

Preaching Life-Changing Sermons: Six Steps to Developing and Delivering Biblical Messages. Jesse L. Nelson. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2022. 144 pp., \$16.99, paperback.

For some preachers, the aim in preaching is either to inform, inspire, or instruct (or a combination of the three) the hearer. Jesse Nelson states that his main aim for preaching (and this book) is delivering life-changing sermons to those that hear the message. He asserts, “So how do I preach life-changing sermons? The secret is simple. I preach the text” (p. 9)! Jesse L. Nelson is the senior pastor of Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church of Panama City, FL and holds the DMin in expository preaching from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary where he also serves as an adjunct professor. In addition, he is the current president of the Evangelical Homiletics Society.

Five reasons are given for reading this book: 1) it will fill a cultural gap with the inclusion of information on African American preachers—a subject missing in most biblical or expository preaching books, 2) it will expose you to a few nuances of African American expository preaching, 3) it simplifies the approach to preparing biblical sermons, 4) it is shareable and can be used as a training manual in churches, as well as a textbook for Bible college/seminary preaching courses, and 5) it will help you preach the Word. This book is meant to be practical, not theoretical and he suggests six steps for preparing and delivering life-changing sermons—these six steps form the book chapters. As one “digs in” they will learn how to *seek* the Spirit, *select* your Scripture, *study* the Scripture, *structure* your sermon, *speak* in the Spirit, and *share* the Savior (p. 10). The three appendices are helpful, supplying a *Life-Changing Sermon Guide*, *Example Sermon Outlines*, and *Example Sermons*.

Chapter one (*Seeking the Spirit*) answers the question, “Why should we seek the Spirit first?” Nelson points to the Spirit: 1) as the author of the Bible, 2) as God and knows the thoughts of God. He knows exactly what God meant in the text, 3) revealing the wisdom of God (illumination), and 4) as working in our preaching (pp. 11-13). He rightly perceives prayer as the most neglected means of seeking the Spirit and presents the *What? —Why? —When? —Where? —How?* of prayer. This spiritual groundwork begins with a spiritual mindset where the preacher must: 1) prepare his sermon to please an audience of one (the triune God), 2) be aware of the spiritual nature of his human audience, and 3) be a practitioner of the Word that he preaches (pp. 21-22). In the next chapter (*Selecting the Scripture*) Nelson looks at ways to preach through books of the Bible: 1) preach through the entire book, 2) preach a topic from a book, 3) pick a chapter or section of a certain book and preach through it, or 4) preach one passage from each chapter of the book (p. 26). He then gives the “why” for preaching through books of the Bible: 1) it creates a preaching plan for the minister, 2) it will lessen the sermon preparation time, 3) it reveals the unity within that book, 4) it increases biblical literacy in the congregation, and 5) it gets you off your hobbyhorse (pp. 26-28).

Chapter three covers the importance of *Studying the Scripture*. Nelson stresses:

When I think of all the preachers who inspired me to be an expository preacher, the one common denominator between them was their desire to study the Scriptures so they could accurately interpret the Word of God ... When we misinterpret the text, our listeners will misapply the text, which can lead to mistakes in their Christian life and missed opportunities in the kingdom of God (p. 33).

He sees four preliminary steps to assure proper study: 1) pray, 2) complete a historical background study, 3) read the Scripture (you *must* internalize the Word), and 4) exegete the preaching text (he recommends questions to ask, clues to pick up on, interpretive keys, how to do

word studies, and understanding genres) (pp. 33-50). *Structuring the Sermon* is the content of chapter four. He includes the traditional way of structuring a sermon, still, he offers less conventional approaches such as Andy Stanley's "me-you-we-God-you-we" structure (p. 55).

Chapter five is *Speaking in the Spirit*. He discusses at length the biblical basis for *anointing* for preaching and lends practical advice for sermon delivery. "What does the anointing mean today? For preachers today, the anointing is the Spirit filling ministers to empower them for completing a specific task, like preaching. The Spirit controls the anointed preacher's thoughts, words, and actions. When preachers are under the anointing, they are not preaching. The Spirit is preaching through them" (p. 75). He concludes with *Sharing the Savior* (chapter six). Nelson reminds preachers that:

Expository preaching is Christ-centered. You must share Jesus. "Christ-centered" does not mean we bend every Scripture toward Christ. Instead, we reveal Christ in the Scripture. Every Scripture is not typological but an example of Christ's character. You can share Jesus in the sermon through an explanation, illustration, or application of how the text connects to Christ (p. 83).

Most important, the invitation is never trivial or casual and therefore should be part of sermon preparation (p. 87).

Note bene. Positively, the section on *Application* (in *Structuring the Sermon* chapter four) is worth the preacher's investment. Nelson finds that it is application that makes the text practical and places God's Word into people's hands—He considers this area the most overlooked element of the biblical message (p. 63). This is true out of either disregard of application and/or application incorrectly done. He conveys nine principles for discerning the application points of a life-changing sermon. Applications: 1) should be theological, 2) should be clearly formulated at the time of sermon writing, 3) should be biblical, 4) should be adaptable, 5) should be universal, 6) should be visible, 7) can be statements or principles with specific action, 8) should be practical and doable, and 9) should be contextual (pp. 63-64). Negatively, Nelson proposes different sermon structures, such as the: 1) Rhetorical or Traditional sermon outline ("three points and a poem"), 2) Question-Answer outline. The sermon points are questions, and the exposition answer those questions, 3) Then-Now format (part 1 explains the text, part 2 [the now] illustrates the text and offers life application), 4) Key Word sermon (highlights key words in the text, and 5) Devotional (a homily or a running commentary with exegetical insights and life application (pp. 68-69). The plethora of structures, while inventive, leaves the danger of imposing a structure on a text, while a simple text-driven model allows the text to *supply* or *be* the structure.

Nelson's work is a serviceable homiletic primer, he declares:

Whatever they hear, your audience needs more than an informational, inspirational, or instructional sermon. People need to hear a life-changing sermon. A sermon that is biblical, theological, Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, and practical. Preach a sermon that people can see, feel, and do. Preach a sermon that will place God's Word into people's heads, hearts, and hands (p. 89).

This work will ably serve the pew and the pulpit (especially the untrained minister), *Preaching Life-Changing Sermons* brings the seminary classroom to the minister's study (pp. 7-8). It is there that this work is most beneficial—it is easy to follow and cogently instructive. For the more seasoned and skilled expositor, one may want to turn to the homiletic trilogy of Jerry Vines and Shaddix's *Power in the Pulpit* (Moody, 1997/2017), *Progress in the Pulpit* (Moody, 2017), and Vines and Adam Dooley's *Passion in the Pulpit* (Moody, 2018).

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