

# Preaching Jesus Christ T O D A Y



Six Questions  
for Moving from  
Scripture to Sermon

ANNETTE BROWNLEE

B  
BakerAcademic

*a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan*

Annette Brownlee, Preaching Jesus Christ Today  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2018. Used by permission.

© 2018 by Annette Brownlee

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
[www.bakeracademic.com](http://www.bakeracademic.com)

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brownlee, Annette, 1955– author.

Title: Preaching Jesus Christ today : six questions for moving from scripture to sermon / Annette Brownlee.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Publishing Group, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017049009 | ISBN 9780801098826 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Preaching. | Bible—Homiletical use.

Classification: LCC BV4211.3 .B766 2018 | DDC 251—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017049009>

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

Scripture quotations labeled NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org))

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Annette Brownlee, Preaching Jesus Christ Today  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2018. Used by permission.

*For he is our God,  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand.  
O that today you would listen to his voice!  
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
when your ancestors tested me,  
and put me to the proof,  
though they had seen my work.*

*Psalm 95:7–9*



For E, H, and I

# Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xvii

Introduction: *Listening to Scripture for Preaching: A Discipline in Need of Remediation* 1

1. Question 1: “What Do I See?” *The Preacher as Witness* 19
  2. Question 2: “Whom Do I See?” *The Preacher as Witness to Christ* 41
  3. Question 3: “What Is Christ’s Word to Me?” *The Preacher as Confessor* 57
  4. Question 4: “What Is Christ’s Word to Us?” *The Preacher as Theologian* 71
  5. Question 5: “What Is Christ’s Word about Us?” *The Preacher as Theologian of a Broken Body* 87
  6. Question 6: “What Does It Look Like?” *The Preacher as Witness to Christ in a Disobedient World* 109
  7. Using the Six Questions: *Sermon Form and Sermon Examples* 133
- Conclusion: *Love as the Hermeneutical Criterion* 165
- Further Reading 169
- Bibliography 171
- Index 181

# Preface

Several years ago our daughter gave her father and me a small book for Christmas, *The Asian Grocery Store Demystified*. As the title suggests, the book takes the reader through the many unfamiliar vegetables and fruits sold in Asian markets and explains what they are and what to do with them in the kitchen. We love this book. We had recently moved to Toronto and bought a house near little Chinatown, just a block from its overflowing markets of strange fruits, vegetables, dried plants, and seafood. We cooked with the book, and over time we moved from sautéing bok choy and Japanese eggplant to cooking amaranth and fuzzy melon. We love it all.

Though the analogy is limited, it offers guidelines for a theologically shaped practice of preaching Jesus Christ. It points the way for preachers to have more confidence in their knowledge of what to do in the strange world of Scripture's fruits and nuts. To claim Scripture as God's word to us—to claim it as authoritative in the church and in our lives—is only a beginning for preachers. We preachers often need help in knowing what to do with these commitments in our sermons, especially in a world in which this claim carries little currency. The guidelines that follow take the form of six straightforward questions for listening to Scripture as one prepares sermons, week after week, and for moving from interpretation to sermon text in the midst of daily congregational life.

The inspiration for these guidelines comes out of the specific nature of the claim I am making: preaching Jesus Christ is a theological practice. Let me briefly say four things this claim implies, all of which I explore in the chapters to come.

First, preaching is theological. It is based on a variety of theological commitments, implicit or explicit, that shape how we read Scripture, preach from it, and move from Scripture to sermon in the context of worship and the church. As later chapters describe, these commitments have to do with what kind of text the preacher understands Scripture to be, the role of the church both in God's purposes for creation and in the interpretation of Scripture, questions of the correlation or connection between Scripture and our worlds today, between then and now, and the role of the preacher in the pulpit and in the congregation. The chief theological claim on which this practice rests is this: the location of preaching in and for the church needs to be the primary business of preachers and must shape how they go about sermon preparation. Why? The church is the God-given soil in which Scripture, preacher, and people are rooted, and the Spirit uses Scripture to testify to the church and to form it into the Spirit's witness to the nations. How might this theological claim shape how we as preachers read Scripture in sermon preparation, craft our sermons, understand our role, and use doctrine and personal stories? How does it shape our understanding of the role of sermons in discipleship and mission? These are questions this book addresses.

This project is part of the movement of theological retrieval that began with the postliberal theology of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei and has, more recently, moved into evangelical traditions.<sup>1</sup> This is not primarily a book of theology; it is about one approach to the practice of preaching based on theological commitments about Scripture and the church that have been part of this movement. It is anchored, in part, in a retrieval of David Yeago's understanding of the inspiration of Scripture, which is based not on plenary inspiration but on the Spirit's use of Scripture in the church for God's ongoing mission.<sup>2</sup>

1. See W. David Buschart and Ken D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), for an excellent introduction to "retrieval" from an evangelical perspective.

2. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); George Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal*

Second, preaching is a practice. It is one practice among many in the church, all of which are a response to God's gracious action through the Spirit. The nature of this response in preaching is that preachers need to *do* something with their interpretation of Scripture. Sermons involve a lot of movement—from Scripture to sermon, from the beginning of a sermon to its end, from the preacher's mouth to the people's ears to everyone's lives, from the gathered community out into the places people spend their weeks—all in the context of worship and a specific culture. It doesn't matter whether pastors preach from a written text, from notes, or just wing it or whether they preach in a Baptist church, an Anglican church, or a café. This movement is not primarily about sermon form, literary style, or holding the listener's (and the preacher's) interest. It is about the power of God on the cross to bring into existence that which is not. In the synagogue in Thessalonica, Paul preaches about this power, the Messiah who suffers and rises from the dead; and what is the reaction of some who hear? They say, "These people . . . have been turning the world upside down" and send a mob in search of Paul and Silas (Acts 17:1–7; here v. 6).

Preachers need help knowing what to do with their theological commitments in their interpretation of Scripture and how to serve it up in a sermon. In my claim that preaching is a theological practice, I aim to expand the movement of theological retrieval to include not only the interpretation of Scripture but also the interpretation of Scripture for the practice of preaching.

Third, preaching is a theologically shaped practice of proclaiming Jesus Christ. This statement shows my theological hand. All Scripture reveals the risen and ascended Jesus Christ. In Scripture, through the Spirit, Christ addresses us individually and as a people; and, again through the Spirit, we are able to respond. Preachers do not have to figure out on their own how to make Scripture meaningful or relevant. Jesus Christ is implicitly relevant and is the meaning and telos of our lives and of all creation. However, preachers do need help in knowing how to pay attention to Scripture; how to see Jesus Christ, the son of

---

Age, ed. James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); David S. Yeago, "The Bible: The Spirit, the Church and the Scriptures; Biblical Inspiration and Interpretation Revisited," in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, 49–93, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

the God of Israel, revealed there; and then how to listen with and on behalf of their congregations as God addresses them through it. We preachers need help knowing what it looks like to be the people God makes us through Christ's address to us in our particular contexts.

Finally, preaching and sermon preparation are practices of pastors. To say this is not to imply for a moment that this happens in isolation. Preachers prepare sermons from within and for their communities; preachers are part of their interpretative communities. With their congregations, pastors are called to stand under God's Word and let it address them. We are called to close the gap between pastors, in their authoritative role, and people. What distinguishes the preacher from her congregation is her role; and for most of us, the weekly round of sermon preparation is a key practice in our God-given vocation of binding ourselves to God's people and to God's Word for the sake of God's world. Here I invite preachers to see sermon preparation as a key spiritual practice in their ongoing growth in Christ through this vocational binding. To do so I turn to Augustine. In *On Christian Teaching* he writes of the relationship between sticking with the hard parts of Scripture and loving feeble, difficult people. The same skill is needed for both. The discipline needed to stick with both the concrete words of Scripture (what is often called the textually mediated world of Scripture) and the fleshly limitations of the human condition is an ability to see the redemption of both in Christ's incarnation.<sup>3</sup> This is our call as pastors: to see Jesus Christ as we are bound to God's Word and to God's people for the sake of God's redemption for the world.

Why does any of this matter? The hallmark of this postmodern age, where differences between people—the other—are regularly perceived in terms of struggles for power and contested realities, is that it lends itself to preaching abstract principles and timeless propositions or retreating to personal stories, all of which are easier to swallow. Love, justice, and justification seem broad enough ideas—we hope—with room for everyone across social, educational, racial, sexual, and geographic divisions. Preaching universal principles or resorting to personal stories, however, is not preaching Jesus Christ, incarnate, risen,

3. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching (On Christian Doctrine)*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27–28.

ascended, and coming again. Paul asks, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Not *what*. The good news of the gospel is that Christ’s incarnation into the problematic particularity of the human condition is this fallen world’s redemption. In his incarnation Christ embraces the differences and inequalities that are part of being human, a creature in a particular time and place. In this embrace he offers us not a way to negate the chasms between ourselves and others, or a way to define them in terms of a struggle for dominance, but a way to love across the gaps. In what follows I endeavor to show that an attentive reading of Scripture, hard parts and all, focusing on the identity that Jesus Christ offers, gives us a way to preach—and most importantly to love—in a postmodern world.

Is this not our hope, that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life *across* all our contested realities? That he speaks in all times, cultures, and places? The burden of making Jesus relevant in our time and context is too heavy for even the most gifted preacher. But before preachers open their mouths or Bibles, God has created the condition for us to be able to preach Jesus Christ. What is that? God has created us able to hear his Word. All of us, across centuries, continents, and cultures. All of us together. Only God can create hearers of his Word, Luther claims; and God has done just that through the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> Thus preaching truly is first and last a response to the gracious action of the Spirit, which makes us able to hear God’s Word. As Augustine writes, before we are preachers we are hearers of the Word.<sup>5</sup> Before we can be preachers we must listen to God’s Word along with our people. This is who God has made us. The psalmist writes, “Hear this, all you peoples; / give ear, all inhabitants of the world, / both low and high, rich and poor together” (Ps. 49:1–2).

Such is our privilege: to learn to listen to the Word with those God has entrusted to us in our congregations. Our vocation as preachers is found in this: to stand under the Word with our people, in the context of the church, and to let it address and shape us.

4. All citations from the works of Martin Luther are taken from Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (American edition), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86); here, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 1–4*, 22:8.

5. Paul Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 208.

## The Organization of the Book

The book is organized around the Six Questions of the Sermon. The introduction lays out what is at stake if we lose the practice of carefully attending to Scripture for proclamation, and it roots the Six Questions and the role of the preacher in the common life of the church. The heart of the book moves through the Six Questions in order. With each specific question I discuss the theological and hermeneutical issues it brings to the foreground, the role of the preacher in this stage of sermon preparation, and tools for using the questions in sermon preparation. Each question is set in its postmodern context. The final section of the book offers sample sermons using the Six Questions.

## The Six Questions of a Theologically Shaped Practice of Preaching Jesus Christ

1. What do I see? The preacher as witness.
  - ▶ Main action: Attentively read the appointed Scriptures.
2. Whom do I see? The preacher as witness to Christ.
  - ▶ Main action: Describe the identity of Jesus Christ revealed in the text.
3. What is Christ's word to me? The preacher as confessor.
  - ▶ Main action: Hear God's address to you and receive God's mercy and judgment.
4. What is Christ's word to us? The preacher as theologian.
  - ▶ Main action: Hear God's address to the church and one's own congregation in its particular context.
5. What is Christ's word about us? The preacher as theologian of a broken body.
  - ▶ Main action: Describe the identity of the church and the disciple given in Christ's word and address to us.
6. What does it look like? The preacher as witness to Christ in a disobedient world.
  - ▶ Main action: Facilitate recognition of how the identity of Christ is inhabited in a broken and disobedient world.

The Six Questions move from attentiveness to the scriptural text (What do I see?); to the text's center and completion, Jesus Christ (Whom do I see?); to Christ's address to us personally (What is Christ's word to me?); to Christ's address to us as the church (What is Christ's word to us?); to the identity Christ offers the church and disciples (What is Christ's word about us?); to how we inhabit our identity in Christ for and in a disobedient world (What does it look like?).

# Acknowledgments

There are many people whose fingerprints are on these pages. I am grateful to all of them. Philip Turner read an early version. Ellen Davis and Will Willimon provided early support. Dave Nelson at Baker Academic provided excellent advice about the organization of the book. Melisa Blok, my editor at Baker, made this a better book. Rachel Lott proofed the manuscript and tracked down errant citations. My colleagues at Wycliffe College and the Toronto School of Theology provided steady encouragement, and clergy friends in Kingston were willing to practice using these questions for a summer of sermons. Colleagues at the Academy of Homiletics provided constructive feedback to portions of chapters. But primarily I am in the debt of the congregations with whom, over the years, I have broken bread and tried to hear and respond to God's Word. To the people of St. Paul's in East Cleveland, Ohio; St. Luke's in Cleveland, Ohio; Emmanuel in Stamford, Connecticut; Ascension in Pueblo, Colorado; St. Paul's L'Amoreaux in Scarborough, Toronto; and Founder's Chapel in Wycliffe College, Toronto. Many thanks to those who gave me permission to use their stories. Finally I am thankful for my husband, who has been with me through it all.

# Introduction

## Listening to Scripture for Preaching: A Discipline in Need of Remediation

I recently heard a sermon on Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18. This text about the day of the Lord, in which neither gold nor silver will save the complacent from the Lord’s wrath—that is, from having their blood “poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung”—is part of the Revised Common Lectionary assigned at the end of November in Year A. The preacher is commended for not avoiding this tough Old Testament text; though the Gospel assigned for the same Sunday, Matthew 25:14–30, is no more congenial. In the Gospel a certain master throws one of the servants he entrusted with his property into the outer darkness, amid weeping and gnashing of teeth. The preacher could have preached on the psalm or the reading from 1 Thessalonians. Rather, he bravely tackled this difficult text. Except he really didn’t. Instead he preached around its edges. He spoke of the difficulty of the text. He pointed to Zephaniah 1:1, which speaks of the need for silence before the Lord. He promised his listeners that this text would be easier to deal with when it came up in the lectionary in Advent, with the chapter’s beginning verses. He located this reading contextually in the rest of Zephaniah. But each time the preacher turned toward the content of the passage assigned for this particular Sunday, he quickly exited its dark contours by telling

an amusing story or an anecdote, which turned our attention away from its particular challenges.

## A Quick Exit from Scripture's Room

What I heard on that particular Sunday in November is not uncommon. Because preachers aren't necessarily sure how to listen to Scripture—let alone how to serve it up in a sermon that is life giving to those who then listen to it—we quickly skip over its difficulties. We leave its foreign world for the more familiar and accessible world of story and personal experience. A fellow preacher told me, "I'm a storyteller by nature and use lots of stories in my preaching, and yet I have an uneasy feeling about the connection between my stories and the Scripture."

Stories and personal experience are not our only way of evading Scripture's strangeness. I work at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, an evangelical-Anglican seminary composed of students from Anglican/Episcopal and other Protestant traditions. This denominational soup, while maintaining its Anglican heritage and form of worship, is united by a commitment to the enduring Word of God and the inheritance of the Reformed tradition. All would confess, in some way or another, that Scripture is God's enduring, authoritative, and living word.

A commitment to the authority of Scripture, however, is no guarantee that preachers will know what to do with it in a sermon. These evangelical students are no surer of how to read Scripture than those who may not identify as evangelical. What to do with its historical particularity, the place of historical criticism in their interpretation, their own faith—and what to do with all of this in a sermon? They frequently exit the text of Scripture and turn to doctrine, pietism, moral exhortation, and personal experience in order to proclaim it. So, for example, they might rest their shaky sermons on theological truisms such as grace, justification, and repentance, which are important terms but ones many parishioners drop in the recycling boxes as they leave church. Often, without meaning to do so, preachers of all kinds exit Scripture's room through storytelling, personal experience, doctrine, and piety; in doing so, they walk away from Scripture's rich fruits.

## Whom Do We Blame?

I don't think we can lay this tendency to exit Scripture's room on the backs of individual clergy and their inability to manage their time or on those who teach preaching or even on the ease of downloading sermons. There has been an erosion of confidence in the power of the gospel. The erosion is partly due to decreasing confidence in Christian language and practices, but also to the lack of practice in carefully reading and listening to Scripture. In the introduction to *The Art of Reading Scripture*, the authors describe reading Scripture as a form of art, a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination. They go on to acknowledge that it is difficult to do well and that "the disciplines of attentiveness to the word do not come easily to us."<sup>1</sup> It is a discipline in need of remediation.

### *Scripture's Authority and Particularity*

Two central characteristics of Scripture are problematic for many at this time: its authority and its historical particularity. Is it surprising that we don't know what to do with it? Both the authority of Scripture and the church's basic practices (which spring from it) are called first-order language and practices—and they are contested.<sup>2</sup> Many denominations have divided or are in division over differing understandings of baptism, Holy Communion, marriage, ordination, and the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> "Religions," George Lindbeck writes, "have become

1. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), xv. They then go on to lay out nine theses for how to read Scripture with imagination, engagement, and attentiveness (1–5). The essays included in the volume flesh these out for the life of the church and for preaching.

2. Beginning with the Reformation, disagreements between Catholics and Protestants over the relationship between church and Scripture led to an erosion of confidence in both. The clarity of Scripture and the teaching role of the church became places of competing claims and discord. For a fuller historical investigation of this erosion, see Ephraim Radner, "The Absence of the Comforter: Scripture and the Divided Church," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 355–94.

3. Here I mention marks of the church. Others include prayer, worship, discipleship, evangelism, and mission. Martin Luther describes seven basic marks of the church in *Luther's Works*, 41:148–68. For a more comprehensive understanding of practices in the church, see Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and*

foreign texts that are much easier to translate into current popular categories than to read in terms of their intrinsic sense.”<sup>4</sup> They have also become battlegrounds. Augustine’s claim that what is written in the Scriptures is better and truer—even if its meaning is hidden—than anything we could think of by ourselves seems preposterous to some and scandalous to others.<sup>5</sup>

In *Preaching and the Other*, Ronald Allen writes, “To be postmodern is to respect difference and otherness, to appreciate pluralism and particularity, and to recognize the social conditioning and relativity of all awareness.”<sup>6</sup> However, to acknowledge and respect the particularity of the other, as Allen describes, does not necessarily mean we know what to do with it in our congregations, the world, or our sermons. What do I do with the texts about circumcision? In Scripture it is a practice only for men, and in contemporary practice, female circumcision is a form of mutilation and is against the law in most countries where it occurs (though laws are poorly enforced). What do I do with Jesus’s conversation with the woman caught in adultery? Where is the man who was part of her act?

Particularity is part of the sunk cost of being a creature. I cannot be born and shaped everywhere or anywhere. Neither can you. By the fact of being creatures we are unequal in most of the ways we measure the human race: economic, social, educational, ecological, and so on. This raises difficult questions for the practice of preaching. Can I speak for anyone but myself in a sermon? Do I have a right to speak for or about others? I assist at a church in Scarborough, a part of Toronto considered one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the world. Can I preach the same sermon to all my parishioners, many of whom are immigrants from places as varied as mainland China, Sri Lanka, Ghana, and the Bahamas? If so, how? Unsure of what to do with their particularity, as well as my own and that of Scripture—and wanting to respect differences—I am often tempted to recast texts and situations

---

*Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), and Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997). The latter explores twelve Christian practices, from honoring the body to household economics.

4. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 110.

5. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 2.7.9.

6. Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 15.

that seem primarily contextual into abstract or universalized terms like love, tolerance, or hope. Otherwise they might become contested and reduced to struggles for power. It is easy to see the appeal of leaving Scripture's stubborn detail and asking instead, "What do these words mean to me?" or "What do they express about me?" Or of jumping from Scripture into a sermon on justice or justification by faith. Or of telling a story.

But there is something of a vicious circle in this uncertainty over what to do with Scripture's stubborn particularity. The lack of practice in carefully reading and listening to Scripture leads to an erosion of confidence in the church and Scripture as primary vessels of the Spirit's saving work in the world—a result that only decreases our attention to it. L. Gregory Jones makes just this point. He notes that the rise in arguments about various methods of reading and interpreting Scripture is, in part, due to the declining practice of actually reading it.<sup>7</sup> He states, "Even evangelicals, who have a very high view of the Bible's authority, often have a rather low competence in reading and embodying Scripture."<sup>8</sup>

In light of the difficulties with the particularity of Scripture and contested church practices, the turn to doctrine, piety, or the more accessible and less contested world of stories and personal experience in the search for meaning is appealing. This is especially true when the rhythm of parish ministry crowds out time for much else. But in doing so, we have exited Scripture's room without realizing it. We look around it quickly then walk to the nearest exit to find its meaning.

### *A Quick Exit from Scripture: An Example*

I offer the following by way of example: Say I am preaching on Christ's temptations in the wilderness from either Luke or Matthew. I focus on how Christ's temptations show us that God is always with us when we are tempted. In doing so, I have exited the particularities of *Christ's* temptations—as specific to him—and have stepped into the world of human temptation. I have interpreted Christ's battles with the

7. L. Gregory Jones, "Embodying Scripture in the Community of Faith," in Davis and Hays, *Art of Reading Scripture*, 143–47.

8. Jones, "Embodying Scripture," 145.

devil in the wilderness in terms of a shared experience of temptation between Christ, me, and my parishioners.

Or, perhaps I take the text in a different direction. I preach that Christ's temptations in the wilderness show us how God responds to our obedience. I go on to apply this teaching on obedience to everyday situations my congregation confronts in the wildernesses of their own lives. I interpret the particularities of Christ's battle in terms of a generalized teaching about obedience.

Notice what has happened in these examples. I have preached sermons that are worth hearing, since it is true that God is with us in our temptations and that disciples are called to obedience. I have tried to offer my congregation comfort, hope, and direction. But I could have preached either sermon without this specific text. The details of Christ's temptations, the uncomfortable statement that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, the angels ministering to Jesus, and the devil's promise to come again at an opportune time are skipped over. What the details of this text say about who Jesus is has been left for another time. In both cases, because of my desire to make the Scripture speak to my congregation, I have looked outside of it for its meaning: in a shared experience, in a church teaching. I have exited Scripture's room and its rich and stubborn detail.

### The Six Questions of the Sermon and a Turn to the Church

Facing an erosion of confidence in Scripture and in practices of the church, we desire to preach sermons that speak to our congregations. But we do not have to turn away from Scripture's particularity in order to make it meaningful. Along with the first disciples, we say to Jesus, "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). These words of eternal life, however, God gives to us in the often difficult and obscure words of Scripture. As R. R. Reno has eloquently stated, an erosion of confidence in the gospel calls us not to look away from Scripture and the practices of the church, but to look again—attentively, expectantly, and obediently.

We should not try to ignore or correct or deny the spiritual dryness of the *concreta Christiana*. The difficulties are quite real. . . . But precisely

as such, the difficulties and impediments are constitutive of the very saving power of Jesus Christ. The impotence we perceive is part of the potency of new life that is promised, for it forces us to submit ourselves to a lifetime of obedient searching in the very *concreta Christiana* we might so quickly abandon as inauspicious and lifeless. The weakness forces us to look again rather than to look elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

The Six Questions of the Sermon provide the structure for this book and act as guidelines to help the preacher do just this: to look attentively at Scripture and understand how to interpret and preach what she sees. To do so, the Six Questions distill a theologically shaped practice of preaching Jesus Christ into its simplest form and clarify the preacher's role in each step. In other words, they are designed to be simple enough to be remembered and easy enough to be used. They spring from a commitment to Scripture as God's revealed word and address to the church (Rev. 3:22), a church that is given a specific identity, vocation, and mission by the one who addresses it and whose word creates it. The Six Questions are also shaped by the claim that the church—in which are located both Scripture and the people God forms through it—needs to be more than an afterthought to how we read, hear, interpret, and preach Scripture.

The questions, in their simplest form, are as follows:

What do I see? The preacher as witness.

Whom do I see? The preacher as witness to Christ.

What is Christ's word to me? The preacher as confessor.

What is Christ's word to us? The preacher as theologian.

What is Christ word about us? The preacher as theologian of a broken body.

What does it look like? The preacher as witness to Christ in a disobedient world.

The Six Questions of the Sermon return the reading and interpretation of Scripture for preaching to the church. Why the church? The

9. Russell Reno, *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), 144.

church is the soil in which Scripture, preacher, and congregation are rooted. In other words, the church is the natural habitat for interpreting Scripture for proclamation. It is the place where, over the centuries, Scripture is heard, proclaimed, and lived. Thus to develop a theologically shaped practice of preaching I offer guidelines for hearing Scripture as God's address to us, personally and corporately, and for receiving the identity God offers us in Jesus Christ in the church. We enact this identity, in response to Christ's address to us, in and for the broken and disobedient world.

### *The Ecosystem of the Church*

Several years ago on a Sunday afternoon, amid one of my parish's annual fundraisers for mission work, I received a call to come immediately to the hospital. There had been an accident at a parishioner's home and the infant of a parishioner was not breathing. The doctors and nurses tried to revive the child but were unable to do so. The parents wanted me to baptize their baby before the nurses called the time of death. It is one of the hardest things we do as clergy. I did so amid the overflowing love in that room, as the baby's mother and father held it, the nurses competently kept an eye on the situation, and we all wept. A few days later her parents carried an infant-sized coffin into a full church for the funeral, and afterward we all drove to the family gravesite outside of town for the committal. It was a long, heart-wrenching week. I did not expect the family to be in church that Sunday. But there they were: father, mother, a sibling. I was in the pulpit and they were in the congregation—trying to listen. What could they possibly hear?

As a parish pastor I have learned that there is a vital relationship between what happens in the pulpit and what happens in the rest of parish life. This organic relationship involves the proclamation of the Word in sermon, sacrament, and practices of the church. It involves the individual listeners in their many contexts and backgrounds, the communities beyond the church of which parishioners are a part, and the building up of a corporate sense of identity in the church as a visible witness in the world to the new life given in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1–3). In the body of Christ I have learned that one cannot separate

the hospital room, the pulpit, the local jail, the neighborhood, and the mission trip or field any more than the eye can say to the hand, “I have no need of you.” Pastors and congregants know that sermons are only one part of this ecosystem, though connected to all the others.<sup>10</sup> The complex ecosystem of the church—not personal experience, abstract principles, piety, or doctrine—is the soil in which both Scripture and God’s people are rooted.

This claim rests on the promise that the Spirit uses Scripture to build the church. We sing of this hope in the hymn “The Church’s One Foundation”: “She is his new creation by water and the Word.” The homiletician Richard Eslinger has described the Spirit’s use of Scripture to build the church as a “double movement.”<sup>11</sup> Eslinger reiterates Stanley Hauerwas’s claim that the biblical story “is not self-referential but rather creates a people capable of being a continuation of the narrative by witnessing to the world that all creation is ordered for God’s good end. The church is the necessary context for the testing of that narrative.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the Spirit uses Scripture to build the church by creating a people able to hear and respond to it. The focus of Scripture is not on God’s being in and of itself—for that is not the story found in the canon—but on “how life is to be lived and reality construed in the light of God’s character as an agent as this is depicted in the stories of Israel and of Jesus.”<sup>13</sup>

The church the Spirit builds is one capable of hearing and responding to Scripture in its common life and in the lives of disciples in the world. Not perfectly, not without great failures, but nonetheless able to hear and respond. Thus the church is not only the soil in which Scripture and people are rooted; it is not only a web or ecosystem of relationships and practices. Because the Spirit uses Scripture to create a people capable of hearing it, *God has made the church the primary form of the interpretation of Scripture*. A commitment to the life, activity, and

10. David Lose notes this and comments that it takes some of the burden off what a sermon must accomplish. See *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

11. Richard Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 30.

12. Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, 26, quoting Stanley Hauerwas. See Hauerwas, “The Church as God’s New Language,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 183.

13. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 121.

organization of the Christian community is the fundamental form of the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> In Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, he writes of the church's key role in the plan of God, who created all things. "Through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (3:10). In other words, the witness of the Spirit in the world is mediated not only through the words of Scripture but also through the life of a people formed by the Word, Jesus Christ.

We do not have to exit Scripture, with its difficulties and particularities, into the world of personal experience, abstract principles, doctrine, or piety in order to interpret it for preaching. The actions, practices, identity, and mission of the church, in its various expressions, *are* the meaning and interpretation of Scripture, both in its common life and as believers go about their lives as disciples in their own time and place.

### *The Eclipse of the Church in the West*

Perhaps it seems like poor timing to develop an approach to preaching based on the claim that the church is the primary form of the interpretation of Scripture, as the rapid decline of the church and its many divisions in the West have dimmed its witness to Jesus Christ. But it is here, in the face of the church's limitations and failures, that we should follow Reno's advice. Rather than look away from or question the church's central place in the plan of salvation as described in Ephesians (what was God thinking?), we should look again, attentively, obediently, and expectantly. To do so thrusts us back, as Reno says, onto the narrow way of Jesus Christ.

That is where we need to be. The narrow way of Christ offers us a way forward in the postmodern world of contested otherness. The central identity of Jesus Christ is as one who has embraced particularity. Christ comes as a particular person in a particular time and place. His incarnation compels us to resist capitulating to a conceptual understanding of the Other or to reducing otherness to a struggle for dominance. In the church our primary identity is found *within* Christ's embrace and redemption of creaturely differences and inequalities.<sup>15</sup>

14. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 42.

15. Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 120–34.

### *The Cost of Turning Away from Scripture*

The dangers of abandoning Scripture are far worse than the difficulties of knowing how to read it. The cost of turning away from it is simply too high in terms of the vocation God has given the church. In *Captive to the Word of God*, Miroslav Volf writes of the current resurgence of a theological reading of Scripture by both biblical scholars and systematic theologians, which he calls “the most significant theological development in the last two decades.”<sup>16</sup> He places the importance of this resurgence in light of the eclipse of the theologian’s role in shaping public life. “To the extent that theology is able to shape broader society at all, it will be able to do so *largely to the degree that it is able to shape the life of the Christian communities.*”<sup>17</sup> The vocation God gives to the church as a light to the world is not eclipsed despite the shrinking public role of the church in much of the West. Given this shrinkage, we have a great urgency to form persons who are shaped by the life of Jesus Christ through the common life of the church. Individual church communities and persons formed by them are the church’s great way of participating in societies. Philip Turner insightfully declares that “the exemplary power of lives well lived” is perhaps a key way the church models the truth of the life and death of Jesus Christ today.<sup>18</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. preached at a time when the church still had an influence on the larger society. But he also knew, as Richard Lischer describes in *The Preacher King*, that the congregation is at the center of Christianity.

Ebenezer [Baptist Church] had taught King that the basic unit of Christianity in the world is the congregation. . . . Perhaps he understood that Christianity was never meant to work in the lecture hall or at the level of abstract principles but, rather, among a community that is joined by race, family, neighborhood, and economics, but whose truest identity transcends all of these. . . . The power of Jesus is in the church. The

16. Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 14.

17. Volf, *Captive to the Word of God*, 10 (emphasis original).

18. Philip Turner makes this point in *Christian Ethics and the Church: Ecclesial Foundations for Moral Thought and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). See the section “The Exemplary Power of Lives Well Lived: Truth and Reconciliation,” 205–11.

congregation is the laboratory for the love commanded by God and the instrument of his justice. The black preacher knows that if it isn't happening there, it isn't happening.<sup>19</sup>

What we do in our congregations matters, even if it seems small, tedious, and fruitless at times. Our sermons matter. Our sermon preparation matters. So do our evangelism, ethics, outreach, formation, witness, and mission. Our people matter enormously. And communicating the gospel to them matters now even more than before.

### The Role of the Preacher: Witness, Confessor, and Theologian

For each of the Six Questions of the Sermon, I describe the role the preacher assumes in that step of sermon preparation. I do so for two reasons. The first is to help the preacher use the Six Questions by offering two ways to understand and enter into each of them. Each question is meant to clarify the preacher's role, and the description of the role is meant to clarify the intent of the question. For example, in question 1 (What do I see? The preacher as witness), the preacher might ask herself, "What am I doing when I describe what I see in the text?" The role assigned to the preacher in question 1 helps her to answer her own question. I am being a witness. Or, with question 4 (What is Christ's word to me? The preacher as confessor), the preacher might ask herself, "What does it mean to be a confessor?" It means that I speak of my own faith and of my own response to standing under the Word and trying to hear Christ address me in it.

Second, the role of the preacher is shaped by the double movement of the Spirit: the Spirit uses Scripture to create a people able to hear and respond to it. The preacher is part of this interpretive community that the Spirit creates and has a particular role in it. The preacher is a witness. She attentively reads Scripture and sits with it until she can witness to the God who acts in and through it. The preacher is a confessor. As the Spirit makes both preacher and congregation able to hear and respond to Scripture, the preacher must allow herself to be addressed

19. Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 79.

by the one about whom she has witnessed. The preacher cannot be a witness to God and then stand outside the need to respond to the one she testified to. This one—the living God who raises the dead—calls forth from us a response, and the Spirit makes that response possible. Thus, the preacher must be a confessor as well as a witness. Finally, the preacher is a theologian. The Spirit uses Scripture to build the church, and the preacher speaks of the shared identity we are given for the sake of the world in Jesus Christ. Her witness and confession is not for herself alone. It is for her congregation and for building up the church's witness.

### *The Preacher's Ongoing Growth in Christ*

A theologically shaped practice of preaching, rooted in the church, offers tired clergy a way to understand their sermon preparation as a central practice in their ongoing growth in Christ. Our vocation as pastors is to bind ourselves to God's Word and to God's people in the weekly rhythm of parish life. The vocation of the preacher is an odd one in an electronic age. Where else, except in houses of worship, do people gather together to listen to a person or persons speak, week after week? Not to movies, TED talks, or YouTube videos, but to a person? In *Preacher and Cross*, André Resner Jr. reminds us that speech is always tied to the one speaking; and for the Christian preacher, sermons are tied not to some general ethic of character but to his ethos or character as rooted in the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> In visual media—movies, videos, and images—the cord has been cut between the character of the messenger (actors, speakers, editors) and the message. This is not so in the act of preaching. As we preach, our character preaches as well, and more importantly, so does our stature in Jesus Christ. This is more important than eloquent words or finely crafted sermons.

The ease of downloading sermons or leaving our preparation to Saturday night might seem a necessary pastoral reality, but the discipline of attentively reading Scripture for sermon preparation is a key practice for clergy as they seek to grow in Christ. We cheat ourselves when our weeks crowd out this discipline. We also cheat those to whom

20. André Resner Jr., *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 105–28.

we are bound in love. In *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine writes of the discipline we must develop in order to stay with the difficult parts of Scripture. He claims that the skills we need to read Scripture properly are also the very ones needed to act morally. To stick with both the strange world of Scripture and the limitations of the human condition is the same: we need to be able to see that both lead beyond themselves to Christ, who in his flesh has embraced and redeemed our limitations.<sup>21</sup> Can this not also help us to abide in the constraints and brokenness of our ministries and those of our congregations? Our people—like the all-too-human words of Scripture, which we stumble over and often prefer to ignore—lead beyond themselves to Jesus Christ. Developing the patience, trust, and discipline to become fluent in God's transforming Word, given in this life in the humble, broken speech of Scripture, helps us to develop the perceptive powers to look for and recognize Christ in creaturely finitude and flaws, including our own. It leads to a life where, rather than trying to transcend these limitations, we joyfully bind ourselves in love to God's Word, people, and world in obedient expectation. The attentive reading of Scripture for sermon preparation will be a primary spiritual discipline throughout our ministries. Our hope is that, over time, the Spirit will form us into people and pastors able to do just this.

### *Augustine as a Model for Preaching in a Postmodern World*

Does Augustine, who prepared sermons in the fourth and fifth centuries, have anything helpful to say to those who preach in a culturally diverse church—in a pluralistic, postmodern, secular world—where many do not know the basic story of Scripture? He does, for his world was not unlike ours.

Immediately after his ordination as a priest, Augustine wrote a letter to his bishop, Valerius, asking for some time to study the Scriptures. Valerius had asked Augustine to preach regularly, even though at that time preaching was primarily restricted to bishops. Augustine felt he needed to study the Scriptures with an ear for how they speak to the whole church and not just to one man in the privacy of his

21. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 3.10.14. See also Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 150.

garden.<sup>22</sup> How could he preach to all his flock, the classically trained, the uneducated, and the pagans? How could he preach as their pastor? This is what he needed time to figure out. His dilemma is our dilemma. How do we preach to those who are suspicious of Scripture or who do not know its basic story? How do we preach to a wide range of needs, situations, and starting places? Across economic, educational, and ethnic lines? That Augustine was able to do so without excising Scripture of its content offers us a model and a challenge.

Augustine wrote what is considered the first Christian manual on preaching, *De doctrina christiana* or *On Christian Teaching*. He began writing it at the beginning of his episcopacy in the 390s but did not complete a portion of book 3 and all of book 4 until the end of his life in the late 420s. It is worth our attention to look at how this manual teaches preaching. Unlike many books on preaching, which begin with a definition of preaching or descriptions of the vocation of the preacher—as shepherd, pastor, herald, witness—Augustine begins in another place. He begins with this question: How do we learn Scripture? Three of the four books of *On Christian Teaching* are devoted to addressing this question. Only in the fourth book does he turn to the kinds of questions we usually associate with preaching: questions of form, rhetoric, persuasion, eloquence, and so on.

In the organization of *On Christian Teaching* Augustine presents the principle I consider essential to all Christian preaching: how we learn to read Scripture is absolutely fundamental, as is learning to read it for the vocation of preaching in the church. The preface to *On Christian Teaching* defends the legitimacy of teaching rules for interpreting Scripture. In it Augustine clearly states the connection between God's revealed Word and the divine means of passing it on, which defines the vocation of the preacher and pastor—to bind herself to God's Word and God's people.

The human condition would be wretched indeed if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency. . . . Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as

22. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 201–6.

it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans.<sup>23</sup>

For Augustine, questions of social context, sermon form, presentation, the role of imagination, and the use of stories and illustrations are critically important. But they are secondary to the discipline of reading Scripture in the church; and more so, they spring out of it. Augustine knew about the erosion of confidence in Scripture. He too said that we are not good at reading Scripture. Why? In part because we are not good at seeing this truth: what is written in the Scriptures is better and truer—even if its meaning is hidden—than anything we could think of by ourselves.<sup>24</sup>

Augustine was a pastor and understood that he was bound both to the people God had entrusted to his care and to God's Word. He assigns a privileged place not only to Scripture but also to the community of the church. In its creeds, liturgies, and rule of faith, the church is the corporate memory of the one Scripture points to and reveals. In all these, the church turns toward Christ, head of the broken body, and toward its neighbor. Thus, to interpret Scripture is not an end in itself but a part of the life of holiness. The interpretation of Scripture means nothing if it does not build up the body of Christ. Augustine states this rule for interpreting Scripture at the end of book 1 of *On Christian Teaching*: “So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.”<sup>25</sup> Augustine understood that his vocations to teach, preach, and love his people were intertwined: they were a single calling.

### ***To Look Again Rather Than Elsewhere***

In response to the Western erosion of confidence in the gospel, we do not need to walk out of Scripture’s room into order to preach sermons that are good news to our people. God comes to us in what is weak and

23. Augustine, preface to *On Christian Teaching* 1:13–14, pp. 5–6.

24. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 142.

25. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* 1.86.

rejected, especially in the strange words of Scripture, in order to give us life in his Son. The Spirit guides us to look again at Scripture and the church, attentively, obediently, and expectantly, rather than looking elsewhere. To attend to it with a guide for its navigation is far less of a burden on the preacher than trying to erect one rickety bridge of meaning after another. Relevance is not established by connecting the text with objective truths or doctrine; with the expectations, perceptions, and felt needs of the hearers; or with some universal experience. It is established by inviting hearers to join you, the preacher, as you stand under the Word—the same Word that addresses Israel, Mary, Paul, the Corinthians, believers across the ages, and the contemporary church. I hope these Six Questions will help us discover how to do just that—to know what to do with what we see and hear.