

Preaching Within the Church

We're beginning to equip and train women to preach within our gatherings under the authority of elders. Women have shared within panels and co-taught with men. Women lead worship, lead missional communities, lead within the apostolic team, share during celebration Sundays, baptize others, lead communion, and a host of many other things.

We want to provide clarity on what we believe about preaching and how you'll begin to see shifts on who is preaching because we believe that preaching is not limited to elders and is therefore not limited to men. We also want to clarify what we believe preaching is and what's happening during a sermon on a Sunday because that is often misunderstood.

Executive Summary

- Preaching in our gatherings is a moment of collective worship.
- Preaching isn't for everyone...but it is for all who are gifted, equipped, and live out a life of submission to the Spirit and under the care of the elders.
- Woman ought to be equipped and empowered to preach within their gifts, on a team, and under the authority of the elders as they were within the early Church.

What is Preaching?

What is happening on a Sunday during a sermon? We're all standing around together and singing until the music stops and the worship leader prays about the word coming into our hearts. Then, we sit down and someone steps up and begins talking...what is happening? Why do we do it? What happens if we don't?

Is the sermon a lecture? Is the person up from educating the group about information we don't know or have forgotten?

Is the sermon motivational entertainment? After all, life is pretty hard and we need some excitement and some umph put into our step as we go about the next week.

Is the sermon an op-ed explanation of current events and how we ought to think about them, vote about them, and act in light of what is happening in the world?

Is the sermon self-help? Group therapy or arm chair expert moments where someone with spiritual authority gives counseling advice to the group?

Honestly, there's aspects of those elements in nearly every sermon. Good sermons engage our minds. Good sermons motivate us and don't bore us. Exceptional sermons acknowledge the world we live in and help us navigate it with courage and compassion. Truly good sermons engage our inner-emotional lives.

But that's not the essence of a sermon and that's not what is happening while we sit together. We'll look at the Bible, Church history, cultural norms, and then finally explain what we believe preaching is doing within our gathering on Sundays.

Preaching in the Bible

1. **The Old Testament** gives quite a bit of fodder for our idea of preaching through the role of prophets, particularly the prophets after David and Solomon's reigns when the people of Israel became divided and lost their way. The Old Testament priests were not preachers or communicators at all. Their role was to perform sacrifices and rituals. However, the prophets became the speakers. In town squares, in the royal court, and on the steps of the temple. Their work was to proclaim who God was, what he had done, what he was going to do. They also called the people back to belief and back to obedience. This was all done under the word, "prophesying".

In the New Testament, the writers of the epistles followed a similar pattern whether it was Paul, Peter, or the author of Hebrews. They would offer a proclamation of who God was and what he had done through Jesus, then an exhortation about their identity in Christ, and then finally, a didactic section on how they should live in light of Jesus and their status before Christ.

Biblically, preaching has to do with calling people into remembrance of who God is, what he has done, who we are, and how we are called to live. In other words, preaching is telling the story. In short, preaching is retelling God's story.

2. In the New Testament, we see the arrival of a new word: **Euangelioizo** (transliterated to evangelizing) but often translated "share the good news" or "proclaiming the Word". This was used throughout the gospels as Jesus proclaimed good news. Throughout the book of Acts, the apostles and disciples spend their time proclaiming the good news, too. Essentially, they were messengers of the victory of God in Christ over the powers of evil, death, and sin. They were like people coming from a battle: God has won and everything is different now! **Biblically, preaching has to do with proclaiming the good news about Jesus that he has defeated sin, death, and evil through Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection and is now making all things new!**

3. In the new testament we see "**teaching.**" Jesus teaching the Scriptures within a gathered group of people (for example in Luke 4, Luke 23, and Mark 2). Him teaching was often the occasion for other miracles as gospel writers point out, "While Jesus was

teaching...” After Jesus ascended and the Holy Spirit descended, Acts 2 describes the church gathering regularly to hear the Apostles teach the gospel, expound on what Jesus had said and explain it to them. It says, they were filled with a sense of awe and expectation at what God was doing. Similarly, at the end of Romans, Paul commends Phoebe to the readers as the person who can explain the letter to them (Romans 16:1).¹

Importantly, the teaching was placed within the life of the church sharing meals, caring for the poor, communion, baptism, invitation to others to join them, miracles, and prayer. It was within all of that activity that teaching about Jesus was also taking place. In the same way that Jesus’ teaching was also surrounded by meals, parties, miracles, conversations, and friendship. Interestingly, Jesus’ disciples did not write out or share large anthologies of Jesus’ teaching on the Scriptures; though we might think that to be the most pressing thing. Imagine: A book of Jesus’ sermons on every text of the Old Testament? Seems important! Matthew shares the most of Jesus’ sermons and it was only 3 chapters out of his 28 chapter book on everything he thought was essential to understand Jesus. Instead the gospel writers spent page after page writing about Jesus’ moments when he wasn’t preaching. When he was with disciples, when he was healing, when he was arguing with religious leaders, and when he was sharing meals.

The authority of Jesus’ life was in his living not his teaching. The power of the early church wasn’t the preaching of the Apostles, but the shared life of the church in the city.

Teaching and explaining the Scriptures is a key component of preaching that happens within the scope of a shared life of community and mission.

4. Still, there’s another demonstration of preaching which is to reason with the culture. Paul in Athens in Acts 18, does this with great nuance and effectiveness in making the gospel clear to a culture that isn’t aligned with his own. But also, in Acts 17:1-3 it says that Paul went to the synagogue to reason with them from the Scriptures and explain and provide evidence that Jesus was the savior and king of the world. He dealt with their objections and misunderstanding, and made evidence and reasoned explanations for Jesus. **The last key biblical aspect of preaching is this: preaching requires an astute reasoning and apologetic of the gospel to those within the faith and outside of it.**

Preaching in Church History

Early Church gatherings were marked by meals, baptisms, communion, Scripture readings, songs, prayer, and explanation of the scriptures they were reading (Ephesians 5:19). The high point was the meal itself and all of the elements we might call “spiritual” or “ritualistic” happened around that shared meal in a large estate type home. It is

¹ Nehemiah 8 is an Old Testament example of this kind of preaching: Scripture read and then explained.

important to note that sitting in rows and listening in that manner as we do today was not the norm in the ancient church.

In the Middle Ages, the church moved toward a gathering that focused on communion. In fact the term for these meetings is itself “communion”. The high point was the ritual of remembering the gospel through the taking of the bread and the wine. The leaders of the church took more of the form of Old Testament priests: carrying out the rituals or sacraments on behalf of the whole.

Through the Reformation, there was a big shift. Protestant churches moved away from the ritualistic elements and put a greater emphasis on preaching of the Bible. The Bible being understood, explained, and internalized drove the Reformation from Johan Hus’s preaching in a warehouse in Prague onwards. This resulted in the sermon being the high point of all church services and even all church activities. Martin Luther, for example, preached 8 different sermons a week. The church service became preaching. Then the church became preaching and listening to preaching.

Then, after the dust of the enlightenment had settled across Europe and North America, the Great Awakening brought with it an increased view of “the preacher”. The heroes of the faith became well known preachers who traveled around the world. At this time formal education was growing into all classes and all communities. With that formalization, there was also a greater emphasis on learning in church around lecture and podium.

Then, after World War II, there was both a baby boom and a church growth boom. Preachers became celebrities. Local churches became regional churches as buildings grew, programs grew, and the main endeavor of any church was to grow “the stage through the sermon.” No longer was the “main moment” of a church the sermon, it essentially became the “only moment” of the life of the church. Solidified at this moment was the concept that a pastor = preacher. Seminaries focused entirely on producing preachers — not spiritual directors, shepherds, disciple makers, or missiologists. The most defining aspect of churches in this period has become the personality, ability, style, and performance of their preacher.

Preaching in Contemporary Christian Culture

There’s a lot to celebrate through our shared church story. There’s a lot to understand in regards to our background and understanding about preaching. Preaching has become

- The way of doing pastoral care
- The moment of theological correction
- The method to exercise spiritual authority
- The “work of the ministry”

Overall, preaching has taken an odd status as “the thing”—simultaneously being overvalued and undervalued. Overvalued for the preacher and undervalued in the sense that everyday disciples cannot make the impact a sermon can.

In Soma

In Soma, we believe preaching in our gatherings is a moment of collective worship that is crucial to our collective mission and life outside of those gatherings. Preaching is an expression, as important as it might be, of a greater and more holistic reality of our shared lives of following Jesus.

What we're doing together within those thirty to forty minutes is learning how to submit to the truth about Jesus together, learning how to see that truth get deep within our souls, and learning how this truth connects with and impacts the world around us.

Together (as a church of individuals, families, and missional communities) we're experiencing a moment of worship within a liturgy. In other words, the sermon is a song born out of the words of God (that's our AMEN!)², together we're hearing God speak to us in our lives, together we're learning apologetics and how this faith not only makes sense for us but is good news for our city.

When we sit together under the word and listen to a sermon we are participants in a moment of worship that we hope propels the life of our body toward three goals:

1. People are brought into faith because they hear the gospel preached from the Bible.
2. Our body is encouraged in the gospel and empowered to share the gospel with one another. Our MCs are more effective in their encouraging one another in the Gospel because they've heard the gospel carefully proclaimed from the Scriptures and specifically to our church in that moment.
3. Our missional communities are more effective in their mission of sharing the gospel because in our preaching we've experienced an example of gospel proclamation to our city.

We believe preaching is best when done within a community that's on mission. Our shared lives together within the city creates the foundation of discipleship in which the sermon offers encouragement, exhortation, teaching, and proclaiming of the good news.

Who Preaches

Our view is that women and men ought to be encouraged and equipped for all the work within and outside the church they are gifted in. The Holy Spirit uses our talents, stories, personalities, and occupations to advance the gospel while also giving us gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the body. Put plainly, we believe every disciple is given a role and plays a crucial role in the body (or *soma*) representing Christ in our city. If a woman or man is gifted to preach, it's our collective job to equip, encourage, and empower them within their gifts just as it would be within the gifts of hospitality, leadership, administration, prayer, or mercy.

² This concept was taken from Dr. Eric Redman's book: "Say it!", which explores gospel-centered preaching within the African American church. He describes the sermon as a song and the preacher as the song leader. A good sermon calls a congregation to worship.

In fact, our structures and convictions around missional communities, DNA groups, and worship gatherings demonstrate this view. We believe elders are called to provide spiritual direction and care for the entire body which includes overseeing the doctrines and protecting our body from false gospels. However, we see each person within our church as ministers of the gospel and the role of our leadership team (staff, elders, and deacons) to equip each member to live out and express their gifts for the building up of the body.

Therefore, preaching in Soma is a team sport where those gifted, able, and mature are invited to be equipped with the art and service of preaching.

Our Vision for Preaching Team

We hope to see a diverse team of preachers—diverse in perspectives, stages of life, communities they live in, and backgrounds that represent our body. One way to think about the diversity is through the list of gifts Paul describes in Ephesians 4. Within the New Testament you will find people with each of these gifts preaching.

Apostle — Preaching to establish and send

Prophet — Preaching to challenge and call to repentance

Evangelist — Preaching to persuade and re-persuade into the gospel

Shepherd — Preaching to care for the flock and to feed them

Teacher — Preaching to explain the truth in a way people understand

While Brad will continue to preach the majority of the time, we see part of his job to develop more preachers because: 1) those gifts are within our body, 2) he can't express all the perspectives God has for us, 3) the church is most healthy when it relies on all that God has given us.

FAQs & Responses

Can non-elders preach?

Examples can be found throughout the New Testament of non-elders preaching as we've described above. Apollos preached in Ephesus when Aquilla corrected him and "equipped him" to preach the gospel better (Acts 18:26). Phoebe, who is a deaconess, explains the book of Romans (Romans 16:1-2). Philip's four daughters prophesied (Acts 21:9). Additionally, Stephen, Titus, Timothy, and even Paul all had seasons of preaching when they were not elders.

However, we believe, as an extension of the calling to provide care, protection, and spiritual direction, that elders ought to oversee the preaching ministry of the church. The elders oversee this through the preaching cohort that equips new preachers and the ongoing preaching team that collaborates in the process of preparing to preach.

In addition to that oversight, we don't believe non-elders ought to be given the responsibility of course correcting false doctrines or refuting false gospels that are

harming our church within our gatherings. That's a role for the elders. You can read more about our understanding of what an elder is [here](#).

Who do we equip?

- Faithful men and women within our church in missional communities and DNA groups
- Humble and patient people who have a love for the body and Jesus
- Disciples who are gifted in communication and public speaking
- Those who affirm our theological statements

Are you sure women can preach?

We would actually say women within our body ought to be equipped to preach—not allowed, but encouraged. Women are the principal witnesses of both the death and resurrection of Jesus and are the first to proclaim the gospel: “Christ is risen”. The real question is if non-elders can preach. As we've seen above, we affirm that they can! Then both women and men can.

You can read further in [this paper](#) on all the relevant passages and our interpretation of the biblical limitation of eldership to men.

How do we equip preachers in Soma?

We equip preachers through a four month process led by Brad on what preaching is, and how to prepare, write, and craft a sermon. Each month the new preachers work on a different aspect of the sermon and come together to get feedback and collaborate together. Lastly, they preach their sermon in front of the group and receive feedback. Throughout this process Brad looks over interpretations, outlines, and final manuscript and helps the preachers proclaim the gospel clearly and within their own voice.

Why is this happening now? Why did it take so long?

For the last six years we've had a policy and philosophy that preaching was for elders alone. (While exceptions were sometimes made, that was usually done under the guise of “non-preaching” special events, like a panel discussion, for example.) However, as we've reconsidered that philosophy through how we train preachers with the preaching cohort, we've looked ahead to the biblical realities of non-elders preaching and want to empower women to do the same because they have so much to offer our body.

Honestly, this is a challenging topic so we've been patient.

Are we caving to the culture?

Actually, the cultural “battle of the sexes” makes this a more delicate decision, not less. The Bible doesn't suggest a zero-sum game of women vs. men; instead it describes a unified mutual dependence and honoring of one another. Our cultural moment seeks redemption through the breaking of glass ceilings and our fear is this could represent one of those. But we want the women in our body to know they are worthy, crucial, and

desired members of God's kingdom regardless of what roles, platforms, or acknowledgements they receive from others.