



# preaching that connects

the MINISTRY PAPERS

## the preacher

"It's Sunday morning. In a couple of hours I'll be standing in front of the church family delivering my Bible Talk on Galatians 3. This moment is the culmination of 20, 30 maybe 40 hours work. Or is it more? So much has happened to bring me to this point. I've read the text. I've re-read the text. I've re-read it again, a dozen times. I've chased up the historical context, the Old Testament background, the New Testament links. I've worked over the concordances, dictionaries and commentaries. I've had so many unanswered questions about what the text is saying. And the commentaries only added to the list. Each verse has been a wrestle with interpretive possibilities. Even single words have been loaded with shades of meaning. But I think I've done it. A talk jam-packed with all I've learnt, just brimming with knowledge, insight & scholarship..."

## the listener

"It's Sunday morning.... must get to church ... is that the time?! Where are the kids' shoes?... where are the kids?!... "what do you mean it's not your turn to sit in the middle...?" We're late already... we'll be lucky to make the Bible talk... or unlucky! What are we looking at anyway? Ephesians is it? or is it Galatians? hmm ... "Nigel, leave your sister's hair alone!..." Sure hope the preacher helps me get a grip on life..."

## the bible talk

Will the talk connect? Will it communicate the truth? Not just "is it truthful?", but "does it communicate the truth?". Of course, being faithful to God's Word is top priority, and it takes hard work to discern it's truth. But if this truth isn't actually communicated, what good is it to the listener? God's Word is always relevant to people's lives. But not all Bible talks show it! This means hard work: to go beyond *interpreting* the truth, to *communicating* the truth. That's what this paper is about!...

**LEADERS:...**before taking someone through this paper, review the two key introductory MINISTRY PAPERS: 'the ministry training church' and 'meeting one to one'.

Connect. Grow. Serve. After **connecting** to God through trusting in Christ, a vital way we can **grow** is through a growth group and a vital way we can **serve** is through a ministry team.

This MINISTRY PAPER is designed to help your preaching ministry leader introduce you to what it means to serve as part of our **preaching** ministry.



## read **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

1. What is *flexible* in Paul's approach to ministry?

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2. What is *fixed* in Paul's approach to ministry?

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## read **Acts 13:13-41**

3. Preaching here to *Jews*, what ground does Paul cover?

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4. What's his starting point?

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5. What's his finishing point?

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## read **Acts 17:16-34**

6. Preaching here to *Gentiles*, what ground does Paul cover?

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7. What's his starting point?

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8. What's his finishing point?

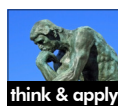
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9. What can we learn about preaching from Paul's example?

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# 1. connect to **CHRIST**... the **gospel** centre

The focus of this paper is an introduction to writing Bible Talks that communicate God's truth effectively. But before we think about connecting to our listeners, let's think about who we're trying to connect them to: Jesus Christ. Because, whatever part of Scripture we're preaching from, it is, according to Jesus, ultimately about his death and resurrection!...



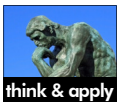
read **Luke 24:25-27 & 44-47**

1. What is the context for Jesus' words?

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2. What does he say the Old Testament is all about?

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3. What are the implications of Jesus' words for our preaching?

... preaching the law?

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... preaching the prophets?

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... preaching the other Old Testament writings?

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... preaching the New Testament?

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read **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

4. What is the centre of all Paul's preaching?

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5. Paul clearly covers a lot of subjects in this letter. What does he mean, then, that he only preaches Christ crucified?

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read **Ephesians 4:11-16**

6. What role do pastor-teachers have in people's growth in Christ?

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7. Many of the other *MINISTRY PAPERS* start with this passage. In what way is our proclamation of Christ critical to everyone's ministry?

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## **killed any giants lately?**

In his introduction to his book *Gospel and Kingdom*, Graeme Goldsworthy illustrates the importance of Christ-centred preaching through the way the story of David & Goliath (1 Samuel 17) is often mistaught. People are often urged to imitate David, and to kill off the giants of sin in their life through taking up 'stones' of faith, obedience, etc. These exhortations sound fine, but is it what the story is about? The fact is, David, as the Messiah (God's anointed king), is winning a battle for God's people they could never win. It's God's chosen king alone who can defeat the enemies of God's people! This points to Jesus, God's true king, who ultimately defeats sin & death.

## **sermon on the mount**

people love a section of Scripture like this because it's so 'practical'. But direct application of it to us might be quite *impractical* ... or inappropriate. We need to acknowledge that Jesus is talking to an all-Jewish audience about what the law was all about. He is also teaching before his death, resurrection and pouring out of the Spirit. Of course, the text will still have application to us, but there are some steps needed in application rather than leaping directly to our situation.

## **"rules for holy living"**

... is the not-so-helpful NIV heading over Colossians 3. All the imperatives in chapters 3 & 4 ("do this") rest on the indicatives of chapters 1 & 2 ("Christ has done this"). They are *not* rules for holy living but the appropriate heart and life response of forgiven people. If they are unanchored from the gospel they become legalism. So, in a series across a few weeks the preacher needs to be careful to keep linking the exhortation of chapters 3 & 4 back to the earlier gospel basis [so also in Ephesians chs 1-3 & 4-6, etc].

## **gospel letters to the churches**

In the book of Revelation this happens the other way around. The imperatives come thick and fast in the letters to the churches (chapters 2 & 3) ... with the gospel basis outlined in the long vision (chapters 4-22). The preacher needs to be careful to not rip the letters to the churches out of their gospel context.



## 2. connecting the talk **itself** ... the **BIG IDEA**

Listening is hard work. The fact is, even minutes after your 20 minute talk is over, people won't be able to recall a great deal of the detail of what you have said! Furthermore if your material isn't well organised, they may not be able to remember *anything* of what you've said! This is where communicators recommend a unifying BIG IDEA for any communication...

### **less is more... how long should a Bible Talk go for?**

The impact of the television and the internet on our society has been profound, not least in shortening people's attention span. We've become poor listeners. What was I saying? ... oh yeah: poor listeners. People are used to being bombarded with rapidly changing images. They don't have to work very hard to receive the message – it's all packaged up for them. If you watch the TV news you might've noticed how politicians work hard at getting their message down to a few word "grab". They know they'll only be allocated a few seconds in the news. They realise that the TV networks won't show a really long monologue. So they have to make it really snappy.

All this is relevant to considerations about both the style and length of our Bible Talks. Instead of long complex sentences, we need to use short, simple ones. If there is a simpler word for the job we should use it. Again, this doesn't mean we'll pander to cultural change completely – or we wouldn't preach at all. But we do need to be sensitive to our culture and what is realistic for people.

With regard to length, there is no definite answer. Some people listen better than others, according to their motivation and background. Some people might cope fine with 30 or 40 minutes, others might already be struggling after 10. Generally 20 minutes is seen as a good guideline for our context. Indeed, you have to work hard to hold people's attention for that long! But chances are, even with good communication, you will lose more and more people each minute you go over the twenty.

There is a fair bit you can say in twenty minutes! And when we go longer, it's often not because we had more to say, but because we were lazy in our preparation or unclear in our structure. Furthermore, even if we do have more to say, it might be more than people can take in at one sitting. And at that point, more becomes less!! **NOTE: 20 mins is normally about 2500 words.**

*"I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal"* (J.H.Jowett, Pastor of Westminster Chapel, London, speaking at the Yale lectures on preaching). *"Students of public speaking and preaching have argued for centuries that effective communication demands a single theme... this basic fact of communication also claims sturdy biblical support..."* (Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching p33-36). Robinson goes on to show how the speeches/sermons of the Bible always had a specific purpose ... "each embodied a single theme directed towards a particular audience in order to elicit a specific response".

A preacher must have something to say. And they must say it clearly. This means making tough choices about what to leave out. Sometimes less is more! If you try to say too many things, people hear nothing. Being profound doesn't mean being complicated! A talk may cover a few different points but unless they are connected by a unifying theme they'll be lost. That's why a big idea is essential (see p4 for how to develop one).

## 3. connecting to **lives** ... '**APPLICATION** mode'

Whether consciously or not, many people have a question running through their minds as they listen to you speak. It's the question, "so what?... what difference does what you're saying make to my life?" This step is crucial. A Bible talk needs to be (i) Christ-centred, (ii) have a clear big idea and (iii) be APPLIED to the listener. It needs to answer the "so what?".

Of course, we don't want to pander to this question completely. After all, Christ is at the centre of all things not us. But we do need to show how Christ being at the centre of all things has real implications for us. It has implications for all the questions we ask and issues we feel. The gospel is always relevant and life-changing. It's the preacher's job to show it!

What we're talking about here is often called 'application'. Unfortunately, this is often thought of as just the last bit of the talk. Sometimes it's a token two minutes at the end if you're lucky! This is insufficient. It's more helpful to think of the whole talk as being in "application mode". It needs to be all angling towards a question or issue that is real for the listener. While the more sustained application might usually still come at the end of the talk, a real question or issue needs to be raised early in the talk and kept on the radar right through it, so people are with you when the conclusion comes.

# 4. connecting to listeners

## ... COMMUNICATION

Becoming a preacher means becoming a student of good communication. Whenever you notice something communicated well, in whatever context, ask yourself, 'what made that effective?'. When it comes to memorable communication, certain themes start to emerge: things like, simple language ... repetition ... here's a few principles to consider:

- listening is HARD WORK – it's easy to drift off
- SO WHAT? is the question in people's heads – give them reasons to listen
- talks don't need to be complicated. Focus on a single key idea.
- read the passage. Re-read it. Write it out by hand. Re-read it.
- if you can't summarise your talk in a single sentence, who could?
- don't start writing until you have this big idea
- the idea needs to be broken down into a clear structure
- the more you say the LESS people will remember
- give yourself plenty of time to think through application
- repetition is very important
- people like to hear about PEOPLE not abstract ideas
- even the most brilliant people prefer SIMPLE communication
- simple communication uses simple words, short sentences and repetition
- repetition is very important
- learn to write how you speak not how you write
- never use a long word when a short word will do the job
- use down to earth language – without being offensive
- never use more words than you really need
- aim for an average sentence length of 15-20 words. Or less
- repeat the first sentence of a new point two or three times
- direct people's attention to the verse(s) you are dealing with
- illustrate and use stories ... to explain points and to give a break
- almost always abbreviate: can't, don't, aren't, etc
- almost never use long sentences with lots of subordinate clauses. Break it up to shorter sentences with repetition of the primary clause
- start sentences with AND and BUT. Ignore your old English teacher!
- strong conclusions are crucial – don't fizzle out.
- repetition is very important
- treat the previous point seriously – it'll revolutionise your communication

*[apologies if anything said here is repeated from elsewhere in the paper]*



### listen to yourself

This sounds a bit weird, but listen to yourself. When you're talking at morning tea or supper, listen to yourself. When you're talking at work or at a party, listen to yourself. Get used to how you sound normally, and try to make sure that's how you sound when you preach. With the exception of projecting your voice a bit more, your preaching voice should be your normal voice. Your tone should be the same, rather than preachy or sermonic. And your language should be the same, rather than formal or contrived. Try to be as 'over the fence' as possible. To do all this, you need to become a student of how you talk ... listen to yourself!

### telling stories

Most especially, listen to yourself (and others) in how you tell stories. This is something that we all can do very naturally when chatting but can be difficult to do in a talk. The key is to try to keep it natural ... the way you would tell it ... just sitting around the dinner table. For example, something we do quite subconsciously, but is great in story-telling, is dropping into the present tense .... "so he looks at me and he says...". It gives a greater sense of being there. This can also be useful when preaching in narrative and re-telling the story .e.g. "so Peter stands up and says to them..."

Story-telling is a big part of preaching so it's worth thinking about and becoming a student of. Study the way people tell stories. And always be on the look out for a good one to use as an illustration!

### gather illustrations

always be on the look out (newspapers, other media, personal stories, etc) for illustrative material. And the further ahead you plan your talks, the more time you will have to gather relevant illustrations.

# planning the talk

With these four aspects of 'connection in mind' it's time to write the talk. But notice that Jowett's comment about a big idea applies to the *writing* stage, not just the *preaching* stage. Don't start detailed writing until you're clear what it is you want to say! ... until you have wrestled with the passage and arrived at a clearly stated (written out) big idea. This next section is about how to plan out a talk.

## pray

we need to ask God to help us to be faithful and clear in handling his Word. We need also to recognise that it is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit that applies God's Word to people's hearts. Preaching is definitely an activity where we need not only to pray first, but pray at all times.

## select a unit of text

for the sake of this exercise we will assume you already have a unit of text to speak on. Robinson's book has a useful chapter on how to divide up a book into units, if you would like to pursue this issue.

## let the Word speak to you

ideally it's good to look at the passage you are preaching on well ahead of when your actual preparation needs to start. This gives you space to respond to this part of God's Word yourself before you step into calling others to do so.

## read & re-read the text

this stage shouldn't be hurried. Spend plenty of time just soaking in what the passage is saying. This will include looking at it's context in the book, and chasing up any links to other parts of the Bible, etc). Try to work out what the sections or movements are within the passage. Write out a summary in your own words. A flow chart of the ideas might help too.

... at this stage you should be ready to put a big idea together. This is most easily done by identifying a subject and a complement...

## the subject

... is the broad 'topic' the passage is about, in a word or two: e.g. God's love

## the complement

... is what the passage is saying about the subject... so in the above e.g., what is the passage saying about God's love? .... e.g. that it is unconditional.

## the big idea

... the subject and the complement together give you the big idea: "God's love is unconditional".

## a big question

... it can be useful to put the big idea into question form: e.g. "can anyone be beyond God's love?". This might be useful to state early in the talk.

## application

don't wait till the end of the writing process to work out where it's going! jot down some of the key application ideas first.

## structure

with your big idea in front of you, look back at the work you did on the flow of the passage and work out a structure for the talk that will establish the big idea (i.e. subpoints that together make up the big point.... 1. God is loving, 2. God's love is unconditional...).

## key verse

if there is one verse that most captures the big idea it's worth identifying it – and perhaps going to it first in your talk before then working through the passage.

## key language

write down some 'picture' words that will help carry the big idea (i.e. before you think about bigger illustrations, think about illustrative language & word pictures)

## gospel check

how does the big idea relate to the centre of the Bible message: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Don't move on until you are clear about this.



## using commentaries

you'll notice that the steps listed out for planning a talk doesn't mention the use of bible commentaries. This is not because they shouldn't be used but because they should be used carefully and discerningly.

Commentaries are great servants but bad masters. Always spend plenty of time reading the text before turning to the commentaries. And when you do turn to the commentaries, do so with specific questions in mind. Use them to answer your questions not to have them raise a hundred more for you. The commentaries often debate issues that are a long way from being relevant to your talk, or many steps removed from the actual Bible text!

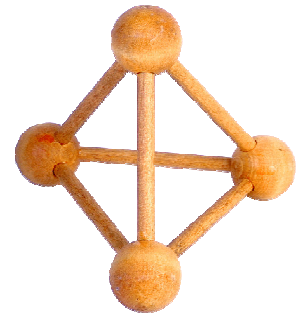
Of course, there may occasionally be an insight or issue raised in the commentaries that is worth taking on board. The point is, just be careful not to let them set the agenda. It's easy to pick a talk where someone is hitting people with everything they learnt from the commentaries!

Another use for commentaries is as a safeguard. If you have a new thought about a passage it can be useful to check a few commentaries to see if anyone else has seen it that way. If none of them have, that doesn't mean in itself that you're wrong. But you might want to proceed with a bit of caution and think your position through again. Tyndale, Bible Speak Today, Word, and New International commentaries are generally reliable.

With all that said, my favourite commentaries aren't the ones that canvas 58 different viewpoints on every verse but where the author actually has something they want to say. I might not always agree, but it's stimulating to read. I like to read a commentary like this ahead of the more detailed prep. stage.

# a model talk

the danger of presenting a model talk shape is that a model can easily become a mantra. With that qualification stated, however, it is good to have a basic model as a starting point for talk-writing. This is especially the case when you are starting out. Learn the model first, and then you'll be able to adapt it and develop it intentionally to your own style.



## introduction

people make up their minds in the first minute or two whether they are going to listen to you! So the introduction needs to be interesting. This might take the form of a story, whether personal or from current events. But being interesting is only half the job. It also needs to introduce the big idea and the key language associated with it. Getting people's attention is great, also getting them thinking in the right ball park is even better.

## key question

before moving to the text, it is useful to state the big idea in question form and somehow connect with the listener. If the introduction is where you bring the big idea to the listener, this is where you bring the listener to the big idea. It needs to be personal and direct. It's about helping people anticipate that God's Word is going to speak to them today. This may also be a good point to go to the key verse.

## 1st point

Within each of your subpoints a few steps are normally involved:

STATE the point – say in clear terms what this point is

SHOW where in the text this point has come from (verse reference, etc)

EXPLAIN the point – in plain language expand on the point

ILLUSTRATE the point – some sort of story, etc to help your explanation

APPLY the point – this may only be brief at this stage but should happen

TRANSITION to next point – “we have seen that... next we see that” (these are critical as ‘get back on board’ points for people who may be struggling)

## 2nd, 3rd, etc points

... steps as above

## biblical theology

depending on where you are in the Bible you may need an intervening step before drawing conclusions and making application (e.g. in Old testament passages you need to bring the ideas/themes through the death and resurrection of Christ/pouring out of the Spirit before applying to us, otherwise you will misapply it).

## conclusions & application

- what does the passage tell us about God?

- what does it tell us about us?

- what change in thinking/acting might be needed... David Cook suggests 3 categories of application:

NECESSARY – how the text applies to all people at all times...

e.g. “God's Word is the absolute authority in what is true”

POSSIBLE – some helpful suggestions on how to practically apply the truth...

“why not start each day with reading God's Word for 15 minutes?”

IMPOSSIBLE – what you cannot do or think if you are responding to this passage ... “you cannot walk away from this passage thinking tradition matters as much as the Bible...”.

## the script

how you lay out your notes is a key aspect of preparation. Here's a few suggestions to consider:

- it's good to be fully scripted but work hard on writing the way you *speak*, not the way you *write* (more over page)
- use a large font size so you can read your notes easily
- don't lay out your text in long paragraphs but in smaller units of thought that you can grab at one glance.
- use CAPITALS, **bold** or *italics* to help with remembering to emphasise different words.
- try to think of visual ways of representing the flow of the talk e.g. indent subpoints, start a new page for a new major point, etc
- you might even want to include notes or symbols for where you want to pause, or speedup/slow down, etc.
- if telling a story, group it together or offset it somehow so that it stands out as a unit – you can generally talk a bit faster in an illustration than during more in-depth explanation.
- include the Bible text you want to read out in the notes of your talk. This will help with flow.
- check page numbers from the church bibles, if used, and include them in your notes to help direct people.
- organise your pages into a display book so they can't get out of order (and halve the number of page-turns!)



# the critique

there is nothing radical in the idea that feedback is important. But here's something more radical... get feedback *before* you preach! A few days ahead, get a couple of other preachers together, preach your final draft and get their feedback. That way you actually learn and develop – through having to make changes as you respond to thoughtful feedback.

## GIVING FEEDBACK...

### truth issues

- was the passage properly understood?
- was the passage well explained?
- context in book?
- original audience?
- biblical theology/Christ centred?
- other comments/questions:

### communication issues

- introduction: passage to us? us to passage?
- structure: what were main points? easy to follow?
- illustrations: effective? enough?
- language: complexity? flow? keywords?
- application: flowed out of passage? enough?
- delivery: eye contact? gestures? emphasis? voice?
- other comments/questions:

## a possible critique format...

### pray

... that it will be more than a training exercise – still sitting under God's Word (there is a danger of being in critique mode all the time – thinking so much about the craft of the talk that we forget to listen to God's Word!)

### read the passage carefully

... try to do this as it would happen in the meeting

### hear the talk

... again, this should include using any technology that will be involved in the real thing (e.g. microphones, projectors, etc)

### self-critique

... it's useful to give the person who gave the talk the first opportunity to reflect. Sometimes just giving the talk to others for the first time helps clarify in your mind some issues, questions, etc.

### big idea?

... a useful opener to discussion can be whether the big idea of the talk came through. This will open up preliminary discussion about whether the truth was communicated effectively (i.e. both: was the big idea true to the passage? was it communicated clearly?)

### truthful?

... our goal is to communicate the truth. Being truthful – faithful to God's Word – is the greatest concern of all. More involved discussion of interpretation of the passage can happen next (see questions on left).

### communication?

... our goal is to communicate the truth. If the communication isn't effective, the truth probably won't be heard. More involved discussion of communication of the talk can happen here (see questions on left).

### summarise

... not every single scrap of feedback need necessarily be acted upon. Try to identify one or two key improvements that can be made to the talk.

### respond to God's Word

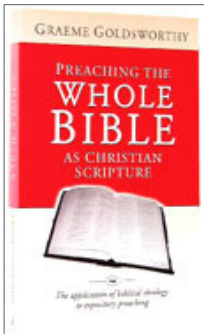
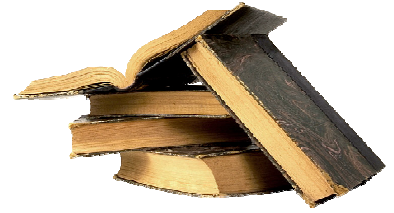
... rather than finishing in critique mode, try to finish with some personal reflection from those present on how we should respond to this part of God's Word. This may help us lapsing into just being professional critiquers ... who don't hear God's Word!

### pray

... both for the person giving the talk (the process of re-working it and then giving it) as well as for all present in responding to God's Word.

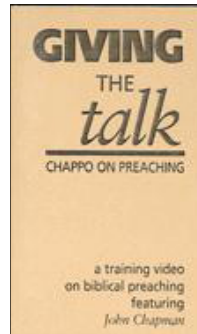
# useful resources

there are literally hundreds of books out there on preaching... with varying usefulness! Below are a few helpful ones available. Working through them all over time would certainly give a thorough grounding to the student of preaching!...



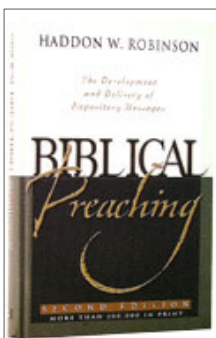
## Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture ...

*Graeme Goldsworthy*  
A must read about the importance of being Christ-centred, whatever part of the Bible you are handling.



## Giving the Talk...

*John Chapman*  
In four sessions Chapman takes you through his process of putting together a talk on Romans 3. A good introduction to the 'big idea' model of preaching.



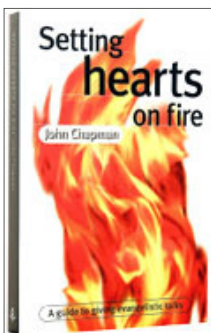
## Biblical Preaching...

*Haddon Robinson*  
Not as strong on biblical theology but a thorough guide to the steps involved in putting a talk together.



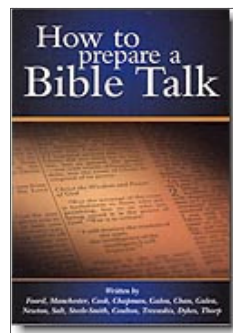
## Speaking God's Words: a practical theology of expository preaching...

*Peter Adam*  
Stands out from other preaching books because of its treatment of the theology of preaching – the biblical basis for what we do when we preach.



## Setting Hearts on Fire...

*John Chapman*  
An excellent resource for thinking through evangelistic preaching, with some sample talks included.



## How to Prepare a Bible Talk...

*David Cook & others*  
A new resource well worth a look. Various contributors have written a chapter each on specific aspects of preaching e.g. introductions, illustrations, application, prayer, etc

# preaching & small groups

it's worth writing bible studies to go with your bible talks. It takes time but it's a really worthwhile investment. It helps the small groups to build on what they're learning in the Bible through the talks. This paper has highlighted the importance of application in preaching. However, it's in the small group context that application can really be extended. The 'ministry training church' introductory paper set out a number of objectives for how small groups provide accountability for all the relationships in the life of the believer (see adjacent table). Keep these various objectives in mind in terms of the application in the bible talk... and then build on that with questions in the bible study that take the issues further. It's all part of not just learning the Bible together, but being transformed by God's Word.

a growing relationship with <b>God</b> , especially through personal Bible reading and prayer
growing relationships with <b>other believers</b> , especially through the small group
growing relationships with those in their <b>family/household</b> , as servants
growing relationships with <b>unbelievers</b> , especially through personal evangelism
growing relationships with the <b>whole church</b> in mission, serving in a ministry team