



## *Texts in Context*

# The Need and the Art of Biblical Preaching

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**A**t least two factors call for a renewal of biblical preaching. The relative biblical illiteracy of the average churchgoer is the first. Unfamiliar with all but the most well known passages in Scripture, most persons in the pews on any given Sunday stand at an alarming distance from the Bible, unable to fit the passages they hear into any larger narrative or theological framework. If preachers do not use the Sunday sermon—the most frequent occasion most people are likely to hear Scripture read—to explore and unfold the biblical witness, any hope for reacquainting Christians with their book all but vanishes.

The second precipitating factor is the diminishment, if not demise, of biblical preaching in the church. Whether seeking to take seriously the interests and temperaments of today's listeners or simply capitulating to their lack of biblical knowledge, too many preachers have abandoned the thoroughly biblical sermon in favor of life-application, apologetic, or seeker-oriented preaching that seeks to make the Christian faith relevant to today's hearer by shifting the sermon's primary focus away from the biblical narrative to some other source of introspection or inspiration. Hence, the adjective "biblical" is no longer redundant when speaking about preaching.

Of course, this call for renewal becomes somewhat more complicated once we realize that there is more than one type of preaching that can legitimately claim to be "biblical." What do I mean by "legitimate"? Mark Twain's response to the

*Only preaching that is truly biblical can reacquaint Christians with their book of faith and bring them an encounter with the word of God that gives life to the dead, healing to the ill, and hope to the despairing.*

question “Do you believe in infant baptism?” comes to mind: “Believe in it?” Twain exclaimed, “I’ve seen it!” Similarly, because there are numerous Christian preachers delivering what they would describe as “biblical” sermons, which vary greatly in terms of their content, aim, and style, I would argue that there is more than one form of preaching that can legitimately be described as “biblical,” because each seeks to allow the biblical passage at hand to govern the sermon.

For this reason, it may prove helpful to this call for renewal to distinguish between three dominant patterns of biblical preaching, which I describe as the *cognitive*, the *experiential*, and the *eventful*. While I have a clear preference for the third, I nevertheless believe each manifests a form of genuine biblical preaching, so I will first offer a brief sympathetic sketch of each by describing their assumptions about (a) the nature of Scripture, (b) the role of the preacher, and (c) the relationship between Scripture and sermon. To flesh out these sketches, I will then suggest how each approach to biblical preaching might work with a specific passage that occurs in the lectionary cycle this and every Easter season, John 20:19–31, on the Second Sunday of Easter.

## PATTERNS OF BIBLICAL PREACHING

### *Cognitive Biblical Preaching*

What I describe as “cognitive” biblical preaching is traditional expository preaching with a heightened intention to apply a biblical truth, thought, concept, or teaching to contemporary lives; hence, the emphasis on “cognitive.” Given its roots in the expository preaching of some of the Reformers, the Puritans, and many contemporary evangelical preachers, it is perhaps the most familiar form of biblical preaching and can be treated most succinctly. In brief, as Haddon Robinson writes, such preaching “is the communication of a biblical concept derived and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage” to today’s hearers.<sup>1</sup>

From this perspective, one understands Scripture as a repository of truth, the resting place of God’s revealed norms for faith and life. The task of the preacher consequently is twofold: first, to recover, uncover, or discover the timeless truths buried in the particular historical and cultural forms of the biblical writings in order, second, to translate and apply those truths to contemporary life. The sermon, then, provides the cognitive bridge between the “then” of the biblical record and the “now” of the lives of contemporary hearers.<sup>2</sup> The biblical author and contemporary exegete and preacher are bound together by their God-given rationality, their ability to think, express, and communicate an idea; both are, finally, *Homo sa-*

<sup>1</sup>Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) 21.

<sup>2</sup>For another example, see John R. W. Stott’s *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) esp. 137ff., where he develops the metaphor of preaching as “bridge building” between the biblical world and our own.

*piens sapiens*—thinking, reflective beings. Similarly, what links Scripture and sermon is the essential and eternal idea, teaching, or concept of a particular passage that transcends culture, then and now.

*Experiential Biblical Preaching*

If cognitive preaching relies on universality of ideas and concepts to bridge the historical and cultural gulf between Scripture and sermon, the second form of biblical preaching relies on timeless and universal human experience. From this point of view, in fact, the gap between the world of the Bible and our own is overstated, since, despite changes in history, language, and culture, human nature—and therefore human experience—remains essentially unchanged. Scripture, from this point of view, is therefore a catalogue not simply of the thoughts of the biblical writers that need to be translated into the common idiom but rather is even more a record or witness of their *experience* of the divine, an experience still open to contemporary hearers. The preacher’s job, from this point of view, is to recreate the experience depicted in Scripture so that readers might be drawn into a similar experience through their hearing of Scripture and sermon.

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In mainline Protestant circles, perhaps the closest analogue to this type of preaching is the postliberal emphasis on the biblical narrative expressed by George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and others. Hans Frei makes this striking claim:

Western Christian reading of the Bible in the days before the rise of historical criticism in the eighteenth century was usually strongly realistic, i.e., at once literal and historical, and not only doctrinal or edifying. The words and sentences meant what they said, and because they did so they accurately described real events and real truth that were rightly put only in those terms and no others.<sup>3</sup>

Frei’s contention is that the rise of the modern historical consciousness of a gap between ancient worlds and our own prompted a slow but steady fracturing of the biblical narrative because of the implicit necessity to translate the meaning of specific biblical passages into today’s language. What is lost through such a process, Frei contends, is the assumption that we are all linked by a common biblical narrative and worldview that joins Christians of every age. Postliberal preaching, explored in most depth by Charles Campbell and Mark Ellingsen, seeks to unite preacher and hearer not at the level of ideas, but rather by drawing hearers into the cultural and

<sup>3</sup>Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 1.

linguistic world of the Bible so they may experience the truth of the faith captured in the biblical witness.<sup>4</sup>

But while mainline Protestant postliberal theologians and preachers have explored largely *theoretical* alternatives to cognitive approaches to biblical study and preaching, we must turn to the African American pulpit to see the regular and fullest *practice* of this form of biblical preaching. African American preachers simply assume that the biblical world is also the world of their hearers and know that their job is to draw their hearers more fully into the world, and even the shoes, of the biblical characters. As Henry Mitchell writes, “The hearer enters vicariously into the story, making it his or her own personal story.”<sup>5</sup> There is, finally, no meaningful difference between Abraham and Sarah’s world and our own, no significant discrepancy between the situation of the apostles and our own. Linked to the biblical characters by a common experience of both human tragedy and divine redemption, contemporary hearers therefore not only think the faith but also feel it, breathe it, experience it, as Mitchell describes, “holistically.”<sup>6</sup>

#### *Eventful Biblical Preaching*

The third category of biblical preaching is the one I claim, but, perhaps ironically, also the one I have the most difficulty in describing. I choose “eventful” as an admittedly inadequate description, because what links Scripture and sermon in this case is neither a common rationality nor a common human experience but rather the common event of God’s word intruding into the lives of believers of

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every age. That is—agreeing here with experiential preachers—Scripture is more than a collection of timeless ideas, and the Christian life is more than holding the right beliefs or doctrines or even doing the right things. Rather, Christian faith is the holistic response to being encountered by God in Christ and drawn into a living relationship with God through that experience. At the same time—and here agreeing with the cognitive preachers—the world of the biblical authors *is* different from our own, and to assume there is no meaningful cultural or historical gap is to risk projecting our values and experiences onto the biblical witness. What links Scripture and sermon, biblical character and contemporary hearer, then, is a common

<sup>4</sup>See Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), and Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>5</sup>Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 67.

<sup>6</sup>Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 18.

encounter with the word of God, the living and active word that actually and meaningfully *affects* those it encounters.

Scripture, then, is neither a repository of divine concepts nor a record of faithful experience but instead is the word of God that did and still does confront hearers with the living and active God we know in and through Jesus Christ. The “eventfulness” of Scripture—and, indeed, of all words—becomes the key to reading, understanding, and preaching Scripture. As Gerhard Ebeling writes, “So we do not get at the nature of words by asking what they contain, but by asking what they effect, what they set going, what future they disclose.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, as Ebeling continues, there emerges an organic relationship between Scripture and preaching:

The Bible bears witness to a proclamation which has taken place and is the impulse to a proclamation which is to take place. And this event, which claims to be the Word of God, is not mere speech. But it sets something in motion, just as it itself was set in motion. It has to do with reality, which it changes.<sup>8</sup>

The gospel, from this point of view, is not simply a word, but a word-event, something that actually *happens* to people.

The task of the preacher, then, is to read Scripture expecting an encounter with the living God through the words of the text in order to recreate, or set the stage for, a similar event to occur in the lives of the hearers. Thomas Long gets at this when he describes the preacher as “witness.” As Long writes, “Witnesses testify to events, and the event to which the preacher testifies is the encounter between God and ourselves.”<sup>9</sup> For this reason, as Fred Craddock suggests, preachers pay attention not simply to what a biblical passage is “saying,” but to what it is “doing,” in order to produce a similar effect in the sermon.<sup>10</sup> The preacher looks to the eventful character of Scripture as the link between people of faith then and now and therefore seeks to allow his or her sermon to be animated by the same dynamic that drives the biblical passage.

#### BIBLICAL PREACHING AND DOUBTING THOMAS

It is, of course, difficult for me to imagine fully a sermon from the cognitive or experiential approaches to biblical preaching, because, while I have tried to describe them sympathetically, my descriptions remain those of an observer, not a participant. What I offer below, then, are educated guesses open to revision or correction by actual practitioners.

The familiar story of so-called “doubting” Thomas is the appointed Gospel

<sup>7</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 187.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 183–184. See also, Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 155–158.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 45.

<sup>10</sup>Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 122–123. Whether the preacher always wants the sermon to *do* precisely what the text is doing is another question; viewing Scripture as living, active, and eventful, however, is the hallmark of this approach to preaching.

reading in each of the lectionary cycles for the Second Sunday of Easter. It is, therefore, one of the more familiar stories. Cognitive preachers, I imagine, would likely discover a viable “essential idea” in Jesus’ pronouncement “Blessed are those who believe without seeing.” Here, certainly, is an invitation to reflect deeply on the nature of faith. Corollary verses from Heb 11:1 and other places may give the preacher an opportunity to probe the nature and benefits of faith, but the primary focus would be on Thomas’s desire for proof and the distinctive and trusting nature of faith that believes without seeing.

An experiential approach would more likely invite the hearer into Thomas’s shoes, relating both the agony of the hours since the crucifixion, the doubt and confusion of the week after the Sunday of the resurrection when Thomas received the report of the other disciples, to the surprising joy of his meeting with the resurrected Christ and his bold confession of faith. Preachers from this tradition would likely correlate these stages to various episodes in our own lives, inviting us implicitly or explicitly to move from agony through doubt and confusion to life-changing faith.

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An eventful biblical sermon might also place a premium on the experience of Thomas prior to that second Sunday evening to provide backdrop but would probably be more concerned with Christ’s encounter with Thomas. The focus, however, would be less on the content of Jesus’ words—whether “Stop doubting and believe” or “Blessed are those...”—and more on the effect of being encountered by the Risen Christ, on the ways in which Christ continues to encounter us (through word, sacrament, fellowship, etc.), and on the ways by which these encounters similarly prompt us to faith and confession. Thomas, from this point of view, is less a “doubter” than a realist; so, while his doubt is swept away by his encounter with Christ, his realism is left intact. What he is encountered by, ultimately, is neither the proof he sought nor the exhortation to believe that we so often hear, but rather an entirely new reality, one in which the dead are given life, the ill healing, the despairing hope, by the mercy and grace of a God who continues to enter into, disrupt, and redeem our lives. Once touched by such an encounter, Thomas is forever changed—as are we—marked by the faith, hope, and love that are the gifts of God.

None of these descriptions, of course, is adequate, as sermons in each of these traditions would bring the biblical drama to life in distinct and compelling ways. What unites them, ultimately, is the conviction that Scripture should govern and animate the sermon. Where they differ is on the understanding of the nature and

relationship of Scripture and sermon and therefore the means and methods available to the preacher. If preachers begin asking these kinds of questions—How do I bridge the gap between the “then” of the Bible and the “now” of my hearers? How do I understand Scripture as God’s word speaking into our world?—with even a modicum of intentionality and seriousness, then the renewal of biblical preaching that I am advocating will be off to a healthy start. ⊕

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