

Preaching as Translation via Theology



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Abstract

The homiletical understanding is strikingly parallel to the transaction of translation. Both endeavors seek to render a text into a valid product—a new linguistic text in one, sermonic application in the other—that, while demonstrating relevance for a fresh setting, maintains authority of the source text. It will be proposed that the key hermeneutical entity governing the validity of application in the homiletical translation from text to praxis is the theology of the pericope being considered. This entity, pericopal theology, will be defined and its significant role in preaching delineated.

Introduction

Application is the culmination of the exercise of preaching, whereby the biblical text is brought to bear upon the lives of the congregation in a manner that seeks to align the community of God to the will of God, for the glory of God. Therefore, a fundamental issue for homileticians has always been the determination of application that is faithful to the textual intention (i.e., authoritative) and fitting for the listening audience (i.e., relevant). The struggle to bridge the gap between ancient Scripture and contemporary listeners in order to provide valid application is parallel to the transaction of *translation*. This paper will explore the metaphor of translation to demonstrate how the preacher might effectively move from text to praxis by means of the theology of the particular pericope being handled in the sermonic endeavor.¹ The peculiar nature of texts that necessitates “translation” in the preaching of a biblical pericope will be considered, and a theological means to achieve this end proposed.²

Translation and Preaching

The singular property of texts that obliges both the linguistic translator and the biblical preacher to undertake translation is the phenomenon of distanciation; indeed, the goal of both agents is to neutralize distanciation by saying the “same thing” as their respective source texts.

Texts and Distanciation

Texts are unique communication acts, estranged from their authors, their maiden audiences, and the original circumstances of their composition—they have undergone distanciation.³ Interpretation seeks to counter this distanciation, a task aided by the fact that distanciation does not render the text utterly orphaned: it bears artifacts of the event and context of writing, and traces of the author in its script, medium, content, arrangement, etc. Such residues are essential for interpretation, and are sufficiently present in most texts to establish the writer’s purpose. Nevertheless, the physical absence of the writer at the point of the text’s reception by the reader ensures that the scenario of dialogue no longer operates in textuality as it does in orality.⁴ For a text in another language, it is the translator that becomes the hermeneutic intermediary between text and audience; for the biblical text, the preacher serves that office. The proximity of such a mediator to the audience enables the former to regenerate the message of the text effectively for the latter. This is the role of both translator and preacher—human intermediaries between author and readers/listeners “rendering the communicative action of the script in new situations,” for the goal of translation is “to enact the way, the truth, and the life in new settings, to make Christ live within new contexts.”⁵

Fidelity in Translation and Preaching

“Translation” is derived from the Latin *trans* (“across”) and *latus* (“to carry”). The translator carries a text across a linguistic gap; the preacher, too, seeks “to carry across” the applicational import of a passage of Scripture to a congregation across the communicational

chasm between text and audience. In principle, there is no difference between the translation of a text in a different language and that of a text in a different time; in the case of the Bible, it is both in a different language *and* from a different time. Both textual translation and biblical preaching attempt to demonstrate the relevance of a source text for a new setting. Both seek to render the original into a valid, new product—a text in a different, contemporary language in the one; fresh sermonic application in a different, contemporary context in the other. While there is thus an element of *novelty* in these enterprises of translation and preaching, both also strive to be faithful to the source text, seeking to maintain its authority in the new product—the element of *fidelity*. Translation seeks to be faithful to the source text (to be “author”-itative), while at the same time attempting to render that text accessible to a reader, in the new language and idiom of the latter (to be relevant). In like fashion, generating application to stimulate life-change for the glory of God, the homiletician is charged not only to lead meaning *from* the biblical text with authority, but also to direct meaning *to* the situations of listeners with relevance. Thus “translation” is descriptive of both the linguistic operation and the preaching enterprise.

Saying the “Same Thing”

“A translation...implies that although we are speaking in a different language, we are still saying the *same thing*.”⁶ Whether linguistic or sermonic, translation is an attempt to say the “same thing” to a contemporary audience, the translated product in either case seeking to be faithful to the source text, thereby bearing its authority. As a consequence of saying the “same thing” as the source text in the new context, the distanciation between author and reader is nullified.

The phenomenon of “false friends” illustrates this eloquently: the meaning of the word “g-i-f-t,” for instance, depends, at the very least, on what language the script is in. To disregard the linguistic context of the text “g-i-f-t” written in German (= “poison”), and to read it as English would be thoroughly misleading, if not dangerous.

In order to be understood by an English-speaking audience, *gift* in German must be translated to *poison* in English. Only then will the English reading be faithful to the conceptual core of the German text—“a chemical substance that causes injury, illness, or death.” This conceptual core (the “same thing”) maintains an equipotent identity in both worlds—that of the author and that of the reader—irrespective of language or context. Such a translation is not an option; it is necessary *in order that* the translated product may remain faithful to the original, saying the same thing as the latter.⁷ Across the gulf between the textual world and the readerly world, conceptual identity (the “same thing”) has to be faithfully carried: “one...has to posit a transworld identity in order to make a translation of meaning from one world to another.”⁸ With regard to the interpretation and application of Scripture, Richard Hays declared that “[o]nly historical ignorance or cultural chauvinism could lead us to suppose that no hermeneutical ‘translation’ is necessary” for a contemporary audience to grasp the ancient biblical text.⁹ Fidelity to the original requires that the linguistic, temporal, and contextual changes be taken into account; i.e., translation *must* occur.

David Clark observed that interpreters of Scripture who refuse to change the reading of the normative text in a changed situation (those who resist translation) are *transporters*, naïvely carrying the “untranslated” biblical text into fresh contexts and violating its transworld identity and conceptual core intention. *Transformers*, on the other hand, attempting to be relevant, alter the text, making no attempt at faithfulness to it. R. Judah ben Ila’i sagely remarked: “If one translates a verse literally [a transporter], he is a liar; if he adds thereto [a transformer], he is a blasphemer and a libeler” (b. *Qidd.* 49a). On the other hand, responsible *translators*, unlike transporters and transformers, are those who speak a new language in the new context, thus faithfully proclaiming what is affirmed by the text and its transworld conceptual core.¹⁰ This is to assert that untranslated readings of a text are likely to be readings of infidelity. To say the “same thing” as the original text, then, is not merely to repeat the latter verbatim. The conceptual thrust of the text must be isolated, to which all of that text’s translations/applications must align,

if one wants to say the “same thing” as the source. And thereby distancing, the result of textuality, is counteracted.

The rest of this paper will propose a means to achieve the goal of faithful translation in preaching, that enables the interpreter to say the “same thing,” conferring fidelity (and thus authority) to sermonic application.

Theology in Preaching

The core thrust of the text that must be translated, this paper proposes, is the “world in front of the text”—the theology of the pericope being preached.

The “World in Front of the Text”

Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the “world in front of the text” provides a helpful category to understand the conceptual thrust of the text.¹¹ The text is not an end in itself, but the means thereto, an instrument of the author’s action of employing language to project a transcending vision—the “world in front of the text”. Literary works of any kind are essentially referential phenomena. A Hollywood western movie, for instance, goes beyond panoramic vistas of wild frontiers, horses, outlaws, sheriffs, and the narrative of their interactions. Another implicit, to-be-inferred theme refers to “the way depicted actions embody, instantiate and/or formulate ethical knowledge and values.” The film genre of the western, that depicts a particular society in the western United States of the late 19th century, projects a world with the themes of individual rights, responsibilities, and codes of honor in the face of evil. Such a world is projected for all time, not just restricted to the historical era of the narrative; so much so, if that medium/text were inspired, it would be advocating a kind of behavior for all its future audiences, beckoning them to inhabit the projected world with its particular brand of ethics. Thus the text not only tells the reader about what actually happened (what the author *said*), it also projects a “world in front of the text” (what the author *did* with what was said) that

bids the reader inhabit it. Such implied thrusts of texts are always facets of ethical value; they are especially evident in proverbs and maxims. “Birds of a feather flock together” semantically makes a statement about avian social behavior, but also projects a world in which readers, being warned of guilt by association, eschew questionable company.¹²

The determination of the world so projected is thus an integral undertaking of biblical hermeneutics intended to culminate in application. This “world in front of the text” is the core conceptual thrust of a text that, when translated, helps discover application that is faithful to the original source. Indeed, such a notion is appropriate to all categories of texts intended for application at times and places distal to their origin, including, and especially, religious and legal writings.¹³ Unlike other utterances, though, the inspired text of Scripture is unique in its subject matter: in, with, and through all that it says, the A/author projects a world that portrays God and the specific details of His relationship with his creation. That world is not necessarily the way the world actually is. Rather, it is a world that *should be* and *would be*, were God’s people to align themselves to it. The elucidation of the specifics of this “world in front of the text” is therefore an essential transaction in biblical interpretation, for that world, comprising the thrust of the text, provides the platform from which to develop faithful and valid sermon application (that says the “same thing” as the source text).

The Projected World: An Example

If one considers the imperative, “be not drunk with wine” (Eph 5:18), one might ask what the core conceptual thrust of the text is, that is conveyed by “wine.” Would it be acceptable to be drunk with an alcoholic beverage *other than* wine? Distanciation of the text and the resultant change in context call for that imperative to be translated in order to generate valid application—a transaction engaged in by the preacher.

Community governance is in view in the latter half of Ephesians, with guidelines for living embedded in a cascade of contrasts

between the dynamics of the “new self” and the “old self” (4:17–5:14). Drunkenness is paralleled with walking unwisely and being foolish, and is explicitly labeled “dissipation,” used elsewhere in the NT only in Titus 1:6 (1:7 mentions addiction to wine) and 1 Pet 4:4 (4:3 has drunkenness). Wine, while its use is not condemned in the NT (see 1 Tim 5:23), is clearly not to be abused (3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; 2:3); inebriation is marked as folly and as a characteristic of those who operate in the lifestyle of the old self. Filling by the Spirit, on the other hand, is a characteristic of the wise, those displaying the lifestyle of the new self.¹⁴ Spiritual filling refers to the abiding presence of God in Christ mediated by the Spirit (note the instrumental use of the Greek preposition *en*, in Eph 5:18) with, in, and among His people. In exhorting the Ephesians to be filled by the Spirit rather than be drunk with wine, Paul is essentially commanding them to become, corporately, the unique temple of God, the dwelling place of God in Christ, by the Spirit (also see 1:23; 3:19; 4:13). Filled in this fashion, the Christian community is to engage in spiritual worship (5:19–20).¹⁵

The conceptual core of Eph 5:18, then, portrays a world in which believers refrain from drunkenness with *any and all manner of alcoholic beverages capable of rendering one intoxicated*.¹⁶ Translation to the specific world of a specific listener is now possible; the consequences for application are evident: drunkenness is proscribed, whether it be with vodka, whiskey, or any conceivable ethanol-containing concoction. The core thrust of the text, the “world in front of the text,” thus forms the basis for “translation” to derive valid application for a contemporary audience.

Pericopal Theology

This paper proposes to call that world projected by the text the *theology of the pericope*, inasmuch as it portrays God and the relationship he intends to have with his people. It is a world where kingdom priorities, principles, and practices are portrayed (in Eph 5:18, it is a world in which God’s people refrain from intoxication with alcoholic potions of any kind). Therefore it can rightly be called “theology”—“that skein of thought and language in which

Christians understand themselves, the Bible, God, and their everyday world.”¹⁷ The theology of a particular pericope, then, is a specific segment, a quantum, of the larger canonical world; all such individual pericopal segments together compose a holistic understanding of God and His relationship to his people. It is such a world that God graciously invites humanity to inhabit. Thus one might define *pericopal theology* as the theology specific to a particular pericope (the representation of a segment of the plenary world projected by the canon) which, bearing a future-directed intention, functions as the crucial intermediary—the element that enables the preacher to say the “same thing”—in the homiletical move from text to praxis.

Scripture, thus, displays to readers how God relates to His creation, by portraying a world governed by divine priorities, principles, and practices, and offers to the believer the possibility of inhabiting that “world in front of the text” by subscription to God’s values and obedience to God’s demands—a new way of living: God’s way. The biblical canon as a whole projects a composite divine world. However, in the weekly homiletical transaction that moves the church towards inhabiting that world, it is the pericope that remains the most basic textual component handled. As the fundamental textual entity in ecclesial and homiletical use, and as a relatively irreducible scriptural quantum composing a single sense unit, each pericope projects a portion of that broader ideal world projected by the canon. Each pericope demarcates a segment of that plenary vision of God’s relationship with His creation, the details of which segment are unique to that text and are derived from its particulars. The cumulative projections of all the individual pericopes of Scripture therefore constitute the integrated, singular, canonical world. And to this world of Scripture, Christians are called to align their lives. Therein lies the utility of the projected world (*pericopal theology*), for with its future-directed intention, it makes possible valid application in contexts far removed from those of the original utterance or discourse. The preaching endeavor, therefore, must include the explication of this pericopal slice of the canonical world, elucidating what that specific text affirms about God and His relationship to mankind. What the pericope so affirms

in its theology forms the basis of the subsequent homiletical move to derive application. Derived as it is from the text, the theology of the pericope confers fidelity (and thus authority) to the sermonic application that is subsequently derived from this intermediary.¹⁸

Needless to say, the situation of the audience is an important parameter for the translator-preacher: what specifically is accomplished in readers and hearers varies from era to era, situation to situation, and even from person to person. However, as long as these varied applications fall within the bounds of the same pericopal theology, they are but instances of a single type, spawned from the single conceptual core thrust of the text. Therefore all such applications are saying the “same thing” as the source text; distanciation is conquered, and fidelity to the original maintained.

Pericopal Theology Distinguished

Pericopal theology, in this conception, is neither the imposition of a systematic or confessional grid on textual data, nor the result of an exclusively historical or sociological focus on the subject matter. Rather, it elucidates the textually mediated theological truth of the pericope at hand, attending to the contribution of that particular textual unit to the plenary canonical world displaying God and humanity rightly related to Him. In this, pericopal theology differs from systematic or biblical theology. *Systematic theology* pays attention to the entailments of what is written, drawing conclusions deductively from one text and integrating those with deductions from other texts (for instance, the assertion of the divinity of the Holy Spirit discovered from a number of biblical texts). By its integrative activity, it operates at a more general level than does pericopal theology. Pericopal theology, more inductively derived, is constrained by the specific thrust of that particular pericope. *Biblical theology* falls somewhere in between as it identifies the development of broader biblical themes across the canon.¹⁹ Therefore, its level of operation also tends to be more general than that of pericopal theology. The advantage of the greater degree of specificity that by definition is inherent in pericopal theology is the possibility of moving from pericope to pericope, week by week, for those who

seek to preach in that fashion. On the other hand, with systematic and biblical theology as the basis of sermonic preparation, if one chooses to preach pericope by pericope, clear distinctions between the sermonic aims of successive pericopes become harder to maintain. Operating as systematic and biblical theology does at a level of generality somewhat removed from the immediacy of the text and its details (at least at a level farther than is the locus of pericopal theology), contiguous pericopes will often tend to have similar thrusts, making *lectio continua* on a weekly basis virtually impossible to sustain without repetition of sermonic/applicational goals.²⁰ However, given the degree of specificity prescribed by pericopal theology, preaching pericope by pericope would not be impeded by this handicap, were one to make the theology of the pericope the bridge to application.

This, of course, is not to declare that sermons and applications constructed upon systematic theology or biblical theology have no place in the homiletical calendar. The goal of this proposal is simply to add another arrow to the preacher's quiver, one that will help those keen on preaching pericope by pericope, progressively unfolding the world projected by the canon. Week by week, and pericope by pericope, as specific portions of Scripture are brought to bear upon the situation of the hearers, the community of God is gradually and increasingly (re)oriented to the will of God as it "inhabits" the canonical world segment by segment.

Conclusion

In employing the metaphor of translation, this paper has explored how the sermon and its application may manifest the authority of the text and maintain fidelity to the original while, at the same time, relevantly translating that text for a particular audience. The theology of the pericope functions as the bridge between text and praxis, between the circumstances of the textual inscription and those of the reading community. As a pericopal segment of the canonical world that displays God and His relationship to his creation, the theology of a particular biblical pericope facilitates the valid and legitimate translation from the "then" to the "now"

with fidelity; it enables the preacher to say the “same thing” as the text. The theology of the pericope is, thus, the ideological locus in which the priorities, principles, and practices of the projected divine world are propounded for appropriation by readers and listeners. Discovering this entity should therefore be an important goal of interpretation of all biblical texts, for it is *via* this critical intermediary that an interpreter can move from text to sermon, from authoritative inscription to relevant application. Scripture is not merely informative, but also transformative; the A/author was projecting a world in such a way that the theological thrust of the pericope would be emphasized, allowing the past to flow over into the present. Sermonic proclamation of a biblical text, therefore, is complete only with the translation of the text, via pericopal theology, to praxis.

Notes

1. While acknowledging its more common connotation of a portion of the Gospels, “pericope” is employed here to demarcate a segment of Scripture, irrespective of genre or length, that forms the textual basis for an individual sermon.
2. Portions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Homiletics Society, Birmingham, AL, October 16–18, 2008.
3. See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (ed. and trans. John B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145, 147.
4. It is granted, of course, that authorial distanciation refers only to the alienation of the *human* agency involved in the creation of the text of Scripture. Notwithstanding the constant presence of the Spirit of God (the divine Author of the Bible) with the believing interpreter, it is the remoteness of its *human* authors that essentially necessitates the interpretive enterprise—the engagement of languages, the exploration of historical contexts, the examination of literary and rhetorical aspects of the text, etc.
5. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 131.
6. William Hordern, *Introduction (New Directions in Theology Today, vol. I; London: Lutterworth Press, 1968)*, 142 (emphasis added).
7. Lawrence Lessig, “Fidelity in Translation,” *Texas Law Review* 71 (1992–

- 1993): 1165–1268.
8. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., “Counterfactuals in Interpretation,” in *Interpreting Law and Literature: A Hermeneutic Reader* (eds. Sanford Levinson and Steven Mailloux; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 63.
 9. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 5–6.
 10. See David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003), 53, 56; Hordern, *Introduction*, 141–142; and Lawrence Lessig, “The Limits of Lieber,” *Cardozo Law Review* 16 (1995): 2262.
 11. Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics: Ideology, Utopia, and Faith,” in *Protocol of the Seventeenth Colloquy*, 4 November 1975 (ed. W. Wuellner; Berkeley: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1976), 1–28; idem, “Naming God,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979): 215–27.
 12. Peter Seitel, “Theorizing Genres – Interpreting Works,” *New Literary History* 34 (2003): 285–286. For the distinctions between what the author *said*, and what the author *did* with was as said, as it pertains to biblical interpretation, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 374; London: T. & T. Clark, 2009).
 13. With regard to a “classic” legal text, the U.S. Constitution, James Boyd White observes: “What is required in interpreting the Constitution ... is something like translation, a bringing into the present a text of the past” (“Judicial Criticism,” in *Interpreting Law and Literature: A Hermeneutic Reader* [eds. Sanford Levinson and Steven Mailloux; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988], 403–404). So also, Lawrence Lessig: “Like the linguistic translator, the judge is faced with a text (say, the Constitution), written in an original or source context (America, late eighteenth century); she too must write a text (a decision, or an opinion) in a different context (America, today); this decision, in its context, is to have the *same meaning* as the original text in its context” (“Fidelity and Constraint,” *Fordham Law Review* 65 [1996–1997]: 1371, emphasis original).
 14. Interestingly enough, in the book of Acts, the ministry of the Spirit was mistaken for drunkenness (2:4, 13, 15).
 15. See Timothy G. Gombis, “Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in Its Epistolary Setting,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53 (2002): 265, 268; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 379–381; and Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990), 348.
 16. The theology of the whole pericope, Eph 5:15–20, might be summarized thus: Rather than remaining under the control of alcohol—unwise and

foolish—members of the Christian community live wisely, understanding God's will and in a manner befitting the temple of God, controlled by the presence of God in Christ mediated by the Spirit, the consequence of which is spiritual worship.

17. Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 9.
18. While the concept of theology as a bridge between text and sermon has oft been invoked in the past, what exactly that theology comprises and how it might perform its role has not been explicated. See Heinrich Ott, *Theology and Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 17; John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester, U.K.: InterVarsity, 1981), 43; John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137; Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 463–486; and idem, "The Theological Process in Sermon Preparation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 336–356.
19. For similar definitions of biblical theology see, among others, B. S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 10; Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 267; Elmer A. Martens, "Tackling Old Testament Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977), 123; and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centred Hermeneutics: Biblical-Theological Foundations and Principles* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), 68, 271.
20. For a critique of such a *modus operandi*, see Abraham Kuruvilla, "Book Review: *Preaching Christ through Genesis*, by Sidney Greidanus," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 8 (2008): 137–140.