

Fabarez, Michael. *Preaching that Changes Lives*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002. (224 pp.)

“. . . [T]ruly biblical preaching must be both didactic and practical. The two things are not opposed to one another. They are, however, notoriously difficult to keep in balance. Those who stress sound doctrine sometimes neglect the passion and pleading that are necessary parts of biblical preaching (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:11, 20; Luke 14:23). And those who stress practical matters too often neglect to build the foundation of sound doctrine. To be lopsided in either direction is a serious mistake.” (p. ix)

These words by John MacArthur introduce Fabarez’s book, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, as an aid to remain balanced and a corrective to those who have become lopsided in one direction or the other. Fabarez wrote *Preaching that Changes Lives (PCL)* as a D.Min final project from Westminster Theological Seminary. He currently serves as the pastor of Pacific Coast Church located in San Clemente California where he has been since 1990. His book addresses an important weakness in much of contemporary evangelical preaching by helping the preacher understand how to apply biblical exegesis without sacrificing the primacy of the exposition or diminishing the role of the Holy Spirit in application.

Purpose and Intent

Fabarez did not set out to write another book on preaching technique or to contribute another text on hermeneutics or exegesis to an already glutted market. His concern is specific and targeted to what happens in the lives of the hearers after the preacher has finished his sermon. He set out to confront every expositor of Scripture with the penetrating and discomfiting question, “How did your sermon change the lives of your hearers? What real difference did it make in their lives?”

Frabarez laments the appalling lack of effect that characterizes much modern expository preaching. In short, there is more expository preaching now than ever and yet, this preaching does not seem to have much if any significant effect on the life and thinking its hearers. (p. xii-xiii). He contends the fault for this dismal picture may lie more with the expositor than with the hearer. Since God intended biblical preaching to result in changed lives and gave specific directions for its declaration to those called to preach it, Fabarez argues that,

“To be faithful and effective preachers, we must ensure that we are doing all that we can in every sermon to assist our people in becoming ‘doers of the word.’ We must be sure that we are not just presenting biblical information or simply lecturing about the Bible. Rather, we must verify that we are actually preaching. We must unabashedly do what all great preachers have always done—we must cause our people to gaze face to face in the mirror of James 1:23 and commit themselves to change in the area which God’s Word is addressing to them each week.” (p. xiii)

The solution to this problem also lies with the preacher. In short, he must learn to construct and deliver expository sermons that apply the truth of the text clearly and powerfully with the specific intent to produce life change in the hearer and not just accurate biblical information. Believers should be transformed not just informed by life-changing preaching.

Structure and Content

After a brief introductory section in which Fabarez challenges expositors to rethink how they go about the entire preaching process, he addresses application in the areas of preparation, preaching, and follow-through with the goal of transforming the lives of the hearers. (p. xv)

In the first section, “Rethink Your Task,” he discusses the current disillusionment in the evangelical Church toward preaching and evaluates the trend in many

congregations to either supplement preaching or replace it altogether with alternative strategies. This is not the first time the Church has had to face questions about the effectiveness of preaching and history proclaims that “she cannot survive without the consistent, accurate, and authoritative preaching that intends, in every instance, to transform its hearers.” (p. 5) However, the kind of preaching most necessary to health of the church is preaching that transforms the lives of believers. Therefore, preachers can no longer be content with just good exegesis or a memorable outline. “Instead, we must purpose to evaluate every sermon we preach in light of the biblical change it brings about in the lives of our congregations!” (p. 9) This means we must rethink our approach to expository preaching.

The second part of the book consists of five chapters designed to help the expositor prepare his preaching to change lives. Of primary importance to change in the hearers is personal authenticity and growth in the preacher. He observes that one of the primary reasons much of modern preaching is powerless may be ascribed to the hypocrisy and lack of integrity in modern preachers. In a moving appeal for holy character, Fabarez admonishes the preacher to adopt a “willingness to be benched.”

Disqualification is a sobering word for preachers of God’s Word, but one that needs to be sincerely considered. If we do not periodically evaluate our fitness for the task, or have others do so, we risk forcing upon the Christ and His church a teacher who could easily prove more harmful than helpful.” (p. 31)

Preaching to change lives demands that we study the audience as well as the preaching passage with a view to transformed living. (p. 43). When we have determined both the correct exegesis of the text and its legitimate application for the hearer, we must organize the message into an outline that is designed to orient the hearer to recognize and make the changes demanded of him by the text. Fabarez has a fabulous

section discussing several important guidelines for developing this kind of an outline as well as some practical examples that are helpful in grasping this concept. This kind of sermon preparation is going to demand a commitment to prayer. He has some great ideas and suggestions for the preacher who is serious about implementing a structured prayer program specifically targeted to his weekly sermon preparation.

In the third section of the book, Fabarez devotes the next five chapters to the actual delivery of the sermon. In this section, he contends that just as preachers must allow application to impact the preparation process; they must also allow it to impact the actual preaching process. At the heart of effective transformational preaching is the matter of urgency. Preaching that transforms its hearers must be delivered by preachers who actually are convinced that their hearers can and must be changed by what they hear. The next section is an important clarification and protection. Lest the preacher adopt thinking that presents change as the sole responsibility of the hearer, *PCL* stresses that change is only possible through Christ.

There is a better way to preach. It secures change in people's lives because it gives them the right perspective, adequate resources, and a biblical motivation to change. It is preaching that keeps God and His agenda at the center of our sermons. A steady diet of this kind of faithful preaching will transform men and women into a congregation of servants equipped by grace to follow the Master's lead. (p. 114)

In light of the true possibility of biblical change by means of God's grace, the preacher should preach boldly and with authority recognizing that he is delivering what God knows the believer most needs to enable true change. This requires a renewed way of thinking on the part of the hearer. The biblical way to change a persons thinking in preaching is by teaching them the biblical doctrine and then applying that doctrine to life and practice.

If our preaching is to be effective, we must proclaim God's eternal truths as the only adequate catalysts for biblical application. It is inherent in good study, and it must be apparent in good preaching. Through thoughtful study, we uncover eternal principles, and by our transformational preaching we demonstrate their applicability to life. This requires logical thinking on our part and the ability to instill theological thoughts in the minds of our hearers. (p. 148)

One way to train an audience to think in life transforming ways about the preaching they hear is to preach on how to listen to such preaching. Fabarez has an entire chapter packed full of suggestions to help expositors wanting to move their congregations toward this concept. He actually includes several suggested texts with summary paragraphs that interested expositors may develop into such sermons for their congregations.

In the fourth and final section of the book, Fabarez closes with two chapters full of suggestions for the pastor who desires to follow the preaching through to actual life change in his own life and the lives of his hearers.

Evaluation and Conclusion

PCL provides a solid of help to expository preachers who are frustrated at the lack of effect their preaching has on their people. His particular focus on application is practical and theologically sound. After stating the problem, Fabarez marshals his evidence and makes a compelling case that something is drastically wrong with much of what passes for expository preaching. His arguments are solid and his solution is biblically based, theologically sound, and practically achievable by the average reader.

One of the strengths of *PCL* is the wealth of practical suggestions contained in every chapter. The reader will find workable suggestions many of which are easily implemented even by pastors with small congregations and limited resources.

Additionally, most of the suggestions are ones Fabarez has "road tested" in his own

church. Not only are the suggestions practical and achievable, in many cases he provides biblical examples or support for what he is advocating. He makes the case for application in preaching by pointing to amount of application as well as the nature of its use in the preaching of the Lord and His apostles.

A second major strength is the spiritual and inspirational flavor Fabarez has woven into the fabric of PCL. His chapter on prayer in the preparation stage of preaching is worth the price of the book. His appeal to integrity and authenticity in the life of the preacher is a much needed reminder given the moral crisis present in the evangelical Church. His thrust on follow through after the message as well as practical ways to help the audience grasp and preserve the message is an emphasis almost never found in other books on preaching.

Clearly the book has much to commend it and will be a great blessing to the reader. However, there is one primary area that may concern some readers. His stress on application may give some readers cause to worry that he has joined application to hermeneutic process in inappropriate ways. While it is true that the exposition must be applicable to life and is intended by God to produce life change, the primary means by which this is accomplished is by confronting the hearer with the correct interpretation of the text and exhorting him to obey or to conform to the demands made by the text. Modern hermeneutics make application a part of the hermeneutic process when historically it has followed after the work of hermeneutics has been done. His emphasis on application and exposition may lead some to wonder if he has started down this dangerous path.

Two things help to alleviate these concerns. First, throughout the book Fabarez stresses the primacy of the text rightly interpreted. In the opinion of this reviewer, he does observe that part of accurate hermeneutics is to discover how the original author intended his meaning to be applied by the original audience. His approach is very different than the approach of modern hermeneutics whose proponents start with the life situation of the contemporary audience and bring their needs into the hermeneutical process.

Second, Fabarez clearly states that he is not advocating preaching that merely moralizes the text. Any application must rise out of the text and presented as possible only because of the finished work of Christ and the empowerment of the Spirit. He is not presenting the concept of life changing preaching by the persuasive power of the messenger, or by the independent effort of the hearer but by the power of God as the Spirit of God empowers the believer to obey and respond to the text.

Fabarez has made an important contribution to the literature of preaching. He has provided help in the area of application that is both theologically sound and practically useful. In the opinion of this reviewer, every expositor of Scripture who desires to see his preaching transform the lives of his people will benefit from this work.