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Preaching to the Biblically Ignorant without Seeming Biblically Arrogant

By Matt Ewart

For many generations, preachers could assume a decent amount of biblical understanding from their hearers. Pastors could mention a name like Abraham or Zacchaeus without having to explain who they were or what they did. People generally knew their Bibles better than some do today.

A change was first apparent in confirmation classes. Year after year, a growing percentage of kids did not know anything about Abraham, Moses, Daniel, or Paul. They had no concept of Old Testament and New Testament. Trying to find Exodus was a chore. Initially we blamed poor parenting as the culprit.

Then we discovered it was not just a handful of isolated incidents. Biblical ignorance became a defining characteristic of an entire generation. Perhaps it was the parenting. Perhaps it was the local church. Perhaps it was a combination. Rather than dwelling on what brought us here, it is better to figure out a plan for going forward. The question to address first is this:

Should our style of preaching change to accommodate a generation that is biblically ignorant?

Let's work through some common myths that might shape the way we answer that question.

Myth #1: I don't have any biblically ignorant people in my church.

If you believe this, you will eventually be correct. Let me illustrate with a hypothetical example.

Over the course of 30 years church leaders believed that the only people who came to their church were well-versed, biblically-founded

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Christians. It never crossed their minds that someone biblically illiterate might wander through the doors. At every service and in every sermon, the pastors communicated in such a way that would engage and challenge the spiritually informed people who gathered there. They didn't explain things in a way that a biblically ignorant person could understand. Now after 30 years, what kind of a church would you have?

I believe that this church would be one of the most biblically-literate churches around. Granting that this church is Bible-based and the pastors taught the Bible well, another significant factor might be at play. This church would have attracted people who already knew the Bible and were loyal to the church's doctrinal stance before they even met the pastor. Guests who were biblically ignorant and doctrinally ungrounded would have difficulties connecting to such a church.

So if you believe there are no biblically ignorant people in your church, you will eventually be correct. Rather than ask if there are such people in your church, ask if you want them to be there. With that desire, we can overcome a few myths fairly easily.

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Myth #2: If I preach down to the level of the ignorant, they will remain ignorant.

Preaching to their level does not mean you minimize the gospel or water down the law. It means you communicate the word clearly and show them how it applies to their lives. We will talk about practical ways to do that in a moment, but for now consider the importance of doing it.

These are souls who have not been reached. They are ignorant not because they woke up one day and decided the Bible was not important to them. Most of them are ignorant because the Bible doesn't make sense to them. It's a foreign language to them. They do not miss what they do not know. Any given Sunday might be the first time someone is hearing the message.

When you preach at their level, you show them what they have been missing. You connect them to the means of grace by which the Holy Spirit will sow and grow their faith. The Spirit will nurture a new man who thirsts for God's Word, which in turn will overpower the old man's contented ignorance.

Myth #3: If I adopt a style that engages the ignorant, I will bore the literate.

I can confidently tell you on the basis of plenty of anecdotal evidence that mature Christians enjoy a preaching style that engages the biblically ignorant. Here is why I think they enjoy it. The language of the shepherd becomes the language of his sheep. The words you regularly use will become their vocabulary. The way you explain things will shape the way they look at things.

Mature Christians enjoy a preaching style that engages the biblically ignorant.

The point is that even if you have a consistent audience of informed Christians, they will consistently interact with biblically ignorant people five or six days per week. Teach them how to converse with such people by demonstrating it from the pulpit. Then the language used on Sunday can be put to use on Monday.

Myth #4: I don't have enough time to explain everything.

It will absolutely require more time. It will require you to think like an uninformed person—even like an unbeliever. It will force you

to find words and phrases that communicate God's timeless truths to people with no biblical background. This requires a great deal of mental effort. You will question if you can afford the time to do this. But in light of myth #1, there is a better question. Can you afford to not do this?

It is not your job to preach the entire Bible every week. It is not your burden to defend the supremacy, inerrancy, and efficacy of Scripture on a weekly basis. It *is* your job to be a clear window to the gospel of Jesus.

Some practical tips follow on how to speak to the level of the biblically ignorant without coming across as biblically arrogant.

Tip #1: Rethink the atmosphere you create.

I wish that engaging those with little Bible knowledge was as easy as switching a few words in our vocabulary—which does help, as we will see. But we have to start deeper than that. The biblically ignorant who are determining if your church is for them pay attention first not to the words you say, but to how you say them.

Most pastors are wired completely opposite. When you visit a church, you evaluate it based on doctrine. If the church is a solid Lutheran church, there is not much evaluation to do. But if you have ever gone to a wedding or funeral at a different church, how did you feel? No matter what that church did to make you feel comfortable, you probably felt out of place and awkward. That's because we pastors evaluate churches on the basis of doctrine.

Those who are biblically ignorant cannot do this. The first thing they pay attention to isn't *what* you say, but *how* you say it. While the implications of this could warrant an entire article, here's just one connection that is pertinent to the title of this one. What does your atmosphere communicate to those who are biblically ignorant? Does it communicate a loving desire to reach them on their level, or does it suggest an arrogance that requires them to reach yours? The remaining tips narrow in on specific parts of the sermon that are worthy of attention.

Tip #2: Rethink your introduction.

The purpose of the introduction is to find a point of connection with the listeners. We preachers often leverage our introductions to connect with people on a biblical level. Here's what I mean.

Let's say I am preaching about Samson's final feat. I introduce the sermon by talking about a character from *The Avengers* that will surely get the attention of the younger crowd: Iron Man. I show a picture of Iron Man as a visual aid. After highlighting Iron Man's unique strength and how he used it, I immediately transition to talk about Samson's unique strength and how he used it. Then I announce my theme and parts: God makes you strong. Strong to live. Strong to die.

Illustration: Iron Man is strong → **Connection:** Samson was strong → **Theme:** God makes you strong

In this model, the illustration which is widely recognized is *immediately* connected to a detail in the text. This is not inherently bad or wrong. It immediately connects people to the text, which is great for those people who are familiar with the Bible and eager to hear it.

But what about people who are not familiar with the Bible and perhaps a bit skeptical about it?

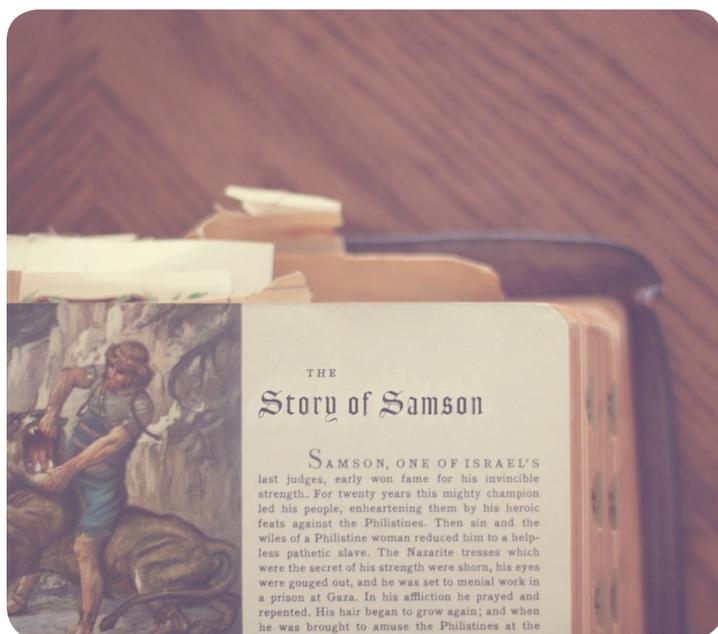
In the introduction above, the illustration doesn't apply to them unless they own a fully-functioning Iron Man suit. The connection is difficult for them to make because they have no context yet for Samson. The result is that they might contemplate scenes from *The Avengers* more than your message.

The traditional way to use the introduction is to gather people around the text. An alternative way to use the introduction is to gather people around an issue resolved by the text.

For example, a sermon on Samson's last feat could start with a dialogue about the mercy rule—the rule that ends or shortens the game when a team is completely outmatched and everybody knows it. What if you could apply the mercy rule to life when your career, health, or relationships seem to be beyond repair? Perhaps you recently went through something where it seemed like God was working against you—like you were down and out, and there was no way you could possibly win. In a moment I will show you why a guy named Samson had every right to feel that way. But when you see what God did through him, you will discover that even when you are down, you are never out.

Illustration: Mercy rule → **Connection:** Common tension → **Theme:** You are never out

The illustration is something biblically ignorant people can relate to, and the connection is something they have all experienced.



Gather people around an issue resolved by the text. This draws everyone in, regardless of biblical knowledge, and it creates a sense of urgency in which everyone leans into the text to discover the solution.

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Tip #3: Rethink your vocabulary.

If you are not careful with your vocabulary—especially overused insider words and phrases—it's easy to cause disconnect and bring ambiguity to your message. Here are a few examples.

"The text before us this Sunday..."

Use of this phrase could be a homiletical shortcut that undermines the authenticity that Millennials are searching for. If what you are preaching on is just a "text," you don't need to explain where it came from or what it is. It's just there. Somebody put it in front of you, and now you have to deal with it.

Tell them what "the text" really is. It is God's living, powerful word. It is from God's library of books and letters of which he himself is the Alpha and Omega. What you have is the best news that anyone could hear.

Try banning this phrase altogether and see what it forces you to do. You will likely be more specific about the way you refer to the Bible, and that's always a good thing.

"This part of the Bible reminds us that..."

What are you communicating with the word *remind*? On a theological level, the Bible does not repeat something we already know. It is earth-shattering news that deserves urgent attention no matter how often we hear it. The word *remind* can deflect hearers away from that sense of urgency.

On an interpersonal level, you are implying that the hearers *should* know what you are reminding them of. But what if they don't know? What are you implying about them?

"We"

Pay attention to pronoun usage. When preachers use "we," they often mean everyone in the room. Be careful, though. By default, Millennials and most guests interpret "we" as a reference to the pastor and the members of his church. Big difference.

There are appropriate times to talk about yourself and the members of your church, such as when you are welcoming guests or sharing a congregational vision.

There are also times when "we" could make a good statement sound arrogant. For example: "We know that we are forgiven

because of what Jesus did for us.” This might be heard as an attitude of arrogance to those who don’t feel like part of the “we.”

“We read from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.”

Textual introductions like this create confusion for the scripturally uniformed by opening up a lot of questions. “Who is Paul? Why did he write a letter? Why is it my business to read his letter? What is a Corinthian?”

“What is a Corinthian?”

Take the time to tell people what they are hearing. Set it in its historical context. “This was a message written by the most influential first century Christian missionary to a group of struggling Christians in a bustling city called Corinth.” This shows your authentic interest in what you are about to read.

“ ... ”

That was you completely ignoring a detail in the text that you did not want to take time to explain. You decided to skip it, hoping that nobody would notice.

Better to highlight such details. It should be expected that God’s story contains details that are odd or difficult. Rather than skipping over them, acknowledge them. Offer at least a brief explanation so that people can learn from the challenging detail.

If we ignore the oddities or imply that people just need to believe everything in the Bible without mentally processing it, we risk creating an atmosphere of biblical arrogance which could reinforce biblical ignorance.

“Here are a few other passages that support this.”

With some Millennials you don’t need to prove yourself. If you feel that a truth is unusual enough that it needs reinforcement, just share that you have been convinced by studying the many places where the Bible speaks about it. If you feel compelled, list the references you studied. Tell them where to look it up for themselves.

If it aids in the joy of their discovery, walk through one auxiliary passage that provides exceptional clarity on the issue. Digging into one passage with context is better than sprinting through several with none.

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Conclusion

Right now you might feel that these tips overemphasize some very minor points. I acknowledge these are little things, but a bunch of little things contribute to an atmosphere.

That is what the Pharisees hated about Jesus. Their accusation that he welcomed sinners was telling. He did lots of little things to create an atmosphere where sinners felt welcome. Don’t think that Jesus had it easier than we do. He encountered guilty people who should have *known better* and people who should not have been so *ignorant* of the truth.

For these kinds of people, Jesus created an atmosphere of grace where everyone was welcome. He gathered people around issues that he alone could resolve. He ran towards messes that he alone could fix. Many of these were temporal in nature rather than spiritual. But by engaging them Jesus drew people toward the problem of sin for which he was the remedy by his life, death, and resurrection.

Next steps

- 1) As you read through the Gospels, pay attention to the atmosphere Jesus created for ignorant “sinners.” How did he communicate to help them make sense of the message?
- 2) Answer the question: “Do I want my church to attract the biblically ignorant?” Is there anything about the answer that scares you or makes you hesitate? Why?
- 3) Use the tips in this article to build a framework for personal evaluation. Include people of all ages in the evaluation process. Nothing apart from the Word is too sacred to evaluate, but use wisdom when making changes.

Banish everything alien?

The examples in this article are not from a list of things to banish from preaching so that messages have no trace of anything alien. Millennials, like seekers of all time, will have much to learn as they explore the message and culture of Christianity and confessional Lutheranism. But the examples in this article do illustrate points on which greater awareness might increase a listener’s interest in receiving a message. *BG.*

