

EXEGESIS

We concluded chapter 1 by saying that it is possible to both “get the text right” *and* “get it across.” We don’t have to choose between one or the other. Both can be done, and done well.

But, how? How do we prepare messages that are both faithful to the text and fruitful for today? And how do we do it while avoiding our propensity toward a blind adherence to contextualization?

There is a way, and good expositors seem to take it. The next three chapters lay out a three-part process—a mind-set for working—that follows this course: (1) exegesis; (2) theological reflection; and (3) implications for today.

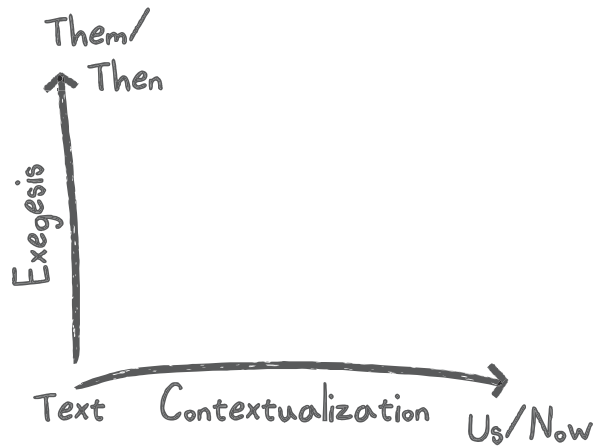
KEEPING FIRST THINGS FIRST

All preaching must begin with exegesis. To put it differently: contextualization, theological reflection, and matters of today are held at bay—we should be committed to a process of preparation that *keeps first things first*. By this I mean that a faithful preacher starts the sermon preparation process by paying attention to a biblical text’s original audience and a text’s purposes for those readers. And he makes this first audience his first concern in three different ways. In one fashion or another, he:

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1. Gives the biblical context (rather than his own context) control over the meaning of the text.
2. Listens intently until he knows how the text fits within the overall message of the book.
3. Sees the structure and emphasis of the text.

Did you notice how nothing in the above list deals with contextualization? Contextualization is important, as we will see in chapter 4, but good biblical expositors train themselves to hold off on that step until later in the process.



Contextualization is a good dance partner, but she should never be allowed to lead. Put her before the exegetical steps in your sequence of preparation, and problems will quickly emerge. The trouble is that too many of us push exegesis back in our preparation, and we clothe the message in a short red dress

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of contextualization by focusing on culture and our ability to connect with it. It's like we want to spin her out away from us in exciting circles, showing off her long legs and high heels.

For many of us, then, our greatest challenge will be to reorient what comes first. The first step toward expositional preaching is to treat contextualization like a woman you hold close. You lead her in the dance of exposition. It simply won't work the other way around. I can still remember where I was sitting on the day when this reorientation of mind-set clicked for me.

THE DAY THE PENNY DROPPED

I was twenty-nine years old when Steve Bickley, a pastor and friend, introduced me to Dick Lucas. Lucas is now retired as the rector of St. Helen's Bishopsgate Church in London. Bickley had arranged for Lucas to spend a day with those of us on the pastoral staff of College Church under Kent Hughes. This would be the day the penny dropped for me—and for all of us, really.

In short order, God used Lucas to challenge our conventional approach to sermon preparation. In two fast-moving hours, he put us in the world of a very familiar passage: 1 Corinthians 13. When he was done putting us through our paces, our preparation for preaching had found a new direction. He had set our feet on a better course, one that still guides me to this day.

First, Lucas asked us to *keep first things first*. This was harder to do than I had imagined. I had always heard 1 Corinthians 13 referred to as "the love chapter." My only exposure to it had been at weddings. On those occasions, the preacher's

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approach to the text—due to contextualization—was governed by the joyful event before us. Wedding days are ruled by the themes of encouragement and celebration, and the homilies I had heard on the text were likewise embedded with those sentiments. To put it another way, the audience in front of the preacher ruled the hour. Never mind the audience to whom the letter was first written.

Second, Lucas led us into a period of observation. He asked us to suspend judgment for a moment on what the text means or how it might be applied for today, but instead to consider the chapter in its *immediate literary context*. When we did, we saw that 1 Corinthians 13 was placed between two chapters that discussed spiritual gifts, and, in particular, the relationship between the gifts and spiritual maturity (12:1, 4, 9, 28, 30, 31; 14:1, 37).

Third, Lucas asked us to search out the terms for gifts and spiritual maturity earlier in the letter. He wanted us *to listen intently* until we knew how our text fit into the overall message of the book. That led us to 1:4–7, where Paul calls the Corinthians a gifted group. In fact, they did not lack any gifts at all. But in 3:1, Paul blasts this incredibly gifted congregation for being spiritually immature. He even calls them spiritual infants (vv. 1–2).

It was beginning to dawn on us that some in Corinth had gotten the relationship between gifts and maturity mixed up. They had begun to think that certain gifts (“tongues” in this case) gave them an advantage in spiritual maturity. Our minds began to race. What was Paul really saying about love in chapter 13? Did he mean to rebuke them for their lack of love? Was

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the Spirit's primary intention for the "love chapter" to correct rather than to encourage (in the guise of sentimentality)?

Fourth, Lucas showed us how the context of the whole book was wedded to the vocabulary of chapter 13. Think of chapter 13's "[love] is not arrogant." Does this language show up previously in the letter? It does, and Paul's prior use is not complimentary: "And you are arrogant!" (5:2).

Lucas then stopped and allowed us to take it all in. We realized that this chapter would have landed in the Corinthian congregation like a bombshell. Paul was talking about love precisely because it was the one thing the Corinthians lacked! They might have been a gifted group. But they were still infants. Paul wanted them to grow up, to be like him, a "man" marked by love, which for him was maturity.

We had arrived in Corinth—with the first audience—and ironically found ourselves better prepared to preach a relevant message for people in Chicago.

For me, the penny dropped right then and there. I could see the components necessary for any preacher doing exegesis. God powerfully used that day to reorder our approach to sermon preparation. All of us left that experience changed men. We had a renewed appetite for God's Word and a newfound commitment to what it would take to become expositors of the sacred text.

When the original or first audience becomes your first concern, you see things differently. Let me illustrate this with the telescope. Telescopes allow us to see far into the heavens. Galileo made them famous by using one to see craters on the moon as well as the millions or even billions of stars

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suspended in the Milky Way galaxy. The idea behind the invention is simple. Take two lenses, one larger than the other, and connect them with a sliding cylinder. The larger lens is curved with the capacity to magnify an image. The smaller lens is simply an eyepiece that allows the viewer to take a closer look at distant things. Hold a telescope the right way, and you will discover incredible things. But hold the telescope the wrong way, and the object in view suddenly appears distorted, small and out of focus. The beauty and shape of an object will be lost.



The same principle can be applied to your process of sermon preparation. If you want to be a good biblical expositor, you need to discipline yourself to put your eye on the original hearers first. This will keep you from distorting the shape of your text and help you to see what the Holy Spirit intends for your congregation.

That said, there's more to this than meets the eye. I don't believe I can do the exegetical work on my own. And so, each time before I sit down to study the Bible, I pray. For while there are ordinary means of study, I need the Spirit's extraordinary help in the process. And while I am going to share some practical things you can do in your study in the coming pages, you

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must understand that you are at the mercy of the Holy Spirit in understanding the text.

1. GIVE THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT CONTROL

In getting to the practical work, I have found it helpful to think about context in two different ways: *literary context* and *historical context*. These are two related and often overlapping ideas, but it is worth understanding the difference. The *historical context* concerns the circumstances or situation that prompted the text. This may require you to understand ancient culture. You may need to firm up your grasp of biblical history. Or you might study an entire book in an effort to piece together the situation faced by the first audience.

The *literary context*, on the other hand, is simply the text around your text. It considers an author's writing or editing strategy and asks why he has organized his book in the way he has. The verses or chapters that precede and follow a text give a flow or shape that helps us understand a text's meaning.¹

Let's look at an example of how the meaning of a text should be controlled by its context rather than our own. In 2 Corinthians 6:14–15 we read:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

There was a day when I might have preached a message from this text that was meant to help my people think through is-

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sues related to marriage or their choice of business partners. Indeed, this is the verse that spawns things like a Christian Yellow Pages.

The problem is, if we dig just a little deeper into the historical context, we will see that the writer is not talking directly to us. Paul had been arguing against the Corinthian affinity for securing popular and proud teachers who conducted their ministry in a way that avoided persecution at all costs. These “super-apostles” had led the people away from the gospel and away from Paul. And Paul wanted them back! He wanted them yoked to him. Historically speaking, therefore, our approach to this text should be controlled by Paul’s concern about wedding ourselves to false teachers. It has nothing to do in the first instance with whom you marry or with whom you partner in business.

The literary context of these verses only confirms this. In the verses before, Paul tells the Corinthians that his heart has been open to them even while their hearts have been closed off. He pleads, “Widen your hearts” (6:13), an appeal to be closely yoked to him. And he returns to this plea in the verses following our passage: “Make room in your hearts for us” (7:2).

Knowing the historical and literary contexts can change everything for you. Good biblical expositors allow these contexts to control the meaning of the text. So, the first thing you should do is start reading the verses and chapters on both sides of your text. Start asking yourself a different set of questions. Why is this passage here in this place? How does my passage fit within a larger section? What is the situation faced by the first audience or, depending on genre, the first readers?

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2. LISTEN FOR THE MELODIC LINE

At the outset of this chapter I mentioned that there are three practical ways of keeping first things first. Having looked at the first (giving the biblical context control), let's look at a second: listening intently to a text until we know how it fits within the overall message of the book.

The best preachers are usually the best listeners. They enter their studies with ears intent on listening. If that is our role, then we'd better learn to do exegesis with our ears as well as our mind! Every good expositor I know does exegesis by listening for the unique things that God is saying in the book they are expounding. Years ago, Dick Lucas represented the principle this way:



A melodic line is a short sequence of notes that form a distinctive portion of a song. It may be part of the main melody that gets repeated and varied. Books of the Bible work the same way. Each book has a melodic line, an essence that informs what the book is about. And each passage in the book, then, will serve that melodic line in some way. So, in preaching, we might ask, what is the essence of my book? And how is my particular passage informing it and informed by it?

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The upside for preachers is this: if we know what the whole book is about, we can handle each individual passage better. There is also an important second benefit. If we make use of the melodic line in our preaching, our people will gradually learn what a book is about, even if they don't remember individual sermons.

How then do we find the melodic line of a book?

Let me tell you how I did it in high school. At several points, I was required to read a large book or novel. Inevitably, my teachers informed me that an exam was coming. And since the school library didn't stock CliffsNotes, I figured out how to get the main point of the book quickly. First, I looked for a paragraph somewhere in the introduction that offered some kind of thesis or purpose statement. Then I read the first and last chapters. Finally, I flipped back to the table of contents and, based on what I had read, tried to connect the dots between chapter titles.

I intuitively used different strategies to find the essence of the book: reading the book from *cover to cover*, reading and rereading the *beginning and end*, looking for important *repeated words, concepts, and phrases*, and hunting down *purpose statements*.

These same tools can help you find the melodic line of a book of the Bible. I discovered the benefit of adding this element to my sermon preparation a few years ago. I wanted to preach through the short book of Jude. I ended up preaching eight messages from it, and loved every minute of it. But getting the melodic line required some real effort.

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Cover to Cover

Long before I began the Jude series, I incorporated the letter into my private reading plan simply by reading it from start to finish—not hard for a book of just twenty-five verses! I would suggest doing this for any book you are going to preach. In fact, it is always good to read it through in one sitting. The book will start to become familiar. Getting to know it on its own terms, listening intently to it, will pay great dividends when you come to preach it.

Reading the Beginning and the End

A composer will often begin and end a piece of music with a melodic line, even if he develops it throughout the piece. The same is true for books of the Bible. When I knew that I was going to preach through Jude, I spent time reading and rereading only the beginning and the end of the book. A single sound began to emerge: *being kept*. In verse 1 Jude says he writes to those who are “kept for Jesus Christ.” And in verse 24 he refers “to him who is able to keep you from stumbling.” At this point in my preparation, I felt ready to make a provisional guess as to what Jude was about—*our being kept by God for Christ*.

Repeated Words, Concepts, and Phrases

At this point in the exegetical phase, I was ready to test my provisional statement by tuning my ear to the content of the letter. Did the idea of *being kept by God for Christ* play a significant role in shaping the body of the letter? I found that it did. The same word used for *kept* in verse 1 (of which *keep* in verse

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24 is a synonym) is repeated four more times: twice in verse 6 (the first time it is translated as “stay” in the ESV), once in verse 13 (as “reserved” in the ESV), and again as an imperative in verse 21. As exciting as this discovery was, the use of this repeated word challenged my initial melodic line! Those who are kept for Jesus at the beginning and the end of Jude are told in the body of the letter to keep themselves in the love of God. And this is in contrast to the fallen angels and false teachers who did not keep themselves and so are being kept in judgment. If at this point someone asked me what Jude was about, I would have said, *those who are being kept by God for Jesus have a responsibility to keep themselves in the love of God.*

Purpose Statement

Finally, I reread the letter in hopes of hearing a purpose statement.² It wouldn't take long to find one. Jude 3 captured my attention: “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to *contend for the faith* that was once for all delivered to the saints.” This statement allowed me to hear the tonal quality of Jude. Whatever the melodic line, it needed to contain a sense of urgency. Nothing less than the health and holiness of the church was at stake!

Jude is anything but a dry theological ode that explores the themes of *kept* and *keeping* in terms of the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. No. This brief and potent letter is an impassioned piece of sheet music. My melodic line would need sharpening for a third time: *given the peril of the hour, the health and holiness of the church demand*

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that those who are being kept by God for Jesus contend for the faith by keeping themselves in the love of God.

I now had a melodic line. I had also learned two important lessons during this part of my preparation. Not only will I preach each individual passage better if I know how it relates to the overall message of the book, but also each listening strategy employed in this part of the exegetical process plays an important part in my overall understanding. A single tool for discovering the melodic line of a book just won't suffice.

3. SEE THE STRUCTURE AND EMPHASIS

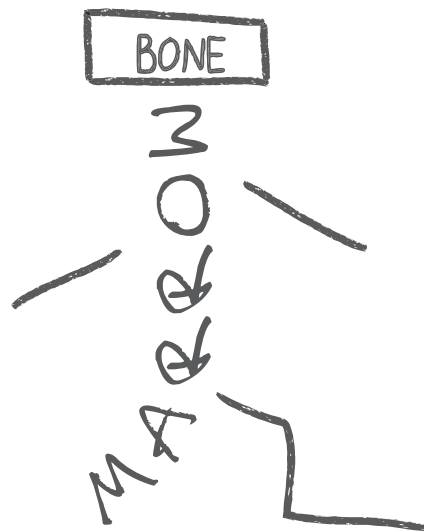
In addition to giving the biblical context control and listening for the melodic line, biblical expositors do one more thing during the exegetical phase of preparation. They work to apprehend the skeletal structure of the text from which they are preaching. They ask: How has the author organized this text? What does the organization reveal about the author's intended emphasis?

In *How to Read a Book*, Mortimer Adler observes:

Every book has a skeleton between its covers. Your job as an analytical reader is to find it. A book comes to you with flesh on its bones and clothes over its flesh. It is all dressed up . . . you must read the book with x-ray eyes, for it is an essential part of our apprehension of any book to grasp its structure.³

If Adler is right, then you cannot apprehend the point of a text until you have apprehended its skeletal structure. Put differently, good biblical exposition demands that you need to see the bones and the marrow of the biblical text for yourself.

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And when it comes to preaching, we can say even more:

Every text has a structure.

The structure reveals emphasis.

My sermon should be rightfully submitted to the shape and emphasis of the text.

This aspect of exegesis brings us back to the definition of expositional preaching that I gave in the introduction. It is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text.

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And for most of us, this is our problem. We step into the pulpit without apprehending the skeletal structure of the text. As a result, we are not very clear about the text's meaning, and when we step out of the pulpit, our people are no better off. How then do we find the structure of a text?

Use Reading Strategies That Work Well Anywhere

In trying to find the structure of a biblical text, you will want to start with simple strategies that are useful regardless of where you are in the Bible.

First, work from a word-for-word translation of the text. Of course, if you can study in the original languages, this will help you. But a word-for-word (rather than a thought-for-thought) translation generally renders individual words more consistently, which should make the bones more visible. That said, no single translation accomplishes this completely. You might find it helpful to consult multiple translations. Now, don't miss my point. We are talking about private preparation focused on finding structure. When it comes to preaching, there may be a variety of good reasons to use less literal translations.

Second, I have been helped by making my own translation of the text. The process slows me down, but I begin to see what the author is doing, and how each part relates to the larger unit.

Third, read, reread, and read the text again, slowly and out loud. The more time you spend in the text, the more you will see how it works.

Fourth, as you read, look for repeated words, phrases, and

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ideas. If the goal is finding the structure and emphasis, frequently used expressions will usually be big clues in seeing the emphasis.

Know What Type of Literature You Are Studying

While some strategies work well throughout the Bible, the fact is, not all literature works the same way. You wouldn't pick up a newspaper and read it with the same tools you would use to read a poem. You wouldn't read a novel the way you would read a recipe. And you shouldn't read every book in the Bible the same way, either.

The Bible has different genres: Old Testament Narrative, Prophetic, Apocalyptic, Wisdom and Poetry, Epistles, Gospels, and Acts. Within those different genres, you have three basic text types: *discourse*, *narrative*, and *poetry*. As a general rule, you won't discover the structure of a psalm (poetry) using the same reading strategies you would employ in a Gospel (most likely narrative or discourse). Knowing how each of the different text types works will help you to know which tools best unlock them.

Generally speaking, *discourse* is spoken material. It is logical and linear. We find it most prominently in the Epistles. We also find it in the Old Testament history books, the speeches in Prophetic and Apocalyptic books, and the sermons in the Gospels and Acts. To find the structure in discourse, it is helpful to write the text out on a piece of paper without the paragraph breaks or verse numbers given by the editors of our Bibles. This is what I call getting the text out of the Bible. The important things to look for all relate to grammar. Look for repeated

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words or phrases, key words, transitional words, the flow of ideas, grammatical relationships, independent and dependent clauses, whether the text is written in the first (*I*) or second (*you*) or third person (*it*), whether it contains questions or declaratives or imperatives, and similar grammatical features. This is what we might call sentence diagramming. If you use these tools properly, you will normally find the shape and emphasis of your passage.

A *narrative* is a story, and stories tend to follow a fairly distinctive structure. So, while focusing on grammar can be helpful for an epistle, it is the *scenes*, *plot*, and *characters* that will assist the preacher in seeing the structure and emphasis of a narrative. Identifying different scenes—where the activity in the text changes location, for example—will probably be the best starting point. If you take longer narrative passages for your sermon text, the changes in scene will reveal an organizing principle. Within those scenes (and sometimes across scenes), you will want to look for plots. Plots typically have five parts:

- *Setting*: The setting will typically include place, time, season, and an introduction of characters.
- *Conflict*: Conflict is the part of the story that provides dramatic tension and a sense that something needs to be resolved. It might be very clear (like a violent threat), or it might be quite subtle (like emotional turmoil).
- *Climax*: The climax is the reversal or turning point, where the dramatic tension breaks.
- *Resolution*: The resolution is the outworking of the climax, how the conflict is resolved.

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- *New Setting*: The new setting is the return to a new kind of normal from which the next plot arc will emerge.

In trying to identify these parts of the plot, the important questions to ask are: What is the conflict here? What is providing the dramatic tension? What is the turning point? How is the tension resolved? I would argue that the emphasis is located in some combination of the *climax* and parts of the *conflict* and *resolution*.

Of course, understanding how the author portrays the characters—the people in the story—is also important. Notice which people the author introduces and when. Notice how they change. Pay attention to how the author moves back and forth between them. If you have a good sense of the plot and the characters, you will have a good sense of the shape and emphasis of the narrative.

Poetry is a third text type. Most of the poetry in the Bible is in the Wisdom Literature and Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament. To find structure, you will want to consider repetitions of words or even entire stanzas (e.g., Psalms 42 and 43 are organized around the stanza that begins “Why are you cast down, O my soul?”). You will also want to consider changes in imagery and grammatical strategies (such as shifts in person or point of view). But probably the single most useful strategy for finding structure and emphasis in poetry is seeing how *parallelism* works in your text, particularly the transition between kinds of parallelism in the text. *Parallelism* is the technical term used for describing a feature of Hebrew poetry in which lines often appear in pairs (or sometimes triplets) that

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are related to or correspond to each other in specific ways. It may be that the second line repeats the general idea of the first, perhaps only slightly amplifying it. The second line may contradict, negate, or contrast the first. Or the second line might complete the thought of the first. These different relationships between the first and second line indicate different kinds of parallelism. Seeing the shifts in parallelism will help you find the shape and emphasis of your text.

THE DANGER OF THINKING YOU ARE DONE

Getting a good handle on both the general strategies and the genre-specific strategies will be a great start in finding the structure and emphasis of your text. And finding the context and the message of the book are equally important aspects of exegesis. Remember, you need to:

1. Give the biblical context, rather than your own, control over the meaning of the text.
2. Listen intently until you know how your text fits within the overall message of the book.
3. See the structure and emphasis of the text.

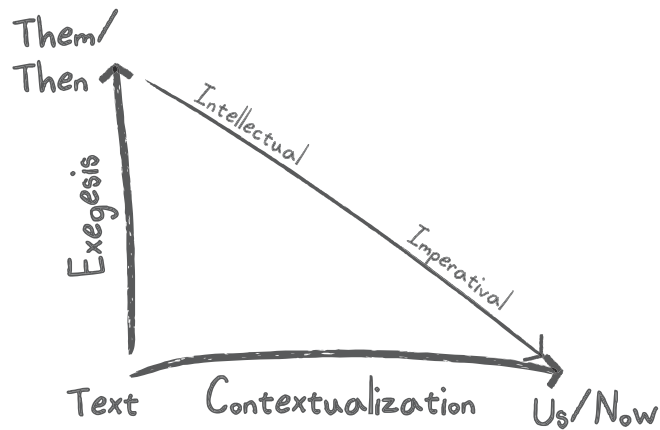
That said, I don't think you are yet ready to preach.

Exegesis is not enough. Done in isolation, exegesis alone can lead to preaching that is either overly *intellectual* or merely *imperative*.

Intellectual preaching occurs when you make the first audience your final concern. It's what happens when you take a profoundly relevant text and render it irrelevant by writing sermons that read like an academic commentary. You do the

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work of exegesis but stop. You end up with boring, ineffective, well-footnoted speeches.



I encounter this kind of preaching particularly among young preachers who make the mistake of thinking that the sermon is—as my friend Mike Bullmore says—a storage container for housing everything they learned about the text that week. Well, it's not. You simply need to avoid preaching overly intellectual sermons.

The other pitfall of exegesis in isolation is that we become *imperative-only* preachers. The Bible is full of imperatives, and they are relevant. But imperatives without a proper biblical and theological context can also be applied in very wrong ways. Perhaps the most dangerous version of this is when we neglect the theological-reflection stage (which we'll

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look at in the next chapter). If we don't consider the gospel context of the Bible as a whole, even well-exegeted imperatives turn into moralism. And this fosters a legalistic culture in our churches.

All of this means that theological reflection is worth considering, which brings us to the next step in sermon preparation.