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Adam, P. J. H. "Preaching and Biblical Theology." In NEW

## Preaching and Biblical Theology

### The relationship of biblical theology and preaching

#### *Biblical theology demands a preacher*

The Bible commands its readers to communicate its message. So true biblical theology will reflect this imperative, and the true biblical theologian will want to communicate to others the truths of the Bible. A good pragmatic test of any theology is whether or not those who believe it want to pass on what they have learnt. Preaching, or any other means of explaining the message of the Bible, attempts to communicate it to others.

We can summarize a biblical theology of preaching in these words: *God has spoken*, *It is written*, and *Preach the word* (P. Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, pp. 15-56).

*God has spoken.* The self-revelation of God is always either expressed or explained through words. It is by the words which God has spoken that we know who he is, that he has made the universe, and the meaning of his works, his saving acts. It is by these words that we know of the identity and significance of his Son Jesus, of his plan of salvation, and of the gospel. It is by these words that we know how we should respond to God's grace with the obedience of faith, and look forward to the return of Christ and the consummation of God's kingdom. God has accommodated himself to us and condescended to speak in human language, with perfectly true words, so that we can respond to him in faith as we hear his voice. When God is present, he is present to speak. Whereas he once spoke on earth, he now warns us from heaven (Heb. 12:25).

The idea of God's revelation as 'speaking' or 'words' is so powerful that it is used as metaphor for God's self-revelation in his Son. So in Hebrews 1 we read that 'In the past God spoke ... at many times and in various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son'; Paul writes of Jesus that he 'preached peace'; and John describes Jesus as 'the Word' (Heb. 1:1-2; Eph. 2:17; John 1:1, NW). God uses words to reveal the Word.

*It is written.* When God has spoken he has sometimes also caused the words to be recorded for future generations. Throughout the Bible we see him doing this. Moses not only speaks to the people of Israel the words that God has spoken, he also writes them down, so that later generations, who are constituted as the people of God by the same saving acts, can know that he is in a covenant relationship with them. Moses' sermons on the plains of Moab are written down, not only for the immediate hearers, but also for the subsequent generations of God's people. When these ancient writings are rediscovered, read, and obeyed, as in the times of Josiah and Ezra, there is revival. God's words were also written down for us 'on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come' (1 Cor. 10:11).

As we become part of the people of God we inherit these promises, covenants, and warnings. In NT times, some of the teaching of Jesus and his followers was written down for the benefit not only of the original readers but also of subsequent generations of God's people. All these words are preserved, or *inscripturated*, for God's people who live in the last days, which began with Jesus' first coming and will end with his return. As God's saving acts are complete, so also is the verbal revelation that explains them.

*Preach the word.* The call to preach the word is heard throughout the Bible in many different ways. Abraham as a prophet is to teach his household, and Moses the prophet is to speak, write and read the words of God for the people of God. The priests of the old covenant have the duty of teaching the law given through Moses, and prophets apply the law to their own generation. Wise men and women teach others the way of wisdom; the disciples of Christ preach the kingdom of God; apostles, pastors and teachers speak the truth in order to bring people to faith in

Christ, and to present them mature in Christ. The great need in the post-apostolic church is for teachers, who can teach the truth and refute error. Ordinary believers have the responsibility of encouraging one another with God's words (1 Thess. 4:18); as they do so 'the word of Christ' dwells richly among them (Col. 3:16) and this mutual encouragement is God's remedy for the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13). It is therefore unsurprising that Paul instructs Timothy to preach the word (2 Tim. 4:2).

As Edmund Clowney points out, biblical theology reflects the authority, character and content of preaching: 'We bear in our hands the words which Moses carried on the tables of stone down the thundering mountain ... We bear the whole witness of the Father to the Son: those things that are written in the law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms concerning him. In our hands we hold the inspired *kerygma* and *didache* of the witnesses who testify of Christ' (*Preaching and Biblical Theology*, p. 61). Those who receive the biblical revelation also receive the command to become speakers of God's word.

#### *Preaching and biblical theology need each other*

Gerhard Ebeling has expressed this mutual need in these words: 'Theology without proclamation is empty, proclamation without theology is blind' (*Theology and Proclamation*, p. 20). He is saying that theology can never be a satisfactory end in itself, and that preaching that is not informed by reflection on the content of revelation is destructive.

So theologians should never be satisfied when their theology serves only the needs of the academy. Any theology, including biblical theology, must serve the Christian ministry of the word. Likewise preachers should not be satisfied when they have communicated only their own insights, the ideas of contemporary sociologists, political commentators, or psychologists, or even current theories of Christian or church life. Nor should they be content with the ritual repetition of a text of Scripture, reference to a token Bible verse, or preaching on a text to which they have not first applied Paul's instruction to Timothy: 'Reflect on what I am saying' (2 Tim. 2:7).

The dangers of the Western academic tradition are its assumptions that knowledge can be discovered only by those who share secu-

lar, naturalistic, or contemporary world views, and that knowledge is a satisfactory end in itself. These are damaging assumptions for any Christian academic to adopt, but particularly damaging for the theologian. Many preachers today, even many who know the Bible, do not use it in their preaching, or use it in a trivial way. We should not meet the challenge of postmodernism by abandoning the Bible, but by using it carefully, theologically and effectively. If we abandon theological reflection on the meaning of the text of the Bible, we will indeed be blind guides.

#### *Preachers always practise good or bad biblical theology*

Theologians can avoid the demands of biblical theology. They can ignore the Bible, or base their theology on their favourite verses. Bible commentators can avoid biblical theology by concentrating on the pre-history of the text, by assuming that the Bible has no intellectual coherence, by isolating one Testament from the other, or by commenting on other commentators rather than on the text itself.

The preacher has nowhere to hide: every sermon presupposes a good or bad biblical theology. The pitfalls are legion, and the wise preacher tries to avoid them. How can I preach on 'Do not commit adultery' without implying that salvation is achieved by moral perfection? How can I preach on the gift of the land to the people of God in the OT without raising the question of the ownership of that same land today? How can I preach on the OT in its own right and also use it to point to Christ? Is physical prosperity a NT blessing? We communicate biblical theology as much by our silence as by our words. We must work hard at communicating good biblical theology.

People learn how to use the Bible mostly from their teachers in church, so preachers have a better opportunity than anyone else to teach good biblical theology and to model a hermeneutically sound use of the Bible. Breyard Childs writes: 'Christian pastors continue to do their own Biblical Theology', and because this is the case 'some directions may come from the experience of pastors in the front line' (*Biblical Theology in Crisis*, pp. 95-96).

If the preacher is using a text, then that text must be placed not only in the *literary context* of chapter, book, Testament and Bi-

ble, but also in the *theological context* of that same Bible, *i.e.* in the context of both the developing revelation and the whole revelation. If the preacher is using a story from the Bible, then that story must be placed in the context of the great story of the Bible, the sending of God's Son for the salvation of the world. If the preacher is using a parable of Jesus, Jesus' explanation of the purpose of parables must be taken into account. Preachers need to teach good biblical theology, making good use of the Bible, and not misusing it.

#### *Jesus, preacher of biblical theology*

Jesus' debates with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the leaders of his nation were mainly concerned with the interpretation of the Bible. Their interpretations were wrong, and as a result they did not believe in him.

Jesus not only told them that they were wrong, but on many occasions told them *why* they were wrong. He frequently prefaced his explanation of their error with the question 'Have you not read?' On one level this was simply a way of reminding them of the *content* of Scripture, and of pointing out to them that the truth would be found in that Scripture. On another level the question 'Have you not read?' challenged them to question their understanding of the *meaning* of Scripture. If they had read it carefully, and understood it as God intended, then they would believe in Jesus, and not oppose him. Even his own disciples were 'foolish', and 'slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken'; Jesus had to open both their minds and the Scriptures for them to believe in him and understand the OT revelation (Luke 24:25-27).

Christian preachers should make sure that they teach the same biblical theology as Jesus taught. His interpretation of the OT, and his summary of his own teaching is found in Luke 24:44-47: 'This is what I told you when I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms ... The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations ...' Jesus attempted to teach true biblical theology; that is, to interpret the OT as pointing to him.

Luke described Paul's ministry in Rome in similar terms: 'From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom

of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets ... he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 28:23, 31). Paul provides another useful summary of his message in speaking to the Ephesian elders. His message was that they 'must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus'. He then describes his ministry as 'the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace', 'preaching the kingdom', and points out that he has told them 'the whole will of God', by which he means God's plan of salvation (Acts 20:21-27).

#### *Preachers need biblical theology in order to preach the text in context*

We all know the saying 'A text without a context is a pretext', which points to the danger of trying to interpret words out of their context. However the task of understanding a text in context is more complex than many realize. To place a text in context we must identify its *literary context* in the book, its *theological context* in the writings of the author, and the *historical context* of the book. Then to place a text in the context of the whole biblical revelation will involve understanding its *context in OT or NT theology*, its *context in God's progressive revelation* within each period of salvation-history, and its *context in biblical theology*. In sum, context must be theological as well as literary, and context must include the whole biblical revelation, as well as the book in which the text occurs.

In the words of Geerhardus Vos, biblical theology is: 'the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in historic continuity and multiformity'; and 'the specific character of Biblical Theology lies in this, that it discusses both the form and contents of revelation from the point of view of the revealing activity of God himself' (in *Redemptive History and Biblical Revelation*, pp. 15, 6-7). When God chose to reveal his saving will in the Bible, he did not use a systematic theology, a dictionary of useful texts, or an anthology of current debates. He used progressive revelation in word and explained deed, at intervals during the history of his chosen people. The OT declares God's promise; the NT relates its fulfilment. Salvation in Christ was first revealed in shadow, and then in substance (Col. 2:16-17). In preaching

Scripture we are not dealing with timeless truths but with coherent, progressive, historical and theological revelation.

The study of biblical theology will help the preacher to preach from the text in the context in which it was placed by God. There is great need for such preaching today, when so many think that the OT provides nothing more than background to the NT, that it is just a part of its social and cultural context. On the contrary, the OT is the essential basis of the complete biblical revelation, and we cannot understand the NT without it. There can be no local cultural substitute for the OT, and those who read the NT without the OT are sure to misread it.

#### *Preachers need biblical theology for application*

A widespread problem for theologians in the 20th century has been 'the pastness of the past', the great gulf between the world of the 1st century and our own world. The challenge has been to develop a hermeneutic or principle of interpretation that manages to bridge that great gulf. The assumption has been that we live in such a different age that we need to work very hard at listening to both the word (the Bible) and the world (our own very different world).

While it is true that from the perspective of sociology we live in very different worlds, from the perspective of biblical theology we live in the same age, the last times. There is not much difference between reading the Bible as a Gentile in the 21st century, and reading it as a Gentile in the 1st century. The task of *internal hermeneutics* (*i.e.* biblical theology) needs to be addressed first, and only then the task of *external hermeneutics* (the meaning of the text today). Without biblical theology, we will frequently misapply the text. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, when we are studying an ancient text it is that which we think we understand which we are most likely to misread.

We need biblical theology for appropriate application. This is not because the Bible is an ancient book, because although it was written long ago, it is also a contemporary book. It is contemporary because it is God's message for those who live in the last days. In the Bible God speaks today. The difficulty in application does not lie primarily in the pastness of the past, but in the progressive and diverse

nature of the revelation itself. A NT Gentile would have had as much difficulty as a contemporary Christian in knowing what to do with the OT instructions about not boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Preachers in different centuries will have the same difficulty in piecing together what the Bible teaches about marriage and divorce. The church at Laodicea may have had as much difficulty as we do in understanding Paul's teaching in Romans. If understanding biblical theology helps the preacher to apply the text, then every reader of the Bible needs to learn some biblical theology in order to understand and apply the Bible. Preachers should not only use biblical theology, but also teach it to others.

#### *Let the text speak!*

Biblical theology and preaching have the same aim: to let the text speak. As von Rad instructed young preachers: 'every text wants to speak for itself' (G. von Rad, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 18). We should not only try to find out what the text means; we should also ask: 'What is the passage trying to do?' (D. Buttrick, in EA 1, p. 91). In the words of Gerhard Ebeling: 'The sermon is the execution of the text ... it is the proclamation of what the text has proclaimed' (*Theology*, p. 109). This is why biblical theology is so useful for the preacher; because both have the same aim, 'to allow God to address man through the medium of the text' (R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutics and The Word of God*, p. 11). The text provides both information and proclamation (S. T. Logan, in *The Preacher and Preaching*, p. 137), and as the Bible is read and preached, God speaks to us today. If biblical theology and preaching have the same aim, then the preacher should take advantage of the insights of biblical theology.

#### Using biblical theology in preaching

##### *Text in theological context*

Most preachers have been trained to read a text in its literary context, a verse in the context of a paragraph, a paragraph in the context of a chapter, a chapter in the context of a book, a book in the context of the thought of the author. However not every preacher has been trained to read a text in the context of theology, much less biblical theology. To do so is to ask the following questions: How does this text fit into the

progressive revelation that God gives in the Bible? Is it related to any major biblical themes? Is its theme one in which there is significant development between the OT and NT? What relationship does it have to the gospel? How does the gospel form a context for it? How does it relate to the revelation of Jesus Christ, to the promise or the fulfilment? Is it used or interpreted elsewhere in the Bible? In which major theological category does it occur, e.g. promise, law, prophecy, wisdom, instruction, blessing, curse, people of God, gospel?

This is a more difficult exercise than studying the literary genre and context. But to attempt it will make it less likely that a stirring call to build the temple will be applied to the church building programme, that a call to discipleship will become a proclamation of justification by works, or that adulterers will be stoned. Only biblical theology can save us from misusing the Bible, as we read each text in the context of the progressive revelation of God's saving work in Christ.

##### *Biblical theology and expository preaching*

Although all preaching ought to include an exposition of the Bible, I am here referring to the practice of preaching through books of the Bible sequentially, verse by verse and chapter by chapter. Augustine and John Chrysostom followed this model of preaching in the early church, and Zwingli, Luther and Calvin rediscovered it at the Reformation. It is the obvious way to preach the Bible, as it reflects the way in which God caused Scripture to be written (in books, not isolated texts or paragraphs). It enables us to imitate God in respecting the humanity of the authors and their style and historical context. It also reflects the usual way of reading books, and models a good use of Scripture to the congregation.

However, as Peter Jensen has pointed out, preaching consecutively through the whole Bible is not necessarily to preach the whole Bible: 'The goal of "preaching the whole Bible" is attained when we so preach Christ that every part of the Bible contributes its unique riches to his gospel' (in *When God's Voice is Heard*, p. 64).

A decision to use both expository preaching and biblical theology will enrich and invigorate our ministry, for both imply commit-

ment to Scripture as a whole. Expository preaching implies commitment to the literary extent of Scripture, and biblical theology to its theological depth. The preacher who is using both will be a true preacher of Jesus Christ.

##### *Biblical theology and topical preaching*

While the greater part of our preaching should be expository, topical preaching is also important. Every day Christian people face many issues on which they need biblical wisdom. The preacher can provide good models for analysing issues and thinking biblically about them. But to do this the preacher needs biblical theology, which can place each relevant text in its theological context in the light of the whole Bible, and which can be used to evaluate the way the issue has been set out and to point towards an answer.

Inexperienced preachers should not try to preach topical sermons, because they are the most difficult to prepare, and require an extensive biblical theology. Not every preacher has enough biblical theology to preach on 'love', or 'divorce' or 'prayer'. The pressure to preach on only one text that addresses the topic, or to take a text out of context, is unbearable; the sermon can become nothing more than a repetition of contemporary clichés. Experienced preachers should include topical series in their programme; they will benefit the preachers as well as the people.

##### *Planning a sermon series*

The preacher who tries to cram into one sermon everything that the people need to know about the historical and literary context of a text, its place in the thought of the author, its meaning, and its role in the unfolding revelation of the Bible, will undoubtedly over-feed the congregation. One great advantage of preaching a series on a book of the Bible is that we can distribute teaching on the historical context, the intentions of the author, and biblical theological themes throughout the series. So a sermon series on the first chapters of 2 Samuel could include historical background (in the sermon on chapter 1), the context of 1 and 2 Samuel (ch. 2), biblical theology relating to David (ch. 3), the biblical theology of kingship (ch. 4), the biblical theology of Jerusalem (ch. 5), and the historical background and biblical theology of the ark and temple (ch. 6). Biblical theology should

always be in the mind of the preacher; but the preacher should not put everything in his or her mind into the sermon.

##### *Useful resources?*

Brevard Childs asserts that many commentaries discuss everything about the text but its theology. He illustrates this point from a commentary on 1 Kings 13, on the story of the man of God from Judah, which deals with different kinds of trees in Palestine, varieties of lions, and furniture in Early Bronze Age family tombs, but never tackles the theology of the text. Many modern commentaries reflect 'tone deafness to theological issues', whereas some old commentaries include 'highly significant models for the doing of theological exegesis' (Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 142,144).

The preacher who wants to use biblical theology will need to be discriminating in the use of commentaries. A good assessment can be made by looking at what the commentary says on a significant theological passage. If there is no theology here, it is unlikely to be found elsewhere. If it is hard to find commentaries that discuss theology, it is even more difficult to find any that discuss biblical theology. Because of this, one author has even written on 'The superiority of pre-critical exegesis' (D. Steinmetz, in EA 1, pp. 74-82). For useful commentaries, see the bibliographies to the Part 2 articles. For a good introduction to biblical theology, see E. P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery*, G. Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, and J. A. Motyer, *Look to the Rock*.

##### *Key themes of biblical theology*

Another way of teaching biblical theology is to preach on themes that reveal the structure of that theology, and so explain most parts of the Bible. Here are some themes that may be useful: covenants, the kingdom of God, the gospel, the temple, promise and fulfilment, the people of God, the land and the inheritance, the promise of the Messiah, the promises to Abraham, atonement, resurrection, creation and new creation. We can also study these themes in seminal books of the Bible such as Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, John, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, 1 Peter and Revelation.

*Content and mood*

The aim of the preacher is to let the text speak not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of its mood or intended emotional impact. The insights of biblical theology do not alter the emotional direction of a text, nor do they diminish its passions; rather they serve to intensify it. The preacher should ask not just 'what does the text say?', but also 'what is the text trying to do?' (Buttrick, in *EA* 1, p. 91).

As Calvin points out, one of the aims of the preacher is to increase the emotion of the text: 'we add there withal a vehemency to the end that doctrine may touch their hearts to the quick, that they not only know what is good but be moved to follow it' (J. Calvin, *Sermons on Timothy and Titus*, p. 419). David Day comments that the text is 'content embodied in a form', and encourages preachers to express the form and emotion of the text as well as the content (in *Anvil* 14, p. 278; and see also Peter Adam, in *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*).

The task of the preacher is to release the eloquence of the text. Whether the text is making an appeal, giving information, rebuking, encouraging, or demanding obedience, the preacher should release the emotion as well as the meaning of that text.

*Dangers to be avoided*

*Preaching biblical theology rather than the text.* The particularity of the text can be lost in the discussion of its great theological themes. We need to make use of the great themes, but then find out which particular aspect of the themes is found in the text. Our aim is not to muffle the particular message of the text, but to let it speak with its own purpose, emotion, and power.

Just as we should avoid preaching from the text without also communicating its biblical theology, so we should avoid bypassing the text in order to preach the biblical theology that lies behind it. Our task is to preach the text and to use its biblical theology to illuminate it, not to overshadow it.

*Slow motion biblical theology.* Sometimes a preacher preaches a complete sermon on every word of a text, including a complete biblical theology of each word drawn from all its occurrences in Scripture. To do this is to lose the movement and particularity of the

text, so that it becomes a peg on which to hang a series of theological sermons. Each word is used as an exercise in biblical theology. William Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armour* exemplifies this approach (W. Gurnall [Glasgow, 1864; repr. London, 1964]).

*Failing to apply the text.* In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul affirms the usefulness of Scripture for 'teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' and in 4:2 he instructs Timothy to use Scripture to 'correct, rebuke, and encourage'. Because it is useful, Scripture should be applied to those who hear so as to achieve its God-given purpose in their lives. Biblical theology should not distract from this application, but should be a means to appropriate application.

In sum, preachers should not become so intoxicated with biblical theology that they fail to preach the particularity of each text.

**The benefits of biblical theology***Coherence*

When the preacher uses biblical theology, the congregation learns more about the coherence of the Bible. They learn to recognize and identify the shape of God's plan for the human race, revealed in two stages (the OT and the NT) and focused on Christ. In an age in which knowledge is more and more specialized and fragmented, they learn the meta-narrative that explains human existence and purpose in the context of God's saving will and the coming of Christ. Biblical theology helps them to learn the message of the Bible, and to understand the universe.

Paying attention to biblical theology is an effective means of turning people away from the ultimately destructive postmodern question 'What does this text mean to me?' to the more fruitful question 'What does this text mean?' Only when this primary question of the text's meaning has been answered can the other, secondary question of the application of the text to our lives be addressed to advantage.

*Variety and humanity*

Preachers who use biblical theology will be better able to use the great variety of biblical revelation, exploring every genre of writing, every stage of biblical revelation, and every style of revelation. Their preaching will be

alert to each stage of salvation history, and will be sensitive to the human context of every part of the biblical revelation. Awareness of what Vos calls 'the organic structure of the truth' (in *Redemptive History*, p. 21) will enable the preacher to respect the humanity of every part of Scripture, and also to express the unity of the revelation as it comes from the mind of God. The message of the sermon will thus reflect both the humanity and the divine origin of the message, in all its rich variety. The message includes the medium, and God has spoken in many ways. The use of biblical theology makes for interesting preaching.

*Effective apologetic*

It is not possible to 'take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5) without teaching a biblical world view, and we cannot do this without biblical theology. We cannot help people to address the pervasive worldviews of humanism, post-modernity, secularism, materialism and pantheism by providing them with a few helpful texts or pious ideas. They must begin to 'think God's thoughts after him', and they do this by learning the shape of God's self-revelation in history and in the Bible. This biblical theology is the best corrective for false worldviews, just as it is the best corrective for destructive heresy. By teaching and using biblical theology in all our Bible teaching we point people to the objective and historical reality of God's progressive and purposeful revelation. Through this revelation, God speaks a transcendent message to people in every age, and shapes their minds, hearts and lives so that they can know and serve him, and speak his truth to others.

**Conclusion**

Without biblical theology we cannot understand the Bible as God intended; with a sound grasp of biblical theology we can both read and preach the Bible so as both to convert people and to build up the body of Christ to maturity. When Jesus taught in the synagogue at Nazareth, he explained that the Scriptures were fulfilled in himself; the people wondered at the gracious words that came from his lips (Luke 4:16-22). We too can speak these gracious words if we follow the example of Jesus Christ in our teaching, and show how the Scriptures point to him and to God's

mighty work of salvation in his death and resurrection.

We can use biblical theology to preach the whole Christ and the whole gospel from the whole Bible. We may then dare to say with the apostle Paul: 'I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God' (Acts 20:27).

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