

The
PRACTICES
of CHRISTIAN
PREACHING

*ESSENTIALS for EFFECTIVE
PROCLAMATION*

JARED E.
ALCÁNTARA

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Introduction

What does Charlie Parker have to do with preaching? The answer might surprise you. Parker rose to fame in the jazz music world in the late 1930s and, with Dizzy Gillespie, pioneered a new sound known as bebop. According to jazz historian Thomas Larson, “Charlie Parker’s legacy continues to shape jazz. It is almost impossible to escape his influence.”¹ Some claim that Parker is the greatest jazz musician who ever lived. On occasion, if a jazz musician from a country outside the United States performs boundary-crossing music, an expert might refer to that person as “the Charlie Parker of [insert nation here].”

At first glance, the *differences* between Parker and preachers stand out more than the similarities. Parker hung out in jazz clubs. Preachers hang out in churches. Based on what we know from biographies, Parker would not have liked being associated with preachers; he made his distrust of organized religion widely known. Preachers have devoted their lives to Christian service. Parker struggled with alcoholism and frequent heroin use. Preachers tend toward piety. He died at the age of thirty-four and had so damaged his body that the coroner initially thought he was between fifty and sixty. Some of my preacher friends only use Christian-approved cuss words on the basketball court. You get the point. Despite the many differences, one similarity in particular brings the connection between Parker and preaching into focus, one point of convergence that can easily be overlooked. What does Charlie Parker have to do with preaching? In a word: *practice*.

Parker launched his career playing jazz in nightclubs in Kansas City at the age of sixteen or seventeen, and, at least at the very beginning, he

1. T. Larson, *History and Tradition of Jazz*, 127.



Figure 1.1. Charlie Parker

majored in zeal and minored in skill. He barely kept up with the career musicians on the stage, and it was clear to everyone that he was an amateur, a boy among men. Imagine trying your luck as a professional ballet dancer on a Friday night at Carnegie Hall in New York City or attempting to shoot three-pointers in an NBA Finals game and you will have some sense of what Parker was up against at the beginning.

As the story goes, one night in the spring of 1937, Parker tried his best to play the saxophone at a jam session in the Reno Club in Kansas City. The guest star at the club that night was Jo Jones, a drummer for Count Basie's Orchestra, one of the great swing bands in the United States. When Jones heard Parker that night, he thought Parker was so bad that he stopped playing the drums mid-song and threw a cymbal at Parker's feet from across the stage, a not-so-subtle hint that the time had come for him to make his exit.² Parker felt humiliated and, at that moment, he had to make a choice—quit playing jazz altogether or get better. If he wanted to improve, the professionals told him, he had to “woodshed”—a term that jazz musicians like to use as a noun and a verb. To woodshed means to practice with such relentless-

2. See Fordham, “A Teenage Charlie Parker Has a Cymbal Thrown at Him”; T. Larson, *History and Tradition of Jazz*, 127.

ness and tenacity that everything else revolves around getting better—it is a complete overhaul of one’s priorities. The term traces back to the idea of locking yourself in a woodshed, practicing your instrument for hours, and not coming out until you demonstrate exponential improvement. If a jazz musician tells someone “Go in the woodshed a little bit” or “Spend some more time woodshedding,” that is code language for “Put some *real* practice in if you expect to get better.”³

We do not know if Parker locked himself in an actual woodshed—that part of the story just might be apocryphal—but we *do* know that the cymbal-throwing incident changed the trajectory of his life. Put simply, he decided to practice. Just a few months later, in the summer of 1937, he played almost nightly with the George E. Lee Band as they toured the Ozarks (a mountainous region of Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Kansas). Whenever he was not on stage, he spent almost all of his spare time woodshedding—that is, practicing his instrument in a focused and deliberate way. He also kept at it when he returned to Kansas City at the end of that summer.

A pianist and band leader named Jay McShann recounts the first time he heard Parker’s unique sound: “So I walked up to Charlie after he finished playing and I asked him, I said, ‘Say man,’ I said, ‘where are you from?’ I said, ‘I thought I met most of the musicians around here.’ Well, he says, ‘I’m from Kansas City.’ But he says, ‘I’ve been gone for the last two or three months. Been down to the Ozarks woodshedding.’” In 1954, when a fellow saxophonist named Paul Desmond interviewed him about that time period, Parker told him, “I used to put in at least 11 to 15 hours a day. . . . I did that for over a period of three or four years.”⁴

Practice. For some of us it may seem odd to think of preaching this way, as a craft that one must practice. Perhaps it feels too human centered, technique based, even formulaic. Popular sayings like “Practice makes perfect” or “You win the game during practice” make sense when someone is talking about music, dance, sports, or academics, but something in us resists the idea of practicing sermons. If we focus too much attention on the *how*, will we not lose the *what* and the *who* of the sermon? Preaching is supposed to be a spiritual gift, a “divine charism” as the theologians like to say.

Why should we practice? We will overtake a few hurdles when we remember what should drive our desire to improve. When we reflect on what preaching is and how preaching works, our motivation to practice should increase rather than decrease. Put simply, we practice because our motivation is grounded in

3. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 54.

4. Vitale, “Birth of Bird.”

gospel reality—we love the God of the gospel and love to preach the gospel of God. We do not practice to curry favor with God or because of selfish ambition or because we long to be the center of attention. We grow as preachers because we have been called by God and because a task as noble as preaching should bring out the best in us.

Those who write introductory homiletics textbooks do not typically appeal to Romans 12:18 to make a case for preaching, but I suppose there is a first time for everything. The apostle Paul writes, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Note especially the first two phrases: “If it is possible” and “as far as it depends on you.”

Surely preaching does not “depend” on us, does it? On the one hand, preaching does not depend on us at all. God offers preaching to us as a means of grace, a divine gift through which human words re-present the Word of God in time and space. When it comes to the effects of preaching—the outcomes—only God has the power to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. Only God makes dry bones live. God depends on us about as much as a parent depends on a newborn. On the other hand, God does “depend” on us if, by that word, we mean that God entrusts to us a message and a ministry in which we have agency. When parents tell a teenager, “I am depending on you,” it usually means that they believe in them and that they trust them, but that they also expect them do their part when it comes to what is expected of them. Consider Paul’s statement once more. Even though God alone has the power to bring about total and lasting peace among people and between communities, nevertheless, Paul writes, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you . . .” For reasons that God only knows, God grants a surprising amount of agency to those who preach. Put simply, God wills to preach through preachers. William H. Willimon writes, “What amazes faithful preachers is not that we have managed to come up with words about God but rather that God has come up with words for us.”⁵ How strange that God would transform sinful preachers into news anchors for the gospel of Christ.

But are preachers really supposed to woodshed like Charlie Parker did? Just as in other areas of our lives, we get better at preaching when we practice. If you want to know how much practice matters to proficiency, just ask a high-school Spanish teacher how much language students will lose after graduation if they do not continue speaking it and improving at it. The truth is, we lose proficiency in *anything* we do not practice; our proficiency at the

5. Willimon, *How Odd of God*, 8–9. Philip Yancey writes, “In an awesome act of self-denial, God entrusted his reputation to ordinary people.” *Disappointment with God*, 162.

task weakens over time in much the same way that a muscle weakens without exercise. Practice may not make us perfect preachers, but it can make us better preachers.

The central claim of this book is that *preachers who cultivate life-giving preaching habits through deliberate practice will enhance their proficiency, grow in their commitment, and flourish in their homiletical ministry*. In the chapters that follow I will recommend five practices in particular, which I will outline shortly. But in a book focused so heavily on practice(s), I should offer a few caveats before proceeding.

First, I use the phrase “deliberate practice” intentionally, as deliberate practice means something different than normal practice, and I also want to signal to readers that I am *not* adding my voice to contemporary conversations on Christian practices in theology. According to K. Anders Ericsson, one of the leading researchers on practice and performance, a person must practice *in a certain way* in order to improve. Most of us make the mistake of assuming that “someone who has been driving for twenty years must be better than someone who has been driving for five.”⁶ Not necessarily. According to Ericsson and his colleague Robert Pool, “Research has shown that, generally speaking, once a person reaches that level of ‘acceptable’ performance and automaticity, the additional years of ‘practice’ don’t lead to improvement. If anything, the doctor or the teacher or the driver who’s been at it for twenty years is likely to be a bit worse than the one who’s been doing it for only five, and the reason is that these automated abilities gradually deteriorate in the absence of deliberate efforts to improve.”⁷

So if you have preached two times, it does not mean that you cannot preach, and if you have preached for twenty years, it does not mean that you can. Preachers must practice *in a certain way* in order to improve, regardless of how many sermons they have preached. “Generally the solution is not ‘try harder’ but rather ‘try differently.’”⁸ To engage in *deliberate* practice, Ericsson states, one must ascribe to at least four commitments, whether the task is driving, medicine, dancing, or preaching. One needs well-defined and specific goals, focused attention, a consistent feedback loop, and a willingness to get out of one’s comfort zone.⁹ This project prioritizes these commitments, but it does so in a more tacit manner through embedding them in book chapters, video discussions, sermon excerpts, and learning activities. I have structured this

6. Ericsson and Pool, *Peak*, 13.

7. Ericsson and Pool, *Peak*, 13.

8. Ericsson and Pool, *Peak*, 19.

9. Ericsson and Pool, *Peak*, 15–22. For more on deliberate practice, see also Ericsson, “Influence of Experience,” 685–705; Ericsson, *Road to Excellence*.

project in such a way as to give you as many opportunities as I can to “try differently” rather than “try harder.”

Second, this book’s approach to deliberate practice places it outside of the typical approaches that one finds in introduction to preaching books. Instead of following the standard formula of presenting readers with a method-centered, single author, monocultural, monolingual, text-based approach, it sets forth a practice-centered, intentionally collaborative, strategically diverse, consciously multilingual (English and Spanish versions), technologically interactive approach. Because I have organized the book’s chapters around practices, one will not find the same organization of material that one usually finds in a typical book on preaching. I have not written separate chapters on reading Scripture for preaching, form, genre, structure, preparation, or delivery. No doubt all of these subjects matter and should receive adequate attention when one is learning how to preach. There are already many excellent homiletics books that follow the typical format. Perhaps I will publish another book someday that structures its content according to these categories. Perhaps not. I have woven some (but not all) of these themes into this book but also want to emphasize to the reader that I have adopted a different organizational framework. This strategy attempts to engage the teaching and learning needs that are emerging in diverse twenty-first-century preaching classrooms, and it also represents a logical outworking of the dispositional convictions and pedagogical recommendations that I laid out in my first book, *Crossover Preaching*.¹⁰

Students who read this book will have opportunities to learn about each of the five practices that I recommend, to see and hear audio and video clips of sermons, to engage with the video contributions of the collaboration team, and to take advantage of individual and group learning activities in each chapter through the companion website: www.PracticesofChristianPreaching.com.

Third and finally, *what* we preach matters, not just *how* we preach. As St. Augustine reminds us, “There is a danger of forgetting what one has to say while working out a clever way to say it.”¹¹ Those who preach are called to engage in the practice of *Christian* preaching. Just as a builder cannot build a house without making sure that solid foundations are laid beforehand, so also a preacher cannot build a strong and abiding preaching ministry without building it the right way, for the right reasons, and with the right foundations.

In chapter 1, I explain why we should preach *Christian* sermons rather than the many pseudo-gospels that we are sometimes tempted to preach. Then, in

10. See Alcántara, *Crossover Preaching*.

11. Book IV, 11–12 in Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 103.

chapters 2–6, I recommend five deliberate practices designed to help preachers cultivate life-giving habits that enhance proficiency, grow commitment, and lead to homiletical flourishing. The practices that I will propose are *conviction*, *contextualization*, *clarity*, *concreteness*, and *creativity*. All five begin with the same letter in English and in Spanish which I hope will make them easier to learn and remember. The shorthand I use for them is the Five Cs. Think of these practices not so much as constitutive of a method you must master but as healthy habits you can implement over time. They invite you to pursue a “growth mindset” over a “fixed mindset” when it comes to your development as a preacher.¹² Here is a brief summary of each practice.

Preach Convictionally: Since God sees fit to preach through preachers, we foreground conviction inside and outside of the pulpit. We watch out for complacency and indifference in ministry and pursue life-giving habits that promote health and prevent homiletical burnout.

Preach Contextually: We preach to a particular group of people at a particular point in time. We consider what it sounds like to preach to the community where we are, to embrace the uniqueness of the place where God has called us to be, and to resist the dangers of undercontextualizing and overcontextualizing.

Preach Clearly: As the old saying goes, “A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew.” If we do not have clarity on what we want to say and how we want to say it, how can we expect others to understand us? We practice clarity through concise exegesis, accessible language, a clear main idea, and commitment to brevity.

Preach Concretely: Many of us preach in abstract generalities rather than with concrete specificity. Our sermons remain at thirty-five thousand feet and never make their way to sea level. As preachers, we practice concreteness through focusing on specific details in the biblical text and through working hard on illustrating and applying in our sermons.

12. The terminology of “fixed mindset” and “growth mindset” comes from Stanford University psychology professor Carol S. Dweck and her pioneering work on mindset theory. Dweck writes: “For thirty years, my research has shown that *the view you adopt for yourself* profoundly affects the way you lead your life. . . . Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the *fixed mindset*—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over.” *Mindset*, 6; emphasis in original. By contrast, she argues, a “*growth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.” *Mindset*, 7. Dweck’s understanding of “growth mindset” comports well with the underlying approach, structure, and pedagogical assumptions laid out in this book.

The Practices of Christian Preaching

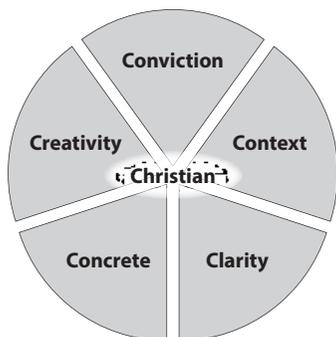


Figure I.2. Overview of the Five Cs

Preach Creatively: Preachers confront numerous roadblocks in ministry that stifle the creative process; some are environmental, others structural, and still others self-imposed. We grow in the practice of creativity when we remove specific obstacles that prevent it and pursue practices that catalyze creative thinking, processing, and production.

Consult figure I.2 for a visual way of thinking about the Five Cs.

For each of the Five Cs, readers are encouraged to access learning activities on our companion website. Some of the activities invite you to reflect through writing, others direct you to discussions between expert teachers in homiletics, still others connect you with audio and video clips of sermons. The various questions, audio and video clips, and collaborative discussions will help you to cultivate the practices that I propose in this book. Whenever you encounter a writer, a multimedia clip, or a perspective that feels unfamiliar or perhaps uncomfortable, resist the urge to shut down or be dismissive. Push through the discomfort that you experience with the encounter: whether that is the author I cite, the preacher you hear/watch, or the perspective you hear from someone whose background and preaching experiences are markedly different than your own. Disorientation can be a positive experience if it is used as a catalyst for learning and growth, leading to reorientation as a result. Try to keep an open mind, especially when you encounter divergence from your own experience.

Preaching really does have the power to change people's lives and, dare I say, to change the world. If you believe this is true of preaching, why would you not want to get better at it? If God has entrusted you with such an audacious and ennobling task, why would you not want to give your very best to

it? For if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, engage in the deliberate practice of Christian preaching, and perhaps you and even those who listen to you will notice that you play clearer, better music. The gospel that you preach is worthy of the hours that you spend in the woodshed preparing to preach it.

1

Preach Christian Sermons

Church X has the sterile feel of an operating theater. . . . The sermon—on justice to one’s fellows—has so squeezed out any mention of God or Jesus, maybe to sound modern, there’s no sense of history. The pastor asks for peace and gives thanks for plenty, but the homily might come from *Reader’s Digest*.

—Mary Karr, *Lit: A Memoir*

A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that?

—Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*

About nine miles from where I grew up in New Jersey, a beautiful colonial town called Hopewell greets you like a lost time capsule that has just been discovered. The town, established by colonists in 1691, has curved roads, rolling hills, classic homes, and a historic downtown that seem like they belong in a fairy tale rather than real life. Drive north on Broad Street, the historic main road, and you will see an old colonial cemetery on your right. Directly adjacent to the cemetery stands a regal, red-brick building. Its location and architecture suggest that it probably used to be a church. You park your car, get out, and notice a little white sign by the door that reads “Hopewell Old School Baptist Meeting House.” It turns out that people used

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Figures 1.1. and 1.2. Exterior Views of Hopewell Church

to meet here—to worship here. You head home that night determined to learn more about the beautiful red-brick church on Broad Street, so you decide to conduct some research in local libraries. You also enlist the help of Google, your trusty research assistant.

You discover that the church opened its doors for the first time in 1715 with fifteen charter members. Then, in 1727, it established the first Baptist school in the colonies for “the education of youths for the ministry.”¹ By 1747 the congregation had grown to sixty-five. Several revivals swept through the Northeast during the next few decades and in a twelve-month span in 1764 the church added 123 converts to its growing congregation. It added 105 more in 1775–76. A new pastor came in 1796, and by the time he finished his term ten years later, he had baptized 151 more people. By all accounts, it seemed like the people who worshiped there lived like Great-Commission Christians. It looked as though nothing could go wrong for the Hopewell Old School Baptist Meeting House. What happened next took place not overnight but over time. It did not hinge on one particular decision.

In the early 1800s, the church’s leaders embraced some of the latest doctrinal teachings, which in this case were heterodox rather than orthodox. They also lost their passion for people to know and be found by Christ by ignoring the mandate to make disciples, to be God’s witnesses in the world. Experts might use the phrase “mission drift” to describe what took place at the red-brick church in Hopewell.² In 1835, the church split from

1. Griffiths, *History of Baptists in New Jersey*, 68.

2. Greer and Horst, *Mission Drift*.

the Baptist Conference of New Jersey because it (and other churches) decided to embrace a false teaching called antinomianism. Decades later, in 1904, when just a handful of laypeople remained in attendance on Sunday mornings, Thomas Sharp Griffiths, a Baptist historian, wrote these words in his *History of Baptists in New Jersey*: “It is the prayer of Baptists that the venerable First Hopewell Church will return to her ‘first love’ again. . . . A glorious past, is to her a robe of white, except as it has been soiled by associations and which darkens her future. When again, she incorporates the last commission of our Lord into her activities, we will rejoice together in her ‘walking with God.’”³

Not long after Griffiths made these comments, the church held its final worship service and shuttered its doors. Today the building serves as a historic landmark and is designated for civic purposes. Local leaders open it once a year for a flag ceremony.

Stories like this one sadden us as ministers, as well they should. They also remind us of how easy it is for churches to lose their way. Again, it does not happen overnight but over time. A church can drift without standing in clear opposition to the gospel. Presumably, the writer of Hebrews warned his readers not to “drift away” because they *were* faithful believers, not because they had wandered far from the faith (Heb. 2:1). As preachers, if we are not careful, we will also drift not because we are swimming against the tide but because we are swimming with it. Anyone who has gone swimming in an ocean with a strong current knows how easy it is to look over at the beach and notice that you are fifty to one hundred feet north or south from where you entered the water. Often without even realizing it we lose touch with the gospel as our fixed point of reference and thereby neglect our responsibility to proclaim it.

In this chapter, we consider why it is so important to preach *Christian* sermons. As I stated previously, if we miss the call to preach Christianly, then we miss out on our primary task as gospel witnesses. The Five Cs hinge on the basic conviction that preaching Christianly is at the center of everything we do. I have placed the word “Christian” at the center of the accompanying figure in order to communicate that everything else we do grows out of preaching Christianly.

First, we will define and describe the gospel that we preach. Then we will discuss the pseudo-gospels that we are (sometimes) tempted to preach. Then, in the final section, we will consider various proposals concerning our call to preach Christian sermons.

3. Griffiths, *History of Baptists in New Jersey*, 72.



Figure 1.3. The Five Cs: Christian

The Gospel That We Preach

Preachers without the gospel are like reservoirs without water. They do not serve their intended purpose. We claim to have a grasp of the gospel, and we believe the gospel. But for various reasons we forget to preach it. Our problem is not a new one. According to Emil Brunner, “At every period in the history of the Church, the greatest sin of the church, and the one which causes the greatest distress, is that *she withholds the Gospel from the world and herself*.”⁴ Perhaps if Brunner had mentioned only the world and not the church, then that would make more sense to us. But what if he is right? What if the world does not hear a compelling vision of the gospel outside the church’s walls because we do not preach a compelling version of it inside the church’s walls?

Before proceeding any further, perhaps we should ask a few basic questions: *What is the gospel? What language should we use to describe it? Why is it good news?* Even if we tried to posit in-depth responses to these questions, we would only skim the surface. For the purposes of this chapter, I will provide a basic definition of the gospel, and I will highlight five distinguishing marks that add depth and texture to that definition.

Defining the Gospel

Succinct definitions of the gospel abound. Gardner C. Taylor defines the gospel as follows: “God is out to get back what belongs to him.”⁵ Notice that God is the one who does the seeking. David James Randolph defines the

4. Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, 565 (emphasis added).

5. G. Taylor, “Sweet Torture of Sunday Morning (Interview),” 20.

gospel this way: “Love which is desirable for life is available in Jesus Christ.”⁶ In this definition, spiritual life and vitality find their source in Jesus Christ. In *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth emphasizes a Christocentric announcement: “Jesus Christ, very God and very man, has come as its [the world’s] Savior and will come again. This is the announcement of the kingdom of God. This is the Gospel.”⁷ Here the focus is on Christ’s work, his promises, and the kingdom he brings.⁸ Back in 2017, I heard Thomas G. Long present a paper on the preaching of Jesus at a homiletics symposium in which he summarized Jesus’s message of good news as, “You don’t have to live this way anymore.”⁹

In defining the gospel, Christians often appeal to well-known texts of Scripture. Some like to quote John 3:16: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Others appeal to Romans 5:8: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Some highlight Christ as a sin offering on our behalf by quoting from 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Still others appeal to lesser-known texts like 2 Timothy 2:8: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.” Each of these passages of Scripture and many other well-known texts focus the attention on the person and work of Jesus Christ, a theme we will return to in a moment.

I define the gospel as *an announcement and a call from God through Jesus Christ that welcomes us into covenant relationship*. It is an *announcement* of the good news that the triune God is reconciling the world to himself through Christ—his life, death, and resurrection—instead of counting our

6. Randolph, *Renewal of Preaching*, 29.

7. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 4, *Doctrine of Creation*, 506.

8. Reeves writes,

We naturally gravitate, it seems, to anything but Jesus—and Christians almost as much as anyone. Whether it’s “the Christian worldview,” “grace,” “the Bible,” or “the gospel,” as if they were things in themselves that could save us. Even “the cross” can get abstracted from Jesus, as if the wood had some power of its own. Other things, wonderful things, vital concepts, beautiful discoveries so easily edge Jesus aside. Precious theological concepts meant to describe *him* and *his* work get treated as things in their own right. He becomes just another brick in the wall. But the center, the cornerstone, the jewel in the crown of Christianity is not an idea, a system or a thing; it is not even “the gospel” as such. It is Jesus Christ. He is not a mere topic, a subject we can pick out from a menu of options. Without him, our gospel, our system—however grace-filled or Bible-based—simply is not Christian. (*Rejoicing in Christ*, 10)

9. I attended Long’s presentation, “The Preaching of Jesus,” at the National Symposium on Preaching, Truett Theological Seminary, Waco, TX, September 11–12, 2017.

sins against us (2 Cor. 5:16–21; Col. 1:19–20); and it is a *call* to individuals, systems, and the whole world to acknowledge and follow Jesus by responding to God’s grace through faith (Rom. 1:5; 5:2; Eph. 2:6–9) and by re-presenting Christlikeness through love (Ps. 89:1; John 13:34–35; Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:6; 1 Pet. 2:9–11).

The gospel is newsworthy because it offers new life for those dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1–10), freedom for those held in captivity (Isa. 58:6–7; Luke 4:18–19), and the promise of a new reality for a world bound to powers of an age that is passing away (John 3:17; Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 6:12). It repairs the

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broken relationship between God and humanity through divinely initiated reconciliation—that is, through God exchanging enmity for covenantal relationship through Christ’s death on the cross, resurrection victory at Easter, and promise of new life.¹⁰ The enmity that God exchanges for relationship at the vertical level also functions as a model for reconciliation at the horizontal level in and through the life of the church as guided by the Holy Spirit. Those who have been reconciled

to God through Christ become reconcilers for God in Christ. As a community saved by grace and grounded in hope, the church proclaims to the world the good news of vertical and horizontal reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–20). Because of Christ, relationships characterized by enmity and estrangement have the capacity to be transformed into relationships characterized by intimacy and love (Jer. 31:31–34). The church functions as an outpost of heaven (Phil. 3:20), performing God’s vision for the world in the present and signposting a future vision in which all things are made new (Isa. 40:3–5; 65:17–25; Matt. 5:13–16; 6:9–10; Rev. 21:5).

In addition to announcing, the gospel calls for a response. In Christ, Lesslie Newbigin writes, “something has altered the total human situation and must therefore call into question every human culture.”¹¹ Through Christ, God calls humankind *out of* sin, death, and destruction *into* repentance, faith,

10. In using the language of exchange to define reconciliation, I am indebted to the work of New Testament scholar Stanley E. Porter, who has written an extensive study on *katallasso*, the primary word (and its cognates) used for “reconcile” in the New Testament. Porter argues that reconciliation conveys the idea of exchange at both the literal and figurative levels. He writes, “*Katallasso* seems to have been used by Greek writers with two major senses, that of exchange of goods or things (although *antikatallasso* was widely used in this kind of context, especially in later writers), and that of eliminating hostility and creating friendship (i.e. exchanging enmity for friendship).” *Katallasso in Ancient Greek Literature*, 13.

11. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 3.

and transformation. Although we wrestle and struggle and fall and fail, we do so grounded in a gospel of grace and mercy that summons us out of our penchant for self-destruction. God graciously pulls us away from our subjection because of sin toward life in the Spirit because of righteousness (Rom. 8:10–11). Life in the Spirit looks like Christ followers embodying the vision of God in the world through their character, conduct, and action. That is to say, it looks like faith gone public. To be children of God means that we are partners in the mission of God in the world and that we reorient our lives around that mission. Those whom God has encountered through Christ in the Spirit cannot continue in complacency or indifference, living as if nothing radical had “altered the total human situation,” but instead are *compelled* into mission, into a new way of living, being, and acting in the world.

The gospel does not leave room for neutrality. C. S. Lewis writes, “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”¹² Those who hear the gospel promise heed its directive to live Christlike lives of surrender, discipleship, and mission. They (we) believe in a gospel that looses people from the shackles of their allegiance to and affection for an age that is passing away, one that sets them free to reframe their allegiance and restore their affection for a God who has incontrovertibly inaugurated an age that has come, is come, and will come: the kingdom of heaven. Preachers have the privilege of announcing the good news that the kingdom of God has been established and will one day be realized in all of its fullness, and they also have the solemn responsibility to remind all who will listen—“You don’t have to live this way anymore.”¹³

Describing the Gospel

Now that we have outlined a basic definition of the gospel, we will consider several of its distinguishing marks. I will propose five marks in particular that will offer readers more nuance, texture, and depth to the definition provided. Preachers preach a gospel that is transformative, offensive, hopeful, prophetic, and eschatological (see fig. 1.4).

12. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 102. The Baptist preacher George W. Truett puts it this way: “We must openly take sides with Christ, and follow with prompt and unflinching obedience, wherever he leads. . . . Not to take sides with Christ is to take sides against Him.” From the sermon “Taking Sides,” in *Follow Me*, 184–85.

13. Not coincidentally, Jesus and Paul “proclaim[ed] the good news of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; see also Matt. 9:35; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:2, 6; Acts 29:27). As preachers, we announce what they announced—namely, the good news of kingdom inbreaking through Christ.

A TRANSFORMATIVE GOSPEL

We preach a transformative gospel. It has the power to change individuals, families, friendships, communities, and even nations. As preachers, we know this to be the case because we too have been gripped by what Thomas Chalmers calls “the expulsive power of a new affection.”¹⁴ Theologically speaking, transformation takes place in justification, sanctification, and glorification. At its simplest, justification means that Christ—through his life, death, and resurrection—has reversed our verdict from “guilty” to “innocent” before God by declaring us righteous. Sanctification means steady growth in day-to-day Christ-likeness over time. Glorification represents the consummation of our salvation, when our earthly bodies are resurrected.

Practically speaking, transformation occurs when disciples learn from and follow in the way of Jesus even if doing so leads them

in a direction they would rather not go (John 21:18). Jesus said “Follow me” to Peter at the beginning of his journey in discipleship (Mark 1:17), and he said “Follow me” to Peter at the end (John 21:22). A disciple listens to and heeds the call of God, “Follow me,” more than just the first time these words are uttered. One steadily moves out of self-centeredness and isolation toward other-centeredness and engagement in order to be transformed and transformative. To follow in the way of Jesus is to follow him wherever he wills to take us even if it means bearing “the disgrace he bore” (Heb. 13:13). The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama writes, “The periphery is the place of discipleship. If we follow Jesus we will come to the periphery with him. The periphery is the place of the cross. It is the place where we are asked to save others and not ourselves.”¹⁵

AN OFFENSIVE GOSPEL

We preach an offensive gospel. Perhaps you know the *New Yorker* cartoon that portrays a wealthy couple leaving church after exchanging pleasantries with the Sunday morning preacher. As they exit, the wife in her fur coat and clad in jewelry says to her husband wearing a top hat, “It can’t be easy for him not to offend us.”¹⁶ There really is no way around the offensive dimensions

14. Chalmers, *Sermons and Discourses*, 2:271–78.

15. Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai*, 251–52.

16. *New Yorker* cartoon cited in Gomes, *Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, 18–19.