

How to Preach/Teach on Controversial Passages

2021 Apostolic Christian Apologetics Conference

I think the very best approach to a talk like this would be to preach a series of about a hundred sermons where we take various difficult passages and give example after example of how to preach on them. I suggested to the committee that I should be the only speaker and that the conference should a week of eight-hour days so that we could do this, but there was a bit of hesitation with that approach. In fact, it might have been around that same time that they moved me into one of the shorter time slots.

Not too long ago, I was preaching on a passage of scripture and I gave an explanation/interpretation of that passage as part of my normal approach. Later a brother in the church reached out to me and let me know that he thought my interpretation was wrong until he looked the passage up on his phone (yes, during the service) and his study Bible app agreed with me. I think he was reassuring me that I was on the right track. This isn't the only time this happened, either. I have recently had probably a half dozen such discussions each year for the last few years. Perhaps this hasn't happened to you yet, but it might soon. Teaching and preaching in our modern age has changed a bit, hasn't it? I have thought of three big reasons for these changes, but of course, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Realities of Preaching/Teaching Today

1. The internet in your pocket + a fact-checking culture = more questions. We have developed what I like to think of as a “Snopes Culture.” People can feel like experts with almost zero work and with little wisdom. For many parts of our society, skepticism is on the rise, especially regarding absolute truth claims like inerrancy, inspiration, and the authority of scripture. If you haven't yet had the joy of someone in your congregation or in your Sunday school class fact checking you, let me just say...it's delightful!
2. More acceptance of modern Bible Translations. Overall, this is a good transition for most people, but it does raise some unique discussions. Which is better: an older translation (being closer to the actual time of Jesus and the apostles) or a newer translation that can benefit from the explosion in biblical discoveries (the Dead Sea Scrolls for example) over the past couple hundred years? What about the different Bible translation approaches that make different choices (e.g. the role of the Textus Receptus, the Septuagint, majority text approach, gender neutral language debates, etc.)? But, of course, it isn't just that modern Bible translations are more accepted, people also have more access due to technology. Free apps can bring hundreds of translations and countless commentaries, study Bible notes, and other thoughts into the mix. And, by the way, some people read the Bible exclusively on their phones. For the record, I am one of those people. I read the Bible on my phone or computer each day and typically only pick up a physical Bible on Sundays.
3. The explosion of Christian media and voices. Where there are more voices there is an increased need for discernment. The problem is that many of the most well-known biblically conservative voices are coming out of the reformed tradition (think Calvinism). Some of the most socially conservative voices are coming out of the Roman Catholic tradition. We even have political commentators like Bill O'Reilly writing books about Jesus. Our various alignments make for very strange bedfellows indeed.

What is my point? My point is that the Bible is full of passages that can be tricky to translate or have some sort of theological landmine in them or have footnotes in the modern translations that they possibly aren't authentic. And more people know about them now because of the three factors I just listed. So how do we navigate this? What do we do with these difficult passages? Do we need to become Bible scholars with a huge array of knowledge in our heads each time we open the Bible? For this discussion, I have chosen to break down the various difficult passages into two groups: those passages that are difficult because there are disputes regarding their authenticity and those passages that are difficult because there are disputes about how they should best be interpreted.

Disputed Authenticity

There are a number of passages in the Bible that have engendered debate regarding their authenticity. The early church argued whether whole books of the Bible should be considered part of the biblical canon. The last books to be accepted into the Old Testament canon include Esther, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Ezekiel¹. The Book of Revelation was the last book that was included in the New Testament canon². Even after the canon was established, however, certain passages continued to be disputed for various reasons³. Of course, for the sake of this discussion, we cannot go into depth on any of them, but it will be a good idea for you to be aware of them as we will discuss in just a minute.

Perhaps it would be a good idea, however, to focus on just one. John 7:53-8:11 is probably the one that most of us have heard of. The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery is still included in most Bible translations although many modern translations have added a note about the dispute to authenticity. The KJV does not have such a note unless you have a KJV study Bible⁴. I spent considerable time reading conservative biblical scholars on this subject and their reasons for saying it isn't authentic. The basic argument against the authenticity of this passage goes something like this⁵:

1. This story does not appear in any Greek manuscripts before the fifth century.
2. When the early church fathers wrote about John's gospel, none of them included this passage. None of the Eastern church fathers include this passage in their commentaries until the tenth century.
3. The gospel of John flows better from 7:52 to 8:12 if you remove this passage.
4. The style and vocabulary of this passage do not match the rest of John's gospel. In fact, many scholars have pointed out that the style and vocabulary much closer resembles Luke's gospel than John's gospel.

¹ <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/5-disputed-books-in-the-old-testament> Date accessed 9/21/21.

² Mounce, R. H. (1997). *The Book of Revelation* (p. 24). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

³ Some of the most important in the New Testament are: Mark 9:46, 16:9-20, John 7:53-8:11, Acts 8:37, 1 John 5:7

⁴ The New King James Version (NKJV) has included a similar footnote.

⁵ This list is summarized from the resources quoted below including Carson, Morris, Beasley-Murray, Kruse, and Michaels.

5. In the manuscripts that do include this story, the biblical editors don't seem to know where to put it. Some have it after John 7:36, some after John 7:44, and some after John 21:25. In one manuscript, this story is included in Luke's gospel.

So, what's the bottom line on this passage? The bottom line is that it almost certainly is not authentic to John's gospel. Here is a sample of the comments from those scholars⁶.

"The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel."⁷

"It is universally agreed by textual critics of the Greek NT that this passage was not part of the Fourth Gospel in its original form."⁸

"Most scholars agree that this section does not belong at this point in John. Most early manuscripts either omit it or mark it with asterisks to indicate doubt. A few manuscripts place it at the end of the gospel, and a few others after Lk. 21:38."⁹

It is in point of fact absent from virtually all early Greek manuscripts, and from very many in the other language groups. None of the early church fathers who wrote commentaries on John's gospel include it. There can be no real doubt that it was not an original part of John."¹⁰

"The diversity of placement confirms the inauthenticity of the verses. Finally, even if someone should decide that the material is authentic, it would be very difficult to justify the view that the material is authentically Johannine: there are numerous expressions and constructions that are found nowhere in John, but which are characteristic of the Synoptic Gospels, Luke in particular (cf. notes, below)."¹¹

"This attractive story is not found in the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts, it interrupts the flow of the account of Jesus' interaction with the Jewish people, which is taken up again in 8:12, and more than 15% of its vocabulary is found only here in this Gospel. Despite its inauthenticity, Metzger says it has 'all the earmarks of historical veracity'. It is consistent with what we

⁶ There are some conservative scholars and pastors who argue this passage IS authentic to John. John MacArthur, RC Sproul, William Hendriksen, and John Calvin are some examples of this point of view. This is still the vast minority view, however.

⁷ Morris, L. (1995). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 778). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁸ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1999). *John* (Vol. 36, p. 143). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

⁹ Guthrie, D. (1994). *John*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1042). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

¹⁰ Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John: here is your king!: with study guide* (pp. 123–124). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 333). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

know of the person of Christ from what is reflected in the rest of this Gospel as well as in the Synoptic Gospels.¹²”

“Possibly they come from a lost passion account resembling Luke in certain respects, yet clearly the scribes who placed the passage here in John’s Gospel did so for a reason.¹³”

But here is the real difficulty: even IF this passage is not authentic to John, that doesn’t mean it isn’t an authentic story of something Jesus did. Those are two different questions, right? John might not have originally included it, but that doesn’t mean Jesus didn’t have this exchange with the woman caught in the act of adultery. As many biblical scholars point out, the story could very well be authentic and doesn’t contradict Jesus’s overall ministry and character. It has many of the earmarks of a real story of Jesus. The historical contexts feel right, the language feels right (just not from John), and the theology feels right¹⁴. Not only that, but some later manuscripts insert this story in other places (Luke’s gospel for example)¹⁵. Clearly, the early biblical editors wanted to include this story and felt it was authentic. They just didn’t know where to put it, perhaps because they didn’t know its origins.

So, even if the story is not original to John, that doesn’t mean we have to stop teaching it or stop using it as a true story of Jesus that reveals the heart of God. God hates sin, God is holy, and yet God is gracious. Our application of God’s law sometimes misses God’s heart. Even when God extends grace to us, his expectation is that we go and “sin no more.” This is the heart of the gospel, isn’t it?

Which leads us to this question: how do we teach or preach on passages like this? Let me propose four options with a few thoughts on each.

Option 1: Refuse to preach/teach on it with reasons why. I personally dislike this approach. It’s the conflict avoidant approach. The portions of scripture that have legitimate challenges to authenticity are still in the Bible even if they are still heavily disputed. Don’t ignore them or skip them.

Option 2: Preach on it with no disclaimer. I personally dislike this approach as well because it ignores the elephant in the room. For some people, they will know the debate exists or they might even be reading a translation that highlights it. To completely ignore this potentially leaves

¹² Kruse, C. G. (2017). *John: An Introduction and Commentary*. (E. J. Schnabel, Ed.) (Second edition, Vol. 4, pp. 225–226). London: Inter-Varsity Press.

¹³ Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (pp. 494–495). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹⁴ Leon Morris (1995) writes, “But if we cannot feel that this is part of John’s Gospel, we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It rings true. It speaks to our condition. And it can scarcely have been composed in the early church with its sternness about sexual sin. It is thus worth our while to study it, though not as an authentic part of John’s writing.”

¹⁵ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 333). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

people wondering at best and doubting the Bible at worst. Now granted, very few people in your congregations or classes will care too much, but some will.

Option 3: Preach on it, but give a disclaimer. The difficulty with this approach is that you need to know what passages are disputed when it comes to authenticity. The good news is that there are only a few major passages¹⁶. There are a fair number of smaller disputes (a verse or a few words from a verse), but if you just try to memorize which passages are disputed, you can add a thoughtful disclaimer just to show people that you are aware of the controversy and how you plan to approach the passage¹⁷.

Option 4: Use it as an opportunity to teach on discernment, textual criticism, and the authenticity of the Bible. The difficulty with this approach is that it takes a lot more work and probably a topical presentation. It is probably the best and safest path when dealing with these disputed passages, however, and it teaches our students or congregations how to think about the Bible. Of course, you will inevitably find that some (perhaps many!) don't really care about the finer points of textual criticism. But, of course, our sermons shouldn't turn into biblical criticism lectures either. We need to strike a balance: teach, but don't overwhelm. Discuss the context and situation, but keep our lessons and messages focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Disputed Interpretation

Passages that are disputed due to authenticity are, in my opinion, the easy ones. Passages that have disputed interpretations are far more difficult. If, for no other reason, they are more difficult because there are so many of them. I have come up with ten different types of interpretation challenges (although there are surely more!), an example or two of each, and some basic advice for each. This is not so much intended to be an exhaustive study, but rather to raise awareness and prompt ongoing discussion.

Type 1: Difficult because believers have a long history of interpreting it incorrectly

Examples: Matt. 18:20, John 14:2*¹⁸, Phil. 4:13

Teaching/Preaching: There is no way around it: the solution here is to do the hard work of study ahead of time. Good biblical commentaries can be immensely helpful here. The real problem is recognizing the incorrect interpretation. Some of these incorrect interpretations are so engrained in Christianity, it is not immediately apparent that the passages are being misused.

Type 2: Difficult because unbelievers have a long history of translating it incorrectly

Examples: Matt. 7:1*, Phil. 4:13

¹⁶ As noted previously, the most important disputed passages in the New Testament include: Mark 9:46, 16:9-20, John 7:53-8:11, Acts 8:37, 1 John 5:7.

¹⁷ An example of a disclaimer might be something like this: "Some of your Bibles might have a statement saying this passage is not in the oldest manuscripts. This is a debate that largely has to do with Bible translation. Whether or not this passage is in certain manuscripts will not be part of our discussion today. I plan to teach this passage as being authentic. Even if I am wrong, this passage does not contradict God's heart and it tells a story that many Christians over the years have found helpful."

¹⁸ Passages with an asterisk will be used as examples in the presentation at the Apologetics Conference.

Teaching/Preaching: Try to understand why unbelievers have latched on to certain Bible verses or passages. Why are unbelievers so quick to quote Matt. 7:1 back to believers? When teaching on these passages it is best to call out the incorrect understanding directly and then gently correct it. Humility is important here because unbelievers who quote scripture do not have the Holy Spirit to guide them and our goal is not to win arguments against them, but rather to persuade them of the whole truth of God's word¹⁹.

Type 3: Difficult because it presents a truth that makes us uncomfortable

Examples: Deut. 28:63*, Genocide passages like 1 Sam. 15:3, Josh 6:21, Deut. 20:16-17
Teaching/Preaching: There are quite a number of passages where God orders genocide or where the bible appears to endorse slavery and the like. Or, as in the case of Deut. 28:63, the Bible shows God taking delight in cutting off Israel. Many books have been written on these subjects and there are also helpful resources online. It is perhaps always best to begin by talking about the seriousness of sin and its destructive nature on our world and humanity. I believe it is also very important to express grief over the effects of sin on our fallen world.

Type 4: Difficult because we don't have a clue what they mean or because some people think they know what they mean

Examples: Certain prophecies including parts of Revelation and Daniel, Jesus gets mad at a fig tree in Matt. 21:18-22, 1 Cor. 11:10*

Teaching/Preaching: Whether we like to admit it or not, there are passages and verses that seem to defy easy interpretation. In these cases, the best approach in these cases is to admit that you don't know what the passage means. Humility is a vital skill for biblical teaching and preaching! It can be helpful to give several possible interpretations, but still to admit that you don't know what interpretation is best. If this is your approach, we would suggest that you reaffirm the authority and authenticity of holy scripture. The problem is not the Bible, but our inability to understand.

Type 5: Difficult because they present a black and white portrayal of something that experience tells us is quite gray

Examples: Prov. 22:6*, Ps. 27:35, Mark 9:45

Teaching/Preaching: This is one of the reasons why the book of Proverbs is so difficult to teach/preach. It often makes things black and white that seem gray. The best approach is typically to talk about the "form" of a proverb (proverbs are not always meant to be taken as blanket statements, but rather "truisms") and the nature of biblical inerrancy. Then focus on the truth that the passage is pointing to rather than on the exceptions to that truth.

Type 6: Difficult because of the historical context

Examples: Much of the Law of Moses, Jer. 29:11, 1 Cor. 15:29, Revelation*

Teaching/Preaching: There is no way around it. The best approach to difficult historical passages is to learn the historical context. The Bible is a historical book. It is quite

¹⁹ When speaking one-on-one with an unbeliever who uses a Bible verse incorrectly or out of context, it might be good to start by clarifying what they believe about scripture. You might say something like, "I didn't realize you believed the Bible to be a guide for life?" Again, the goal is not to win an argument, but to win the heart.

arrogant to assume we don't have to learn anything of history in order to understand it. Some of the notorious difficulties in Revelation, for example, can be understood by reading about the historical context of the churches to whom the book is written.

Type 7: Difficult because the literal/plain reading is misleading

Examples: Matt. 5:29-30*

Teaching/Preaching: Perhaps one of the most misunderstood concepts in Bible study is what is meant by the word "literal." Theologically conservative Christians hold to a "literal" interpretation of scripture, but this does not mean that we ignore common literary devices such as metaphor, parable, hyperbole, word pictures, and rhetorical devices. The trick is to understand what passages were intended to be read literally and what passages were intended to be read figuratively. Again, a good study Bible or conservative commentary can be an immense help here.

Type 8: Difficult because of doctrinal differences

Examples: Rom. 9, Eph. 1:4-5*

Teaching/Preaching: Most books on Bible interpretation and hermeneutics would tell you that it is a bad idea to approach a passage with a theological interpretation already in mind. The reality is that we do this often. Our goal, however, should be to truly understand what the original author was trying to say to the original audience and then teach that. This is easier said than done. Most of the time, it is a bad idea to use the pulpit as a platform for arguing against certain theological viewpoints (e.g. Calvinism). We should be known for what we are FOR, not what we are AGAINST.

Type 9: Difficult because of varying English translations of the Bible

Examples: Ps. 10:5, 51:5*

Teaching/Preaching: This difficulty is especially apparent when using a parallel Bible or Bible software that places multiple translations side-by-side. Biblical translators have to make certain decisions when translating and this can lead to vastly different versions of the same verse in a few places. Most of these can be ignored because the overall message of the verse/passage is the same even if said differently. But there are a few that need to be carefully thought through because there are serious differences. Ps. 51:5, is an example of this. It has been translated by some translations (NIV, NLT) that we are sinful from birth, thus giving credence to the idea of original sin, or it has been translated that we were born to sinful parents (KJV, ESV), which is true for all of us²⁰. Generally, in these situations, a simple statement can suffice: "Another way people have understood this verse is ____."

Type 10: Difficult because of the KJV

Examples: John 14:2, 2 Thess. 2:7*

Teaching/Preaching: Our denomination continues to endorse the King James Version of the Bible. This means that at least part of our teaching/preaching will be dedicated to understanding the language differences between King James English and modern English. When we become immersed in a passage, it can be easy to forget that there are

²⁰ Of course, these differing translations are not necessarily opposed to each other as many commentators have noted (e.g. Wilson, G. H. (2002). *Psalms* (Vol. 1, p. 774). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

people who struggle to understand the language in the passage. It is best to slow down and do a certain amount of translation for your audience before teaching/preaching. This is not meant to undermine the KJV, but rather to make sure we understand it. The primary goal of teaching and preaching is to communicate the truths of God's word effectively and clearly so that the hearer may be convicted of sin, inspired to obedience, drawn into the heart of God, and drawn to worship. In other words, teaching and preaching are primarily offensive not defensive pursuits.

Final Considerations

1. Avoid the expert trap. When teaching/preaching it is ok to say, "I don't know." It is far better to say, "I don't know" than to do damage to God's word. If you say, "I don't know," go study the passage/question until you do know and then consider reporting back. It is always a good idea to express humility when we interact with God's inspired word.
2. Try to develop a robust understanding of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. The doctrine of inerrancy does NOT mean that the Bible is 100% literal. There is still metaphor, parable, hyperbole, word pictures, rhetorical devices, and a host of other things that do not lend themselves to "literal" translation. Consider the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. The Bible can truthfully and inerrantly record falsehoods or thinking errors²¹, for example.
3. Try to avoid defending a single Bible translation. Our defense is of God's inspired word not a particular English translation.
4. Never forget the role of the Holy Spirit. Both the teaching/preaching of the word of God and the receiving of the word of God are both primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. We are called to be faithful expositors of the word of God. This means it is generally unprofitable to argue biblical truth with unbelievers. We run the risk of putting the cart before the horse. We can truthfully (but perhaps unhelpfully) say, "Of course you don't understand this...you are missing the Holy Spirit."

²¹ For example, the Bible inerrantly and accurately records the despondent thinking of Job or the preacher in Ecclesiastes, but is not encouraging believers to become despondent.