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Sermonizing is an ought-to sport. In fact preachers enjoy one of the few occupations that allow the freedom of telling people what they ought or ought not to do. This can only be done legitimately as long as they read the Bible before they do it and work at keeping their sermons biblical. The truth is most people go to church expecting to be challenged with the ought-tos of life. Most of us know generally what we ought to do, and want to get on with doing it as long as there is something of God in this oughtness. The Ten Commandments are studies in oughtness; so is the Sermon on the Mount. So are the warnings to the seven churches of Asia. The great ought passages of Scripture have been around for millennia, but their age has never diminished our constant need to be reminded of them. The oughts of life leave us unsettled. To serve them is often wrought with feelings of failure. Preachers certainly haven’t been able to wrap their own oughts and ought-nots in peace. They ought to do better, live better, and preach better than they do. Preachers ought to quit sinning. Still nobody knows better than those who preach that preaching is an art in which a studied, professional sinner tells the less studied sinners how they ought to believe, behave, and serve. Fortunately the office of “preacher” carries with it a common understanding that as long as the preacher speaks for God, he should be heard even if he is a sinner. Most people not only believe in God but have some notion that if all the world served God, the world would be a better address. But most people also feel that preachers should shoot straight, and when they say, “Thus saith the Lord,” they ought to let God do the talking.
This oughtness is what differentiates Christ-centered preaching from public speaking.

Homiletics is an intelligent, high-sounding word, and in moments of ego I like calling myself a homiletician. But I am addicted to simplicity, and most of the time I like calling myself by my simpler title: preacher. After reading hundreds of books on the subject and writing a few, I have taken it upon myself to set forth what I have learned, both as a practitioner and a scholar, and cast it in a simple mode. My desire to do this has come from the realization that none of the books on preaching—even the great books—have done it exactly right. Some get closer to being right than others but none is exactly there. I realize it is just this sort of thinking that keeps creating new books on every subject. New books come from the honest neuroses of scholars who are only trying to make the world better by letting their particular drive to write a perfect book furnish the libraries of the world.

How Will This Book Be Different from Other Homiletic Texts?

How will this book be different? Rather than write out of a compendium of other text books, I want to lean heavily on my thirty-five years of pulpit experience as well as my fourteen years of teaching preaching. I want to do something like Fred Craddock did in Preaching and write this book a little freer of intrusive footnotes than I usually do. By this I mean that I don’t want my argument interrupted by a lot of indentations and block quotes. I don’t pretend to imitate Craddock’s excellence, only his style of argument regarding external academic authority. I do want to allow other teachers and educators the right to comment on the argument, so I will allow them the space on some pages at the back to make sure the book isn’t dependent entirely on my own limited understanding of preaching. Of course, no excellent book was ever written except that the author had done a great deal of reading and while writers may not lay out their sources in ibids and op. cits, their sources are an automatic part of who they are, having been gained in the sweat of personal study. But all good
scholarship moves forward on a trail of footnotes. Without mentioning these sources the information gained from all my study may not always be visible but will always remain foundational to my insight.

The style of this book will be what I like to call conversational scholarship. So forgive me if I veer off a “third person stilt” from time to time and borrow from a lifetime of homiletic involvement and say what I personally think and feel about my subject. Quoting others says this is important, but writing in first person says, “this is important to me.”

Still, I don’t want this book to come off only as heavy personal opinion. I want this work to be a dialogue with you, my reader, believing that we both have an eager interest in the same subject. In a way, this is the definition that lies at the bottom of all great preaching. After all, a really riveting sermon is just that: a conversation about a subject in which the “preacher” and the “preachee” have an equal and avid interest. We’ll speak more about this idea in an area of the book to which the subject belongs.

Preaching lies at the core of worship and worship is composed of three parts. The first is music and/or praise. The second part is liturgy. Liturgy is the formal teacher—a poetic sort of didache—that keeps the church focused on her founder and his teachings. Liturgy is didache, the ancient church word for teaching. Liturgy of some sort becomes the focal point of worship. Congregations gather and recite their paternosters, Nicene creeds, psalms, doctrines, benedictions, invocations, commandments, covenants, Gospels, Epistles, and pledges. These elements of liturgy have rolled on weekly across the centuries. They poetically nudge the church to remember who she is, what she must teach, how to sanctify baptisms, wedding rites, birthrights, and final rites. Liturgy comes in Latin, Greek, Elizabethan English, and to some degree in Baptist plain talk.

Preaching, the third element of worship, grows from Scripture and conscience, devotion and conviction. It rises from many sources—from Episcopal lectionaries and Pentecostal rambunc
tion. It is there to call sinners to redemption, instruct the church, rebuke the wayward, and—as the cliché runs—to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” In this book, however, I will be talking about preaching not as so many homiletic texts do. I
want this book to reveal preaching as a dialogue of hope—a verbal rendezvous between the Spirit and the listener.3

In writing this book I have taken aim at the oft held supposition that preaching textbooks are written so that boring preachers can read, heed, and become fascinating. Preaching has a calling far greater than just making sermons interesting. Preaching exists to create the kingdom. Merely getting and keeping attention is too small a job description for this critical, redeeming art. Preaching has work to do—a lot of work to do—and honest sermons are in league with God’s ultimate plan of conforming souls to the image of his Son.

Is Persuasion a Legitimate Form of Preaching?

Audience interest, then, has never been preaching’s main purpose. The sermon is the workhorse of the ecclesia. Preaching was established by Jesus because God has a job to do.

To get the job done preaching must be committed to two goals: first it should be passionate and second, fascinating. Passion makes preaching seem imperative and urgent. Narrative is a force that postmodern preachers must use and listeners must reckon with. Narrative handcuffs intrigue to the ancient text. So, the homily gains relational force when the sermon is passionate enough to be visceral and story-driven enough to be visual.

Neither of these two qualities is enough considered alone. Speaking only to get people to listen is an art that ends generally in egotism. If fascination alone is the goal of keeping attention, a Dale Carnegie course would be as good as the Gospels in preparing the preacher to preach. Still the new homiletic has too often yielded to this shallow goal. In recent years this low road for preaching has become a major highway that runs between seminaries and lifeless parishes. As America has moved further away from the revivalistic zeal that endued the sermon with passion, sermons seemed to grow more congenial but also more sluggish. Thanks to advancements in psychology there is no longer any real sin lurking about and, therefore, no real sinners to reform. Since sin and eternity have been discarded in the ash can of postmodernity there seems to be little serious work for the sermon to do.
So preachers have often jettisoned incarnational preaching and opted for merely trying to be interesting.

This book therefore presumes that there are still many students of Christ-centered preaching who are committed to a biblical worldview and want their sermons to become a reply to secular decadence. Those readers will hopefully side with me that preaching remains a redemptive art, calling the world to align itself on the side of Christ and the creeds.

The manual for this art is Scripture. The fuel for this art is the devotional life of those preachers who have never seen their primary credentials for preaching as coming from diplomas and degrees. Worthy preachers never serve any academy, only their calling.

The serious, scholar pastor wants to be both a sound expositor and strong communicator. Such preachers have a clear understanding that a call to preach is a lifelong call to preach the kingdom and call the church to remember all that was lost in Genesis 3. Preaching is rescue work. It arrives on the human scene with splints and bandages to save and heal—and restore the world to all that was lost when the gates of Eden clanged shut.

I know of no one who has written more clearly about this agenda for the sermon than Bryan Chapell, who speaks of every sermon dealing with what he calls the FCF, the Fallen Condition Focus. Each time a preacher stands to proclaim the gospel, that preacher is out to change the world back. Back? Yes, back to what it was when Adam was in Eden—back to the pristine business of holiness and relationship. When so much was lost in Eden . . . when so much of the current world is captive to secular values and philosophies, preaching cannot afford to opt for being cute when it ought to be visceral.

From Genesis 4 onward in Scripture, humankind stands at the brink of irrelevance, banging on the gates of Eden, arguing with the flaming angels about all that was lost when the gates clanged shut. The Bible is a book about change: from Noah to John, from Ararat to Patmos, the millennia roll and preachers dominate the Judeo-Christian story. Each of these heralds focused on getting the world back to what it owned before it sampled the forbidden. We all still long to restore that pure rapport with the Almighty that ended at the apple.
I believe that properly nourished this hunger lives in the heart of every parishioner who comes to church. But most of these have not the spiritual vocabulary to articulate how they feel. Therefore they cannot arrive at what’s missing in their lives unless someone who knows what’s missing helps them understand.

But transformation has become an ugly cultural concept. The idea that sects or denominations have the right to change others drives secularists to the wall. Secular thinkers feel that people should be free to be what they are or want to be without anyone trying to “convert” or “transform” them. This postmodern, post-denominational world we have inherited (perhaps even caused) glories in discussion. Talk is the mode of the day, not argument. Talk—as the cliché runs—is cheap. It’s not only cheap, it’s a group sport, warm and harmless and so conversational that everybody can participate. But persuasion and conversion, which have always lived at the heart of the Christian mission, are the preacher’s mission. Yet persuasion is suddenly taboo. “Just As I Am, Leave ME Alone” is not just the hymn of the penitent, it has become the creed of individual liberty espoused by the media and championed by the libertine spirit of the age.

Still, the current crop of secularists are not very informed. Naïveté is a wonderful quality: it allows even the least informed to enter every conversation with instant esteem. It fashions an equality of all views, without the inconvenience of actually having to study any view. Christians, like the secularists they distrust, also talk a lot. Increasingly they too are unstudied and yet the force of their convictions flies at the world full tilt. But naïveté is a warm cocoon that allows the naïve to be fully authoritative and respected without facing anything dangerous or requiring.

The Apologetic Imperative of Preaching in a Secular Culture

So “thus saith the Lord” seems a weak way to argue, when everyone believes themselves to be “lords” of their own affairs. The authority for all argument is not born in study. It is sui generis. It arises from every person’s right to run their own show and be who they are without really studying. Most of these super-sovereigns feel
that God can comment if he wants to, but God must avoid getting loud. While God is welcome to his opinions, he is only one voice, and he doesn’t get extra points just for being God. The unstudied opinionated are prone to say, even to God, “Yes, but here’s what I think.” In such a world, classic apologetics has lost much of its force.

A popular evangelical wrote a book on apologetics only decades ago that he entitled *Evidence that Demands a Verdict.* The book held its popularity for only fifteen minutes, before the world it was meant to convince began to challenge it. “Excuse me, was that your verdict or my verdict?” There is almost no evidence now that demands a verdict—at least a clear verdict which is evident to all. To put anything in black and white is to be called upon to defend the various shades of either hue.

So preaching has to find an apologetic that is incontrovertible if it hopes to go on making a difference. But the world is tired of hearing what preachers think and so it is increasingly turning a deaf ear to the pulpit. In spite of megachurch success, George Barna argues that church attendance in America has declined significantly since the early 1990s. This means, if such trends continue, that it will decline still further. While in recent years the rate of decline in church attendance has remained flat, the overall prognosis is not good. Philip Jenkins, in his astounding *The Next Christendom,* says that the marked decline of evangelical religion in Europe, England, and now New England will continue until even the Bible Belt of the U.S. has been secularized.

So preachers have passed beyond the easy times. They have lost the wonderful feel of the fifties when the wholesome culture looked at the church and the sermon as traditional and valuable. Still, if this is a brave new world, preaching too must be brave. I once heard a daring prophet say of the new millennium, “There’s good news and bad news. The good news is preaching has become all-important in the plan of God. The bad news is, it’s not 1950 anymore.” Preaching, as always, has a wonderful future, but it will require a fierce kind of bravery to go on practicing its art—a courage that renames pastors as prophets, and anoints the authority of the Word with the oil of truth.
How Listening Patterns Have Changed

In some ways it seems to me that preaching remains too captive to 1950 to transform the third millennium. I travel widely and hear a lot of sermons. Many of them sound to me like some I heard (and some I may have preached) during the 1950s. Could it be that during the past five decades the world was learning to listen in a new way, while preachers continued talking in the old way? Anthropologists and historians have come together on the point that world cultures made some almighty changes in the fifties. It was then that the age of information—often called the age of communication—was born. During those years we moved from the age of print to the age of video. What this really means is that during those decades the world moved from being a huge ear to a huge eye. But instead of becoming more visual, preaching remained too captive to older ideas. That’s why in the pages to follow you will read much of the “image-driven sermon” and less of older sermon styles.

But the sermon’s twentieth-century captivity was not the only problem. Sermonic passion too seems to have died. There are places where it seems alive—such as in Dixie where I live and work. But in Dixie it seems alive because passion is not so much an intensity of belief but a style of preaching. Many preachers below the Mason-Dixon Line still yell a lot, which often accomplishes little more than to clothe weak sermons with volume. Passion is intense feeling, and merely stepping up the projection does not necessarily mean the preacher is feeling the God-sized burden of the words being preached. A huge discrepancy is born. The hype-as-passion movement settled at the center of evangelicalism in the volume, however. This bogus volume-hype often came not from the gut but from the need to sound urgent.

Passion can never be genuine unless the preacher owns a burning need for a God-relationship. Zeal must own the herald before the herald can preach it into others. I believe that preachers who have no God-hunger may have some good things to say but they lack the passion that is essential to create the kingdom of God and transform the world.

This value no text book can teach.

It arises from a longing beyond homiletics.

It is sustained by a visceral hunger mere scholarship cannot engender.
Preaching Love and Absorbing Secular Belligerence

Biblical preaching now lies gasping before the onslaught of secularism.

As proselytism became a cultural “no-no,” preaching quit saying “no-no.” Because the secular culture didn’t want a Lord, preaching quit saying, “Thus saith the Lord.” Now there are far too few pulpits informing the world that God has something to say to it. In the absence of God’s Word, “how-to” has replaced “repent and be baptized.”

This trend in some cases makes preachers more interesting but less vital. Preaching is getting more creative, but it is often fluffy and vaporous. Real textual exposition often finds itself coming in a distant second to film clips and drama clubs. Biblical ignorance owns the day. A political contender for president said recently that Job was his favorite book of the New Testament. The odd thing was that nobody in the crowd who heard him spotted the faux pas.

But even in the face of a culture belligerent toward God, the mood of the sermon must remain warm and loving. I offer this book on biblical exposition to remind us that we must never join the secular world nor adopt its bogus values. Honest biblical exposition sets orange cones around the unsafe lanes of the human journey. The book is not written to massage those who want to serve in the Bible-lite megaghettoes of casseroles and softball. Sermons are called to rip the doors from closeted communities of user-friendly “Christians” who would like to see their church get bigger without any real reference to knowing God. This is a book dedicated to that courageous art form known as “encounter!” The kind of preaching set forth in these pages will call for sermons that esteem the pleasure of God more than human compliment.

How Postmoderns Listen

How do postmodern listeners listen? Well, for one thing, they listen with a group ear in order to arrive at a group mind. At the midpoint of the twentieth century, the world changed in two ways. First, the age of communication began. It was an age of dialogue. Lecture died, conversational style was born. “I told you” and “Let me tell you” were replaced by “Whadda ya think?” The culture
bowed down and finally agreed to view the church as a vast dialogue. In studying the evening news over fifty years now, I have noticed a progression in the format of national news. It has moved from a single anchor person to a committee of anchorpersons and field correspondents. Even the local news settled down to become a roundtable of lesser luminaries reasoning together.

Great preaching has always been dialogical, but to the indiscriminate layperson, it has been seen as monologue. This view originated out of two qualities of the sermon. First of all, preaching has a style. It is often an upbeat and authoritative style. It is sometimes too loud and struts about very sure of itself. It is often delivered from a pulpit whose elevated visual placement makes it seem high and lifted up. Pulpits are heavy furniture and the persons tough enough to ride them can round up the doggies any way they like, I suppose. But today's mavericks don't respond well to the lasso and prod.

But there is another reason why the sermon seems like a monologue. The preacher reads from the ancient book where God has so many things to say. God often speaks in lightning and thunder and seems—at least in sermons—not to care much what people think of his ideas. “Thus saith the Lord” carries with it a huge foreboding that ends with the congregation saying, “Well okay then.”

So as the current age of dialogue proceeds, biblical preaching seems more out of sync with a culture captive to chit-chat. In a culture that goes about asking “Whadda ya think?” the phrase “thus saith the Lord” has become an introduction to Sunday monologues that more and more people are choosing to avoid.

Since the sermon is so out of vogue in the secular dialogue, it may be seen that preaching as a “perceived” monologue is hastening the decline. I say “perceived” because Christ-centered preaching has never been a mere monologue. It has always been a reasoning together and it has always been a tête-a-tête between speaker and listener.

But the world also changed in a second way that has come to bear in how contemporary listeners listen. The age of communication brought with it the technological overhaul of how people listen. The eye joined with the ear to say, “Feed me or I’ll take my
ears with me and abandon you, Dear Preacher.” To some slight degree, the church heard the ultimatum of the eye, but only to a slight degree. While drama clubs and PowerPoint choruses began to punctuate suburban evangelical worship, changing things a bit, sermons remained dull of image and void of light. The church has sometimes castigated television, because it seemed to pipe too much R-rated secularism directly into the living rooms of the faithful. Outside of cable religion, the church seemed rarely to comment on the good aspects of watching television—if there were any.

In his essay *Fourth Temptation of Christ*, the late Malcolm Muggeridge alleged that Jesus’s fourth temptation was thirty minutes of prime-time television. Muggeridge said that Jesus rejected the offer because faith had always been an *otic* (a hearing) rather than an *optic* (a visual) experience. He agreed with Paul the apostle who said, “Faith comes from hearing the message” (Rom. 10:17 NIV), and not from seeing it. The church at the end of the twentieth century seemed to agree: the gospel was an “ear” event and not an “eye” event.12

But the truth is the gospel was never just an “ear” event. The best preachers throughout the centuries always preached highly visual, image-driven sermons. But if today’s listeners have developed great eyes as their ears have atrophied, then the church must do all it can to preach in the same manner that people best hear the sermon. This means that within the framework of all things auditory, sermons must remember the visual age to which they are preached, and create a rhetoric that is image-centered.

By the 1990s, Neal Postman had made the point that the age of print was over and the age of video had arrived in force. Barbara Tuchman said the changes in the twentieth century were equally cataclysmic to those of the turbulent fourteenth century. One of the most striking of those changes had to do with communication. The printing press of the fifteenth century was the magnificent leap ahead that is symbolized in the computer revolution of today.

All in all, we may be sure that the sermon attendee of today listens with the eyes rather than the ears. It would be great to be sure that we are preaching in pictures, for pictures are the language of the age.
Narrative as Exposition

Expository preaching has been the watchword of four hundred years of American evangelicalism. When the term was used in previous decades, it was generally understood to be the basis of sermons that employed linear reasoning, building arguments with highly propositional styles. Because these styles often lacked illustrations and stories there grew up the idea that if a sermon was interesting it was probably not expository. Exposition was hard work for both the preacher and the audience. Preparing it was arduous for the preacher, and listening to it was toil for the laity. But that was the price you paid to have the true Bible preached to you. If preaching didn’t defy your ability to care about it, it was clearly not the Word of God. To really be good for you, sermons had to be dull. Exciting sermons were generally seen as heretical, or at least non-biblical.

Many people secretly felt that this “expository” style of preaching was boring, but nobody would say so out loud for fear of being branded as a liberal. Many felt that liberals were more interesting than conservative expositors, but people generally opted to be bored, rather than heretical.

It was after all the theological left that began talking first of narrative theology. But time and interest were on their side. The last half of the twentieth century brought on the video renaissance. Movies and television took charge of our eyes and our minds and the movement, the special effects, the soundtracks, the cinematography, and the overwhelming video captivity made ponderous preaching look dull. Still we all felt it was our duty to listen even when listening left us dozing in the pew.

But seeming dull wasn’t preaching’s only problem. Unwittingly, the show-biz society had turned up the lights and the amplifiers. So the church did too. Most people weren’t at first turned off by the marriage of technology and theology. But they were turned off by its dull insistence that when you strobed things up people ought to listen merely because you said God was in favor of PowerPoint.

The preaching they first abandoned was that which flew at them in a highly propositional style. The preaching they cheered on was that with a highly narrative style. By the dawn of the third millennium, the sermon as mere lecture was on the ropes. But
the sermon which picked up on Augustine's word *narratio* was alive and well. The *narratio* was the story-saturated, image-driven sermon.

All of this talking about being image-driven was not a new idea. Jesus himself told lots of stories, and his sermons were full of images—image-driven, to be precise. We still remember the images that drove Christ's preaching: wildflowers, shepherds, fig trees, weeds in the wheat fields, a despised Samaritan that turned out to be good, and a goody-goody Pharisee that turned out to be bad. And this is just the beginning of the images that drove Jesus’ sermons. Think of leaven, chaff, foundations, cheap sparrows, poor widows, barn builders, bridesmaids, vine dressers, lost coins, lost sheep, lost boys, thankless lepers, pipers and dancers, dishonest judges, reeds shuddering in the wind, houses on sand, white-washed tombs, scorpions for fish, right-hand-sheep, left-hand-goats, and beggars at the rich man's gate. On and on the metaphors rise to define the preaching of Jesus.

But the hurdle that many evangelicals have not yet crossed is the final barrier of biblical exposition. Does expository preaching have to be totally precept-driven and logically set forth, or can a far more inductive, artistic mode play a role in exposition? Can biblical narrative, as a style of preaching, be expository? Can preaching—narrative style—really be expository?\(^{13}\)

Jesus thought so.

When asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus in effect does not say, “Let me give you three Hebrew roots on the word *neighbor*.” What he does say is, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. . . .” In other words he follows the question “Who is my neighbor?” with an immediate “Once upon a time” and then launches into a story. He never does come back with a precept, but ends his highly expository story with a great inductive conclusion, “Who do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?”

Throughout this book, I will be arguing for preaching as craft. Preachers are not only professionals in their field, but the best of them are artists who can make the Scripture come alive with metaphor and image. I will also argue that metaphor and story is not only a legitimate form of exposition but is a preferred style of exposition mostly because it is so much more memorable than mere precepts-driven homiletics.
Introduction

So the force of this book will be centered on narrative exposition. In the video-oriented world in which we now live, this is the way the modern church-goer listens. Many preachers are terrified by the fear that they cannot learn to preach in this manner. But I believe that while all preachers cannot tell stories with the same ease, most all preachers can learn to communicate in a narrative style. It will require some work for those not naturally blessed with the talent. But it also will be worth the discipline. Narrative preaching begins talking where the world begins listening: at the point of narrative exposition. If only this ideal is achieved, this volume will have been well worth the writing.

Conclusion

The Bible will be the primary text upon which the argument is based. But I will, in speaking of being a true “herald of God,” call upon many of the books of note I have read. The authors of those books all stand about my word processor as I write, and their integrity and commitment to biblical preaching inform these pages. I am not great at soloing. I like living in the company of the committed. My small logic is not a grand river of truth. It is just a brook that feeds that stream from which we all may safely drink. For the water of life is kept pure and safe for all generations by the filters of sound doctrine, a guardian community, and a fearless commitment to truth.

In this book I hope to encourage the preacher to preach as God intended preaching to be done—in both a narrative and expository manner. It's the only kind of preaching I have any interest in.