

**TheWordWorks**

# **Expository Preaching Module 1: For the Preacher**

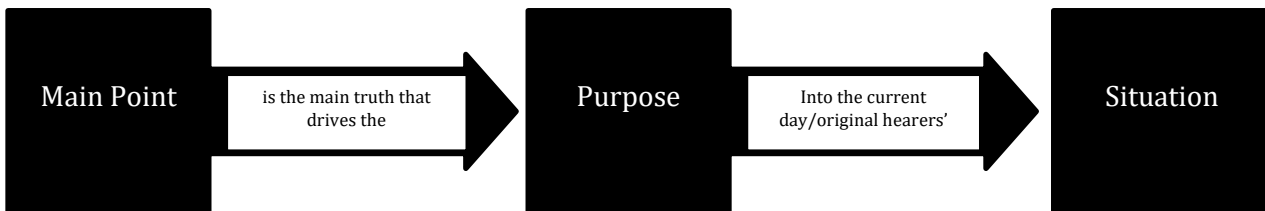
## **What is not expository preaching? Part 2**

## Aim of this module:

Based on the definition of expository preaching covered in the Module “What is expository preaching?”, to consider why some kinds of preaching are not expository

## Recap (See modules “What is expository preaching and “What is not expository preaching? Part 1”)

Expository preaching is preaching which teaches the author’s **main point** in order to achieve the author’s **purpose** in a **current day situation** similar to the situation of the original hearers.



The **Big idea** of any bible text = Main point + Purpose + Situation

## What is not expository preaching?

### 1. Expository preaching is not the opposite of topical/thematic preaching

Topical/Thematic preaching is where the preacher’s starting point is a topic/theme which he/she addresses by choosing one or more bible passages to speak from (examples of topic/themes: The power of God, the Spirit’s role in the Christian life, How can I be more Christ-like?). Topical/thematic preaching can be done in an expository way. However, it can also be done in a way that bypasses the biblical author’s main point/purpose for the verses/passages preached. When this happens, we move away from the biblical author’s (and therefore the divine author’s) mind.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Too-narrow-doesn’t-take-context-into-account preaching

This is preaching which misses the meaning of the verse/passage because the surrounding context hasn’t been sufficiently taken into account.

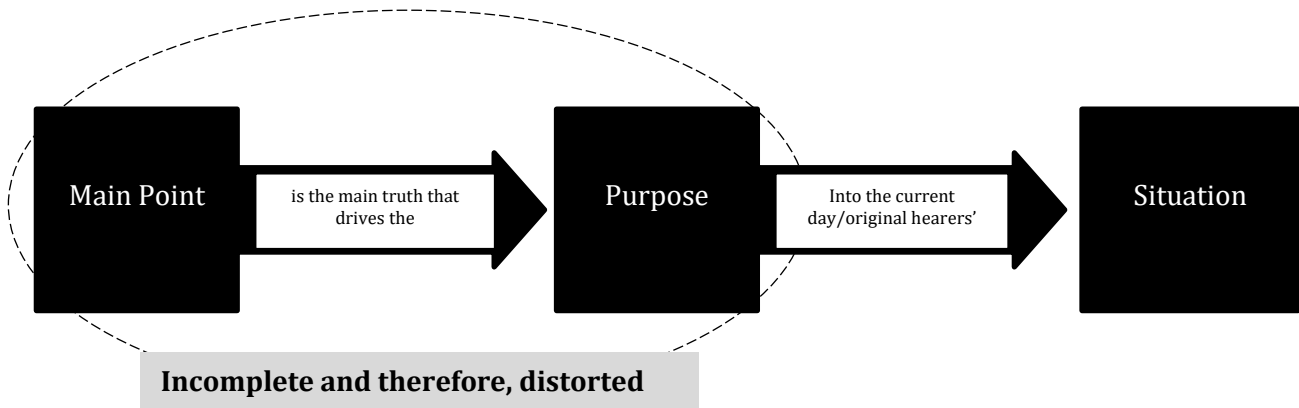
Example:

The classic examples are sermons based on single verses like Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” or Matthew 18:20 “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”. In these cases, a quick read around the verses will show that they’re not about acing the exams with Christ’s help or about Christ being committed to small Christian fellowship groups. They’re about being content in tough circumstances and Jesus’ authority undergirding the verdicts of church discipline.

<sup>1</sup> The training module for expository topical preaching will be published in March 2020. There, we’ll look at how to and how not to.

Why such sermons are not expository:

The verses/passages are part of a bigger section of scripture which has 1 big idea (i.e. 1 main point, 1 purpose, applied to 1 situation). Therefore, to preach that 1 verse/passage without its context is to seriously distort the biblical author's mind on that verse/passage.



### 3. A special case of “Too-narrow-doesn’t-take-context-into-account preaching”: Old Testament preaching that doesn’t connect to the New Testament

The bible is the story of God’s gradually unfolding plan to save the world through his son, King Jesus. Therefore, story arcs which begin in the Old Testament eventually end up somewhere in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Old Testament preaching which doesn’t show these New Testament connections is like an unfinished story with an incomplete big idea.

Example of Old Testament preaching that doesn’t connect to the New Testament:

A sermon on Genesis 12:1-3 focuses on the promises to Abraham. It might zoom in on Vs 3 and stress the worldwide impact of these promises: *“In you, all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed”*. It would teach that these blessings come to people who are near to Abraham’s family. The application then might be something like this: Today, Abraham’s family are the world wide people of faith (i.e. Christians). Therefore, Christians are called to bless those around them. They are to do good to those around them. After all, *“In you (Abraham’s family of faith), all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed”*.

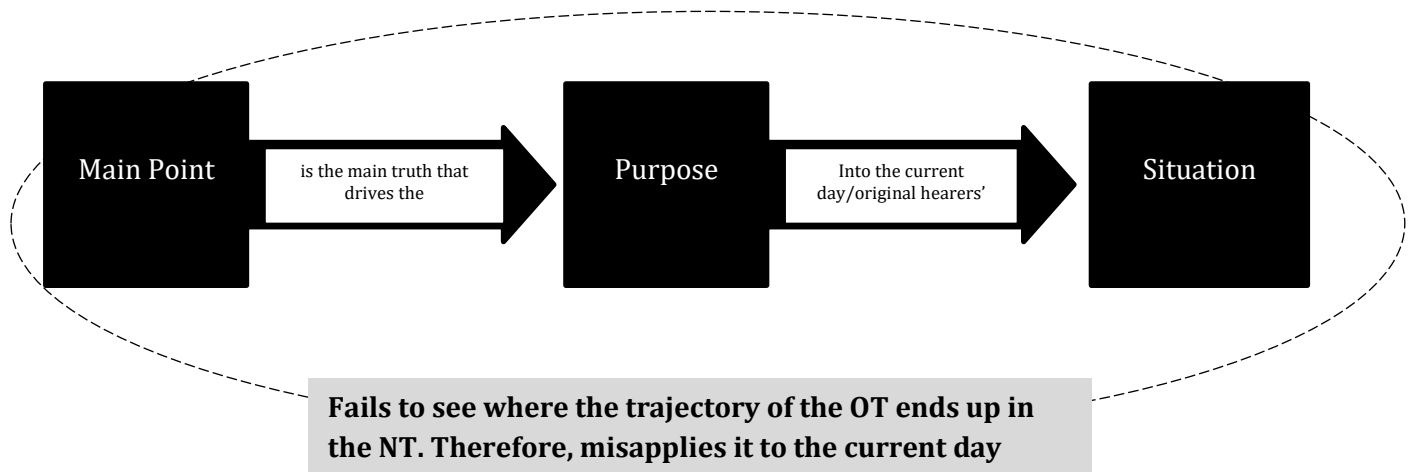
Why such sermons are not expository:

It doesn’t connect rightly to the New Testament and therefore has an incomplete big idea. Galatians 3:6-14 is where Genesis 12:3 “lands” in the New Testament. Here, Paul says that the Genesis 12:3 promise of the peoples of the earth being blessed (Gen 12:3 is quoted in Vs 8) is fulfilled in Gentiles being justified through faith in Jesus and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Vs 8, 14).

Note: There are a *variety of ways* in which the OT connects to the NT. The Gen 12 → Galatians 3 example given here is a direct promise – fulfilment connection. There are other types of OT-NT

<sup>2</sup> Biblical Theology is the discipline of interpreting bible passages in the light of this one story of God saving the world through His Son King Jesus. A training module on Biblical Theology will be published in early 2020.

connections e.g. Typology, Direct prophecy -fulfilment, God's character in OT shown in greater resolution in the NT.<sup>3</sup> Expository preaching is concerned to show these connections.



#### 4. Shopping preaching<sup>4</sup>

This kind of sermon treats the bible text as a supermarket full of good stuff. It goes shopping in this supermarket and chooses items which it thinks the hearers need. In other words, the sermon is primarily about the verses that meet my hearer's need rather than what the passage as a whole is saying to my hearers. In the latter, the text is king and dictates the application. In the former, the hearer is king and dictates which verses are preached on.

Here's an example of the preparation process for a shopping sermon from 1 Corinthians 12:1-26

• A shopping preacher might look at this passage and notice the many items on "sale":

Item 1: The Corinthian Christians' pagan/idol past and Spirit-empowered present (Vs 1-3)

Item 2: The gifts are given by one God for the common good (Vs 4-7)

Item 3: A listing of the more supernatural gifts (Vs 9-10)

Item 4: The big push for unity in a body with many parts (Vs 12-26)

The preacher might think of his/her hearers and remember their interest in the more supernatural gifts of the Spirit. The preacher might also be aware of a brewing disunity problem in the congregation. And so, the preacher selects Items 3 and 4 off the shelf and starts crafting the sermon around these 2 key points. The 2 key points in the sermon almost sound like 2 stand-alone sermons because they're addressing 2 separate needs. To give some semblance of coherence, the preacher might tie these two points under a super general, motherhood idea like "Supernatural gifts and Supernatural unity"

<sup>3</sup> All these different connection pathways will be discussed in the upcoming Biblical Theology module

<sup>4</sup> This is similar to "Selective preaching: Ignoring parts of the passage or failing to show how it relates to the main point" covered in Module "What is not expository preaching Part 1". Both kinds of sermon effectively pick and choose what parts of the passage to preach on. However, the difference is in **why** the sermon picks and chooses. In selective preaching, the preacher is unable to see how all the parts fit together and so emphasises only the parts he/she is familiar with. In shopping preaching, the preacher picks and chooses what verses to preach because he/she feels that it meets a particular need of his hearers.

Why this sermon is not expository:

Items 1, 2, 3 and 4 cannot be “bought” separately. Expository preaching always seeks to integrate all the items in the passage into 1 main point driving the 1 purpose into the 1 situation. Here’s the integrated big idea for 1 Cor 12:1-26

The situation (Item 3 & 4):

A growing disunity problem in the church where members with more supernatural gifts saw themselves as more spiritual than members with less supernatural gifts. The “less spiritual” folks thought “I don’t belong”. The “more spiritual” folks thought “I don’t need you”.

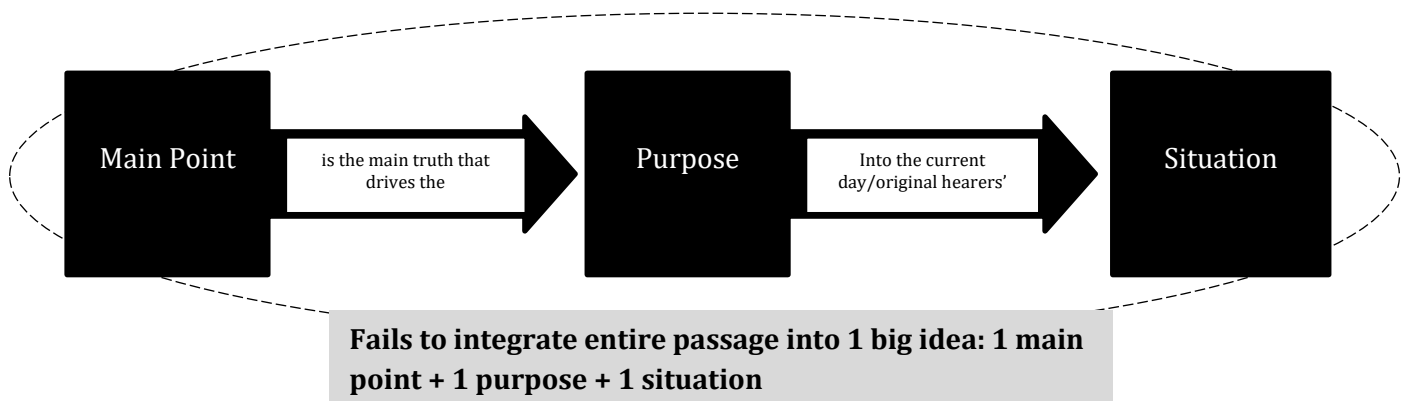
The main point (Item 1-3):

The Spirit gives every Christian spiritual gifts for the common good (of the body).

The purpose for the “more spiritual” Christians (Item 4):

(for the “more spiritual” Christian): Don’t say to the “less spiritual” Christians “I don’t need you” (Vs 20-21)

(for the “less spiritual” Christian): Don’t say “I don’t belong” (Vs 14-16)

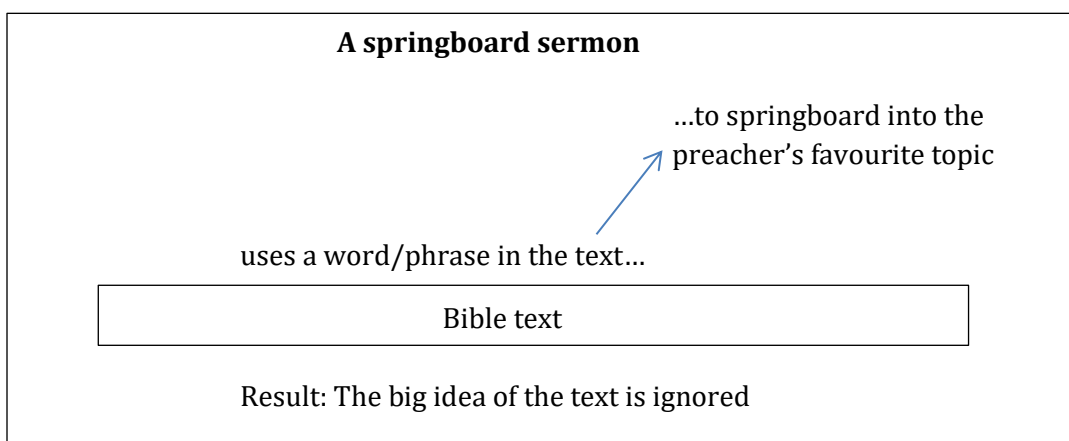
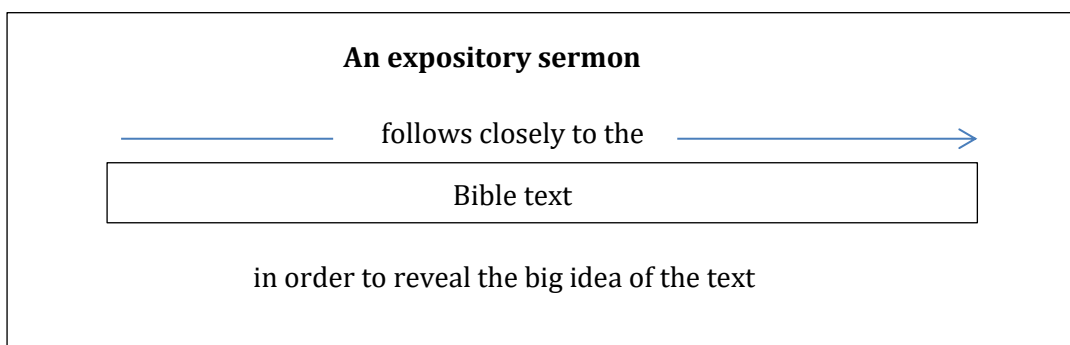


## 5. Giving a word/phrase/doctrinal idea more significance than what author gives it

These kind of sermons pick up on a word/a phrase/a doctrinal idea in the passage and **amplify it** in a way never intended by the biblical author. The result is that the word/phrase/doctrinal idea becomes the de facto big idea rather than the actual big idea of the passage. There are 3 main ways this happens.

### a. Springboard preaching

A springboard sermon uses a word/phrase in the bible text to launch into the preacher's favourite topic and therefore ignores the big idea of the text.



Example of a springboard sermon from Ephesians 5:18-21:

*<sup>18</sup> And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,  
<sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

The preacher picks up the phrase “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” and launches into a sermon extolling the benefits of singing old hymns in the Sunday service. He then contrasts the theological richness of old hymns with the lyrical shallowness of contemporary songs to make the point. The denominational history and traditions are invoked to add weight to this exhortation.

## A springboard sermon from Ephesians 5:18-21

...to springboard into the preacher's favourite topic

- Old denominational hymns & history
- Theological richness of hymns
- Shallow modern songs

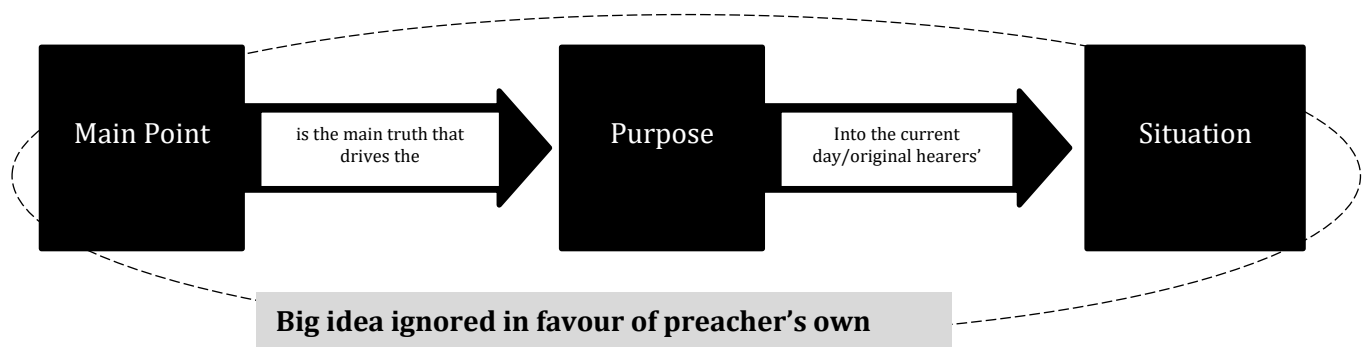
uses the phrase "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" ...

Ephesians 5:18-21

Why this sermon is not expository:

This text's big idea is not revealed. The main imperative is to be filled with the Spirit<sup>5</sup> (Vs 18) which, because of its contrast with being filled with wine, means something like "be controlled by the Spirit". This main imperative is followed by 3 portraits of what the Spirit-controlled life looks like: it's singing to each other and to God (Vs 19), it's being thankful (Vs 20), it's submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

By launching into a springboard sermon about psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and highlighting things about this topic that are tangential to the text's concerns (the text is concerned with the "addressing one another and God" aspect of singing), the preacher will reveal a lot about his favourite topic (parts of which might even be biblically accurate). But God's Word in THIS text has not been revealed.



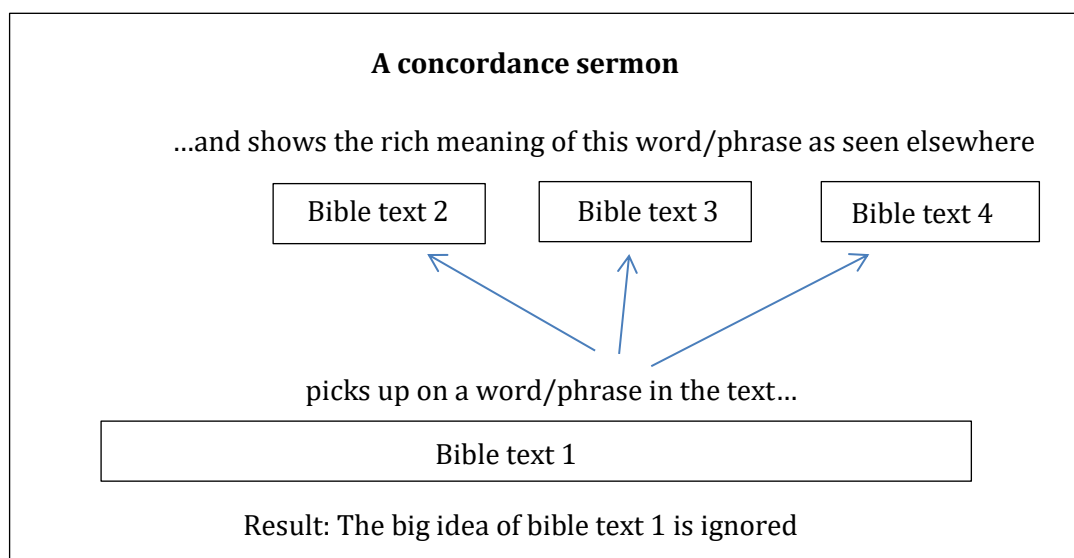
<sup>5</sup> This imperative is driven by the new identity of Christians as children of light as established in 5:1-17. Being filled with Spirit is part of what it means to walk as children of light (Vs 8, 15).

## b. Concordance preaching

A concordance<sup>6</sup> sermon is one where the preacher picks up on a word/phrase and proceeds to make the sermon **primarily** about the rich meaning of this word/phrase as seen in other bible texts.

A caveat: That's not to say that practice of looking up other texts is illegitimate. Example: you don't really get Mark's "sheep without a shepherd" phrase in Mark 6:34 without looking at Ezekiel 34 and Psalm 78. The issue is when the meaning of the phrase "sheep without a shepherd" becomes the **primary focus of the sermon** rather than a step along the way in finding the big idea of Mark 6:30-56.

A caveat to the caveat: Even if you resolve to make the fruits of your word/phrase study a step along the way to finding the text's big idea, you can still run into a landmine. Words can have a range of meanings. Example: the word "righteousness" has the range of meanings A, B or C. When Paul uses the word "righteousness", he might have meaning A in mind. When Peter uses the word, he might have meaning C in mind. Context determines which. Therefore, if you import Peter's "righteousness" into one of Paul's passages, you will totally distort Paul's big idea for the passage at hand!



Example of a concordance sermon from Mark 1:14-15:

*<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

The preacher picks up the phrase "kingdom of God" and proceeds to bring the hearer to all the places in the bible where kingdom is mentioned. The sermon becomes a lecture about what the bible says about the kingdom. He shows that the kingdom is something that will come in the future (Matthew 6:10). He shows that this kingdom is eternal (Psalm 145:13). He shows that Christians are to seek first this kingdom (Matthew 6:33).

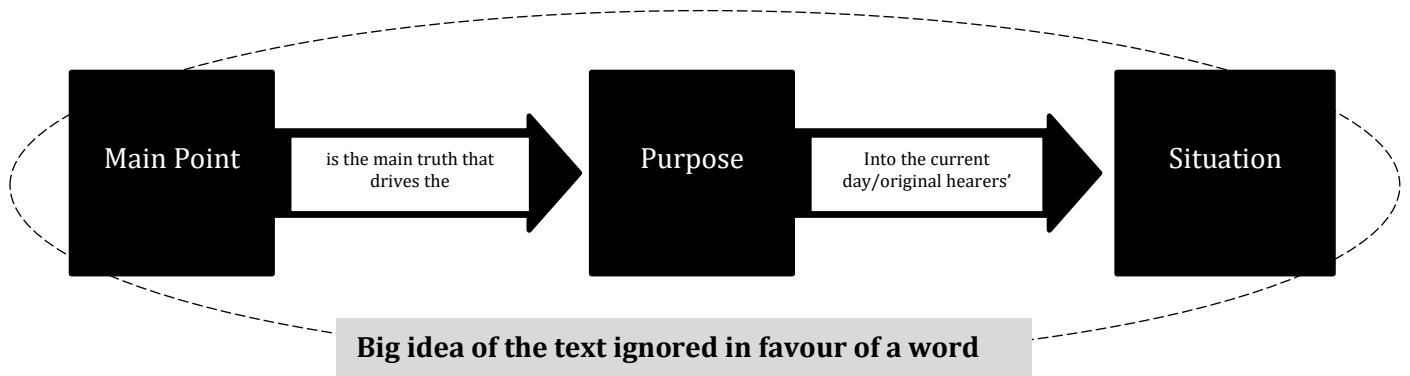
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<sup>6</sup> A concordance is a resource that lists out all the places in the bible where a particular word is found. Example: If I'm interested to see how the word "justify" is used in the bible, I would use a concordance for this.



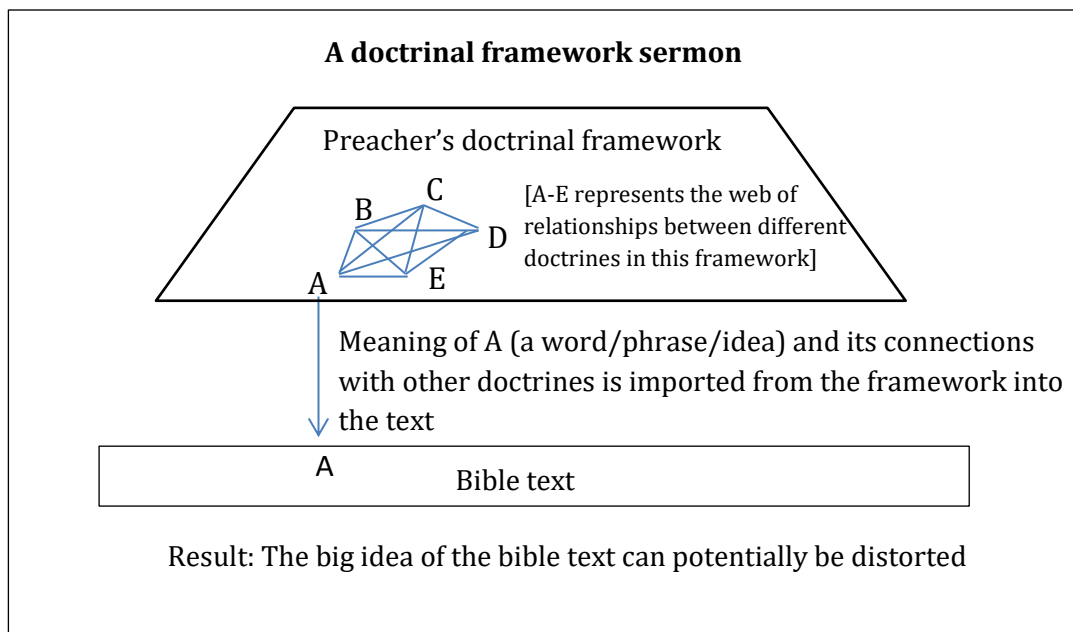
Why this sermon is not expository:

The big idea of the Mark 1:14-15 is ignored: With the arrival of the Christ (i.e. the King), the promised Kingdom of God is finally at the doorstep. The response of people to this Kingdom and the King is Repent and believe the gospel. In concordance preaching, the hearers gain a greater understanding of the word/phrase. But the particular angle that Mark wants his hearers to see about the Kingdom (that it's at the doorstep) is lost in the process. Also, the hearer is not shown how the phrase 'Kingdom of God' contributes to the big idea of this passage. In short, we're preaching passages, not individual words/phrases.



c. Doctrinal framework preaching

A doctrinal framework sermon happens when the preacher's doctrinal framework imposes itself on the text in an unnatural way. This usually happens when there is a word/phrase/idea within the text that is also a part of the vocabulary of the doctrinal framework (e.g. law, righteousness, chosen before the creation of the world, filled by the Spirit). Rather than let the meaning of the word/phrase/idea be determined by how it is used in the context, doctrinal framework preaching supplies the framework meaning and as a result, can **potentially** distort the big idea of the entire verse/passage.



## Example of doctrinal framework preaching: Mark 1:16-20

*16 Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.*

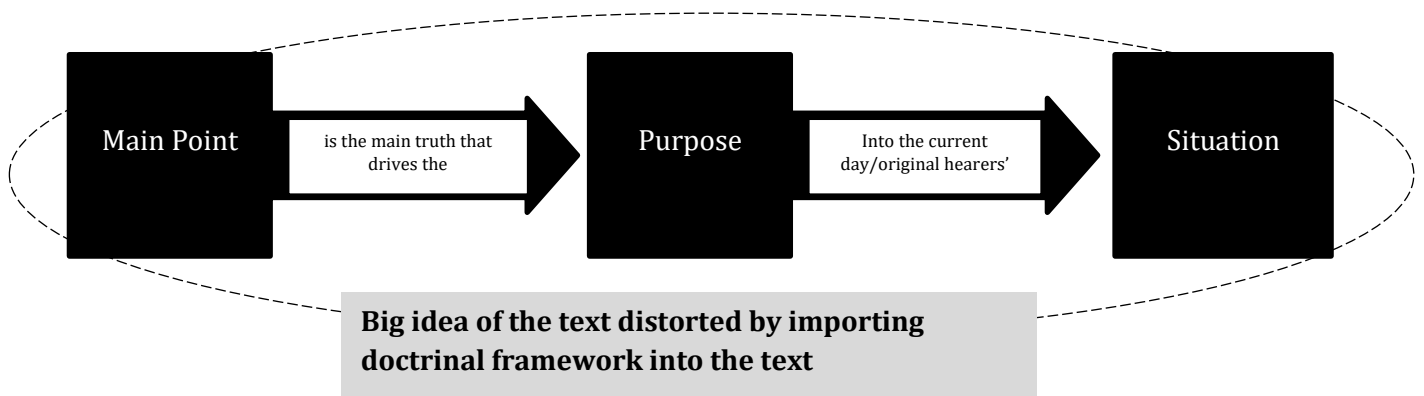
The preacher is someone who has a Calvinist<sup>7</sup> doctrinal framework. He notices the word "called" in Vs 20. He observes that all the 4 men whom Jesus calls immediately follow him. He concludes that this is the doctrinal idea of the irresistible call of God. In his framework, the irresistible call is connected to the idea of total depravity: sinful humans cannot and will not respond to God unless God calls them irresistibly to himself.

He imports these meanings from the framework into the text of Mark 1:16-20. The sermon focuses on the utter inability of the 4 disciples (because of their depravity) to be fishers of men apart from the grace of God working in them via the irresistible call of Jesus.

### Why this sermon is not expository

It distorts the big idea of Mark 1:16-20. In 1:14-15, Jesus has just announced that the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is at hand because he, as the Christ (God's King), has finally arrived. The right response is to repent and believe the gospel. 1:16-34 carries on from 1:14-15 by showing that this King has great authority. He has authority over men (Vs 16-20), authority over demons (Vs 23-28) and authority over sickness (Vs 29-31). Here is the authoritative King Mark wants his hearers to turn to in repentance.

The big idea focuses on Jesus' authority and human repentance, not on human depravity/inability. The preacher's doctrine framework has thus imposed itself on the text in an unnatural way.



## 6. Cultural framework preaching

Cultural framework preaching is when the preacher lets the hot button cultural issues of the day be the grid through which he/she decides what is highlighted from the text and what the big idea of the sermon should be.

<sup>7</sup> I realise that a Calvinist/Reformed framework contains much more than just the doctrine of God's sovereignty and human will but it is not less than this. I use this framework in this example not because I don't agree with the framework or the idea of frameworks but because I think our doctrinal framework can sometimes deter us from seeing what the text actually says.

Cultural framework preaching stems from a good desire for the bible to be relevant to God's people today. However, its means of making the bible relevant runs the risk of ignoring the biblical author's purpose of writing what he writes.

Example of cultural framework preaching: Mark 6:14-29

The #metoo cultural issue of the sexual harassment of women pushes the preacher to make this sermon primarily about the horror of Herod sexually objectifying his step-daughter. The main application would be "Don't sexually harass others!".

Why this sermon is not expository:

It fails the author's purpose test. Did Mark include this episode to put a stop to sexual harassment? I don't think he did. Now, don't get me wrong. God hates sexual harassment and anything which objectifies/de-humanises anyone. However, I think the main reason this passage is here at this point in Mark's gospel is to show Herod as a living example of someone who hears the Word but does nothing about it. Mark 4:35-6:30 are real life examples of the parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-34 being fleshed out. Herod hears the Word (6:20b) yet is totally unrepentant. The repugnant way he treats women is just one expression of his unrepentance.

If this is the main reason this passage is here in Mark's gospel, then the author's purpose is this: "Listen to Jesus' Word and repent (unlike Herod)".

