"How Do You Read?" A Hermeneutic for Preaching[1]

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The other day, in a church I visited, I found a copy of a popular daily devotional that can be found in the foyer of many churches here in the United States. Skimming through its pages in an idle moment, I spotted this devotional on Acts 28. Paul is shipwrecked in Malta. And he joins everyone else in helping out and picks up sticks for a fire. So, the devotional recommended, we too should be willing to do menial jobs in churches. *Always be willing to do even the lowliest job!*

Of course the writer of the devotional conveniently forgot about the viper that came out of the cord and bit the apostle. Therefore, I—in contrast—could use that part of Acts 28 to recommend exactly the opposite: *Never do menial tasks*, because—who knows?—a poisonous snake may sink its fangs into you. (And, let me tell you, there are lots of these deadly species with two legs in churches.) So, *never ever* engage in lowly jobs, for fear of venomous beasts lurking in the shadows!

How do we go about this task of finding valid application for an ancient text? Through the two millennia of the church age, this has been the gaping hole in every theory of preaching: how to derive valid application for a modern audience from a specific passage in the ancient text. A robust hermeneutic for making this move from text to audience has been lacking. In the history of the church this issue has remained somewhat of a black box. David Buttrick once said:

> [M]any books have been written on "biblical preaching"; specifically on how preachers can move step by step from the Bible passage to a sermon. …. But in all such books there seems to be a gap. There's something left out in between. The crucial moment between exegesis and homiletical vision is not described. The shift between the study of a text and the conception of a sermon—perhaps it occurs in a flash of imagination—is never discussed. So alert readers are left with the odd impression that we move from the Bible to a contemporary sermon by some inexplicable magic![2]

I struggled with finding this "magic" in my seminary years and as I preached in pulpits. Was there a solution to this black box? Somewhere in these days of gloom and darkness, I caught a glimmer of light as I studied 2 Sam 11–12. Let me show you what I saw …

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[1] It is my delight to contribute to the *festschrift* for Dr. Joykutty George. I have had the privilege of watching him operating in ministry in Bengaluru, at Asian Christian Academy and its affiliated institutions. A man of God with a pastoral heart, keen intellect, and sparkling humor, Joy is a servant-leader I have admired. I take great pleasure in wishing him many more years of fruitful labor in the vineyards of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the glory of God. The title of this essay is from Luke 10:26.

[2] David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994)*,* 89.

Second Samuel 11–12: A Malady and A Motif

No doubt you have heard many sermons from 2 Samuel 11–12 on five steps to keep men from adultery—don't be idle; don't climb on your roof; don't look into your neighbor's yard; etc., etc. Of course, I confess with chagrin that some of those sermons were preached by me! But here, let me paint a different picture of that horrible story of David's adultery and murder.

The Ophthalmic Malady

After having Uriah killed brutally, David has the gall, the unmitigated insolence and disregard for God and his holiness, to say to Joab: "Then David said to the messenger, 'Thus you shall say to Joab, 'Do not let this thing displease you, for the sword devours one as well as another''" (2 Sam 11:25). "Oh, it's only a few lives, Joab. Just … just collateral damage. Who cares if a few are killed? Life is cheap! The sword devours one as well as another."

Look at 11:25 again: "Do not let this think displease you." Unfortunately for us English readers, that's not what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew literally reads, "Do not let this thing be evil in your sight."

What? Let this thing not be evil in your sight? Let this horrible, gruesome sin not be called "sin"? How could this not be evil? To have one of your finest warriors deliberately placed in the line of fire, and to get several others of your top-notch fighters killed in the bargain? Not evil? How depraved can you get?

Read two verses down: "But the thing that David had done was *evil in the sight of Yahweh*" (11:27). The exact words that David had used to Joab in 11:25 are now being thrown back in his face. The identical phrase! David's acts of sin that he had carelessly and cavalierly decide to overlook—"Do not let this thing be evil in your sight"—were now being labeled for what they really were: "evil in the sight of Yahweh." This is the turning point of the whole story. Whose eyesight was better and more authoritative? Who gets to call evil "evil" and good "good"? Hold that thought, will you?

The Send *Motif*

There is one phrase that curiously keeps cropping up in 2 Samuel 11. Examine these verses below and you'll catch what I'm talking about:

- "Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David *sent* Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon" (11:1).
- "So David *sent* and inquired about the woman" (11:3).
- "David *sent* messengers and took her" (11:4).
- "Then David *sent* to Joab, saying, "*Send* me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab *sent* Uriah to David" (11:6).
- "Now in the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and *sent* it by the hand of Uriah" (11:14).
- "When the time of mourning was over, David *sent* and brought her to his house and she became his wife" (11:27).

Notice the word that is repeated: "send." There is an unusual concentration of the word here. Altogether in 2 Samuel 10–12, this term appears twenty-three times. In the larger unit of 2 Samuel 9–20, it is utilized forty-four times; only thirteen instances occur in the rest of 2 Samuel. "Send, send, send, send, send …." The king! His word was command! His sending was a picture of His imperial strength. What he dictated would happen. What he commanded would get done. He sends and everyone jumps! The king! "If I want the woman, I'll send for her, and take her. And if I want to dispatch her husband, I'll send him away. And then when he's been sent, I'll send for his wife and I'll take her. I am the king." Or so thought David!

Now look at 12:1: "Then Yahweh *sent* …." You don't even have to read the rest of the story to know the tables have been turned on the adulterer and murderer. One can almost hear God saying: "Listen up, King David, the 'sender.' I'm the 'Sender' with a capital 'S.' You small-time despot of this puny piece of real estate called Judah, who do you think you are? I am the Sender who sends atoms spinning and planets orbiting. I am the Sender who sends the sun on its way, and the waves pounding on the shores. I am the Sender who sends brainwaves dancing across your synapses and blood coursing through your arteries. I decide what is evil and what is good, not you. And what you have done, with your uncontrolled passion and irreverence for my name, is nothing but evil." God, and God alone, is the Sender. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And he makes the call on good and evil.

What happened here? From the text, itself, from a close attention to the text, we get a sense of what it is all about. Is this possible? Can the text itself give us its thrust? It can! Let me explain.

How Language Works: Authors' *Doings* and Projected Worlds[3]

Christians recognize that the content of the biblical canon is of immense significance for man: it is abiding, weighty, and binding. Therefore, preachers must ensure that its critical content is understood by God's people. If one does not understand, how can one obey? Psalm 119:34 has David pleading, "Give me understanding, and I will may observe Your law, And I will keep it wholeheartedly." So preaching at its foundation must be communicational, if God's Word is to be obeyed. And what must be communicated is the *thrust* of the text.

Take this piece of Jewish folklore, in the form of a letter[4]:

Dear Riwke,
Be good enough to send me your slippers. Of course, I mean "my slippers" and not "your slippers." But, if you read "my slippers," you will think I mean your slippers. Whereas, if I write: "send me your slippers," you will read *your* slippers and will understand that I want *my* slippers. So: send me your slippers.

Whose slippers are being asked for here? The distance in time and space between the writer and future reader, Riwke, calls for interpretation. If she is to respond to the writer with valid application, Riwke is going to have to figure out the *thrust* of the letter, what the author was trying to do. The same issues surface in the interpretation of Scripture: the human author is unavailable and readers are far away from the origins of the text. So if Scripture is to be employed in new locales of reading, the thrust of the text—what it is all about—must be recovered and communicated. This is the role of the preacher: to understand the thrust of the text, and to convey that thrust to listeners.

Authors Do *Things with What They Say*

With the blossoming of language philosophy in the late twentieth century, the understanding of how language works has matured considerably. Communication of any kind—sacred or secular, spoken or scripted—is now increasingly being recognized as a communicator *doing* something with what is communicated. Authors, including those of Scripture, *do* things with their words. Take the case of the narrative in 1 Samuel 15 (the story of Saul being ordered by God to kill the Amalekites). With the following words, the prophet Samuel passes on God's message to king Saul that he should annihilate the Amalekites: "Listen to the *voice* of the word of Yahweh" (15:1).

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[3] Details of much of the following discussion may be found in *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), and *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015).

[4] From Marina Yaguello, *Language through the Looking Glass: Exploring Language and Linguistics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

Unfortunately, you will not find "voice" in most of your English Bibles. Quite surprisingly, such a literal translation of the Hebrew is found only in the KJV and the NKJV. The seeming redundancy of "voice" is swept under the rug in all other major English translations that essentially have: "Listen to the word of Yahweh." I'll come back to the significance of this in a bit. For now, let's go on with the story.

Saul, as you know, does not obey God's voice: rather than eliminate all the animals and humans, he saves the good ones of the former and the chief of the latter. Soon after, Samuel confronts Saul. The king declares he has done everything that God told him to do. Whereupon Samuel goes: "What then is this *bleating* of the sheep in my ears, and the *lowing* of oxen which I hear?" (15:14). It's not "bleating" and "lowing" in the Hebrew: it's *voice!* Did you catch the thrust of the text in this wordplay? The author is *doing* something here, telling readers that *The one committed to God listens to the* voice *of God, not the* voice *of worldly seductions.* Again, most English translations render "voice" in each case here as "bleating" and "lowing," respectively, and thus, combined with the omission of "voice" in translations of 15:1, the thrust of the text is almost completely negated![5] These translational missteps are a clear indication that Bible translators and scholars do not think in terms of what biblical authors are *doing* with what they are saying. And here in 1 Samuel 15, the thrust of the text is clearly the issue of listening/obedience to God.

One sees this even in folk tales. Take the old one by Aesop about the dog that found a bone. On its way home with its booty, the canine happened to cross a bridge over a stream, and as it looked into the water it spotted "another" dog with a bone. Well, greed took over, the real animal barked at the virtual one, and thereby lost the bone it had. What does it mean? What is the thrust of the text? It's not: *Don't eat bones! Don't climb bridges! And don't bark!* While the story deals with dogs, bones, bridges, streams, and reflections, the thrust of the story is about being content (and the loss one incurs otherwise). That is what Aesop was *doing* with what he was saying, and that is what he would want readers to respond to: *One practices the prudence of contentment rather than lusting for the virtual/ephemeral.* Only after grasping this thrust of the text—what the author is *doing*—can one ever move to valid application. So here is the scheme of preaching we should espouse: Text → Thrust → Application.

This notion of authors' *doing* things with what they say falls into the field of language philosophy called pragmatics. Pragmatics, studying communication as an event, deals with what authors/speakers *do* with what they write/say.[6] Or as I was calling it, the thrust of the text. In other words, it is not enough to comprehend what authors are saying (the semantics: language/grammar/syntax); one must also catch what authors are *doing* with what they are saying (the pragmatics)—the text's thrust. In the fable by Aesop, the semantics deals with the description of the specific events—the dog-and-bone theater; the pragmatics or the thrust of the text is an endorsement of contentment—that was what Aesop was *doing* with what he was saying. Again, without catching the pragmatics, the thrust of the text (or utterance), valid application is impossible. For interpretation for preaching, too, the thrust of a text of Scripture—what the author is *doing* with what he is saying (pragmatics)—must be discerned. Only by catching the author's *doing* in and with that text can God's people arrive at valid application. Preachers, therefore, must discover the thrust of the text and then—and then alone—will they be able to discern valid application.

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[5] Also see 1 Sam 15:19, 20, 22, 24, for other significant *voices* in the story—thankfully, these are translated accurately in English.

[6] Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12, 17; idem, *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000)*,* 9, 168; Daniel Vanderveken, "Non-Literal Speech Acts and Conversational Maxims," in *John Searle and His Critics* (eds. Ernest Lepore and Robert Van Gulick; Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 372; François Recanati, *Meaning and Force: The Pragmatics of Performative Utterances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)*,* 1–27.

In 1 Samuel 15, unless one catches what the author was *doing* with those wordplays on "voice," one will not be able to respond appropriately to the requirement of that text. This thrust of the text has nothing to do with: *Trusting God's fairness without doubting!* (from God's severe treatment of the Amalekites) or *Bewaring of sin's serious consequences!* (from the fate of those sinful people). That is not at all what that text is recommending. Rather, it is something like *Listen to God's voice, not the voice of anyone else or anything else!*

One might interpret the Bible in many ways. But when we interpret the text *for preaching*—and I stress here: for *preaching*—preachers must focus upon what the author is *doing* what he is saying in that particular text (i.e., the thrust of the text, its pragmatics) in order to elicit valid application for readers.[7] Let me move this another step forwards.

The World in Front of the Text

A text is not an end in itself, but is the means to an end: it projects an ideal vision of life: what Paul Ricoeur called the *world in front of the text*.[8] In that 1 Samuel 15 narrative discussed earlier, the biblical author is projecting an ideal *world in front of the text* in which inhabitants listen to/obey the voice of God, disregarding the seductions of all other voices. In essence, this world is the thrust of that text, or this is what its author is *doing* with what he is saying; indeed, this is what this writers would want their readers to respond to. And those readers are being invited to dwell in such an ideal world, abiding by the demand of that world. Here's the author of 1 Samuel 15: "Come, abide in this ideal world by obeying only God's voice." To live in that world projected by the text is to abide by the values of that world. Here, in 1 Samuel 15, the key value of the projected world is that the people of God obey exclusively. And as for Aesop, in the fable of the dog and the bone: "Come, abide in this ideal world [of course, this is not an inspired world] by being content with what you have."

Thus, in texts, an ideal view of life is depicted. A new world is portrayed, and an invitation to that world is extended. Lives are changed as listeners respond and inhabit the world by living by the demands of that projected world. All texts work the same way and so does Scripture: its interpretation must discern the *world in front of the text* (*wifott*)—the thrust of the text, its pragmatics: what the author is *doing*. And when the text is rightly applied, its readers are, in effect, inhabiting the world it projects. So here is our preaching scheme again: Text → Thrust/*wifott*/Pragmatics → Application.[9]

All communication intended for application functions this way. For instance, if Joy George and I are standing, chatting, and Joy exclaims to me, "Hey, Abe, you are standing on my foot!" the *semantic* meaning (what the author/speaker is saying) locates the position of my foot on top of Joy's foot, while the *pragmatic* meaning (what the author/speaker is *doing* with what he is saying—the thrust of the utterance) is this: "*Abe, get your foot off mine!*"

In fact, what Joy was actually *doing* with what he was saying was projecting a *world in front of the text* in which no one is ever stationed upon his lower extremities to cause him distress. Joy's desire was for me to

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[7] In fact, it is not just preachers who must attend to the thrust and pragmatics of the text—what the author is *doing.* Anyone who reads the Bible intending to arrive at valid application *must* interpret the text in this fashion.

[8] "Naming God," *USQR* 34 (1979): 217. I have appropriated Ricoeur in a distinctive way, integrating his philosophy of symbol, metaphor, and the *world in front of the text* to address the specific issue of moving from text to application in preaching. Ricoeur's own philosophical perspectives on these and other issues were generally more latent than concrete, works still in progress at his demise. He confessed: "[W]hen I happen to look backward to my work, I am more struck by the discontinuities of my wanderings than by the cumulative character of my work" ("Reply to Lewis S. Mudge," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation,* by Paul Ricoeur [ed. Lewis S. Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980], 41).
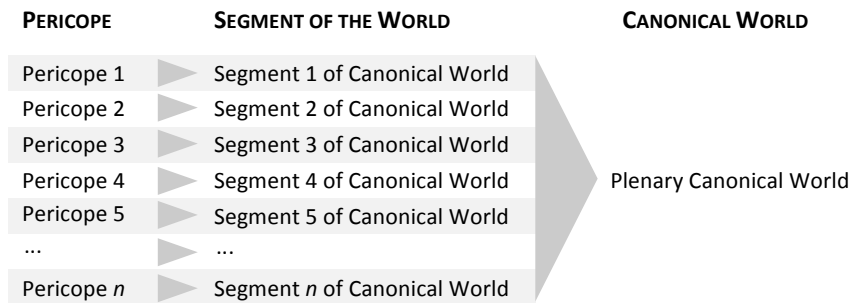
[9] For all practical purposes, the terms "thrust," "*world in front of the text*," and "pragmatics" (as well as the term introduced later, "pericopal theology") are synonymous.

inhabit such an ideal "nobody-ever-standing-on-Joy George's-foot-to-cause-him-pain" kind of world. That inhabitation could be accomplished only by my conforming to the major demand of that world—removing my foot off Joy's, thus alleviating his agony, because a primary requirement of that projected world is that nobody ever stand on Joy's foot to cause him pain.

Unfortunately, that is not how biblical texts are looked at in the traditional homiletic style. If that statement by Joy to me ("Hey, Abe, you are standing on my foot!") were an inspired utterance in Scripture from an imaginary prophet Simkhah[10], a preacher in the traditional camp expositing that "text" on Sunday morning would conceivably expatiate on the derivation of the word "foot" from the Old Eng *fot* from the Latin *pes* from the Greek *pos*. The preacher might discourse upon the foot's kinesiology (26 bones, 30 joints, over 100 muscles, tendons, and ligaments), its hematology (blood vessels), and its neurology (nerve supply). This preacher would, no doubt, wax eloquent about the pathology of that extremity (the various abnormalities: club foot, flat foot, athlete's foot, skew foot, rheumatoid foot, …); and so on, focusing on all the "–ologies," but completely missing the thrust of the utterance and its intended valid application: *"Abe, Get your foot off mine."*

In other words, unless one catches what Joy George is *doing* with what he is saying (the pragmatics and thrust of his utterance, i.e., the *world in front of the text*), valid application is impossible. Without a comprehension of the pragmatics, without grasping the ideal *world in front of the text* (a world in which no one stands on Joy's foot to cause him pain), all this regurgitation of hematology, neurology, Christology, pathology, ecclesiology, or one's favorite "–ology" *du jour,* can never bring one to valid application.

So also for the biblical text. Remember: Text → Thrust/*wifott*/Pragmatics → Application. Look at it this way: The biblical canon as a whole projects a *world in front of the text*—God's ideal world, with each pericope of Scripture projecting a segment of that canonical *world in front of the text.*

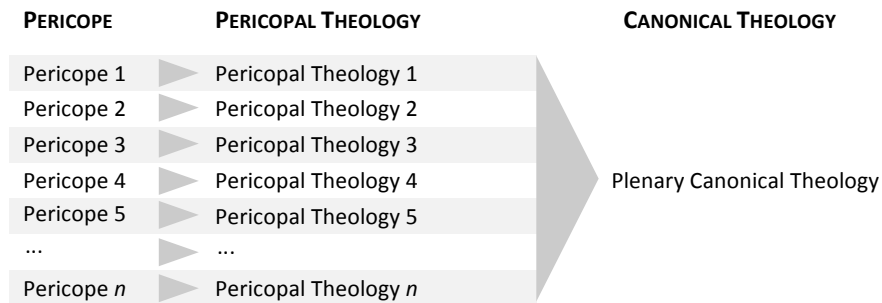| PERICOPE	SEGMENT OF THE WORLD	CANONICAL WORLD
Pericope 1	Segment 1 of Canonical World	
Pericope 2	Segment 2 of Canonical World	
Pericope 3	Segment 3 of Canonical World	
Pericope 4	Segment 4 of Canonical World	Plenary Canonical World
Pericope 5	Segment 5 of Canonical World	
…	…	
Pericope *n*	Segment *n* of Canonical World	

Taken together, the integrated composite of all such segments make up the canonical projection of God's ideal *world in front of the text*—the plenary (i.e., full) canonical world.

Thus each sermon on a particular pericope is God's gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the thrust of that pericope—i.e., the requirements of God's ideal world as called for in that pericope's world-segment. And as mankind accepts that divine invitation, week by week and pericope by pericope God's people are progressively and increasingly inhabiting his ideal world and abiding by the requirements of that divine world. One pericope at a time, the various aspects of Christian life, are gradually being brought into alignment with the will of God for the glory of God—God's world is becoming reality. This is the goal of preaching.

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[10] *Simkhah* (שִׂמְחָה) means "joy" in Hebrew.

Theology of the Pericope: Defined, Exegeted, and Distinguished

Because this world speaks of God and how he relates to his creation, I call it "theology"—the theology of the pericope. After all, theology is "that skein of thought and language in which Christians understand themselves, the Bible, God, and their everyday world."[11] Speaking as it does of God and his relationship with his creation, and bearing, as it does, direction for life-change, this projected world is the concern and focus of theology as a discipline. So each pericope is portraying a segment of "pericopal theology," and the integrations of all these pericopal theologies makes up the plenary canonical theology—the composite and canonical *world in front of the text.*

PERICOPE	PERICOPAL THEOLOGY	CANONICAL THEOLOGY
Pericope 1	Pericopal Theology 1	
Pericope 2	Pericopal Theology 2	
Pericope 3	Pericopal Theology 3	
Pericope 4	Pericopal Theology 4	Plenary Canonical Theology
Pericope 5	Pericopal Theology 5	
…	…	
Pericope *n*	Pericopal Theology *n*	

Pericopal Theology Defined

This segment of God's ideal world that each pericope projects is the theology of that pericope. Thus *pericopal theology is the theology specific to a particular pericope—representing a segment of the plenary canonical world in front of the biblical text that portrays God in his relationship to his people—which functions as the crucial intermediary in the move from text to application.* Living by the theology of a given pericope, is to accept God's gracious invitation to inhabit his ideal world. By so doing, God's people align themselves to the precepts, priorities, and practices of that ideal world—i.e., to the will of God. So each sermon must point out the theology of the pericope under consideration, elucidating what that specific text affirms about God and his relationship with mankind—the values of the *world in front of the text.* I submit that biblical interpretation for preaching that does not discern this intermediary, pericopal theology, is *de facto* incomplete, for without discerning this entity, valid application can never be arrived at. So here is the scheme of preaching theory again: Text → Theology[12] → Application.

So sermon by sermon and pericope by pericope, more and more facets of life are aligned to values of God's ideal world. God's call in each pericope is, therefore, his gracious invitation to his people to inhabit his ideal world, and to enjoy its fullness of blessing, in the presence of God. It is a divine offer that should capture our imaginations and set afire our affections for God's ideal world. As Miroslav Volf put it: "At the heart of every good theology lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life."[13] It is a divine offer that should capture our imaginations and set afire our affections for God's

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[11] Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 9. As Kaufman noted, "[T]heology is, and always has been, an activity of what I call the 'imaginative construction' of a comprehensive and coherent picture of humanity in the world under God" (Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* [3rd ed.; Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1995], ix).

[12] As was noted, all the terms employed for this intermediary entity between Text and Application are essentially synonymous.

[13] *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 43.

ideal world, for "our action emerges from how we *imagine* the world."[14] This vision of the good life captivates us not with propositions and points but with "a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well" in every facet of our existence—a vision cast by the preacher from the word of God in the form of pericopal theology.[15] This is the vision of a *world in front of the text,* God's ideal world, painted by Scripture and portrayed in preaching—a glimpse of the divine kingdom. As this world is gradually unveiled by faithful preaching, as the community of God inhabits this ideal world pericope by pericope, in faithful application,

> [t]he goods and aspects of human flourishing painted by these alluring pictures of the good life begin to seep into the fiber of our … being (i.e., our hearts) and thus govern and shape our decisions, actions, and habits. … Attracted by it and moved toward it, we begin to live into this vision of the good life and start to look like citizens who inhabit the world that we picture as the good life. We become little microcosms of that envisioned world as we try to embody it in the here and now.[16]

This vision of the good life captivates us not with propositions and points but with a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well in every facet of our existence—a vision cast by the preacher from the word of God in the form of pericopal theology. This is the vision of a *world in front of the text,* God's ideal world—a vision cast by Scripture, a glimpse of the divine kingdom. This picture of God's ideal world and the values of the world-segment projected by a given pericope is the theology of that pericope. So we can say with Aquinas: "Theology is taught by God [in Scripture], teaches God [and how he relates to his people], takes us to God [to a life with God in his presence, in his way, in his world]"—a glorious relationship, indeed![17]

Theological Exegesis

So what is crucial for preachers is first to grasp the thrust of the text, what the author is *doing* with what he is saying, i.e., the theology of the pericope. I propose, therefore, a *theological* exegesis that privileges the text, looking for clues to its theology. For you see, within every text, there are literary and stylistic traces of authors' agendas, evidence pointing the authors' *doings*, signs that lead to the discovery of pericopal theology. Such clues can be caught only by a careful reading of the text and discerned at the level of exegesis—*theological* exegesis. In other words, my proposal works at the level of the language and structure of the text to discover the text's theology—theology from exegesis: theological exegesis—just as we saw with the 1 Samuel 15 and 2 Samuel 11–12 examples.[18]

I have demonstrated this theological exegesis in my commentaries on the Gospel of Mark and on the book of Genesis (one on Ephesians and another on Judges are on the way).[19] What I've attempted to do in these

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[14] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Cultural Liturgies 2; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 31–32.

[15] Idem, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Cultural Liturgies 1; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 53.

[16] Ibid., 54.

[17] Aquinas, *Summa* 1.1.7.

[18] It is exactly in this department that standard commentaries have failed. Instead, they perform what I call a "hermeneutic of excavation" on the text, a seemingly random exegesis that unearths all kinds of information about the text with no particular relevance for its preaching. The theological exegesis I propose seeks the gold ore in each text—exegetical clues that point to the theology of that text. Once that theology is discovered, now—and *only* now—the preacher can move to discerning valid application.

[19] Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene: Oreg.; Cascade, 2012); idem, *Genesis: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene: Oreg.; Resource, 2014); idem, *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene: Oreg.; Cascade, 2015); idem, *Judges: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (in preparation).

commentaries is go pericope by pericope and unearth the clues in the text that elucidate the theological thrust of each pericope of the book, paying attention to the text, its language and its structure. Mine is therefore a plea to *privilege the text!*—to attend to the text itself, which alone is inspired. The text is therefore not just a plain glass window *through* which we look to see the world behind it (in 1 Samuel 15: the bleating and lowing). It is also—and dare I say, it is *primarily*—a stained glass window *at* which we look, to see the world it projects in front of it (in I Samuel 15: the voice of God vs. the voice of the allures of the world). The glass, the stains, the lead, the copper, and everything else that goes into its production are meticulously planned for the appropriate effect, to tell a particular story. So too with texts. In sum, I claim that a text is primarily a stained glass window *at* which we ought to look, to see the world it projects in front of it, not a plain-glass window *through* which we look, to see the world behind it.

For each pericope, its particular world-segment is what the author wants us to catch; this is what he would want us to respond to—this is the thrust of that text, the theology of the pericope. i.e., how things should be in God's ideal world. David Buttrick was right: "The odd idea that preachers can move from text to sermon without recourse to theology by some exegetical magic or a leap of homiletic imagination is obvious nonsense." He calls for "theo-*logic*" to grasp the thrust of the text.[20] Let me repeat: Biblical interpretation that does not elucidate this crucial intermediary, pericopal theology, is *de facto* incomplete, for without discerning this entity, valid application can never be arrived at.

Pericopal Theology Distinguished

As a relatively new field in the past decade, "theological interpretation of Scripture" remains quite undefined, with a number of variant approaches to this hermeneutical operation. As a homiletician, I adopt a unique approach to theological interpretation, one operating from the vantage point of the pulpit of a preacher, rather than from the desk of a Bible scholar or from the lectern of an academic theologian. As has been noted, "theology" in "*theological* hermeneutic" as I employ it is *pericopal theology*, not biblical or systematic theology.

Here is how pericopal theology differs from systematic and biblical theology (at least as they are commonly defined). Systematic theology draws conclusions deductively from one text and integrates those with deductions from other texts, slotting them all into a variety of theological categories. D. A. Carson defines systematic theology as "the branch of theology that seeks to elaborate the whole and the parts of Scripture, demonstrating their … connections."[21] By virtue of this connecting and correlating activity, systematic theology operates at a level that is more general than does pericopal theology. The latter, on the other hand, is more inductively derived, and is constrained by the particulars of a single pericope. It deals with matters pertaining to God and his relationship to his creation, as proposed in *that* pericope. So pericopal theology is an expression of the values of God's ideal world in *that* text, that the people of God must abide by, if they are to inhabit this divine world.

The operation of biblical theology also tends to be more general than that of pericopal theology, for it develops broad biblical themes across the canon, with a strong emphasis on timelines. According to Sidney

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[20] Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," 57.

[21] "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 69–7. Also see Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 15: "Systematic theology correlates the data of biblical revelation as a whole in order to exhibit systematically the total picture of God's self-revelation."

Greidanus, "biblical theology … helps us trace longitudinal themes from the Old Testament to the New." [22] Invariably, then, the preacher will find that several pericopes, especially adjoining ones, deal with the same general themes of biblical theology, potentially resulting in the same sermon, week after week, as one moves through sequential pericopes in a biblical book. Seeing a text in the wider historical context of the canon, for which biblical theology is certainly helpful, is not the same as seeing how a particular pericope makes a specific demand of its reader as it projects a segment of the ideal world of God. "[B]iblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview, of biblical revelation."[23] But big canonical pictures tend to miss the small pericopal miniatures. And it is these miniatures (i.e., the theology of the individual pericopes) that are essential for the week-by-week life-changing transactions of preaching.

For instance Mark 8 has the healing of a blind man. If we go ahead and preach it as demonstrating Jesus' power over the retina, optic nerve, and occipital cortex, what will we do in Mark 10, when Jesus heals another blind man? Or the two feedings of thousands in Mark 6 and Mark 8? Preaching the systematic theology of these texts (the omnipotence of Jesus/God) or their biblical theology (the ability of Jesus to conquer evil/provide for his people) will yield identical sermons for those texts in each pair. In fact, Mark is actually doing two different things with each of the blind healings, and each of the crowd feedings.[24]

So, on the one hand, with systematic or biblical theology as the basis of individual sermons, distinctions between the theological thrusts of successive pericopes become harder to maintain. Operating, as these species of theology do, at a level of generality somewhat removed from the specificity of the text and the intricacy of its details, sermons on contiguous pericopes will often end up having similar goals and applications. On the other hand, given the degree of specificity prescribed by pericopal theology, the sequential preaching of pericopes would not be impeded by this handicap. The particular theological thrust of each pericope would be heard clearly, without the weekly tedium caused by the repetition of the broad themes of biblical and systematic theology.

In sum, there is, in my conception, a twofold aspect to the sermonic transaction: the exposition of the theology of the pericope—i.e., the move from text to theology—and pastoral recommendation regarding how the latter may be applied in real life—i.e., the move from theology to application: Text → Theology → Application. Pericopal theology, thus, helps bring that specific portion of the biblical text to bear upon the situation of the hearers, thereby aligning congregation to canon, God's people to God's word. Pericope by pericope, the community of God is thus increasingly oriented to the will of God as it progressively inhabits the projected canonical world. Willimon puts it well: "In preaching, we are moving people, little by little, Sunday by Sunday, toward new and otherwise unavailable descriptions of reality. … Christian preaching is not merely the skillful description of the world as it is but a bold, visionary, and demanding call to be part of a world that is to be."[25]

A Hermeneutic for Preaching: Christiconic and Trinitarian

The goal of each preaching event is, therefore, to align God's people with God's requirements in a small portion of Scripture—pericopal theology—week by week and sermon by sermon. Preaching is God's gracious invitation

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[22] *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 267. Also see Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 15–16: "Biblical theology formulates the character and content of the progress of revelation."

[23] Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 22.
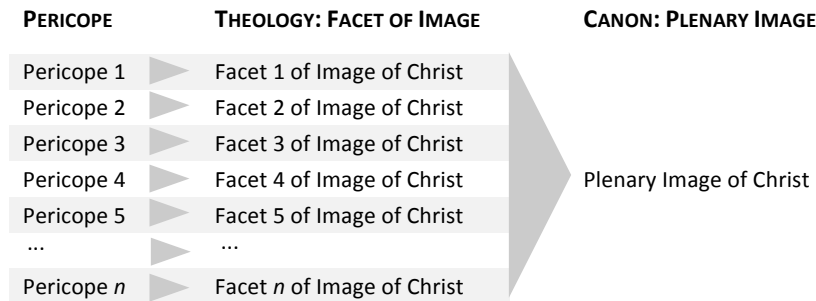
[24] For more information see the appropriate sections of Kuruvilla, *Mark*.

[25] William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 115.

to his people to live with him in his ideal world, abiding by its demands. So bit by bit, sermon by sermon, pericope by pericope, we are inhabiting God's ideal world more and more fully, as we apply the theologies of the various pericopes into our lives.

Christiconic Interpretation of Scripture

Now, since only one Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, perfectly met all of God's demands, being without sin, one can say that this Person, and this Person alone, has fully met every thrust of every pericope of every book of the Bible. He alone has comprehensively abided by the theology of every pericope in Scripture. In other words, with regard to the *world in front of the text,* Christ alone has perfectly inhabited the *world in front of the text.* Or to put it yet another way, each pericope of the Bible is actually portraying a characteristic of Christ. Each pericope portrays a world-segment depicting a facet of the image of Christ, showing us what it means to perfectly fulfill, as he did, the particular divine demand in *that* pericope.

PERICOPE	THEOLOGY: FACET OF IMAGE	CANON: PLENARY IMAGE
Pericope 1	Facet 1 of Image of Christ	
Pericope 2	Facet 2 of Image of Christ	
Pericope 3	Facet 3 of Image of Christ	
Pericope 4	Facet 4 of Image of Christ	Plenary Image of Christ
Pericope 5	Facet 5 of Image of Christ	
…	…	
Pericope *n*	Facet *n* of Image of Christ	

The Bible as a whole, the collection of all its pericopes, then, portrays what a perfect human looks like, exemplified by Jesus Christ, the perfect Man. By him alone is God's world perfectly inhabited and God's demands perfectly met. In other words, Scripture portrays Christ's image. And on our part, by living by the theology of the pericope, pericope by pericope and sermon by sermon, we become progressively more Christlike, as we align ourselves to the image of Christ displayed in the theology of each pericope. Preaching facilitates the conformation of the children of God into the image of the Son of God. After all, God's ultimate goal for his children is that they look like his Son, Jesus Christ, in his humanity—"conformed to the image [εἰκών, *eikōn*] of His Son" (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 3:19; 4:13–16; Col 1:28; etc.). So I have labeled this model of interpretation for preaching *christiconic.*

Likewise also from 1 Samuel 15, one facet of what it means to be Christlike is to listen exclusively to the voice of God, shunning all worldly voices. And so on and on, pericope by pericope. This is the purpose of preaching: "We proclaim Him, instructing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, that we may present every person mature in Christ. For this also I labor, striving according to His working that works powerfully in me" (Col 1:28).

I liken preaching, then, to hypothetical multiple, weekly visits to a doctor. Say you are visiting me, a dermatologist, this week.[26] I might tell you how to take care of your dry skin. Next week, if you return, I might advise you on how to take precautions in the sun. The week after that, you might be given recommendations regarding your moles. After that, I'd offer tips on how to care for your hair. Then, your nails. And so on. As you follow my recommendations, your dermatological status is being improved week by week, and you are well on your way to developing perfect skin!

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[26] The practice of dermatology forms the profession of my other life, the care and cure of diseases of the skin, hair, and nails.

After several weeks of this, you might decide to visit your cardiologist. The first week she might tell you all about controlling your blood pressure. The week after that, how to maintain an exercise regimen. Then, how to control your cholesterol with diet and a prescribed statin. And so on, week by week, till you attain to a perfect cardiovascular state. You might then move on to a endocrinologist, and after a few weeks of that, a gastroenterologist, nephrologist …. In short, slowly and steadily, you are being perfected in health, assuming, of course, that you do what your doctor tells you to do.

So also for preaching. Week by week, pericope by pericope, sermon by sermon, as God's people align ourselves to the divine demand in these pericopes, to the demands of their world-segments (i.e., pericopal theology), they are being molded, slowly and steadily, into the image of Christ, the only one who fully kept divine demand, and who perfectly inhabits the *world in front of the text.* So it is through the entire corpus of Scripture—all 66 books—that we learn what it means to be Christlike. Calvin agreed: "Christ, through whom we return into favor with God, has been set before us as an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life. What more effective thing can you require than this one thing? Nay, what can you require beyond this one thing? For we have been adopted as sons by the Lord with this one condition: *that our life represent Christ*" (*Institutes* 3.6.3).

And this, I venture to propose, is the primary function of Scripture and, therefore, the primary purpose of preaching! Again: Preaching is the means by which we are made Christlike. This is why 2 Tim 3:16–17 declares that "all Scripture is profitable" to render every person mature, i.e., Christlike—to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). And thereby believers gradually become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), a privilege that will be consummated on the day of glory. But even in this life, as one is increasingly aligned to divine demand pericope by pericope, one is gradually being conformed to the image of Christ. "[M]en are image of God in so far as they are like Christ. The image is fully realized only through obedience to Christ; this is how man … can become fully man, fully the image of God."[27]

Trinitarian View of Preaching

And not only that, with this christiconic hermeneutic for homiletics, preaching also becomes fully Trinitarian. Here is our scheme again: Text → Theology → Application. Which is to say, the Holy Spirit's words of the text of Scripture (2 Pet 1:21: Text) portray the image of Christ (Rom 8:29: Theology), and when God's people become increasingly Christlike, in a sense the Kingdom of the Father—God's ideal world—will have come to be (Matt 6:10: Application). In preaching in this fashion, with this christiconic hermeneutic, the text inspired by the Holy Spirit that depicts Jesus Christ will have become life in the people of God, and the will of Father will have been done and, in a sense, his kingdom will have come—all for the glory of God!

On that happy doxological note, I'll stop, reiterating my best wishes to Joykutty George for an abundantly blessed future of continued pastoral ministry that edifies the people of God, that earns the pleasure of God, and that abounds to the glory of God, as the children of God are conformed to the image of the Son of God, through the preaching of the word of God.

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[27] D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *TynBul* 19 (1968): 103.