

A  
VISION  
FOR  
PREACHING

UNDERSTANDING THE HEART  
OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

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ABRAHAM KURUVILLA

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**BakerAcademic**

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kuruvilla, Abraham.

A vision for preaching : understanding the heart of pastoral ministry / Abraham Kuruvilla.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-9674-7 (pbk.)

1. Preaching. I. Title.

BV4211.3.K87 2015

251—dc23

2015015877

Unless otherwise indicated, translations of ancient texts, including Scripture quotations, are the author's translation.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To  
Dallas Theological Seminary  
whose seal  
after almost a century  
still bears the words  
κήρυξον τὸν λόγον  
(2 Timothy 4:2)

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# Acknowledgments

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To my colleagues, past and present, in the Department of Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, especially Timothy Warren, Vic Anderson, Ramesh Richard, Tim Ralston, and Reg Grant: thank you for those discussions on a vision for preaching—what it would look like and how it might be articulated.

To my family—my father, brother, sister-in-law, and nephews: thank you for your love, prayers, and constant support.

To Jim Kinney, who has had persistent faith in my productions: thank you for the “megaphone.”

To Northwest Bible Church: many thanks to this local assembly of God’s people for their encouragement at all times, and especially when I preach.

To Dallas Theological Seminary: I am grateful to God for its noble heritage, for the nine decades of its belief in preaching, and for its people—the faculty, staff, and students who make it a wonderful place to labor for Christ and his church. To this institution I am privileged to dedicate this work.

The solemn responsibility of preaching God’s ineffable word (as well as that of teaching preaching to a fresh generation) has impacted me powerfully as I labored through this book. What an honor to partner with God, albeit in a minuscule way, in his glorious purposes for the cosmos and for his church! I am grateful for the divine grace that has entrusted me with an opportunity to participate in God’s work.

I solemnly charge [you] before God and Christ Jesus who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word!  
(2 Tim. 4:1–2)

May all of us preachers (and teachers of preachers) be faithful to our commission, facilitating the transformation of lives, in the power of the Spirit, to further the kingdom of Christ, for the glory of God.

Abraham Kuruvilla  
Dallas, Texas  
Pentecost 2014

# Introduction

“*The Entrance of Thy Words . . .*”

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The entrance of Thy words giveth light.

Psalm 119:130 KJV

Biblical preaching, by a leader of the church, in a gathering of Christians for worship, is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture discerned by theological exegesis, and of its application to that specific body of believers, that they may be conformed to the image of Christ, for the glory of God—all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**I**t is a fact that all speech is answering speech. We were all spoken to before we uttered our first words, be they “Mama,” “Papa,” “Mine!” or “No!” Immersed in a sea of words from birth, over a period of months we learned to babble, vocalize, and finally speak. Preaching, too, is always answering speech, a response to what God has already said in the Bible, the Scriptures of the Christian church. There would be no preaching were it not for the word that first came from God. But though it is a response to the utterances of God, preaching is a different kind of response: it is more an *extension* of that divine utterance, an amplified echo that carries God’s word to God’s people, rather than an answer directed back toward the One who spoke first. By that token, preaching is crucial speech for the body of Christ: it is speaking for God, based upon the word of God, to bring humankind into relationship

with God. In other words, preaching leads the world to follow God. “What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. . . . Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”<sup>1</sup> With the pulpit for a prow, humanity is led by preaching into a unique world, an ideal world, *God’s* world, where it may dwell with him. That makes preaching a kind of address that has no parallel.

But preaching, after all, is just words, is it not? As Eliza Doolittle lamented:

Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words!  
 I get words all day through;  
 First from him, now from you!  
 Is that all you blighters can do?<sup>2</sup>

Is that all preaching is—just words? And is that all we preachers can do—spout words? One might well ask: Whose words are these words originally (preaching is biblical)? By whom are they to be spoken (preaching is pastoral)? In what context (preaching is ecclesial)? What should these words convey (preaching is communicational)? What are these words intended to do (preaching is applicational)? And why (preaching is conformational)? To what ultimate end (preaching is doxological)? By whose power (preaching is spiritual)?

Before the rest of the book attempts to answer these questions in the form of a vision for preaching, glance with me, your tour guide—through my eyes and with lenses I’m familiar with—at how preaching has been conceived at key points in the history of the church.

## Preaching through the Ages

From the very early days in the life of the people of God, preaching took the form of a commentary on the sacred text of Scripture. In the mid-fifth century BCE, Ezra’s reading of the law, and the Levites’ explanation thereof, demonstrates this “preaching” activity.<sup>3</sup>

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The White Whale* (Boston: The St. Botolph Society, 1890), 42.

2. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Lowe, *My Fair Lady: A Musical Play in Two Acts Based on Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1956), 146.

3. The description of this momentous event will be considered further in the chapters of this work. Even before Ezra, in the days of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah in the ninth century BCE, the Levites “went to all the cities of Judah, teaching the people” from “the book of the law of Yahweh” (2 Chron. 17:9).



So Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, and even women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. . . . And they [the Levites] read from the book, from the law of God, clarifying to give the sense so that they [the people] understood the reading. (Neh. 8:2, 8)

Jesus himself adopted that same pattern of reading the text and expounding it (Luke 4:16–21), as did the New Testament church (Acts 2:42; 13:14–15; 20:7, 11). And, in the millennia that followed, the church has continued to adhere to Jesus’s command that his ideas be spread “to the end of the age” through preaching:

Therefore go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I commanded you. And, behold, I Myself am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:19–20)

This was “an infinite goal that envisioned enormous, continuing oratorical effort on a world-wide basis,” marking a “purposeful corporate rhetoricality . . . not found in any other community of the ancient world.”<sup>4</sup> Yet for all that, the only major treatise on preaching to appear in the first millennium of Christianity was *On Christian Doctrine* by Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth century.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the reason for this lack of any formal conception of preaching was that in the early centuries of the church, soon after the days of firsthand witnesses of Jesus Christ, biblical exposition focused, for the most part, on discriminating between orthodoxy and heresy; it was mostly apologetic and informational in function. For instance, Irenaeus, one of several Christian apologists in the second century, right after reciting a creed, asserted the following about the importance of preaching right doctrine:

The Church, having received this preaching and this faith [the creed], although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she preaches them, and teaches them, and hands them down, as if she possessed only one mouth. . . . As the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so

4. James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 273, 274.

5. Though it is less focused on preaching, one might add the sixth-century work *The Pastoral Rule* by the Latin church father Gregory the Great; his concern is more with the life of the preacher and the diversity of audiences. Another is *The Training of the Clergy* by Rabanus Maurus, a German Benedictine in the ninth century, consisting mostly of passages culled from Augustine and Gregory.

also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. Nor will any one of the rulers in the Churches, however highly gifted he may be in eloquence, teach doctrines different from these.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the decline of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Dark Ages in the fourth and fifth centuries did not help the cause of preaching scholarship; in those days there seems to have been little time for theorizing about preaching. Even the lone standout, Augustine's treatise (published partly in 397 and partly in 426), focused for the most part on defending the adoption of the pagan art of rhetoric into preaching.<sup>7</sup>

Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the persuasion either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? . . . Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and serves much to persuade either of wrong or right, why do not good men engage in its study for the cause of truth, when bad men use it to obtain the triumph of wrong and worthless causes, and to further iniquity and error?<sup>8</sup>

Later, Thomas of Chobham, a dean of Salisbury Cathedral in the thirteenth century, also affirmed that "the doctrine of the orator is very necessary for the office of a preacher."<sup>9</sup> Around the same time, the twelfth-century Cistercian monk Alan of Lille taught that "preaching is the plain and public instruction in morals and faith, serving the information of mankind, proceeding by the path of reason and issuing from the fountainhead of authorities."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the influence of rhetoric continued to grow, but the style of preaching remained topical and doctrinal, dealing with felt needs of the hour and serving to uphold dogma as prescribed by the authorities of the church.

Things began to get fuzzy as the Middle Ages progressed: exegesis became rather esoteric, with multiple senses of Scripture being expounded. The Benedictine abbot of Nogent, Guibert (1053–1124), famously gave the example of the fourfold meaning of the word *Jerusalem*:

6. *Against Heresies* 1.10.2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885–1887; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:331 (hereafter ANF).

7. See Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, 286–92.

8. *On Christian Doctrine* 4.2.3.

9. *Summa de arte praedicandi* ("Essence of the Art of Preaching"), Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis 82, ed. Franco Morenzoni (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1988), 262 (lines 78–79; my translation).

10. *De arte praedicatoria* ("On the Art of the Preacher"), Patrologia Latina 210, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1855), column 111 (my translation).

Historically, it represents a specific city; in allegory it represents the holy Church; tropologically, or morally, it is the soul of every faithful man who longs for the vision of eternal peace; and anagogically it refers to the life of the heavenly citizens, who already see the God of Gods, revealed in all His glory in Sion.<sup>11</sup>

Historian of preaching Hughes Oliphant Old explains this lack of clarity in the Middle Ages:

Medieval preachers tried very hard to take their exegesis seriously, but they faced formidable problems. By the year 500 Jesus and his disciples had become figures of long ago and far away. . . . With the fall of the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions, the New Testament—and in fact the whole Bible—was becoming very difficult to understand. It more and more became a book of mysteries that could only be solved by mystical contemplation. . . . The language barrier also contributed to the difficulty in understanding the Scriptures. How can one do grammatical-historical exegesis when almost no one west of the Adriatic Sea could read Greek, let alone Hebrew? True expository preaching was almost impossible. No wonder the conscientious preacher found allegorical exegesis attractive.<sup>12</sup>

But then came the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and the Bible was once again brought to light, translated into the vernacular from Hebrew and Greek (and Latin), printed for mass distribution, and preached regularly. The emphasis in sermons of this period was necessarily on soteriological truths. This focus on Christ and redemption, after centuries of confusion as to what it took for sins to be forgiven and salvation to be gained, was epochal. No wonder Martin Luther was inclined to see Christ everywhere in Scripture: “[Christ] is the man to whom it [Scripture] all applies, every bit of it.”<sup>13</sup> Such a monopolizing focus tended to make sermons largely evangelistic or a recitation of salvation benefits. “[The] concern that every Christian sermon expound its text in relation to Christ and his saving work is solidly rooted in the Reformation and the Protestant heritage that is its legacy.”<sup>14</sup> The Reformation’s christocentric impact upon homiletics continues to this day.<sup>15</sup>

11. Guibert de Nogent, *A Book about the Way a Sermon Ought to be Given*, in *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric*, ed. Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 171.

12. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Medieval Church*, vol. 3 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), xv–xvi.

13. “Prefaces to the Old Testament,” in *Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 of *Luther’s Works*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 247.

14. Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 49n49 (italics removed).

15. In a later chapter, “Preaching Is Conformational,” I will describe an alternative way to make sermons christological. Also see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 238–68.

It is obvious that preachers and scholars of preaching are children of their own ages. Circumstances and the need of the hour determine, to a great extent, the shape of preaching in any era. In the history of the church, there have been many and varied ideas of what preaching is and should be, each emphasizing one facet of this activity or another, some of which I have highlighted here. But an integrated vision that addresses the essentials of this most important activity in the church has been lacking, and that is what this work hopes to provide. In addition, there has been a glaring lacuna in preaching theories over the years: the understanding of how a particular text chosen for preaching dictates specific life change in the lives of Christians. While application was no doubt considered to be important throughout church history (see “Preaching Is Applicational”), guidance as to how to attend to the details and specificities of a particular passage of Scripture, how to discern its theological thrust, and how to discover its specific demand for concrete life change has been unavailable to the preacher. This book, providing an integrated vision for preaching, will thereby also suggest a means to plug that gap in preaching theory.<sup>16</sup>

### The Lacuna in Preaching

Through the two millennia of the church age, there has been a striking deficit in conceptions of preaching: a lack of clarity about how to derive valid application for a modern audience from a specific passage in the ancient text. A robust hermeneutic for making this move from text to audience, which places preaching and application within the larger scheme of the spiritual formation and discipleship of God’s people, has been sorely wanting. Despite the recognition that “the highest service that men attain on earth is to preach God’s word,”<sup>17</sup> this complex—and critical—issue of how the preacher moves from text to sermon has not been explicated; throughout church history it has remained something of a black box. David Buttrick writes:

Many books have been written on “biblical preaching”; specifically on how preachers can move step by step from the Bible passage to a sermon. . . . But in all such books there seems to be a gap. There’s something left out in between. The crucial moment between exegesis and homiletical vision is not described. The shift between the study of a text and the conception of a sermon—perhaps

16. Of course, I too am a child of my times. Conceivably, there will be more holes to be filled in the field of preaching.

17. John Wycliffe (1329–84), “On the Seven Deadly Sins,” in *Miscellaneous Works*, vol. 3 of *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, ed. Thomas Arnold (Oxford: Clarendon, 1871), 143.

it occurs in a flash of imagination—is never discussed. So alert readers are left with the odd impression that we move from the Bible to a contemporary sermon by some inexplicable magic!<sup>18</sup>

Stanley Porter concurs: “The move from the original text of Scripture, with all of its time-bound character, to theological truths for life today is one of the most demanding intellectual tasks imaginable”—an uphill struggle faced by preachers every time they take to the pulpit.<sup>19</sup> Thomas Long expresses the angst of the preacher incisively:

Conscientious biblical preachers have long shared the little secret that the classical text-to-sermon exegetical methods produce far more chaff than wheat. If one has the time and patience to stay at the chores of exegesis, theoretically one can find out a great deal of background information about virtually every passage in the Bible, much of it unfortunately quite remote from any conceivable use in a sermon. The preacher’s desk can quickly be covered with Ugaritic parallels and details about syncretistic religion in the Phrygian region of Asia Minor. It is hard to find fault here; every scrap of data is potentially valuable, and it is impossible to know in advance which piece of information is to be prized. So, we brace ourselves for the next round of exegesis by saying that it is necessary to pan a lot of earth to find a little gold, and that is true, of course. However, preachers have the nagging suspicion that there is a good deal of wasted energy in the traditional model of exegesis or, worse, that the real business of exegesis is excavation and earth-moving and that any homiletical gold stumbled over along the way is largely coincidental.<sup>20</sup>

This I call the hermeneutic of excavation—the exegetical turning over of tons of earth, debris, rock, boulders, and gravel: a style of interpretation that yields an overload of biblical and Bible-related information, most of it unfortunately not of any particular use for one seeking to preach a relevant message from a specific text. And so, at this frustrating juncture in sermon preparation, one of two things happens: alchemy or distillation.<sup>21</sup>

In the first scenario, the preacher, deprecating the apparent lack of any gold in the Bible, gives up. After all, what relevance is there in the morass

18. David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 89.

19. Stanley E. Porter, “Hermeneutics, Biblical Interpretation, and Theology: Hunch, Holy Spirit, or Hard Work?,” in I. Howard Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 121.

20. Thomas G. Long, “The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Preaching,” *Interpretation* 44 (1990): 343–44.

21. The two scenarios are, no doubt, exaggerations, but they enable me to make a point.

of historical, geographical, and linguistic detail for living life come Monday morning? So the enlightened and modern preacher, the alchemist, turns away from an outdated and seemingly irrelevant book—“a shift away from the canons of classical ‘sacred rhetoric’ and a move toward psychology and personalism.”<sup>22</sup> The only recourse now for the preacher is to preach something that is more emotionally and existentially relevant to the congregation but only tangentially connected to a biblical text. Often the driving force of such sermons is a felt need scavenged from yesterday’s newspaper or today’s blog, boosted by the latest in media and technology, and bolstered by a smooth delivery with glib humor and pathos that sustains the rapt attention of listeners. After all, the Bible itself has nothing much to say about real life, such preachers conclude. Therefore they transact some sort of alchemy, transmuting the base metal of the remote and rambling text into the noble metal of an entertaining and moving sermon, though the biblical “lead” and sermonic “gold” really have nothing to do with each other: alchemy!

In the second scenario, the preacher, still trying vainly to locate gold in Scripture, performs a distillation of the text into propositions of the sermon that are preached in formulaic fashion, with outlines, points, proofs, and arguments, and with application drawn seemingly at random somewhere along the way. This reflects the tendency toward a sort of eliminative reductionism that breaks things down to their constitutive parts, and these elementary parts—usually bits and bytes of systematic theology—are taken to be more real and more valuable than the whole.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the dross of texts is distilled off to leave behind the precious residue of theological propositions that is then preached. Or, as Fred Craddock puts it, “The minister boils off all the water and then preaches the stain in the bottom of the cup.”<sup>24</sup> Such propositions end

22. Thomas G. Long, “A New Focus for Teaching Preaching,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 8.

23. Michael S. Hogue, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 213.

24. Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 123. It was perhaps Haddon W. Robinson, whose book *Biblical Preaching* has chaperoned generations of preachers through the field of homiletics since its first publication in 1980, who popularized the use of propositions in preaching in modern times. See *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 5, 20, 21. Walter C. Kaiser calls for “principlizing the text paragraph by paragraph into timeless *propositions* which call for an immediate response from our listeners.” See *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Teaching and Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1998), 236 (italics added). Such a distilled extract of the text is the “timeless, transcultural theological *proposition*” that is to be preached (Timothy S. Warren, “The Theological Process in Sermon Preparation,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 156 [1999]: 342 [italics added]). Also see Ramesh Richard,

up having a self-contained existence independent of the text and denuded of all its specificity—the gold without the impurity, the kernel without the husk, the candy without the wrapper: distillation! Neither alchemy nor distillation does justice to the text or respects its intricacies and specificities.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the alchemical and distillatory tendencies of this generation, it is in our current era that the Holy Spirit shows up for the first time in a formal definition of preaching: Haddon Robinson speaks of a proposition derived from the text that “the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.”<sup>26</sup> And thus, with this particular attention given to the life-changing work of the Spirit, the practical sanctification phase of Christian life returns to the core of biblical preaching: the gradual transformation of the people of God into the image of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Of course, what kind of life change is called for in the text and how one may discern it from a particular passage, has never been elucidated: the black box continues to work by some “inexplicable magic.”

In the vision for preaching propounded here, I seek to address this lacuna by borrowing from the fields of language philosophy that study how language works and what authors do. These areas of scholarship have, in the last few decades, borne much fruit for the understanding of communication, including communication that is textual. With the confluence of these latter developments, I believe a renewed focus on preaching will be profitable, particularly the scrutiny of the theological role of the specific portion of Scripture chosen for a given sermon, and an examination of what *that* text has to say about the transformation of the lives of God’s people for God’s glory.

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*Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 19, for the same notion.

25. This book will propose an alternative to both these approaches and show that one has neither to transmute the biblical text into something entirely new (alchemy) nor to reduce it into a propositional entity (distillation). See the chapters “Preaching Is Communicational,” “Preaching Is Theological,” and “Preaching Is Application.”

26. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 5.

27. See Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching: Declaring Scripture with Responsibility, Passion, and Authenticity* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009), 10. See also Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 19, for his goals of preaching: “to inform minds, instruct hearts, and influence behavior towards godliness.” Nevertheless, other contemporary definitions of preaching are less than clear. Many continue to focus exclusively on information and hardly touch on transformation. For example: “Expository preaching is essentially the practice of explaining the meaning of a passage of Scripture” (Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 120); and, “I assert that expository preaching is really exegetical preaching and not so much the homiletical form of the message” (John F. MacArthur Jr., “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 1 [1990]: 12).

## Vision for Preaching

This book seeks to portray what preaching is in an ideal sense and what the characteristics of this unique form of address are. Here is my vision for preaching, in one sentence, individual elements of which will be unpacked chapter by chapter in the pages that follow.<sup>28</sup>

Vision for Preaching	Chapter
Biblical preaching,	1. <i>Preaching Is Biblical</i>
by a leader of the church,	2. <i>Preaching Is Pastoral</i>
in a gathering of Christians for worship,	3. <i>Preaching Is Ecclesial</i>
is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture	4. <i>Preaching Is Communicational</i>
discerned by theological exegesis,	5. <i>Preaching Is Theological</i>
and of its application to that specific body of believers,	6. <i>Preaching Is Applicational</i>
that they may be conformed to the image of Christ,	7. <i>Preaching Is Conformational</i>
for the glory of God	8. <i>Preaching Is Doxological</i>
—all in the power of the Holy Spirit.	9. <i>Preaching Is Spiritual</i>

I have deliberately refrained from calling this recital a “definition,” preferring to label it a “vision.” A definition is far too categorical for what I am attempting in this work. My goal is not to provide a precisely demarcated boundary within which is preaching and without which is everything that is not. Rather, I seek to articulate this vision as a target toward which all of us preachers—novices and experts and everyone in between—can work.<sup>29</sup> In other words, this vision is not the prescription of a precise destination with GPS coordinates telling you that you’re either there or you aren’t. Rather it is more of a road to travel, a direction to take, a momentum to develop. The

28. Each chapter tackles a facet of this vision for preaching, validating each element’s inclusion in the vision, addressing its implications for preaching today, and exhorting preachers to align their preaching with the call of that particular facet of the vision. A “Reflection” section in each chapter, based upon a portion of the Gospel of Mark, deals with a related theme of the chapter—but with a twist—geared to stimulate thought; these studies from Mark also serve to illustrate the hermeneutic proposed in this work. Also provided in the “Reflection” sections are some ideas and questions for pondering, for further exploration, for prayer, and for the preacher’s development. Each chapter may therefore be employed either for personal contemplation or for group discussion in a fellowship of students, ministers, or pastors. Greek and Hebrew terms are used minimally in this work; when employed, they are both translated and transliterated.

29. For the same reason, I have purposely retained the vagueness of some terms in the preaching vision: “gathering” (how many make a gathering and how often should they gather?), “worship” (what constitutes worship?), “leader” (what office of the church does a leader occupy?), etc.



vision is thus an ideal that preachers (and churches) can aim for. If this book helps them advance toward that goal, the intent of this work will have been accomplished.

Such an approach concedes that a spectrum of activities may be labeled “preaching”: pastoral preaching during a worship service, guest preaching, preaching at a Bible conference, preaching in a seminary chapel, preaching at a gathering of men (or women, or young adults), and so on. The difference between these activities is one of degree: the extent to which each approximates the vision in being biblical, pastoral, ecclesial, communicational, theological, applicational, conformational, doxological, and spiritual. Of course, it is impossible to provide a metric by which a sermon may be gauged as to *how* biblical, *how* pastoral, *how* ecclesial, or *how* communicational (and so on) it is, and so I won’t. This vision for preaching simply exhorts that a sermon be biblical, pastoral, ecclesial, communicational, theological, applicational, conformational, doxological, and spiritual, without dogmatically quantifying each of these facets. That is like providing a vision for parenting that comprises a number of essential elements: love, discipline, protection, nourishment, clothing, education, exercise, fellowship, and so on. Clearly, a variety of models can accomplish each of these elements to varying (and unquantifiable) degrees: parenting in a nuclear family, parenting by separated parents, parenting by a single parent, parenting by adoptive parents, or parenting in a foster family, to name a few. A vision for parenting may therefore simply be an encouragement that parenting be loving, disciplinary, protective, nourishing, and so on. So also with this vision of preaching. It is an encouragement to preachers to keep traveling toward a broadly outlined goal (“vision”) rather than to arrive at some precisely pinpointed destination (“definition”).

In a sense, then, the vision propounded here is almost a manifesto—a declaration of principles and intentions (i.e., this author’s stance on what preaching should tend toward).<sup>30</sup> But rather than it being solely my individualistic and idiosyncratic conception, this vision has sought to integrate the work of many who have faithfully plowed the field of homiletics in ages past. As I stand on the broad and powerful shoulders of those who have gone on before, I have attempted to rearticulate what has been expressed earlier,

30. A Protestant evangelical bias will, no doubt, be discernible in this vision of preaching, reflecting my own reading and interpretive practices with regard to Scripture and my concept of and personal engagement with the local and universal church. This perspective, however, does not invalidate my attempt to provide an account of what preaching is all about. A perspectival description is not necessarily rendered unviable or inaccurate simply because it comes from a particular viewpoint. Hopefully the acknowledgment of my particular frame of reference will make these observations complementary to those of others from a variety of traditions.

rediscover what has been forgotten, and resurface what has been lost sight of, by mining church history, teasing out connections, and sifting through biblical theology.<sup>31</sup> In addition, I have reconnoitered some new terrain, particularly the domain of language philosophy, to shed light on how valid application may be derived from a particular passage of Scripture. It is hoped that an integration of all these—elements old and new, observations historical and exploratory, findings theological and secular—into a summative vision for preaching will help sustain and further the role of this preeminent form of public address in the life of the church.

More proximally, my aim is to give future pastors—those who are training to go out into the front end of the battle arena to pastor—a better conception of what it means to preach, a heightened sense of the divinely granted privilege of preaching, and a greater excitement for the preaching ministry. In these days when preachers have to compete with the latest in technology and the ultimate in media, when they have to contend with the trends and fads of culture and the apathy and inattention of a new generation, a fresh look at preaching, the heart of pastoral ministry, is essential. And for those already in the trenches preaching regularly, the ideas in this work hopefully will serve as an encouragement to persist and a goal to strive for as you earnestly and faithfully discharge the responsibility of your divine appointments to proclaim the word of God to the people of God.

I offer this work as a big-picture depiction of the preaching task, to show how it fits in with the rest of pastoral ministry; how it is consistent with biblical and systematic theology; how it incorporates aspects of communication theory, rhetoric, and language philosophy; and how it plays a key role in the spiritual formation of God's people, through Scripture and by the agency of the Holy Spirit, all for the furtherance of Christ's kingdom and the exaltation of God's name.

31. The wide range of sources and ideas throughout this work reflects considerable consensus in Christendom, both historical and contemporary, regarding the various concepts of preaching that are discussed here.

# 1

## Preaching Is Biblical

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The sum of Your word is truth,  
And all Your righteous ordinances are everlasting.

Psalm 119:160

*Biblical* preaching, by a leader of the church, in a gathering of Christians for worship, is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture discerned by theological exegesis, and of its application to that specific body of believers, that they may be conformed to the image of Christ, for the glory of God—all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As millions watched on television on January 28, 1986, seventy-three seconds after liftoff, the mission of space shuttle *Challenger* ended in a fiery disaster resulting in the death of all seven crew members. In response, both a congressional house committee and a presidential commission were charged with investigating the catastrophe. Apparently an O-ring manufactured by Morton Thiokol was at fault. In a statement to the investigating House Committee on Science and Technology, Charles S. Locke, chairman and CEO of Morton Thiokol, said:

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that some decisions made the evening of January 27 were wrong—that mistakes were made. Our space program experts, confronted with reports that the weather would be substantially colder than for any previous launch, reviewed the available data and initially concluded that a launch should not occur at an O-ring temperature lower than 53 degrees Fahrenheit, the lowest previous launch temperature.<sup>1</sup>

The day of the launch, temperatures were as low as 16°F at Kennedy Space Center in Florida, but NASA officials overrode the objections of Thiokol engineers. During a televised hearing of the Presidential Commission, member and Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman stunningly demonstrated that O-rings lost resilience at cold temperatures by immersing one in a Styrofoam cup of ice water. In a memorable understatement, he declared, “I believe that has some significance for our problem.”<sup>2</sup> And how!

One disregards manufacturers’ instructions at one’s own peril. This is why preaching has always sought to be biblical, from the word of God, the Scriptures of the community of God. For therein is the word of the Creator to his creation. Neglecting his directives can have calamitous consequences. Christian preaching over the millennia has therefore consistently been based on the Scriptures of the church: preaching is biblical. “The most notable characteristic of the Christian homily, not only theologically but also rhetorically, is its dependence on the biblical text.”<sup>3</sup> The community of God’s people holds that this divine discourse that comprises the Christian canon is to be preached as normative for the faith and practice of Christians. In fact, the Bible itself demands to be read this way. In the Old Testament, Joshua declares:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may give heed to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will be successful. (Josh. 1:8)

1. “Statement of Charles S. Locke, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Morton Thiokol, Inc., Before the Science and Technology Committee, United States House of Representatives (June 17, 1986),” in *Investigation of the Challenger Accident (Volume 1, Part 2): Hearings before the Committee on Science and Technology, House of Representatives, Ninety-Ninth Congress, Second Session (June 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 25, 1986)* (Washington, DC: Committee on Science and Technology, 1986), 331.

2. Richard P. Feynman, “Testimony of Lawrence B. Mulloy, Project Manager, Solid Rocket Boosters, Marshall Space Flight Center, NASA,” in *Report to the President, by the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, June 6th, 1986, Washington, DC, Volume 4: February 11, 1986 Session*, 679. Available at <http://history.nasa.gov/rogersrep/genindex.htm>.

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric: The Sermon on the Mount as Message and as Model in Augustine, Chrysostom and Luther* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 32.

And in the New Testament, Jesus asserts (citing Deut. 8:3):

It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4)

Why is the Bible so special? What are the unique qualities of this canonical text of the church? After all, all kinds of books exist, as Hugh of St. Victor noted a long time ago (in the eleventh century):

There are books and books. . . . The books that men write are made of the skins of dead animals or some other corruptible material and, as these last for only a short time, the books themselves grow old and in their own way are reduced to nothing, leaving no vestige of themselves behind. And all who read these books will die some day, and there is no one to be found who lives forever. These, therefore, being made of dead things by mortal beings who are going to die, cannot bestow enduring life on those who read and love them. They are certainly not worthy to be called books of life, but would be termed more fitly books of death, or of the dead or dying.<sup>4</sup>

A couple of millennia before Hugh, a biblical sage warned that "the making of books has no end" (Eccles. 12:12). And not all of those innumerable tomes are worthy of being read. Google has estimated that, as of August 2010, a total of 129,864,880 unique books have been published throughout history.<sup>5</sup> However, only a fraction of these have survived the attrition of time. Even from among these hardy survivors, there are those that stand out—the "classics," works judged over a period of time to be outstanding in quality with recognized and established value for the conceivable future.

## The Classic Nature of the Bible

Classics, scholars say, possess philosophical quality and original content, they influence events, they are the foremost examples of a certain category of thought, and they bear extended relevance far beyond the dates of their

4. In Hugh of St. Victor, *Selected Spiritual Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 88.

5. See Leonid Taycher, "Books of the World, Stand Up and Be Counted! All 129,864,880 of You," *Google Books Search* (blog), August 5, 2010, <http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2010/08/books-of-world-stand-up-and-be-counted.html>. Also see reports from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, especially Fred von Lohmann, "Google Book Search Settlement: Updating the Numbers, Part 2," February 23, 2010, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2010/02/google-book-search-settlement-updating-numbers-0>.

publication.<sup>6</sup> The Bible succeeds in meeting every one of these criteria. However, the peculiar features of this sacred work surpass the qualities of any other classic, whether it be Plato or Shakespeare. What makes this biblical classic unique and particularly pertinent for Christian preaching is that it is abiding, weighty, and binding.

### *The Bible Is Abiding*

For any text, its content is usually consumed at an event of reading subsequent to the event of its writing. However, information conveyed by a text is not necessarily relevant to a readership far away in time and space. That would be like reading a local newspaper from another city, a decade after its publication. In other words, the “literature of knowledge,” which merely conveys information, usually becomes outdated in direct proportion to the distance in time and space between the event of writing and event of reading. Ancient texts are therefore less relevant to the modern-day reader. Likewise, today’s grocery lists, bank statements, inane blog posts, Twitter feeds, emails, and a whole host of other published works that have only parochial concerns, provincial consequences, and personal value will never interest anyone but the odd historian in a few years. Pure information rarely transcends time and space to provide direction for future application and behavior. Such informational texts (literature of knowledge) merely tell us how things *were* or *are*, not necessarily how things *can* or *should be*. On the other hand, the “literature of power” never grows outdated.<sup>7</sup> Texts in this category (i.e., the classics) retain the power to say something relevant across the span of ages, making recommendations for *all* time: they have abiding value. Such abiding texts that possess value for the future—advocating for how things *can* or *should be*—are rightly labeled “classics,” specimens of the literature of power.

Authors of classics are usually conscious of the future-directedness of their work and typically intend their meanings to go beyond what is attended to at the moment and place of writing. The effects of such classic texts are therefore boundlessly extended in time and space into the “always” and the “everywhere”: they are abiding—perennial in relevance. Psalm 102:18 explicitly marks Scripture as being recorded for all time: “Let this be written for a generation to come.” Thus this abiding quality, an inherent property of classics, characterizes the Bible as well. This book has amply proven its abiding nature over the millennia, for it has been preached gainfully to every

6. Michael Levin, “What Makes a Classic in Political Theory?,” *Political Science Quarterly* 88 (1973): 463.

7. E. D. Hirsch, “Past Intentions and Present Meanings,” *Essays in Criticism* 33 (1983): 88.

generation of God’s people, and its profit has accrued to many, even those situated far from the original event and location of writing.<sup>8</sup> Things written over a thousand years before the time of Paul’s readers remained relevant to them, as they still are to current readers.

For whatever was written in former times was written for our instruction. (Rom. 15:4; see also 1 Cor. 10:11)

That the Bible is an abiding classic is not just an a priori assumption. Rather, it demonstrates itself to be abiding—relevant and material in every new generation, addressing every age and era with immediacy and urgency. This is not to say that the Bible is outside the boundary of time, but that it is inside the perimeter of *all* time: the Bible is abiding.<sup>9</sup>

Forever, Yahweh, is Your word;  
It is established in heaven.  
Ps. 119:89

Why is Scripture so abiding? The reason for its endurance is its unique *weightiness*: it concerns matters of critical importance to humankind in every era and thus remains vital and potent across the span of time.

### *The Bible Is Weighty*

Dealing as it does with matters concerning its main character, God, and his relationship to humankind, the Bible addresses issues of immense significance, both temporal and eternal. It is weighty—substantial in content. It provides direction for entering into a relationship with God (Heb. 2:3; 2 Tim. 3:15), and it guides the maintenance of this relationship with the Creator as it gives the child of God “training in righteousness.” Only in the Scriptures can one discover how to be “complete, equipped for every good work”—weighty matters, indeed.

All Scripture is God-inspired and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

8. See, e.g., 1 Pet. 1:25 (Isa. 50:8). Though dealing specifically with Jesus’s own words, Matt. 24:35 (Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33) echoes the same sentiments about the divine word—its abiding quality. How the Bible’s guidance for the future—i.e., God’s direction for how things *can* or *should be*—may be discerned for preaching will be dealt with in “Preaching Is Theological.”

9. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 288, 290.

Therefore, Athanasius of Alexandria, in the fourth century CE, could declare:

They who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they [the Scriptures] contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take aught from these.<sup>10</sup>

No wonder Paul concludes his description of inspired Scripture by giving Timothy a sacred commission: “preach the word” at all times (2 Tim. 4:1–2). The sort of discourse found in the Bible, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur wagered, is worthy of study “because something is said that is not said by other kinds of discourse.”<sup>11</sup> The Bible is uniquely weighty, and because of the gravity of its content—God and his relationship with humans—it has supreme priority for the life of the Christian. Preaching, therefore, is necessarily biblical.

The reverence and respect that God’s people have accorded Scripture, and the resulting responsibility with which its preaching has been undertaken over the centuries, testify to the weightiness of the Bible. The proliferation of interpretive works on Scripture—innumerable commentaries, homilies, and tracts—reflects this preeminence. The prodigious output of Origen, an early Christian theologian of the third century CE, for instance, amounted to 6,000 writings, including homilies on almost the entire Bible (over 200 preserved).<sup>12</sup> John Chrysostom, a church father of the late third century, bequeathed over 900 sermons (i.e., those that survive).<sup>13</sup> Equally significant in attesting to the weighty quality of the Bible is the abundance of manuscript copies extant, as well as the plethora of translations and versions of Scripture created in the past and that continue to be produced today. Portions of the New Testament, for instance, are preserved in more ancient manuscripts than is any other ancient writing—around 6,000 in Greek, 10,000 in Latin, and another 10,000 in Armenian, Ethiopic, Coptic, Syriac, and other languages. Ironically, even the myriad controversies over interpretations of Scripture that have dogged the church throughout its existence testify to the weighty content of the Bible. This book and its interpretation mattered enough to be vigorously, sometimes even violently, defended.

10. *Festal Letters* 39.6, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (1886–1889; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 4:552 (hereafter *NPNF*<sup>1</sup>).

11. Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 71.

12. This is recorded by Epiphanius, a fourth-century bishop in Cyprus, in *Refutation of All Heresies* 64.63.8. Also see Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 37–39.

13. See Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7; and J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (London: Duckworth, 1995), 132–33.



Not just the entire collection as a whole, but individual texts and pericopes that compose Scripture are weighty as well, no portion of it trivial.<sup>14</sup> For instance, in 1 Corinthians 9:9 Paul considers Deuteronomy 25:4, a relatively minor text in the Old Testament, as being significant for the current practice of the community of believers. In fact, it is the weightiness of every part of the Bible that promotes the serviceability of pericopes for preaching. The density of the canonical text, packed as it is with substantial matters, makes it advisable to engage the Scriptures in smaller, bite-sized segments for weekly church use. Hence the use of pericopes.

The Bible is, indeed, a text of great consequence; therefore this abiding and weighty work, in all of its parts, is not to be neglected but rather preached and applied. The substantiality of Scripture mandates a surrender by readers and listeners to the gravity of the text and to the will of God that it expresses—a willingness to align themselves to divine demand. Thus the Bible is not only abiding and weighty, but it is also *binding* for the faith and practice of the church.

### *The Bible Is Binding*

Classics are generally considered prescriptive, to one extent or another. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer declared that “the most important thing about the concept of the classical . . . is the normative sense.”<sup>15</sup> But whether that prescription is authoritative enough to demand compliance is another matter. For Scripture, however, the community of God holds that this text is binding in a manner that no other classic ever has been, is, or ever can be, because the Bible is divine discourse. In other words, the binding nature of the Bible is a consequence of its construal as a divine communiqué, making it authoritative for the faith and practice of the church. This divine discourse, the word of God, must therefore be preached as binding upon the people of God, bidding them to hear it and to apply it—it is normative in quality.

To assert that Scripture is binding, then, is to acknowledge it as divine discourse. For most of its history, the church has affirmed that Scripture is God’s word. “All Scripture,” 2 Timothy 3:16 affirms, “is God-inspired.” John 10:35 uses “word of God” in parallel with “Scripture.” In Mark 7:9–13 “commandment of God,” what “Moses said,” and “word of God” are interchangeably

14. Though “pericope” has a technical sense of a demarcated portion of the Gospels, I use the word in this work simply to designate a preaching text, irrespective of genre or length (see “Preaching Is Theological”).

15. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288.

employed, attesting to the nature of the Bible as divine discourse—its human authors guided by the divine Author, the Holy Spirit, to produce the word of God (2 Pet. 1:21).<sup>16</sup> The first-century church father Clement of Rome called Scripture “the true utterances of the Holy Spirit” and “the oracles of God.”<sup>17</sup> Origen also held “the holy Scriptures to be no human compositions, but to be written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> Augustine of Hippo expounded on this divine agency working through human authors:

All that he [God] intended to give for our perusal on the matter of his own doings and sayings, he commanded to be written by those disciples, whom he thus used as if they were his own hands.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that no ancient creed incorporates the idea of inspiration (or inerrancy) is simply because inspiration was an accepted fact and was never challenged in the early church. It was never a controversy to be adjudicated or a heresy to be countered. As Bruce Vawter sums up, “The language of the Fathers both in the East and in the West, as well as their habitual handling of the Scripture, leaves little doubt that for many if not most of them God was . . . the *literary* author of the Bible.”<sup>20</sup>

Well beyond the age of the fathers, the church held it to be dogma that Scripture was divine discourse. The Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) declared that “the author of Holy Scripture is God.”<sup>21</sup> During the Reformation era, Luther was explicit: “Thus you are to deal with Scripture: consider it as God himself speaking.”<sup>22</sup> It was this notion of Scripture as divine discourse that led the church to construe Scripture as binding.

16. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 53. Also see William Lane Craig, “Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God’ (2 Peter 1:21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration,” in *Providence, Scripture, and Resurrection*, vol. 2 of *Readings in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 157–91. In this work I will consider Scripture the joint product of both human and divine authors, without differentiating between the two.

17. *1 Clement* 45, 53 (ANF 1:39, 44–45). He also introduced Jer. 9:23 with “the Holy Spirit says” (*1 Clement* 13 [ANF 1:16, 41]). Equally, Paul’s writings, Clement claimed, were inspired by the Holy Spirit (*1 Clement* 13, 47).

18. *First Principles* 4.9 (ANF 4:357).

19. *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.35.54 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 6:101).

20. Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Louisville: Westminster, 1972), 96.

21. *Summa Theologica* 1.1.10.

22. *Predigten über das erste Buch Mosis und Auslegungen über die folgenden biblischen Bücher bis zu den Psalmen*, vol. 3 of *D. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften*, trans. (from the original Latin to German) Johann Georg Walch (St. Louis: Concordia, 1894), 21 (my translation into English).

It is to the canonical Scriptures alone that I am bound to yield such implicit subjection as to follow their teaching, without admitting the slightest suspicion that in them any mistake or any statement intended to mislead could find a place.<sup>23</sup>

That it is divine discourse renders the Christian canon binding in a manner unique to itself; no other classic shares that property. Given this binding and prescriptive status of the Bible for believers, preaching is to be, first and foremost, biblical.

Another consequence of the binding nature of the canon, one that is pertinent to preaching, is the demarcation of what is acceptable as “Scripture” and what is not. In effect, the canon is an ancient form of “copyright” protecting the Bible as a whole from distortion and deformation.<sup>24</sup> And so, for the purposes of preaching, the canon also delineates what texts may be employed for the edification of the church. It confers (and thereby restricts) binding authority to these particular texts. Only these may be preached from to bring the corporate life of the community and the lives of the individuals it comprises into alignment with the will of God.<sup>25</sup>

There was a good reason for this limitation of which texts could be included in the canon of Scripture and be preached from. The church in the second century recognized that without a *written* binding norm its station in time was too distant from the apostolic age for it to be able to guard the purity of what had been *orally* handed down. Neither Jesus nor any of the apostles were around at that time for consultation. Besides, all kinds of spurious literature was floating around and being championed as normative for God’s people. There needed to be a clear demarcation, a line, a “rule”—which is what *κανών* (*kanōn*) means: “rule/canon.” This principle of canon was an acknowledgment by the community of God’s people that thenceforth every act of preaching would be submitted to the control of the authoritative apostolic tradition that was textually fixed within the canon of Scripture.

Not only did the canon establish which texts could be employed in preaching but this principle had yet another implication: no one passage of Scripture could be so expounded in preaching “that it be repugnant to another” (article 20 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion [1563], the defining statement of the doctrines of the Church of England). In other words, the bounding of the

23. Augustine, *Epistle to Jerome* 82.3.24 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 1:358).

24. George Aichele, *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), 20.

25. I am avoiding any debate here about the specific composition of the canon. The faith and practice of a particular Christian tradition will, no doubt, be dependent upon the boundaries of the canon that it submits to.

canon mandates that the interpretation of one biblical text not be inconsistent with that of any other, for they all together make one book of God.<sup>26</sup> In the second century, Irenaeus wisely noted:

All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent; . . . and through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things.<sup>27</sup>

The canon thus renders the Bible cohesive and congruent in all its parts. This settled and stable body of written texts was deemed binding, and so it became the authoritative norm for regulating preaching in the church.<sup>28</sup> Nothing else would carry as much authority for preaching as would the canon of Scripture.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, nothing else is to be preached but this binding text.

In sum, the canonical classic of Scripture—abiding, weighty, and binding—demands to be preached and applied. One might go so far as to say that a willingness to be subject to the abiding, weighty, and binding claims of Scripture marks a member of God’s community. Because the Bible is abiding, weighty, and binding, it is to be preached, for it alone is efficacious for the alignment of individual and community to the will of God: all Scripture is profitable for application, to render God’s people complete, competent, and capable for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). The obligation for the preacher is therefore equally serious because the Bible is abiding, weighty, and binding: preaching must be biblical, comprehensively and exclusively.

26. Cyril of Alexandria, a fifth-century church father, declared: “The entire Scripture is one book and was spoken by the one Holy Spirit” (*Commentary on Isaiah*, on 29:11–12 [my translation]).

27. *Against Heresies* 2.28.3 (ANF 1:400). So also Irenaeus’s contemporary, Justin Martyr: “I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 65.2, [ANF 2:177]). See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 71–76.

28. Oscar Cullman, *The Early Church* (London: SCM, 1956), 90–91.

29. Formal acceptance of the canonical texts of Scripture occurred early in the life of the church; Paul credits the Thessalonians, for instance, with having received his word as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). The designation of Luke’s Gospel as “Scripture” also acknowledges its canonical reception by the church from early days (and 1 Tim. 5:18 expressly labels Luke’s Gospel as such, citing Luke 10:7; also see 2 Pet. 3:15–16). As well, these accepted biblical documents were widely acknowledged to be relevant to the community of God’s people. Indeed, the Colossians are asked to have their letter passed on to other Christian assemblies (Col. 4:16). Tertullian, the second-century Christian apologist, could therefore ask rhetorically: “But of what consequence are the titles [of the letters], since in writing to a certain church the apostle did in fact write to all?” (*Against Marcion* 5.17 [ANF 3:465]). So also, Rev. 1:3 assumes a wider readership than the seven churches to which John wrote.

## Preaching Biblically, Reading Continuously

If preaching is to be biblical, respecting the abiding, weighty, and binding nature of Scripture, then every part of Scripture is valuable and every text of Scripture must be preached from. How can one begin to accomplish this?

While most of the evidence about the liturgical practices of the synagogue comes from the second century CE onward, it is clear that quite early on, the pattern of communal utilization of Scripture in measured doses came to be directed by Jewish lectionaries that prescribed which passages of the Bible were to be read and preached on, on a given day. Appropriately divided sections of the text (pericopes) were read in continuous fashion (*lectio continua*, “reading continuously”) from week to week, each subsequent reading taking up from where the previous one had left off. This was the oldest approach to the exposition of Scripture, and it was the standard practice on nonfestival Sabbaths in Jewish synagogues.<sup>30</sup> In all likelihood, this protocol of continual reading was bequeathed to the church; this sequential assimilation of Scripture, *lectio continua*, appears to have been the norm for most of early church history.

By the time of the fifth century, however, the proliferation of feasts and special days in the church calendar and the allotment of specific biblical texts for each of those days rendered readings almost entirely *lectio selecta* (“reading selectively”): the textual assignments for these occasions were based upon the significance of the particular saint or that special day being celebrated. Such selections of the biblical text were rarely contiguous, and thus *lectio continua* fell into disuse. Soon the complexity of the festal calendar required that texts allocated for particular occasions be listed formally, and so Christian lectionaries configured for this purpose came into existence.<sup>31</sup> Unlike for most of church history, the Middle Ages therefore suffered a dearth of *lectio continua* sermons. It was not until the Reformers that this practice returned to popularity in churches. Luther advised: “One of the books should be selected and one or two chapters, or half a chapter, be read, until the book is finished.

30. The Babylonian Talmud tractate *Megillah* 4 refers to interruptions from the “regular order” of reading for festival/special days and returning to the set pattern afterward. This rabbinical writing also points to “the people of Palestine, who complete the reading of the Pentateuch in three years”—*lectio continua* in action. As quoted in Jacob Neusner, *The Comparative Hermeneutics of Rabbinic Judaism*, vol. 1, *Introduction and the Hermeneutics of Berakhot and Seder Mo’ed* (Binghamton, NY: Academic Studies in the History of Judaism, 2000), 544. Skipping passages of the Torah was looked upon with disfavor.

31. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Medieval Church*, vol. 3 of *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 85, 289; and John Reumann, “A History of Lectionaries: From the Synagogue at Nazareth to Post-Vatican II,” *Interpretation* 31 (1977): 124.

After that another book should be selected, and so on, until the entire Bible has been read through.”<sup>32</sup> Huldrych Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, explained that he followed *lectio continua*: Matthew for a whole year, then Acts, then the letters to Timothy, the letters of Peter, and Hebrews.<sup>33</sup> So also John Calvin, the great Reformer:

What order must pastors then keep in teaching? First, let them not esteem at their pleasure what is profitable to be uttered and what to be omitted; but let them leave that to God alone to be ordered at his pleasure. . . . Mortal man shall not be so bold as to mangle the Scripture and to pull it in pieces, that he may diminish this or that at his pleasure, that he may obscure something and suppress many things; but shall deliver whatsoever is revealed in the Scripture, though wisely and appropriately for the edifying of the people, yet plainly and without guile, as becomes a faithful and true interpreter of God.<sup>34</sup>

Several crucial assumptions operate in the practice of *lectio continua*. First, *all* portions of the abiding, weighty, and binding text of Scripture are valuable and worthy of being preached. The tendency to pick and choose texts based on preacher’s fancy, significance of event, or ease of exposition is to be strongly resisted. Second, individual pericopes are properly interpreted only in the context of the rest of the book, and it is continual reading and preaching that emphasizes this relationship of part to the whole. While the pericope is the smallest unit of text attended to in a given gathering of God’s people, preaching by *lectio continua* affirms the pericope’s indissoluble unity with its textual neighborhood.<sup>35</sup> Thus the integrity of a whole book may not be disrupted by preaching noncontiguous pericopes.

What, then, is the role of topical preaching that necessarily deals with diverse texts of Scripture in a single sermon? There is undoubtedly a place in the life of the church for ad hoc sermons (i.e., those that are topical in nature) to meet the needs of particular situations and circumstances, be they national in scope (to address wars, terrorism, special days), or local (to address celebrations, bereavements, weddings), or theological (to address

32. Martin Luther, “Concerning the Order of Public Worship (1523),” in *Liturgy and Hymns*, vol. 53 of *Luther’s Works*, trans. Paul Zeller Strodach, rev. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 12.

33. Gottfried Locher, *Zwingli’s Thought: New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 27.

34. John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 251–52.

35. Again, by “pericope,” I intend only a small, preachable portion of Scripture. To a great extent, what is preachable will depend upon the preacher. Too narrow a slice will result in texts with theological thrusts not very different from each other week by week; too large a cut will result in specific theological thrusts being overlooked. See “Preaching Is Theological.”

doctrinal weaknesses, spiritual issues, festivals on the church calendar). Such sermons may be biblical in the sense that their ideas are drawn from the Bible. However, I submit that to be biblical, not only do ideas have to be from Scripture, but also the sequential development of Scripture's ideas (i.e., the trajectory of a particular book incrementally developed pericope by pericope) has to be respected. Thus the preaching of sequential pericopes in any given book is essential and ought to be the staple (and stable) practice of preachers. Only then can one catch the thrust of a text, the agenda of the author, in its fullest sense. Jesus's healings of the blind men in Mark 8 and 10 are often preached in isolated fashion as proving Jesus's divinity and omnipotence (as systematic theology topical sermons that expound Jesus's control over the optic apparatus and exhort listeners to trust in the Great Physician). But Mark's thrust with each of these texts is different and may be caught only as one moves through the book, pericope by pericope.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while not discounting the value of the occasional topical sermon, I would strongly recommend that the regular diet of the congregation be sequential sermons through books of the Bible—*lectio continua*. One scholar with a particular aversion to topical messages advised his students “to preach a topical sermon only once every *five* years—and then immediately to repent and ask God's forgiveness!”<sup>37</sup> I have to confess there is some merit to this recommendation.

In short, to preach pericopes sequentially through books is therefore a significant part of what it means to preach biblically.<sup>38</sup> *Lectio continua* requires the interpreter to seek application in every portion of the canon, pericope by pericope, week by week, and to catch the sequential development of ideas within a given book.<sup>39</sup>

36. For the interpretation of these passages, see the Reflection section of “Preaching Is Communicational.” Also see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 155–68, 226–37. Each of the two healings has a specific intent and seeks to elucidate discrete facets of Mark's overall theme of discipleship. So also do each of the two crowd feedings in Mark 6 and Mark 8: they too are distinct in their theological thrusts (see *ibid.*, 129–41, 155–68).

37. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 19.

38. Of course, the choice of which book to preach from will depend upon a number of factors, including the preacher's pastoral vision and goals, and the congregation's spiritual status and maturity. Preaching through each chapter of a book may not work with those portions of the Scriptures that are collections of songs and sayings—the Psalms and Proverbs, for instance—as these are not necessarily organized with a broader arc of meaning and an interpretive trajectory from verse to verse or chapter to chapter.

39. The benefits of *lectio continua* are further developed in “Preaching Is Theological,” with the introduction of the concept of the *world in front of the text*.

## Summary

What does it mean to affirm that preaching is biblical? We have seen that Scripture, divine discourse, is to be the source material for sermons in the church, for the Bible is abiding, weighty, and binding upon the people of God for their faith and practice. Therefore, preaching that is biblical will ensure that every part of Scripture is preached over a period of time (ideally by reading continuously, *lectio continua*), for “all Scripture” is profitable for the body of Christ (2 Tim. 3:16). Biblical preaching by *lectio continua* guarantees that the voice of every pericope is heard, and heard sequentially, enabling successive sermons to gradually develop the trajectory of a whole book. Needless to say, biblical preaching “allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the “force” of the biblical text being handled—its *thrust*, as this vision for preaching has it (see “Preaching Is Communicational”)—is what must be preached, not a catchy illustration on which the preacher can build a whole sermon, or a snippet of systematic theology gleaned from the text. In other words, it is Scripture itself that must be preached to the people of God, for it alone is divine discourse, abiding, weighty, and binding. *Preaching is biblical!*

## Reflection

Mark 7:1–30—Disciples and God’s Word<sup>41</sup>

And in vain they worship Me teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men. (Mark 7:7–8)

The subject of this pericope, Mark 7:1–30, is purity and acceptability before God, the issue of what is clean versus unclean. The first episode of the pericope (7:1–23) stages the issue and culminates in a list of sinful elements coming from the heart that render one unacceptable before God. The second episode (7:24–30) illustrates what is acceptable to God and worthy of commendation by Jesus. In short, what is important to God is obedience to his commandments stemming from an inward, heartfelt devotion rather than the outward observance of man-made regulations. Thus, the outward

40. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 52.

41. For more details on this pericope, see Kuruvilla, *Mark*, 142–54. These studies on Mark’s Gospel in the Reflection sections in each chapter are intended not only to stimulate thought but also to serve as illustrations of the hermeneutic proposed in this work.



observance of man-made rules without inward, heartfelt compliance to the commandments of God renders one unacceptable before him.

The pericope commences with the disciples eating with unwashed hands. This galls the Pharisees, who question Jesus about the adherence of his disciples to tradition. While hand washing was enjoined only of priests in the Old Testament (Exod. 30:17–21; 40:30–32), ritual washings in the context of prayer are mentioned in several nonbiblical Jewish writings. These latter “traditions of the elders” (Mark 7:5) were supposed to have been delivered to Moses from God at Mount Sinai. Mark’s pointing to “many other things” (7:4) and “many similar things” (7:13) indicates that this imposition of humanly devised rules involved more than just hand-washing rituals. The long and short of it is that wherever they may come from, traditional human regulations, being outside the word of God, cannot constitute divine standards for morality.

On the other hand, Jesus’s concern is with the priority of obedience to divine commands arising from an inward, from-the-heart morality (7:6, 19, 21) over outward, self-righteous adherence to man-made laws. Three sets of antitheses expressed by Jesus bring this argument to the fore (7:8, 9, 13):

<i>Antithesis 1</i> (Mark 7:8)	Neglecting	the commandment	of God
	Holding	the traditions	of men
<i>Antithesis 2</i> (Mark 7:9)	Rejecting	the commandment	of God
	Establishing	tradition	your
<i>Antithesis 3</i> (Mark 7:13)	Annulling	the word	of God
	Passing down	tradition	your

The issue was not whether the disciples should obey the Old Testament laws but rather whether they needed to adhere to those nonbiblical rules developed in Pharisaical Judaism. What the Pharisees called the “tradition of elders” (in their question to Jesus in 7:5), Jesus labeled “precepts of *men*,” “tradition of *men*,” and “*your* tradition” (7:7, 8, 9, 13). In other words, Jesus challenged the default assumption of authority in those human traditions. So the fundamental contrast in this episode is the one in the last column of the table above: “of God” versus “of men/your.” It was clear which one was to be held preeminent. Unfortunately, the adoption of tradition by the Pharisees was producing a disregard for God’s commands. Theirs was an escalating degree of abandonment of God’s word: from “neglecting” (7:8) to “rejecting” (7:9) to “annulling” (7:13). Jesus’s stern accusation is that the commandments of God in his word have been rendered secondary to tradition. The Bible no longer came first!

Jesus provides an example in 7:10–11 of the contrast between “Moses said” and “you say,” the antithesis between God’s word and man’s tradition. The

stakes are raised considerably with the citation of a specific item of law from the Ten Commandments, the breaking of which incurred the death penalty: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). Here, a son’s resources, from which parents could reasonably expect support, were (apparently with Pharisaical approval) being declared “Corban,” an exclusive “offering” to God as “divine property.” This made it no longer accessible for such philanthropic purposes as parental support. Very cleverly, the vow was being used to avoid one’s responsibility to one’s parents so as to keep one’s own property intact. Thus the son calculatedly (and callously) evaded his *divinely* mandated responsibility to honor his parents by seeking refuge in a practice of *human* tradition.<sup>42</sup> This was a rejection of God’s commandment while adhering to a man-made regulation, all in the service of selfish gain: adherence to human tradition rather than devotion to God’s word.

It is interesting that the Pharisees, while feeling free “to abandon” (ἀφίημι, *aphiēmi*) God’s commandment (Mark 7:8), found it necessary not “to permit” (also ἀφίημι) the son to honor his parents in any fashion (7:12). In other words, for them, it was acceptable to reject God’s word but not acceptable to support one’s parents! The use of the same verb makes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees more vivid. What was a capital offense in the Mosaic law is not just being allowed but is being demanded by these tradition-bound officials.<sup>43</sup> This was a case of misplaced priorities, man-made regulations trumping God-ordained rules, man’s word surpassing God’s word. But no amount of punctilious keeping of human codes would find acceptability with God without submission to the mandates of the divine word. Acceptability to God begins with an inward attitude of devotion to divine commandments (7:19, 21); it is not the result of an outward, self-righteous adherence to human regulations.

In a striking juxtaposition of narratives, in 7:24–30 Mark provides an illustration of a woman—a gentile mother whose daughter had an unclean spirit (7:25–26), not one the Pharisees would ever have dreamed of considering pure. But with the healing of her daughter, this unlikely individual is found acceptable to Jesus because of her “answer” (λόγος, *logos*, 7:29), clearly a wordplay on what the tradition-bound Pharisees were “neglecting,” “rejecting,” and “annulling”: the “word” (also λόγος) of God (7:13; also 7:8, 9). It was not what unclean things went into the woman, or what her “unclean” genetic background was, or what unclean spirits lurked in her abode, that

42. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 352; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 286.

43. Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 342.

mattered, but what clean things came out of her, in this case the *λόγος*, reflecting her inward attitude. This is Mark's way of pointing out the devotion of this woman to God and his *λόγος*: in the only words she speaks, she herself produces *λόγος*, exactly what those Pharisees had been abandoning. And Jesus, in response, proclaims her daughter healed; and the woman, with her attitude of faith in Jesus, instantly obeys, departing for her house (7:28–30). She trusts in the only act of telemedicine that Jesus performs in this Gospel as she goes as Jesus commanded (7:29). This woman is the one who becomes acceptable to God, her inward, heartfelt devotion manifesting in obedience: she was a disciple, indeed, abiding by God's word!

Clearly, the Bible is to be what is preached and applied, heeded and obeyed, not tradition, not the rules of man, not the stipulations of culture. God takes a dim view of any attempt at the subversion and devaluation of his word. So, first and foremost, *preaching is biblical*. The centrality of Scripture in the life of the community of God cannot be overstated. Every facet of that community's faith and every one of its practices are to be biblical. Preachers have the primary responsibility of keeping Scripture at the forefront of all of their ministerial activities. The pulpit is the venue for this, the most public of preachers' responsibilities: it is here that the word is opened, read, explicated, and applied into the lives of listeners. And that activity must be wholly biblical.

- We must work hard at the discipline of studying the text. This, of course, means *time*! Do we budget adequate chunks of time for this endeavor? Are we conscientious in planning and working way ahead for our sermons? All kinds of exigencies will derail the preacher if preparation is put off till the last week and the last minute. Let's take the task of preaching seriously, respecting the text as God's word.
- How conscientious are we in ensuring that every pericope of Scripture is preached? It is easy to fall into the habit of preaching topically, catering to what is felt to be the need of the hour (or the comfort of the preacher). Part of what it means to affirm that preaching is biblical is to "read continuously" (*lectio continua*), respecting each pericope and the momentum of the book it is part of.
- If asked by an outsider, would our listeners say that we, their preachers, keep the Bible front and center in our sermons? Is that obvious to all who listen to us? Perhaps we should work to make it more obvious, both in our treatment of Scripture from the pulpit and by explicit statements to that effect in our sermons, prayers, and conversations.

- Our focus on Scripture must extend beyond the preaching endeavor. As preachers and leaders of our congregations, we must set this tone for all the other activities that go on in the church—children’s ministries, midweek Bible studies, missions activities, and so on. All of pastoral ministry, not just preaching, must be biblical.

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*Preaching Is Biblical!*

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