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A Call To Preachers

BY DAVID FLEER



I was recently asked to present a talk entitled “Can Gospel Preaching Reclaim Its Biblical Place?” At first I thought, “That’s an obvious question, if not an easy answer.” After all, when we say “gospel,” we all know what we’re talking about. I recalled the preaching chronicled in Acts and the impressive descriptions of Philip’s “gospel preaching.” Philip’s preaching had as its subject “the good news of the kingdom of God” (Acts 8:12), “the name of Jesus Christ” (8:12), and “Jesus” (8:35). This is a plain enough subject, I thought. Everyone will know what I’m talking about when I say “gospel preaching.”

It does seem plain enough. The gospel, Paul said, is that “Christ died for our sins, . . . was buried, . . . was raised, . . . and appeared” to a host of people. That’s the gospel. Where’s the question? We know what we’re talking about. And, quite in line with the teachings of Paul and the evangelism in Acts, the first four books of the New Testament are given the titles *The Gospel according to Matthew*, *The Gospel according to Mark*, *The Gospel according to Luke*, and *The Gospel according to John*. All four accounts contain the good news of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is there any question that this is the content of gospel preaching? We know what we’re talking about.

And yet, when we say “gospel” today, our meaning is not so clear. We have *Gospel Minutes* stuffed into the shelves of the church library, and some older members think that is good. We’ve seen the *Old-Time Gospel Hour* on the religious cable station, but we don’t know if that is

so good. We have journals “advocating,” “guarding,” and “lighting” the gospel with mixed meanings. We have experienced gospel meetings and remember them as generally good, but we know now that, while the gospel has not changed, times have, and few individuals come out for the meetings. The truth is, we live in a time of some confusion, but we still believe that the answer, to whatever the problem, should be gospel preaching.

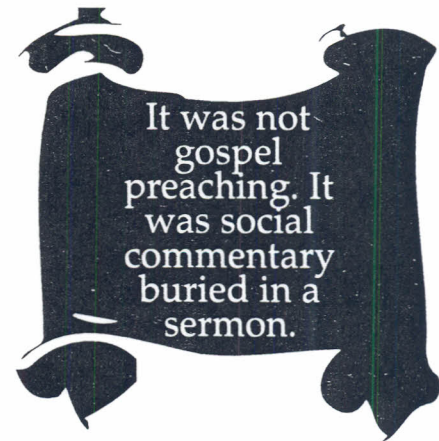
Can gospel preaching reclaim its biblical place? Beneath this minor confusion, there is another issue at stake. The one who had assigned the title of the talk assumed a direction for preaching that would land the preacher and listeners in scripture. But even a “back to the Bible” movement in preaching is anything but simple. Homiletician David Buttrick traces the problem to a dichotomy forged early in the twentieth century. Representing one opinion, Karl Barth advised preachers, “If a fire broke out in the community last week, and church members are still suffering under its awful impact, we should be on guard against even hinting at this theme in the sermon.” Barth’s segregation of the activities of the parishioners from the biblical text was answered by Harry Emerson Fosdick, who suggested that preachers approach the sermon with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. Over the century Barth’s segregation has been buried in scorn and forsaken as irrelevant and unhelpful. Fosdick’s pragmatic wisdom has clearly won out.¹

Fosdick's perspective finds representation in some of the largest evangelical pulpits today. Rick Warren, pastor of the Saddleback Community Church, a ten thousand-member congregation in Mission Viejo, California, advises, "We have to show the relevancy of the Bible and translate it into terms the unchurched will understand. We must communicate the unchanging Gospel in a rapidly changing world."² To argue with Warren is to argue with success. However, something more important than success is at stake.

My concern with Warren is the focus of his thesis: the human condition. His work, quite frankly, is a psychological or sociological project. It proposes a serious study of humans in order to apply the biblical aids to living. It is a major in the social sciences with a minor in the Bible. It is not the existence nor the importance of matters social or political or psychological with which I contend. It is the primacy given them. There exists throughout the evangelical Christian world an attitude toward preaching that is impatient with traditional approaches. To no one's surprise, this attitude is present in our fellowship, too. Warren's *Purpose-Driven Church*, like Bill Hybels' Willow Creek model, advocates a pulpit that is, above all else, user friendly. What are we to make of this movement that is influencing pulpits in major cities and suburbs throughout the country? This is a serious interest for many members of the Churches of Christ, who are witnessing an exodus of their children and friends to the sermons and worship in these seeker-sensitive churches.³

The view of Fosdick is problematic. Modern-day adherents put emphasis on being first a student of today's human being. The biblical story is judged according to its relevance. Pragmatic matters subjugate the word of God.⁴ On the other hand, who can live with Barth's claim that preaching should "aim beyond the hill of relevance"? This is certainly at odds with the biblical record of preaching, which specializes in the most essential relevancies of life. Such is the homiletic struggle of the day. Such is the nature of preaching today. Indeed, can gospel preaching reclaim its biblical place?

When I listen to "biblical preaching" sympathetic to the spirit of Karl Barth, I wonder. My concern is not that this kind of preaching goes back to the Bible, but rather how long it stays there and what it brings back from the text. I listened recently to one sermon as the preacher worked his way through the entire book of Jonah. The audience was full of religious and political conservatives. That is, Texas ranch-country Republicans blended with Church of Christ religious conservatives. The preacher knew his listeners.



At one point in the sermon, he likened God's ability to catch Jonah to the CNN cameras that preceded the U.S. troops to one location during the Gulf War. As the preacher ended his analogy, he added the aside, "That's a whole lot closer to God than most of 'em had ever been." The comment about the cable network personnel revealed more the preacher's philosophical treatment of the "secular media" than his theological treatment of Jonah. The audience, virtually silent at the conclusion of the analogy, appreciated the quick judgment and responded to the aside with seconds of interrupting laughter. The snide remark revealed only the preacher's disgust for a group within the larger society. It was foreign to the text. It was not gospel preaching. It was social commentary buried in a sermon.

More central to my concern with the current representatives of biblical preaching are the intentional and practical moments in the biblical sermon. These are the opportunities for the preacher to apply the biblical text to the needs of the hearers. These windows for comment and application are often framed by the preacher with the words "lessons" or "by way of application" or "what God is saying to us today." Consider the sermon from Jonah mentioned above. After preaching through the four chapters of Jonah, the preacher moved to his concluding remarks, "lessons from Jonah." Marriage, divorce, remarriage, clapping of hands during the assembly, and church cooperation were some of the issues mentioned. From Jonah? Yes, according to the preacher. For him, going to Tarshish was symbolic of false doctrine. However, not one of the issues mentioned by the preacher was even alluded to in the sermon's biblical text. The preacher's practical comments continued with an attack on materialism and bad attitudes that cause us to "cloister ourselves under our gourd vines as we watch the lost march over the precipice to Hell." Paved parking lots, central heat, and multi-

purpose buildings are the church's gourd vines, according to the preacher. In Jonah? No. According to the biblical text, matters of race or nationalism surfaced long before the modern struggle with materialism. It is not that the Bible does not have a word of rebuke to our society. It most certainly does. But the rebuke should come up out of the text.

The loose relationship of text and application in a sermon claiming to closely follow scripture is not confined to conservative pulpits. Consider the published sermons of Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann is often subtle in his preaching and makes his footnotes with tact.⁵ However, he knows his audience and cannot resist, even in print, the snide aside. In a sermon from the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Brueggemann claims, "The story resists any scare that you will have to pay for petty, little affronts about sex and all of those 'values' we hear about so much."⁶ Sex in Luke 16? In a sermon from Matt 3:1-12, John the Baptist's comment against the religious leaders, Brueggemann writes in parentheses, "We do not even think to mention mother Sarah, so fixed are we on the patrimony of male genes."⁷ In another sermon with "lessons" located at the end of the talk, Brueggemann applies the Daniel account of the fiery furnace to the "prideful posturing of the United States, with its military capacity and its economic privilege, stalking the earth, seizing, exploiting, and consuming whatever it wants. . . . [W]e fall down in complicity against such an easy practice."⁸ Does this biblical text suggest that the United States is a modern equivalent to Babylon? Even if one could successfully argue such a claim, it seems odd that the biblical text makes so transparent the preacher's political convictions. This is not gospel preaching. It is political commentary.

When reading or hearing "biblical preaching" supposedly in the spirit of Karl Barth, I worry. It is not that the preaching goes to the Bible but what it brings back that is troublesome. Similar to my concern is the warning of Stephen Carter in *The Culture of Disbelief* about the role of religion in the public square. Carter maintains that religion and faith have been trivialized and that "political preaching" has sold out to society. Carter argues that when one's theology always squares with one's politics, "there is reason to suspect that far from trying to discern God's will and follow it in the world, the political preacher is first deciding what path to take in the world and then looking for evidence that God agrees."⁹ Indeed, when Rush Limbaugh commentary and Republican-led congressional bills take priority and groove our preaching, we may, with the right audience, receive applause and amens.

But such preaching is social commentary imposed on the text. It is not gospel preaching.

I find these two practitioners to be representative of a much larger body of preachers who make the same claim of biblical preaching but flounder with their own variety of applications that appear to have little relation to the text. I am concerned with what I perceive to be a widespread practice. My concern begins with my own propensity to do the same.

When I began preaching on a regular basis, I made an effort to keep track of the sermons I preached and the places I preached them. I did not want to repeat myself. I soon began a filing system that consisted of placing the sermon manuscript in a six-by-nine-inch envelope and labeling it by text, title, date, and location. The text was in bold print and the title placed underneath. The envelopes were stored in a box by my desk where they gathered dust. After two years at my first congregation, and with the rigors of graduate work pressing on me, I fell into the dreaded habit of unintentionally repeating my sermons. I noticed, when at last I attempted to organize my growing archive of sermons, that even in my attempts to prepare fresh material, I would return to a text I had preached no more than eighteen months before.

To correct this pattern, I began to log on a single sheet of paper, one page for an entire year, each Sunday's sermons, morning and evening, titles and texts. I continued the practice for more than a dozen years. With this modification in place, I seldom returned to a text. I began to preach a variety of sermon series from different biblical locations: Minor Prophets, Thessalonians, Corinthians, Sermon on the Mount, Acts, and elsewhere. Yet even with my growing understanding of the Bible, my immersion in church life, and the variety of texts, I came to notice that I was still repeating myself. The repetition was not of the text but of the application. Whatever the text, I found my sermons rehearsing the same "lessons" of encouragement, urging the same particular moral code, or advocating social issues of my, and the congregation's support. The problem was that I stood in the way of the text. I had somehow dominated the word of God and pushed my way on the biblical passage.

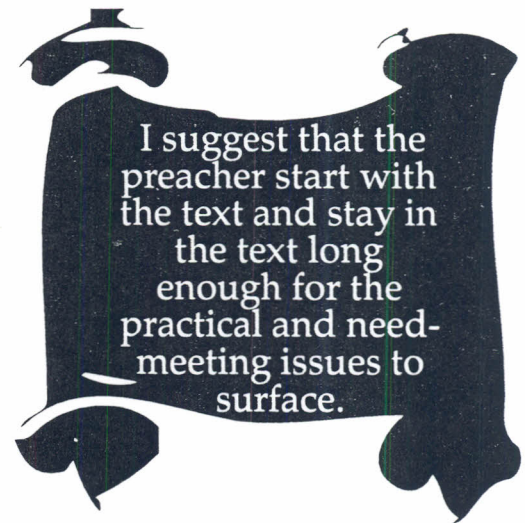
How does gospel preaching reclaim its biblical place? In near despair, I know, some preachers abandon the text as the source for the pragmatic and find in *Reader's Digest* or *Men's Journal* or the op-ed page of the city's news helpful solutions to crises the congregation faces. I recall from early in my preaching tenure the terrible and relentless

pressure to produce two sermons per week, in addition to the rigors of Bible classes and other preparations. One Sunday evening I caved in to the constraints on my time and “preached” the highlights of a book I’d just finished, *Men in Midlife Crisis*. What surprised me was the enthusiastic response to the sermon. Comments like, “Now that’s preaching, David!” and, “That hit home; keep it up!” enhanced the temptation to abandon the hard work of exegesis and bolster with appropriate but disjointed verses from the Bible the bevy of readily available, therapeutic, and popular essays.

How does gospel preaching reclaim its biblical place? Where do we go? The answer, I have come to believe, is to delve even deeper into scripture. It is in scripture that we find the applications for life. Why? Because the Bible was written for application. The Bible was written to change lives. I suggest that the preacher start with the text and stay in the text long enough for the practical and need-meeting issues to surface.

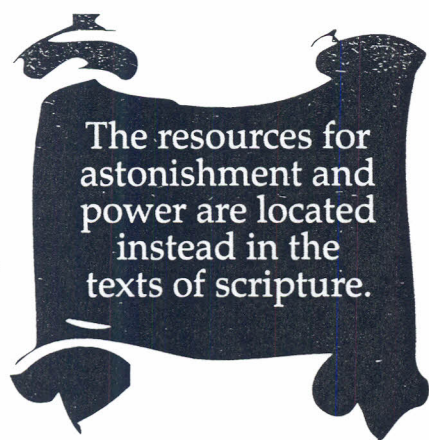
For example, before preaching from the story of Jesus’ calming the storm at sea recorded in Mark 4, you will note, after a quick study, that the issue of faith and fear drive this story and the vignettes that follow. The temptation, even when starting with the text, is soon to abandon the passage for that fine article, “How to Overcome Fear,” you clipped from *Parade* magazine. Resist the urge. Instead, ask what the Bible writer does with this passage. How does the text fit with the other collections in which Mark has positioned this pericope? Stay with the text long enough that you launch the boat from the dock and row to the middle of the sea. Then watch as the storm clouds gather above and the wind picks up from the east. Stay with the text until you feel the waves at first begin to lap against the wood of the boat and then to push harder, so that the cold spray hits you in the face. Now the boat is taking on water, but the master is sound asleep. Finally, you can wait no longer. Someone wake him! Stay with the text long enough that you hear him rebuke the wind and then rebuke you for not having faith. Stay with the text long enough that the congregation can see Jesus at work and be confronted with his question for their lives. Then, preach in such a way that the congregation will ask the same question that the disciples asked: “Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey his voice?”

Another example: When you preach from the book of Esther, bring King Xerxes out on stage. Tell the congregation about the party, the half-year-long party. No, better, stay in the text long enough that the congregation can see the king display his opulence. Describe his gold couch, the marble columns, and the royal wine aplenty. Stay in



the text long enough that they see Queen Vashti, heels dragging, refusing to be one more piece of furniture. Then tell the story in such a way that the congregation is engaged. Speak so the congregation can see the action, hear the action, and taste the action. Finally, put the noose around Haman’s wicked neck so the congregation can feel the rope. Ultimately, set the scene so that when Mordecai speaks through his servants to Esther, the whole congregation will lean forward to hear the counsel, “Who knows if you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?” If you stay in the text long enough, you can not imagine the thousands of possibilities that your overhearing congregation will themselves imagine as they ask of themselves, “For what has God prepared me, for such a time as this?” That is all possible if you stay in the text long enough.

Can gospel preaching reclaim its biblical place? We swim against a strong current that has been pulling preachers out to sea for years. Perhaps you have heard the popular reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1838 “Divinity School Address,” in which he bemoaned his experience with an impersonal sermon. Of the preacher, Emerson judged, “If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. . . . [There was] not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. . . . The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, life passed through the fire of thought.”¹⁰ Emerson has connected with generations of preachers for his scolding against irrelevance. Preaching was condemnable for not revealing, or at least processing the sermon through, the press of marriage or defeat or laughter or other human experiences. Emerson recalled hearing that sermon during a



winter storm: "The snow was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow."¹¹ The sermon flunked the test of true faith: the power to charm and command the soul.

For Emerson, as for Fosdick, Rick Warren, and a company of preachers today, the dichotomy is clear, and the "right side" is obvious. The losing perspective, Emerson declared, followed "[h]istorical Christianity [which] destroys the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is. . . ."¹²

I call us not to be Emerson's foil, without breath or life or any evidence of the world in which we live or any fact of our biography. I suggest, instead, that the sublime, those things that are capable of challenge and motivation and conversion, are not the beautiful sentiments conjured from within the preacher or his practical aids for a happy home. The resources for astonishment and power are located instead in the texts of scripture.

Emerson argued, and the world has come to affirm, "The fountain of all good is in oneself."¹³ This is false. The truth is that in the speaking of scripture, life—real life—is experienced. More than one hundred sixty years have ticked away since Emerson's "Divinity School Address," and Christian pulpits have found their relevant niche. However, the question that stands against Emerson is this: Can preaching reclaim its biblical place?

When listeners can sooner tell whether the preacher listens to Limbaugh or Kennedy, to Gingrich or Cuomo than they can discern what the biblical writer may wish readers to experience, we have yet to reclaim the proper source for preaching. When the issues in *Gospel Advocate* and *Wineskins* or *Time* and the *National Review* are more obvious than the theology of Jonah or Mark, we have yet

to reclaim preaching's rightful source.

The truth is that biblical preaching should be as practical as life itself. Biblical preaching should connect with and influence the deepest currents of our lives, impacting our most profound hopes and fears. Preaching is most effective when it is thoughtfully and deeply rooted in the biblical text.

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Notes

¹David Buttrick, critical of the legacy of both Barth and Fosdick for reasons that differ from my critique, adds Martin Luther King Jr. to claim a trio of persons who defined the American pulpit in the twentieth century. David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). See especially pp. 103–105. For Buttrick's assessment of biblical theology and its influence on preaching, see pp. 5–32.

²Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). The most common complaint Warren has heard through community surveys is, "Church is boring, especially the sermons." In response, Warren crafts practical sermons, since audiences "want to hear something on Sunday they can apply on Monday" (191). When preparing for Sunday's sermon, the first question preachers should ask is, "To whom will I be preaching?" "Simply thinking through the needs of the audience will help determine God's will for the message" (227). For a fuller description of Warren's philosophy of preaching, see chapters 12 and 16.

³Even mainline churches are co-opting the new way of doing church. In the Detroit metropolitan area, a United Methodist church plant has clergy without robes or ties, a building without Gothic architecture, and no somber organ music. Instead, a band welcomes visitors with tunes including the theme from *Cheers* ("Where Everybody Knows Your Name"), and sermons are brief and, above all, practical. *Detroit Free Press*, 9 January 1998, sec. 1A, 3A.

⁴Buttrick's complaint is similar: "[I]f the pulpit preaches a God no larger than the reflection of contemporary psychological problems, the pulpit will not preach the great God disclosed in Jesus Christ" (Buttrick, 104). Notice, however, that Buttrick does not call preachers back to the Bible. His gospel is more illusively located, and he derides preachers who "assume that every little swatch of scripture contains some sort of Word of God . . ." (Buttrick, 16).

⁵For an accessible and current introduction to Brueggemann's theology of preaching, see Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching a Sub-Version," *Theology Today* 55 (July 1998): 195–212.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, "On the Wrong Side of the Ditch . . . For a Long Time," in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness*, ed. Charles L. Campbell (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 136–43.

⁷Brueggemann, "Checkpoint John," in *The Threat of Life*, 129–35.

⁸Brueggemann, "Always Again Before Nebuchadnezzar," in *The Threat of Life*, 122–26.

⁹Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 70.

¹⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838," *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature, Addresses, Papers from the Dial*, vol. 4 (New York: Bigelow, Smith, & Company, n.d.), 97.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 96–97.

¹²*Ibid.*, 99. In his groundbreaking study of the history of preaching in the Churches of Christ, Michael Casey suggests the dichotomy in preaching today lies between the scholarly (rational) and need-focused (therapeutic) approaches. Michael

Casey, *Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1995), see chapter 13. Casey calls for a reconnection of the academic disciplines of rhetoric and homiletics. It is, historically, a natural relationship. I am concerned, however, that in this, or any, interdisciplinary relation, the texts of scripture not be dealt second-class status. Indeed, the one who performed the ceremony that wed scripture with rhetoric argued for the primacy of the Bible. The authors of scripture, Augustine claimed, were themselves the epitome of eloquence. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (New York: Macmillan, 1989), see 4.7.12–21. Augustine wrote in A.D. 427 the section I have referenced.

¹³Emerson, 88.