

# *Touchstone*

**Volume 32**

**February 2014**

**Number 1**

## **THE INDISPENSABLE MINISTRY OF PREACHING**

### **CONTENTS**

<b>Editorial</b> .....	3
<b>Articles</b>	
Why Do We Preach? A Brief Theology of Preaching the Word of God Harold Wells.....	4
Postmodernity and Preaching Paul Scott Wilson .....	12
Preaching: A View from the Pew Michael Cooke .....	21
The Indispensable Ministry of Preaching John J. Grady .....	26
Preaching the Gospel Beth Pollock .....	30
The Inner Landscape of the Preacher Kate Crawford .....	32
Three Goals for Preaching in our Context Jeff Crittenden .....	40
The Writing is on the Wall Ross A. Lockhart .....	46

**From the Heart about the Heart of the Matter**

Proclamation is Indispensable

Ross Bartlett ..... 52

**Profile**

Flowers for Maurice Boyd

Malcolm Sinclair ..... 57

**Reviews***Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*

by Joseph Ratzinger

Colin Peterson..... 63

*And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament*

by Fleming Rutledge

Carmen Palmer ..... 65

*What Christianity Is Not: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology*

by Douglas John Hall

John McTavish ..... 67

*Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship*

edited by Martin Tel, Joyce Berger and John D. Witvliet

Mac Watts ..... 69

*The United Church of Canada: A History*

edited by Don Schweitzer

Robert C. Fennell ..... 70

## Editorial

This issue of *Touchstone* is about preaching and its indispensable role in the life of the church. Two lead articles grace this number. The first is a splendid and accessible primer on the theology of preaching by Harold Wells. The second is a consideration of the nature of post-modernity and of its impact on preaching by Paul Wilson, long-serving homiletician and prolific author. He maintains that this is an hour for sermons to become “theopoetry.”

The next three articles are written by lay leaders in the church, people who are the “consumers” of preaching. In thoughtful and diverse ways, Michael Cooke, Jack Grady and Beth Pollock attest the influence of preaching on their lives.

Then follow three articles by practitioners of the preaching art. Kate Crawford, Jeff Crittenden and Ross Lockhart bring vital reports on what they are learning in living out the call to preach in their contexts. Our “Heart” column is by another preacher, Ross Bartlett, who observes that one significant request made by congregations of their preachers is: “We would see Jesus.”

Our goal was to devote the profile in this number to a preacher. We had to choose one from among the many notable preachers who have significantly influenced United Church folk. With files from David McKane, Malcolm Sinclair offers flowers to the memory of one of Canada’s most effective and controversial preachers, Maurice Boyd. His story is one of both success and sadness.

Two of our five book reviews are on the preaching art: one book reviewed is by Joseph Ratzinger, and the other by U.S. preacher, Fleming Rutledge. Rounding out the books reviewed are the latest from Doug Hall, a fulsome resource on the Psalter and the recent *United Church of Canada: A History*, edited by Don Schweitzer.

Again this is a truncated editorial to make sufficient room for the rich contributions solicited from our writers.

*Peter Wyatt*

# WHY DO WE PREACH? A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF PREACHING THE WORD OF GOD

by Harold Wells

Preaching has a bad reputation: as when a teenager says, “Don't preach at me, Mom!” No one wants to be accused of being “preachy.” I recently overheard someone say: “I don't need to go to church for the minister to tell me how to live. She's no better than I am, anyway.” Preaching is sometimes seen as a self-righteous activity. This is a misunderstanding. But there it is.

Then there's the widespread feeling that sermons are boring and put people to sleep. One chap considers it his job to keep the guy beside him awake during the sermon—with a thrust of the elbow.

So we ask: Why do we preach, and what is specific and unique about Christian preaching? It's obviously a form of rhetoric, but how is it different from an after-dinner motivational speech, or a political speech, or a lecture?

Actually, it claims to be much more than these. It claims to be a proclamation of the Word of God! According to Luke, Jesus said: “Whoever hears you, hears me” (10:16). And, as Luther insisted in light of the “priesthood of all believers,” God's Word can be spoken by any Christian to any neighbor. This is no less “God's Word” than any sermon.

## **Preaching the Word of God!**

Some would regard it as the ultimate arrogance to stand in the pulpit and attempt to speak the Word of God! To understand where this comes from, we should realize that preaching the Word has historical roots in both testaments of the Bible.

**The Prophets.** The prophets were preachers more than eight centuries before Christ. An English Bible concordance shows the words “preach” or “proclaim,” or sometimes “call,” or “cry out” (Hebrew, *karah*) pertaining to the prophets (Amos 3:9, Jeremiah 2:2, Jonah 3:2, Nehemiah 6:7). The prophet is one who calls out to the people for God, announcing God's love, judgment and promise. We hear, “the Word of

the Lord came to Hosea,” and Jeremiah says, “the Word of the Lord came to me . . .” The prophets boldly address the concrete circumstances of their time and place, denounce injustice, warn about the domestic and foreign policies of kings and promise God’s future. They were frequently in trouble with their contemporaries.

The Word, in Hebrew, is the *davar* of God, the same *davar* by which God first created. In Genesis 1, we hear several times: “God said.” God creates by this *davar*. God’s Word is also God’s self-communication to human beings. The supposition here is that God is self-revealing, and that, without revelation, God is not accessible to us as are other objects of perception. We are told: “No one has ever seen God” (1 John 4:12). “Revelation” implies that God cannot be mastered by us intellectually, and does not come under our gaze as do other objects that we may know. Moreover, God is not a blind force, but a Subject, and can be known only if God communicates to us. God is “holy Mystery,” incomprehensible, inconceivably greater than we, but not less than personal. God seeks to get through to us, while not blinding or deafening us, using human messengers to do so. The prophets preach out of an overwhelming conviction that God has given them a Word for the people. Typically, they say, “Thus says the Lord” (e.g., Amos 1: 3).

Thus, the prophet is not a philosopher who speculates about the existence of God or the meaning of life. Rather, the prophet speaks out of a deep sense of inspiration and vocation. The prophet’s message is typically unpopular; yet he cannot keep silent. Listen to Jeremiah: “I have become a laughingstock all the day long . . . For, whenever I speak, I must cry out, ‘Violence! Destruction!’ for the Word of the Lord has come before me. If I say, I will not mention him or speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary with holding it in and I cannot” (20:9).

We might wish to dismiss the prophets as megalomaniacs who imagine they speak for God, but we cannot discard them that easily. Their words are profound, challenging and eloquent. They are not infallible, yet they speak with originality, courage and understanding.

**The Rabbis.** Another Jewish precedent for Christian preaching is that of the rabbis in the ancient synagogue. The first Christians were

Jewish, and the earliest Christian churches were spawned in synagogues. “Rabbi” means “master,” in the sense of “teacher.” A rabbi is not usually a prophet, and does not bring new messages from God, but instructs the people in their faith tradition. Down through the centuries of Christendom, the rabbis of ongoing Judaism have needed courage to lead a faith community often under persecution.

The rabbi explains and clarifies. Many of our sermons are rabbinical. Preaching and teaching are distinct modes of speaking, but they can overlap; preaching includes an element of teaching, and teachers may at times preach.

**Jesus.** In the New Testament, Jesus appears as both prophet and rabbi. He was clearly a wisdom teacher, as we see in his sayings in the gospels. We are told that he *taught* them (Matt. 5:2). But he also came preaching and proclaiming: “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Jesus preached, or taught, in parables and in dramatic pithy sayings. He was a consummate story teller. He also sent out his disciples to preach (Luke 9:2).

The verbs “to preach” (*kerussein*), and “proclaim,” and “declare,” are used more or less interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to the distinctive speech of Jesus about the kingdom of God. It is notable that proclamation (*kerygmatos*) was also part of the context of the Roman Empire in which the early Christians lived. Roman functionaries *proclaimed* news of the emperor's military victories or imperial policies. Roman law required not only unquestioning obedience, but worship and sacrifice, since the emperor was not only a ruler, but also a god, or “son of God.” When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and the good news of God's love and grace, he was turning the tables on the Romans with the announcement of a different kind of kingdom.<sup>1</sup> He proclaimed an *evangelion*—good news for the poor (Luke 4:18)—about a kingdom that was breaking into the world then and there, and was still to come. *Evangelion* in its verbal form can be translated “evangelize” or “preach the good news.”

In Isaiah 61:1, the prophet proclaims good news for the poor.

---

<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 168.

Evidently Jesus took the term from Isaiah. But the Romans also proclaimed an *evangelion* about “peace on earth” (the *pax Romana*) which the emperor imposed by military force. So when Jesus used this term, *evangelion*, he was implicitly challenging Rome’s imperial religion, saying: there is truly good news, and true peace on earth, which comes from the God of Israel. He went about preaching the inexhaustible love of his *Abba*, healing the sick, calling the people to be faithful to their God, to forgive debts as they were forgiven, to love their neighbours and enemies. In an empire based on a slave economy, he called his disciples to be slaves of one another. Thus he courageously announced a kingdom utterly unlike the oppressive regime of Rome, throwing into question its ideology and absolute authority.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus’ preaching, like that of the prophets, has a revelatory character. It is not human wisdom, appearing foolish to “the wise” (Matt. 11:25), because God’s Word communicates something new and strange that we could not have learned for ourselves. Moreover, Jesus claimed astonishing authority, moving beyond the Mosaic law: “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say unto you . . .” (Matt. 5: 21, 27, 38).

### **Proclaiming Christ: Apostolic Preaching**

The distinctiveness of Christian preaching appears first in the apostolic proclamation of the early church. The earliest references are in the letters of Paul, where a shift appears between the pre-Easter preaching of Jesus and the post-Easter preaching of the first Christians. The great watershed was, of course, Jesus’ resurrection; without it, the apostolic preaching would have been groundless. They testified that Jesus had conquered death and was alive among them, and this was the basis of their courage. They claimed that the titles given to the Emperor—Lord (*kurios*) and Saviour (*soter*) actually belonged not to Caesar, but to the crucified and risen Jesus!<sup>3</sup> In this way they were “turning the world upside down,” proclaiming that “there is another king called Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7).

We notice that the preaching of Jesus’ followers differs from the

---

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Briggs, “Paul on Bondage and Freedom in Imperial Roman Society,” in *Paul and Politics*, 110-123; see also Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 116.

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” in *Paul and Politics*, 168.

discourse, for example, of the devotees of the philosopher Socrates, in that the Christians do not merely report the wise words of their teacher. They preach Christ himself, crucified and risen. The proclaimer becomes the one proclaimed. We find later a shift also in the concept of the Word (*logos*). While the prophets claimed to speak the Word of God, Jesus is said to *be* the *logos* made flesh (John 1:14). He not only proclaims or teaches the Word, but also incarnates it. He is one with the Creator, and the Creator is one with him in his full humanity.

Notice what Paul says about preaching in 1 Corinthians:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation (*kerygmatos*) to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:24).

The text implies that God's salvation reaches us through preaching. "How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (Romans 10:14). When Paul says that we "preach Christ crucified," he means much the same as when we say we "preach the Word of God." When we preach Christ, we preach the Word of God.

### **Preaching from the Bible**

But what is the Bible, and why do we preach from biblical texts and not from anything else? Some Christians easily speak of the Bible as the Word of God. We sometimes hear, after the reading of Scripture, "This is the Word of God." But we know that the Bible is not made up of infallible texts. There are contradictions and historical errors in the Bible. This is an ancient, pre-scientific book that sometimes reflects outmoded ideas about the world and the universe, about human relations, and—in places—about concepts of God that are inadequate in the light of Christ. Moreover, the canon of the Bible was compiled by

flawed human beings (however inspired they may have been) and Christians do disagree about the canonical status of certain books.<sup>4</sup> So the words of the Bible cannot be simply equated with the words of God; they need to be read both respectfully and critically. For Christians, not the Bible, but Jesus Christ himself *is* the Word of God in the primary sense. That is why Luther, who rejected the authority of some biblical texts, used a critical christological hermeneutic, declaring that “Christ is Lord and King of Scripture.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, from the earliest centuries Christians have found these books inspired and inspiring, and have passed them down to us as “canonical” (our rule or standard). When we preach from the Bible we base ourselves upon the primary and most proximate witness to unique revelatory events. Since God’s self-revelation occurred decisively long ago, we need a witness to those events. Otherwise we could know nothing about them. When we read the Bible we listen to these human testimonies, praying to hear a Word from God. God’s Word is not print on a page, but living and dynamic. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the words of the Bible can become, again and again, the “clay jars” through which God’s own Word reaches us (2 Cor. 4:7).

Preaching, then, is more than the personal convictions of the preacher. Certainly the life experiences, insights and personality of the preacher are valuable instruments through which God speaks; yet it is appropriate that our preaching is disciplined by faithfulness to Scripture, and even by use of a common lectionary. In this way the church community places some control over the personal inclinations of preachers.

This is the remarkable thing: within the discipline of biblical preaching we hope to hear the Word of God not only from the Bible, but also from the words of the preacher. The preacher, like the Scripture, is by no means infallible. The preacher’s words are emphatically not God’s own words! Yet we pray that the words of fallible human beings can

---

<sup>4</sup> See Karl Barth’s discussion of canonicity in *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, pt. 2 (ET: Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 476-481.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*, in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 35, ed. H. J. Grim (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 395-398.

become, by the power of the Spirit, vessels by which God's truth reaches the minds and hearts of listeners. This is what makes preaching different from other kinds of rhetoric. To preach the Word of God weekly to a congregation is indeed a high calling.

### **Preaching is for Here and Now**

Good preaching requires careful study of biblical texts, but also a keen awareness of the world of here and now. The good preacher does not merely repeat the words of the Bible over and over again in different ways, but hopes to deliver from the Scripture a fresh Word from God that addresses the here-and-now life of the people. In this sense, God's revelation does not remain in the past.

The French Reformed thinker, Paul Ricoeur, argued that, to interpret Scripture fruitfully, we must first pay close attention to the original intention of the authors (e.g., Jeremiah or Mark) who were addressing the world of their time. However, we also have to move beyond the author's original intent and consider what the text means for us in our own time and place.<sup>6</sup> We ask: Is there a lively Word to be found in this text for these very people in this very place? This interaction between the historic biblical text and our context is called "hermeneutical circulation." Interpretation for preaching involves a circular, spiralling interaction between Scripture and our present knowledge and experience of the world. First, we need to hear as accurately as possible what the biblical author is saying within his own historical context, and not merely read into her words whatever we like. "Exegesis" means "reading out," pulling the message out of the text.

Having heard what the author was saying in his time, we must then interpret the Bible in view of the world we experience. As we have seen, the Bible comes to us from the ancient world and often reflects perspectives of that world that we cannot share. We cannot deny what we know from the sciences. We find texts in Scripture that we recognize as racist, sexist, and heterosexist. We cannot discard what we know about the equality of women in our time. We cannot ignore what we

---

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 29-30.

have learned about sexual orientation. We have to bring our scientific, psychological, social and economic understanding to the task of preaching. So we come to the biblical texts prayerfully, bringing all that we know and experience as twenty-first century people. That is why, in a certain sense, scriptural interpretation involves *eisegesis*, “reading in.” Rich and profound texts carry a “surplus of meaning.”<sup>7</sup> For example, the ancient texts of Exodus have spoken powerfully to oppressed peoples in our time, inspiring resistance and revolution. Galatians 3:28, referring to the oneness of male and female in Christ, has been interpreted as supportive of the ordination of women. Prophetic warnings about destruction of the land (Isaiah 32) speak to us today of the terrifying consequences of wanton abuse of the natural ecology. In each of these cases, interpretation is not limited to authorial intent, but new meanings, arising out of new circumstances, are “read in.” This is necessary, because “texts have a life of their own” (Ricoeur). To be responsible, such “reading in” must be coherent, though not identical, with the original intention of the author. Through the Spirit, and under the lordship of Christ, the Bible is able to speak meaningfully to many eras, many cultures and many conditions of life. God’s revelation is not simply a “thing of the past.”

We note that “prophets” are listed, together with apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers, as among the Spirit’s engifted servants of the church (Eph. 4:11). Few of us would regard ourselves as prophets, but we may indeed be prophetic in our function as evangelists, pastors and teachers. Only in the power of the Spirit will we find the imagination and courage truly to preach God’s Word for the here and now. When we do that, we may err, but we can never be boring or self-righteous.

Why do we preach? Because we have received, in Christ, a Word of truth from the creating, redeeming, sustaining God. We preach because that Word is a treasure to be shared with a world too often gloomy and despairing. We share the Word because it is life-giving and liberating.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 45-46.

## POSTMODERNITY AND PREACHING

by Paul Scott Wilson

Many preachers speak of an enormous social shift that leaves them feeling disoriented and uncertain about what they can say to a new age. Like the rising seas, postmodern thought has flooded the modern coastlands once thought secure, and new ways of being must be found. We may be tempted to think that postmodernity is a problem, but modernity may be the real issue. A generation is now living for which postmodern changes are normal—they have not known anything else. They may not know the names of those who have articulated key postmodern philosophical and literary perspectives, like Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Linda Hutcheon and many others, but their ideas have been filtered through teachers, technology, the media and peers. Moreover, postmodernity is in our blood. Some people in the church and academic community have been talking about postmodernity for decades, yet, for some, it has moved only recently from being a sideshow to being an influence so pervasive that it cannot be ignored. Here I reflect on the impact of postmodernity on preaching—past, present, and future—with a view to offering a word of hope to preachers in their calling.

### **The Postmodern Shift in Recent Decades**

Postmodernity may be defined as a reaction against the Enlightenment project and its emphasis on reason, the intellect, the certainty of knowledge and the rights of the privileged. David Lose says, “Postmodernity at its best stands against modernity’s penchant to quash dissenting voices in its relentless quest for order, stability, unity, and certainty. At its worst postmodernity loses all confidence in *any* truth or conviction beyond its own pessimistic views on the absence of truth and the futility of conviction.”<sup>1</sup> Postmodernity has not been an organized movement with a particular worldview or end product in mind—it is more a variety of reactions against modern attitudes.

---

<sup>1</sup> David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 32.

While changes may have seemed sudden to some, many insights of the postmodern era have been with us awhile, though only in retrospect do we apply the postmodern label. Some of these insights are apparent in the New Homiletic that began to take shape since the 1950s:

1) Words do not have a one-to-one correspondence with reality. Meaning is not straight-forward; it requires interpretation and is socially conditioned. In the early 1800s imagination was regarded as wild and suspect, but poet S.T. Coleridge, by contrast, argued that it opens doors on reality and truth. He elevated imagination above linear ways of thinking, as a principal tool of poets and theologians. Re-valuing imagination for preaching has been a big part of the New Homiletic with its emphasis on image, metaphor, story and idea.

2) Words have many meanings. Language is not univocal. Horace Bushnell knew this in the 1850s when he argued that biblical texts have many meanings, “even as a stalk of corn pushes out leaf from within leaf by a growth that is its unsheathing.”<sup>2</sup> Language communicates many things beyond information and, in narrative form, can generate experience. We need to enter texts to experience their meaning; they cannot be effectively reduced to propositions and doctrines.

3) Pre-determined forms and unexamined assumptions are suspect. The New Homiletic challenged classic modes of point-form preaching when it claimed that a sermon should have its own forms, design, functions and ways of being. Sermons should be organic as opposed to mechanical, as H. Grady Davis was among the first to argue in 1958; a sermon should be “an idea that grows.”<sup>3</sup>

4) “Context is everything” is a frequent mantra of postmodern thought. Already in 1969 David Randolph said of the sermon: “[it] does not arise from religion in general and address the universe . . . [It brings] the meaning of the text to expression in the situation of the hearers, rather than by abstraction . . .”<sup>4</sup> Preaching is concrete speech about specific situations, as contrasted with broad generalizations and

---

<sup>2</sup> Horace Bushnell, “Our Gospel, a Gift to the Imagination,” in *Horace Bushnell: Sermons*, ed. Conrad Cherry (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 100.

<sup>3</sup> H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 15.

<sup>4</sup> David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press: 1969), 22-23.

intellectual abstractions.

5) Logic and reason are not the only ways of learning and knowing. Fred Craddock proposed an inductive method, as opposed to deductive, in *As One without Authority*<sup>5</sup> in 1971. Charles L. Rice, Eugene Lowry and others speak in a related manner of sermons proceeding by narrative plot, drawing listeners into the unfolding action. Sermons proceed in dynamic ways that do not necessarily conform to discursive argument.

6) Postmodern thought is a reaction against universal truth claims demanding conformity and suppressing difference. The particular and specific are now valued—differences matter. Stories of contemporary individuals within their social context have been an important way to highlight those who have been silenced or oppressed.

7) Words are events. Meaning is fluid and unstable, needing to be renegotiated in each moment. Interpretation is inescapable. These notions correspond well with the Word of the sermon understood as an event of God. The New Homiletic, inspired by the New Hermeneutic, became focussed on the eventful nature of metaphor, story and parable, but here it may be said to have stumbled. The Word-event often seemed to become a word-event. At its worst, stories and the experience they provided seemed to be the point, not encounter with God's story.

### **Recent Changes in Postmodern Influence**

Not all of these developments were perfect in anticipating current postmodern thought. For instance, the sermon as an organic entity would now be suspect as a model in some postmodern thought, because it implies a closed system—completion and unity, not multiplicity. Unity is a notion dear to the church, as in Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21, NRSV). Unity is not the only notion to take a major hit: goodness, history, truth and the Bible as our story (meta-narrative) are also in question; so it is no wonder that many preachers are left reeling.

1) Goodness. Goodness was once conceived as a value existing as

---

<sup>5</sup> Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Enid, OK: Phillips University Press, 1971).

an objective reality. Standards of ethical and moral goodness applied equally everywhere. Differences with predominantly Western ideas of goodness were often dismissed as products of uneducated or inferior cultures. Difference was threatening.

Today good tends to be determined by individuals or sub-groups in the culture. Ideas of good are governed by relationships and community. People think of themselves as having identities according to who their companions or partners are, or what they are doing. This need not imply a lack of integrity; rather it can speak to different aspects of one's personality or activities (e.g. student, athlete, coach, volunteer) and different ways of engaging and of determining what is valued and good. Good is contextual and relational. It is determined through patterns of interaction and by consequences of action. Often good is practical.

2) History. History was once understood as fact, but now it is seen more as an interpretation of data. Daniel Aaron laments that "scientific historians" have taken over history with "the no-nonsense monograph, conceived by specialists for other specialists and stripped of pageantry, descriptive set pieces, dramatic confrontations, and authorial reflections."<sup>6</sup> As a result some writers "have begun to smudge the boundary line between history and fiction, to blend them, and to assert that fictional history might be 'truer' than recorded history."<sup>7</sup>

The preacher is charged with dealing responsibly with the biblical text as an historical document; thus it is challenging to be a preacher when scholars like Zhang Longxi say, "The past cannot be fully present in the historical account."<sup>8</sup> History as a kind of fiction shapes and selects the information it renders, and no single uncontested version of the whole is possible. We can no longer even be certain about what is history in history. Preachers need to think twice about saying, "the meaning of this text is," or "history tells us." As Kevin Vanhoozer

---

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Aaron, "What can You Learn from a Historical Novel?" *American Heritage* 43, no. 6 (1992), 1. <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/what-can-you-learn-historical-novel-1992>.

<sup>7</sup> Aaron, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (London and New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 46.

explains, “For many postmodern interpreters, there is not ‘the meaning,’ nor ‘the past’; instead, there is ‘my interpretation’ or ‘our interpretation’ of these things.”<sup>9</sup>

3) Truth. Truth is not an objective external reality; nor is it necessarily propositional knowledge. Filling the mind with correct doctrines was once a primary way to form disciples of Jesus Christ. The certainty with which the modern era claimed to possess the truth is now challenged, and the view that truth is fixed and transcendent is seen as pretentious. Stanley J. Grenz notes: “Postmoderns denounce the pretense of those who claim to view the world from a transcendent vantage point from which they are able to speak imperiously to and on behalf of all humankind.”<sup>10</sup> Truth claims are dismissed as easily as weather reports. Pontius Pilate could have been postmodern when he questioned Jesus at his trial, “What is truth?” Indeed, Pilate is now enrolled as a student in the seminary, and even may be teaching some classes. People ask, “What truth?” since truth is hard to find; “whose truth?” since truth seems relative; and “which truth?” since many truths may apply. Truth exists to be deconstructed. Deconstruction looks for evidence in a text of hidden authorial assumptions and biases that are the opposite of what the author thinks, and uses them to take apart the argument. Wisdom has become more important than cognitive knowledge on its own, in part because wisdom speaks to the integration of various ways of knowing and needs to be discerned in each specific situation.

4) The Bible as Christian Story/Meta-narrative. The church listened with particular interest when philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard said, “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>11</sup> He referred in particular to what he called “the Enlightenment narrative” in which knowledge is the hero and the plot moves toward the goal of universal peace.<sup>12</sup> It found its support in progress in the sciences.<sup>13</sup> It

---

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 157.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 38.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in vol. 10, *Theory and History of Literature*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [French, 1979]), xxiv.

<sup>12</sup> Lyotard, xxiii-xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Middleton and Walsh point to the decay of the “progress myth” beginning with World War I and the Great

operated by consensus and made sense of society, but like the Christian story, it implied universal application and authority. It became the underlying truth against which knowledge was measured in society.

Lyotard's point was that knowledge is power, and that meta-narratives disregard differences and try to make one size fit all. They distort reality; they represent a modernist "nostalgia [for] the whole and the one."<sup>14</sup> They are "haunted by the paradisiac representation of a lost 'organic' society."<sup>15</sup> He argues that we do not need meta-narratives in order to bond as a society. All we need are individual local narratives and what he calls language games. An example is the game of question and answer, in which one can find that hierarchical social positions are already assigned: the one who asks, the one who responds, and "the referent asked about."<sup>16</sup> These language games generate dynamics of power and authority, and allow readers to challenge the legitimacy of each. Such games undermine meta-narrative attempts to make any absolute universal claims.

### **A Way Forward**

How churches will respond to these radical challenges is uncertain. They can try to ignore them. Or they can be defensive and push back. For example, postmodern advocate Stuart Sim says that Enlightenment ideology since the eighteenth century, "has striven to bring about the emancipation of mankind from economic want and political oppression," but in time "came to oppress humankind, and to force it into certain set ways of thought and action not always in its best interests."<sup>17</sup> He says that the postmodern is "a positive aspect of our culture that deserves our support."<sup>18</sup> In ascribing to postmodernism the status of a movement (implying a unified worldview, something many scholars would deny), postmodernism is open to the same critique it offers: it becomes a saving

---

Depression. Richard J. Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 20-23.

<sup>14</sup> Lyotard, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Lyotard, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Sim, "Preface to the Third Edition," in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Stuart Sim (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), vii.

<sup>18</sup> Sim, vii-viii.

meta-narrative in danger of making the same totalizing or universal claims as any other meta-narrative. Lyotard himself spoke ironically of "the great narrative of the end of great narratives."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the death of the meta-narrative is itself a meta-narrative. Some people therefore might say we don't need to take criticism of the Christian meta-narrative too seriously. One could also legitimately respond that meta-narratives are not the problem: it is the use to which they may be put as a way of suppressing others. Further, the local narratives Lyotard recommends are particularly in the foreground in preaching where individual Bible texts intersect with contemporary stories.

An alternate way to respond is to see postmodernism as an opportunity to be free of modernist limitations. The church needs to learn from postmodernism in order both to value and to speak to coming generations. Ironically, the church is a good partner for many postmodern notions—"ironically" because most writers on postmodernism have little use for God or organized religion. It is viewed as a closed system that allows no contribution from others. On the other hand, postmodern thought is open to differing perspectives including Christian, while sophisticated critics in the modernist period sought to sideline the church.

On the subjects of unity, goodness and truth, the church should welcome ways of thinking that are more fluid, relational and contextual, rooted in the specific stories of individuals. That is because, for the church, unity, goodness and truth are not abstract concepts that exist externally like Plato's ideals, but are rooted in the actions and person of a loving God. When Jesus says, "you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32), the modernist may think of cognitive knowledge; yet one could think equally of relationship: you will know me in walking with me, and, in walking with me, you will find freedom. To respond to postmodern ideas by turning more to God in preaching might be surprising, but the notions many are embracing find their fullest expression and potential in relationship to God.

More than any other author, Phil Snider has adopted Derrida in his

---

<sup>19</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 135.

book, *After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*. The danger with his approach is leaving much scriptural language aside. His insights are nonetheless strong in regard to the event of encounter with God: “To be sure, the truth of the event is not the same kind of truth one tries to locate in a metaphysical principle, but rather is true in its phenomenological appeal and claim on our lives as the call and solicitation that overcomes us, that disturbs our lives and our world, and its work on us is never complete.”<sup>20</sup>

The path suggested here is that preaching in the future should concentrate on its strengths, both on God and on poetry. Preaching might be understood as the use of imagination to communicate God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The language of spirituality and faith is not certainty, but poetry, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb.11:1). Reason and its propositional formulations are inadequate on their own to portray the sublime. Preaching needs to be re-conceived as a kind of poetry, but not poetry in the usual sense.

In some ways the preacher is like a poet, at least in being sensitive to language, to its limitations in terms of capturing its subject and to its ability to open new worlds. However, in general we speak here, not of poetry in the sense of high art, or of preachers composing sermons in verse with rhyme scheme and meter, as some hip hop artists might be able to do with effect. The illumining contrast is between preaching as information and preaching as poetry. Poetry is a way of pointing to God in the world, of praising God and God’s love, and finding wonder, meaning and purpose in creation. Poetry here refers to the capacity of the sermon to “put a frame around the mystery,” as Frederick Buechner once described preaching, or to awaken a sense of wonder, as Thomas Troeger has argued.<sup>21</sup> Poetry refers to the sermon’s ability to take the fragmented nature of daily life and offer, in and through it, glimpses of a coherent and meaningful whole and, even more, the hand of a loving

---

<sup>20</sup> Phil Snider, *After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 163.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

God.

The poetry in question is not the preacher's creation but God's—God's purposes seen in and through the events of daily life. We might adopt Amos Wilder's term from the 1970s, namely, "theopoetry," to describe preaching that both points to God and also offers an experience of God. Wilder said that we still think of the imagination as "separably aesthetic and irresponsible . . . [but our] deepest apprehensions of the world and . . . of God himself, have always been poetic in the sense of symbolic and metaphorical."<sup>22</sup> I like to think that the best words in a sermon come not from the preacher alone, but from the Spirit. That is why at the end of a sermon in the ascription of glory preachers do not say, "All thanks be to me." The sermon opens windows on the world to show the new creation amidst the old, Christ drawing all things to himself. God's poetry synthesizes, harmonizes, integrates and pulls together; its language portrays divinity infusing the common, ordinary events of each day. In short, preaching can be a source of beauty.

The notion of theopoetry might seem hopelessly romantic. Beauty may seem like a frill in the context of the world's horrors. The sermon must look unflinchingly at the worst the world has to offer and open portals on life in all of its ugliness, stink, brokenness and sin. The sermon is poetry to the extent that it can name these, yet still hold out evidence of God's loving and saving purposes. Poetry is not an ingredient the preacher adds to a description of reality; it is found in reality when God's reconciling, healing, unifying and renewing actions are portrayed. The poetry of the end times is already heard as music in the present. Its refrains crack the foundations of all the powers that seem to reign. The new reality that this poetry communicates is already breaking in. The reign that finally will rule has already begun. This poetry does not answer all questions; nor does it try. It is sacramental, bearing God and all the hope that is needed in this broken world. Anselm defined theology as faith seeking understanding. As we move into the future, I wonder if we might define preaching as faith seeking God.

---

<sup>22</sup> Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 41.

## **PREACHING: A VIEW FROM THE PEW**

**by Michael Cooke**

### **The Listener**

The preacher has a tough job. Every person in the gathered community has a story and a set of ears that are tuned by the stories that s/he brings. I write from the pew, hoping to share how my story shapes the way I have received the preaching I've heard.

I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition. For many years, I went to Mass daily. Only on Sundays did the priest preach. In my understanding, the essence of the Mass was the opportunity to participate in the re-enactment of Jesus' sacrifice and in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The homily or sermon—when there was one—was an “extra,” often an object lesson, a moralistic story or a reflection on a contemporary event, with reference either to the Scripture reading of the day or to the life of Jesus. If they were imaginative, I considered it a good “extra.” If the priest rambled or mumbled, I just waited till he finished and we got to the essence of the Mass. (Of course, we all enjoyed a good rant by the priest if it wasn't directed at us in particular!)

Post-Vatican II, there was more emphasis on the Liturgy of the Word, but I don't think this shift really sank into my religious psyche until I was introduced to the United Church by my wife and to a whole new experience of preaching. As I have sat in the pews of various United Churches over the past 40 years, I have discovered the centrality of the Liturgy of the Word, the depth of potential for exploring my faith through Scripture and the important role that the minister-as-preacher plays in the faith journey of the gathered community.

### **Preaching or Lecturing**

I begin this reflection on my experience of preaching by asking myself what constitutes preaching. What's the difference between a great sermon and a great lecture—if any? Why am I tempted to skip church on Sunday morning to listen to *The Sunday Edition* on CBC or to spend the morning watching some of the extraordinary TED talks available online? How are these activities different from listening to a preacher? I see at

least three unique characteristics of preachers that differentiate them from lecturers, teachers or motivational speakers: 1) the preacher is speaking to an intentional faith community; 2) the preacher helps the gathered community wrestle with its Book in a specific context and in an accessible language; and 3) the preacher enables the gathered community to act on its faith both as individuals and as a collectivity.

Michael Enright or one of the very clever TED Talk lecturers is not speaking to a gathered faith community, is not using Scripture as his/her point of departure and does not bear responsibility for enabling the listeners to act, especially not as a community. So it is that on most Sundays, I make sure I'm in the pew with the other members of the community who choose to be there too.

### **Powerful Preaching**

Assuming that I've made it to church forty times a year for the past forty years, I've listened to sixteen hundred sermons. What role has that preaching played in my faith journey and why? Above all, I believe it is the act of being present with the gathered community, the act of listening together and the inherent commitment that we must listen and act as a community that has had the deepest and most powerful impact on sustaining me and helping me to grow. It is the shared experience of the Word, coupled with a shared obligation to act together on what we are hearing. Even when I'm visiting another congregation, I am listening for the call to act from the preacher.

I don't believe that there is a formula for powerful preaching. I would be wary of *Preaching for Dummies* (if such a volume exists) or formulaic approaches. At the same time, I'm sure that good preaching is an art that is improved through discipline and practice. In this spirit, I offer my list of ten important characteristics that have increased the impact of preaching in my life.

1) *Credible*: My friend, Masaoki Hoshino, is a pastor in a rural area of Japan. In his first congregation, he preached for a year to the only person present, his wife. At the end of seventeen years, he had seventeen members. During the week, he spent his time working side by side with the local farmers. Hardly any of them came to his church, but his

preaching was grounded in his experience with them and reflected the wisdom he gained from the time he spent with them. Powerful preaching emanates from an authentic struggle by the preacher to live his/her own faith. To the degree this is true, it will be evident and it will make the preaching credible.

2) *Grounded in Scripture*: Touchstone's editor, Peter Wyatt, once published a collection of his sermons entitled *The Page That Fell Out of My Bible*. The image of a page falling out of the preacher's Bible speaks to the absolute need to read and re-read one's Bible to the point that the pages fall out from wear. It is only through this constant re-reading in light of an evolving world, a changing community and a dynamic faith journey that the preacher can help listeners in the pew do the same.

3) *Surprising*: Many of the biblical passages are so familiar that either we don't hear them or we can predict the direction the preaching will take. And yet, the questions we face require new thinking, new insights and new approaches. The powerful preacher reads the Bible till the pages fall out and finds wisdom and guidance that is surprising, unexpected, even startling.

4) *Story*: Preaching is an age-old practice within the oral tradition. Within that tradition, storytelling is the highest form. It is universal as a form. It is the most accessible. It is engaging. In one sermon, our preacher tells us about joining his youth group for an afternoon of skateboarding. One of the kids, noticing his efforts to be "in" with this group of experienced boarders, whispers to him nicely: "You're just a poser." Our preacher then asks us, are we too "posers," wearing all the trappings of Christianity, but not really acting as Christians. This is a great story: pithy, funny and easy to repeat.

5) *Relevant*: In my youth, I often found sermons to be highly theoretical and spiritual, i.e. relating to some other world quite remote from my daily existence. They were rooted in a theology that separated body and soul. The preaching that really helps me in my faith journey wrestles with current issues of life in my community, in my country, where I am living, working, relating, and searching for meaning and impact. I need preaching that offers relevant wisdom for daily life.

6) *Empathetic*: One of my favourite proverbs says: “Be kind—everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” June Callwood, one of Canada’s most influential change agents, summed up her life work saying, “I believe in kindness.” Powerful preaching exudes kindness and empathy. It embraces the gathered community, lifts up its inherent goodness, celebrates its present state and its promise so that the listeners can hear and feel the affirmation and the empathy. When I feel this, my ears open to listen and my heart opens to receive.

7) *Challenging*: Preaching kindness does not mean preaching pap. To quote June Callwood again: “If any of you happens to see an injustice, you are no longer a spectator, you are a participant, and you have an obligation to do something.” The good preacher challenges me not to be too comfortable in my pew. Earlier this year, our preacher took us to the edge of the Jordan, gave us a lot of reasons why we might want to stay on this side where, in spite of the difficulties, we know what to expect and then he made it very clear that we are being called to cross the Jordan into the unknown. I’m at a stage in life where I very much want to stay on this side of the Jordan. This sermon pushed me to ask myself some hard questions about the next steps on my faith journey.

8) *Practical*: Last spring, I visited a church in New England. The preacher began her sermon with a story of a road trip with her kids and the difficult question of whether or not we can command someone to love. She helped us see that dogma and polemics are often a trap and an escape from following the simple and powerful command that we love one another. And then she offered a very concrete and relevant opportunity for the congregation to practise loving. The parish is adjacent to a state prison. The preacher said she felt called to create a summer camp for the children of inmates in the local prison. She called on the congregation to join her in answering this call. I could feel the community shift in their pews with her challenge. I live just outside Kingston where there are more prisons than anywhere else in Canada. I retired a year ago and promised myself that I would get involved in some way with the prisons here, but I have not yet taken action. Her sermon pricked my conscience and presented the listeners, including me, with a clear opportunity to practise their faith.

9) *Clear, light and unwavering*: While I think that preaching goes far beyond technique, good delivery helps a lot. So I am moved by the sound of the preacher, by his/her ability to modulate the tone, by a certain lightness of spirit and by a consistency in the way that the sermon is woven together. There is nothing more off-putting than a preacher with a preachy tone.

10) *Humble and gentle*: “If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). The preaching that moves me is not pompous or self-absorbed or scholarly. It is spoken by a preacher with humility and gentleness.

### **Conclusion: The Gathered Community Listens and Eats Together**

The 1600+ plus sermons I've heard have deepened my understanding of Scripture and continue to do so every week. Preaching has given me a thirst to read and re-read my Bible until the pages fall out. (Mine is still far too crisp!) It continues to strengthen my faith while posing new questions and presenting new opportunities to practise. It has strengthened my relationship to the congregations where I have worshipped. It has been an almost weekly topic of conversation over Sunday lunch and thereby a source of growth for our family. It draws me back Sunday after Sunday because it is essentially different than *The Sunday Edition*, my favourite radio program.

I conclude with the final scene from the 1984 movie *Places in the Heart*. It tells the hardscrabble story of Edna Sparkling who is forced to take over the debt-ridden Texas family farm when her husband is killed. Throughout the film, director Robert Benton stresses the importance of solidarity in facing down disaster, underlining this point with a remarkable, surrealistic finale, in which the entire town population (living and dead) are assembled in the church where they listen to the sermon and then take communion together. The Catholic in me believes that the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Meal remain inextricably linked. So, I'm left wanting, each Sunday, when the preaching, no matter how powerful, is not followed by an invitation for the gathered community to come to the table and share a meal.

## THE INDISPENSABLE MINISTRY OF PREACHING

by John J. Grady

A short while ago my wife and I were enjoying a bite of lunch in a local Tim Hortons when we met two acquaintances. We exchanged pleasantries, inquiring after each other's families. When the conversation got around to our oldest son, the question was: "Where is Ted preaching now?" The point was not lost on us that his ministry was being defined by his preaching—indeed, that it was indispensable to his ministry, and that set me to thinking: What *is* the indispensable quality of the ministry of preaching? That led, naturally, to several other questions about the nature and quality of preaching: what makes a good sermon, what is the connection between the word and the Word, and how can good preaching bring us closer to Christ in our everyday lives? I have regularly attended worship services for over half a century, and during that time I have listened to countless sermons. As a result, I have come to feel that good preaching and good sermons are not necessarily one and the same thing. In the book, *A Chorus of Witnesses*, Thomas Long and Cornelius Plantinga point out that: "Of course, a written sermon is not a preached sermon. Reading a sermon is an importantly different experience from hearing one, and both differ from actually seeing a preacher aim and fire."<sup>1</sup>

I have spent my adult life as an academic, enjoying absorbing knowledge, but nothing moves me like worship and good preaching. It seems that the more sermons I hear, the more I become convinced that good preaching plays a central role in worship, and is essential to making worship services an uplifting, challenging and elucidating experience that brings one closer to the body of Christ. As a lay person, I do not have much knowledge or understanding of what goes into sermon preparation, but I know that ministers are expected to produce on an almost weekly basis a sermon that addresses the needs of seekers, raises curiosity, offers hope and develops a strong didactic thrust that feeds the congregation for the coming week. These expectations are based upon

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today's Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), xiii.

several assumptions on the part of the congregation: first, that the minister has sufficient time to prepare a sermon; second, that the minister will preach with conviction, perhaps with a “radio announcer” voice; and third, that the minister will keep it short.

Certainly these are the conventional standards to which congregations hold their ministers, but one asks if these standards are realistic. The response to this question depends largely upon the perspective of the person asking it. Preachers are likely to have a different reply than laity, yet each answer may constitute a valid response and bring a certain candour with it. With this in mind, I propose to offer a personal response to what constitutes the indispensable ministry of preaching and how it has affected my life as a Christian.

1) *An Eclectic Background*: The divine mandate about the central role of preaching is quite clear in Jesus’ words in Mark 16:15: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” My wife and I have been privileged to attend services on two continents, visiting many churches of different denominations. We are also blessed to count several ministers among our friends and family.

I began regular church attendance as a teenager through my wife and her family. My father was Roman Catholic and my mother an Anglican, and I attended both kinds of mass, making me “bilingual” in the liturgical sense. When I met my wife it seemed like the most natural thing in the world that I should join her family on Sundays. Later, in my studies as a graduate student in philosophy and literature, I became quite fascinated with the technical, academic aspect of church, theology and liturgy; however, I was always pulled back to consider what message I received each week in worship.

2) *An Exercise of the Heart*: Let me begin by observing that worship may be compared to a GPS—God Positioning System. Seekers come to find peace, comfort, hope and food for the week to come. I suggest that preaching, for the congregation, is not an academic exercise but rather an exercise of the heart. Texts simply do not capture the deeper feelings that preaching can evoke. I would further suggest that preaching ought to be engaging, honest, faithful, scripturally based (or at least have respect for Scripture), and recognize that the congregants are

giving the minister their time as a “captive audience.” This is a rather daunting list of qualities, underscoring that the minister has a very serious obligation to the congregation when creating and delivering a sermon. I would add one more point to this list: the congregation ought to find that the sermon is a starting point for the rest of the week. It should challenge and encourage the congregation with spiritual nourishment that helps members live out their lives in a Christ-like way through the week ahead.

Thomas Long suggests that worship ought to be a “soundtrack” we hear even after we leave church: “It’s a provocative idea—worship as a soundtrack for the rest of life, the words, the music and actions of worship inside the sanctuary playing in the background as we live our lives outside, in the world.”<sup>2</sup> Long’s idea points to a very important aspect of the indispensable nature of preaching; namely, that preaching is not a moment of entertainment, but rather contains the seeds of comfort, insight or revelation that members of a congregation need as they face the grind of everyday life.

3) *The Centrality of Scripture*: Another important aspect of good preaching is the connection to Scripture. As John S. McClure points out: “I assume that the Bible is at the centre of the preaching process.”<sup>3</sup> I agree wholeheartedly, and recognize that, to the homiletics scholar, such language suggests a plethora of technical concepts, including preaching styles. I am not that kind of scholar; however, I do know that preaching without a biblical centre sounds to me like a lecture: such preaching may be informative, but it is rarely food for my soul. While some members of a congregation may have at least a passing knowledge of Scripture, it is a safe guess that few would have the trained, intimate knowledge of Scripture expected of their minister. Thus, the ministry of preaching plays a central role for seekers whose lives may be in turmoil and who are searching for words of hope and comfort.

My wife, who likes metaphors, suggested an analogy that may capture the essence of the indispensable ministry of preaching. Let’s suppose that a group of like-minded people decide to go to a warm

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 48.

<sup>3</sup> John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9.

destination in January to escape the blasts of a Canadian winter. The most effective way to get there is by airplane. First, the group must gather at a common destination, the airport, in order to prepare for take-off. Second, they prepare to board the plane, feeling confident that there is a well-trained professional team who will assist them with their journey. This is much like the weekly worship journey that the congregation takes.

The metaphor suggests that when we worship we are called by the Holy Spirit to gather as a community. We believe that the Holy Spirit has led our worship leaders who have fine-tuned their worship and communication skills, and have enough training to know where to go, as well as where not to go. Once the group leaves the airplane, their gathering is over, and, at this point, the analogy breaks down, for worship is different. Good preaching is not a point of termination, but a beginning because it encourages curiosity and a common feeling amongst the congregants. We come to church in community, called by the Holy Spirit, seeking to be a part of the body of Christ. We seek that which will enrich our lives as we prepare for the week ahead.

Speaking of her experience at the Church of the Redeemer at Yale, Diana Butler Bass says that she finds that ancient Scripture does not necessarily separate us from vital encounter with God if we are prepared to listen. “The reality of the Christian story, of the power of biblical faith, was not the stuff of distant historical events. Rather, their own stories vibrate with the Spirit’s wisdom—of discovering faith, of living faith, of struggling faith, of risky faith. Yes, I thought: God continues to speak.”<sup>4</sup> In the ministry of preaching, surely a connection to God is central to its purpose. I have read much, and I have heard much, but the ministry of preaching remains central to my worship life. I feel that the primary reason for a community of worshippers attending church is to seek the Word of God. It is in this connection, I humbly suggest, that we find the indispensable quality of the ministry of preaching.

---

<sup>4</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 133.

## **PREACHING THE GOSPEL**

**by Beth Pollock**

The Bible tells us, “He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation’” (Mark 16:15, NIV). It’s that simple, and that essential. A thought-provoking sermon delivered on a Sunday morning can provide enlightenment, strength and guidance through the day and through the dark night. Indeed, great preaching is one of the most effective ways to nourish our spirits.

I have benefitted from a lifetime of inspired preaching. I remember the sermon at my father’s funeral service, an earnest devotion of quiet, simple thanks and celebration of a beloved member of a small-town church. As a university student, I attended Metropolitan United Church in London, Ontario, to hear the Reverend Maurice Boyd preach. He was highly intellectual, but straightforward and compelling; his book, *A Lover’s Quarrel with the World*, is a compendium of his favourite sermons and was a reading staple in our house for years. My family and I have heard outstanding speakers at churches we’ve visited on holidays. On Father’s Day 2003, we visited Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and thrilled to the oration of Reverend Calvin Butts; his words were stirring, and occasionally unsettling. And one of the reasons my family and I belong to Islington United Church is the excellent preaching we hear each week, both from our own ministers and visiting preachers.

I’m a writer, and I love the written word. But I also love the spoken word. The first form of human socialization probably came from sitting around a campfire, listening to a fellow tribe member tell stories of his or her forbears. Stories that chilled the listeners’ bones and made them shiver; stories that made them laugh with recognition; stories that made them weep in empathy. We have evolved in many ways from those fireside narrations, and yet at the core we haven’t changed at all. We have a fundamental need—almost as deep as the need for oxygen, food and water—to connect through stories. And the Christian stories that we need to hear are those of our biblical forebears. Sometimes we learn from their good decisions and willingness to follow God’s will. Sometimes the stories remind us that the early Christians were as fallible as we are, and that even our most paltry efforts can serve God.

So often, these stories provide a sense of hope. In Marilynne

Robinson's *Gilead*, the preacher John Ames says of his community, "This whole town does look like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more. But hope deferred is still hope."<sup>1</sup> Each Sunday, we in the pews grasp a phrase, an idea, a theme from the words of the preacher, and that gives us something to hold on to.

The stories are important, and so is the sense of hope they confer. But why can't we just read them on our own? Why do we go to church and listen to a sermon, rather than stay at home and read the Bible by ourselves? Because it is the process of hearing a preached sermon in community with others that strengthens both us and the community. What might be compelling delivered to one person may become powerful and irresistible when delivered to many. Sitting in the congregation, I realize it isn't I alone who aches to hear and respond to the message. I am linked to the Christians sitting around me through my frailty, but also through my deep desire to serve God.

I wonder sometimes how this intensely personal message—so personal that it might have been written just for me—can be simultaneously so universal in impact. Even when my faith is dwarfed by a mustard seed, a good preacher's words meet me where I am. They fill my heart, my mind and my soul, and give me the inspiration and courage to live a Christian life.

---

<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 247.

## **THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF THE PREACHER**

**by Kate Crawford**

Much like Jonah, I was shoved into ministry kicking and screaming. I jumped so many ships to Nineveh that I had frequent flyer points! But God caught me in the belly of the whale when I moved from urban, sophisticated Toronto, where I was a graduate student and staff associate, to the small town of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where I was a complete unknown. “I have left that pesky sense of call behind,” I remember thinking to myself. “Nobody knows me here!”

Do you hear that whale coming up behind me? Within three weeks I was asked to preach. Within eight months I had agreed to cover the pastoral charge as lay supply while they looked for another minister. Chomp! Belly of the whale, pure and simple.

I shared the responsibilities with a colleague named Mac. Even then I fancied myself a bit of a preacher, and worked hard on my sermons, and enjoyed the positive regard of the community for this effort. Mac whipped a sermon up while washing the dishes. I drew on poetry, current events, commentaries and global politics. Mac just told his story.

And the people loved us both. Boy, that irritated me! But I learned a valuable lesson early in the game—once I got over being petty and resentful. A sermon is more than words; it is all of you. Your life and your self are your sermon. “You’re the one.” We intuitively know this—and we also know the complementary truth: “It’s not about you.” A rabbi once said: “Keep two truths in your pocket and take them out according to the need of the moment. Let one be: for my sake the world was created. And the other: I am dust and ashes.”

### **In Frozen Food Aisle and Pulpit**

Perhaps you have had the experience of being out and about in the community where you work and live, and someone comes up to you wanting to talk. You aren’t sure you know them, but they want to share with you something of significance to them. So there you are, standing in the frozen food aisle with a stranger, talking about the meaning of life, or the mysterious ways of God, or the fact of suffering. It generally happens to me when the children are cranky, or when I am expected somewhere else—in other words, not on my time, but on theirs.

This presumed intimacy is the outward sign of what has happened to the person inwardly as you preached. People form attachments to us through the power of the process of which we are each a part, the congregation as listeners of the word, and we as proclaimers of it. All of us, in our different ways, are embodying the Word of God—some through the ears and some through the mouth. It is as if hearers hold one end of a golden thread, and speakers the other. The thread is the relationship, experienced as intimacy by the hearers, if they were moved in the process.

Clearly, this relationship-building quality of preaching carries a heavy responsibility along with it. Many of us feel it most pressingly when we are growing into our preaching self. It is the invisible box we step into, “the goldfish bowl” I have heard it called, where it feels as if all your actions and all your off-hand comments are being measured against some impossible standard that we will never be able to attain. But people do understand that we are human, and that we are going to have our off days, and our failings; they’ve seen enough preachers go through their pastoral charge to be very clear on preachers’ shortcomings.

The goldfish bowl effect is the natural result of the burden of effective preaching: you are joined to more and more people by that golden thread, the relationship created when both hearer and preacher are moved by the Word of God. It is what Henri Nouwen calls “a deep human encounter.”

Pastoral conversation is not merely a skillful use of conversational techniques to manipulate people into the Kingdom of God, but a deep human encounter in which people are willing to put their own faith and doubt, their own hope and despair, their own light and darkness at the disposal of others who want to find a way through their confusion and touch the solid core of life.<sup>1</sup>

No wonder we get put into invisible boxes! Who else in the community talks that way? It’s scary! Sometimes overwhelming—always unpredictable—who’s to say we might not reach right into their doubts and despair right there in the frozen foods section? That power and that

---

<sup>1</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Image Doubleday, 1972 and 2010), 43.

possibility trail around us like wisps of smoke all the time, in our listeners' unconscious minds. Like shamans, we are necessary, appreciated and feared because of what we do.

Craig Barnes writes about the powerful dynamic unfolding in these pastoral conversations.

[We walk] around in the flat plains of routine conversations about ordinary things, which is where the vast majority of my parishioners spend their days . . . We wrap ourselves in small talk about small things in order to hide from holiness. All of the chatter about things that everyone knows do not really matter is nothing more than fig leaves we use to cloak the naked truth of who we are and what we have done to the holy garden we were given. Who we are is less than we were created to be, and what we have done is to lose the sacred in the ordinary. The garden that was meant to be a daily experience of holiness is now just a garden.<sup>2</sup>

Our responsibility is to take this role seriously and also to be aware of how it is at play in all our human interactions. I would dare to say that there is almost no relationship that we form on the pastoral charge that is untouched by this truth: there is never a time when one is not the preacher.

Heavy as this feels at times, it is also the key to effective preaching, I think. It means that our sermons are not just discrete events that occur from 11 am to 11:15 on Sunday mornings, confined within the pulpit. It means that they slip into our pockets and accompany us into the community, in how we live our lives, how we speak to our family and friends, how we conduct ourselves in business—and how we bring the community back with us into the pulpit the next Sunday.

### **A Web of Threads**

If you have been thoughtfully watching and listening through the week, and then bring what you know of the community to the gospel, then this is the second part of the same gift.

---

<sup>2</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet: Texts and Subtexts in the Ministerial Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 30, 31.

So that those who listen can say, “You say what I only suspected, you clearly express what I vaguely felt, you bring to the fore what I fearfully kept in the back of my mind. Yes, yes—you say who we are, you recognize our condition.” When someone who listens is able to say this, then the ground is broken for others to receive the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

The second function of preaching is a natural extension of the first, when multiple golden threads are created among multiple people on multiple occasions. If you are following me in your mind’s eye you will immediately see that there is a shining web of golden threads that unites the preacher and all the listeners, with you and with one another. Effective preaching is generative—it actively creates community; it weaves that web of golden threads.

My older daughter Martha has underscored for me this weaving of the web of community. Martha is cool! She is eighteen, a vegan with a nose ring and five tattoos. She doesn’t need the church any more—especially since she is now officially an atheist. And yet she comes. And she wants you to know why. In her words: “It is not your church; it’s the big church. Community is what’s important. Church is just a roof. It’s about accepting everybody. It’s never been more important than now. It was easier to ignore others before. You can’t do that anymore. You are so much more than the person who says the sermons.”

Urgency animates her words. These are foundational values that she is articulating and around which she is orienting her life: acceptance, inclusivity and community. Where else in our trivia-saturated culture are foundational values discussed, enacted and celebrated? The public discourse on values is dominated by the media, where the chief value is consumption (what do I want?). The other public conversation on values is framed by political parties and their spins, where the value is self-preservation (what’s good for me?). Both of these are supremely individualistic: how much can *I* consume? how long can *I* survive?

In the face of this cultural context, gospel-centred preaching offers a counter-discourse: community over the individual; sharing over hoarding; compassion over self-interest; loving the neighbour over bombing them or keeping them out of our country or away from our resources. Week after

---

<sup>3</sup> Nouwen, 43-44.

week, as the community affirms and negotiates these values through our preaching, it is setting markers around itself to define its limits. “Like Mary and Martha, we will be hospitable. Like Daniel in the lions’ den, we will stand firm against the idolatries of our day. Like Jesus, we will break bread, and wash feet, and proclaim that the kingdom is among us.” As preachers, we have the exquisite and essential task of holding up those values that define us and create us as a community of faith.

These values are deeply counter-cultural, and so they need to be rehearsed, week after week, in a public way. Rev. Ed Searcy says that it is a form of *practice*. In the same way that an athlete practises over and over how to run or how to throw or kick, we Christians practise the gospel through the speaking and hearing of our sermons. And we do need practice! We are losing the knack for living in community—even the family, the smallest community of all, is stressed and strained.

Another community-building aspect of preaching has to do with a certain fearlessness in naming our failings as human beings. I know that I am a sinner! But when I hear the name of sin being spoken with others sitting beside me, I am joined to them by this shared frailty. Suddenly it’s not just my problem. Henri Nouwen observes how corporate confession connects us to each other. He is writing about the practice of hospitality, but I think it applies equally to preaching:

Hospitality [or preaching] becomes community as it creates a unity based upon the shared confession of our basic brokenness and upon a shared hope. This hope in turn leads us far beyond the boundaries of human togetherness to the One who calls all people away from the land of slavery to the land of freedom . . . It is the call of God that forms the people of God.

A Christian community is therefore a healing community, not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. Mutual confession then becomes a mutual deepening of hope, and shared weakness becomes a reminder to one and all of the coming strength.<sup>4</sup>

Being part of community helps us to be healthy, first by embedding us in a web of relationships and increasing our emotional safety, and,

---

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, 100.

second, by giving us a space in which we can acknowledge, with others, that we are not all that we would wish to be. A third blessing of community, I think, is that it is the place where we have the possibility of being truly known. Jack Kornfield, a respected teacher of Buddhism, tells a story about a tribe in Africa in which all members have their own song, sung to them from the time of their conception, and through every meaningful life event. “And it goes this way through their life—in marriage, the songs are sung, together. And finally, when this child is lying in bed, ready to die, all the villagers know his or her song, and they sing—for the last time—the song to that person.”<sup>5</sup>

Our sermons are doing that. We are singing the song of people's lives for them, helping to weave the shining web of golden threads that is the community that surrounds and protects us.

### **The Logic of Self-Involvement**

There is just no denying it. Every sermon we preach is played out on the turf of our own souls. “Doctors can still be good doctors even when their private lives are severely disrupted; ministers cannot offer service without a constant and vital acknowledgment of their own experience.”<sup>6</sup> Those blessed doctors! They get to practise their profession protected by the safety of a private emotional life. Your family doctor could be an absolute shipwreck of a human being, but excel at his or her job. Not so for preachers.

There is something essential about our self-involvement in the preaching that we do. It is not about us—we all understand that very clearly—but it uses us in a deeply personal way.

The parish minister's soul becomes a crucible in which sacred visions are ground together with the common and at times profane experiences of human life. Out of this sacred mix, pastors find their deep poetry, not only for the pulpit, but also for making eternal sense out of the ordinary routines of the congregation . . . As odd as it may sound; it's the scars on the pastor's soul that make it attractive. This is also what gives

---

<sup>5</sup> Kornfield, as told by Wayne Muller, *How, Then, Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1996), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nouwen, 94.

credibility to the Gospel the pastor proclaims. Parishioners will always measure that credibility by the degree to which it has clearly been at work in the pastor's life.<sup>7</sup>

Did any of us fully understand the cumulative effect of our psychological self-disclosure when we accepted God's call to be preachers of the Word? Would any of us have followed through? As the years go by, I feel as though I walk into the pulpit week after week and rip open my alb, so completely am I made bare in this act. We are not exhibitionists, and yet the nature of our proclamation is to confess how God is at work in human lives, and to testify that this is nowhere more true than in our own life. Nouwen goes so far as to call this "martyrdom." That sounds stark, but I know exactly what he means.

Real martyrdom means a witness that starts with the willingness to cry with those who cry, laugh with those who laugh, and to make one's own painful and joyful experiences available as sources of clarification and understanding. Who can save a child from a burning house without taking the risk of being hurt by the flames? Who can listen to a story of loneliness and despair without taking the risk of experiencing similar pains in their own heart and even losing their precious peace of mind? In short, "who can take away suffering without entering it?"<sup>8</sup>

It is this very commitment to being fiercely honest about human suffering that sets the preacher apart.

The ordained consent to be visible in a way that the baptized do not. They agree to let people look at them as they struggle with their own baptismal vows: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to resist evil, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people. Those are not the views of the ordained, but the baptized, even though we do not seem to know how to honour them in the course of ordinary life on earth.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Barnes, 22, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Nouwen, 77-78.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 1993), 30.

I am currently astonished by the wisdom and discipline of the Vipassana meditation practice. There really is nothing more bracing than the icy freshness of a polar dip in the First Noble Truth: there is suffering. In this culture of trivialities in which we people of spirit are constantly and exhaustingly swimming against the current, it becomes urgently important to be able to affirm this Noble Truth. Suffering exists. And how do we know this? Not by looking outside ourselves! Outside ourselves everything is fine, it is always fine, in a culture that is younger, stronger, faster every day.

We know this, say preachers to whom I have spoken, by paying careful attention to what is going on inside of us. We explore it in sermons trusting that others are coping with similar experiences. In this we are required to be self-aware, responsible and mature. *Self-aware, responsible and mature*. We can add to that, courageous, humble and wise, which I mentioned earlier, and soon we begin to feel like the butler carrying Veronica Lodge's shopping home for her . . . buried under an impossible burden which no one can manage alone.

Sometimes we can barely manage it in community, where our brothers and sisters keep an eye on us, correct us lovingly and rebuke us gently when we stray from the integrity that our vocation demands. But we can manage it—and we do—because someone has to lead the way through the desert. One of my preaching friends asked rhetorically, “Why do I do this?” And she answered her own question: “It is absolute call. I am pushed every Sunday.”

Yes, we are pushed every Sunday, brothers and sisters. Sometimes we are tired. Sometimes this calling is too heavy for us. I know that it feels too heavy for me sometimes. That is why this is a martyrdom, of sorts. At the end of the day, it is not about what one wants. It will always come down to what God wants. In this way, then, you're the one, but it's not about you. It's about God working through you, to speak hope to the hurting, and life to the dying, and love to the broken. Where else would you want to be but in the middle of that!

“For your sake the world was created; you are dust and ashes.”

## **THREE GOALS FOR PREACHING IN OUR CONTEXT**

**by Jeff Crittenden**

It takes little time to notice great variety in the state of preaching in our present context. We have come a long way from the “three points and a poem” sermon; diversity is evident as preachers incorporate narrative, expository and conversational styles in their preaching. We are in an age of experimentation—or desperation—depending on one’s perspective. Certainly it is a time of great transition for our denomination.

In a landscape dotted with aging congregations, strained budgets and an increasingly hectic lifestyle, many congregations are turning their focus to worship, pastoral care and community/world outreach. For many congregations, the focus has been limited to the Sunday morning service, looking after their members (especially long-time members) and participating in some form of outreach ministry. But a clear opportunity is presenting itself. The sermon carries a great deal of influence, as the reading of Scripture and the sermon are slowly becoming a blend of education, theological discernment and inspiration for discipleship. The question emerges: are we preachers rising to this opportunity and responsibility?

For generations, our denomination has set apart ordered ministers to proclaim the Good News. Formal education, training and mentorship constituted the means of development and practice. Beginning in the late seventies, preaching began to take a back seat to other aspects of ministry, such as outreach, community development and counselling, with the acquiring of psychological tools being encouraged in programs like Clinical Pastoral Education. In the seminary I attended, there was only one required tutorial in preaching. I will never forget the last day of class, after four years of preparation for ordained ministry, when a student innocently asked what to say at a funeral. No one present will ever forget the professor’s jaw dropping and then the remaining hour-long crash course! And with that, many of us were sent out to learn on our own.

In retrospect, it seems ironic that preaching is given so little attention, since it is often the main yardstick by which a preacher is measured by a congregation. Sunday after Sunday, preachers hear informal reviews of how they did: “Nice sermon! Great service! Inspiring!” Sometimes those words are shared with tears as something has

struck a chord deep inside. Sometimes it is just the polite thing to say on the way out, and often a congregant comments on something the preacher knows was not actually in the sermon. That irrepressible Holy Spirit!

And that is where the dance occurs. Just as the preacher needs to be prepared, with a structure and a point, so too must the listener be ready and open to “hear a word from the Lord.” The preacher’s responsibility, as Augustine said, is to educate, to delight and to persuade. But there also is a responsibility placed on the listener. Speaking and listening constitute a two-way street. Perhaps some preachers are growing weary of seemingly preaching into the wind; some listeners are tired of preaching that says nothing to them, and perhaps the Holy Spirit is impatiently waiting to bless us all.

Beginnings and endings are wonderful opportunities for reflection and action. It is clear that our denomination is in the throes of both as preaching is being quietly invited back onto the centre stage of our faith community’s spiritual life. Numerous ministers are studying in post-graduate preaching programs, just as hundreds of lay people are flocking to continuing education and worship leadership courses. In this time of reviving interest in worship, I see three areas of focus for reflection on preaching today: Preaching through Transitions, Preaching with Intention and Preaching as a Way Out and Then In.

### **Preaching through Transitions**

Preaching through transitions demands that the preachers be carefully tuned into the context of the community they are serving. First, we need to honour the tradition. Scattered throughout the sanctuary—sometimes sitting in the very seats their parents sat in—are people who have invested much in the congregation. Preaching that suggests that somehow they got it all wrong and that is why their children (and others, for that matter) are not attending anymore is not helpful.

Telling those who have had their hands on the plow for decades that they must “change or die” might just be insulting, since these same people already know a great deal about change. Just ask them about the change they went through when they lost a driver’s licence, moved from their family home or buried the one with whom they spent every day of their adult life. Perhaps the preacher might offer a *familiar word* of assurance,

courage and hope as many in our congregations navigate the “golden years” with all its trials and tribulations. What we need now, more than ever, is preaching that helps hearers make transitions from what was toward what is emerging, including in their personal lives.

In a time when our culture is denying death or at best tip-toeing around the topic, preachers need to speak about death and dying in the theological framework of Christian hope and grace—from the pulpit, in small groups and at the graveside, perhaps simply standing and sharing the good news of the mystery of life beyond the grave.

We need to respect our congregations. As many are deciding how much longer to keep their programs, their endowments and their buildings, we must remember that there probably was a time when the place was bursting at the seams. At Metropolitan in London, I often hear about the Goth and Boyd years: every congregation has its legendary ministers. But it only takes a moment to realize that those legendary years were the same ones in which the city was growing quickly; when those who remember the stories were young and able, bringing their toddlers and teenagers to church with them; and money was raised, apparently with little difficulty. Certainly gifted, George Goth and Maurice Boyd were without today’s primary competition: Sunday shopping or sports. Church was the live event that would be carried over to the dinner table, the workplace and the newspaper. Often church members issued personal invitations to others to come to experience worship first-hand.

Finally, preaching through the transitions encourages the preacher to have a direct connection with the life of the community. Karl Barth famously said that the preacher ought to have the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. Perhaps we can add a third to juggle—the history of the community in which we serve, so that the preacher can readily draw on the common experience of the congregation, making theological connections among the past, present and a hopeful future.

### **Preaching with Intention**

Preaching with engagement requires a great deal of preparation and careful observation of the surrounding culture. Moving from the long-time members of a congregation, the focus shifts to their children’s and grandchildren’s generations who likely are not involved in the life of the

congregation, save for Christmas, Easter and when they are “invited” with an offer they cannot refuse. They were raised in a culture that dismissed the church as irrelevant, yet most likely carry fond Sunday school memories of Adam and Eve, Noah, David and Goliath, and Jesus’ lost sheep, along with the underlying message “Be nice to people” and all is good. In one of the congregations that I served, I delighted in leaving the Bible story unfinished—often right at the height of the conflict—and watching some of the congregation asking, “So . . . what happens next?”

Given our familiarity with the excellent plot lines and energy of television shows and movies, with the producer’s knack for building, holding, breaking and resolving tension—so that the viewer feels fully engaged and involved—it is difficult for a preacher to compete. To engage a listener, the preacher needs to have established a clear idea of what the sermon is about, from beginning to end.

My practice for over twenty years has been to read the biblical text on Sunday and then let it sit for a day or two. On Tuesday I begin listening for key words, phrases and look for the tension in the story. On Wednesday I begin to brainstorm. On Thursday I go for a walk through the community in which I serve, asking, “What difference will this gospel passage make in this community? Why would the bus driver, the stranger pushing a stroller, the guy racing across the street care about this text?” It is here that I begin to form my focus sentence—the key point of the sermon. Then, from Friday through Sunday I choose a structure and write until the deadline! If I am preaching without notes, I prepare the sermon in movements that are easy to recall; if preaching from a manuscript, I use the creativity and beauty of language to deepen the impact of delivery.

With the point of the sermon established, the work of choosing a structure is crucial. The advantage the preacher has over television and film is that the preacher is live and immediate, and this opportunity must not be squandered. The preacher needs an engaging opening, clear points or movements, and one ending. The preacher is not the expert on all things and authenticity is crucial. Retelling one of Barbara Brown Taylor’s experiences as one’s own is hardly authentic. While some texts lend themselves to certain structures more readily than others, there is no “right” way. Working through a string of stories (Long’s episodic preaching) or suspending the ending (Craddock) or following the four

pages (Wilson) or utilizing Lowry's reversal pattern all provide excellent structural frameworks.

Most often the structure that I incorporate is the style and structure of African American preaching. This structure takes the biblical text and encourages the community to move through the situation, complication, resolution and celebration of the context, ending in a flourish of celebrating God's grace.

Finally, ending the sermon once, and well, is critical. Whether one ends the sermon as a lead-in to the next movement in the liturgy (prayers, hymn or . . .), or one simply sits down having a clear ending without "ought to," "could do," or "let us," the lingering point of the sermon is left in the hearts and minds of the listeners so that they and the Holy Spirit can begin to unfold the next move.

### **Preaching as a Way Out and Then In**

Whether we are speaking with long-time members or those who have wandered in for the very first time, the fundamental message of the Christian preacher needs to be focussed on Jesus Christ. Our preaching must make a clear case as to why a listener would be interested in a relationship with Jesus. The heart of the gospel promise is that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, one will experience salvation—the freedom and peace of grace, a grace that re-defines the meaning and purpose of life. Preaching serves as a way *out* of murkiness and the shadows that cause us to stumble and forget who we are; it serves also as a way *in* to the new life offered in Jesus Christ.

As Walter Brueggemann declares so passionately, preaching must "capture our imaginations" and re-shape experience of the world in such a way that justice, compassion, right relationships and hope abound. What complicates this mandate is the risk that mere platitudes and half-believed words will be heard as hollow. It is clear that communities of faith in which the listener's heart is "strangely warmed" and rekindled with the passion of the Spirit are often also places where there is dynamic preaching. Preaching that touches on the places where there is tension, fear, misunderstanding, or simply complications for the listener, is also the very place where a preached word has an opportunity to offer a different glimpse of reality—a glimpse of a still more excellent way.

While preaching may not resolve all of the problems of an individual or community, it certainly can re-frame them, leaving the work of the Holy Spirit to weave in and out.

I often am teased that I am a preacher who gives homework, inviting listeners to consider one thing this week that they might do to nurture their faith, serve the greater community or work with some challenging person. This can be as simple as remembering to let someone finish her sentence, or writing a note of thanks, or encouraging someone to stand by a friend through a storm. Preaching as a “way out” invites the listener to imagine ways of acting so that patterns of behaviour can be altered. This ultimately leads to a “way in” to the rich tapestry of faith where the heart of the good news resides.

For that is what we have heard through the generations of the United Church. As Samuel Chown preached humility, George Pidgeon preached unity. William Gunn and Peter Bryce preached through the crash and depression. Aubrey Tuttle and James Mutchmor stood their ground as they preached through the storms of war. Stanley Knowles preached politics. Lydia Gruchy preached inclusion. Stella Burry preached outreach. Clarke MacDonald preached with an eye on our denomination. Leonard Griffith preached with eloquence. Preachers in high steeple churches, in missions and in the fields, have raised their voices through the transitions. We can still hear Ben Smillie’s voice echo through the Prairies. Robert Mumford’s warm invitation. Clifford Elliot’s every-person connection. Newfoundlander Ernest Howse challenging the status quo. Crossley Hunter’s Methodist fire. Angus McQueen’s brilliance. George Goth’s perception. Maurice Boyd’s eloquence. We can still see Ray Hord preaching in the park. Clarence “Big Nick” Nicholson preaching with authority.

This vast depth does not even begin to touch on the profound and faithful preaching that, week after week, emerges throughout our denomination. Whose preaching continues to inspire you? What is it that you remember? And whom will you invite to join with you in worship this week?

Preaching, in such a time as this, is crucial. May our preachers continue to find their voices and share the Good News—that in life, in death and life beyond death, we are not alone.

## THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL

by Ross A. Lockhart

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the church lounge while crust-less sandwiches sat under plastic domes, foreshadowing the breaking of bread yet to come. It was our autumn board retreat and the room was full of a dozen elders ranging in age from late twenties to mid-seventies. After worship and Scripture study, we moved on to an exercise entitled, “The Writing is on the Wall.”

Each person was handed a pen and a different coloured “Post It” note pad with the invitation to answer the question, “Why do *you* go to church?” They could post as many notes as they liked on the wall, as long as it was only *one word or one phrase* per note. In a matter of minutes the whole wall was a rainbow of different coloured notes, naming “every activity under the heavens.” Then the exercise really began.

One of our younger elders approached the wall, selected a sticky note and asked a different question. “Where else *outside the church* can you get *this* on the North Shore of Vancouver?” If someone could offer an answer, then the note was taken down and put to the side.<sup>1</sup> Even some of the “safer” topics like community, music or spirituality fell off the list. “Music is too generic,” someone said; “sacred music for sure, but music on its own you can get anywhere.” “Yeah, spirituality is also generic,” piped up another, laughing; “I can get that at my men’s yoga group.” One by one, like the autumn leaves falling outside the window, more and more Post It notes came floating down.

As we went through this exercise the “light bulb” came on for many in the room. We were exploring a critical question for the church in this post-Christendom context: “What is essential for a vibrant, healthy, faithful, witnessing community of Jesus’ disciples?”

In the end, we had thirty-two notes left on the wall. Our chair of worship organized them quickly into themes of Prayer, Growth in Faith, Thanksgiving to God, Christian Relationship and Worshipping God. And yes, many notes under the “Worshipping God” category named *preaching as a central action of the Christian community*. Looking at the remaining notes one could not help but think of King Belshazzar’s legacy: as “they

---

<sup>1</sup> We went to painful lengths to clarify that whatever we took *off the wall* was *good* and of value, but that folk living in our highly secular context could experience *that* somewhere else.

drank wine . . . and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone”—*the writing was on the wall* (Daniel 5: 4).

The exercise opened a conversation for our board about what is *essential* in our post-Christendom context where one can be “good without God.” Increasingly, people are finding community outside of traditional church structures with most being apathetic rather than angry towards organized religion. Some are even finding community in “secular church” without God,<sup>2</sup> leading one to wonder, in a politically stable, diverse, prosperous Canada, what *do* people need to be saved *from* anymore? And what do they need to be saved *for*? Surely the ministry of preaching must address these critical questions. The *Writing on the Wall* exercise was an attempt to strip away the approach to church as “Christendom’s country club” and discern what is essential for discipleship and proclamation in a world enamoured of the gods of silver and gold.

What has all this to do with preaching? Here’s my assumption. When we speak of the “indispensable ministry of . . . *anything*” we are asking a question of what is *essential and urgent* in the worshipping, working and witnessing functions of the body of Christ in God’s beloved yet broken world, marred by sin. If the church is a home for recovering sinners and a place of hope where humanity is reconciled to the triune God and one another through the cross of Christ, what is *essential and urgent* and what should simply fade away?

Each year the provincial government holds its “Great British Columbia Shake Out,” officially encouraging citizens to become prepared for a major earthquake.<sup>3</sup> Everyone is, in some small or big way, getting ready for “the Big One.” For example, every year as a parent one has to write a note and send it to school with one’s child (along with a teddy bear, snack, and photo of your family) that is kept in a locked container on the school grounds. The note is meant to reassure children that, in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Vancouver has the distinction of hosting the first “Sunday Assembly” in Canada. Sunday Assembly is an upstart atheist church from the United Kingdom that holds its meetings (without the mention of God) using a traditional Christian “Order of Service.” The Sunday Assembly movement began in January 2013 and is featured in two news reports from the CBC at <http://www.cbc.ca/player/Radio/Local+Shows/British+Columbia/On+The+Coast/ID/2406701927/> and the BBC at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-24766314>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://shakeoutbc.ca/> It even has the catchy phrase, “Shake out, don’t freak out!”

event of the big earthquake, they are to stay with their teachers, not panic—and wait for mom or dad. At home, you build an earthquake kit with enough supplies for seventy-two hours, the time anticipated to elapse before someone comes to your rescue. Getting prepared can be an exercise in discerning what is essential or *indispensable* and what is superfluous in our lives. The “Writing on the Wall” exercise with the church board was an attempt to help our leaders discern what is essential for the Christian church in a post-Christendom context. As descendants of Calvin’s “Company of Preachers,” we must risk asking the same kind of question, seeking to discern *what kind of* preaching is necessary as the church experiences the great “shake out” of transition from Christendom to Post-Christendom.

### **Indispensable preaching is *biblical***

While in other branches of the Christian family this first assumption may be taken for granted, I fear that in our corner of the Reformed family we need to be especially clear about the need for biblical preaching. Parents of a friend of mine recently moved to a new community in southern Ontario. Dyed in the wool United Church folk, they diligently set out to find a new church family. They reported that after a month they were still looking for a church home and hoped to find one by Christmas. After trying four different United Church congregations in a row, they could not find one where the preaching was based on the Bible. One preacher used *Chicken Soup for the Soul* as the authoritative text. Another used some form of Buddhism, and still another read a short piece of Scripture, but never referred once to the Bible in the sermon. *Lord, have mercy.* One teacher of preaching, David Bartlett, says, “Right preaching is the interpretation of Scripture. There is much excellent Christian speech that is not preaching . . . unless it is an interpretation of the text or texts that the congregation has just heard read aloud, it is not preaching.”<sup>4</sup> Preaching that you will not find outside the church in a self-help group, in a generic spirituality gathering or post-theistic church, is clearly based on the Word of God in Scripture that points to Jesus Christ as the living Word.

---

<sup>4</sup> David L. Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 11.

**Indispensable preaching is *evangelistic***

Indispensable preaching must *do something*. It's not just a collection of lovely stories designed to take "nice Canadians and make them nicer" in a warped theology that places its trust in human agency rather than God's. Nor does preaching that is indispensable sink into the quick sand of what Kenda Dean in *The God Bearing Life* names as the *de facto* theology of mainline Protestantism—*Moralistic* (be a good person), *Therapeutic* (only do what makes you feel good), *Deistic* (God is wallpaper). No, indispensable preaching brings the good news of Jesus to bear on the dark corners of our individual and corporate sin, turning us away from death through the power of the Holy Spirit to live a new life in the freedom of the gospel. In short, indispensable preaching saves our lives through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. As Stephen Farris argues, the purpose of preaching and revelation are linked. In preaching, God discloses something of God's own self in Jesus through the Spirit, and the response in the listener is not an increase in understanding but rather in trust and obedience.<sup>5</sup> In other words, indispensable preaching promotes the deepening of conversion.<sup>6</sup>

This is particularly challenging in a mainline denominational context where we have confused membership with the ongoing process of sanctification. In an encounter at a funeral reception, a woman approached and told me how she had strayed from the West Vancouver flock years ago. She and her husband had moved to Vancouver from Edmonton and attended for a while. When they decided it was time to transfer their membership, they were told that they would be invited to come forward on Membership Sunday and would then make a profession of faith. "I just didn't want to do that," the woman explained. "Oh," I replied pastorally, "were you nervous about standing up in front of a large crowd?" "Oh no," responded the woman, "I don't care about any of that. It was about the whole profession of faith thing. I did that *once* as a teenager. How many times do you have to make a profession of faith?"

---

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Farris, *Preaching That Matters: The Bible and Our Lives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>6</sup> As Karl Barth's argues in *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.1 (page 185) this way: "The terms faith and love and obedience are always near when reference is made to knowledge. Knowledge in the biblical sense directly includes, indeed, it is itself at root . . . conversion . . ."

“How many times?” I stuttered. “Every day. Sometimes ten times a day you have to remember and confess your faith in Jesus.” Standing there, I wondered how it would go down in a marriage if one partner said, “I told you I loved you once in 1954, and I’m not going to say it again.” Clearly, the ministry of preaching is indispensable in calling people to convert again and again to the way of Jesus.

And yet, conversion is the penultimate, not ultimate, goal of our work. Surely the ultimate goal of indispensable evangelistic preaching is that people, converted by the cross and grace of Christ, become evangelists themselves. Our worshipping communities are transformed into witnessing communities through words and acts of peace, love and justice from the benediction right through to next week’s invocation.

### **Indispensable preaching is *sacramental***

Now this may sound a bit fishy. After all, we have only two sacraments in our Reformed tradition— Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. However, if we take seriously Calvin’s suggestion (leaning on Augustine) that the sacraments are “visible signs of invisible grace,” pointing towards Christ, then surely there are other means of grace that are “sacramental in nature.” I believe preaching is one, especially when we take seriously Paul’s question in Romans, “How can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:14). Borrowing on our Reformed understanding of the Lord’s Supper, that sits somewhere between the “high” theology of Catholics/Lutherans with tran/consubstantiation and the “low” theology of the Anabaptists with a memorial emphasis, we understand a sacrament to be a “symbol with real power and presence.”

On a recent Communion Sunday I observed that our understanding of a sacrament is like a Translink bus parked outside the church on Marine Drive. The bus has a sign that says “250 – Vancouver.” And it’s just that—a sign. But it takes you to the place to which it points. In no time the passenger will be over the Lion’s Gate Bridge and on West Georgia Street in Vancouver. Surely our sacramental theology promises the same hope: the sacraments and other rites and practices are vehicles of the Holy Spirit that take us deeper into the presence of God. Preaching is one of those indispensable vehicles for congregations and preachers

alike—to experience afresh the transforming power of God at work in our spirits and in the world.

### **Wall Street versus Wall Speak**

Looking at the declining statistics of our denomination at a recent presbytery meeting, a colleague leaned over and said, with a wink, “The writing is on the wall.” “Ah,” I replied, “but who can make sense of what God is saying through the scribbles?” King Belshazzar couldn’t make sense of the writing as he drank his Messiah Merlot and praised the gods of “gold and silver.” Surely, there is a Daniel (or Danielle!) among us who can read the writing on the wall. But there also needs to be a Company of Preachers that can offer the alternative vision of the gospel to this world “drunk on silver and gold.” Perhaps it is a company that looks a little like Peter and John meeting the beggar on the way to the temple in Acts 3. They had a different gift than King Belshazzar treasured or that even the beggar desired. Peter says, “Silver or gold I have not, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus . . . walk” (Acts 3:6). The writing may be on the wall, but the time is also right for somebody to utter *The Name*. Who will utter The Name? The Company of Preachers is needed more now than ever. It is urgent. It is essential. It is time.

## FROM THE HEART— ABOUT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

### PROCLAMATION IS INDISPENSABLE

by Ross Bartlett

There is a possibly apocryphal story of the Rev. George MacLeod (founder of the Iona Community) who was sharing the gospel with a committed communist. That young man reportedly exclaimed: “You Christians have got it. If only you knew you had it and how to communicate it!” If that was true in the 1940s how much more does it hold today? We live in a society where awareness of the foundational Christian stories is widely absent. High school English instructors bemoan the lack of biblical literacy that raises a considerable barrier for engaging with classic novels and plays that assume a scriptural familiarity. The crisis is magnified when we acknowledge that the ignorance extends beyond the Bible to almost every aspect of Christian history and tradition. And I’m referring to folk in the church!

This is more than an elitist rant. In most minority cultures an awareness of the stories of the people is a sustaining factor. Identity is found in the corporate memories shared and the unique events that mark a particular community. The increasing marginalization of the formerly mainline traditions, together with the media absorption with radical groups that are “not us,” increase the need for church participants to be knowledgeable in ways that were less critical when Canada was generically Christian in makeup.

Proclamation plays an indispensable role in closing the knowledge and practice gap. I deliberately employ *proclamation* as opposed to *preaching* because the latter carries so much baggage. Consider any standard dictionary definition of preaching. Words like *pompous* and *self-righteous* appear regularly. In the popular mind, preaching is often associated with the conveying of unwanted or irrelevant information in the most tedious and unattractive of fashions. Unfortunately, those sentiments have enough grounding in reality that, even as we wince, we recognize their validity. Too much of contemporary preaching lacks challenge or edge or genuine insight into the human condition and the Spirit’s relevance to it. Too much sounds like the same old thing, week after week. This is not to impugn either the faith or the sincerity of the

preachers. Often they are earnest, sincere and terribly dull. Apparently they never encountered the dictum of Augustine that preaching's purpose is "to teach, delight and persuade." So I employ *proclamation* in the hope of freeing our minds to consider a wider range of ways to announce the good news.

If Paul is correct in his rhetorical questions, then proclamation has a crucial role. "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (Romans 10:14). Certainly proclamation cannot stand alone, but it is a crucial part of the repertoire of a minority faith community committed to living its calling. We have no doubt that study, discussion and activity groups, mission and outreach teams, and all the other ways of learning by, and while, doing, are effective in their own sphere. However, most participants in a congregation still limit their primary participation to worship. There is a solid chance that in the roughly 166 other hours of the week there has been no theological reflection on world or personal events, little sustenance for the life beyond self-absorption, no reflection on their stories in conversation with God's story, no placing of their lives in the continuum of a faith family across time and space, and little chance for reinforcement in their identity as sisters and brothers of the Risen One. Indeed, for too many, those hours may be marked by abuse or bullying, a degradation of human worth, or assaults on their self-perceptions. Proclamation has a crucial role is responding to—and in some cases countering—those human experiences. Let's consider how.

1. It is vitally important that the proclaimer *believe* in what is being offered. Not simply at a theoretical level but at one where it is clear that the proclaimer is convinced that the message will make a difference in the listener's life. Our words come alive in the joy of what we are proclaiming. Having been convinced of the importance and impact of the message we have been given—indeed its crucial nature—proclaimers are then ready to explore the most effective means at their disposal to communicate its significance.

2. Most people are interested in stories about other people. That provides the key for speaking of our common *history*. One's congregation and its practices (even in the most newly formed mission setting) did not

drop out of the sky fully formed one day. We are the products of decades, indeed centuries, of factors interacting in human lives and communities. Proclamation has a crucial role in connecting people with these stories of who we truly are—not as memorized names and dates—but with folk as real as we are, with shared joys, sorrows and inspiration. The closest distance between two people is always a story.

3. Most people will rarely experience their lives *interpreted* through the lens of God’s story. But in the hands of a skilled practitioner, they can understand the relevance of the biblical witness to their own lives and catch a glimpse of the activity of the Spirit echoing today. When we see the continuity of divine action across the centuries, it may be easier to perceive God’s present working in the confusion of the contemporary moment. At the heart of Israel’s testimony is trust in YHWH *today* because of the faithfulness of YHWH *yesterday*. In our societal absorption with the individual, as divorced from other factors, the broadening lens of interpretation is a crucial resource. This becomes even more significant as the church continues its move to the social margins and experiences, in our time, the competition of values, commitments and lifestyles characteristic of the social context of the early Christian movement. As Jesus’ followers deal with the push-pull of competing claims we can also experience solidarity with those of other generations in parallel settings.

4. Related is the indispensable role of proclamation in providing instruction in, and examples of, *credible* theological reflection. Clearly I am advocating a style of reflection that does not always see God’s hand directly active in every event, either in simple blessing or punishment. That form of theology is widely available through various media. Instead I am contemplating a style of probing that is able to ask the tough questions about the divine presence in the seemingly “Godless” moments of tragedy or cruelty or evil, such that it may be tempting to write-off the tradition of faith as irredeemable. Rather than imagining that all things occur because some celestial teacher wants us to learn an easily encapsulated lesson, the faithful proclaimer will hold with the painful or the baffling in the conviction that God is up to something. Grappling with this mandate is a crucial component of the church’s grasp of God’s mission in the world.

5. Proclaimers sometimes wrestle with how to convey appropriately the *challenge* of Scripture, heritage and context. Congregations need to be affirmed in their familiar and dedicated ways. Such comfort is a good thing as long as it is centred on trust in a loving God, or in seeing examples of the kingdom's presence in the congregation's life. Niebuhr's maxim, "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" can be overdone when the proclaimer seems to neglect the concern of the Almighty for all the human family, *regardless* of social standing. Would that we could be as balanced as Jesus in dealing with the financially wealthy and the powerful of this world! On the other hand, listeners in *most* United Church congregations can fairly be numbered amongst the world's wealthy, secure and powerful simply by virtue of our birth. Most of us struggle with how and when to articulate our faith. We often succumb to narrowness of focus when it comes to loving our neighbours. Thus, the one who announces the good news must fearlessly, yet caringly, demonstrate the ways in which our discipleship falls short of what we are capable of, because of the Spirit within us.

6. Dull duty fulfilled because of a sense of obligation is rarely inspiring and never attractive. The absence of *joy* is perhaps the most indictable offence of many of our worship services. Assuredly we deal with serious and important issues, but that is no reason for the grim tone in which worship is often conducted. The proclaimer can do good work not only in demonstrating joy, but also in expounding the many places where we are called to "rejoice in the Lord."

7. Finally, among many aspects of proclamation that seem indispensable today is the theme of *hope*. We don't need to be reminded of the many reasons for despair that pervade our lives, our community, and indeed the whole of creation. These bombard us daily from the headlines. The declaration of hope is a vital need. Not because it is wrong to communicate bad news, but because the bad news is not the whole story. An important part of the weaving of hope is reminding ourselves and others that walking the path of discipleship is not merely one more task we take on, adding to an already overabundant to-do list. Instead of having to break the trail, it is our great privilege to go where God is already at work and join in God's mission.

At the outset of this article I noted the distinction between preaching and proclaiming. This was not meant to disparage preaching as a discipline central to the well-being of the church, but to set aside some negative associations and also to alert us to the variety of forms available for this indispensable work of proclamation. As the preacher becomes more confident in her ability and more familiar with the worshipping community, she may discover that different messages are readily adaptable to different formats. Strategies for presentation will depend on a host of factors, including the resources available, the content of the message, the comfort level of the congregation and proclaimer with surprising or innovative experiences, the flexibility or adaptability of the setting, and so on. Within these various parameters, the responsible and prayerful use of novelty is a powerful reminder of the lively movement of the Spirit.

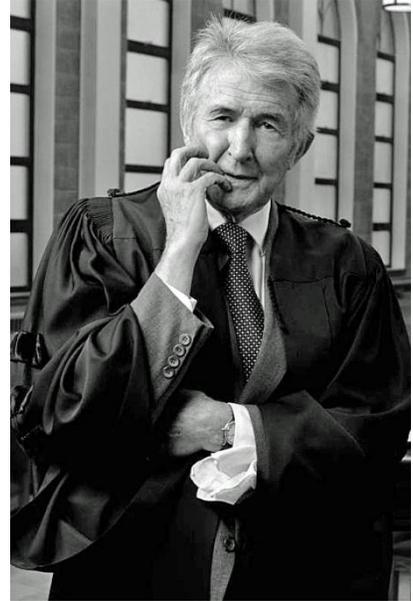
In various churches in eastern Ontario (and perhaps elsewhere) it is quite common for the preacher to be greeted in the pulpit with a carving or note carrying the message, “We would see Jesus” (John 12:21). Besides being intimidating, the message conveys a particular hope that congregations bring to worship. That desire is framed in different ways and met in a multitude of fashions, but it expresses the desire (indeed the need) of people to be assisted to an encounter with the Holy in which proclamation plays an indispensable role.

## PROFILE

### FLOWERS FOR MAURICE BOYD

by Malcolm Sinclair, with files from David McKane

The last two words in the New York Times' obituary of the Rev. Dr. R. Maurice Boyd were "no flowers." Now, almost five years after his death, it seems that flowers of tribute are both necessary and fitting. It is time to laud this wonderful preacher whose voice and spirit brought forth such flowering in his congregations.



Maurice Boyd was born in 1932, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. He recalled, "When I was fourteen years old and had discovered that I loved to preach and was likely, if I had my way, to spend the rest of my life doing it, I listened to every preacher within an unreasonable distance." He took his B.A. from Edgehill Methodist College, Queen's University, Belfast, followed by a Licentiate in Theology from Magee College in Londonderry. Following his ordination as a minister of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 1956, he served in pastoral appointments in Belfast and Portadown.

Yearning for a wider opportunity than the church in Northern Ireland could give him, he emigrated to Canada in 1959. He began working as a Christian Education minister at First United Church in Hamilton, Ontario; then moved in the early 1960s to Rhodes Avenue United Church in the east end of Toronto. His extraordinary preaching gifts were revealing themselves rapidly and in 1967 he was called to Central United Church in Sarnia, Ontario. His popular ministry there led to the call to Metropolitan United Church in London in 1975—to follow the feisty Dr. George Goth.

At Metropolitan Church, Boyd began to focus all the more on his work as a preacher. During his thirteen years of ministry there, the congregation grew to become the largest in the denomination, with 3400 members and over 2200 people at worship each Sunday. A Metropolitan member observed of him:

Why did Boyd rank as a pre-eminent preacher? Elegant prayers, vital history tying faith to the apostolic church, sermons enlivened by Christ's mind speaking to the heart, and worship alive with poetry, brought the people close to Jesus. He kept sacred fires burning in a day when so many churches douse them with sentimental rhetoric and casual asides reducing worship to religious banalities.

As with all singularly gifted people, reaction to his abilities and personality varied. While thousands loved him, others found him difficult. His positions seemed immovable, his collegiality thin and his tone arrogant. In this regard he is often remembered as one who discouraged the presence of children or extraneous noise or interruption in the sanctuary during the sermon. He was said to rule by decree. "Maurice always wanted to lead. He didn't want to be led."

In London he moved his office out of the church to the manse where he spent hours in his study mastering the sermons, striding up and down the room, repeating the notes out loud, until they were memorized and ready for delivery. He would then have the freedom to present the sermons in his own dramatic style. While in London, Boyd received the L. Mus. degree from the University of Western Ontario, and was honoured by Emmanuel College with the Doctor of Divinity degree of Victoria University.

By 1988 he was ready for another preaching adventure. A strong Canadian congregation, noted for its excellent pulpit, was of great interest to him, but it failed to meet him on his terms and the opportunity for both was lost. Maurice then accepted a call to the prestigious Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, one of the great pulpits in the United States. He followed the exemplary twenty-five year ministry of Dr. Bryant Kirkland. Maurice again evoked a huge response to his preaching, as Fifth Avenue added over 900 new members during his brief three and a half years there. A Fifth Avenue member said:

No small part of his uncanny effectiveness as an orator was his theatrical flair. The lilt and contrasting inflections of his voice, the dramatic pauses, and if he did not devote the better part of each working week to thinking and writing Boyd felt that his sermons would not have been as meaty and challenging.

However, a familiar fault-line over his personal style began to divide lay leadership at Fifth Avenue. His supporters welcomed his great ability, idiosyncrasies and all, while his detractors found him hard to steer, preoccupied with self and sermons, weak on polity and church order, and too often away as guest preacher and lecturer across the continent. Despite much passionate pleading, Boyd resigned from the church after refusing a recommended course of supervision and counsel. He then retreated back to Canada for a brief sojourn. One of the Fifth Avenue leaders who had challenged Boyd's commanding style commented, "There was no happiness on that day, no victors; all were losers because we lost Maurice Boyd, a great preacher, and left divisions in the church, now to be overcome."

In Lent, 1993, Maurice Boyd began his last great period of ministry. A new congregation gathered around him, The City Church, New York, named in homage to The City Temple in London, England, where Leslie Weatherhead, who had ordained Boyd at the annual meeting of Conference in Cork, laboured so memorably for a generation. In April of 1993, three hundred and forty-three adults and thirty-four children became founding members of The City Church. Another two hundred and twenty-seven outside New York City became "founding friends." The congregation thrived in fashionable rented quarters until Boyd's retirement in March 2007. The City Church disbanded on that day.

Over his fruitful years in the United States, Maurice Boyd preached and lectured in many of the prestigious universities and churches in the country and beyond. He was the author of four books of sermons and two other publications. He died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage in New York City on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009, at the age of seventy-seven. Twice married, he was the father of three children, Leslie, Heather and Jennifer. Little seems to have been made of his passing in either of the two national churches that he served.

I did not know Dr. Boyd well, but we spoke happily on occasion. I preached for him, and he for me. I was deeply moved by his gifts and abilities. I saw the joy he had in his art and have felt the adoration that hundreds of people have for him to this day. Among all the fine preaching I have heard in my life, I have experienced five giants, unforgettable in their content, perception, ability and impact. They are James S. Stewart,

James Forbes Jr., Fred Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor and Maurice Boyd. Here follow a few gathered reflections, first about him by others (mostly anonymously) and then by Boyd himself.

“Dr. Boyd has the single capacity to engage the hearts and minds of all who hear him, drawing inspiration not only from Scripture but the richness of our common literary and musical traditions. He spoke to our present day condition infusing old orthodoxies with new content and urgency, touching simultaneously the believer and unbeliever.”

“He shared with his congregations a musician’s temperament and a poet’s soul. Boyd approached truth the way we do, as someone we love. We hug them, not wanting to control them, but to receive their warmth. Boyd used words to hug truth in order to discern rather than to explain.”

“At their best, Boyd’s sermons could be as stimulating as a top-flight university lecture, chock full of literary and poetic references, yet firmly grounded in the 2000 year continuum of Christian thought. At their infrequent weakest, one sometimes felt they had been battered by Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, and struggled amidst all the dropped names and references, to discern just what it was Boyd himself was trying to say.”

“The tragedy I ultimately construe from the story of Rev. Boyd’s career is that I do not think he ever served an institutional church whose divine authority he could trust and thus he himself was hobbled. As deep and sincere as his faith was, and as rare and compelling as his oratorical gifts were, he never was part of a church that he could sufficiently honour and respect so as to submit to its tempering influences.” (Herman Goodden, “Memories of a United Church Minister,” *Catholic Insight*, London, Ontario.)

From Maurice Boyd, in *The Fine Art of Being Imperfect* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998):

“When I consider my own life I am haunted by the insights that converge from several sources. I think of the notes Nathanael Hawthorne wrote in his diary, about planning a novel in which the chief character never appears. That comes close to the bone, doesn’t it?”

“God hasn’t finished with you yet! There are many things in your life whose significance is not yet decided. What their meaning will be nobody knows, not even you. What we do know about is that of all the stuff of your life God will bring forth a unique good.”

“There are not good and bad bits, but only good and bad joined inextricably in the self I am. Do you not know that my gifts are my limitations, that my tenderness is inseparable from my frailty, my compassion from my failings, my insights from my sin, my understanding from my weakness?”

“I have always known that the wilderness of this world is a place to pass through because I have never felt at home in it.”

“Do you know what disappoints me after forty years of ministry? That offered so much grace there is little graciousness, so much truth to welcome and we remain false, so much light to illumine and our lives are still dark, so much mercy and still we are merciless. It is easy to be indignant about it.”

From Maurice Boyd, *A Lover’s Quarrel with the World* (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing Company, 1985):

“‘I have had a lover’s quarrel with the world.’ All the words in this statement are important, but the most important is love.”

“Words, words, words! All my life I’ve been in love with words—with the flavour and sense, and power and beauty of them. Yet even the best of them are no match for experience. We make them into prose, and when we come to the end of that we turn them into poetry, and when poetry will no longer carry our love or fear or adoration we say, ‘Let the musicians begin,’ and they do, they set our words to melody.” (Memorial Service bulletin)

A colleague recently mused that Maurice Boyd was much like the biblically recorded statue of Nebuchadnezzar, with head of gold, throat of silver, and feet of clay. “Clay” may be a bit severe in that any of us could be spoken of in such terms. For me, as time goes by, Maurice Boyd’s greatness as a preacher overshadows any perceived flaws in style or personality. He was not of us, but he was among us awhile and many gained much from his ministry.

The almost mystical Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, were said to have been created by Nebuchadnezzar II. The Greek who wrote of him two centuries before Christ tells us, “In his palace he erected high walls, supported by stone pillars, and by planting what was called a pensile paradise, replenishing it with all sorts of trees. He rendered the prospect of an exact resemblance of a mountainous country. He did it to gratify the one he loved.” High walls, stone pillars, lush beauty, mountain heights in the distance, and all for the beloved? Is that not the preacher at work and preaching at its best? Flowers so beautiful that they are remembered down the corridors of time are a worthy tribute to the gardener, whether clay-footed or not. To Maurice Boyd, then, I wish to send flowers.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*

**Joseph Ratzinger. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011. Pp. 402.**

When I was asked to review Joseph Ratzinger's book, *Dogma and Preaching*, it seemed best to talk with my archbishop before accepting the assignment. Given Ratzinger's reputation for ecclesiastical and doctrinal inflexibility, I thought there was a possibility my review would not be entirely glowing. As a convert to Catholicism on a journey toward ordination as a priest, I didn't want to ruffle any feathers in Rome. The archbishop gladly gave his approval and I went on to discover that my trepidation was misplaced. Not only does Ratzinger display an extraordinary capacity to deal creatively with difficult theological questions, but he does so in a way that is entirely pastoral and inspiring.

Those who turn to this book expecting help with the Sunday sermon might be disappointed. This is a collection of articles, lectures and sermons spanning a significant period of time dating back to the 1960s. Consequently, the book lacks the cohesion one might expect in a book on Christian doctrine and daily life. It is anything but a practical guide to homiletics, but it is a treatise on the theological, ecclesiological and societal challenges faced by the contemporary preacher. Whatever it lacks with regard to form is more than compensated for by the depth and insight of its content.

The reader will detect an unfortunate absence of inclusive language throughout much of the book. The problem was frustratingly apparent in the lecture Ratzinger delivered at the seventy-fifth anniversary of an association for the protection of young women. His contribution on that day was obscured by his use of "man" in both generic and gender-specific senses. I'm not sure if this negligence was due to the inherent perils of translating German to English or the fact that much of the material was written in the sixties or early seventies, before our sensibilities regarding language had been aroused.

The book is divided into three parts: *Toward a Theory of Preaching*; *Some Major Themes of Preaching*; and *Meditations and Sermons*. The *Epilogue* contains two articles, one a reflection on the legacy of the Second Vatican Council and the other on the relevance of Christianity

today. It should be noted, however, that both articles were written in the seventies. Even so, each article is rich with images and insights that speak to the social and political realities facing the Church today.

The subject matter in the first two sections of the book does not make for light reading; moreover, Ratzinger's writing style tends to be very formal. This, more than anything, is a book about dogmatics, and I believe Ratzinger should be counted among the great theologians of the past fifty years. I was delighted to discover that he is thoroughly immersed in Scripture, particularly the Hebrew Scriptures and the relevance of those texts to Christian preaching. It is lamentable that the way in which he appeared to exercise authority in the Church may have diminished his reputation as a theologian and a thinker. Anyone who reads this book will appreciate the substance and strength of his arguments, even if they disagree.

I thought he missed the mark slightly in "Contemporary Man Facing the Question of God" by subscribing to the popular notion that rationalism and materialism are products of modernity. While he correctly identifies these as challenges to religious belief, he seems to forget that the attempts to explain and understand reality without God existed even among the pre-Socratic philosophers. In doing so he missed an opportunity to point out that religious belief has been under attack in every age of human history. Indeed, it is the hubristic nature of rationalism, especially atheistic rationalism, to believe that it is saying something new; that it represents a fresh perspective on reality when, in fact, it is simply reflecting a skepticism, healthy or not, that has been present in virtually every age of human history.

The final section of the book, a collection of sermons, retains some of the formality of the earlier sections, but not in a way that diminishes the effectiveness of his preaching. While preaching on the occasion of some of the great feasts of the church, Ratzinger deals with weighty subjects such as the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection and even the Assumption of Mary. In each instance, his skill as a theologian and a pastor is palpable. On the strength of these sermons alone I would recommend this book to the readers of *Touchstone*.

Colin Peterson, Headingley Correctional Centre  
*cpeterson56@shaw.ca*

***And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament***  
**Fleming Rutledge. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. 421.**

The working position behind this collection of sermons, spanning the length of Fleming Rutledge's thirty-five year ministry, is that the Old Testament functions as the "operating system" to bring meaning to the New Testament (2). Rutledge argues that "the church cannot teach homiletics at all without the revelatory Old Testament declaration, "Thus says the Lord" (2). This collection draws together sermons which specifically accentuate use of this Testament. By pedagogical example, the sermons demonstrate the whole biblical canon as a "seamless garment" (7), in which the God of the Old Testament is the same as that of the New, and not, as some Christians mistakenly understand, a "wrathful and judgmental God . . . supplanted by an endlessly tolerant and indulgent Jesus" (6).

To bring further understanding in this regard, Rutledge highlights certain thematic characteristics of God in the Old Testament that, as readers, "we would not be able to extract from the New Testament taken by itself" (5–6). For example, the notion of "God's 'jealousy' and the nonexistence of other gods" (6), which might also be readily understood as the sovereignty of God, arises in "The Lord Spoke to Abraham" (27–32). In this sermon, the reader learns that God alone is able to keep promises of "blessing and redemption and abundance and righteousness and fullness of joy and eternal life in [God's] presence" (32). Rutledge also emphasizes "the righteousness of God as both noun and verb" (5). This theme emerges in a sermon titled "Blessed Are the Poor" (394–402), with references to the prophetic book of Amos.

The sermons follow the structure that Rutledge identifies: they "*begin* with the contemporary situation, then focus on the text in some detail before finally allowing the text to speak precisely *into* the contemporary situation" (15). In this regard, the collection offers a specific contextual engagement with American society and issues, especially those of interest to the mainstream church. Embedded within the sermons is an exhaustive array of three decades' worth of contemporary current events, such as Hurricane Katrina in "What Job Saw" (160–166), the Cold War period in "The Future of God" (61–68)

and Barack Obama's election as the first African-American president in "God's Justice Is a Verb" (311–316).

Rutledge identifies her intended audience as "preachers and their hearers" (17). Indeed, much of the introduction discusses themes particular to those with the responsibility of worship leadership. Topics include the problems posed by the use of a lectionary (11–13), encouragement of ongoing Bible study (22–24) and a recommendation to preachers to "impart a sense of wonder and amazement" to those adults who will be teaching the Bible to children (24).

By way of critique, two primary issues may be noted. First, many of the resources used, while they may be foundational works to the study of Hebrew Bible, are dated (even in the more recent sermons). Much new biblical research exists on the history of biblical reception and the re-use of Scripture (or "rewritten Bible") which should have been included, especially since the author herself argues against the notion of a "static" Bible (23). Second, there is an uneven use of male and female imagery. References to God always use the third person masculine singular pronoun. Only the church receives a feminine pronoun (3). A reference to a Saviour "helping us and guiding us like a loving father" (402) could easily have been expanded with "like a loving father or mother," or even more simply, "like a loving parent." This omission of inclusive language detracts from an otherwise fairly justice-oriented work.

Overall, however, the sermons are engaging, and bring the significance of the scriptural narrative to life with the right amount of historical contextual explanation—for example, identifying the narrative significance in Abraham leaving his homeland (Gen. 12) already as an older man (30, 62). Most important, the sermons provide a commendable example of the use of Hebrew Scripture as an appropriate foundation to understand the New Testament as a continuation of a long scriptural and faith tradition. Christian sermons should neither ignore Hebrew Scriptures nor suggest that New Testament Scriptures are intended to replace them. These sermons are a fine example of how to avoid both pitfalls.

Carmen Palmer, Toronto School of Theology  
*carmen.palmer@utoronto.ca*

***What Christianity Is Not: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology*  
Douglas John Hall. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013. Pp. 175.**

With this book, the 84-year old author tells us that he has taken his last trip to the batter’s box. Doug Hall may not have knocked the ball out of the park (as Ted Williams did in *his* last bat), but he has certainly ended, at the very least, with a line drive double to centre left.

The contents of *What Christianity Is Not* are more positive than the title suggests. Yes, Christianity is neither a culture religion nor a religion of the book. It is not a doctrinal system or a system of morality. It is not the church or “the truth.” But in spelling out what all this means, Hall ends up saying a good deal about what Christianity *is*.

For example, take his claim that Christianity is not a religion of the book. We don’t just open the Bible and locate the right scriptural verse in order to answer everything from questions concerning acts of civil disobedience to the ethics of homosexuality. But if proof-texting is not the way to go, the question arises: How *do* we understand the Bible? This question leads Hall to talk about the christological criterion and how the Christ-shaped Word is attested in and through (and sometimes in spite of) the words of the Bible:

. . . There is only one absolute authority for Reformation thought—the authority of the One who transcends all authorities: the Authority of the Voice the prophets believed they heard out of a burning bush, from a mountaintop, in dreams and night callings, in the midst of a suffering and exiled people; the authority the apostles experienced in the call of an itinerant and unrecognized rabbi to discipleship (57).

Another example of the book’s positive thrust can be taken from Hall’s discussion of ethics. In claiming that Christianity is not a system of morality, he ends up replacing the moralistic approach with a strong and vibrant ethic of grace. This is done through an illuminating discussion of Jesus’ conversation with the rich young ruler: Why do I need to believe in God and go to church when I’ve already proven to be a model of propriety? That’s the question Hall hears the rich young ruler putting to Jesus. And in Jesus’ reply, “Go, sell everything you’ve got and then come

and follow me,” he hears not another moral directive—“Go and help the poor!”—but a highly perceptive and profound word of spiritual counsel. This man, Jesus knew, would only attain the peace he sought if he *could forget himself, sufficiently, become sufficiently nonchalant about both his material wealth and his naive self-righteousness, to enter fully into life.* Life! It is life, not religion, that Jesus wants to give us, says Bonhoeffer (89).

On and on Hall rolls in this provocative, dialectical way, often reinforcing his arguments with quotes from the greats in the classical tradition—Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Kierkegaard and Barth, especially Barth. But then just when you think Hall is operating as a standard neo-orthodox thinker, he’ll throw in a quote from his beloved Tillich:

Paul Tillich wrote that “the new form of Christianity” cannot “be named yet,” though it is “to be expected and prepared for,” and “elements of it can be described.” I would only like to add to these wise words of my great teacher this: that, since these words were written, more than half a century ago, while we are still unable to say with any kind of confidence what “the new form of Christianity” will be, it is by now much clearer what it will not and cannot be. It cannot be the triumphalistic, imperial religion of Christendom (161, 162).

*What Christianity Is Not* is clearly not a book that allows us to pin this wily theologian down. The author may be moving ever closer (in company with not a few of us!) to the eschatological sunset. But he’s still his own man, full of qualifications and counter-qualifications, saying one moment what Christianity is not, and the next moment what it is, keeping us all slightly off balance while constantly throwing out morsels of the bread of life.

A class act Douglas John Hall has been, and remains, and one can only wish the old maestro well in the coming years of retirement.

John McTavish, Huntsville, ON  
*jmctav@vianet.on.ca*

***Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship*****Edited by Martin Tel, Joyce Berger and John D. Witvliet.****Grand Rapids: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Faith Alive and Brazos Press, 2012. Pp. 1130.**

This is not a denominational publication. The three editors belong to Reformed churches, but the project was initiated solely by them in collaboration with the publishers. The book contains over one thousand pages, with all 150 psalms included in many forms.

Every psalm is reproduced in full, rendered in the NRSV translation, and printed alternately in ordinary and in bold type for responsive reading. The psalms can be sung; so they are printed with symbols helpfully placed over each line as guides in the use of “tones” (two musical bars), in the style of Anglican chant. At the bottom of each psalm is a prayer picking up on the main theme, often as short as a collect. (These reflect the editors’ hope that the book will be used for private devotion, as well as at public worship.) Then there is a brief comment on the content of the psalm with suggestions for its use. Recognizing that most of the mainline churches follow the lectionary, a second prose version is printed, the abbreviated one—we might say the hygienically cleansed one—of each of the psalms as they are listed in the Common Lectionary, where it is assumed the psalm will be said along with a sung refrain. The source for this version is usually *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, published in 2006.

In addition there are metrical versions of many of the psalms, many set to quite well-known tunes. The texts have a familiar ring to them, but unlike the ones found in our books, which have been taken from the Scottish Psalter of 1650, these are from a metrical Psalter in more contemporary English produced by the American Presbyterians in 1912. Attached to most of the psalms is at least one hymn, many of recent composition, set sometimes to older tunes and sometimes to contemporary ones. Virtually all of the hymn texts are of high quality, which doesn’t surprise us when we consider they come from authors like Isaac Watts, John Bell, Timothy Dudley-Smith and Ruth Duck. There are many fine texts from newer writers, such as the twenty-three texts from the American Presbyterian musician and hymn writer, Michael Morgan,

who recently published a volume of hymn texts based on each of the psalms, and the nineteen texts from British Baptist, Martin Leckebusch, whose profession is information technology and whose avocation is hymn writer.

This may sound to the reader like a good, but fairly predictable, book with many items already in *Voices United*. But actually, the book greatly exceeds expectation. Throughout, one psalm after another has options for challenging and wonderful musical settings. The index reveals twenty different genres and musical styles, running from Gregorian chant, Lutheran chorale, English and North American cathedral tradition, to Afro-American spirituals, and to settings from Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. The back of the book contains seventeen pages of performance notes for every musical item. There are more than twenty-five languages as well as litanies for various times and seasons, scripted readings, and quite a number of prayers (e.g., a prayer for “trying times,” a child’s bed-time prayer, and a table prayer).

In this age of power point, and light diets of evangelical praise choruses and their liberal counterparts, this book offers a connection with the solidity and richness of the Psalter. It’s a treasure trove.

Mac Watts, Winnipeg  
*amwatts@mymts.ca*

### ***The United Church of Canada: A History***

**Edited by Don Schweitzer. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012. Pp. 306.**

A book like this only appears once in a generation. Don Schweitzer has masterfully marshalled a cadre of very fine authors to produce an outstanding collection of essays, and it is rightfully being snapped up by scholars, students, ministers, libraries and lay leaders. This is a vitally important book and succeeds in being both scholarly and accessible to a wide readership.

The book has two parts. Part One is a decade-by-decade recounting of the signal moments and movements within the denomination (1899-2003). Part Two examines a number of key issues that have occupied the

United Church's attention across several decades (worship, ministry, mission and First Nations peoples, Jews and Palestinians, theology and Scripture, and the denomination's "social imaginary" or self-identity). Not to be missed is the stunning "Genealogical Chart of Church Union in Canada [1925]" by William T. Gunn (xxii-xxiii). If you thought your family tree was complicated, wait till you see this!

I will highlight four chapters that are illustrative of the quality and substance of the book as a whole. In Chapter One, the familiar story of Church Union is retold by C.T. McIntire, with new research that fills in some of the gaps. McIntire offers a thorough outline of the factors and processes that led to the formation of the United Church, and tells the less-well-known parallel story of the inauguration of the Women's Missionary Society (WMS). The WMS accomplished a union of its own from four antecedent organizations, and after Church Union "operated as virtually a church within a church" (11). Going well beyond the mechanics of the Union story, McIntire assesses the achievement of Union and the new United Church's national aspirations in light of the broader contexts of politics, economics and immigration.

Chapter Four, by John H. Young, reflects insightfully on the denomination in post-World War Two era. "If The United Church of Canada had a 'golden era,'" writes Young, "surely this was it" (79). Church participation, membership, and finances were booming across the country. Receptivity toward the Church's public role and influence was also at a pinnacle. These were days of bursting Sunday Schools and lay mobilization movements, prominent public "crusades" and evangelistic missions. New congregations seemed to appear out of thin air. Young gives the example of Northlea United in suburban Toronto that began with a handful of families meeting in a local school in 1949 and within five months had 511 members (82). Notwithstanding various shadows and road bumps, this was for the United Church "an optimistic age . . . [and the] future seemed bright" indeed (93).

In her lucid treatment in Chapter Five of the United Church in the 1960s, Sandra Beardsall writes of "that crucible of free inquiry and radical orientation to the world that marked the decade's theology and action" (113). This was a period in which social upheaval and—for the first time—declines in church participation were met with vigorous

church projects and programmes designed to meet an increasingly secular society. The famous *New Curriculum* was developed for Sunday school and all-ages Christian Education, endeavouring to combine critical biblical scholarship with the need for faith formation. The United Church addressed itself to divorce and universal health care, and developed new, significant worship resources, including *A New Creed*. It united with the Evangelical United Brethren and began union talks with the Anglicans. The speed of change in the wider society was mirrored by changes—and resisted by continuities—within the denomination itself.

Charlotte Caron tackles one of the most amorphous themes in the United Church in Chapter Ten: ministry. As she puts it, “The question, ‘What does ministry mean?’ has arisen over and over again” (203). Undeterred, Caron corrals the diversity of views into three categories: ontological, functional, and professional. This is particularly helpful since, as she notes, “reports . . . [and] General Councils have not always been clear in their approach . . . adopting policies but not acting on them, accepting motions in principle, or sending items for further study, many of which never re-emerge” (203). Caron traces the various expressions and theological treatment of ministry over the denomination’s history, noting the emergence of “a new ethos” in the 1980s, forged amid the changing realities of increasing numbers of women in ministry, shifting understandings of human sexuality, the renewing autonomy of First Nations communities, and growing stresses for both rural and urban congregations and ministry personnel. By 2004, the *Manual* “described sixteen [!] different designations of ministry” (216). Right up to the present, the ambiguities and complications of ministry persist.

My students and I have found this volume to be tremendously useful, and I enthusiastically recommend it to any who are interested in the United Church or Canadian church history. The story is vast and deep, but rather than getting carried away with repetition or endless dates and details as some histories do, this collection is a manageable and enjoyable read. Each chapter is carefully researched and written, and the whole succeeds in offering readers a compelling and illuminating study.

Robert C. Fennell, Atlantic School of Theology  
*refennell@astheology.ns.ca*