

## Balanced Preaching: A Four-Legged Stool as a Model

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**Abstract:** *While consecutive expository preaching has become the norm in many conservative churches, different preachers have different emphases. Some focus upon detailed expositions of the text so that their sermons sound like running commentaries. Other preachers emphasize certain favorite theological themes. Some rush straight into application, with little explanation of the text. In recent years, preaching in which the focus of every sermon is how the text fits into the history of redemption has become popular in certain circles. I have developed a model for my students in which each of these four emphases is treated like the legs of a stool. While some texts may call for more emphasis on one “leg,” every good sermon should have all four elements. Furthermore, over time, one’s preaching ministry should be balanced among these four aspects.*

**Key Words:** *balanced preaching, consecutive expository preaching, Dennis Johnson, Edmund Clowney, Jay Adams, John MacArthur, preaching with purpose, redemptive-historical preaching.*

### What’s a Preacher to Do? Conflicting Approaches to Preaching

In 1999, Dennis Johnson, one of my professors from Westminster Seminary in California, shared an unpublished paper he wrote for his preaching students entitled “What’s A Young Preacher to Do? Toward Reconciling Rival Approaches to Reformed Preaching.” In this paper, Dr. Johnson shares his seminary experience in which he was exposed to various competing preaching models. Proponents of each approach offer reasons why their system is superior and point out potential weaknesses or excesses of other homiletic methods. Later, Dr. Johnson incorporated a revision of this material in chapter 2 “Priorities and Polarities in Preaching” in his book, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ*

*from all the Scriptures.*<sup>1</sup> Here he categorizes reformed preaching into three broad categories which I found to be helpful.

1. **Preaching to Convert.** Evangelism was an emphasis in the sermons of the Reformers, the Puritans, and many great preachers such as Spurgeon. Many evangelical churches in our day make the evangelization of the lost a primary focus of the worship service, which often culminates in an altar call. Preaching to felt needs has been an emphasis of seeker-sensitive churches whose preaching is primarily aimed at the conversion of the lost. There also have been well-known reformed preachers in recent years whose preaching has sought to show how the gospel speaks to people in our postmodern culture.
2. **Preaching to Edify.** Edifying-sanctifying preaching, of which Jay Adams is an example, focuses upon the application of the practical purpose of each biblical text to affect the congregation. This preaching is primarily aimed at believers for their edification and growth in holiness. Hearers should walk away knowing how their lives should be changed and what they must do as a result of the proclamation of God’s Word.
3. **Preaching to Instruct.** Certain reformed denominations have a heritage of doctrinal preaching, particularly in their Sunday evening services during which they may preach through a confession or catechism. In more recent years, Redemptive-Historical preaching, which focuses on the place of each text in God’s unfolding plan of redemption (as exemplified by Johnson’s mentor, Edmund Clowney), has been promoted in certain circles as the only proper approach to public proclamation.

Dennis Johnson seeks to synthesize the best of each of the three broad categories he describes in what he refers to as “The Gospel Changes Everything: An Approach to Evangelistic, Edificatory, Historic-Redemptive Preaching.”<sup>2</sup> Johnson cites Jack Miller and Tim Keller, who probably fall more into the Redemptive-Historical camp as exemplifying this balanced approach.

<sup>1</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 25–61.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 54–61.

Other popular variants which might be subsets of some of Johnson's broad categories include the "Fallen Condition Focus" approach of Bryan Chappell (whom Johnson puts broadly in the Redemptive-Historical preaching category of a given text)<sup>3</sup> and those who emphasize a law-gospel paradigm (resembling Lutheran tradition) in preaching. In the past, most preaching came in the form of textual sermons, typically based upon one verse, which typically becomes a jumping-off point for evangelism, edification, and/or instruction. I personally have read and profited from hundreds of textual sermons by Charles Spurgeon, some of which faithfully expound and apply the text and some of which are launch pads for many true and edifying statements which are not directly drawn from the chosen passage.

As someone who has been training preachers for almost forty years, I appreciate the dilemma a young preacher faces as he is exposed to various preaching paradigms. I have been exposed to preaching influences like those described by Dr. Johnson and have come up with a somewhat different model for embracing the strengths of each approach while trying to avoid the pitfalls. Just as Edmund Clowney was the most significant influence on Dr. Johnson, Jay Adams has had the greatest impact on my thinking.

### My Personal Preaching Journey

My exposure to different approaches to preaching is similar to that described by Dennis Johnson, but I employ some different categories.

#### Consecutive Expository Preaching

I had the immense privilege of being converted as a teen at Believers Chapel in Dallas, Texas, in the early 1970s. It was an incredible blessing to be under the consecutive expository preaching ministry of Dr. S. Lewis Johnson. Hundreds of thousands of his tapes were sent out around the world, and now, over 1500 of his expositions are available online.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Johnson influenced a future generation of pastors and theologians including John MacArthur, Steve Lawson, Gregory Beale, William McRae, and Ray Ortlund (who was my first youth leader). In addition to Dr. Johnson, Believers Chapel had some amazing expositors in the congregation (most of whom were on faculty at Dallas Seminary)

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Chappell, *The Gospel According to Daniel: A Christ-Centered Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> S. Lewis Johnson Jr., n.d., <https://slj.institute.net/>.

including Bruce Waltke and Haddon Robinson. Dr. Waltke's mid-week teaching from the Psalms and Proverbs was life changing. When Dr. Robinson preached from James at a summer conference I was absolutely mesmerized. I had never heard such a gripping proclamation of God's Word. Later, I eagerly devoured his classic work on Expository Preaching.<sup>5</sup> Each of these men, while possessing different gifts and emphases, modeled faithful consecutive expository preaching. I was convinced that this was by far the best way to "preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2).

#### Doctrinal Preaching

During my early days as a Christian, I was exposed to expositors who focused almost entirely upon the theology of the text. Their sermons would typically focus upon the doctrine and often would be very light on application. This was especially the case when the preacher had come to a new theological conviction. For example, when one preacher became a convinced five-point Calvinist, his expository sermons tended to be about how each passage supports God's sovereignty and the doctrines of grace. Another brother shifted his eschatological position away from dispensationalism and towards covenantal amillennialism and suddenly his sermons, week after week, seemed to focus upon how the text relates to his new understanding of the continuity between Israel and the church. I will say that I benefited from such preaching and as a result was well-prepared for the Systematic Theology classes in seminary.

#### Preaching with Purpose

In the early 1980s, I had the blessing of pastoring an underground English-speaking church in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Our congregation consisted of over two hundred expatriate believers from approximately thirty nationalities and various Protestant denominations. I sought to practice consecutive expository preaching, and the Lord saw fit to bless it in amazing ways, as many grew spiritually and many came to faith. While engaged in this ministry I shared a recording of one of my expository sermons (of which I was unjustly proud) with a friend who was in seminary. As the Proverb states, "faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov 27:6). My friend responded that his main criticism was that I was trying to say too much and that I had covered enough material for sev-

<sup>5</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

eral sermons. He insisted that I read *Preaching with Purpose*, by Jay Adams.<sup>6</sup> The two most important correctives I received from this book were that my preaching should focus upon the one main point (purpose) of the passage and that my proclamation should reflect the practical impact which the Lord intends the text to have upon my hearers. My preaching was transformed as I sought to work harder at being focused and relevant while being faithful to the text of God's Word.

### Preaching Christ from All of Scripture

After being thrown out of Saudi Arabia in 1987 (which is another story), I completed my theological training at Westminster Seminary in California where I was extensively exposed to Redemptive-Historical preaching. We were taught that the focus of each sermon is to demonstrate how the text fits into God's redemptive plan. We were reminded that Jesus went through the entire Old Testament with his disciples demonstrating how it all points to him (Luke 24:27). We were impressed by how Geerhardus Vos's book *Biblical Theology* expounded the redemptive story from Genesis to Revelation.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Edmund Clowney masterfully instructed us in how to preach Christ from all of Scripture, especially the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> We were taught to look for connections in our text to Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. We were warned against moralistic preaching which failed to connect the biblical text to God's redemptive purposes. Dr. Clowney's work provided a paradigm for proclaiming Christ from the text and showed how any application had to be drawn explicitly from the redemptive purpose of the text.

### More Preaching with Purpose

After completing my master's degree, I went on to get my Doctor of Ministry degree, beginning my study under Dr. Jay Adams. Dr. Adams had significant concerns with the Redemptive-Historical approach to preaching which he thought could become monotonous and lack practicality.<sup>9</sup> He taught us to determine the *telos* (purpose) of our text and then to construct a sermon which was focused upon God's intention for his

<sup>6</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Jay Adams, "The Proper Use of Biblical Theology in Preaching," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 9.1 (1987): 47–49.

people in the chosen passage. I finished my degree studying under Joey Pipa, whose view of preaching was influenced by the experimental preaching represented by many of the Puritans and the Southern Presbyterians.

### The Danger of Imbalance in Each Approach

While each of the approaches to which I was exposed has strengths, each has potential weaknesses. Often my main concern with some advocates of a particular approach would not be with what they were emphasizing, but rather with what they were neglecting. I also have observed that followers of an approach sometimes go to an extreme (for example, zero application in some Redemptive-Historical sermons) which their teachers would not embrace.

### Concerns with Expository Preaching

Some expository preachers can sound merely like a running commentary on the text. A friend described his pastor's preaching as resembling someone cutting a long salami—each week the preacher would pick up where he stopped cutting last time and simply work his way through the text until his time was up. Such messages often lack clear focus and structure. A visitor walking in during the middle of the series may have difficulty picking up how this week's passage fits into the context of the book being studied. Some proponents of consecutive expository preaching so emphasize sticking to the text that they fail to make appropriate theological and redemptive connections to the rest of Scripture. If the gospel is not explicitly in the text, they may not bring in the gospel (except perhaps as an unrelated appeal to the lost at the end of the sermon). This can be especially problematic if a preacher is slowly going through a book of the Bible. They may spend several weeks in texts in which there is no explicit statement of the gospel. We should keep in mind that when the epistles were first read to the original audience, the gospel indicatives upon which the imperatives were based would have been heard in one sitting. Faithful exposition of a preaching pericope should be offered in the context of preaching Christ. Paul described his ministry as preaching the gospel and preaching Christ (Rom 1:15; 1 Cor 1:23). Some expository preaching is also weak in application. The preacher exegetes the text, explaining the meaning of the words and the grammar, without offering practical usefulness of the passage to his hearers.

### Concerns with Doctrinal Preaching

Preaching which consistently emphasizes the great theological truths appeals to many reformed congregations who love their doctrine and are well versed in their catechisms and confessions. Such preaching also appeals to many seminarians who already have an academic bent and to pastors who tend to live in their studies and love reading their books. A strength of such preaching is that it builds the congregants' mental muscles and may enhance their God-centered worship. Sometimes, however, such preaching fails to address the heart and lacks practical application to the lives of the hearers. The New Testament epistles serve as a model for how pastors should address their flocks. They build a doctrinal foundation and always address specific practical challenges faced by believers in the early churches.

### Concerns with Application-Focused Preaching

Some preachers, by nature, have a very practical bent. They want to emphasize what their hearers must do in response to the text. Sometimes they can rush to the application without adequately following Paul's example (see Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, etc.) of laying the foundation for the application in God's work of redemption. Because human nature tends to go back to legalism and moralism, seeking to find some standard we can keep so that we can be good in the eyes of God, others, and ourselves, we need to continually be reminded of God's grace to us in the gospel. Some application-focused preaching carelessly uses biblical figures as mere moral examples without emphasizing how they point to Christ. Jay Adams rightly states that Christ should be at the center of all our preaching and that no sermon that would be acceptable in a synagogue or a Unitarian congregation should be preached in a Christian church.<sup>10</sup> Application-focused preachers also have less interest in proclaiming the doctrine of the passage because they want to get to the part of the message which they consider to be most practical.

### Concerns with Redemptive-Historical Preaching

Redemptive-Historical preaching also has potential strengths and weaknesses. Many seminarians become enamored with the emphasis on preaching Christ from every text. Some of the proponents of this approach to preaching grew up in churches where the preaching was moralistic, focusing exclusively upon duty—serve more, evangelize more,

<sup>10</sup> Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 11.

give more, etc. They also heard biblical characters used as moral examples without connecting their stories to God's grand redemptive story—"You, like David, can fight the giant problems you face" or "Dare to be a Daniel!" They are thrilled when they realize that David functions as a type of Christ and that we were like the Israelites who needed God to provide an anointed warrior to defeat our great enemy against whom we were helpless and afraid (Heb 2:14–15).

In their quest to emphasize redemption and reject moralism, however, the pendulum can swing too far as they enforce their paradigm with a rigidity not supported by Scripture. Some judge any exemplary use of historical narrative as wrongfully moralistic. But Old Testament heroes can point both to our redemption in Christ and serve as practical examples. The New Testament explicitly uses Old Testament characters as examples. "Remember Lot's Wife" (Luke 17:32; also see Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11; and Heb 11). In addition, while the paradigm of first proclaiming the indicatives of what God has done for us in redemption as the basis for applying the text to our hearers is attractive and seems to follow Paul's pattern in some of his epistles (Romans, Ephesians, Colossians), the pattern of redemptive indicatives coming before and explicitly being the basis for the imperatives is not explicitly followed by all of the New Testament authors. For example, while James refers to our redemption as the basis for our new life in Christ ("Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures"; Jas 1:18),<sup>11</sup> James does not explicitly tie each of his many moral exhortations to redemption. Some proponents of Redemptive-Historical preaching even go so far as to deny the plain reading of books such as Proverbs and The Song of Solomon to state that the exclusive focus when preaching from these books should be to show Christ in the text. Some go so far as to say, "We come to church to hear what Christ has done for us, not what we should do for Christ." This statement addresses a valid point—that the gospel should be prominent in every sermon (and in worship) and that many preachers so focus upon duty that little emphasis is placed upon redemption, other than perhaps an appeal to the lost stuck on to the end of the sermon.

But this creates a false dichotomy. The Bible emphasizes both what God has done for us and what we should do for him in response. A final concern I have with this approach, from having heard many such

<sup>11</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

sermons (often from seminarians), is that in their quest to find Christ in the text, they make redemptive connections (especially from the Old Testament) which can seem obscure to ordinary congregants. Some sermons bring to mind the Magic Eye Pictures into which, if you stare long enough, you are supposed to see a hidden image. Years ago, I would stare at Magic Eye pictures and never see the image. I have had the same experience with some sermons which sought to show Christ and redemption in obscure ways. My advice to preachers would be to stick to clear connections easily followed by the ordinary person in the pew.

### A Different Paradigm: A Four-Legged Stool

Rather than seeing the four primary approaches to which I have been exposed as competing, I teach my students to strive to incorporate the wisdom from each into their preaching ministry using the illustration of a four-legged stool. The legs represent how every sermon should expound the text, apply the text to the hearers, point to Christ, and be based upon sound doctrine. The seat of the stool represents the purpose of the text which holds the sermon together and to which each of the legs is connected.

#### The Seat: Purpose

I previously acknowledged how Jay Adams taught me the importance of determining and proclaiming the *telos* of the chosen biblical text. As the preacher studies, he should constantly keep in mind the need to ascertain the one main thing God would have to say to the congregation through this particular passage. After the bulk of studying is done, but before sermon composition begins, I encourage my students to write out a clear memorable statement of purpose which is succinct

enough to be tweetable. A well-formed purpose statement will helpfully guide the rest of the process of sermon composition. Adams suggests that the purpose should be so clear in the preacher's mind that "If your wife were to awaken you on Sunday morning at 4 o'clock and ask, 'What is the purpose of this morning's message?' you ought to be able to rattle it off in one crisp sentence, roll over and go to sleep again."<sup>12</sup> The purpose statement should correspond to the text without addition or subtraction.

Adams also distinguishes between the idea of theme, which tends to be more abstract, and purpose, which is aimed at the hearers.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of the sermon is to be developed and expounded on the main points of the preaching outline. The main points in the skeleton outline should develop the purpose statement in a way that is faithful to the text without going beyond the purpose statement or leaving out anything substantial. Adams encourages pastors to aim the main points of the sermon (the skeleton outline) at the hearers by using the second person plural "you" to help the preacher connect God's message to his hearers. He says that because preaching is heralding God's truth as his representatives, we should not be hesitant to speak with authority. Since the writers of the New Testament epistles often speak in the first-person plural, I believe that "we" may also be appropriate (often following the text itself). Different texts may have different types of purposes. Some passages are primarily to inform (1 Thess 4:13–17). Others are a call to action (Eph 4:1–3). Others appeal to both believers and unbelievers to turn from their sin to the Lord as they believe the gospel (Isa 55:1–7).

#### Leg 1: Exposition (2 Tim 2:15; 4:1–2)

Preaching derives its authority from Scripture so we must explicitly connect everything we say to God's Word. Christ himself is present in the faithful preaching of God's Word. Paul refers to Christ preaching peace to the Ephesians through those who first preached God's Word to them (Eph 2:17). Every faithful sermon must clearly explain the meaning of the chosen text. In order to do this, the preacher must be a workman who has no cause to be ashamed as he diligently studies to show himself approved by God (2 Tim 2:15). He must carefully study the passage, ideally in the original language, making sure that he understands the meaning of each word and how the words fit together gram-

<sup>12</sup> Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 42–46.

matically.

The preacher also needs to understand his passage in its immediate context and in the context of Scripture as a whole. An advantage of consecutive expository preaching is that the preacher (and hopefully the congregation) should be familiar with where the chosen text fits into the flow of the book being studied. After doing his own work in the text a preacher can benefit from exploring what the Lord has taught others through the centuries as he consults commentaries. He then needs to take what he learned and fashion it into a sermon which clearly explains the meaning of the text, as the Levites did when the Law was read in Nehemiah's day (Neh 8:8). The preacher's goal should not be to mesmerize his hearers with insights and explanations which will make them believe that they too must go to seminary and learn the original languages before they can understand Scripture. But rather as the preaching sheds light on the Scriptures, they should look into their open Bible and say, "Yes, that is clearly what this text means."

### **Leg 2: Christ-Centered Focus (Luke 24:27; Rom 1:15)**

It is important that we always keep in mind that the big story in the Bible is redemption and that all of Scripture points to Christ. Proponents of Redemptive-Historical preaching have done a great service to the church to deliver us from merely moralistic preaching which focuses exclusively on the biblical imperatives while neglecting the gospel indicatives upon which the imperatives are based. They have also given appropriate warning against merely using historical figures as moral examples without showing how their exploits fit into the history of redemption and thus point to Christ. Many preachers find it difficult to make these redemptive connections in all of Scripture (especially the Old Testament). They may not have been trained in biblical theology. Just as most commentaries and lexicons don't offer much help for making applications, there aren't many commentaries that emphasize the redemptive connections emphasized by biblical theologians.

There are several things preachers can do to grow in this area. One is to take the time during their studies to consider and meditate upon the historical context of their passage and its place in the unfolding of God's plan of redemption. One should look for connections to redemptive themes—such as Jesus as God's Anointed Prophet, Priest, and King and God's acts of deliverance throughout Israel's history. When preaching the commands/law, we all are reminded how our failure to live up to God's standard drives us to Christ, who perfectly kept the law by his active obedience and fulfilled the just demands of the law through his passive obedience on our behalf. "So then, the law was our guardian

until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith" (Gal 3:24). Weekly proclamation of the gospel ensures that any lost people in the congregation hear the way of salvation. Believers also need to hear the gospel every Lord's Day. Just as Paul was eager to come to preach the gospel to the believers in Rome (Rom 1:15), we should be eager to preach Christ for the edification of the Christians in our churches.

### **Leg 3: Application (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Tim 3:17; 4:2)**

A frequent complaint against preaching in evangelical churches is that it is boring because it is both abstract and impractical. John Stott entitled his book about preaching *Between Two Worlds*.<sup>14</sup> In this book, Stott states that the pastor is to build a bridge connecting the world of the past about which we read in Scripture to where his hearers live in our present day. This takes effort. If a pastor's preparation consists merely of digging into the original languages and reading commentaries, his preaching may sound like a book that was written to people living "long ago and far away."<sup>15</sup> He needs to spend time considering how to speak specifically into his hearers' lives, or "zip code," as Haddon Robinson puts it.<sup>16</sup> Since most exegetical commentaries contain little or no application, the preacher will have to put in extra work on his own to build the bridge between his exposition of the text and the practical needs of his hearers.

Sometimes the work of faithfully applying the text expounded to the congregation is harder than exegetical work. There are some things a pastor can do to improve at making his sermons more practical. One is to identify connections between his congregation and the people and events in Scripture. For example, Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope," is often misused by those who don't consider and explain its meaning to Jeremiah's original hearers. Jeremiah spoke to the generation in Judah which was conquered and sent into exile by the Babylonians. The Lord promised that after seventy years the Lord would remember his covenant and miraculously bring them back to their land. This was fulfilled in the return of the exiles which is written about in Ezra and Nehemiah. This previous fulfillment does not

<sup>14</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 78.

mean that this passage is irrelevant to us today. The New Testament tells us that we are living as exiles in the world (1 Pet 2:11), and as exiles, we suffer. Yet, we are able to endure as we anticipate the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenant promises in the return of Christ. Earlier in the chapter (Jer 29:1–7), the Lord tells the faithful among his people how to live during their exile—be busy in your family and vocation and pray for the peace of the city in which you are exiled. While we are not literally exiles in Babylon, this provides a great model for how we are to live in this present age.

Another way to get better at including useful applications in sermons is to spend time with your congregation in counseling and informal social situations. As you care for people, you will become more aware of their struggles and their spiritual needs and, hopefully, you will feel compelled to speak to these needs, and struggles in your sermons (without violating any confidences). Sometimes it could be helpful to have a cross-section of specific people in your church in mind as you are preparing your sermon. How would this passage help the couple having marriage problems, the single mom with the rebellious teen, the new widow, etc.

You also might think of people at different points in their lives—singles, young married, widows, older people. I try in every sermon to speak directly to the children in a practical way at least once or twice. Their parents, who are trying to get them to pay attention in church, are very appreciative. J. I. Packer points out that the Puritans sought to ensure that their sermons addressed people who are in different places spiritually including the ignorant, the proud, the desperate, those in need of correction, and the discouraged.<sup>17</sup> Applications should be derived from the unique purpose of the text being expounded. Some lazy pastors rarely get beyond “read your Bible more, pray more, attend more, give more, and serve more” in their application of the text. Work at it. Sometimes good ideas for application can be gleaned from listening to or reading expository sermons by preachers who are skilled at calling God's people to an appropriate practical response to God's Word. I also find that preaching extemporaneously from an outline, as opposed to a manuscript, gives me more freedom to make applications to the congregation as ideas come to mind while I am preaching.

<sup>17</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 287.

#### Leg 4: Sound Theology (1 Tim 4:6; Titus 2:1)

Paul often refers to his message as the doctrine that must be taught and defended by those who preach God's Word (Rom 16:17; Eph 4:14; 1 Tim 1:3, 10; 4:6; 6:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 10). A body of core doctrine was taught in the early church (Acts 2:42; 18:11; 28:31; Rom 6:17; Col 1:28; 1 Tim 4:13; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim 4:2–3; Titus 2:7; 2 John 9–10). Our faithful preaching of God's Word should be filled with sound scriptural theology as is summarized in the historic confessions and creeds of the church. While sound doctrine is foundational in all of Scripture, certain texts lend themselves to more extensive theological teaching.

Some passages also are appropriate for the exposure and refutation of false teaching. For example, as the mystery of the incarnation and the full deity and humanity of Christ is expounded in John 1:1–18, it may be appropriate to refute the errors of the cults which corrupt this teaching. Similarly, as new errors arise in the evangelical church, such as the openness of God theology, which denies God's true omniscience, or elements of the New Perspective on Paul, which corrupts biblical teaching of justification by faith alone, it is appropriate to expose and refute these errors. It may even be appropriate to break away from a series in order to address an error that has been influential among church members. For example, I was in a church in which some were being enticed by full-preterism, the belief that Jesus returned spiritually in AD 70 and that the prophecies of Matthew 24 and Revelation were fulfilled at that time with no anticipation of the future bodily return of Christ to establish his kingdom (2 Thess 2:2). Our leadership decided that in addition to speaking to those who had been influenced by this error, we would answer this false teaching from specific passages of Scripture which we would preach. There may also be times when it is appropriate to preach a series of sermons that do systematic theology, drawing from the entire Bible's teaching on a particular topic. For example, I have preached such series on the attributes of God, the Trinity, and what the Bible teaches about the afterlife (heaven and hell).

#### Conclusion

As Dennis Johnson rightly points out, a preacher can be overwhelmed when considering the different approaches to preaching along with the awesome responsibility we face as those who will give account to God (Jas 3:1). I believe that my diagram of the four-legged stool can offer a helpful model for focused and balanced sermons. I acknowledge that different texts have differing emphases so that the four legs will not be of identical length in every sermon. Some passages are very doctrinal

in focus (Eph 1:3–11) in which case the doctrine leg may be longer than usual, while others may be intensely practical (Eph 5:22–33) or may explicitly unfold the glorious mystery of redemption (Eph 2:1–10). Each element should be present in each sermon, reflecting the balance found in the epistles and apostolic preaching. Over the course of a preaching ministry, there should be a balance among the legs. It is also very important for a preacher to know which way he leans. Some of us are all about being practical and we need to work hard at exposition and finding redemptive connections. Others of us may be bent towards the theological, and need to make greater effort towards being practical. I also am thankful that God is merciful to ordinary, imperfect preachers who are striving to be faithful to him and his Word.