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# The Wholly Bible

TIM SENSING

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The guest speaker demonstrated his excellence in the area of first-century slavery in Corinth. His recently published book gave rise to this opportunity to address aspiring preachers. During a question-and-answer session, an African-American asked, “How would you preach this text in my home congregation?” The speaker responded quickly, “I don’t preach on this text for it is not a topic for discussion in church even though it is in the Bible.”

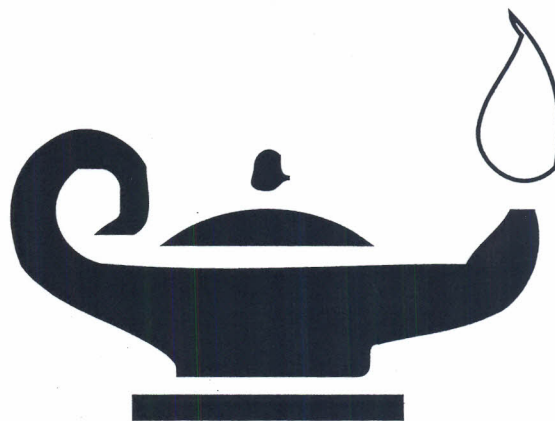
Are we to conclude that the issue of slavery is passé in a post-Civil War and equal-rights society? Or that the text is no longer relevant to a postmodern, inclusive, multicultural society? Should a political position delimit the canon?

Earlier that same year, I sat in a class discussing the topic “preaching as a social act” when the professor turned to me. “You are our token fundamentalist, how would you preach about the sin of the Benjamites in Judges 19-21?” He was not expecting me to answer. He concluded, “God spoke before we had the Bible and after. Just because it is in the Bible doesn’t mean it is a Word from God. There are lots of things in the Bible that do not reveal a thing about the character of God and how he relates to humanity.”

Should a theological position delimit the canon?

Since the 39th Festal Letter of Athanasius in 367 CE, 27 books of the New Testament have been widely accepted. However, the process to fix exactly what books belonged in the canon began much earlier—receiving its primary stimulus from forces that either restricted the possibilities too narrowly (e.g., Marcion) or expanded the options too uncritically (e.g., Gnostic secret writings and Montanist’s revelations). The idea of closing a canon implies the existence of claimants to be denied. In order to maintain the central foundations of Christianity against subtraction and addition, the canon came into being.<sup>1</sup> These texts were deemed sacred and authoritative for the church.

The problem of adding to or subtracting from canon has continued throughout history. For example, the recent Jesus Seminar is but one case of critical scholarship that considers only a fraction of the materials contained in the Gospels as belonging to the historical Jesus. Much is dismissed as legendary or as a product of the church. D. Buttrick deems that many portions of the parables are unlikely to be from Jesus. Recognizing the value of canonical status of texts to protect the church, he argues that even then such status “should never be turned into a tablet of stone.”<sup>2</sup> We squeeze texts with scientific approaches until the juice is drained and the pulp not worth eating.



Conversely, others want to add texts for consideration as Scripture. Two marginal examples come from the Latter Day Saints and Christian Scientists. If the idea that the regular reading of a Christian document in worship is the main factor in its acquisition of authoritative status in the first place, then many pulpits in the mainstream are making the case for increasing the canon with self-help pabulum, health-and-wealth theologies, and narcissistic spirituality of pop culture and best-seller evangelicalism. Moralizing about heroes of faith or psychologizing about overcoming worry is not biblical preaching, yet it speaks with great authority throughout our churches.

Some folks limit the canon by using a theological filter. "The appropriateness to the gospel" is the first theological criteria for preaching according to R. Allen's newest book.

The church seeks to determine the degree to which every biblical text, Christian doctrine and practice, ethical action, personal and social situation, and every voice in the preaching conversation is appropriate to ... the gospel. 'Is this text, ... appropriate to the news of God's unconditional love promised to each and all and God's call for justice for each and all as the church comes to know these realities through Jesus Christ?'<sup>3</sup>

Allen proceeds to dismiss Ps 137:8-9 and Rev 6:10 as cases of inappropriateness. No matter how romantic the notion of "gospel sermon" or "preaching Christ in every sermon," when such notions delete imprecatory Psalms as part of the gospel, then the romantic notion is nothing more than fizzled puppy love.

Others have used various lenses that either restrict or expand one's field of vision. For example, E. Kasemann strongly urges that "justification of the sinner" be the hermeneutical principle for reading texts. For Augustine, charity, or the twin principles of love for God and neighbor became the guiding principle. Furthermore, Augustine proposed that Christian doctrine framed the context within which scripture should be interpreted and preached.

Once close consideration has revealed that it is uncertain how a passage should be punctuated and articulated, we must consult the rule of faith [regulam fidei], as it is perceived through the plainer passages of the scriptures and the authority of the church [*ecclesiae auctoritate*].<sup>4</sup>

Finally, one last example of theological lenses is Elizabeth Achtemeier's text *Preaching From the Old Testament* where she advocates pairing each OT text with a NT text in order to ensure a Christological interpretation.

Central as redemption, love, doctrine, or Christology are, taking any issue as being the core of the gospel creates a canon within the canon. But practically speaking, none of us can avoid such rubrics and presuppositions. Much preaching heard throughout the land would do well to put on such lenses as redemption, love, or Christology. Allen's guiding principle of "the appropriateness to the gospel" would salvage many pulpits. Because such lenses limit canon, and we all wear lenses, being intentional about which lenses are worn is crucial. Ideally, preaching from a whole Bible is a worthy aspiration. But we need to confess that none of us can do it. We all have presuppositions, finite and fallible perspectives, and restricted resources of time and opportunity.

The purpose for a lectionary is "to set forth an orderly succession of passages which reflect the calendar and fit the public worship pattern of the group and which can be repeated periodically so as to cover scriptural content which is important to the community's life."<sup>5</sup> Yet no lectionary includes every passage of the Bible. A key question to ask is, "What texts do lectionaries leave out, and on what basis?"

Recently, S. Martin criticized the Second Vatican Council for deleting three Psalms and various Psalm verses from the Liturgy of the Hours. The chosen selections were either Imprecatory or Historical Psalms. She argued that the entire Psalter has historically functioned as prayers fit for the Christian assembly and

should be used for the church's prayers.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, W. Willimon,<sup>7</sup> addressing the subject of the use of the lectionary among ministers stated that 85 percent of ministers most often would choose the gospel lection for the text of the sermon. This practice in the field reduces the canon even further.

Although the lectionary has limited the canon in some traditions, for others, the lectionary would give them a larger canon. Due to their limited study, experience, or theological blinders, only a small portion of the canon is available. Often this is the case with those who protest the loudest that they are a Bible-centered community. In practice, personal agendas, favorite selections, or lack of attention creates multiple canons within the canon.

It is not without reason that professed New Testament Christians have been accused of not believing in the Old Testament. We poke fun at folks who have rubbed the gold edges off only certain sections of their Bibles, while our gold edges tattle on us as well. It reminds me of the day when one of my teachers gazing at my pocket New Testament told me not to bring half a Bible back to class ever again. Although we cry out against Reader Response, Liberation Theology, pop-psychology, this "ism" here and that "ology" there, our own subjective particularistic experiences in the name of being relevant to our culture offers a reading of the text that would make both Benny Hinn and Stanley Fish proud.

R. W. Wall clarifies the situation we face when he states,

If one were to ask a particular communion of faith to narrate the life of Jesus from memory, one would receive in response a harmonized version of the gospel. But such harmonies pick and choose ... according to their loyalties. What is omitted or included from the [canon] in a community's articulation of it reveals that community's theological and ethical commitments. ... Sermons about Christ that are shaped exclusively by dogmatic or socio-political concerns therefore do not really proclaim the canon's Christ. ... The canon's Jesus resists our efforts to transform him, to make him more respectable, or to portray him in sectarian terms.<sup>8</sup>

Whether it is done in the name of political correctness or sectarian ideology, the very text that offends our sensitivities today may be the text we need to counter tomorrow's offensive arguments. As L. S. May says, "So, we pull loose threads in the canon. We snip a house code here, a brood of vipers there. Here a king, there a slave, everywhere a bended knee"<sup>9</sup> and the tapestry of the canon unravels. We all stand guilty of having a canon within a canon.

So our dilemma exists. We do not want to add or subtract from the Bible, yet we are unable to be free of our lenses and just be back-to-the-Bible "historical-critical-neutral-objective-observers." But thankfully, we still have a canon. And we confess that these 66 books are our canon. We grant these texts status and authority. They are our sacred scriptures. R. Lischer states,

Gospel and Scripture ought not to be divided or played off against each other. The noetic, informational skeleton of the NT can no more be separated from its dynamic, evangelical heart than Christ's human nature can be separated from the divine. ... Perhaps this is why most attempts to peel away the skin in order to get at the pure keryma, that is, a kerygma acceptable to contemporary ethical, scientific, or political standards, so often result in a net loss of biblical truth. In its reduced or "purified" form the biblical message has been rendered unrecognizable to the faithful and deprived of its power to attract and convert the nonbeliever.<sup>10</sup>

What is biblical preaching? To think of the Bible as a repository of ideas that must be retrieved and then preached violates the nature of how these texts came into existence in the first place. We often ask the wrong questions of the text. Although I don't want to downplay the meaning of a text, the question, "What is the

text doing?" is often overlooked. Recent trends in homiletics, arising from literary and rhetorical studies, have changed the focus from "How to preach the Bible" to "How does the Bible preach?"

Both the theological focus of the text and the divine intent or function of the text have become the keys to biblical preaching. When the sermon can say and do the same that the text says and does, then something real has the potential for happening in our congregations. I find no pericope in the canon that cannot be a rich source for Christian preaching or catechesis. Even the dicing of concubines by Benjamites is a story that functions in some way in the theological narrative of Judges.

Although it is a perilous journey at times, it is not my job to make a text relevant, but it is my task to show the theological relevance already inherent in the text. As it has been said many times and in various ways, we are not to interpret the text but allow the text to interpret us. Therefore, many OT texts do not need baptizing or resurrecting. For gospel can be inclusive of lament as well as praise; language of judgment as well as grace; horrific stories as well as heroic ones. When I can give witness to what a particular text says and does about God and his people and how that text functions in the ongoing story of God, then I can be faithful to the canon.

The canon is Christian Scripture. To preach a biblical sermon from a text as a Christian does not mean that we claim we are not wearing lenses but that we are intentional about which lenses we wear. As we allow the theological focus and function of texts to proclaim their witness throughout the years, we are allowing the multiple voices to enter the congregational conversation as we become the people of God. Keeping the whole canon before us has the advantage of preserving Christian witness from the whims of interpretive agendas, maintaining the disclosive possibilities that are intrinsic in certain passages, and allowing congregations to develop skills of moral discernment by engaging texts in their ambiguity.<sup>11</sup> Therefore,

Being sensitive to the canon means taking seriously its capacity to correct distortions, misinterpretations or partial accounts of the gospel. Being sensitive to the congregation's faith means being aware of those parts of the canon's gospel that have been excluded or misrepresented.<sup>12</sup>

We come to the text with prejudice. We expect a word from God that is living and active. We expect a life-changing word that will bring us closer to the heart of God. To confess that the Bible is canon is to believe these words possess the Words of Life.

How exactly is one to go about using the Bible as canon?<sup>13</sup> It is unrealistic and inconceivable to think that every text can be studied throughout the lifespan of a church. Yet a workable, systematic, and intentional approach must be incorporated into the church's education and preaching ministry in order to provide the healthiest diet we are capable of preparing. Options available for a holistic approach center around the issues of criteria for selection, who selects, the process by which texts are chosen, what is selected, when a text is selected, and so forth. Such a plan is often called a lectionary. A lectionary is a systematic and comprehensive approach to the use of scripture.

Any compilation of an orderly sequence of selections from scripture for use within a congregation may be classified as a lectionary. ... Preachers who choose their own readings and assign them to a day are, in effect, building their own sequence of biblical selections—a self-chosen lectionary-under-construction. ... Thus whether or not to use the lectionary is not the question, because everyone uses a lectionary of one form or another. The question is, Which kind of lectionary will we use? Or, more to the point, Who will select the texts, and on what basis will they be selected.<sup>14</sup>

Lectionaries can be arranged in various ways. *Lectio continua* or "continuous reading" of biblical books section by section is common. More often, however, some passages are omitted giving a semi-continuous

reading. Finally, there is the “eclogadic” type where isolated excerpts are chosen for specific occasions and dates whether it be for thematic or liturgical reasons.

When one does not choose to use a preset lectionary, a variety of methods for selecting the texts and topics for preaching on any given Sunday exists. First, external events that affect the life of our nation may call for attention on any particular Sunday. Many in the pew will have the day’s events fresh on their minds. Many will need a Christian voice to help them put these matters in perspective. As the preacher examines world events, he can be sensitive in the selection process of texts so that a word from the Lord will be spoken.

The pastoral concerns of the congregation can also be the primary factor in selecting texts. The life-situation approach to preaching is best exemplified by Harry Emerson Fosdick’s dialectical method rooted in his social gospel agenda. In the introduction to their multi-volume anthology of Christian preaching, Clyde Fant and William Pinson write that, over the centuries, those preachers who exercised the greatest impact upon the world were those who spoke to the needs and issues of their day.<sup>15</sup>

Long-term planning along pastoral concerns include: (1) the need of the people to hear doctrinal sermons and series that treat topics in great depth, (2) the need of the people for continuity that only *lectio continua* provides, and (3) the need to set the agenda for specific congregations as they grow to meet their distinctive mission in their community. Combining the weekly concerns of the congregation with careful planning for the complete nutritional diet places the responsibility of text selection with either one person or a small select group. Choosing texts due to pastorally perceived need makes preaching immediate and powerful.

An abuse sometimes practiced by preachers who select their own text happens when passages are chosen at random, thus rejecting any intentional system of planning. Preachers far too often choose texts to serve their agendas. Although one must allow for the guiding of the Spirit, often, too much is blamed on the third person of the Trinity. These preachers may be merely preaching sermons that promote their causes or promote themselves. They may be doing more self-therapy than proclamation. The canon is usually reduced to a few favorite texts or themes. The gospel is usually reduced to one person’s individual encounter with it. The Bible is not a random set of stories connected together like pearls on a string. Accordingly, preachers should not string sermons together without reason or to meet their personal agendas.

Finally, from a liturgical motive, the *Revised Common Lectionary* is sensitive to the fact that many denominations observe the seasons of the Church’s year.<sup>16</sup> W. Willimon encourages preachers, instead of seeking the right text or topic for some pressing need of the day within the church or the nation, to proceed with the lection for the day. He personally delights in how the lections serendipitously connect with today’s latest headlines, thus speaking a word from the Lord the congregation otherwise would not have heard.

A benefit that a public lectionary has for protecting the integrity of canon occurs when several congregations in town take advantage of the opportunity to engage in a shared dialogue. The *Revised Common Lectionary* provides such a framework. Such a critical yet formative exchange between diverse traditions extends our limited perceptions and protects us from myopia. As Wall observes,

Involvement in ecumenical discussions offers one way for pastors to become sensitive to the gospel’s different contours. The whole church helps to reflect the whole gospel. Listen to the prayers and doxologies of believers from different traditions; hear how they confess their faith or construe the goodness of God’s salvation. Often the commitments embedded in these acts of worship can guide one to a fresh understanding of Christ, and to those sacred texts that must be reinterpreted and represented to one’s congregation.<sup>17</sup>

Realize that the pulpit is not the only option for engaging the whole of Scripture. Each congregation must also have a systematic way to read and study texts. Catechesis, though often neglected, partners with proclamation for building up the body of Christ. Subsequently, we engage in a study of Scripture as a com-

munity expectant and committed to grow into the image of Christ. The preaching event is not done individually but is a communal activity that recognizes the multiple voices in the text and in our own congregations.

Whatever the choice a particular preacher, congregation, or denomination makes, greater awareness of the whole Bible is needed in order for us to hear the rich and dynamic fullness of God's intent for us. Over a year and through the years, the texts we choose to preach and teach will form people. A limited canon is simply incapable of providing the strength to live life courageously and faithfully. With a complete canon, listening to the multiple witnesses of Scripture, hearers can be transformed into a whole people of God.

By faith we accept the Bible as the Word of God and celebrate the consummation of its divine and human authorship. We preach not the Bible, but the Christ of the Bible. ... "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5: 39-40). A biblical sermon is an exposition of the Scripture, which is an exposition of the gospel, which is an exposition of the life of God. We preach the Bible kerygmatically ... knowing that to do anything less is to reduce the living scriptural Word to a dead letter.<sup>18</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

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- 2 David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), xi.
- 3 Ronald Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel: An Introduction to Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 83.
- 4 *Christian Teaching* 3.2.2
- 5 John Reumann, "A History of Lectionaries: From the Synagogue at Nazareth to Post-Vatican II," *Interpretation* 31 (April 1977): 117.
- 6 Shannon Martin, "'A Certain Psychological Difficulty'" or a *Certain Spiritual Challenge: Use of the Integral Psalter in the Liturgy of the Hours*. *Worship* 73(4) (1999): 290-309.
- 7 All references to William Willimon refer to either private conversations or group discussions.
- 8 Robert W. Wall, "The Canon and Christian Preaching," *The Christian Ministry* 17(5) (Sept 1986): 16.
- 9 L. Susan May, "Unraveling Canon," *Perspectives* 9 (January 1994): 24.
- 10 Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1992), 58.
- 11 May, 24.
- 12 Wall, 16.
- 13 See Allen, chapter 8, "Starting Points for Sermon Preparation" for a complete discussion of this subject.
- 14 Peter C. Bower, *Handbook for the Common Lectionary* (Philadelphia: The Geneva Press, 1987), 15-16.
- 15 Clyde E. Fant and William M. Pinson, Jr., *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching, vol. 1, Biblical Sermons to Savanarola* (Waco: Word Books, 1971), v.
- 16 For an extended discussion of the *Revised Common Lectionary*, see my article, "Strange Encounter of a Lectionary Kind," *Restoration Quarterly* 37 (1995): 225-246.
- 17 Wall, 17.
- 18 Lischer, 59.

