

APPLICATIONAL PREACHING*

Abraham Kuruvilla

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST THREE ARTICLES IN THIS SERIES have developed a Vision for Preaching.¹ A recap is in order.

The biblical canon as a whole projects a canonical *world in front of the text*—God’s ideal world—segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes. Each pericope of Scripture projects a segment of the canonical *world in front of the text*. Thus each sermon on a particular pericope is God’s gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by meeting the requirements of God’s ideal world as called for in that pericope’s world-segment. Or to put it another way, as they accept the divine invitation in each pericope, week by week and sermon by sermon God’s people are applying pericopal theology and thereby progressively and increasingly inhabiting God’s ideal world. This is the goal of preaching.

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 theological thrust of every pericope. Christ alone has perfectly inhabited the *world in front of the text*. In other words, each pericope of the Bible is actually depicting a facet of the 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, God incarnate, the perfect Man. So Scripture portrays Christ’s image. And by living by the

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¹ Abraham Kuruvilla, “Pericopal Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (January–March 2016): 3–17; idem, “Christiconic Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (April–June 2016): 131–46; and idem, “Theological Exegesis,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (July–September 2016): 259–72.

theology of each pericope God's people become progressively more Christlike, aligning themselves to the image of Christ displayed in the theology of each pericope. Thus, preaching facilitates, sermon by sermon, 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 [εἰκῶν] of His Son" (Rom. 8:29)—a *christi-conic* hermeneutic.² This final article of the series continues outlining implications of the vision for preaching begun in the third article.

In the proposal of this vision for preaching, I am seeking to portray what preaching is in an ideal sense, and what the characteristics of this unique form of address are. Here, again, is my vision for preaching.

VISION for PREACHING	
Biblical preaching, by a leader of the church, in a gathering of Christians for worship, is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture discerned by theological exegesis, and of its application to that specific body of believers, that they may be conformed to the image of Christ, for the glory of God —all in the power of the Holy Spirit.	<i>Preaching is Biblical</i> <i>Preaching is Pastoral</i> <i>Preaching is Ecclesial</i> <i>Preaching is Communicational</i> <i>Preaching is Theological</i> <i>Preaching is Applicational</i> <i>Preaching is Conformational</i> <i>Preaching is Doxological</i> <i>Preaching is Spiritual</i>

As I noted in the last article, I deliberately call this a "vision" rather than a "definition." It is a goal to be aimed at, a trajectory to be developed. Such an approach concedes that a spectrum of activities may be labeled "preaching": addresses delivered during a worship service, at a Bible conference, in a seminary chapel, during a gathering of men (or women or young adults or other groups), by a guest speaker, and so on. The difference between these activities is one of degree—the (unquantifiable) extent to which each approximates the vision in being biblical, pastoral, ecclesial, communicational, theological, applicational, conformational, doxological, and

² For further details, see idem, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015).

spiritual. So this vision for preaching is simply an encouragement to preachers to keep traveling towards that broadly outlined goal (“vision”), rather than to arrive at some precisely pinpointed destination (“definition”).

This article will consider the *biblical, pastoral, ecclesial*, and *applicational* facets of this vision for preaching.

PREACHING IS BIBLICAL

“*Biblical preaching . . .*” The community of God’s people holds that the divine discourse that comprises the Christian canon is to be preached as normative for the faith and practice of the church. If preaching is to be biblical, respecting 2 Timothy 3:16–17, which declares *all* Scripture to be profitable for rendering every person mature, that is, Christlike, then *every* text of Scripture must be preached. How can one begin to accomplish this?

While most of the evidence about the liturgical practices of the synagogue comes from the second century after Christ onwards, it is clear that quite early on, the pattern of communal utilization of Scripture in measured doses came to be directed by Jewish lectionaries that prescribed what passages of the Bible were to be read and preached on a given day. Appropriately divided sections of the text (pericopes) were read in continuous fashion (*lectio continua*, “reading continuously”) from week to week, each subsequent reading taking up from where the previous one had left off. This was the oldest approach to the exposition of Scripture, and it was the standard practice on non-festival Sabbaths in Jewish synagogues. In all likelihood, this protocol of continuous reading was bequeathed to the church, and this sequential assimilation of Scripture, *lectio continua*, appears to have been the norm for most of early church history.

By the fifth century, however, the proliferation of feasts and special days in the church calendar and the allotment of specific biblical texts for each of those days rendered readings almost entirely *lectio selecta* (“reading selectively”). The textual assignments for these occasions were based upon the significance of the particular saint or the special day being celebrated. Such selections of the biblical text were rarely contiguous, and thus *lectio continua* fell into disuse. Soon, the complexity of the festal calendar required that texts allocated for particular occasions be listed formally, and so Christian lectionaries configured for this purpose came into existence. Unlike most of church history, the Middle Ages therefore suffered a dearth of *lectio continua* sermons. It was not until the Reformers that this practice returned to popularity in churches.

Luther advised: “One of the books should be selected and one or two chapters, or half a chapter, be read, until the book is finished. After that another book should be selected, and so on, until the entire Bible has been read through.”³ So also Calvin:

What order must pastors then keep in teaching? First, let them not esteem at their pleasure what is profitable to be uttered and what to be omitted; but let them leave that to God alone to be ordered at his pleasure. . . . [M]ortal man shall not be so bold as to mangle the Scripture and to pull it in pieces, that he may diminish this or that at his pleasure, that he may obscure something and suppress many things; but shall deliver whatsoever is revealed in the Scripture.⁴

A couple of crucial assumptions operate in the practice of *lectio continua*. Firstly, *all* portions of Scripture are valuable and worthy of being preached. The tendency to pick and choose texts based on preacher’s fancy, significance of event, or ease of exposition is to be strongly resisted. Secondly, individual pericopes are properly interpreted only in the context of the rest of the book, and it is the protocol of continuous reading and preaching that clarifies the relationship of part to whole. Preaching by *lectio continua* affirms the pericope’s indissoluble unity with its textual neighborhood. Thus the integrity of a whole book may not be disrupted by preaching noncontiguous pericopes.

What, then, is the role of topical preaching that necessarily deals with diverse texts of Scripture in a single sermon? There is undoubtedly a place in the life of the church for *ad hoc* sermons—those that are topical in nature—to meet the needs of particular situations and circumstances, be they national in scope (to address wars, terrorism, special days), or local (to address celebrations, bereavements, weddings), or theological (to address doctrinal weaknesses, spiritual issues, or festivals on the church calendar). Such sermons may be biblical in the sense that their ideas are drawn from the Bible. However, I submit that to be biblical, not only do ideas have to be from Scripture, but also the sequential development of the trajectory of a particular book incrementally developed has to be respected. Thus the preaching of sequential pericopes in any given book ought to be the staple (and stable) practice of preachers (*lectio continua*). Only then can one catch the theology of a text, the agenda of the author, in its fullest sense. Jesus’s healings of the blind men in Mark 8 and 10 can be preached in isolated

³ Martin Luther, “Concerning the Order of Public Worship (1523),” in *Liturgy and Hymns*, vol. 53 of *Luther’s Works*, trans. Paul Zeller Strodach, rev. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 12.

⁴ *Commentary on Acts* 20:26.

fashion as proving his divinity and omnipotence (a systematic theology topical sermon that expounds Jesus's control over the optic apparatus and exhorts listeners to trust in the Great Physician). But Mark's thrust with each of these texts is different, and their discrete pericopal theologies may be caught only as one moves through the book, pericope by pericope.⁵ Thus, while not discounting the value of the occasional topical sermon, I strongly recommend that the regular diet of the congregation be sequential sermons through books of the Bible—*lectio continua*. One scholar with an aversion to topical messages advised his students "to preach a topical sermon only once every *five* years—and then immediately to repent and ask God's forgiveness!"⁶ I have to confess there is some merit to this recommendation.

In short, to preach pericopes sequentially is a significant part of what it means to preach biblically. *Lectio continua* requires the interpreter to seek application in every portion of the canon, pericope by pericope, week by week, and to catch the sequential development of ideas within a given book. Preaching is *biblical!*

PREACHING IS PASTORAL

"Biblical preaching by a leader of a church . . ." The recent iterations of the iPhone have Touch ID, Apple's fingerprint scanning security system. Gone are the days of passwords to unlock your phone. Now all you need to do is put one of your fingers on the sensor and—*voilà!*—your device is instantly accessible. Only the one whose fingerprints were recorded during set up can use the device. In other words, there is a rightful person authorized to operate that iPhone. No one else can. And no one else should.

I claim that preaching, too, has similar constraints. Not all can preach. Not all should preach. Biblically and historically, preaching has always been pastoral, with the shepherd of the flock engaging in the formal and corporate ministry of the Word. In other words, there is an authorized person for this important task. Now, by "pastoral" I don't necessarily mean a particular office. All I'm emphasizing is the importance of integrating preaching with the pastoral *function* of shepherding, whatever the context—whole church, Bible study group, youth group, and others.

⁵ See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 155–68 and 226–37. So also the crowd-feedings in Mark 6 and Mark 8 are distinct in their theological thrusts (*ibid.*, 129–41 and 155–68).

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 19.

When the Israelites returning from exile assembled for the reading and exposition of the divine law, the leaders of the assembly were at the forefront of the endeavor (Neh. 7:73b–8:18). Thirteen named leaders of the community stood by Ezra the protagonist, on his right and his left, as Ezra read. These leaders were the prime activators of the reading of God’s Word for God’s people. Subsequently, another group of thirteen named leaders (Levites) explained this reading to the people. “Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood [six named leaders] on his right hand, and [seven named leaders] on his left hand. . . . And [thirteen named Levites] explained the law to the people as the people remained standing. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clarifying to give the sense so that they understood what was read” (8:4, 7–8).

This pastoral nature of preaching was documented early in church history. Justin Martyr in the second century recorded a typical worship service, with the “leader” taking the responsibility for preaching: “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the leader⁷ verbally instructs and exhorts the imitation of these good things” (*1 Apol.* 67). It falls to the pastoral leader to preach because the regular exposition of Scripture is part of the task of shepherding: preaching is essential for spiritual formation. There cannot be a severance between preaching and pastoring, between the exposition of God’s Word and the shepherding of God’s people. The two form an inseparable and integral unity, and so it is a leader of the church who must preach. Preaching is, in its essence, spiritual formation from the pulpit—truly a pastoral ministry.

It is preaching that, undertaken for the long term, sets the vision (i.e., the image of Christ) for that local body, and how that vision (Christlikeness) may be accomplished—a critical task, indeed! Herman Melville observed through his character Ishmael, “The pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. . . . Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”⁸ The pulpit is, indeed, the prow of God’s ship, the church!

⁷ Or “presider” (ὁ προεστώς), the one presiding over the gathering. The verb is also found 1 Thessalonians 5:12 to refer to those with pastoral and teaching authority: “those who are over you/presiding/leading.”

⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The White Whale* (Boston: The St. Botolph Society, 1890), 42.

And pastor-preachers stand at the bow, bearing the burden of edifying the people of God. It is they who have immersed themselves in the Word of God and the things of God. It is they who, therefore, must convey to the children of God, with discernment and sensitivity, what a particular text means for the lives of their flocks and how they might align themselves to the will of God in that text.

Of course, it is obvious that not anyone and everyone can be a preacher, for the gifts of the Spirit are not universally distributed in monotonous uniformity, “but to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). “Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then [workers of] miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, gifts of leadership, [different] kinds of tongues. Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? Not all are teachers, are they? Not all are [workers of] miracles, are they? Not all have gifts of healings, do they? Not all speak with tongues, do they? Not all interpret, do they?” (vv. 27–30). No, not everyone is identically gifted, and therefore “not all” engage in these activities; so also for preaching.⁹ As Luther wryly put it: “If everyone wanted to preach, who would want to listen? If they preached at the same time, it would become like a racket made by frogs: ‘Croak, croak, croak!’ Instead, it should happen in this way: the congregation should set in place someone who is competent for it to preach.”¹⁰

I have used “leader” in my vision of preaching quite deliberately: “Biblical preaching, by a *leader* of the church”—whether pastor or teaching elder in the context of the whole church, or one bearing another title in another context. Irrespective of label, the one who preaches must be one who also shepherds the flock (or a part thereof) and is pastorally involved with the lives of people on a consistent basis.

With that in view, there is a place for ordination to the task of preaching, particularly for those engaging in that ministry in a more public venue. Ordination implies two dimensions in the service of every Christian in the church, a public dimension and a more private one. It is the public nature of the preaching ministry that calls for this restriction of ordination. Many may have the gift,

⁹ And, for that matter, not everyone who works in a hospital is a nurse; neither is everyone who plays on the football field a linebacker.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “Sermon for the First Sunday after Easter, John 20:21–29,” in *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John Chapters 17–20*, vol. 69 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown, trans. Kenneth E. F. Howes (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2009), 330–31.

the talent, and the capacity to preach, but not all are legitimized to exercise that gift on behalf of the larger body, though they may, of course, do so at other, less public venues. Legitimation of public ministry in the larger gathering of the church comes with ordination, which is essentially a corporate recognition of the public ministry of an individual.

Ordination is, however, not just a human appointment. It has two facets and two primary agents who act in this transaction; there is a divine appointment and a human affirmation of that divine appointment. In the sixteenth century, the Lutheran Reformer Martin Chemnitz observed, “For through laying on of hands the person called is set before God, as it were, so that there might be a public and outward testimony that the call is not only a human matter, but that God himself calls, sends, and appoints that person for ministry.”¹¹ There is a priority of divine action in ordination: God’s hand comes first, then human hands—a corporate recognition of the giftedness of an individual by God and of that one’s capacity to undertake the public ministry of God’s Word. The appointment of a pastor-preacher is a sacred trust, and the responsibility of preaching, one of immense gravity for the preacher: “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. . . . I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . . preach the word” (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 4:1–2). Preaching is *pastoral!*

PREACHING IS ECCLESIAL

“Biblical preaching by a leader of a church, *in a gathering of Christians for worship* . . .” In the annals of Dallas Theological Seminary, my alma mater and the institution where I teach, there is the story of a graduating student who chose to wear shorts at the commencement exercises. Apparently, he was not allowed to “walk” on stage to receive his diploma. The relevant authorities saw fit to determine that some items of clothing were out of place for such a solemn occasion. He is said to have collected his diploma in private, no doubt clothed in a lower-limb outfit of his own choice. But a soher pair of pants was deemed appropriate at public ceremonies such as graduations. Likewise, one does not jump into a swimming pool wearing a jacket and tie, or a fancy gown. There is an appropriate place for certain activities, too. One doesn’t do jumping jacks in a church service. I don’t do ballet as I see patients in my derma-

¹¹ *Ministry of Word and Sacrament: An Enchiridion* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), 36–37.

tology clinic. You don't send text messages while in a car driving.

So also for preaching. There is a proper locus for that activity. And extracting preaching from its proper locus, conducting it anywhere and everywhere, divorcing it from the biblical, historical, and pastoral contexts of which it is an integral part, renders preaching, to a great extent, devoid of its significance and its potency. Was my speaking at a Bible conference "preaching"? How about the message I delivered in the chapel of my institution? What about the monologue I offered at a lunchtime Bible study for medical students? Or a discussion at a gathering of singles in my church? Do these discourses constitute preaching? Where can/should/must preaching occur? I submit here that *preaching is ecclesial*; that is to say, a vision for preaching sees this activity as ideally occurring in the gathering of a group of Christians for worship. Such a formal assembly of the church is the liturgical locus where ordinances are practiced, praises are sung, prayers are made, offerings are given, and sermons delivered. After all, worship, in its entirety, is the proper and primary response of the people of God to the voice of God.

A DEFINITIONAL ASIDE

Because the goal of preaching is to conform mankind to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), and because the first step of such conformation is the placing of one's trust in Jesus Christ as one's only God and Savior, the proclamation of the good news of salvation has also generally been considered (and translated in the New Testament as) "preaching" (from κηρύσσω).¹² However, in the Bible, evangelistic "preaching" is never a formal exposition of a specific biblical text that contextually interprets authorial thrust, discerns divine demand, and draws out relevant application. And rarely is κηρύσσω itself textually sourced; more often than not, the verb is used in the New Testament in the generic sense of "announcing/proclaiming" as, for instance, in Revelation 5:2.¹³

Evangelistic proclamation deals with the announcement to nonbelievers about an accomplished act—the atoning work of Christ (with evidence from Scripture, perhaps). Thus the message and application in evangelistic proclamation remains the same in

¹² Another verb employed in the New Testament for such announcements of the gospel is εὐαγγελίζω, "to proclaim the good news" (1 Cor. 9:16; Gal. 1:16).

¹³ Exceptions where κηρύσσω is actually employed for textual exposition occur in Romans 2:21–22, where "preaching" deals with the Decalogue, a specific text of the Mosaic law, and in 2 Timothy 4:2 (in connection with 3:16), where κηρύσσω is the exposition of a source text.

its every iteration: *Trust Jesus Christ as your only God and Savior!* Edifying preaching, on the other hand, involves the exposition of a particular biblical text and the specific demand of *that* text upon the life of the Christian. The message and application in edifying preaching varies from sermon to sermon, depending on the text utilized. In other words, the audiences, methods, emphases, and goals of employing Scripture for proclamation of the gospel and using it for preaching for edification are distinct. Therefore, in my discussions here, “preaching” deals with the exposition of a particular biblical text to discern divine guidelines for Christian living. Such a narrowing not only reflects the use of a specific portion of Scripture as the basis of preaching, but also makes another distinction: “preaching” refers to the ministry of the Word to those who are *already* part of God’s people, the ecclesial community. Evangelistic proclamation—essentially an announcement of the redemptive work of Christ—is a call to faith for those outside the perimeter of the church. Thus it falls into a separate category.¹⁴

THE LITURGICAL NATURE OF PREACHING

Preaching as a historical practice conducted among God’s people at worship has its origins in the Old Testament. The primary text for this is Nehemiah 7:73b–8:12, as we have seen, which records the reading and interpretation of Torah in the context of a liturgical assembly. In fact, the account is bracketed on either end by a gathering of “all the people” (8:1, 12). This focus on the corporate assemblage of the people of God is remarkable; such a gathering serves as the primary context of the ministry of God’s Word, and the entire undertaking is an act of worship (v. 6)—the appropriate accompaniment to the exposition of Scripture.

There is also evidence in the New Testament of preaching occurring in formal gatherings of God’s people for worship (Luke 4:16–21; Acts 13:14–15; 15:21). The liturgical context of the preaching event is also evident in its frequent juxtaposition with the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and other key elements of the worship of the early church (Acts 2:42; 20:7, 11). In short, exposition of Scripture was an integral element of formal worship assemblies of the people of God, alongside other liturgical elements that are, even today, important facets of the worship of the church. Several second-

¹⁴ This does not mean that one should not present the gospel when preaching. I often do so myself, even if the text I’m preaching does not call for it—it is not a *hermeneutical* constraint imposed by the chosen text of Scripture. Rather, I do so frequently simply because I’m uncertain if everyone in my audience is a believer—it is a *pragmatic* constraint that I choose to abide by.

century Christian writings attest to preaching being an indispensable part of these worship activities. Justin Martyr's account of a Sunday worship gathering (which we encountered earlier) is instructive. After describing the leader preaching, he writes: "Then we all rise together and pray, and . . . when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the leader in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying 'Amen!'" (Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 67). Tertullian (*The Soul* 9) includes in worship services the "reading of Scriptures," "chanting of psalms," "preaching of sermons," and "offering of prayers." All of this suggests that preaching was an intrinsic element of worship in the early church.

So if preaching is integral to worship, and if it is frequently juxtaposed with other liturgical elements, particularly the Lord's Supper, is the exposition of God's Word sacramental, as is that ordinance?

THE SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF PREACHING

"Sacrament" is derived from the Latin *sacrare*, "to consecrate, to set apart as sacred, to devote to deity"; the root *sacer* also shows up in the English "sacred." There can be no doubt that the exposition of Scripture is a "consecrated" activity—concerning itself with the "consecrated" word, conducted by a "consecrated" individual, in a "consecrated" event, the gathering for worship of a "consecrated" people, the saints of God. If we begin with the straightforward definition of "sacrament" as a visible form of invisible grace that affects, impacts, and transforms people, surely it would be hard to disagree that the "visible" exposition of Scripture is an "invisible" divine impartation of grace.¹⁵ Ben Witherington states,

While "de jure" baptism and the Lord's Supper are the Protestant sacraments, "de facto" there has always been another one, and in fact one that has been seen and believed to have a far more regular and enduring effect—namely the Word of God. . . . If a sacrament is a means of grace, by which is meant a means of divine influence and change in a person's life, then surely the Word of God and its proclamation, reading, hearing, learning, [and] memorizing is a sacrament.¹⁶

¹⁵ "A sacrament properly so called is the [visible] sign of God's grace and the form of invisible grace" (Peter Lombard, *Book of Sentences* 4.1).

¹⁶ "The Word as Sacrament," November 9, 2007, accessed February 1, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Ezwmnu>. "Sacrament" generally focuses on the *divine act* involved—God's offering grace to those participating in the Lord's Supper and baptism. In that case, the exposition of Scripture must also be sacramental: note the "activity" of

Both preaching and the Lord's Supper are *proclamations* of Christ, as 1 Corinthians 11:26 and Colossians 1:28 affirm, employing the same verb, *καταγγέλλω*. Besides, both need the mediation of divine activity to be efficacious. As Calvin noted:

Both in the preaching of the Word and in the use of the sacraments [the Lord's Supper], there are two ministers, who have distinct offices. The external [human] minister administers the vocal word, and the sacred signs [elements of the Lord's Supper] which are external, earthly and fallible. But the internal [divine] minister, who is the Holy Spirit, freely works internally, while by his secret virtue he effects in the hearts of whomsoever he will their union with Christ through one faith [1 Cor. 3:5–7; Acts 16:14].¹⁷

In other words, preaching is no less sacramental than the ordinances, making the prime locus of the former the same as that of the latter—the gathered body of Christ in worship.¹⁸ No wonder that, in times both ancient and modern, “word and sacrament” have existed side by side in Christendom. Preaching, thus, is sacramental and a liturgical act. This raises the issue of the presence of God in the sacramental and liturgical act of preaching.

Perhaps the one aspect of similarity between the sacramental acts of preaching and the Lord's Supper that has been forgotten in the modern era is the fact of Christ's presence in both. Calvin declared, “The sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace” (*Institutes* 4.14.17). In other words, both of these liturgical activities, the Lord's Supper and preaching, in a special sense evoke the presence of God the Son. That makes sense, for the goal of preaching is to conform believers to Jesus Christ, and so it is the *Christicon* that is being depicted in the preaching event.¹⁹ All that to say, in these sacramental engagements in worship, Christ is there; he is *really* present. And this presence is acutely experi-

Scripture as God extends grace to mankind through it (1 Thess. 2:13, it “works”; Acts 6:7 and 12:24, it “grows”; Col. 3:16, it “dwells”). The more common Protestant term “ordinance” focuses on the *actions of believers* in these events—their partaking of the bread and cup, and their undergoing baptism.

¹⁷ *Summary of Doctrine Concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments*, Article 5.

¹⁸ Rather than label preaching a “sacrament,” I consider preaching sacramental, “to express the reality of God's presence through human instrumentation or divine activity through human labor.” See J. Mark Beach, “The Real Presence of Christ in the Preaching of the Gospel: Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 81, 92 n. 38.

¹⁹ Kuruvilla, “Christiconic Interpretation,” 131–46.

enced in the celebration of the Lord's Supper and in the preaching of God's Word in that context of worship. Preaching is *ecclesial!*

PREACHING IS APPLICATIONAL

"Biblical preaching . . . is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture . . . *and of its application to that specific body of believers . . .*" Preaching is applicational. That is to say, life change has to be called for, in specific fashion, as the pericope preached demands. Preaching that solicits listeners' alignment to the divine requirement in each pericope is not justification oriented but, rather, sanctification oriented, intended for those *already* in relationship to God. For, in Scripture, relationship to God is always followed by responsibility.²⁰ That is to say, when men and women come into relationship with God, God always stipulates how they should live—in accordance with the values of his ideal world, his kingdom. Indeed, such a theme resonates even through the Pentateuch. God elected a people; *then* he required of them obedience to divine demand. Notable is the prefacing of the Ten Commandments (responsibility) by an announcement of relationship: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). Relationship always precedes responsibility. "First God redeems Israel from Egypt, *and then* he gives the law, so obedience to the law is a response to God's grace, not an attempt to gain righteousness by works."²¹

Obedience, or even a willingness to obey God, was never a criterion for establishing a relationship between God and his people. The initiation of the divine-human relationship was entirely a unilateral divine act of love and grace, apprehended from the human side by faith alone. Thus, God's plan, all along, has been to direct the behavior of those who were already his children.²² Relationship always precedes the responsibility; obedience is the response of God's people to his prevenient operations of grace. Therefore, a loving relationship with God should result in the keeping of his commandments, as the New Testament is not hesitant to point out in John 14:21; 1 John 2:3–5; 3:21–24; 5:3. And it is the role of each

²⁰ See *idem*, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 151–209, for further discussion of this issue.

²¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 117–18.

²² But with time, what God had intended as guidelines for sanctification were misconstrued as means of justification—a self-glorifying, flesh-driven, merit-attempting, grace-rejecting, faith-negating obedience to law (i.e., God's values, standards, and demands)—the legalism Paul so often excoriated.

pericope of Scripture to spell out what those commandments of God are, so that the children of God might keep them and be holy, as God, their Father, is holy.

Needless to say, it is also God who empowers his people to obey him. The Holy Spirit now indwells them, enabling them to overcome the flesh and meet God's "righteous requirement." Indeed, this was the purpose of God's redemptive intervention—"so that the righteous requirement of the law may be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). The power of God through the Spirit is at work in the believer, enabling obedience and a life that pleases God (Eph. 2:10; 3:16; Phil. 4:13; Col. 1:9–11). In other words, it is God's grace through Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit that enables believers to obey God's commands, a fact that even the Old Testament affirmed: "I will put My Spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep and obey My ordinances" (Ezek. 36:27).

While there is no salvation-merit to be won by obedience, there is nonetheless great value in obeying God's requirements.²³ Application of Scripture *is* profitable. God takes pleasure in the obedience of his children, and there are benefits that accrue from his pleasure, even though his people's obedience is a consequence of God's own gracious operation in them. Indeed, Colossians 1:10 encourages the believer to "walk worthy of the Lord, in everything pleasing [Him], bearing fruit in every good work." Jesus himself pronounced on the importance of obedience, explaining that the experience of divine blessing (here, God's love) is contingent upon such a walk with God: "If you keep My commandments, you will remain in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and remain in His love" (John 15:10).²⁴ All this to say, there is much value in application for the believer, not to mention that such obedience is God-glorifying. "Now may the God of peace . . . equip you with every good thing to do His will, doing in us what is pleasing before Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever. Amen!" (Heb. 13:20–21).

May God help us, through his Spirit—not just to preach—but also to live lives pleasing to him and worthy of the name of his Son, to whom be glory forever. Amen!

²³ See Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!*, 252–58, for the importance of abiding by God's "righteous requirements."

²⁴ And there are the benefits of eternal rewards, too, of course.



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