

The Proceedings of the

TST Homiletics Seminar

**An E-Journal for the Homiletics Doctoral Program's Colloquium
at the Toronto School of Theology**

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David Schnasa Jacobsen, Ed.

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Editor's Note

Welcome to this inaugural issue of the TST Homiletics Seminar. The articles and synopses below represent the proceedings of the colloquium held among the homiletics doctoral students and faculty at the Toronto School of Theology. Three times each term we gather to hear TST faculty and colleagues from affiliated colleges present some of their latest research as it pertains to preaching. TST is one of the leading North American graduate schools in homiletics. Its faculty is widely published and teaches internationally. It draws students from Canada, the United States, and around the world into its doctoral program. Its graduates teach at seminaries across the globe. Its goals are to promote scholarship in homiletics, prepare future teachers of preaching, and thereby also renew the life of the church for the sake of the world. We hope you will enjoy “overhearing” what we have been discussing in our colloquium.

Sincerely,

David Schnasa Jacobsen, Ph.D.

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- + Church Historian Oscar Cole-Arnal on preaching during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1914
- + New Testament scholar Dorcas Gordon on preaching and feminism
- + Homileician Art Van Seters on *Preaching as a Social Act: Two Decades Later*

“Preach the Text or Preach the Gospel?”

Paul Scott Wilson

Professor of Homiletics, Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology

Anyone who has been to the Grand Canyon in Arizona knows that one comes upon it suddenly, the ground just drops away and some considerable distance across it continues on again. One might say that there is a Grand Canyon in homiletics today, though there has been almost no discussion of it. The terrain on both sides of the divide is similar but the divide is real and has large implications for the sermon, starting with the theme sentence. The divide is over this question: do we preach the text or do we preach the gospel?—The answer is both, but what is the difference?¹

Preachers will answer both ways and good arguments are on both sides. To say that we preach the text is natural because most teachers in biblical studies assume this stance. The unit of scripture or pericope is the source of the sermon and determines its direction. What the text communicates at its literal or plain level to its own people is what the sermon tries to communicate to listeners today. One seeks the Word of God in the intention of the original writer against the historical and cultural background of the time. The Bible says, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Having found the message in a biblical text through exegesis, one is ready to preach. The operating assumption here is that the word one finds in the text is the gospel. However, in the practical reality of today’s sermons, one cannot be confident that this is in fact the case.

The terrain on the preach-the-gospel side of the divide is much the same. Those who represent that position agree with their preach-the-text colleagues on most points and procedures, especially on starting with the text. They would agree that the bald way the above question is framed, Do we preach the text or the gospel? implies ‘either/or’ when the right answer is ‘both/and’, we preach the text and the gospel. However, those who argue preach-the-gospel disagree that the message one finds in a text is necessarily the gospel. It may be, but it may not be. Not every text immediately yields the gospel, and as Calvin noted, one needs the Holy Spirit to read it rightly. Every approach is a lens, a perspective, and the same is true for the gospel.

Scholars in neither camp believe that there is one objective meaning of a text and even the gospel meaning of a text is an interpretation. Still, the preach-the-gospel argument runs, when the text does not directly yield the gospel it needs to be treated as an essential lens to it, a portal if you like, that offers a way to read the larger Christian story so that the gospel comes into focus through it. Seen another way, the biblical texts are treasured windows through which the light of the gospel is projected upon and into the lives of the hearers.

Both positions are steeped in historical-critical and literary thought, yet preach-the-text is resistant to making God a deliberate focus where God may not be directly mentioned in a text. A

¹ This paper is compiled from various places in the second edition of Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press) that is to appear in June, 2007.

theological purpose of the text is often sought, yet no safeguards ensure it. The great Scottish preacher of the 1900s, James S. Stewart's had a theological test of a sermon for a congregation: "Did they, or did they not, meet God today?"² What does one preach when a text like the Good Samaritan does not mention God, as is true of many texts? Is Christ only to be mentioned when a text mentions Christ? Many experienced preach-the-text preachers in fact instinctively arrive at God, but there is nothing in their explicit exegetical or homiletical methods or sermon forms to ensure that they do or, more important, to instruct the student how to do this. Advocates of preach-the-gospel developed the kind of detailed theological exegetical method recommended earlier as a means to compensate for what was missing.

Edward Farley is one scholar who encourages preachers not to think narrowly about preaching a text or unit of Scripture, but to concentrate on the theological task of preaching the gospel and to allow it to set the themes of the sermon.³ James F. Kay and David Buttrick agree and have written papers that are among the best recent theological treatments of preaching.⁴

The point here is plain, Christ commissioned the church to preach the gospel. Preachers must preach individual texts and often they do not contain the gospel, yet all texts in their own particularities can serve as windows to and from it. The texts are essential and vital starting points for biblical preaching; they are the means whereby preachers arrive at the gospel. Not all sermons based on the Bible are biblical, and many biblical sermons are not the gospel. Preaching is no better than the instruments one uses to guide its formation. If preachers do not look for God in texts, they may not find God. If they do not find God, how can they know they have found God's word? Without a focus on God one can have no grace. Without a focus on grace one can have no gospel. Without a focus on gospel one cannot live up to the commission Christ gave to preach it. If preachers do not in some way seek the gospel, it may not be discerned.

Hermeneutical Method

The Grand Canyon in biblical preaching represents an important divide in current homiletical thought. Traditional biblical exegesis is essential; its limitations however are apparent in sermons that do not arrive at the gospel. Of course God can still use sermons on biblical history, ideas, characters, events and images yet they are likely to have only modest success in fanning the glowing embers of congregational faith if that is all they focus upon.

A basic requirement for a hermeneutical method is that it account for how the word of God in a previous age is the word of God today. Historical criticism can be argued never to have met this requirement. It tempts preachers to preach the text as history, without the gospel, yet in

² James S. Stewart, *Heralds of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 31.

³ Edward Farley, "Preaching the Bible and Gospel," *Theology Today*, 51:1 (April 1994): 90-104; and "Toward a New Paradigm for Preaching" in Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley, eds., *Preaching as a Theological Task*, 165-175,

⁴ See James F. Kay, "The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages," *Interpretation*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 1999), 44-56; and David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), esp. his first two chapters, Preaching and Bible, and Preaching and Church.

doing so preachers ironically ignore a historical truth: scripture is composed of texts that are not only of history but also of faith. In the 1950s at Union Seminary, Paul Scherer stated the matter in brilliant simplicity:

Do you realize that the Bible does not primarily invite us to any knowledge about God?... We are invited to meet God.

That's what the Gospel is about. Nothing else.... If you want to try an experiment, take any page and strip it of God, as we strip our lives, down to the bone, with that infinite mind away somewhere, and that eternal heart just a grand perhaps. And all of a sudden you'll be right back in the world that you know all too well, where a sower sowing his seed is just a sower sowing his seed, nothing more than that, where laborers stand idle in the market place, and where nothing is a parable because God hasn't anything to do with any of it, and the whole place is stale, flat and unprofitable, and makes you sick.

The difference between us and these more stalwart souls of the Bible was simply this: that when they looked at the world they saw Him, when they listened to the Babel of the world's voices they heard His voice. Everywhere in their days there was something God wanted them to do....⁵

In other words, until preachers read their texts theologically, looking for God, viewing individuals in the Bible as people of faith and doubt for whom salvation is a possibility, the texts are not being read as they were historically intended to be read, which is the goal of historical critical readings.

Still, awareness of this great divide in homiletics is not great, if one is to judge from the academic literature. There may be good reasons for this seeming silence. First, awareness of the problem is relatively recent; homiletics has been shifting from propositional preaching to the New Homiletic and attention has been focused on all of the implications of this. The focus has been on how communication is made, however, not on the theological nature of the message. Second, historical critical method is still the best means of getting deep into a biblical text in its historical setting to discover what it says, even if something more is often needed by way of getting to what also matters, namely theological criticism. Third, some students might erroneously take any criticism of exegetical method by their teachers as justification not to practice it.

Finally, teachers of historical criticism seem not to comment on its weaknesses as a hermeneutical approach. Perhaps they are not aware of it or matters of the Word of God are beyond the boundaries of their discipline. They may have a different understanding of gospel than the one understood here. Or they may equate God's word from a text with the gospel, perhaps because many texts have an obvious gospel component. With those other biblical texts

⁵ Paul E. Scherer, "The Perils of the Christian Life," in *Great Preaching Today: a Collection of 25 Sermons Delivered at the Chicago Sunday Evening Club*, Alton M. Motter, ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1955), 190-92.

that may be in the majority, either preachers may have learned at some intuitive or other unstated level to compensate, or they have come to accept the status quo as normal, thus they may see no need to correct the basic approach. Truth be told, no homiletical method is failsafe, and something important can be learned from most approaches.

Both preach-the-text and preach-the-gospel are presented here because in fact, one needs to preach the text to preach the gospel. Students will be better preachers for knowing the strong arguments on both sides. Here we make the case for preaching the gospel as the much-needed next stage of homiletical development beyond the New Homiletic. It involves one's entire approach to preaching.

The Theme Sentence

The difference between the two biblical stances can be quickly demonstrated in relation to a theme sentence for the sermon. Most writers today think of the theme sentence in double-barreled ways,⁶ in other words, two related statements take the place of the former notion of a theme sentence. Tom Long and Fred Craddock are in the preach-the-text school and advocate that sermon direction comes from the preacher answering two questions, What is the text saying? and, What is the text doing? As Craddock says,

This question [i.e. What is the text doing?] is not only identifying the nature and function of the text but is also providing an early guideline for the sermon to come. After all, the preacher will want to be clear not only about what is being said in the sermon but also about what is being done in the sermon. And just as one's message is informed by what the text is saying, the sermon's function is informed by what the text is doing. If, for example, one were to state as *what the text is saying*, 'Every Christian is a charismatic,' and as *what the text is doing*, 'Encouraging those believers who felt second-class,' then content and tone and purpose of the sermon have come into focus."⁷

Long argues that this double variation of the traditional theme sentence makes the sermon eventful and avoids the propositional dominance of an idea-centered approach. Texts not only have a message, they have a rhetorical intention; they make a claim and seek an effect.⁸ This is in line with the New Homiletic shift in preaching emphasis from what the sermon says to what it does. A bridge connects the historical text and the sermon, and the preacher is to carry over from the text what it says and does.⁹

⁶ See Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), esp. 15. Haddon Robinson uses, What am I talking about? and What am I saying about it? These are perhaps the closest today to the traditional propositional theme sentence approach. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001 [1980]), 41; see 33-50.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 123. My italics.

⁸ See for instance, Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 106-116, esp. 107.

The strength of this approach is obvious. The event captured in this approach is the event of the text, “the eventfulness of the text is expressed in the claim of the text, which then guides the eventfulness of the sermon.”¹⁰ “[S]omething happens between text and people; a claim is made, a voice is heard, a textual will is exerted, and the sermon will be a bearing witness to this event.”¹¹ This approach gives to the text rhetorical freedom to determine the direction of the sermon.

By comparison, those who stress ‘preach the gospel’ treat the sermon first and foremost as God’s event, not the text’s. This approach also uses a double-barreled adaptation of a theme sentence. It asks, What is God doing in or behind the text? (i.e., in the larger story if God is not directly mentioned) and, What is God doing today? The answer to the first is designated the major concern of the text because the preacher will treat it as though it is the main route to the heart of the text’s original meaning (in fact there are other possibilities). The answer to the second is designated as the major concern of the sermon because the preacher uses that as the main bridge across which to transport the significance of the text today.

This approach ensures that the sermon will deal with the text in responsible ways and will also teach about God and God’s relationship to humanity and creation. God will be the center. Jana Childers says that some years ago she freed herself of the enormous burden to come up with something original in every sermon. She discovered, “it is more important to say something timely than something original....God was not expecting a fresh new insight every time I preached.... [The congregation] didn’t need me to invent new spiritual gadgets for them; they needed to hear the connection made between their worlds and God’s.... The purpose of a theme sentence is to help you keep your focus, not advertise the erudition of your sermon.”¹²

Focusing on God ensures that the sermon can foster a relationship with the triune God. It ensures the eventfulness of the sermon by focusing on an action of God. Without this it is easy to imply that God is remote and abstract, indifferent, impersonal, passive or apparently irrelevant; propositions can become dominant. In cases in which God does not seem to be the subject of the text, this approach helps the preacher still to find God. The text remains one’s primary authority

⁹ Michael J. Quicke is critical of the bridge as an overall image or model of the sermon (a 180 degree model) because it misleads preachers “into thinking that *they* bear all the responsibility to connect the two poles.” He wants a bigger, Trinitarian picture. Michael J. Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching; Hearing, Speaking and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; & Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoser Publishing, 2003), 48. Nancy Lamers Gross is also critical of the bridge metaphor, for a different reason, it implies a rigid progression from the text to the sermons when the pattern is more like swinging back and forth. See her, *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul...* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 74-76, 83, 114-115. Charles L. Campbell may well be arguing against the notion of bridges when he calls for the meaning of texts to be found within the logic and language of the texts themselves, never straying too far from the world of the text. His important argument centers on Jesus Christ. *Charles L. Campbell: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997).

¹⁰ Long, 108.

¹¹ Long, 97.

¹² Jana Childers, “A Shameless Path,” in Jana Childers, ed., *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 42-43.

for preaching yet Christ's mandate to preach the gospel determines the sermon direction. In short, this approach understands the gospel to be the rhetorical purpose of the text.

What is God doing in or behind the text? Texts have many meanings or senses and each lens that a preacher uses yields other meanings; this one we may call the God sense of the text. Preachers face a problem however: a God focus is ensured but does this in itself ensure that the gospel will be proclaimed? No, it does not. One can say many things about God without ever getting to the gospel. Indeed one can teach many things about even the gospel and still stop short of performing the gospel, allowing it to be transformative in the lives of listeners. However, an essential place to start is in ensuring that the theme sentence will have a gospel focus by focusing on God's grace.

Preaching as the Gospel

In order for preaching to establish a relationship with the triune God and for it to be an event of God's encounter it needs to proclaim the gospel. Christ commissioned the church to preach the gospel, and God's promise to meet us in the sermon can be said to be dependent upon that. The Word of God needs to be preached, not some other word. What is the gospel? This seemingly obvious question now needs deliberate focus because we live in a postmodern era and all assumptions are challenged. Such questioning provides a fresh opportunity for preachers to reexamine what they do.

The gospel is literally good news. It centers on God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, an announcement or proclaiming of the saving acts that God has done, is doing and will do. The gospel is contained in the Bible and the ancient creeds of the church are an attempt to state it, as are many prayers, hymns and songs. The gospel can be summarized, but one needs the entire Bible to communicate it adequately. It is not narrowly confined to the New Testament, the good news is found wherever God acts with saving power, there is one God in both Testaments, yet the character of that saving power is fully disclosed in Christ. The gospel is not identical to the Bible; God's Word needs to be sought in Scripture (some readings are not the church's). As Luther said, the Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid; if one seeks the gospel in Scripture one avoids making an idol of the Bible.

The gospel is centered in Jesus Christ, yet not narrowly so to the exclusion of the other persons of the Trinity, as can seem to be the case in some worship settings where Jesus alone is mentioned, where prayers are addressed to Jesus rather than to God in the name of Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Where Christomonism reigns, Jesus may become a kind of idol.

The gospel is a scandal. It is perhaps natural to avoid the scandal or stumbling block of the resurrection. Paul identifies the problem when he says, "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [*skandalon*] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). It is an embarrassment to the postmodern mind that we need a Savior, that this Savior happened to come as a male, that he ate with sinners, that he refused to defend himself, that he died the death of a common criminal, that he died for us, that he rose from the dead, that he sits at the right hand of God, and that he will come again at the end of time, that we drink his blood and eat his body to our salvation. In a casual conversation recently about the future of the church, someone suggested that it needs to put less emphasis on Jesus and more on other things, like the *Bahavaghita*, in

order to attract youth. The church could try any number of innovative practices, yet Paul said, We have nothing but Christ to preach and if Christ did not rise from the dead then we are fools indeed.

The gospel is an announcement of a new age. Something happened on the cross. The world is different. What died with Jesus on the cross was the power of the old ways of violence and degradation, abuse and humiliation, injustice and greed. They rule no more. While we are yet at what James F. Kay calls the “turn of the age”,¹³ and while even our preaching still has one foot in that old age, the other foot is firmly planted in the new creation. Proclamation of the gospel is like midnight on New Year’s Eve at Times Square every Sunday. Preaching not only heralds the death of the old age, in preaching the cross it ushers in the new. That make the power of the cross not just a past event but a now event in preaching.

Kay, drawing on Paul, puts the matter well: “If the turn of the ages has taken place in the cross and continues to take place in the work of the cross, then what is required of preachers are not simply illustrations from history and nature, but illustrations that place history and nature, indeed all of life, into the crisis of the cross.” By crisis of the cross he means see things new: “What assumptions of the old world are called into question by the new?”¹⁴ Thus every image, story, and experience in the sermon needs to be viewed from this two-world perspective.

Preaching the gospel means to preach God's future, to picture in sermons the new age with vivid images of a world reconciled in God’s love. David Buttrick argues that eschatology ought not just inform preaching, but assist preachers in preaching boldly about social injustice in the present. As he says, “Let us paint images of the new creation on an age that seems tumbling down. Although the age may well tumble, our images are painted on the eternal mystery of God and, therefore, sure.”¹⁵

Finally, one may think of the gospel as the doorway to faith. There may be no better place for people to stand or stumble in their faith journeys than at the empty tomb asking, Is the One put to death on a cross as testified in Scripture the same One whom I have met today? Is Jesus of Nazareth dead or alive? If he is dead he remains the Jesus of history, but if he is alive he is acknowledged as the Christ of faith. If the answer is yes, a God who works other seemingly lesser miracles need be no real stumbling block. If the answer seems no, the matter rests between the individual and God and love remains.

The Gospel Has Form

Because of the centrality of the resurrection for the good news, does this mean that every sermon will bring the same news, like endless deliveries of yesterday’s newspaper? Yes and no: yes in that Christian preaching is Christ-centered and the cross has saving power. No in that

¹³ James F. Kay, “The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 1999), 44-56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50

¹⁵ David Buttrick, *Preaching the New and the Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 141.

preaching texts vary and how the gospel is proclaimed in relationship to specific occasions will vary widely from week to week. Listeners also vary in their needs and this too adds variety; Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., and Ronald J. Allen, speak of “one gospel, many ears”.¹⁶

Homileticians made a key discovery in recent decades: the gospel is not just content, it has a form and effect. It is the story of what happened at the turn of time in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The good news continues to happen whenever we preach these events. Stories have structure and can be told in various ways but the key elements remain the same. Psalms, hymns, parables, letters—they all have basic structural and stylistic features that mark them as separate genres. The same is true of gospel, it is a genre. It may be told and retold in many different ways, from the perspective offered by individual biblical texts, but the basic story, the underlying movement, the final outcome remains the same. A new age has dawned that exists alongside the remnants of the old, yet the end is already in sight.

The scholarly battle has already been won that determined the meaning of a text is affected by its form: form, content and rhetorical effect are intimately related. Another issue remains. Homileticians have now claimed that the same arguments that were applied to literary genres of the Bible apply to the gospel genre at the heart of the faith. The gospel has a form, its movement from crucifixion to resurrection is related to its content, and these contribute toward its rhetorical and spiritual effect. To deny that the gospel has a form can only be at the expense of communicating the gospel effectively. Gerhard O. Forde was getting at the form of the gospel when he said the preacher’s words “have the form of the cross, presuppose it, drive inexorably to it, and flow from it...cut[ting] in upon our lives to end the old and begin the new.”¹⁷ Because the gospel has content, form and effect, the implications for the sermon are large.

It became clear that to preach the gospel is not just a matter of adding some gospel words to a sermon, the way people add pepper to soup to enhance flavor. Gospel is not just a surface matter of sprinkling a few references to Christ here and there. The sermon needs something of the bold plot, movement, and shape of the gospel, not to mention language, imagery and emotion of the cross and empty tomb. It needs some of the cross’s way of putting the old norms to death as well as some of the resurrection’s way of inaugurating a new era.

Sermons have many varieties of exterior form. Most of them function well as potential vehicles for the gospel and most of them can be employed to display a movement from trouble to grace, because most of them are concerned with exterior form. The argument made here is that content form and effect of the gospel provide the sermon with deep structure, a grammar and movement. In other words, to preach the gospel does not reduce the number of sermon forms available, it enhances what each is able to express. This is said with one exception—the single exposition/application format tends to predispose the sermon to either trouble or grace, not both, thus at least in its overall structure it seems to have least gospel potential.

¹⁶ Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 15.

Some preachers may resist the idea that the gospel is polar, that it is cruciform and that something of this form needs to be present in its communication. Since biblical form is a necessary part of a text's meaning, it follows that the form of the gospel is important for it as well. Scholars can be committed both to preach the gospel and to respect the integration of form, content and rhetorical effect of biblical texts, yet still deny that the gospel has a form. However, one cannot safely presume that the gospel is present when one preaches a text. When we make this assumption we need to discuss gospel in a significant manner, explain what we mean by it, show in what ways it operates in our homiletic, indicate how it is present in any of the forms we use or recommend, and give guidance to help students get to the gospel in their preaching. Instead nearly all of us teaching homiletics have been silent on these matters: we have been schooled in preach-the-text and are more complacent than we should be in matters of preach-the-gospel.

Beyond Preach-The-Text

The problem of preaching the gospel also arises with the contemporary understanding of preach-the-text that treats texts as though they are isolated units or pericopes cut off from the larger story.¹⁸ Other ages had different understandings of text and they had their own flaws. However the problem is larger even than this and it has to do with the offense of the cross at the center of the faith. Mary Donovan Turner speaks for some seminaries when she laments, "Who among our community talks openly about the resurrection?" It seems to be connected with "evangelistic zeal and fervor".¹⁹ James F. Kay wonders if "without a saving cross, would the Christian message still be Christian?"²⁰

Arguably only in the last century or so has preaching the gospel been diminished as an objective of critical scholarly endeavor in biblical departments. Preach-the-text became the dominant twentieth-century emphasis and the New Homiletic christened it if only by uncritical assumptions concerning it. While its ongoing strengths are plainly evident in rendering a trustworthy text understood against the backdrop of its own times, its theological limitations only gradually became clear: the gospel was often missed. Or rather the gospel was hit and miss: sermons in the New Homiletic might proclaim the gospel, but this as a practice was rarely discussed, it was not named as the preaching goal, and methodology was not developed for obtaining it.

Using the gospel as a lens to read texts is one of the least discussed practices in contemporary homiletics yet it is one of the most important and vital steps for preachers to learn. There is not space in this paper to explore it but a full gospel hermeneutic is needed that has three critical dimensions: a) seek the gospel in the text itself; b) bring the text to the cross and

¹⁸ See Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 53-54.

¹⁹ Mary Donovan Turner, "Not Silent," in Jana Childers, ed., *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St. Louis, Chalice, 2001), 173.

²⁰ James F. Kay, "The Word of the Cross at the Turn of the Ages," *Interpretation*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (January 1999), 45.

resurrection to see how the meaning of the text is altered in light of Easter; and c) bring the larger gospel story to the text to discover echoes²¹ of it there.

For all of the continuing centrality of historical criticism for the pulpit, and for all of the ongoing need for preachers to do careful exegesis for the pulpit, preaching has perhaps been too closely wedded to biblical studies to depart from it significantly. In any case, preachers need to learn from the New Homiletic and move ahead. One important step is to reclaim in a contemporary way some of the theological ground of past preachers, without making their mistakes. If preaching is to be for renewal, liberation and transformation what may be needed is a new ability to proclaim the gospel.

²¹ See David Bartlett *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 17-24, 64-72. For the most thorough recent treatment of typology see Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ From the Old Testament: a Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), esp., 90-97; 249-61.

“Forgotten Nineteenth-century Women’s Sermons”

Marion Ann Taylor
Professor of Old Testament, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

Six years ago, a student in the class I was teaching on the history of biblical scholarship asked me if she could do her term paper on a woman who had made a significant contribution to the field of biblical studies. My initial response was to suggest a number of important twentieth-century women. However, the student’s question drew me into what has become my life’s passion, a search for women interpreters of the Bible. I soon discovered that the subject of women interpreters is a surprisingly neglected area of study, despite its obvious appeal as a topic in the field of biblical studies generally, and more precisely in the field of the history of interpretation. I decided to take on the task of recovering women’s writings on the Bible. I began with the nineteenth century, which had been the focus of my doctoral dissertation and which is pivotal both for critical developments in biblical studies and for the history of women. A Lilly Theological Research grant allowed me to spend a sabbatical leave for 2002–2003 researching and writing on women interpreters of the Bible. This sabbatical year was very fruitful, producing essays on the interpretive work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Rundle Charles and Mary Cornwallis in *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible* (SBL Symposium Series, 2007) and several other papers and presentations. With the help of Heather Weir and a number of other graduate students, a chart containing the titles of over 1000 books written by nineteenth-century women and the names of hundreds of women interpreters of the Bible throughout history was created. I began to search for the lost writings of these women and decided that their voices needed to be allowed to speak again. The first fruits of this labour, *Let Her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis*, a 495 page book, (Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir, Baylor University Press, 2006), features the writings of fifty women on women in Genesis.

Discovering Lost Nineteenth-century Preachers

The discovery of women’s sermons within the corpus of women’s publications on the Bible was made by my husband, Glen Taylor, Associate Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Proclamation at Wycliffe College. Glen was interested in the women’s writings on Genesis that we were finding and one day decided to read one of the pieces aloud. He recognized features that suggested that the essay he was reading was really a “sermon.” The published writings of the forgotten British Anglo-Catholic author, M. G. (fl. 1893) fall into the category of “sermon”. M.G. “preached” to women in an Anglican parish gathered together at Mothers’ Meetings. M. G. sermons (M. G. *Women Like Ourselves*, London: SPCK, 1893) reveal that she read the Bible through various lenses, including her experiences as a mother and wife. Her social location, her theology and her particular views on the Woman Question also affected her interpretation. The addresses of Mrs. Donaldson to women at Mothers’ Meetings can similarly be considered as sermons (Mrs. Donaldson, *Home Duties for Wives and Mothers, Illustrated by Women of Scripture*, London: William Hunt, 1882). The sermons of M.G. and other forgotten nineteenth-century women provide a new corpus of material for those interested in the history of preaching and in women’s ways of preaching. Below are a few excerpts from Donaldson’s evangelistic sermon on Luke 17:32 (Remember Lot’s wife.) Other examples of women’s sermons and

examples of women preaching with their pens are found in *Let her Speak for Herself: Nineteenth-Century Women Writing on Women in Genesis*.

. . . A VERY short injunction, yet one full of meaning and importance. The reason for keeping this woman in mind is not that we may admire and praise her, but, on the contrary, by recalling her willful disobedience, and her deplorable fate we may learn to avoid her sin, and not to waver on our heavenward journey. Let us consider briefly the outline of her history. . . .

Perhaps too, like Lot and his family, we have required much urging by Christian friends to depart from the danger so near at hand. The Gospel has been preached and read to us, over and over again; God's servants have spoken most earnestly and faithfully to us concerning our souls, and pointed out a loving and waiting Saviour. Or God has sent His own angels to speak to us the same message. He has laid us low on beds of sickness, and in the stillness of the chamber of death He bade us flee from the wrath due to our sins. In sickness, in losses, and in afflictions, His still small voice has spoken the same words, and at last, perhaps,—I trust it is so,—we have obeyed the call. And though we may have needed even to be led forth, yet we have at length fairly left it all behind. Past sins, former friends, old pleasures, ill-gotten possessions,—all are given up, and, better still, if in the company of those we love dearest upon earth, we have all started together on the narrow path, with our faces Zionward.

. . .

And if the influence of a wife be thus great, how much greater even must be that of a mother! You know it is. Think, O mothers! is *your* influence over your children such as it ought to be? Do your authority and your example tally? Do you teach them what is right,—to serve God and keep His commandments, to attend His house, to study His Word? And do you do the same yourselves; or do they see you gradually neglecting these things, and therefore think there is no need for *them* to observe them? Ponder these things well, my dear friends: examine your own lives, and see whether you are in the right road yourselves, or whether you are beginning to linger behind; nay, even “looking back from behind.” If so, turn again, turn again with us, I entreat you, and “we will do thee good” [Numbers 10:29]

But, before I close, I would most earnestly urge those of you who have never yet set out at all on the road to Zion to do so without delay. To remain behind is certain death: destruction is at hand, even at the door. Jesus has died; nay, is risen again, and bids all come to Him that they may find pardon for all their sins in His precious blood. He asks nothing of you: no goodness of your own; but simply to cast yourself on His mercy, and He will pardon and bless you. And while you look to Him in all dangers and difficulties, He will keep you safe in this world, and bring you at last to His eternal home in the world to come.

To all, then, I would say, “Escape for your life: look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed;” for “remember Lot’s wife,” [Luke 17:32].

**“Proclaiming the Gospel in Situations:
Theological Commonplaces for Occasions in Ministry and Life”**

David Schnasa Jacobsen
Associate Professor of Homiletics, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary
Doctoral Faculty in Homiletics, TST/Knox College

Theologian Ed Farley has argued that preachers preach not so much Biblical texts as the gospel.¹ As important as Biblical texts are, the object of proclamation is not the text itself, but the gospel. As part of our research, systematician Robert Kelly and I have sought to bring Farley’s important theological claim to bear on a specific, more occasional form of homiletical activity: the situational sermon.² Although most Sundays preachers will do the work of gospel proclamation with a stipulated text in view, whether provided by the lectionary or chosen by some other means, on some occasions preachers are faced with situations that go far beyond what any pre-selected text can foresee. There are some moments for preaching--say, a congregational crisis, the Sunday after a natural disaster, or an important moment of public decision--when a Biblical text is no longer fore-grounded, but the situation itself is. In moments like these, I contend, the role of the preacher as exegete recedes yet further and the role of the preacher as a theologian of the gospel comes to the fore.

The Situational Sermon and the Problem of Topical Preaching

Of course, the idea of situational preaching brings with it certain problems. Toward the early part of the twentieth-century Harry Emerson Fosdick tried to make a case for a type of preaching he called the “project method.”³ For Fosdick, a too narrow vision of Biblical preaching had proved to be problematic for the early twentieth-century pulpit. “Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites,” Fosdick quipped.⁴ On the other hand, Fosdick also worried that some forms of topical preaching were simply too subjective. Instead, what Fosdick envisioned with his project method was a more relevant pulpit that took the problems of the world seriously and supplied gospel answers to them. Thus, if the problem people faced in life was, say, depression, then preaching should bring the gospel to bear on that problem. Indeed, for Fosdick, the success of such preaching on Sunday was often measured by the number of people who showed up for counseling at the pastor’s office on Monday: “This, I take it, is the final test of a

¹ Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 71-82.

² David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly, *Kairos Preaching* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, MS in Progress).

³ Harry Emerson Fosdick’s famous article, “What Is the Matter With Preaching?” appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in July, 1928. A reprint of the same, along with other notable Fosdick articles, can be found in Lionel Crocker, ed. *Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Art of Preaching: An Anthology* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1971), 27-41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

sermon's worth: how many individuals wish to see the preacher alone?"⁵ Such preaching was thus relevant preaching—relevant to the world as people experienced it.

Naturally, such a naively correlationist view of preaching proved problematic. As soon as the gospel is envisioned as the answer to all the questions we are asking, the scope of the gospel is truncated. What if, for example, the gospel does not merely answer our questions, but parabolically re-frames or even over-turns them? If our worldly perspectives always determine what is "relevant," the movement from our question to gospel answer tends to become just a barely-baptized way of turning the gospel into culture religion. The good news of the gospel should, after all, be more than the problem/solution gambit of laundry detergent commercials and headache remedy ads. If the movement is always unidirectional between worldly problem and gospel solution, such "relevance" will probably lead to a cultural domestication of the gospel. Perhaps this is why, as David Buttrick has noted, the therapeutic gospel triumphed for so much of the twentieth century.⁶ In the name of being "relevant," the gospel was reduced to one-to-one therapy. We also may be witnessing a new form in our day and age, when certain forms of preaching sound more like motivational speaking or a pep-talk from the ecclesiastical CEO. In this case, the gospel may end up being reduced to mere management. Either way, the gospel loses its theological content and scope.

Situational Preaching as Proclaiming the Gospel in Light of a Situation

The key for preacher, therefore, is to become more theologically focused on the gospel in light of the situation. Rather than viewing the gospel as an *answer* to a problem, we need to ask what the gospel looks like *in light of it*. Of course, such an approach brings with it some problems of its own.

On the one hand, the term "gospel" is one we sometimes bandy about without defining. It can easily become a kind of empty cipher. As a result, for our hearers too often the term is confused with the final lection that is read according to the ecumenical order of the lectionary (as in, "the Gospel According to Luke"). Yet the gospel is not simply reducible to the Bible that bears witness to it, let alone the four Gospels that bear the same generic name. Indeed, the gospel is something we should be able to talk about with our preaching, reflect on for our preaching, and develop in our preaching. It should help us focus our work theologically so we can know what to say in the pulpit when difficult situations emerge in parish life.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume that the gospel is merely a timeless essence standing apart from life as lived.⁷ The gospel is not like condensed soup, which needs only a can of local water to make reasonably palatable. No, when we talk about the gospel *in light of situations*, different aspects of it come to the fore and require our attention. Theologian Ed Farley puts it this way:

⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 409-410.

⁷ For a survey of 19th and 20th century thought on this issue, see Stephen Sykes excellent work, *The Identity of Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973). This is in part why Sykes abandons the language of the "Essence of Christianity" for the term "identity."

Gospel is not a thing to be defined. It is not a doctrine, a delimited objective content. The summaries in Acts and in Paul of what is proclaimed, the formulas of the kerygma, attest to this. Phrases like “the kingdom of God,” “Jesus as Lord,” “Christ crucified” do have content, but that content is not simply a quantity of information. To proclaim means to bring to bear a certain past event on the present in such a way as to open the future. Since the present is always specific and situational, the way that the past, the event of Christ, is brought to bear so as to elicit hope will never be captured in some timeless phrase, some ideality of language. Preaching the good tidings is a new task whenever and wherever it takes place.⁸

As a practical matter, for example, the gospel as preached at a situation like a funeral should sound somewhat different from the gospel as preached at a wedding. So, though we will need to think clearly about our theology of the gospel, we will probably not always be talking about the same gospel “things” in every situation. Because the gospel is preached in light of a situation, we will need to pay attention to enduring features of our common life that color our perceptions, including how those features help us both to “hear” and “mis-hear” the gospel. We can call these features “context”. We will also need to understand the many variations of situations that will call forth some gospel Word. All this is to say that preaching the gospel contextually in situations is both an exciting and demanding theological task. As such, it will also be quite different from the unidirectional movement of the old correlational preaching of the project method.⁹

Loci Communes: Gospel Commonplaces for the Situational Pulpit

Consequently, our book intends to speak to situations by appealing not to a cut-and-paste gospel, but to a structure of gospel “commonplaces,” a series of theological “loci” or “topics” that preachers can draw on for developing and organizing what they want to say. The idea of “*Loci Communes*” or common topics is an old one. The term appeared first in rhetorical manuals in the ancient world. When a speaker wished to figure out what to say, he or she could use either “special topics” unique to the matter being discussed (i.e., an argument among those rhetorical Greeks about whether to go to war against Troy would presumably include matters such as numbers of ships to get there; the costs of large, empty wooden horses; what one hoped to gain by going to war; etc.). At other points, a speaker might also use “common topics” or commonplaces, that is, arguments that one could appeal to in different kinds of speeches (e.g., “from the lesser to the greater”: as in, “if our Greek troops could make short order of the mighty Minoans, how much more could they truly rout those pathetic Trojans!”). Here commonplaces refer to arguments that you could use in more than one kind of speech.¹⁰ Given the fact that the

⁸Farley, *Practicing Gospel*, 80.

⁹Two homileticsians have endeavored to develop a kind of *critical*-correlational model for preaching that moves in the same helpful direction: David Buttrick with his work on “preaching in the mode of praxis” (*Homiletic*, 405-445) and Ron Allen in his book, *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

¹⁰ In rhetorical theory commonplaces can refer to common themes used across different kinds of speeches or, as with Aristotle, patterns of argumentation or inference. Rhetorician Stephen O’Leary offers a helpful summary of the

situations of ministry are so variegated, it might be helpful indeed to refer to a series of homiletical-theological “commonplaces” that one could use to put together what to say in such moments.

Yet in this book the idea of “commonplaces” is for us far more theological than rhetorical. In fact, for a long time the same Latin phrase, *Loci Communes*, was used to designate theological treatises. The title was a very common one, for example, in the Reformation. Theologians like the Reformer Melancthon wrote his famous work, *Loci Communes*, to make a brief compendium of Reformation theology more accessible.¹¹ In such a time of rapid change, books in the form of a *Loci Communes* helped give early shape to emerging Protestant perspectives. In these books the “commonplaces” were the loci of theology: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, salvation, eschatology, etc. It treated theology as a series of “common topics” or commonplaces to reflect on the Christian faith.

Nonetheless, though we recognize that preaching the gospel in light of situations is a structured way of thinking theologically, there is a center to that structure. For us its core is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. In one sense, it is quite natural to be so particular. My co-author on this forthcoming book, Robert Kelly, is a Lutheran systematic theologian. As a United Methodist, I am also aware that Wesley’s own understanding of it was profoundly impacted by hearing Luther’s preface to the *Epistle to the Romans* read at Aldersgate.¹² Our theological dialogue about gospel and situation proceeds quite naturally out of a place where our traditions overlap. Nonetheless, pastors of other denominations need not fret that our starting point for thinking situationally about a theology of the gospel is utterly irrelevant to their realities. Protestants and Roman Catholics alike share a commitment to preaching the gospel.¹³ Even among Protestants the gospel of God’s free gift of grace is hardly under anyone’s copyright.¹⁴ Yet if some sort of adaptation is required of the reader because of the variety of

issues as it pertains to contemporary topical theory as it relates to millennial preaching in his book, *Arguing the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford, 1994) 21-25.

¹¹ A wonderful translation of and introduction to Melancthon’s important work can be found in Clyde Manschreck’s *Melancthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci communes, 1555* (New York: Oxford, 1965).

¹² The relationship of Wesley’s understanding of justification by faith to Luther and the other Reformers’ is complex. For further information, see Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 57-73, esp. 64ff.

¹³ The document of the US Catholic Conference of Bishops, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: USCC, 1982) 1, makes this quite clear by quoting on its first page from Vatican II’s Decree on the Ministry and the Life of Priests #4, “The primary duty of priests is the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all”. More recently, the issue of the content of that gospel, especially as it relates to justification, has emerged in the theological discussions between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” (http://www.lutheranworld.org/Special_Events/OfficialDocuments/jd97.EN.html).

¹⁴ New Testament scholar Stephen Westerholm traces a fascinating history of the Apostle Paul’s influence and understanding through Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley in his book, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The Lutheran Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 3-87. Although these Protestant theologians stand at the head of diverging theological traditions, they take with great seriousness a largely Pauline understanding of justification by grace through faith. Naturally such views of Paul have come under serious question of late, especially the degree to which one can relate to a kind of Lutheran reading of “law” through Paul: e.g., Krister Stendahl [*Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976)] and E. P. Sanders [*Paul, the Law, and the*

theological traditions today, such adaptation is certainly of a piece with this whole book. Our gospel commonplaces will be *starting points* for pastors and their situational preaching ministry. Though we will try to begin at a common starting point, every preacher will need to engage the issues in his or her own way and unique situation.

The goal of our research for this forthcoming book is to give preachers gospel commonplaces that will aid them in their work of articulating the gospel in different situations of ministry and church life in the world. Because situations are so diverse, preachers will probably need to add to or otherwise modify what we will offer concerning situations like funerals, weddings, public crises, etc. A book cannot anticipate the special topics or nuances of every situation in ministry! However, it can at least give preachers some topics, commonplaces, which will get them started toward articulating the gospel in light of them. We view this structured gospel task as *homiletical theology*.¹⁵

Does this sound heavy? It certainly does. But a pastor is a resident theologian in her/his congregation. There are probably other people, whether in a parish or outside, who can offer better therapy to clients than a preacher can. There are probably also other people who can manage a business better than a pastor can. There are in the average community, however, few people who can relate with insight the unique situation of the people a pastor knows and love to the theological riches of the gospel. We hope our gospel commonplaces will help pastors get started. When difficult or even recurring situations pop up, there will at least be some place, some *commonplace*, with which to begin.

Jewish People (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983)] among others. Westerholm includes their critiques in his work, however, and makes an interesting case for elements of continuity that run from Paul through to the above-mentioned Protestant theologians.

¹⁵ Following theologian Ed Farley, homiletician Teresa Lockhart Stricklen has tried to show how homiletical theology can be understood as a unique kind of theological method in “Analgesic Jesus and the Power of God for Salvation: The Importance of Theological Method for Preaching,” in *Papers of the Annual Meeting* (38th Meeting; Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, comp.; December 2003), 242-252. In our book, of course, the work is of a much more modest scope, chiefly because we are limiting ourselves to specific types of situations that show up occasionally in pastoral ministry. For another related way of thinking about homiletical theology, see David Buttrick’s *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletical Theology* (Fortress Resources for Preaching; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).