



THE NEXT THIRTY-FOUR YEARS? THE MAKING OF THE FUTURE

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I recently had the chance to peruse the third edition (2014) of a standard work on preaching, used as a textbook in a number of evangelical seminaries all over the world. The first edition of the work was dated 1980, so I decided I'd carefully go through the first and third editions, line upon line, precept upon precept, highlighter in hand, to gauge how much had changed in the field of homiletics in thirty-four years.

If you go by the more than a quarter century this book has been in existence, the answer is: "Nothing, really!" And if you go with that trajectory, the question posed by our Editor, "What do you consider to be the future of evangelical homiletics?" has an easy answer: "Nothing, really!" The past will repeat itself, there will be no change—we've arrived!

That can't be, I said to myself. Nothing remains unchanged for over three decades. And, until we get to glory, we will never have arrived!

So on that non-arrival note, I began thinking not of what the future *might* be, but what the future *ought* to be ... in 2048.

I see the mighty stream of preaching as having two essential tributaries that feed into it: hermeneutics rhetoric. You might say: hermeneutics + rhetoric = homiletics. Dealing as preaching does with a sacred Book expounded in a sacred event to sacred people, the tributaries are *sacred* hermeneutics (all the dealings with the text of Scripture) and *sacred* rhetoric (the invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery of the sermon).

But in the next three and a half decades, it is with hermeneutics that I'd like the future to look different. Because hermeneutics is where it all starts. Way before we launch into the pyrotechnics of our pulpitering, there is that critical task we have to engage in, asking: *What does the text say?*

Actually, may I suggest an alteration to that question? We should, instead, be asking: *What does the text do with what it says?* I would affirm that the future of preaching in 2048 (and beyond) lies in that question.

Only in the last couple of decades has language philosophy borne fruit with a better understanding of how language and communication work. Authors (and speakers) *do* things with what they say.

If we are seated at dinner and I tell you, "Can you pass the salt?" it is not a query about the capacity of your neuro-musculo-skeletal apparatus to pick up and deliver the shaker of NaCl to me. If you thought it was, you

might answer, “Yes, I can, for my brain and nerves and bones and ligaments and muscles are working well, thank you,” and not pass the condiment. So unless you catch what I’m *doing*—and I’m actually asking you to pass me the container of the good stuff—you can never apply my utterance as I, the author, intended you to.

That, unfortunately, has not been how Bible scholars have examined the text of Scripture for most of the past two millennia. Rather what is done in the name of hermeneutics is a random excavation of the text: “[P]reachers have the nagging suspicion that there is a good deal of wasted energy in the traditional model of exegesis or, worse, that the real business of exegesis is excavation and earth-moving and that any homiletical gold stumbled over along the way is largely coincidental.”¹ I call this the hermeneutic of excavation—the exegetical turning over (and unloading onto the desk of the hapless preacher) every conceivable bit of data: tons of wood, stone, potsherds, arrowhead, nails, dirt, Reams of pages and petabytes of information—most of it unfortunately not of any particular use for one seeking to preach a relevant sermon from a specific text to changes lives for the glory of God.

In other words, there is a marked tendency to look *through* the text as if it were a *plain-glass window*. What seems to be important to “see-through-ers” is something behind the text, whether it be historical event, systematic theology dogma, biblical theology tidbit, christocentric assertion, any random connection to the audience, or some such.

I don’t want this excavating hermeneutic any more. I want a future (I’ll take a good commentary or two in lieu of a whole future!) where I am taught to look *at* the text as if it were a *stained-glass window*, because the text/author is *doing* something with what is said. And unless we catch the author’s *doings* there can be no valid application. And it’s all right there in the text itself!

So I say: “Enough of the old ways!”

What do we do to go about creating for the church a rosier future of preaching for the next thirty-four years?

I issue a challenge to all of us seated at the homiletics roundtable—veterans, novices, and everyone in between: *Privilege the text!* No more lip-service to the Bible while we privilege something behind it—I don’t know what, but it’s certainly not the inspired text! Preachers, pay more attention to the text to catch what the author is *doing*; preach the author’s agenda. Students, consider engaging in a deeper study of hermeneutics, or—even better—in an intense study of a biblical book or two, seeking to discern what their authors are *doing*: enlighten the people of God. Teachers of preaching, encourage students along those lines, and take the lead yourselves: model it for the rest of us.

Do we want a better future? Let’s make it. 2048, here we come!

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Long, "The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Preaching," *Interpretation* 44 (1990): 343–44.