

The background of the cover is a complex geometric pattern of teal and blue triangles. A large, dark navy blue circle is centered on the page, containing the title and subtitle. A small teal square is positioned between the title and subtitle within the circle. A solid black vertical bar runs along the left edge of the cover, containing a small white logo at the bottom.

Teaching the Hard Parts of Scripture

LEADERS & STAFF



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Practical Ministry Skills: Teaching the Hard Parts of Scripture

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TEACHING THE HARD PARTS OF SCRIPTURE

Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of church ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This special theme on **Teaching the Hard Parts of Scripture** is designed to help you prepare yourself and your teachers to address the most difficult and taboo topics in the Bible and culture. You may either use these handouts for personal edification or for a group training session. Or you may choose to provide copies to the church board, staff members, or those involved with specific ministry teams at your church. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

We hope this training tool will guide your efforts and encourage you as you seek to improve the emotional health of your church. And ultimately, we hope that your congregation, your ministry, and you will be blessed as you see God working through your ministry.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com.

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Preaching Hard Truth in an Age of Grace*Difficult passages help us understand the true nature of grace.*

Hebrews 12:18-26

A young man approached me after I'd preached on [Mark 8:34](#) ("If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"). I'd quoted Bonhoeffer: "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." The young man hemmed and hawed, then said plaintively, "I feel I never do enough for God, so a sermon like that is hard for me."

There it was—the theological tension between doing and grace. The tension was clearly expressed in that young disciple's face. I felt the weight, too. Had I somehow turned "deny yourself and take up your cross" into a way to earn salvation? Had I shortchanged grace?

In-your-face, prophetic preaching poses a challenge for gospel preachers. How do you get up and preach, "Repent and sin no more," when the congregation has just sung "Jesus Paid It All"? Prophetic preaching often goes to the dark heart of bad behavior just when our people have gotten used to hearing about "grace that is greater than all our sins."

The potency of New Testament preaching is not in scaring the hell out of people. There is the urgency of *must* in prophetic sermons, sure, but grace adds the beautiful counter melodies of *forgiven* and *able*. Our preaching is one way God fulfills his new covenant promise to write his law on our hearts.

[Hebrews 12:18-26](#) explains: "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire ... but you have come to Mount Zion ... to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant." Living on Mount Zion has this in common with the responsibility laid upon God's people at Mount Sinai—"See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks." But for gospel preachers, these demands are tuned to grace.

Gospel preachers bring more potency to the *oughts* and *musts* of holy living than Old Testament prophets ever could. The gospel sends us out to do right, to deny ourselves, to wash feet—but to do so because God is our loving Father, because in Jesus we are forgiven already, because the Spirit places God's love in our hearts.

Yet there is something about passages heavy with commands that stirs the moralist in us. Why is it so easy to sound angry, to become religious taskmasters? Jesus warned of teachers who "tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." It is hard to do justice to both law and grace in our preaching.

We are most likely to find the tender balance when we have processed our texts through our own hearts in prayer before we stand to preach. We confront ourselves there in God's presence with his righteous commands and take the measure not only of our righteousness but also of our faith. We see what we can do and what we can't. Then we bring to our sermons sympathy born of our own struggle. We invite people into our own Gethsemane and urge them to "watch and pray lest you fall into temptation."

We misunderstand grace if we think it's only about forgiveness. Grace has backbone. It was grace that confronted the rich young ruler with his poverty. It is God's grace that warns us of hell and shows us the glory of God till we say, "Woe is me!"

Grace is what we're sent out to offer to others, without price. It's not just something that we are forever taking from God. In preaching, we insist that God's people carry grace, and we outfit them with grace. Preaching that is alive with grace wrenches the remote control from people's hands, snaps off the TV, and pushes them out the door to live like Jesus.

My heart went out to the young man who stood before me in the foyer. I told him how I struggled with the same battle of fearing my failures. Then a gospel idea dawned on me.

I'd said in my sermon that Peter received power only after his crowing denials woke him to his deep need. I reminded the young man of that. "When you see your own inadequacy so clearly, you are near that place where Peter died to himself. That is where you find Jesus' grace to strengthen you."

The grace change moved over that man's face like dawn. Muscles relaxed. Eyes widened. He smiled in a kind of relief—the kind only the gospel can give.

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—LEE ECLOV is pastor of Village Church of Lincolnshire, Illinois; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss

1. Which do you find it easier to teach on—grace, or law? How do the two connect?
2. What does it mean to “process our texts through our own hearts in prayer before we stand to preach”? How does this change your approach to a text?
3. How can you keep from losing the balance between these two ideas when preaching about hard topics?

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You Had to Bring It Up*How to preach controversial topics without picking a fight.*

Colossians 1:17

I have twice passed out cards to my congregation with the following words: “I would like to hear a sermon no longer than --- minutes on the subject: What the Bible has to say about ---.” Self-appointed comics took advantage of this. One fellow said he’d like to hear a sermon no longer than five minutes on what the Bible says about God.

But many times people request the tough issues. People want to know if the Bible’s message can stand up to modern pressures. I want to assure them it can.

It would be easier if we could preach a lifetime without ever touching on sin, morality, sexuality, lifestyle, or any number of other adrenaline inducers. Controversy makes preaching a more difficult proposition. But, as any pastor knows, a congregation needs the spicier issues if for no other reason than that God fills his Word with just such fare. However, a crisis is not inevitable. We can preach controversial topics without picking a fight.

Turn the Heat Off and the Light On

We need to credit people with enough maturity to handle the balanced presentation of an issue. Over the years I’ve addressed the role of women, eternal security, Spirit baptism, various issues of sexuality, and the church and politics. I’ve concluded that what’s crucial is not so much the topic as the method.

When diving into an area of controversy, I don’t expect total agreement. That’s why there’s a dispute in the first place. People’s belief systems are complex. Much more is at stake than the particular issue at hand. I recognize from the start that I’m probably not going to change anyone’s mind.

Thus, I try to broaden thinking rather than change it. Although people probably won’t budge from their position, they may at least acknowledge the other side. That’s progress. Maybe, over the years, they will change. Maybe not. In any event, I agree with Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said, “Once a mind has been stretched by a new idea, it never returns to its original shape.”

When I try to change people, however, I only add heat and dim the light. For instance, I have strong feelings about the way the talents of women have been wasted in the church. So I must be careful when I talk on the subject. People often say I feel this way because of the wife I have. I usually answer, “Has it ever occurred to you that I may have the wife I do because I feel this way?” That doesn’t always go over too well!

Preaching out of anger may feel good at the time, especially when we’ve built up a good head of steam. But in the long run, it doesn’t accomplish what we’re after.

I also have to point out that I was at the same church for over 25 years. That gave me a level of credibility that a fresh seminary graduate doesn’t have. I would think carefully before I preached controversial themes in my first few years at a church. It’s a matter of sensing the needs and maturity of the congregation. But I never provoke controversy just for the sake of controversy.

Drumming up a controversial topic is not hard. Currently American Christians are debating the relationship between church and state. Some Christians believe the state is working its way into church matters and trying to take away freedoms. Others insist believers must be more politically active. The issue of abortion is a prime example: the extent to which the church should be challenging the state on its laws concerning abortion is highly controversial. In many instances, people’s spirituality is measured by their level of involvement on this issue.

Recently I addressed this in a message on the church and politics. I opened by saying that the politics of many Christians are often more determined by economics than theology. I pointed out that we live in a particular country in a particular socioeconomic group and that people living in other countries in widely differing socioeconomic groups may look at the Scripture differently.

I gave an example: If we live in a comfortable, upper middle-class suburb in the Midwest, then we probably don’t spend much time in the Old Testament where it talks about God’s concern for the poor. But if we had grown up in an impoverished Asian or African country, we would. If we lived under a totalitarian regime or right-wing dictatorship, then it’s quite possible we would be interested in what the Bible says about liberty.

To further provide context, I mapped out the historical background, from the days of the early church when the state controlled the church to the modern period where the church and state live in a uneasy relationship.

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I concluded that the church and the state should be separate but mutually respectful and influential. I also concluded the church should encourage individual Christians to recognize the limitations of participatory democracy and to exercise their Christian citizenship responsibly in a less-than-ideal situation. I gave specific ways they could do this.

I could tell I had touched a nerve that Sunday by the debate stirred in our congregation. Our church is filled with thoughtful people unafraid to debate controversial topics. In fact, that's one way I gauge the impact of my sermons: Does it generate discussion? Discussion is an indicator that the lights have been turned on.

Do Your Homework

Few controversies in the church are new. Whenever I touch on eternal security, I remind folks that if Whitefield and Wesley struggled with this for a lifetime, I'm not likely to end the debate in a 35-minute sermon. However, if I prepare well, I at least can give them an overview of the issues involved. A preacher who handles controversial subjects must do adequate research.

To prepare for a recent sermon on values, I read *A Question of Values*, a book that delineated three ways people arrive at a system of values. One is the individualistic approach—the it's-nobody's-business-what-I-do approach. The second is what society thinks—for example, the Supreme Court's debate over defining pornography. It finally decided that pornography is that which offends local community standards. The third way is based on the assumption of a sovereign Lord in whose character and nature reside absolute values.

In addition to *A Question of Values*, I also found helpful Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*. Since in the last few years a tremendous amount of material on this subject has been published—in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*—there was no shortage of resources. Preaching effectively on controversial issues requires a lot of spadework.

Give Balanced Treatment

When I preach on a disputed topic, I think it's only fair to present more than one side. I don't mean setting up a straw man only to knock him down, but trying to present both sides with honesty and empathy.

Often, after outlining both sides of the issue, I can present what I feel is a biblical point of view. Other times I can't. In that case I challenge people to come to their own conclusion. I have to remind myself that these people believe the Bible. If I present what it says, then Scripture remains the authority over us all, and we all have to wrestle with the implications. If I set up myself as the authority, then they wrestle with me.

I preached on Ephesians 5, with particular reference to the phrase, "Wives, submit to your husbands." I struggled to prepare for the message, because in some extreme instances men abuse their wives and rationalize it based on this verse. And many women find any talk of submission distasteful.

So to be balanced, I first pointed out that in Ephesians 5:22, the Greek word submit is not there. Paul uses ellipses; the phrase is dependent on the previous verse, which says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Literally, then, the passage reads, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your husbands," which means it is appropriate to add submit in verse 22, but inappropriate to separate verse 22 from verse 21. Grammatically, you can't do that.

"Whatever it means that wives should submit to their husbands," I said, "it cannot be divorced from two other kinds of submission—both people submitted to the Lord, and both submitted to each other. Now that puts it into an entirely different context."

Careful exegesis helped me give what I believe is a more balanced view on the controversial issue of submission.

Consider Pastoral Needs

Whenever I preach a controversial topic, I try to keep in mind that more than theory is at stake. Real people in my congregation are struggling with the implications. Some have had abortions. Some are confused about homosexual desires. Some are alcoholics. I can't just leave the issue "out there." I have to think through the situation well enough that I can suggest a sensible course of action.

When I spoke on God's plan for marriage, I took into consideration the couples in the congregation who were living together out of wedlock. I could have told them it's simply not God's will. But I realized some of these couples have overextended themselves financially. They can save several hundred dollars each month by doubling up. In that case, they need to hear that the church will help them locate inexpensive housing.

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Sure, they should separate anyway. But if I can communicate to them that I understand their situation, they're more likely to change.

I also try to remember that behind topics such as abortion, divorce, or child abuse is an enormous amount of pain. I must be sensitive to people's experiences without blasting them with the truth. It took a while to learn this.

When I started addressing touchy subjects, the issue of abortion was causing a great deal of turmoil. It seemed everyone in the church was discussing it. Although our members were in basic agreement, some were confused about the details and proper biblical response. I decided it was time to confront the issue, however controversial it might be.

So I studied the appropriate passages, read the current literature, and delivered what I thought was an inspiring message on the sanctity of life. I felt fine about it until I heard the honest reservations of a good friend. "You know," he said, "by the law of averages, you probably spoke to three or four unmarried women who were contemplating abortion." Then he said, "I feel that what you said this morning would only add to their dilemma."

I had powerfully challenged them to make the right choice but failed to show sensitivity to their painful situation and the shame they probably felt. I'd offered no help in dealing with the heavy responsibilities of carrying a baby full term. It was a vivid reminder of how easy it is to wound people with the truth. The truth can be cutting, but we don't have to be.

Seize the Opportunity

I don't want to give the impression I announce controversial topics every month. If I did, I'd be guilty of sensationalism. I don't want my sermons to be the ecclesiastical equivalent of supermarket tabloids. Most of the time, I deal with controversial issues while preaching on some other subject.

When I did a series on the Israelites' settling of Canaan, we came to the passage in Deuteronomy that speaks of the sins of the fathers being passed down to the children. I saw this as a beautiful opportunity to address the trend in some church circles where parents are blamed for their children's faults, and where people fail to take responsibility for their sin. When I preached on that topic, no one came expecting a controversial sermon, but they got one nonetheless.

I once preached a sermon based on Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19, which speaks of singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. I had to address the controversy over musical styles in worship.

"In the sixteenth century," I said, "Zwingli would not allow any music. Luther had to have music but said it must be simple. Calvin said that only psalms should be sung but used modern music that was disparagingly called 'the Geneva jingles.'"

"In the seventeenth century, Pietists said that there ought to be singing, but it needed to be unaccompanied. In the eighteenth century, Christians had orchestras, but no violins, because they were called 'the Devil's fiddle.' In the nineteenth century, the organ came in and began to push the orchestra out.

"Then William Booth came along and said, 'Why should the Devil have all the best tunes?' so he started brass bands. The Scandinavians came over to America and brought guitars. In the twentieth century, the youth culture brought rock; from the South, we got folk music; the charismatics began to emphasize praise songs; and from Britain we got the celebration marches.

"So what is your position on what is appropriate for worship music? Is it based on your theology or is it based on taste?"

Certainly preaching on controversial topics carries a risk. However, I've learned that if I ignore controversial issues, I also ignore a timely opportunity to argue for the relevance of Christianity. And that's an opportunity I don't want to miss.

—STUART BRISCOE is an author, speaker, and former senior pastor of Elmbrook Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. How does your teaching try to broaden thinking, rather than change it? Is this a good goal?

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2. Do our sermons generate discussion? What kind of discussion? How could we encourage this further?
3. How does your teaching on difficult topics acknowledge the humanity of those impacted directly by the subject?

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Teach the Bloody Bible

Why teaching the strange and disturbing stories in Scripture is essential to outreach and spiritual growth.

Psalm 103:8

You don't have to read Richard Dawkins anymore to encounter objections to the Christian faith. Just log onto Facebook or Twitter. Many of the objections center on the "problem passages" of Scripture, those stories where God seems capricious or cruel. The Genesis flood, the Canaanite genocide, Levitical laws, Sodom and Gomorrah, Ananias and Sapphira—all have become fodder for Internet memes and reverse apologetics sites attempting to undermine the Bible and the God it proclaims. We can no longer avoid these parts of the Bible. So how can we teach them in honest and redemptive ways? We talked to two pastors who have tackled the topic head-on. Joshua Ryan Butler is pastor of outreach at Imago Dei Church in Portland, Oregon, and author of *The Skeletons in God's Closet* (Nelson, 2014). Dan Kimball is a teaching pastor at Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, and author of the forthcoming *Crazy Bible?* (Zondervan, 2016). *Leadership Journal* managing editor Drew Dyck sat down with Butler and Kimball.

Many Christians avoid the hard passages in the Bible. Both of you were drawn to them. Why?

Josh Butler: When I was writing *Skeletons in God's Closet*, I imagined writing to myself 15 years ago. That's when I was a new Christian and confused about how some of these "problem passages" could be reconciled with the goodness of God as encountered in Jesus. So part of it was personal.

The other reason was pastoral. People in our church and community are wrestling with these topics. Some have friends and family who are leaving the faith because of it, and they don't know how to address them. We did a class at our church addressing this topic called "Is God Good?" It was by far the best-attended class I've ever taught. There's a real hunger to learn about this.

Dan Kimball: For years I kind of swerved around those tough verses. I just thought, *Well, somebody's figured those out.* But then I received a series of emails from a guy named Brad, asking about blood sacrifice and the strange things in Leviticus. One of his questions: "Why does the Bible say a woman has to marry her rapist?"

I'd try to answer them, but then I'd get another one from him almost instantly. Finally I wrote back and said, "Brad, can we meet?" So after a service one Sunday, this kid approaches me, and introduces himself as Brad. I couldn't believe it. He was in eighth grade! I asked him, "Where are you getting these verses?" He said told me it was a website: EvilBible.com. He was just copying the questions on this website and sending them to me.

In the past, you might come across these problematic passages if you went to a bookstore or library, or read the Bible very carefully. You'd have to dig for it. Now you just go online. It's being propagated through the Internet. A 13-year-old girl asked me, "Why did God kill the Amalekites?" The guy that cuts my hair asked me why there are unicorns in the Bible. There aren't, of course. An early King James Version just mistranslated the Hebrew word for "wild oxen." But these kinds of ideas are all over the Internet.

A generation ago young skeptics could read Josh McDowell's *More Than a Carpenter* or more recently Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ*. But today's questions seem to be of a different kind.

Kimball: In recent years I've distributed more than 1,500 3x5 cards to people and asked them to write their most pressing questions about the Christian faith. Many of those writing questions have been youth. Not one asked, "How do you prove the Resurrection is true?" They're not asking is-it-true questions. They are asking about sexuality, blood atonement, and child abuse. Those are the questions today.

Butler: The question used to be, "Is this rational?" Today it seems to be, "Is Christianity ethical?" Is God is ethical? Does God act in accordance with the rules he expects us to live by?

When people come at you with these objections, is there usually a deeper question behind the question?

Butler: People first and foremost want to be heard. In these situations I try to restrain my need to get my voice in. I just hear the person out. Often the immediate question that people pose is not the deeper, underlying issue. And they won't divulge that deeper issue unless they're heard and you gain their trust.

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There's a time to provide answers, but I avoid being a Bible answer man. It's essential to ask clarifying questions, so you make sure of what they're asking. If someone asks, "How can God send people to hell?" I'll ask, "What is your picture of hell?" If they describe an underground torture chamber where Satan is poking people with a pitchfork, I will say, "I don't believe in that hell either."

Have you seen hard passages of the Bible taught poorly?

Butler: Sometimes there's a tendency to pit Jesus against the Old Testament. If you find anything in the Old Testament that you don't like at first glance, you just dismiss it and go with Jesus. The problem is that Jesus is the God of the Old Testament. Yes, there are tensions between the New and Old Testaments. But we have to grapple with them. Plus we can't fully understand Jesus until we understand the Old Testament, because that was Jesus' framework for understanding his own identity.

Kimball: There are Christians of a certain theological bent that too easily say, "Well, God is God and he's going to do whatever he wants. Deal with it." Or they talk about examples of divine judgment in a callous way. You almost get the feeling that they take delight in it. But when you're talking about real lives and the horrific things that do happen in Scripture, we need to be sensitive. We need to remember that the Bible describes God as slow to anger and one who relents from sending calamity.

Butler: We need to do the work of trying to connect the acts of God with the character of God. God acts out of his character. So we need to try to understand why this holy and loving God did what he did. That's more helpful than just saying, "He's all-powerful so he can do what he wants." I tell our people that it's okay to feel tension when you hit parts of the story that don't immediately make sense. We're dealing with the Word of God, but it's 66 books, written over thousands of years, in different cultures and languages. We should expect there are going to be parts that we have to wrestle with.

When you teach a problem passage, whether it's the Canaanite genocide or others you've mentioned, what is the ultimate purpose you want to achieve?

Kimball: Knowing God more. When we study the hard parts of the Bible, it enables us to see God holistically. And that's especially important right now because we have a generation that's not thought of God as holy. They lack an understanding of the consequences of sin. And some of that comes from turning God into an application. You go to him for certain things. We paint him a certain way. And I think that's why some of the stories showing God's holiness and wrath freak people out—because they didn't know this part. That's why we have to teach the whole Bible. Ultimately it's about knowing God more fully.

Butler: If you can help people see God's goodness, even in the tough places of Scripture, their faith becomes more unshakeable. I think the ivory tower and the suburbs have influenced a lot of American evangelical theology. We end up with a protected, safe, sanitized faith. But the God of Scripture is untamed. So you have this safe, sanitized god and then you encounter the hard reality of the world, and you think, *Where the heck is God in this? How does this fit in?*

I've worked in some tough spots around the world, like genocidal war zones. I've seen kids coming out of sex trafficking. It's made me realize that I need the untamed God, not the sanitized god, to be able to make sense of his goodness in this bizarre, raw, jacked-up world. We need to help people see God's goodness even in these hard passages, so they can reclaim a greater confidence in the goodness of God. But it's also about unleashing our vision of God. We want them to see God as he is—untamed. Holy. Just. Hating evil. Doing good. That's a God you need when you encounter the raw, hard realities of our world.

The Bible is full of hard stories. You can do a lot to clear up people's misperceptions by providing historical context. But ultimately some stories, even when properly understood, are still really difficult. Do you have to sometimes admit you don't know God's reasons? That it's a mystery?

Kimball: I do it all the time. You can't understand everything. Why did God kill the guy who was picking up sticks on the Sabbath? ([Num. 15:32-36](#)). That makes no sense to me. I have to admit that I don't know. But what I do know is God's character through the entire Old Testament, through the entire Bible. I know that "God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love" ([Ps. 103:8](#)). I don't understand why Egypt's firstborn children had to be killed. But I trust God does. There's a lot we just don't know. And it's okay to admit that.

Butler: My daughter was in the hospital recently with some serious symptoms. She's five, and the nurses are holding her down, putting needles in her arm. She's confused, scared. Of course I'm there with her, holding her hand. She's looking up at me, as if to say, "What the heck is going on?" She's raging. She wants out. But

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she knows me. My hope is that she trusts me in that moment, that she sees the rest of our story, our life together, and trusts that I'm doing what's best for her. If you just isolated that moment, where I'm allowing people to hold her down and put needles in her arm, it looks bad. But there's a broader story. We've developed trust. She knows I love her.

When we hit those passages that seem strange and disturbing, and that's all you have, it's like looking at a stranger holding you down to put needles in your arm. You won't understand because you don't know what's going on. But if you have that broader narrative, the bigger picture, a history with God, then you can hit those tough spots and say, I don't know, but I trust the Person at work. And it's okay. My end game is not to figure it all out. It's to know God.

Kimball: There's a humorous video online called Scary Mary. It's a short video that has taken snippets of *Mary Poppins* to make her look like a murderous villain. There's a shot of her looking out the window, then one of the kids blowing away. In one shot, she's in the room cleaning, then it cuts to the kid getting sucked into the closet and the door slams. The last scene is of the two kids running down the street, and it flashes the words "Scary Mary. Hide your children." It's funny because if you had not seen the whole movie, you wouldn't know the real story of *Mary Poppins*. You'd think she's evil because you've isolated a few clips from the story and robbed them of their context.

Unfortunately that's what a lot of people in the broader culture do with the Bible. They know a few scary parts, but not the rest. Inside the church, it's often the opposite. We've focused exclusively on the sunny parts of Scripture and neglected the scary ones. This presents us with an exciting challenge. It's forcing us to be better teachers, because we have to start teaching the whole Bible, hard passages included. I'm hoping there's a resurgence of better Bible teaching in response to the time we're in.

Have you seen spiritual growth in people's lives as the result of teaching hard passages?

Butler: There's a young woman who recently joined our Bible study on this topic. We're going through holy war and Old Testament violence—and she comes to faith! Now she loves Jesus. I think there was something attractive about being able to get into the grit of the faith and not feeling like you're being shown the shiny front door and always wondering what we're hiding.

Kimball: When we do a series in our church on this topic, attendance goes up. There's more interest, a hunger for this. There's one girl who is a brand-new Christian. She started reading through the Bible on her own, and she got to some hard stories, including the one about Lot and his daughters, and asked, "What is this about?" But that's given us the opportunity to walk through these stories with her and help bring a sense of perspective to the text and teach her about the whole scope of Scripture.

How can we make teaching on this topic a priority in the church?

Kimball: Leaders have to see this as important. It's especially crucial that youth pastors get on board because they're often the first ones fielding questions about the Bible. Bottom line: we all have to take theology more seriously. Instead of being so worried about things like video venues and the latest programs, let's get serious about the Bible. We have to raise up theology once again in the average evangelical church.

Butler: Often churches don't see study time as valuable as programs. But we really need to push back on that. Studying the Word is not retreating. It's not time away from ministry. I know 85 percent of our church body would be bored to death reading the stuff I read—and that's fine. They shouldn't have to read fat theology books. But they are interested in the issues that good theology addresses. There are so many great authors and theologians writing on these topics, but the average person will never read them. We can bridge that gap by working to make the theological understanding accessible to everyone.

Kimball: Increasingly I think the role of the pastor-teacher needs to be as a translator of scholarship. When we teach, instead of just jumping to the application, we need to slow down, unpack the difficult parts of the text, and provide people with the tools to navigate these passages. Ignoring these parts of the Bible really does a disservice to people. Besides, because the culture is raising questions about the Bible, they're hungry to explore what these stories mean.

In some ways, I'm glad there's a lot of skepticism and criticism coming at the Bible. I think it's going to cause us to be better teachers. It's going to force us to examine the text and become better stewards of God's Word.

—adapted from sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.leadershipjournal.net.

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Discuss

1. Are the “hard passages” something we gravitate toward? Or away from?
2. What are the issues our church is most dealing with right now? How could the “hard passages” in the Bible speak into these issues?
3. How high a priority is teaching in our church? How is this reflected in our practices? In our services? In our weekly schedule?

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Hot Theology

Ignoring the reality of hell makes one of Jesus' frequent teachings a mere metaphor.

1 Corinthians 15

Clocking in at 55 minutes, I nearly broke my personal record for the longest sermon I've ever preached. It was "Hell."

In our series called "Hot Theology," the topics were determined from surveys of the congregation. The most common question: "Would a loving God send people to hell?" That's hard to cover in 35 minutes.

The subject of hell and judgment is all over the New Testament. Still, we don't hear much about hell today, at least not from the church. We tend to cover other subjects repeatedly, but ignore one that Jesus talks about all the time. There are some exceptions, but the preachers yelling "turn or burn" on street corners are rare.

There is an episode of *Seinfeld* where Elaine's boyfriend, Puddy, becomes a Christian. He starts listening to Christian music and begins badgering Elaine about going to hell. At one point he asks her to steal the neighbor's newspaper for him because she's "the one going to hell, so [she] might as well steal it." Elaine explodes, starts whacking him with the newspaper, and screams, "If I am going to hell, you should care that I'm going to hell!"

I think Elaine has the right perspective. We cannot approach the subject of hell merely as a doctrine and ignore the human impact. Teaching on hell is not for the sake of knowing Christian trivia or to satisfy theological curiosity. If we believe in hell, and if we believe people created in God's image will either experience eternity in communion with him or apart from him, then we should be communicating the gospel, both the good news and the bad news.

Of course, this calls for balance. Christians have often been guilty of making hell the primary motivation for salvation. I believe this is an alteration of the holistic gospel found in 1 Corinthians 15. But if we completely ignore the reality of hell and judgment, we are forced to make one of Jesus' frequent teachings little more than an obscure metaphor.

Because of the church's tendency to be unbalanced about hell, and because of our cultural assumptions about the afterlife, I began my sermon by having the congregation read aloud every single New Testament passage about hell. The exercise took several minutes but it got people participating and thinking. We compared these passages with popular portrayals of hell—from *The Far Side* cartoons to AC/DC's "Highway to Hell"—to see how we've had our beliefs shaped by pop culture, the red devil with horns and a pitchfork, and all that.

Then we looked at concepts of the afterlife from other cultures and religions. Christians aren't the only ones who believe in a "hell." Despite our culture's growing discomfort with eternal judgment, we shouldn't be embarrassed by a belief that's been almost universally held throughout history and still is today.

I led the congregation through a study of the words translated "hell" in English: Jesus described Gehenna, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem where bodies were thrown, where worms ate flesh, and where fires continually burned.

Finally, we returned to Elaine on *Seinfeld* and what matters most—the mission.

As Charles Spurgeon said, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our bodies. If they will perish, let them perish with our arms around their knees. Let no one go there unwarned and unprepared for."

—DAN KIMBALL is pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*; © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. How does this treatment of hell provide a helpful model for preaching on difficult topics?
2. How do the "hard passages" tie back to mission?
3. When was the last time we taught about hell? Judgment?

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Tips for Teaching on Taboo Topics*Helpful principles for approaching societal landmines well.*

Romans 3:23

It was the summer of 2014 when I found myself in the middle of teaching through the book of Joshua. That is when I came to the next section in the book: 5:13-6:25. I knew I was going to have to tackle it when we started the book, but it was now the week where I had to tackle the never ending questions from the skeptics that I knew I was going to have to address: *Why would God kill innocent people? How can I believe in a God who would do that?* Or they would make statements like, “Causing a genocide is not my idea of a loving God.”

The week before I taught on this a guy let me know he knew the passage was coming up and he was “extremely curious” to hear my perspective because he had researched this for three years. That wasn’t exactly encouraging.

There are all sorts of questions, opinions and connotations that surface when we take on harder topics. This is one tension with teaching through books of the Bible: you can’t dodge these things. Although the tension subsided, even after I taught the passage I was facing confrontational questions. Immediately after our service, a woman who had just begun coming to the church came up to me and said, “Well, I must say, that was something I have never heard before. I will think about this more, but I sincerely think you don’t understand the Bible.”

The bottom line is these types of topics are “taboo” for a reason. There are certain topics, words, gestures, or behaviors that are simply societal land mines. As a teacher, tackling passages of Scripture that push on issues like gay rights, divorce, eternal punishment, marijuana being legalized, what seems to be genocide at first glance ... well, can bring challenges. This is why most pastors avoid them like a plague.

That said, there is no doubt it is the “hot topics” that tend to inspire curiosity and a genuine interest in what will be taught on the subject. However, when certain concepts are generally prohibited because the consensus of society is in opposition to what we would teach, we run the risk of offending people. At one level we cannot worry about that, yet at another we must. When people are offended or feel degraded in any way, they shut out everything else we are saying. We must take this seriously and with caution.

If the gospel itself becomes offensive we must be satisfied. But, if a word choice or tone do so, we ought to be extremely restless. It is rarely worth teaching on sensitive subjects without being very intentional about the words we choose, the path we use to verbalize them, as well as the tone and posture we assume. Truth is far too important to negate this process as a preacher.

Prepping to Teach

Everyone has different processes for preparing to preach. That is actually a beautiful thing and should be a means of learning from one another. I have a weekly process I go through that certainly would not work for everyone. But I do think there are some practical things that help anyone who will teach on tough issues.

Recognize common anxieties and fears.

Depending on the topic discussed these will vary, so it is important to really process through what these will be accordingly. I always start with my own thoughts and then, without sharing what I wrote down, ask a few other people what they think are common fears people have. They always share things I never thought of. Having this variety of perspectives is necessary in this process before teaching on the topic. It can greatly affect what and how things are articulated.

Articulate common desires.

There are basic human desires that are always good to recognize and articulate. This is helpful to think through for every message we teach, but absolutely critical for tackling highly sensitive topics. The bottom line I recommend starting with is the desire to belong. This is the basic human desire and, honestly, in every human being is a fear of not belonging. We don’t want to be an “outsider,” but rather want to have a place to belong. This is important because the point is to bring people into the truth, not push them out of it.

Acknowledge the fact that people have differing opinions.

Everyone has an opinion and everyone thinks their opinion is right. This is true from issues about hell, holy war, and what seem to be genocide in the Old Testament, to divorce or same sex marriage. If we do not acknowledge this, our tone and posture will not appropriately meet our audience. It’s important to articulate what we believe truth to be, but we must do so respectfully. Godly people disagree on what seem to be some of

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the most clearly articulated realities in Scripture and this is only heightened when non-believers or immature believers are present as we teach on issues.

These few things will greatly shape how we approach teaching what we believe to be true.

Setting the Environment

We must remember that there are all types of people listening to us as we teach. They have a variety of convictions and knowledge about the topics we teach on, and they also have a variety of backgrounds that will affect how they hear what is said. So, here are a few practical ideas for setting a common environment for everyone present.

Set the boundaries.

As I teach on taboo topics in our church, I have always framed the discussions and set the boundaries. I may reword them to best fit the specific issue I'm addressing, but I always touch on the following concepts in some fashion:

1. Love and humility, not shame, is our mutual aspiration. Christians ought to seek humility and love as the premise of everything they do and say. I will always state this as the place of common ground we must all stand on. Then I will say something like, "Wherever you stand on this issue, if you are not able to assume the posture of humility as we dialogue about this topic, I would like to ask you to leave now." The point of statements like this is to create a humble environment where truth is sought, not one where arguments are seeking to be won.
2. Dignifying conversation is honoring to God and one another. After stating this point, I acknowledge the complexity and emotionality of the subject, maybe some controversy surrounding it, make sure it's known that I will state where we stand as a church in regard to the issue and that our desire is to navigate this with great sensitivity so that our emotions don't get the best of us. We want truth to be portrayed more than our emotions.
3. Disagreement is a fact of life that should be respected. We all want the freedom to hold our own beliefs and if we want that to continue we have to respect the fact that other people hold to different beliefs than we do. We can still honor each other as human beings despite our differences in opinion and belief. We don't need to condemn each other to make sure other people know we don't condone certain things. Every person is made in the image of God and is therefore deserving of respect.

Articulate the sinful common ground we all stand on.

Until Jesus returns we will struggle with being imperfect (Romans 3:23). This is an important point to not only assume, but to make in the beginning of any message that is highly sensitive in our culture today. Using the LGBTQ discussion as an example, here are a couple thoughts I always make sure I articulate to set a common ground environment:

1. Everyone has a tendency to get angry with others who sin differently. This is always a result of arrogance and perhaps even bigotry.
2. Everyone has a skewed sexual orientation. There is no human being alive that has fully embraced God's original design for sexual relationships. At some level, we all have mixed expectations and sinful desires.

Number two above is critical to acknowledge when teaching on LGBTQ issues. It initially puts some people on their heels (usually Christians who don't struggle with same-sex attraction), but after thinking about it for just a minute everyone agrees that this is reality. These sorts of things help to bring common ground for everyone present, which is critical for them to hear all that is taught. This environment of emotional safety is critical.

Framing Your Beliefs

I always wrestle with a myriad of ways of saying what I want to say, but I think there are three things to keep in mind that have proven to be most helpful. These may take a few minutes to process through and if that's the case for you, please take the time to do so before reading the last section. Being as concise as possible, here are three "guidelines" I recommend when articulating your position on sensitive issues:

Center the discussion on values, not behaviors.

Think of yourself as a shepherd who is guiding sheep through a desert. You stop to rest for a couple days and yet need to keep the sheep close. You have two options, really. First, you can build a fence around the

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perimeter, prohibiting the sheep from crossing that boundary. Or, second, you can put a watering hole in one place and know the sheep won't stray too far from that center. The first option is restrictive whereas the second simply promotes proximity. When teaching on taboo topics most tend to build fences that prohibit certain questions or maybe even certain behaviors. However, I recommend the approach of the watering hole. For example, state the fact that you value Scripture and its authority in your life, and therefore your conscience won't allow you to sway from what you believe the Scriptures say about this topic. This type of statement sets up the Scriptures as the "watering hole" and is usually not taken offensively once the proper environment is set!

Articulate conclusions as convictions.

Of course we all think our conclusions are truth! But what about other godly people who land a little differently than you do? Surely we should be concerned about and perhaps even fight for some core tenants of our faith, but there has to be some sort of beauty that is recognized in differing opinions. We can confidently state our position and even more so when we frame our conclusions as our "convictions." This is especially helpful when talking with younger generations.

Emphasize the work of Christ, not our works.

If our identity is based on the works of Christ, then we ought to talk more about him than anything else. Western culture places a high value on doing, to the point where Westerners see their value in what they do and therefore, in its extreme cases, treats behavioral issues as salvation issues. Our salvation is based on works, but thankfully it is the works of Christ.

Conclusion

This leads me to simply state two concluding thoughts to keep in mind in regard to taboo topics:

Embrace sanctification as God's job. It's amazing how quick we are to condemn others because they sin differently than we do. We certainly want all to pursue holiness, but we must allow God to work in the lives of people when and how he wants. Our job is to participate in what God is doing, not determine what he should be doing in the life of someone else.

Think about how your non-believing friend will hear what you say. Even if he or she is not present when you teach on subjects, picture them in the room as you prepare. Picture someone you love deeply. Envision them listening to you teach Christians about this topic. Even if they don't agree with your conclusions, what do you want them to perceive about the Christian community?

When addressing a question like, "Does God kill innocent people in the Old Testament?" make sure you can articulate your position in one or two sentences at most. If you cannot do this, you have not thought through it enough and therefore won't clearly articulate it in thirty minutes.

—CHUCK BOMAR is Lead Pastor of Colossae Church in Portland Oregon, and is author of *Losing Your Religion* and *Better Off Without Jesus*; adapted from our sister site PreachingToday.com, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.preachingtoday.com.

Discuss

1. What are the "taboo" topics in our church? Which "societal landmines" get talked about? Which don't?
2. What are our fears in addressing taboo topics? What makes them taboo? What do we risk by teaching clearly on them?
3. Is our teaching on taboo topics based on values, or behaviors? How can we tell the difference?

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Call In a Team

When the topics get tough, don't be afraid to ask for help.

1 Peter 3:8

Last weekend our series on the Prophets brought me to 1 Samuel 15:3, where God commands Saul to wipe out the Amalekites: “Totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep.”

Smart people avoid these passages—or assign them to the youth pastor. But I knew this passage was one that some college professors use to separate naïve students from their childhood faith.

So instead of avoiding it, I started on it six weeks early. I sent my extensive outline to several people:

- An Old Testament prof at the local seminary.
- A friend who'd written a doctoral dissertation on this passage.
- A former senior pastor of the church, two staff members, and two elders.
- Two other friends, both former pastors.

My request was simple: “Tell me what you think. Stop me from saying anything stupid. Let me know how it could be improved.”

The professor sent me two unpublished articles on the text. The friend with the dissertation provided reasons for the view he'd reached, which was different than my own, but also assured me I understood the passage. The former senior pastor provided some advice on the way I'd structured the sermon. One of my friends warned me that an illustration I was going to use would likely be misunderstood.

I folded in some—though not all—of what I received, substantially improving the message. I also ended up confident that though this was a challenging text, I was prepared for it and for the follow-up conversations it would spark.

Do I do this with every sermon? No. But for difficult topics or texts, I frequently seek this kind of outside help. For a series on Christians and politics, I spent several hours being tutored by a friend with a Ph.D. in political theory.

For a series on 21st-century idols, based loosely on Acts 17, I asked two friends with degrees in chemistry and genetics to make sure my comments on science and technology were fair.

For a series on the history of the church, I sent three sermons to a church historian. For the price of lunch, he corrected some mistakes I'd made and provided additional stories that substantially improved my messages.

Perhaps the most help has come from friends from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Their perspective—especially on matters of Western culture and money—help me see how my Western bias shapes my exegesis.

On two occasions I have had friends advise me not to preach a message I'd written. I heeded the advice once because I realized I did not understand the issue well enough to comment on it. The other time I prayerfully considered the counsel but decided it was a message I needed to deliver.

Generally I receive more input than I can use. Some of it I discard. Some I simply throw into footnotes that may or may not ever see the light of day.

I go through this process because it makes a good message better, because I learn a great deal in the process, and because I believe those who are tapped to help are generally honored and learn more as well.

Requirements

In order to pull this off you need:

- To write your sermon well in advance. I try to give readers at least two weeks between when I send it and when I need their comments.
- To write out a manuscript or, at the very least, a very extensive outline so they can follow your argument without much effort.
- To be open to criticism.

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- To find people who are able to offer advice and then walk away. I certainly cannot incorporate every suggestion they give.

—MIKE WOODRUFF is pastor of Christ Church of Lake Forest (Illinois); adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit www.leadershipjournal.net.

Discuss

1. Is this a realistic approach to teaching? What would hold us back? What could we gain?
2. Who are the people in our church with expertise that could speak into a controversial topic?
3. Which of these requirements would pose the biggest challenge? How could we help address that?