

## TIME TO KILL THE BIG IDEA? A FRESH LOOK AT PREACHING

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**Abstract:** *This essay traces the history and development of the “Big Idea” in preaching and reviews its methodology—the distilling of a text of Scripture and the preaching of that distillate. Both operations are found wanting in hermeneutical rigor; the resulting detrimental ramifications are addressed. A fresh look at preaching then describes this central mode of Christian communication as a novel form of text-based address unknown to classical rhetoricians, calls for attending to authorial doings with texts (discerning the theology of pericopes), and considers textual interpretation as not only a science but also an art, texts being both discursive (in their sayings) and non-discursive (in their doings). Such a conception of texts entails that preaching be conceived more as demonstration than as argumentation. A narrow and circumscribed role for text reductions is also offered.*

**Key words:** *Big Idea, hermeneutics, rhetoric, homiletics, preaching, reduction, Pericopal Theology, interpretation, demonstration, argumentation, semantics, pragmatics*

To craft a sermon that logically presents the big ideas of the text to hearers is not the same thing as designing a sermon as a piece of drama intended to precipitate a powerful and life-changing experience.<sup>1</sup>

The late Haddon Robinson, a stalwart of evangelical preaching theory and praxis, was the one who tagged and named the Big Idea in his magisterial work *Biblical Preaching* (1980). The multiple editions of this tome have made it one of the most widely used homiletics textbooks in evangelical seminaries worldwide. Expository preaching, Robinson asserts, is “the explanation, interpretation, or application of a *single dominant idea* supported by other ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Essentially, this Big Idea is a proposition, comprising a subject and a complement.<sup>3</sup> Though a variety of terms

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 33 (emphasis added). Subsequent references to this work indicate its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 22. In Robinson’s conception there is both an “exegetical [big] idea,” as well as its converted product, the “homiletical [big] idea.” For ease of discussion, I will not make much of the difference between the two—it is only in style that the two appear to be different: the latter is to be “in fresh, vital, contemporary language,” “up-to-date” and “personal” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 69). In this essay, I will not be dealing with applicational aspects of preaching, choosing to confine myself to the hermeneutical matters of interpreting texts and the rhetorical issues of how to conceive of a sermon.

have been employed, the label “Big Idea” has stuck and the notion has influenced evangelical preaching for close to four decades. In that span, language philosophy has come far, calling for a reevaluation of this basic tenet of hermeneutics for homiletics.

## I. HISTORY OF THE BIG IDEA

Robinson declared that “to ignore the principle that a central, unifying idea must be at the heart of an effective sermon is to push aside what experts in both communication theory and preaching have to tell us.”<sup>4</sup> In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle put the concept of a Big Idea into words: “A speech has two parts. It is necessary to state the subject, and then to prove it. . . . The first of these parts is the statement of the case.”<sup>5</sup> Cicero, three centuries later, touted the “major premise” of an oration, “which sets forth briefly the principle from which springs the whole force and meaning of the syllogism [argument]” (*On Invention* 1.37.67).<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, he demarcated one of the “brilliant and effective” parts of a speech as “the discussion of a general principle, which . . . the Greeks call *θέσις* or ‘proposition’”—our Big Idea (*Orator* 36.125).<sup>7</sup> So did Quintilian in the first century CE: “The Proposition, whenever it can profitably be introduced, must be (1) clear and lucid . . . and (2) short and not burdened by any superfluous word. We are not explaining what we are saying, but what we are going to say.”<sup>8</sup>

In the nineteenth century, John A. Broadus, designated by Charles Spurgeon as “the greatest of living preachers,”<sup>9</sup> carried on the legacy of the ancients, explicitly calling homiletics “a branch of rhetoric.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Aristotle had asserted that the “statement of the case and proof . . . are appropriate to *every speech*.”<sup>11</sup> Homileticians concurred. To a question on what made a good sermon, Charles Simeon replied: “Apply the word of God to the hearts and consciences of your hearers, presenting *the main truth* contained in your text.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Art of Rhetoric* (trans. J. H. Freese; LCL 193; Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1926), 3.13, 1414a (425).

<sup>6</sup> *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topic* (trans. H. M. Hubbell; LCL 386; Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1949), 111.

<sup>7</sup> *Brutus. Orator* (trans. G. L. Hendrickson, and H. M. Hubbell; LCL 342; Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1939), 399. Also see Cicero, *On the Orator*, 2.41.177; 3.13.46. The *propositio* (proposition) is the main statement of a legal case; sometimes this was expanded into *narratio* (narration), an account of the facts of the case; both were located at the beginning of a speech, right after the *exordium* (introduction).

<sup>8</sup> *The Orator's Education, Volume II: Books 3–5* (ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell; LCL 125; Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2002), 4.5.26 (309; also see 3.9.1–3, 5; 4.4.1–2, 5; 4.5.1–2).

<sup>9</sup> As attested by J. H. Farmer, “John A. Broadus,” *The McMaster University Monthly* 4 (June 1894–May 1895): 343.

<sup>10</sup> *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Philadelphia: Smith, English & Co., 1871), 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Art of Rhetoric*, 3.13, 1414b (427) (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> “A Dialogue Between Diaconus and Pastor, on the Subject of the Ministry,” *The Christian Observer* 20.12 (December 1821): 745 (emphasis original).

Modern-day thinkers and exponents of preaching do not stray far from these notions of their predecessors: “Homileticians join their voices to insist that a sermon, like any good speech, embodies a single, all-encompassing concept,” to be crafted and conveyed as a Big Idea (or its equivalent).<sup>13</sup> Most of them cite J. H. Jowett approvingly: “I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as a crystal. . . . I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps no one had as much influence on Robinson’s thought as Henry Grady Davis, who said: “A well-prepared sermon is the embodiment, the development, the full statement of a significant thought. . . . Because a sermon is a developed thought, that thought is central to the sermon.”<sup>15</sup> John R. W. Stott calls preachers to look for the “text’s dominant thought . . . because every text has a main theme.”<sup>16</sup> Grant R. Osborne recommends that “the pastor/teacher should . . . determine the single point the writer has been trying to develop. . . . We are true to Scripture only if we develop the ‘big idea’ (Robinson’s term) that the author intended.”<sup>17</sup> Sidney Greidanus concurs: “The theme of the sermon is a summary statement of the unifying thought of the *sermon*. . . . It seeks to articulate the message of the sermon in one short sentence.”<sup>18</sup> Ronald J. Allen refers to such a statement as a “sermon-in-a-sentence.”<sup>19</sup> Donald R. Sunukjian treads the same path: “The expositor must first condense the teaching of the passage into a single sentence which will summarize and unify his entire message.”<sup>20</sup> This “take-home truth” is equated to the Big Idea, “the essential core of what the author is saying,” “the idea that dominates all other ideas,” “the central truth that the author is trying to get across.”<sup>21</sup> Duane Litfin asserts that “the history of public speaking and the lessons we have learned from that history unite to argue forcefully that a speech, to be maximally effective, ought to attempt to develop more or less fully only one major proposition.”<sup>22</sup> Bryan Chapell also approvingly cites Robinson’s Big Idea, as well as his subject and complement questions that determine it—“the foundational questions

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<sup>13</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> *The Preacher: His Life and Work: Yale Lectures* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), 133–34.

<sup>15</sup> *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 20–21. Davis goes on to dissect the anatomy of this “central idea,” finding in it a subject and a complement (*ibid.*, 24–40).

<sup>16</sup> *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 224.

<sup>17</sup> *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 358.

<sup>18</sup> *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 136.

<sup>19</sup> *Preaching the Topical Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 64.

<sup>20</sup> “The Homiletical Theory of Expository Preaching” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1974), 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 65, 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 80 (emphasis removed).

of an expository sermon.”<sup>23</sup> On finding the main point of a passage, John MacArthur Jr., writes, “This concept is referred to as the ‘big idea,’ the thesis, or the proposition. It is the main idea the passage is teaching.”<sup>24</sup> Timothy Keller observes that “a sermon must be like an arrow, streamlined and clearly driving at a single point, a single message, the theme of the passage.”<sup>25</sup> Almost without exception, all Big Idea proponents call for the creation of this entity as a propositional sentence, and its expression as such in a sermon.

## II. BIG IDEA METHODOLOGY

My concerns with this approach to analyzing texts and preaching sermons stem from the assumptions that behind every text is an essential truth that can be reduced and expressed in propositional form as a Big Idea (distilling the text), and that that Big Idea is what is to be preached to listeners (preaching the distillate).

1. *Distilling the text.* The Big Idea is extracted from the pericope in question by means of a reduction, involving “an ability to abstract and synthesize,” as Robinson confesses. “An idea, therefore, may be considered a *distillation* of life. It abstracts out of the particulars of life what they have in common and relates them to one another.”<sup>26</sup> Almost two centuries ago, Simeon adumbrated that notion: “Reduce your text to a simple proposition.”<sup>27</sup> More recently, Sunukjian, pointing to Paul’s sermons in Acts, agreed: “each address *crystallizes* into a single sentence which expresses the sum and substance of the whole [textual] discourse.”<sup>28</sup> Walter C. Kaiser calls for “*principilizing* the text paragraph by paragraph into timeless propositions which call for an immediate response from our listeners.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, for Timothy S. Warren, by principilizing, “specific contextualizations are eliminated and specific behaviors [in the text] generalized.” Such a distilled extract and core of the text is the “timeless, transcultural theological proposition” (the Big Idea).<sup>30</sup> For principilizers, then, cultural issues apparently “intrude” on the text, seemingly a distraction from the principle behind the text: “Principles ... must be given priority over accompanying cultural elements.”<sup>31</sup> Another who continues in this vein is Wayne McDill: “As we hear what the text is saying, we are identifying the *text idea*. That

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<sup>23</sup> “What is the author [of the passage] talking about?” and “What is he saying about what he is talking about?” *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 25.

<sup>24</sup> “A Study Method for Expository Preaching,” in John MacArthur Jr. et al., *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (ed. Richard L. Mayhue; Dallas, TX: Word, 1992), 219–20.

<sup>25</sup> “A Model for Preaching (Part One),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 12/3 (1994): 40.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 20 (emphasis added). I use “pericope” simply to designate a preaching text, irrespective of genre or length.

<sup>27</sup> “A Dialogue Between Diaconus and Pastor,” 745 (emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup> Donald R. Sunukjian, “Patterns for Preaching: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Sermons of Paul in Acts 13, 17, and 20” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972), 176 (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Teaching and Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 236 (emphasis added).

<sup>30</sup> “The Theological Process in Sermon Preparation,” *BSac* 156 (1999): 342, 346.

<sup>31</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “A Principilizing Model,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (ed. Gary T. Meadors; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 21.

theme will become your *sermon idea* as well.”<sup>32</sup> According to Osborne, a key step in the move from text to sermon is the determination of “the underlying theological principle behind the text.”<sup>33</sup> All this reflects a tendency towards a sort of eliminative reductionism that breaks things down to their constitutive parts; these elementary components are then taken to be more real and more valuable than the whole.<sup>34</sup> So the dross of a text is distilled off to leave behind the gold of a Big Idea that is then preached. Or, as Fred B. Craddock wryly put it, “the minister boils off all the water and then preaches the stain in the bottom of the cup.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, propositions end up having a self-contained existence independent of the text and denuded of all its specificity—the gold without the dross, the kernel without the husk, the candy without the wrapper!

Such an operation assumes that the text is a conglomeration of unordered (disordered?) data. And the distillate is the product of the interpreter’s reworking of this raw textual data and its massaging into something supposedly more intelligible and easier to grasp (and preach)—the Big Idea. One would then have to wonder at God’s wisdom in giving the bulk of his Scripture in non-propositional form. Perhaps deity would have served himself and his people better had he just stuck to a bulleted list of timeless Big Ideas rather than messy stories and arcane prophecies and sentimental poetry, all of which turn out to be merely illustrations or applications of “underlying ... principle[s] behind the text.”<sup>36</sup> This Big Idea approach of traditional evangelical homiletics may even suggest that once one has gotten the distillate of the text, one can abandon the text itself. In fact, a recent Study Bible seems to imply exactly that. Its publisher contends that this product “complements” the Bible “by elaborating on 1,500 principles in Scripture that are as relevant today as when the sixty-six books of the Bible were written. *Distilling* these truths into principles, ... helps the reader more easily remember and effectively apply the Bible’s wisdom to everyday life.”<sup>37</sup> Boiling off the water and preaching the stain!

*a. 2 Samuel 11–12.* Take, for instance, the story of David’s adultery and murder in 2 Samuel 11–12. Here are the principles from that text as suggested in the aforementioned study Bible:<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 75 (emphasis original).

<sup>33</sup> *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 343.

<sup>34</sup> Michael S. Hogue, *The Promise of Religious Naturalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 213.

<sup>35</sup> *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 123.

<sup>36</sup> Such a concept also assumes that the Big Idea was what came first into the mind of the author. Then he supposedly hunted around in a book (scroll?) of illustrations for the right story within which shell he might couch the Big Idea kernel.

<sup>37</sup> See “Life Essentials Study Bible,” <http://www.bhpublishinggroup.com/books/products.asp?p=9781586400453> (accessed March 1, 2018; emphasis added).

<sup>38</sup> *Life Essentials Study Bible: Biblical Principles to Live By* (ed. Gene A. Getz; Nashville: Holman, 2011), 402–6.

Principle #6 (2 Sam 11:1–3): “When we are most vulnerable physically, emotionally, and spiritually, we must be on guard against Satan’s attacks.”

Principle #7 (2 Sam 11:4–5): “We should take deliberate steps to keep sexual temptation from becoming sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions.”

Principle #8 (2 Sam 11:6–27): “To avoid continued moral failures, we must openly acknowledge our sin.”

Principle #9 (2 Sam 12:1–12): “We should be especially on guard against self-deception and rationalization when we fail morally.”

Principle #10 (2 Sam 12:13–23): “Though the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins, we should not expect all negative consequences to suddenly disappear.”

Principle #11 (2 Sam 12:24–25): “Once we acknowledge our sins and experience God’s forgiveness, we should move forward in our lives, relying on God’s unconditional love.”

Another pair of writers came up with this single exegetical idea from 2 Samuel 11–12: “David learns to accept what the grace of God gives him and what the grace of God does not.” And “the exegetical idea can be turned into a timeless proposition by stating it as follows: ‘Believers must learn to accept what God’s grace has given them and what that grace has not.’” Or, a condensed version thereof: “Believers must learn to be content with God’s gracious gifts.”<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, when we look closely at the text, we find that these Big Idea sympathizers neglect critical exegetical observations that clue the interpreter into what the thrust and force of 2 Samuel 11–12 is all about<sup>40</sup>:

The chiasmic structure of 2 Samuel 11–12:

- A Sin/conception (11:1–5)
  - B Sin concealed (11:6–13)
    - C Actual crime (11:14–27a)
      - D Evil in Yahweh’s eyes (11:27b)
        - C’ Parabolic crime (12:1–6)
          - B’ Sin exposed (12:7–15a)
            - A’ Death/conception (12:15b–25)

The ophthalmic malady: The incompatibility between David and Yahweh (Who gets to decide what’s evil and what’s good?): “Let not this thing *be evil in your*

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Borden and Steven D. Mathewson, “The Big Idea of Narrative Preaching: What Are the Clues to Interpreting a Story?” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators* (ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 279 (emphasis removed). One really does not need 2 Samuel 11–12 to come up with all these Big Ideas; one could as easily have gotten them from the NT.

<sup>40</sup> For more details on this pericope, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 118–27.

eyes” (David to Joab in 11:25); and “But the thing that David had done *was evil in the eyes of Yahweh*” (the narrator, in 11:27).

The Hittite model: The critical contrasts between the two protagonists. On the one hand is the Jewish king, unfaithful and disloyal, willfully engaging in adultery with the spouse of one of his warriors. On the other hand is that Hittite soldier, besotted Uriah, emerging more faithful to Yahweh, liege, and comrades, than does the sober David.

The “send” motif: The unusual repeats of the verb “to send,” a concentrated imperial motif (11:1, 3, 4, 6 [×3], 12, 14, 27): David sends; everyone jumps. Until 12:1, where Yahweh—who now appears for the first time in the narrative—does some “sending” of his own, turning the tables on the hubristic ruler who thinks *he* can decide what is evil and what is good.

The punishment merited: Yahweh would “take” David’s wives (חָלַק, 12:11), just as he had “taken” Bathsheba (חָלַק, 11:4; 12:9, 10).<sup>41</sup> This “taking” by Yahweh would be “in his [David’s] sight”—his wives would be lain with “in the sight” of the sun (12:11; see 16:22), and on the same roof whence David had commenced his contemptible conspiracy.

The blot on David’s reign: The scorning of Yahweh and his word (12:9, 10) was heinous indeed, and that not by a private individual but by Yahweh’s anointed himself, the king of God’s chosen people (Israel/Judah is mentioned five times in 12:7–15). The fact that these nefarious affairs had given occasion for the enemies of Yahweh to blaspheme him (12:14) would also not be forgotten (1 Kgs 15:5, a black mark till the very end).<sup>42</sup>

All this to say that the text is not merely a *plain glass* window that the reader can look *through* (to discern some Big Idea lurking behind it—“the underlying ... principle behind the text”). Rather, the text, with all the nuances of its language, structure, and form, is a *stained-glass* window that the reader must look *at*.<sup>43</sup> Such a window is carefully designed by the craftsman: the glass, the stains, the lead, the copper, and everything else that goes into its production are meticulously designed to generate a particular experience. So, too, with texts. The interpreter must, therefore, pay close attention to the text, privileging it, not just to discover some kernel hidden in it, but to experience the thrust and force of the text *qua* text, in toto and as a whole—the text irreducible into any other form.

*b. Schenkerian analysis and the Big Idea.* Big Idea distillation in hermeneutics and homiletics has a comparable analogy in music scholarship. The Viennese music theorist, Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) propounded his eponymous Schenkerian analysis of music that examines the underlying structure of a piece. One of the

<sup>41</sup> And just as the rich man had “taken” the poor man’s ewe lamb in Nathan’s parable (חָלַק, 12:4). In that prophet’s denunciatory fiction, “eat” and “drink” and “lie” (12:3) poignantly echo the “eating,” and “drinking” and “lying”—the relationship between Uriah and his wife (11:11).

<sup>42</sup> While the narrative’s overall tone is retributive, there is also, no doubt, a remedial impulse—albeit lesser in importance—portraying the grace of God to the repentant sinner (12:13). That, however, is not the thrust/force of this pericope that is consumed by the commission and condemnation of sin.

<sup>43</sup> This metaphor is borrowed (and modified) from Greidanus, *Modern Preacher*, 196.

basic premises of his work was to attend to “melodic motion at *deeper* levels,” that is, “beyond the musical surface.”<sup>44</sup> Schenker proposed approaching music “from the foreground (the score of the complete piece) to the background . . . , through a series of levels representing the successive ‘reductions’ of the piece.”<sup>45</sup> The final product he termed the *Urlinie* (primal/fundamental line), “an archetypal succession of tones.”<sup>46</sup> Here is an example, my admittedly amateur Schenkerian analysis of the first eight measures of the 1939 hit, “Over the Rainbow.”<sup>47</sup> The top staff shows the melody. Conceivably, that delectable tune could be “reduced” to a descending scale (the *Urlinie*, bottom staff, derived from the circled notes in the top staff), all else in the composition being considered mere ornament (those notes *not* circled in the top staff).



Interestingly enough, one of Schenker’s most important pupils, Felix Salzer, called this sort of analysis akin to “deduction.”<sup>48</sup> Can one ever consider this Schenkerian deduction/distillation of “Over the Rainbow” (its “Big Idea”) equivalent to the original piece (“text”), bearing all of its power and pathos? I think not. Yet, traditional homiletics continues to reduce a text to what is assumed to be a text-equivalent distillate—the Big Idea. But most of the Bible does not present itself in propositional Big Idea form. Therefore, to convert a text into a Big Idea is surely going to entail significant loss of its details, meaning, power, and pathos, thereby deflating the thrust/force of that text, just as my Schenkerian reduction would do to “Over the Rainbow.” Such a “lossy” reduction (of a text) is equivalent to a photo (of a person), or the theme (of a musical work), or the summary score (of a ball game), or any number of other distillations that can never substitute for the real thing.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> David Beach, *Advanced Schenkerian Analysis: Perspectives on Phrase Rhythm, Motivation, and Form* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xv, 3 (emphasis added).

<sup>45</sup> Karl-Otto Plum, “Towards a Methodology for Schenkerian Analysis” (trans. William Drabkin), *Music Analysis* 7 (1988): 143.

<sup>46</sup> “The Urlinie: A Preliminary Remark” (trans. Robert Snarrenberg), in *Der Tonville: Pamphlets in Witness of the Immutable Laws of Music, Volume 1*, by Heinrich Schenker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>47</sup> E. Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen © 1938, 1939 (renewed 1966, 1967), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc.

<sup>48</sup> Felix Salzer, *Structural Hearing: Tonal Coherence in Music* (New York: Dover, 1962), 206–7.

<sup>49</sup> “Lossy” primarily describes the mp3 digital audio coding format which, in contrast to CD-quality (“lossless”) versions of music, utilizes compression that discards of much of the original data in a re-

But in the Big Idea world, such a distillate of the text can effectively depose the text from its rightful throne and stand alone. Then the only reason to advert to the text when preaching is to substantiate for listeners that that Big Idea discovered by the preacher is indeed the nub, essence, and core of the text, the truth that must be taken home.<sup>50</sup> One could then conceive of a situation where, if the audience trusted the preacher implicitly, the latter could dispose of such proofs and even the text itself, and just plow on with the Big Idea and its sermonic development (see below).

*c. Overdetermination.* That is bad enough. But there is another major problem with this distillation enterprise—"overdetermination." The term "overdetermination" was used by Sigmund Freud to indicate that a given dream could have resulted from a number of non-competing causes.<sup>51</sup> In my Schenkerian analysis of "Over the Rainbow," I ended up with a descending scale as its "Big [Musical] Idea." That distillate could also have been derived, *mutatis mutandis*, from the initial strains of "Joy to the World" (ANTIOCH), the first few measures of Ravel's Bolero, and perhaps portions of the first movement of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G minor, or even the beginning of Victor Young's "Stella by Starlight." In other words, the product of my Schenkerian analysis is *overdetermined*, with any number of possible musical works, other than "Over the Rainbow," serving as potential sources—a natural consequence of a reductive procedure. Indeed, a contemporary of Schenker alleged that "the *Urlinien* of various masterworks all look rather devilishly alike," with any *Urlinie* conceivably being derived from very different compositions—anything "from a mosquito to a phoenix."<sup>52</sup>

The Big Idea is, likewise, causally overdetermined—it is an entity possibly having more than one set of independently sufficient causes. There are at least two important ramifications to this. First, reductions raise the possibility of *other* texts having the same Big Idea. It is obvious that every one of the Big Idea principles distilled from 2 Samuel 11–12 could equally well have come from other biblical

ording master in order to generate a file of considerably smaller size. Consider this: It is likely that at some time in the future, scientists will analyze the nutritional components of a cheeseburger and be able to reproduce its calories, carbs, proteins, fats, vitamins, etc., with a couple of pills. Do you think I should give up my cheeseburger in favor of those pills? If I were foolish enough to do so, what would I lose? The juiciness of the patty, the slightly burnt crust on its surface from the Maillard reaction, the melting magnificence of a slice of cheddar, the sweet chill of the tomatoes, the crunch of the lettuce, the silky smoothness of a bit of mayo, not to mention the holistic experience of the combined creation, the confluence of the aromas of its constituents, the sight of this glorious food plated alluringly, and the anticipatory excitement as I proceed to take a bite. Yum! (Not to mention fries—preferable the sweet potato variety.) And, no less important, the conviviality of sharing these scrumptious delicacies with friends. Compared with the pills (distillate) that scientists want to feed me, I'll take a cheeseburger any day. Because it is irreducible into anything else. Nothing can substitute for a cheeseburger (or a text) without entailing considerable loss.

<sup>50</sup> Scripture is now relegated to providing raw data that only serve to validate the preacher's Big Idea distillate. The text has become ancillary and accessorial in one's interpretive exercises, a relic of analyses past.

<sup>51</sup> "The Psychotherapy of Hysteria," in Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (trans. James Strachey; New York: Basic Books, 2000), 290.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Riezler-Stettin, "Die 'Urlinie,'" *Die Musik* 22 (1930): 509 (my translation).

passages. The specificity of a particular pericope is, therefore, always lost with its reduction into a Big Idea.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, I am convinced that no two biblical pericopes can ever have the same thrust or force. The uniqueness of wording and structure and context of any given passage renders it impossible for one pericope to have the same thrust/force as another.

Second—and perhaps, more importantly—overdetermination causes a leak in the orthodox doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration. My “Big (Musical) Idea” from “Over the Rainbow” would remain the same irrespective of the version of the song it was derived from—that of Judy Garland, Cliff Richard, Sam Harris, Ariana Grande, or Eric Clapton. Multiple, differing versions of the same song in different keys, in different arrangements, and by different performers, would yield the same distillate, my “Big (Musical) Idea.” So also, if multiple different versions of 2 Samuel 11–12—varying uninspired and creative non-biblical retellings of the story, whether oral, written, pictured, or enacted—can generate the same Big Idea then one would have to wonder why plenary verbal inspiration was necessary at all. If God wanted to convey only these “timeless truths,” there would have been no need for precision in wording the sacred text; a wide play in the verbiage of a given pericope would have still yielded the same overdetermined Big Idea.

2. *Preaching the distillate.* For those of the Big Idea persuasion, the Big Idea is not only the distillate of the text, it is also the main message that sermon listeners should be hearing, catching, taking home, and assimilating—that is, the distillate is what must be preached. Robinson asserts that “it’s what a congregation is to remember”—not the text, not the sermon, but the Big Idea. “The rest of the sermon is often like the scaffolding: it’s important, but the major thing is for people to get hold of an idea or have an idea get hold of them.”<sup>54</sup> Sunukjian sees this “take-home-truth” as “more likely to stick in the listeners’ minds and enable them to recall the truth of the message ... even if they forget everything else.”<sup>55</sup> MacArthur asserts that the Big Idea is “the target I aim for in the exposition. It is also the primary message I want my people to retain after they hear the sermon.”<sup>56</sup> The Big Idea is all that listeners need, apparently.

Almost every proponent of the Big Idea subscribes to the thesis that the resulting sermon simply expands on the distilled Big Idea core of the text. Simeon, calling for the preaching text to be “reduced to a categorical proposition,” gives a reason for doing so—“in order to take it up and prosecute it in an orderly manner” in the sermon.<sup>57</sup> In other words, once you have the Big Idea, that entity forms the foundation for arguing the sermonic case to listeners. Here is Davis: “A well-

<sup>53</sup> Reductions are abstractions or generalizations that, of necessity, are untethered to the particularities of the text in question.

<sup>54</sup> “Better Big Ideas: Five Qualities of the Strongest Preaching Ideas,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators* (ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 353, 357.

<sup>55</sup> *Imitation to Biblical Preaching*, 66, 136–37.

<sup>56</sup> “Study Method for Expository Preaching,” 220.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Simeon in an editorial aside in *An Essay on the Composition of a Sermon* by Jean Claude (ed. Charles Simeon; New York: Lane & Scott, 1849), 41–42.

designed sermon, then, is the embodiment and extension of an important idea.”<sup>58</sup> And Robinson: “So one purpose of the big idea is that you organize the sermon around it. . . . Everything leads up to it or everything develops out of it. . . . You want to drive it home.”<sup>59</sup> Then there’s Chapell: “The features of a sermon must all contribute to the theme [or ‘major idea’] derived from the text.”<sup>60</sup> After recommending a hunt for the Big Idea, Stott calls upon preachers to “arrange your material to serve the dominant thought. . . . Now we have to knock the material into shape, and particularly into such shape as will best serve the dominant thought.”<sup>61</sup> The Big Idea is king; everything else serves this monarch who ostensibly keeps his recalcitrant subjects (text, preacher, sermon, and listeners) in line! Allen declares that “everything in the sermon leads to, flows from, develops, illumines, enlarges, or otherwise relates to the sermon-in-a-sentence.”<sup>62</sup> And MacArthur: “Everything else in the sermon builds to support, elucidate, convict, and confront the hearer with the main truth.”<sup>63</sup> Likewise, Warren: “The biblical preacher must recognize and represent the timeless truth of God’s Word and then relate that truth to his audience.”<sup>64</sup> It is the Big Idea, the transtemporal, universal truth of the text, that must be communicated, not the text itself, apparently. So also, Osborne: “The details of the text or main points of the sermon will actually develop aspects of this thesis statement [Big Idea]. Each main point will be one part of the larger whole, much like pieces of a pie.”<sup>65</sup> The Big Idea is *it!* The rest of the sermon is merely a series of riffs on this main theme, ornament and embellishment, whipped cream on the pie.

Since distilling the text into a Big Idea entails considerable loss when compared to its source—loss of meaning and power and pathos, not to mention attenuation of filigrees of structure and nuances of language that contribute to the experience of the text—such reductionist operations cannot be condoned. Would hearing my Schenkerian distillation (Big Idea) ever give one the experience of “Over the Rainbow” (text)? I doubt it. Even Schenker’s acolyte agrees: “Establishing and understanding the structural basis [Big Idea], however interesting and revealing, cannot in itself be considered the real explanation of a musical organism [text].”<sup>66</sup> Or as Flannery O’Connor put it poignantly:

People talk about the theme [Big Idea] of a story as if the theme were like the string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you can pick out the theme, the way you pick the right thread in the chicken-feed sack, you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works. . . . A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, *and*

<sup>58</sup> *Design for Preaching*, 29.

<sup>59</sup> “Better Big Ideas,” 353, 357.

<sup>60</sup> *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> *Between Two Worlds*, 224, 228.

<sup>62</sup> *Preaching the Topical Sermon*, 64.

<sup>63</sup> “Study Method for Expository Preaching,” 220.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy S. Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching,” *BSac* 148 (1991): 463.

<sup>65</sup> *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 358.

<sup>66</sup> Salzer, *Structural Hearing*, 207.

*it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is.* You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate.<sup>67</sup>

The text is what it is and will suffer no transmutation into anything else. Long rightly warned homileticians: “Sermons should be faithful to the full range of a text’s power, and those preachers who carry away only main ideas ... are traveling too light.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed!

Yet Robinson justifies Big Idea distillation with the unusual argument that “unless ideas are expressed in words, we cannot understand [them].” On Psalm 117, he declares that “we do not understand the psalm until we can state its subject.”<sup>69</sup> Robinson keeps going: “And those who hear us preach do not understand what we are saying unless they can answer the basic questions: What were we talking about today? What were we saying about what we were talking about?”—the subject and complement questions.<sup>70</sup> If understanding is possible only with propositional Big Idea distillation, then it is impossible to experience of a piece of music, a painting, a poem, or even a person (or texts, see below). To contend that understanding does not happen, either for preacher or for listeners, unless one can hold in one’s mind a Big Idea proposition with a subject and complement, is naïve at best, and perilous at worst.<sup>71</sup> Because, thereby, one is implicitly asserting that there is little power in the text itself, but only in some distillate thereof (the Big Idea) that needs to be expressed in a particular form, without which people can grasp nothing, comprehend nothing, and gain nothing from Scripture.

In sum, traditional evangelical homiletics seeks to reduce the pericope into a Big Idea (distilling the text) and then preach that reduction (preaching the distillate), supported by textual proofs, real-life illustrations, and practical application.<sup>72</sup> This is a misunderstanding of how language functions, why texts work, and what a sermon does.

### III. A FRESH LOOK AT PREACHING

How did we come to this? Following the lead of classical rhetoric, preaching came to be seen as an argument made by the preacher (prosecutor? defense attorney?) to influence and persuade listeners (jurors?). But it was during the Reformation that preaching as an argument became *de rigueur*. It perfectly suited the ends of the Reformation polemic against Roman Catholicism. While those controversies have died down, argumentation sustained by propositions has been the norm in

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<sup>67</sup> *Mystery and Manners* (ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), 96 (emphasis added).

<sup>68</sup> *Witness of Preaching*, 116.

<sup>69</sup> *Biblical Preaching*, 21, 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26.

<sup>71</sup> “There is a vast area of thought that has no direct relation to speech. ... thought can function without any word images or speech movements” (Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* [rev. ed.; ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann, Gertrude Vakar, and Alex Kozulin; Cambridge: MIT, 2012], 94).

<sup>72</sup> Provision of application is a valid secondary role of the sermon (not discussed in this essay), the primary role being the “curation” of the scriptural text and its thrust/force (see below).

Protestant sermons ever since. The influential Broadus was of this stock: “Preaching and all public speaking ought to be largely composed of argument.”<sup>73</sup> Generations of preachers have followed after Broadus, subscribing to the thesis that an argument maketh a sermon. David James Randolph ruefully declared that since that “fateful day” of Broadus’s announcement, “American homiletics has not yet been completely reconstituted after this stroke which severed the head of preaching from theology and dropped it into the basket of rhetoric held by Aristotle.”<sup>74</sup> With that legacy of rhetoric we still remain burdened: preaching as argumentation employing Big Idea propositional distillates. A contemporary preacher “seems like a second-rate lawyer arguing a case . . . , a kind of Perry Mason of the pulpit who differs from his television counterpart in that he *loses* all the time.”<sup>75</sup>

Besides the polemics of the Reformation, the scientific advances of the Enlightenment in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century also fostered this trajectory of homiletics towards argumentation that sustained Big Ideas/propositions. David G. Buttrick called such an approach a “parody” of scientific procedure.<sup>76</sup> The text of Scripture, like an object for scientific study, is sliced, diced, parsed, and atomized to generate a Big Idea that is then preached with persuasive arguments (distilling the text and preaching the distillate). William H. Willimon acknowledged the perils of using the Big Idea to control a sermon. “The danger of this device is that it may encourage me to treat my text as an abstract, generalized idea that has been distilled from the text—such as ‘the real meaning behind the story of the prodigal son.’ I then preach an idea about the message rather than the story which *is* the message. My congregation listens to ideas about a story rather than experiencing *the* story.”<sup>77</sup> What, then, is the alternative?

1. *A new form of rhetoric.* One of the first things to note is that preaching is a new form of rhetoric, unknown to ancient rhetoricians. Though the exposition of sacred text does occur in the OT, it was in the practices of the synagogue and the early church that this act achieved prominence and developed into a new genre of communication. In the description of Paul’s speech in Acts 13:15–41, labeled *λόγος παρακλήσεως* (“word of exhortation,” 13:15), one detects a pattern: Scripture citations/references coupled with a concluding exhortation to action.<sup>78</sup> The utilization of a text in this fashion—an *inspired* text—to generate application and cause life change is an unusual form of communication. Indeed, it might well be that the

<sup>73</sup> *Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, iv–v.

<sup>74</sup> *Renewal of Preaching: A New Homiletic Based on the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 21. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the movers and shakers of evangelical homiletics possessed advanced degrees in rhetoric, including Haddon Robinson, Donald Sunukjian, Duane Litfin, Timothy Warren, and Bryan Chapell; others that I am aware of, but are not cited in this article, include John Reed, Keith Willhite, Jeffrey Arthurs, Barry McCarty, and Calvin Pearson.

<sup>75</sup> Randolph, *Renewal of Preaching*, 54.

<sup>76</sup> “Interpretation and Preaching,” *Int* 35 (1981): 47.

<sup>77</sup> *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 68 (emphasis original).

<sup>78</sup> This pattern is also reflected in the letter to the Hebrews—Heb 13:22 labels the writing as *λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως*, (“word of exhortation”)—as well as in other early Christian documents. See Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *From Prophecy to Preaching: A Search for the Origins of the Christian Homily* (VCSup 59; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 31–33.

traditional Aristotelian classification of rhetoric into judicial, deliberative, and epideictic rhetoric had, by the first century CE, “outlived its usefulness and that the Hellenistic synagogue provides a new social setting for what is effectively a new rhetorical occasion”: παρακλήσις, “a technical literary designation for a certain kind of oratorical performance.”<sup>79</sup>

It is not unexpected that new forms of rhetoric emerged in social situations and institutional settings not found in classical Athens. The Hellenistic synagogue would have been one such setting. There the weekly confrontation with a revered text set the stage for a new rhetorical occasion, defined by the necessity of actualizing the significance of that sacred but often strange piece of literature for a community in, but not entirely of, the social world of the Hellenistic polis. Paraclesis, I suggest, is the newly minted rhetorical form that actualizes traditional scripture for a community in a non-traditional environment. It certainly has affinities with the classical forms of oratory, and those who regularly practised it probably had some training in rhetorical art, but paraclesis is in fact a mutant on the evolutionary trail of ancient rhetoric.<sup>80</sup>

Classical rhetoric never conceived of a speech that was not topical; rather, its discourses dealt with particular subjects of importance and relevance, always delivered without recourse to texts and with an emphasis on propositions (Big Ideas). Preaching, however, is unique. The use of a normative text on which to base a sermon sets this form of oral communication apart from all other genres of address.<sup>81</sup> And new forms of (sacred) rhetoric call for new approaches to homiletics.

2. *Authorial doings*. With the blossoming of language philosophy in the late twentieth century, our understanding of how language works has grown considerably. Communication, of any kind—sacred or secular, spoken or scripted—is now being recognized as a communicator *doing* something with what is communicated. Authors, including those of Scripture, *do* things with what they say. “Texts are no longer viewed as inert containers, jars with theological ideas inside, but as poetic expressions displaying rhetorical and literary artistry,” *doing* things, intending effects in readers.<sup>82</sup> This *doing* of the authors ought to be the interpretive goal of preachers—the discernment of the text’s thrust/force, the domain of pragmatics (as op-

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<sup>79</sup> Harold W. Attridge, “Paraenesis in a Homily (λόγος παρακλήσεως): The Possible Location of, and Socialization in, the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews,’” in *Paraenesis: Act and Form* (Semaeia 50; ed. Leo G. Perdue and John G. Gammie; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 216–17. Classical rhetoric taught that speeches fell into one of the three categories: a judicial assessment of past events, a deliberative exhortation with regard to future actions of an audience, or an epideictic appreciation of particular beliefs or values in the present. See Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education* 3.7–9; Anaximenes, *Rhetoric for Alexander* 1421b; etc.

<sup>80</sup> Attridge, “Paraenesis in a Homily,” 217.

<sup>81</sup> Such an assertion is not to deny that rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is vital in preaching. It is rather to affirm that the field of rhetoric, dealing with topical addresses, is distinct from the field of homiletics, dealing with *text-based* sermons. As far as topical sermons are concerned, suffice it to say here that I am sympathetic to the sentiments of Kaiser who once exhorted: “Preach a topical sermon only once every five years—and then immediately ... repent and ask God’s forgiveness!” (*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 19).

<sup>82</sup> Thomas G. Long, “The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Preaching,” *Int* 44 (1990): 350.

posed to semantics that deals with the sayings of authors), without which there can be no valid application.<sup>83</sup>

What an author is *doing* is projecting a transcending vision—what Paul Ricoeur called the *world in front of the text*.<sup>84</sup> For Scripture, this *world in front of the text* is God's ideal world, individual segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes. So each sermon on a particular pericope is God's gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the thrust and force of that pericope—that is, the requirements of God's ideal world as called for in that pericope's world-segment. And as mankind accepts that divine invitation and applies the call of the pericope (its thrust/force), week by week and pericope by pericope God's people are progressively and increasingly inhabiting this ideal world and adopting its values. This is the goal of preaching.<sup>85</sup>

Because this world speaks of God and how he relates to his creation, this projected world may rightly be called “theology.” Thus, the segment of this ideal world that each pericope projects becomes the theology of that pericope. To live by the theology of the pericope is to accept God's gracious invitation to inhabit his ideal world; by so doing, his people align themselves to the requirements of that ideal world—that is, to the will of God. This is the vision of a *world in front of the text*, God's ideal world, painted by Scripture—a glimpse of, and an invitation to, the divine kingdom, unveiled by faithful preaching.<sup>86</sup>

Since only one Man, the Lord Jesus Christ, perfectly met all of God's demands, being without sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 7:26), one can say that this Person, and this Person alone, has perfectly inhabited the *world in front of the text*, living by all of its requirements. Jesus Christ alone has comprehensively abided by the theology of every pericope of Scripture. Or in other words, each pericope of the Bible is actually portraying a characteristic of Christ, showing us what it means to perfectly fulfill, as he did, the particular call of that pericope. The Bible as a whole, the col-

<sup>83</sup> For more on semantics vs. pragmatics, see Abraham Kuruvilla, “What Is the Author *Doing* with What He Is *Saying*? Pragmatics and Preaching—An Appeal,” *JETS* 60 (2017): 557–80. This article, a response to it, and my rejoinder to that response are available at [www.homiletix.com/KuruvillaJETS2017](http://www.homiletix.com/KuruvillaJETS2017). A number of my other essays in this *Journal* have tackled the pragmatics of particular pericopes: “The Naked Runaway and the Enrobed Reporter of Mark 14 and 16: What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?” *JETS* 54 (2011): 527–45; “The *Aqedah*: What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?” *JETS* 55 (2012): 489–508; and “David *v.* Goliath: What is the Author *Doing* with What He is *Saying*?” *JETS* 58 (2015): 487–506. Besides these, my commentaries on Genesis, Judges, Mark, and Ephesians analyze the pragmatics of each pericope therein sequentially.

<sup>84</sup> “Naming God,” *USQR* 34 (1979): 217.

<sup>85</sup> As was noted, I do not deal with the matter of application in this essay. Here, I am concerned only on the hermeneutical approach to texts and the rhetorical conception of sermons.

<sup>86</sup> For all practical purposes, the theology of a pericope, the *world in front of the text*, the thrust/force of the text, and its pragmatics (i.e. what its author is *doing*), may be considered equivalent terms. I also want to emphasize here that the theology of a text is the thrust/force of the text-as-a-whole: how the text is A/authorially intended to be experienced. The text (with its thrust/force) is inexpressible in any other form, and cannot be substituted by a condensate, reduction, or distillate thereof. The text and its theology are therefore virtually inseparable and inextricably integrated. Perhaps the best way to put it is that the theology supervenes upon, and is integrated with, the text, just as the mind is supervenient upon and integrated with the brain. I frequently employ “text+theology” to designate this unified entity.

lection of all its pericopes, then, portrays what a perfect human looks like, exemplified by Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the perfect Man. By him alone is God's world perfectly inhabited and by him alone are God's requirements perfectly met.

Thus, sermon by sermon, God's people become progressively more Christlike, as they align themselves to the image of Christ displayed in each pericope. Preaching, therefore, facilitates the conformation of the children of God into the image of the Son of God. After all, God's ultimate goal for believers is that they look like his Son, Jesus Christ, in his humanity—"conformed to the image [εἰκῶν] of his Son" (Rom 8:29). Therefore, I label this model of interpretation for preaching *christonic*. I submit that Scripture is geared primarily for this glorious purpose of God, to restore the *imago Dei* in mankind, by offering, pericope by pericope, a theological description of Christlikeness to which God's people are to be aligned.<sup>87</sup>

Preaching is for the transformation of lives, that the people of God may be conformed to the image of Christ. Week by week, sermon by sermon and pericope by pericope, habits are changed, dispositions are created, character is built, and the image of Christ is formed—in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the instrumentality of Scripture, by the agency of the preacher—until humanity becomes what it was meant by God to be. "We proclaim Him, instructing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, that we may present every person mature in Christ" (Col 1:28).

3. *Science and art.* Thus, there is another significant reason to consider preaching a different form of rhetoric. Hermeneutics for homiletics involves more than just decoding the semantics of a text to decipher and comprehend its saying (science). Additionally, it involves discerning the pragmatics of a text to infer and experience its *doing*/theology (art).

According to Susanne K. Langer, a *discursive* symbol is rational, denoting something—it is "a vehicle of propositional thinking." "Words have a discrete, sequential, successive order; they are strung one after another like beads on a rosary"—a chain of reasoning requiring ideas to be linearly syntaxed and sequenced. But Langer also affirmed that "there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression ..., matters which require to be conceived through some symbolistic schema other than discursive language."<sup>88</sup> Thus there are *non-discursive* symbols capable of addressing nuances of mental states and emotions unavailable to purely discursive modalities. Such non-discursive formulations may truly be said

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<sup>87</sup> This, of course, is not the only function of Scripture, but it is the critical role played by the word of God as far as preaching is concerned. For more on these matters, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 71–109; and *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming 2019); as well as a series of articles: "Pericopal Theology," *BSac* 173 (2016): 3–17; "Christonic Interpretation," *BSac* 173 (2016): 131–46; "Theological Exegesis," *BSac* 173 (2016): 259–72; and "Applicational Preaching," *BSac* 173 (2016): 387–400.

<sup>88</sup> *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York: Mentor, 1951), 66, 76, 82–83.

to “do something to us.”<sup>89</sup> They follow laws “altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. . . . They do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously, so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision. Their complexity, consequently, is not limited, as the complexity of discourse is limited, by what the mind can retain from the beginning of an ap-perceptive act to the end of it.”<sup>90</sup> Pictures, photographs, painting, and poetry fall into this category and differ significantly from a linear, verbal code that must be deciphered. One does not need Big Ideas or even words to experience their realities and to catch what they *do*.<sup>91</sup> Artistic inference is how such non-discursive works are experienced.

But here is what we have forgotten: texts can not only be *discursive* (lending themselves to scientific analyses of their sayings), they can also simultaneously be *non-discursive* (bearing an artistic element—their *doings*): “Non-discursive writing creates, combines, associates, juxtaposes, compares, leaps, bridges, and synthesizes through the composition of images. . . . [This] acknowledges image [with words or without] as the lexicon of thought.”<sup>92</sup> That is why distillation of texts, that ignores authorial *doings*, is problematic: such operations result in significant loss of textual meaning, emotion, power, and pathos. I claim that a canonical text such as Scripture is *both* discursive (authorial sayings with tangible information that deals less with images, and that must be deciphered: science) *and* non-discursive (authorial *doings* with intangible experiences that deal mostly with images, and that must be inferred: art). Preachers are not simply to major in the science of semantics, but must graduate in the art of pragmatics, discerning authorial *doings* and the theology of the pericope so as to experience the text as intended. And this calls for a major shift in how preaching is conceived, for “artistic import, unlike verbal meaning, can only be exhibited. . . . [The artist] is not saying anything . . . ; he is *showing*.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, the experience of a text can be fully and faithfully shared by a preacher with the congregation only by *demonstration*, not by argumentation.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 397 (emphasis added).

<sup>90</sup> Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 86.

<sup>91</sup> This applies to other forms of art, too—dance, drama, music, and movies. In fact, most of life is lived without Big Ideas! How do we experience John 3:16? As a proposition? Quick, can you reduce all the verses of “Amazing Grace” into one Big Idea? How about a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC—what's the subject and the complement of what you saw/heard/experienced? How about your spouse—can you distill your loved one into a Big Idea?

<sup>92</sup> Joddy Murray, *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multimodal Composition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009), 54.

<sup>93</sup> Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 379, 394 (emphasis original).

<sup>94</sup> This is not to rule out the use of ideas or arguments in sermons. It simply denies that the current-ly dominant *modus operandi* of Big Idea reduction and its argumentation (distilling the text and preaching the distillate) facilitates the experience of Scripture for listeners—in fact, such an enterprise may even be detrimental, short-circuiting the art of interpretation. “The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but *experience* meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully” (O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 96 [emphasis added]). Unfortunately, artistic aspects of interpretation “became more and more ancillary, even rejected alto-

4. *Preaching as demonstration.* Henry H. Mitchell once said that “the dullness of most mainline preaching is due to its being conceived of as argument rather than art—as syllogism rather than symbol.”<sup>95</sup> Instead, Scripture calls for its experience to be demonstrated, not for any Big Idea to be argued. By this demonstration of what the text is *doing*, preachers facilitate listeners’ experience of the text as they encounter God and his ideal *world in front of the text*—the theology of the pericope. And thereby, lives are gradually transformed by the power of the divine Author. It is this hermeneutic and such a conception of preaching that is the foundation of homiletics. The primary task of preachers, therefore, is to help their listeners experience the text+theology—the agenda of the A/author—in all its fullness.<sup>96</sup>

We preachers must ask ourselves: Why do we interpose ourselves between the word of God written for the people of God? It is not so that we can create something new and exciting that substitutes for the text—our rationalistic argument of a sermon built upon a Big Idea distilled from the text. Rather, it is so that the theology of the text may be demonstrated to listeners who are unable to see the clues in the text that point to pericopal theology. It is the preacher’s primary task to help them experience the text+theology—that is, the agenda of the A/author—in its fullness (the secondary task of the preacher, to provide application, is not a concern of this essay).<sup>97</sup> Therefore, I propose the analogy of a curator guiding visitors in an art museum through a series of paintings.<sup>98</sup> Each pericope is a picture, the preacher is the curator, and the sermon is a curating of the text-picture and its thrust/force (text+theology) for gallery visitors, that is, congregants. A sermon is thus more a demonstration of pericopal theology than an argument validating a propositional Big Idea. This to say, preachers are to let their listeners encounter and experience the text as they themselves did when they were studying the text (i.e. before they crafted a Big Idea). What is needed in the pulpit, then, is a creative exegesis of the text undertaken with a view to portraying for listeners what the author is *doing*—pericopal theology—enabling their experience of the text+theology. Traditional preaching focuses on ideation: proffering ideas to the audience. I suggest homiletics should focus on *mediation*: the text+theology curated by the preacher for listeners. This individual, standing between God’s word written to God’s people, primarily facilitates the latter’s experience of the theology of the former. Eugene L.

gether as logical positivism and rational discourse prevailed during the modern age,” leaving us with only Big Ideas and propositions (Murray, *Non-Discursive Rhetoric*, 11).

<sup>95</sup> “Preaching on the Patriarchs,” in *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor’s Treasury* (ed. James W. Cox; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 37.

<sup>96</sup> The theologian D. Ernst Fuchs once dryly observed, “If you want to understand a cat, you give it a mouse”—a demonstration (*Hermeneutik* [Bad Cannstatt, Germany: R. Müllerschön, 1963], 109 [my translation]). But a Big Idea devotee would dissect the animal to its core essentials of “catness” and preach that essence of distilled felinity, whereupon one would end up with neither a cat nor an experience thereof. Demonstration counts for far more than argumentation.

<sup>97</sup> Once again, I see pericopal theology as the thrust and force of the text, inseparable from the text and inexpressible in any form other than the text itself; so, text+theology.

<sup>98</sup> I use the term “curator” both in its *museum* sense: one who cares for the gallery holdings; as well as in its *sacerdotal* sense: one who cares for the parish flock (“curator” comes from the Latin *cūrāre*, “to care for”).

Lowry quotes a comment made by a friend during a conversation on preaching: “I see myself as a stagehand who holds back the curtain so that some might be able to catch a glimpse of the divine play—sometimes—perhaps—if I can get it open enough.’ . . . If we could just get a better handle on how to pull back the curtains.”<sup>99</sup> Precisely—that’s the role of the preacher: mediation, pulling back the curtains! We, as handmaids to the sacred writ, as midwives to Scripture, want the audience to experience the text as the A/author intended. What we must preach, then, is the *text*, not a reduction, not a proposition, not a doctrine, not anything else.

Indeed, neuroscience research has shown that when there is successful communication, the listener’s brain activity mirrors the speaker’s brain activity—“speaker-listener neural coupling.” The same areas of the brain seem to be active in three discrete states: when the *speaker* experiences something, when the *speaker* recalls and recounts that same experience, and when the *listener* hears the speaker’s recounting.<sup>100</sup> Why not let the way the text affected us preachers (*sans* Big Idea) affect them, our listeners (also *sans* Big Idea)? For the preacher is to be a co-explorer of the text *with* the flock, not chief-explainer of the text *to* the flock. Long trenchantly describes the traditional sermonic argumentation of a Big Idea: “On one side of the bridge the preacher has an exciting, freewheeling experience of discovering the text, but the preacher has been trained to leave the exegetical sleuthing in the study, to filter out the zest of that discovery, and to carry only processed propositions across to the other side. The joy of ‘Eureka!’ becomes, in the sermon, the dull thud of ‘My thesis [Big Idea] for this morning is . . . .’”<sup>101</sup> Unfortunately true in far too many pulpits, on far too many Sundays. Instead, the preacher ought to be a facilitator who curates the picture (text) and the clues therein that point to its thrust/force (theology), so that the visitors (congregation) might experience it themselves with all its power and pathos as intended by the painter (A/author). The seventeenth-century scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal was right: “People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others.”<sup>102</sup> Then the text becomes the people’s, its claim theirs, its call upon their lives their own experience: the word of God for the people of God!<sup>103</sup>

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

In sum, I am registering my opposition to *distilling the text*: pericopal theology (irreducible) cannot be expressed in a Big Idea (a reduction) without crippling loss

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<sup>99</sup> *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 52.

<sup>100</sup> Greg J. Stephens, Lauren J. Silbert, and Uri Hasson, “Speaker–Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107 (2010): 14425–30.

<sup>101</sup> Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 118.

<sup>102</sup> *Pascal’s Pensées* (trans. W. F. Trotter; New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), 1.10 (4).

<sup>103</sup> We preachers pass out the eggs, and the hearers make omelets themselves (modified from Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 193). Otherwise they are getting an already-chewed and predigested meal. Again, I am not considering application here. That should be clearly specified in the sermon, preferably as an imperative.

of power and pathos, and without denuding the text of its experience-creating thrust and force; a distillation of a text can never be an adequate substitute for the text. I am also objecting to *preaching the distillate*: I disagree that Big Idea distillates are what listeners of sermons should catch, that these reductions are what preachers must preach, and that without them sermon listeners will never get what the text is about.

That being said, let me state that I am not against reductions *per se* in homiletics; there is a specific, narrow, and circumscribed use for them—in sermon *preparation*, not necessarily in sermon *delivery*. Such an appropriately created reduction of the pericopal theology I designate as the Theological Focus. As a reduction, it can never be a stand-in for the text. So how does a Theological Focus help sermon preparation? The primary role of a sermon is the demonstration of the theology of a pericope by the curation of the text, in order that the text+theology may be experienced by listeners (a secondary goal is the provision of application). In this conception, the Theological Focus, a lossy reduction of the irreducible pericopal theology, merely serves as a label (or if you will, a proxy or a handle) for that theology. For instance, “d-o-g” is not a canine, it is simply an English label (proxy/handle) for one, referring to a member of the species *Canis lupus familiaris*.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, the Theological Focus, is a convenient label (proxy/handle) for the theology of the pericope. Did the sermon preparer need the Theological Focus to experience the theology of the text in the first place? Of course not—the reduction was created after the fact, concocted *after* the preacher caught what the text is *doing*. Following that discernment of the text’s theology (inexpressible in any format other than the text itself), it is subsequently reduced to the expressible—and lossy—format of the Theological Focus to serve as a label for that pericopal theology, a concise and easy reminder of the direction sermon preparation is to take.<sup>105</sup>

In this way, as a label for pericopal theology, the Theological Focus also potentially helps with the creation of a sermon map. For instance, the Theological Focus of 2 Samuel 11–12 may be stated positively as: *Reverence for God and deference to his word is manifested in the reined exercise of power, the restriction of self-indulgent passions, and the recognition of evil as reprehensible in the sight of God; this respect for the authority and rulership of the true sovereign brings blessing*. This bald and barren, long and lossy reduction of 2 Samuel 11–12, utterly powerless and pathos-less, can never substitute for the irreducible and inexpressible text+theology. But while this Theological Focus is unprofitable for a sermon listener, it can serve the sermon preparer well in giving shape to the sermon. If you split this Theological Focus into its components, you can generate a functional sermon map, with slices of the Theological Focus (labels for the discrete portions of the pericopal theology) serving as labels for the discrete moves of the sermon.

- I. Unreined exercise of power [the “send” motif]
- II. Unrestricted self-indulgence of passion [the Hittite model]

<sup>104</sup> Just as my name, “Abe,” is a proxy for the entirety of my person.

<sup>105</sup> It might also help the preacher in thinking through the application step.

- III. Unrecognition of evil as reprehensible in God's eyes [the ophthalmic malady]
- IV. Disrespect of the true sovereign brings punishment [the punishment merited]
- (V. Application)

These fragments of the Theological Focus guide the preacher as to what should be demonstrated about the text in the sermon—that is, the clues to the pericopal theology.<sup>106</sup> So, the Theological Focus may be gainfully employed to create a map for a sermon that curates the text's theology.<sup>107</sup> And at the conclusion of move IV. in the sermon, the text+theology will have been demonstrated, and listeners will, hopefully, have experienced the text in all its power and pathos (again, discovering application for the audience in move V. is another issue not tackled here).

All that to reiterate that the Theological Focus is entirely for the benefit of the sermon preparer, not the sermon listener. Yes, the Theological Focus, like the Big Idea, is a reduction. But no, it is not the same as the Big Idea: it is a different species, in derivation, structure, function, and context:

1. *Derivation*: The Theological Focus is a reduction of what the author is *doing*—pericopal theology, the pragmatics of the text. The Big Idea, on the other hand, is a distillation of what the author is saying, the semantics of the text. There is usually no attempt to discern pericopal theology in these Big Idea transactions, for that hermeneutic does not see texts as non-discursive *objets d'art*, but only as discursive subjects for scientific examination.

2. *Structure*: No particular format is assigned for the Theological Focus—one can make it a phrase or a collection thereof, one long sentence (my example from 2 Samuel 11–12) or a paragraph, or whatever helps the preacher.<sup>108</sup> After all, it serves only as a label for pericopal theology. The Big Idea, on the other hand, is generally mandated to be structured as a proposition, with a subject and a complement.

3. *Function*: The Theological Focus is a useful label for pericopal theology; it helps with sermon shaping, its split portions forming convenient labels for sermon-ic moves; it may even guide the development of specific application. But it can never be a stand-in for the text to ferry the experience of the text+theology to listeners. The Big Idea, on the other hand is considered the all-important essence of the text and a seemingly adequate and lossless substitute for it—that is, distilling the text. Implicitly, the text itself (the shell) becomes dispensable, its Big Idea (the kernel) having been conveniently extracted from it. And so what listeners are now expected to catch in a sermon is this Big Idea. The rest of the sermon is simply an

<sup>106</sup> I have converted the positives of the Theological Focus into negatives, as it is in 2 Samuel 11–12.

<sup>107</sup> The nomenclature is deliberate: the Theological Focus is a *label* for pericopal theology; and its fragments (*labels* for the split parts of the pericopal theology) are effectively *labels* for the various sermon moves, yielding a homiletical map (cheat sheet!) by which the theology of the text may be curated by the preacher. Since those split pieces of the Theological Focus serve only as labels for sermon moves, I prefer to call I.–V. a map, rather than an outline. The latter has some self-imposed constraints: full sentences, main points subsuming subsidiary points, etc., all of which pedantries are unnecessary for a map that aids the sermonic curation of text+theology. See Kuruvilla, *Manual for Preaching*.

<sup>108</sup> Why not a picture?

expansion of that proposition, explaining it, proving it, and applying it—that is, preaching the distillate.

4. *Context*: Needless to say, the context of the Theological Focus is the conception of a sermon as the demonstration of an irreducible pericopal theology (inextricably interwoven with, and inexpressible apart from, the text: text+theology). The preacher is only a servant to the text, and the sermon primarily is a curation thereof, so that listeners may experience the text+theology as its A/author intended (secondarily, application must also be offered). The context of the Big Idea, on the other hand, is the notion of the sermon as a novel, standalone entity constructed as an argument to explain, prove, and apply the Big Idea distillate of a text. Texts are only discursive in this approach and, therefore, can be grasped cognitively and verbally.

I believe that the repercussions of such a philosophy, that does not acknowledge authorial *doings*/pericopal theology or see the sermon more as demonstration than argument, erode the very foundation of the spiritual formation of the people of God into the image of the Son of God.

## V. CHALLENGE

Let me conclude by issuing a challenge to each of us seated at the homiletics roundtable—Bible scholars, rhetoricians, preachers, and students of preaching. Scholars—give preachers what they need to serve God’s people better with God’s word: tell us what authors *do* with what they say, pericope by pericope. Rhetoricians—see preaching in a fresh light, as a demonstration of the text+theology: explore how to do this better. Preachers—preach the text+theology: curate it for your listeners, so that they may be transformed into Christlikeness by the power of the Spirit. Students—engage in a deeper study of hermeneutics, language philosophy, or the pragmatics of a biblical book or two, seeking to discern what their authors are *doing* in each pericope: push the envelope of our understanding. And all of us together—let us enlighten the people of God for the glory of God!

Schneiders is right:

Method, understood as a pre-established set of procedures for investigating some phenomenon, in fact not only *attains* its object but *creates* its object. In other words, it determines a priori what kind of data can be obtained and [what] it will consider relevant. If, for example, my method of investigation is a ruler, the only scientifically reliable datum that can emerge is linear dimension. If no other methods are employed over a long period of time I might eventually conclude that the only significant datum about reality is linear dimension and that the essential scientific definition of reality is in terms of physical extension. Method . . . rules out of court any data not discoverable by that method.<sup>109</sup>

Perhaps it is time to change methods.

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<sup>109</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 23 (emphasis original).