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Preaching to the ~~Choir~~ Biblically Illiterate

By Nathan Nass

In March 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* had to issue a correction. The previous day, a journalist had quoted Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as saying that Moses had brought water from Iraq. As it turns out, Mr. Netanyahu actually said that Moses brought water from a *rock*.¹ Who'd have thought? That same week, National Public Radio had to make a correction too. An NPR blog on Good Friday stated, "Easter—the day celebrating the idea that Jesus did not die and go to hell or purgatory or anywhere at all, but rather arose into heaven—is on Sunday." As the corrected blog later noted, Easter is actually "the day Christians celebrate Jesus' Resurrection."²

There's a term for this lack of Bible knowledge: biblical illiteracy. Less than half of adults can name the four gospels. 60% percent of Americans can't name five of the Ten Commandments. 81% of born-again Christians think that "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse. Over 50% of high school seniors think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a husband and wife....³

And then a guest walks into your church and hears your sermon.... Would they understand it?

Actually, don't even think about that guest for a moment. Think about the members of your church choir. Over the past year, I've had member visits with spiritually mature members of our congregation—like your typical choir members. For a devotion, I've read the story of Zacchaeus. I assumed it would be a familiar story. Everybody knows about the wee little man, right? Wrong! When I've asked, "Can you remember anything about Zacchaeus?" less than 50% have had any recollection of Zacchaeus at all. Even if we just "preach to the choir" in our churches, we're preaching to people who are less familiar with the Bible than we'd like to think.

Far from being comical or simply surprising, biblical illiteracy presents a huge challenge to the preacher. Consider these words

from Jesus' "sermons": "Just as **Moses** lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up" (John 3:14). "For as **Jonah** was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). "Before **Abraham** was born, I am" (John 8:58). "As it was in the days of **Noah**, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:37).

What did Jesus assume? That his hearers knew about Moses, Jonah, Abraham, and Noah (and many others!). How can we preach what Jesus preached if our hearers don't know what Jesus' hearers knew? Biblical illiteracy isn't just a matter of Bible trivia. The less our hearers know the people, places, and stories of the Bible, the less they can appreciate God's plan of salvation in Jesus. Paul reminds us that "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us" (Romans 15:4). We want to lead our people to an ever deeper knowledge of God's Word.

A caution is needed. Biblical illiteracy certainly can't be solved by preaching alone. That's more pressure than any preacher can or should bear. We need the Word in our homes, not just in our churches. But preaching does matter. Our sermons do make a difference. So how can we preach when even preaching to the choir means preaching to people who might be biblically illiterate?

To start, we need to understand what biblical illiteracy is. At its simplest level, **biblical illiteracy is a lack of knowledge about biblical names and places**, like my members' ignorance about Zacchaeus. In our small Spanish services, I routinely ask if my hearers have heard of people in our Bible lessons. Moses? Blank stares. Abraham? No clue. The apostle Paul? Nope. I've come to assume that every character in every story is unknown to my hearers, except for maybe Jesus. People simply don't know who people in the Bible are. That's biblical illiteracy.

But it's been helpful for me to realize that biblical illiteracy goes much deeper. **Biblical illiteracy is also missing the context of the words of Scripture.** Albert Molher comments, "Our people can know so much, and yet know nothing, all at the same time. They can have a deep repository of biblical facts and stories, and yet know absolutely nothing about how any of it fits together, or why any of it matters beyond the wee little 'moral of the story.'"⁴

How many of our people struggle with that? There is danger in "Facebook-meme Christianity." How often aren't single Bible verses pulled out of context and used independently from the rest of Scripture? Think of how misquoted this verse is: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13). It's talking about contentment, not winning the Super Bowl!

To be biblically literate doesn't just mean knowing that Zacchaeus was a wee little man. Jesus' love for tax collectors and sinners is at the heart Luke's gospel, from the Calling of Levi (Luke 5) to the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) to the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16) to the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18). The story of Zacchaeus leads to a marvelous conclusion: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). Every text has a context.

So does the Bible itself. Every "little" story like Zacchaeus is part of God's "big" story. **Biblical illiteracy is also failing to grasp how each story of the Bible fits into God's grand plan of**



salvation. Professor Paul Wendland likes to quote this phrase from Luther: "If you don't understand the subject matter, you won't be able to make sense of the words." You can learn all sorts of stuff about Zacchaeus, but if you don't know God's plan of salvation from creation to the fall to Christ's cross to God's promises of heaven, you still won't get it. How many of our people grasp the little stories (like Zacchaeus) but miss how they fit into the big story of salvation?

That leads us to the deepest, most hidden level of biblical illiteracy. **Biblical illiteracy is failing to realize that every text of Scripture points me to my Savior Jesus.** "These are the Scriptures that testify about me," Jesus asserts (John 5:39). It's all about Jesus! Every part of God's Word—from Genesis to Revelation—was written to point you to your Savior Jesus. To miss that truth is the worst kind of darkness. You can be a biblical expert and lecture on the grand metanarrative of the Bible, but if you miss the truth that Jesus came to save *you*, you're still biblically illiterate.

So where do we start? How do we preach to people struggling with different levels of biblical illiteracy? I know where I need to start: with me. The biblical illiteracy that's most concerning is my own. Would you agree? I often feel embarrassed to read Luther. He quotes the Bible left and right. In contrast, how many of us have a Google (or a Logos) knowledge of the Bible? I can remember bits and pieces from Bible verses. So, I Google the phrase, and Google tells me where it's from. Easy! I don't have to memorize anything. I don't really have to know anything. Can you relate? Biblical illiteracy in my ministry starts with me.

So I appreciate the encouragement that WELS pastors receive to keep learning and growing. There are lots of conferences. Lots of presentations. Lots of suggestions. "Read Luther. Read current events. Read philosophy and science and history. Read apologetics." Those are all great suggestions, but do you know what I don't hear very often? "Read the Bible." I wonder if our job description as pastors has become so broad that we inadvertently spend less time in the Word than previous generations of pastors. Do we sometimes "run ahead" of the Word (2 John 9)?

Here's my confession: I don't know the Word as well as I think I do. I bet you don't either. So I'm going to give you the encouragement that I need you to give me: Read the Bible! God's promise is true: "Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2). Read the Bible. If you read just one thing today, read the Bible. In fact, don't worry about reading anything else until you've spent time in God's Word.

Let's be men of the Word. Biblical literacy starts with us.

In a recent seminary satellite course, "Preaching on the Parables," Professor Paul Wendland shared two Latin phrases that have stuck in my mind. He encouraged us to preach *todo in illis*—"everything in these things." Fill yourself so full of God's Word that your

sermon is *todo in illis*—"everything in the things of God's Word." Then he reminded us that we are the *vox Dei*—the "voice of God." What a privilege! We stand before God's people and share his Word as if God himself were speaking through us. Let's be men of the Word. Biblical literacy starts with us.

But it doesn't stop there. We want to raise up people who are people of the Word too. To do that, we need to know people. Where are people at? Which level of biblical illiteracy do they struggle with? Dear pastor, have you planned visits in people's homes on your calendar yet? There's no substitute for time with people. Listen to the 13-year-old girl cry hysterically because she's terrified of death. Watch that hard-working man struggle to find Genesis in the Bible. Preaching to a biblically illiterate society starts with knowing the Word and knowing people.

Here are suggestions for preaching the Word to biblically illiterate people. Assume your hearers will be hearing your text for the first time. Before you dive into your text study, read the text in English, just like people will hear it. **Ask yourself this question:** *What biblical knowledge is assumed in this text?* Since we can't assume that our hearers are familiar with any text, be proactive about anticipating their questions.

Asking that question before you dive into your text study is key. You don't want to forget what it was like to hear the text for the first time. Don't start your sermon where you are at on Sunday morning. Your people aren't there yet! You need to start where you were. In your sermon, **take people on a journey.** Instead of downloading information, lead them to discover God's truth, just as you did as you studied your text. Start with the questions that popped into your mind. How did God's Word answer them? In each sermon, take your people on a journey.

Along the way, **tell the context of your text.** Don't just jump into Ezekiel or Mark or Romans. Walk your people into the biblical world of the author. When?... Where?... Why?... It doesn't have to be long. Often a paragraph or two is enough. Show your hearers your text's biblical context.

One of the best ways to do so is to **not be afraid to preach on biblical narratives.** Jesus did! He preached on Moses, Noah, Abraham, Jonah, and many others. If we want our people to know the stories of the Bible, let's preach on them! When was the last time you preached on creation? How about David and Goliath? Sodom and Gomorrah? If we don't preach on Bible stories, we shouldn't be surprised when people don't know them. Consider using Hebrews 11 as a guide to help you see which heroes of faith to include in your preaching.⁵

Once you decide which text to preach on, **don't jump away from your text.** Before referencing biblical stories or verses from outside your text, ask yourself, "Can biblically illiterate people understand this verse without its wider context?" Don't say, "Just like Noah in the ark," unless you plan on telling the story of Noah and his ark. You'll lose your hearers. Proof texts work great in doctrinal essays, but they can make it hard for our hearers to follow.



This isn't "dumbing down" the sermon. Our hearers aren't stupid. They just haven't had the opportunity to study the Scriptures like we have. Instead of jumping around the Bible, let's help our hearers appreciate the rich ways our sermon text plumbs the depth of sin and the fullness of God's grace.

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As you do, **tell the big story over and over again.** Every little story of God's Word is an intricate part of the big story of God's plan of salvation. Zacchaeus wasn't just a wee little man. He's Exhibit A of how Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Biblical illiteracy clouds the unity of Scripture. This is where a thorough text study comes in. How does this specific text in its specific context connect to God's plan of salvation? That's what the Scriptures are meant to do, right? They "make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

That means that we want to **get to Jesus in every sermon**, like Jesus did on the way to Emmaus. "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Since the Scriptures from beginning to end testify about Jesus, every text contains its own unique path to Jesus. Charles Spurgeon is known for saying, "I take my text and make a beeline to the cross." Instead of thrusting the same gospel paragraphs into every sermon, mine your text to discover that text's own connection to Christ.

That's especially relevant, because our biblically illiterate culture desperately needs to hear **law and gospel in every sermon.** At the heart of biblical illiteracy is failing to see Jesus as my Savior from sin. Not every text reveals God's plan of salvation with the same clarity. That's true. Some texts emphasize Christian living



more than justification. That's true. Yet, in hundreds of texts and in hundreds of ways, Scripture was written to say to us, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Our people won't hear that anywhere else.

Our biblically illiterate culture desperately needs to hear law and gospel.

Your sermon matters. From the choir in the balcony to the guest in back, there is a great need for biblical preaching. So here's a final encouragement: **Give yourself time to preach.** At times, I stand up to preach already 30 minutes into the service, and we still have the offering to collect, prayers to be said, the Lord's Supper to celebrate. There are many good things that can be included in worship. Make sure there's time for the preaching of the Word. Our people are not overfed with God's Word. In a biblically illiterate world, your sermon matters. Sermonettes can make Christianettes. We need to give our preachers time to preach the Word.

Just remember your goal. I once talked with my dad about how little my confirmation students knew about the Bible. I've never forgotten how my dad responded about his time teaching confirmation class in the 1980s. He said, "My goal for my confirmation students by the end of the year was to have them believe in Jesus as their Savior." That's our goal as Christian preachers, isn't it? Our ultimate goal is not people who know lots about the Bible. Our goal is people who believe in Jesus as their Savior through the power of God's Word.

But think of the names the Bible gives to our Savior: Son of **David** (Matthew 21:9), **Lamb** of God (John 1:29), the last **Adam** (1 Corinthians 15:45), Lion of the tribe of **Judah** (Revelation 5:5), and the Root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10). What's striking about those names? They intimately connect Jesus with the people and places of the Bible. Biblical knowledge draws me closer to Jesus. The more I know God's Word, the more I appreciate God's plan of salvation for me. So to the choir... To the guests... Preach the Word! Don't give up. Don't give in. "Know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

¹For more, read this article from the *Washington Post*: "You Should Read the Bible" (March 30, 2018) at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/even-atheists-should-read-the-bible/2018/03/30/98a1133c-3444-11e8-94fa-32d48460b955_story.html.

²To read NPR's own description of the mistake, check out "NPR Catches Hell Over Easter Mistake" (April 2, 2018) at <https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2018/04/02/598029102/npr-catches-hell-over-easter-mistake>.

³These statistics were compiled by Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. See "The Scandal of Biblical Illiteracy: It's Our Problem" (January 20, 2016) at <https://albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4>.

⁴Mohler Jr., R. Albert. *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008.

⁵As I wrote this article, I preached on Jacob wrestling with God (<https://upsidedownsavior.home.blog/2019/10/20/wrestling-with-god/>) and the end of Hebrews 11 (<https://upsidedownsavior.home.blog/2019/11/03/the-world-was-not-worthy-of-them/>). Here's also a link to a sermon series that I've used on the Heroes of Faith: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/2eid4j28jeam0c3/2016%20Series%20Schedule%20-%20OT%20Heroes%20of%20Faith.pdf?dl=0>. Easy click links are at the online version of this article: <https://worship.welsrc.net/downloads-worship/preach-the-word/>.

