

Ben Best, co-host

Welcome to *Defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity. Do you know someone who would benefit from this podcast? Please share this episode with them and leave us a review.

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Because all of Scripture is divinely inspired, all of it holds promise for the edification of God's people. But it's not always clear how that's so. What are we to gain aside from historical knowledge from genealogies, for example? That's just one kind of biblical text that challenges Bible teachers. Pastor and Cairn University professor Dr. Bryan Murawski wrote his book *Preaching and Teaching Difficult Texts of the New Testament*, a follow-up to his *Preaching Difficult Texts of the Old Testament*, to help those who teach the Scriptures know how to more effectively and accurately teach passages that are hard for a variety of reasons. He joins Dr. Keith Plummer to talk about some of the ideas he shares in these books. Whether you're a pastor, Bible study leader, parent, or someone who simply wants to get the most out of your Bible reading, there's something here for you. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I look forward to occasions like this when I get to sit down with a colleague to talk about their work. I'm with Dr. Bryan Murawski, associate professor in Cairn University School of Divinity. He is the author of several books, including *Preaching Difficult Texts of the Old Testament* and the two-volume *The Preacher's Hebrew Companion to Isaiah*. He's also a member of the pastoral staff at Riverstone Church in Yardley, Pennsylvania, where he is regularly in the preaching rotation. I invited Bryan to talk with me about his latest book, *Preaching and Teaching Difficult Texts of the New Testament*, published by Hendrickson. Brian, welcome to *Defragmenting* and thanks for making the time.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Keith Plummer

This book is a second, maybe like a sequel of sorts, because as I mentioned, the book prior to it was *Preaching Difficult Texts of the Old Testament*. And there is an intentional expansion of the title here, *Preaching and Teaching*. What is to account for that?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Yeah, that was certainly intentional. The first volume, *Preaching Difficult Texts of the Old Testament*, we found was being used by quite a few laypeople, even though it was primarily aimed at preachers. I was talking to preachers and pastors. I had quite a bit of laypeople in my church that were using it, students that were using it. And we felt that to expand it a little bit and to try to intentionally capture individuals that were in the church that might not be in a pulpit, but still teaching Sunday school, interested in knowing their Bible better and teaching it in a number of different capacities, it might help service the church a little bit better.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Having read it, I think even if someone wasn't teaching in an official capacity, there's a lot here that just in terms of learning how to handle the Bible. So I would definitely recommend it to people. If you hear, well, I'm not serving in that capacity, this isn't for me, I wouldn't conclude that. When people hear about difficult texts, they might come— it might come to mind that what you have in mind are, you know, those hard passages to know what they mean. What is it that you're getting at when you say difficult text to preach and teach?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Yeah, the first question I usually get is, well, what passages do you deal with in this book? And the book is not so much a passage-by-passage treatise of these difficult texts, But what I wanted to do is I wanted to grab some different, I'll call 'em genres, even though they're not technically genres, but different genres of difficult texts and deal with them as a whole and help people to understand not just why are they in the Bible, but then how can you deal with them from either a pulpit or a classroom, or even just understand them better. So what I do is each chapter is a different type of text that you

might find, a different type of challenge that you might find in the New Testament. So I have a chapter on when the New Testament references or quotes the Old Testament, how do you handle that? I have a chapter on textual difficulties and what happens. I just had a pastor call me up the other day and say, I'm reading this passage from this gospel and it doesn't have this verse in it. It skips over the verse. And I was actually able to plug my own book, but help him with that question.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

I deal with the opening and closings of books, like the different introductions and conclusions that you see in Pauline letters that pastors either tend to either breeze by when they're speaking on it, or if you're teaching it, you might kind of skip over it to get to the good stuff. And I say, well, why is that here? And how could that help inform the rest of that book that you're reading?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, you open the book giving a rationale for why it is that you believe that it's essential. To preach and teach these difficult texts. First, you already gave a little bit of an inkling of this, but why might a teacher, Bible study teacher, or a pastor preaching, why might they be tempted to not deal with some of these difficult—

Dr. Bryan Murawski

They might be tempted because they are difficult, and we don't like things that are tough. We find that there's a lot of maybe easier passages to look at in the Bible or lower-hanging fruit, and that fruit is still good. I don't want to knock that. I don't think there's anything wrong with speaking on passages that are easier to apply. I think that's a really good thing for many people. But if we are committed to expository preaching and teaching, if we're committed to helping people to understand their Bibles, we can't just stop at the easier texts. We have to be able to deal with the more challenging passages. I find as a pastor that oftentimes the questions I'm getting from people in my congregation are not questions about the easier passages because they understand them better. They're questions about the more challenging passages, and because of that, I as a pastor and as a professor as well have to help equip my students and my church members to know what to do with those challenging texts when they're reading the Bible cover to cover, maybe, or when they're reading a book of the Bible. You have a hard time getting through any book of Scripture without finding something in it that's going to challenge you.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

And because of that, I think, I think we need this kind of a book.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You in several places talk about how the preacher or the teacher handles the Bible, is teaching the people that they're teaching. How to handle the Bible. And so what they do with their Bible, it's likely that the people that they're teaching are going to do. And you say that when preachers ignore difficult passages, they teach their congregants to do the same in their own devotions. This reveals a lazy pulpit, which indeed reflects their character. And you have a lot to say about the character of the teacher or the preacher. It's not just the skills that you help them develop, but I appreciated the fact that you have a lot to say about the humility of the person who is teaching and preaching. And I hope to get to some of that. You ground your conviction that it's necessary to preach difficult texts in your conviction about inspiration. Could you say something about that?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

There would be no reason to teach difficult texts of Scripture if we don't believe in the inspiration of the entirety of God's word. Much of, much of my homiletics and hermeneutics even is built on 2 Timothy 3:16 down to the next chapter in chapter 4, where Paul says "All Scripture is breathed out by God and useful for teaching, preaching, or teaching, reproof, correction, training, and righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." And then he goes on in chapter 4, flows right into it to give the imperative, "therefore preach the word." So if we believe that all Scripture is inspired by God, then we will believe that even those difficult texts of Scripture is inspired by God and therefore useful for our edification and sanctification. To skip over those is to ignore something that God has given us for our spiritual growth. So because of that, we don't really have the

option as evangelicals to pick and choose what we want to teach from God's Word, or to pick and choose what we like in each book of the Bible. But we have to present that book as God has given it to us. And it's through that expository preaching and teaching, I think, is the best way to, to do that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Since you mentioned expository preaching. I'm sure a lot of listeners are familiar with that, but for those who might not be, what do you have in mind and how does that differ from a more topical approach?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Expository preaching is taking the text and teaching it verse by verse, passage by passage, as it's presented to us. So working your way through a book of the Bible and explaining and applying what is there. Not reading into it, but bringing out of it what message the original authors intended for us to receive from it. So good topical preaching is also expository in a sense that you are taking each text that you're dealing with and making sure that the original context is paid attention to and you're bringing over the original meaning as much as you're able to. But a topical approach is typically going to start with a topic and say, let me gather together different passages that talk about this topic. A responsible topical teaching or preaching would maybe start with a topic and ask the question, what verses are relevant to it? And then build out your points from a good, careful study of those passages. I think what a lot of teachers sometimes tend to do, unfortunately, is to say, here's what topic I want to speak on, here are the points that I want to make. Now let's find Bible verses to match with those points.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

And that's irresponsible preaching and teaching. So an expository message is going to take whatever passage is in front of you, which is the next passage in that book that you preached or taught from last week, and you're going to listen to that passage, allow that passage to guide whatever points you're going to make, because the, the point from the passage should be the point from the pulpit or the lectern or whatever you're teaching from, and the application should be drawn right from that text as well.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So there might be times when you are going through a passage, and I think one of the examples you gave, and it's a sermon that I heard you preach on, when the author of the book of Hebrews is calling people to be hospitable and says that in so doing, entertaining strangers, some have entertained angels unaware. You did do a little bit about a theology of angels. But it was— tell us a little bit about how that illustrated what it is that you're talking about here.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

So it's okay when you're preaching a passage, if it's bringing up a topic that's really difficult or much bigger than just that one verse can handle, it's okay to bring other passages in and talk through it. What I try to caution against here is spring-boarding, using a verse or a passage as an occasion just to springboard to whatever topic you really want to preach. And that is not preaching the passage in front of you, but using that passage as an introduction almost to a topical sermon. It's a topical sermon in disguise. So for that example that you're referring to there in Hebrews, when we talk about entertaining angels, if indeed the author of Hebrews means angelic beings, then there's a lot of questions that come up that that singular verse cannot necessarily answer by itself. So there's some necessity to say, well, what does the rest of Scripture speak to in this topic, in this area, and bring some of that over. But we don't want to make the point of the text a theology of angels because that's not the point of that text. That's not the point of that verse.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And you say that it might be that coming across something like that might warrant another venue, right, to investigate a theology of angels, right?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

When I was, when I was in full-time ministry, one of my strategies would sometimes be to align our

Wednesday night teaching time, which was more of an interactive study, with our Sunday morning preaching. And if something came up on a Sunday morning like this verse about angels that I just couldn't or didn't want to do a whole systematic theology of angels on a Sunday morning. That would distract from the text at hand. Maybe what we would do is kick that to our Wednesday night and invite people out there and say, we're going to have a discussion. I'm going to share with you some other passages and have more of a systematic theology there. At other times, I have taken a time for a Sunday and inserted a topical lesson or a topical sermon on whatever topic it was that came up the week before, but trying to be very clear with the congregation that this is what I'm doing. I'm not continuing to preach the text, but now I'm going to address this issue that the text arose or the text has invited us to think about, but do that as a separate talk rather than the same thing, because again, then you're just disguising a topical sermon in your, what should be an expository message.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's look at some of the kinds of texts that you address that I've never seen really handled before. So this was good to see. One of the, you start out with preaching and teaching people lists. And you know, there are times we could think of maybe like the end of Romans where Paul is listing these people and saying, greet them and so forth. And it can be kind of enticing to say, well, this isn't really where the meat of the matter is, so we can just kind of breeze through this. But you say, no, there is stuff there that we can and should take away. What kinds of things should someone who's preaching and teaching a list like that look for?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Yeah, great question. And again, this comes from a conviction that Romans 16 is just as inspired as Romans 9 and Romans 3 and Romans 6 and all of our other favorite passages from Romans. It has good theological insights and caps off what the book has been arguing and summarizes some of those things and also invites us to think of some fresh things as well. What should we be looking at in a people list? Well, we don't want to look down a people list. What I find some of my students do sometimes is they try to find like, what is the meaning of this name? And then there's some sort of hidden message in the list. We want to avoid that. Names sometimes have some significance. Oftentimes when they do, the Bible will point that out for us or draw some very clear attention to that. What we want to look for is trends in those lists. If Paul gives us a list of 30 names or 20 names and in between each one or in between several of them, he is encouraging us to love one another or to watch out for certain people or to be encouraged by certain actions of those people, that's something that will stick out and something that is very preachable, I think.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

So in other words, whatever the narrator is saying or whatever the author is saying about these people, that's oftentimes some of the meat of that passage and will help us to know why is this here and how do I preach it and how do I apply it in my context here.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You mentioned noting things like commendations and condemnations, right? Things to be emulated, things to be avoided. And one of the points that you made in that section that I thought was really, really critical was this. You say, "Hardly a word is spoken of the physical ailments of these people, ailments that paradoxically tend to dominate most of our prayer requests today. Instead, we see a much more concentrated focus on spiritual issues like the refreshment of someone's spirit in 1 Corinthians 16:18, or the urge for proper encouragement." Colossians 4:8, or the need to show grace where it is necessary. Is that kind of what you're talking about in terms of looking for trends?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

And right, yeah, look at what the author's actually saying about these individuals. And that's a good example of a trend when Paul is offering prayer for people or helping the church to know how to be concerned about this individual. As you just read there, very infrequently does he mention physical things, which tend to dominate what we pray for. And it's not bad to pray for physical issues. Paul does that as well. But the vast majority of what he's concerned about is a spiritual condition of these individuals. So that should dominate our focus, and it also should dominate how we apply these texts and what we're paying attention to in them.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Since we're talking about letters, there was a common form that epistles took in the first century, and, you know, there were introductions, greetings, there was a body, an ending of some kind of conclusion, a blessing or doxology. When we're reading an introduction and we're tempted to think this is just preliminary stuff before we get to the good stuff, what kinds of things should someone who's teaching be mindful of when they're dealing with the beginnings and endings, let's say introductions of a letter?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Some of the things we should be paying attention to is whether the introduction invites us to consider some of the major themes of the letter. 1 Peter is a great example of this. Peter begins and not just tells us his situation, his contextual historical situation, but has this theological statement in the beginning, in the first verse or two, that summarizes a lot of the Trinity's work within our salvation. It talks about what the Son does, the Holy Spirit, the Father, and a lot of that will show up again in his letter in encouraging the suffering believers of his time. So that introduction is highly valuable for that reason. It, it really introduces what the letter is going to focus on. It's a great introduction to a sermon series. So for that kind of an occasion, I would say put a full stop on that sermon 2 verses in, 3 verses in, and really lean into what Peter has to say and use that as your introduction for that series rather than just glimpsing over it and jumping right into the rest of that chapter. There are other times when an author's introduction maybe is a little bit more generic.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Paul has a typical way of of saying hello. And sometimes he's a lot more brief than he is in other times. Those other times are the times when maybe you want to pay more attention and say, is he bringing up issues that he's going to later develop? And if so, that's a great way to pitch the themes of this series and why you're going to be speaking on this particular book. At other times when he is a lot more generic, maybe you don't spend a whole sermon there, but just use that as the first point that you make in that sermon or a way to introduce what that first text or that first passage is. So it really depends on what text you're looking at. Some are a little bit more significant than others, and some have a little bit stronger of a tie-in with what is to come than others.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So we should be looking to see whether or not there's any way a preview of what is to come, right, in an intro, right?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

I, I think some books do the work for us in some of those ways. Other books, those introductions, as I said, are a little bit more generic and maybe don't offer us quite as much to, to use as, as an introduction to the book as a whole.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And I should mention that throughout the book you give a number of illustrations from your own preaching, how it is that you formulated or formatted an introduction to a sermon series and some of the things that you're talking about. There is always a temptation for anyone who is speaking to people, teaching, whether it be a pastor or a teacher, I want to say something that they haven't heard before. I want to, you know, we can be inclined to look for what is clever, what is new. And you've got a chapter on preaching and teaching well-worn texts. And this was very, very helpful. You say that there are two kinds of well-worn stories: the ones that we hear frequently because of their attachment to a holiday, so Christmas and Easter, and those that are simply Bible stories that people are well familiar with. And I have to admit that there are times when I have been assigned or usually it's when I've been assigned, but sometimes when I've decided to do a passage that I know people are familiar with, there's this thought, well, people know this already. And there can be this reservation. But what are some of the things that anyone who's responsible for preaching or teaching should have in mind and shouldn't have in mind when they're dealing with familiar texts?

Dr. Keith Plummer

So let's start first with like the the holiday ones, Christmas and Easter.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

One of the things I've found being a pastor for many years now is that people really like familiar stories for a reason. And when you're trying to be a little too clever, sometimes that actually can be detrimental and a turnoff for many people with what texts that you're preaching and even how you're approaching them. My first year in the pulpit, as a senior pastor, I was working through the book of Exodus, and we had come to Exodus chapter 3, where the Lord gives this great revelation of his name as Yahweh. And then I was supposed to preach that right around Christmas time, and I thought, this is a great Christmas passage that could lead right into here to John 1 and talk about Jesus as God. And so I thought this was great. And boy, did I get a few complaints afterwards. That wasn't Christmas. Where's baby Jesus on Christmas? So I think people do like their nostalgia. And it's not that we just give them what they want. That's not what a preacher should be doing. But at the same time, we shouldn't be afraid of preaching something that is very familiar. Wherever somebody is hearing this, they're in a different context than they were the last time. It might hit them a little bit differently. So it's okay to preach something that they've heard 100 times. Don't make any apology about it.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

One of the things I recommend in my book is to preach it as if they've never heard it. So don't start by apologizing. I know you've heard this text before, but preach it as if this is the first time they're encountering it. And that brings a fresh excitement to it that assumes that everybody's kind of on the same level ground as they're listening to it. And there may be some insight if you've studied hard enough that, that's fresh for somebody or a new angle that they haven't thought about. But the goal isn't just to give them something fresh, but to teach the text as, as the text is and give the message of that text.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You had a recommendation particularly for young pastors to spend time selecting 10 Well, the text for Christmas and Easter for the next 10 years, right, ahead of time. Not that they're, you know, they're committed to this, but why do you think that that's a valuable exercise for them to do early on?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Right, so I, I think it's really helpful because these are, these are gonna, these are texts and topics that are gonna come up every single year. You can't avoid Easter, you can't avoid Christmas, and it's helpful to have some kind of strategy moving out from it. Otherwise, every single season you're going to think about, oh, you know, what do I preach? And did I do this? I can't remember. Or, you know, am I going to do Luke 2 again? If you can sit down at the very beginning of your ministry and work out for 5 to 10 years, here's what I want to preach on when it comes time to Christmas Eve, Christmas sermon. And, you know, same, same idea with Easter, Good Friday and Easter morning. That will give you a little bit more, I think, comfort in approaching that text every year. You know that there's something ahead of you that you haven't done before, a passage that you haven't preached before. And then by the time you're done exhausting that, you'll either have a new list in front of you, or you could even go back and, you know, it's been 5, 10 years since you preached this text, and most people aren't going to remember what you did 10 years ago anyway.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You were talking about preaching a well-worn story like they've never heard it. And one of the things that you pointed out there is that narratives are stories. And you had this illustration that I found quite humorous, but also it made the point. And you said, "How many people would enjoy a movie that begins with a summary of everything you're about to see, including the ending?" And then you gave a polite spoiler alert. "In this thrilling follow-up to *Star Wars: A New Hope*, Luke Skywalker finds out that Darth Vader is his father. Over the next 2 hours, we'll learn about the problem of evil." And sometimes sermons do do that. Like, they give the overview and so that they don't allow the story to unfold and things to be encountered as they come. And you also had a good observation about how some ways that our Bibles, our English versions, are, you know, some of the subtitles and so forth. Could you say how it is that that in some ways works against our own reading a story as it unfolds?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

You've really hit on one of my pet peeves here, so I'll try to constrain my opinions to some degree. But I think for many preachers approaching a narrative text, as you mentioned and as I wrote, they really spoil the whole thing at the beginning. For whatever reason, they find that it's the best way to approach this topic by telling everybody what's going to happen and telling them what the point is, which is exactly the opposite of how narrative works. Narrative unfolds, it brings you along with it, it has tension, which is something that is unresolved. And if you stand up in a pulpit and resolve everything in 2 minutes before you ever get to it, that takes a lot of wind out of your own sails. So I would recommend, as you're preaching narrative especially, to allow the narrative itself to bring up its own point, its message, its topics, and allow that tension to stand as you're preaching it. And what you mentioned about the subtitles and headings from our Bible— these are the headings that the editors add in— oftentimes they can be a spoiler to the text that you're looking at. So I don't even mention them. I don't, I don't look at them, and I don't encourage people to do that either for narratives that they're looking at. I would love to see a Bible that just gives the chapters listed without any sort of addition. Another related issue is even that some people get confused thinking that that's actually part of Scripture, right? They don't understand that those titles are something the editor has added in there to help them. This is something we just got done preaching a short series in the Psalms on the Psalms of Ascent. And one of the first sermons that I did there, I tried to help people discern the difference between an editor's added title and the superscription, which is part of that psalm. And there's a difference between those, even in regard to what is inspired and what is not.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I know some publishers have tried to deal with some of the issues that you're dealing with by creating what they call readers' Bibles, where it's just it reads more like a continuous narrative.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Right. And that's, that's the way I would encourage you to approach a narrative when you're preaching it. More like the Reader's Bible. It's not that there's no stopping point or no beginning, but allow, allow the tension of the text and the way the narrator unfolds that tension to be part of your strategy in the pulpit.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's pause right here. And then when we return on the other side, we can talk about some of the other genres.

Ben Best, co-host

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I am talking with Dr. Bryan Morrow about his book, *Preaching and Teaching Difficult Texts of the New Testament*, published by Hendrickson. There's a wealth of material here. Hopefully we're giving people an idea of some of what they will find here. One of the things that you talk about is how it is that there are enigmatic texts. And you say that an enigma is a saying that defies easy understanding or explanation. An enigmatic verse or passage of Scripture is one that has an abundance of possible and even probable interpretations, often without any clear or obvious solution. It's clear why it is that pastors and teachers might want to avoid those kinds of texts. But tell us a little bit about some of the things that when we're dealing with those kinds of texts, and maybe even give us an example of one or two, what should we be looking to do? How should we proceed?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

One example of these kinds of texts is where Paul in Corinthians is talking about head coverings, I believe, and he gives this little off kind of side comment, make sure you do this because of the angels. And then he just keeps moving on. Doesn't take the time to explain himself. What does that mean

because of the angels? How does that relate? He doesn't clearly explain that. That's a passage where if you open up 10 commentaries, you'll probably find 20 opinions on what does this little phrase mean. And one of the major recommendations I would give for enigmatic texts like that is for the preacher to approach it with humility. The teacher and preacher as they're presenting whatever their opinion is on this text, and you've got to study hard with these things. You have to make sure that you're you're doing your homework and you're trying to figure out what are some of the most probable solutions here. Whatever you land on, because these texts are so controversial, you want to make sure that you're presenting it with a great deal of humility, knowing that there are good, godly, sometimes more-educated scholars on other sides that have a different conviction than you.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

And because of that, you need to hold that opinion pretty loosely in your hand. We're not talking about major gospel issues here. We're not talking about even secondary issues here. We're talking about these texts that are really tertiary. Not that they're unimportant, and they're not unimportant for the author's argument, but they're exceedingly challenging to be dogmatic about in what our opinions are. So we want to study hard.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

The other thing I would encourage preachers to do, especially young preachers, I think, and teachers fall into this trap is they feel like there's a need to present all the options when they see a challenging text like that. And I want to encourage people to be careful of that mentality. Just because the opinion is out there doesn't mean we need to share it. And it doesn't mean that it has equal weight as all the other opinions. You might find 10 different opinions on what does it mean because of the angels. And you'll probably find a lot more than 10. Maybe 3 of those are really worth mentioning on a Sunday morning. Maybe 3 of those. And maybe what you want to do is cut through all of them and say, based on my study, here's what I think this means and here's why, and not even give time and attention to the other ones.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

So you have to use a great deal of discernment how to approach that type of a text. But you're not giving a running commentary. You're not trying to be exhaustive with the options that are out there, and whatever you land on, be humble about it.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You just mentioned running commentary. That reminded me of something earlier in the book, and I think this applies to a variety of— well, actually, I think this probably applies to all of preaching. You warn against commentarizing your— commentarizing, that's the word— commentarizing your sermon or your lesson. What does that mean?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

That means when you are preaching or teaching, you are taking a text and you're helping people to understand the meaning of that text and helping them to understand how to apply that text. What you're not doing is the same thing a commentary does, which is giving you all the different options about the controversial words and phrases and historical situations of that text. A good commentary is going to give you those options. It's going to wrestle through the exegetical difficulties. It's going to give you an opinion and support for that opinion. And oftentimes commentaries don't spend time in application, or at least they don't spend as much time in application. So as a teacher and a preacher of the Bible, your goal is not to just present options, and it's not to just run with the text and say, here's the different challenges in that text. It's to help people to understand it. Now there are times when giving them options and helping them to see some of that exegetical wrestling is really appropriate and helpful. Good homiletics leads to good hermeneutics for a person that's going to demonstrate good hermeneutics, but most of the time you're not just trying to give, you know, every possible solution to the problems that people didn't even know they had with the text.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

I think sometimes preachers bring up more problems than they need to, and they're giving more credit to even non-evangelical opinions than they need to, and that just confuses rather than helps people

understand.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say at one point, if your congregants can't replicate what you're doing from the pulpit without an advanced Bible degree, whatever you're doing may be counterproductive.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

I don't think there's anything wrong with that or using what you learned with your advanced degree to bring to the pulpit. But if you— the ideal is to not just bring those insights to the pulpit, but help people to understand how you got there. And that way they can learn how to study their Bibles themselves even better.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There's a lot that gets left on the cutting room floor that doesn't get communicated. And as you're pointing out, doesn't necessarily need to be communicated.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

but what does get communicated is benefited from that other material, right?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

I mean, every sermon I preach, I probably have 2 to 3 times more material than I can actually use, if not more. Yeah, and part of that study is figuring out what is relevant to share, what is not necessarily most impactful, um, how do I, how do I help people to understand what I'm looking at, what the text is doing here. And not every subpoint is needed to be preached. So I think it's important to kind of triage your text at times too and figure out, well, what is most important to get the point of the author across? And sometimes that means you're going to share some insight that people would need an advanced degree to figure out. But again, if you can help them to see how you got there, that's going to help them to see it's not just some sort of mystical thing that I learned in seminary, but this is, this is how you study your Bible and how you could have gotten here too.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. And if anyone's not familiar with that term you used, triage, what is that referring to?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

So it's a medical term, but it's referring to looking at the text and figuring out what is most necessary to deal with and what maybe can wait or is not as needed to be explained or dealt with. You know, on the battlefield, a medic is going to have to triage the soldiers that are coming in that are wounded, and those that are in life-saving, dire condition, those are the ones you've got to deal with first. So we do the same with our text, and everything you're seeing in the text is good and valuable, and it's there for a reason, but not everything necessarily needs to be said from the pulpit or preached with the same attention.

Dr. Keith Plummer

We are living in contentious times, and there are numerous issues that are sources of great controversy, and appropriately, you have a chapter called Preaching and Teaching the Politically Incorrect, by which you mean controversial issues. What kinds of topics that the Bible deals with do you have in mind when you think about that, that might cause people to shy away from preaching and teaching on them?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

There's a whole host of topics we could mention. Issues relating to gender, issues relating to race, issues relating to politics. Even just yesterday after church, I spent some time with a couple of our members for lunch and the issue of politics came up. You know, do we lean more Democrat or Republican as a church, and what does the Bible have to say about that? You know, the Bible doesn't

necessarily use those terms, but it speaks to the issues on either side that those individuals are wrestling with, those camps are wrestling with, so that's what I mean when you come across a text that brings up some of these topics. How do you handle it responsibly? How do you handle it while keeping in mind there are going to be people that are on both sides of that issue. You want to make sure that you are preaching right, that you're preaching the text itself and making sure that the text is guiding your message. You don't want to shy away from speaking hard truths in a culture that is very sensitive, but you also want to be sensitive to people who are on the other side of the aisle or even on the other side of Christianity and helping them to understand why it is that you got where you got in the text and why the text is saying what it's saying.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, you say that there are 3 important words to keep in mind and to embody, and they are sensitive, confident, and humility. And particularly the humility piece is pervasive throughout the book, but you spend a significant space on each of those words, sensitivity, confidence, and humility. Sometimes when people think of confidence, they think of it as brashness. Or if they think of humility, they think of it as weakness. But you kind of present these in that chapter as like three legs of a stool that are to be coexistent. You say there, you have not fully researched a controversial topic until you can articulate the opposing viewpoint in a way that the other side would agree is accurate.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

That's really hard to do, but it's really essential. Oftentimes what I find preachers, teachers, Christians do is they will yell about a topic or talk about a topic that is controversial, that clearly there are people on the other side that are— that have a very different opinion of the issue. And what we will do is we'll set up a straw man to burn down. And we'll kind of caricaturize our opponent rather than really listen to what they're arguing and deal with those points. So this advice actually comes from advice that I give for premarital counseling in that you don't really know what your spouse is— you know, you have to have empathy with your spouse and really understand what he or she is saying. And arguing to get to the heart of the matter. If you're just waiting to say what you want to say when they're speaking, you're not really listening. So I'm not saying that we should treat all of these opinions as equally valid or equally right. But what I am saying is we do need to listen enough to be able to have a good understanding of what these individuals are really saying. Otherwise, our argument to them is not going to really hold weight.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

They're going to very quickly see through it and recognize that we're just— we're not really listening. We're not really getting what they're saying, which is why it's important to meet them where they are in those areas. But have confidence when you're giving your opinion on what the Bible says and what the Bible is saying. That confidence is, as you said, not a brashness. It's not an arrogance, but it's a confidence rooted in here's what the Bible has to say about this issue. And because the Bible says it so clearly, I can stand on it and speak it as absolute truth.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's appropriate that the final chapter in your book has to deal with the end times, and that is filled with difficult texts. But one of the things that you highlight in this chapter is we really need to be mindful of what it is that God is aiming for in prophetic texts, eschatological texts. You say that contrary to the way they are often handled on the pulpit and the classroom, prophetic texts were not written to solve complicated debates over eschatological schemes. Preachers and teachers should consider evaluating any sermon using the following 5 reasons for prophecy. And then you give reasons for why it is that God has given prophecy. Whether we're dealing with the Book of Revelation, whether we're dealing with issues in other prophetic works, Old Testament books and so forth, what kinds of things should a person charged with teaching or preaching these kinds of texts be mindful of?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

God did not give us end times texts just to make sure that we have the right charts to put up on PowerPoint. And that's part of what I'm getting at is that oftentimes the bulk of the time that we spend in these things and teaching and preaching them is to try to help people to figure out their chart, so to speak. Whereas the original context of a lot of these has some sort of encouragement or

even condemnation sometimes or some sort of edifying factor for the original listeners and readers. So one of the things we want to keep in mind is what was the impact of this kind of prophecy on those original readers? Was it to encourage them through persecution? You know, Peter has a lot to say about what is to come, and Peter is speaking in his epistles to a group that was undergoing incredible suffering under the persecution of Nero. So you have a text that, yes, it talks about what is to come and what Jesus will do when he comes back. Well, how did that impact those original readers? And then we take the step and say, how should that impact us?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

It was not given just so that way the readers could get their eschatology correct. Although we want to get our eschatology correct. It was given so that they could be encouraged to stand up under suffering even now. It was given— we want to think about what hope does this give our readers and our listeners, that hope of Christ's return, that hope of final justice, that hope of judgment even upon those who are wicked and against the Lord and Christians. We want to think about, are there any any specific sins that are being condemned even in this prophecy that we want to avoid so that we are not ashamed when Christ returns. So there's, there's a sanctifying purpose to these eschatological passages, not just an academic purpose. And that's, that's really what I'm trying to get at there is to say, can we cut through and not cut through as in discard or ignore the academic purposes, or the intellectual purposes, but make sure that we understand why was this given and what role in sanctification and even worship for the Lord does this help us with.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I think of like Paul's writing in 1 Thessalonians 4, where he's talking about the Lord's return. And if you read that, you just come away with, okay, so this is the chronology. But it's cut off from therefore encourage one another with these words. We've lost his point.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Yeah, exactly. We've lost his point. Yeah. So we want to make sure that we are making our charts in the right context.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I said before we started recording that I was going to restrain myself from not giving away what I call Easter eggs of humor in your in your book. I have never read a book on preaching that made me actually laugh out loud. And you have got some illustrations and things even hidden in footnotes that really did have me in stitches. But this is a unique blend of scholarship and humor, and it's accessible. I know that you dedicated the book prior to this, *Preaching Difficult Texts of the Old Testament*, to two Dons. You said there that they are Don Meckley, who encouraged me to preach, and Don Cheney, who taught me how to do it. I don't know Don Meckley, but I do know Don Cheney because he was until rather recently one of our colleagues, recently retired, but taught homiletics. And you had him as a professor. It was really interesting reading this, knowing that Trying to think, I wonder how much of Don is this the result of? But if you could say, if you were to be given, which you will be now, just a time to say, this is something that I really gained from the instruction I received from Dr. Cheney. What's one of those things?

Dr. Bryan Murawski

Don Cheney helped me to root the message of my sermon in the message of the text. He spent a great deal of class just helping us hermeneutically to learn how to study the Bible and to see how that connected with even the way in which the text was presented from the pulpit, following the points of the text and allowing that to be the driving point, shifting even with the genres of the text and making sure that each sermon is different based on what genre that you're preaching. If you're preaching a proverb or passage from Proverbs, it's going to be different than if you're preaching Paul, and I think that was one of the things that really stuck out to me from his teaching. Don is a man who modeled what he taught as well. He is a great preacher, and he I think really embodies the message. It was not something that was divorced from his actual practice, so I got to see it in him as he was teaching it to us, but yeah, that love for the Word of God and allowing the Word of God to really drive the sermon and not fill the sermon with trite illustrations or, you know, video clips or trying to be super relevant in those ways, but allowing the Word to take center stage in a sermon, I think more than anything, that's

what I took away from Don's class.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, having heard him preach and teach, yeah, you describe him well. And it is fitting that now you have stepped into teaching the class that you were taught him by. You teach homiletics to our grad and undergrad students and obviously take some of the riches that you have in the book and bring that to the classroom. I have told you this before. I mentioned that you are one of the pastors at Riverstone in Yardley, where my family and I have attended for several years now. And I am really, really grateful for your preaching ministry.

Dr. Bryan Murawski
I appreciate that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

There have been Sundays after Sunday that we have left and said how grateful we are for the labor that you put in to your preaching in terms of the preparation, the study, the delivery. I have often left rejoicing, convicted, challenged, encouraged, just really savoring Christ and the gospel. So it was a unique thing to read this and get something of the behind-the-scenes look in terms of what has gone into what it is that you have presented to us as a congregation. Very grateful for it.

Dr. Bryan Murawski

I appreciate hearing that. I praise the Lord for that. I'm humbled to really have the opportunity to share the Word on a regular basis. And as you said before, even to teach others how to preach in their own ministry that's developing here at Cairn University. But I could not have written what the Lord has done in my life, you know, 20 years ago when I started journey toward pastoral ministry and just humbled to, to be able to share the Word of God on a regular basis.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, again, thank you for your time. The book again is *Preaching and Teaching Difficult Texts of the New Testament* by Dr. Bryan Murawski and published by Hendrickson Publishers. Glad to sit down and talk with you again, Bryan. Thanks.

Dr. Bryan Murawski
Thank you, Keith.

Ben Best, co-host

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