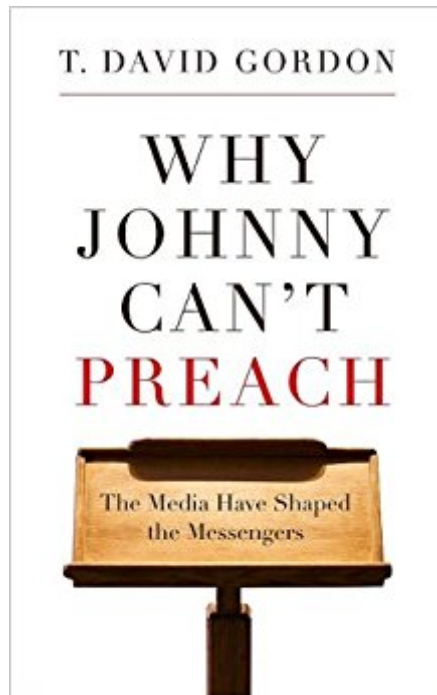




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# Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped The Messengers



## Synopsis

T. David Gordon has identified a problem that affects us all and needs to be fixed. Today's preachers are not speaking the language the congregation understands and needs to hear. Fortunately, Gordon not only diagnoses the causes of this failure but also shows us remedies for improvement.

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## Customer Reviews

"No, it's not just you. There's a lot of disappointing preaching today, and it's not entirely due to departures from sound principles. It's also affected by the media culture in which we live. While there are helpful studies of popular culture and important books on proper biblical interpretation and theology, this book does both. I couldn't help but wince as I recognized myself in Gordon's descriptions, but he writes so clearly and convincingly that I couldn't help but be grateful." --Michael Horton, Westminster Seminary California "An insightful diagnosis of a serious problem in the life of the church. For this we should be grateful, as we should for the way out of the crisis to which this book ably points." --David F. Wells, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary "Adds more to the homiletical conversation than ten books twice its length. Dr. Gordon is saying things that no one else has said, perhaps because no one dares to. He brings two very important perspectives to bear on the serious business of preaching: finely tuned literary sensibilities and media ecology. Electronic media alter perception and dramatically transform the sensibilities of preachers and the rest of the culture. Gordon's analysis offers us hope that Johnny can learn to preach well." --Gregory Edward Reynolds, pastor, author of *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: Preaching in the Electronic*

## Age

T. David Gordon has been Professor of Religion and Greek at Grove City College since 1999. Previously, he was an Associate Professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for 14 years and Pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church (Nashua, NH) for 9 years.

Seventeenth century Puritans produced some of the greatest preachers in Christian history. As far as I know, those preachers had nothing comparable to a modern seminary education. But what they did have was university training that required the careful reading of texts in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. The Puritan minister was therefore the product of a language-based educational system. Far more than most modern pastors, including myself, he was at home with biblical texts. In addition to his university training, he likely served as a tutor to children of the affluent, and because of his pedagogical responsibilities, became a skilled expositor of ancient texts. All of this proved to be invaluable preparation for extraordinarily fruitful pulpit ministries. Which brings me to T. David Gordon's *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers*, about the modern preacher and his ability both to read biblical texts and communicate compellingly their God-breathed truth. The minister's work is demanding: he must not merely assert the point of his sermon; he must fulfill "his duty of demonstrating that what he is saying is God's will." (18) Sadly, he often seems unaware of his solemn duty, and, even if he is, he finds himself woefully prepared to discharge it adequately. *Why Johnny Can't Preach* is a pre-homiletics book. It has little to say about the how-tos of crafting a sermon but much to say about the literary sensibilities and habits of learning a preacher must possess - prior to undertaking the work of sermon construction. These cannot ordinarily be learned at seminary; the ministerial candidate must master them earlier as he studies in academic environments that prize the careful reading, interpretation and exposition of texts. Gordon's assessment of the contemporary American pulpit is severe. Great preaching is rare, but that is not his fundamental concern: "What I care about is the average Christian family in the average pew in the average church on the average Sunday. And the problem there is not that we don't have 'great' preachers; in many circumstance we don't even have mediocre preachers." (14) The author, an ordained Presbyterian minister, teaches at Grove City College, and among his responsibilities, are courses in media ecology. As a media ecologist he explores our culture's movement from a language-based media to an image-based and electronic media, and how that movement affects the preacher and his preaching. Two deficiencies mar contemporary preaching: Johnny, the preacher, can't read (texts) and he can't write. That Johnny can't read doesn't mean that he is

illiterate. But reading the sports page, or the latest John Grisham novel, or even a history book is not the same as reading a text - and, especially an ancient text - carefully. Too often readers read either for amusement or scan texts to acquire information. Speed-readers have learned to ignore articles, prepositions, adjectives and adverbs in order to quickly identify the main points. (43) In the process, appreciation for how the text is constructed is lost. (46) This leads to a sad state of affairs, indeed. "Reading texts demands a very close and intentional reading. One cannot omit a single line of a given Shakespearean sonnet; each of the fourteen lines plays a crucial role. Those who are accustomed to reading such texts read each line for what it contributes to the whole and how it does so. But those not accustomed to reading texts closely just look for what they judge to be the important words, and the concepts to which they ostensibly point, and then give a lecture on that concept - ordinarily without making any effort to explain the passage as a whole, to demonstrate how each clause contributes to some basic overall unity." (48) The same careful attention to the text is demanded of any preacher who would faithfully discharge the duties of his office. Sadly, the disciplined and careful reading of texts is no longer prized by much of our culture, and is beyond the immediate reach of many pastors. The text is not treated like a door that ushers us into the author's world, enabling us to examine it from his vantage point. Rather, the text becomes a tool to confirm our own biases about reality. (49) As I read, I thought about books that claim the life of Jesus as the model for the successful CEO, salesperson or guru of human potential. That kind of author approaches the New Testament with predetermined and cherished ideas, and to no one's surprise - the very ideas he expected to discover in the text are waiting there for him, apparently undiscovered by earlier readers, now ready to be exploited and made into a cutting-edge book. Far from these best-selling authors' minds is the need to make the trek from our world back to the first century; to enter the mind of God as revealed through the words of the inspired gospel writers. They penned their accounts amidst the sorrows of God's suffering people, their words capturing the aspirations of the faithful, who waited patiently for the advent of the coming Messiah. Little or no time is devoted to how the words of the gospel writers fit into the grand story of God's redemptive work in preceding revelation, as proclaimed in the law and by the prophets. Our self-help author has no time or proclivity for that kind of study. "To employ C.S. Lewis's way of stating the matter, they 'use' texts but do not 'receive' them." (50) Conspiring against the careful reading of texts is the omnipresence of electronic media - inconsequential, distracting, confronting us mostly with the trivial, and robbing us of the "sensitivity of significance." (51) Gordon observes: "a culture that is accustomed to commercial interruptions every six or seven minutes loses its ability to discuss significant matters because it has lost the patience necessary to consider them." (54) Such a culture produces

ministers "who are not at home with what is significant; ministers whose attention span is less than that of a four-year-old in the 1940s, who race around like the rest of us, consequently distracted by sounds and images of inconsequential trivialities, and out of touch with what is weighty." (58-59) Life drives a hard bargain: the emergence and use of a new technology demands that we spend less of our time doing what we once did. We have fewer face-to-face encounters with our conversation partners - those occasions which require not just speaking, but also listening and looking, studying visible reactions to our words. Sadly, "ministers today seem especially blind to the visible response of the congregation because, as a culture, we get used to telephone conversations in which there is no visible response." (64) Diminished, too, is the time spent composing letters. (61-63) Disciplined letter writing demands unity, order and movement," (66) all of which are invaluable to good sermon construction. Where does this leave us? "A once-common sensibility (close reading of texts) is uncommon, and a once-common activity (composition) is now comparatively rare." (67) How can Preacher Johnny be taught to preach? Prior to entering seminary, he should study where he learns to read the word of God, and where he is taught the skill of "composed speech." (96) A degree in English literature might be a wise choice for undergraduate students pursuing ministry. (101) If Johnny is already in ministry, Gordon proposes: 1. An annual review which thoroughly evaluates the preacher's sermons according to unity, intelligibility, and so forth. (98) 2. The continual cultivation of the sensibility of reading texts closely. In addition to studying the scriptures in the original languages, the reading of poetry is most helpful in cultivating literary sensibility. (99-102) 3. The continual cultivation of the sensibility of composed communication through note and letter writing and through writing for publication. Joining a club devoted to honing public speaking skills and soliciting feedback from seasoned preachers are good uses of a minister's time. (103-105) Although it is not a preaching "how-to" manual, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* does contain a very helpful review of Robert Lewis Dabney's seven requisites of preaching (23-28) and an extended reflection on the content of preaching (69-93). Gordon argues persuasively that "the content of Christian preaching should be the person, character, and work of Christ." (70) "Christian proclamation properly includes a declaration of those character traits that equip Christ to effectually fulfill his redemptive office. His love, mercy, compassion, and other traits equip him in specific ways to accomplish his works; therefore, the proclamation of such traits nourishes the faith of those who come to God through him." (71) Seriously deficient alternatives to Christological preaching include: moralism, "how-to" preaching, introspection (namely, preaching that constantly suggests to hearers that they might not be believers after all), and "Social Gospel/So-Called Culture War" preaching. None of these alternatives are helpful in cultivating biblical morality. "No; preach Christ, and you will have morality.

Fill the sails of your hearers' souls with the wind of confidence in the Redeemer, and they will trust him as their Sanctifier, and long to see his fruit in their lives. Fill their minds and imaginations with a vision of the loveliness and perfection of Christ in his person, and the flock will long to be like him.

(78)I cannot recommend this book too highly to preachers. As I read, deficiencies in my own preaching and preparation came to mind, but along with them, suggestions for improvement. Since good preachers are ordinarily the products of homes and/or churches that cultivate literary sensibilities, I believe that anyone who cares about children, education, and the future of pulpit ministry would find reading this book exceptionally beneficial.

While Johnny can't preach, he can learn to preach! This book gives a harsh (yet discouragingly accurate) critique of modern day preaching and preachers. It is a must read for any student of preaching or anyone who preaches at least semi-regularly. Despite the grim outlook, all is not lost. Preaching can be reclaimed. My only wish is that more time would have been spent on good preaching and practices of good preachers. However, there are countless other books for that. Therefore, the more negative tone of this book is a needed addition to the how to of other more typical preaching books.

Gordon takes a hard-line stance on a problem that is even more prevalent today than he could have imagined when first penning this book in 2004. The basic premise is that our social world and its media make the preacher (and everyone, for that matter) improperly equipped to effectively read and understand the Word and then re-articulate it to his (captive) listeners. It's hard to disagree with that! Gordon probably alienates the people he desires to win over because of his tone, which borders on shrill at his most passionate moments. However, his point is valid, and those who disagree need to be able to articulate what it is they disagree with. As an aside, I personally disagree with his conclusion that a Christi-centric preaching model will fix this problem. I would hope that sound hermeneutics can be applied and excellent preaching still be practiced.

Due to the author having had cancer at the time that he wrote this book, he dispensed with what many would consider the normal decorum and got right to the point. Having been a preacher for 20 years, it was hard to learn that, not only do I have some improvements to make, but that a radical overhaul would be necessary. Do not read this book if you are not prepared to do some deep, introspective soul-searching. Kudos to the author for his no nonsense way of getting down to the brass tacks in the least amount of time. If one's preaching is not centered in the risen Jesus Christ,

his preaching is in vain. As Augustine once said about the Old and New Testaments, "In The Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.." It is ENTIRELY appropriate for Jesus to refer to himself as The Word, because when all is said and done it is ALL about Him.

This book is so well written that it draws you into its account. However, more importantly, Dr. Gordon's unique perspective actually names a possible source for the lack of substance from the pulpit on most Sundays, at most Protestant churches...the influence of media. Not necessarily its ideological influence, but it's success in creating cadres of preachers who don't know what and how to preach and teach. As this book alludes to, they are used to focusing on the insignificant. Therefore, their congregations are spiritually malnourished in a world filled with ravenous, spiritually dangerous wolves.

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