

## **One on One with Colin Smith** **Transformational Expository Preaching**

*“But Pastor, why don’t you preach on something relevant? I need help with my marriage, raising my children and advice on saving for retirement. How can a book of the Bible like 1 Corinthians or Deuteronomy relate to me?”*

How do we relate an ancient text to a modern world? Preachers adopt a variety of ways to connect their message to their audience. Recent decades witnessed a swing away from classical expository preaching and the elevation of need based topical sermons. Don’t misunderstand me; topical preaching has a valid place in the church. But in our zest to connect with the sophisticated world, have we come up spiritually undernourished by ignoring expository preaching?

Colin Smith, Senior Pastor of the Arlington Heights Evangelical Free Church, believes many of us may have inadvertently done this. At the October Great Lakes District Conference of the Free Church, Colin taught a track on Transformational Expository Preaching, a rethinking of expository preaching for our day.

I sat down with Colin, listened to his heart and found myself emboldened to unashamedly anchor my preaching in the ancient text as I preach to everyday needs.

Join me as we sit down with Colin and listen to his heartbeat for the pulpit.

### **Colin, you champion expository preaching. How does expository preaching connect with our everyday needs?**

I stick with expository preaching because God promised to bless His Word and the blessing will be upon the words of the preachers as they are a faithful reflection of the words God gives us in Scripture. It would be an absolute disaster if God gave us 66 books of His inspired Word and the best thing I could think of to do on a Sunday morning is give people my opinion on how they can do life better.

The preacher is entrusted to communicate what God entrusted to us. One must recognize there are some inherent problems with topical preaching. First of all, it assumes I know the needs of people better than God does. God knows what we need and that is what he gave us in His Word. We must be careful when we create our own solutions to people’s needs and then simply attach Bible texts to support them. Coming to the scriptures first allows God to set the agenda of what our real needs actually are. Many times what we think we need and what God says we need are two different things. Expository preaching lets God’s analysis of people’s needs set the agenda.

Now I realize this can go astray and this is why I like the term “transformational expository preaching”. I am very concerned about preaching that is merely Bible explanation that sounds something like a running commentary rather than a sermon. Preaching is not just making comments on Bible texts, as John Stott describes it, preaching is a bridge between two worlds.

In my own pastoral work I have seen how the preacher can teach the text, but not adequately connect it to people's lives. We need to be every bit as intentional about connecting the text to the people as we are about understanding the text.

Transformational expository preaching is preaching driven by the text of Scripture, because there is nothing better to say than what God has to say, and it is what God has to say to us today.

To apply the text I must know the needs of the people. Pastors are not to just be in their study; pastors need to pastor, they need to be with their people. As we meet with those in pain, weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, we understand the needs of our people and we see how God applies his timeless words to His people. It is the Word of God, not the preacher that changes people's lives. The preacher's power is only found in his ability to take the Word in one hand and our lives in the other and bring them together.

I have seen young men fall into the trap of what I call "cerebral expository preaching." This is preaching that is scripturally sound, but it is not brought to bear upon the needs of the congregation. It is not earthed. People put up with it for a while, but when the pastor leaves, the congregation longs for a topical preacher because they have never heard how God's Word brings encouragement and hope to their lives. This "Cerebral Expository Preaching" is what killed expository preaching in many churches.

**So it is important for the pastor to not just study the text, but to study the people. How do you address the needs of the people when you are constrained to preaching chronologically through a book?**

I think there are two parts to this. First is the necessity of doing pastoral work, not just being a preacher. As I said before, knowing the needs of the people helps the Holy Spirit apply the text to their lives. This is a pressure for me serving in a larger church. I don't necessarily need to do pastoral work. I have a staff. People don't expect me to see them. When I invite people in, they are surprised. While I can't do this for everyone in the church, I do this for some. The reason I do it is because if I don't, it will shrivel me. The effectiveness of my preaching will diminish if I spend all my time with one hand in the text, but fail to use the other hand to touch the people.

Second, as part of my preparation process, I try to think intentionally every week about who is in the congregation. I think about how the text relates to the middle school kids, to the children, to the unconverted, to the woman having an operation, to the man who is bereaved of his wife. Mentally bringing the text to the congregation drives me to say, "What does the Scripture say to them?"

Being in touch with the wounds and worries also helps me avoid a pitfall many preachers fall into, that is preaching all Law and not Gospel. The message of the Bible is to lift high Christ and what God has done for us through Christ. Who we are in Christ is the foundation and motivation of all that we seek to do in life. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism has all the Law of God in a section entitled, "Gratitude." That is brilliant! The whole of the Christian life is lived as an

expression of gratitude for who we are in Christ. It is life dependent and delighting in the Spirit.

There is a lot of preaching today that wouldn't give you the impression the Christian life is responding to what God has done for us through Christ. Most preaching is about what we do for God by obeying the great commission, making sure we love God adequately, dealing with the sin in our lives. This kind of preaching is a bunch of law and it is laid on people who really need to be fed Christ.

The topical preacher can fall into this trap because at the end of the day, all "how to do life" sermons are law. They are about what we can do, what we ought to do, what we should do. This appeals to our ego, but it isn't the message of the Bible. The Bible message is that we live life as an expression of gratitude for undeserved grace.

### **What words of advice do you have for younger preachers trying to share the gospel in our culture?**

If the focus of our preaching is on how to do life, we will need to push heavily in the direction of cultural sensitivity. If we are about preaching Christ, what God has done for us in Christ and how that enables us to live in this ever changing world today; then we don't need to worry as much about cultural sensitivity. What God has done for us in Christ and how that enables us to live in the world is really no different from what God has done for anyone else in every other time.

There are some good things we can learn from material about cultural sensitivity, but I am often left wondering what the author really thinks is important for the Christian? What does the author think really changes lives; cultural sensitivity or Christ? For many authors, it doesn't seem to be the Gospel. Focusing first on the culture undercuts the real message, which is the transformational power of Jesus.

For example, the trend in our culture is a fascination with what is "Uniquely You" but the Bible addresses "What is Commonly Us." Every one of us is plagued with original sin; every one of us is born alienated from God. Every one of us is powerless to save ourselves. God sent his Son into the world for us. In Christ is found everything we need to face life this week.

What is life in this world? This week I prayed with a 10-year-old child who is going through open-heart surgery as we speak. What is going to help him? To know he is secure in the love of Christ. How is that need different from a guy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or a guy in Australia or a woman in the Middle East? It seems to me that our focus should not be on relevance to particular niche groups, but on bigger things that are common amongst all of us. If I properly understand how Christ addresses the bigger issues that we all wrestle with, that is what I need to communicate. In any situation, in any culture, in any age, in any crisis we are to focus our eyes on Jesus.

## Preachers often change their preaching style over the years. How has your preaching changed?

My preaching has become more Christian. I looked back upon my preaching in the early years and I came to the devastating conclusion that it was not Christian preaching. It was Law centered. I used to preach Law, Law, Law... here is what you should do to be a Godly person. The problem was that there was nothing Christian about it! When I was younger I didn't preach messages that exalted Christ, and the hope we have in him, as the center of our lives.

Jay Adams reminds us to ask of every sermon the question, "Is this Christian?" "Would I be thrown out of a mosque or synagogue for preaching this?" I love those questions. Through the years, I learned to make Christ the centerpiece of my words.

With those closing words, Colin was off to teach another track on "Transformational Expository Preaching." Did God's Spirit speak a word of encouragement to you? Many expository preachers are known for being more informational than transformational. It doesn't have to be that way. With one hand planted firmly in the text and the other planted firmly in the lives of our people, God uses preachers as a cable to flow the grace of Christ to our desperate world.

Let us preach what is uniquely Christian.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at [ktruck@gmail.com](mailto:ktruck@gmail.com) or visit his web at [www.kurtrucksess.com](http://www.kurtrucksess.com)

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