual maturity is complex, both in its understanding and nature. Spiritual maturity requires both preacher and listener to cultivate an informed appreciation of gospel truths that will both motivate and precipitate heart and life transformation. Spiritual maturity also requires that preachers prepare their congregants for the dynamics of maturity by outlining reasonable expectations as to what maturity will mean, including: a growing awareness of personal sin and failure; the purpose of God-ordained trials in daily living that are designed to encourage a mature, believing response; the role and place of the means of grace; and a recognition that maturity and conformity to Christlikeness often happens slowly, in God's wise, overruling providence that is neither simple or programmatically straightforward.

Sixth, authors differ as to whether or not preaching to the congregation, in the context of regular worship services, is alone able to fulfill the mandate of maturing individuals and the church as a whole towards a Christlike spiritual maturity and to adequately equip them for ministry or kingdom service. There is widespread consensus that the preached sermon holds a central role in the corporate body. Preaching can stimulate spiritual vitality among members, set the church's agenda for Christ-centred faith and obedience, and unite God-glorifying worship and service. For many of the authors, however, the Sunday sermon monologue must be supplemented by a range of other interactive or dialogical formats of word ministry within the on-going life of the church in order to effect true edification among believing members.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors intentionally help their congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. The researcher focussed the inquiry upon a sample of experienced pastors who are widely acknowledged as examples of best practice. Through this inquiry, the researcher looked for common themes and a better understanding regarding an underlying intent in preaching, how that intention governs and determines the content of what is regularly preached in worship services, and how such content is suitably applied to individuals' lives in the context of the corporate gathering of the whole congregation. A basic qualitative study was devised in order to collect and analyze data generated through in-depth interviews. The following research questions were developed to guide the exploration of the subject and to provide a framework for the qualitative research:

1. In what ways does preaching in a worship service intentionally further congregants towards spiritual maturity?
2. What are the content emphases of sermons that are intentionally designed to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?
3. How do pastors intentionally design the application portions of their sermons in order to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

Design of the Study

Acknowledging that the term qualitative research defies a simple definition,²⁵¹ Sharran B. Merriam in her book, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, states that “qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”²⁵² Such research, according to Merriam, is normally characterised by a series of common features. First, there is a concern to understand the area or phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspective. Second, in recognizing the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, there is an acknowledgment that the researcher cannot be an entirely neutral observer or collator of data. Researchers will inevitably bring their own subjectivities and biases, which may shape the data as it is collected and interpreted. Third, the interpretative process is inductive. This means that the researchers aim to “build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field,”²⁵³ moving from the particular data collected to more general, universalized themes. Lastly, the research study concludes with a richly descriptive account of what has been learned about the phenomenon throughout the research and analytical procedures.

Participant Sample Selection

For this study, the researcher adopted a purposeful sampling strategy. Merriam writes, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to

²⁵¹ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, rev. and expanded ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 13.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid., 15.

discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned.”²⁵⁴ In this instance, a unique or atypical sample of notably proficient preachers was selected to maximize the information-rich data that is anticipated from the interviews. The sample of six individuals was determined by accessibility and by a series of specific qualifying criteria listed below. Since in qualitative study, the researcher serves as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher wished to learn how some of the best practice preachers fulfil their role so that, in turn, others may apply what is learned in their own contexts.

To maintain a measure of control over the selection of interviewees, the following criteria were applied in the choice made. These criteria particularly served to gain data towards best practices in light of the research focus. First, each interviewee was a male pastor whose theological perspective is reformed and conservative Evangelical. This aided the data analysis by minimizing the variables of gender and theological perspective since these are not the focus of the study. The sample was not restricted to pastors from one particular denomination but was drawn from those who hold to similar primary theological convictions such as the Westminster Standards or the Confessional Statement of The Gospel Coalition. The researcher did not consider other factors such as style of communication, congregational profile, size of church, cultural diversity, or style of worship service.

Second, each interviewee serves a particular church fellowship as its senior pastor or has recently served in such a role, and has done so for at least five years. The sample, therefore, was rooted and engaged in a long-term pastoral relationship with a particular

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 77.

congregation, and is also responsible for setting the weekly preaching agenda. In other words, these pastors know the general and specific spiritual needs of individuals within the congregation and of the congregation as a whole; they also have practice in selecting the passages of scripture to be expounded that most relevantly address those needs.

Third, the sample is committed to preaching as a personal priority in exercise of pastoral ministry. That is, among the many other tasks incumbent upon the senior pastor, the pastors in the sample regard preaching as a primary responsibility. Fourth, the sample believes in and is committed to preaching as instrumentally key in the spiritual maturing of individuals²⁵⁵ and congregation.²⁵⁶ These criteria underline the interviewees' commitment to pastoring their church primarily through their worship service and preaching ministry. The pastors in the sample will most likely frequently engage with church members in other Bible focussed situations such as counselling individuals, teaching classes or leading small groups. But it was understood that the interviewees regarded these as supplementary—if necessarily so—to the principal role of preaching to effect spiritual transformation in people's lives. This commitment to preaching was verified by either published affirmation, perhaps stated on the church website or other published material, or by a preliminary survey conducted by the researcher.

Fifth, the pastors' preaching ministries were recognized and valued not only in their own congregational context but also beyond it, so that these pastors are invited to speak regularly in other churches and/or conferences. This criterion sought to establish a degree of objectivity regarding the interviewees' proficiency in preaching. The researcher

²⁵⁵ Colossians 1:28.

²⁵⁶ Ephesians 4:13.

assumed that only those widely considered by other pastors to demonstrate an above-average competence in preaching would be invited to preach habitually in other contexts.

Sixth, pastors in the sample teach or tutor homiletics in seminary classes, preaching seminars, or workshops for pastors or non-pastoral preachers, or they studied preaching at advanced, doctoral level. This important criterion not only underlines the interviewee's preaching proficiency, but also emphasises that he has considered the craft of preaching. He is not simply an intuitively good practitioner but is in some measure self-aware and deliberately purposeful in what he does and why. This criteria aligns with the researcher's purpose: the analysis of the pastors' own reflections upon their purpose and objectives of their regular preaching ministry, rather than by analysing a sample of their sermons. The purpose of this study was primarily to consider the overall preaching strategy of effective pastors rather than investigating the mechanics of how they prepare and the dynamics of how they preach.²⁵⁷

Seventh, the sample's mode of preaching in worship service is primarily "expository," meaning he "attempts to present and apply the truths of a specific biblical passage."²⁵⁸ This limitation of preaching mode is another helpful limitation variable that is not the focus of the research questions.

Data Collection

In this study, data was collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected participants. Such interviews allowed for information-rich data to be commonly explored with all participants through a list of predetermined questions. It also

²⁵⁷ Vibert, in *Excellence in Preaching*, gives an example of this approach.

²⁵⁸ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 30.

allowed the researcher the flexibility to conversationally respond to answers given with further follow-up inquiry. Interviews were recorded for subsequent data analysis.

Wherever possible, the interviews were conducted by the researcher in the face-to-face presence of the interviewees. However, in order to obtain anticipated information-rich data from particular pastors not readily accessible to the researcher, some interviews were conducted via web based video conferencing.

Prior to the interview, each pastor received a letter explaining the purpose of the research, a consent form and a list of the protocol questions to be asked. In addition, the selected interviewees were asked to respond to two simple preliminary questions to verify their suitability as appropriate interviewees for this process,

1. Do you believe preaching to be a primary element of ministry towards the spiritual maturity of Christian believers?
2. Do you endeavor to lead Christian believers towards spiritual maturity through your preaching ministry?

Had any potential interviewee answered either question negatively, then the interview process with that individual would have ceased at that initial stage. The researcher was pleased to note that all participants answered these questions positively.

Since the purpose of this study was to explore the distinctive role of preaching in helping congregants towards spiritual maturity, the following questions were asked of those participating in the study. These were designed to probe more deeply into the issues raised by the research questions.

RQ 1: In what ways does preaching in a worship service intentionally further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

- a) What are your general objectives as you preach in a Worship service?

- b) What do you consider to be defining characteristics of Christian believers who are progressing towards spiritual maturity?
- c) How does your understanding of how Christian believers grow in spiritual maturity influence your preaching ministry?
- d) In what ways and to what extent is the role of preaching distinctive in helping congregants towards spiritual maturity?
- e) How does preaching relate to other disciplines of the Christian life which encourage growth in spiritual maturity?

RQ 2: What are the content emphases of sermons that are intentionally designed to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

- a) What factors determine which Biblical texts are chosen for these sermons?
- b) What Biblical themes or doctrines do pastors intentionally emphasise or revisit in their sermons to help congregants towards spiritual maturity?
- c) In what ways do other teaching programs within the life of the congregation complement your preaching ministry?

RQ 3: How do pastors intentionally design the application portions of their sermons in order to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

- a) What general approach do pastors adopt in their applying sermon texts to congregants towards spiritual maturity?
- b) In applying sermons for obedience, how do pastors avoid being heard as merely prescriptive or moralistic?
- c) In a preaching context, how do you help congregants understand the life-application relevance of more difficult, but important, theological concepts?
- d) Through their preaching, how do pastors seek to encourage congregants who show little interest to grow in spiritual maturity?

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed in full for analysis. It was expected that significant data would emerge as the transcript is initially subject to “open coding” and information subsequently analyzed, extracted, and grouped into prominent or recurring themes or categories.²⁵⁹ Once the first couple of interviews had been conducted, the researcher began to analyze data using the “constant comparative method” of analysis. Merriam describes this as comparing one segment of data with another to determine patterns of similarities and differences from the contributors. It was expected that further data input from subsequent interviewees would extend, sharpen, and strengthen the patterns that emerge, as was the case.

Study Limitations

Due to limited time and resources, eight male pastors were interviewed for this study. The interviewees did not all belong to the same denomination, but, as outlined previously, all shared similar reformed and evangelical theological convictions. It was anticipated that the conclusions arising from this study would have transferrable applications for pastors in a range of other church situations, particularly those engaged in expository ministry in reformed, evangelical churches. Other sine qua non matters of an effective preaching ministry, particularly the preacher’s character or ethos—to use Augustine’s term, “the most powerful component of persuasion”²⁶⁰—were not considered in this research. It was assumed that those being interviewed, who desire to influence

²⁵⁹ Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 178ff.

²⁶⁰ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 34.

others by preaching God's word, lived grace-dependent lives worthy of this "noble task."²⁶¹

Researcher Position

In a qualitative study such as this, it is necessary to acknowledge and identify the researcher's own particular subjective worldview, assumptions, and predispositions that will inevitably have a bearing both upon the conduct of the research and also the conclusions that are reached so that the objective validity of the research is upheld.

Merriam believes that such a clarification "allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data."²⁶²

Accordingly, the researcher is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland with over twenty years' solo ministry and pastoral experience in one semi-rural congregation. Like the interviewees in this study, he classifies himself theologically as both reformed and evangelical, and he is similarly committed to expository preaching as a primary means of individual and congregational edification. The researcher also believes that the Bible is best understood, interpreted, taught, and applied within a Christ-centred, redemptive-historical framework.²⁶³ As such, in his expository ministry to his own congregation, he endeavours to preach in order to effectively both evangelize non-Christians attending and also encourage and enable Christians towards spiritual maturity in the course of their normal lives.

²⁶¹ 1 Timothy 3:1.

²⁶² Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 219.

²⁶³ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 297ff.

However, the researcher, as a preaching pastor, also acknowledges and personally identifies with many of the difficulties other preachers experience in helping congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries as outlined in the introductory chapter, literature review, and interviews.

The researcher is also theologically persuaded and assumes that, in God's wisdom and providence, his will and purposes towards Christlikeness and spiritual maturity in people's lives are furthered through the preaching and teaching of the Bible. Nevertheless, the prerogative to use and bless that ministry towards that end—irrespective of the preaching being considered, humanly speaking, exemplary or inept—lies solely with God.

As a Christian disciple who desires to grow spiritually, the researcher wanted to understand more fully the preparatory processes and preaching principles that stimulate spiritual maturity in listening congregants. Moreover, he desired to explore the approaches adopted by those pastors from whose preaching ministry he has personally spiritually benefited spiritually. He acknowledges a personal bias in the initial choosing of preachers as from among those whose preaching ministry, whether regularly heard in person or via recorded media, has he believes, over a period of time, spiritually affected his own life for the better.

Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors intentionally help their congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. The following research questions guided the study and provided a framework for the qualitative research:

RQ 1: In what ways does preaching in a worship service intentionally further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

RQ 2: What are the content emphases of sermons that are intentionally designed to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

RQ 3: How do pastors intentionally design the application portions of their sermons in order to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues these questions address, eight proficient, reformed, and evangelical senior pastors were interviewed about their understanding and experience of intentionally helping church members towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. In this chapter, these research participants will be briefly introduced, and the researcher will present the insights, themes, agreements, and disagreement that emerged from their interviews.

Participants

Eight men, holding or recently holding the position of senior pastor in a congregation, were interviewed. These individuals were selected because they fulfilled a series of objective criteria and demonstrated their preaching proficiency and a widespread acceptance of their preaching ministries. While sharing reformed and evangelical

theological convictions, the pastors came from a diversity of denominational backgrounds: four were presbyterian, two were baptist, one was episcopalian, and one, formerly a presbyterian pastor, now ministers in an independent evangelical congregation. Five of the interviewees were currently serving in a senior pastor role; the remaining three, all of whom had decades of senior pastor position experience, each teach homiletics or pastoral theology in seminaries, and continue to exercise an influential preaching ministry in various churches week by week. Five of the interviews were conducted face to face, while the other three were conducted via webcam over the Internet. Their names have been changed to preserve a measure of anonymity.

Andrew is a baptist pastor who has served in a senior pastor role for over 20 years in an international church in continental Europe and also in a large baptist church in his native Northern Ireland. Currently pursuing academic studies, Andrew lectures in homiletics in two seminaries in Northern Ireland during the week and preaches in churches across the evangelical spectrum each Sunday.

Daniel was ordained into the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1981 and has been in his present senior pastor role since 1994. In addition to pastoring one of the largest presbyterian congregations, he regularly speaks at interdenominational Bible conferences in Ireland and is also actively involved as a tutor in training courses for preaching in Ireland and India.

A former seminary professor, Ryan has pastored presbyterian churches in the southern states of the USA. He is currently the founding and senior pastor of a growing non-denominational church that was planted in 2007. He has published a number of Bible commentaries and other books dealing with deepening Christian spirituality. He also

regularly preaches and speaks in other churches and seminaries across America and internationally.

Frank planted and then pastored a large Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) church in the southern states of the USA for over 25 years, and now continues to exercise a regular preaching ministry in a church plant congregation. A published author, he is also adjunct faculty member at several American seminaries, and engages in short term intensive classes and spiritual retreats in seminaries and churches in the USA, Europe, and Africa on such themes as spiritual formation, worship, gospel-centered ministry and grace-shaped relationships.

Bill is senior pastor of a large PCA congregation that he planted nearly 30 years ago. He has also preached and lectured in Bible conferences, churches, and seminars in Europe and Asia. His doctoral dissertation was on gospel-centred discipleship mentoring.

Stephen is currently Professor of Ministry in a British seminary, having previously ministered as a senior pastor in presbyterian churches in Northern Ireland for over 25 years. He has also served on the academic staff of an American seminary, during which time he preached in many churches in the United States and Canada. He has also visited and preached in churches throughout the Far East and in Africa.

Thomas is an anglican minister with 30 years of ministry experience in major cities in England, and now back home in Northern Ireland where he has served for a number of years in the senior pastor role in an influential, evangelical congregation. Underlying his ministry is the conviction that individual lives and churches are changed through the ministry of God's word, particularly through preaching. He is also actively

involved in helping to train younger preachers develop their gift at home and in the Balkans.

John exercises an influential preaching and teaching ministry both locally and nationally as the senior pastor of a baptist church in an historic university city in England, where he has been since 2002. A published author, he also speaks at national Bible conferences. Believing that preaching is central to the life and vitality of churches, he endeavours to nurture future preachers by organizing preaching classes for trainee preachers and by providing opportunities for them to preach in local village churches.

Together, these research participants represent a range of exemplary pastors whose preaching ministries have been effective in helping congregants and congregations towards spiritual maturity. Their evangelical conviction and in their commitment to preaching unites them. The diversity of the participants in respect to their denominational affiliation, congregational context, ministry experience, and individual personality gives the researcher confidence that the data of common ideas, insights, and practices that will arise from the interviews will have general application and usefulness for many other pastors in their own unique ministry circumstances. In response to two preliminary questions at the beginning of each interview, all of the participants individually answered in the affirmative. They confirmed, first, that they believed preaching to be a primary element of ministry towards the spiritual maturity of Christian believers, and second, they confirmed that they endeavored to preach as to lead believers towards maturity. Having given brief background context on each of the research participants, the interview data relating to research questions is now presented.

Preaching for the Spiritual Maturity of Congregants

The first research question, “In what ways does preaching in a worship service intentionally further congregants towards spiritual maturity?” explored the participants’ general understanding of the nature and purposes of preaching in a church worship service. Supplementary questions sought to elucidate how the participants recognized Christian spiritual maturity and preaching’s distinctive role in its formation. Participants’ responses are grouped into four areas: the nature and objectives of preaching; characteristics of spiritual maturity; the distinctive role of preaching in helping Christian believers towards spiritual maturity; and the relationship of preaching to other spiritual disciplines.

Preaching’s Nature and Objectives

Throughout their interviews, each research participant strongly affirmed their belief regarding of the “centrality” or “primacy” of preaching within the life of the church as God speaking to his people through the exposition of his word in order to stimulate and direct worship; to reveal and exult in the glory of Christ; to expose the sinfulness of people’s hearts and lives; to effect internal transformation towards Christlikeness; to encourage and effect the pursuit of spiritual growth and so cultivate a deepening relationship with God; to provide understanding for a biblical worldview; to set the agenda and vision for the corporate life and ministry of the local church; to motivate and equip for missional living and service; and, on occasions, to have a sense of a direct encounter with the living God.

The following key (often overlapping) ideas were identified in the data as common objectives of preaching: exalting Christ, evoking worship, informing minds, exposing hearts, transforming lives, handling the text, and meeting God.

Exalting Christ, Evoking Worship

When asked to outline general objectives when preaching in a worship service, Bill responded,

Obviously, the first objective is to exalt Christ. Paul's passion and vision in Acts 20 is my passion and vision. When he speaks to the Ephesians elders about his ministry of "testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" [v.20], and of his desire to "finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" [v.24], I don't there is any better summary statement of what our objective is as preachers.

Daniel similarly focussed on Paul's ministry objective of "proclaiming him" in Colossians 1:28. He continued, "All through Colossians, Pauls is saying that the fullness of God is found in Christ. Therefore, our worship and preaching should be pointing people to Christ. That should be an overriding objective since it is only in him that we become what we are intended to be. Preaching in general terms has to be something that sets forth Christ, and that makes it distinct."

Likewise, Frank also spoke of preaching, particularly in the context of a worship service to be "an intentional exalting of Christ." He unpacked this thought by explaining his commitment to always be preaching or teaching with a historical-redemptive orientation. Frank's understanding is, "not simply to be looking in the text for Jesus as the 'hero'," Rather, he elaborated that since all the promises of God find their fulfilment in Jesus, "for me the commitment is to preach the gospel through any text, and that's

going to look Christo-centric, and a Christo-centric message is going to bring forth Christ.”

A common thread among all the respondents was the belief that something uniquely special happens among the congregation when the word was preached in the context of a worship service. For instance Bill, said,

We believe that God reveals that the preached word is the main means by which he speaks in a contemporary and relevant fashion to his people. We also believe there is a uniqueness to the preaching of the word that’s different than, say, a conversation over coffee. There’s something about the Lord’s day and worship service and the gathering of the saints with the elders and deacons that is unique. And so we have to believe the scriptures when it says that there is a unique power to preaching that is unlike any other element.

When asked to explain, Bill cited 1 Corinthians 5:4 and spoke of the doctrine of the church. Although the passage is dealing with a matter of church discipline, nevertheless the promise stands that “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus...” Bill commented, “I think it’s talking about the whole idea of the power and presence of Christ when God’s people are corporately gathered for worship.” He continued with reference to 1 Timothy 5, where Paul writes about the dynamic of the local church gathered along with the elder whose primary responsibility is to preach and teach. Bill concluded, “It seems to me he is talking about the Lord’s Day and the unique power that is there.”

Similarly, Stephen spoke about the

variety of responses that come about as a result of the preaching in a worship service that draws me into a worshipful response. If it is God’s ultimate intention to call out for himself a multitude of worshippers, then each service of the church should moving towards that goal of making of worshippers primarily rather than workers. In a service there is an understanding that here is God, and I know him and I hear him and I am aware of him speaking to me, I’m aware of his presence in this service in a way that I’m not aware of it anywhere else.

Expounding upon the unique experience and effectiveness of preaching in a worship service, in contrast to a Christian believer meeting God through prayer and Bible reading in a personal quiet time, Stephen continued, "...in the context of all of God's people and in the singing of praise and the dialogue of worship, suddenly in that context the Word of God comes more powerfully and more strongly, coming in a way that genuinely gets to the heart."

Arising from the biblical principle that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,"²⁶⁴ Daniel deduced that "you then come to the point where the word and worship belong indissolubly together." He continued by warmly citing the Anglican evangelical statesman, John R. W. Stott, "he speaks of something unique taking place in the context of God's people coming together under God's Word in the presence of God's Spirit to hear God's servant." Daniel then quoted Stott's *The Living Church*, from memory, "he has this great phrase regarding the reading and preaching of the word in a service of worship, '...far from being an alien intrusion into worship'²⁶⁵ it is actually the word that shapes the worship. Basically Stott is saying that it is preaching in a worship service is the primary vehicle for evoking the worship of God."

Daniel acknowledges that there is horizontal, edification aspect to the gathering of the local church, that of "teaching and admonishing one another." Nevertheless, like other research participants, he maintains that "there is something that take place in the context of people being assembled for worship which has an upward dimension, in which

²⁶⁴ Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4.

²⁶⁵ John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 37.

the word of God is opened up and through which he speaks to his people ... this puts preaching in a class of its own.” Daniel favors baptist pastor John Piper’s phrase “expository exultation.” He understands the term to mean “the preacher, as much as the worshippers – as he preaches – not worshipping the word, but worshipping over the word.”

Informing Minds, Exposing Hearts, Transforming Lives

It is clear that each of the research participants believe that, due to their commitment to an expository preaching, the biblical didactic or informative element to preaching as means to intentionally help congregants towards spiritual maturity is very important. For instance, John commented on Paul’s exhortation in 1 Timothy 4 that the young pastor “devote himself to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation and to teaching.”²⁶⁶ John explained, “Exhortation, preaching in other translations, is *paraklēsis*, and includes encouraging, comforting, challenging; and then teaching, *didaskō*, is more to do with instruction. You can’t have one without the other. So the instructional and informative side is non-negotiable, but it is not the whole story.”

Daniel highlighted the significance of Jesus’ metaphorical use of the “seed” to represent the word of God, “and as the word gets down deep into people’s minds and hearts they are going to demonstrate spiritual maturity” although, according to the parable, the yields of fruitfulness of maturity will differ.²⁶⁷ Conversely, he noted that if the word does not deeply penetrate listeners’ minds and hearts, “then you will end up with the superficial, the shallow, those who are immediately choked whenever the cares

²⁶⁶ 1 Timothy 4:13.

²⁶⁷ Mark 4:20.

of this life and so on encroach.” For Daniel, spiritual maturity is a function of the depth by which the word of God is both taught by the preacher and also taken in by those listening. He said, “I think [spiritual maturity] is about getting the Word deep down into people’s lives, and that will clearly influence one’s preaching ministry.” He spoke about being personally and significantly influenced by a visiting pastor who preached in his congregation over a week at a depth “that I felt I wasn’t doing at that particular time in my ministry. That week challenged me because I felt I needed to take my preaching up a gear. I needed to explore the depths of scripture more because if I am not doing that, the word will not go deep into people’s lives.” He now also believes in “going deep, and not playing lip-service to ‘preaching the whole counsel of God’ [Acts 20:27]” is a key factor in sustaining a long term expository ministry.

One should perhaps note, however, a measure of caution offered in this area by Frank. He observed one of the limiting factors of preaching: sometimes pastors do not consider as much as they should “how much a particular audience can absorb before it becomes counter-productive... That we are talking to babes in Christ means that we must allow for the limitation of the spiritual maturity of those we are addressing. We should ensure that we are preaching to all the lambs and not just to the ones who ‘dig’ our preaching most.”

Stephen stressed the importance of the informative aspect of preaching as a foundation for preaching’s transformative effect. He stated that in preaching “you are bringing [the congregation] constantly through to Christ, because you know that ultimately what makes a difference in their lives is the understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, and how his grace continues to sustain and help us.” This

underlines that, while preaching for maturity will target people's hearts as the control centre of their lives, the route into that domain is the individual's mind or understanding. Preachers cannot bypass people's minds. The participants highlighted the "renewing of our minds"²⁶⁸ as a significant biblical theme they regularly addressed as they emphasized on-going spiritual maturity.

Thomas was clear that, since "Preaching is God speaking through his word, through the exposition of his word, [then] inevitably preaching is going to further church family members towards spiritual maturity." However, maturity among listeners is not an automatic given since "God's word can harden as well as soften, not everyone will head towards spiritual maturity."

Frank was sure as to where preachers needed to focus their attention, "To me, the preaching of the gospel is declaring the great truths of the gospel, but it's done in the power of the Spirit to the heart." Frank acknowledged that, in his context, many church believers presumed to have a reasonable understanding of the gospel. However, their grasp of the gospel was quite superficial, being reduced to a message "that prepared you to die as opposed to seeing the gospel as preparing you to live." For that reason he was committed to preaching sermons that were informative, that is full of the "good content" of the gospel. Nevertheless, in warmly citing the 19th century British preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon, and the contemporary New York pastor, Tim Keller, as exemplary exponents, Frank recognized the importance of preaching to the heart, meaning the heart's affections. This is crucial for effecting transformed living among those believers sitting under his preaching ministry. "The gospel, well preached and taught" he continued, "is

²⁶⁸ Romans 12:1.

going to go below the waterline of simply my external behavior and begin to expose the control center of my imagination and my choices.”

Likewise Stephen highlighted the necessity of preachers aiming for the heart, saying, “A primary goal of preaching for me is to bring about heart change and life change.” Since transformation of life begins with a change of heart, he explained

preaching contributes to that by exposing the desires and intentions of the heart, showing how those sinful and selfish desires and aspirations are not fulfilling God’s purpose for us, and leading us to see how, in an orientation to Christ and the gospel, that it is through the gospel that hearts are changed and transformed, leading to a change of behavior. So insofar as it is the word of God applied by the Spirit of God into people’s lives and into their hearts, then preaching should move people towards spiritual maturity.

Stephen spoke of his prayerful expectation that “somebody will walk out of church today and say, ‘Because of what I have heard today I can never be the same again,’ because in some way their lives have been touched and affected, either in terms of their attitudes, or beliefs, or behavior, or understanding of God, the gospel, or the work of the Spirit in their lives.” Thomas also spoke of the longing that worshippers leaving a service would say, “I know God more; I know what it means to love him more and serve others more.”

Handling the Text, Meeting God

Each of the participants is committed to an expository preaching ministry, meaning that they ground their sermons in a Bible passage, study the passage contextually, interpret the passage Christocentrically, and apply the passage relevantly. Therefore, a number of the respondents highlighted the necessity of carefully studying the passage to understand the text’s primary meaning as a prerequisite for wise and relevant application. For example, Frank stated,

I am an expository preacher, so I am safest when I am closest to the text of scripture. My goal is always to be preaching through a book of the Bible; or if I am given a topic, I'm going to be looking for a text because the word of God itself is the principal carrier of the gospel of God which is the power of God unto salvation [Rom. 1:16]. So I'm going to do work on the text; I'm going to assume that it is not a sermon until I get to Jesus as the focus of the text, meets the needs of the text and is the provision of the text.

Thomas spoke of desiring to glorify God by “handling God’s word in such a way that we hear God speaking, that is God making himself known.” To the extent to which the preacher correctly understands the authorial meaning and application of the biblical text is the extent to which God’s voice is heard. Where the preacher misunderstands the passage or applies in it inappropriately, then God’s voice is not clearly heard.

As Andrew approaches the Bible text, he states that a general objective would be to “do a faithful job with the passage.” By this he means, in the context of a worship service, “to deliver an exposition which is accurate, clear, and relevant.” Ryan speaks similarly of wanting “the people to be satisfied that that what they are hearing is not my personal brainstorm but is actually in scripture. Not in a clunky, academic way... They deserve to see and expect to see that what I am saying is really anchored in the Bible is general and in the text in particular more profoundly and more searchingly.”

One corollary of a wise and careful handling of the text is a desire among most of the recipients to model how believers ought to read, understand, and apply the Bible for themselves. As Daniel says, “it helps people to gain some type of framework. They learn, (perhaps unconsciously) about context, about genre, where something sits in the Bible timeline.” This further facilitates properly engaging in Bible study discussions, which, as will be highlighted elsewhere in the chapter, is considered by the pastors to be a crucial factor for sermon follow-up or for normal discipleship development. Bill expressed

concern that, all too often, Bible study discussion can be downgraded to simply “What does this passage mean to us?” While this may be helpful in teasing out application, Bill wants to encourage church members to focus on the biblical author’s intent in writing the passage or the Spirit’s aim in inspiring it. He said, “I talk about the fact that there is only one proper interpretation of every single passage in scripture. There are many applications but only one interpretation. So I actually try in my preaching not only to model that but also to outright say that.”

However, returning to thorough Bible based exposition, Ryan considers his expectation of listeners’ “profound and searching” experience to be more than the product of good exegetical preparation or of a wise handling of the text. This experience, which he acknowledges is difficult to quantify and even talk about “has to be at some level a moment with God himself. The people have to – and deserve to – have some experience of the immediacy of God; that he is there, he is speaking, he is serving them, he is revealing himself. So, it’s not just me, the human preacher. There is something else going on, beyond my control that I can only pray for and lend myself to. It seems to me that in real preaching something of that magic happens. I long for that.”

Bill sees correctly handling the text as an important but secondary objective. Rather, “I certainly would want to properly exegete, interpret and apply the passage. I certainly want to do that. But I want to preach Christ in such a way that people see their need for Christ, and also find the hope that is offered to them afresh in Christ.”

John speaks similarly of preaching as not simply passing on a correct understanding and application of the text. Rather his objective in preaching, as learned from his mentor Peter Lewis, is

releasing the energy of the text. That's what I am trying to attempt. I see that energy as a God-given thing which is inherent in the written word but which is released through its authoritative opening up in the power of the Spirit both in the preacher and congregation. That it is trying to enable what God intends to come from the text to come out and do its work. I'm very much hoping for there to be, to use the jargon, a power encounter between the people and the Lord through the preaching of the word. A divine moment of which the preacher is the enabler of, or the channel for.

John also expresses concern that, certainly in conservative circles in the United Kingdom, there is a growing trend to view the “instructional and informative” side of preaching, which he acknowledges as being non-negotiable, as “the sum total of preaching” which he believes only part of the story. As a result, he is hesitant to encourage detailed note-taking of the sermon by listeners, because “I think the danger then is that you are putting off the immediacy of the divine moment... you are unwittingly putting a defensive shield against what the Lord may want you to do in that moment.”

Characteristics of Spiritual Maturity

A core aspect of this study explored how pastors help their believing church members mature spiritually. Therefore, the researcher wanted to know how these pastors understood spiritual maturity, describing characteristic traits of those who were spiritually mature or who were making progress towards maturity. Their responses are grouped under the following headings: conforming to biblical norms, transformed thinking, congregational unity, missional living, understanding the dynamic of maturity.

Conforming to Biblical Norms

When asked to outline defining characteristics of Christian believers who were progressing towards spiritual maturity, a few of the participants responded by referring to

key Bible passages which described normative Christian behavior. Both Andrew and Daniel spoke of character transformation in which the comprehensive “fruit of the Spirit”²⁶⁹ was becoming more evident in people’s lives. However, Daniel recognized that “while it is easy to qualitatively quote such traits, love joy, peace and so on, these are very difficult to measure.” Stephen described spiritual maturity in terms of the profile of a disciple given by Jesus in John 15, “someone who is remaining in Christ through the word and prayer; someone who is obedient; someone whose life bears fruit, that there is clear, observable evidence of a change of heart, change of life; there is a joyfulness about their lives; and then obviously a key mark of the disciple is that they love as Christ loves.”

In contrast, John who, at the time of the interview was preaching through 1 Timothy, said that “the standards for leaders [outlined in 1 Timothy] give a good summary of the level of maturity, or the definitions of maturity that would be expected of all believers.” He then listed such traits as “love for Christ, self-control, conducting yourself in a manner seen by others that would be consistent with the gospel... more private aspects would be confessing sin, believing forgiveness for confessed sin, more progressively overcoming habitual sins as the gospel is applied with the power that the Spirit has given. In summary, words such as love, holiness, true to the Spirit.”

In other words, these participants, highlighted observable, external change in behavior: reflecting a growing Christlikeness, epitomizing the fruit of the Spirit, forsaking sin, and centering their lives on God. All of these arise from an internal transformation of the heart.

²⁶⁹ Galatians 5:22-23.

Other respondents spoke about spiritual maturity in more abstract terms. For instance, Thomas said that what he was looking for in the lives of those exhibiting maturity was “a growing hunger to know God more.” He further explained that would be tangibly “seen in people’s conversations, whether informally over coffee or in a fellowship group. You can detect quite quickly whether people have a hunger for God and knowing God through his word. I would be looking for that kind of hunger in people.” Such hunger would be also be evidenced in people’s lives, particularly in their recognition of the need to repent. Since “God’s word is transformative” he continued, “you would want to be hearing people say, ‘Actually, this is how my life needs to change; this is what I need to stop doing and take obedience more seriously.’” Once again, the pattern is of internal, God-ward heart change demonstrated in genuine, external, observable life transformation.

Frank, who has written passionately about maturity, describes sanctification as “removing the obstacles to obeying the great commandment,” to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind and strength. Against his own cultural background where holiness was viewed as “more of a category of conservative morality,” Frank admits to moving away from what he calls “old-school individual piety,” to a position where, under the influence of his spiritual father, pastor and missions leader, Jack Miller, Frank understands spiritual maturity as “letting the gospel run through us, enabling us to become what the great commandment says we were made for, to be God-centered in every aspect of my being.” This God-centeredness, he continued, is “not just concerned with my relationship with God but with my relationship to the things that matter to God.” That being so, he expressed reservation about a common, but inadequate view of spiritual maturity as “a

steady diet of the spiritual disciplines, a commitment to micromanage sin and removing the possibility of removing temptation in their life.” Instead, Frank described spiritual maturity as “every aspect of my being, bearing the mark of the glory of God but – like creation - subject to disintegration of sin and death, being reclaimed by this glorious gospel, so that I can be more fully freed to live for God’s glory in his story.” In summary he said, “I have written about maturity as ‘I am mature as I am free to be about the things that matter to God himself’.”

Transformed Thinking

Daniel expressed concern that spiritual maturity was difficult to measure. In consequence said he was “probably more inclined to think in terms of Romans 12, we are transformed by the renewing of our minds.” Daniel referenced the apostle Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 2, “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus...” and Colossians 3, speaking about “letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Daniel stated his understanding “that one of the defining characteristics of maturing believers is that they try to think biblically, they challenge the suppositions of the world because they are being transformed by the renewing of their minds so that they are no longer being conformed to the patterns of this world.” The pattern still holds, maturity through internal change – this time of mind - leading to external transformation of behavior.

Frank also echoed the importance of embracing a gospel worldview framework as a result of renewed thinking when he spoke about those maturing believers who begin to appreciate the bigger gospel story beyond a limited and pietistic “Jesus and me.” Those who are mature grasp the concept of the gospel of the kingdom. Frank explained, “we are already citizens in a new heaven and earth, that I am a conquered one moving forward in

Christ's train until the day when his kingdom is fully revealed." But mature Christians then further think through the implications for this, both with respect to their understanding of God's plan as revealed in scripture, but also begin to live in light of this big picture agenda.

Congregational Unity

There was widespread agreement among the participants that indicator of spiritual maturity is how believers relate to one another within the church fellowship. Because of verses, like Ephesians 4:16, which describe a cohesive body of people, Ryan thinks of Christian maturity "not only in internal, personal ways but in external relational ways." He continued, "A mature Christian is a very relational, connected human being in a body, in a local church." To him, the "dream church member is humble, modest, available, cheerful, and prayerful. They have a foundational willingness to serve and care and pray. That's a paradigm of maturity." Ryan highlighted Jesus' beatitudes, in Matthew 5, to add weight to his emphasis on spiritual maturity and unity. He noted that the descriptive markers of those Jesus calls, "blessed" are "all plural adjectives, poor in spirit, and so on, they are all plurals. So it's a community marked by a poverty of spirit and so forth."

Also articulating that relational commitment and unity is a primary evidence of a growing spiritual maturity among believers, Bill stated his understanding that such growth is a "fight." According to Bill, mature Christians right in the realm of love: a fight to express and grow in love for God and love for one's neighbor. While this right certainly includes congregational unity, this model of spiritual maturity will be further explored as missional living.

Missional Living

Considering the spiritual maturity of the congregation as a corporate whole, Andrew drew attention to the importance of the three types of relationships that Jesus explored in his John 15 discourse. Firstly, the vine imagery pictures the intimacy of the disciples' relationship with Jesus, and where that relationship is vibrant and cultivated, then "the fruitfulness of God working in us and through us will follow." Secondly, "the relationship that the disciples have among themselves, as an overflow of their prior relationship with Christ, is one distinguished by love." Thirdly, maturity is demonstrated by how disciples relate to the outside world. With "the essential task being that of relevant and effective witnesses, a mature congregation will neither exclude itself from the world nor is it so intertwined with the world that there is no distinctiveness." Again, maturity is marked by internal transformation stemming from a deepening relationship with Christ. Maturity is then externally demonstrated by a loving commitment to fellow believers, and by distinctive and effective missional living in the context of an unbelieving world.

John also noted the importance of corporate spiritual maturity. Over time, he believed, a congregation's corporate ethos should change, with a growing and strengthening of loving, relational commitment among congregants being an obvious distinctive marker. More than that, with a growing collective maturity should come a change of corporate habits and activities. Speaking from his own pastoral context, John observed how the congregation had, over a number of years, slowly changed by becoming less timid to being more ready and prepared to take risks in outward community focused outreach, such as evangelism and mercy ministries. This echoed

Frank's expectation: a congregation where the love of God enlivens the body through a deeper grasp of the gospel and its missional implications will begin to earnestly live redemptively and attractively in the community. They will take risks and move out of their building into the neighborhood, with all its darkness and brokenness, because they are confidently assured of the hope they are given in the promise that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under their feet."²⁷⁰

John expressed the view that the corporate maturity and missional effectiveness of a relationally-committed, local church was synergistically greater than the sum of the individuals. Furthermore, he said that, with respect to individuals' personal maturity and a congregation's corporate maturity, there was a "feedback loop" that worked both ways. Where individuals were maturing spiritually, this would help to promote collective maturity; and an environment of corporate maturity itself would have a positive stimulating effect on the spiritual growth of individual believers.

The Dynamic of Maturity

In addition to describing characteristic traits of spiritual maturity, a few research participants commented on the process of spiritual maturity. For instance, Stephen affirmed that believers "obviously grow through nurturing their relationship with Christ." He explained that, in reformed circles, those disciplines that are termed "means of grace," such as Bible reading, praying, corporate worship, and the Lord's Supper, of themselves "do not produce the growth... but insofar as they connect us to Christ, they are ways of bringing into the atmosphere where we can breathe the oxygen of Christ's presence, and in breathing the fresh air of God's grace, we grow."

²⁷⁰ Romans 16:20.

Thomas stated that the process of spiritual growth “is tied in with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; so that, Christian believers grow in spiritual maturity ultimately through the work of God in someone’s life.” At the time of the interview, Thomas was preaching through 2 Peter, and he referenced, “The whole thing of ‘growth in grace’ is a very important aspect of 2 Peter. But I take it, although it is not explicitly mentioned, that growth in grace is not a human dynamic but is actually God at work in someone’s life. It has to do with understanding the doctrine and work of the Holy Spirit – illuminating, transforming, changing, convicting, all those things; and of course the starting point of regeneration.”

Andrew observed, “growth tends to come when we are challenged.” In referencing the Lane-Tripp model of spiritual growth,²⁷¹ he noted that the “heat” of “difficult situations reveal what our hearts are really like; and therefore showing to us those areas of change that are required, we discover where we need to trust God for and obey God for.” Faith and obedience grow in the face of the possibility of a response to testing circumstances of unbelief and disobedience.

Bill, as a result of his own doctoral research, has developed a practical model of spiritual growth and maturity that he briefly outlined. Rather than marking spiritual maturity simply by noting the evidence or fruit of someone’s external behavior, Bill’s model attempts to practically unpack what it means, to quote Stephen above, “to grow through nurturing their relationship with Christ.” Bill speaks of a 3-step “waltz” consisting of on-going repentance, belief or faith, and obedience (or “the fight”). Believers that are truly maturing are firstly,

²⁷¹ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Charlotte, NC: New Growth Press, 2011).

growing in repentance, which leads them back to Christ to reaffirm their justified standing before God and their adopted status, finding that Zephaniah 3:17 is still true of them, even in the midst of repenting of their sin; secondly, by faith, they appropriate the power of the gospel to apply the power of the transforming blood to their souls at the point of their repentance, trusting that supernatural power is being released at the place of repentance; and thirdly, that they would step out and “fight the good fight of faith” choosing to say “Yes” to righteousness and “No” to sin.²⁷² That’s what I would say is a defining characteristic.

In other words, Bill considers how those who progress in spiritual maturity are growing in their relationship with Christ through a cyclical, or—perhaps better—spiral process. The spiral of spiritual progress, far from linear, involved a dynamic of a deepening repentance towards Christ, an active believing in and dependence on Christ, and a selfless obedience arising from a growing love for Christ.

The Distinctive Role of Preaching

The research participants were asked how their understanding of how Christian believers grow in spiritual maturity influenced their preaching ministries, and in what ways did they consider preaching to have a distinct role in this regard. Ryan made the general but significant observation based upon Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 4:12-16, that “God’s strategy is to take us further [in maturity] than we would ever dream of going, further than we have ever gone before towards ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ He is straining at the leash of language to describe the massiveness of the glory of Jesus, and that is where preaching should take people.” Ryan continued,

I have changed my understanding of preaching through the years. I see a little more clearly now that preaching is not simply expounding a biblical text, although I would hope it is never less than that. It is taking a group of people from one place to another, not just on one Sunday, but on successive Sundays over time. It’s taking people somewhere: it’s taking them into green pastures;

²⁷² Particularly in the area of “love” and loving relationships, as mentioned previously.

it's taking them into still waters; it's getting them toward the promised land in stages as the book of Numbers describes... it's a church on a journey into more of Jesus. And the [weekly exposition of the Word] is simply the platform for one insight after another, one deeper insight after another on that larger journey.

As the respondents' focused upon the distinctive role of preaching with regards to spiritual maturity, their answers were grouped the following categories: authoritative declaration, intentionality towards transformation, beholding Jesus, creating momentum.

Authoritative Declaration

Andrew recognized that preaching is distinctive in that, "when properly understood and properly done it is setting out 'Here's what God is saying' on the authority of what God has spoken in scripture... it is more than simply sharing ideas; there is a declarative element to it, this is what God is saying." John agrees with this when he said that, in preaching, one is not simply "a gifted individual making accurate comments on the text. Rather, as the Apostle Peter says, 'speak as if you are speaking the very words of God.' That's the biblical warrant for presuming to be God's spokesman on the text." John continued by stating that the danger in viewing the preacher solely as a teacher or merely giving a talk about the text is that "the element of 'This is what the Lord is saying about your life' is almost absent." As such, John was keen to draw a clear line between the distinctive nature of preaching – particularly in the context of a congregational worship service - and teaching the Bible in some other context or format, such as a Sunday school class or seminary lecture. John reasoned, "A lecturer is aiming to instruct and maybe persuade about an opinion. Whereas a good sermon announces fairly early on the intention of changing a life. I don't think lectures do that. I'm pretty clear about that."

Other study participants were not as clear-cut in their approach. Thomas regards preaching as distinctive because of “its corporate dimension. In Deuteronomy, Moses gathered God’s people together as a corporate body, and then spoke God’s words. It seems to me that there has to be that corporate dimension that gives preaching its true meaning. One-to-one Bible studies, small group discussions is certainly sharing God’s word and building each other up, but I don’t think of it as preaching.” Thomas sees the difference between preaching and teaching as being somewhat fluid, “I think ‘preaching’ and ‘teaching’ in the Gospels are words that are used interchangeably, so I wouldn’t want to nail down one at the expense of the other. I think they dovetail. Preaching will certainly include teaching; but teaching students need not necessarily be preaching.” One possible distinctive about preaching that Thomas saw “could be the appeal, such as in 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul is obviously teaching, but the teaching leads through to a very clear appeal. So while that may be a preaching distinctive, I wouldn’t want to be too tied on the difference between preaching and teaching.”

Ryan favorably cited Professor John Murray’s critique of the difference between preaching and teaching, “Theologian John Murray said that while preaching obviously has a teaching component, it’s set apart from teaching by ‘3p’s:’ personal, passionate pleading... Teaching is launching proposals, ‘Here’s what I think, what do you think...?’ Preaching is more direct, more intense, more personal, passionate pleading.”

Other participants offered a variety of viewpoints: Andrew viewed preaching as distinctive because it occurred in the context of a worship service. On the other hand, while holding a high regard for preaching in a worship context, Frank saw no distinction between preaching and teaching. Similarly, Stephen also saw no clear distinction between

preaching in a Sunday service and teaching at a midweek meeting. However, while wanting to “stress the primacy of preaching, and of its supreme or primary importance in the ministry of the church” he understood “the ministry of the word to be a more extensive and flexible term” to describe the multifarious ways by which God’s word can engage with and impact people’s lives, such as in small groups or pastoral visitation.

Preaching, as authoritative public proclamation, Stephen understands as just one aspect of word ministry under which nebulous label “can include exhortation, comfort, and evangelism. It can include a whole range of things that are taking place there.”

Intentionality Towards Transformation

Arising from the understanding that preaching is distinctively an authoritative declaration of God’s word in his name, a corollary of that is that preaching intentionally seeks to effect spiritual transformation towards Christlikeness in the hearts of and lives of the hearers. That God accomplishes such true and lasting transformation working through his preached word in the lives of those listening and responding, is, for Thomas, “wonderfully liberating” since it means that he does not have “to preach in such a way, using unique techniques, to move someone onto spiritual maturity.” Rather, even as he preaches, he is to have “confidence in God and in his word and in the Holy Spirit, believing that there is an expectancy that as God’s word is preached that the people, in God’s will and way, will be changed into the likeness of Christ.”

Likewise, Bill declared, “the preacher must make sure that his hope is in the power of the Spirit showing up in the lives of his hearers.” Out of personal experience, he admits that on occasions, some of his “greatest mistakes have been whenever I tried to actually force people to the cross, instead of resting in a deep, personal trust that, in my

preaching, the Holy Spirit is at work.” He further acknowledges that to speak of Christ in a very intense way can put off people. When, however, “I am resting in my calling and trusting in the power of the Spirit in my preaching, there is more of a winsomeness so that people are drawn to the attractiveness of Christ.” Preachers who are preaching in expectation for the response of faith must also themselves be preaching in faith, that is “resting in the gospel that they are preaching.”

The participants expected to see transformative impact in the hearts and lives of their listening congregants. As to the nature of that transformation, two aspects arose from their responses. On the one hand, there is the possibility, suggests Ryan, that arising from preaching that is “personal, passionate pleading, in that kind of discourse, with relationship, that kind of moment or dynamic, it creates an intense, personal connection between preacher and congregation, in which moment God is present, stirring new things.” Similarly, Andrew affirmed, “we all know as preachers it is wonderful when someone comes up and says ‘The Lord spoke to me through what you said this morning’ and I think we should want more of that.” Indeed, Daniel seeks to create an expectation among the congregation of an encounter with God through the preaching of his word, strongly encouraging them to pray “that the word will come not simply as word only but with power and Holy Spirit conviction.”

On the other hand, the pastors were also aware of the transformative impact that a slow-burning or lingering new insight would have upon listeners’ as they later reflected upon its meaning and implications. As a former teacher, Andrew said, “whatever way God might speak in the moment in a congregation, and I hope he does, I would still hope that someone could go home afterwards and open their Bible and say, ‘Well, here’s John

15 that we looked at this morning. Now I can read this for myself.’...I don’t want to discard an element of people going home and mulling it over and saying, ‘Well, I think I’ve learned something from this passage that is new’.” In other words, a growing, spiritually hungry believer will continue to avail and mediate on the teaching of the passage and its implications for everyday living long after the sermon has finished. In a similar way, Thomas said, “I would like to think that as a sermon is preached on a Sunday it would be carried by people throughout the week, consciously informing and shaping their prayer-life, discipleship... maybe affecting people’s thinking in the particular context in which they are in.”

Ryan speaks hopefully about “the preaching being so compelling that it just starts in people’s lives throughout the week. It just can’t be ignored. In small group discussions there will be echoes of the sermon, not only because the group leader intends that to happen, but because if the sermon is what we want it to be it will get people so thinking that they can’t help but talk about it.” Thus, he says, “hopefully the sermon starts pushing out in all directions in people’s thinking. It’s the stimulant, even the irritant.” These participants are suggesting that the impact of the sermon, as a dynamic expression of God’s word, continues to resonate in people’s lives as they discuss it together.

The important aspect of providing additional opportunity for the sermon to be ingested and applied within the interactive fellowship of small groups will be considered presently.

Beholding Jesus

Closely allied to preaching’s transformative impact is the understanding that spiritual change occurs when, by faith, believers “behold the glory of Christ” as Paul

describes in 2 Corinthians 3:18. “We make progress”, says Ryan, “by seeing him with the eyes of our hearts [Eph. 1:18], seeing him only as our hearts can see.” This does not bypass the mind,

but “beholding the glory of the Lord” is such visual language. The heart has some God-given capacity to see, and the best moments in preaching, when people actually make progress, are when – in God’s mercy – not just the people but the preacher too get so Christ-focussed, sitting there, absorbed in who he is for us, absorbed in his glory, and captivated, that we’re actually worshipping. And that, I think, is when we start changing.

In the context of believers growing “through nurturing their relationship with Christ,” and of “the means of grace being a way of connecting with Christ,” Stephen noted that “preaching has to be a special way of getting people to access Christ and his grace. You’re bringing them constantly through to Christ” since it is only through a deepening personal appreciation and dependence on his grace, “spelled out in terms of practical application,” that change will come.

In his preaching, Bill stresses the importance of Luther’s second use of the law, “where we preach the law to expose sin and drive people to despair of their own self-righteousness and self-sufficiency and self-reliance, so that having no other recourse they flee afresh to Christ.” Bill, therefore, seeks in his preaching to show how “Christ has provided for our failures and how Christ is the hope of progression towards the love that God requires.” He cited his mentor in this respect, Dr Bryan Chapell, “who always used to tell me that constant adulation of the glories of Christ is what is motivating, a constant adulation of the beauty of Christ and the beauties of the blessing of the gospel.”

Creating Momentum

The research participants all affirmed their belief in the centrality of preaching within the life of the church. For example, Ryan stated, “I do think that preaching is, in my understanding of the ongoing life of the healthy church, it’s the big burner right at the centre, where God is most present.” And in consequence of which, says Thomas, “preaching enables other ministries of the word to happen... other opportunities for different forms of word ministry are created.”

Bill explains more fully, “I think preaching is distinctive in that it creates the gathering momentum of the people of God and their being exposed to the gospel, and that sets the table for deeper discipleship. The distinctive role of preaching is setting the table for other opportunities for spiritual growth.” Similarly, John affirmed,

I don’t think preaching is sufficient, I do think that other forms of instruction and other education type tracks are needed... but I do think preaching is at the heart of it. Something happens in preaching that then radiates out that enables everything else. It affects the spiritual maturity of those doing other things. Preaching creates and sustains and develops what all the other people are ministering in different ways.

In other words, preaching that flourishes in the lives of congregants, was not intended to be the sole input of the life-giving, life-sustaining word. Rather, such preaching, by its very nature, encourages, enthuses, enables, and equips congregants to engage in other forms of word based, discipleship-making ministries.

Preaching and Other Spiritual Disciplines

Of all the participants, Ryan was possibly the most enthusiastically animated in extolling the primacy and blessing of preaching within the life of the church. For example, he said, “Throughout the Bible, what’s God doing? He’s speaking: he’s speaking new a new world into existence; he’s speaking the human race and creation into

existence; he's speaking redemption into people's lives...So the corollary of that is, we experience that through preaching as in no other way. That's my view." And yet, even he granted that "Even the best of preaching is not the whole of ministry." This section will outline the participants' views on the limitations of preaching, and the need for spiritual supplements.

Limitations of Preaching

Stephen gave a historical perspective, saying, "Every great spiritual movement within the history of the church hasn't been done by preaching alone. There has always been some attendant meeting of people together, either in prayer groups or study groups, which has aided and supported that. There was the pre-Reformation Lollards; our own '1859 Revival' had a lot of prayer meetings going on around that."

Speaking more generally, Stephen continued, "I don't expect preaching to accomplish everything, and my pastoral experience tells me that preaching doesn't accomplish everything, but there's some other work, whether you call it catechesis, or have a small group, or whether it's personal reflection and application together with others that really drives the message home."

Bill was clear in his own mind, "When I teach on grace discipleship, I think that most life change takes place in small group discipleship because that is where you apply in a very personal, intentional way, with interaction, the elements of the gospel." Despite the importance of preaching for presenting and upholding Christ to most people every week, the limitation of preaching is "you don't have the one-on-one interaction, you don't have any feedback, there's no Q and A, there's no ability to wrestle together with the message. Small group discipleship is what provides the environment for further

growth.” Bill then qualified, “But that opportunity for discipleship would never happen if it were not for the preached Word on Sunday mornings.”

John also commented on the limitation of preaching as a monologue and the positive benefits of interactive engagement, saying, “I think dialogue is important. You can have a dialogue based upon the sermon, but the sermon itself is not dialogue. That is quite a big limitation... People need to be able to ask questions just for clarification. People come up afterwards and they have misunderstood, or exaggerated or whatever.”

Frank cautioned those pastors who, through poorly crafted or structured worship services, expect a lengthy teaching sermon to carry the weight of the transformative impact, saying, “I don’t consider that to be doxological preaching. Preaching that is not positioned in a well-developed service or worship can limit itself.” He believes that the whole service, from the initial call through to the benediction, should reflect the text’s story.

Spiritual Supplements

Daniel believed that “there has to be some extensions to the preaching beyond the pulpit... I think there needs to be another context where the preaching can be ingested and applied.” In his own church context, “we always tie in what we do in our small groups to what we do in the preaching.” While the impact of such follow-up is hard to assess quantitatively, Daniel believed that, over time, people are better prepared to read, study, and engage in more edifying Bible discussion. Other participants, Frank, Bill, Thomas, and Andrew, using similar language and ideas, all agreed on the benefits of additional study-discussion forums for congregants. In these forums, congregants can

either further engage issues of application that the sermon raised, or they can deal with some other area of Bible study entirely.

Andrew summarized his view, “I think I want to say that preaching needs to be supplemented. The vision that the New Testament gives of the Christian life is not just about preaching.” Where the church is viewed simply as a “teaching station,” then sadly the “life of relationships with other brothers and sisters can be replaced by preaching.” The many biblical encouragements to “speak into each other’s lives, to encourage one another, relate to one another, all those kinds of things, is a demonstration not that the [preaching of the] word of God is insufficient, but that it needs to be supplemented.”

Andrew developed his thinking by suggesting that there is “scriptural precedent for saying that preaching cannot exist on its own” from the book of Hebrews, which many scholars believe is written in the form of an extended sermon. Andrew argued that despite the fact that the book is a sermon itself, or at least has sermonic elements within it, “Hebrews elevates the role of ‘one another’ in other peoples’ lives, in a couple of places encouraging one another, provoking one another to action, and so on.” So while the book has the author’s “direct exhortation and pleading, he still says you have a role to play in the context of other people’s lives. Saying that ‘preaching is the only thing’ does not do justice to the book of Hebrews. The author wanted his written-down sermon to be supplemented by what people were going to say into one another’s lives.”

Some of participants cautiously expressed agreement with the approach, popular in some conservative circles, “Preaching is essential, but not sufficient” as axiomatic. However, they cautioned that, by itself, the maxim is open to misinterpretation and to an unhelpful downgrading of preaching. In response, Ryan sought to put other

supplementary word-centered ministries within a pastoral framework. “Everyone needs a shepherd,” he said, “To the extent that we need a human, personal shepherd, then other disciplines are more personal or group focussed; they all make a wonderful contribution, we’re all very thankful, but everybody needs a shepherd. Everybody needs a pastor preaching the Gospel to them.” In other words, in Ryan’s understanding, other disciplines have a necessary, supplemental role, but they are not fundamental. That place is reserved for the pastoral preaching.

Content Emphases of Sermons

For the second research question, participants answered questions regarding their practices of choosing the biblical content for their sermons. Specifically, what themes did they intentionally emphasize or revisit in their regular preaching ministry with the purpose of helping their congregants progress towards spiritual maturity? Why did they choose that content and themes? Participants’ responses are grouped into three areas, although again, there is a measure of overlap in the analysis of their answers: pastors’ rationale in selecting biblical texts or themes for their preaching ministry; biblical doctrines or themes emphasized in preaching for promoting spiritual growth; the relationship of preaching to other edifying ministries within the church.

Rationale for Selecting Biblical Texts

With the goal of the spiritual maturity of congregants in view, the researcher was keen to discover what factors influenced the pastors as they select biblical texts for their regular expository preaching, whether sermon series or individual sermons. Four primary determinant factors on text selection were identified in discussion: pastoral concerns,

providing a balanced and biblical diet, casting a vision, and laying a theological foundation.

Pastoral Concerns

Most of the participants stressed the importance of understanding their role as primarily that of pastor, rather than merely that of a Bible expositor. For example, Bill stated, “First of all, you need to have your pastor’s heart engaged. You need to be aware of what the particular [spiritual] issues that your congregation in your community in your place and in your time are facing. What are they wrestling with? What are the cultural issues impacting our church? ... and how does God’s word apply? I’m constantly asking myself those questions.” He asserted that he had never preached through a book in the Bible simply because he wanted to preach through the book. Rather, his choice was always based upon the condition of the church. He continued,

I do tend to be pastoral first, and then pick the appropriate book that I think would address the themes that the sheep most need to hear. Part of that is just that I want it to be relevant, I want it to be practical. And we’re pastors for reasons, you know? We’re pastors because we’re called to know the condition of our flocks and it just seems to me to make sense, that if I’m going to preach, that I’m going to preach to where the people are itching, so that God can scratch that itch.

Frank also stated that his selection of biblical texts for exposition was pastorally driven, that is, guided by the perceived spiritual needs of the congregation or audience, or by actual needs that frequently manifested themselves through counselling. Frank explained, “The pastor has to exegete the text, but also the soul and culture of those listening.” In his itinerant ministry to groups such as youth leaders or missionaries in cross-cultural contexts, Frank begins with assessing the needs of the culture and asks,

“Who are the people? Are they coming weary and tired? If I am called to care for missionaries that have been under great duress, that’s going to help shape my text.”

Daniel said that his preaching agenda was often directly influenced by what was currently happening in his church at that time. At a time when the church experienced a significant increase in children, with respect to Sunday preaching “we felt it important to look at certain aspects of family life... in a season where we had some hard pastoral situations to deal with, we did a series on Job; we knew there were people who were facing potential suffering and loss in their lives and that determined our choice of Job.” While Thomas’s preaching agenda was more rigid and pre-determined than other participants, he too, like Daniel and others, recognized the need on occasions to break into a sermon series to address critical pastoral issues that arose within church life.

Stephen acknowledged, “some within reformed and evangelical circles are nervous about adapting our message to the congregation because we want the word to set the pace, we want the word to be normative and we don’t want in any way our preaching to be determined by the congregation.” And yet, Stephen was convinced that in seeking to “apply the word directly and personally to the lives of the hearers” the pastor’s recognition of the unique spiritual needs and intellectual capacity of the audience was absolutely necessary, and so the sermon preached would be “tailored” with the audience in mind. Using the same Bible passage, “the sermon I would preach on a Sunday morning would not necessarily be the same sermon I would preach to the youth group on the Sunday night.” Similarly, Stephen spoke of the realization that in moving pastorates, the passage preached in the former church required different application in his new church.

John has a somewhat unique context: pastoring a thriving church in a university town attended by a large number of students during term-time. John spoke of his preaching being shaped by the pastoral needs of the regular congregation, the pastoral needs of the students, and the constraint of the university calendar. His church elders encourage him to fit his major preaching exposition, his annual “one big sermon series,” into the academic year. The elders are reluctant to let John spill over into a fourth term when new students would begin. John’s elders requested that he adopt a settled, almost curricular approach to textual and doctrinal exposition, covering most of the key areas of Bible teaching over a three year period. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that his selection of texts is, in comparison to the other research participants, highly subjective and even sometimes the result of “fanciful whimsy.” Nevertheless, in ensuring that he preaches from a variety of biblical genres over a period, he affirms “I don’t think I have ever gone into a series and thought that it wasn’t relevant, or that I wanted to stop because it wasn’t the right thing. I just think that the word is invariably relevant and probably whatever I chose there will always be ways of connecting it to where people are in any particular week.” Furthermore, his application for biblical texts is “heavily driven by context” and by the particular pastoral concerns of the church situated in its university environs, such as intellectual idolatry, anxiety, neglect of Christianity’s affective side, and an over-emphasis on the mind.

A Biblically Balanced Diet

Alongside pastoral concern as the primary motivating factor as the reason most of the pastors selected their sermon texts, the other principal determinant was the desire, in their preaching, to provide their congregations with a “balanced diet” of sermons based

upon a diversity of biblical genres, books, and themes. Motivated by the apostolic pattern to preach “the whole counsel of God,”²⁷³ this is viewed by most of the participants as a spiritually healthier alternative to preaching from similar genres again and again.

Andrew admitted that for most of his settled pastoral ministry, while his preaching was intentionally pastorally sensitive, his choice of sermon focus was more text driven than pastorally driven. Clearly “there were times when issues arose in the congregation and it was helpful to say something about them.” However, the overriding factor for him was “trying to get a balance of different parts of the Bible.” While Daniel reviews the previous year and plans ahead with his pastoral team, he similarly asks, ““what have we done from the Old Testament, New Testament, are we keeping the right balance between narrative and gospel and epistle?”” Daniel also stated it was important to stay in touch with the broader annual calendar by reflecting seasonal high points in the preaching agenda, such as Christmas and Easter.

In his earlier training as a curate/assistant, Thomas was tutored by his senior pastor to adopt a four-year preaching syllabus, a practice he has maintained throughout his ministry. The purpose of the syllabus, he explained, “is not that we cover every part of scripture, but to make sure that we get the weight right between Old and New Testaments, between the different genres of scripture. It is nearly always book based, with one or two exceptions, such as a doctrine series, but that is very rare.” The syllabus, as a guide, helps him to know where the preaching schedule is going next, but he has the liberty to “tweak that depending on what is happening in church life.”

²⁷³ Acts 20:26-27.

While in regular pastoral ministry, Stephen “tried to alternate between Old and New Testaments, and I tried to give a range of biblical genres.” He expressed concern that, in his denomination, where some churches had a pattern of shorter ministries of first-time pastors before they moved on, often the new incoming, inexperienced pastor would preach on similar or identical books, such as Philippians or Romans, as the previous incumbent, so that the church did not experience a good diet of biblical content. Now in his role as a lecturer in homiletics, Stephen reckoned that “on any given Sunday in evangelical churches [in Northern Ireland] only 20 percent of the sermons are from the Old Testament.” Stephen sees this as a sign of spiritual weakness. He also expressed his belief that the gospels were not as regularly preached as they should be.

Frank was unhappy with the phrase “balanced diet” since he believes it might suggest “taking extremes and mixing them together to come out with a ‘happy medium’.” Nevertheless, he thought that the approach was valid particularly when considering “key spheres of truth that are preached on periodically.” In other words, Frank was not so much concerned with ensuring that his preaching ministry was “balanced” in the sense of alternating between Old and New Testaments, as he was in making sure that “key themes, such as money, family, and sex dynamics are gone through every calendar year.” Frank also has a deep commitment to frequently demonstrating to his congregation the validity of a unifying redemptive-historical framework and the context by which to understand and interpret both the whole biblical story and the particular passage being expounded on any given Sunday. Therefore, his need to artificially create balance by oscillating between the testaments is not as strong.

Ryan highlighted the importance of selecting biblical texts for preaching determined by both a consideration of pastoral concerns and the provision of a scripturally “balanced diet.” He expressed concern that, in attempting to preach relevant or practical sermons, preachers can effectively trivialize preaching by meeting people’s expectations and focussing on practical concerns such as anger management or better parenting skills, as helpful as those things may be. Ryan acknowledged that “God cares for these things... and the Bible is a practical book from cover to cover;” yet, he denied that addressing such matters was preaching’s primary goal. Rather,

I have a deep conviction that people deserve to be helped by preaching in their actual lives. But what is most helpful is not to tell them how they can tweak this in their lives, add this to their lives...people who are looking for sermons like that, they haven’t hit the wall yet. They’re not ready. They haven’t failed enough. They have not yet discovered what a dead-end practicality is – as it is often understood. They need to reach that point of such shocking failure and impasse that they are just crying out for the grace of God. Then they are ready to hear real preaching.

Further, with respect to sermon series that provided congregants with a biblically balanced diet, while Ryan admitted to “loving the concept” of preaching widely from different scriptural genres, he expressed his reservation by saying, “...but I just don’t know how to put that into a framework or schedule of less than maybe a decade.” He felt that the pastoral needs of the congregation were “so diverse, so many, so fast-paced coming at us” that even a decade’s worth of preaching ministry seemed a “very short time” in which to adequately deal with such pastoral issues. Ryan, therefore, posed this question, “Plus, there’s this consideration: what is this church going to be known for? In the mission field? On the street, what will be the word about this church?” That is, from the perspective of determining which biblical texts should be selected for preaching, he

stressed the significant place of preaching as a means of shaping the character and vision of the church. This factor shall now be briefly considered.

Casting A Vision

Andrew said that, on those few occasions when he consciously diverted away from straight and consecutive expositions of biblical books towards a more thematic approach in his preaching, it was with the expressed purpose of trying “to shape the congregation’s life.” He continued, “The pastor-teacher has to have a vision of where the church is going and what kind of values need to be inculcated.” Thus, Andrew felt that the pulpit is the place to share the pastor’s vision for the church’s present and future character and mission. While some pastors might set vision from an expositional perspective, Andrew addresses vision with thematic sermons. Nevertheless, his regular, exegetical preaching is informed and shaped by consideration of the church’s broader vision and mission.

With respect for a broader church vision and direction, Frank said that his choice of biblical series for exposition would only be made after spending time with his elders in prayer, asking for discernment, “Where do we sense the Lord calling us as a body, as a group of families in our context? I like to do that in community with those who are my key leaders.” While the final choice of sermon series is still his prerogative, Frank believes this approach allows him more faithfully to respond to the question “What are we hearing the Spirit say to the church?” By preaching through the early chapters of Revelation early in his pastorate, he believes that he “modelled early on a way of saying to the church, ‘Let’s trust Jesus to take us to the parts of the gospel, his word, his story, that at any given season, we will need the most.’ Prayer is so critical for that.” Thus the

vision-shaping dynamic of preaching to shape and steer the church is given fresh spiritual impetus with each new series that is begun.

Ryan spoke about the need of vision casting in another way. Ministering in a Bible-belt area of the United States where, culturally speaking, the people “don’t mind God-talk, even Jesus-talk,” Ryan decided to begin a long haul exposition of John’s Gospel, broken up by with regular, smaller excursive series focussing on other Bible passages or themes. He explained his reason, “I thought that we needed to come back to constant exposure to and staring at the glory and mystery of Jesus himself ...there is nothing like John’s Gospel to stretch and expand our categories in a wonderfully unsettling way.” In his continuing preaching through John, Ryan wants to see his congregants transformed, with John’s own “beholding of Jesus’ glory,” in stark contrast to the culturally familiar and domesticated version of Jesus of country music and popular political speak. Ryan said, “John’s Gospel is just perfect for that.”

Laying a Theological Foundation

Finally in this section a couple of the participants felt it was important to lay a theological foundation, either early in their own ministry or early on in the church’s life. For example, Daniel said that “laying the foundations” was his reason for preaching through the early chapters of Genesis. He wanted to give the church a biblical framework for understanding both the Bible storyline as well as providing a worldview explanation for people’s experience of life. Similarly, Daniel chose to preach through Galatians because of his conviction that “every now and again I think you need to go back to something that is foundational to the gospel. And while the gospel is foundational to all

preaching, I think Galatians will do at that particular point and sound those important notes.”

In the first year or so of planting a new church, Ryan “went through Romans 1-9 early in our history because I wanted to lay a foundation of Pauline grace, received with the empty hands of faith and make that just the foundational framework for everything thereafter.” What followed in the regular Sunday preaching was a thematic unfolding of the church’s theological and missional vision as increasing numbers of new visitors appeared and stayed.

As the participants spoke of their rationale in selecting biblical texts or themes for their preaching ministry, the discussion naturally flowed into those areas of biblical content or doctrine that they strategically emphasised or revisited in their preaching for the purpose of helping their congregation members towards spiritual maturity, which the next section explores.

Biblical Themes for Spiritual Growth

The participants were asked about biblical themes or doctrines that they intentionally emphasized or regularly revisited in their sermons in order to help their congregants towards spiritual maturity. The following overlapping themes emerged in discussion: a Christocentric focus; gospel-centrality; a redemptive-historical framework; a kingdom emphasis; and issues of the heart. It should be noted that some of these themes will reappear later in this chapter when discussing the participants’ methodology of sermon application.

A Christocentric Focus

Bill was clear, “I know what I really try and focus on, and I use an outline very week to help me prepare my sermons. At the top of that outline I have in bold letters, ‘Remember to preach Christ!’ That is the content emphasis, to tell people of their need of Christ and to offer people afresh the benefits of Christ.” This Christ-centeredness emphasis is even to the fore on those rare occasions when he directly tackles more cultural or lifestyle issues in his preaching, such as his current series of “Life in the Fast Lane.” Bill stated that he will consciously “address it from a Christ-centred perspective, choosing passages that are related to that topic but preaching them in a Christ-centred way.”

Having already highlighted his view that what his congregation “needed to come back to was a constant exposure to and staring at the glory and mystery of Jesus,” Ryan then stated his desire for “this church to unmistakably stay Jesus focused and not agenda driven.” Ryan meant that the “witness or public face of the church [is] to be very clear in lifting up Jesus alone, and not complicating that.”

Thomas offered a biblically reflective perspective. He adjudged that the emphases of the sermons recorded in Acts are quite significant in setting precedent for future preaching ministries. While these sermons in Acts were preached “in different contexts and therefore no sermon is the same, yet obviously the thing that unites them is ‘Jesus Christ is Lord.’ He is the one to whom we must respond. That might sound simplistic but it’s there in Acts.” Thomas noted that these recorded sermons often had exposition of Old Testament texts to help the hearers understand who Jesus is, thereby setting a pattern of “what content sermons should have – scripture, obviously the Lord

Jesus himself, the facts of his death and resurrection, ascension, the ‘whole counsel of God’.” Thomas further commented, “but you don’t always get the whole counsel of God in every sermon, do you?”

Gospel Centrality

Closely related to a Christocentric focus is the broader theme of gospel centrality. So closely aligned are they, that at times it is hard to extract participants’ comments on one without reference to the other. For instance, Andrew admitted that, in recent years, as a result of exposure to the ministries of such as Dr. Tim Keller from Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NY, his own preaching changed direction somewhat. Andrew explained, “I wanted more of a gospel-centred focus. How does this [passage] actually connect to the gospel? How does it connect to Jesus? That would have been a recurring theme.” Similarly, Bill spoke passionately about constantly revisiting these intertwining themes of “the gospel, the work of Christ, our need of it and the beauty of it and the power of it.”

Daniel spoke about his conviction of “intentionally coming back to first things,” referencing 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 as Paul’s summary of the gospel. He explained, “In the course of a year, I’m always going to be thinking about something that will make sure that we don’t allow the congregation to come to the point where the gospel is assumed.” Daniel is conscious of the dangers of a spiritual trajectory whereby a congregation can move from evangelicalism to liberalism because succeeding generations simply assume the gospel as the backdrop of their teaching ministries without regularly declaring or explaining it. Daniel elaborated, “In the first generation the gospel is believed; in the second generation, the gospel is assumed; third generation, the gospel is denied.”

Whether he plans an evangelistic series of sermons each year, or unpacks the thematic “solos of the faith” as he did recently, he “will make sure that we do something that brings us back to some of those basics.”

Ryan also quotes the Reformation “solos,” but is more pointedly specific with respect to gospel centrality. He says, “I want to be a pastor who really, really, really believes in the power of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone, apart from all our works. I come back to that a lot.” A thorough grounding in the understanding and application of these truths, he believes, “is a way of motivating progress in the direction of discipleship and deeper maturity.” While Ryan does not often cite it in his preaching, he believes that the core gospel elements of “justification by faith, the cross, atonement, God’s love for the undeserving and his love and provision for Christians who don’t do well” are all encapsulated in the first of Jesus’ beatitudes, “‘Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ [Matt. 5:3]. They’ve got the whole package!” This is what gives his preaching direction. Like Daniel, Ryan believes that “if we ever think that we grow past the central message of the cross as the place of atonement and mercy for the undeserving, or outgrow our need of it, then we take a fatal step.” However, he also recognizes dangers into which some of his pastoral colleagues have fallen. Specifically, Ryan cited not following through in the preaching of these things of “the subsequent emphases on obedience, personal disciplines and so forth. They are wrong not to follow through, but they are not wrong to emphasise heavily that foundational truth of justification by faith alone.”

Ryan’s conviction about the necessity of gospel centrality in his preaching, particularly his emphasis on justification by faith, has been strongly influenced by the

assertion of church historian, Richard Lovelace, who wrote, “In order for a pure and lasting work of spiritual renewal to take place with the church, multitudes within it must be led to build their lives on this foundation [of justification by faith].”²⁷⁴ Ryan commented,

I want that to be the environment of everything else I do in preaching and pastoral ministry. It’s the framework, it’s the context, it’s the air we breathe, acceptance on terms of grace – within which – we can then face ourselves as we really are and then rethink our lives. If we don’t have that foundation of acceptance and assurance, we’ll just live in constant crisis, an existential moral crisis, but we’ll be submerging it, not owning up to it because we have this appearance of “everything’s alright, I’m a serious Christian.” But down deep inside, as he says in that passage, there are “deep insecurities” and this just creates legalistic, angry, finger-pointing Christians for whom everyone else is wrong but they themselves can’t face their own problems.”

Stephen also noted the helpfulness and clarity of Lovelace with regards to “his understanding of the difference and overlap of justification and sanctification and helping people to understand the difference, so that they do not base their justification on their sanctification.” In his current role as professor of preaching, Stephen expressed concern that, even as the students in college will preach on the Christian life, “I’m not sure they have a clear understanding of the doctrine of sanctification.” Stephen will encourage them to read some of the classic works “so that they will have a clear idea about mortification, vivification [and] how God actually works in people’s hearts.”

Thomas finds himself “most often returning again and again to the doctrine of God’s grace,” a key element of gospel centrality. Thomas believes that, possibly due to “who we are, and the default setting of the heart,” he is constantly “needing to help people understand the place of obedience and the place of morality.” Thomas is “just

²⁷⁴ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 101f.

very conscious of how easy those, even within the church family, tend to talk about Christianity more in terms of ‘what I do’ rather than who God is and what he has done... That is something we plug reasonably hard.”

Frank concurs that congregants are naturally “allergic to grace,” so that he too is “always thinking about fresh and imaginative ways of confronting listeners with the paradox of the gospel.” In fact, Frank identified a number of facets of gospel centrality that he consciously and constantly brings to the attention of those listening. He is acutely aware that with repetitive use of the same metaphors and images, even with similar intonation, “people will become immune to even stuff they like hearing. We don’t want to inoculate our people towards our personality or our way of saying things.” To counter the danger of over-familiarity or complacency with important truths that need to be frequently revisited, he will “listen and read broadly, try and stay tuned in enough to popular culture so that there will be new ways of connecting.”

A Redemptive-Historical Framework

In response to being asked about biblical themes or doctrines that they regularly revisited, both Frank and Bill mentioned preaching gospel centrality in the context of the broader biblical background of a redemptive-historical perspective, particularly a creation-fall-redemption-restoration framework. While Bill only commented on this aspect in passing, Frank was more forthcoming. He said,

I am always thinking that we cannot understand redemption apart from a high view of creation... before there was a need of Christ as redeemer, he created a glorious world for us to live in. A higher view of creation helps us to prepare our people to lament how disconnected this world is from God’s original plan, but also to appreciate the dimensions of new creation life. It’s hard not to imagine any theme that does not complement the whole tapestry of the gospel.

Thomas was also keen to stress the broader perspective of a redemptive-historical approach. When preaching on Old Testament texts he said, “we would major on ‘covenant,’ God taking the initiative, promising to save and then saving his people, so that they are saved to serve.” In seeking to help people to grasp the big picture in his preaching, once within his four year syllabus, “we do a Bible overview so that we give people the opportunity to recognize that there is a beginning and an end, and where we are on that line.”

A Kingdom Emphasis

A kingdom emphasis means helping congregants grasp how the big picture Bible storyline has both theological and practical consequences. Possibly arising from a similar cultural background, both Frank and Bill identified having a kingdom perspective as a crucial element of preaching or teaching that necessitated frequent revisiting. Frank said, “In the sub-culture of individualistic piety, we’ve got to constantly remind our people that we are preaching the gospel of the kingdom, not just the gospel of ‘me and Jesus’.” Rather, in his understanding of the Bible, “a kingdom emphasis, the kingdom being the reign of God breaking in, defeating the dominion of evil, one day eradicating that kingdom, is a story that we participate in... we are characters in and carriers of God’s story. The story is both personal and cosmic.” Frank explained why, in his Christian sub-culture especially, this was an important concept with practical lifestyle and missional relevance,

I’m using those 2 themes [personal and cosmic] constantly, which we really have to do in our culture here because of so many in the old-school dispensationalism made it far easier for a big part of our culture just to become pietistic and very “against the culture” as opposed to moving into our world as good neighbours and those engaged in every sphere of life.

Bill spoke similarly. He said, “I think the kingdom of God is an important theme. The Christian life is not merely about morality or ethics. It’s about Jeremiah 29, ‘living in the land to which God has sent us and seeking the welfare of the city’.” Bill said that somehow he had to connect the regular jobs that people had through the week with what happened when they gathered together on a Sunday. He bemoaned any view of Christianity that belittled what people did Monday through Saturday as having little significance in light of eternity and “winning souls.” While Bill concedes that all those who die without Christ will be eternally condemned is a sobering thought, that does not mean that the normality of what happens in this world does not matter. He explains, “If your brand of Christianity says basically the only thing that matters is heaven and laboring to populate heaven, and that everything else is rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic, then that leads to a minimization of this life and what it means to be image-bearers, called to rule and bring things into dominion.” In contrast, a kingdom emphasis or perspective views “what the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker do as having value in and of itself, we’re building a garden into a city, that’s what the kingdom of God is. I think our people have a really skewed view and that’s why the theme has to be addressed.”

Using different terminology, John also spoke about the need to revisit certain truths as a necessary response to a prevailing and similar church subculture. As noted previously, that culture viewed itself as “evangelical” but which “finds it difficult to enjoy grace and tends towards different forms of pharisaism.” In consequence, some of the practical issues that need to be frequently addressed include the Lordship (or

Kingship) of Christ over every area of life and the validity of all vocations. Such concerns, although phrased differently, are not that removed from those expressed above.

Heart Problems

Finally, Stephen recognizes that much application in preaching tends to focus predictably (and boringly) on relational issues within the church family, or encouraging congregants to be more participative when it comes to prayer, Bible reading, meeting attendance or personal evangelism. He questions the helpfulness of all this. Instead, what he believes needs to be addressed frequently are matters of the heart that motivate and direct behavior. Stephen explained, “I think what would be better to do would be to try to uncover the idols of the heart. What is it we are really worshipping? What is it we really desire? What is it we are really wanting here? Then show how that is only fulfilled in Christ.”

Frank also expressed an awareness in his preaching preparation and delivery that “there’s a battle for hearts in this room that’s below the level of the visible.” Consequently, he says, “I’m always thinking idolatry, the worship of [the] heart.” The matter of the heart will come to the fore again when the participants’ responses regarding application are examined.

Other Teaching Ministries within the Church

The final supplementary question in this section explored how the regular preaching ministry was augmented or complemented by other word-based ministries within the life of the church, and what intentional relationship, if any, existed between these ministries. The researcher was inquiring if any necessary teaching material was thought to be unsuitable from the pulpit, and whether the participants thought that

preaching was sufficient for the on-going progress of congregants' maturity or whether something more was required. Two principal responses arose in discussion: sermon follow-up and additional information and instruction.

Sermon Follow-up

In light of earlier, widespread comments among the participants that preaching was essential but not sufficient to help believing congregants towards spiritual maturity, what did they consider would make up the deficit? Bill was forthright in his assertion,

This is non-negotiable: preaching alone will not be sufficient to change lives. It's absolutely essential but it's not sufficient. It has to be complemented... That's not to say that God does not change lives through preaching. He does. But I've just found in my experience, having been in ministry now for over 30 years, that what really tends to help people connect the dots is when they are able to process and discuss the Gospel-centred message with other people.

Bill believes that preaching's "greatest problem, if you can call it a problem, is that it is all one-sided communication... and one-sided communication isn't always effective." He believes that congregants need to be given time, whether simply in quiet reflection immediately after the sermon is over or perhaps in group discussion after the service to think about and begin to answer questions such as, "... what is your take-away here this morning? How is God speaking to you? Where do you need to repent? What do you need to believe? How do you need to fight?"

Bill further noted that the effectiveness of the sermon in the lives of the congregants was diminished if it was viewed in isolation from other aspects of the worship service. In gospel-centred worship, appropriate hymns and songs are chosen "to lead the people to reaffirm that gospel-centeredness." Other worship elements provide a helpful context that introduce and reinforce the message that is proclaimed in the sermon.

Daniel said his church, for two terms each year, has sermon follow-up fellowship groups that meet later in that week and discuss what was preached the previous Sunday morning or evening. In his appraisal, this had worked very well. Thomas said that, although it does not happen very often, when “our small group teaching has run parallel to the Sunday ministry that has been really helpful.” Similarly, Andrew was very positive about tying the preaching ministry into small group discussion or having a question and answer seminar after the service where the pastor and congregants can engage, ask questions, or probe more deeply. However, his main concern echoed the earlier comments of Bill when he said, “If there are going to be other programs which will supplement the preaching ministry, a lot of it has to be aimed at application and how that gets worked out in people’s lives.”

Stephen expressed disappointment that “even when people are exposed to fairly good Bible teaching over a long period of time, some of them still remain unchanged by that.” He stated that earlier in his ministry he had assumed that “if you preached the word, the word by itself would accomplish all that God intends, and so you just leave it to the Spirit of God.” Now, he embraces what he calls a “more Calvinistic understanding of the ministry of the word” which involves deep application. He explained, “...at some point you have to apply it, at some point people have to feel the weight of it in their hearts and lives... and I’ve always found that most effective when I have been meeting with people individually or in small groups as well.”

As previously noted, Ryan desires that “the preaching is compelling enough that it just starts conversations in people’s lives throughout the week. It just can’t be ignored... if the sermon is what we both want it to be, people talk about what they think about.

Ultimately the sermon will get people so thinking that they can't help but talk about it."

Ryan is also convinced that where the church is "fundamentally unified relationally, personally, and doctrinally, unified in its emphases and culture," then much of the complementary alignment between the Sunday sermon and follow-up discussions will be "wonderfully unintentional... as the same conversation keeps on happening throughout the church."

Additional Information and Instruction

In addition to sermon follow-up, most of the participants alluded to other teaching times such as classes or seminars that were held throughout their church program and which were viewed as helpful, if not even necessary, for making progress towards spiritual maturity. Generally, these teaching times centred on providing congregants additional Bible information or practical instruction in a format that allowed for interaction and discussion. These environments allow church members to better process the information in a non-sermonic form.

Some of these classes were based on an existing small group discussion format. For instance, in Daniel's context, for one month of the year, the normal, weekly sermon follow-up Bible study group is suspended, and focus is given to more practical training, such as in prayer or personal evangelism.

In John's setting, with plenty of university students attending the church throughout the academic year, a formally structured midweek teaching program is held, and covers a range of both information-intensive and practical instruction topics. Such discipleship topics include seminars on the spiritual disciplines; interactive systematic theology classes; church mission and vision; congregational theological distinctives for

potential new members; apologetic issues; the Christian mind; and more. John explained that such a forum, complementary to the main Sunday morning preaching ministry, “enables us to deal with topics that aren’t coming up in any particular sermon series. It also allows us to deal with topics which we want to cover on a regular basis, which if we did them on a Sunday morning would become boring for our regulars. And sometimes we deal with areas that have a more intellectual or instructional point of view which we wouldn’t normally deal with from the pulpit.”

Ryan said that his whole church program was designed in order to help people experience spiritual growth. The main track is whatever Bible book or passage he is preaching through every Sunday. He elaborated, “I want there to be a steady, almost relentless on-going exposition through a book of the Bible, that’s the main ministry driver.” Running alongside the exposition Ryan hosts and arranges regular teaching seminars and occasional, invitational events. He wants to “stimulate other conversations for congregants or inquirers along the way, and build on-ramps into the church for people who may not immediately appreciate John’s Gospel but would really like to hear ... [a] talk about human sexuality.” While such and similar events might well attract some people from the edge of church connection, Ryan also affirms that these gatherings also serve to help spiritually stabilize and “equip our own people who are knocked-off balance by the shifting winds of our culture.”

Clearly the sermon preached on a Sunday is vital for the spiritual welfare and maturity of both individual disciples and the collective congregation. However, the participants interviewed were agreed that not only did the sermon need to be further considered and applied by members to optimize its usefulness in effecting maturity, the

sermonic form alone cannot carry the weight of additional instruction in matters of biblical doctrine and obedient practice that are required to produce rounded and mature disciples.

Principles and Practices of Application in Sermons Intended for the Spiritual Maturity of Congregants

Until this point in the interviews, participants had made oblique references to application of the biblical text as a necessary sermon element for the congregation to respond appropriately. For the third and final research question, the participants were asked explicitly about the principles and practices that governed how they apply the biblical text to the lives of those listening. In particular, the research question explored sermon application with the expressed purpose of helping congregants grow in their faith and relationship with God. The question asked, “How do pastors intentionally design the application portions of their sermons in order to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?”

The principles and methodology of sermon application are a vast and sometimes volatile area of discussion within the field of homiletics. Supplementary questions, therefore, attempted to keep the focus of research centered on sermon application relating to the spiritual maturity of listening congregants, particularly from within a grace-driven perspective. For purposes of analysis and clarity, their responses are grouped under the following main headings: gospel framework; using a good model; hitting the target; pastoral transparency; dealing with difficult doctrines; and arousing the apathetic.

Gospel Framework

John underscored the importance of viewing and exercising all of pastoral ministry, and preaching in particular, through the lens of a gospel frame. He said,

It's important to me in my sense of what I'm doing that I'm the minister of the gospel and not simply a minister of the word. So, it's all through it. It's the gospel that I'm explaining. I'm not simply trying to teach people what the Bible says or to get them to obey it. It's within a gospel frame of sin and redemption, personal failure and of forgiveness and of personal transformation in relationship with the living God. And so, that is very much the framework within which I'm working.

In other words, John viewed the gospel as not merely the primary theme of what is proclaimed in sermons. The gospel also provides the proper context, correct motivation, and image-renewing power for people to live in continual relationship with God and to be continually transformed towards Christlikeness. In the course of the interviews, a number of common threads pertinent to sermon application arose in discussion under this general theme of gospel framework.

Indicatives and Imperatives

Half of the participants drew attention to the significant relationship between the gospel's—what is now true of Christian believers—and gospel imperatives—how believers are expected to behave in light of their new identity in Christ. For example, Daniel admitted that

sometimes in our preaching we have concentrated on the imperatives, “Here's what you must do!” and you can end up with moralism. I have tried in preaching, because it is obvious that the apostle Paul begins with the indicative, “Do you not know who you are?,” to begin with the facts of what it means to be Christian, to have the imperatives follow on from that. This is one of the emphases I have tried to come back to: We become what we are. We work from salvation we have received rather than to our salvation... that is how Paul avoids getting into [mere] moralism. I try to reflect that in my preaching.”

Frank reflected a similar change in his thinking about direct application with a gospel framework. Exhortations towards obedience are not cold commands but expressions of God's loving care; likewise, they are not limited to the obedience of actions, but they also imply a reorientation of faith. Frank said,

My old background would have been thinking of application as “Here’s 3 things that I want you to do as a result of this sermon”... So the [focus was on the] exhortative and imperative – which I don’t decry. But when I think now about application, I’m as careful to say – in terms of application – here’s what we are called to believe, not simply do. In other words, good application now is going to bring a person to a crisis of faith: “Am I seeing Jesus more foundationally as my substitute before I see him as my model?” ...I am concerned in my application to always root the imperatives of love in the indicatives of grace. So, that would be language I would be far more consciously tuned into, where am I being real clear of calling people to believe the indicatives of grace as the motivation and power for the imperatives of love. You’ve got to do both.

Andrew warned that, even when rooted in gospel indicatives, preachers should not give the impression that imperatives are “prescriptive or moralistic” with their overbearing, moralistic tone. He elaborated, “We need to realize how incongruous a ‘Just stop it!’ approach would sound in a counselling situation, so why would you do it in preaching? The imperatives need to be couched in pastoral terms, with pastoral concerns. We’re not simply trying to get people to measure up. [Imperatives] need to be couched pastorally.” Daniel was also concerned that pastors – sometimes unintentionally, sometimes not – can abuse their position of authority in the pulpit. Congregants can view their pastors as moralistically authoritarian because they do not sufficiently emphasize that the imperatives arise directly from the word.

The Right Sort of Obedience

Obedience may ensue for good reasons as well as unhealthy ones, as John commented, “I’m not simply trying to teach people what the Bible says or to get them to obey it.” Frank explained,

Are we, in light of the gospel, going to offer the obedience of faith and love, or are we going to default to the obedience of guilt, fear and pride? ...when we are training and discipling our people, and remind them that in John’s gospel we hear Jesus saying, “If you love me you will obey my commands,” unfortunately most of us hear Jesus saying “If you obey my commands I will love you.” So we

need to look for teaching opportunities and ways of knowing that the default mode is always going to be towards pragmatism, moralism and individualistic piety. You have to hammer away at those things until people begin to say, “Ah, I think I’m beginning to realise the difference btw grace-empowered obedience against simply private pietism.” We’ve got to hammer that one a lot more than we even care.

Bill also cautions preachers about only giving direction on how sermon application is live. Instead, he repeatedly emphasized the importance of a gospel or grace perspective as the only proper motivation for such obedience.

I always, always, always stop, even in the midst of calling people to action, and say, “Remember, if you do this, God’s not going to love you anymore; if you fail to do this he’s not going to love you any less.” Now, certainly scripture tells us what is pleasing to God, and what is displeasing to God; and the tension of a Christian is in our justification and adoption – our persons are pleasing to God; but our attitudes and actions, based on whether or not they are aligned with scripture or pleasing or displeasing... The only way to truly be pleasing to God, Hebrews says, is by faith, [meaning] trusting in Christ, boasting in the gospel. And that is also going to provide the motivation for obedience.

Stephen offers another gospel perspective to obedience: As preachers, “You have to say, ‘Here’s what the passage says, but, do you know what? You can’t do it! But Christ has done it perfectly. Therefore, learn to rest in him and allow his grace to transform you.’” He went on to affirm, that Christ fulfils the law for the believer, and imperatives are earthed in the indicatives of the gospel.

As a follow-up remark to Thomas’s comment about constantly “needing to help people understand the place of obedience and the place of morality,” he expressed profound appreciation for the influence and help of Irish theologian and author Alec Motyer²⁷⁵ and his “very, very strong emphasis on grace before law. He is so clear on that,

²⁷⁵ See, for example, Alec Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 1996).

and tackles that in such depth. He's really caught on to the confusion that people have with respect to this... and helps preachers to work hard to get that order right." John also spoke of the importance of this grace-law relationship in daily living as something "that younger preachers don't really get" and of the dangers that arise out of that. Having an all-embracing gospel framework helps both preachers and believers to understand that obedience is presented in scripture "as an experience of grace, and not an experience of law" and that preachers should work hard to "see those features in the text, because they are almost always there, one way or another."

Straight Talking

While Andrew spoke of the danger of preaching heavy-handed, prescriptive imperatives, he also highlighted another danger: "being so fearful [of the accusation of moralistic legalism] that we never challenge anybody to obedience." As Bill also asserts, the gospel alone provides the proper motivation for obedience; nevertheless, he also says to his congregation, "Now don't think that just means that you sit around and wait to be zapped, and wait to be borne along, like a stick in a current. No, there is swimming that needs to be done."

What these participants are highlighting is that obedience to God's word is the expected response from congregants and preacher alike, whether or not heart motivation for that instance of obedience is virtuously grace-driven or not. Pastors should exhort congregations towards obedience, even when their motivation is, according to Frank, "moralism and individualistic piety." Instead, Frank wisely observes, "We don't want to be afraid of [moralism]. There are some people that are so over-reacted to moralism that

they don't care about morals. There are people that tragically have need of the book of Jude which is a corrective against 'grace as license'."

However, John offers insight from a slightly different perspective. He is concerned that sometimes, in an effort to protect the overall grace context of biblical imperatives, preachers may unnaturally impose it upon passages contrary to authorial intent. He says,

When there is a command, which is a command, then I will just preach it as a command. I'm not afraid to do that. Because I think that otherwise the whole [gospel-driven] thing can become a bit rigid and a bit "systemee" that you then start imposing it on texts, and maybe it can't be pinned down just as much as that. Sometimes [the apostle] Paul says "Just do it!" and I'll often say "Just do it!" as well. And if the sermon feels like a "Just do it!" sermon which some of them do, I don't always artificially inject "justification by faith" and a lot of explanation about how this isn't the way to get to heaven. What I do is to trust the overall impact of the service in which the prior readings, songs and prayers will have created the gospel context ...and then let the Holy Spirit make the connections with the people.

In other words, where the sermon text has a strong exhortatory thrust, John believes the wider biblical grace context can, and perhaps should, be safeguarded by including gospel-rich elements throughout the service, rather than weakening the impact of the imperatives. John is uneasy when inexperienced preachers give "endless qualifications of the imperatives in the sermon itself... and it has felt like half the sermon was them having to go over justification by faith through grace again, so it has lost its impact. That's not how I do it."

The Use of Good Models

During the course of the interviews some of the participants made passing reference to influential individuals or biblical models. These helped the participants understand the dynamics of spiritual maturity, and they used or adapted these models in

their preaching ministries. For example, Andrew commented on the helpfulness that former colleagues Paul Tripp and David Powlinson at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation had been in both “connecting the Bible to real life ...and writing about what is generally true of all people so that everybody can identify with them.” Both Andrew and Stephen also made mention of Paul Tripp and Tim Lane’s curriculum, *How People Change*. They used the material personally and as a model for sermon application. Based upon Jeremiah 17:5-10, Tripp and Lane identify four elements of change in daily living: heat (life situation with attendant difficulties, temptations, and blessing), thorns (heart-driven, ungodly response to the situation and consequences that follow), cross (God’s redemptive presence enabling power to change), and fruit (a God-empowered godly response to the situation, including the consequences that follow).²⁷⁶ Stephen said that in thinking about application, he would

set up tests of particular life situations whereby people can judge for themselves how they might react in a given situation. I’m always thinking in terms of heat, thorns, cross, fruit. It’s always on my mind. I would ask, “In light of this passage, have you been tempted to think or behave in particular ways? ...how might you respond because of being late for an appointment because of traffic? Angry? Frustrated? What’s going on in your heart at that point? How could you respond better?”

Like some of the others, John said that he has adopted and adapted Bryan Chapell’s “Fallen Condition Focus” approach,²⁷⁷ “in which every passage reveals something about our fallen nature that Christ alone can redeem. I learned a lot from that,” he said.

²⁷⁶ Lane and Tripp, *How People Change*, 96ff.

²⁷⁷ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 50.

Andrew also expressed his appreciation for the models for spiritual maturity as found in materials produced by Serge, a missions organization formerly known as World Harvest Mission. Particularly, Andrew appreciates how Serge presents life-application and the relevance of difficult—but necessary—theological concepts, such as believers' union with Christ. Andrew found the way that Serge presented these important ideas helpful for a larger gathering and for a preaching situation. Even though Serge developed them for a small group setting, Andrew was able to adapt them.

Arising out of his own doctoral studies on discipleship, Bill's devised a model he entitled "The Waltz," because of its three-step pattern of repentance, belief, and obedience. This model can be adapted to serve in a variety of disciple-making contexts, including preaching. Bill studies every expository unit and reveals its application with The Waltz as a theological grid to analyze repentance, belief, and obedience within the passage.

In seeking to explain and present repentance, belief, and obedience in a way that congregants can assimilated them, Daniel said that he turned for help to his mentor, the influential Reverend William Still of Aberdeen, and particularly his "Three Dimensions of the Cross."²⁷⁸ Daniel said, "I have always found [his 'Three Dimensions of the Cross'] useful."

Theologically robust and contextually adaptable models can be used to illuminate, explain, and apply difficult areas of doctrine. These proficient pastors were not averse to using other people's material, with due acknowledgement, as an aid in their Bible teaching. Furthermore, from the listeners' perspective, a model that is easily and

²⁷⁸ Still, *Towards Spiritual Maturity*.

repeatedly taught can also be more easily understood, learned, and appropriated. From the evidence in the interviews, it is clear that the participants regularly use these ideas cited, and possibly others, to more effectively communicate and apply gospel truth.

Hitting the Target

A number of practical issues revealed how participants improved the effectiveness of their application in preaching. These will now be examined. All the participants agreed that an important aspect of preaching is applying the text to the lives of listeners. Not all pastors, however, apply their sermon text. As Bill commented, “It’s interesting, in many sermons I have heard, the preacher doesn’t even believe that it is his job to lead people to application. I disagree with that but I’ve seen many preachers who think it is their job simply to exegete the text and let the Holy Spirit make the application.”

The participants’ insights are grouped together under the following sub-headings: contextual application, generalization and specificity, connecting with listeners, and when to apply.

Contextual Application

Contextual application refers to the principle of application in expository preaching that, using Daniel’s words, “whatever application I will make is immediately suggested by the text and [I will] try and make that as practical as I can.” In other words, the application that pastors suggest in their preaching should be consonant with the original author’s intention for the original readers. When pastors make application that is not drawn directly from the passage, or if preachers misapply the passage, then God’s intentions for that passage’s impact upon people’s lives will not be fulfilled. As Andrew

states, “The application has to be connected with the rest of the preaching and not detached [from the text].”

Echoing Chapell’s “Fallen Condition Focus,” John says that in his sermon preparation, “I am thinking about the text but I am also thinking about the areas of strength and particularly of deficiency that characterise people [generally] and the people I have knowledge of in church.” Again, this participant is seeking to connect the Bible passage directly to people’s lives.

Generalization and Specificity

According to Andrew, “application has to have a certain generalization to allow everyone to identify with it, but also specific enough to remind us that life is lived out in the details of everyday lives and different situations.” Andrew notes that if application is overly detailed and prescriptively specific, then it becomes a list of dos and don’ts, an approach he does not like. In contrast, Stephen designs his application “to be as concrete as possible, and as specific as possible, setting up tests whereby people can judge for themselves how they are doing in response” to the preacher’s exhortations. Andrew’s concern about a prescriptive list approach to application is that “it can become legalistic. But at the same time, simply to leave ‘the truth out there’ and hope that everyone is going to work out their own thing is not helpful either.” Application, therefore, should be both general in addressing the human condition, but also specific to address the actual lives people live.

Each of the participants was asked specifically about their opinion and use of an “application preaching grid.”²⁷⁹ Proponents argue this helpfully earths application in

²⁷⁹ Packer, “Aspects of Authority.”

people's lives by identifying a broad diversity of types or classes of people, such as a 70-year-old widow, and 43-year-old male accountant, a high school student, an unemployed blue collar worker, et cetera, reflective of society generally. Over a period of a few weeks, using the grid ensures that sermon application is directed at a wide variety of classes of people. Interestingly, while all thought the model had merit and some would even recommend its use to less experienced preachers, none of them used it in their own application preparation or delivery. Their reasons for not using it varied, but at the core was the common belief that the grid approach to application was both superficial and insufficient to deal with the complexities and difficulties of real life. As Andrew said, "If preachers go about their application and it is so simplistic and it doesn't acknowledge and wrestle with the complexities of people's lives and problems, then it's not going to satisfy anybody." He continued, "the congregation might be full of accountants, but their jobs might not be the most important thing on their minds that Sunday morning." He preferred to think of "five different, specific, real people, and if the application is done with them in mind, it doesn't even matter if those five people are even in church that morning, there is enough reality that others can make the connections."

While Thomas was concerned that thinking about application relevance with specific people "might make things 'skew-whiff' by shaping and affecting one's application," nevertheless, Frank believed that "the congregation was better served in application the more specific stories we can give rather than general moral imperatives." Bill said he was thinking of a diversity of people in his preparation of the whole sermon, not just for application. However, "before I think of any of them I am preaching to myself: how does this text apply to me? How does this text show me my need Christ?"

Having then preached to myself, then I am ready to think about the single mom, the young child present, the workaholic, the non-Christian.”

Connecting with Listeners

In seeking to connect the Bible passage with people’s lives in application, John spoke pointedly about “connecting with people’s minds, wills, hearts.” He continued, “changing minds is about giving people a more accurate view of truth, but also about themselves. Heart is very important to me, and I use a range of things to engage with people’s affections and imaginations.” He uses illustrations drawn from real life. He also learned from author C. S. Lewis to use extensive narrative analogies, and he learned to use sensory language, appealing to people’s “sensory appetites” from 18th and 19th century pastors, Jonathan Edwards and CH Spurgeon. John says, “I use everyday examples that are visual or auditory or whatever, to give flesh to things. I do work hard at that to help their imaginations be moved.”

Both Daniel and Ryan stressed the importance of using fresh and vivid language to convey scriptural truth, especially those doctrines considered more difficult to grasp. Daniel does not jettison biblical terms in his preaching, “such as justification and sanctification, but I’ll keep coming back to them and try and explain what they mean.” However, Ryan paraphrased an unknown American author who said “if there is going to be a revival or resurgence of the Christian religion in this country, then we have to take the debased coinage of Christian language and repristinate the very words in our discourse.” In light of that, said Ryan, since the familiar biblical language and terms have lost their impact, “with God’s help we need to find new ways to articulate these powerful concepts of justification, atonement... and find a completely different and fresh way to

articulate these things that will take people by surprise... and deliver a sense of God's glory before they are even aware of it."

When to Apply?

Three participants commented on when they made application during the course of preaching the sermon, saying that they applied the teaching as they went through the sermon rather than leaving the application all to the end. Thomas and Bill said that they normally keep the sermon application as the primary heading or as the sermon points backed up with the passage's exposition. For instance, Bill said, "I tend to make my sermon points as application points. Other people have their points as truths and then they make application; or some preach truths and don't even make application. I put my sermon points in the form of application, expounding the text in application." Bill attributes this methodology to one of his professors in Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, "Walter Kaiser, who really influenced me on that. He presented the case for your points in application form, and I bought it. I think he's right."

Pastoral Transparency

Most of the participants desire to show honest transparency and spiritual vulnerability when preaching. Bill outlined how he prepared himself to preach to the people in his own church,

I'll tell you, before I think of any of them I am preaching to myself. When I write a sermon, I am first of all studying the Word for my own growth in Christ. And I tell people in [church] all the time that I'm just preaching to myself and they are being invited in to see what my past week has been like with Christ... I know there are huge debates over how transparent preachers should be in the sermons – well, for years I have had people tell me that the most powerful thing about my preaching is my transparency. And that's what gives people the hope and the openness to the gospel.

Similarly, Frank quoted the apostle Paul who says, “‘We do not preach ourselves, but Christ.’ But we preach Christ to ourselves that we may preach him to others.” And then he said,

Where in the providence of my story, where has the Lord has taken me through struggles or aspects of growth in my narrative? I should be thinking, “What is context-appropriate for me to share to help our congregations know that we pastors we struggle, we long, we need Jesus as much as anybody?” I think sometimes when we are able to emulate the best of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians where he is so real and honest about his own struggles... if you avoid some of the real conundrums and heart issues that surface in scripture, then we are not preparing our people for the fact that the Christian life is “rapture and rupture.”

In other words, within the providence of God, the pastors’ weakness and vulnerability is stretched that they may, through their own life experiences and in their preaching, point others to Jesus as the only hope.

Ryan also spoke of pastors needing to be honest about their own personal struggles and of their need of prayerful support, and he also admitted to struggling to connect deeply with people in application. However, looking into his own heart first is one method that helps him apply the passage to others, “Well I try to be honest with myself in my preparation: how is this unsettling to me? How is this searching me? What is it about this that I find myself resisting? And why? I believe, that we’re all cut out of the same bolt of cloth, and so however in becoming defensive is how they are going to become defensive. So that’s actually an insight into that.”

Andrew also spoke of the shared heart experiences of pastor and people. Recognizing his own need of God’s forgiving and sustaining grace is an indication that others are deeply in need of it as well. He said,

Partly because I’m aware of my own need of grace and I find it so enticing. When I preach it to other people I am preaching it to myself ...how often do

preachers preach to congregations what they really need to hear themselves? Obviously in an ideal world, we'd all be only preaching things that had become fully engrained into us and we would be living them out fully. In reality, we're going to be falling short, but I think we preach with greater vigour the things that we are longing to grasp for ourselves.

Dealing with Difficult Doctrines

The study participants were asked how they went about helping congregants understand and appreciate the life-application relevance of more difficult, but important, theological concepts, such as union with Christ, election, or predestination. The importance of properly applying truth came to the fore. For example, Thomas said,

I think that the way that I have found most useful and probably the safest way, is by giving a life application from within the scripture itself. So, if the big emphasis in the early chapters of Romans is the wrath of God that is in a sense he is revealing now but especially that wrath of God that will be revealed on the last day. Life application? You have no excuse. So, it's trying to see the life application within the passage that is going to apply to all.

However, Andrew noted that often theologically dense passages had little direct application in the immediate context. That being so, Andrew says that pastors need to examine the wider context of the passage to determine the author's point and anticipate the author's application in light of the theologically heavy section. He suggests asking, "Why did the writer think it necessary to establish this part of scripture as a theological base? What was going on in the original readers' head, hearts and lives that needed this response?"

Bill also spoke of aiming

to tie difficult doctrinal issues and conversations and ground them into real-life and the warp and woof of people's daily struggles... All that theology is, is the knowledge of God. So how does knowing this unique, difficult element of God's heart, how does this apply to our lives? How is that relevant? Why would God tell us this about himself? I think preachers do themselves a real disservice if they just teach a doctrine and don't tie it to the heart of God.

In other words, the biblical concept that is difficult to understand or accept is, nonetheless, an expression of God's heart for his people that they should seek to comprehend and accept by faith because they trust God's love and wisdom.

Bill also offered some practical advice in preaching difficult or controversial passages: make decisive conclusions and applications. Bill was not claiming that this approach is right, but he has adopted this practice. Bill said that the sermon was not the place for theological speculation and musings,

I preach conclusions and I preach applications. I don't let people in on all the intra-mural debate and discussion that's going on, and I don't even present multiple views. I just present conclusions and applications. Even for a very knotty and thorny text, I don't get into how knotty and thorny it is. I'll just give them what my conclusions and my applications are for them. That tends to make it pretty relevant.

While he engages interactively with questions and push-backs in sermon discussions, Bill considered that the sermon, by and large, was not the place for such debate.

Similarly, John bemoaned, particularly younger colleagues on this, "because they want to go through all the possible interpretations of Romans 7 in detail, but end up without being able to demonstrate much relevance to life." John's practice is to "preach through everything in the Bible, leaving nothing difficult out." His practice in undertaking difficult passages is, knowing how much time he has to preach, to consider the "length, density or complexity of the preaching portion and how much time I will spend on that, relative to the amount of time I will have to spend on application. There is a proportion thing going on in my mind" to ensure that the application is not overlooked. Depending the wider context, he will slow down and focus on a smaller pericope, trying

to unpack the significance and relevance in detail, or he will take a larger section, engaging in less detailed exposition.

Frank considered necessary, biblical doctrines that are out of step with society. Wanting to help believers respond to prevailing cultural issues that are contrary to biblical norms, Frank strongly advocated pastors being

sensitive to themes right before us in our situations. We will do a better job of serving our congregations and unbelievers listening in if we show to them “This church is different, they are willing to deal with real issues in a way that evidences humility, but also a forthrightness of listening to the Bible and presenting [its claims] clearly, faithfully and winsomely.” ...Conservative Christian people need to learn how to love well as well as defend the truth in an ever-changing context. We need to be upfront and show how to lead with kindness as much as with rightness.

In other words, pastors will invariably have to preach on doctrinal matters in which there is a measure theological speculation, or on lifestyle issues in which the biblical mandate cuts across what society considers acceptable and normative. In order to help individuals grow in understanding and wise response to these, pastors should preach with genuine, perceptible humility and love, carefully ensuring that whatever they teach and apply is reflective of and based upon a scriptural framework.

Arousing the Apathetic

Finally, the study participants were asked, in the course of their preaching, how they encouraged congregants who showed little interest in spiritual growth. Stephen affirmed that the genuine disciple will want to move forward in the direction of growth. Even if their maturing is imperfect and hesitant, nevertheless, growth can be and should be expected. Where there is no indication of spiritual growth, then the reality of that person's profession of faith must be question.

Addressing spiritual stagnation is a tricky task. Daniel and Thomas considered that someone's spiritual stagnation was possibly a sign of other pastoral issues, and that these were probably most helpfully addressed out of the pulpit, in a counseling situation. Others admitted to a measure of uncertainty about how to approach spiritual stagnation as they preached. They acknowledged that only by committing these individuals to God in prayer would deep and lasting change take place in their hearts. Ryan thought that people only listen when their lives fell apart, and so he seriously suggested that pastors perhaps tentatively and lovingly pray towards that end.

Bill and Daniel highlighted how motivation by guilt or berating by metaphorically "beating them over the head with a big stick" must be avoided. More positively, what will motivate spiritually stagnant individuals towards maturity, according to Bill, "is the gospel. And as they hear Christ week after week after week, or if they hear their own issues exposed through my own transparency, then that is what I think will lead them to a new desire to grow spiritually."

More practically, since the complacent and disinterested still turn up at a Sunday service, Andrew, Frank, and Bill together agreed on the necessity of working hard at the sermon to ensure messages are engaging, relevant, and challenging. Frank also highlighted the importance of ensuring that the "in the worship culture in which the preaching takes place, well-chosen songs celebrate God's welcoming heart, so that there may be an expectation of the presence of God in their midst." Bill said, "as they are interested enough to keep coming back, I work hard to 'keep them on the reservation' long enough for the Holy Spirit to do a fresh work in them."

A few of the participants suggested that congregants should be made aware of both the negative effects of spiritual stagnation and the positive impact of aiming for spiritual maturity. Negatively, John admitted to sometimes saying to his congregation, “If you are not pouring yourself out yourself into the Lord, you don’t really know what you are depriving yourself of and you are taking spiritual risks. Much of it is a dull and foolish thing to do. Are the things that you are pursuing really that much better than growing close to Christ?’ That kind of rhetoric comes out quite a lot.”

More positively, Daniel said, “you want to show them [that in the pursuit of maturity] there must be something worth having, ‘This is where I should be’.” This was echoed by Ryan who considered that allowing apathetic and complacent congregants to sense that they were living on the outside and missing out on something wonderful was not necessarily a bad idea.

Andrew once again said that he found the book of Hebrews very helpful in this regard. He suggested that that the pattern or model set by the author of Hebrews is worth emulating as it addresses those reluctant to press on towards maturity by giving both positive encouragement which centers on Christ, and negative warnings which exegetically cannot easily be dismissed. He said,

I would go back to Hebrews – again see how Hebrews does it – there is a mix of amazing OT exposition and its fulfilment in Christ, “If the blood of animals did this – how much more will the blood of Christ make our consciences clean?” So there is that positive encouragement. But there is a fair dose of warning in its warning passages along with plenty of encouragement to encourage one another.

Andrew concluded his interview with this helpful reflection, “I think Hebrews is a good model for a preaching ministry. It has material in it that is exposition, warnings,

focus on Christ, encouragement to help each other – all these elements that seem to be brought together.”

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand more fully how proficient pastors intentionally help their congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. Eight men, each with considerable experience serving in the role of senior pastor were interviewed about their understanding and practice of preaching in the context of a worship service, particularly with the edification of their congregants in view. In response to three research questions, various themes, patterns, and insights emerged regarding the importance and place of preaching within the life of a church. In this chapter, the recorded data arising from the interviews was analyzed and was presented, grouped together under appropriate headings in line with the research questions. Comparisons and contrasts in participants’ responses were identified and noted by the researcher in the general areas of understanding the basis and role of preaching for the spiritual maturity of congregants, the content emphases of sermons designed for the spiritual maturity of congregants, and in the principles and practices of application in sermons intended for the spiritual maturity of congregants.

In the following and final chapter, the study will be brought to a close as the researcher considers personal insights and conclusions drawn from the literature review and information gleaned from the research participants.

Chapter Five

Discussion And Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how reformed and evangelical pastors help their congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. The apostle Paul clearly believed in preaching's legitimacy and effectiveness to mature Christian believers in their faith and grow them in Christ-like character.²⁸⁰ This study was carried out with the understanding that many current, conservative Western pastors similarly believe that the regular, expository preaching of the Bible has a unique God-given role in the life of the church and is a primary means to effect a growing Christ-like transformation in people's lives. Nevertheless, many of these pastors struggle in practice and in confidence because they see little tangible fruit in people's lives in direct response to their preaching. As a consequence of losing assurance in the sermon to effect significant change, many of those pastors now look to other forms of word ministries, such as one-on-ones or small groups, as a more effective means of making disciples within the life of the church. In many congregations, therefore, preaching is ignored as a key disciple-making strategy, and the significance of the sermon within the life of the church is diminished and even questioned.

In this context of widespread hesitant and ineffective preaching, this study sought theological insights and helpful practices from a number of proficient senior pastors whose expository preaching ministry continues to have an effective maturing and transformative impact in their congregants' lives. The researcher hoped that lessons from

²⁸⁰ Ephesians 4:12-13; Colossians 1:28.

the research participants could be identified, understood, and implemented, and, with God's help, these lessons would be of help to other beleaguered pastors who desire to become more effective and fruitful in their preaching responsibilities.

The research questions that guided the study were:

RQ 1: In what ways does preaching in a worship service intentionally further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

RQ 2: What are the content emphases of sermons that are intentionally designed to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

RQ 3: How do pastors intentionally design the application portions of their sermons in order to further congregants towards spiritual maturity?

Chapter Two of the study reviewed published literature relevant to the research questions. The literature review first outlined a biblical-theological background of preaching and its importance to the life of the local church. Second, the review examined the nature and purposes of preaching, particularly within the context of a worship service, from the perspective of conservative scholars and seasoned practitioners. The third section of the review examined reformed and evangelical authors' theological understanding of both the nature and characteristics of spiritual maturity. This third section explored their understanding of how Christian believers grow in spiritual maturity and the biblical content that undergirds such growth. The fourth section considered sermon application and particularly how listeners experience spiritual transformation as they are directed, encouraged, and enabled to respond appropriately to the preached word. The final section summarized key findings collated from the literature review.

Chapter Three of the study described and explained the study's research methodology. Using a qualitative research analysis approach, eight research participants

were selected using purposeful sampling. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured method. These interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by web camera. The interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. The provided data was then analyzed according to the constant comparative method. Finally, Chapter Four briefly introduced the research participants and presented findings as common or divergent themes which had emerged in response to the research questions posed during the interviews.

Discussion of Findings

In this final chapter, the responses of the research participants are critiqued in the light of the literature review, the researcher's own experiences, and his expectations of the study, so that transferable implications may be determined, conclusions drawn, and recommendations or suggestions made.

Introduction: Preliminary Principles

Before submitting a personal, detailed appraisal of the findings and review, two principal points must be made with respect to the overall purpose of the study that provide a background against which all other findings and recommendations should be viewed and evaluated.

First, the study has shown, at least with these particular participants, that there are no definitive principles or reproducible practices, either ancient or modern, that pastors may adopt in their preaching which will unequivocally ensure the spiritual maturity of those regularly listening. Christian maturity is commonly understood, or even caricatured, as a calm, angelic serenity and sanctity that rises above life's difficulties and that resolutely and transparently eschews sin and temptation in all their forms. No

preaching methodology or content can ensure such a state for listeners. Disappointingly but expectedly, the study failed to identify a formulaic, universal preaching strategy that effects deep and lasting transformation in people's lives before they leave the church door.

On the one hand, at the level of human experience, the New Testament authors expect that Christian believers will grow and mature towards genuine Christlikeness as a mark of true faith. As Pastor Stephen said, "If you are a genuine follower of Christ, you'll want to move forward, however hesitantly, however imperfectly, but there will be some growth. If there is no sign of growth or life, then on what basis can you say true faith is present?" Yet, on the other hand, such growth is complex, non-linear, multi-faceted, slow, often taking place in the context of spiritual warfare and trials, facilitated in community relationships which require an ever-deepening commitment to endure, regularly impeded by lingering sinful attitudes and behavior, constantly subject to spiritual derailment or failure, and yet exemplified in continual repentance and recovery of faith.²⁸¹ As previously noted, pastor and author Peter K. Nelson calls this the "paradox of spiritual maturity," in which true believers exhibit both a spiritual restlessness which spurs them on to knowing Christ more fully, while at the same time becoming increasingly aware of their pervasive sinfulness in every aspect of daily life.²⁸²

If believers make progress towards Christlikeness at all, it is due solely to the active, often imperceptible sovereign grace of God who uniquely initiates, co-ordinates, oversees, sustains, and advances believers' maturity. Normally working through human

²⁸¹ John 15:1-11; Romans 8:28-30; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Galatians 5:18-26; James 1:2-4; 2 Peter 1:3-9; 2 Peter 3:17-18; 1 John 1:7-2:6.

²⁸² Nelson, *Spiritual Formation*, 97.

means, God nonetheless ensures that, in accordance with his will, indwelling unbelief, besetting sin, or a reluctance to forward spiritually forward does not ultimately hinder the predetermined goal of increasing believers' "conformity to the image of Christ."²⁸³ In God's purposes and plans, spiritual maturity is not an automatic procedure in which believers move naturally from one spiritual grade of holiness to the next. Maturity is a journey, in which the Lord leads towards his goal for Christian believers, not directly but along a spiritually scenic route, wherein getting to know, trust, and love him more, Christians are transformed to becoming more like him. For God, for believers, for now, the journey is as important as the final destination. Nelson explains,

The journey of spiritual formation takes us through seasons of the soul. After a stage of initial zeal followed by an episode of eager learning, disenchantment and even bitterness can develop. Pressures and temptations never anticipated in the earlier, simpler seasons of spiritual life eventually confront us. As it is on a long road trip, the journey with Jesus takes many turns, and we can't envision what awaits us around the bend. In particular, we don't foresee where the clash with sin and temptation may take us.

The Apostle Paul pours out his heart for his spiritual "children" in Galatia: "I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" The shaping of souls and the conforming of lifestyles to the pattern of Jesus are urgent priorities of God. God has a heart for the Christ-centred spiritual formation of his beloved ones; he intends them to be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). But sin crops up in countless ways to disrupt and derail progress in our walk with Christ.²⁸⁴

Similarly, authors Lane and Tripp, whose writing and teaching ministries were particularly helpful to a couple of the participants, underline the importance of grasping that spiritual maturity often occurs in the midst of difficult and testing circumstances,

²⁸³ Psalm 127:1-2; Romans 8:28-30; Corinthians 3:1-9; Philippians 1:6; Philippians 2:12-13.

²⁸⁴ Nelson, *Spiritual Formation*, 2f.

where progress is not often obvious, and along a pathway where there are many opportunities to doubt, despair, disobey, and drift away from the Lord. They write,

Life is seldom simple. Growth in God's grace is a process and not an event. Tough things are not going to turn around overnight because you have untrusted them to the Lord. The Bible is honest in its description of how grave and comprehensive our war with sin is. Individuals, friendships, churches, marriages, and neighborhoods don't turn around in a moment. The Bible describes the Christian life as a journey that often takes us through the wilderness. You will get tired and confused. You will have moments when you will wonder where God is. You will struggle to see God's promises at work in your life. You will feel that following God has brought you more suffering than blessing. You will go through moments when it seems like the principles of Scripture don't work... There will be times when you feel like quitting.²⁸⁵

Nevertheless, Lane and Tripp write to encourage their readers "to be full of hope in the midst of things you do not fully understand. You don't have to figure everything out. You do need to trust the One who does understand, and who knows exactly what he is doing... God will not quit until every bit of his work is complete in each of children. God's dream for us will come true."²⁸⁶ God will ensure that his people will grow in spiritual maturity and conform more and more to the image of Christ.

A second undergirding point emerged from the study and provides validity for the study itself. Despite failing to identify an overarching preaching strategy that conclusively secures observable spiritual maturity, nevertheless, more positively, each participant enthusiastically affirmed their belief in and commitment to preaching as a key and indispensable strategic element within God's economy to effect true and deep spiritual transformation in the hearts and lives of congregants. The literature review and

²⁸⁵ Lane and Tripp, *How People Change*, 43.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.; Philippians 1:1-11.

interviews together should assure pastors that God can use their preaching ministries to advance spiritual maturity effectually in the lives of congregants.

For instance, picking up on the journey motif, Ryan said,

preaching in a church is not simply expounding a biblical text (though I hope it is never less than that). It is taking a group of people from one place to another – not just on one Sunday, but on successive Sundays over time. It’s taking people somewhere; it’s taking them into green pastures; it’s taking them into still waters; it’s getting them toward the promised land by stages as the book of Numbers describes. So, it’s not just the Gospel of John, passage by passage in the course of two or three years; it’s a church on a journey into more of Jesus and the Gospel of John is simply the platform for one insight after another, one deeper insight after another on that larger journey.

In Ephesians 4:11ff, Paul identifies pastor-teachers as God’s gift to the church to enable Christians to grow towards maturity. Ryan expressed how word-ministry is God’s “strategy to take us further than we would ever dream of going, further than we have ever gone before towards ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ He is straining at the leash of language to describe the massiveness of the glory of the glory of Jesus, and that is where preaching should take people.”

Similarly, Daniel, in affirming preaching as a primary element of ministry to help believers towards maturity, referenced Paul’s words in Colossians 1:28, where he writes about his apostolic ministry as “Him [that is, Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” Daniel commented, “earlier in the passage Paul talks about the calling that was given to him was to make the word of God fully known so that he could make the people of God fully known.”

The participants’ responses generally echo the reviewed literature. Historically, the Westminster Larger Catechism assures that “the Spirit of God maketh the reading, but

especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of enlightening, convicting and humbling sinners; of... drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image...²⁸⁷

Likewise, Bryan Chapell writes,

Preaching that is true to Scripture converts, convicts, and eternally changes the souls of men and women because God's Word is the instrument of divine compulsion, not because preachers have any power in themselves to stimulate godly transformations... Paul preaches without shame in his delivery skills because he trusts that the Spirit of God will use the Word the apostle proclaims to shatter the hardness of the human heart in ways no stage technique or philosophical construct can rival.²⁸⁸

Scott Gibson also highlighted spiritual transformation and growth in maturity in congregants as a general expectation in consequence of preaching the Bible. He said, "Growth of the believer is an ongoing expectation... Preaching is a means of discipleship, a shaping of men and women into the people God wants them to be – growing, deep believers able to face the world in which they live because they have been nurtured to do so by the Word."²⁸⁹

The study has therefore concluded that pastors may be assured that the word preached is a God-ordained means by which spiritual transformation and maturity occurs in congregants' minds, hearts, and lives. In fact, the general health of the local church and the vitality of its mission are intrinsically linked to the spiritual momentum generated by its pastor's biblical and vibrant preaching. Even though the study did not identify a formulaic strategy for maturity through preaching, this study has revealed a pattern of good preaching practices that the research participants have adopted, so that, by the grace

²⁸⁷ WLC, Question 155.

²⁸⁸ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 27f.

²⁸⁹ Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan*, 17.

of God and by his consonant will, their believing congregants are helped towards spiritual maturity. In the remainder of this chapter, those key preaching practices will be examined and appraised in light of the literature reviewed in order that conclusions may be drawn.

Preaching for Spiritual Maturity

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors help congregants towards spiritual maturity through their preaching ministries. During the course of the study a number of common, significant themes from both the literature and interviews were identified as being particularly pertinent to this area of research. These themes may be broadly categorized into strategies for pastors as they preach for spiritual maturity, and strategies for pastors to develop the efficacy of their preaching ministry. In no way does the researcher claim that the strategies listed here are either definitive or exhaustive on this topic. They are not the last word on preaching for maturity. Vital elements such as praying for congregants' spiritual enlightenment and receptivity to the word as preached,²⁹⁰ or the necessity for a robust, exegetical examination of the text, or the preparatory methodology adopted to move from text to sermon, or other necessary considerations lie outside the remit of this research, but these are assumed as foundational to the factors that will be highlighted. Those factors are that are stressed reflect the research conducted and, as such, the researcher trusts they will make a positive and helpful contribution to the study and practice of this essential area of ministry.

Strategies for Pastors as They Preach for Spiritual Maturity

What factors ought preachers consider as they prepare and preach for spiritual maturity? Six strategic factors will be considered. Once again, a measure of overlap

²⁹⁰ Ephesians 1:18-19; Colossians 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6; Mark 4:14-20.

exists among them. While some may be of more importance than others, they are not ranked in any order of significance.

In-depth Proclamation of the Gospel

Pastors who want their preaching to encourage congregants in their spiritual maturity should first ensure that the congregation has a growing understanding and appreciation of the gospel's riches and depth. Furthermore, in accordance with the congregation's intake capacity, pastors should emphasize a functional understanding of how the gospel works in the lives of believers to effect maturity. In his seminal work, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace affirms,

The beginning place for personal renewal in most congregations is a preaching and teaching ministry that emphasizes primary elements of spiritual dynamics: depth proclamation of the gospel. The aim of the minister should be to encourage in each parishioner an intelligent response of faith laying claim to the provisions of Christ's redemptive work, a daily standing on the four platforms... "*You are accepted, you are delivered, you are not alone, you have authority.*" At the same time as this good news is given, the "bad news" to which it is the answer must also be presented: the depth and gravity of sin in the light of God's holiness and righteousness, and the problems likely to be encountered in spiritual conflict with the powers of darkness. The balance and proportion of these positive and negative materials of preaching, and the order in which they are approached, is a subtle matter which depends on the spiritual profile of each congregation.²⁹¹

Throughout his book, Lovelace emphasises the importance of helping believers become increasingly aware of key biblical messages: God's holiness and majesty, expressed especially in his justice and love; the depth and pervasive nature of human sinfulness, as experienced individually, relationally in community and within society; the wonder and glory of the gospel and its provision to address and meet people's needs, and

²⁹¹ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 210.

restore them to a deepening response to God's mercy and grace shown in love, delight, repentance, faith and selfless, joyful obedience.

In calling for preaching that focuses on "depth proclamation of the gospel" Lovelace is not arguing for a doctrinally dry, cerebral Christianity. He acknowledges that "*Spiritual life is produced by the presence of and empowering of the Holy Spirit, not simply by the comprehension of doctrinal propositions or strategies of renewal.*"²⁹² As in the past, God can still work sovereignly and powerfully to bring about spiritual transformation in people's lives where there is "a very deficient awareness of the dynamics of spiritual life" and where the gospel is "still imperfectly understood."²⁹³ Nevertheless, Lovelace asserts that a superficial teaching of the gospel or a congregants' resistance to grapple with the gospel will thwart the rich experience of God and his grace. Lovelace writes,

... since spiritual life is rooted in faith and missing elements are usually replaced by misapprehensions which amount to unbelief, failure to understand rightly any of the primary or secondary dimensions affected by our union with Christ inevitably produces distortions and deficiencies in the church's experience. [A spiritually awakened church's] continuance in vitality is not always dependent on perfect comprehension of the provisions of redemption, but it does require *movement towards the experience of those provisions*. Enjoyment of full spiritual vitality by individuals or churches is not an automatic result of comprehending all the facets of redemption; it depends on the *relationship* of believers to the sovereign Lord. Movement towards grace is accepted and blessed by the presence of God, while retreat from growth yields increasing barrenness.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Ibid., 79.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.. Lovelace defines "primary and secondary dimensions" of union with Christ as justification, sanctification, the indwelling Spirit, authority in spiritual conflict (primary elements); mission, prayer, community, disenculturation, theological integration (secondary elements). Ibid., 75. Together these form a curricular frame for individual and congregational "continuous spiritual renewal."

That final phrase is telling. When Christians act or respond, they make spiritual progress, facilitated by pastors who wisely stretch their grasp of the full-orbed gospel. Christians who retreat will spiritually regress and will fail to fully enter into the joy that the Lord desires for them.

J. I. Packer also stresses the importance of coming to a deeper comprehension and consequent appreciation of gospel truths as a prerequisite for true growth. Writing about the composite aspects of humanity's salvation as planned and accomplished by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he says, "The New Testament writers... expend their strength going over the various aspects of this [Trinitarian] salvation in the hope of helping their readers to get a better grasp of it, and so to enter into it more fully. Those who do not see this, do not understand the New Testament at all."²⁹⁵

Not surprisingly, most of the study participants also stressed the importance of in-depth gospel proclamation for spiritual maturity. When asked what biblical themes were intentionally emphasised and revisited, Bill answered, "Well obviously, the gospel! The work of Christ, our need of it and the beauty of it and the power of it." In preparation, Frank is "always thinking gospel centrality." While Daniel frequently returns to core gospel themes lest the "congregation comes to a point where the gospel is assumed," Ryan said,

I want to be a pastor who really, really, really believes in the power of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone – apart from all our works... just this past Sunday – justified freely by His grace as a gift, I come back to that a lot. I do not believe that is a way of evading deeper questions of discipleship and maturity; I believe that's a way of motivating in the direction of discipleship and deeper maturity.

²⁹⁵ Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 46.

Ryan commented specifically on Lovelace's thoughts on lasting spiritual renewal that takes place when people are led to build their lives on the foundation of justification by faith.²⁹⁶ Ryan said, "I want that to be the environment of everything else I do in preaching and pastoral ministry. It's the framework, it's the context, it's the air we breathe, acceptance on terms of grace – within which – we can then face ourselves as we really are and then rethink our lives. If we don't have that foundation of acceptance and assurance, we'll just live in constant crisis..."

How, of course, all this works out in the course of one's regular preaching ministry, is another matter. Lovelace himself recognized the need for a deft approach when he said, "The balance and proportion of these positive and negative materials of preaching, and the order in which they are approached, is a subtle matter which depends on the spiritual profile of each congregation,"²⁹⁷ and the researcher would add the wisdom of the preaching pastor. However, some things can be said and must be borne in mind.

First, those pastors who desire to move their congregants towards spiritual maturity cannot ignore substantive doctrinal preaching, especially on key or core gospel texts. Over time, pastors must help congregants understand and appreciate basic gospel doctrinal concepts such as justification, adoption, and sanctification by faith. Pastors must also emphasize the necessity of believably embracing these truths as the functional springboard for sermon application (e.g., indicatives and imperatives), and the motivation and power for consequent mature, Christlike living. Even as they live to increasingly

²⁹⁶ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 101f.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 210.

please God, Christians need to be consciously aware of the dangers of drifting towards legalism or pharisaism: thinking and living as if their relationship with God is somehow reflected in their record of performance driven spirituality or activity.

Congregants also need to be informed as to the realities of progress and maturity, so that they are not disheartened or deterred by repeated cycles of sinful failure. In fact, like the pastors themselves, congregants need to understand growth and maturity from God's perspective. As Peter Nelson writes, believers need to "recognize that 'progress' in sanctification is not simple or straightforward. Expectations of neat and tidy stair-step advancement have to be challenged. When following Jesus, the way up is down, loss is gain, and death is the doorway to life; in Jesus' upside-down plan of spiritual formation the last shall be first."²⁹⁸

Through all this foundational teaching, pastors will have to repeat these truths imaginatively, lovingly, and patiently as congregants are slowly helped to transition from a default, performance-driven mind-set to a gospel-centered worldview and life orientation. As Christopher Ash wrote,

We need repeated preaching, because by nature we will never [continue to] repent and believe. We will 'move on' from the simple gospel of daily repentance, daily taking up the cross, daily faith, to a supposed higher life, a more sophisticated life, some kind of super-spiritual life in which repentance and faith are too ordinary and simple to be practised. This is what will happen unless we sit under faithful preaching.²⁹⁹

Second, in adopting in-depth gospel proclamation as a central element of their preaching ministries, pastors must not allow their sermons to become the pretext for dusty lectures on the intricacies of Reformation theology. They must remain committed

²⁹⁸ Nelson, *Spiritual Formation*, 100.

²⁹⁹ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 60.

to an enthusiastic and vibrant expository ministry so that the breadth of God's own inscripturated voice in all of the Bible is heard by his worshipping people, even as each sermonic passage reveals something unique about humanity's sinfulness and the glory of God's grace. Pastors need wisdom so that they do not impose an artificial, theological construct on every passage in an attempt to reveal its gospel-centred perspective. Instead, they must work hard at exegeting the preaching passage within its redemptive-historical framework, helping the congregation to see how the passage fits into the Bible's creation-fall-redemption-restoration framework. Doing so points to God's purposes and provision for his people finding fulfilment in Christ. Bryan Chapell highlights the difficulties of developing such grace-oriented sermons since they "seem to stretch the boundaries of precise expository preaching and go against the flow of so much that we are accustomed to hearing in the evangelical church."³⁰⁰

The journey motif is also helpful in this regard too. There will be seasons when the preached Bible text will be seen as more gospel-rich than others. For example, congregants might find some passages more easily accessible and explicit in their gospel message than more obscure narrative passages where their relation to the gospel is not particularly obvious. On such occasions, the wise pastor, as a tour guide on this journey with his people, will help them by pointing out gospel connections and by reminding them "You remember that whenever we were looking at Romans... well, here we see that idea or truth again but in embryonic form..."

Third, pastors must help congregants who express resistance to sermons that are theologically loaded or that stem from a different perspective than theirs. Christians, by

³⁰⁰ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 297.

virtue of the indwelling Spirit, are primed and ready to grow in spiritual maturity. It is a primary reason why God saves us them. In my experience, however, many congregants are hesitant or reluctant to think through doctrinal issues raised in preaching, preferring a preaching format that is certainly Bible-based but which majors on application, telling listeners how they should respond and obey. Often preferring to serve, congregants need help understanding that maturity comes with a willingness, if not desire, to love God with their mind. Therefore, part of growing as disciples means Christians are to think and comprehend more fully the things that God considers important, to have an understanding of the spiritual resources and riches that God has provided for his people in the gospel. As a number of the participants said, congregants need help viewing maturity, even in the realm of thinking, as a positive measure. Pastors can help congregants pray that God will open their eyes to see more of the beauty of Christ as they delve deeper into gospel truths, so that they might want to know him more.

Fourth, preachers, as they minister to the people in the context of a worship service, must not simply preach or teach theology, even the wonders of gospel theology, even in the name of in-depth gospel proclamation. As Peter Adam said, “the ministry of the Word is exercised to some purpose. It is not mere teaching; it is teaching which achieves the purpose of God in changing people’s lives.”³⁰¹ Pastors need to help their struggling congregants make connections between the realities of their daily lives and the gospel. Sensitive to the needs and maturity of the congregation as whole, wise pastors will take difficult passages slowly, perhaps even leading with applicatory relevance, or they will move through the text more quickly while concentrating on its purpose within

³⁰¹ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words*, 76.

the flow of the section, perhaps why the author considered it necessary to be included without becoming trapped in the detail, and especially its usefulness for Christlike maturity. As Bill said, in preaching

I always try to tie difficult doctrinal issues and conversations and ground them into real-life and the warp and woof of people's daily struggles... all that theology is, all that doctrine is, is the knowledge of God. So how does knowing this unique, difficult element of God's heart, how does this apply to our lives? Why would God tell us this about Himself? I think preachers do themselves a real disservice if they just teach a doctrine and don't tie it to the heart of God.

Finally, does this mean that the Sunday worship service sermon is always the best forum for this in-depth gospel proclamation? The researcher humbly suggests not. Clearly, gospel-centeredness ought to be just that: the church's teaching axis around which all other teaching throughout the congregation revolves. Ryan said that, for him, the "steady, almost relentless, on-going exposition through a book of the Bible, that's the main ministry driver for the whole church." Similarly, Bill spoke about preaching being "distinctive in that it almost creates the gathering momentum of the people of God and their being exposed to the gospel and that sets the table for deeper discipleship. The distinctive role of preaching is setting the table for other opportunities for spiritual growth." In other words, in-depth gospel proclamation ignites and fuels spiritual renewal and maturity throughout the church.

A weekly sermon or two is insufficient time to unpack deep gospel truths and also help people process the complex truths, questions, and personal applications that invariably arise. Other dialogical formats are necessary that allow for feedback, interaction, and follow-up. Jesus facilitated his own inquiring disciples with many a

follow-up session for those who wanted to know more.³⁰² Even a small group, inductive Bible study may not be the most helpful forum unless the leader is well versed in the dynamics of spiritual renewal. The researcher suggests that a seminar program, containing both direct, formal teaching and engaging, group discussion provides the best forum for personal, in-depth gospel study and assimilation and also for the deepening of relationships. Andrew expressed appreciation for the material produced by the missions' organisation, Serge, as being "particularly helpful in how they had presented the life-application value and relevance of some of the more difficult but necessary theological concepts, such as those associated with believers' 'union with Christ'." The researcher finds no reason to disagree.

Captivating Hearts for Christ

Spiritual maturity requires more than sermons that embody and espouse a fuller, intellectual comprehension of gospel dynamics—an in-depth proclamation of the gospel is more complicated than that. While pastors need to go deeper theologically, they must also bring people along with them as their congregations learn to trust their wisdom and pastoral care. Pastors, in cooperation with the Spirit, need to aim for the heart. As Frank said, "To me, the preaching of the gospel is declaring the great truths of the gospel, but it's done in the power of the Spirit to the heart." Frank believes that congregants must learn to love God with their minds, so that they will love him with their hearts, and so display that love in their lives through obedience that flows from belief and delight.

According to theologian J. I. Packer, the reorienting struggle for mature Christ-likeness begins and is fought upon the battle ground of the human heart, which Packer

³⁰² Mark 4:10ff.

defines as “the centre and focus of one’s inner personal life: the source of motivation, the seat of passion, the spring of all thought processes and particularly of conscience.”³⁰³ In essence, two related matters of the heart must be repeatedly addressed for maturity to occur: First, negatively, the heart’s predilection for making and cherishing idols must be exposed. Second, positively, cultivating true heart worship and delight in Christ.

These matters featured strongly in both the literature review and in the participants’ findings. Frank stated, “The gospel, well preached and taught is going to go below the waterline of simply my external behaviour and begin to expose the control centre of my imagination and my choices.” Of all the participants, Stephen focused on the importance of preaching with the heart in view,

preaching then begins to uncover what’s going on in the hearts and lives of the listeners. If it is going to be a means of grace then we are looking for heart-change in people, and preaching contributes to that by exposing the desires and intentions of the heart; showing how those sinful and selfish desires and aspirations are not ultimately fulfilling of God’s purpose for us; and leading them to see how, in an orientation to Christ and the gospel, that it is through the Gospel that our hearts are changed and transformed, which leads to a change of behaviour. So insofar as it is the word of God applied by the Spirit of God into people’s lives and into their hearts, preaching should move people towards spiritual maturity.

Murray Capill helpfully contributed in this area, focusing on “heart application,” which addresses those deeper “underlying attitudes, mind-set, motivations, ambitions, character and goals”³⁰⁴ which have their roots in human hearts. Capill is one of a growing number of authors who consider that “the fundamental heart problem is idolatry.”³⁰⁵

Frank in a similar vein said, “In my preaching, I’m going to always be thinking ‘There’s

³⁰³ Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 22.

³⁰⁴ Capill, *The Heart Is the Target*, 39.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

a battle for hearts in this room that's below the level of simply the visible.' So I'm thinking idolatry – the worship of my heart.” Similarly in D. E. Johnson identifies,

The root of the unbeliever's sin and misery is his worship (recognized or, often, unrecognized) of a false god, an idol. Likewise the believer's frustration, resentment, lack of joy, anger, worry, fear, etc., are symptoms of lingering allegiance to various idols of the heart that persistently reassert themselves as rivals with Jesus for our trust, devotion, and service.³⁰⁶

Preaching which merely addresses surface sins will do little to uproot the idolatrous sins beneath the sins of heart attitudes, aspirations, and affections which must be realigned towards Christ for deep transformation and maturity. This resonates with Andrew's frustration, that “one of the biggest failings of preaching is basically superficial diagnosis of human problems... I don't like superficial black-and-white things that portrays things in a superficial way. People's lives are complex and people's problems are often very heavy.” He bemoans that form of preaching that offers a simple prescriptivism, which leads to a form of legalism, and which ultimately leaves the congregation dissatisfied.

The researcher agrees with Chester and Honeysett, that “The goal of preaching is to capture the affections of our hearts for Christ so that lives are changed so that God is glorified.”³⁰⁷ Moody and Weekes use very similar language when they write that the “goal of preaching [is] to captivate people's hearts with the beauty of Jesus.”³⁰⁸ These writers understand that preaching that will truly glorify God through spiritually

³⁰⁶ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 57.

³⁰⁷ Chester, and Honeysett, *Gospel Centred Preaching*, 25.

³⁰⁸ Moody, and Weekes, *Burning Hearts*, 33.

transformed lives who are enraptured with Christ. To do so, preachers must engage people's hearts, not just their minds.

Bryan Chapell asserts that “preaching that stimulates ever greater love for God drives the affections of the world from the heart so that it beat ever stronger for God's purposes ... the consistent adulation of the mercy of God in Christ is a preacher's primary instrument to stimulate a passion for God and his ways.”³⁰⁹ Whether pastors target apathetic believers, urging them towards maturity, or whether they target struggling Christians, encouraging them when life is tough, the preaching pastor must address the heart and woo it for Jesus. Pastors who desire to help their people mature spiritually must learn to motivate by primarily exalting Christ and his glorious gospel of grace that congregants may exult in him. Chapell states, “love for God is necessarily the highest and strongest of motivations for a life of enduring fellowship and faithfulness, making Christ's ministry of mercy our main message and motivation.”³¹⁰

The Problem of Practical Preaching

The researcher recognizes that the preaching emphases that this study advocates are in stark contrast to much popular preaching today, even within reformed and evangelical circles. On the one hand, some insist that preachers' primary responsibility is to ensure that their expository sermon is based upon a rigorous analysis of the text so that those listening are enabled to properly hear what the passage says, in effect, what God is saying, thereby keeping close to authorial intent. This focus is on teaching the text, or even, to use John's words, “to give a talk about the text.” Any life-changing implications

³⁰⁹ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 326.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 322f.

and applications, for both pastor and people, are then often largely glossed over or ignored. Such preachers would often rather leave meaningful application to emerge from discussion groups held afterwards.

On the other hand, there are preachers who acknowledge their pastoral responsibility to say something to believers from the Bible that relates to people. These pastors want to give their listeners something to which they can practically respond by changing some aspect or detail of life. They often achieve this goal by endeavoring to keep the content of sermon simple, the implication for life change bland, and the instructional specifics so minor and achievable that they often sound as if they were gleaned from a self-help book. When asked about the content emphases of sermons intentionally designed to help towards maturity, Ryan responded with directness,

I know the kind of sermons I don't want to preach: "Four handy tips for stress management," "Five sure-fire helps for raising your child." Those things matter, God cares about these things, but that is not what preaching is for. If I were in a church on a Sunday morning and the pastor said in his first sentence that this is what I'm going to preach on today, it would be really hard for me not to get up and walk out. I would be so frustrated. It's so deep-rolled within me. I would want to scream.

Some suggest that these practical sermons are the type of sermons that many regular church attendees want, and that they help the unchurched to feel at ease within a church environment. Ryan responded starkly,

I would say, practicality is obviously a good thing; the Bible is a practical book from cover to cover... and it is possible for pastors not to be helpful. I have a deep conviction that people deserve to be helped by preaching in their actual lives. But what is most helpful is not to tell them how they can tweak this in their lives, add this to their lives; what is most helpful for broken sinners who are reaching impasse and don't know what to do, they're stuck where they are ... See, people who are looking for sermons like that, they haven't hit the wall yet. They're not ready. They haven't failed enough. They have not yet discovered what a dead-end practicality is – as it is often understood. They need

to reach that point of such shocking failure and impasse that they are just crying out for the grace of God. Then they are ready to hear real preaching.

Andrew also spoke about his desire for his preaching “to help people think differently, rather than necessarily saying, ‘Here’s 5 things you ought to be doing.’”

The researcher is persuaded that preaching helps move believing congregants towards spiritual maturity and live lives that increasingly “conform to the image of Christ.”³¹¹ To do so, pastors must primarily focus on gospel, grace, and glory matters addressed and applied to head (in-depth teaching) and heart (captured for Christ) before giving some direction as to how such matters are worked out in and impact daily living.³¹²

Bryan Chapell believes that preachers who “make moral instruction or societal reform the *primary* focus of their messages” are mistaken and actually hinder the effective communication of the gospel.³¹³ When pastors only encourage listeners to “strive to ‘be something’ in order to be loved by God,”³¹⁴ then they give their parishioners every indication that they can do what is required or expected. They effectively “present godliness as product of human endeavor.”³¹⁵ Since such sermons

³¹¹ Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18

³¹² In saying this, I am conscious of and sympathetic to John’s comment when he expressed frustration at a tendency, especially among inexperienced grace-oriented preachers, who “feel bound to expound ‘justification by faith’ in every sermon before they give direction to the congregation to do anything, lest they give the impression of teaching salvation by works.” In contrast, grace-oriented as he is, he said, “I will often tell the people, ‘Just do it!’”

³¹³ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 19.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

essentially sever the believer from Christ as necessarily both their motivation and enabler to obey, “there is no message more damaging to the faith.”³¹⁶

Avoiding messages of self-sufficiency involves more than ensuring that the imperatives follow the indicatives. For spiritual maturity, preaching should aim at cultivating godly desires that arise from a renewed and spiritually maturing heart. Such a heart is believingly and lovingly anchored in Christ. As the Spirit transforms listening hearts through hearing mind-renewing, heart-transforming gospel sermons, then “the obedience that comes from faith” and the “presenting of one’s body as a living sacrifice” for the glory of God will follow.³¹⁷ As in-depth gospel preaching propagates and cultivates godly desires, then, according to J. I. Packer, appropriate in-depth, transformed responses of heart-felt praise, gratitude, zeal, and Christ-like living will demonstrate a growing spiritual maturity.³¹⁸

For those church members who still want help with the issues and problems of contemporary life from a biblical perspective, two things may be said in response. First, such issues may well be better dealt with in a different format than the sermon, allowing for discussion, questions, and greater interaction. This may be necessary to avoid perceived indifference to people’s daily concerns. Secondly, as authors Chester and Honeysett suggest, truly transformative preaching that leads to maturity helps congregants to see their lives and their very real problems with a different perspective. They explain,

³¹⁶ Ibid., 289.

³¹⁷ Romans 1:5; Romans 12:1.

³¹⁸ Packer, *A Passion for Holiness*, 67ff.

Our job is to preach the glory of God for the glory of God. The glory of God is both the content and goal of our preaching. Life is not about me. And preaching is not all about addressing my needs... We're to lift people's sight above the horizons of their small me-centred world to see the majesty of God. But here's the thing: the glory of God is the water that truly satisfies and the rock upon which we can build our lives.³¹⁹

Homiletic Dietetics and Spiritual Diagnostics

One of the few themes that the participants almost universally affirmed as a preaching practice to be adopted was that of a “balanced diet” approach to preaching different genres of scripture. Pastors should ensure that, over a reasonable period of time, the preaching focus would not remain static over a particular type of Bible book or genre. Rather, pastors should expose the congregation to a diversity of expositions from gospels, epistles, Old Testament narratives, poetry, wisdom literature, prophets, et cetera. By doing so, pastors approximate to preaching “the whole counsel of God.”³²⁰

The participants adopted various approaches to ensure such homiletic balance. Outside of seasonal digressions and the occasional topical series such as family or prayer, for the most part Daniel simply alternated between Old and New Testament books to “keep the right balance between narrative and gospel and epistle.” Stephen followed a closely similar line. While allowing for emergency or crisis interventions, Thomas attempts to stick rigidly to a four year syllabus, “not that we cover every part of scripture, but to make sure that we get the weight right between Old and New Testaments, between the different genres of scripture. It is nearly always book based, with one or two exceptions, such as a doctrine series, but that is very rare.” Conversely, despite his elders’ better judgement, John has a more subjective approach to book or series selection. He

³¹⁹ Chester, and Honeysett, *Gospel Centred Preaching*, 29.

³²⁰ Acts 20:26f.

carefully avoids repeating similar genres over a short time period, but he admits at times to choice being made almost as a result of “fanciful whimsy.” He is, however, confident of the Lord’s sovereign overruling in this. He said,

...sometimes I will have a feeling that there will be something that will be good for the church at a particular time, so I will respond to a sense of say, performance legalism going on in the church that it would be good to hit on the head, with a series on Galatians. With other things, sometimes the relevance just seems to emerge as I do it, it’s just the Lord’s leading...I don’t think I have ever gone into a series and thought that it wasn’t relevant, or I wanted to stop because it wasn’t the right thing. I just think that the Word is invariably relevant and probably whatever I chose there will be ways of connecting it to where people are in any particular week.

While a frequent or regular change of sermon series will certainly minimize the boredom among congregants who struggle with a particular series, the literature and interviews presented the primary rationale for a varied preaching diet as encouraging a balanced and healthy growth from a range of different source texts. Such variation would provide congregants with the necessary spiritual vitamins and biblical nutrition that each genre uniquely gives. The negative inference is that only feeding from any one genre would lead to an imbalanced intake, resulting in uneven or distorted spiritual growth. Exploring to what extent that is fair or true is an area for further research beyond the scope of this study.

The researcher admits to being surprised and even a little disappointed that the participants did not give widespread evidence of purposefully selecting biblical texts for sermon series to match the spiritual condition of their congregation. Andrew acknowledged that, for most of his pastoral ministry while he was pastorally sensitive to the needs of the congregation, his expository series were selected because he “wanted to give people a balanced diet. Probably most of the time I was text driven rather than

pastorally driven.” While Stephen also alternated between Old and New Testaments, he strongly emphasised his practice of exegeting or diagnosing the spiritual state or capacities of the church and then bringing the sermon series to meet their needs. Frank also drew attention to his practice of exegeting, what he called “text, soul, and culture:” text is the Bible; soul is the unique congregation before the pastor; and culture is the particular community in which God has placed his people to live and witness for him. Frank, uniquely among the participants, spoke of praying with his elders before deciding upon a new sermon series “that we would be discerning, where do we sense the Lord calling us as a body, as a group of families in our context? ...what are we hearing the Spirit say to the church?” Such pastorally-sensitive approaches to text selection was not as obvious among the other participants, although they were not asked directly about this.

Preaching pastors have a role as homiletic dieticians to ensure that congregations are properly and wisely fed from scripture’s breadth. It seems to the researcher, however, that the balanced diet approach to preaching is perhaps a weak and overly simplistic metaphor. Instead, I suggest remembering that believing individuals and congregations are not naturally spiritually healthy, renewed, empowered, and motivated. Instead, they require more than merely a biblically balanced, dietary top-up to keep going. Despite God’s saving grace, Christians are still spiritually sick people, weak and frequently spiritually malnourished who still need Jesus.³²¹ Often Christians refuse to eat what is good for them.³²² More than a biblical dietician, congregations need an emergency

³²¹ Mark 2:17.

³²² 2 Timothy 4:3-5; Hebrews 5:11-12.

physician-pastor. Such a pastor must use diagnostic skills to prayerfully assess the condition of individual hearts and collective souls and, by God's grace, give them the food that will revitalize, resuscitate and nurture their congregations, whether they recognize any of that or not.³²³ Bouncing between Testaments to provide a varied menu of recuperative food for rehabilitating sinners is not enough. I assert that God does not merely want pastors to broaden the scriptural appetites or palates of congregations. He wants preachers who are familiar with the "whole counsel of God" and sensitive to people's deep, real spiritual needs at any particular season, so that pastors will bring God's necessary and relevant word as a gospel balm to heal sin-sick souls.

This study concludes that simply selecting a varied diet of expository material is a somewhat inadequate and inefficient paradigm for stimulating spiritual growth. Rather, pastors who desire to help their congregants spiritually mature need to keep laying and re-laying a gospel-centered foundation from various genres, but particularly from the epistles and gospels. That in itself should minimize the tedium factor for listeners. Ever prayerfully sensitive to the changing needs of the church, Haddon Robinson called pastors to be tuned to the congregation's "hurts, cries, and fears."³²⁴ In doing so, pastors should then make planned expository forays into other biblical genres to illustrate, consolidate, make connections, and expand their congregants' grasp of the multi-faceted nature of gospel truth thus giving a panoramic view of the creation-fall-redemption-restoration framework. Pastors can then return back to the hub for a season of more direct gospel-rich exposition.

³²³ Matthew 4:4.

³²⁴ Robinson, *Expository Preaching*, 26f.

Building a Church

The stress of the study has been on helping congregants mature through preaching, and, perhaps, the study has falsely given the impression of such congregants as isolated individuals who just happen to gather in the same place, at the same time, listening to the same sermon, on a Sunday morning. In the literature review, however, the researcher examined theologian and author Peter Adam's study of Ephesians 4:11 ff. Adams defined preaching as "the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for serving, unity of faith, maturity, growth, and upbuilding... The main purpose of preaching is the edification of the body."³²⁵

Ephesians 4 highlights that pastor-teachers are God's gift to the local churches that the believing people may become mature. That maturity is demonstrated as individual congregants, within the fellowship of a covenant community, grow together in deepening relational unity and in a corporate understanding of the content of their faith as together they "grow up into [an experiential knowledge] of Christ."³²⁶ This is how the body, the local church, thereby fulfils their God-given destiny of increasingly conforming to the image of Christ. As such, Adam believes,

preaching is essentially a corporate activity and its most useful aim is corporate edification... This means that the sermon's focus of address is most appropriately not individuals and their needs but the needs of the congregation as a whole. This is not to say that individuals may not be greatly helped by the sermon, but its primary aim is the welfare, obedience, holiness, godliness and good working of the congregation.³²⁷

³²⁵ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 71.

³²⁶ Ephesians 4:16.

³²⁷ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 70.

One may quibble with Adam's assertion that the primary focus of preaching within the life of the local church is for the local church as a whole and not for the direct benefit of individuals within the fellowship. Yet, how can individuals be greatly helped by the sermon when it was not intended to be of help to them as individuals? In the researcher's experience as a preaching pastor, those who offer any positive feedback or appreciation of the sermon do so as individuals who have been somehow affected, encouraged, or rebuked by what was said, not on behalf of the whole body.

Nevertheless, the point is well made that pastors who would preach for the spiritual maturity of their congregants must take into account their responsibility to preach for the uniting vision and maturity of the whole congregation. Andrew spoke a number of times during the course of his interview of preaching "to shape the congregation's life" and of the need for pastors in their preaching to communicate their corporate vision of the church. More generally, congregants need to understand that their own spiritual maturity becomes evident most openly in how they lovingly relate and commit to others within the fellowship.

At a practical level, such corporate concerns and issues to be addressed can most easily be dealt with as the pastor preaches his way through the New Testament epistles. These were originally written to local congregations, and the problems they address with the original audience are often the same problems in the contemporary world. Keeping the corporate aspect of application to the fore when expositing, for example, Old Testament narratives, might not be as straightforward or obvious. Yet, considering Old Testament narratives within the broader canvas of the redemptive-historical framework

and why they were written to encourage the collective people of God at the time may be helpful.

More generally, a significant number of authors in the literature review attributed critical weight to preaching within the life of the church body. Preaching affects corporate matters of behavior and unity relevant to the body as a whole, but preaching's importance also arises from its God-given, intrinsic nature to maintain spiritual vitality within church life. For example, M. J. Quicke wrote,

Ineffectual preaching has dire consequences for God's church and mission in the twenty-first century. A crisis in preaching means a crisis in the health and life of the local church. Of course, local churches live and die for many reasons. Strong churches with authentic worship and vital mission core owe much to factors such as gifted leadership, spiritual vitality, prayer, vision, and above all the grace of God. But preaching has primary responsibility, and when it is weak and sick, the local church and its mission are weak and sick.³²⁸

Thus, for the sake of the vitality and maturity of the congregation as whole, priority must be given to the preaching of the word.

Meeting God

The final strategy to be noted for pastors as they preach for spiritual maturity is something that lies outside the control of the pastor to effect: meeting God. When asked about general objectives in preaching, Ryan said:

...this is very difficult to quantify and even talk about, but it has got to be at some level a moment with God himself. The people have to (and deserve to) have some experience of the immediacy of God; that he is there, he is speaking, he is serving them, and he is washing their feet, he is revealing himself. So it's not just me, the human preacher, there is something else going on, beyond my control, that I can only pray for and lend myself to. It seems to me that in real preaching something of that magic happens. I long for that.

³²⁸ Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching*, 34.

In a similar manner, John spoke about his understanding of “preaching as releasing the energy of the text... that energy is a God-given thing which is inherent in the written word but which is released through its authoritative opening-up of it in the power of the Spirit both in the preacher and in the congregation.” He continued, “I’m very much hoping for there to be, to use the jargon, a kind of power-encounter between the people and the Lord through the preaching of the word. So, in that sense, I see it as a divine moment that I’m hoping for to happen which I see the preacher as just the enabler of, or the channel for.”

Stephen also talked about his longing that in the context of a worship service that through preaching especially, congregants would have

a sense of transcendence that God is here, this is God who is speaking to us today. And beyond the human voice there is something else going on. We’re pricked in our hearts, our hearts are warmed, there’s a variety of responses that come about as a result of the preaching in a worship service that draws me into a worshipful response... That there’s an understanding that here is God, and I know him and I hear him and I’m aware of him speaking to me, I’m aware of his presence in this service, in a way that I am not aware of it anywhere else.

What these pastor-preachers long and pray for, is what some of the reviewed authors understand to be a normative expectation of preaching. J. I. Packer is concerned that preaching is not simply understood as the authority of God presented as prescriptive moralism. Rather he writes, “Preaching mediates not only God’s authority, but also His *presence* and *power*. Preaching effects an encounter not simply with truth, but with God Himself.”³²⁹ M. J. Quicke similarly affirms, “Preaching is about God communicating his

³²⁹ Packer, “Why Preach?” 13.

will and purpose and immediacy to effect change. Preaching, at its best, is a God happening, empowered by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”³³⁰

This study concludes that preaching, at its best, facilitates listeners to be uniquely aware of God’s presence in a worship service that they would not experience anywhere else. What this means is that the effectiveness of preaching, whether in evangelizing the unconverted, or in helping the believing congregant to mature, is outside the control of the preacher. It is all in the purpose and will of God.

Daniel’s approach in this respect is, perhaps, most helpful. Daniel remembered J. I. Packer once saying, “Blessed are those who expect nothing for they shall receive nothing.” He then continued,

What I’m always trying to do is to create an expectation on the part of the people: think about Cornelius (in Acts 10) and the whole way in which God works to bring Peter to the home of Cornelius which he would never have done naturally, it had to be done supernaturally; the Jew and the Gentile coming together. When he arrives Cornelius has all these people assembled, and they are all there in presence of God, waiting to hear what Peter is going to say. So, I want our people if I can – and I can’t create this, only the Spirit can do it – to be actually expectant for this encounter that is going to take place between them and God through his word as it is preached.

Pastor-preachers must, indeed, cooperate with and depend on the Spirit. As they encourage congregants to have an expectant, prayer-fuelled faith, they open up God’s word and proclaim the gospel in-depth. As pastor-preachers endeavor to capture and captivate hearts for Christ, they strive to help their congregants to view their needs, burdens, and problems in the light of the gospel’s glory because Christ journeys with them through the pages of all the Bible. As pastor-preachers exhort their congregants to grow and mature together in the unity of faith, love and hope, then, maybe, some Sunday,

³³⁰ Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching*, 37.

God himself will turn up at church. The listening, believing, expectant congregants will have that life-changing encounter the living God through his word, and so be spiritually transformed to become more like Christ.

Strategies For Developing Efficacy in a Preaching Ministry

This final section explores some of the practices that the research participants highlighted, practices that equipped preachers to be more useful in God's hands and plans as their congregants matured.

Mentors and models

Each of the participants acknowledged the influence of one or more key figures in their lives, either directly through personal acquaintance or indirectly through media or books. These influential figures helped the research participants with counsel, methodology, direction, or templates upon which to base their own emphases in ministry. Several participants named Dr. Tim Keller, for his preaching content and philosophy of ministry, and Richard Lovelace. Others named Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Stott, C. Jack Miller, Dick Lucas, and William Still as influential in their ministries.

While a few of the participants knew of these men and embraced their influence indirectly, others had direct and prolonged engagement with some of them and acknowledged a lasting legacy upon their own ministry. Frank said, "Part of my story is that I owe a great deal of gratitude to some of the preachers in my life and in print that have impacted me who have, by their preaching, propelled me into prayer... the text... methods of study... evangelism... exalting Christ."

The apostle Paul has given sufficient warrant in his letters that believers, especially those in positions of leadership and pastoral ministry, are to learn from others,

learning from what they say, how they live, and how they serve. Writing to his protégé, Timothy, Paul said, “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”³³¹

At the human level, there is always a danger of an inappropriate use of God’s gifts. Pastors are not immune from attaching themselves to others, whom they admire for doing better or more effectively what they would long to do themselves. It is the basis for every fan club or appreciation society. Pastors can be as guilty of fawning adulation of other worthy pastors as much as anyone else may be extolled for their expertise and proficiency by their peers in another profession, sport, or pastime. In fact, pastors face a strong temptation for affectionate mimicry and blatant, idolatrous plagiarism.

However, where a healthy relationship between the mentor and protégé exists, the following generation learns from the wisdom, experience, and mistakes of those who have gone ahead of them. In fact, the healthier option is probably to learn from a few, trusted, and varied exponents, whose different styles and approaches will give fledging preachers the encouragement and confidence to develop their own particular approach as God works through their own unique personalities and character, ministering to a uniquely called and gathered people. This study concludes that pastors, who desire to help others grow in maturity through preaching, should watch, listen, and learn from those who, in God’s name and for his kingdom, do it well.

In addition to finding suitable mentors, a number of the participants also spoke about teaching models that they adopted, adapted, or formulated. Teaching models enabled the participants to more readily present in-depth gospel truths, or provide a

³³¹ 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6.

framework for understanding how gospel dynamics work out in people's hearts, lives, and circumstances. Examples abound. Bill used the waltz as a model of "repent, believe, fight." Andrew and Stephen mentioned the Serge teaching materials and the Lane-Tripp model.³³² Ryan and Stephen highlighted Richard Lovelace's paradigm of primary and secondary "elements of continuous renewal."³³³ Frank and John frequently use the idolatry motif. Andrew and Frank expressed gratitude for Tim Keller's elder brother – younger brother paradigm that he draws from Luke 15. Finally, almost everybody mentioned Bryan Chapell's Fallen Condition Focus.

Some of these and similar models are not primarily for direct congregational consumption. They are either a helpful means for the preacher himself to process and present expository materials in such a way so that congregants may more fully grasp gospel concepts and their implications for life; or they are designed to be used out of the pulpit, in an adjunct, interactive seminar or small group context, to both complement and reinforce the preaching ministry. However, the wise pastor will on occasions, as the sermon passage facilitates, help his congregation by introducing them to such transferrable, repeatable, and memorable models to understand and apply scripture, and even indeed, to help congregants more fully understand the workings of their heart and why they behave as they do. Over a period of time, the same model can be reintroduced, reapplied, and so reinforced in people's minds from other passages being expositied.

³³² Lane, and Tripp, *How People Change*.

³³³ Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 95ff.

Teachable Preachers

If pastor-preachers are to pursue mentors, they must also remain teachable, always wanting to grow in their understanding and practice of the faith. When pastors retain that enthusiasm for learning, they pass onto others what they have learned. When pastors wain in their personal pursuit of spiritual maturity, then it is unlikely that the congregants will progress. Again, Paul’s counsel to the younger pastor Timothy was, “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”³³⁴

The participants all noted having changed their minds about both the content and practice of their preaching. Andrew admitted that, for most of his ministry, his selection of sermon passages was based more on consideration of text, e.g., the balanced diet approach), but recently, his choice has been more pastorally-driven, e.g., preaching to meet the discerned needs of the people. Similarly, Andrew said his approach has become more gospel-centered, something that he attributes to the influence of Keller. Stephen changed around his order of service as his views on the nature of preaching as part of worship also changed. As previously noted, Ryan’s view has also changed over the years, from simply “expounding a biblical text... to taking a group of people from one place to another on successive Sundays over time.” Frank changed his views on sermon application from “Here’s three things I want you to do...” to more of “Here’s what we’re called to believe...”

³³⁴ 1 Timothy 4:14-16.

In *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chapell writes of his frustration early in pastoral ministry at the unresponsiveness of his biblically literate, morally up-right congregation to his preaching. Despite their “outward conformity to accepted Christian conduct,”³³⁵ their lives and attitudes were marked by coldness of heart, intolerance of others, bitterness, joylessness, and guilt. There was little evidence of the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace or patience. He continues,

I used to get so angry at those people for their lack of response to the Word they said they loved. Then I began to realise that the problem was not so much them as it was my preaching – and the preaching of others like me. I was using shame and fear to motivate people to obey God... though my messages often secured changed behavior, my ministry seemed to produce little spiritual maturity... I saw few signs of real spiritual growth... Finally, the Lord opened my eyes to my error.³³⁶

Because Chapell grew in his understanding of the gospel and the motivation for spiritual maturity, his congregation also grew in true spiritual vitality and renewal. I conclude that spiritually maturing congregations need spiritually maturing pastors with teachable hearts and inquiring minds, eager to more fully explore and be gripped by the awesome nature of the glory of God’s grace to his people in Christ, so that as the wonder and beauty of that grace is proclaimed others may be transformed even as they worship in response.

Open and Transparent

Congregations that see the progress³³⁷ of their pastors, will invariably and necessarily see them mature spiritually through seasons of difficulties and brokenness.

³³⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 316f.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ 1 Timothy 4:15.

For instance, Bill prepares his sermon and thinks through areas of application, but before he thinks of the text in relation to the lives of others, he says, “I’m preaching to myself... The first person I’m thinking of is me, and how this text applies to me? How does it show me my need of Christ?” Bill believes this outlook

lends itself for me to share transparently with the congregation. I know there are huge debates over how transparent preachers should be in the sermons – well, for years I have had people tell me that the most powerful thing about my preaching is my transparency. And that’s what gives people the hope and the openness to the gospel.

In other words, as Bill acknowledges his struggles and his need of God’s sustaining grace, then others are encouraged to look by faith to Christ as well.

Transparency demands that pastors pursue the wisdom and courage to honest with people about how they are doing. In speaking, again, of the pastor as journeying with the people, Ryan spoke about the importance of helping them to see the “honest realism... that we’re in this together; that I struggle as much – if not even more – than some people whom I really admire... they’ve got depth I haven’t touched.”

Frank asserted, like the apostle Paul, “we preach Christ to ourselves that we might preach him to others.” Acknowledging that in the course of God’s providential dealings with his people, Frank said, “where the Lord has taken me through struggles or aspects of growth in my narrative, I should be thinking, ‘What is context-appropriate for me to share to help our congregations know that we pastors we struggle, we long, we need Jesus as much as anybody?’” Frank spoke of the apostle Paul’s reality and honesty in 2 Corinthians when he spoke about his own pains and difficulties. This sets a precedent for others to follow cautiously and with deep wisdom. Frank continued, “You don’t want to do that every Sunday. But if you avoid preaching songs of lament, if you avoid some

of the real conundrums and heart issues that surface in Scripture, then we are not preparing our people for the fact that the Christian life is ‘rapture and rupture’.”

The impact of the participants’ preaching, particularly when dealing with the tests and trials, is given added weight and significance when God uses the circumstances of their own lives and their godly responses to difficulties as visual aids to help others see what it means to trust in the sustaining grace of Christ. C. J. Miller understands “preaching by faith [to mean]... that through the humbling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have seen the Christ of the Scriptures, and we have fearlessly handed on to our hearers what we have seen.”³³⁸ Such preaching, often born out of the preacher’s own experience of “humbling pain,” is that “of bringing Christ to them and them to Christ. The goal is to change them by the power of the gospel.”³³⁹

This study concludes that pastors may often experience days of darkness through which they discover afresh the sustaining power and grace of Christ. As such, their preaching is amplified by the testimony of their lives. This is reminiscent of Paul’s apostolic struggles in the midst of ministry,

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, 121.

³³⁹ Ibid., 123.

³⁴⁰ Colossians 1:24-29.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to explore how reformed and evangelical pastors help their congregants mature spiritually through their preaching ministries. It is acknowledged that spiritual maturity cannot be advanced in people's lives merely by the adoption or implementation of prescribed spiritual disciplines, but ultimately, maturity is a work of God's sovereign grace. Nevertheless, through an extensive literature review and qualitative research study, the researcher identified a number of common principles and practices in preaching strategy which may equip and enable others pastors to more fully help believers towards spiritual maturity.

One possible area of further research would be to repeat the study with a different group of pastors, particularly those in ministry contexts where the preaching must necessarily be shorter and simpler to match the limited capacities of the congregants.

Other potential lines of research could prove beneficial. The researcher suggests studying why individuals and congregations fail to exhibit significant spiritual growth and maturity despite a pastor's long and faithful preaching ministry, and what may be done in response to widespread apathy or complacency. It would also be helpful to examine more fully how pastors might more effectively integrate the sermon and follow up materials for small group study and application. And in light of the widespread, growing interest in Christ-centered preaching, it would be beneficial to conduct further study on the principles or methodology pastors adopt for life-challenging application when preaching from Old Testament texts.

A Final Word

In the opening paragraph of his highly influential, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chapell echoes the apostle Paul's prayer for the Colossian church, writing,

We pray that God will also use our preaching to produce such a knowledge of God's will that others will live to please him and will produce spiritual fruit, resulting in an ever growing knowledge of their God. These priorities indicate that the goal of preaching is not merely to impart information but to provide the means of transformation ordained by a sovereign God that will affect the lives and destinies of eternal souls committed to a preacher's spiritual care.³⁴¹

As a consequence of this study, may this prayer for the transformation of hearts and lives through preaching be answered in the lives of many who hear pastors opening up God's word Sunday by Sunday. May pastor and congregants alike leave those gatherings for worship spiritually renewed and refreshed, with

a clearer vision of the living God in Jesus; a better understanding of the gospel of Jesus, the good news of what God has done, is doing and will do in Jesus; an "alternative reading of reality," a different more redemptive way of understanding concrete circumstances, challenges and fears in their lives; a new way of thinking, feeling, acting and re-acting shaped by the clearer vision, better understanding and alternative reading; and with a new power enabling them to walk into the new reality into which the preached text has brought them.³⁴²

Sola Dei Gloria

³⁴¹ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 25.

³⁴² Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching*, 11.

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