

Fabarez, Michael. *Preaching That Changes Lives*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002. 224 pp. \$22.50.

Purpose

Fabarez helps preachers to help their audience become not mere hearers, but also transformed doers of the word of God (James 1:22-23). He writes to help preachers be more intentional in sermon application than just "tacking on a few scant applicational thoughts at the end of a sermon" (xiv). "This book is intended to be a reminder—a humble yet forthright plea to regain what has been so widely forgotten. Regaining ground in effective application is critically important, not only for our hearers' sake, but more importantly for Christ's sake" (xiv). Furthermore, the author writes to preachers, "my goal is to challenge you to reevaluate and consider your current practice of preaching through the matrix of application" (xiv).

Preaching That Changes Lives is written to help preachers—who are already biblical in content, who know how to do exegesis, who are called to preach and excited about the task—to preach "sermons that are not only accurate but also life-changing" (xv).

The author's burden is that preachers "give attention to life-changing application in three primary areas of your ministry: your preparation, your preaching, and your follow-through. Eventually, it will lead you to develop a new pattern of *preparing* to change lives, *preaching* to change lives, *and following through* (author's emphases) to change lives" (xv).

Summary

Part One (Chapters 1 and 2) is about rethinking the preaching task. It focuses on the life-changing power and the life-changing method of preaching. Part Two (Chapters 3 through 7)

addresses preparation that changes lives. It exhorts preachers to make sure they are saved and growing, to study both text and audience, to outline, pray, and take the time it takes to prepare a sermon that will change lives. Part Three (Chapters 8 through 12) targets preaching that changes lives. Here Fabarez hones in on the need for Christ-centered (as opposed to man-centered, moralistic), authoritative sermons. Preachers must teach their hearers how to listen; this is especially important since the Scriptures say more about how to hear a sermon than about how to preach one. Part Four (Chapters 13 through 15) shows the reader that *preparing* to change lives and *preaching* to change lives is not enough; he must also *follow through* to change lives. That post-sermon plan emphasizes cultivating a culture of commitments and accountability, providing tools to implement change, and personally modeling on Monday the changes laid out in the sermon on Sunday.

Critical Assessment

Fabarez speaks of his early, post-seminary days in ministry. He followed templates, trends, and gadgets, yet saw that those very things were suppressing the longing of his heart: "God's Word, clearly taught and properly applied" (11). He goes on, "With that realization, I had turned a corner in my own philosophy of ministry. I abandoned contemporary wisdom for an ancient call. I began to preach with the expectation of transformation. I began to present the Bible in the same way the Holy Spirit presented it to me each day—with the clarion call to understand and do what was expected of me. Preaching with an expectation that people 'do it' was a risky endeavor. At first, I thought this strategy could surely empty our little church completely! Yet I knew it was biblical. I told myself that, at worst, I'd go down satisfying the hearts of a few who would benefit from a biblical call to action" (11). The concept of an expectation of transformation is not new or novel in the Scriptures nor in church history, but it

has not been the norm in my preaching. At times I just quietly expect the bare minimum, hope they show up, and if they do, I tend to think it was a successful Sunday. But expecting results is logical, biblical, and it is normative in most other areas of life. Teachers expect results: homework is to be completed; if not the grade suffers. Employers expect results: jobs are to be completed, with excellence, on time; if not the employee may be written up or fired. What if preachers expect results? Application points are to be heeded, with excellence, without delay; if not . . . no consequences. How painfully true. Enter the commitments and accountability of Chapter 13. Expecting results—what a concept! And what a challenge: it assumes that the preacher is alive and well in Christ, that the Holy Spirit has spoken to him in the Scriptures each day with that clarion call to know and obey, and that this is what the people need also. This assumes the preacher has been with the Lord in His Word and prayer. This assumes that he has understood that God expects results from him, and there have been results, so he can, void of hypocrisy, preach that he and God are expecting the congregation to bear fruit also.

An oasis refreshed me in Chapter 3. That chapter is entitled, "Make Sure Your Life is Changing." Having read 12,000 pages related specifically to preaching in the past couple of years, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Like trying to drink out of a fire hydrant—it came fast, I got as much as I could, but felt like I was drowning in what was meant to refresh me. With much review and practice and the grace of God, I will get it. In the interim, this chapter was an oasis in that it reminded me that though regular, undistracted time communing with God is hard to come by, with all of my avoidable and unavoidable distractions, yet it is priority one. It reminded me that "the ambassador must be intimately engaged with the One who sent him, or the distance between the two will soon become evident to all." This cannot be faked. "Any pretense of intimacy will come across as artificial" (33). For now, if I cannot remember everything I read, at

least I can always simply and profoundly make sure my life is changing as I get on my knees with my Bible and my Lord, looking not for a sermon, but just time together.

Jesus said to Martha in Luke 10:41-42, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” That “better” thing was to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen. Martha was just trying to prepare a little bread for Jesus. When I preach, with all my “many things”—word studies, contexts, outlines, commentaries, illustrations, main points, transitions—I am just trying to prepare a little bread from Jesus, for His people. Nothing is wrong with that, unless that serving supplants sitting before Him. I have let that happen, and Fabarez reminds me that I need those “intimate prayer encounters” (33).

The author tells of situations in which he preached a sermon in his own congregation and then preached it in another church soon after that. It was the same sermon, right down to the illustrations, “but the results were dramatically different. The sermon did not take hold and change lives in the foreign environment like it did in my home church. . . . The sermon fell flat” (167). The reason it fell flat was that the preacher did not know the culture and its values (167). He goes on to talk about the necessity of commitment and accountability. I disagree that the sermon necessarily fell flat. As a (guest) preacher, could he have known whether or not it fell flat? Was that his impression as he saw one asleep, another doing their nails, and yet another looking bored stiff? He cannot know for sure. He's here today, gone tomorrow. Who knows what the Lord did with that sermon in some soul a day, a year, or five years later? God's word does not return void (Isaiah 55:11), does it? Besides, maybe God provided some commitment and accountability and there were “results” after all.

On the negative side, the book lacks a scripture index as well as a subject index. These

simple things would make *Preaching That Changes Lives* more attractive to researchers and casual readers alike. Manuscripts of sermons by the author are not included. They would help the reader to see how the author himself applies his own material, and thus provide clues as to how the reader might do the same. Fred Craddock helpfully included four of his own sermon manuscripts in the appendixes of *As One Without Authority*.

A man I know says he never understood how nineteen drops of rain can keep twenty people out of church. Occasionally my cynicism shows through and I can be heard lamenting, "In the winter people miss church because the weather is bad. In the summer people miss church because the weather is good. In the fall they miss because their uncle fell, and in the spring they miss because there's no spring in their legs." In light of attendance woes, I appreciated Fabarez's bold words in the section, "Schedule Around Church." I have not seen an exhortation such as this in any other book on preaching. He writes, "Emphasize the importance of weekly attendance, punctuality, and practical planning on Sunday mornings. Challenge them to think counter-culturally about Sunday mornings! While the rest of the world sleeps in and ratchets back on the first day of the week, we need to build in a value that declares Sunday morning the most important time of the week. Encourage them to wake up earlier and plan a real breakfast. Make it clear that getting ready for church has greater implications for their lives than getting ready for work or class any other day of the week. Their obedience to your instruction in this area will impact their Saturday evening plans, weekend getaways, and Sunday morning routines—and it should motivate us even more to give our best effort when they arrive with great expectations on Sundays. Asking them to sacrifice in order to attend services provides a built-in accountability and places the responsibility squarely upon us to make the preaching and worship all it deserves to be" (155-156).

Finally, the words that close Part Two form a fitting benediction: "May Satan's intentions be thwarted as we shun lesser things to wholeheartedly and diligently engage in the awesome priorities of biblical study and sermon preparation" (95). Amen.