



# Respecting the Text

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Consider the following text.

Marilyn, tired of her glamorous image, embarked on a new project. She would now cultivate her mind, sharpen her verbal skills, pay attention to standards of etiquette. Most important of all, she would devote herself to charitable causes. Accordingly, she offered her services at the local hospital, which needed volunteers to cheer up terminal patients, many of whom had been in considerable pain for a long time. The weeks flew by. One day she was sitting at the cafeteria when her supervisor approached her and said: "I didn't see you yesterday. What were you doing?" "I painted my apartment; it was my day off," she responded.<sup>1</sup>

1. What kind of writing is this? (The technical term here is genre.) Is this a poem? A letter? A newspaper article? A fictional piece? Biography? Historical narrative? etc.
2. What time period does it describe? OT? NT? Medieval? Modern? Future?
3. Describe the main character.
4. Why do you think this text was written?
5. Summarize the message of the text in a brief statement.

I will not ask you to do the next step since it would take far too long, but at least think about the sort of things that would be included. What would a commentary on this text look like? How would you interpret it?

A commentary is intended to help the reader understand the text on which it comments. If the text were Scripture (and I realize that it is not) and you were going to write a commentary on it, what sort of information would be included? Think of it in terms of your favorite commentary, whether a classic work such as Westcott's commentary on the Gospel of John, or a modern equivalent such as the ones written on the same gospel by D. A. Carson or Leon Morris.

What would you expect to find in such a commentary?

As surprising as it may seem, a commentary has been written on this text. Let me read a portion of that commentary to you. As you listen, ask yourself what is wrong with it as a commentary.

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[This version of the paper contains an expanded footnote (#15) from the original distributed at the ShopTalk.]

<sup>1</sup> Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 11.

We are unable to determine whether this text is an excerpt from a novel or from a historical biography. Almost surely, however, it was produced in a religious context, as is evident from the use of such words as *devoted*, *offered*, *charitable*. In any case, this passage illustrates the literary power of twentieth-century English, a language full of wonderful metaphors. The verb *embarked* calls to mind an ocean liner leaving for an adventuresome cruise, while *cultivate* possibly alerts the reader to Marilyn's botanical interests. In those days North Americans compared time to a bird—probably the eagle—that flies.

The author of this piece, moreover, makes clever use of word associations. For example, the term *glamorous* is etymologically related to *grammar*, a concept no doubt reflected in the comment about Marilyn's "verbal skills." Consider also the subtleties implied by the statement that "her supervisor approached her." The verb *approach* has a rich usage. It may indicate a similar appearance or condition (*this painting approaches the quality of a Picasso*); it may have a sexual innuendo (*the rapist approached his victim*); it may reflect subservience (*he approached his boss for a raise*). The cognate noun can be used in contexts of engineering (e.g., access to a bridge), sports (of a golf stroke following the drive from the tee), and even war (a trench that protects troops besieging a fortress).

Society in the twentieth century is greatly illumined by this text. The word *patient* (from *patience*, meaning "endurance") indicates that sick people then underwent a great deal of suffering; they *endured* not only the affliction of their physical illness, but also the mediocre skills of their medical doctors, and even (to judge from other contemporary documents) the burden of increasing financial costs.

A few syntactical notes may be of interest to language students. The preposition *of* had different uses; causal (*tired of*), superlative (*most important of all*), and partitive (*many of whom*). The simple past tense had several aoristic functions: *embarked* clearly implies determination, while *offered* suggests Marilyn's once-for-all, definitive intention. Quite noticeable is the tense variation at the end of the text. The supervisor in his question uses the imperfect tense, "were doing," perhaps suggesting monotony, slowness, or even laziness. Offended, Marilyn retorts with a punctiliar and emphatic aorist, "I painted."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, 12–13. Please note that Silva is using a caricature to illustrate *improper* method. His comments on this are well worth reading. His fictional setting for this illustration is as follows: "It is approximately the year 2790. The most powerful nation on earth occupies a large territory in Central Africa, and its citizens speak Swahili. The United States and other English-speaking countries have long ceased to exist, and much of the literature prior to 2012 (the year of the Great Conflagration) is not extant. Some archaeologists digging in the western regions of North America discover a short but well-preserved text that can confidently be dated to the last quarter of the twentieth century.... The archaeologists know just enough English to realize that this fragment is a major literary

What is wrong with this commentary?

Are the individual facts wrong?

Why is it so unrealistic and indeed, even bizarre at times?

How is it that we can immediately identify this as a case of imagination gone awry? [Because we know the culture described and we know the “original language” in which this text was written.]

The most fundamental error of all is that this Swahili scholar does not understand how English works. His commentary is very artificial. We know that immediately because we speak English as native speakers. None of us make the bizarre associations that this commentary suggests as we read the narrative about Marilyn—or any other English text.

Now, what does a fictional Swahili commentary on a fictional story about Marilyn have to do with the Bible? I’ve used this strange illustration to get you thinking about how language works—about how we interpret texts. We don’t spend much time evaluating the workings of our own language when we are reading the newspaper or a letter from a friend. We do not attempt to apply the principles of hermeneutics to the newspaper. We just *read it* and we understand what it says.

*Or do we?* Actually we *do* use hermeneutics when we read the newspaper. It’s just that when we read our own language we “interpret” it almost unconsciously because we know how our language works. It is usually when we turn to a text in another language that we consciously ask hermeneutical questions. Even if we have a translation of that text in our own language, we realize that there are enough foreign elements remaining that we must be more careful to understand it correctly.

What about the Bible? Do we interpret it different from the newspaper? The answer is not a simple yes or no. The issue is a bit more complex than that. So let’s look at some of the issues involved when we interpret holy Scripture. Having done that, then we want to ask another question. How does all of this affect how we do ministry?

## A. Respecting the Text in Hermeneutics

Let’s begin by reviewing some theology. There should be little new in this section (at least I hope this is familiar territory!). But perhaps we do not always connect our theology with our hermeneutics. There is a theological basis for hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup>

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find that deserves closer inspection, so they rush the piece to one of the finest philologists in their home country. This scholar dedicates his next sabbatical to a thorough study of the text and decides to publish an exegetical commentary on it” (ibid., 11).

<sup>3</sup> Were time to permit, there are a number of other theological issues that should also be considered in terms of how they underpin our hermeneutics. These would include theology proper, anthropology, and

## 1. A theological basis for hermeneutics

### a. Revelation

We begin with the doctrine of revelation. We believe that God has chosen to give us information that we could not know on our own recourse. That revelation comes in several different forms, including what is known about God from the created order (that there is an eternal, powerful Creator), the spoken word proclaimed as the “thus says the Lord” of the prophets, the oral proclamation of God himself, the physical inscription of text by the finger of God (as infrequent as either of the last two items were), the message mediated by angels, the earthly life and teaching of our Lord Jesus, and the written text of Scripture. We typically divide that spectrum into general or natural revelation on the one hand and special revelation on the other. Our concern today focuses on one portion of the category of special revelation—and the only form of revelation which God has chosen to provide for his people at this juncture in history—the written Bible.

Had we time, we might profitably examine the propositional nature of that revelation. It is becoming popular in some evangelical circles again these days to deny that revelation is propositional.<sup>4</sup> “We mean by propositional revelation that God supernaturally communicated his revelation to chosen spokesmen in the express form of cognitive truths, and that the inspired prophetic-apostolic proclamation reliably articulates these truths in sentences that are not internally contradictory.”<sup>5</sup>

This revelation has not been left to chance that we might happen upon it at random. We believe that God recorded the body of revelation needed by his people across the centuries in written form. It was recorded in a particular fashion that we describe in the following terms.

### b. Inspiration

As fundamentalists, we are committed to the inspiration of Scripture. We can all recite 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is θεόπνευστος—God-breathed.” We offer a theological definition of inspiration as the God-breathed character of the autographa of Scripture that resulted from the superintending work of the Holy Spirit supernaturally enabling the human authors and writers\* of the Scriptures to accurately verbalize and transfer into writing divine truth in keeping with their own particular style and vocabulary, thus guaranteeing that this truth is accurately, inerrantly, and infallibly inscripturated.<sup>6</sup>

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pneumatology. Some brief suggestions in those regards are appended to this paper, but will not be discussed.

<sup>4</sup> I have explored the doctrine of propositional revelation in an extended comparative study (still unpublished) of Carl F. H. Henry’s and Stanley Grenz’s views of propositional revelation. (Henry defends the doctrine; Grenz in large measure denies it.) The paper was originally presented at the national ETS conference in Colorado Springs, Nov. 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83), 3:457.

<sup>6</sup> My definition. \* “Authors and writers” is intended to recognize that not all authors of Scripture actually wrote what they authored but, at least

*Scripture* is inspired, not the writers. The Bible says that “all *Scripture* is God-breathed.” The *process* in which the writers participated is best referred to as *inscripturation* and the work of the Holy Spirit in *inscripturation* may be described as his *superintendence*.

As fundamentalists, we even go so far as to argue for *verbal-plenary* inspiration. Verbal inspiration refers to the fact that the very words of the text are inspired, not just the concepts. That is why we refer to the Bible as the “Word of God.” The Bible says in words what God wants said—it accurately communicates God’s truth.<sup>7</sup>

Plenary inspiration affirms that *all* the words of the text are inspired and equally so. The words of Jesus in the text are inspired (even though he himself wrote none of them), and so are those of James, Habakkuk, and Moses. (For that matter, even the words of Balaam’s donkey are inspired in that they form part of biblical text!) As a side note, if we are consistent with our claims of verbal-plenary inspiration, it would cast serious doubts on the wisdom of focusing attention on certain words by printing them in red. Although Jesus’ words are certainly important and authoritative, so are the words of Obadiah and Jude.

### c. Inerrancy

A related claim that we are bold to make is that *Scripture* is not only inspired, but also inerrant. We would affirm the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.<sup>8</sup>

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy *Scripture* in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy *Scripture* is God’s witness to Himself.
2. Holy *Scripture*, being God’s own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: It is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, *Scripture*’s divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.

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in the New Testament, frequently dictated to an amanuensis. The superintending work of the Holy Spirit governs both the verbalization of the truth on the part of the author and the transcription of the truth by the writer.

<sup>7</sup> This is defined from the post-apostolic perspective. It might be couched differently if we were referring to a perspective contemporary with the OT or contemporary with the incarnate ministry of Jesus Christ.

<sup>8</sup> The following five statements comprise the summary statement adopted in Chicago in 1978. The published text can be found several places, including *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 493–502.

4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, *Scripture* is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.

5. The authority of *Scripture* is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.

If we claim to believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, then our view of the Bible and its role in our lives *and in our ministry* is affected.

### d. Authority

We do not stop with inspiration and inerrancy. Although it is inherent in those two doctrines, we fundamentalists are also wont to make a separate statement regarding the authority of *Scripture*. If God’s propositional revelation as recorded in the Bible is inspired both in its words and in its entirety, and if that inspired text is inerrant, then it must, of necessity, be authoritative. By that we mean that the Bible—and all the Bible—commands our assent. It is the ultimate and final standard for truth and is not subject to the judgment of human experience or human reason. We must believe all of it.

But we must do more than believe it. Our goal is not an academic discourse on an abstract subject. We must allow God’s revelation to impact our lives. Our thinking, our actions, our attitudes, must all be controlled by God’s revealed truth recorded on the pages of Holy Writ. We might be technically correct in what we assert, but if such an assertion does not affect the way we live, we have failed miserably. As John Woodbridge has written, “We can quietly empty our commitment to biblical authority of significance if we deny biblical ethics in day-to-day decision making. Or, we can interpret the Bible so ineptly that its authority is refracted in genuinely disturbing ways.”<sup>9</sup>

As Baptists we are sometimes inclined to repeat a somewhat traditional claim, that the Bible is the Christian’s sole rule of faith and practice. Although the gist and intent of such a statement is true, it must really be qualified before being implemented. By that I mean that despite the fact that all the Bible is authoritative for faith—we must believe all of it—the question of practice must be nuanced somewhat more carefully. That is because God governs the life of his people differently at different times. The Christian no longer lives under the dictates of the old covenant as his rule of life. We no longer offer the sacrifices nor restrict our diet as the Mosaic commands stipulated. Our rule of life is no less stringent or less holy than that of our pre-cross brethren, but it *is different*. The new covenant forms the basis for the believers’ faith today. Yes, we still

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<sup>9</sup> John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 13.

learn much from the old, and its contents still form part of the revealed, inspired, inerrant, authoritative corpus which we must believe, but it is not directly authoritative for how I live my daily life.

#### e. Unity

One final theological note. We are committed, by our theology of inspiration, inerrancy, and authority, to believing that the Bible contains a unified message. It tells but one story—though with many sub-plots, all of which contribute in some way directly to the main storyline. The Bible is a single symphony, though with many melodies and themes that combine to convey a complex harmony. As a completed revelation consisting of a closed canon, we resist changes or additions to what God has said. We bow before the Lord our Maker and humbly accept his authoritative Word.

Such are our convictions as to the nature of our Bible. Too often we stop at that point with a nice, tidy doctrinal statement. But does a bibliography such as I have just described affect the way we handle the text of Scripture and the way we do ministry? If it does, how?

By even raising that question I am, of course, implying that our bibliography should impact our use of the text, what we do with that text in ministry, and even what ministry we do. So let us now turn our attention to some of the entailments of an inspired, inerrant, authoritative Scripture. Let's begin with the area of hermeneutics.

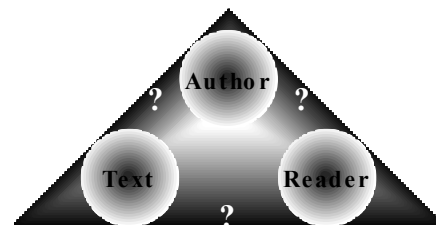
### 2. *The priority of the text in hermeneutics*

Perhaps it seems so obvious as to be ridiculous even to state that the text must have priority in hermeneutics. After all, isn't it the text that we are interpreting? How could it not have priority? Unfortunately, what may seem so obvious as to be a given for us is no longer a given in many discussions of hermeneutics.

#### a. Modern hermeneutical theory

Modern hermeneutical theory has, for many years now, sought to shift hermeneutical priority away from the text. We do not have time, nor do you likely have the interest, for an extended discussion of the tangled web that comprises modern hermeneutics. For our purposes this morning, let me give you a brief summary that highlights a few of the issues that have been raised, and then follow that with some positive suggestions that attempt to tie our bibliological convictions to our hermeneutical practice.

There are three foci in interpretation. We might refer to their relationship as the interpretive triangle.



The Interpretive Triangle

The relationship between these three—author, text, and reader—is not quite as simple as it at first appears. This triangle raises a number of questions. The author produces a text and a reader studies a text. But which of these three (author, text, reader) is the primary determiner of meaning? Where does meaning lie? In the mind of the author? In the text? In the reader? Since the author is no longer present to explain the meaning of the written text, does that separate the author from the meaning of the text? Since the reader must interpret the text from his own “grid” (preunderstanding), what role does the text play? Since the author cannot control the future and the use of his text once he has written it, can he play any role in determining its meaning for future readers? Can the reader understand the mind of the writer as he wrote the text—get into his mind, so to speak?

The crux for our purposes is that in answering these questions, modern hermeneutics has given the greatest weight in this triangle to the reader. In some such approaches the author is essentially ignored, but even more surprisingly, the text is also minimized. The reader reigns supreme. He determines what the text means. He decides if and how the text is relevant to his own situation. At times the reader even determines how the text is to be ordered. One of the goals of the literary theory known as deconstruction is to demonstrate that the text has no fixed or stable meaning, but by tweaking presuppositions, definitions, contexts, and even word order, it can be made to say whatever the reader wants it to say. The text is a wax nose that can be twisted to any desired shape. Even in less extreme approaches reader-response criticism gives priority to the reader. For them, the reader's response to any given text is not a response to the meaning of the text, their response *is* the meaning.

Now this summary is oversimplified, but it shall have to do for now. Deconstructionism and reader response criticism sound, I'm sure, like rather radical approaches to interpretation, rather far removed from real life. But I need to tell you that these are much closer to home than you might realize. When your young people go off to the university or to the local community college, the standard assumption in the literature classes that they take as required courses are predicated on hermeneutical theories such as these. Our young people go to the state schools expecting to confront unbiblical thinking in the science classroom, but most are unprepared for what they find in the English department. Most are oblivious to the implications of such methods. They assume that what they are usually taught is the normal way to read literature. But then what happens when they pick up their Bible? Most read their Bible the same way they are taught to read *Moby Dick* and *Hamlet*.

Nor do you have to go to the university to find this problem.<sup>10</sup> Where are high school lit teachers trained? How do your high school students learn to read a text? For that matter, how do elementary children learn to read stories?

For 8 weeks this past September and October we had a BBC student living with us who was doing her student teaching in the local public *elementary* school. (Our Christian education grads do their student teaching in both Christian and public school.) At supper one evening she was describing for us the third grade reading curriculum that was used. These 8 and 9 year old kids were reading the story of The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. But interestingly, they read not only the traditional story, but they also read several “modern” versions of it. They also read, e.g., the story of The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig. In this story it’s now the pig that is the bad guy, but the cute little wolves are smart enough to build a fourth house made out of flowers. When the big bad pig comes along, he smells the flowers and becomes a good pig and they all live happily ever after. The children next read The Real Story of the Three Little Pigs, told by the wolf (who is in jail). It turns out that the wolf had really gone to the little pigs’ house to borrow a cup of sugar, but he had a cold and his sneeze that knocked down their house was totally accidental and he was really very sorry. The fourth version was a Hispanic version of the three little jabalinas and the bad coyote. And then there was a fifth version, this time with three Hawaiian pigs and the big bad shark.

Now what have our third graders learned about how to read a text? Perhaps this is supposed to just be good, playful creativity. But perhaps in good postmodern fashion they have learned that there is no real truth. They have learned that the same story can have several different meanings. They have learned that what may appear to be the bad guy is really just an innocent victim. They have learned that depravity can be cured by smelling the flowers. They have learned that a story can be deconstructed and revised to fit the ideological purposes of the publisher. They have learned that the reader can make the story say what he wants it to say. And then you sit them down in Sunday School and tell them the story of David and Goliath, or the story about Joshua and battle of Jericho, or *the story about a man who was crucified...!* And how do our children understand such stories? Are they accepted as inspired, inerrant, historical accounts that have a fixed meaning? This is not just the difference between fiction and nonfiction. Children can figure that out (though with television, video games, and virtual reality, even that distinction is becoming blurred in our society). Here we may be dealing with the semantic multivalency of postmodern deconstruction.

<sup>10</sup> I am concerned that some Christian colleges may reflect this same approach to literature—unwittingly undoing in one class what the students may learn in their Bible classes. I have no evidence for this, and have no particular school in mind, but I must confess to wondering whether academic deans who hire English teachers ask as many relevant questions in this area as they might of a prospective science teacher.

## b. Authorial Intent

But now let me move from a description of what we do not accept as valid to a positive discussion of how we do handle a text, specifically, how we interpret an inspired, inerrant, authoritative text. I would propose that the fundamental hermeneutical principle which best accords with our bibliology is that of authorial intent. Authorial intent is the hermeneutical principle that validates the meaning of a text on the basis of determining what an author affirms in his written statements as understood in their cultural and literary contexts. It asserts that a text cannot mean what its author did not understand and that meaning is in no way conditioned by the reader of that text. The alternative is to “banish the author” which is to “redefine communication.”<sup>11</sup>

What is the theological basis for such a claim? It begins with our contention that the Bible is revelation from God. As such, it forms a body of propositional truth that God wants us to know. There is absolute truth and God is the source of such truth. If he determines to impart that truth to us in the form of verbal propositions, then as the ultimate author, he is the determiner of meaning. Furthermore, if he has vouchsafed that revelation to us in the form of an inspired, inerrant, in-scripturated text that conveys a unified message, then we have no right to revise that text,<sup>12</sup> to rewrite it, or to deconstruct it into some alternative form to communicate some other meaning.

But what about the human element in the Bible? Thus far we have spoken of God as author. Yet our bibliology claims that there is a dual authorship of Scripture. Yes, God is the ultimate author, but he wrote precious few actual words (the original stone tablets on Sinai and “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin” on the wall of a Babylonian palace!). With those few, tiny exceptions, all the Bible was written by human authors. It has been common in some circles to appeal to the human element as the basis for claiming errors in Scripture. We reject that conclusion, arguing that the superintending work of the Spirit guaranteed that the exact words written were both adequate and accurate in communicating exactly what God wanted said, even though they reflect the personality, style, and culture of the human writer. The text was not recorded by verbatim transcription from divine dictation. Rather God worked providentially to prepare each writer so that he was capable of producing the form intended (whether a poetic masterpiece like Lamentations or a tightly reasoned treatise like Romans). Much of what the author wrote came from his own knowledge—directed in his selection and composition by the Spirit—but he was cognizant of other content solely by direct revelation. All of these aspects fall within the

<sup>11</sup> Elliott Johnson, “Author’s Intention and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. E. Radmacher and R. Preus, 409–29 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 412.

<sup>12</sup> Translate it we must for Hebrew and Greek are not our native languages. Translation, however, despite the fact that all translation of necessity includes interpretation, does not change the meaning—it only makes the meaning accessible to those unable to read the original. Such translations will, of course, have to be revised periodically because the target languages continue to change and because our understanding of the ancient languages and cultures continues to increase. No translation is final or perfect.

purview of the process of Spirit-directed inscripturation and resulted in an inspired text.

### c. *Sensus plenior*

But with a dual authorship, is there not a necessity of postulating the potential that the two authors, human and divine, had different understandings of the content of the inspired text that the human author recorded? This possibility comes most directly to the fore in the context of prophetic Scripture, but it is potentially true of any text if such a cognitive discrepancy is entertained. It is often referenced with the formula, the human writers “wrote better than they knew.” That is, they recorded God’s revelation, but they did not totally understand what they wrote. The technical name for this proposal is *sensus plenior*—a “fuller sense” of which God was aware but regarding which the human writer was oblivious.

Such a proposal has some obvious implications for how we interpret the text of Scripture. It affects particularly our validation of a proposed interpretation. If we can demonstrate that an interpretation could not have been understood by the human writer, then we can argue that such an interpretation is invalid—unless there is a legitimate *sensus plenior*.

Once again I’ve raised a major issue that can receive only a summary answer. If we genuinely desire to respect the text, I think that we should resist inserting a wedge in our hermeneutical system that tends to divide the knowledge of the human and the divine author. If we were to suggest that the text really means more than the human author understood, on what basis would we make that claim? How would we know what he did not know? Do we have any recourse to the mind of God that an author of Scripture, writing under the superintendence of the Spirit did not? As Stein comments, “We have no way of understanding what God means except through what his apostles and prophets wrote in Scripture, and in seeking to understand God’s apostles and prophets, we want to know what these human, inspired authors meant by their words. We simply have no access to a separate divine meaning.”<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that the text is our only source of such information and if we can understand it, then the human author did also.

We should think of the relationship between the human and divine authors as a *concursum*. What God meant, the human author understood and meant. What the human author understood and meant by the text he inscribed is what God meant and intended to communicate to his people. Certainly God knew more about the subject than the human author, but this additional knowledge is not part of the revelation. If it were, then the human author would, of necessity, have to understand it else it is not revelation. Remember that revelation is the *making known* of information, not the concealing of information.

Let me address but one argument to the contrary. Often appeal is made to 1 Peter 1:10–12 to demonstrate that the OT prophets wrote

better than they knew. [Read] The picture that is sometime painted of the situation which Peter describes runs something like this: the OT prophets wrote their prophecies, but didn’t really understand them; having written, they then studied them (“searching intently and with the greatest care”) to figure out what these prophecies meant. I do agree that there was something that these prophets did not know, but I do not think that it was the *meaning* of what they wrote. If we read Peter’s explanation carefully, he tells us precisely what it was that they did not understand. He does not say that they “searched intently and with the greatest care” to discover the meaning of what they wrote. Rather he says that they were “trying to find out the *time and circumstances* to which their prophecy pointed. They knew full well what would happen, but they did not know *when* it would be fulfilled, nor did they understand all the surrounding events or how this prophecy might relate to some other prophecy. God’s revelation was fully intelligible to the prophets, but it was not a complete description that included all the details nor did it specify (in most cases) the time of its fulfillment. In that sense God obviously knows far more than the human author. He has not told us everything that will happen. But what God has revealed, his prophets understood. There is no hiatus between what the text means to God and what it means to the human writer.

Now by this time you may think that I’ve rambled over quite a wide range of topics. And it’s true that we have touched on a great many issues. These, and a number of others that we might have included, form a theoretical and theological foundation for the next section. In part two I want to think about the question of how these issues impact the way we do ministry. They are not just theoretical issues that do not connect with where you live and how you minister. It turns out that these are intensely practical matters. What we believe about the Bible and how we interpret it make an enormous difference in how we do ministry.

## B. Respecting the Text in Ministry

My second year Greek students are reading this week from 1 Peter. It is their first exposure to Peter’s Greek, and they are finding it quite different than John. By the time they are finished, most of them will wish that John had written the entire NT, for his Greek is much easier to turn into English. Peter’s syntax is quite different. Some of my students will probably conclude that it is convoluted or even confused. Regardless of their thoughts on how Peter writes, however, they are reading a very powerful passage. Look at it with me: 1 Peter 5:1–4. (READ)

Peter addresses the elders and exhorts them regarding their shepherding ministry as they serve as overseers of God’s flock. That we care for God’s flock as under-shepherds who will one day give account of that ministry to the Chief Shepherd when he appears is a sobering message. We dare not minister for financial gain nor may we minister in an authoritarian way. For those elder-pastor-bishops who serve well, there is a reward promised.

But how do we do that? What are the proper priorities in ministry? I would propose to you that our entire ministry must be

<sup>13</sup> Robert Stein, “The Benefits of an Author-Oriented Approach to Hermeneutics,” *JETS* 44 (2001): 464.

theocentric—God-centered. Too often these days I fear that much ministry has become anthropocentric—man-centered. An anthropocentric ministry focuses first on people and their needs, asking what they want to hear, what they perceive their needs to be. Certainly a biblical ministry will meet people’s needs, but that ought not be our first or primary concern. Instead we ought to focus on our God. If we do that, the rest of our priorities will usually fall in line.

The problem is, of course, how one does that. How do you maintain a theocentric focus in ministry? My answer to that perplexity is that we can only develop a theocentric ministry by employing a biblio-centric model. By that I mean that the Bible must be central in every aspect of our ministry. That is not because we worship the Bible. We are not bibliolaters. It is because the only way we have of knowing God is through his book.

How do we know who God is?

Only through the Bible.

How do we know what God is like?

Only through the Bible.

How do we know what God expects of us?

Only through the Bible.

How do we know what a church is to be like?

Only through the Bible.

How do we know what people’s real needs are?

Only through the Bible.

Hebrews 4:12–13. (READ) Notice how tightly this passage connects the Bible with our responsibilities before God. It is the *Word of God* that is living and active. It is the *Word* which is so sharp as to penetrate to the very center of our being. Yet the very next statement says that it is *God* to whom we are open and it is to *him* that we give account.

How then do we maintain a God/Bible-centered ministry? Let me consider two answers to that question this morning. There are certainly others. My colleague, Dr. Stallard, teaches an entire course on that subject in the D.Min. program: “The Centrality of Scripture in Ministry.” But for our purposes just now, let’s talk about Bible reading and Bible preaching.

### **1. The importance of Scripture reading in ministry**

How important is the public reading of Scripture in a ministry that seeks to respect the text? Which attempts to maintain the centrality of Scripture in ministry? Let’s practice what we’re preaching this morning and begin by asking what the Bible says about Bible reading.

Some form of the English word *read* occurs about 90 times in the English Bible.<sup>14</sup> More than 70% of those references refer to reading Scripture. That in itself ought to tell us that Bible reading is important. Not only that, but most of these references refer to the public reading of Scripture. There are only a half dozen or so that refer to private reading. There is significance in that as well, even

though it is partly due to the cultural aspects of books and reading in the ancient world. The Bible assumes that the primary subject of reading is Scripture and that this reading is done orally in public.

Now narrative record does not in itself constitute normative policy. But we can go one step further. Not only do we have the narrative record of what happened in certain situations, but we have both explicit commands to read as well as key passages in which the public reading of Scripture is the central point of the text.

One of the most fascinating passages in this regard is the record found in Nehemiah 8. This narrative recounts what might be termed a revival among God’s people. Upon returning to Jerusalem from captivity Ezra publicly reads Scripture to the assembled people. (READ: 8:1–9, 18) This is not just an incidental comment in passing about reading Scripture. This is the primary point of the entire chapter. Nehemiah is telling us about priorities in ministry—and the priorities of OT ministry at this point are the same as those of NT ministry as we will see shortly. Placing a priority on the public reading of Scripture is what produced the revival among the people. It is hearing and understanding the Word of God which produced both the repentance and the joy described in this chapter. Nor was this just an exceptional, one-time event in this OT ministry. This formed the centerpiece of the entire week. For 8 straight days they read during the Feast of Tabernacles. But it did not stop there, for we read in chapter 9 that when the people assembled once again three weeks later that they spent a quarter of the day reading God’s Word publicly. And again in chapter 13 we find once again that the “Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people” (13:1). It is hard to miss the fact that this is the way it was intended to be. Israel did not always obey as they should, but the fruit that came from obedience in these cases demonstrates what God expected of them.

Look also with me at the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels. Again, we are in narrative material. There are two evidences of the importance of the public reading of Scripture to be found in the record of our Lord’s public ministry. First is his own example of reading the Scripture publicly. Luke 4:14–21 (READ). Jesus based his teaching ministry in this instance on the public reading of Scripture. It is the only such example that is recorded for us, but the implication is that this was not unusual. The text explicitly tells us that it was his custom to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath. It is not considered at all unusual that *he* was the one who stood to read during the service. (The custom in that day, by the way, was for the speaker to stand when he read Scripture, but to be seated when he proceeded to teach its meaning. That was one means that the Jews used to indicate their respect for the text.)

Jesus example of the public reading of Scripture is reinforced by an interesting series of references in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In those two gospels there are 10 references to reading of any sort and 9 of them refer to the public reading of Scripture. All 9 such references are the words of Jesus and they all take the form of a rhetorical question. Although the exact wording varies slightly they all in essence echo Matthew 21:42, “Have you never read in the Scriptures?” Given that reading in the first century would almost

<sup>14</sup> Statistics based on Accordance search of the NIV.

invariably be the oral reading of the OT in the synagogue, Jesus uses this rhetorical question as a rebuke: you have heard the Scriptures read; why don't you understand the significance of this? Jesus *assumes* that they regularly heard the word of God read.

This practice of the public reading of Scripture continues into the book of Acts where the apostle Paul took advantage of such opportunities to speak. We are told on three occasions (Acts 13:15, 27; 15:21) that this was the regular practice in the synagogues of the Diaspora. Paul also comments several times in his epistles regarding this practice (2 Cor. 3:2, 14, 15).

Returning to the OT, we discover that the king of Israel was *commanded* to read Scripture. We are moving now from narrative descriptions to explicit commands to read Scripture. Look at Deut. 17:18–20. (READ) The king was not only to read the text, but he was to make his own handwritten copy of the text from which to read. He was not allowed to have a scribe do it for him nor was he allowed to send it out to Kinkos to duplicate, nor could he stop by the local Jewish bookstore and buy a new copy. The purpose of God's command here is that the king might learn to "revere God and follow carefully all the words of the law." Note once again the close association between God and his word. Even though this is primarily private reading, it had a public purpose: righteous decisions by the king. One would assume that were he obedient, such legislative and judicial decisions would be regularly reinforced when they were announced by the public reading of the Scripture upon which they were based.

But that's OT. Are these narrative models and commands relevant to the NT church? To answer that I would invite you to turn back with me to the NT. Let's begin with Paul's adjuration in 1 Thessalonians 5:27 (READ). Paul not only expected that his letters would be read publicly to the congregations to whom they were sent, he *commands* it—here with a strong word, "I adjure you by the Lord." "I place you under solemn oath to do this." The public reading of Scripture is not optional for Paul.

We should not assume that this was just for a specific letter at a specific church. Paul explicitly *commands* (he uses an imperative form) that his churches read his other epistles, even though they were not addressed directly to them: Colossians 4:16 (READ). Paul's letters were to be exchanged and read by sister churches. This assumes that they had copies of them. It also assumes the authority of these letters. In each case these are public, oral readings of the letters.

We come, finally, to the Pastoral Epistles. 1 Timothy is addressed to Paul's apostolic envoy who has been sent to Ephesus on an apostolic trouble-shooting mission. Timothy has been in Ephesus for some time; Paul's letter comes to provide further instruction regarding his ministry there. Among many other things that Paul instructs him to do we find the list in 1 Timothy 4:13 (READ). (I would have been happier if the NIV had translated the second verb "exhorting" rather than "preaching"—but that's another subject!) Although this is a specific command to a specific individual, I think that it is valid to say that it serves as a biblical imperative for pastoral ministry.

Even though Timothy was not technically a pastor (he functioned more as an apostle than pastor in Ephesus), yet his role in the Ephesian church was to correct things that were wrong and re-establish the ministry there on biblical grounds. His ministry overlapped the role of a local church pastor to large extent. The imperatives that Paul gives all focus on how ministry is to be done, and they are as true of the pastor who does them as of an apostolic representative. Just as the qualifications for the bishop in chapter 3 are transparently intended not just for Timothy's specific mission but for the ongoing ministry of the church, so also are most of the other imperatives. All three of the ministry areas concerning which Paul commands Timothy to devote himself should be high priorities in ministry, but for our present purposes, note that the public reading of Scripture is first on the list.

With that survey of biblical data, what should we conclude in terms of our own ministries in the 21st century? I am quite confident that we would all acknowledge the importance of Scripture and of the public reading of Scripture. But perhaps it would be good for each of us to do some evaluating. Just how much Scripture is actually read orally in an average Sunday morning service? I have been in some services in which the only Scripture read is a single verse upon which the sermon was based. I do not think that pattern is a wise one. Other times we assume that if we use many verses during our sermon that we have fulfilled our biblical mandate in regards to the public reading of Scripture. But none of the examples that we looked at (or any of the others that we might have) read isolated verses. They all assume the reading of a significant, contiguous portion of text.

How much Scripture does your congregation hear read over the course of a year if they attend regularly? Would they hear more than the equivalent of a few chapters?

I would propose to you that even if we are preaching Bible messages on a regular basis, that we might be wise to also consider how we might expose our people to the entire scope of biblical revelation. If we rely on our preaching alone to do this, my guess is that it will take years and years before our people hear many portions of God's Word, perhaps decades. Given the mobility of our society, very few of our congregations remain stable for that length of time.

Perhaps Spurgeon's example in terms of public Bible reading is worth emulating. In addition to his regular sermon, Spurgeon also read consistently through the Bible with his congregation. He prefaced such reading, which was earlier in the service than the sermon, with introductory and explanatory remarks so that the people could relate the passage being read to the Bible's story line. He would read a chapter or more at a time, explaining as he went.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A typical order of service at the Metropolitan Tabernacle ran as follows: silent meditation, pastoral prayer, hymn, Bible reading with comments, long (pastoral) prayer, hymn, sermon, and benediction—a much simpler service than is typical in our day! This order of service as well as several contemporary descriptions of Spurgeon's practice of Scripture reading and services may be found in Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 239, 298, 371–79, 501–02. See also

(It was here, by the way, that he earned his title, “The Prince of the Expositors”—his sermons were not in the least expository.)

I did something similar during the dozen years when I was pastoring and were I to return to the pastorate in the future I would attempt to do even more of this. I often read through Bible books with my congregation in Michigan, a chapter at a time. Often times that can serve as a helpful introduction to a later series of messages on the same book. For example, I read through both the Gospel of John and the epistle to the Romans this way, in each case a year or so before I actually began preaching a series from those books. Doing this serves to acquaint your people with the material which you then later expound. Such reading will also enable you to cover the scope of OT history much more rapidly than if you were to preach your way through those books. I’d suggest that there you might consider reading even more than a chapter at a time for purposes of continuity. It also helps if you give a 60 second review before reading such sections that places the text in the flow of the OT and reminds your congregation what was read the previous week.

It is not enough to just read the text. If Scripture is to be a central focus in our ministries, we ought to think about *how* we read it. A few simple suggestions to begin.

- Never read a passage aloud in a public service unless you have first read it aloud in private. Few things are more embarrassing than listening to a pastor stumble through a text.
- Always check the pronunciation of difficult words in advance, whether they are names (which are perhaps the most common obstacle) or just uncommon English words.
- Know the passage well enough that you can read it semantically. That is, your vocal inflections should help communicate the meaning. For example, you should never read Nahum in a ho-hum voice, with a twitter, or a chuckle. Nahum 1:14-15 should never sound like this: [read in uninflected monotone]. Your voice has just destroyed the message. This passage contains a stark contrast and moves from harsh judgment to glorious hope: [re-read, this time with appropriate inflection].
- Don’t overdo the drama. This is a text, not a play. If you get too carried away with oral interpretation your people will remember and be impressed with your reading, not with the message. No matter how good a reader you are, the message is always more important than your oral skill.
- If you ask someone else to read, always select someone who can read well orally. Always make such assignments in advance, especially if the reading is a lengthy one. Train such readers with the same sort of advice that I have just offered. If you have a young assistant pastor, let him read, but practice

reading together in advance and always de-brief him afterwards and so that he learns not only how to lead singing and make announcements, but also how to communicate Scripture effectively.

Since I’ve mentioned Spurgeon’s practice of public Scripture reading, let me give you his advice on how to do it.

Let [your public reading of the Scriptures] be distinct. Aim to be good readers, and be the more anxious about it because few men are so, and all preachers ought to be so. It is a good as a sermon to hear our best men read the Scriptures\*; they bring out the meaning by their correct emphasis and tone. Never fall into the idea that the mere utterance of the words before you is all that is required of you in reading; good reading is a high, but rare attainment. Even if you do not comment, yet read the chapter previously, and become familiar with it; it is inexcusable for a man to betray the fact that he is out of his latitude in the reading, traversing untrodden ground, floundering and picking his way across country, like a huntsman who has lost his bearings. Never open the Bible in the pulpit to read the chapter for the first time, but go to the familiar page after many rehearsals. You will be doubly useful if in addition to this you ‘give the sense.’ You will then, by God’s blessing, be the pastor of an intelligent, Bible-loving people.<sup>16</sup>

These suggestions, both mine and Spurgeon’s, relate to your oral presentation. But there is more to the public reading of Scripture than a speech class. Your theology ought to be reflected in what you read. No, I do not mean that your Christology should be inserted into the text at every possible point. What I mean is that what we say we believe about the Bible should be reflected in the very selection of the passage.

Does the selected passage constitute a self-contained unit? Or are you jumping into the middle of a passage because you want a text that includes a certain phrase? If we really believe in the hermeneutical priority of authorial intent as the proper way to understand an inspired text, then we must make sure that our reading selection does justice to the context. Are you reading *enough* of the text so that the author’s message is clear?

Is the Scripture reading a conflation of many different verses from widely scattered contexts? You might note that many of the Responsive Reading selections in the back of your hymnal do just that. Is that consistent with our view of an inspired text with a unified message given progressively over many centuries? Or does it tend to “flatten” our reading of the Bible as if it were one undifferentiated corpus with no literary or historical contour?

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<sup>16</sup> Spurgeon, “On Commenting,” 31–32. [\*One of the most capable and effective public readers of Scripture that I have heard is D. A. Carson. The first time that I heard him preach in a local church setting (as opposed to an academic lecture) I was initially dismayed. His first words in the pulpit were, “Turn in your Bible to Ezekiel. We are going to read Ezekiel chapters 1, 2, and 3.” That is not the sort of introduction that you are taught in homiletics class! And then to propose to read three chapters of an obscure, cryptic book...! But I was absolutely blown away when he proceeded to read those three chapters—every word of them—in such an effective way that he had everyone’s attention when he finished. His example has been a major motivation in my own reading ever since.]

Will you read responsively? Such reading is nearly a sacred cow in some of our churches, but might I suggest that this is one sacred cow that might make good hamburger?! I realize that some view responsive reading as a means to involve the congregation. But what does this form of reading teach our people about the meaning of the text? Does a unified message come through? Or does it suggest that it is appropriate to divide up a text into alternate chunks? Does the typical responsive reading make the message of the text clear? Is it usually well read? My fear is that we do it more as a ritual than as a means of comprehending God's inspired text.

I find it ironic that Christians who would claim to be opposed to postmodernity sometimes handle the text of Scripture in a very postmodern, cybernetic sort of way in public ministry. I am afraid that too often the public reading of Scripture is done in a very fragmented, extrapolated fashion, reminiscent of deconstructed hypertext.

As a case in point, I observe that often in contemporary worship settings the Scripture reading comes from the hymnal (or the video projector) rather than from the Bible.<sup>17</sup> That in itself speaks loudly of our practical view of Scripture in that we can extrapolate it from its context and use it for whatever purpose we see fit. Wrenching texts from their contexts and foisting artificial (and often illegitimate) associations upon the gathered scraps has always been a problem, but this becomes an even greater problem in a postmodern context in which such associative jumps are considered normal, in which the reader creates the meaning. No longer do the author and the text determine meaning, but now the editor and reader deconstruct and rearrange verbal scraps to produce the desired effect or message, whether that was God's intent or not.

You will remember our earlier comments on the hermeneutical priority of authorial intent. If our hermeneutics have a solid theological basis and the author's intended meaning is considered the essential means of verifying an interpretation, then we are on shaky ground when we read the text in such a way that ignores or hides such necessary clues to its meaning.

Not only do such practices ignore the contextual elements and associations of the text, but the way in which they are sometimes read tends to reinforce the isolated, discontinuous nature of their message. This has always been a problem with responsive reading. The constant alternation of readers depicts, not a coherent, integrated message, but one in which we may dip in at any point.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>I recognize that the multiplicity of Bible translations presents certain difficulties for group reading (whether unison or responsive). I am not convinced, however, that collecting verbal scraps in a topic-oriented pastiche in a hymnal is a legitimate solution to the problem.

<sup>18</sup>The way in which many Bibles are printed often implies the very same problem. KJV (& NKJV) Bibles have traditionally been printed with each verse formatted as a separate paragraph. The NASB has chosen to follow the same questionable path (reverting from the ASV). But this typography teaches the reader that the text is composed of individual statements that can be addressed (and memorized) in isolation from their context. There is much to be said for the typography of the NIV or the ESV which lay out the text on the page in paragraph and pericope units. The verse numbers have been minimized by printing them in smaller type. This

More recent trends in "worship" exacerbates this even more as dramatic readings are used which break up the text for public reading into fragments even smaller than a verse. Phrases and even individual words are parceled out to various voices, presumably in an attempt to create the desired dramatic "tone." The result might be judged as artistically pleasing, but I fear that it is too often a hermeneutical cacophony that detracts from the *meaning* of the text. The model for such readings is the visual pastiche of television rather than the verbal, rational, theological model of the book. We must remember that it is, after all, The Book that we are reading. It is not a collection of optional sound bites.<sup>19</sup>

I would not argue that any form of multiple readers is invalid. If done carefully, using larger sections of text and based on textual phenomenon (dialogue, argument shifts, rhetorical devices, etc.), multiple readers may, indeed, facilitate comprehension of the argument of *some* texts. But to be effective, to respect the text, and to make the theological point that the text speaks with a single voice, it is usually best to employ a single voice in the public reading of Scripture. The exception would be texts such as Deuteronomy 27 and Psalm 136 that explicitly call for a group/unison response in their original setting. But I would not want to extrapolate such antiphonal responses to other texts that did not, by their nature and message, suggest it.

We may think that we have gotten away with doing it otherwise since the message that we generate in this fashion *is* (usually) "orthodox" (at least at some surface level). But what concerns me most is that many people do not seem the least bit concerned about such matters. Few people even ask such questions. After all, the result is "good" because it produces "worship" (or so we assume). The modern church has become as pragmatic in this scenario as the classic Jesuits for whom the end justified the means.

Some may come to different conclusions about such things—and that's fine, *so long as* the questions have been addressed and a conscious biblical, theological answer has been given. If we are going to respect the text and strive for a theocentric, bibliocentric ministry, then we need to ask some unpopular questions in the current ecclesial environment. Biblical, theological answers may not be the same as those based on market studies. But our responsibility as pastoral ministers of the sacred text is higher than that. Our ministry is defined and prescribed in the text we respect, not in the latest title on the best seller list.

May I conclude this section by reminding you of 2 Timothy 3?  
(READ 3:14–4:5)

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still facilitates their use in reference, but correctly de-emphasizes them in reading and interpretation. The new NET Bible has followed a similar format (though bolding the verse reference doesn't help), as have a number of other newer translations. These considerations illustrate well the point that "the medium is the message." The technology, including the typography, *does* affect the message conveyed.

<sup>19</sup>I have explored some of these issues in "Communicating the Text in the Postmodern Ethos of Cyberspace: Cautions Regarding the Technology and the Text," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 5 (2000): 45–70. An earlier version is available at <http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/commtext.pdf>.

## 2. The importance of Bible preaching in ministry<sup>20</sup>

In 1981 a book was published on the secular market that has been quite influential. You will encounter it in ministry sooner or later, usually when someone in your church encounters tragedy and turns to it for help in dealing with the resulting hurts. It was written by a Jewish rabbi who attempted to deal with the problem of theodicy. How do we explain the problem of evil? It was titled, provocatively enough, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.<sup>21</sup> It is a catchy enough title to remember long after the rabbi's rationalizations have been forgotten.

I'd like to adapt that title for my comments this evening and talk to you about *When Bad Things Happen to a Good Text*. By using that title, I certainly don't intend to distinguish between good texts and bad texts. I am very deliberately referring to Bible texts, and they are all good in some sense. They may not always be equally appropriate in any given situation, but they are all inspired and authoritative Word of God. My concern is rather for the other part of that title: *When Bad Things Happen to a Good Text*. Perhaps I should adapt, not Rabbi Kushner's title, but the title of a much more profitable volume by Warren Wiersbe (who wrote in response to Kushner's book). Wiersbe's title was, *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People*.<sup>22</sup> It is, after all, not just a collection of good texts with which we deal, but it is God's text. So my alternate title is, *When Bad Things Happen to God's Text*.

I would like to talk to you about preaching. My concern could be stated fairly well in the words of 1 Sam. 3:1. As the KJV says, "the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision"—which, as I'm sure you know, is better translated something like the NASB, "the word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent." I would adapt that wording and suggest that *biblical preaching* is rare in our day, a word from God is infrequently heard from our pulpits.

I make no pretense of being a great preacher myself, though I have a great respect for the privilege I am accorded from time to time to minister God's Word to his people, and I spent quite a few years in pastoral ministry before I returned to the classroom. I have an intense concern that those who stand behind the sacred desk—as many of you do—handle the Word of God carefully and accurately. I see too little of that in my day.

That is not just my cantankerous opinion; some of today's best known preachers echo the same sentiment. John Stott says that "true Christian preaching ... is extremely rare in today's Church,"<sup>23</sup> and Kent Hughes bemoans the fact that "dis-exposition ... is a serious problem that deserves careful thought. At least in my part of the world, these abuses increasingly dominate the pulpits."<sup>24</sup>

As those who stand in the pulpit and open the Word of God to a local congregation, you have the same charge as that with which Paul charged Timothy: "Preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2). That is an awesome responsibility. The apostle Peter reminds us that "if anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). John Wycliffe, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," described preaching as "the highest service that men may attain to on earth."<sup>25</sup> The Word of God is a most precious treasure—equal to our very salvation in worth, for if we had no Bible we would know nothing of God's Son and the forgiveness that his crosswork provided. As John Stott has said so well,

Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God. No attempt to understand Christianity can succeed which overlooks or denies the truth that the living God has taken the initiative to reveal himself savingly to fallen humanity; or that his self-revelation has been given by the most straightforward means of communication known to us, namely by a word and words; or that he calls upon those who have heard his Word to speak it to others.<sup>26</sup>

Although the Word of God has been given for all, the pastor is entrusted with the Word of God in a special sense due to his primary responsibility of proclaiming that Word to a congregation. Handling the Word of God correctly is an enormous responsibility. As James exhorted his hearers, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (Jas. 3:1). There ought to be a very real sense in which we recognize and acknowledge our inadequacy for such a great task. I sense little of that in many preachers. Some are quite confident—even proud—of their ability in the pulpit. Others treat it rather flippantly. Richard Baxter, the famous 17th century preacher, saw it quite differently. He said that

The public preaching of the word ... requires greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal, than any of us bring to it. It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation and deliver a message of salvation or condemnation, as from the living God, in the name of our Redeemer.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The following section was originally the transcript of a chapel address on 10 March 2000, although it has been edited for this presentation. It is not a sermon. It is rather a lecture about preaching. The material above and the footnotes below draw heavily from a few important discussions of preaching; but they do not attempt to be exhaustive. I am a NT scholar, not a homiletician—but that will be obvious as you read! (There is a copy of the original, unabridged text posted on my web site: <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/preach.htm>>.)

<sup>21</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (NY: Schocken Books, 1981). A 20th anniversary edition was released in 2001 with a new introduction by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Kent Hughes, "The Anatomy of Exposition: *Logos, Ethos, and Pathos*," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 (1999): 45–46. "Dis-Exposition" is Hughes' term: "Though the term is new, you have all experienced dis-exposition as a listener. You can easily recall a Sunday service in which the biblical text is announced and you settle back, Bible in hand for a good Sunday meal, only to find out that the text is departed from, never to return. Dis-exposition causes Sunday indigestion" (*ibid.*, 44).

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Between Two Worlds*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *The Reformed Pastor*, edited and abridged by Jay Green (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971), 17.

Indeed, “the pulpit is a perilous place for any child of Adam to occupy”!<sup>28</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for many years, was of the opinion that

It seems to be the case that the greater the preacher the more hesitant he has generally been to preach.... A man who feels that he is competent, and that he can do this easily, and so rushes to preach without any sense of fear or trembling, or any hesitation whatsoever, is a man who is proclaiming that he has never been ‘called’ to be a preacher. The man who is called by God is a man who realises what he is called to do, and he so realises the awfulness of the task that he shrinks from it.<sup>29</sup>

My purpose today is not to teach you how to preach. Some of you have been preaching for far more year than have I. Beyond my initial reminders of the high calling of the pulpit ministry, my purpose is warn you of the dangers that appear to lurk in the office of many clergymen. That is where many sermons seem to originate—*offices* where more attention is paid to programs and technique than to the study of the Word of God.<sup>30</sup> The very fact that it is conceived as an *office* says a great deal about our modern conception of ministry. The pastor’s *study* is viewed as a quaint concept—a relic, perhaps, of the 19th century; certainly not an appropriate image for the administrator of a local church.<sup>31</sup>

To take the negative approach—to address what might be called “homiletical fallacies” (to adapt the title of D. A. Carson’s excellent book, *Exegetical Fallacies*)—has certain risks. Since I have mentioned Carson’s book, let me also read part of his introduction and adapt it to my homiletical concerns. The two issues, exegesis and homiletics, are closely related (though one might not suspect that from many sermons!). Carson acknowledges that

To focus on fallacies, exegetical or otherwise, sounds a bit like focusing on sin: guilty parties may take grudging notice and briefly pause to examine their faults, but there is nothing intrinsically redemptive in the procedure. Nevertheless, when the sins are common and (what is more) frequently unrecognized by those who commit them, detailed description may have the salutary effect of not only encouraging thoughtful self-examination but also providing an incentive to follow a better way. I hope that by talking about what should be done in exegesis [homiletics], we may all desire more deeply to interpret [preach] the Word of God aright....

... This study is important because exegetical fallacies [and homiletical fallacies] are painfully frequent among us—among us whose God-given grace and responsibility is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. Make a mistake in the interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays ... and there is unlikely to be an entailment of eternal consequences; but we cannot lightly accept a similar laxity in

the interpretation [and preaching] of Scripture. We are dealing with God’s thoughts: we are obligated to take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly. It is all the more shocking, therefore, to find in the evangelical pulpit, where the Scriptures are officially revered, frequent and inexcusable sloppiness in handling them.<sup>32</sup>

To make my homiletical fallacies a bit more palatable, and to ease the pain just a bit for anyone whose toes get trampled in the process, I have formulated the remainder of my comments in terms of a contest. I propose to present “The Annual Homiletical Awards.” And no, they are not personalized. I have tried to generalize the egregious errors in order to protect the guilty. My goal is not to criticize people. It is certainly not to criticize you! I greatly appreciate those of you who labor on the front lines—in the local churches of this state. If it were not for the faithful pastors and the local churches they serve, there would surely be no need for a seminary! My purpose is to help you learn from the errors that are, as Carson says, “so painfully frequent among us.” On a rough estimate, I have heard or preached something in the neighborhood of 8,000 sermons in my life, so the potential range of illustrations is fairly broad. So let me come to the awards.

## The Annual Homiletical Awards

The Annual Homiletical Awards are presented to worthy recipients who have excelled in significant ways in their public declamations. To qualify for consideration for these awards all that is necessary is to demonstrate that one is capable of and willing to fulfill the descriptions below in a public forum. Neither pride, embarrassment, intention, nor ignorance of having done so is necessary. Other than the grand prize, the awards are not presented in any particularly significant order.

### 1. Pearl Award

The first award is presented to those outstanding speakers who are able to string together the largest number of unrelated texts. The award is named after the practice of Jewish exegetes who considered “pearl-stringing” to be a proper way to handle the text. But the Jews certainly have no corner on this one. It is amazing how many sermons skip all over the Bible, collecting texts willy-nilly wherever it suits the preacher’s fancy. The fact that these texts have absolutely no relationship with one another seems to be irrelevant. Sometimes the same word appears in these texts—as if that in itself justifies ignoring the contextual meaning of these passages.

It is appropriate to associate some texts, but only if they are discussing the same concept. Mere word association is inadequate. Such a practice also tends to ignore dispensational distinctions—arbitrarily lumping together passages from the patriarchal or old covenant eras with passages addressed to the church. There have been some major changes, e.g., in the work of the Holy Spirit and in

<sup>28</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 320.

<sup>29</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 107.

<sup>30</sup> “The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology.... Technique can only make us orators; if we want to be preachers, theology is what we need. If our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing, and all the incentives we need to induce us to do it faithfully” (Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 92).

<sup>31</sup> Yes, every pastor has some administration to do, but that should not be the primary focus of his time.

<sup>32</sup> *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 15–16.

how a believer relates to God. Ignoring such differences perverts the meaning of the text.

Moreover such a practice prevents people from properly relating passages to the Bible's storyline. Some preachers mix and match texts in such a way that people assume that is the normal way to handle the Bible. It encourages them to ignore the contextual meaning of passages in their own reading. The Bible becomes a magical book of tidbits that can be selected, combined, and applied in any random sequence that seems helpful.

Granted, such an approach can be made to look very correct homiletically. For example, consider this nicely alliterated outline:<sup>33</sup>

- Theme: The Five Trees of Human Experience*
1. The Sinning Man behind a Tree, Gen. 3:8
  2. The Sincere Man under a Tree, Jn. 1:48
  3. The Seeking Man up a Tree, Lk. 19:1–10
  4. The Sinless Man on a Tree, 1 Pt. 2:24
  5. The Saved Man like a Tree, Ps. 1:3

But “homiletical” or not, these are unrelated passages. The only thread that connects these “pearls” is the preacher’s ingenuity—he has found five texts that all have the word *tree* in them. But I could show you several thousand texts that all have the word *the* (or *and*, or, *a*, *he*, etc.!) but that doesn’t justify stringing them together any more than does the word *tree* in these texts. Actually this is one of the better such examples in the sense that if someone actually preached a sermon based on this outline (and don’t you *dare* try it!), it is remotely possible that a series of five 5-minute mini-expositions might be given. But why would you settle for sermonettes when any one of the passages deserves at least the entire message all alone? And in this example there is a text for each point. More commonly this pearl-stringing is the way preachers develop each point of a topical sermon—in which the points are the preacher’s own, not based on *any* text. They are just what *he* wants to say. To substantiate it, he then strings his pearls in such a way so as to make it *appear* that his comments are biblical. But this is not biblical preaching at all.

## 2. Memory Award

Presented to the speaker who is able to read a biblical text and then most quickly to forget it and depart there from. This is what John Stott calls the preacher’s pitfall of forgetfulness. “The forgetful expositor loses sight of his text by going off at a tangent and following his own fancy.” Too many preachers write their sermons and then go looking for “a text as a peg on which to hang them.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> This example comes from one of my former professors, John L. Benson, *A System of Homiletics: The Fine Art of Scientific Skeletonization* (By the author, n.d.), 69—but it is *not* an example that Benson encourages. He uses it, rather, to illustrate how a sermon should be *structured* in a parallel fashion. His entire focus is strictly expository and contextual. He would have been aghast if anyone actually preached this message!

<sup>34</sup> An alternate designation for this award might be the “Interior Decorating Award”! Thomas Schreiner laments this practice: “We may even decide the main points of the sermon before we begin to study the passage from which we preach. This latter practice indicates that we believe we have

They should, perhaps, be honest enough with their audience to read their text and then to say, “That is my text. I am now going to preach. Maybe we’ll meet again, my text and I, and maybe not.”<sup>35</sup>

## 3. Speculation Award

This award is earned by those who have the unique ability to provide more speculation about what the text does *not* say than the average preacher.

The best example (or should I say, worst?) of this that I’ve ever heard was a preacher who selected as his text the account of the 10 lepers whom Jesus healed (Luke 17). You will remember that only one of the healed lepers returned to thank Jesus. Why didn’t the other nine do the same? The text doesn’t say. It doesn’t even *hint* at a possible reason. There is absolutely nothing in the text that suggests that it is even of concern. Yet this preacher’s message consisted of, can you guess? Nine points—nine reasons why the nine lepers were not thankful. The application was pretty obvious. There are nine reasons why we might not be thankful—and we certainly wouldn’t want to displease God by being unthankful like these nine lepers.

It seems that many of us are not content with what the text itself actually says. We are always wanting to know more. Yet we must be satisfied that God has told us exactly what he wanted us to know. No more, no less. We do the text (and God!) a great disservice when we forget that and attempt to fill in the blanks where God was silent. Even if we admit that the text doesn’t say it, we are still speculating where God has deliberately been silent. To the extent that our sermons are based on that which the text does not say, to that extent our sermons have no authority and no credence.<sup>36</sup>

## 4. Creativity Award

This trophy is awarded to those preachers who exhibit exceptional ability to use a text in the most creative ways, i.e., in ways the furthest removed from the author’s intention and which ignore the context of the text concerning which they are speaking. These are more dangerous sermons than those which simply forget their text and expound the preacher’s own ideas, for here there is a semblance of exposition. In reality, the text is too often exploited for other purposes, sometimes crassly so, other times much more subtly.

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a better grasp of what the church needs to hear than God—for *we decide* what the church needs to hear” (“A Plea for Biblical Preaching,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]: 3).

<sup>35</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 130.

<sup>36</sup> “The limit of our instructions should be the limit of inspired truth. We have no authority to add.... Speculation may fascinate us by its bewitching visions, but we have no right to introduce these into the realms of the pure light given by God’s truth.... We have not even the liberty of supplementing the plain interpretation of that truth by our own conjectures of what must be or what ought to be.... We must take God’s word as far as it goes and no farther. We must mark the boundaries which it places. We must not undertake to pass them” (James Petigru Boyce, “Thus Saith the Lord, Ezekiel 2:4,” an ordination sermon preached 31 May 1874, reprinted in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]: 38–39).

You have heard the stock examples. For example, the preacher who was opposed to women wearing their hair in a bun. His text? Matt. 24:17, “top not come down!” Or the preacher (who must have had Marcionite tendencies) who preached against the OT in the words of Matt. 22:40, “hang all the Law and the Prophets!” Kent Hughes tells of the preacher who selected Rev. 11:10 as the text for his Christmas message: “And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another.”<sup>37</sup> Never mind that this refers to celebrating the death of the two prophets during the tribulation! The preacher knew what he wanted to say, and it was certainly convenient that there was a text that referred to gift giving. More serious were those in the 19th C. Oxford Movement whose favorite text was Matt. 18:12, “hear the church!” Their focus was on the authority of the historical, ecumenical church—in other words, the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, they sought the reunification of the Anglican church with Rome. In response an Anglican archbishop took a slightly larger slice of the context as his sermon text: “If any man refuse to hear the Church, let him!”

We laugh at such examples, but how often do preachers in fundamental churches do the very same thing? Any time that we preach from a passage and either ignore the context, or use it in a way that is different from the author’s use in the context, we have essentially said, “top not come down,” “hang all the Law.” When we use the angel’s words to Joseph in Matt. 1:18-25 as an example of pre-marital counseling (as I once heard a preacher do), the difference is only one of degree, not substance. The preacher who did that said in his introduction, if I remember correctly, that in preaching Christmas messages over the years he had “chased everything that could be chased” in those passages. If his counseling message was representative, I believe him.

Why aren’t we content to use texts in their context? Are we afraid that God’s purpose in giving them to us isn’t exciting enough? That people will listen better or respond better to our preaching if we can spruce up the text? Is creativity a commendable quality in an exegete? I’m glad to see some creativity in *how* a message is presented, but I shudder when a preacher’s creativity affects [or worse, “effects”!] his exegesis—when it determines the *content* of his preaching. There we have absolutely no right to be creative. We are subject to what one preacher has called “the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!”<sup>38</sup> “In being committed to preach a passage of Scripture in context, expositively, taking as the point of the message the point of the passage, we hear from God those things that we do not already intend to hear when we set out.”<sup>39</sup> Exegesis is “a discipline of the utmost rigour.”<sup>40</sup>

Homiletical creativity is what prompted a 19th century writer to remark,

I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign between their hands till it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half-a-dozen brilliant glass globes filled with water, and with four or five goldfish swimming in each of them. For myself, I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be amused by the tricks of a clever conjuror; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste.<sup>41</sup>

## 5. Newsweek Award

The Newsweek Award is merited by the longest and most notable introduction from contemporary news media. It is certainly commendable to be relevant, but some preachers are as predictable as the sunrise. Every message begins with some recent clip from *Newsweek*, *Time*, *US News*, *USA Today*, or from some recent television show (or the latest movie). And these introductions are usually not brief. These fashionable introductions are usually rather lengthy. I find them objectionable because they turn the focus on the wrong object. The Word of God must be primary, not human need. I know, that’s not what the fad of baby-boomer and buster homiletics will tell you. You are supposed to touch felt needs first, then show them how the Word of God is relevant.<sup>42</sup> But what are you telling people when week-after-week the first thing they hear when you step behind the sacred desk is *Newsweek*?

If you occasionally use a brief *Newsweek* clip for an introduction, that may not be a problem. Better, I think, to use that *during* your message—and even then it ought to be kept brief. You have precious little time in the pulpit each week. Use it to focus your people’s attention where it ought to be: on the Word of God. Leave the fancy, faddish introductions to others. Say enough in your introduction to get their attention, but not so much that they go away more impressed with your introduction than they are with God and his Word.<sup>43</sup>

## 6. Minimalist Award

This award is presented to those who have the least need for a Bible when they speak, or who speak in such a way that their hearers have minimal need to use a Bible to understand the sermon. I must confess to amazement as I observe some sermons “happening.” In some the preacher waves his Bible vigorously as he preaches and fills his sermon with phrases like, “the Bible says”—and yet he

<sup>41</sup> R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching*, the 1876 Yale Lectures (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1877), 127; cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 132.

<sup>42</sup> Kent Hughes calls this a “homiletics of consensus” in which “the preacher determines the congregation’s need from the pollsters’ analysis of felt needs, and then bases his preaching agenda on those feelings.” Hughes acknowledges that “all biblical exposition must be informed by and be sensitive to perceived needs,” but there is a problem: “our deepest needs often go beyond our perceived needs” (“The Anatomy of Exposition,” *SBJT* 3 [1999]: 4).

<sup>43</sup> I’m tempted to add another award related to introductions—for those who have such long introductions that they never get to the text until their time is nearly gone. The classic recipient here would be a preacher I heard once who, with a 25 minute preaching slot, used 20 minutes for his introduction—and only then turned to the text. A sad state of affairs indeed!

<sup>37</sup> Hughes, “The Anatomy of Exposition,” *SBJT* 3 (1999): 44.

<sup>38</sup> Donald Cogan, *Stewards of Grace* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 48, as cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 127.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Dever, “Expositional Preaching as a Mark of a Healthy Church,” *SBJT* 3 (1999): 61.

<sup>40</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 127.

seldom reads any Scripture, and if he does, it has little to do with his sermon, and he certainly isn't explaining what God's Word says. Another thing that surprises me is that people open their Bible to the text that the preacher announces, and then keep it open on their lap throughout the entire sermon... yet not once do they have any need to ever refer to it! Perhaps it's misplaced optimism. Perhaps they are hopeful that the preacher will, indeed, return to the Bible before he finishes. They are far too often disappointed.

I hope that you will remember that your commission is to preach the Bible. If there is little need for a Bible when you preach, I seriously doubt that you have preached the Bible. Now you may preach in some settings where people don't have a Bible—perhaps in some evangelistic settings, or on the street, or in a prison. But if you are ministering the Word in a local church setting, then I plead with you to make the use of the Bible by your people central. Biblical preaching *requires* the Bible.

### 7. Academic Award

This award is merited by those who are best able to denigrate serious study of the Bible, particularly the value of the biblical languages. Extra points are awarded to those who manage to denigrate both Greek and Hebrew in the same sermon.

I'm not quite sure why it is that preachers do that so often. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism by those who *did* study Hebrew or Greek, but who have long since forsaken their skills. If I may appropriate the wording of Hebrews 5, they are those who, in fact, though they ought by this time to be teachers, need someone to teach them the elementary principles of *λύω* and *qātal* all over again—who need milk, not solid food!

Sometimes the languages are denigrated unconsciously. How often do you hear people making snide remarks about or groaning over the horrendous burden it was to learn Hebrew—all the hours they devoted to learning Greek—implying in their comments that it wasn't worth it, that there were more important things to study than Greek and Hebrew. Some students have heard so many of these statements that they approach their first year language courses with dread at such an impossible requirement.

Now it is true that it is easier to memorize John 3:16 in English than to learn your vocabulary and verb forms in Greek. But is that unexpected? Is it a bad thing for a Seminary to require that you learn Greek and Hebrew? Would you go to a surgeon who thought that Anatomy 101 was too difficult? Who decided that Cardio-Vascular Systems was best forgotten as soon as he graduated? Who learned just enough of Anesthesia 101 to pass the course? Who thought that Pharmacology wasn't very important?

And yet you are handling the Word of God! How you understand a passage makes an *eternal* difference. Is it an indicative or an imperative? An aorist subjunctive or a perfect participle? A Qal imperfect or a Hiphil Jussive? Are those items of little importance? Is it OK to gloss over such details? To trust an English translation when you *could* read it as God wrote it? Listen to Martin Luther's

words: The biblical languages, he said, are “the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained.” “It is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish.” He goes on to say that

There is a vast difference ... between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture.... A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages. Now there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough. Hence languages are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian church.

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book.

For there is great danger in speaking of things of God in a different manner and in different terms than God himself employs. [Speaking of preachers in his own day who denigrated the languages, he said:] In short, they may lead saintly lives and teach sacred things among themselves, but so long as they remain without the languages they cannot but lack what all the rest lack, namely, the ability to treat Scripture with certainty and thoroughness and to be useful to other nations. Because they could do this, but will not, they have to figure out for themselves how they will answer for it to God.<sup>44</sup>

Those words are as true today as they were in the 16th century.<sup>45</sup>

### 8. The Application Award...

is merited by those with the uncanny ability to read a text and immediately discern the proper application of it with no need to be encumbered by the original setting and meaning; for whom exegesis seems to get in the way of “relevant” preaching.

For example, what about taking 2 Corinthians 3:5, “our competence comes from God,” as an exhortation to pastors in regards to their ministry? Here we may, at first, seem to be on solid ground. But is the context talking about pastoral ministry? I would suggest that you read the context carefully. (I know that is a novel approach, but try it some time!) What is the antecedent of the pronoun *our*? You will discover quite quickly, I think, that the *our* is Paul's apostolic plural that refers *only* to Paul (note esp. v. 2). It does not refer to all Christians, nor to all pastors, or even to all the apostles. If you read 2 Corinthians carefully, I think you will discover that almost all the

<sup>44</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524); available on-line at the following URL: <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/RDecker/luther.htm>>.

<sup>45</sup> The comments of Scott Hafemann about the importance of the biblical languages for preaching are well worth reading: “The *SBJT* Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 (1999): 86–89.

first person plural pronouns in the book refer exclusively to Paul. That makes an enormous difference in how we understand the text, for what is true of the *apostle* Paul may not necessarily be true of someone who is not an apostle. I do not deny that it may also be true of someone else—but the point is this: to what does the text refer? If the text refers to an apostle (especially if it is a specific apostle), then we have no right to interpret it directly as true of anyone else. Now there may be *application* to others, but let's make it explicit that it is, indeed, application. We dare not leap from reading the text to application—to skip the process of exegesis and interpretation. By doing that we not only ignore God's message in the text, but we also teach our people that the Bible is a magical book that always refers directly to them. It encourages a very simplistic, superstitious view of God's Word.

There are a number of other awards that I could present. For time's sake, I can only list a few with some brief indication of the criteria for nominations.

#### **9. The Bunny Rabbit Award...**

I would present to those who are capable of including an exceptional number of bunny trails in their remarks—things that are only tangential to the point of the text.

#### **10. The "Alligator" Award...**

might be bestowed on those who exhibit special ability in allegorizing the text.

#### **11. The Technology Award...**

is presented to those who use technology in such a way as to draw special attention to the technology itself (or their ability [or inability!] to use it).<sup>46</sup>

#### **12. The "Majors" Award...**

might be presented to those who are uniquely able to major on the most insignificant details in the text (e.g., Paul picking up sticks in Acts 28 supposedly teaches us that we should serve humbly!).

#### **13. I earned the Homogenization Award...**

in the first sermon I ever preached in a homiletics class, though I don't appear to have exhausted the competition in this category! This award is earned by preachers with the ability to homogenize

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<sup>46</sup> It is not wrong to use technological tools in preaching, but the technology itself should never receive the attention. Learn to use it as transparently as possible or don't use it at all. Focus on the Word. Respect the text. Keep the Word central in your ministry. That sometimes requires that these technological tools be used only for selected parts of a presentation. You might have noticed that there was a distinction in *this* presentation/lecture as to the use of the technology. The introduction and the "awards" were accompanied by PowerPoint slides, but the first major section that focused on the importance and gravity of the pastor's responsibility in preaching the Word did not. That was a conscious and very deliberate decision.

parallel passages and discover that they really are identical after all. One might wonder why there are multiple accounts in the text if that were true. Did God stutter? Or did he intend a different focus in each account?<sup>47</sup>

#### **14. The Illustration Award...**

is presented to those who become so captivated by a unique and powerful illustration that the illustration becomes the basis for their sermon or their application rather than the text. Once they are captivated by their marvelous illustration (and some are quite good), they can no longer see the text clearly. The illustration determines the meaning of the text.<sup>48</sup>

#### **15. And finally the Gematria Award...**

would go to the pulpiteer who shows the most creative use of numbers, names, or colors. The symbolism of the text overshadows the plain and clear meaning of the passage.<sup>49</sup>

I must say a bit more about my final award.

#### **16. The GRAND Prize...**

... is presented for a sermon that demonstrated proficiency in not just one category, but was clearly outstanding in multiple categories. That award goes to a sermon that I heard recently on Gen. 5:24. The text? "And he walked with God." In that sermon, we visited the Garden... and learned more about the preacher's garden than Eden. We visited the wilderness... nicely allegorized and illustrated with heart-wrenching stories of human tragedy that the preacher had experienced in his own life. We visited the mountain... and didn't learn much at all... either because he was running out of time, or perhaps he just didn't have much to say. We visited the miraculous... and discovered that the "storm" wasn't much different than the "wilderness." (Once you start allegorizing, you can make just about any text say what you want it to say!) None of his comments had anything to do with Gen. 5:24 or the context of the other texts that we visited. He skipped all over the Bible and collected isolated snippets of texts. He did tell more funny stories, and used more good puns than I've heard in a long time, but *he never preached the Bible!* He was an excellent speaker. He was a horrible preacher.

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<sup>47</sup> This might be true of the Synoptics, of the OT historical books (esp. Samuel/Kings and Chronicles, but also, e.g., the two Genesis accounts of creation), or even of similar passages in the Pauline epistles. This is not to suggest that there are contradictions in such passages. There are not. But each passage has its own focus and that should not be homogenized or "flattened" to read exactly like a parallel account. In explicitly homiletical terms, the focus of the text should be reflected in the sermon. Two sermons on two parallel passages should not be the same sermon.

<sup>48</sup> A variation on this award might be designated as the architectural award—presented to those who can build the largest number of stories on the smallest textual foundation. These are sometimes called "skyscraper sermons"—one story on another.

<sup>49</sup> Such items are very seldom exegetically significant, and when they are, the text itself points that out.

## Conclusion

Let me be very clear that this is not a “style” issue. I am not criticizing any particular style of preaching. There are many ways to preach the Bible ... Many ways to “package” it.<sup>50</sup> The issue is *content*. What do we put in the package? If you bought a package of hamburger at the meat market and discovered when you fried it for supper that most of it was fat and bones—that there were only a few small scraps of meat—you’d be outraged. You would complain to the manager that you have been defrauded. You had paid for meat and been sold a package of fat. Yet how many Christians go to church each week for meat—for the Bible—and end up with bones instead? Or even sadder, due perhaps to the pulpit diet that they have been fed for so many years, they *think* that they’re getting meat, when all that is really in the package is suet. Some are even a bit bewildered when they hear a real Bible message. Some of these “chickadee-Christians” have pecked at the suet for so long that they don’t know what to do with steak. The fault does not lie totally with them, however. Much of the responsibility lies at the feet of preachers who tack up suet on the pulpit week after week.

I must agree with John Stott that “all true Christian preaching is expository preaching.”<sup>51</sup> To do any less or any different is to pervert

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<sup>50</sup> A biblical, expository sermon will differ greatly in style whether one is preaching the epistles, narrative, a parable, the proverbs, or prophecy. A very few may need to be packaged topically (some of the Proverbs, perhaps). Others may lend themselves to a story-telling format, perhaps even a first person dramatization (as John Reed—and Alan Ingalls—have been known to do). A verse-by-verse approach is appropriate for much of Scripture (and all can be done that way). There are many different factors that determine the way in which exposition is implemented, *but in every case the sermon must be a biblical sermon—it must expound the text in its context or it is invalid preaching and carries no divine authority*. As Mark Dever puts it, “Expositional preaching is not simply producing a verse by verse commentary from the pulpit. Rather, *expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the point of the sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture*” (“Expositional Preaching as a Mark of a Healthy Church,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]: 60–61). Lest I be misunderstood, let me be very blunt: topical and textual sermons are rarely appropriate, and even less often biblical. I first heard it from my colleague Dr. Bill Arp about 30 years ago, though he tells me that it should be attributed to Walter Kaiser: never preach more than one topical sermon a year, and confess your sin as soon as you’re finished! That is, of course, somewhat “tongue-in-cheek,” but a bit of hyperbole helps make the point—and it probably isn’t nearly as hyperbolic as some think!

<sup>51</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 125. As he goes on to say, “To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor [pries] open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is ‘imposition’, which is to impose on the text what is not there.... What matters is what we do with it. Whether [the text] is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said. ... Exposition ... restricts us to the scriptural text.... The very first qualification of expositors is the recognition that we are guardians of a sacred ‘deposit’ of truth, ‘trustees’ of the gospel, ‘stewards of the mysteries of God’.... ‘The Christian preacher has a boundary set for him. When he enters the pulpit he is not an entirely free man.... It is a great thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!’” (125–27; the embedded quote is from

the Word of God and pass off bones and fat as the meat of God’s truth.<sup>52</sup>

Men, we must respect the text. We must make sure that the Word of God is central in every aspect of our ministry. Only God’s Word is able to bring new life to lost sinners. Only God’s Word can transform sinful, depraved people into trophies of his grace. Our words, our ideas, our programs, our creativity, our ingenuity cannot do that. We can not avoid our own words—that is what preaching is all about—but they must always be secondary to God’s Word. We will employ our ideas, programs, creativity, and ingenuity as best we can, but our goal must be that they do not detract from what is at the heart of our ministry—the Word of God. Whenever God and his Word take second place we are treading on dangerous ground. Never be defensive about preaching the Bible. That is the sword of the Spirit which God has given us to wield. “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). “Preach the Word..., correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.” For “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 4:2; 3:16–17).

## Appendix

Other theological issues related to hermeneutics:

### 1. Anthropology

#### a. Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of how we know. It ought to be studied as part of theological anthropology, though it seldom is included. How we know something—actually the possibility of knowing anything at all—will have an obvious impact on our hermeneutical efforts. The fact that man was created in the image of God (see below) fortifies us against the epistemological skepticism that can be found among unbelievers.

#### b. Image of God (language & logic)

The very fact of language makes revelation from God possible and also enables us to understand that revelation. Language is not a human invention (though writing is), but is part of the *imago dei* in which we were all made. Logic flows out of that created image. Logic was not invented by Aristotle any more than Adam created language. God made man as a rational being with the same logical

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Donald Coggan, *Stewards of Grace* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 46, 48).

<sup>52</sup> Though many of us may never have a written ministry as extensive nor an influential so substantial as Calvin, may we, at the end of our ministry, be able to say as he did, “I have endeavored, both in my sermons and also in my writings and commentaries, to preach the word purely and chastely, and faithfully to interpret His sacred Scriptures” (from John Calvin’s last will and testament; cited by John Piper, “The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin, The Man and His Preaching,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]:12–13).

capabilities that he himself possessed. Man's logic is not different than God's logic but is rather an expression of it. The basic "laws of logic" as they are called, are just as true for God as they are for us. The laws of noncontradiction do not constrain God—they are part of his nature. Since we are created in his nature, we possess the same system of logic. True, we do not know as fully or as exhaustively as God knows, nor do we know in the same way as God knows. But man's rational process of logic is univocal with God's rationality.

The primary meaning [of a text] must be shared with component meanings that are unified, related, and noncontradictory. If the meaning is true, then a statement may mean A or non-A, but it cannot mean A and non-A. The same statement cannot mean contradictory meanings at the same time and in the same context.<sup>53</sup>

### c. Depravity and finiteness

Even though humanity was created in the image of God, sin has seriously affected that image. With the fall of Genesis 3 the image was substantially marred. Man still possesses the image of God (Gen. 9), but it no longer functions in the way God created it. Sin now affects every aspect of a person: mind, will, and emotions. As such we now frequently misuse the gifts that God gave us. We still reason, but too often we now pervert and misuse logic for our own ends; we deny and suppress truth that does not suit us (Rom.1:18).

### d. Priesthood of the believer and individual soul liberty

Two of our Baptist distinctives are relevant to hermeneutics: the priesthood of the believer and individual soul liberty. As priests before God it is the privilege of all believers to handle his Word and to mediate it to others (whether other believers or the world). We do not depend on an ecclesiastical hierarchy to interpret the Word for us, but we may all read it for ourselves, seek to understand it, and obey God directly. None may coerce our conscience as to what we should believe; we are each accountable to God alone. (We ought to be careful not to pervert those privileges into an isolationist, Lone Ranger Christianity that arrogantly ignores the ministry, help, and contributions of others of our contemporaries and our spiritual forbears. That is the great temptation posed by our culture with its emphasis on individuality.)

## 2. Pneumatology

(Role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation)

The Word of God will never be properly understood in the fullness of its meaning and significance apart from the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14). That does not entail, however, the transmission of additional revelation or the objective authentication of particular interpretations. It is always illegitimate to attempt verification of an interpretation by appeal to the Spirit's work. The Spirit does not do for us what we can do for ourselves, nor does he impart a different meaning to the words of the text that they would otherwise not carry. Neither does he work (in his teaching ministry) apart from the Word of God. His primary focus

is subjectively guiding out thoughts as we read and study the Word as well as convicting our hearts regarding our responsibility to obey what we come to understand.<sup>54</sup>

The essence of all critical thought, in the best sense of that abused expression, is the justification of opinions. A critical interpretation of Scripture is one that has adequate justification—lexical, grammatical, cultural, theological, historical, geographical, or other justification. In other words, critical exegesis in this sense is exegesis that provides sound reasons for the choices it makes and positions it adopts. Critical exegesis is opposed to merely personal opinions, appeals to blind authority (the interpreter's or anyone else's), arbitrary interpretations, and speculative opinions. This is not to deny that spiritual things are spiritually discerned, or to argue that piety is irrelevant; it is to say rather that not even piety and the gift of the Holy Spirit guarantee infallible interpretations.<sup>55</sup>

Carson records an illustration of the problems that arise from failing to understand this principle. It would be funny if it were not so common—and such a sad commentary on how many people handle Scripture.

Occasionally a remarkable blind spot prevents people from seeing this point. Almost twenty years ago I rode a car with a fellow believer who relayed to me what the Lord had "told" him that morning in his quiet time. He had been reading the KJV of Matthew; and I perceived that not only had he misunderstood the archaic English, but also that the KJV at that place had unwittingly misrepresented the Greek text. I gently suggested there might be another way to understand the passage and summarized what I thought the passage was saying. The brother dismissed my view as impossible on the grounds that the Holy Spirit, who does not lie, had told him the truth on this matter. Being young and bold, I pressed on with my explanation of grammar, context, and translation, but was brushed off by a reference to 1 Cor. 2:10b–15: spiritual things must be spiritually discerned—which left little doubt about my status. Genuinely intrigued, I asked this brother what he would say if I put forward my interpretation, not on the basis of grammar and text, but on the basis that the Lord himself had given me the interpretation I was advancing. He was silent a long time, and then concluded, "I guess that would mean the Spirit says the Bible means different things to different people."<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Cf. further *BBI*, 22–25 and Zuck's larger work that includes this subject: *The Holy Spirit in Your Teaching* (rev. ed., Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1984).

<sup>55</sup>D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 12–13.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 13 n.2.

<sup>53</sup>Cf. E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 55.