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Preach the Bible

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Abstract: *It is sometimes argued that to preach the Bible simply means to faithfully "re-say" what any given text of Scripture says, whether such speech may (in the spirit of 2 Tim 3:16) take the form of teaching, instructing, admonishing, correcting, etc. This article argues, both on biblical-terminological and theological grounds, for a much more specific understanding of what it means to preach the Bible. It is, namely, to proclaim "the word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18)—the gospel of Jesus Christ— from any and every text of Scripture. Other Scripture-based speech is important and vital for the Christian community, but only the act by which the Holy Spirit gives Jesus through the proclamation of Jesus is what the Bible means by "preach." Implications and applications are offered.*

Key Words: *expository, gospel, ontology of Scripture, preach, preaching, Reformation, Reformers, sermon(s),* κηρύσσω

> Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take what is yours.
>
> ~Martin Luther[1]

What does it mean to "preach the Bible"? Perhaps we could start with our resurrected Lord: When Jesus preaches the Bible, what does he preach? Of course, the Emmaus Road was no church, and before Jesus was no pulpit. However, the significance of what is recorded in Luke 24 for preaching cannot be overstated, both because of its hermeneutical and homiletical implications, and because it propels us into the second volume of Luke-Acts, where there *is*, undeniably, a record of the first instances of Christian preaching.

"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

[1] Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Fortress, 1958), 213.

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).[2] "Moses and all the Prophets" is shorthand for the entirety of the Hebrew Bible ("all the Scriptures"), corroborated by the exclamation of the two hearers who later testify, "he opened to us the Scriptures" (v. 32).[3] The *content* of Jesus's Bible-based speech is "all things concerning himself." Its *effect* was to make the hearts of his hearers "burn within" (v. 32). Such an effect helps us realize that we are beyond the borders of mere Bible study, mere teaching. Hearts burn in the land of sermons. Jesus has preached the Bible. So when Jesus preaches the Bible, what does he preach? Well, he preaches Jesus.

When the phrase "preach the Bible" is deployed in many of our contexts, what do *we* mean? Some may argue that preaching the Bible involves merely re-saying—in proclamatory manner and through exposition and application—whatever the biblical text says in any given passage. To preach the Bible is to faithfully communicate what is directly on the page. But does faithfully re-saying whatever a Bible passage says qualify as *preaching*? I will argue that in many instances it does not. *My claim is that to preach the Bible is to engage in a specific, boundaried speech-act—namely, gospel-proclamation—differentiated from other modes of Bible-based ministry (often also performed through speaking) such as admonition, teaching, exhortation, ethical instruction, and the like.* I will build this argument by working through three movements. First, aided by the discipline of worship studies I will examine the early history of Christian preaching with special attention to its Jewish origins. Second, I will briefly survey and analyze what the NT communicates when it uses the language of "preaching." Third, I will engage the theological resources on preaching, especially from the Reformation, which bring the argument all together. I will then move into a final section which will attempt to provide tools and guidelines for this vision of preaching the Bible.

Before we embark, we might ask: Is the definition I propose above not immediately confronted by perhaps *the* classic text on preaching, 2 Tim 3:10–4:5? There the apostle encourages his young protégé that "all Scripture" is "profitable" for a variety of things, including the ministries

[2] All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

[3] Though we will not revisit this text, I find it noteworthy that we have here in v. 32 a compact rendering of what we will argue makes a sermon *preaching*. First, it is from out of the "Scriptures" (τὰς γραφάς). Second, it is an "opening" (διανοίγω) of them to reveal Jesus. Third, it is directly received: "to us" (ἡμῖν).

which I above differentiated from preaching (3:16).[4] Paul then moves into a formal and solemn "charge"[5] (4:1) with a series of five imperatives: "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort" (4:2). Two interpretive possibilities are before us. On the one hand, we could see 4:2 as offering one central imperative, "preach the word," with the other four modifying and expanding that directive.[6] In other words, Timothy is to preach, and he is to do so *in* a state of readiness and *by* reproving, rebuking, and exhorting. Particularly the latter three imperatives, in this view, provide preaching's mode and content. Reproving, rebuking, and exhorting become possible ways of preaching. On the other hand, we could see Paul's words as a series of independent but related imperatives. In this view, to "preach the word" is a distinct ministry, with the other three speech-oriented works of reproof, rebuke, and training as separate forms of Scripture-based (3:16) ministry, which function on their own but additionally serve to protect the purity and clarity of the preached word.[7] Here, I am arguing for the latter perspective, but all views may concede that for this passage, neither grammar nor syntax necessarily closes off either interpretive possibility. Other biblical-theological arguments must be added (including especially what ὁ λόγος means in Paul's thought) in order to make a claim about what this particular passage might or might not say about the form and content of preaching the Bible.

In sum, then, I am arguing that though the Bible is profitable for all the things listed in 2 Tim 3:16 and 4:2, and though ministers of the Word should be engaging those Scripture-based, largely speech-oriented ministries, to "preach the word" (which I will identify with what it means to "preach the Bible") is something distinct. A sermon may include teaching, admonishment, reproof, and correction, but biblically and theologically speaking, it is not "preaching the Bible" until the gospel is proclaimed and Christ is offered or given.

[4] Many commentators describe well the multivalent richness of the Scripture-based ministries of "teaching" (διδασκαλία), "reproof" (ἐλεγμός), "correction" (ἐπανόρθωσις), and "training" (παιδεία). Two such helpful treatments are Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC (Hendrickson, 1988), 279–80; and Stanley E. Porter, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Baker, 2023), 647–48. For an intriguing complement, see William D. Mounce who points out the chiastic structure of the four ministries (*Pastoral Epistles,* WBC [Thomas Nelson, 2000], 570).

[5] I. Howard Marshall (*The Pastoral Epistles,* ICC [T&T Clark, 1999], 798) and Philip Towner (*The Letters to Timothy and Titus,* NICNT [Eerdmans, 2006], 595) identify this as installment ceremony language—a formal "charge" (διαμαρτύρομαι) in the presence of a credible witness (in this case, Jesus). Mounce notes, additionally, that the aorist tense of the five imperatives gives "a serious tone appropriate for the pronouncements" (*Pastoral Epistles,* 572–73).

[6] See Fee, who describes the first imperative as "the rubric for all the others" (284), and the final three imperatives as "related to the various aspects of his task as a proclaimer of the Word" (*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 285).

[7] See Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles,* 799; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 573; Towner, *Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 600–602; Porter, *Pastoral Epistles*, 653–55.

"Preach the Bible" in Historical Perspective

Nearly all historians distinguish between the worship practices of ancient Israel and those of Judaism, locating the evolution from the former to the latter most broadly within the time spanning from the centralization of the kingdom and cultus in Jerusalem, through the exile, and into the Second Temple period. Generally speaking, Israelite worship centered on animal sacrifice whereas Judaism centered on prayer and supplication.[8] Emerging out of this change in worship from Israel's sacrifice-centered orientation to Judaism's prayer-centered orientation is a new kind of liturgical practice: the sermon.[9] Though it is surely false to say that nothing like preaching happened in ancient Israel,[10] what we now think of as a sermon finds its most direct ancestor in Jewish worship practice. Any inquiry into our own traditions as to what it means to "preach the Bible" must start here, with Jewish origins.

[8] Jon D. Levenson states: "Judaism is the tradition of the synagogue and the yeshivah, not of the Temple, the tradition of prayer and learning rather than of sacrifice" ("From Temple to Synagogue: 1 Kings 8," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith,* ed. B. Halpern and Jon D. Levenson [Eisenbrauns, 1981], 165). Interestingly, Levenson identifies 1 Kgs 8:23–53 as a "pivotal text in the transition from Israelite faith to Judaism and Christianity" (p. 164).

[9] See Gerhard von Rad, "The Levitical Sermon in 1 and 2 Chronicles," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays,* trans. E. Dicken (McGraw-Hill, 1966), 279.

[10] Allen Ross demonstrates that the sacrifice-centric worship of ancient Israel was filled with proclamation of the Word of God (even during the sacrificial act), such that we cannot say that proclamation of the Word "began" with the synagogue or late Levitical practice. In fact, it may be at least a slight misnomer to identify Israel with a "sacrifice-centered" cultus. Ross would remind us that, biblically speaking, the core of ancient Israel's worship was the proclamation of the Word of God and that sacrifice itself was always joined with (in fact, was a form of) proclamation (Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* [Kregel, 2006], 142–46, 152, 173–74, 177–78). See also Levenson, "Temple," 165. Something about this continuity reveals a close alignment between proclamation of the Word of God and a theology of sacrifice, the connection of which is creatively explored by Peter J. Leithart, *Theopolitan Liturgy* (Athanasius, 2019), 51–78.

The rise of the synagogue in the Second Temple period is perhaps the single most visible monument to this slow, multi-faceted liturgical revolution from Israel's sacrifice to Jewish prayer.[11] Most worship historians and biblical scholars agree that what took place in Second Temple synagogues had a profound effect on early Christian liturgical practice, particularly preaching.[12] The NT reports that many of the first Jewish believers continued to attend synagogue gatherings even after conversion.[13] Earlier scholarship expressed confidence in what we can know about the shape and content of those gatherings, even sketching potential reconstructions of first-century synagogue liturgies.[14] More recent scholarship, however, urges caution. Paul Bradshaw argues persuasively that we have far more clarity about the development and content of synagogue liturgies *after* the first century, which is often too confidently read backward into the era of the early church.[15] It is more likely that first-century synagogue gatherings were far less liturgically formal. In fact, as Andrew McGowan argues, until the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, "first-century synagogues were not primarily liturgical centers; the temple was still the real hub of Jewish worship."[16] Based on the NT accounts and on sources such as Josephus

[11] The language of "liturgical revolution" is borrowed from Peter J. Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Canon Press, 2003).

[12] Levine argues that there were two kinds of gathering spaces for Jews in this period—the synagogue and the *proseuche*—the former being dominant in the Judean communities with the far more broad purpose as a meeting-house for many kinds of purposes beyond the religious, and the latter dominant in the diaspora communities, which seemed to have a more regularly focused "religious dimension" (Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* [Yale University Press, 2000], 128). This distinction, for my purposes, is less important to observe, and I will continue referring to "synagogue" practice as inclusive of our understanding of what happens in both spaces when the purpose of the gathering is for scriptural teaching and dialogue.

[13] Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14–15, 42–43; 14:1; 17:1–2, 10, 17; 18:4, 7–8, 19; 19:8

[14] E.g., Paul Philip Levertoff, "Synagogue Worship in the First Century," in *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion*, ed. W. K. Lowther Clarke (SPCK, 1932), 60–77. For a recent re-articulation of this approach, see Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Kregel, 2006), 356–66 (noting especially 363n18).

[15] Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 23–33.

[16] Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Baker, 2014), 67.

and Philo,[17] it is likely that first-century synagogue gatherings in Judea and surrounding regions resembled far more what we might stylize today as a Bible study.[18] Apparently, such gatherings had no previous or contemporaneous analogue in any other religion. "By the first century, a weekly ceremony featuring the communal reading and study of holy texts had become a universal Jewish practice. It was a unique feature in the ancient world; no such form of worship was known in paganism."[19]

Those Scripture-centered synagogue gatherings, therefore, were not quite what we would call "worship services," but practiced in them was a form of authoritative speech. The form and content of such speaking would influence what later centuries would recognize as Christian preaching.[20] Evidence strongly suggests that such synagogue "preaching" was conversational, rather than "a formalized, univocal activity led by one uninterrupted orator."[21] Still, when the "preacher" was speaking, do we know anything of what it was like?

We know with more certainty that in later centuries synagogue preaching had developed formal styles and patterns.[22] Those ancient synagogue homilies may shed light on what first century Christian preaching was like, especially if we are willing to consider the scholars who see connections

[17] E.g., Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:16, 31–33; John 6:59. Josephus, Antiquitates Judaicae 16.43; Contra Apionem 2.175; Philo, De somniis 2.127; Moses 2.216–217; Hypothetica 7.13; De Vita Contemplativa 30–31.

[18] Bradshaw writes, "It seems to have been an assembly for the primary purpose of studying a portion of the Torah on every Sabbath and festival (at which some praying might also have been done) that was a regular feature of the synagogue from the outset, and may even have constituted *the* fundamental reason for the emergence of that institution" (*Origins,* 36, emphasis original).

[19] Levine, *Synagogue*, 139. See also Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 90.

[20] According to McGowan, it is not until the fourth century when historical records visualize sermons as resembling what we know—i.e., formal orations from a single person to a non-speaking listenership in the context of a worship service comprised of formal elements (*Worship,* 62–65).

[21] McGowan, *Worship,* 70. If such conversational practice did have an influence on the first-century church worship gatherings, it might possibly provide part of the backdrop for the Corinthian problem related to the chaos of prophecy and tongues addressed by Paul in 1 Cor 14 (McGowan, *Worship,* 74–75).

[22] See William Richard Stegner, "The Ancient Jewish Synagogue Homily," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament,* ed. David E. Aune (Scholars Press, 1988), 51–70.

between Jewish preaching and certain NT texts.[23] Such Jewish homilies appear to be a combination of exposition and explanation of a text or texts, with a move toward application by way of admonishment, and potentially a Messianic conclusion. They would have interacted with several disparate but related texts of Scripture, likely assigned from some type of lectionary.[24]

If indeed the synagogue homily shaped early Christian preaching, we can say that from the beginning Christian homiletics was influenced by traditions which took seriously the exposition, interpretation, and application of Scripture. Expository preaching as we know it today bears strong resemblance to this ancestor.[25] And bringing together such evidence, it seems that the landscape of Christian preaching is wide enough to include modes of speech identified earlier from 2 Timothy as teaching, training, exhorting, reproving, and rebuking. Even more, Christian history bears this out. By the time we *do* have records of formal Christian preaching, such sermons, whether by Tertullian, Origen, Chrysostom, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, or Augustine, contain the full spectrum of speech just noted.[26] At least in practice, then, early Christianity would support an understanding of what it means to preach the Bible as much wider than my proposed narrow focus on preaching as gospel-proclamation. Even so, what we will discuss below will press a question: Can all these modes of Scripture-based sermonic speech be rightly categorized as forms of "preaching the Bible" if, on the one hand, the Scriptures themselves demonstrate something more focused when they use the terminology of "preaching," and if, on the other hand, the Bible is understood theologically as existing, to say *one thing*? The next two sections will handle each of

[23] E.g., Peder Borgen sees Jewish homiletical patterns present in the Gospel of John (*Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* [Brill, 1981]); and Gabriella Gelardini who observes considerable overlap in structure, language, and liturgical locale between the book of Hebrews and later synagogue homilies ("Hebrews, An Ancient Synagogue Homily for *Tisha Be-Av:* Its Function, Its Basis, Its Theological Interpretation," in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods, New Insights,* ed. Gabriella Gelardini [Brill, 2005], 107–27). Of course, my argument above rests on the conclusion that both these NT texts were written in the first century, with which I acknowledge not all agree.

[24] See esp. Stegner, "Homily."

[25] McGowan's admonition, however, that we should be cautious about easy anachronisms that fashion ancient preaching "in the image of modern homiletics" should be taken seriously (*Worship,* 72).

[26] Wendy Mayer summarizes such patristic preaching under two broad characteristics: moral and ethical teaching, and scriptural exegesis. See her "Preaching and Listening in Latin? Start Here," in *Preaching in the Patristic Era: Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West*, ed. Anthony Dupont et al. (Brill, 2018), 13.

these "ifs" in turn.[27]

"Preach the Bible" in New Testament Perspective

The previous section took us into the NT world of preaching, and though we engaged some of the scriptural data historically, we will now do so from a biblical-theological perspective. The NT does not merely record the earliest history of preaching, it also makes theological claims about what "preaching the Bible" is and is not. One could make the case that we should begin with the preaching of Jesus himself. This indeed would be tempting, given that the content of his first recorded sermon in Luke 4 appears to be nothing other than a "Christocentric" message where Jesus proclaims himself (v. 21) from the biblical text of Isaiah (vv. 18–19). Move on to other sermons, though, such as Matthew 5–7, and the hearer is hard-pressed to find any Christocentrism apart from the fact that Jesus himself is preaching the message. Strange as it sounds, we may have good reason to exclude the sermons of Jesus in developing a biblical understanding of Christian preaching. Rudoph Bultmann's now classic argument about the Christian kerygma, though contested and compromised in many of its finer points, remains relevant to our discussion in its broad thesis:

> Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian kerygma; i.e. a kerygma proclaiming Jesus Christ—specifically Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen one…. He was first so proclaimed in the kerygma of the earliest Church, not in the message of the historical Jesus, even though that Church frequently introduced into its account of Jesus' message, motifs of its own proclamation.[28]

[27] I acknowledge that in this section we have utterly ignored *non*-Jewish influences on early Christian preaching, such as the Greek rhetorical traditions, which certainly had an impact, both positively and negatively (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–2:5). Part of the reason for such exclusion is that we are focusing on the topic of preaching *the Bible*—engaging in speech *from* the scriptural text—which is, as we have observed, uniquely Jewish in origin. Nevertheless, the influence of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, especially on Christian preaching after the first century, is well attested (cf. Mayer, "Preaching," 11–27).

[28] Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* 2 vols, trans. Kendrick Grobel (Baylor University Press, [1951] 2007), 3. We should be clear that Bultmann is using the phrase, "Christian faith," in a narrow, literal, and technical sense. As I interact with his thought, I am not saying that, theologically speaking,

In other words, the proclaimed message *about Christ* could not be faith-creating (Rom 10:17) "preaching" (κήρυγμα) until the deeds to be proclaimed—his death and resurrection—were done. Christ "the preacher must become the preached."[29] This insight led Bultmann to notice in the NT the emergence of language that would be indicative of the specific character of truly *Christian* preaching. Such language orbits around two terms, κηρύσσω and εὐαγγελίζω, and their cognates.[30] In fact, Bultmann observes, as the Hellenistic Christian community adopts the broader culture's terminology of εὐαγγελίζω (originally a more general term for any kind of heralded proclamation), it transforms the word into a precise and "technical term for the Christian proclamation" to the end that, in the NT writings, εὐαγγελίζω "is, in use, completely synonymous with" κηρύσσω.[31] In other words, in the New Testament, "to preach" *means* "to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ." Let us observe this claim in action.

Κηρύσσω occurs sixty-one times in the New Testament. In the Gospels and Acts, Jesus's own ministry is characterized as a ministry of κηρύσσω (Matt 4:17; Luke 3:3; 4:18, 19). At this point, an important distinction should be made. On the one hand, we have the pre-crucifixion "sermons" of Jesus (like those mentioned above), delivered in public and in the synagogue. On the other hand, we have what the post-resurrection Christian Gospel-writers would later recognize, through theological reflection on the revelation that is Jesus's death and resurrection, as Jesus's own ministry of κηρύσσω. In other words, on the other side of the resurrection, the Gospel-writers recognize more clearly what they were coming to understand earlier: Jesus is more than a Jewish rabbi; Jesus *is* the gospel's gift, and as he himself had been present in his own acts of teaching and proclamation, κηρύσσω was taking place. So, the Gospel-writers describe, as Jesus enters the synagogues he "preaches the gospel of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14). As he commissions the disciples, he

saving faith in Jesus was not possible prior to the death and resurrection of Christ. Israelite believers were in fact drinking the same spiritual drink from the Rock of Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Rather, Bultmann is more technically asserting that Christian faith *post-resurrection* was absolutely dependent on what he understands to be the NT kerygma.

[29] Gerhard Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation: Dialogue with Bultmann* (Fortress, 1966), 73. Earlier, Ebeling concurs with Bultmann: "kerygma in the strict sense of the word, is christological kerygma, which the proclamation of Jesus was of course not" (p. 42).

[30] We could also include here καταγγέλλω, often translated "to proclaim," with its emphasis more on public declaration. It appears eighteen times in the NT (concentrated solely in Acts and Paul), and maps very well onto what we will observe about the specificity of κηρύσσω and εὐαγγελίζω.

[31] Bultmann, *Theology,* 87.

tells them to do the same kingdom-preaching (Matt 10:7; Acts 20:25; 28:31). Jesus's preaching of this gospel is characterized as effecting "remission of sins" (Luke 24:47), "repentance" (Mark 6:12), "deliverance" (Luke 4:18), and "the year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19). Noticing these effects helps us to see how narrowly the term "preach" is being defined. Are sin-remission, repentance, and deliverance the effects of mere exhortation, admonition, or teaching? No, they are the effects of speech far more specific—the giving of the gospel. When one is "preached" to, one is given the Jesus who effects all these things. This makes sense, then, of the language used once the apostles themselves begin their own ministry of κηρύσσω. Their preaching is summarized as "preaching *Christ*." Philip "preached Christ" (ἐκήρυσσεν … τὸν Χριστόν) in Samaria (Acts 8:5). Upon conversion, Paul begins to "preach Jesus" (ἐκήρυσσεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν) in Damascus (Acts 9:20).

Outside the Gospels and Acts, when Christians begin reflecting upon "preaching," the term continues to be used for specific speech with defined content. Of the twenty instances of κηρύσσω outside the Gospels and Acts, eighteen are found in Paul.[32] In seventeen of those eighteen instances,[33] κηρύσσω most naturally fits within the narrow definition of preaching as gospel-proclamation. Significantly, the apostle concludes his most systematic epistle by placing in apposition "the gospel" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) and "preaching Jesus Christ" (τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), effectively equating the two (Rom 16:25). Along these lines, Paul most commonly employs the phrase "preach Christ/Jesus"[34] or "preach the gospel,"[35] but he also uses other names for this same speech-activity. Sometimes it is preaching "the word" (2 Tim 4:2) or "the word of faith" (Rom 10:8). Other times it is summarized as preaching "Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23) or "the mystery" (1 Tim 3:16).[36]

The importance of 2 Tim 4:2 thus far for our discussion gives us entry

[32] The other two are 1 Pet 3:19, where Jesus preaches to the spirits in prison, and Rev 5:2, where the angel preaches in a loud voice. Both instances fit our narrow definition.

[33] Rom 2:21 is the single instance of Paul's use of κηρύσσω which is clearly not some form of "preaching Christ" (but cf. 1 Pet 3:19).

[34] 1 Cor 1:19, 23; 15:12; 2 Cor 4:5; 11:14; Phil 1:15.

[35] Gal 2:2; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 2:9.

[36] The nine instances of the noun κήρυγμα show much of the same consistency of usage. In its three instances in the Gospels, twice it is used for the "preaching" of Jonah (Matt 12:41; Luke 11:32) and once (in some mss) refers to the "preaching of eternal salvation" of the disciples after Christ's ascension (Mark 16:20). The remaining six instances, all from Paul's epistles, quite clearly mean the preaching *of the gospel* (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 1:21; 2:4; 15:14; 2 Tim 4:17; Titus 1:3).

into another term which helps us define what the NT means by preaching *the Bible* and may challenge our common parlance. Many times, when we speak of "preaching the word," especially for those of us in the traditions of evangelicalism, we broadly mean something like, "delivering sermons from the Bible"—i.e., many kinds of authoritative speech from the Scriptures, whether teaching, admonishment, exhortation, etc. Is this what Paul means by "preach the word"? Surveying elsewhere what is often the object of the verb κηρύσσω—namely "the word" (ὁ λόγος)—is instructive. Earlier in 2 Tim 2:8–9, Paul had equated "the gospel" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) with "the word of God" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ).[37] A few verses later, Timothy is admonished to "rightly handle the word of truth" (τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας, 2 Tim 2:15), which in context of the trustworthy saying (2:11–13) cannot mean the whole Bible broadly, but the whole Bible's gospel specifically. In Titus 1:3, God has manifested eternal life in his "word" (τὸν λόγον) "through preaching" (ἐν κηρύγματι). In 1 Cor 2:4, Paul's "word" (ὁ λόγος) and "preaching" (τὸ κήρυγμα) are equated with the content of "Christ and him crucified" just two verses earlier. To "preach the word," then, is not to say just *anything* from the Bible, nor is it merely re-saying what any given scriptural passage says. Preaching the Bible, biblically speaking, is very specifically to preach *the gospel* from the Bible.[38]

[37] The apostle equates the two the same way in 1 Thess 1:5–6.

[38] If this is the case, we might expect to see distinctions being made between κηρύσσω and other forms of Scripture-based speech often associated with what it means to preach the Bible. And indeed, we do. For instance, Paul distinguishes between "preaching" and "teaching" (διδασκαλία) in 1 Tim 5:17 in the ministry of the πρεσβύτεροι. Notably, the term translated as "preaching" is not κήρυγμα, but λόγος. Preaching is so associated with the "word" of the gospel that κήρυγμα and λόγος are interchangeable. The word preached from the Scriptures is something more specific than mere Christian teaching (διδασκαλία) or catechesis (κατήχησις). Do we find counter-evidence to this with Paul's language of "the one who is *taught* the word" (ὁ κατηχούμενος τὸν λόγον) in Gal 6:6? In this instance, immediate context is less helpful because the statement appears almost as a parenthetical aside, providing an exception to the admonition which sums up his main argument in 6:5. We may have to rely on evidence elsewhere, such as when Paul calls himself on two separate occasions (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11) both a "preacher" (κῆρυξ) and a "teacher" (διδάσκαλος) of "the gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον). We have strong reason to believe that even in Gal 6:6, "teaching the word" is yet another way of describing gospel-proclamation. In my opinion, C. H. Dodd complicates and confuses the distinction between κήρυγμα and διδασκαλία when he equates the former with missionary work only to "persons interested but not yet convinced," and the latter with "ethical instruction," παράκλησις, and ὁμιλία, which are to be preached "to a congregation already established in the faith" (*The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* [Hodder and Stoughton, 1951], 7).

I end this section giving special attention to Paul's sermon in Acts 13. There, in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, "after the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it'" (Acts 13:15). This requested "word of encouragement" (λόγος παρακλήσεως[39]) appears to be a phrase used to describe first-century synagogue homiletical activity. Paul is being asked to deliver the synagogue homily, which, given our explanation above in the previous section, might have typically included three things: (1) scriptural exposition; (2) application and admonishment (i.e., ethical teaching); and potentially (3) a Messianic conclusion. Interestingly, Paul leaves out the ethical teaching altogether, effectively removing what we most typically think of as παράκλησις from his λόγος παρακλήσεως. Instead, Paul exposits Scripture (vv. 17–22) and then offers its "Messianic conclusion," identifying Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture (vv. 23–31).[40] However, he does not stop there. Suddenly, Paul's sermon gives way to *preaching*. He says, boldly and directly in v. 32, "we bring you the gospel" (εὐαγγελιζόμεθα), given as a "promise," the form of which is concretized in the climactic words of vv. 38–39: "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed (καταγγέλλεται) to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed[41] by the law of Moses."[42]

Whether or not we have a water-tight case on the level of terminology, we should feel the force of the New Testament's verbal weight: Bible-based sermons become "preaching" when they preach *the gospel*. I turn now, in the third section, to the resources of Christian theology both to complete my argument and to clearly define what I mean by "gospel."

[39] Interestingly, Paul uses the verbal form of the same word for "encouragement" (παρακάλεσον) in his string of five imperatives in 2 Tim 4:2, often translated as "exhort."

[40] Of course, by "Paul" here, we mean the Paul whom Luke, the author of Acts, presents to us. No doubt the entirety of Paul's speech was not recorded. For our purposes we are interested in the canonical form of this speech and the resulting theological vision Luke's "Paul" offers us.

[41] Both instances of "freed" are literally "justified" (δικαιωθῆναι and δικαιοῦται).

[42] Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–39) resembles this same structure, offering the same language of "forgiveness of sins" (ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν, v. 38) and "promise" (ἐπαγγελία, v. 39), making one wonder whether Luke is establishing a new pattern (or relaying a recently developed pattern) for Christian preaching. Furthermore, it seems significant to me that Luke separates what Peter has preached from what Luke afterward identifies as the "many other words" (ἑτέροις … λόγοις) with which he "exhorted" (παρεκάλει) the people (v. 40).

"Preach the Bible" in Theological Perspective

1. The Ontology of Scripture. If we are serious about preaching from the Bible, our understanding of that act should be informed by theological reflection on what the Bible *is*. The insights of John Webster on the ontology of Holy Scripture are helpful here. Central for our purposes is his claim that the Scriptures, as revelation, are nothing short of God's "divine self-presentation."[43] Such revelation, furthermore, has a specific aim beyond some general personal disclosure of God:

> Revelation is … the establishment of *saving fellowship*. Revelation is purposive. Its end is not simply divine self-display, but the overcoming of human opposition, alienation and pride, and their replacement by knowledge, love and fear of God. In short: revelation is reconciliation.[44]

The Bible then, as Holy Scripture, postures the church to open and receive it in a very specific manner. If the Scriptures are God's self-revelation for the purpose of establishing *saving* fellowship, then the church's "definitive act" before that Word "is faithful hearing of the gospel of salvation announced by the risen Christ in the Spirit's power."[45] If one takes seriously this ontology of Scripture, then every member of Christ's Church is obligated "to read Scripture as one caught up by the reconciling work of God."[46] In other words, Scripture's nature dictates Scripture's reception. If Scripture is God's reconciling action, we should receive it ultimately as gospel.

In another essay, Webster clarifies the "theological hermeneutics" necessitated by Scripture's ontology by reminding us of Christ's eternality and priority—what he calls "the categorical primacy of the resurrection."[47] Webster argues, "[Christ] is that from which we move, not that towards which we strive; he is not that which we posit (rationally, experientially), but the one whose unqualified self-existence posits us."[48] In reading and interpreting Scripture, then, it is not enough simply to arrive finally at Christ, or even to exposit the text with a constant Christ-centered orientation. Interpretation is much more personal and relational

[43] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

[44] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 15–16.

[45] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 44.

[46] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 101.

[47] John Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (T&T Clark, 2007), 142.

[48] Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," 141.

than this. As we read, we do so surrounded by Christ's prevenient, abiding, and saving presence. Scriptural interpretation at its best, therefore, is not merely Christo-telic (culminating in Christ), or even Christo-centric (centered on Christ). It is, you could say, Christo-pleromic (saturated in Christ's saving presence).[49]

The net effect of this ontology of Scripture for preaching the Bible is becoming evident. If preaching the Bible is an activity done within the fullness of Christ's presence, whose purpose is the establishment and maintenance of a *saving* relationship with us, then the gospel—the Word which effects and sustains that saving relationship—is not "simply one more topic to which the inquiring human mind might choose to direct itself,"[50] nor is it something only spoken to non-believers for the sake of their conversion. The gospel, theologically speaking, is what the Bible exists to give—to *everyone*, believer and unbeliever alike—from any and every passage of Scripture.[51]

2. A Reformation Theology of Preaching. The theological resources of the Church, uniquely crystalized at the time of the Reformation, are particularly useful for the present discussion.[52] We begin by asking about the end: What is the formational goal of preaching the Bible? What are we hoping to effect through our preaching? We often answer, "changed lives," but what precisely do we mean by that? We could say that a changed life looks like Christian maturity, and such maturity can be distilled into one word—love (1 Cor 13). Such love expresses itself in a two-way direction: vertically, toward God, and horizontally toward our neighbor (Matt 22:34–40). Love "fulfills the law" (Rom 13:8; Gal 4:14). We then must ask, "What produces this love?" Reformation theologians particularly observe the Scriptures as offering a singular answer—faith. The Reformers claimed that faith alone produces love, often quoting Gal 5:6: "In Christ Jesus," what "counts" is "*only* faith working through love." If the goal of our

[49] I had help with this neologism in a recent conversation with Jonathan Linebaugh.

[50] Webster, *Holy Scripture,* 123.

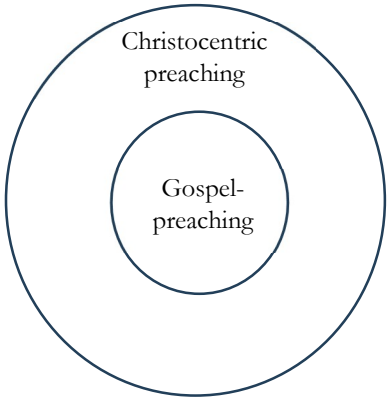
[51] See Calvin: "[Christ] daily presents to us the fruit of his suffering through means of the Gospel, which he designed, should be in the world, as a sure and authentic register of the reconciliation, that has once been effected. It is the part of ministers, therefore, to apply to us … the fruit of Christ's death" (*Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians,* Calvin's Commentaries 20.2 [Baker, 2003], 238).

[52] The following paragraph is a summary restatement of the teaching I have heard many times from Jonathan A. Linebaugh, most recently articulated in his *The Well That Washes What It Shows: An Invitation to Holy Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2025), 152–56.

preaching is that our people become a people of love, then our aim should be toward the increase of their faith. But now we must ask, "What produces faith?" The Reformers again observed another singular answer from Scripture—the Word. The Word *alone* creates faith: "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). This, in the Reformers' minds, reveals a "permanent relationship"[53] of directionality:

Word → Faith → Love

If we want to achieve the stated goal of our preaching—changed lives marked by faith-produced love—we must preach *the Word*. We have already established above that "the word" is not so much synonymous with every word of Scripture, as if preaching "the word" merely means re-saying what Scripture says. Rather, to preach "the word" is to preach the one thing that every word of Scripture exists to reveal—the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here we can now begin to make crucial distinctions. We will start with an important one.



All gospel-preaching is Christocentric, but not all Christocentric preaching proclaims the gospel. In other words, not all preaching *about* Christ counts as preaching *the Word*. One can preach a Christocentric sermon and not preach the gospel. This parallels Martin Luther's point in his 1521 treatise on "What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels."[54] There he argues that words about Christ, or even words *from* Christ himself,

[53] In Calvin's words, "There is a *permanent* relationship between faith and the Word" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Westminster Press, 1960], 548 [3.2.6]).

[54] Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Fortress, 1960), 117–24.

must be differentiated from the Word of the gospel which gives Christ. Luther writes, "The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift … Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works."[55]

Beyond talk about Christ, there are yet other "words" which could be spoken from the Bible that would not qualify as faith-producing preaching of the Word. Again, consider 2 Tim 3:16 and 4:2. Though "all Scripture" indeed is profitable for all kinds of Bible-based speech-ministry—exhortation, admonishment, ethical instruction, correction, etc.—none of those words creates faith and produces love.[56] None of those words actually *grows* the Christian. They may demonstrate what maturity looks like. They may point the way and illumine the path. But they are powerless words when it comes to actually moving the Christian toward that end. The Word alone, producing faith alone, by grace alone, does this.[57] "The righteous shall *live* by faith" (Gal 3:11). As it turns out, preaching the Bible, understood as preaching the Word, is a quite narrow and specific mode of speech.

Understanding this Word as "the gospel" is in our day and age by no means self-explanatory, and we must again turn to the Reformation's theological resources to help us define precisely what the gospel is. Particularly helpful here is NT scholar Jonathan Linebaugh's exegetical insights into Paul, resourced by Luther. Linebaugh argues that the Reformation understanding of Paul's theology of justification by faith alone sees justification not merely as a soteriological doctrine.[58] Justification, by placing

[55] Luther, "Instruction," 119, 120. Calvin speaks similarly: "[Paul] understands … the new and extraordinary kind of teaching by which Christ, after he became our teacher, has more clearly set forth the mercy of the Father [in his gospel]" (*Institutes,* 548 [3.2.6]).

[56] In fact, as Calvin points out, those other words are not necessarily neutral in relationship to our faith. Sometimes, such "words are so far from being capable of establishing faith that they can of themselves do nothing but *shake* it" (*Institutes*, 550 [3.2.7], emphasis added).

[57] "Calvin understood preaching to be about much more than education, edification, reproof, or prophetic critique of the world. The preaching event was the primary means of grace. The whole drama of salvation unfolded as the gathered people listened to the sermon" (Dawn Devries, "Calvin's Preaching," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin,* ed. Donald K. McKim [Cambridge University Press, 2004], 110).

[58] Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross: Reading Paul* (Eerdmans, 2022), 159–80.

faith and works in an antithetical ("not, but") relationship,[59] functions as an overarching "grammar" to norm the saying of the gospel. Linebaugh arrives at the following conclusion: "Justification relates to preaching, praise, and prayer as a grammatical rule: to speak the gospel, do not condition the grace of God by any human criteria; rather give Jesus Christ in the form of an unconditioned promise."[60] Linebaugh argues persuasively that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone, as understood by Luther, functions as "a criterion, an evangelical canon that makes possible the judgment: this is or this is not the gospel."[61] How do we know we are preaching the gospel? Justification tells us that the gospel is preached when Jesus is presented as a categorical and unconditioned gift, separated from any markers of human worth, and applied at the site of our deepest need. The gospel is only the gospel when the gift of Christ (i.e., what Christ has done *for us*) is completely distinguished from all "human criteria," including what we are to do *for Christ*. A sermon may offer many Bible-based words of admonishment, instruction, and correction, but none of those words is what it means, theologically and biblically, to *preach* the Bible. As noted above, the Christian tradition down through the ages makes room for a wide array of sermonic speech. I am not saying that Christian sermons cannot contain those things. I am saying that a sermon does not move into "preaching the Bible" until Christ is given in his gospel.

3. A Theology of Sermonic Experience: Preaching as "Word-Event." The previous two sections converge here: when we preach the Bible, God creates a fresh and immediate experience of his saving presence through the gospel. A Reformation understanding of such preaching identifies this experience as "sacramental"[62]—meaning, a local, unique manifestation of "the real presence of Christ in the kerygma"[63] through the power of the Holy

[59] E.g., "Not … by works of the law, but through faith" (Gal 2:16); "No longer I … but Christ" (Gal 2:20).

[60] Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross*, 165. Both Luther and Calvin (though perhaps the former more than the latter) center "promise" as a primary category for reflection on the gospel. Cf. for Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church;* for Calvin, *Institutes,* 3.2.6. On Luther, cf. esp. Oswald Bayer*, Promissio: The Reformational Turn in Luther's Theology*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Fortress, 2025).

[61] Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross,* 164.

[62] See Ronald Rittgers, "Scripture as 'Sacrament' in Early Modern Evangelical Church Ordinances," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 27.1 (2025): 28–43; Phillip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel That Gives Us Christ* (Baker Academic, 2019), 145; and David C. Steinmetz, "The Domestication of Prophecy in the Early Reformation," *Church History* 58.2 (1989): 84.

[63] Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation,* 77.

Spirit. "The sermon is, by God's will, his presence itself."[64] The Reformers were not shy about naming the existential and sensory consequences of such an encounter. Preaching the Bible, for Calvin, should "penetrate into the consciences of men, to make them *see* Christ crucified, and *feel* the shedding of his blood."[65]

Preaching the Bible in the manner we have argued creates a "word-event in which the encounter with Jesus brings God to expression in the reality in which we live … it becomes the event which establishes our faith."[66] The past work of Christ becomes present "in the *kairos* of today"[67] as the Word of Scripture is "brought to life in the actual situation of the hearer."[68] Linebaugh describes the preached Word as traversing "the gulf" between Christ past and present—"between the coming of Christ 'for us' and the coming of Christ 'to us.'"[69] When the gospel is preached, it is not merely that Christ's saving work is applied to us; Christ, the Savior, is *here*. How does preaching do this, precisely?

What homiletical content can we identify as the epicenter of this Word-event? We return to the concentric diagram above. The Word-event happens when explanatory words about Christ become promissory words which give him. "As a christological narrative, the gospel tells the story of the Christ who gave himself for me. As a christological promise spoken in the power of the Spirit, the gospel is Christ giving himself to me."[70] Preaching the gospel is not merely the relaying of past events for present "application." It is the transposition of those past events into a present offering—a promise from God, through the preacher, *for you*. Until Christ is announced as a gift—whether explicitly by the preacher or implicitly through the Spirit accompanying other words of the preacher—*the Bible is not yet preached.*[71] The Bible may be spoken about and spoken

[64] Oswald Bayer, "Preaching the Word," in *Justification is for Preaching,* ed. Virgil Thompson (Pickwick, 2012), 207.

[65] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians,* Calvin's Commentaries 212 (Baker, 2003), 80 (emphasis added). See also the overabundance of vivid, experiential, affectively-loaded language of what many consider to be the earliest Reformation systematic theology: Philip Melanchthon's 1521 *Loci Communes*.

[66] Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, 79.

[67] Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 205.

[68] Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, 54.

[69] Jonathan A. Linebaugh, "The Uglier Ditch: First-Century Grace in the Present Tense," in *The New Perspective on Grace: Paul and the Gospel after Paul and the Gift*, ed. Edward Adams et al. (Eerdmans, 2023), 270.

[70] Linebaugh, "The Uglier Ditch," 272.

[71] For what "gift" means historically and theologically in Paul's thought, see especially John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2017).

from. Its lines may be faithfully exegeted, exposited, and expounded. But until Christ is *given*, preaching the Bible has not truly occurred, and the present Word-event remains out of reach, inaccessibly locked up in the past.

How to "Preach the Bible" (Suggestions for Sermon Preparation and Delivery)

1. True Preaching and the Freedom of the Spirit. The above discussion invites two questions. First, in our sermons, what do we preach *from*? The answer is certainly "all Scripture" (2 Tim 3:16). We preach from any and every part of the Bible. We open up the text, and we say enough about it to orient our hearers to its words and context. We do not springboard away from the text. We preach from it, out of it. But we must be careful to distinguish that first question from this second one: What do we *preach*? We have concluded that we cannot merely say what the text says as sometimes the text in isolation will leave us only with those "other words," whether they be words of instruction, rebuke, correction, or admonishment. We have argued that though we preach *from* the Bible, to faithfully preach the *revelation* the Bible exists to offer—to faithfully participate in preaching becoming an event of the manifestation of the saving presence of God—we must preach "the Word" (2 Tim 4:2): the gospel about Jesus Christ, which gives Jesus Christ. What do we preach *from?* The Bible. What, or more precisely Whom, do we *preach*? Christ. To preach the Bible rightly, this distinction must hold.

Still, amidst all the belabored and technical dissecting, parsing, and explaining above, we must confess that the Word of God is living and active (Heb 4:12) and that the Holy Spirit is wildly free, beyond our control. As this is so, no amount of tools, techniques, and how-to's can predict, much less manufacture, the Word-event that is the manifest presence of Christ's Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Bible.[72] We cannot make this happen through our own cleverness, or even in our firm commitment to sticking to certain best practices that we are about to entertain. In fact, the Spirit continues to reveal and give Jesus in all kinds of unlikely contexts where, despite our poor preaching, confused worship, and wayward theologies, God continues doing what God does best. Indeed, to build upon Hopkins, Christ preaches in ten thousand places.[73] Thank God.

[72] Linebaugh, "The Uglier Ditch," 278. See Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 176.

[73] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* ed. Robert Bridges and W. H. Gardner, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1948), 95.

That said, with the vision laid out above, here I offer some on-the-ground insights for the homiletical process.

2. What to Avoid When Preaching the Bible. The gospel is the scriptural Word about Christ, particularly the news of his death and resurrection, which becomes good news to each person when it is received "for me" (Luther's famous *pro me*). Insofar as it is up to the human preacher (and again, thank God it is ultimately not), we might first identify ways of speaking we want to avoid if we are intent upon preaching that gospel. Recalling our theological discussion above of the permanent relationship of word, faith, and love, we are ready to receive the categorical claim of the following simple statement by theologian Oswald Bayer: "Only if the word is promise and gift, is faith really faith."[74] As the word, so the faith—which means that we can make the mistake, when preaching a different "word" than *the* Word, of fostering pseudo-faiths rather than living faith in Christ. Bayer offers three examples.[75] First, we can make the mistake of *theorization*. In this mode, if the proclaimed word is merely teaching—making statements and offering instruction about God, Jesus, the Bible, holy living, a biblical worldview, or anything else—then the resulting "faith" takes the form of insight and knowledge. Such faith says, "I know." Second, we can make the mistake of *moralization.* In this mode, if the proclaimed word is merely moral appeal—urging hearers to live in certain ways, or to avoid living in other ways—then the resulting "faith" takes the form of deed, or activism. Such faith says, "I do." Third, we can make the mistake of *psychologization.* In this mode, if the proclaimed word is merely expression—effusions about inner experience, spiritual progress, or feeling close to God—then the resulting "faith" takes the form of introspective self-awareness. Such faith says, "I am." Notice the self-orientation of all three resulting pseudo-faiths. Neither "I know," nor "I do," nor "I am" offer any hope, because trust remains caged in the self. Knowing, doing, and being are the fruit of faith and must never be confused with faith itself. Therefore, only if the proclaimed Word truly is the promise and gift of Jesus Christ can faith truly be faith. Only when the Word is Christ *for me* can resulting faith be uncaged, look outside itself, and cry, "I trust," clinging not to self but to its blessed Object: "I trust *you,* my Jesus."

This is not to say that in our sermons, there is no place for teaching, moral instruction, or expression. But we must be clear-eyed about those forms of speech: They cannot create or sustain faith. They cannot give. They are, in the words of Paul, "powerless" (ἀδύνατος, Rom 8:3). We might add one final insight under the category of what to avoid in our

[74] Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

[75] Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 201–2.

preaching before moving on to things more constructive: the gospel-promise ceases to be a promise when it is conditioned. If affixed to the promise of God's love in the gift of Jesus Christ are any "ifs," "ands," or "buts," the promise is no longer a promise. It is a contract, a two-person agreement, strings attached. It is *quid pro quo,* not *Christus pro me.* Conditional language added to, surrounding, or even in the vicinity of God's promises ends up taking back with the left hand what the right hand has given. The gospel, with a condition added, becomes "a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:6–7 NIV). We should therefore pay attention to the potential of tacking on conjunctions (either literally or figuratively) which might compromise the gospel and turn faith into a self-oriented work.

3. A Process and Strategies for Preaching the Bible. The process of preaching begins with the preacher's own reception of the text. Before the preacher interprets the text, the text interprets the preacher. Before the preacher opens his mouth, he must be preached *to.* As Webster says, preachers "are set in motion by the text; they do not animate it but rather are the audience of its animating utterance."[76] How does a preacher first receive a text? Certainly, this includes all our normal patterns of interpretation, including the utilization of exegetical resources at our disposal to gain an understanding of the meaning of the text in its time and place. However, our interpretation must not only discover a passage's message. It must also discover its action. If the Word really is living and active, interpretation must not only attend to what the Word *says* but to what the Word is *doing* as it speaks.[77] To borrow from theologian Simeon Zahl, we attend to the text's "affective salience."[78] We cultivate awareness of the text's psychological and emotional *effect.* Rational exegetes are not accustomed to including these features in exposition, but if Scripture is ontologically the locale of God's self-revelation, then asking, "What is God doing in and to me in this text? In what ways is God moving toward me? How does this make me *feel*?" becomes another important part of homiletical preparation alongside our other hermeneutical tools. Assessing such effects of the text on ourselves and others can helpfully put us on the trail toward discovering and differentiating what is or is not *promissory* about the passage. The restful and relieving feeling of comfort and consolation is often a sign that one is in proximity to the promise. From there we can begin to discover whether the text itself provides a homiletical promise, or puts

[76] Webster, "Resurrection and Scripture," 153.

[77] This is why I use the language of "speech-act" from modern communication studies in my introductory thesis statement.

[78] Simeon Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," *Modern Theology* 31.3 (2015): 428–44.

us on a larger biblical trajectory to take hold of one. We can ask, "Does this text lead me to any specific promises of God?" Even if your sermon may not articulate something as concrete as a formal promise, attention even at this stage of interpretation to the promissory character of the text will inevitably contribute the promissory flavor of the sermon.[79]

Another way of engaging this living activity of the Word is to ask a simple, two-part question, "How is the Bible, through this text, showing me my need for Jesus, and how is it giving him to me?" That question can help us to hear the Spirit's voice piercing our own heart. Additionally, we can bring this question into our life and relational ministry. For example, when dealing with difficult relationships with others, we can ask of the Lord, "What does this Word have to say to that conversation or experience?"

After this process, it is time to craft words. There are several guidelines that gospel-preachers can recognize as meaningful "rules of speech," even as these rules resist slavish obedience.[80] First, when it comes time in the sermon to preach the gospel it is helpful to use second-person speech, "where an 'I' addresses a 'you.'"[81] Second, it is often important to craft that address with present tense or present perfect tense verbs: "God loves you" or "Your sins have been forgiven." Future tenses also carry a strong promissory character: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5) or "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa 43:2). Third, it is helpful when "the 'I' of the preacher who speaks legitimates itself, implicitly or explicitly, as authorized to make this promise."[82] Prophetic language, "thus says the Lord," is instructive here. "I say this to you, in Jesus's name," or "I, as God's minister, declare to you." I sometimes find myself saying, especially when quoting a direct promise of Scripture: "These are not my words, but God's Word to you." Fourth, our language can emphasize the prophetic "now-ness" of the Word being delivered: "Jesus says this to you, here and now." At times, one can differentiate the universality from the specificity of the Word by saying, "Though God's Word is for all people everywhere, make no mistake, God himself is saying this to you, in this room—right here, right now."

Finally, as a preacher, pay attention over time to the effects of your preaching on the overall culture of the community which receives it. The

[79] On the necessity and inescapability of attending to emotions and experience in theology, see Zahl, *Holy Spirit,* esp. 142–82.

[80] What follows is adapted and expanded from Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

[81] Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

[82] Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 202.

gospel bears very specific fruit. Non-gospels produce something different. A community marked by gospel-preaching (what we have argued is equivalent to "preaching the Bible") will often become less anxious and more peaceful, less pretentious and more honest, less hostile and more gracious. In other words, preaching the Bible produces what faith borne of the Word produces: love.

Conclusion

The Word "must always be spoken anew without ever saying anything new."[83] Preachers who preach the Bible in the manner I have described can be tempted to wonder whether it is sustainable, week in and week out, to say *one thing*.[84] Will we run the risk of falling into homiletical ruts, of becoming a broken record? Will our people grow dull of hearing, inoculated against the surprising wonder of the Word of the cross? Newly saying nothing new every week—knowing "nothing among" our people "except Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2)—certainly is risky. But it is the right kind of risk. It throws us into deeper dependence and greater abiding (John 15:1–11). We must depend on God for new, creative words to say the same Word. We must depend on the Holy Spirit to renew in us a hunger and appetite for the gospel alone, against the lusts of the flesh and the craving for what itching ears long to hear (Gal 5:16–21; 2 Tim 4:3). We must depend on God to show up and make good on the promise to be present—felt in our bodies and spirits—in our preaching. Preaching the Bible leaves us vulnerable. It leaves us "foolish" and "weak," right alongside God (1 Cor 1:25). But therein, under the opposite, we discover all the power we need (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 2:5; 2 Cor 12:9).

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[83] Bayer, "Preaching the Word," 203.

[84] Perhaps this is a good reason among many, when possible, for churches to have a rotating pulpit with multiple preachers rather than a singular voice.