

Probing the Passage 1: Handling Paul's Theoretical Writing

Ephesians 1:1–2:10 is one of the most famous, and most densely constructed, passages in all of Paul's biblical writing. A proper understanding of this passage is essential for our understanding of the rest of the book, both in terms of its content and its theological significance. The challenge for the Bible teacher is how to handle such a passage with profound understanding, in order to communicate with clarity and simplicity.

Peter Mead is the director of Cor Deo, a mentored study and ministry training programme in Chippenham, England. As well as regular preaching in the local church, Peter also ministers for Operation Mobilisation as a Bible teacher, and has served as a trainer with Langham Preaching. Peter studied at Multnomah Biblical Seminary before getting his Doctor of Ministry degree under Haddon Robinson at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in the area of expository preaching. Peter is the author of BiblicalPreaching.net. He is married, with five children.

Ephesians 1:1–2:10 (ESV)

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, **4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love **5** he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, **8** which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight **9** making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ **10** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. **11** In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined

according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰ that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power

of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Heartfelt Explanation

A common mistake is to assume that the explanation of the text will be dull, but the application should make up for this by riveting relevance and powerful personal punch. An alternative, but sibling error, is to think that the illustrations will be the source of heartfelt energy, while the text explained remains dull.

Some preliminary thoughts on preaching to the heart:

1. The text is a heartfelt composition, it makes no sense to sterilize it. Sometimes we need to re-tune our theological ears so that we hear inspired human communication, rather than just theological proposition transfer embedded in inspired packaging. If you don't hear a heart beating in the Psalms you are really in trouble. And what about narratives written by someone who cares deeply that the story be heard? And even the epistles are far more rich in tone than we tend to make them sound.

2. The text communicates to the heart, don't neutralize it. Epistles don't just inform, they were written to stir, to encourage, to rebuke, etc. Poetry, almost by definition, is meant for pondering and heartfelt response. Narratives, by nature, will captivate, characters drawing us in to identify, or causing us to disassociate, tension in the plot gripping the listener for more than just a statement of truth, but for truth dressed up in real life. We have a habit of disengaging truths from the packaging in which they come. This is not to minimize the importance of truth, but to recognize that God's choice of genre packaging was intentional and effective for life transformation.

3. God reveals His heart in the Word, don't hide it. The Bible is, supremely, God's self-revelation. But we're often too quick to cover over that self-revelation. Oh, that's just an anthropomorphism (using human form descriptors to communicate about God who is Spirit and absolutely nothing at all like us), or worse, an anthropopathism (same again, this time removing any possibility that God might have any passions at all)! Really? God only pretending to have emotion? Our theological assumptions can quickly override the plain truth of Scripture and leave us with a God so distant and uncaring that he might as well be the god of the Greek philosophers, and a Jesus only feeling and loving and dying "in his humanity," and other such confusion.

Preaching to the heart is not primarily a matter of homiletical technique. It is an issue of our theological assumptions and the accuracy of our exegesis.

4. Dispassionate presentation is not honest, be sure to incarnate it. Some are committed to being as dispassionate as possible in presentation. *"If I let my own heart response show, then I*

might distract listeners from the information in the text.” The text is therefore offered at arms length, and typically received as such. It should make us stop and wonder why we see no support for dispassionate preaching in the biblical record. Some preaching is more like 1980’s washing powder advertising than biblical preaching.

5. When we add “affect” to the text, we are in danger of manipulation or emotionalism.

Why do we assume the text is dull and that our job is to add a stirring or rousing challenge? Why do we think the text is dull, but we can add windows to the building by fascinating little illustrations? I’m not against effective challenge, nor helpful “illustration”, but I am bothered by the assumption that the Bible is sterile and flat. If we would reflect the affect of the text better, perhaps we’d see more listeners genuinely stirred by it. When we simply add our own impact, we shouldn’t be surprised when people seem superficially stirred, or uncomfortably annoyed.

6. When we remove “affect” from the text, we are in danger of dulling hearts.

Some preachers don’t preach to the heart. They take a vibrant and living Word and turn it into dull lecture material for the heads of their listeners. Do we really want churches full of well-informed heads with dulled, or hardened, hearts? If our theology and view of ministry leads us in that direction, please let’s respond to the warning flag and evaluate where we might have gone slightly off target. Or to put it another way, if you think preaching is simply about informing people in a dull manner, please stop preaching for the sake of your listeners. Take a sabbatical and prayerfully chase God’s heart on the issue through the Bible.

Preaching to the heart matters, because the heart matters. And preaching to the heart is not primarily an issue of application or challenge, it is at the very centre of our explanation. God’s heart revealed, in heartfelt inspired texts, should be felt by the hearts of those hearing it properly presented.

<http://biblicalpreaching.net/2012/06/15/heartfelt-explanation-preaching-to-the-heart/>

Recommended resources

www.biblicalpreaching.net – daily posts from Peter Mead relating to sermon preparation, delivery and the life of the preacher.

www.cordeo.org.uk – weekly posts from Peter Mead and Ron Frost relating to spiritual formation and applied theology.

www.theologynetwork.org – excellent resources, including many on the delight to be found in God as trinity.