

The
Christian
Pharisee,
the
Cake-lover
and the
Church

HEXUN

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
PREFACE	1
THE JOURNEY TO KNOWING	5
1 <i>NOT TRULY KNOWING THE BIBLE</i>	6
2 <i>WHAT KNOWING LOOKS LIKE</i>	13
3 <i>WE NEED A WORD-CENTERED CHURCH: WHY THE WORD MATTERS MOST</i>	21
4 <i>WHY OUR PASTORS MATTER: THE CONSEQUENCES OF STAYING IN A CHURCH THAT DOESN'T PREACH WELL</i>	27
5 <i>CONCLUDING MY STORY: NOT THE BETTER WAY, BUT THE BIBLICAL WAY</i>	34

OBJECTIONS & QUESTIONS

COMMON OBJECTIONS

- | | |
|---|----|
| Objection #1: Look past teaching flaws, there's no perfect church | 37 |
| Objection #2: There are many ways to interpret a text | 37 |
| Objection #3: I need to stay and help and change the church | 38 |

FAQs ON WHERE THE CHURCH SHOULD PLACE THE BIBLE

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1: What does a word-centred church look like? | 41 |
| 2: Why is word ministry that important? What about other forms of ministry? | 43 |
| 3: Does a "best" church exist? Should all Christians join it? | 43 |
| 4: Who should be staying put in their churches? | 48 |
| 5: I am a church leader. How can you encourage my members to leave? | 48 |
| 6: What happened to loyalty? Christians in the past didn't leave their churches | 48 |
| 7: What is so hard about being Word-centred? What are the obstacles? | 49 |
| 8: Isn't God sovereign over his church? Is there only one way to grow? | 50 |
| 9: Can't I just watch another church's sermon? Or read my Bible better? | 51 |
| 10: How do I leave my home church well? | 51 |

FAQs ON HOW OUR CHURCHES SHOULD TEACH THE BIBLE

- | | |
|--|----|
| 1: Is expository preaching merely a 'new' fad? | 52 |
| 2: How do we know who is actually faithful in interpreting the Bible? | 53 |
| 3: What is the problem with thematic/topical/doctrinal preaching? | 54 |
| 4: Is expository preaching only suitable for intellectuals? | 54 |
| 5: Do we need to know biblical languages to understand the Bible? | 55 |
| 6: Is my pastor heretical if he's not expository? | 55 |
| 7: Have you exaggerated the implications of poor teaching? | 56 |
| 8: Isn't God concerned about my morals and external behaviour as well? | 56 |
| 9: How is being Word-centred related to teaching expositionally? | 57 |

USEFUL RESOURCES

59

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Though I had always wanted to be an author, this was a project I had undertaken more out of urgent need and less out of a creative desire to express myself. Unknowingly, one paragraph grew into two and more; pages multiplied like rabbits; and my friends' vettings produced drafts after drafts of revision.

I drew much inspiration referencing what I had learnt at the Cornhill Training Course, sitting under faithful teaching at Holy Trinity Church Chicago, Kaypoh Road Baptist Church, and The Crossing Church; and Christopher Ash's brilliant book *The Priority of Preaching*. I would also like to thank my wife and several brothers and sisters – Jo, Sherrie, Arthur, Ben and Jabez who have lovingly immersed themselves in the maze of my texts so that I can be clear, loving, and true in not only what I want to say, but also what I think the Bible authors wanted to say.

PREFACE

Recently, to avoid any conflict of interest, my pastor asked me to advise a troubled sister intending to leave her church since I had experience agonizing over my own decision four years ago. When we spoke, it astounded me that two people from such different church backgrounds could have such remarkably similar realisations: we realised we did not truly *know* the Word of God with our hearts and minds. Unfortunately, we also shared the same painful conclusion that leaving our home churches was necessary as the views between us and our pastors had diverged too greatly, the eternal stakes were too high, and because we wanted to follow the sweet scent of God's Word faithfully preached. This sister was not the only one who shared such convictions. In the past four years, I had through various events, camps, and mutual friends, conversed with half a dozen other believers on uprooting to join Word-centred churches. How do we explain this? Are we just young, impressionable believers with no loyalty?

Having had extensive conversations with these believers, I cannot say any of them left their churches whimsically. In fact, many of them were rather distressed at leaving their cherished communities. So I want to explain to you why and how we came to such a point of view, because you too must make sense of these issues on your own. Were these divergences a matter of

different views, of methods, or of needs? Well anecdotally, the common thread between us is this – we all realised that our church’s poor teaching had life-or-death implications. At some point, outside of our churches’ teaching, we heard the Word taught in a way that made sense to our hearts and minds, and concluded that our churches’ teachings had unintentionally given us the wrong directions in our Christian walk.

But as we are a minority, it is not convincing to simply share anecdotes. And since there was no evident abuse or serious doctrinal heresy, what good reasons did we have to leave the church that taught and nurtured us? The answer to that is our churches’ non-faithful, distracted teaching. While most of our churches’ teachings were not doctrinally wrong, I want to show you how the differences between *unfaithful teaching* (heretic teaching) and *non-faithful teaching* (distracted, incomplete teaching) are subtle and could potentially be just as eternally catastrophic. And I will try to persuade you from the Bible itself.

If you belong to my home church, I would understand if you are ready to disagree with what I say. Four years ago, I would too. Afterall, by most accounts, I *was* thriving in this church; serving fervently, going on mission trips, mentoring youths, and giving talks. We were a community earnest in growing in godliness. Even my friends from other churches saw and acknowledged my zeal.

However, I was surprised to later find that in the Bible, the people who resembled me were in fact those who were judged by God: the Pharisees and those who wanted to have their cake and eat it too, i.e. have salvation *and* the good life. You see, I didn’t realise that the actual discernible difference between me and an unbeliever was only that I was “morally better”. I was taught not to be like them, cursing, gambling, having no integrity etc. But my heart’s desires and thoughts remained just like most middle-class Singaporeans. In fact, I was taught and modelled that Christians pursued excellence as a means to “give glory to God”,

just that we did so with more “peace”.

The Bible says that people like me are blind, hard-hearted and opponents of Jesus. But how could it be? Was I not doing enough? Did I need to sacrifice more?

My problem was and is my sinful self. Its accomplice? Non-faithful, incomplete, and distracted teaching that did not help me truly know the Bible. Firstly, my pastors were not taught to emphasize what the Bible authors were *truly* emphasizing in their preaching. Secondly, and by implication, the church activities placed its emphasis elsewhere. These two factors buried the voices of the Bible authors and left the true message of the Bible wrapped and bound. I did not truly know the Word. Thus my understanding of the Word and the gospel was incomplete, and in some ways, incorrect.

In this short document, my intent is first to persuade my parents that due to our home church’s teaching, their understanding of God’s Word is like mine – in many ways incomplete, and in some ways incorrect. And this incomplete understanding and wrong thinking could entail a distorted understanding of the gospel that has consequences for eternal life or death.

Second, for those that did not grow up in my church or may not share the worldly goals I do, I still want to persuade you that truly knowing and responding to God’s Word with our hearts and minds matters vitally. This *is* in fact the emphasis of the Bible authors and of God.

Despite my best efforts, my explanations may still sound like critiques of my past leaders. I ask for your grace as I try to reason lovingly, for what I want to comment on is the approach that my pastors received from their previous churches and seminaries. The approach of how to read the Bible and where to place it in church and Christian life. I am not alone in criticizing their received approaches. In fact, I know pastors (one of whom from my home church) who have admitted that they themselves had

not equipped (for e.g. by their seminaries) to read and place the Bible faithfully.

If non-faithful teaching and distracted church activities bury the Bible authors' voices and do not help us know the Word, then in order to know the Word we must do the reverse; dig deeper to hear the Bible authors' voices, and emphasize what they emphasize in our activities. When this was done, I was shown that *my critical issue was less one of my external conduct, but more of my heart and mind*. So how God's Word is preached and where it is placed matters vitally. I hope this encourages us to think hard about your church and Christian life so we don't end up as Christian Pharisees and cake-lovers.

THE JOURNEY TO KNOWING

NOT TRULY KNOWING THE BIBLE

In John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the main character treads through multiple obstacles, sin, and ordeals to progress towards the Celestial city. Unfortunately, while I started like the protagonist, I didn't realise I was walking further and further away from the Celestial city because I had been reading my map wrong. That map is the Bible.

As a doctrinally conservative and evangelical church, my home church certainly gave me a good head-start. I'm thankful to my home church, as I learnt the gospel and accepted Jesus Christ there, and my friends helped me navigate my early Christian years. But I chose to leave behind 20 years of relationships I had cultivated because it had become clear that its teaching could not help believers truly know the Word. By implication, the central activity of the church was confused.

A church with a confused focus is in a similar situation as a church with a wrong focus. Both cannot help its believers grow. In my church, some people majored on missions, others on

discipleship, evangelism, or children's activities. Clearly some of these were encouraged and even commanded in the Bible. But nobody could convincingly answer what is the central focus of church or of Christian life. So let us start from ground zero: from the Old Testament to the New, the central focus of church and Christian life is to hear and submit to God's Word preached to the congregation. By God's grace, when our hearts and minds hear the Word faithfully preached, we slowly become reformed as we rediscover what it means to be made in God's image. The result is an earnest desire to spread the knowledge and glory of God to the ends of the earth. This is an earthly picture of the future heavenly gathering, when we continue to hear God's Word and sing praises to magnify his glory throughout all the new creation. So, if hearing God's Word is so important, we need to truly *know* what the Word is about!

What knowing the Bible means

As mentioned, non-faithful teaching and distracted church activities can obscure our knowing of the Word. Yet knowing is also not equivalent to doing more Bible work, or simply listening to more sermons. After hearing me insist on "something about not enough Bible", the knee-jerk response of some was to metaphorically pull up their Bible-reading socks by reading more and reading harder, by taking seminary classes for credit or by attending Bible-related workshops or Bible-study organisations. While these are useful, knowing the Word is not an intellectual activity that we can profit from by sheer effort. Because knowing happens at the level of our hearts and minds.

Before I start to sound mystical, let me state upfront: we know the Word when we hear God's voice unwrapped to us. And we hear God's voice when our pastors do the following:

- (a) Faithfully preach the Bible author's point in the author's tone to meet the author's aim (i.e. preach expositionally)

- (b) Endeavour to place the Word in the driving seat of the church and Christian life

Point (a) tells us what the Bible authors emphasize, and point (b) tries to emphasize what the Bible authors emphasize in the activities of the church and in personal Christian lives. As you will see, the Bible authors' are always targeting the hearts and minds of believers. So if our pastors are faithful in teaching the Bible authors' point, their preaching will likewise challenge our hearts and minds. This is the starting point for change and growth. Unfortunately, in my experience, my home church and most of the other churches and organisations I had been a part of largely lacked in both conditions. Without these conditions, believers not only miss out on the beating heart of our church and Christian life, but more gravely, could have an incomplete portrait of the gospel.

Condition #1: The subtle problem of teaching themes

On a weekly basis at my home church, what we heard ranged from grand summaries of biblical scholars' debates, or what Mom termed as "refreshing takes" on familiar gospel stories. But the most common pattern was by far themed preaching and talks. The pastors could go through a sermon series on, for example, Ephesians, but sermons would heavily feature doctrines of the church and church unity, or topics like discipleship, service, or evangelism. We also had talks and workshops providing book overviews or teaching techniques like how to spread the gospel. These themed-teaching are useful, but if this approach to preaching the Bible becomes the staple for what the church hears, it has subtle but significant problems.

The surface problem is that in the long term, the thematic approach also becomes the model for the church to understand the Word. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with teaching themes. Thematic teaching excels in drawing the boundaries of

orthodoxy (accepted, mainstream beliefs). So they can be incredibly useful for clarifying positions. But if it becomes the main approach for understanding the Bible, the more worrying problem is that it can smother and obscure the Bible author's voice. Since through listening, believers learn the pastor's approach to understanding the Word, in the long term, the pastor's model becomes the believers' model. The outcome is that believers in these churches do not know how to hear the Bible author and thereby truly know the Word.

Let me first explain how themed-teaching works with a metaphor. Imagine we have a 1954 letter of Churchill complaining to his wife Clementine about German aggression. Instead of keeping our eyes on the very words Churchill wrote, thematic teaching extracts topics like Deterrence, Nazism, and Imperialism from his letter. Doing so might be appropriate if we are trying to understand Britain's decisions during WWII. But what if Churchill's *intent* for writing had actually been to convey to Clementine his anxieties and to have her write back to soothe him? So we must admit that by superimposing sources and concepts from outside of the letter, we are in fact burying Churchill's voice and imposing our own. To extend this further, thematic teaching could ask, "based on the themes Churchill wrote about, how do you think he would view contemporary events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine?"

Likewise, approaching the Bible thematically helpfully clarifies certain topics e.g. How are we saved? What was Calvin's view of predestination? It even draws principles to address relevant questions the Bible doesn't directly address for e.g. How should believers view gender identity, or financial investing? But we must be clear that teaching themes **does not help the congregation to listen to the Bible author's voice**. It is equivalent to reading Our Daily Bread or Oswald Chamber's devotionals, or C.S. Lewis' magnificent works. These are incredibly helpful to provide perspective, and very encouraging

to read. But they are not God's Word. God is not speaking through them (Hebrews 1:1).

So, as a result of long-term themed preaching, the flock inherits the themed-model of understanding the Word from their pastors. And the most worrying implication of a themed approach to understanding the Bible is not just that we don't hear the Bible authors' voice, but also that *unintendedly, we apply the Bible primarily to our external behaviour*. This is because themed teaching defines correct theology and behaviour at the expense of the Bible author's voice. So when pastors, teachers, or even laypeople apply biblical texts thematically, they tend to demand that we do more right and less wrong (e.g. spread the gospel more, don't be unfaithful like David), or make us feel bad for not doing something enough (e.g. pray, read the Bible, serve). Focusing on external, visible actions fed my pride. I felt I was doing well since I wasn't like David, and I had served, frequently read my Bible, and didn't kill.

But even if you never had the same prideful reaction I did, failing to hear the author's voice means you are still missing out on what the Word is all about! I wonder if you also have trouble understanding the Bible as I did in my own reading. My eyes would glaze over words until they saw so-called calendar verses - commands like "honour your parents" or inspiring text like "soar on eagle's wings". The Bible seemed to be bound and in the realm of only our pastors and Bible gurus.

However, even they were always looking for new ways to teach the Bible – for e.g. new gospel sharing techniques or new models of ministry, through a new popular book, or movie. This further sidelines the Bible authors' voices.

I distinctly remember Good Fridays at my home church often involved watching sad and graphic scenes of Jesus' crucifixion, a vivid re-enactment of Jesus bearing the cross, or scientific analyses of how Jesus was nailed. But none of the four gospel authors emphasised the gory details of Jesus' crucifixion. In fact,

only John detailed the detail of Jesus' blood spilling after he was pierced. But John detailed this to confirm Jesus' death, and to confirm that Jesus was in fact the one who was "pierced for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53)! Yes, his physical pain was immense. However, Jesus wasn't the only one in history that was nailed to the cross. Rather, Jesus was the only one in history who went to the cross to bear the father's wrath. Therefore, the gospel writers were more interested in detailing the contrasting responses to Jesus' death than in detailing the gore. They emphasised the great pain of eternal separation with the Father (Mark 15:34) rather than the physical pain of crucifixion. We must ask - which matters more? And how does the wrong emphasis affect our view of valuing our life now as opposed to our life in eternity?

Condition #2: When the Bible does not drive the church and Christian life

This leads me to discuss the second condition of knowing God's Word. Since most of us did not understand the Bible, the church's activities naturally reflected that the Bible was not placed in the driver's seat of church and Christian life. Church life included plenty of socializing, attending workshops, meetings and retreats. We would search for the most attractive activities for events, both internal and evangelistic. Again, these are good things, but when these side-dishes take away attention from the main dish, the result is that believers lose focus of that which truly changes their hearts and minds – the Word.

How we opened the Bible and used outside of teaching also reflected the church's focus. The Bible was often referenced to justify something. Examples include invoking the great commission (Matthew) as we began an evangelistic event, or a call to give more for the church's rebuilding (Nehemiah) and so on. If the Bible is mainly used as a reference, believers naturally become more comfortable with acting and implementing Bible commands. Therefore in terms of knowing the Word, the

emphasis of the church's teaching, and the emphasis of the church's activities left the Bible bound and side-lined.

This was what I knew of the Bible, of church life, of Christian life. You might be wondering what you are missing out on. What really is the value of *knowing* the Word and the consequence of not knowing? What does hearing God's voice mean?

WHAT KNOWING LOOKS LIKE

A glimpse of teaching expositively

One day, at my church friend's invitation, I helped at a camp for school-age children organised by a campus group. In five days, almost everything I knew about the Bible, of church, and of the Christian life all crumbled like a house of cards. I genuinely felt like the Bible was a new book that I had never known or read.

Firstly, how the Bible was taught. Though most speakers were laypeople, they exposed the Bible author's clear voice and intent, teaching with a laser-focus on the text. And by turning our attention to the text, the speakers proclaimed the weighty implications of God's word so clearly that non-Christians had nowhere to hide. And though evangelistic and though they taught familiar texts, their teaching challenged both unbelievers and long-time believers alike.

I witnessed how such teaching had, not us, but God's Word directly confronting even non-believing hearers. I recall that even the most hard-hearted camper had to conclude from the Gospel of Luke, that the innocent Jesus had planned to die for us. He saw how Luke had gone to great lengths to convince the reader

that Jesus – though in a pathetic state – was not a victim of his circumstances, but a willing lamb to be sacrificed. This camper admitted so even though he wasn't willing to submit to Jesus. That fascinated me, for it felt like it was simply a dialogue between him and God. There wasn't any need for further persuasion or theological debates.

I discovered this was **expository preaching**, where one preaches the Bible author's point in his tone to achieve his purpose, rather than one's own. Uncovering the author's reason for writing unwraps the Bible and points us to what God is really telling us. I was told that expository preaching seeks to expose the author's aim rather than to impose our own thoughts. I learnt that the Bible authors weren't just compiling stories, anecdotes, and wise sayings to tell us *what* happened. They organised their content, employing literary devices like juxtapositions, chiasms, repetitions, and referenced other authors to tell us *why* they were writing. So if hearing the author's voice is foreign to us, then it means that even if we tried our best to read harder and more carefully, we could well only get to the *what*, and not the *why* – the intent of the author's writing.

Performing a close, literal reading only gets you so far, and is not the same as listening attentively to the author's voice. To use a real-life example, suppose someone noted the following words my wife relayed to me last night: "you've left your socks on the floor last night!" Since we only have her spoken words, there are several plausible reasons *why* she said them. She could be complaining, or be singing a line of a made-up song to tease me, or perhaps informing me where I had misplaced my socks. Reading literally tends to take the last option – indicating the facts and descriptions of the *what*. But if you could sense my wife's tone, and read the conversations before and after which indicate a brewing argument, you could reasonably conclude *why* she said it - to complain about my untidiness. Expository preaching helped me to see that every Bible author had an intent for writing,

and that I should listen carefully to note to understand *why* they said *what* they said.

As the Bible was being unwrapped and revealed to me, I began to hear the author's voice clearly. And I grew thirstier for more.

A glimpse of driving with the Word

Secondly, if we were in a car with different places to put the Bible, the camp organizers clearly placed the Bible in the driving seat. I discovered this was **Word-centred ministry**. Such a ministry not only helped us to treasure God's Word and thereby think hard about applying it in our personal lives, it also showed us *how* it looked like. While they put in such outrageous effort to be fun, their teaching of God's Word remained central, and all other events served its delivery. Since they trusted that proclaiming the Word was the critical activity, it didn't matter that other activities were executed imperfectly, or if leaders needed to take a break from serving for certain periods. Rather than expect their leaders to be all-action outdoors folk who had the ability and energy to run excellent camps and keep up with the youths, they expected them to teach clearly and faithfully when it mattered.

In their internal meetings, they would discuss last minute rearrangement of activities that they felt would help campers to hear the Word well. Leaders also updated on the campers' doubts, questions, and responses to previous teaching sessions, and they would take note of which upcoming Bible talks would eventually address these doubts and questions. They prayed words from the Bible passages we had just heard so that we were continually reminded. They reminded the leaders not to guilt-trip campers, for they trusted that God's Word was sufficiently weighty. There was no ambiguity that the Word was at the centre. All of us were there just to facilitate its proclamation.

Through the specific programmes even for helpers like us, the camp also demonstrated the Word was driving. Most of us

would be happy to just help, expecting nothing in return, but the camp wasn't about throwing everything to evangelise to unbelievers. Rather, since the Word is central to Christians, they wanted to help *all* understand the Word and thereby *cherish* the Word – whether you were a camper, leader, or helper.

When we looked at how the Pharisees and Sadducees asked Jesus for a sign in Matthew 16, our discussion leader simply asked us a few questions about what Jesus meant when Jesus said he would not give them any other sign other than the sign of Jonah. In that one hour, as I searched the text with some guidance, I felt that it was just me and the Word wrestling. What could Jesus mean? Could it be that all Jesus fundamentally wanted was for us to be like Nineveh and repent, receive him, and be saved?

This made sense, as the author Matthew contrasted this with the behaviour of the Pharisees and the disciples, who noted only the external things – their religious conduct, practices, Jesus' abilities and miracles. There and then, God's Word exposed me as a Cake-loving Pharisee, and encouraged me to love the Gospel.

What about in my personal life? How did Word-centredness help me? Because the preachers did homework explaining what the author's intent for writing was, I did not need to do any theological, literal or metaphorical gymnastics. By their teaching, I could now read, understand, and apply the same text on my own. I concede that a five-day camp is not the same as a church. But in five days, they helpfully modelled what is the beating heart of church and Christian life.

The psalmist in Psalm 119 says that God's law is his meditation all the day. Does it mean we read and reread the same text and expect something happens? Well, I used to stare at the Bible until I caught myself daydreaming. But now that the truths had been unwrapped and the authors voice heard, I now understand the Psalmist's delight. When the author's voice sang unwrapped, a beautiful side of the gospel was painted, captivating my heart and mind. It made me think hard and perform mental

housekeeping – what are false, worldly thoughts and assumptions to be chucked in light of these gospel truths? How do I live the truth out? It seemed a grander vision had now captured my mind and heart, displacing bit-by-bit other narrow and worldly selfish desires. This is the power of God’s Word; the power to save, and to change, and to grow. Commentaries, books, devotionals are helpful – I use them still today. But we must remember these are not the Bible’s words. They have been chewed by another person before being paraphrased, thematised, and further packaged as metaphors. The intention of these book authors is often not to present to you the Bible author’s voice. That, is in fact our pastor’s job.

Old Wineskins? Misunderstanding what Word-centricity means

At this point, you might still be confused about and thereby doubtful of the picture I’m painting. My leaders were too. The reason is because I am using vocabulary that is familiar to you to describe something new. Also, like my leaders you could doubt the following: whoever said that expositional teaching and placing the Bible at the centre is key to knowing, key to growth, and central to church and Christian life? Afterall, no one would dispute that the Bible is important. My leaders for example said that the Bible had to be accompanied with fellowship, accountability, service, etc.

Actually, without the Word, things like fellowship, accountability, service, evangelism are empty. These are concepts and activities that can exist outside of Christianity! They are limited in helping us grow. Rather we change first when our pastors preach expositionally, revealing the author’s voice (see diagram). The author speaks gospel truths to challenge our hearts and minds. And when soft hearts and honest minds submit to these gospel truths, their inclinations change and believers naturally want to live consistently with the gospel and proclaim the gospel to the world. When our leaders place such teaching at

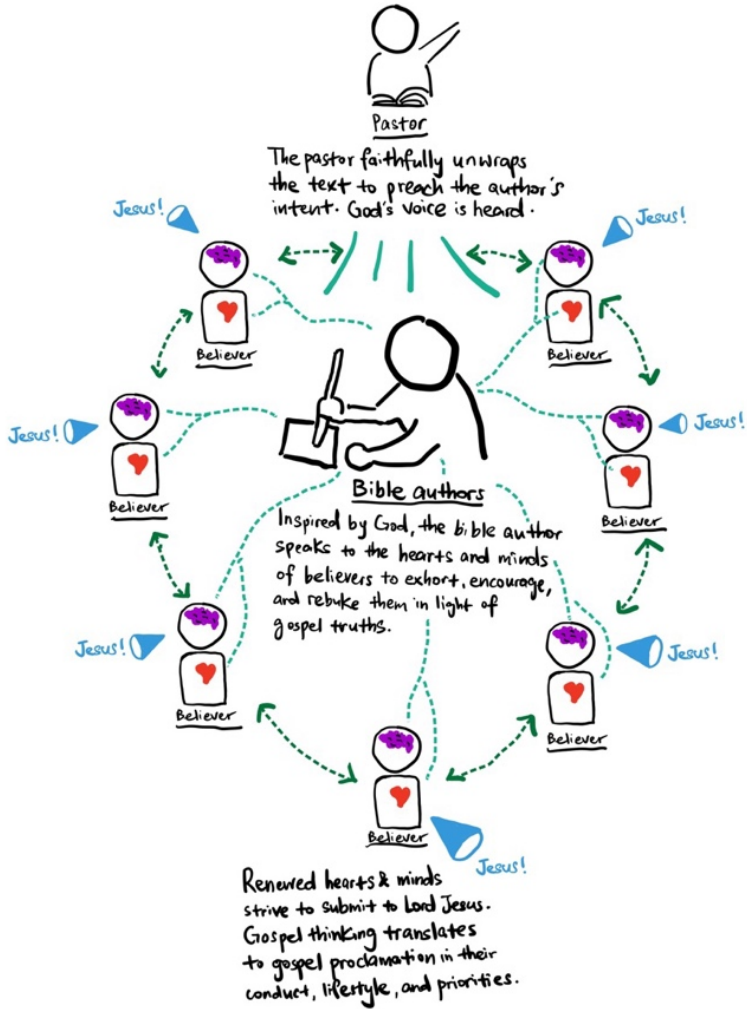


Figure 1 Word-centricity

the centre, these Bible truths circulate between believers in their conversations, activities, songs, texts, prayers. As a church, then, believers naturally want to proclaim Jesus (evangelise), gather to encourage one another of God's truths (fellowship), and confess and remind one another in our struggle against sin

(accountability). This is what Paul means to let God's Word dwell (Col 3:16). God's Word is the beating heart of the church.

The fact is, if not motivated and informed by the Word, these good things can just be externalised and be no different from the world. Fellowship becomes just socializing, accountability is finding a close friend to tell secrets to, service is performing whatever talents we had, and evangelism is conveying a good news to people we like. In fact, if we are not faithful to the author's voice, even preaching becomes emotional manipulation, or like an academic lecture. Rather, service, accountability, evangelism flow out naturally as a result of knowing and obeying the Word. They are not coequals that share the same importance with the Word.

Again, given our shared vocabulary of what the Word means, there are other ways that the idea of Word-centricity can be misunderstood. My leaders and many others thought I was an intellectual who wanted more Bible-rigour and Bible work, or more rational discourse and intellectual reasoning. When my friend and I (the one who invited me to camp) told a deacon that the pastor wasn't the problem, but that there was a more worrying problem of a famine of the Word similar to that in 1 Samuel, the message slipped him by. Maybe he thought like my pastors that we wanted more Bible work. But we did not.

Ironically, placing the Bible at the driver's seat is not about teaching more Bible, or discussing more Bible. It means to let God's Word set the agenda, emphasizing what He emphasizes. And we are best able to place the bible in the driver's seat when we can hear the Bible authors' voices clearly, because the bible authors' emphases on the power of God's Word will not go unmissed.

Fundamentally, my friend and I left because nobody agreed with us about where to place the Bible. We understood that not every pastor is trained to preach expositionally, but it cannot be that the Word is treated as just one element among many for

church and Christian life!

Dear reader, there's a reason why even unbelievers like to quiz us on what we Christians can or cannot do. And that is because many of us were taught in a way that focused on our external conduct. On the contrary, your problem likely lies less in your visible conduct - whether you lied, stole, prayed, or served as a church leader. Rather, it's more your heart and mind (Matthew 15:18). In fact, *addressing corrupt hearts and minds and their life-or-death consequences were the Bible authors' emphases*. God cares most of all about who we are: whether we are becoming increasingly reformed by and united to Jesus. So the visible things God wants us to do (missions, good works, service) cannot be separated from who he wants us to be as a result of a heart rinsed by the Word and reformed by the gospel (Col 3:9-10). So we need faithful teaching that emphasizes the Bible authors emphasis of reforming our hearts and minds. And we need to be in Word-centred churches that keep at emphasizing that. Hence, to truly know the Bible, I encourage you to consider looking for a Word-centred church that feeds its congregation with a diet of expositional preaching.

Thus far, you've only heard from my own experiences. In the following pages, I will attempt to show you the Bible's pattern of God and the Bible authors, and persuade you on the importance of knowing the Word, and by implication, good teaching churches. Still, I invite you to check what I say critically, for this is what the Bible expects of us.

WE NEED A WORD-CENTERED CHURCH: WHY THE WORD MATTERS MOST

1. God acts through his Word

God is unique because he speaks. That's not to say that he's a talkative God. It means that he *acts* by speaking. His words are powerful. When God speaks, he creates, promises, reveals, judges, produces faith, and gives life.

Since that's how God works uniquely, the Bible identifies God closely with what he says. In 2 Samuel 12:9-10, despising the Word of the Lord was taken to be despising God! Hence the Bible constantly tells its hearers to hear and to listen. For when we respond to the Word, we are responding to God. Abraham believed God's Word and was saved (Gal 3:16). And we too are saved in the same way (John 3:16).

But surely nobody disputes that what God says matters! After all, many a Christian have desired to "hear God's voice" or look for his signs. So I must clarify: while God speaks, he speaks most clearly to his people through his Word (Heb 1:1-2). Therefore in the Word – whether the spoken words of the

prophets, the law, or in Jesus (as we will see later) - we possess *everything* that God has to say and wants to say. And if God's Word is closely identified with God, we must be careful with how we understand it, and we cannot afford to know just fragments, or just refer to him when needed.

Paul said that *all* scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). So a bound text has little use for us. And knowing an incomplete version of God and His Word could also mean little.

2. The Word is all about the gospel. And we don't stop needing the gospel

While the Word is important, God is not randomly rambling. God is not a tyrant who demands whatever he wants and likes, even though he can. If you read carefully, at the heart of all his Word is the gospel (or the good news).

But wait a minute, don't we already know the gospel, which is Mark, Matthew, John and Luke talking about Jesus? This is an example of distorted gospel understanding that reduces the gospel into an introductory doctrine for nonbelievers. Rather, the gospel runs through the Bible. In the Old Testament the idea of the gospel begins as early as in Genesis 12, when God promises a kingdom to Abraham. By Isaiah, the gospel is God's promise of both a kingdom, and of a king who will release his people from captivity and bring his good reign to the end of the earth. We see all these finally fulfilled in the writings of Mark, Matthew, John, and Luke: God's promise king dies to redeem his people.

But the gospel is not just a message about what Jesus did for us. While the gospel is a momentous news, the gospel is also a person. In Mark 1:1, Mark introduces the gospel as referring to Jesus. Yet note what happens in 1:14, Jesus goes about proclaiming the gospel and the coming kingdom of God! The gospel proclaimed the gospel!

If the gospel is also about who Jesus is, then it is incomplete to merely equate the gospel to Jesus' historical act on the cross. Jesus is not a good Samaritan who spots a drowning man and saves him. Rather, he breathes life into our already dead hearts, and he now demands that our hearts submit to him. So Jesus is not just saviour, but also a king calling his people into his kingdom. Even if you have been a Christian for decades, you never move on from struggling to submit to Jesus' Lordship. He is the one the *Word made flesh*, the only one who has seen God (John 1:18), and the only one who can communicate (i.e. a word) God to us. He's the supreme, for whom all was created, and to whom all will be reconciled (Col 1:19). All of God's words are about his one Word – Jesus.

If so, the obsession of church should be to labour in preaching this Word (1 Tim 5:17) so that we know him better and so that our softened hearts turn to softened knees that bow in submission to him. For he will come again to judge. Thus we must keep proclaiming the gospel to believers and nonbelievers alike. But what does submitting to the gospel look like? How does it actually change believers?

3. The gospel challenges hearts and minds

We may be well-versed in TULIP, or doctrines of justification, or predestination. We may have covered our bases by praying and attending church regularly, read the Bible, taught, served, evangelised. But Paul says that without the gospel, we may have all the zeal for God, but could well be unsaved (Rom 10:1). Because only Jesus gives us a new heart to obey the king (Ezekiel 36:24-29), and Jesus is not looking for well-behaved, active people; he's looking for people who surrender their hearts and minds to him. The more we surrender to his Lordship, the more we grow. And just like how we came to faith by hearing the gospel, we grow too by continuing to hear the gospel preached to us.

This was Paul's argument in his letter to the Colossians, who thought that beyond believing the gospel, believers had to resort to other new approaches, traditions, and practices to grow. Paul said, "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him" (Col 2:6-7). Notice that Paul's first instruction was for the Colossians to stop listening to other alternatives (Col 2:8) – traditions, philosophies and other sources. *If all of God is in Christ, the Word, then no part of God exists outside of the Word.*

Through the Word, the Spirit renews our hearts and minds to counter worldly thinking (Rom 12:2). And changed hearts and minds lead to changed actions. When we start to think differently about what is true prosperity, or what true security is, or how the church is to be like, or who we are and where we will go because of Jesus, we can reason and counter with what we hear from the world.

I've seen counter-cultural believers give up promotions, home-ownership, financial security; content to be last in life (Mark 8). Teachers who will not stop proclaiming the gospel to their students even though they received warnings. Mothers who give up their careers to disciple their children, young parents training their toddlers so that they can be undistracted during sermons. These were personal calculated decisions that we cannot simply command and enforce because they happen at the individual heart level. These individuals didn't do so because they wanted to be special, or to deny themselves to be austere like monks. They did so because their reshaped hearts and minds were thinking hard about applying God's truths.

In 2 Peter, a dying Peter writes to a church who is unsure of how they will keep persevering without him. But Peter is clear: by knowing him through his Word (1:19), God has given everything pertaining to life and godliness (1:3). But this could mean either good or bad news for us. Given that we have everything we need for godliness in the Word, will we make every effort to grow and not be ineffective in our knowledge of God?

Or will we be found wanting, not heeding the Word although we have everything we need?

Thinking hard is fuel for loving God. Since all scripture can correct, and expose our worldly thoughts and challenge us to live according to the gospel, surely it cannot be that all the Bible repeats is our need to: love God more, pray more, read more, serve at church more! We wouldn't need 66 books for that! So we cannot know just mere fragments. More sinisterly, one other key reason we need to sit under the unwrapped Bible is because the devil is actively working to deceive our hearts and minds.

4. Our heart and mind is the battlefield of our war with the devil

Though we hear, and understand, we are *easily deceived*. In Ephesians 6, Paul insisted that though imprisoned, his greatest opponent was not earthly rulers, but the spiritual forces of evil. The devil works in ways we cannot see, on our hearts and minds.

How do we know the devil is working, you ask? Look no further than how the pandemic has bred lazy, uninterested Christians. For the first time in our lives, we have valid reasons to skip church, or casually attend online. We debate vaccinations and meeting physically. Through all these, the devil is labouring, sowing seeds of doubt, fear, and inconvenience so even the healthy will not gather physically to hear the Word. What do we do?

According to Paul in Ephesians 6, we fight back and resist the devil by putting on God's armour of truths – righteousness, peace, faith etc. Attractive events won't do, ultimatums won't do. We need the Word preached expositionally to us to counter the doubts, fears, and laziness in our hearts. Not an agenda-driven Word, or a guilt-trip-laden rebuke, but the complete counsel of the Word! When we follow the Bible's agenda, we are naturally confronted with what we don't want to hear. This is how we are guarded from the devil.

This is also why Paul tells Timothy and Titus to guard believers against heresies by teaching. Not only big-H Heresies of earthly prosperity, but also small-h heresies e.g. “love yourself”, “spread the gospel with your actions”, or “follow your heart”.

But not only are we easily deceived, *we are also forgetful* (2 Pet 1:9). This is why placing the Word at the centre matters. So aside from pulpit preaching, the truths of the Word is proclaimed at our fellowship, at women’s events, at Sunday school, in our personal conversations, in our prayers, and when we sing. By doing so, the Word dwells among us (Col 3:16). This is why the gifts given to build the church in Ephesians 4 are primarily proclamatory and teaching in nature. The Word-centred church is an echo chamber where the Word resonates and rinses our hearts and minds.

Yet, I suspect that many of us are uncomfortable with hearing more teaching. Perhaps you are uncomfortable because your experience with hearing the Bible thus far has largely felt like downloading information. I would venture to say that the reason we feel this way is because many pastors are not trained expositively, so what they say fails to prick our hearts and minds. That is why our pastors matter.

WHY OUR PASTORS MATTER: THE CONSEQUENCES OF STAYING IN A CHURCH THAT DOESN'T PREACH WELL

1. The most important people in the Bible were prophets

In the OT, the most important people were not priests or kings, but prophets (e.g. Moses, Isaiah, Elijah). Even Moses, who had royal heritage, was not referred to as a king, neither was he remembered as a priest, but a prophet.

In fact, proclaiming the Word is so important that the Father made his only son a preacher. In Mark 9, before the two great prophets Elijah and Moses who miraculously appear, and before Jesus, God instructs “This is my son... *Listen to him!*” At that instant, Elijah and Moses disappear, thus elevating Jesus to be the supreme prophet surpassing even Moses (Deut 34: 10).

Frankly, Jesus could have done a world of good if he had a more extensive record showing his miracles, couldn't he? Perhaps if more people had seen and recorded what he did, more would believe him. Yet he declared that he came to preach, not heal the sick (Mark 1:37). He preached because that's how God calls his

sheep: those who hear (not see) the Word and submit to it are blessed (John 20:29). If preaching the Word is our master's priority, then our church and our leaders must likewise prioritise it.

Conversely, one of Israel's darkest periods was when the prophets stopped speaking although they had God's Word written (1 Sam). The author described the situation as a famine. And people did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 17:5). Because prophets were the most important people, it also makes sense that the most dangerous threats to God's church were always false prophets.

As modern day prophets, our pastors continue the function of preaching the Word to our hearts and minds. Their role is to help us dig deeper and unwrap the Bible. For, like how the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip - how can we understand unless someone explains it to us? (Acts 8:31). Without being equipped to understand the Bible, our faith is likely to remain shallow.

You see, when we can't unwrap the Bible, we tend to think that Bible truths are better expressed through other means. When proclaiming the Word to unbelievers, we often think it more engaging and entertaining to lead first with friendship, movies, and skits. We're not the only ones.

The pastor Peter Adam made the point that the Reformers from the seventh to twelfth century thought ordinary citizens just couldn't understand preaching. They thought the best way to communicate with the man on the street was through statues, stained-glass windows and pictures instead. But they later realised that it "produced people who knew the gospel stories, but did not know the gospel; people who knew what had happened, but who did not know the meaning of it."

So if our pastors were not trained to teach expositionally, we need to encourage pastors to be equipped, to put the Word at the driving seat. Without this, their preaching will always have a gospel gap, and they will fail to preach to hearts and minds.

2. *The gospel gap that cannot change our hearts and minds*

Let us take the example of 2 Samuel 11 – of David’s adultery with Bathsheba. Not paying attention to the author’s intent leads to two interpretive outcomes that fails to paint the gospel picture:

a. *Interpret literally* (action-oriented; moralistic)

The text warns us against adultery. People of God should not be like the unfaithful David.

b. *Interpret metaphorically* (more reflective and philosophical)

Some pastors would push further to question why David was in Jerusalem while his armies were warring. Pastors have preached that being idle opens the door to temptations. Or that temptations often capture us first through our eyes.

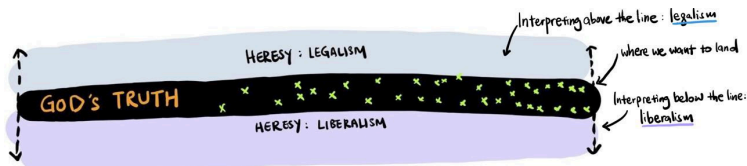


Figure 2 *Outcomes of not paying attention to author's intent*

None of what these various pastors mentioned are *wrong* conclusions about what God despises and warns about (i.e. adultery and idleness). But these simply are not what the author intends with the text (i.e. right truth, wrong text). And both teachings place the reader into David’s shoes and wind up focusing on external conduct.

In such non-faithful preaching, our interpretation lands either above the line of God’s truth on legalism or moralism (don’t commit adultery), or below the line of truth, on liberalism (don’t be idle). In either case, we say what *we* want to say.

Rather, at Cornhill, I learned to follow the author's emphasis: the adultery was described in 5 verses, and the weight of the chapter was the remaining 22 verses detailing the attempted cover-up of David's sin. While sin can be covered up, how do you hide a baby?

From man's perspective, it's possible if you're a king. But taking on God's perspective, the author of 2 Sam almost seemed to be asking ironically in 11:27, "Why bother, David?" The author wants to show that David is in fact behaving functionally as an atheist, thinking that no one would know.

What about the entire book of 2 Samuel? Why was the author writing? What was his aim? Was it merely to inform us what happened? At a broader level, the author contrasts two Davids. One who is trusting, prayerful and shows God's lovingkindness (ch 1-8), and one who despises God's Word (ch 9-20). And within Samuel, we learn that in spite of human sin and wickedness, God establishes David's throne as he promised he would. God's hand is not thwarted by human evil, even as we see the messy and horrible consequences of David's sins. Do we now see the shoots of the gospel? Jesus is the king we have always longed for, the king who shows lovingkindness and who never strays. And what God did for David in spite of sin is a foretaste of what Jesus accomplished in spite of human evil. Even in the Old Testament, the gospel must be preached.

3. Without preaching the gospel, we remain like the Pharisees

Though we make caricatures of Pharisees, all of us consciously or subconsciously find reasons that contribute to our salvation (i.e. we believe we were chosen because of something good within us like our character, morals, etc). Non-faithful preaching that focuses on external actions or biblical commands worsens this.

My current pastors shared that when guest-speaking in other churches, people sometimes ask, "so, what should I *do* in

response?” Many believers are trained to think that application is always something you do. But focusing on doing breeds pride.

When focused on doing, we feel deserving of salvation because actions are visible. We can count our attendance, ministry efforts, or our conduct because we didn’t sin like David did. Once we line up a good track record, confessing sin can also be substituted with admitting our mistakes and shortcomings because “nobody is perfect”. We can also offer sins from long ago, or generalize (e.g. “we tend to...” rather than “I tend to”). All these to save merit for ourselves. Without the gospel preached to our hearts and minds regularly, we forget we are wretched filth without any merit to offer.

4. Without preaching the gospel, we keep loving our cake

By this I mean we want to be saved and to excel in this life by being friends with the world. This friendship with and assimilation into the world is certain because everybody conforms to the cultural imperatives, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Cultural imperatives tend to be unquestioned societal beliefs and objectives that guide our thinking. And Singapore’s middle-class imperatives often entail fulfilling our potential, climbing career ladders, upgrading our lives and buying bigger and better homes, planning our next travels, putting our children at the centre of our lives, and making comfortable retirement plans, etc. Many of these are good gifts from God. But when these are programmed into the cultural thinking and left uncriticized by our minds, we unknowingly get mixed into this cultural batter. We become a pastry that tastes no different from the world.

You may also be anti-cultural and love your cake (apologies for mixing so many baking metaphors here). Perhaps your main goal in life is to be a respectable, upright, and just person. Or perhaps your life’s efforts aim to uplift the needy and the poor. You could make saving animals, conserving the environment, or

fighting for equality your life mission. You could also be none of these, and just want to chill. The idea is the same: you want salvation, and you want your life the way you want it.

But following Jesus comes at the cost of our life (Mark 8). It is not that he only accepts followers who are prepared to die for him. Rather, he demands all of a believer's heart and mind, not just his or her actions. Yet many of us still think we have clear consciences because we are productive within church *and* outside of church. Many churches gladly borrow the "gifts" that outstanding individuals have for use in the church, especially celebrating those who can play instruments, give talks, lead groups, organize events etc. Unwittingly, we are deceived that it is okay to be ambitious in the world since we are also productive in church, and we assimilate into the world.

But James' letter is clear: those who want their life are double-minded enemies of God whose lives are empty of works. No, not external works like attending church, evangelising, praying or reading the Bible. Rather, in James' context, genuine works spring from hearts and minds that are soaked in and reformed by gospel promises. James cites Abraham, who, though already declared righteous (Gen 15), was willing to give up his only son, choosing to believe in God's previous promise of offspring. What a radical worldview Abraham must have had to be willing to sacrifice his son based on a promise of offspring! So it is incompatible for us to be followers of Jesus and also continuing to befriend the world and live however we please.

5. We may not be in God's church

The consequences of a unreformed mind and heart that does not produce genuine works are severe. If we continue focusing being pleased with our external actions as the Pharisees were, and being friends with the world, we may well be fruitless. Matthew 13 describes three types of bad soil that the Word of God is planted in. But the outcome is the same for all bad soils: it's fruitless, and

Jesus will remove them (John 15:2).

I want to state categorically: I am *not* saying that all Christians who remain at non-faithful teaching churches are not in God's church. In reality, *all* churches have a mix of true and false believers. While you may not be in a heretical church, the big question to consider is this: which church's teaching is more likely to expose you for your false beliefs and encourage you to love the gospel? Could you be living as an opponent of God without realising?

You see, one could have all the knowledge of the Bible, and have all the right external actions with great track records as I did. But one could still have demonic faith as Peter did (Mark 8:33), and as James warns of (James 2:19). But truly genuine works must always flow out of changed hearts. Hearts that have truly received the Word that God planted (James 1:21).

CONCLUDING MY STORY: NOT THE BETTER WAY, BUT THE BIBLICAL WAY

When someone from my home church asked for strategies to revitalise the church, my current pastor replied, “just preach the Word, bro”. No secret sauce. *It’s not about the better way, but the biblical way.*

But as a layperson telling this to my leaders back then, it seemed that I needed to show that I had a soaring Christian life to validate my “better way”. It’s understandable, when someone comes along to challenge us with a better way, it smacks of arrogance and elitism – as if this kid would know any better! I would certainly react instinctively with defensiveness. But actually, I don’t have a better way.

In fact, I too bend to the cultural imperative. I too am a Pharisee. In reality, we are all a mix of both. The only difference is that I’m constantly preached the gospel and held accountable to it. And it happens that preaching the gospel *is always* the biblical authors’ pattern and antidote for addressing self-righteousness and assimilation into the world.

All I have to offer is the biblical pattern. So see if what I say makes sense, because I genuinely think this message could concern eternal life or death.

Imagine fighting a losing war and somehow we receive a newspaper from the future telling us how we will win. Our outlook becomes radically changed by hope. This hope allows us to persevere, know how to keep fighting on, and not desert, even in the bleakest of days. In some ways, what we have in the Bible is like receiving the newspaper of the future. The Bible is clear that the next milestone in our timeline is the end of human history. On that day, those gathered with him will join in victorious praise and celebration!

So while we wait, we need to embrace this Word. Because in war, no matter how short or how guaranteed victory is, we will witness pain, suffering, and death. Likewise, due to sin and brokenness, our daily lives hardly resemble the reality that God has promised. And the devil constantly deceives and tempts us to desert the battlefield. But we know that *all* scripture is preached by God and profitable for our growth and righteousness. So we need *all* of the newspaper of the future unwrapped, revealed, and preached to us repeatedly based on how the authors intended. The Word is our hope and our strategy to stay in this war till the triumphant day. And a community of believers with united hearts and minds shaped by the Word at the centre will fight valiantly in the war. We fight by loving and submitting to one another and unashamedly proclaiming the gospel, thereby truly becoming a beacon of light in the dark world.

OBJECTIONS & QUESTIONS

COMMON OBJECTIONS

Objection #1: Look past teaching flaws, there's no perfect church

When I left the church, I was looking for a faithful church, not a perfect church. As explained, a church that equips its believers to “know” is one that a) places the Bible at the driving seat, and b) teaches faithfully by caring for the author's intent.

Therefore, the crux of the matter is not perfection, but faithfulness to the *primary activity* of the church: hearing the Word preached faithfully and obeying it. If Jesus expects the church to be the bastion of truth by proclaiming him to the world (1 Tim 3:15-16), then not focusing on teaching is akin to saying that we can do a better job than Jesus in teaching and leading his church, and in making him known. Such a church ceases to be a church.

If Paul cares about teaching (e.g. as clearly emphasised in 1-2 Tim, Titus), we cannot say that poor teaching is just one of the acceptable flaws among other strengths. In fact, it would be right to say that that poor teaching *is* a critical flaw.

Objection #2: There are many ways to interpret a text

It's notable that we don't apply this same logic when reading novels, articles or emails. Every text has an author with an aim.

The Bible is no different. In fact, the Bible is the issued decree of our king. If any of us dare speak on the king's behalf, don't we want to say what it *actually* says so people truly hear and obey?

If every biblical text has an aim, then it's fair to disagree with someone's interpretation because, a) this person's framework for understanding the text fails to consider the author's aim seriously, and/or b) this person's conclusions were neither based on evidence in the text, nor coherent with salvation history.

Also, we want to be faithful to the author's intentions because unlike most texts we read, the Bible authors are writing to multiple audiences across time and space. That is, they have dual purposes (sometimes more) that apply to the first readers and then to us (see e.g. Luke 24:27, 1 Cor 10:11, Romans 15:4). Thus God is speaking to *us*, *literally*. We want to listen carefully and respectfully.

At this point, I might sound like a purist or elitist gatekeeper of what I think is legitimate. On the contrary, being faithful to the Bible means God sets the agenda, not me. Moreover, scripture also expects us to be discerning of what we hear (Col 2:8; Titus 1:9-13), for poor teaching leads to false thinking and false action.

Objection #3: I need to stay and help and change the church

The church needs Jesus more than they need you. Many people think they are equipped to change their church. But few truly are. It is worth asking whether:

- a. You are sufficiently equipped to explain God's Word expositionally
- b. You are in a position to make a difference by teaching, and have influence to put the Word in the driving seat
- c. You have long-suffering character
- d. You have like-minded partners in church who meet

- conditions (a-c)
- e. One of you intend to enter full-time paid Gospel ministry
 - f. You can be nourished through your own reading & teaching of God's Word

If you believe in the Word's importance, but are not taking concrete actions towards getting equipped to teach expositionally, then *you may well be sending the message that God's Word isn't of first importance to the church and to the Christian.*

Even the matter of equipping takes years and cannot be short-cut by entering seminary, as seminary students preach only 3-4 times over 3-4 years. It is ultimately still an academic institution to learn doctrine, not to hone one's Bible handling. Perhaps this is why many pastors model to us a topical/thematic approach.

The fact is, for those who grew up under the preaching of thematic pastors, it's hard not to read the Bible without a thematic lens; even if we try to adopt so-called "expository" approaches (e.g. reading verse-by-verse, inductive reading).

Attempting to remove my thematic lenses has been a long process that I'm still not done with. Very often, my understanding of the text becomes dominated by a doctrine I'm familiar with.

Therefore, the best place to be trained to hear the author's voice is not in seminaries or through workshops, but through a local church that receives expositional preaching weekly. The equipping here is not just in handling the Bible, but in refining one's character.

But if you are certain that you are equipped to help, then consider why you're not taking concrete steps into full-time paid ministry. If not, then consider how not doing so may be undermining your church's minister.

In all, I'd encourage you to think first of teaching your

household before teaching God's household. If a father, be the resident pastor in your family. If a husband, lead your wife to critique the world using the Gospel. If a parent, disciple your children not with fear and rules, but with gospel love. As a daughter, encourage your parents that their breaking bodies will soon be replaced with eternal ones.

FAQS ON WHERE THE CHURCH SHOULD PLACE THE BIBLE

1: What does a word-centred church look like?

I borrowed the metaphor of a driving seat from David Jackman (and lifted from Ash's *Priority of Preaching*). There are many places in a car that we can put the Bible. There's the boot, brought out occasionally to be looked at briefly, but never taken seriously (like sermons where we hardly needed to read the text).

There's also the backseat, which can be irritating. Like a backseat passenger "tiresomely questioning our driving or our directions". The Bible placed in the backseat is a distraction or a diversion to what we want to do on Sundays.

Or it could be in the co-driver's seat. A co-driver can be helpful – reading maps, and looking out for signposts. But even here, *we* drive and make the decisions.

If the Word of God is at the driving seat, God drives. It means that all church activities, meetings, teachings, fellowship, are informed by, controlled by, and led by the Word. *Everything* points towards or flows out from the Word's proclamation.

Hebrews 4 says that the Word of God is alive and active,

sharper than a two-edged sword. Every time the Word is preached, people either reject the message (and are judged) or accept it (receive life). So a Word-centred preacher recognises that preaching is a central activity that's not merely communicative in nature.

Such a pastor labours tirelessly in preaching (1 Tim 5:17). Since the Bible sets the agenda, he preaches expositively as the church's staple diet. He doesn't select topics he fancies or push his agendas, even if they are good, Christian agendas (e.g. evangelism, church unity). He is wary of secondary activities on Sundays that may take attention away from the Word. Careful not to teach moralism, he preaches evangelistically weekly, because *all his hearers* need the Gospel.

A Word-centred church is full of Pharisees and cake lovers. But they are constantly rebuked and encouraged by the gospel and told to cling onto God's word like it's the newspaper of tomorrow. When believers finally submit to the gospel, there is an organic outflow of evangelism, service, and fellowship, etc. Joining such a church entails a hard life, as one is joining the battlefield, not deserting it.

How does a church practically become more Word-centred? This is an orientation that starts at the top. There must be unity over what is the core focus when believers gather, and on why the Word is important. And this begins by first listening well to the Bible authors, and if unsure, leaders should seek help to be equipped in listening well. Based on this, the leaders should whittle down the sequence of events and activities determining how believers gather on weekends and even on weekdays. And of all the events and activities, the church should put as much as they can to ensure that the faithful preaching is the highlight of the gathering. All else serves its proclamation and circulation.

2: Why is word ministry that important? What about other forms of ministry?

All church ministry can be divided into word ministry and table ministry. Table Ministry is derived from Acts 6:1-7, where deacons were appointed to serve tables so that the apostles could focus on teaching. While table ministries are important, the Bible's pattern of "ministry" is primarily proclamatory.

Why? Because the dead, dry bones in Ezekiel 37 describes our spiritual condition, and only God's word can breathe life into us. Table ministry is important, but it can only save insofar as it keeps peoples' attention on the word. This was the model at the camp I attended, where helpers like myself were actually serving tables. We did not want campers to get up to refill their cups or queue for seconds because we wanted the gospel conversations with their leaders to continue unabated.

But too much table ministry squeezes out word ministry (e.g. the world demands more since it demonstrates social action; distracts believers). Conversely, word ministry multiples table ministry. The church needs more Marys than Marthas.

3: Does a "best" church exist? Should all Christians join it?

There will never be a perfect church on earth due to sin. But it is worthwhile to consider the different "types" of churches based on broad, observable dispositions. I suggest 4 common archetypes and the recommended actions. To be clear, no single church is fixed in a single type, or fits all of my descriptions perfectly.

A. Bible-in-the-Boot Church

Doctrinally incorrect, No faithfulness to Bible author's intent

Such a church teaches false doctrine that is supported by Biblical texts taken out of context. They tend to preach triumphant messages about victory and success in our lives on earth, focusing on prophecies, healing,

prosperity, and so on. But don't forget the concept of "now but not yet". Jesus may have defeated death and the devil on the cross, but the devil has not conceded defeat. So our celebrations must be muted, for our true home is not on earth. We celebrate when Jesus comes again and we find our new home in the Jerusalem above.

Since such churches focus on things that appeal to our current lives, they are very upbeat in their messages, potentially using attractive elements such as songs, entertainment, or healing to sustain interest. Obviously then, there is no faithfulness to the author's intent, as if ever the Bible authors are upbeat, it is always an expression of hope in the future; they also often rebuke and are stern in tone, especially when sin is discussed. Attendees in this church may not understand the gospel and may not be saved.

B. Bible-in-the-Rear-Seat Church

Could be doctrinally correct, non-faithful to Bible author's intent

Churches here may either be liberal (e.g. looser interpretation of the Bible) or conservative (e.g. more moralistic, literal interpretation), and tend to be anchored on well-accepted doctrine (e.g. Reformed or Charismatic). But whatever their doctrinal leaning, such churches are just as likely to be agenda driven, thematic, and focused on external behaviour. Since their chosen doctrines form the 'boundaries', there is latitude for biblical interpretation as long as it falls within these boundaries. Members here are not equipped against both major or minor heresies. Growth often comes from other external buckets (e.g. conferences, camps serving in xyz ministries). Knowing the Bible is often seen as knowing the most Bible trivia. Since the Word is not at the centre and there is no faithful preaching, the key

themes described in this document naturally threaten the Christian's spiritual health.

C. Bible-in-the-Old-and-Squeaky-Driving-Seat Church

Doctrinally correct, tries to be faithful to Bible author's intent

Often led by middle-aged pastors who realised the importance of the Word. However, the thematic training of the pastors mean they still tend to take on a thematic approach for exegesis, and often lack sharpness. Hence, while the Word drives, the seat may squeak distractingly. This means the pastor may unknowingly be at times preaching themes or his own thoughts instead of the Bible author's.

In my observation, their lack of sharpness is evident when they teach narratives (e.g. Samuel, Kings), where it's harder to find the author's intent since the text is more story-based than propositional like the epistles.

Top-down "turnaround" ministries where the leaders try to steer the church towards the Word reside here. But they face resistance as the congregation majority's reflex action is to return to an approach they are comfortable with. This is often the case when such churches have a large group of long-time Christians.

Among the congregation, believers who love the Word but do not regularly hear sharp, faithful preaching in this church may face stagnation, burnout, and ultimately, assimilation into world due to repetitive teaching and the slow speed of change. Such believers should assess their situation prayerfully. If there are likeminded believers in such churches, they should band together to encourage and support their pastors. They can also help their pastors by reading one-to-one with other believers.

D. Bible-in-the-Driving-Seat Church

(Doctrinally correct, mostly faithful to Bible author's intent)

Such a church is united in putting God's words in the driving seat. Since they trust and embrace God's Word, God sets the agenda, and the church preaches through multiple books from the bible throughout the year. This, and the fact that the gospel is proclaimed through their teaching, provides a Biblical antidote against legalism and worldliness.

However, whether believers hear and submit to their king is a separate matter, and listening to good teaching can simply become a pastime. Many believers do love to listen without putting effort in personal godliness (Herod loved listening to John). Be that as it may, in such churches, the personal choices and diligence of Christians are laid bare without any smokescreen (e.g. busy activities and various forms of ministry/service): considering what God has done for us and what he demands, will you or will you not obey God's Word?

Type	Placeme nt of the bible in the car	Doctrinal correctness	Faithfulness to author' s intent	Identifiable traits	Core Issues
A	In the boot	Unbiblical	None	Evangelism via entertainment, Lacks mention of sin	Salvation at stake
B	In the rear seat	Depends	Lacking	Doctrine-based teaching; quotes famous authors often	Heresy; danger of assimilation; salvation
C	In the driving seat	Biblical	Inconsistent/ Rudimentary	Bible as the focus; struggles in teaching narratives; repetitive teaching	Repetitive applications; may not challenge all aspects of Christian Life
D	In the driving seat	Biblical	Consistent & competent	Word ministry is key driver of churh organisation & budget	Emphasis on correctness vs. application

Table 1 Summary of 4 types of churches

4: Who should be staying put in their churches?

A sister I know chose to stay in her Type 2 church, a small aging Chinese church that was planted by her father. She decided to stay out of love of her father and the congregation. But this was likely to be a short-term matter. To receive nourishment and support, she connected herself to Word-centred parachurches.

Between placing the Bible in the driver's seat and teaching the Bible expositionally, I would place more emphasis on the former as the latter can be worked on as long as the focus is correct (Type 3). If your pastor strives to put the Word in the driver's seat, encourage him. At the same time, equip yourself to hear the author's voice!

5: I am a church leader. How can you encourage my members to leave?

Believers have one allegiance – to their Lord Jesus Christ. If Christ is not preached faithfully, then they should go to where it is.

I was recently told the encouraging story of a pastor in the UK, who, at a conference, realised that he was teaching the Bible wrong and that he wasn't equipped to equip his flock. He resigned and started all over, joining as an apprentice at a Word-centred church. This is how we should treat the Word.

If your church is not equipped against heresies and righteousness, the loving thing for their eternity might be for them to join a Word-centred church.

6: What happened to loyalty? Christians in the past didn't leave their churches

Our predecessors (especially Christians from the UK or the US) lived in 'religious' societies where the bible influenced law and social mores. The prevailing expectations of society for individuals to behave as Christians meant that many churches were also prone to legalism (attendance, dressing, praying a

certain amount, using very religious language) and moralising (strict moral conduct).

Like Type 2 churches, these churches of the past turned largely to principles, which are easily abused and made into strict rules. In the absence of good teaching, godly men and women tended to appear only in small patches, by God's grace. For example, the puritans.

They appeared to be unmatched for their love and devotion to God. Yet, these were unique individuals, highly skilled with the pen. Their writings can be helpful, but they are thematic and ultimately do not help us to read the Bible since their writings were influenced by their dispositions and by their historical period.

Given that the prevailing approach to understanding the bible did not account for the author's voice, both heretics and doctrinally faithful puritans shared the same approach to exegesis. So for every puritan with doctrinally faithful reflections, ten other heretics could come to different conclusions. If so, we cannot look to the puritans as a model for understanding the Bible.

7: What is so hard about being Word-centred? What are the obstacles?

Hard hearts. Most don't like to be told they need to change how to read the Bible, instead trusting their friends, pastors, and education (i.e. seminaries) more. Moreover, long-time Christians who have accumulated no little bible knowledge are always tempted to say "I already know these." This was similarly present when Christians started evangelising to the Jews, when Stephen accused the stiff-necked Jews who resisted the Holy Spirit like their forefathers. (Acts 7:51).

Unfortunately, some also do not like what hearing God's voice implies. Nigel Styles, an instructor at the Cornhill Training Course told us that church members at a previous church

opposed his preaching because they didn't want to hear the Bible. Indeed, the weight of God's demands are great and tremendously uncomfortable to our cake-loving hearts!

8: Isn't God sovereign over his church? Is there only one way to grow?

While the Bible's approach to growth is through the Word, it doesn't mean there are no godly Christians in non-faithful teaching churches. I'm just pointing out the Biblical model.

In Luke 24, after his resurrection, Jesus first appeared to two of his disciples. Yet instead of telling them who he was, Jesus chose to first point them to scripture (Luke 24:27). In fact, Jesus used scripture to open their eyes to recognise the resurrected Jesus (Luke 24: 31-32). Even at this juncture, Jesus used the Word. This is the Bible's emphasis.

But I've also met godly Christians who did not have the same understanding of the Bible. So why do we need to be Word-centred?

In Romans 14, Paul addresses the problems arising from the gathering of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians continued the Jewish practices they were taught even though these practices were now unnecessary.

Paul tells the Gentile Christians not to pass judgment, or do things that would stumble them. If the Jewish Christians didn't eat certain foods out of love for God, then other Christians shouldn't eat them in front of them out of love, though knowing it would be harmless to do so.

Regarding these Jewish Christians who kept up old practices, Paul says they are "weak in faith", but doesn't demand that they stop immediately since they did so out of love for God. Thus, godly believers may still misunderstand God's truths. While it may not be detrimental to their own salvation and godliness, it is not right to model after their approach simply because it is not the Bible's approach. Rather, the model the church adopts that

can pass on for generations must be the Bible's model.

9: Can't I just watch another church's sermon? Or read my Bible better?

In the Bible, God's voice was mediated not through the written word, but by the written word preached. This is why God gave preachers that could teach, challenge, rebuke, and exhort. They can preach to our hearts and minds because they know us, and we know them (Titus 2:7-8).

The Word is to be received by a gathered people; it dwells among us as we speak it, sing it, and admonish one another with it (Col 3:16). How will we speak it if we can't apply certain truths (e.g. things related to the church body)? If the church gathering is the foretaste of the heavenly gathering, then how will we anticipate it if we don't gather as a church on earth?

10: How do I leave my home church well?

Visit a church for an entire sermon series, or for a month to assess. Speak to the leaders and try to identify what is their overriding concern for the congregation.

When decided, explain why you are leaving to your leaders. Highlight your concerns; be careful not judge or belittle them. Remember they may have been trained differently. Leave quietly; if arguments arise, as Paul tells Timothy: flee!

FAQS ON HOW OUR CHURCHES SHOULD TEACH THE BIBLE

1: Is expository preaching merely a ‘new’ fad?

If expository preaching is saying what God wants to say and emphasizing what he wants to emphasize, then it cannot be new. On the other hand, it is the curious prevalence of thematic and doctrinal preaching that needs analysing and explaining!

Doctrinal preaching first appeared when the Catholic church made the study of scripture highly monastic and academic. Martin Luther’s Reformation tried to return to the Bible author’s intent for writing. But even he struggled to remove his old thematic lenses.

Over the past two decades, thematic and doctrinal teaching resurged to combat liberalism (first as a public philosophy, not necessarily as a doctrine) and attacks from the scientific community. Later, as liberalism also crept into churches, many pastors similarly resorted to doctrine to draw boundaries between liberal teachers and to defend their faith, influencing seminaries and churches till today.

2: How do we know who is actually faithful in interpreting the Bible?

“Expository preaching” is superficially understood by most today as the equivalent of “faithful preaching”. In fact, most seminaries teach a class on expository preaching. Since most understand expository preaching as faithful preaching, then most pastors claim to be expository because the implication of being non-expository is to be unfaithful. So while most truly expository preachers who unwrap the author’s voice demonstrate the following characteristics, one could be doing all of them but still miss the point:

1. Sensitive to author’s intent by pointing us to:
 - a) Verses where the author has explicitly stated his aim of the letter/book (e.g. Luke 1:1-4)
 - b) The author’s literary devices such as repetition, structure, surprises
2. Shapes his interpretation of a text through the author’s intent for writing the book
3. Allows the text to set the agenda; emphasizes what the author does
4. Goes through an entire book without skipping tough passages
5. Focused & points listeners to evidence so we learn to read ourselves
6. Interprets the text through the Gospel of Jesus Christ
7. Interprets according to God’s plan in salvation history

At the heart of it, the most faithful preachers are those who work humbly, and do not presume to know everything. They invite believers to ask questions, and willingly open themselves up to critique. Such pastors are likely to faithfully work at texts knowing that as God’s mouthpiece, they have a huge responsibility. On the other hand, I have also been to expository preaching conferences where the preacher relied more on his experience

and oratory gifts, but failed to truly show us the beating heart of the passage. So it's not about where you stand, the name of your certificates and seminaries, or what you call your preaching/method/approach. You are simply expository when you reveal not your own, but the Bible author's voice.

3: What is the problem with thematic/topical/doctrinal preaching?

Let me state categorically that teaching doctrine or themes is not wrong, especially when done in a way that remains faithful to the author's intent. Teaching doctrine or a theme is useful for a series (e.g. what is church) or a workshop (e.g. how to be godly parents). But if it forms the church's main diet, believers cannot be equipped to understand the Bible and to grow. Why?

In a themed sermon, the pastor assembles verses from throughout the Bible on a theme (e.g. marriage). In this way, the pastor is setting the agenda (he chooses what to include or omit). In the long-term, he unintentionally buries the author's voice, and the voice of the author fades into the background.

Also, while biblical authors issue commands based on gospel-motivated reasons, themed preaching assumes the gospel. Hearing themed sermons for a long term, the gospel motivation becomes less audible, and the commands sound louder.

Thematic reading is like putting on red sunglasses: everything looks red. We see a word and instinctively zoom in on its related theology. E.g. see "justification" in Romans 3 and rush into the doctrine of justification. But Paul was arguing that the law cannot save humans who are so filthy with sin, but for Jesus' appearance!

4: Is expository preaching only suitable for intellectuals?

Since we must follow the text and the author's argument closely, some say that requires the church to be highly educated. If true, then we also exclude a large segment of our population (e.g. children, mentally disabled, elderly).

For the benefit of those who did not read the main text, in the 7th-12 century, the reformers thought the best way to communicate with uneducated, ordinary people was through statues, stained-glass windows, and pictures. Unfortunately, “it produced people who knew the gospel stories, but did not know the gospel; people who knew what had happened, but who did not know the meaning of it.” We all need to be preached to.

In fact, teaching children requires more sharpness as they do not have the same assumptions we do. I also have friends who teach those with special education needs and who are still able to explain the profound gospel clearly and simply to them. The content remains the same, but the method of delivery differs (e.g. using simpler words, questions, illustrations, stories).

5: Do we need to know biblical languages to understand the Bible?

While my home church pastor insisted it was key, all my later pastors said no. When I learnt basic Biblical Greek, I was told context mattered more than language rules. You can be linguistically accurate, but exegete woefully.

If original languages mattered critically, then linguists would be the most accurate teachers. Knowledge of original languages adds an added layer, e.g. the author may have used wordplay to emphasise something which would not be apparent in English. But the text’s main point remains unchanged.

6: Is my pastor heretical if he’s not expository?

No, as long as they preach according to the gospel, they are fine. However, if a pastor is not expository, it is also likely that they do not have a Word-centred view of the church. This might manifest in various models of ministries that can be distracting (e.g. mercy ministries, structured forms of discipleship and evangelism). If true, I would describe them as ‘distracted’.

I have also explained that their poor training is due to

historical and cultural reasons. Because of this, many pastors mostly see themselves serving 4 critical functions:

1. Preach the Gospel (doctrine) at events
2. Teach fundamental Christian doctrine
3. Answer difficult questions of the faith (apologetics)
4. Pastoral care for the weak and sick

But in 1 Tim 5:17, the standard for a pastor/elder to be “ruling” a church well was that he laboured in preaching and teaching. A pastor’s role is to tend to Jesus’ sheep by feeding them spiritual food.

But be sensitive and loving. We should be thankful for their service. On their teaching, tread lightly and mention only if necessary. Laypeople pointing out the errors – as I had regrettably done - in a pastor’s teaching is usually very hurting for pastors.

7: Have you exaggerated the implications of poor teaching?

If God communicates and acts by his Word, then ignore poor teaching at your own peril! Playing down its impact is akin to saying God’s voice is not important. My pastor lamented the outcome of many mainland Chinese Christians when they returned to China. Those who did not see the importance of good teaching eventually joined churches out of convenience and proximity rather than good teaching. Most of them then either became lukewarm Christians, or left the faith altogether.

8: Isn’t God concerned about my morals and external behaviour as well?

Yes, God is very concerned about right action. In fact, James tells us that it is impossible to have faith without evident works. However, the biblical model has always been first to change hearts, which would lead to a change in action. Even if you point

to the “command-heavy” Old Testament, God’s commands were issued *after* redeeming his people. And in John 5:46, Jesus said that Moses wrote about him. So even from the beginning, God’s people were already directed to the gospel, and not merely instructed to obey laws.

In the absence of faithful preaching, my observation is that we are putting the cart before the horse (i.e. actions before changed hearts). Due to this, it is easy to think we are respectable – though imperfect – Christians that serve and do not have significant blemishes in our external conduct.

But actually, striving to act righteously entails acting in ways that are not always explicitly defined in the Bible. For what does “putting on Christ”, or to “not be friends with the world”, or to “count it all joy” or “rejoice” mean? It can be applied in many ways and forms, but it must flow out of an understanding from a changed heart and mind, and a desire to hear carefully and obey one’s Lord.

9: How is being Word-centred related to teaching positionally?

Being Word-centred is the natural implication of teaching faithfully. If we work hard at understanding what God is telling us, exposing the author’s aim rather than imposing our own, we will realise that God speaks often, and he speaks to change our hearts and minds. If that is the emphasis of the Bible authors, then that is also how church and Christian life should be – to hear God speak often, to rub our noses in the text, to put God in the driver’s seat i.e. be Word-centred.

Therefore, in a sense, Word-centredness cannot be separated from expository preaching. When our pastors are faithful to the Bible Author’s intent, they *will* be Word-centred. And when pastors strive to be expository, they are saying that God’s Word matter’s immensely. This is the first step to Word-centredness.

On the other hand, as I have mentioned, some pastors may not

be trained to preach expositionally. Therefore, all expository preaching churches are Word-centred, but not all Word-centred churches preach expositionally (although they strive to).

USEFUL RESOURCES

If you're interested to know more about Word-centredness and Expository preaching, do consider the following resources.

Placing the Word at the Driving Seat

The Priority of Preaching (2009) by Christopher Ash

Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today (2014) by David Helm

Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God: Psalm 119 for the Bible teacher and Bible hearer (2008) by Christopher Ash

Learning how to uncover the Bible authors' voices

Dig Deeper: Tools for Understanding God's Word (2010) by Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sach

Dig Even Deeper; Unearthing Old Testament Treasure (2011) by Andrew Sach and Richard Alldritt

Dig Deeper into the Gospels (2015) by Andrew Sach and Tim Hiorns

God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible (2003) by Vaughn Roberts

Learning how to apply Bible texts to improve community groups

Get Preaching: Application (2020) by Gwilym Davies

Unleash the Word (2015) by Karen Soole

In general, books by the Proclamation Trust.