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Preaching The Gospel With The Great Preacher: Ten Convictions After 40 Years Of Trying To Do It Well

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For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for “Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed?

And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard?

And how shall they hear without a preacher?

And how shall they preach unless they are sent?

Just as it is written,

“How lovely are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!”

(Romans 10:11-15 NASB¹)

The Great Preacher—Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, risen, reigning and coming Lord—has in His great mercy and grace, given me the privilege and joy of preaching His Gospel with Him for over 40 years now.

I preached my first “official” sermon in July of 1970, while serving as a seminary intern at Community Presbyterian Church in Ventura, California (where I

was then ordained in 1974). It was an overly ambitious and clumsy attempt to exposit the Apostle Paul’s opening salvo in his letter to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ ...” (1:3). I gave it the title, “Jesus and the Age of Aquarius,” thinking it would be a clever connection with the then hit pop song, “This is the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius,” by The Fifth Dimension. I meant well!

Since then the Master has invited me to preach Him with Him in 118 different cities in 15 different countries of the world. Probably the highlight for me was during a trip to the Middle East, when I preached what has become my life’s text (Matthew 11:25-30, Jesus’ invitation to wear His easy yoke) for the Baptist Church of Beirut, Lebanon, and for the Baptist Church in Nazareth, Galilee. Imagine—getting to preach in the very city where the Great Preacher began His preaching ministry! As I looked at the faces of the congregation, I kept wondering which most resembled the face of the Savior. It was a profoundly moving morning.

I tell you of my varied experience not to boast, but to set the table for what I want to give you (feed you?) in this issue of *Theology Matters*. In most of the places and

pulpits where I have preached (especially during the years I served as a professor at Regent College) I had no personal relationship with those who heard me. Which means I did not have one of the key factors in preaching that a stated pastor of a congregation has: relational dynamics on which to rest. You know what I mean: times when we preach throwing ourselves on the good will of people we know and love, who know and love us, who can “read between the lines” if we are having an “off day.” In most of the contexts where I have preached the only person I had any kind of relationship with was the one who invited me to speak, and sometimes the only contact with that one person up to the day of preaching was via email or phone. Which means that I have been forced to throw myself on the Preacher, on His Word and His Spirit. That was all I had to count on. And I can tell you that every time, He has come through for me and for the people hearing me. Every time. Every. He has preached His life-giving, life-transforming Gospel every single time. Someone was changed in some way every time.

In the following pages, I want to develop (in some cases too briefly) ten convictions about preaching that The Great Preacher has built into me over the past four decades. Along the way I will raise and speak to various “crises” in preaching today. If how I develop the convictions feels more “oral” than “literary,” well ... how else does one speak after so many years of trying to do oral communication well?²

Conviction One:

The preaching of the Word of God is a primary means by which the Living God accomplishes His purposes in and for the world.

I want to say, the preaching of the Word is *the primary way* God brings blessing and transformation, but will rein in my enthusiasm.

The world was created by the Word of God. The world is redeemed by the Word of God. And the preaching of the Word of God is a primary means the Word Himself uses to bless and transform.³

Is this not the major theme of the book of Acts? We tend to think of Luke’s work as the story of the emergence of the Church. And to a degree this is the case. But on a more careful reading we see that Luke’s work is a celebration of the spread of the Word, which gives birth to the Church. “And the Word of God kept on spreading” (6:7); “But the Word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied” (12:24; 4:29-31; 13:49; 19:20). Acts

ends not with the celebration of the emergence of a Church, but with Paul under arrest but still preaching: “preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ” (28:31).⁴ It would seem then that church-growth is the result of Word-growth; the Church grows by the preaching of the Word. Primarily by the preaching of the Word, I will boldly claim. No preaching of the Word, no growing of the Church.

This first conviction is most powerfully exemplified for me in Luke’s first work, his Gospel. Jesus sent out 70 disciples, in teams of two, telling them to say to the people in every city where they went, “The Kingdom of God has come near to you” (10:9). The 70 did what He told them to do; they preached the advent of the redeeming Rule of God. And what happened as they preached? People were healed. And, what startled the disciples the most was what they later report to Jesus, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name” (10:17). Jesus said to them—it is startling to say the least— “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightening” (10:18). Talk about transforming the world! And what strikes me about this example is that those who were preaching did not see what Jesus was seeing. Things are happening when preachers preach that preachers are not aware of. It takes “Jesus-eyes” to see the full impact of the preaching of Jesus’ Gospel. Preaching changes things, in the visible and the invisible realms of life, 1st century and 21st century. Oh Lord, let us see what You are doing through preaching in our cities today! Please.

Now, in making this bold claim about the consequences of preaching the Word of God, I am not suggesting that preaching always involves what many of us have experienced: a designated, ecclesiastically authorized person, standing at a lectern or pulpit, delivering a prepared “message” for 25-30 minutes, while the “audience” listens without any direct interaction. Preaching can take place in many different ways.

So how for instance do we communicate with those living on Twitter? (Can you even imagine what new forms of communication are going to be developed in the years to come?). The preacher for the day (I am thinking still in terms of a Lord’s Day worship service) introduces the text for the day; why we are going to consider it, its fundamental message to us, etc. The preacher reads the text, and then poses questions for the listeners to interact around: i.e. what is your first reaction to what you have just heard? What leaps out at you? If you could ask the author one question what, at this moment, would it be? What help do you need to hear this text? The preacher then gives a 20-25 minute exposition of the text. During the exposition, listeners can tweet their comments and questions to a cell number identified on the screen behind

the preacher, the cell phone being held by someone other than the preacher. At the end of the exposition, the person with the cell quickly scans all the tweets, and says to the preacher, “I think there are two major questions to which you ought to speak.” And the preacher then takes 5 to 10 minutes to give a thoughtful response. Then he or she wraps up the sermon by briefly returning to the main point of the message. A move that will require Holy Spirit wisdom! An alternative to this is for the preacher, after the exposition part of the sermon, to either suggest further questions for the people to grapple with, or actually take questions from the floor. A risky move, to be sure. But one that engenders the kind of interaction many folks in our culture presently desire.

What the first conviction is maintaining is that preaching, in one way or another, is one of the chief ways God brings about transformation in the world. God will always be employing the exposition of the Word.⁵

Conviction Two:

The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.

It is a major conviction at the heart of the Protestant Reformation led by Martin Luther: “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.”

As we know, the Reformed tradition speaks of the “Word” in three senses. 1. Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He Himself is the Living Word. 2. The Scriptures, the Word written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They faithfully witness to the Living Word. 3. The preached Word. By the grace of God, by the work of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God comes through the preaching of the Word of God. I like what my friend Gordon Smith⁶ says after reading the text before preaching the sermon: “Thus far, God’s Word.” The implication being that what follows is also God’s Word. What dignity is granted the one who dares to preach! What a vocation!

I want to further nuance this second conviction. **The preaching of the Word of God is the preaching of the Word of God.** That is, preaching the Word is always about the Word. Or, preaching the Word always points to the Word. That is, all preaching of the Word of God ends up pointing to Jesus. In one way or another. No matter what text we preach, we end up with Jesus.

On the first Easter, in the afternoon, Jesus is walking with two downcast disciples, who had not yet realized what had happened in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that after having said, “Was it not necessary for the Messiah to

suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:26), Jesus then, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures”(24:27). Somehow every text is about Him. Every text somehow points to Him. Thus all preaching of texts somehow points to Him.

A preacher who has formed this conviction in me is John the Baptist. Listen to him preach, and we hear and see how radically Christo-centric he is. “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the LORD’” (John 1:23). John consistently pointed to Him.

I have on my study wall a small reprint of the painting by Mathias Grunewald. (It is also on the wall on the main floor of the Barbour Library at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and on the wall of the second floor of Regent College in Vancouver). And, famously, a large reproduction hung on the wall of Karl Barth’s study, right in front of his desk, for all 50 years of his ministry. In the painting people in desperation and longing are gathered around Jesus being crucified. John the Baptist is off the side, holding an open Bible in his left hand. With his withered, bony right hand he is pointing to Jesus hanging on a cross, blood flowing from his side. John is saying that the texts of the Bible are all pointing to the Crucified. In a lecture in 1920, Karl Barth says, “We think of John the Baptist in Grunewald’s painting of the crucifixion, with his strangely pointing hand. It is the hand which is in evidence in the Bible.”⁷ “Shall we dare turn our eyes in the direction of the pointing hand of Grunewald’s John?” asks Barth. “We know whither it points. It points to Christ. But to Christ crucified, we must immediately add. That is your direction, says the hand.”⁸



Do we believe with John the Baptist that it all points to Jesus? Herein lies one of the crises of preaching today: the crisis of confidence in the Word. You know what I mean. We all have those times when we painfully, agonizingly, ask ourselves, “Is Jesus of Nazareth the ‘one word in which we are to trust’⁹”? Can I really believe this in our time? Can I really say this with integrity in our massively pluralistic societies? Is Jesus who John and the rest of the New Testament says He is? Can I trust the New Testament (and First Testament)

witness to Him? Will He speak for Himself as I name His name in the present arena of conflicting claims about truth?"

All preachers sooner or later have to grapple with what is called "the scandal of particularity," the seemingly audacious claim that Jesus is the Creator of all things come into the world as one of us. Who is at once the final and perfect revelation of the Living God ("They who see Me see My Father" [John 14:9]) and the perfect revelation of what it means to be human. Who by His death on the cross has done everything that needs to be done for us imperfect humans to have an intimate, life-giving relationship with the Living God. Who has defeated the powers of death and evil. Who now reigns as Sovereign above all sovereigns. Who is soon to come and bring about a whole new creation. Can we really take our stand on this "scandal"? Can we get up before our contemporaries, and say with the apostle Peter, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among humans, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12)?

Words like "no other" and "no one else" quickly ruffle feathers in our time. They are not politically correct. They offend our inclusive, egalitarian sensibilities. I have often had people say, "What do you mean, only Jesus? How can you, a mere human being, in one little corner of the globe, say that there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved? What about Buddha and Mohammad and the Dali Lama? What about Eckanakar and Scientology?"

I have to often remind myself that pluralism and thus "the scandal of particularity" is not new to our time. The fact is, the scandalous Gospel emerges in the context of pluralism! Mark tells us that Jesus was walking through the villages of Caesarea Philippi (8:27). As they travel, Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples give a number of answers; we can give even more. Then Jesus asks, "And who do you say that I am?" Peter, responding for the whole group, says, "You are the Messiah."

Caesarea Philippi was an amazingly pluralistic setting. A kind of religious "Mount Rushmore," as a number of scholars have put it. It was established as a place of worship of Baal, the fertility god. (I like to refer to Baal as "the god of the way things are," versus Yahweh "the God of the ways things were supposed to be and one day will be." Baal-worshippers base their ethics on "this is the way I am," Yahweh-worshippers on "this is the way we were supposed to be and one day will be"). The area was first called Balinas in honor of Baal. When the Greeks moved in they changed the name to Panias, in honor of the god Pan, "The All." When the Romans

moved in they changed the name to Caesarea Philippi in honor of Caesar, who by that time was beginning to be worshipped as divine. And in that place, of all places, Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" Disciples of Jesus have faced the challenge of pluralism from the beginning.

What helps me as I prepare to preach "the scandal" is to be clear about what "the scandal" is not saying. First, when we say, "there is no other name," we are not saying, "there is no truth in other names." In preaching salvation in no one else, Peter was not thereby canceling out all the claims of the Judaism in which he was raised. All truth is God's truth, and points to Jesus Christ, no matter where it is found. As Paul said in the city of Lystra, "God did not leave Himself without witnesses" in any part of the world (Acts. 14:17). Every culture, and every religion (or, most religions) expresses something of God's truth, or it would not win human hearts. Second, when we say, "there is no other name," we are not saying that the disciples of Jesus Christ cannot learn from other names. We Christians in the West, and especially in North America, can learn a great deal from other people of the world. The intensity with which some Hindus seek union with the divine makes me feel very lazy in my pursuit of God. The discipline of some Muslims makes me feel like a hypocrite. I am often shamed by the peace I sense in the Buddhist monks of the city where I live. We who name the name of Jesus have much to learn from other faiths and world-views. Dialogue can actually enlarge our view of Jesus: we see Him through other glasses than those shaped by our traditions and cultures. Third, when we say, "there is no other name," we are not saying that Christianity is the one true religion. Peter was not making any claim for a religion. He was making a claim about a Person. Christianity does not save; Jesus saves. Indeed, sadly so, much of what is called "Christianity" have not even begun to grasp the message of Jesus, and the world-transforming consequences of His death, resurrection, and subsequent exaltation. A Person is "the scandal." A beautiful scandal. A life-giving scandal.

As I have grappled with all of this over the years, I keep coming back to a simple answer to "Why no other name?" A two-fold answer. No one said the things Jesus of Nazareth said. And no one did the things Jesus of Nazareth did. Objective fact.

No one said the things Jesus said. You have no doubt had people say to you, "Look, all the great religious figures are basically saying the same thing." But that simply does not fit the facts. And on this one could write a very big book!

For instance, no one spoke or speaks with the authority with which Jesus speaks. That is what struck the crowds who heard Jesus preach His Sermon on the Mount. Matthew tells us that, “When Jesus finished, the crowds were amazed because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (7:29). “Other teachers spoke by authority ... Jesus spoke with authority.”¹⁰ Jesus simply says, “Amen, Amen, I say to you.” As one scholar has put it, “Search Jewish literature and you will look in vain for a man who prefaces his words with, ‘Amen, I say to you’.”¹¹ No appeal to any higher authority. Jesus even dared to set His words over against the words of religious authorities who came before Him. Six times in the Sermon on the Mount He says, “You have heard it was said, but I say unto you.” After he hears Jesus speak this way, Rabbi Jacob Neusner wants to ask Jesus, “Who do you think you are—God?”¹²

This note of authority is sounded in other ways. Some men bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus seeking healing. Jesus says to the man, “Your sins are forgiven.” What? The teachers of the Law ask themselves, “Why does this fellow speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). Mark tells us that Jesus spoke to demonic powers which had a hold on people. No weird incantations. No waving of magic wands. Just a word: “be gone!” And the powers obeyed! And the people who witnessed the event ask each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey Him” (Mark 1:25-27). Mark tells us of that evening when the disciples were caught in a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee. Waves were breaking over the sides of the boat. Jesus was on board, fast asleep on a cushion in the stern. The disciples wake Him up: “Master, we are perishing!” Jesus stands up, and speaks to the environmental forces. “Be still!” No appeal to a Higher Power. No prayer. Just His own word, “Hush!” The winds die down, the sea becomes perfectly calm, and the disciples ask, “Who is this that even winds and waves obey Him?” (Mark 4:41). Who indeed?

No one else made Himself the issue of His preaching and teaching the way Jesus of Nazareth did. While others said things like, “follow the Law,” or “follow the way of love,” or “follow the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment,” or “obey the karma,” Jesus said, and says, “follow Me,” “attach yourself to Me,” “drink of Me,” “eat of Me,” “abide in Me,” “be yoked to Me.” Moses never made Himself the issue of Judaism. Mohammad never made Himself the issue of Islam. Buddha never made himself the issue of Buddhism. In fact, Buddha told his disciples that he could do nothing for them; they had to find their own way to enlightenment. Jewish Rabbi Solomon B. Frehoff once observed that no Muslim ever sings,

“Mohammed, lover of my soul,” nor does any Jew sing to Moses, “I need Thee every hour.”¹³ Disciples of Jesus—especially preachers—sing both.

No one else made the kinds of claims about Himself that Jesus made and makes. One could conclude He is wrong. But one has to admit no one ever said what Jesus says about Himself. “I Am the Bread of Life. I am that-without-which-you-cannot-live. You need Me more than you need your next meal,” as Earl Palmer likes to paraphrase it. “If you are thirsty, come to Me and drink, and out of your inner most being will flow rivers of living water.” “I Am the Light of the world; follow Me and you will not walk in darkness.” “I Am the Resurrection and the Life; whoever believes in Me will live even if they die.” On it goes. John tells us that a police officer sent to arrest Jesus, returns to the Temple without Him, excusing his disobeying of orders saying, “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks” (John 7:46). No one—except Yahweh the God of the Hebrews—made the kinds of claims about Himself that Jesus makes about Himself.

Heighten the scandal. Other teachers and prophets claimed to be sent *from* God. Jesus claims to be sent *out of* God. The Greek preposition is not just *para*, *alongside*; but *ek*, *out of the center of*. Others claimed to be representing God; Jesus claims that in Him we are actually meeting God.

No one said the things Jesus said. No one. C.S. Lewis makes the point best. “If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, ‘Are you the Son of Brahma?’ he would have said, ‘My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.’ If you had gone to Socrates and asked, ‘Are you Zeus?’ he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, ‘Are you Allah?’ he would have first rent his clothes and then cut off your head. If you had asked Confucius, ‘Are you Heaven?’ I think he would have probably replied, ‘Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste.’”¹⁴ But get this. In October of 32 A.D., when the religious authorities went to Jesus of Nazareth during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, and asked Him, “Whom do You make Yourself out to be?” Jesus answered, “Unless you believe that I AM, you shall die in your sins” (John 8:24); “When you lift up the Son of Man [Jesus’ favorite self-designation] then you will know that I AM” (8:28); “Before Abraham was, I AM” (8:58). And John tells us that the authorities took up stones to throw at Jesus. They concluded He was wrong about what He was claiming about Himself. But they could not deny that no one else ever spoke the way Jesus spoke. It is a fact of history: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified because He spoke of Himself in ways no one ever dared to speak.

“No other name” because no one said the things Jesus said. And because no one did the things Jesus did.

I am not here thinking of His miracles, the likes of which others have done, especially in His name. I am here thinking of the kind of salvation Jesus said He was accomplishing. What Jesus claimed to be doing in “coming down” and “going to the cross,” no one else ever remotely claimed to do.

Every religious and philosophical system acknowledges that we humans are caught in some sort of bondage. Right? Something is “off.” Terribly “off.” Something keeps us from being what deep down inside us we feel we were meant to be. Right? Some say we are in bondage because of a lack of education; others because we have not yet mastered some special techniques; others because we need to transcend our creature-liness. Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, understands our bondage in very different terms. In a way no one else understands it. He sees us as hostages, held by the powers of sin, evil and death. He sees us as prisoners, held by an all-pervading infection, under an all-pervading spell, resulting in death. And He says that, try as we might, we cannot free ourselves from this bondage. Other would-be saviors think we can free ourselves, and offer us “steps to liberation.” Jesus says there are no steps. So He comes to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He comes to get rid of the infection, to break the spell, and overcome the reign of death.

No one did the things Jesus did.

And the surprising thing—the “scandal of scandals”—is that He looked to the cross, to the weakness and foolishness of the cross, as the means by which He would deal with the forces that held us captive. He went to the cross to engage the powers. At the cross, Jesus entered into hand-to-hand combat with the powers that threaten to destroy us.

No one did the things Jesus did.

For three days it appeared that the powers, especially death, had beat Him. It appeared that the darkness of death had snuffed out the One Who claimed to be the Light. But appearance is not always reality! On Sunday morning, the women went to the tomb to anoint His body, His dead body. And to their utter surprise, the tomb was open, and the body was gone. Not stolen, but transformed. Not resuscitated, but resurrected. Taken through death into a whole new order of existence. Death had not won!

No one did the things Jesus did. Lesslie Newbigin puts it so powerfully: “I know of no place in the public history

of the world where the dark mystery of human life is illumined, and the dark power of all that denies human well-being is met and measured and mastered, but in those events that happened under Pontius Pilate.”¹⁵

That is finally why “there is salvation in no other name.” No other name even comes close to claiming to do what Jesus was claiming to do. So Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten, working at the forefront of pluralism, can write: “If salvation is the experience of ‘illumination,’ then perhaps Buddha ‘saves.’ If salvation is ‘the experience of union with the cosmic All,’ then perhaps Hinduism ‘saves.’ If salvation consists in ‘being faithful to one’s ancestors,’ then perhaps Shintoism ‘saves.’ If salvation is ‘being freed from the oppression of the bourgeoisie,’ then perhaps Marxism ‘saves.’ If salvation is ‘material well-being,’ then perhaps Capitalism ‘saves.’ If salvation means ‘feeling good,’ then perhaps there is salvation not only outside of Christ but outside of religion in general. But if salvation is ‘liberation from the powers of sin and death,’ then only Jesus saves.”¹⁶

No one said the things the Great Preacher said. And no one did the things the Great Preacher did. Oh blessed “scandal of particularity”! May we be given grace to proclaim it graciously. And courage to take the flak.

The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God, pointing to the Word of God. Always pointing to the Word-made-flesh for us and for our salvation. Always pointing to Jesus. To whom else should we point?¹⁷

Conviction Three:

The preaching of the Word of God participates in the preaching of the Word of God by the Word of God.

This is the most liberating conviction I have come to thus far in ministry. And I learned it from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, in the text cited at the beginning of this essay, Romans 10:11-15.

Notice that Paul has changed a text. “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things” (10:15). He is quoting Isaiah 52:7, and he has changed the text. Isaiah refers to a single individual: “How beautiful are the feet of Him...” referring to the Servant of the Lord, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. How beautiful His feet indeed! But Paul changes the text, from the singular to the plural, from “Him” to “those,” referring to us who the Servant of the Lord calls to preach. If you know Paul’s reverence and respect for Scripture, you know that he does not easily alter texts,

especially such central texts like Isaiah 52. Why then the change? Why the shift from the singular to the plural?

Not just because now the baton has been passed to us. Not because now that Jesus has finished His earthly preaching He calls us to carry on the work. Paul changes the pronoun because he realizes that the Servant continues His preaching and is inviting us to join Him in His preaching. “How beautiful are the feet of those...” because they are participating in the preaching of “Him” whose feet are exquisitely beautiful. Paul is declaring the great mystery of the preaching moment: preachers are participating in the preaching of Another!

Which means we preachers never stand up in a pulpit anywhere alone. When we preach we stand up in the pulpit with the Great Preacher. He makes what happens in the preaching moment happen. Things we can never make happen. He simply calls us to partner with Him. “How beautiful are the feet of Him ... and those ... who bring glad tiding of good things.”

Many of the folks in the congregation where I now have the privilege of preaching are starting to understand this. And they are coming to the Lord’s Day worship saying, “I am really looking forward to what Jesus is going to preach today!”

The next time you preach may you be keenly and wonderfully aware that you are not preaching alone; you are participating in the Word of God preaching the Word of God. And He knows what He is doing, blessed be His name.

Conviction Four:

Preaching is hard work.

This is important to emphasize after conviction three. Even though we are participating in the work of Another, it is still hard work.

For one thing, preaching involves the whole self. Head. Heart. Eyes and ears; both literally and metaphorically. Diaphragm. Lungs. Stomach. Hands. Feet. Spirit. Soul. Which is why we are often so tired afterwards. We have employed every dimension of our humanity in the work. The full self: thinking, feeling, breathing, intuiting.

Preaching is hard work because it involves the full range of human skill. Devotion. Prayer. Research. Exegesis. Hermeneutics. Rhetoric. Writing. Prayer—again and again.

Preaching is hard work because of the many obstacles encountered, both in the moment and in preparation for the moment. Distracted hearts and minds. Overloaded hearts and minds, bombarded by all kinds of visual and audio media. Fear. Philosophical pre-suppositions. Spiritual powers that do not want the Word spoken or heard (they do not want to “fall like lightning”). And the inadequacy of language, of human words. All of it making for very hard work.

Which is why conviction three is so crucial to grasp: we are not alone in the hard work. The Word Himself is at work, and thanks be to His name, He is able to overcome any and every obstacle. “How lovely are the feet of Him” who does not get weary, who defeats any person, power, or ideology raised against Him; whose Word outperforms any other word.

Conviction Five:

The word “deliver” is exactly the right word to use for preaching.

For two reasons.

First, we are “delivering” a message of Another, from Another. We are not speaking our own message. We are ambassadors of Another. We are not passing on what we have thought up or dreamed up or imagined. We are simply the “delivery woman,” the “delivery man.” Which, if we are faithful to this fact, gives us great freedom; especially when the Word is a hard word to speak and hear; we say to ourselves and to our listeners, “I am only saying what I have been told to say. Don’t shoot the messenger!”

Second, “deliver” is the right word because of the dynamics of the preaching moment. The word comes from the realm of child-birth; a woman “delivers” a child. The process involves conception, gestation, birth pangs, delivery, and post-partum blues. Is that not how it works? Conception—we are drawn to a text, we get a great idea about how to preach it. Gestation—the text and idea begin to work on us, and often we, like a pregnant mother, say, “what possessed me to do this?” Birth-pangs—mostly on Saturdays. Then the actual delivery—hopefully at the appointed hour! And then post-partum blues—when we have given our all and feel we can never do it again. I do not like Sunday afternoons. Neither does my family. Sorry about that. And I do not like Monday mornings. So be it. It all comes with the call.

Conviction Six:

The Church must set its preachers free to be engaged in all that faithful preaching of the Word demands.

If I may be so bold, one of the reasons we are not witnessing the kind of transformation the Great Preacher can work through preaching is that preachers are too bogged down in other responsibilities the Great Preacher has not given them. People speak of “the crisis of the pulpit.” I suggest that the crisis is “the crisis of the view of the pastor.” The church has laid on the preacher demands and tasks preachers are not to have and for which they are not gifted and equipped. Most preachers are not hard-wired to also be effective CEOs. At least, not this preacher.

Two texts of Scripture can help the church function more faithfully in this regard; one from the Old Testament, one from the New. Both having influenced the shape of our church’s polity. I am going to take some time with each because, from my perspective, the church is not taking them seriously enough right now. And the consequences are tragic.

The Old Testament story—Exodus 18:13-23—the conversation between Moses and his father-in-law Jethro.

The key word of the text is the last word of the text—the word *peace*. “If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all the people will go to their homes in peace.” The Hebrew word is *Shalom*. Next to the Name of God itself (Yahweh), this is the most significant word in the Old Testament. *Shalom*. It means more than the absence of war and strife. It means well-being, soundness, wholeness. “All the people will go to their homes in *Shalom*.” Oh, how I covet that for the people I serve... and for me.

The conversation between Moses and Jethro can be divided into three sections: The Problem (13-18), the Prescription (19-22), and the Promise (23). I have gone to preaching, haven’t I?

The Problem. It is due to the grace and mercy of God. Through Moses, the Living God had liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. Something Yahweh, the Holy One delights to do! The problem was, now what? Having been freed, now what? It is the problem people all over the globe are facing today: after the revolution, now what? How do we move forward now? How do we live together now? I witnessed the problem firsthand while living in the Philippines, going through the so-called “People-Power” revolution of 1986. Once

the dictator had been ousted. . . now what?

Put yourself in Moses’ shoes. You are out there in the desert trying to lead a million plus people to the Promised Land. Moses was called to pastor a million plus people! Many scholars have trouble with the Exodus numbers. I used to, until I spent time in Asia. During three days of the Philippine revolution, I spent time out on the streets. On the third day there were over three million people on a small stretch of freeway. Three million! On the first anniversary of the revolution, President Cory Aquino and Cardinal Sin of the Roman Catholic Church held a thanksgiving worship service. They invited me to offer prayer before the Mass. There were one-and-a-half million people tightly packed on an open field near where it all started. One-and-a-half million! So I have no trouble with the Exodus arithmetic. I can easily envision Moses leading a million plus people across the desert.

Again, put yourself in his shoes. Where is he to get the food to feed all the people? Where is he to find adequate shelter for them? What about toilet facilities and medical care? And what about their emotional and spiritual well-being? Along the way, the people need guidance and comfort; they need support to keep on going through the wilderness. And who is this Yahweh, anyway? What does He plan to do with us? What is His will for our lives? How are we supposed to relate to Him?

The people, naturally, wanted someone to talk with, someone who knew this liberating God, someone who would listen to their fears and doubts, someone who would guide them through the decisions they had to make, someone who would help them move into the new life for which they had been liberated.

So, from morning until evening, people would go to Moses to “inquire of God” (18:15). And from early in the morning until late at night, Moses would teach the will of God and guide each one who came to him along the path of faith.

Can you picture the scene? Long lines of people standing outside Moses’ tent, waiting, for hours, maybe the whole day, in order to have time with the man who knew Yahweh. I can imagine some folks standing in line all day and not getting to see Moses. I can also imagine a low-grade irritability, a low-grade discontent emerging in the community. And rightfully so, because the people’s personal needs were not being met.

It describes many growing congregations in our time. Sadly, in most, the discontent has given way to settling for less than the best, settling for a form of religion but

not experiencing the power of it (2 Timothy 3:5).

So Jethro goes to Moses, his son-in-law, and puts his finger on the cause of the trouble. “What you are doing is not good”(18:17). Not good? Look how much good he is doing, how many people he is serving. Why not good? “You will surely wear yourself out, both you and the people with you” (18:18). “You cannot do it alone.” Bingo! Jethro has identified one of the chief reasons the church in North America is not as strong as it needs to be. “The Ministry” is something only professional ministers do. People wait in line to get to the professionals because, it is thought, it is the professionals who really know God and God’s will for life. Thus we have the ridiculous situation where church members have to schedule appointments to see their pastors two or three or four weeks down the road. Is that what the Lord Jesus had in mind when He called us to be His church?

The problem out in the Sinai desert is our problem: our concept of ministry. Moses is “The minister,” the *real* minister. And if you want real ministry, you must get close to Moses.

It is very important to notice that Jethro has a two-fold concern. He is concerned for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of Moses. And he is concerned for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the people. They are not going to have their needs met. And some could get so discouraged they might stop following Yahweh.

So what are we to do? I suppose one way to handle it is to set up strict office hours, and simply not be available any other time. Is that any way to run a church? Another way is for the pastors who are responsible for preaching regularly, to be gone all week and show up on Sundays. Is that any way to be the church? Another, of course, is to just keep hiring more and more staff: more professional teachers, more professional counselors, more professional prayers. Or, we could follow the plan laid out in God’s blueprints. As they say, “When all else fails, consult the Owner’s Manual.”

The Prescription. Jethro’s concern was two-fold, so his advice is two-fold. First, he tells Moses that he must, for the sake of the people, stick to his God-given priorities. Jethro says to Moses: “Now listen to me. You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do” (18:19-20).

You know how I respond to Jethro’s advice? “All good and well, Jethro, I agree. If the leaders forsake their primary roles, the church dies. But Jethro, what about

all the other needs? What about the need for personal discipling and mentoring? What about the need to be listened to and supported and touched?”

So Jethro goes on “And you should also look for able folks among all the people, who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set them over the people as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves” (18:21-22). Jethro’s prescription is to decentralize. We could paraphrase it this way: (a) break the larger congregation into smaller units. And (b) spread the ministry throughout these smaller units. If the congregation as a whole wants to ensure that each individual is being cared for and nurtured in faith, then it must look at itself differently. There must be a paradigm shift. A congregation must see itself as made up of smaller units, shepherded by gifted lay leaders. People are to find, in those smaller units, most of the help they think they can only get from Moses.

Now the key to Jethro’s prescription lies in the selection process. Moses needs to find the appropriately qualified persons. Jethro highlights three essential qualifications; people, who fear God, are trustworthy, who hate dishonest gain. People who fear God. That does not mean being afraid. It means having reverence for God, being humble before God. It means fearing disobeying God more than fearing offending people. It means being more concerned for what God thinks than for what others think. People who are trustworthy, who can be counted on to fulfill their promises. People who want to know the truth; who want to do the truth; who believe there is truth to be known! People who are grounded in God’s revealed truth and can, therefore, easily spot falsehood. People who hate dishonest gain. People who cannot be bought off, who will stay loyal to the vision, who will not compromise to get ahead. Unless the leadership of the smaller units is of that caliber, the plan Jethro lays out will not work.

The Promise. Jethro says to Moses. “If you do this thing, then you will be able to endure, and all those people will go to their homes in peace.” Shalom. Well-being. Soundness. Wholeness. The long lines will be gone—for Moses and for the people.

I want to be whole. And I want everyone I serve to be whole. I desperately want to see each person in our church healed of emotional scars, experiencing the joy and freedom of forgiveness, knowing and obeying God’s good will, fully, more deeply in love with the Master. I want them to know Shalom. And that is the promise: “If you do this thing, you will endure. And all the people

will go to their homes in peace.”

The New Testament story—Acts 6:1-7. Use the same approach on this text as we did with the Exodus text: problem, prescription, promise.

Again, I am taking time on these texts in which the role and quality of preaching is at stake.

The Problem. It is due to the power of the Gospel! The problem was due to the effective preaching of the Gospel; the Gospel was having its way. Luke says, “The disciples were increasing in numbers” (6:1). The church began on the Day of Pentecost with 120 people (Acts 1:15). But by the end of the day, the Holy Spirit had converted and added to the church 3,000 new believers (Acts 2:41). A few days later, the membership grew to 5,000 (Acts 4:4). And Luke was likely only counting the men. So the actual number of people in the infant church, by the time the problem arose, was 5,000 to 20,000.

Again, the problem the infant church encountered was due to the Gospel. The Gospel was doing its thing, winning the people to Jesus Christ, increasing the numbers of the people needing nurture and instruction. In all the excitement, a complaint arose. The word Luke uses literally means “complaint expressed in grumbling.” Grumbling. It is the same word used in the book of Exodus to describe what Moses regularly faced as he sought to lead the people of Israel across the desert to the Promised Land. Know anything about grumbling in the congregation?

The grumbling had to do with one of the ministries the infant church had immediately established; distributing meals to widows. As the Old Testament made clear, caring for widows (and orphans) is a top priority on the agenda of the Living God, so much so that God speaks of Himself as “defender of the widow” (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18). The early Church, in response to the Spirit of God, was making sure that the physical needs of widows were being taken care of. At its inception, this ministry was under the direct supervision of the apostles (Acts 4:23).

Now, on the surface, the grumbling was about an (apparent) inequality in the distribution of food, Luke says, “a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food”(Acts 6:1). The oversight was not deliberate. As John Stott has observed, “More probably the cause was poor administration or supervision” on the part of the apostles.¹⁸

What do we know about these two groups, the Hellenists

and the Hebrews? The Hebrews were Jews who, knowing some Greek (for everyone in that day had to speak it in order to get by), nevertheless, primarily spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. But there is more to it. By the term “Hebrews,” Luke is referring to Palestinian Jews, descendants of the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. They were fierce nationalists, passionately observing every nuance of Palestinian Judaism. By the term “Hellenists,” Luke is referring to Jews who did not grow up in Jerusalem, but in the cities of the so-called Dispersion, growing up in a thoroughly Greek world. Thus the Hellenists were always held in suspicion by the Hebrews. Biblical scholars suggest that we render the terms “Hebraic Jews” and “Grecian Jews.” Both Jewish to the core, but living out their “Jewish-ness” in different cultural ways. Which is why I said earlier that “on the surface” the problem had to do with the distribution of food. The fact is, the grumbling had to do with the clashing of cultures, the apparent inequality of food distribution being only one symptom of the deeper tension.

The wonderful thing about the problem is that those two diverse groups of people were being brought together! The Gospel was doing its thing, both groups being drawn together into the new community centered in Jesus. The problem was that both groups were still living out of their “un-Gospel-ized” prejudices.

So, the apostles find themselves in the middle of all of this. And thus the crisis Luke is addressing in Acts 6. Needing to organize the food distribution effort, and trying to settle all the inter-cultural conflicts, was threatening to occupy all of the apostles’ time and energy, diverting them from the primary ministry to which the Risen Lord had called them, the ministry of the Word, the ministry of teaching and preaching and praying. That, for Luke, was the critical crisis: leaders too busy to pray, too other-wise preoccupied to teach and preach.

So the apostles gather the whole community together, and lay the facts before them. They say, “It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables” (Acts 6:12). They knew that without the ministry of Word and Prayer the Church would not continue to grow, it would not mature. People might be fed bread, but they would not be fed the Bread of Life. The apostles believed the word Jesus spoke: “We do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Without the Word, prayerfully preached and taught, the Church dies. Empty sanctuaries on our streets bear painful witness.

The fact is most pastors today spend most of their time in

administration, committee meetings, responding to emails, fund raising, public relations, putting out conflict-fires. Whatever time is left over is used to hurriedly prepare to preach and teach. And if there is any time left pastors might pray. A recent survey found that the average time spent by pastors in prayer was five minutes a day.

That is the real crisis in Luke's mind: those called to and trained for the ministry of Word and Prayer side-tracked by other ministries, valid ministries, but side-tracked nevertheless. John Calvin comments on the Acts 6 story: "The ministry of the Word is so demanding that it occupies a person entirely, and does not allow him [or her] to be free for other occupations."¹⁹

Consider then the prescription. "Therefore friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and serving the Word" (Acts 6:2-4).

Now here we must listen to the apostles carefully, to the text. They do not say that one ministry is of greater value than the other. Luke uses the same word—*diakonia*—for both the ministry of Table-waiting and the ministry of Word and Prayer. That is, both are ministries of *service*. It is just that the same person cannot be devoted to both. The apostles do not see themselves confronted with a choice between good and bad, between greater and lesser. They are having to choose between good and good, greatest and greatest. Both ministries are important, necessary, and of significant value. Both are worthy of any disciple's time and energy. Those who feel that waiting on tables is beneath them should not be entrusted with the ministry of Word and Prayer. It is simply that doing either well, with compassion and excellence worthy of the name of Jesus Christ, precludes doing the other. To say "yes" to one automatically means saying "no" to the other. Expecting the apostles to be involved in social service—a most worthy call—diverts time, energy, mental space, from prayer and study. Just as expecting those involved in social service to preach—a most worthy call—diverts time and energy from their ministries.

It took much courage for the apostles to say to the congregation, "It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables." They were opening themselves up to painful criticism. Some might say, "Oh, you are just too lazy." Others might say, "You are trying to get us to do your work." Others, "You preach the Kingdom but will not live it." Or worst of all, "You do not really care; for all your preaching of Jesus, you do not really care." (I have heard them all). But they risked the criticism. For they knew that if the Church is

to grow and move forward, those gifted to teach and preach must be set free to prayerfully exercise those gifts to the max. And those gifted to serve tables must be raised up and set free to exercise that Jesus-like ministry to the max.

Spend just a little more time in this story; it is crucial for ensuring that the ministry of preaching can actually happen for a congregation.

The prescription to the problem is three-fold. One, affirm the validity of both types of ministries; both types of servants are rightly called "ministers." Two, ask the Church to select appropriately gifted people to handle ministry to widows. Third, ask the Church to commission such people for that ministry.

Notice, that as in the Jethro-Moses story, a key factor in the prescription is giving attention to the spiritual character of those chosen for the ministry of tables. "Select from among you seven of good standing, full of the Spirit, full of wisdom." "Of good standing" is literally, "of good witness" (*marturomenous*, from *martus*, witness, and later, martyr). Select folks who bear a clear witness that they belong to and are following after Jesus Christ. "Full of the Spirit." Select folks who are open to, receptive to, wanting to be filled with the very life of God. "Full of wisdom." Select folks who are humble enough to seek the mind of Christ, who realizing they do not know it all ask for wisdom from above. Put such people in charge and watch Christ's ministry flourish! (Not pay attention to spiritual character and ... well, we have seen where that leads.)

I shudder when I hear someone say, "The Church ought to..." because more often than not what is meant is, "The Preacher ought to..." I usually agree with what follows the "The Church ought to..." But I cringe because I feel the expectation that one of the pastoral staff is suppose to do the "ought." I think the Acts 6 story says that whoever says, "The Church ought to..." is the one who ought to! It was the Hellenists who grumbled, and it was to the Hellenists that the new ministry was given! All seven set aside for that work were Hellenists.

The promise. Luke says the seven were brought before the apostles, "who prayed and laid hands on them. And the Word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly" (Acts 6:6-7). That is finally about: the life-giving Word spreading into all the world. Luke is telling us that when the gifts are freed to function without diversion, the Gospel spreads, giving birth to more and more disciples of the Savior of the world.

How long is it going to take for the Church to understand this fact of ministry? Preachers must be set free to do all the demanding work that preaching involves.

John Stott (who passed on to glory July 27, 2011, and who in my mind is the most faithful expositor in church history), argues in his magisterial work on the book of Acts, that the evil-one tried to destroy the emerging church using three tactics.²⁰ The first was through persecution from the religious establishment. It did not work, for it only scattered disciples throughout the Empire, who then “scattered” the Word (think parable of the sower), giving birth to more churches. The second was through deception, trying to get the church to play games with the truth, as people like Ananias and Sapphira were doing. It did not work either, for God exposed the lie and the liar. The third was through distraction, trying to divert the Apostles from prayer and the Word. It almost worked. Thank God for the wisdom of those who saw the real crisis. And who set the preachers free to do what they have to do in order to preach faithfully.

Eugene Peterson has put the matter so typically well. He imagines what the Church is saying when we ordain persons to the ministry of the Word and Prayer. We may not be saying the actual words, but it is what we want to be saying.

The definition that pastors start out with, given to us in our ordination, is that pastoral work is a ministry of Word and sacrament.

Word. But in the wreckage, all words sound like “mere words.” Sacrament. But in the wreckage, what difference can water, a piece of bread, a sip of wine make?

Yet century after century, Christians continue to take certain persons into their communities, set them apart, and say, “You are our shepherd. Lead us to Christlikeness.”

Yes, their actions often speak different expectations, but in the deeper regions of the soul, the unspoken desire is for more than someone doing a religious job. If the unspoken were uttered, it would sound like this:

“We want you to be responsible for saying and acting among us what we believe about God and kingdom and gospel. We believe that the Holy Spirit is among us and within us. We believe that God’s Spirit continues to hover over the chaos of the world’s evil and our sin, shaping a new creation and creatures. We believe that God is not a spectator, in turn amused and alarmed at the wreckage of world

history, but a participant.

“We believe that the invisible is more important than the visible at any single moment and in any single event that we choose to examine. We believe that everything, especially everything that looks like wreckage, is material that God is using to make a praising life.

“We believe all this, but we don’t see it. We see, like Ezekiel, dismembered skeletons whitened under a pitiless Babylonian sun. We see lots of bones that once were laughing and dancing children, adults who once aired their doubts and sang their praises in church—and sinned. We don’t see the dancers or the lovers or the singers—or at best catch only fleeting glimpses of them. What we see are bones. Dry bones. We see sin and judgment on the sin. That is what it looks like. It looked that way to Ezekiel; it looks that way to anyone with eyes to see and brain to think; and it looks that way to us.

“But we believe something else. We believe in the coming together of these bones into connected, sinewed, muscled human beings who speak and sing and laugh and work and believe and bless their God. We believe it happened the way Ezekiel preached it, and we believe it still happens. We believe it happened in Israel and that it happens in church. We believe we are a part of the happening as we sing our praises, listen believingly to God’s Word, receive the new life of Christ in the sacraments. We believe the most significant thing that happens or can happen is that we are no longer dismembered but are remembered into the resurrection body of Christ.

“We need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. We don’t trust ourselves; our emotions seduce us into infidelities. We know we are launched on a difficult and dangerous act of faith, and there are strong influences intent on diluting or destroying it. We want you to give us help. Be our pastor, a minister of Word and sacrament in the middle of this world’s life...this isn’t the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks. This is yours: Word and sacrament.

“One more thing: We are going to ordain you to this ministry, and we want your vow that you will stick to it. This is not a temporary job assignment but a way of life that we need lived out in our community. We know you are launched on the same difficult belief venture in the same dangerous world as we are. We know your emotions are as fickle as ours, and your mind is as tricky as ours. That is why we are going to

ordain you and why we are going to exact a vow from you. We know there will be days and months, maybe even years, when we won't feel like believing anything and won't want to hear it from you. And we know there will be days and weeks and maybe even years when you won't feel like saying it. It doesn't matter. Do it. You are ordained to this ministry, vowed to it.

"There may be times when we come to you as a committee or delegation and demand that you tell us something else than what we are telling you now. Promise right now that you won't give in to what we demand of you. You are not the minister of our changing desires, or our time-conditioned understanding of our needs, or our secularized hopes for something better. With these vows of ordination we are lashing you fast to the mast of Word and sacrament so you will be unable to respond to the siren voices.

"There are many other things to be done in this wrecked world, and we are going to be doing at least some of them, but if we don't know the foundational realities with which we are dealing—God, kingdom, gospel—we are going to end up living futile, fantasy lives. Your task is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation."²¹

What if the Church were to annually re-new the agreement between congregation and preachers? We could read Peterson's text, and like the Hellenists and Hebrews in Acts 6, re-commit to a Biblical vision of ministry. And like the early church we would witness the spreading of the Word of God. And like them witness the transformation only the Word can effect.

Conviction Seven:

The preaching of the Word takes place in many different modes.

There is no "one way" to preach. Review the New Testament story of preaching and we see there are many different *verbs* preaching.²²

Sometimes the text calls the preacher to evangelize, to simply announce good news. Sometimes the text calls the preacher to "herald," to simply declare, "Hear ye, Hear ye." I love those times! Sometimes the text calls the preacher to teach, to simply outline the truth of the Gospel as it is unfolded in the particular portion of Scripture of the day. Other times the text calls the

preacher to exhort, to call for action; to, in the words of the old saying, comfort those who are disturbed and to disturb those who are too comfortable. When exhorting, one needs always be careful to ground any exhortation in the prior action of God; to make sure any "good advice" is grounded in "good news;" without "good news" it is not even possible to do "good advice." Other times the text calls the preacher to witness, to simply say what we ourselves know to be true at this particular time in history in light of the text of the day. Other times the text calls the preacher to speak apocalyptically, to "pull back the curtain," and simply let people see the dimensions of reality all around us of which we are ordinarily not aware. It is my favorite kind of preaching. I think it automatically takes places in every other kind of preaching. Different preaching moments happen in different preaching modes. The mode is a function of the text. What a privilege, over a span of years, to operate in all these different modes.

Conviction Eight:

Preaching that participates in the preaching of the Word of God by the Word of God, is rooted in, emerges from, and returns to a text, a Spirit-breathed Biblical text.

More boldly, as I see it, the only preaching that participates in the preaching of the Word of God by the Word of God is preaching that is text-rooted and text-driven.

Preachers take our stand on and in a text. Where else are we going to stand? On our own insights and imagination? On our own "Christianized" insights and imagination? Where has that gotten the Church? Our responsibility is to say what the text before us says. Nothing less and nothing more. To say what the text says in the language, imagery, thought-forms of the people to whom we speak, so that they hear for themselves what the text says.

This both constrains us and liberates us. It constrains us to what the Great Preacher, through the Holy Spirit, is saying in the text. It liberates us because we do not have to "have it altogether" in order to say what the text says. The text is the authority in the moment, not the preacher. Or, to be more consistent with the other convictions, The Preacher of the text—Who is preached in every text²³—is the authority in the moment, not we preachers preaching with Him. We are constrained and liberated to say what the text says even if we do not yet fully understand it (1 Corinthians 13:12). And even if we do not yet fully believe it! Who truly believes; that is, who fully trusts everything the Biblical text is preaching? We simply do our best to say what is being said in the text.

Two people have most shaped me as a preacher: James Daane and Daniel Fuller, both of whom were on the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary when I was preparing for ministry. James Daane, fiercely Reformed, pushed us hard to take our stand on the text. And Daniel Fuller, fiercely Biblical, pushed us hard to get to the fundamental affirmation of the text. Nearly every Saturday afternoon, or evening, for over 40 years now, the two of them are, so to speak, sitting on my shoulders. Dan Fuller asking me, “Do you have the message of the text?” James Daane asking me, “Are you trusting the text? Or are you trusting your own cleverness or personality?” Both mentors keep driving me deep into the text. To the text! To the text!

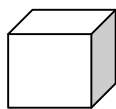
Conviction Nine:

Preaching that participates in the preaching of the Word Himself, has the transforming power it does because of what the Word Himself designed texts to do.

The Spirit-breathed texts of the Bible bring us into Another Reality. The texts give us what Walter Brueggeman calls “an alternative reading of reality.”²⁴ But more than “a reading” of that Other Reality, the text, by the power of the Spirit, actually takes us into the Reality Itself. This is the wonder of preaching texts.

Any given text of Scripture is describing something of Reality as it is in relationship with the Living God. Would you agree? No one text describes the whole of Reality as it is in relationship with the Creator and Redeemer. That would not be possible. Any given text—Old Testament, New Testament, Psalm, Prophet, Gospel, Epistle—is describing a particular dimension of the Larger Alternative Reality.

Think of it this way. Any given text is describing a room, a space, within the whole of Reality.



Not hard to imagine, is it? Is this not what a good novel does? Opens up for us another room to explore. Such that we can speak of “getting lost in a book.” Is this not what a good movie does? Takes us into another place for a while. So any given text inspired by the Spirit of the Great Preacher is opening up for us another room in God’s Big House, another space in God’s Big Space.

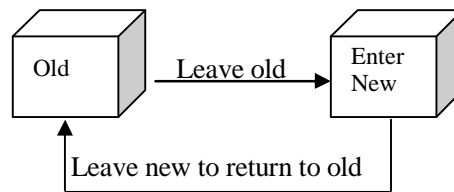
But more than “opening up.” Any given text is “inviting us into” its space. Any given text, by the work of the Spirit, “brings us into” the actual alternative reality it

is describing. It is thrilling to contemplate...and experience.

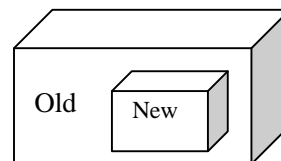
The task of preaching is to help people enter the room. To help people begin to make some sense of the room. To help people begin to navigate their way around the room. And ultimately, to help people *go on living in* the room.

This all suggests that a sermon is all about offering “a way in.” It is not so much that we “get a message out of the text,” as much as we help people “get into the text.” From this perspective, a sermon is implicitly answering questions people are implicitly asking as they approach the text and its room. Questions like: why would I want to look into this room? Why would I want to go into the room? What am I going to discover if I go in? And, what is going to happen to me if I go in?

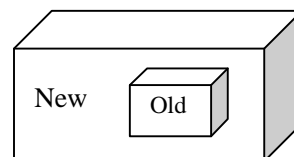
Now this is what I want to especially emphasize. The goal of preaching any text is to so help people enter the new space that they do not want to leave it! The goal is that people so experience the reality of the text that they do not want to go back to life as they knew it before the text and its “alternative reading of reality” got hold of them. Not as in the diagram: leave old reality, enter new reality for 25-30 minutes, and return to old reality. Which is what I think most people are doing: just “getting a little ‘pick-me-up’ to keep me going.”



Not even bringing the new reality into the old reality; “applying the text to my life,” meaning “my life” is the main thing, not the “new life.”



But having the old reality brought into and transformed by the new reality.



The old reality is taken up into the new; the old reality is transformed by the new. The new reality takes over the old; the new reality engulfs the old. So that any problem

folks bring to the text is now seen in a new light. Any challenge is now seen in a new light. Any relationship is now seen...and experienced...in a new light.

Someone has put it this way: the Bible is “a collection of words but words that have been breathed from Beyond and carry with them the weight and authority of that Breath. These are words with power to penetrate and interrupt lives and to alter people for Eternity.... The Bible is a gateway to another realm...a portal that seeks to transport people from this world to another and to point from this reality to a better Reality—a Reality that is the Way and Truth and Life. And when that portal has been opened the power of that world is loosed onto this one so that it begins to effect its influence within it.”²⁵

The task of preaching is to help people enter the space the text is describing, and help them then begin to understand the reality they have entered. The task of preaching is to help people explore and begin to live the alternative reality to which the text points and into which the text is inviting us. And in the process of exploring the alternative reality we are changed; for we slowly, but surely, begin to live the alternative reality. So much so we do not even want to go back to life as we knew it before we began to inhabit the text.

While living in the text and its new reality, at least five things happen. More precisely, The Preacher of the text makes five things happen.²⁶ They are: encounter, news, world-view, obedience of faith, and enablement. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, The Preacher engenders an encounter with Himself, with “the Jesus of the text.” In this encounter, The Preacher speaks news, His good news. This news causes a shift in world-view; we see things differently. This shift then calls for a new step of faith, a new expression of what the Apostle Paul calls “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:16:26). A step which The Preacher of the text Himself empowers. Even if we do not immediately realize it.²⁷ After all, we are not changed by our realization (a kind of “salvation by knowing”) but by the work of the Great Preacher.

Which suggests that we prepare to preach by living in the text until we have met the Jesus of the text, until we have heard His good news for ourselves, until we have had our world-view corrected, until we begin to take a new step of faith, until we are ourselves empowered to walk in newness of life.

Conviction Ten:

The person most transformed by the preaching of the Word is the preacher!

I do not think I would be the disciple of Jesus I am today (and I still have a long way to go!) had He not called me to the preaching ministry. Sadly, I do not think I would have had the discipline to pray over and carefully study the Bible had I not been for the necessity of doing the spiritual-formation work inherent to preaching.²⁸ Week after week after week, the Savior has met me, and with His “sharp two-edged sword” (Revelation 1:16) “judging the thoughts and intensions” of my heart (Hebrews 4:12), slowly, but surely, is cutting away all that is not of Him, moving me further and further into conformity with His nature and character (2 Corinthians 3:18).

I trust that as I continue to try to do the work of preaching well, my feet will approximate the beauty of The Great Preacher’s feet, and that my telling good tidings of good things will be as engaging as His. I pray the same for you.

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1. All Biblical references are to the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.
 2. This essay both builds and goes beyond what I have developed in my *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God’s Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009). In the appendix is a sermon on Jesus’ easy yoke. The book is also now in Korean, having been translated by Dr. Keun Sang Ryu of the Korean Theological Seminary in Seoul, South Korea.
 3. I know I am using the term Word in different senses, which I will clarify in the second conviction.
 4. Texts like these led Lesslie Newbigin to say that “the Gospel is a Name and a Fact.” The name—Jesus of Nazareth. The fact—in Him and because of Him the long-awaited Kingdom of God has come near.
 5. I realize that in using the term *exposition* I am already working with assumptions yet to be developed.
 6. I commend to you his *Listening to God in Times of Choice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), *Courage and Calling* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), and *Holy Meal: The Lord’s Supper in the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI. Baker, 2005).
 7. “Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957, 65).
 8. *Ibid*, 76.
 9. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, BC 8.11.
 10. A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971, 42).
 11. A.M. Hunter.
 12. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).
 13. Quoted by Robert Speer, *The Finality of Jesus Christ*.
 14. C.S. Lewis, “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 157.
 15. *Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Christ*.
 16. Carl F. Braaten, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Jesus Christ,” in *Mission Trends*, No. 5, 82-83.

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17. I am thrilled by the current flood of books on Jesus grappling with these issues. I commend to you the following: N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Robert M. Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); and the two volume project of Pope Benedict, Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (Doubleday Religion, 2007), and *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (Ignatius Press, 2011); James S. Dunn, *Did the Early Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (London: SPCK, 2010 [interacting with Hurtado and Bauckham]; John R. W. Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill. IVP, 2004).
18. John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and The World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990, 120).
19. John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 160. Even as great a Bible student as Calvin got the title of Luke's work wrong. Not "The Acts of the Apostles," but "The Acts of the Risen and Ascended Jesus through the Holy Spirit." But that is another matter!
20. John R.W. Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and The World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990, 124).
21. Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 143-145).
22. See my *Glory of Preaching*, 76ff for a fuller treatment of this conviction.
23. Again, is this not what He claims? See Luke 24:27; 24:44; John 5:39-47.
24. A major theme of his! See *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, Minn. Fortress Press, 2001) and many other books.
25. Jeremy Q. Martini. Quoted by Brad Jersak, *Can You Hear Me? Tuning Into the God Who Speaks* (Abbotsford, BC: Fresh Wind Press, 2003).
26. These I work with more fully in *The Glory of Preaching*, 59ff.
27. Jonathan Edwards: "The main benefit that is obtained by preaching is by impression made upon the mind in the time of it, and not by the effect that arises afterwards by a remembrance of what was delivered." Quoted by George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 282).
28. If you want to see and hear how all I have tried to develop has worked out in actual sermons, you can consult the following books of mine Regent College published (listed chronologically): *Experiencing the Trinity* (2002), 111 pages, 5 sermons exploring the mystery at the heart of the Gospel; *Discipleship On The Edge: An Expository Journey through The Book of Revelation* (2004), 412 pages, 30 sermons on that powerful book of the Bible; *Fifty-Seven Words That Change the World: A Journey Through the Lord's Prayer* (2005), 119 pages, 8 sermons praying the Prayer; *It Is Finished: Meditations on the Death of Jesus* (2008), 97 pages, 6 sermons answering the question, "What did Jesus do that I never have to even think about doing?"; *Who Is Jesus?* (2011), 147 pages, 9 sermons on The Most Important Question anyone can ever ask! More sermon series are in the publication process.

Rev. Darrell W. Johnson, PCUSA pastor, honorably retired, is the author of numerous books and articles including his major work, The Glory of Preaching, IVP, 2009. Johnson has taught for Fuller Theological Seminary in the Doctor of Ministry program, and served on the faculty of Regent College in Vancouver. He now preaches for a large evangelical church in Vancouver.

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