“Preach the Text or Preach the Gospel?”

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Anyone who has been to the Grand Canyon in Arizona knows that one comes upon it suddenly, the ground just drops away and some considerable distance across it continues on again. One might say that there is a Grand Canyon in homiletics today, though there has been almost no discussion of it. The terrain on both sides of the divide is similar but the divide is real and has large implications for the sermon, starting with the theme sentence. The divide is over this question: do we preach the text or do we preach the gospel?—The answer is both, but what is the difference?¹

Preachers will answer both ways and good arguments are on both sides. To say that we preach the text is natural because most teachers in biblical studies assume this stance. The unit of scripture or pericope is the source of the sermon and determines its direction. What the text communicates at its literal or plain level to its own people is what the sermon tries to communicate to listeners today. One seeks the Word of God in the intention of the original writer against the historical and cultural background of the time. The Bible says, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Having found the message in a biblical text through exegesis, one is ready to preach. The operating assumption here is that the word one finds in the text is the gospel. However, in the practical reality of today’s sermons, one cannot be confident that this is in fact the case.

The terrain on the preach-the-gospel side of the divide is much the same. Those who represent that position agree with their preach-the-text colleagues on most points and procedures, especially on starting with the text. They would agree that the bald way the above question is framed, Do we preach the text or the gospel? implies ‘either/or’ when the right answer is ‘both/and’, we preach the text and the gospel. However, those who argue preach-the-gospel disagree that the message one finds in a text is necessarily the gospel. It may be, but it may not be. Not every text immediately yields the gospel, and as Calvin noted, one needs the Holy Spirit to read it rightly. Every approach is a lens, a perspective, and the same is true for the gospel.

Scholars in neither camp believe that there is one objective meaning of a text and even the gospel meaning of a text is an interpretation. Still, the preach-the-gospel argument runs, when the text does not directly yield the gospel it needs to be treated as an essential lens to it, a portal if you like, that offers a way to read the larger Christian story so that the gospel comes into focus through it. Seen another way, the biblical texts are treasured windows through which the light of the gospel is projected upon and into the lives of the hearers.

Both positions are steeped in historical-critical and literary thought, yet preach-the-text is resistant to making God a deliberate focus where God may not be directly mentioned in a text. A

¹ This paper is compiled from various places in the second edition of Paul Scott Wilson, The Practice of Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press) that is to appear in June, 2007.
theological purpose of the text is often sought, yet no safeguards ensure it. The great Scottish preacher of the 1900s, James S. Stewart’s had a theological test of a sermon for a congregation: “Did they, or did they not, meet God today?” What does one preach when a text like the Good Samaritan does not mention God, as is true of many texts? Is Christ only to be mentioned when a text mentions Christ? Many experienced preach-the-text preachers in fact instinctively arrive at God, but there is nothing in their explicit exegetical or homiletical methods or sermon forms to ensure that they do or, more important, to instruct the student how to do this. Advocates of preach-the-gospel developed the kind of detailed theological exegetical method recommended earlier as a means to compensate for what was missing.

Edward Farley is one scholar who encourages preachers not to think narrowly about preaching a text or unit of Scripture, but to concentrate on the theological task of preaching the gospel and to allow it to set the themes of the sermon. James F. Kay and David Buttrick agree and have written papers that are among the best recent theological treatments of preaching.

The point here is plain, Christ commissioned the church to preach the gospel. Preachers must preach individual texts and often they do not contain the gospel, yet all texts in their own particularities can serve as windows to and from it. The texts are essential and vital starting points for biblical preaching; they are the means whereby preachers arrive at the gospel. Not all sermons based on the Bible are biblical, and many biblical sermons are not the gospel. Preaching is no better than the instruments one uses to guide its formation. If preachers do not look for God in texts, they may not find God. If they do not find God, how can they know they have found God’s word? Without a focus on God one can have no grace. Without a focus on grace one can have no gospel. Without a focus on gospel one cannot live up to the commission Christ gave to preach it. If preachers do not in some way seek the gospel, it may not be discerned.

**Hermeneutical Method**

The Grand Canyon in biblical preaching represents an important divide in current homiletical thought. Traditional biblical exegesis is essential; its limitations however are apparent in sermons that do not arrive at the gospel. Of course God can still use sermons on biblical history, ideas, characters, events and images yet they are likely to have only modest success in fanning the glowing embers of congregational faith if that is all they focus upon.

A basic requirement for a hermeneutical method is that it account for how the word of God in a previous age is the word of God today. Historical criticism can be argued never to have met this requirement. It tempts preachers to preach the text as history, without the gospel, yet in

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doing so preachers ironically ignore a historical truth: scripture is composed of texts that are not only of history but also of faith. In the 1950s at Union Seminary, Paul Scherer stated the matter in brilliant simplicity:

Do you realize that the Bible does not primarily invite us to any knowledge about God?... We are invited to meet God.

That’s what the Gospel is about. Nothing else…. If you want to try an experiment, take any page and strip it of God, as we strip our lives, down to the bone, with that infinite mind away somewhere, and that eternal heart just a grand perhaps. And all of a sudden you’ll be right back in the world that you know all too well, where a sower sowing his seed is just a sower sowing his seed, nothing more than that, where laborers stand idle in the market place, and where nothing is a parable because God hasn’t anything to do with any of it, and the whole place is stale, flat and unprofitable, and makes you sick.

The difference between us and these more stalwart souls of the Bible was simply this: that when they looked at the world they saw Him, when they listened to the Babel of the world’s voices they heard His voice. Everywhere in their days there was something God wanted them to do….  

In other words, until preachers read their texts theologically, looking for God, viewing individuals in the Bible as people of faith and doubt for whom salvation is a possibility, the texts are not being read as they were historically intended to be read, which is the goal of historical critical readings.

Still, awareness of this great divide in homiletics is not great, if one is to judge from the academic literature. There may be good reasons for this seeming silence. First, awareness of the problem is relatively recent; homiletics has been shifting from propositional preaching to the New Homiletic and attention has been focused on all of the implications of this. The focus has been on how communication is made, however, not on the theological nature of the message. Second, historical critical method is still the best means of getting deep into a biblical text in its historical setting to discover what it says, even if something more is often needed by way of getting to what also matters, namely theological criticism. Third, some students might erroneously take any criticism of exegetical method by their teachers as justification not to practice it.

Finally, teachers of historical criticism seem not to comment on its weaknesses as a hermeneutical approach. Perhaps they are not aware of it or matters of the Word of God are beyond the boundaries of their discipline. They may have a different understanding of gospel than the one understood here. Or they may equate God’s word from a text with the gospel, perhaps because many texts have an obvious gospel component. With those other biblical texts

that may be in the majority, either preachers may have learned at some intuitive or other unstated level to compensate, or they have come to accept the status quo as normal, thus they may see no need to correct the basic approach. Truth be told, no homiletical method is failsafe, and something important can be learned from most approaches.

Both preach-the-text and preach-the-gospel are presented here because in fact, one needs to preach the text to preach the gospel. Students will be better preachers for knowing the strong arguments on both sides. Here we make the case for preaching the gospel as the much-needed next stage of homiletical development beyond the New Homiletic. It involves one’s entire approach to preaching.

The Theme Sentence

The difference between the two biblical stances can be quickly demonstrated in relation to a theme sentence for the sermon. Most writers today think of the theme sentence in double-barreled ways,6 in other words, two related statements take the place of the former notion of a theme sentence. Tom Long and Fred Craddock are in the preach-the-text school and advocate that sermon direction comes from the preacher answering two questions, What is the text saying? and, What is the text doing? As Craddock says,

This question [i.e. What is the text doing?] is not only identifying the nature and function of the text but is also providing an early guideline for the sermon to come. After all, the preacher will want to be clear not only about what is being said in the sermon but also about what is being done in the sermon. And just as one’s message is informed by what the text is saying, the sermon’s function is informed by what the text is doing. If, for example, one were to state as what the text is saying, ‘Every Christian is a charismatic,’ and as what the text is doing, ‘Encouraging those believers who felt second-class,’ then content and tone and purpose of the sermon have come into focus.”7

Long argues that this double variation of the traditional theme sentence makes the sermon eventful and avoids the propositional dominance of an idea-centered approach. Texts not only have a message, they have a rhetorical intention; they make a claim and seek an effect.8 This is in line with the New Homiletic shift in preaching emphasis from what the sermon says to what it does. A bridge connects the historical text and the sermon, and the preacher is to carry over from the text what it says and does.9


The strength of this approach is obvious. The event captured in this approach is the event of the text, “the eventfulness of the text is expressed in the claim of the text, which then guides the eventfulness of the sermon.”10 “[S]omething happens between text and people; a claim is made, a voice is heard, a textual will is exerted, and the sermon will be a bearing witness to this event.”11 This approach gives to the text rhetorical freedom to determine the direction of the sermon.

By comparison, those who stress ‘preach the gospel’ treat the sermon first and foremost as God’s event, not the text’s. This approach also uses a double-barreled adaptation of a theme sentence. It asks, What is God doing in or behind the text? (i.e., in the larger story if God is not directly mentioned) and, What is God doing today? The answer to the first is designated the major concern of the text because the preacher will treat it as though it is the main route to the heart of the text’s original meaning (in fact there are other possibilities). The answer to the second is designated as the major concern of the sermon because the preacher uses that as the main bridge across which to transport the significance of the text today.

This approach ensures that the sermon will deal with the text in responsible ways and will also teach about God and God’s relationship to humanity and creation. God will be the center. Jana Childers says that some years ago she freed herself of the enormous burden to come up with something original in every sermon. She discovered, “it is more important to say something timely than something original….God was not expecting a fresh new insight every time I preached…. [The congregation] didn’t need me to invent new spiritual gadgets for them; they needed to hear the connection made between their worlds and God’s…. The purpose of a theme sentence is to help you keep your focus, not advertise the erudition of your sermon.”12

Focusing on God ensures that the sermon can foster a relationship with the triune God. It ensures the eventfulness of the sermon by focusing on an action of God. Without this it is easy to imply that God is remote and abstract, indifferent, impersonal, passive or apparently irrelevant; propositions can become dominant. In cases in which God does not seem to be the subject of the text, this approach helps the preacher still to find God. The text remains one’s primary authority

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9 Michael J. Quicke is critical of the bridge as an overall image or model of the sermon (a 180 degree model) because it misleads preachers “into thinking that they bear all the responsibility to connect the two poles.” He wants a bigger, Trinitarian picture. Michael J. Quicke, 360 Degree Preaching; Hearing, Speaking and Living the Word (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; & Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2003), 48. Nancy Lamers Gross is also critical of the bridge metaphor, for a different reason, it implies a rigid progression from the text to the sermons when the pattern is more like swinging back and forth. See her, If You Cannot Preach Like Paul… (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 74-76, 83, 114-115. Charles L. Campbell may well be arguing against the notion of bridges when he calls for the meaning of texts to be found within the logic and language of the texts themselves, never straying too far from the world of the text. His important argument centers on Jesus Christ. Charles L. Campbell: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997).

10 Long, 108.

11 Long, 97.

for preaching yet Christ’s mandate to preach the gospel determines the sermon direction. In short, this approach understands the gospel to be the rhetorical purpose of the text.

What is God doing in or behind the text? Texts have many meanings or senses and each lens that a preacher uses yields other meanings; this one we may call the God sense of the text. Preachers face a problem however: a God focus is ensured but does this in itself ensure that the gospel will be proclaimed? No, it does not. One can say many things about God without ever getting to the gospel. Indeed one can teach many things about even the gospel and still stop short of performing the gospel, allowing it to be transformative in the lives of listeners. However, an essential place to start is in ensuring that the theme sentence will have a gospel focus by focusing on God’s grace.

Preaching as the Gospel

In order for preaching to establish a relationship with the triune God and for it to be an event of God’s encounter it needs to proclaim the gospel. Christ commissioned the church to preach the gospel, and God’s promise to meet us in the sermon can be said to be dependent upon that. The Word of God needs to be preached, not some other word. What is the gospel? This seemingly obvious question now needs deliberate focus because we live in a postmodern era and all assumptions are challenged. Such questioning provides a fresh opportunity for preachers to reexamine what they do.

The gospel is literally good news. It centers on God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, an announcement or proclaiming of the saving acts that God has done, is doing and will do. The gospel is contained in the Bible and the ancient creeds of the church are an attempt to state it, as are many prayers, hymns and songs. The gospel can be summarized, but one needs the entire Bible to communicate it adequately. It is not narrowly confined to the New Testament, the good news is found wherever God acts with saving power, there is one God in both Testaments, yet the character of that saving power is fully disclosed in Christ. The gospel is not identical to the Bible; God’s Word needs to be sought in Scripture (some readings are not the church’s). As Luther said, the Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid; if one seeks the gospel in Scripture one avoids making an idol of the Bible.

The gospel is centered in Jesus Christ, yet not narrowly so to the exclusion of the other persons of the Trinity, as can seem to be the case in some worship settings where Jesus alone is mentioned, where prayers are addressed to Jesus rather than to God in the name of Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Where Christomonism reigns, Jesus may become a kind of idol.

The gospel is a scandal. It is perhaps natural to avoid the scandal or stumbling block of the resurrection. Paul identifies the problem when he says, “but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [skandalon] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). It is an embarrassment to the postmodern mind that we need a Savior, that this Savior happened to come as a male, that he ate with sinners, that he refused to defend himself, that he died the death of a common criminal, that he died for us, that he rose from the dead, that he sits at the right hand of God, and that he will come again at the end of time, that we drink his blood and eat his body to our salvation. In a casual conversation recently about the future of the church, someone suggested that it needs to put less emphasis on Jesus and more on other things, like the Bahavaghita, in
order to attract youth. The church could try any number of innovative practices, yet Paul said, We have nothing but Christ to preach and if Christ did not rise from the dead then we are fools indeed.

The gospel is an announcement of a new age. Something happened on the cross. The world is different. What died with Jesus on the cross was the power of the old ways of violence and degradation, abuse and humiliation, injustice and greed. They rule no more. While we are yet at what James F. Kay calls the “turn of the age”, and while even our preaching still has one foot in that old age, the other foot is firmly planted in the new creation. Proclamation of the gospel is like midnight on New Year’s Eve at Times Square every Sunday. Preaching not only heralds the death of the old age, in preaching the cross it ushers in the new. That make the power of the cross not just a past event but a now event in preaching.

Kay, drawing on Paul, puts the matter well: “If the turn of the ages has taken place in the cross and continues to take place in the work of the cross, then what is required of preachers are not simply illustrations from history and nature, but illustrations that place history and nature, indeed all of life, into the crisis of the cross.” By crisis of the cross he means see things new: “What assumptions of the old world are called into question by the new?” Thus every image, story, and experience in the sermon needs to be viewed from this two-world perspective.

Preaching the gospel means to preach God's future, to picture in sermons the new age with vivid images of a world reconciled in God’s love. David Buttrick argues that eschatology ought not just inform preaching, but assist preachers in preaching boldly about social injustice in the present. As he says, “Let us paint images of the new creation on an age that seems tumbling down. Although the age may well tumble, our images are painted on the eternal mystery of God and, therefore, sure.”

Finally, one may think of the gospel as the doorway to faith. There may be no better place for people to stand or stumble in their faith journeys than at the empty tomb asking, Is the One put to death on a cross as testified in Scripture the same One whom I have met today? Is Jesus of Nazareth dead or alive? If he is dead he remains the Jesus of history, but if he is alive he is acknowledged as the Christ of faith. If the answer is yes, a God who works other seemingly lesser miracles need be no real stumbling block. If the answer seems no, the matter rests between the individual and God and love remains.

The Gospel Has Form

Because of the centrality of the resurrection for the good news, does this mean that every sermon will bring the same news, like endless deliveries of yesterday’s newspaper? Yes and no: yes in that Christian preaching is Christ-centered and the cross has saving power. No in that


14 Ibid., 50

preaching texts vary and how the gospel is proclaimed in relationship to specific occasions will
vary widely from week to week. Listeners also vary in their needs and this too adds variety;
Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., and Ronald J. Allen, speak of “one gospel, many ears.”

Homileticians made a key discovery in recent decades: the gospel is not just content, it
has a form and effect. It is the story of what happened at the turn of time in the life, death,
resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The good news continues to happen whenever we
preach these events. Stories have structure and can be told in various ways but the key elements
remain the same. Psalms, hymns, parables, letters—they all have basic structural and stylistic
features that mark them as separate genres. The same is true of gospel, it is a genre. It may be told
and retold in many different ways, from the perspective offered by individual biblical texts, but
the basic story, the underlying movement, the final outcome remains the same. A new age has
dawned that exists alongside the remnants of the old, yet the end is already in sight.

The scholarly battle has already been won that determined the meaning of a text is
affected by its form: form, content and rhetorical effect are intimately related. Another issue
remains. Homileticians have now claimed that the same arguments that were applied to literary
genres of the Bible apply to the gospel genre at the heart of the faith. The gospel has a form, its
movement from crucifixion to resurrection is related to its content, and these contribute toward its
rhetorical and spiritual effect. To deny that the gospel has a form can only be at the expense of
communicating the gospel effectively. Gerhard O. Forde was getting at the form of the gospel
when he said the preacher’s words “have the form of the cross, presuppose it, drive inexorably to
it, and flow from it…cut[ting] in upon our lives to end the old and begin the new.” Because the
gospel has content, form and effect, the implications for the sermon are large.

It became clear that to preach the gospel is not just a matter of adding some gospel words
to a sermon, the way people add pepper to soup to enhance flavor. Gospel is not just a surface
matter of sprinkling a few references to Christ here and there. The sermon needs something of the
bold plot, movement, and shape of the gospel, not to mention language, imagery and emotion of
the cross and empty tomb. It needs some of the cross’s way of putting the old norms to death as
well as some of the resurrection’s way of inaugurating a new era.

Sermons have many varieties of exterior form. Most of them function well as potential
vehicles for the gospel and most of them can be employed to display a movement from trouble to
grace, because most of them are concerned with exterior form. The argument made here is that
content form and effect of the gospel provide the sermon with deep structure, a grammar and
movement. In other words, to preach the gospel does not reduce the number of sermon forms
available, it enhances what each is able to express. This is said with one exception—the single
exposition/application format tends to predispose the sermon to either trouble or grace, not both,
thus at least in its overall structure it seems to have least gospel potential.

16 Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., and Ronald J. Allen, One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the
Congregation (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002).

17 Gerhard O. Forde, Theology is for Proclamation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 15.
Some preachers may resist the idea that the gospel is polar, that it is cruciform and that something of this form needs to be present in its communication. Since biblical form is a necessary part of a text’s meaning, it follows that the form of the gospel is important for it as well. Scholars can be committed both to preach the gospel and to respect the integration of form, content and rhetorical effect of biblical texts, yet still deny that the gospel has a form. However, one cannot safely presume that the gospel is present when one preaches a text. When we make this assumption we need to discuss gospel in a significant manner, explain what we mean by it, show in what ways it operates in our homiletic, indicate how it is present in any of the forms we use or recommend, and give guidance to help students get to the gospel in their preaching. Instead nearly all of us teaching homilies have been silent on these matters: we have been schooled in preach-the-text and are more complacent than we should be in matters of preach-the-gospel.

**Beyond Preach-The-Text**

The problem of preaching the gospel also arises with the contemporary understanding of preach-the-text that treats texts as though they are isolated units or pericopes cut off from the larger story. Other ages had different understandings of text and they had their own flaws. However the problem is larger even than this and it has to do with the offense of the cross at the center of the faith. Mary Donovan Turner speaks for some seminaries when she laments, “Who among our community talks openly about the resurrection?” It seems to be connected with “evangelistic zeal and fervor”. James F. Kay wonders if “without a saving cross, would the Christian message still be Christian?”

Arguably only in the last century or so has preaching the gospel been diminished as an objective of critical scholarly endeavor in biblical departments. Preach-the-text became the dominant twentieth-century emphasis and the New Homiletic christened it if only by uncritical assumptions concerning it. While its ongoing strengths are plainly evident in rendering a trustworthy text understood against the backdrop of its own times, its theological limitations only gradually became clear: the gospel was often missed. Or rather the gospel was hit and miss: sermons in the New Homiletic might proclaim the gospel, but this as a practice was rarely discussed, it was not named as the preaching goal, and methodology was not developed for obtaining it.

Using the gospel as a lens to read texts is one of the least discussed practices in contemporary homilies yet it is one of the most important and vital steps for preachers to learn. There is not space in this paper to explore it but a full gospel hermeneutic is needed that has three critical dimensions: a) seek the gospel in the text itself; b) bring the text to the cross and

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18 See Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 53-54.


resurrection to see how the meaning of the text is altered in light of Easter; and c) bring the larger gospel story to the text to discover echoes of it there.

For all of the continuing centrality of historical criticism for the pulpit, and for all of the ongoing need for preachers to do careful exegesis for the pulpit, preaching has perhaps been too closely wedded to biblical studies to depart from it significantly. In any case, preachers need to learn from the New Homiletic and move ahead. One important step is to reclaim in a contemporary way some of the theological ground of past preachers, without making their mistakes. If preaching is to be for renewal, liberation and transformation what may be needed is a new ability to proclaim the gospel.