

“Walking Backwards Into The Future”

James Paton
Foothills Alliance Church
Calgary, Alberta
jamesp@foothillsalliance.com

Abstract

Early preacher-theologians were faced with the issue of communicating doctrine in their own generation and often did so with remarkable success, because for them doctrine was not an abstract system of thought but was pastoral in nature and deeply rooted in Christian experience. Preachers today, if they are to accomplish the task, will need to learn to embody the practices of the past as they address the issues of community, Scripture, experience, and, ultimately, Truth.

I wondered what I should preach. I was in my first pastorate, a church named Trinity, and the forthcoming Sunday in the church calendar was Trinity Sunday. I had taken a whole semester course on the doctrine of the Trinity at seminary, but as I prepared my sermon, I was left wondering about what I was to make of trinitarian doctrine in a local church setting. I contemplated if my sermon would have any relevance for the international executive, the tired homemaker, the recovering drug abuser, the pregnant teen, and the others who made up the congregation. The question of what was I to preach lingered long in my mind.

I was probably not alone. In a society that considers itself to have outgrown Christian faith, and values pluralism above all else, preachers often wonder about the possibility of proclaiming Christian doctrine in a way that will be heard. In a world focused upon image rather than substance Christ followers are concerned as to how can one communicate the core of the Christian faith. Doctrine seems only to be a relic of a bygone era.

Given such a situation where Christian faith is sent to the margins of society, both philosophically and with the accompanying cultural manifestations, one may well ask what is a preacher to do. One is forced to ask if preaching itself is at all relevant, and if a case can be made for relevance, is there any room for the further claim that such preaching might be doctrinal. Of course, within the context of a worshipping faith community the possibility exists to provide a resounding positive response to these questions, but I suspect that a lurking doubt remains in the hearts of many preachers that life is not so simple after all.

At another level, popular within the church, is a deep suspicion of academic theology and of the implications of being doctrinaire. Such dogmatism seems to be out of place within

a tolerant society and especially so within an outward-focused, seeker-sensitive community of faith. Wade C. Roof notes, “Virtually all [baby boomers] see religion less in doctrinal or ecclesiastical terms, and much more in personal meaning terms, and often in vague and generalized terms. It is not so much what you believe, it is how you live” (93). Designing churches targeted to baby boomers has become something of an art form in North America where I now serve as a pastor and preacher. The success of megachurches has largely become the focus for studies in pastoral theology and homiletics.

D. Mill notes the concern of many Christ-followers today:

Because Christian doctrine is both so elaborate and specific, modern American Christians tend to feel the whole collection is a bit overdone or academic or of interest only to people who care about that sort of thing. They mean well: they love Jesus, but they simply do not see why they should worry about doctrine. It looks irrelevant. True religion can't be that complicated. (109)

If preaching is to have a future, seemingly it must become more relevant, if preachers are to follow the advice of those who have a voice, calling them back to *biblical* as opposed to *doctrinal* preaching. Nevertheless, one might also despairingly note of much contemporary preaching that it is neither biblical nor doctrinal, focusing rather upon moralism and self-help as a means of “hooking” contemporary listeners. Richard Lischer describes preaching in such a manner as “preaching [suffering] from a theological homelessness” (1). The rationale for preaching has become vague and is certainly not theologically determined. Preaching appears to be more driven by crowd-gathering techniques and, hopefully, their retention than by any other single factor. In truth, preaching often has little content to offer in a world that has become devoid of all content and is fixated on image. The result for preaching, Lischer contends, is a lack of substance, a lack of coherence, a loss of authority, and, finally, irrelevance. Preachers are often left with the haunting question, how then should we preach.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of the discipline of practical theology, observes that what is required is not just the practice, but also the theory of the practice (12).¹ The preaching of theology requires a theology of preaching. My contention is that in our postmodern context preachers would find it useful to review preachers of an earlier age in order to learn how best to preach in their own. Ellen Charry believes looking to the past can inform the present:

The point is not to jump over modernity and reimpose classical theology but to see if there are not terms on which the classical conversation might be a bit less alien to us so that we might be stirred up to take up the task they were engaged in: helping people flourish through knowing and loving God. (6)

In the present era I contend that returning to history to gain some bearings may prove to be a way forward. Jeffrey C. K. Goh describes a return to tradition as gaining freedom from a subjective bias against the past, as well as freedom from a static understanding of the past (83). Goh writes, “We need to begin with the past ... because only with a better understanding of the historic role of the once universal classic hermeneutical framework—a powerful way of interpreting and using Scripture—can we present a cogent argument for present need and possibility” (131-32). Allen, Blaisdale, and Johnston note, “The past cannot be exhumed and replicated in contemporary society. But many people in the postmodern community believe that people in former times had insights into life that can benefit today’s world” (38). Robert E. Webber is one who has argued forcefully for such a position, with his “ancient-future model.” The conceptual context of postmodernity, including the acceptance of mystery, holism, and interpreted fact, bear such striking resemblance to the premodern situation that preachers would be foolish to ignore it (21-30). Indeed, Webber writes, “The primary reason to return to the Christian tradition is because it is truth that has power to speak to a postmodern world” (29).

A feature of the pre-enlightenment historical period was an awareness displayed by preacher-theologians of the pastoral function of good theology. Seemingly scholasticism, even in its ultramodern forms, has robbed doctrine of much of its heritage. Theology has often degenerated into a self-sustaining activity within the academy, with little or no relevance to the faith community. Robert C. Hughes and Robert Kysar lament the lack of relevance of much theology:

Those of us in the church have too often been given to understand and teach that doctrine has to do with abstractions, conceptualization, and theoretical ideas. It has no basis in real, daily experience and is just a mind game that the gifted play. Somehow many of us have forgotten or failed to communicate that theology is always rooted in real visceral Christian experience. (5)

Nevertheless, for some individuals at least, doctrine did have a pastoral function and one that was primarily demonstrated through good preaching. The distinction is between so-called, first- and second-order theology. Second-order theology refers to the detailed reflection upon and rules for sustaining such reflection upon primary dogma, while first-order theology refers to those primary dogmas themselves. Again, primary theology is the Word *from* God, while secondary theology is a word *about* God (Forde 2). Charry states, “In short, primary doctrines are the practically oriented content of the faith” (5-6). She contends that only when the concept of knowledge itself became problematic that theology began to focus more on the secondary. Theology tended towards the intellectual justification of the faith, rather than paying attention to Christian living. Regardless of Charry’s assertion, it is fair to state that historically speaking theology had more of a practical flavor in the pre-enlightenment period. As an example, Charry comments, “The patristic age emphasized sapience as the foundation of human excellence. Sapience includes correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known” (4).

Regarding theology as arcane and irrelevant to the ongoing life of the church is a relatively recent phenomenon. Little wonder, for as Gerhard O. Forde notes, “The secondary discourse is relatively pointless if it does not drive to proclamation, to actual primary discourse” (5). In other words, to quote Michael Jenkins, “The purpose of our study of God is nothing less than the transformation of our lives by the renewing of our minds” (17).

Charry uses the term “aretegenic” to indicate the virtue-shaping function of theology and contends that this has been in the past, and ought to be, the function of theology. The argument for spiritual development is fleshed out by Charry:

The argument here is not to suggest that all classical theology is aretegenic, for it is surely not. Rather, the point is simply that as these major shapers of the Christian tradition formulated, reformulated, and revised Christian doctrine, its moral, psychological, and social implications were uppermost in their minds. Even when refuting their colleagues or opponents, they never forgot that God was seeking to draw people to himself for their own good. (233)

Like all forms of communication, preaching ought to be far more relational and personal than informational.² As Alan of Lille writes, in what is perhaps one of the earliest recorded definitions of preaching, “Preaching is an open and public instruction in faith and behavior, whose purpose is the forming of men” (4).

Thus defined, preaching itself is doctrine; it is first-order theology. Preaching is a part of the Church at worship expressing itself before Almighty God in all of its human frailty. Preaching is *doxa*. Such preaching is living proof of the ancient precept *lex orandi lex credendi*; the law of prayer is the law of belief. Indeed, preaching is how most people encounter theology. Lischer describes preaching as “the projective function of theology” (14). Not that this standard elevates preaching beyond the realm of human speech to infallibility:

They know fear and trembling whenever they mount the pulpit. They are crushed by the feeling of being poor human beings who are probably more unworthy than all those who sit before them. Nevertheless, precisely then it is still a matter of God’s Word. The Word of God that they have to proclaim is what judges them, but this does *not* [original emphasis] alter the fact—indeed, it *means* [original emphasis]—that they have to *proclaim* [original emphasis] it. (Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics* 35)

Later in the Church Dogmatics Barth continues to explore this paradox,

At this point we may recall a noteworthy remark of Luther’s. At one time I used to think ... that its content should be rejected as an exaggeration which leads inevitably to the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Church’s teaching office. But a closer examination of the context has

convinced me that if Luther was expressing himself forcibly—we might almost say on the razor’s edge between truth and error—he was only stating the truth when he said: ... “a preacher must not say the Lord’s Prayer, nor ask forgiveness of sins when he has preached (if he is a true preacher) but must confess and exult with Jeremiah: Lord thou knowest that what has gone forth from my mouth is right and pleasing to thee. He must boldly say with St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets: *Haec dixit dominus*, Thus saith God himself.” (2: 747)

Here preaching functions as sapiential theology, to borrow Charry’s phrase (6). Preaching’s function is to build up the community of faith. Again, Lischer says, “The preacher-as-person lives in this world and ministers to it, but only the pastor-as-theologian can accurately assess the mobility, historicism, secularism, banal religiosity, and, most of all, the anxiety of our age” (8-9). Preaching has the potential to teach right living and thinking by opening hearers to the fresh perspective that comes from God. In the postliberal understanding, Charles L. Campbell writes, “The focus is on learning the distinctive languages and practices—the infrastructure—of the Christian community, which then makes certain ideas and experiences possible” (232). Regardless of the specifics of the postliberal account, one understands that in preaching one hears theology at its finest. Here, in preaching, fragile and fragmented experiences are both named and framed, giving coherence and meaning to life. Hughes and Kysar note, “The preacher will understand theology to be essentially about a structural reference into which all experience can be fitted and through which it can be interpreted” (11). Doctrinal preaching, therefore, is the dialectic of experience and conceptuality that provides meaning to that experience. Again, Hughes and Kysar write, “By speaking freshly of experience and abstraction, preaching makes experience new and names doctrine that resides in the listener’s immediate present” (28).

Exact parallels between past and present are assumed, but sufficient congruities between postmodernity and pre-modernity suggest a fruitful area for research. Even differences themselves prove insightful, as McGrath notes: “The genuine difficulties we experience in understanding the past serve as a paradigm for investigating how we understand *any* [original emphasis] situation which corresponds exactly to our own as observers, whether the differences relate to space, time or culture” (Genesis 98).

Of course, the meaning of doctrine itself can be uncertain and must be clarified. Here one enters into an area of intense debate as to what exactly doctrine is and what its functions are. Certainly, as McGrath notes, it is multifaceted. McGrath writes, “Christian doctrine is fundamentally an integrative concept, which brings together a number of elements into a greater whole” (Genesis 36). McGrath contends that doctrine, historically speaking, has had several dimensions, including social demarcation, interpretation of Scripture and experience, and as a truth claim.

In the course of my research I have often considered the examples of John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and John Wesley. Each was an outstanding preacher of his age, a significant theologian, with a ministry of considerable

import. The following is a brief indicator of how preaching as theology was worked out in their ministry.

Community Formation

Luke T. Johnson writes, “The church today desperately needs a clear and communal sense of identity: what does it mean to be a Christian?” (297). Interestingly, the issue of community for many pre-enlightenment preachers was not only one of identity, significant as that is, but also one of transformation.

Identity easily carries with it the notion of barrier, a clear demarcation of who is in and who is out of a particular community or association. To an extent one sees demarcation with former generations of preachers. Chrysostom preached against explicit heresy, leaving little room for doubt.³ Calvin stood against the excesses of Rome.⁴ Wesley resisted excesses within the revival movement, and formalism outside of it.⁵ When one considers these preachers more closely apparently they had little interest in barriers, their evangelical appeal being regularly to the fore. The great use of corporate language and rhetorical questions, both to identify with their hearers and to draw them into dialogue, is a clear indicator that for these preachers, building community was an exercise in personal and corporate transformation.

Doctrine was seldom used as a rod with which to scold, but very much grounded the preachers’ understanding of community as the community of faith. Augustine provided depth to his understanding of community through his meditation upon Christ. Aquinas identified community as a faith relationship with Christ.⁶ Calvin worked with the biblical concept of covenant. On each occasion their purpose was not only to strengthen the believers but also to invite others to participate by faith in the community of believers. While one would not wish to be shown to be guilty of an historical fallacy, it is not unwarranted to assume these preachers would be in agreement with Zizioulas who refers to the faith community as the Church “in-stituted” by Christ and “con-stituted” by the Spirit (140).

Preaching doctrinally with a view to forming community, then, carries with it the necessity to ground such a call to community within the Christ-event, not simply one’s own personal experience or need for communal identity, and to issue such as a call to personal participation within the corporate life of the body of Christ, that is, the Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The divine initiative must always take precedence; the indicative over the imperative. The call to community says little about self-help but much about self-surrender. The call to community demands a clear understanding of the meaning of becoming a Christ-follower, dying to self and rising to newness of life in the power of the Spirit, to those already within the community of faith, and to those observing. The call to community also requires instruction in the implications of membership of the body. The Church does not pull together to simply build a strong team or to accomplish stated objectives but is composed of persons joined together as members of the body of Christ.

Preaching doctrinally with a view to forming community has less to do with negative

self-definition, that is, over and against where others place themselves, than it has to do with a positive proclamation of the gospel. This positive proclamation ought to be good news to preachers as they inhabit the postmodern world, with less attention needing to be given to proofs for faith and apologetics than does to proclamation of the faith, the preacher's true calling. Preaching to form community is very much "faith seeking understanding." It is preaching "from the inside out," that is, a declaration of faith that invites others to participate in faith.

Doctrinal preaching, with a view to forming community, is evangelistic and results in more than club membership. Community formation requires a clear understanding of who Christ is, the life to which he calls people, and the corporate body in which they may now participate. In most cases pre-enlightenment preachers went further than a simple decision in their evangelistic preaching, and pressed on with the call to discipleship and holy living as the people of God. Doctrinal preaching is therefore more than information transfer concerning right belief. It is the gracious invitation of a loving God to sinful humanity to participate in the community of the redeemed made possible by the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf. Helping others to hear and respond to this invitation is the privilege and responsibility of the preacher.

To accomplish the task of doctrinal preaching today the preacher will have to preach evangelistically in a manner that deals with more than simply personal experience but rather incorporates the call to Christian community.

Scripture Interpretation

While proximity both in time and place to the biblical drama locates the pre-enlightenment preachers within a different era, much can be learned from them. Chrysostom set the stage with strong biblical exegesis, one that Aquinas built upon with his fluid interactions of creed and Scripture. Wesley appears to have been a master at both skills. Clearly these preachers were attentive to both the Bible and to their theological framework for interpretation. What emerges as one examines this framework is that their clearest interpretative strategy involves the larger salvific picture. The creed was useful to these preachers but, rather surprisingly, was not their ultimate interpretative tool.

Doctrine never became a matter of nitpicking through texts, comparing them to some higher body of knowledge, but was the means for viewing the particular through the lens of the whole. Augustine identified this use of doctrine clearly with his use of the law of love for both God and neighbor for God's sake as his lodestone.⁷ In fact, this larger salvific picture of God's love for humanity, demonstrated on the cross, proved to be the greater interpretative tool. Although being aware of my interpretative bias, just as with community formation, a clearly stated, passionate, evangelistic heart throbs in the lives of these sermons and preachers.

Furthermore, the fluid interaction of doctrine and Scripture did not result in Scripture becoming subservient to the lens of interpretation. Rather, Scripture was formative and held in the highest regard. Doctrinal preaching at heart is strongly exegetical. They had

less of a need to drag Scripture from the past into the present, however much informed by the creed or the issues of the day, than to take hearers on a journey of faith that allowed them to inhabit the world of the text and to discover themselves within the unfolding drama of redemption. Far beyond parallels that could be made perspectives were changed from the present to the eternal:

Insofar as we allow God's story to become our home rather than a distant land, we no longer approach the Bible as consumers of religion seeking quotations, illustrations, self-help tips, and practical applications; rather, we will reverently receive it as the living Word addressed to God's people, as the story which furnishes our vocabulary, shapes our imagination, and forms our life for the sake of the whole creation. (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 180)

The challenge of moving from assuming preachers today have to make Scripture relevant and applicable, to graciously allowing hearers to discover themselves within the drama of redemption is one to which preachers must rise. It is, in effect, to invite hearers to a change in worldview. Fortunately, preachers are not alone because, as also is evident in the preaching of these historic men, the role of the Holy Spirit in both the proclamation of the preacher and the reception by the hearers is paramount. Calvin, in particular, gave attention to the Spirit.⁸ The Holy Spirit is the inner and, in every sense, the ultimate Teacher, the One who interprets Scripture and acts in the hearts of the hearers.

This community of faith, based upon a divine initiative, is nevertheless marked by a dynamic relationship between God and humanity, bringing the pneumatological dimension to the fore. Immink writes, "The Spirit not only accomplishes the *re-presentation* [original emphasis] of the Christ-event, but as much the *reception* [original emphasis] of Christ in the heart of the believer" ("Inquiry" 7). He continues to explain the role of both the preacher and the Holy Spirit:

Why do we preach? Well, because we believe that preaching is one of the instruments of the Holy Spirit. While we speak faithfully about matters of faith, we meanwhile trust that God's Spirit is at work. So preaching presupposes that God's Spirit is a creative Spirit, a Spirit who creates understanding, trust and longsuffering in the human realm. Accordingly, preachers should have an anthropological interest. They not only proclaim God's redemptive work in Christ, but also point to the Spirit's work in our human heart and daily life. (12-13)

Doctrinal preaching with a view to interpreting Scripture invites preachers to participate with the Holy Spirit in the lives of their hearers, as worldviews are changed from one that can be described as a sinful, "me-centered" view of reality, to the opening of the eyes of hearers, much like Paul's were on the Damascus Road, to the reality of the risen Christ. This kind of preaching invites preachers to pay close attention to the Scriptures, treating them with integrity rather than a bag of texts to be reassembled at will and with a single eye to God's ultimate purpose, the redemption of his creation to his own glory. Preaching

Christian doctrine means that the preacher will come reverently and prayerfully to the Bible, listening for the Spirit's voice, eager to set aside prior agendas with the Spirit's assistance, and longing for a change in worldview in order that he or she may see both the words on the page and the present reality in the light of who God truly is and what he has done on humanity's behalf. This reality also ought to be good news to the preacher in the postmodern context because the role of story as a vehicle to carry meaning is highly valued in this age.

To accomplish the task of doctrinal preaching today, the preacher will avoid simple information transfer based on creedal statements choosing instead to allow the rule of faith to draw the hearers into the living drama of the Scriptures.

Making Sense of Life

That life is complex, and that post-Christian societies find themselves somewhat rootless, is nothing startling. Much more significant would be the means to provide understanding and direction within this milieu.

The preachers I have considered sought to both frame and define human experience in the light of God's Word. Each was acutely aware of the circumstances within which he ministered. In truth, they were men of their own age and happily engaged with their surrounding culture. Chrysostom utilized the common belief in a hierarchy of supernatural beings to make his point (Dressler 97). Aquinas adopted the thought patterns of both Aristotle and the mystics of his day. Wesley was adept at the use of syllogism.⁹ None sought to hide from his realities but faithfully engaged with the culture in the light of God's self-revelation.

This approach required pre-enlightenment preachers to begin with an awareness of the divine initiative in revelation. The interpretation of experience by these historic preachers was not simply to provide meaning to the here and now but to cast the present in the light of God's ultimate drama. Whether a burning city, a reformation, or a revival, all were part of a larger whole. Even so, the human element was never minimized. The shared common humanity of the preachers studied is clearly evident in their use of corporate language, apt illustrations, depth of psychological insight, and penetrating theological analysis leading to a change in perspective:

A teaching sermon is not solely focused on faith as a human awareness of God, but unfolds the fullness and richness of God and God's kingdom. The teaching preacher is not primarily adjusting to needs and circumstances of the hearer, but brings the hearer in the presence of God's kingdom as it is established in the Messiah of Israel. Such a preacher deals with the ultimate vicissitudes of life and with the destiny of our world in terms of the kingdom to come and the revealed Messiah. This means that the human horizon is broadened and that the work of the Creator and Redeemer illuminates our human experience. (Immink, "Homiletics" 109)

Preaching doctrinally with a view to making sense of life requires the preacher to hold both ends of the tension, broadening the human horizon beyond the immediate to the eternal yet with a profound understanding of and compassion towards the presenting cultural context. Such preachers have to become dedicated students of their emerging cultures, engage with their congregations and surrounding communities, tackling real life as it presents itself, always with a view to this broadening of the horizon. As William H. Willimon says, “You might think of Sunday morning as a struggle over the question, Who tells the story of what is going on in the world?” (129). The call to the preacher is to make God’s voice heard.

Preachers ought not to be afraid of using relevant cultural metaphors, nor should they assume that such metaphors are value neutral. However, redemptive potential can and ought to be discovered.

Preaching doctrinally with a view to making sense of life has less to do with the modern concept of “how to,” seemingly adopted as a homiletical strategy in so many sermons compatible with a modernistic technological mindset. Such preaching does involve a profound understanding of the world in which people find themselves, their Creator and Redeemer, and their response to those realities. Preaching in this fashion will take seriously the human condition and events but be less concerned with personal satisfaction and happiness than with sanctification and holiness. As Bartow says, “A *Christian interpretation of life* [original emphasis], therefore, is not an exploration into the relevance of the gospel to the exigencies of the moment. It is, instead, a ‘read’ of those exigencies in terms of their relevance to the gospel of Christ” (136).

Preaching doctrinally with a view to making sense of life also requires that the preacher pay close attention to context. Pre-enlightenment preachers spoke to their contextual situations with a clarity that allowed present reality to interface with divine truth. To assume that one can take a simple distillation of truth and apply it atextually is entirely to miss the point of doctrinal preaching. A clear pastoral function of Christian doctrine is to equip people to make sense of life in any particular situation.

Doctrinal preaching never ignores shared humanity, even as it points away from it towards the Lord. Discovering this balance is a part of the task lovingly undertaken by preachers as those who are aware of their own weaknesses and limitations yet living in the sure hope of the transforming power of God’s grace in their lives. As Johnson rightly remarks, “Where else in today’s world can humans hear a humane and healing word, or encounter an alternative vision of reality actually being enacted?” (304).

Context and experience are of immense importance to postmodern people. Discovering the valuable role of doctrinal preaching in these circumstances is once again a gift and an opportunity for the preacher.

To accomplish the task of doctrinal preaching today, the preacher will become a cultural as well as a scriptural exegete, searching for redemptive value in the metaphors, examples and stories that surround him or her.

Truth and Response

Preachers are generally delighted with a response to their message. Few preachers desire the call of so many of the Old Testament prophets to rejection and abandonment by their people. Perhaps none more than Augustine clearly stated his purpose in preaching.¹⁰ Interpretation ought to lead to proclamation, and as a preacher his purpose must be to teach, delight, and in the end, move the hearer to action. Augustine's approach was designed to engage the whole person, not just the intellect. To borrow Chrysostom's phrase, to use the "force of eloquence," rhetoric, in the service of piety.¹¹ This principle was discovered not only in historic manuals on preaching but also in the very manner of preaching. Clarity of thought, simple use of language, visual beauty of metaphors, clear structures, summary statements, and paraphrases were all used, with a view to pressing home a truth claim.

The goal of pre-enlightenment preachers was a faith response:

Doctrines define the object of faith—God—not in order that God may be comprehended but in order that the believer may relate to God in faith. There is an existential, as well as a cognitive, dimension or component to the truth-claims of Christian doctrine. (McGrath, Genesis 78)

Mere assent or compliant actions alone were never enough. The purpose of preaching was to evoke faith that, in turn, was lived in action. Historic preachers preached with a view to leading others to faith in Christ and discipling believers in order that their faith might grow and deepen, thereby impacting their wider communities and world.

Doctrinal preaching with a view to pressing home a truth claim must, therefore, not only expect a faith response but be prepared to address the whole person in order to facilitate such a response. Simply to address the mind would only be to inform. As Augustine rightly notes, preachers need to captivate the heart if the will is to be moved.¹² Doctrinal preaching, much against stereotype, ought, therefore, to be more than informational, however relevant, and contemporary, choosing instead to focus upon the response of faith to the invitation of God.

To be sure, creedal preaching was a part of the preaching ministry of prior generations, but this type of preaching was generally not reserved for a particular sermon but rather was evident in almost all of their preaching. Perhaps within an emerging post-Christian culture there is a place for creedal preaching. One instance could certainly be baptismal preparation, appropriating methods from preaching forebears. A further instance might be a short series on the creed itself in order to ground and disciple believers. Neither of these options, that is, baptismal preparation or creedal series, ought to relieve preachers of the responsibility that weekly preaching is for the purpose of pressing home God's truth claims upon the lives of their hearers.

To accomplish the task of doctrinal preaching today, the preacher will never be satisfied with the communication of precepts, choosing instead to become a servant of the Word

whose goal is the life transformation of the gathered community.

Summary

The preaching of Christian doctrine in a post-Christian society ought to be Christological, without becoming narrow in focus. To the question of identity in a fast changing world of plurality and confusion, preachers point to Christ and who believers are in him. To that of community, much of which is virtual and transitory, profound implications are contained within the reality of being members of the body of Christ. Scripture and experience can be framed and interpreted in light of who Jesus is, rather than fitting Jesus into the emerging cultural context, and so bring perspective and clarity. In so doing, preachers will be messengers of hope, based not upon wishful thinking but upon Christ, the hope of glory.

Preaching Christian doctrine has little to do with “dry theology” but everything to do with a vital and dynamic Christian life. Historically, theology was a practical concern, and the pre-modern preachers studied demonstrate the possibility of preaching in such a manner. Just as doctrine functions as the grammar of faith, enabling the faithful to interpret the Scriptures, so, too, doctrine functions as the grammar of Christian preaching. Rather than having to preach a formal catechetical sermon on a particular article of the creed in order to be a doctrinal preacher, one needs to pay attention to this grammar as it informs every sermon. Preaching creedal content does not necessarily mean preaching the creed itself, for doctrine does more than shape the form of the sermon; it undergirds and informs it. Preaching is indeed first-order theology.

Preaching doctrine is not concerned with right belief for its own sake but with the life of faith for God’s sake. A clear call to community is an invitation to personal and communal life transformation. The responsibility of preachers is to clarify who Jesus is and the life to which he calls people. The mechanism easily suited to this purpose is to invite people to inhabit the narrative of the gospel, thereby experiencing a radical shift in worldview. With this shift in mind, prayerfully relying upon the Holy Spirit, preachers preach truth to the whole person, calling for and inviting response. In so doing, one recognizes the pastoral function of Christian doctrine, whose ultimate aim is the glory of God himself.

A preacher of Christian doctrine in the twenty-first century, if he or she is to accomplish the task, will learn to embody the practices of the preacher-theologians of the past. Doctrine, functioning as the grammar of faith, enabled past preachers to address the issues of community, Scripture, experience, and, ultimately, Truth. The present day preacher would be wise to incorporate these insights regarding the pastoral purpose of doctrine into his or her preaching.

Reference list

- Alan of Lille. "The Seventh Rung." *The Company of Preachers*. Ed. Richard Lischer. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. 3-7.
- Allen, Ronald J., Barbara S. Blaisdale, and Scott B. Johnston. *Theology of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.
- Aquinas, Thomas. "What is Faith?" 1 Nov. 2004
<http://www.intratext.com/ixt/eng0029/_p9.htm>. 6pp.
- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. London: T&T Clark, 1975. 14 vols.
---. *The Göttingen Dogmatics*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Bartow, Craig L. *God's Human Speech*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Campbell, Charles L. *Preaching Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960. 2 vols.
- Charry, Ellen. *By the Renewing of Your Minds*. Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Dressler, H., ed. *The Fathers of the Church*. Vol. 72. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 1984.
- Farley, Benjamin W. *John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *Theology Is for Proclamation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.
- Goh, Jeffrey C. K. *Christian Tradition Today*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Hughes, Robert G., and Robert Kysar. *Preaching Doctrine for the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.
- Immink, F. Gerrit. "Homiletics: The Current Debate." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8 (2004): 89-121.
- . "Inquiry into the Practice of Faith." Letter to the author. 5 Nov. 2004.
- Jenkins, Michael. *Invitation to Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.
- Johnson, Luke T. *The Creed*. New York: Image, 2003.
- Lischer, Richard. *A Theology of Preaching*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001.
- McGrath, Alister E. *The Genesis of Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Mill, D. "Necessary Doctrines." *Ancient and Postmodern Christianity*. Ed. Kenneth Tanner and Christopher A. Hall. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. 106-19.
- Outler, Albert C. *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 1. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984.
- Pasquarello, Michael. "Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching." *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching*. Ed. Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003. 177-93.
- Roof, Wade C. *A Generation of Seekers*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.
- Schaff, Philip. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. 1st series. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999. 14 vols.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Die Praktische Theologie nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche in Zusammenhang Dargestellt*. Berlin, Germany: Jacob Frerich, 1850.
- Webber, Robert E. *Ancient-Future Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.
- Willimon, William. H. *Pastor*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002.
- Zizioulas, John D. *Being as Communion*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1993.

¹ “Der Ausdruck *praktisch* ist allerdings genau nicht ganz richtig, denn praktische Theologie ist nicht die Praxis, sondern die *Theorie* der Praxis” (Schleiermacher 12).

² “Communication is the process in which relationships are established, maintained, modified, or terminated through the increase or reduction in meaning” (Forde 2).

³ See, for example, the series “Against the Anomoeans” (Dressler).

⁴ Calvin’s series on Deuteronomy, particularly, the mini-series on The Ten Commandments, serves as an example (Farley).

⁵ Wesley’s second sermon on “The Witness of the Spirit” is a fine example (Outler 285-98).

⁶ See his Lenten series, especially sermon 1, “What is Faith?” (Aquinas).

⁷ *De Doctrina Christiana* (Schaff 2: 519-97) sets out his assumptions well. “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this two-fold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought” (Schaff 2: 533).

⁸ “[T]he Word of God is like the sun, shining upon all those to whom it is proclaimed, but with no effect among the blind. Now, all of us are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly it cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it’ (Institutes 1: 582).

⁹ See, for example, his sermon “Justification by Faith” (Outler 181-99).

¹⁰ Noting that without a response to truth, all is lost, he writes, “For what does it profit a man that he both confesses the truth and praises the eloquence, if he does not yield his consent” (Schaff 2: 584).

¹¹ “On The Priesthood” (Schaff 9: 33-83).

¹² Just as “the hearer must be pleased in order to secure his attention, so he must be persuaded in order to move him to action” (Schaff 2: 583).