



Nothing Other Than Christ Crucified:
A Conversation with William Watley and Joe Clifford
April 1, 2026

Amy Valdez Barker: Hi, this is Amy Valdez Barker, and I am here today with some pretty amazing leaders who've been helping us with our compelling preaching work, and the cohorts that we've been doing over this last year. Reverend Joe Clifford has been one of our facilitators for one of our preaching cohorts, and the cohort he's been working with is Together Amidst Chaos, which is one of my favorite titles for the work that they've been doing. And then of course, Dr. William Watley is an AME pastor, and he is one of our senior advisors. He is known throughout the AME Church as an amazing preacher, so we are blessed enough to have him as a senior advisor working with us. So Dr. Watley, can you tell us a little bit about what you've been up to and the work that you've been doing lately?

William Watley: Since I've been retired and moving into this new season, I've been writing. As a matter of fact, this week, my third book comes out since retirement. I've been doing a cohort, too.

Amy: Thank you, Dr. Watley. Reverend Joe Clifford, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you've been up to?

Joe Clifford: I've served as pastor at Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte for the last nine years. Our preaching cohort that we formed, an amazingly diverse group of pastors in a wide span of contexts, and co-facilitating with Melanie Marsh has been an absolute joy. I've learned so much from her. And the one thing we've all shared in common is the chaotic nature of our days.

Amy: You know, there is so much diversity when it comes to preaching, and we know one size does not fit all. When you think about preaching today, what would you say are two or three essentials for preachers to keep in mind?

William: I think there are several realities that I, uh, face. I've been preaching now for 64 years. I started when I was two. And number one, there was a time when people listened almost unquestioningly, and looked forward to the time of preaching. And now, there is a hermeneutic of suspicion. Secondly, the use of technology means that people can now fact check you. We have to be particularly careful about what we say, because people don't mind pulling out their cell phones and fact checking you. And third, one has to have an attention grabber. There was a time when you could take your time and build a Biblical case, but the attention span of both this coming generation, and now my generation, means that people listen, and they do not have all day for us to get to the point, which means: it goes back to the hermeneutic of suspicion, that people are asking themselves, "Do I really need to take my time to listen to whatever it is this person has to say?"

And of course, there are a couple of other concepts that I really believe in, that I think define Christian preaching, and that is the cross. I was brought up to believe that a sermon is not complete unless, in some way, the cross is mentioned. "I came to you claiming nothing other than Christ crucified." And that still, to me, it seems to be a radical aspect of the faith that we sometimes overlook, because we've made

it a religious decoration that we wear, rather than the means of God's love, Christ's redemption, and forgiveness, and the promise of a quality life as eternity becomes our everyday reality.

Joe: Yeah. It's tough to add to that wisdom of Dr. Watley. I think the centrality of the Word in preaching is key, that we must stay in the Word. The Word is what gives our preaching power. When we connect to the power of God, to be experienced within the Word of God, that's what preaching is. That's what differentiates preaching from public speaking or a TED Talk. I think there's a temptation to try to mimic the culture in that. And for preachers, I think that's a tragic error because we can't compete. But nothing can compete with the power of God's Word. So the more that we can stay in that and proclaim it, I think the more faithful our preaching will be.

Now, to the effectiveness of our preaching, the challenge is that we're an increasingly biblically illiterate society. So, I know when Dr. Watley says, "I come to proclaim Christ crucified, and him only," It's 1 Corinthians, he's talking about baptism, and I know the context of what that is, but 98% of the people in my congregation have no idea what that means, and where that's from.

And so, on the one hand, we've got this challenge to stay in the Word, because that is the source of our life and our power. And yet, we're doing that in a community that very few people know very much about Scripture in my context. I think that's a challenge.

I'm always stunned by what people don't know is in the Bible. We did an eight-week series on the minor prophets, and all you had to do in that series was read the Scripture, and you could hear a pin drop in the sanctuary as people were hearing these words. The power was there. And I think Dr. Watley raises a great point about people's attention spans, and what it takes to try to bridge that. And I think that's probably the third focus is: you have to say something that can get people's attention. And I think within the Word, there's a lot there. I think it's our job as preachers to lift that up.

William: And I think it's important, then, that we take preparation seriously, and that we seek to ask questions of the next generation, without the assumption that they know what we're talking about, or that we know what we're talking about. It seems to me that one of the acts of freedom from not pastoring, is spending more time. Even as a pastor, I had a daily devotion, and now it's even more critical, because people do come to find out if there is a Word from the Lord. In my community, especially, with the leadership that we have, and the number of Black Christians who were praying that he not get elected, what does it mean now that he is?

And so, there is a crying ,unspoken request for a Word from the Lord that empowers and gives hope. And to come up with that, means that we have to really look at issues of preparation, and the time it takes. After 64 years, I still write my sermons out word for word, and it takes me eight to ten hours to do so. Because, in this day and age, when there is so much celebration and, as you said, colleague, mimicking of the ways of the world, that the sense of sacred has to be consciously fostered, and it begins with us, and our own prayer time, and preparation, as we get ready to say a Word from the Lord.

I was saying to one of the youngsters, "I really had to work hard."

And so she asked me, "Uncle Bill, what kind of work did you do?"

And I said, "Well, I sold encyclopedias."

And she looked at me and said, "What's an encyclopedia?"

Which says something about the gap, and how we really have to be conscious, as you've discovered, of crossing the bridge into terrain that people know nothing about, or little about, and their world that we know little about.

Joe: Yet it's exactly what they're searching for.

William: Yeah.

Joe: That longing hasn't changed, that longing within us to connect with the sacred, and to get into the depths of life that we find in relationship with God, that that longing is imprinted in our souls. And that's true for people who don't know what an encyclopedia is. And I feel like we have what they're looking for, and they don't even know they're looking for it, but it's to be found in relationship with God. And I think preaching is an invitation into that.

I didn't grow up in church, and my first interaction with weekly preaching was in my 20s, and with a pastor, K.C. Ptomey, at Westminster Presbyterian in Nashville, Tennessee. I don't remember any of K.C.'s sermons particularly. I do remember that, every Sunday, I left feeling like I had had an encounter with the Holy, and K.C.'s preaching facilitated that. So for me, I think that's what we're trying to facilitate: that, in our preaching, we're trying to connect people, and their lives, to the truth of God, and the reality of God, and where God is amid whatever's happening in their lives: whether it's the political turmoil, or whether it's a cancer diagnosis of my spouse, or my child, where is the Holy in that? And to the degree that our preaching can facilitate that connection, then I think it's faithful.

Amy: What are some of the practices that both of you have in preparing to really invite people to that kind of encounter?

William: You know, it's an everyday consciousness, of looking for a Word from the Lord. And so, we get the text, and then we think it through. And for me, if my sermon is Sunday, I set aside sermon preparation days – Wednesday and Thursday – in which people knew not to even call me, unless it was an emergency. So it is, as we embody and seek a Word from the Lord, and then now, as we listen to what the language and the style of those we are trying to reach in fostering legacy that brings forth the message, and it has to be done consistently.

Joe: I agree with all of that. I think an important piece of preparation for me is, I lead a couple of weekly Bible studies with different groups of people in my church. And I just hear how they hear. Like, what are their questions when they hear this Word? To try to get a sense of, when the people in church on Sunday hear me read Joshua 24, what are they wondering about? And it helps me get insights into ways to get into the text that might work for my congregation. There might be things that are interesting to me, but my people don't care about. So, I think in addition to that sacred time of preparation and study,

I also think it's great to engage your people and get a sense. And then it's a double bang, right? Because I get to do research for the Bible study, that contributes to the sermon, so you get a two-for-one deal.

William: Yeah.

Amy: That's the most fun. And as I say, make it count twice, right?

Joe: Exactly.

Amy: Excellent. Well, thank you both so much for taking the time to share your wisdom and your experience with us. I know that we are richly blessed by both of you, and the leadership you're providing in our cohorts, and across the world. So, God bless you. Thank you so much.

William: Thank you.

Joe: Thank you. God bless.