

Missing the Point

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:15

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The dean of the seminary I attended was Dr. Charles Feinberg, one of the most brilliant and respected men I have ever known. He was Jewish, and after studying for fourteen years to be a rabbi, he was converted to Christ. He knew more than thirty languages. He even told me once that he *taught himself* Dutch because he wanted to read Dutch Reformed theology. He also read through the Bible four times every year. Needless to say, he was exceptional and intense. We were all rightfully in awe of him, and I loved him at the same time.

In those days, every seminary student had to preach in chapel. When my turn came, I was assigned to preach on 2 Samuel 7, the great text on the Davidic Covenant. My sermon was probably a fine example of structural craftsmanship. It had a zinger for a beginning and a zapper at the end. It would have been a great success, too—if it hadn't been for my lack of biblical content in the middle section. I preached a "practical" message that was only superficially related to the biblical text. In that passage, Nathan encourages David to build a house for the Lord. And God says, "Wait a minute, you didn't check in. That's not the plan." So I preached about how important it is to not presume on God.

When I finished, I felt pretty good. The chapel audience seemed to have followed with interest, and I even thought I heard some murmurs of approval. But I really only cared about the opinion of one man—my mentor, Dr. Feinberg. The faculty sat behind us when we preached in chapel, and they had legal-sized criticism sheets, which they filled out during our sermons. After we were done preaching, we would stand at the door, and the faculty would hand us their sheets as they left the room. I just wanted Dr. Feinberg's.

He was at the end of the line, and I could see that he had folded his sheet up very small and very tightly. When he handed it to me, he did not even look up at me. He kept his eyes straight down and walked firmly past. That was not a good sign. So at my first opportunity, I unfolded his paper. I was eager to read his feedback, hoping desperately that he would be impressed with my sermon.

To be sure, I expected some constructive criticism. But the few bold red words that stared back at me were *much* worse than anything I had prepared myself for. He had completely ignored all the suggested categories and scoring helps that were printed on the sheet. Instead, he wrote across the page a one-line critique that hit me like a hard punch to the solar plexus: "*You missed the whole point of the passage.*"

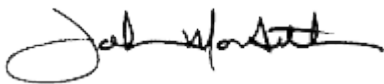
That is the worst possible mistake any preacher can make—but especially in front of someone like Dr. Feinberg. Like many young preachers, I had naively concerned myself with just about everything *except* getting the meaning of the text right. My preparation was focused on delivery, gestures, anecdotes, the right mix of humor and illustrative material, and the alliteration of my main points. I had actually approached the biblical passage itself almost as an afterthought.

Later that day, I received a message instructing me to go to Dr. Feinberg's office. When I got there, he was sitting at his desk, shaking his head in disappointment. "How could you? How *could* you? That passage presents the Davidic Covenant culminating in the Messiah and His glorious kingdom—and you talked about 'not presuming on God' in our personal day-to-day choices. That would have been a fine admonition to preach from Numbers 15:30-31 or Psalm 19:13, but you can't reduce *2 Samuel 7* to *that!* You missed the entire point of the passage, and it's one of the greatest of all Old Testament passages. Don't ever do that again."

He never said another word about it to me, but that incident hit me like a sledgehammer. In fact, it was the deepest single impression I ever received in seminary. *Never miss the point of the passage.* To this day, when I come to the text each week and begin to study its richness and depth, I can still hear Dr. Feinberg's heartfelt admonition ringing in my ears. If you don't have the *meaning* of Scripture, you do not have the Word of God at all. If you miss the true sense of what God has said, you are not actually preaching God's Word! That reality has compelled me for more than forty years of preaching.

During those years, I've seen numerous evangelical trends come and go. Whether it's a new way of doing church or the latest self-help book, contemporary Christian fads are transient by their very nature. Pastors who embrace these fads, usually in an attempt to be culturally relevant, inevitably find themselves neglecting the preaching of God's Word, looking for something else, desperately trying to keep up with whatever is supposedly cutting edge. Many preachers in the current generation seem to find it hard to resist the temptation to approach ministry that way. After all, the endless parade of fads is going the same direction the mainstream of the evangelical movement is flowing. Adapting your ministry to keep up with cultural and ecclesiastical fads is precisely what most books on pastoral ministry advocate. It's the pattern many of evangelicalism's best-known pastors have followed. It's even what most seminaries teach their students.

But for more than four decades now, I have resisted and opposed all those trends. And one of the main things that still constrains me is Dr. Feinberg's admonition to a second-year seminary student—which continually echoes in my head as I prepare my sermons—reminding me to keep focused on the main thing, to concentrate on getting the meaning of Scripture right, and to consume my energies preaching the Word of God as accurately and as faithfully as possible.



(Adapted from [*The Master's Plan for the Church*](#).)

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