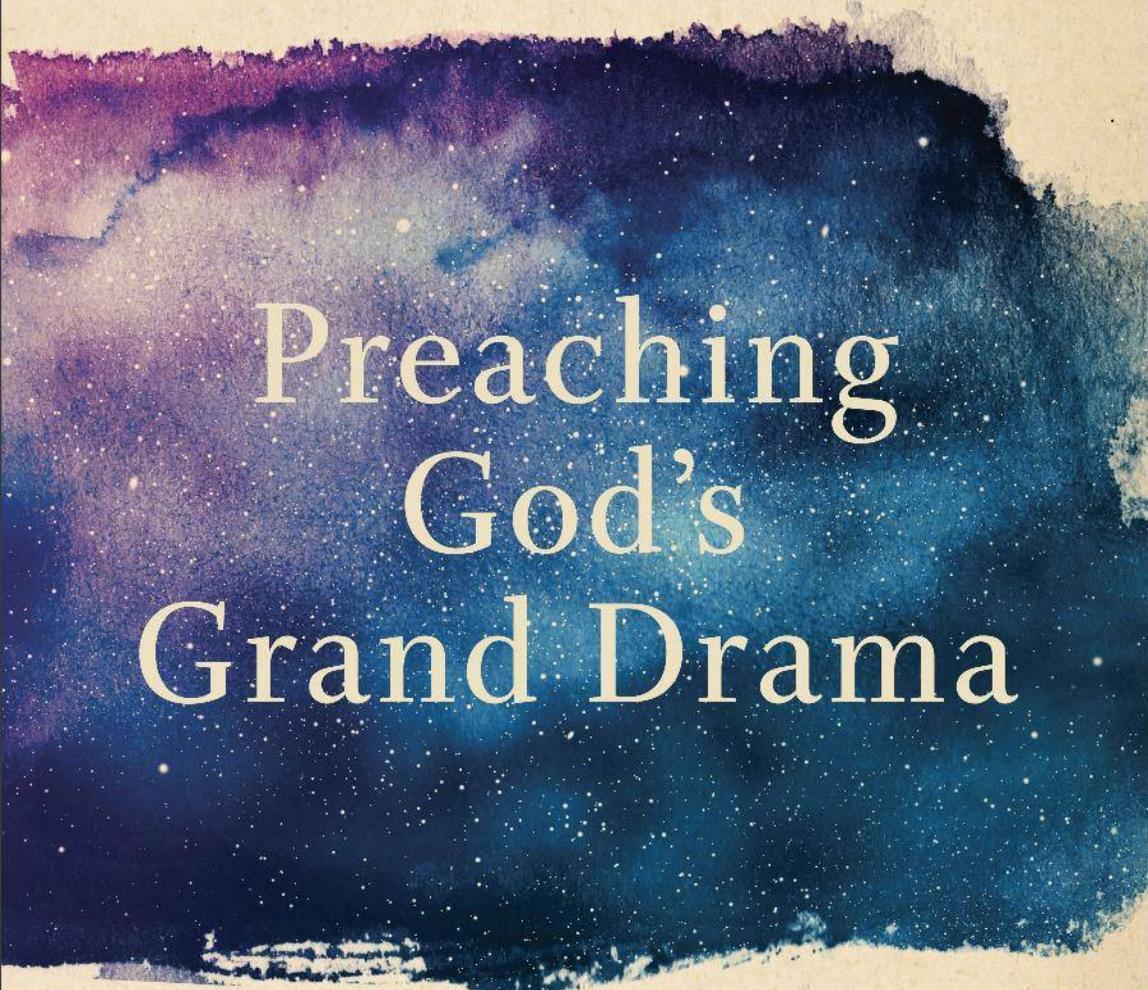


Foreword by Mark Labberton



Preaching
God's
Grand Drama

A Biblical-Theological Approach

AHMI LEE

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Contents

Foreword *Mark Labberton* ix

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction 1

1. The Traditional Homiletic: *Truth Mined, Truth Proclaimed* 7

2. The Conversational Homiletic: *Communal Meaning-Making* 31

3. A Critique of the Conversational Homiletic 55

4. A Dramatic Approach to Theology 87

5. The Shape of a Theodramatic Homiletic 113

6. Four Perspectives at Play within a Theodramatic Homiletic 145

Index 169

Introduction

I have often found myself caught between things. I lived my childhood between the two cultures of my parents: the native Korean culture of my mother and the Japanese culture of my father, who, despite being ethnically Korean, was born and raised in Japan, and so in every other sense of the word is Japanese. I was further caught between the multiracial, multiethnic culture of my American foreign school in Japan and a complex fusion of Korean-Japanese culture at home. Upon my eventual arrival and new life in the United States, I found myself caught in a new challenge: navigating a new world as a third-culture kid from abroad who fully belonged with neither the American-born and -raised Asians nor the first-generation Asian immigrants. Even though I was brought up in an American educational system whose culture significantly shaped my childhood and teen years, as an immigrant to this country, I was neither a citizen who fully belonged here nor a tourist or student who had a sense of belonging in their home country.

This in-between cultural experience also captures my ecclesial experience, especially when it comes to preaching. For the greater part of my life, I was formed and nourished by pulpits that primarily aimed to exposit a biblical text as clearly as possible. Sermons had a chiefly catechetical function and could be summarized in a few logical and salient points that related to the text's central idea. My pastors spoke as great teachers and prophets who strove to hide themselves behind the Word in order to pass on only the decisive divine Word to the congregation, who would hear

and obey it. This style of preaching more or less captures my theological training as a seminary student too. However, in my preaching journey I also encountered more recent homiletical literature (from the 1950s on) that advocates a different style of preaching: the sermon as a liturgical event that gathers the church around its central conversations. A pastor who prefers this way of preaching often likens his or her task to that of a storyteller, poet, or host—among a wide array of other creative metaphors—who evokes and invites listeners into a communal reality-shaping experience. Over time I realized something else: this is not just about my personal journey; many people relate to this experience. The two approaches to sermons that I describe appear everywhere and are thriving. As someone who preaches locally and in other parts of the world in diverse contexts, and as a teacher of preaching at a multid denominational evangelical seminary, I encounter many who are caught between these two prominent and prevalent “cultures” of preaching today. Preachers often side with one over the other; congregations seem to prefer one style instead of the other; and many preaching books fall into one of these two broad theological approaches. Whichever you are more familiar with or gravitate toward today, the point is that these two contrasting theories and practices of preaching dominate pulpits and classrooms near and far.

This book addresses the difficult in-between place that all of us in preaching today find ourselves. Whether you are a pastor, seminary student, layperson, or teacher of preaching, you likely find yourself caught between the two prevailing approaches: (1) the text-centered, so-called traditional preaching that is known for making bold, overarching claims since meaning is perceived as fixed in the biblical text, and (2) the more recent reader-centered, conversational mode of preaching that understands meaning as a collaborative construct of a local faith community and that is gaining interest and popularity in churches and in Christian academia. We are caught in a time and place where we discernibly feel the impact of philosophical and cultural postmodernism—in reaction to modernism—in our religious life. With the indubitable foundation of absolute truth deteriorating beneath our feet, many preachers desperately tighten their grip on the familiar notions of absolute certitude and authority in preaching. Others find new security in the communal experience of participating in the meaning-making of preaching. Many of us feel we are caught between

the two: we must draw a hard line between modern objectivity and post-modern subjectivity and therefore preach as if we belonged exclusively to one side or the other. This kind of polarizing, all-or-nothing thinking is exacerbated by the “worship wars” of “conservative” and “liberal” debates and each group’s favored preaching style.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this book is twofold: first, to describe and critique the two homiletical approaches that correspond to the present shift in epistemology; and second, given the pernicious contrariety of these models, to propose a centered third approach that builds on both of their strengths. By identifying and assessing the underlying assumptions of these seemingly antithetical approaches to preaching, I hope to show the need for a harmonizing model of preaching that reconsiders the preacher’s role in relation to the Bible, the congregation, and the world. Then, in order to address the gap created by the prevalent either/or approach to preaching in the current homiletical literature, I adopt theodramatic theology as a framework that can hold together divine authorial intention and freedom of readers, coherence and particularity of texts, and proposition and experience. The vision of preaching advanced in these pages proposes an integrative and formative theological activity that directs the whole church in light of God’s own gracious past, present, and future performance in the world.

The following six chapters are structured to carefully consider each critical piece in this reflection. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the so-called traditional homiletic by surveying four metaphors that represent its theory and practice. The intent is not to be comprehensive but to name widely accepted customs in preaching and trace where they may come from, with the larger aim of assessing this model’s strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 2 broadly sketches the New Homiletic movement that is considered to be a shift away from the established habits of the traditional pulpit, and it focuses on the characteristics and assumptions of the conversational homiletic as advanced by Lucy Rose, John McClure, and O. Wesley Allen Jr. Although the ideas of these three scholars are distinct, at a basic level their approaches show striking similarity. Postmodern philosophy provides a larger backdrop for chapter 3, allowing us to uncover and focus on the inherent assumptions and values shared by all three conversational models. This chapter provides an extended critique because,

while a number of books evaluate traditional preaching, no significant literature currently focuses on the phenomenon of conversational preaching that epitomizes the New Homiletic movement and the philosophical and cultural postmodernism in vogue. One of my major aims is to provide a much-needed deconstructive treatment of the conversational homiletic and, in doing so, highlight the limitation of its attempts to address the problems of the traditional model at the expense of what is not only central but also essential to preaching: trust in God's ability to communicate through Scripture.

Chapter 4 treats the disengagement of doctrine (the epic dimension) and life (the lyric) seen in the traditional and conversational styles of preaching. It then poses the question of whether biblical interpretation that preserves both the integrity of Scripture and the identity of readers is possible. In response to this query, the chapter proposes a "dramatic" view of theology as advocated by Hans Urs von Balthasar, N. T. Wright, Nicholas Lash, and most prominently, Kevin J. Vanhoozer. This view of theology is able to faithfully communicate the coherence and unity of the biblical discourse and its meaning and significance without sacrificing the complexities of perspectives, themes, and expressions present in it.

Chapter 5 imports dramatic theology into preaching and constructs a homiletic using the building blocks of its ideas. Considering the nature, purpose, and context of preaching, this chapter examines the contours of a theodramatic homiletic. It understands preaching as a performance of the gospel reality that reorients worldviews and values and ultimately moves the church to participate in the ongoing story of God. Although a number of important publications have appeared in the past several years that explore the nexus of theodrama and preaching, books that employ a theatrical framework for homiletical theology are, overall, sparse. This book makes a modest contribution to the emerging discussion by imagining what the ministry of the Word looks like through a dramatic theological lens that holds the epic of traditional preaching and the lyric of conversational preaching in dynamic tension. Finally, chapter 6 summarizes the characteristics of a theodramatic homiletic and suggests four perspectives that cultivate our attentiveness to the full range of God's story so we can participate wholly in his initiative and mission. Although the chapter includes ample questions to demonstrate the kind of work entailed

in the four perspectives, the interest and scope of this book preclude discussions on methodology, sermon forms and language, and delivery. These topics remain fruitful areas for future research that will surely enrich the growing conversation on theodramatic preaching.

We are caught today between the various pressures and counterpoints already mentioned, but the greatest and the most significant tension in which we find ourselves is the *here* and *not-yet* reality of the kingdom. This book does not provide a definitive answer or a one-size-fits-all methodology for preaching in this complex in-between time. Instead, I ask you to join me in reflecting on God's story of what he has done, is doing, and will do—and in this light to consider how we might better live as strangers and exiles in this world. Whether you are very familiar with the homiletical landscape or are now just stepping out into unfamiliar territory, I hope that this book clearly sketches the terrain and gives you an idea of the dominant features that are worth our attention. Along the way, I ask you to reflect on where your preaching stands in relation to the two homiletical landmarks I describe and how you might benefit from this conversation. In this way, I am hopeful that we can wisely navigate together what it means for us to be “lived interpretations of Scripture”¹ until the day when Christ's kingdom is realized and his glory is fully revealed.

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 349.

1

The Traditional Homiletic

Truth Mined, Truth Proclaimed

The rich heritage of Christian preaching reaches back to Old Testament prototypes of preachers like Noah, who was called a “preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:5), and Moses, who as a messenger participated in God’s mission. It carries a weighty legacy of great Old Testament prophets like Deborah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, who delivered God’s burning message of judgment and the promise of redemption to their contemporaries. Christian preaching reaches its glorious pinnacle in Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, whose very being “preaches” truth and grace to all with no partiality. Christian preaching follows in the footsteps of courageous disciples and apostles of faith—like Mary Magdalene, who first announced the joyful news of Jesus’s resurrection, and Peter, who interpreted the miracle of tongues at Pentecost as a fulfillment of God’s sovereignly ordained events that included Jesus’s crucifixion and exaltation.

The heritage of preaching overflows with inspiring stories from the patristic era, when the ministry of the Word flourished through the works of preachers like Ambrose, Basil the Great, Augustine of Hippo, and John Chrysostom, who urged people to understand God rightly. Within this heritage is a treasury of missionary narratives of the Dominicans and Franciscans in the Middle Ages, who spoke against the vices of their time

and challenged people to pursue godliness and live holy lives for the common good of society. The story of the church's preaching also includes the dramatic upheaval of the Reformation era, the blossoming season of the pulpit during the Renaissance, and the tumultuous eras of modernity and postmodernity characterized by radical shifts in thinking about reason, progress, and ways of being. The richness and complexity of the heritage of the pulpit extends far beyond what can be recounted here.

Notwithstanding the vast array of people and styles of preaching throughout history, one particular oratorical approach rose in favor to take prominence. Ironically referred to as the *traditional homiletic*, this theory and practice of preaching does not so much represent the rich heritage of Christian preaching as demonstrate how parts of the legacy have been emphasized and practiced over time. Bearing the nickname "three-points-and-a-poem," traditional preaching is typically discursive and follows a well-recognized form in which one central idea is supported by a few subpoints and punctuated by an emotionally appealing illustration. Despite some variances of form, traditional sermons are generally propositional, deductive, and didactic. And whatever else may be said about preaching's purpose, it is foundationally a ministry of teaching timeless, divine truths from Scripture in a structured, linear manner. Concerning this model of preaching, Lucy Rose notes, "One of the longest-standing, dominant voices at the homiletical table is traditional or classical theory that is grounded in homiletical rhetoric. . . . Throughout the nearly two thousand years of Christian preaching, traditional theory has shifted its boundaries and its emphases; yet much has remained the same."¹

This chapter examines the so-called traditional homiletic and four metaphors that represent its most prominent traits. These metaphors (discussed below) are the Herald, Banking Transfer, Golden Key, and Still-Life Picture. It needs to be noted that the metaphors and the label "traditional" are limited at best because they do not account for the fecund diversity of theological and homiletical perspectives, orientations, styles, and practices throughout the church's history. Also, they are not exhaustive or precise but serve only to highlight salient characteristics often associated with

1. Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 13.

the traditional model. In this sense, the metaphors sketch a “homiletical caricature” of sorts: some pronounced features and peculiarities of what has been considered “traditional” preaching are laid out for the ease of recognizing the abiding assumptions and practices of the pulpit. As is the purpose of caricature, these metaphors draw attention to the conspicuous markers of the Western pulpit and critique what is found lacking or perhaps needs more nuancing in light of preaching’s rich legacy. Despite the clear limitation, the common term *traditional homiletic* and its variants in preaching literature (e.g., *traditional model*, *traditional preaching*) underscore the prevailing patterns of how preaching has been and continues to be understood, taught, and practiced.

This chapter lays the groundwork for the following chapter, which examines another approach to preaching—namely, conversational preaching, which is a reaction against the shortcomings of the traditional model. The first two chapters demonstrate the need for a third approach to preaching that draws from the strengths of both models while also addressing their weaknesses.

Four Metaphors: Key Assumptions of the Traditional Homiletic

Herald

Few metaphors more effectively capture the traditional preacher’s understanding of the ministry of the Word than the *herald* metaphor. The imagery originates in the New Testament, with the Greek verb *kēryssō* appearing sixty-one times (e.g., Matt. 3:1; Acts 8:5; Rom. 10:8; 2 Tim. 4:2). The rich imagery of the herald metaphor involves three elements that pertain to the core convictions of the traditional homiletic.

First, the metaphor points to God as the external message-giver in a communication that involves the church. The source of the message is a self-communicating God who graciously discloses himself because he desires to be known. The traditional preacher’s confidence rests on this God who has spoken and acted in history and whose nature is to be light, whose mission is to reveal and make himself accessible to us. Divine revelation is thus not only the *sine qua non* for preaching but also the sure footing that enables the preacher to stand and boldly claim to know something.

The traditional preacher would say, “We can know God because God has made himself known!” The sermon’s effectiveness rests on the divine authority of the message.

Second, the herald metaphor paints the preacher as an emissary elected, equipped, and commissioned by God to make his will known. As glorious as it is to be a spokesperson for the King of kings, the herald is merely a messenger whose task is to faithfully pass on an entrusted message to a designated audience. The task demands that messengers not get in the way of the message and hence put aside their own ideas and biases, which could hinder others from hearing God’s voice clearly. The herald must therefore be a pure channel that only transmits God’s words to those who need to hear them. With the herald’s great responsibility, however, also comes a great promise: God does not send out the messenger empty handed. Along with the Word to be shared, God confers authority, gifting, and anointing to his representative.

Third, the herald metaphor assumes that the congregation listens as willing recipients of the sermon. Since the preacher speaks on behalf of God, the congregation is expected to eagerly lean in to hear what the herald proclaims, to receive the word with humility, and to comply. Because God knows exactly what his people need to hear, the hearer’s appropriate response to the sermon is openness and trust in both the message itself and the one who was sent by God to share it.

Banking Transfer

Another metaphor that represents the operating assumptions of the traditional homiletic is the *banking transfer*. This metaphor illustrates the traditional preacher’s conception of preaching as a pedagogical activity that deposits knowledge in a unidirectional manner from the minister to the congregation.² Throughout history, numerous homileticians have offered their two cents about the purpose of the pulpit. Among countless words generated on this topic, one simple term has occupied the homiletical spotlight from the church’s infancy: *teach*.

2. Drawing from Paulo Freire’s discussion on pedagogical models, D. Stephenson Bond refers to the traditional homiletic as a “banking concept” model that is to be distinguished from a dialogical model of preaching that he advances. See D. Stephenson Bond, *Interactive Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1991), 58–60.

The link between preaching and teaching was forged early on. Even by the end of the first century, Christian preaching had cast itself as “a style of *homileō*-ing that exhorted listeners to live into the moral claims of the gospel while also offering theological teaching.”³ As the church continued to expand and encounter challenges of religious syncretism, the need to define Christian truths and doctrines and defend them against heresy and apostasy grew. So church leaders taught believers about the meaning of core Christian practices (e.g., worship, baptism, Eucharist) and about what is biblically sound. In such an environment, preaching was associated with salubrious instruction that guides people in ethical living informed by the gospel.

It was Augustine who formally equated preaching and pedagogy in what is widely considered the first homiletical manual, *De doctrina christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine* or *Teaching Christianity*). Augustine, drawing on his oratory background and applying the words of Cicero to preaching, states that the purpose of a sermon is to teach (*docere*), to delight (*delectare*), and to move (*movere*) listeners so they can do what is good and avoid what is bad in order to love God and neighbor. Of these three goals, Augustine deems the responsibility of educating listeners the most basic: “Instructing is a matter of necessity, delighting a matter of charm, and moving them a matter of conquest.”⁴ As a trained rhetorician, Augustine is well aware of the persuasive power of human words. His high theological view of divine beauty leads to his insistence that a sermon’s form and style matter in pleasing hearers. But above all else, the preacher’s duty is to be “the defender of the true faith and the opponent of error, both to teach what is right and to refute what is wrong, and in the performance of this task to conciliate the hostile, to rouse the careless, and to tell the ignorant both what is occurring at present and what is probable in the future.”⁵ Perhaps Augustine’s strong emphasis on teaching is the reason traditional preaching is commonly associated with his name, even though many of his theological impulses and practices do not align neatly with the trademarks of the traditional approach.

3. Robert Reid, *The Four Voices of Preaching: Connecting Purpose and Identity behind the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 38–39.

4. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 4.12.74.

5. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 4.4.6.

Following in Augustine’s footsteps, Alan of Lille also describes preaching as the work of instruction and, in doing so, further solidifies the view of preaching as a didactical endeavor. In *The Art of Preaching*, Alan writes:

Preaching is an open and public instruction in faith and behavior, whose purpose is the forming of men [*sic*]; it derives from the path of reason and from the fountainhead of the “authorities.” . . . Preaching is that instruction which is offered to many, in public, and for edification. . . . By means of what is called “preaching”—instruction in matters of faith and behavior—two aspects of theology may be introduced: that which appeals to the reason and deals with the knowledge of spiritual matters, and the ethical, which offers teaching on the living of a good life. For preaching sometimes teaches about holy things, sometimes about conduct.⁶

To Alan, preaching is “more formative than transformative” in that it can “help to shape the theological and ethical understanding of people.”⁷

To be precise, however, the connection between preaching and teaching existed prior to Augustine or Alan of Lille. After all, preaching in Jewish synagogue worship was primarily expository: a rabbi interpreted a passage of Torah and applied it to the lives of the listeners. In fact, this style of preaching is exemplified even in Origen (considered to be the first systematic theologian and homiletician), who gave a basic structure to Christian preaching that lasted until the Middle Ages.⁸ Origen’s sermons have a definite “form” in that they mostly follow one homiletical pattern, which is to systematically exegete the text like a running commentary. As a trained grammarian, Origen focused his preaching on explicating the Bible by offering various translations in the original languages and elucidating the passage well so that people could comprehend it. His emphasis on the literal sense is often overlooked because of his association with the Alexandrian method of spiritual-allegorical interpretation, but it was Origen who forged an enduring connection between preaching’s

6. Alan of Lille, *The Art of Preaching*, trans. Gillian R. Evans (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 16–17.

7. Joseph R. Jeter Jr., “Cultivating a Historical Vision,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 152.

8. O. C. Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 31.

purpose and a grammarian's task of dissecting and expounding the text to discover meaning embedded deep within the sea of words. Guided by the signs of the Bible, the preacher's duty was to decipher the "code" of the text, ferret out the meaning within, and convey its significance to the hearers, who do not have the training to do so.

The relationship between teaching and preaching was formed early in church history and has endured until recent times. In 1870 John A. Broadus reaffirmed the affinity between teaching and preaching in his work *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. In it, Broadus pays tribute to his predecessors, such as Augustine, as he promotes preaching as an educational endeavor. To Broadus, "the primary conception of preaching is to bring forth the teachings of some passage of Scripture,"⁹ and, relatedly, the preacher's "very purpose is teaching and exhorting [people] out of the Word of God."¹⁰ The teacher-preacher has a responsibility to "tell the people what to believe, and why they should believe it."¹¹ The preacher does this by conferring biblical truths to listeners' lives. For Broadus, "the application of the sermon is not merely an appendage to the discussion or a subordinate part of it, but is the main thing to be done."¹² As Broadus's book gained prominence as the standard textbook for preaching across seminaries in North America, preaching was further cast as the work of instruction that applies Scripture to listeners' lives—the prevailing concept of preaching until the rise of the "New Homiletic" in the 1950s.¹³

These examples offer a glimpse of one of preaching's long-standing foundational beliefs: to preach means to teach. As one who is called, elected, and trained, the preacher is responsible for instructing the congregation to live in accordance with God's statutes. Toward this end, the preacher searches the biblical text for meaning within the soil of ancient grammar, and once the preserved meaning is unearthed, the preacher must successfully transfer that wealth of knowledge to listeners without obscuring it.

9. John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Jesse Burton Weatherspoon (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944), 87.

10. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, 24.

11. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, 146.

12. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, 210.

13. Jesse Burton Weatherspoon later revised John A. Broadus's classic *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, but much of the former author's ideas were left unchanged.

Golden Key

The roots of preaching can be traced back to the ancient soil of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Because of a strong emphasis on persuasion and use of deductive reasoning, the traditional model often goes by the nickname “Aristotelian preaching.” Given that primitive Christian preaching was crosscultural in nature, with a large number of non-Jewish audience members, early preachers had to adopt the prevailing communication style of the period to effectively reach their audience. Generally speaking, “Greco-Roman audiences would understandably expect public speeches to conform to the principles of appropriate civic discourse in the Empire, otherwise the message, regardless of how vital, would fall on deaf ears.”¹⁴ As such, classical rhetoric with its interest in clear and compelling argumentation became a pervasive influence on Christian preaching. O. C. Edwards Jr. suggests that Greco-Roman rhetoric may in fact be the single greatest influence on Christian preaching.¹⁵ One of the lasting influences of classical rhetoric on Christian preaching is the view of the sermon as persuasive discourse, a *golden key* that opens the door to the listeners’ understanding and their embrace of the message.

A few notable characteristics can be highlighted to account for the impact that Greco-Roman rhetoric has had on the shape of preaching as persuasive speech.¹⁶ Take, for instance, the way many Western preach-

14. Lucy Hind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 32.

15. O. C. Edwards, *History of Preaching*, 12.

16. This section does not cover an extensive history of Western Christendom. Instead, the present section draws attention to some examples of Greco-Roman rhetoric setting the trajectory of preaching. For detailed studies that trace the development of Christian preaching, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010); O. C. Edwards, *History of Preaching*; O. C. Edwards Jr., “History of Preaching,” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Richard Lischer, ed., *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching from Augustine to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); DeWitte T. Holland, *The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980); Paul Scott Wilson, *A Concise History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Michael Pasquarello, *Sacred Rhetoric: Preaching as a Theological and Pastoral Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); and Edwin Charles Dargan’s classic, *A History of Preaching*, 2 vols. (1905; repr., London: Forgotten Books, 2012). See also chap. 1 of Robert Reid, *The Four Voices of Preaching*. In the first chapter Reid provides a historical sketch of early Christian preaching, showing how the sermon as a structured argument has evolved over time.

ers are typically trained to prepare and deliver sermons. In many cases, seminaries draw from Aristotle's insight on the three modes of persuasion (i.e., *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*) when instructing preachers on the basics of speech. Coaching them to appeal to the credibility of the speaker, the reasonability of the arguments presented, and the sympathies of the listeners, preachers are taught to ground their sermons in these three pillars of communication.

It is also not uncommon for this lesson to be conjoined with the Ciceronian teaching on the five canons of an oratory task. The canons of *inventio* (invention), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (style), *memoria* (memory), and *pronuntiatio* (delivery)¹⁷ are often taught as rhetorical guidelines as preachers brainstorm what to say in the sermon, organize ideas to make a convincing case, contemplate speech styles, memorize content, and practice delivery.

Along with the teachings of Aristotle and Cicero, the anonymous work *Rhetorica ad herennium* serves as a common basis for instructing preachers. Preachers are taught that effective oration entails six parts of a speech—*exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (statement of facts), *divisio* (division), *confirmatio* (proof), *confutatio* (refutation), and *conclusio* (conclusion).¹⁸ When these parts are skillfully assembled, they build an argument that cannot be easily dismantled.

Such “rules of eloquence” have fashioned the church's understanding of the sermon as persuasive oration because many early Christian preachers were shaped by classical education. A survey of the first apostles shows that possessing an impressive educational background is not the distinguishing mark of the earliest preachers. However, as the church expanded throughout the world, education often came as a privilege associated with the position of a minister. As Christianity gained popularity and power under Constantine's rule, the church further received unprecedented favor and support from the state.¹⁹ As one expression of that support, church

17. Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*, trans. J. S. Watson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

18. Cicero, *Rhetorica ad herennium*, trans. Harry Copland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954). Even though Cicero is noted as the author in the edition cited here, most rhetoricians today do not identify this work as written by him. The original author of the rhetorical teachings in this ancient text remains anonymous.

19. O. C. Edwards, *History of Preaching*, 27–28.

leaders received training in the highest classical education—in particular, in the art of rhetoric. With an incredible opportunity presented to them, early Christian preachers learned the rules of rhetoric and applied their training to the ministry of the Word.²⁰

After all, it is not difficult to see a link between rhetoric and preaching. Rhetoric was civic art that trained and empowered everyday people to make their own appeals before the court of law. And if rhetoric is about “persuad[ing] an audience to respond to truth that had been discovered by reason,”²¹ preaching in a fundamental sense shares a similar interest and burden. Like the forensic task of “proving” one’s case in a court of law, Christian preachers had to stand before a burgeoning Greco-Roman world that was flourishing with rivaling religious systems and make a case for Jesus Christ. These preachers, who were raised and nurtured in the Hellenistic culture, “assumed that the gospel is to be preached” and that “rhetoric provides the appropriate instrument.”²²

This view of the sermon as persuasive discourse is one of the lasting influences of classical rhetoric on Christian preaching. Like a golden key that unlocks rigid, sealed doors, good preaching eases the inhibitions of listeners and convinces them not only to seriously consider the claims of the gospel but also to accept them as their own beliefs that direct how they live. Notwithstanding the work of the Holy Spirit, who is centrally responsible for this, the preacher as an orator plays a vital role in crafting and delivering a compelling message. The sermon should be strategically constructed with well-thought-out, tenable arguments that explicate biblical truths, and they should be communicated in ways that eliminate ambiguity and resonate with listeners intellectually, emotionally, and ethically. Broadus speaks to this idea when he equates preaching with sacred

20. This statement is not meant to deny that various perspectives also existed about what the relationship between preaching and rhetoric ought to be. Some, like Basil of Caesarea and Jerome, argued that Christian preaching, which deals with matters of truth, does not share common ground with the secular art of rhetoric, which aims to make plausible (probable) arguments. Others, like Augustine and Alan of Lille, challenged that view by contending that preaching, although a sacred task, has much to learn from the art of oration as it can sharpen the skills of preachers as public communicators. See Hogan and Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation*.

21. Craig Loscalzo paraphrases Cicero from *De inventione*. See Craig A. Loscalzo, “Rhetoric,” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 410.

22. Ronald E. Osborn, *Folly of God: The Rise of Christian Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 410.

rhetoric that systematically explains, applies, argues, and illustrates biblical truths²³ for the sake of winning souls. What is noteworthy about the classical view of persuasive rhetoric is the operating assumption that there is a universal reason (*logos*), a shared human experience (*pathos*), and a common sense of morality (*ethos*) that the orator can appeal to, and that entreating the listeners on these bases in a logical, ordered manner will convince them to accept the claims presented.

Still-Life Picture

In the traditional homiletic, the content of the sermon generally consists of principles, concepts, and insights that are carefully extracted from the Bible using tools of exegesis. In agreement with this view David Buttrick regards biblical truth like a *still-life picture*: the Scripture is treated “as if it were objectively ‘there,’ a static construct from which . . . [the preacher] may get something to preach on.”²⁴ The efficacy of mining divine truths rides on whether preachers fully render themselves blank slates—ridding themselves of all possible biases (e.g., gender, cultural, experiential) that prevent them from objectively reading the text. The assumption is that if a preacher is successful, the exegetical excavation will yield a rich discovery of truths, and the preacher can then proceed to shape the sermon by summarizing the ideas gleaned into a propositional statement that best captures the thrust of the whole passage. For this reason, many sermons tend to take on a deductive form that begins with a single declarative statement that encapsulates the “big idea” of the passage, and then the central assertion is clarified and supported with additional points in the body of the sermon. Concerning this style of preaching, Fred Craddock observes that “the sermons of our time with few exceptions [have] kept the same form.”²⁵

Again, it is difficult to know exactly how or why certain qualities of early preaching left strong imprints in the lasting form of the traditional homiletic, but it was clearly not fortuitous. Various “moments” in preaching history compounded sediments of prominent beliefs and practices

23. See Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*.

24. David Buttrick, “Interpretation and Preaching,” *Interpretation* 35 (January 1981): 49.

25. Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 13.

over time. One of those moments might be linked to Augustine, who is commonly referred to by the nickname “the sign reader.” Although so much can be said about Augustine’s theology and preaching, this by-name is noteworthy in this discussion because it points to the bishop of Hippos’s belief that preaching was a task of interpreting and explaining biblical signs. He emphasizes the importance of reading the signs correctly because they are indicators to deeper spiritual meaning and transcendent reality, which ultimately is a call to love God and others. Through literal and figurative interpretations, Augustine taught preachers to grasp the deeper theological significance of Scripture. “Augustine considered the Bible to be basically a book of signs that need to be interpreted. . . . [Augustine and others before the rise of the modern historical-critical method] really believed that the interpretations they came up with were what the passages meant, what God intended for them to learn from the words of the prophet or the apostle. . . . [Augustine] believed as a matter of faith that every word in the Bible had been put there by God to convey some meaning.”²⁶

A second notable moment that contributed to the shape of the traditional sermon came in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when a style of preaching known as *thematic* (also known as university, scholastic, or school) sermons sprang up. Popularized by the friars of that time, thematic preaching is considered the “first real homiletical form that was not just a shapeless verse-by-verse comment on a passage from the Bible.”²⁷ Unlike homilies leading up to that point in time (cf. Origen), thematic sermons are characterized by a systematic division of points and subpoints that fall under the main theme of the text. Like a tree with multiple branches extending from the trunk, this style of preaching follows a distinct order of first establishing a clear theme that is derived from a biblical passage and subsequently expanding the theme into three or four parts that are “proven” in the process of delivering a sermon. Writing in this period, Robert of Basevorn endorses a “three point” style of sermons explaining that “a threefold cord is not easily broken.”²⁸

26. O. C. Edwards, *History of Preaching*, 108.

27. O. C. Edwards, “History of Preaching,” 199.

28. Robert of Basevorn, “The Form of Preaching [1322],” in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 138.

Thematic preaching not only assumes that there is more or less one preferred meaning to the biblical text but also assumes that there is one preferred way to communicate it, which is a deductive approach. Since the relationship between language and the particular reality (truth) to which it corresponds is regarded as positive and evident, sermons are thought to be most effective when structured into a series of assertions that sustain an argument. Given its organization and structure, thematic sermons are generally abstract rather than concrete in content, favoring topics that relate to doctrine and Christian ethics over practical matters of life. As suggested by the well-known moniker “three-points-and-a-poem,” the legacy of thematic sermons is easily observable even today. Many pulpits shaped by the traditional views on preaching have a penchant for methodically formatted sermons with supporting points that reinforce a theme rather than sermons that tend to be fluid or a posteriori in orientation (e.g., narrative or inductive).

A third moment in the development of the traditional preaching form can be connected to Martin Luther. Luther is widely known for his theological ideas, such as the five theological pillars of the Reformation; for his views on the law and grace and the written and spoken Word/word; and for his conviction about the priesthood of all believers. Yet Luther was as prolific a preacher and as influential a homiletician as he was a renowned theologian. If only one of his homiletical contributions had to be named, it would be his method of *die schriftauslegende Predigt*, or expository preaching.²⁹ Rather than expounding every word of a passage in a sequential manner or using a verse-by-verse approach as many before him had done, Luther believed that the purpose of preaching was to uncover and make plain the *Sinnmitte* (center of meaning), *Herzpunkt* (heart point), or *Kern* (kernel) of the passage.³⁰ The central thought of the text should be so evident that the rest of the sermon should follow from it, and the text’s main idea is what the audience should remember in the end. His preparation also aligned with this style of preaching: “immers[ing] himself in the text and then preach[ing] extemporaneously, beginning

29. Fred W. Meuser, “Luther as Preacher of the Word of God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 140.

30. O. C. Edwards, *History of Preaching*, 295.

with a statement of the *Herzpunkt* and going from there to extract that meaning from his text.”³¹ With Luther’s influence, preaching’s aim became even more closely associated with the discovery and communication of one prominent meaning that is believed to exist between the words on the page. The import of Luther’s homiletical contribution is the primacy of the propositional form championed by many traditional pulpits. Sermons are foremost fashioned by a single big idea that is derived from a passage.³² “Even though the traditional approach [allows] for a multitude of variation, the constant that [holds] them all together [is] the notion of the sermon as an idea, or proposition, and sermon form as the expression of the internal structure of that idea.”³³

In the late nineteenth century, Philips Brooks added a fourth moment to the understanding of preaching when he defined the ministry of the Word as “the communication of truth by man to men [*sic*].” He asserted that sermons have “two essential elements, truth and personality,” and “preaching is the bringing of truth through personality.”³⁴ Rendering preaching as the communication of truth through personality, Brooks’s words call to mind the long-standing influence of classical rhetoric on preaching, in particular, the Aristotelian teaching on *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* as the necessary modes of effective oration. More noteworthy, however, is Brooks’s perception of truth as “a fixed and stable element.”³⁵ As if the Bible contains deposits of timeless divine truths, Brooks’s understanding of preaching suggests that the Bible contains a permanent and final meaning for preachers to simply tap into and draw out. Since biblical truths are

31. O. C. Edwards, “History of Preaching,” 205.

32. Another giant of the Reformation, John Calvin, shared a similar view. He saw the written Word as perfect and as having no unnecessary word in it. He believed that the responsibility of the preacher was thus to divulge the original meaning of the biblical authors through exegesis and diligent study of the original languages. In this process, he trusted that the Spirit, who superintended the writing of the Scriptures, would guide the preacher to sound interpretation that ties in with the unity of the entire Bible. See H. Jackson Forstman, *Word and Spirit: Calvin’s Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), and T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

33. Thomas G. Long, “Form,” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Wilimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 147.

34. Philips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Dutton, 1877), 5.

35. Thomas G. Long, “New Focus for Teaching Preaching,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 7.

seen as constant, the only variable in preaching is the personality of the minister. In other words, the personality and the communication ability of the preacher function as vehicles that relay the unchanging truth of God to people. Thus, “every preacher, whether in the pulpit next door or in a missionary congregation on the other side of the globe, preached the very same truth. The truth [is] a constant poured into the variable mold of human personality.”³⁶

Albeit a sampling, these examples help us understand the basic assumptions and values of the longest-standing practices of the pulpit. Those who subscribe to these views and practices tend to see Scripture as a minefield of predeposited truths. The preacher’s task is to unearth what lies in the text by means of textual analysis and, upon identifying what is central to the passage—call it a “nugget,” “main idea,” or “thrust”—communicate its significance and applications in an ordered manner to listeners.

An Assessment of the Traditional Homiletic

Chapter 2 will survey the works of three prominent scholars who challenge the assumptions of the traditional preaching model. Examination of their works will give further attention to assessing the traditional homiletic. For now, consider a brief assessment focusing on three main areas of its strengths and weaknesses. These are presented as familiar Christian expressions: “Thus saith the Lord”; “the Bible tells me so”; and “And all God’s people said, ‘Amen.’”

Thus Saith the Lord

The expression “Thus saith the Lord” captures both the strength and the weakness of the traditional homiletic. The strength of traditional preaching is its foundational theological conviction that God has spoken and acted in history and that God delights to make himself known. God is ultimately incomprehensible but knowable. In fact, knowledge of God is essential for faith (Rom. 10:17). The focus on God’s prior words and actions, which precede the minister’s words and actions, is paramount, not

36. Long, “New Focus for Teaching Preaching,” 7.

least because preaching's content and significance are grounded in God, who sought sinners out. Without God's grace-filled words and actions in history (because he did something we did not merit), there is no real message to be shared—at least not one that matters or can save eternally perishing sinners. We have a message to share with the world because God has really *done* something on our behalf. God's kind initiation, resolute love, and untiring faithfulness toward his contumacious children supply the preacher not merely with the necessary confidence to stand up and speak but also, more important, with real good news that is worth heralding to the world. In addition, the recognition of the authority and goodness of God as history's first communicator—as a totally free, independent communicative agent who is *other* than anyone or anything in this world—is what allows the church to be open and receptive to whatever message comes to us. Whether the message is one of hope or sorrow, blessing or wrath, comfort or admonition, the church can have quiet confidence and humility to listen, love, and fear what God says to us when we remember who he is and what he has first done for us.

Despite this strength, one danger of the traditional view of preaching is the potential to equate what flows from the pulpit with the very words of God—*viva vox Dei* directly addressing the people of God. The individual minister is typically the premier—if not the only—interpreter and proclaimer of what the Scriptures mean for the whole church. It is considered the minister's responsibility to protect the integrity of the gospel and the Scriptures' sacrosanctity by instructing the laity on the proper interpretations of texts. To do so, ministers scour the text for meaning using specialized tools from their training and, upon discovery, make universal application that connects with listeners' lives. In this sense, ministers in the traditional model “speak as persons who have been certified to explain meaning authoritatively”³⁷ for the whole church. The congregation is entirely dependent on the preacher to hear and discern on their behalf what God is saying to them.

The tremendous power that accompanies the pulpit and the minister's unique training and position above others also come with a great risk. Preaching has the potential to degenerate into a human campaign that

37. Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 54.

promulgates the minister's personal assumptions, beliefs, and biases and further subjugates the congregation with "exegetical weapons." Accountability for the preacher who is above the rest of the faith community as a spiritual mediator between God and God's people is limited at best. Standing between God and God's people, the preacher is seen as a problem solver who supplies answers to life's conundrums in the form of sermons. Such a view is unrealistic and hazardous insofar as it promotes a self-centered and need-based theology of worship and preaching. Further, such a view is fundamentally antithetical to what ministers are called to be. "If to be in Christ and to give ourselves more and more to [God's] service is to realize a fuller humanity and to participate more fully and freely in the life which he redeems, then to become a minister is not to be placed in a special class but rather to be with humankind and in the world more fully and unreservedly, and to move as openly and easily in the world as grace allows."³⁸

The Bible Tells Me So

"Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so!" These words from a beloved hymn capture another strength of the traditional view of preaching: a high view of Scripture. Like the old hymn says, the Bible to the traditional preacher is the unshakable ground on which believers can stake their claim to know something about God (e.g., "Jesus loves me"). God not only has spoken and acted in history but also has *revealed* himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ and through the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit, who testifies about God foremost through the Scriptures. Therefore to the traditional preacher, Scripture is the ultimate source of authority—an inspired and preserved instrument of divine communication that is as trustworthy as it is essential for the church to have a right relationship with God. In a shifting and turbulent world that insists on the impotence of texts and the irrelevance of the author, the traditional preacher's safeguard is not a magnetic personality or many talents and abilities but trust and reliance on God's ability to graciously communicate and self-disclose, even through frail human words.

38. Charles L. Rice, "The Preacher's Story," in *Preaching the Story*, ed. Edmund A. Steimle et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1980), 25.

The traditional preacher's high regard for Scripture's authority relates to another strength: an emphasis on vigorous historical-critical study of the Bible that lends to sound and responsible interpretation. The task of the traditional preacher is to hear what the Bible intends to say (or to hear God, who appropriates himself to the language of Scripture) rather than to read meaning into it. To this end the preacher strives to exegete, or "draw out," the plain meaning of the text by investigating its historical context, literary makeup, and theological import in line with the church's "rule of faith." An analytic, systematic study of the text keeps the minister accountable to interpretive guidelines that protect Scripture's freedom and ability to address the church so its message can be heard within the proper context.

Yet a shortcoming of the traditional homiletic lies in reducing the awe-inspiring mystery of divine revelation to mere propositions ("the Bible tells me so"). The point here is not to debase propositions. Indeed the Bible does make determinate truth claims about God, the world, and human beings, which in their objective truthfulness have a real consequence for every person, who must choose to believe and accept or to doubt and deny. If the Bible contained no propositional content, there would be nothing the church is called to believe, to adhere to, or to preserve. Even so, the gospel cannot be reduced just to propositions, because it is so much more. The gospel is not simply an idea or a concept but a *reality* of God's kingdom that is here, made evident and available to us through Jesus Christ. To convey the grand reality of this God and his reign, which resists being "reduced to what human reason [can] manage,"³⁹ Scripture provides a kaleidoscopic witness, using a wide range of literary forms and styles that speak to us in different ways. However, the problem is that the preoccupation with propositions can treat stories, images, and metaphoric and poetic language

39. I agree with Alister McGrath's interpretation of C. S. Lewis's work *The Chronicles of Narnia*. McGrath notes that Lewis's depiction of Aslan (symbolizing Christ) goes against the trends of his day that "[impoverish] the majesty and mystery of Christ" either through preaching that makes Jesus too homely or through theology that tries to reduce Jesus into manageable doctrinal formulas (93). Aslan is kind but is not a tame lion. Lewis's portrayal of Aslan challenges the Enlightenment notion that "reality [can] be reduced to something that reason can master" (95) and invites readers instead to "see that Aslan should be appreciated as a totality [through the story], not simply reduced to a mere theory" (94). See Alister McGrath, *If I Had Lunch with C. S. Lewis: Exploring the Ideas of C. S. Lewis on the Meaning of Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2014), 92–95.

as if the propositions that can be extracted from them convey what they mean—or convey all that they mean. Rather than appreciating the Bible as a totality, we can read it to extract the “kernel” of meaning (the cognitive content of principles, doctrines, and rules) and discard the “shell” of the biblical text. This approach results in stripping the multidimensionality of Scripture and diminishes it to “on-the-page inert language from which something may be removed and talked about.”⁴⁰ When we do this, God’s revelation is treated as “a source book for objective propositions, its stories viewed simply as illustrations of an ideational world of religious truths,”⁴¹ and exegesis as “an illusion rather than the reality of listening to the text.”⁴² Ignoring the poetic and evocative language of Scripture also leads to the view of preaching as a rationalistic and cognitive endeavor and underplays the vital role of imagination in sermons.

In a similar vein, it is dangerous to equate the role of sermons to simply mining old truths from the Bible because it can breed two dysfunctions. First, while this view encourages diligent research into what the text once meant to the original audience, it neglects attentiveness to God, who continues to speak to the church through Scripture and by the activities of the Holy Spirit. In this view, God’s work is treated as belonging exclusively to the past or, at a minimum, as if God’s ministry in the Bible and in our world today is disparate and discontinuous. When preachers do not help congregations wrestle with how Scripture is continually and progressively being fulfilled in our day toward the grand finale of history, we fail to point people to God’s enduring faithfulness and the power of his Word, which is meant to be savored here and now. Grasping the ancient context and the original meaning of the text is indispensable to hearing the Scriptures as intended, but a joyful expectation for how God may speak to us again using those same words is also essential to reading Scripture faithfully as God’s dynamic, living Word.

The second and related dysfunction is that application is treated as an accessory to a sermon rather than an important hermeneutical lens that

40. David Buttrick, “Preaching the Christian Faith,” *Liturgy* 2, no. 3 (1982): 54.

41. Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 134.

42. Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 100, quoted by Eslinger, *New Hearing*, 134.

guides the church's reading of Scripture. We read the Bible not to rehearse the past and affirm previous interpretations but to seek guidance on how we may live in God's present and into the future he intends. At times, this requires reformulating our prior understandings and interpretations in light of a more expansive and cumulative view of what God is doing through Christ in his Spirit. Not that the contemporary context should dictate the hermeneutical process but that biblical hermeneutics should bring the historical understanding and the present contextual understanding into a critical dialogue. Sermons without this kind of lively engagement tend to be driven by information that relates to *what* and *how*, and they are disconnected from listeners because the fundamental question of *why* something matters at all is not addressed.⁴³ Such sermons might temporarily fix people's behaviors but often fall short of generating a lasting transformation that is fueled by a changed heart and mind.

And All God's People Said, "Amen"

The driving agenda of the traditional homiletic is to teach God's precepts by expositing Scripture and by underscoring and affirming assertions "warranted" by the biblical text. The strength of traditional preaching is that it takes seriously the critical function of sermons to instruct the church. If indeed "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), it seems that whatever else may characterize preaching as the ministry of the Word, the aspect of catechism is indispensable. The minister's basic assignment is to edify the church through biblical instruction.

Another notable strength of the traditional homiletic lies in its ability to "solicit from listeners the final affirmation, 'Yes! This is what we believe.'"⁴⁴ In other words, "And all God's people said, 'Amen.'" Speaking from "a hard core of convictions related to the historically theological

43. Interestingly, ethnographer and organizational expert Simon Sinek agrees that most effective leaders inspire and inject passion in others by helping them understand *why* something matters. In his own words, "People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it, and what you do simply serves as the proof of what you believe." Simon Sinek, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action," TEDx video, September 2009, TEDx Puget Sound, 14:48, https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action/transcript.

44. Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 63.

and doctrinal convictions of the community,”⁴⁵ the traditional model of preaching generates social cohesion and solidarity that enable the church to cherish and cling to its shared beliefs.

Notwithstanding, this very strength of the traditional pulpit can turn into a dangerous pitfall when preaching serves only to sustain an ecclesial culture. Rather than disrupting the status quo and exposing pride and other self-serving forms of evil, preaching can become the means to maintain the community’s imperturbable beliefs and habits. Furthermore, since the minister has the final authority on what the Bible means, the pulpit can become the platform to silence those whose experiences and thoughts differ from those of the minister or the dominant culture. Robert Reid observes, “Even if a sermon in [the traditional] voice concludes with an invitation to respond or to take action, the purpose of speaking in this voice is to invite the listener to accept the cultural consciousness implicit in this kind of talk.”⁴⁶

The problem is that if preaching’s only aim is to reiterate what the church already believes to be true, there is little room for the congregation to share fresh insights, push back on the preacher’s understanding of the text, or simply marvel at the mysteries of faith. The congregation is reduced to passive listeners who—although they affirm the preacher’s message and may be active in that affirmation—have nothing to share or contribute to the ongoing understanding of God’s Word.

Another danger of the traditional homiletic is the tendency to flatten the robust calling of preaching to a monolithic activity of teaching or a conveyance of ideational content. Preaching is certainly more but nothing less than “truth-sharing,” a communication of information pertaining to an actual state of a matter. Yet preaching does not end with intellectual consent to truth; the goal is eliciting “truthful living” (genuine worship) from all who confess the lordship of Jesus Christ. As Augustine said, preaching is multidimensional work that teaches (speaks to the mind), delights (speaks to the heart), and, ultimately, moves people to live rightly in the world as Jesus’s disciples (speaks to the action). Instruction is thus essential to preaching, but there is no sermon if the preacher fails to stir

45. Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 63.

46. Reid, *Four Voices of Preaching*, 54.

desires, feelings, and imagination for an alternate way of living that directs people to live out their faith in accordance with Scripture.

The traditional homiletic is also susceptible to another weakness: the delimitation of the sermon form. While the traditional model emphasizes “good exegesis,” which includes paying attention to the nature and stylistic elements of texts, once the “nugget” of the passage is identified, these considerations are pushed to the side and do not play a role in shaping the sermon. Whether the text is a poem or a letter, a chronicle or a parable—all texts are more or less treated the same when it comes to sermon design. Sermons are generally forced into the mold of “big idea” preaching that advances a single idea or proposition buttressed by a few subpoints. The problem is that this predetermined, one-size-fits-all approach to the sermon severely limits the communication of Scripture from the pulpit. When preachers package all messages and texts in a single sermon style, more is at stake than a chance to reach diverse listeners who process what they hear differently.⁴⁷ Preachers can miss the opportunity to be witnesses to the rich beauty of God’s incarnational Word, which is communicated in various literary genres, forms, and styles. In order for preaching to be communication that goes beyond telling people *what* to say and do and trains the church *how* to think by reading the Bible well, the pulpit must seize every opportunity to model love and respect for God’s Word even in the way sermons are shaped and delivered. We must honor not only what God says in the Bible but also how God in his beauty and wisdom has communicated to us in diverse voices and styles.

Conclusion

Preaching’s rich heritage includes the beliefs and practices preserved and passed down that this chapter has discussed. Despite various social adversities, persecution, threats of heresies, and constant pressure from the world to conform, the preachers of old remained steadfast in their calling, and their legacy offers us an invaluable treasure that enriches our imagination for how we too might preach the gospel boldly in our own time. The

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

aspects of their legacy that have been most emphasized and remembered through history have become long-standing assumptions and practices of the Western pulpit. Many appear under the banner of the traditional homiletic, although they are not exclusive qualities of that particular style of preaching.

This chapter has surveyed some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with the traditional model of preaching. The greatest strength is the unfaltering trust in God's communicative ability to reveal himself and minister to his people through the reliable witness of Scripture. The preacher's confidence rests in the belief that God, who took the first step by making himself known to those who otherwise cannot know him, is the one who guides the preacher's study of Scripture and supplies the words to share with the church. In this respect, the preacher sometimes speaks as a herald sent out by God and other times speaks as a holy teacher whose task is to instruct and build up the church.

Despite these strengths, the traditional view of preaching also contains weaknesses and dangers. These include the preacher's misuse of authority, indifference to the culture of listeners, misconstruction of the idea that preaching is only concerned with God's past activities, perpetuation of an insular ecclesial culture, diminishment of Scripture's multidimensionality, minimizing the robust calling that is preaching, and delimitation of the sermon form. This critique does not imply a simple causal relationship between the traditional preaching model and certain problems in the pulpit. Rather, the critique hopefully highlights aspects of preaching that deserve (greater) attention because we may have overlooked or forgotten other theological convictions and practices that are also part of our rich faith heritage.

In hopes of addressing these blind spots and shortcomings, some around the homiletical table have named different assumptions and values that give shape to a different understanding of preaching—namely, they advocate a democratic approach to the sermon in which the preacher and the congregation together explore and experience the Word-event, rather than an authoritative one-way communication that flows from the pulpit to the pew. To their voices we turn in the following chapter.