Everything That Was Written In The Past Was Written To Teach Us

Applying the Old Testament through sermons
to Christians in 1994

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Mark Braun

Dr. John Fritz told pastors in the 1940s: "Preachers, as a rule, take their text from the New Testament."[1] Four decades later Prof. John Jeske suggested that while the Old Testament represents three-fourths of the Bible, probably only one-sixth of the sermons preached from Lutheran pulpits are based on the older 75% of Scripture.[2]

I found this an accurate ratio in the last parish I served. My secretary tallied the sermon texts used in that congregation over the previous quarter century. She found that 69.4% of the Sunday sermons were based on a gospel text (usually the gospel reading for the day), and epistle lessons accounted for another 16.5%. The Old Testament provided the sermon text only 14.1 % of the time.

We don't subscribe to the views of the second century heretic Marcion, who called the God of the Old Testament an evil God and insisted that everything worth knowing about God's grace was contained in ten of Paul's letters and an edited version of the gospel of Luke.[3] We disagree with Origen and Jerome and "many other distinguished people" who, wrote Martin Luther, think the Old Testament is "a book that was given to the Jewish people only," but "is now out of date," and that only a "spiritual sense" is to be sought in the Old Testament. [4]

But how well do we act on our convictions? As Prof. Jeske wrote another time:

> The unfortunate alternative to a broader understanding of the Old Testament will, by default, be a pick-and-choose approach to the Old Testament, which pays attention to the creation and patriarchal narratives, focuses (during Advent and Lent) on a few traditional prophecies isolated from their historical context, reads a psalm occasionally for devotions, and pretty well ignores the rest.[5]

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, Paul wrote, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 16:4).

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[1] John Fritz, *The Preacher's Manual* St. Louis: Concordia, 1941.

[2] John C. Jeske, *"Preaching from the Old Testament,"* paper presented to the Milwaukee Metro North Pastoral Conference, St. John Lutheran Church, Newburg, WI, March 15, 1982

[3] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity Volume 1, to A.D. 1500* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1953,1975), 126-127.

[4] Martin Luther, *"Prefaces to the Old Testament,"* tr. by Charles M. Jacobs, Luther's Works, American edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 35,235.

[5] John C. Jeske, review of *The Word Becoming Flesh* by Horace D. Hummel, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 76:3 (July 1979), 269.

"In the past" certainly refers to the older Testament. What can we do to apply the Old Testament through sermons to Christians in 1994?

The Foolishness Of Preaching

When Paul referred to the "foolishness of preaching" (1 Corinthians 1:21, KJV), he was talking about its content, not its style, as the NIV makes clear (the foolishness of what was preached). But we've all heard our share of foolish-sounding preaching, and we may be guilty of generating some of it ourselves. Delivering a message derived from the Word directed to the real lives of people I love is still the most exciting thing I do. I'm sure you feel the same. But it's probably good to be reminded that not everyone shares our excitement.

"People are not tired of preaching," wrote John Killinger, "but of non-preaching, of the badly garbled, anachronistic, irrelevant drivel that has in so many places passed for preaching because there is no real preaching to measure it against."[6] Much of what he heard reminded him of "those unpalatable pastries costing their hosts little bother and less thoughtfulness."[7] Paul Harms characterized most preaching as "unrelieved dullness,"[8] and Helmut Thielicke, while granting that the preaching he heard was "largely correct, exegetically 'legitimate,' workmanlike, and tidy," felt it was also "remarkably dead and lacking in infectious power. Very often it strikes us as an unreal phantom that hovers above and is isolated from what people feel are the actual realities of their life."[9]

Complaints about preaching are nothing new. During the Middle Ages people criticized sermons for being mechanical, dull and little more than poor plagiarisms of earlier works. In the 16th century listeners ridiculed preaching as incredibly boring; they passed time in church by sleeping, chattering or playing simple games. One woman, rebuked in the middle of a sermon for gossiping with her neighbor, instantly jumped up and objected, "Indeed, sir, I know the one who has been doing the most babbling! For I do but whisper a word with my neighbor, and thou hast babbled there all this hour!" John Eachard in his tract, 'The Grounds and Contempt of the Clergy Inquired Into," denounced the unintelligible, unnatural and uncommunicative speech that typically came from the pulpit.[10] In Scotland the word "thole" meant "to endure" or "to suffer," applied primarily to the reaction of a congregation to a sermon, or to a toothache."[11]

Mark Twain said in "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" that the morning sermon "was of the usual pattern; it was the same old things said in the same old way; they had heard them a thousand times and found them innocuous, next to meaningless, and easy to sleep under. [12] Then there's the reaction of Tennyson's "Northern Farmer":

> And I always came to his church, before my Sally were dead,
> And heard him a-bumming away like a buzzard cock over my head;
> And I never knew what he meant, but I thought he had something to say,

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[6] John Killinger, *The Centrality of Preaching in the Total Task of the Ministry*, Waco TX: Word, 1969, 21
[7] Killinger, 11.
[8] Paul Harms, *Power from the Pulpit,* St. Louis: Concordia, 1980. 12.
[9] Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter With Spurgeon,* tr. by John W. Doberstein. Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1975. p. 2.
[10] Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today* New York: Harper and Row, 1975. p. 3.
[11] Interview with James T. Cleland, *Response,* cited in *Context* VI:7, April 1, 1975. p. 1
[12] Laurence Teacher, ed. *The Unabridged Mark Twain,* Philadelphia: Running Press, 1976. p. 1287.

And I thought he said what he ought to have said, and so I came away."[13]

Maybe Archie Bunker said it best about his Rev. Fletcher: "Half a sermon was plenty. He said all he was gonna say." [14]

What's wrong? "What I often hear is a religious sounding lecture, a kind of oral theological essay," wrote Lowell Erdahl. "But a lecture about food is not a steak dinner. Nor is a lecture about the Gospel the same as the proclamation of the Gospel.... I don't want lectures instead of sermons."[15] Phillips Brooks agreed: "Much of our preaching is like delivering lectures upon medicine to sick people. The lecture is true.... The lecture is interesting.... But still the fact remains that the lecture is not the medicine and that to give medicine, not to deliver lectures, is the preacher's duty."[16] "There is a longing," wrote Reuel Howe, "on the part of the layman for a preacher to give an honest, intelligent, passionate, personal representation rather than the coldly rational, dispassionate presentation of objective truth. [17]

I've listened to preaching in other churches; you have too. While we might be intimidated by the occasional superstar pulpitmaster who occupies the airwaves or sermonizes at the local megachurch (I'm a pulpit assistant just down the road from Stuart Briscoe), the preaching done week after week in hundreds of WELS churches by "garden variety" pastors with dreadfully overcrowded schedules and a research staff of one is, for my money, very good stuff. A Marquette professor remarked recently how impressed he was with the preaching he heard at his neighborhood WELS congregation. The pulpit techniques he praised—strongly textual sermon, gospel clearly proclaimed, strong eye contact, freedom from a manuscript—are part and parcel of what we all were taught. After two summers doing graduate study at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, my biggest disappointment has been with the preaching I've heard in chapel. Some messages were read entirely; others never got beyond exegesis. These preachers, to whom seminarians looked as model homileticians, seemed to have spent little time in a parish pulpit.

We can still make a good thing better. The comments of Erdahl, Brooks and Howe hit home with me. Does my Old Testament sermon sound too much like a review of ancient history or a theological essay? Am I more familiar with the world of Moses or Jesus or Luther than the one my congregation must live in right now? Does my preaching contain personal warmth to touch listeners' hearts as well as information to teach their heads?

You can't preach what you don't know

Whenever I teach an Old Testament course, I always devote a slice of class time to ask people, "Tell me about the problems you've encountered when you read the Old Testament," You've heard most of them before. "Is it just me, or does Moses repeat himself a lot?" "I can't keep all those odd-sounding names straight." "How could God let Abraham and Jacob and David and Solomon marry so many wives?" "I vowed I'd read the Bible cover to cover, but I've never gotten past all those laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy." "How could God tell Israel to practice genocide on their neighbors?" "God seems so cruel in the Old Testament. He struck Uzzah when Uzzah steadied the ark after the oxen stumbled (2 Samuel 6:6,7). He enacted Elisha's curse by

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[13] Quoted by Elmer A. Kettner, "Are We Really Preaching the Gospel?" *Concordia Theological Monthly,* XXIV:5 May 1953, p. 324.
[14] *The Wit and Wisdom of Archie Bunker,* New York: Popular Library 1971, p. 131.
[15] Lowell 0. Erdahl, *Preaching for the People,* Nashville: Abingdon, 1976, p. 46.
[16] Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching,* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969, p. 126
[17] Ruel L. Howe, *Partners in Preaching,* New York: Seabury, 1967, p. 28.

sending two bears to maul 42 kids in Bethel (2 Kings 2:23,24)." "There are so many laws and rules in the Old Testament. 'If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession' (Exodus 19:5) -- doesn't that sound as if Israel became God's people by doing good works?" "Why would an inspired Psalm writer say something like this?"

> 0 Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays
> you for what you have done to us -
> he who seizes your infants, and dashes them against the rocks. (Psalm
> 137:8,9)

"Or this?"

> Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead....
> Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate....
> Your two breasts are like two fawns, like two fawns of a gazelle
> that browse among the lilies. (Song of Songs 4:1,3,5)

Honestly, has the unholy thought ever seized you, that it's easier to declare, "We have the Word of God in its truth and purity," than it is actually to lead God's people into the tougher parts of that Word?

Lutherans needn't recall a "born again" experience in their lives or their ministries, but if pressed I'd point to a particular sermon I heard John Jeske preach at a rented hall in Port Washington, Wisconsin on the last Sunday of 1979. The style and content of his message forced me to rethink everything about preaching on the older three-fourths of the Scripture. I wrote him for advice, and what he wrote back is still valuable:

> Make it a practice to read through the Old Testament at least annually. If you don't have the time, find it; make it; steal it. Obviously, I can't preach what I don't know. Annotate your Bible to make it more useful. ... Do you have a loose-leaf Hebrew Old Testament? For my money, it's the surest way to guarantee that you won't let your language skills slip. Any preacher who is restricted in his Old Testament studies to secondary materials is hamstrung; no other way to look at it (the man can't do serious word study, can't use a serious commentary, can't even draw conclusions from the word order of the Hebrew writer). Read everything by August Pieper you can lay your hands on. [18]

Today we might say Bible software offers a quicker, more efficient way to keep our Hiphils straight.

But who of us would dispute the value of keeping our language skills alive? "The languages," Luther said, "are the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained," the "casket in which this jewel is enshrined," the "vessel in which this wine is held," the "larder in which this food is stored; and as the gospel itself points out [Matt. 14:20], they are the basket in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments."[19] (Even the great Reformer found it hard, apparently, to check the urge to allegorize.) Every church body has its language stars who write

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[18] John C. Jeske, personal letter, February 24, 1980.

[19] Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools", tr. by Albert T.W. Steinhauser, *LW* Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962, 45, 360.

scholarly books and give learned papers. But the WELS pastor from Podunk can do legitimate Hebrew exegesis, or at least read with discernment the study of others. That's a great gift.

We need to be as familiar with the Bible, in Charles Spurgeon's words, "as the housewife with her needle, the merchant with his ledger, the mariner with his ship.[20] Knowing the text better in its original languages will help us all.

Constructing a historical skeleton

With such a long-standing tradition of studying the text in the original, we might feel like Ben Maverick, who challenged a rival gun-slinger: "While you were learning to be a professional gunman, I was back East learning Latin. Now if you'd like to stand toe-to-toe and conjugate verbs, I'm your man ."[21] But might we focus too exclusively on the text alone, to the neglect of its larger context? To put it another way, do we concentrate so hard on the tree that we can't see how it fits into the forest?

Our homiletics textbook offers good advice:

> Scan the whole book. Find your text in the setting of an isagogical outline. Consider the period of salvation history during which the book was written. Examine the more immediate context. Consider how the text relates to the whole of Scripture.... Do not immediately think of a verse or verses in your text as proof passages lest you overlook the significance of those verses in their context.[22]

But that's easier said than done. The arrangement of our English Bibles doesn't always help. Unlike American history textbooks, Scripture isn't divided into neatly ordered, easily recalled historical eras. Biblical authors didn't always tell events in chronological (or even logical) order. The Hebrew prophets are arranged out of sequence, hundreds of pages away from the historical account of the times they lived in.

Beside that, Scripture takes more of an episodic (vignette) approach to history. The inspired writer may recount key events in great detail, then dismiss decades or centuries without comment. Though we don't endorse most of his critical assumptions, William Dever's observations on Scripture are on target:

> Because of the radical theological nature of even the descriptive, historical portions of the Bible, the writers were highly selective about what they included. They simply do not tell us many things that we 'moderns' wish to know.... The Bible is concerned with political history, not social or economic history, much less individual history (except for biographies of certain great men'). Nowhere in the Bible do we have more than a passing hint about what most people looked like, what they wore or ate, what their houses and furniture were like, what went on in the streets and plazas of the average town, how agriculture and trade were conducted, how people wrote and kept records, how they went about their daily chores and entertained themselves, how they lived and

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[20] Cited by John R.W. Stott, "Paralyzed Speakers and Hearers", *Christianity Today,* XXV:5, March 13, 1981, p. 44

[21] *Maverick*; quoted by Jack Mingo and John Javna, *Primetime Proverbs: The Book of TV Quotes,* New York: Harmony Books, 1989, 108.

[22] Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel: A textbook for homiletics,* Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982, p. 18

> what they died of or how they were buried. These are precisely the details that archaeology can supply.[23]

Constructing a mental skeleton of Old Testament history, then fleshing it out with further historical details, has been (for me, at least) a continuing challenge. Yet "no one has had better opportunity to read the Old Testament in the light of the history of the ancient world than our own."[24] The reward is a better grasp of the world in which our Lord intervened in justice and mercy.

Western readers will always wrestle with the ethical dilemmas in Abram's compliance to his wife's suggestion, "Go sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her" (Genesis 16:2). But Sarai's proposal becomes more understandable when we learn that contracts found in the Nuzi tablets specified that a wife must provide a female slave for her husband if she proved childless; husbands routinely inserted such stipulations into marriage contracts to guard against being left without an heir.[25] Alfred Edersheim's description of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6) helps us appreciate the role the Savior God designed for His covenant people:

> Just as the priest is the intermediary between God and man, so Israel was to be the intermediary of the knowledge and salvation of God to all nations. And this their priesthood was to be the foundation of their royalty.[26]

John Bright's summary of the governmental structure during the Judges period explains in part the chaos of those centuries.

> Israel had no statehood, no central government, no capital city, no administrative machinery. The various tribes enjoyed complete independence of central authority. Tribal society was patriarchal in organization, and without the stratification of the clans, by virtue of their position, adjudicated disputes in accordance with traditional procedure and were looked up to for the wisdom of their counsel, anything resembling organized government was lacking.[27]

Archaeological findings illustrate the change that came about during Solomon's reign. Israel came to be inhabited "not only farmers and stockbreeders in villages but . . also by craftsmen, merchants and functionaries serving, in the army or in government administration and living in royal fortified cities." Lifestyles improved for some, as evidenced by luxury items, higher quality ceramics, and a population boom in newly developing cities.[28] The prosperity and political resurgence during the 41 year reign of Jeroboam II had its downside: the "notable men" of Samaria lived lazy, self-indulgent lives while small landholding farmers were being

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[23] William G. Dever, "Archaeology and the Bible: Understanding Their Special Relationship," *Biblical Archaeology Review* XVI:3, May/June 1990, p. 53.
[24] John C. Jeske, review of *Old Testament History* by Charles F. Pfeiffer, *WLQ* 71:4, October 1974, p. 310.
[25] Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, New York: Shocken Books, 1966, p. 128.
[26] Alfred Edersheim, *Old Testament Bible History*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1972, p. 109.
[27] John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969, p. 143.
[28] Andre Lemaire, "The United Monarchy", in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel: A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1988, p. 108.

dispossessed by the upper classes. They were plenty religious, but "religion was divorced from justice, piety from kindness, sacrifice from mercy."[29]

Twentieth century readers can understand the anxiety Assyria aroused in the ancient Near East (and the loathing with which Jonah approached his missionary assignment to Nineveh) after hearing Joseph Blenkinsopp's review of the archaeological data of Israel's 8th century enemy:

> The Assyrian success was built on a highly organized standing army which, unlike the forces put into the fields by the smaller powers, did not have to return home at intervals to sow and bring in the crops. The Assyrians are not noted for their contributions to literature and the arts... They have left behind texts remarkable for their linguistic difficulty and intellectual poverty. . In warfare, however, they were technologically far ahead of anything seen previously, and especially in the art of siege warfare. They were also the first we know of to use atrocities against civilian populations as a deliberate instrument of policy and, in the event of rebellion, mass deportation.[30]

Can you feel the horror of ancient warfare as you hear Sennacherib's famous account of the siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.?

> As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered them by means of well-stamped earth-ramps, and battering-rams brought thus near to the walls combined with the attack by foot soldiers, using mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out of them 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered them booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate.... I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute and the katru-presents due to me as his overlord which I imposed later upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually.[31]

Getting a firmer grip on the Old Testament skeleton means a preacher can put more bite into the historical parts of sermons. My knowledge of Israelite history used to be so hazy that I resorted to non-descript, catch-all phrases like, "These were bad times for Israel." (Having utterly bored my listeners, I could hardly be surprised to find that they didn't want to know any more about that history than I was able to tell them.) By contrast, doesn't the following description, though longer, do the job better?

> By Jeremiah's time, the once glorious kingdom of David and Solomon was all but gone. The north was gone for good; the south was reduced to a pipsqueak little power clinging to the hillsides around the capital city, sandwiched between the two

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[29] Stephen Winward, *A Guide to the Prophets* Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968, p. 36-37.
[30] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983, p. 82.
[31] J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 288. Cited in J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986, p. 361.

super-powers of the day, Babylon to the north, Egypt to the south, struggling to decide which side to side with. All this would have been tragic enough even it if were only a political thing, but this was more than that. Israel's existence was meant to be different; she'd been designed to be a light to the nations, a reflection of its God to its neighbors, a magnet to attract the countries next door to Him. Yet from the beginning Israel had insisted on being, not different from her neighbors, but as much like them as possible. She wanted a king like the other nations—all the pomp and circumstance, the military buildup, the "Charles and Di" stuff which even today even Americans find intoxicating, the false security of military men and might. Archaeologists have confirmed what the Old Testament records: Israel often eagerly worshiped the same sleazy fertility cults of the nations around them: temple prostitutes, bizarre black magic, even sacrificing their own babies - coincidentally, in the same valley, Ben Hinnom. This is the Judah Jeremiah found in 600 BC. Its kings were weak, or corrupt, or both; its judges took bribes, its priests got drunk before they did their duties in the temple; its prophets tailored their message to whatever the people with the big bucks wanted to hear; rich exploited poor; businessmen cheated customers; and every guy in the cul-de-sac was sleeping with his neighbors wife, or wanted to.

In other words, instead of being different than their neighbors, they'd become just like them.[32]

Henry Eggold considers mastering the text so vital that he recommends that a preacher devote 70 percent of his time to studying the text, with the remaining 30 percent divided equally between writing the sermon and preparing to preach it.[33]

A text without a context is a pretext

Jesse Jackson (among others) said that,[34] though I don't think he'd want that maxim applied to his own preaching. But he's right. We're all familiar with the kind of Old Testament "preaching" in which the preacher selects a single verse (or only a part of it), disconnects it completely from its historical context, then uses it as little more than a slogan for his sermon, never letting it get in the way of what he wanted to say anyhow.

Preaching like that has been around a long time, and specimens of it aren't limited to old copies of *The Concordia Pulpit*. A recent example appeared in The Christian News. The Rev. William Bischoff of Trinity Lutheran Church, Bridgeton, Missouri, preaching at a Lutheran Vanguard meeting in Chicago, used as his text Isaiah 8:20 -- To the law and to the testimony. If they speak not according to his word, it is because there is no light in them. In his sermon, the Rev. Bischoff denounced contemporary attacks on Christianity, recalled Col. Robert Ingersoll, berated "the suave, affable, personable, scholarly men who hold high positions in the church and claim to be the friends of Jesus Christ" but who are really deadly practitioners of "new methods of evangelism and church growth,"[35] invoked Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul and the apostle John as allies to his cause, reviewed Missouri Synod history (1839, *LEHRE UND*

[32] Sermon on Jeremaiah 18:1-11 for the opening service of Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, August 30, 1992.
[33] Henry J. Eggold, *Preaching is Dialogue* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, p. 64.
[34] Source unknown.
[35] This will be the only occurrence in this paper of the word "church" and the word "growth" in the same sentence.

WEHRE, the 1940s, 50s and 60s), quoted the Psalms, 2 Corinthians, James Russell Lowell and C.F.W. Walther.[36]

But he never preached the text. He never came close.

As one old Scottish preacher, after reading the morning's Scripture, said, "This is a difficult text; having looked it in the face, we will pass on."[37]

It may contain no false doctrine. It may be eloquent, enthusiastic, effective. But such preaching ultimately causes frustration and cynicism in the pew. Frustration because we urge people over and over to read the Bible, but then, when they read a section of it such as Isaiah 8, there's no way they'll find all that stuff in there. "I don't get it," they'll say. "I read the Bible for 30 minutes, and can't I talk about it for ten seconds. The preacher reads it for ten seconds, and then he can talk about it for half an hour." And that leads to cynicism. "Pastor had a good sermon today, but it didn't seem to have much to do with his sermon text. When you're a pastor, I guess you can say whatever you want." As Haddon Robinson observed, "The common practice of using a single verse or fragment of a verse as a 'text' can be blamed for leading many preachers away from the intended meaning of the biblical writer."[38]

God didn't choose to reveal all the upcoming good news about His Son in one swoop. God's revelation "is progressive. . . . As time passed on, God's revelation supplied ever further details, unfolded and clarified earlier revelation, never to correct or to contradict what was said before."[39] Preaching a sermon in its scriptural context means the preacher must place himself on the same horizon of salvation history the biblical writer was on. It's illegitimate to preach on a text from the life of Abraham as though Abraham knew everything we know and could see how everything would come out.

We however live on our own horizon of salvation history. We belong to a later generation of believers on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (I Corinthians 10:11). After we've proclaimed the text in its original setting, we need to explain how the Holy Spirit has brought the words of the Old Testament writers to fulfillment and completion in Christ. We have our Lord's own word on that: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:58). "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). Luther's comments are helpful:

> Although the people in the Old Testament neither knew nor understood what the Messiah would proclaim - for instance, they knew nothing of Baptism, of the Lord's Supper, of the Office of the Keys or of absolution—they nevertheless believed in the Christ who was to come; and they expected that the Messiah would come and teach them everything. They took hold of Him in faith even though they did not yet see Him. Similarly, we take hold of eternal life by faith today, although we do not really understand what it is.[40]

Preaching in the Vulgate

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[36] William Bischoff, "Remain Faithful to God's Word", *The Christian News* 32:36 October 3, 1994, p. 7.
[37] Charles L. Wallis, ed., *A Treasury of Sermon Illustrations* New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950, p. 29.
[38] Haddon W. Robinson, *"Homiletics and Hermaneutics"*, in Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds., *Hermaneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, p. 806.
[39] Carl Lawrenz, "Genesis II and Contemporary Interpretation", *WLQ* 66:2 April 1969, p. 91.
[40] Comments on John 3: 4,5; tr. by Martin H. Bertram, *LW* St. Louis: Concordia, 1957, 22, 285.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, in what may be the only theological observation he ever made with which we can agree, chided the preacher who "proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites."[41] Much as we may become fascinated with the B.C. world from which these texts arise, we preach in a world vastly different from that of the ancients, a world that's changing rapidly in bewildering, frightening ways.

The challenge is to speak *non nova sed nove*, not fresh things but in a fresh way.[42] -- "to keep sermons in the street. The sermon should always be in the vulgate—the language of the people."[43] I appreciate the reflections of a friend and classmate on preaching for today's listeners:

> In the past, the model for a good sermon was considered to be classical oratory: flowery language, elaborate, lots of big words, formal, somewhat impersonal, complex and restrained, half-read from a manuscript.
>
> May I suggest that the kind of preaching needed for the nineties and beyond is somewhat different: personal, intense, eye-to-eye, well researched and yet down-to-earth, poured out from the heart, with the smell of spontaneity, clearly outlined, simple, logical, with real applications to real life, talking and thinking out loud with your friends rather than orating at an audience, using all the storyteller's arts, even humor, radiating the joy of being a member of the royal family of Jesus Christ.[44]

In other words, talking about real things, for real people, by a real preacher.

When Billy Graham stands before his listeners, he assumes "that certain things are true in their lives. Certain psychological factors exist in every audience." He listed five: 1. "Life's needs are not totally met by social improvements or material affluence." 2. "There is an essential emptiness in every life without Christ." 3. "Among my hearers there are lonely people." 4. "I am always speaking to people who have a sense of guilt." 5. "There is a universal fear of death."[45]

Harold Ruopp surveyed more than four thousand church attenders to find out what concerns they brought to worship. Almost half, 48.7%, were concerned with "problems of the individual and his inner self": feelings of futility, disharmony, frustration, insecurity, fear, anxiety, loss of a sense of significance, life decisions about education, job and marriage. About one-fifth (21.2%) involved problems with family relationships; one-sixth (16.7%) were concerned with a person's relation to larger groups in society; one-seventh (13.4%) faced problems of the individual in relation to God and the universe.[46] Such findings support the conviction that we need to relate the good news to the perceived needs of our listeners.

Preaching connects with real people it comes in simple, direct language. Early in 1961, John F Kennedy told speech writer Theodore Sorenson to study Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to

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[41] Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What is the Matter with Preaching?" *Harper's Magzazine* 157:2 July 1928, p. 135.
[42] William Barclay, cited in *Context* VI:10 June 1, 1975, p. 4.
[43] "Preaching in the Vulgate—an Interview with Calvin Miller", *Leadership* IV:3 Spring 1983, p. 14.
[44] Mark A. Jeske, "Worship in the WELS—Changing Practices", presented to the Southeast Wisconsin District Convention, Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, June 12, 1990, p. 8.
[45] Billy Graham, "Anatomy of a Great Sermon" *Ministries Today* September/October 1989, p. 52-53.
[46] Quoted in Batsell Baxter, *The Heart of the Yale Lectures* New York: Macmillan Co., 1950, p. 282ff. In Eggold, *Preaching*, p. 56-57.

find its "secret." Sorenson concluded that Lincoln "never used two or three words where one would do.[47] The uncluttered strength of Kennedy's inaugural address ("Ask not what your country can do for you . . .") is a welcome contrast to the typically tangled syntax of government writing, in which bureaucrat-types drone on about, "megapolicy choices between freeze-feasible baselines," and "revenue enhancement," and "tax-base erosion control."[48]

"Why do some people fall asleep during the sermon?" asked Don Deffner. It could be "God-talk," no longer relevant, or it could be the preacher wasn't addressing the specific needs of his listeners. But it could also be "because the preacher is the same every Sunday—a generic preacher."[49] Why is concrete better than generic?

> An account of specific events is much less predictable than generalized observations. The sociologist may, for example, write some important descriptions of class differences, well documented with statistical findings, but the biographer or novelist can take the same fundamental problems and weave all the observations into an unpredictable story. That is why we "get more out of' illustrations than we do from abstract statements, and why a picture, which is in many respects the most concrete kind of illustration, is sometimes 'Worth ten thousand words."[50]

Dwight Moody's preaching worked because people were "trapped by his utter conviction" and moved by his use of anecdotes from his personal experience.[51] Billy Sunday's words smacked "of the street corners, the shop, the athletic field, the crowd of men."[52] "When Christ preached," Luther observed, "he proceeded quickly to a parable and spoke about sheep, shepherds, wolves, vineyards, fig trees, seeds, fields, plowing."[53]

Real people aren't gigantic bundles of brain cells. They've got hearts too. What do you consider the primary purpose of your preaching? Is it to educate, to inform? "I'd like my people to understand this portion of God's truth better"? Or is your primary purpose to motivate, to strengthen? Blaise Pascal, in his *Pensees*, said, "God prefers rather to incline the will than the intellect."[54]

Important as it is to love to preach to people, it's more important to love the people we preach to.

> Every sermon you preach, every prayer you pray, every visit you make and class you conduct must announce: "Lord, I love you and I love these people!" But -honestly now - listen to some preachers grind out their doctrines, and don't you sometimes

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[47] Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Kennedys: An American Drama* New York: Warner Books, 1984, p. 322.
[48] Bill Moyers, speaking at the graduation exercises of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas in Austin, quoted in *Time*, June 17, 1985.
[49] Donald L. Deffner, "The Plague of Generic Preaching," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 55:1 January 1991, p. 24.
[50] Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission* New York: Harper and Row, 1960. Cited by Lyman Coleman and Richard Peace, *1 Corinthians: A Pastor Directed Study Course for Small Groups* Littleton, CO: Serendipity House, 1986, p. 52.
[51] Myron Jean Fogde, *The Church Goes West* McGrath Publishing Company, 1977, p. 132-133.
[52] William T. Ellis, *"Billy" Sunday: the Man and his Message* Philadelphia: John C. Winston Co., 1914, p. 70.
[53] Table talk, #1650, between June 12 and July 12, 1532, ed. and tr. by Theodore G. Tappert, *LW* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967, 54, 160.
[54] Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, No. 580; quoted in *Christianity Today*, 33:2 February 3, 1989, p. 31.

> wonder whether they've ever been in love, or ever had their heart broken, or ever lost a friend?[55]

Preaching will probably always be a one-way affair - pulpit to pew - but a preacher will touch his congregation more deeply when he employs a dialogical style. Consider: what makes one a good conversationalist? He looks people in the eye. Don't just gaze in a generally pew-ward direction. Don't scan an imaginary script posted on the back wall of the sanctuary. Look at particular faces, look into people's eyes. A good conversationalist longs to be understood and is eager to understand others. Anticipate the unspoken reactions of your hearers ("Please don't get me wrong," or "Does that seem fair to you?" or "Am I making sense?"). A good conversationalist talks with people, not at them. Speak in the second person. Ask questions. Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis make a good case for inductive rather than deductive style in preaching. While deductive sermons state the main point at the beginning ("Here's my conclusion, folks, and during the sermon I'll prove I'm right"), an inductive preacher "explores with the people before he explains what they find"; he "seeks to lead rather than push." Inductive preaching "can disarm, interest and involve" listeners.[56]

> Let the preacher who wants to preach interestingly give his sermons a personality check. Do they speak warmly and winsomely of the Savior's amazing grace? . . . What a poor commentary on the Savior's loving invitation I supply if my pulpit manner and message are too professional, perhaps even matter-of-fact and impersonal.... Arturo Toscanini used to interrupt rehearsals of the New York Philharmonic and cry in broken English: "Give something! Put some blood in it!" Interesting preaching is warm with blood. The loving involvement of the preacher with those who hear his message will be readily apparent to, and will be warmly received by, a grateful congregation.[57]

We two are one in the cause

Preaching is an art, not a science. There'll never be only one good way of doing it, or one style alone to suit every sort of hearer. The power of preaching lies in the content of the message, not the form. Preachers are vulnerable to frustration and disappointment. But we have our Lord's word on it: Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17), and this word is at work in (those] who believe (11 Thessalonians 2:13).

> I did not invent this Word of God and this office. It is God's Word, God's work, his office. There we two [i.e., God and 1] are one in the cause. ... It is our confidence, no matter how much the world may boast, that God has qualified us to be ministers, and, secondly, that it is not only pleasing to the heart of God but also that we shall not preach in vain and that this ministry will lift to heaven some few who receive the Word.[58]

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[55] John C. Jeske, "Communicate the Gospel More Effectively", *WLQ*, 79:1 Winter 1982, p. 17.
[56] Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983, p. 31-32.
[57] John C. Jeske, "The Formal Aspect of Preaching", *WLQ* 71:2 April 1974, p. 89.
[58] Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, 1531; II Cor. 3:4-7", ed. and tr. by John W. Doberstein, *LW*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, 51, 223.