

“Kent Hughes and even more the Word of God that he has faithfully preached are worthy of this astonishing array of contributors. I rejoice that the ripple effect of one man’s allegiance to the Bible has pushed so many new waves of blessing out of their hearts and into these pages.”

—John Piper, pastor for preaching and vision,
Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

“That Kent Hughes can inspire contributions of such quality tells us something of the esteem in which he and his ministry are held. Here in these papers lasting treasure is to be found—in rare wisdom, fresh thinking, and occasional plain speaking. Highly recommended by one who has been uncommonly impressed and helped.”

—Dick Lucas, rector emeritus, St. Helen’s Church, Bishopsgate

“A book packed with preaching wisdom to honor one of this generation’s greatest expositors of Scripture. Kent Hughes is rightly honored, but God’s Word is ever-more highly honored in this special book.”

—Bryan Chapell, president, Covenant Seminary;
author of *Christ-centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*

“Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of Dr. R. Kent Hughes is not just a treasure trove for preachers; it provides what amounts to a refresher course in pastoral theology. Faithful ministers frequently pause to reflect, “What am I doing and why am I doing it and what does God want me to be doing and how does he want me to be doing it?” This book will prove a tremendously helpful conversation partner for this kind of all-important reflection and self-evaluation. I warmly commend it to all who are serious about doing biblical pastoral ministry today.”

—Ligon Duncan, senior minister,
First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi;
president, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals;
chairman, Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

PREACH THE WORD

Essays on Expository Preaching:
In Honor of R. Kent Hughes

Leland Ryken
and Todd Wilson, Editors

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Introduction

Todd A. Wilson

What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is that the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is that the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

For nearly four decades R. Kent Hughes has devoted himself to expository preaching. Believing that not just the world but also the church is on its passage out and not a voyage complete, he has made the pulpit its prow—and the priority of his ministry. This year marked not only Kent's sixty-fifth birthday, but also his retirement from the position of senior pastor of College Church in Wheaton, a post he held for over a quarter of a century. To mark this occasion and pay tribute to his life and legacy, we assembled this collection of essays written by Kent's friends and colleagues. Our primary goal has been to produce a volume of good essays on the subject of expository preaching and a book that Kent himself would enjoy reading, because it covers the topics that are dearest to his preaching heart.

Celebratory volumes like this are usually reserved for those in academic guilds and are seldom produced for pastors. However, we thought it entirely fitting to honor Kent in this way because of his substantial contribution to raising the standard of expository preaching in North America and beyond. His own distinguished pulpit ministry, his nu-

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merous expository commentaries and published writings, and his extensive training of other preachers have done much to strengthen pulpits across this country and around the world—and we believe the evangelical church is the better for it!

This project has brought together a diverse group of contributors. Not all are North American. Nearly half are from Australia and the United Kingdom. Nor are all pastors or preachers. In fact, we have essays from college and seminary professors, a university chaplain, a college president, and urban church planters. This attests to the scope of Kent's influence, his professional ties extending to several continents and a variety of ministry spheres. This diversity also attests to the fact that expository preaching is more than the fascination of a particular wing of North American evangelicalism or the interest solely of pastors and preachers. As this collection testifies, interest in expository preaching crosses national and vocational lines; indeed it is a concern for all who love the church and desire to see her flourish.

Our desire is that this volume serve as a useful resource for many. The privilege of expository preaching, its challenges and hermeneutical presuppositions, biblical and historical examples of such preaching, the priority of training the next generation—these are the leading themes addressed in the pages to follow. Students will find this an inspiring introduction to the great art and science of expository preaching. Those employed in the training of future pastors and preachers will find a good overview of the subject. Congregants will gain insight into some of the delights and difficulties attending pulpit ministry and thus be encouraged to pray more empathetically and strategically for their shepherds. And pastors and preachers will, we trust, find fresh encouragement in these essays and be challenged to make the pulpit the prow of their ministries!

Preach the Word: An Overview

Every editor anxiously wonders whether a collection of essays will in the end form a coherent book. To our delight this volume has come together not only in a way that provides good coverage of the subject at hand, but also with essays that reiterate many of the same themes, thus giving the volume an overall unity and coherence. We have grouped these sixteen essays under four broad headings. By way of introduction, I would like to offer you, our readers, a brief yet enticing preview of each of the sections in the hope of whetting your appetites.

Interpretive Principles and Practices

“What you believe about the Bible determines everything,” Kent Hughes was fond of saying to me as a College Church intern nearly a decade ago. He meant this not just in general terms, but specifically as it relates to preaching. If you believe the Bible to be the Word of God written, God’s words in human words, it should shape your entire approach to preaching. In other words, there are specific interpretive principles and practices that ought to flow naturally from one’s conviction about God’s Word. In this first section, our contributors invite us to reflect upon some of them: things such as listening carefully to the text of Scripture, approaching the study of a passage inductively, appreciating the historical dimensions of a biblical text, seeking to preach both Old and New Testaments as Christian Scripture, and being sensitive to the various genres of the Bible.

It should become clear as one reads these essays that if expository preaching is to be done well, certain habits of study need to be developed and certain pitfalls, both practical and theoretical, need to be avoided. However, as important as right interpretation and interpretive methodology are for preaching, the ultimate criterion of success is faithfulness. This section of essays thus concludes on the right note with pastor John MacArthur helping us to hear once more Paul’s charge to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Biblical and Historical Paradigms

Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is arguably the most oft-cited work of the twentieth century. It is also responsible for injecting into our everyday parlance the term “paradigm.” A paradigm is a model. Our second section of essays provides us with a few paradigms, a few models for modern-day preachers. The first is a biblical one, the model of the rugged and indefatigable apostle Paul. Both Bruce Winter and Duane Litfin explore aspects of Paul’s gospel proclamation and set him up, as it were, as a pastoral paradigm for twenty-first-century preachers. Then, drawing upon the rich legacy of history, Wallace Benn and J. I. Packer offer us a glimpse into the lives of the great Puritan pastor Richard Baxter and the towering Anglican divine Charles Simeon. Baxter provides us, as Benn demonstrates, with a model of how the preacher’s pastoral care for his flock can enhance, rather than detract

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from, his work in the pulpit. And Packer's reflections on Simeon's life paint for us not only an impressive picture of an exemplary preacher and homiletician, but a moving portrait of a life and ministry characterized by earnestness over the long haul.

Contemporary Challenges and Aims

Expository preaching has never been easy. Indeed, as Don Carson rightly points out, challenges have confronted the pulpit in every generation. That being said, as this third section of essays recognizes, there are some distinctive challenges in the twenty-first century: multiculturalism; rising biblical illiteracy; shifting epistemology; increasing social, cultural, and technological complexity; rapid change; and a dearth of models and mentoring.

These are some of the challenges. But if this is what preachers are up against, what should they be trying to accomplish? En route to an answer Phillip Jensen reminds us of the theological basis and rationale for preaching. In simplest terms, preaching is communicating God's Word in human words. Or to borrow from the apostle Peter, it is speaking the very "oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). Don Carson defines it with the single, felicitous phrase: "re-revelation." Hence, preaching is nothing less than God re-revealing himself through the exposition of his sacred Word. Quite an ennobling vision of what transpires in the pulpit! As to the aims, then, of preaching in the twenty-first century, Philip Ryken rightly points in a threefold direction: through the proclamation of the Word, expository preachers must seek the reformation of the church, the reconciliation of the world, and the glorification of God in Christ Jesus. Anything less is less than truly *biblical* preaching, that is, preaching with Scripture-informed aims and ends.

Training and Example

Who is responsible for training future preachers? When hearing this question, our thoughts tend to run toward the seminary. And not without good reason, since for over a century now, the seminary has been the primary conduit of formal ministerial training for pastors and preachers; and this situation is not likely to change anytime in the near future. So it is incumbent upon the church to think seriously about what seminary education ought to look like. To this end, Peter Jensen, dean of Moore College, Sydney, Australia, provides an incisive and sobering

analysis of the state of seminary education today, bedeviled as it is by increasing fragmentation, specialization, and generalization. However, his is not simply a song of lament. Rather, the burden of Jensen's essay is to challenge seminaries to prioritize the training of *preachers* amidst everything else they do. As Jensen contends, "It is the business of the whole faculty and the whole curriculum to produce preachers." Or to put it concretely, the sermon is the aim of the seminary.

Of course, seminaries are not the only ones who should produce preachers. The church is ultimately responsible to raise up her own shepherds. Thus in every generation the church must set itself anew to the task of raising up its own. But what might this look like in our day and age? Setting his proposal against the backdrop of the preacher-led Puritan movement in Tudor England, David Helm identifies several twenty-first-century strategies to help raise up not just a few but a whole generation of gospel preachers. This inspiring proposal is complemented by Jon Dennis's seasoned reflection upon Paul's charge to his pastoral understudy, Timothy: "Preach the Word!" (2 Tim. 4:2), which Dennis suggests provides us with a call and a model for training and deploying gospel ministers.

This entire collection of essays concludes, then, where it ought: with a warm, engaging and indeed fascinating sketch of Kent Hughes's life and ministry. Randall Gruendyke, longtime friend and former associate of Kent's at College Church, has done a great service in putting Kent's story down on paper. Such an exercise, however, serves more than the public record; it provides us with a *living example* of faithfulness to one's calling and faithfulness to one's Lord. We all need examples—preachers not least. May the reader see in this story an inspiring portrait of how the Pauline paradox of grace and discipline (1 Cor. 15:10) came to expression in the life of one godly and much-beloved pastor!

The Pulpit Leads the World

These are tumultuous and indeed unsettling times. As the rising tide of post-Christian secularism threatens to capsize the evangelical church and as many foul breezes rip across her deck, it is the pulpit that should be out in front, leading, navigating, warning of danger, signaling hope. Regrettably, however, it is the pulpit that is all too often relegated to the rear, pastors choosing instead to lead with all the rest. As a result, many churches are left adrift in a sea of moral and theological confusion, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Furthermore, as the pulpit recedes

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from the prow of many ministries, the church of Jesus Christ forfeits her divinely appointed means of bringing sinners to the Savior—and the world suffers.

This collection of essays on expository preaching, a labor of love and tribute to our friend and colleague Kent Hughes, is offered in hopeful anticipation of fairer days. So too we pray for favorable winds and a rising tide—a new generation of gospel preachers who heed the example of our honoree by ordering their lives and ministries around the conviction that the pulpit is ever the earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world.

Soli Deo Gloria!

PART ONE

INTERPRETIVE
PRINCIPLES
AND PRACTICES

The Hermeneutical Distinctives of Expository Preaching

David Jackman

No one can seek to be a preacher of God’s Word on a regular basis today without becoming acutely conscious of the cultural barriers, challenges, and constraints of our contemporary culture. As the tide of anti-Christian secularism appears to be assuming tsunami proportions, all Bible preachers are made supremely aware of our own inadequacies, vulnerability, and weakness, no matter how apparently fruitful and outwardly effective those ministries may be. It would be tempting to imagine that we are called to preach at a particularly difficult time in the church’s history, or that God can only use men of prodigious talent in the face of such overwhelming opposition. But we would be wrong. There is indeed “nothing new under the sun.”

Expository Preaching: The Difficulty of the Task

In 1592, William Perkins, an English Puritan scholar-pastor and a fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge, wrote a book entitled *The Art of Prophesying*. Only thirty-four years of age, Perkins lamented the scarcity of true biblical ministers—a truth that he claimed was self-evident from the experience of all ages. His complaint was that few men of quality

and ability seek out the calling of the preaching ministry. Moreover, even of those who have the titles, very few really deserve the honorable names of messenger (*angelos*) and interpreter. Even at the ascendancy of Puritan influence, in the last decade of the Elizabethan era, it was apparently still very difficult to find godly pastors who could exercise effective expository ministries.

Perkins identified three causes of this dilemma. First, he cited the contempt with which the calling is treated, recognizing that biblical ministry will always be hated by the world since by its very nature it reveals human sin and unmasking hypocrisy. Second, Perkins drew attention to the immense difficulty of discharging the duties of the ministry well. The charge of the cure of souls was (and is) an overwhelming responsibility. The pastor-teacher must speak to God on behalf of the people, as well as speaking to the people on behalf of God, and who is sufficient for these things? Lastly, Perkins focused on the inadequacy of financial recompense and its accompanying status. Who would accept the contempt and the difficulties for such a paucity of reward? Small wonder, he said, that the sharpest minds of the day turn to the law as their chosen profession. And that was over four hundred years ago!

The Contemporary Context

The issues besetting a biblical teaching ministry today are nothing new, though they are more accentuated. While the Reformation era regarded preaching as “the source and spring of Christian faith,” it is now marginalized and increasingly jettisoned. The hostility of the culture has always been a “given,” but the skepticism and rejection of sound biblical teaching at the heart of the local church’s life of ministry—from within the congregation itself—is perhaps a defining aspect of the current crisis. It is, of course, evidence of the world’s waves swamping and threatening the very viability of the church’s boat. A worldly church is always going to reject the clarity of biblical revelation. Such people “will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). These can be the myths of atheistic humanism or the psychiatrist’s couch, the flattering spin of the politicians and the advertisers, or the hard-nosed ethos of corporate capitalism and the culture of success. They are all around us, and they are the powerful siren songs of our unbelieving world.

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So, when we are told that biblical preaching is presumptuous, or naïve, or ineffective, or all three, we know that the ocean is truly within the boat and that it will soon be sunk unless the preachers begin bailing. That is why a biblical ministry, such as College Church has enjoyed under our esteemed brother Kent these many years, stands as a beacon light in the darkness and crosscurrents of contemporary confusion. We salute a ministry devoted to “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” and thank God for the countless lives influenced from that pulpit in both the spoken and the written word, and the numerous ministries put back on track by this powerful example and model. At the heart of this ministry lies the conviction that it is the Word of God in the hands of the Spirit of God that accomplishes the work of God—through the preacher, the man of God.

The Proclamation Trust

That same conviction lies at the heart of the ministry of The Proclamation Trust in the United Kingdom that, in informal partnership with the Simeon Trust in the United States, seeks to bring about the renaissance and development of biblical expository preaching, characterized by careful listening to God in his Word and its powerful application to the lives of both the preacher and his hearers, with penetrating, practical relevance.

John Stott has often spoken of effective preaching as a bridge, firmly grounded at either end, both in the biblical text, with all its unchanging truth, and in the contemporary world, with all its urgent need as expressed in darkened understanding and hardened hearts (Eph. 4:18). Both firm groundings are certainly characteristic of the ministry of Dick Lucas, in which The Proclamation Trust had its origins.

Founded in 1986, the Trust at its inception could already look back over twenty-five years of extraordinary growth and fruitfulness. Dick Lucas was appointed in 1961 as rector of St. Helen’s Bishopsgate in the heart of the business community of the city of London. Building on lunchtime services for those working in “the Square Mile,” extending to Bible study and discipleship groups, St. Helen’s added Sunday evening services for students and young graduates and in due course a families’ work on Sunday mornings, so that over the years, countless numbers of people heard the Word of the Lord. For many, this led to their conversion to Christ and for even more the nurture and growth of a vigorous life of discipleship.

The simple purpose of The Proclamation Trust is to train and equip a new generation of biblical preachers to do that same work, dependent on the same Spirit to use the same Word to multiply gospel growth across the land and around the world. This is carried out through two main programs. The first is an annual schedule of preaching conferences for ministers, lay preachers, and seminarians, culminating each year in June with the Evangelical Ministers Assembly at St. Helen's, which draws together as many as nine hundred Christian workers from all over the United Kingdom, Europe, and beyond. The second is a full-time study program for one academic year called the Cornhill Training Course, which concentrates on providing practical tools for biblical expository ministry.

The Hermeneutical Principles of Expository Preaching

These tools constitute the foundational hermeneutic on which expository proclamation of biblical truth can be most effectively built. They are very basic, and one might be tempted to think all too obvious, but experience has shown over the years that such principles have not been widely taught or assimilated. In the midst of the highly demanding academic agenda of the seminary, very little time can be given to the practicalities of biblical preaching. As a result, young ministers tend on the one hand to read academic essays to their congregations and simply relate their textual exegesis or, on the other, to move into an "inspirational" mode that is basically exhortation frequently disconnected from the plain meaning of Scripture. Either way, "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed" (to borrow Milton's formulation in his poem "Lycidas"). But there is no valid alternative plan for the nourishment of God's flock other than for the under-shepherds to feed them with the rich pastures of God's Word. So, how can we encourage each other to keep working at this most demanding, but also most rewarding, of ministry responsibilities?

Listening to the Biblical Text

Everything depends upon our detailed, careful, and disciplined reading of the text. Effective preaching, as Eugene Peterson has pointed out in his excellent book *Working the Angles*, begins with "passionate hearers, not cool analysts." Our problem is that the skills of literary analysis we have been taught often seem to deprive us of any sense of immediacy,

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or even intimacy, in hearing the living Word of the living God through the paragraphs, sentences, and individual words of Scripture. The text needs to be seen not as an object to be analyzed, dissected, or even “mastered” so that we can then begin to “do something with the Bible.” Rather, we need to hear it as the urgent, present-tense message of the present-tense God (I AM) through our minds to our hearts to energize our wills in faith and obedience. Then the Bible is doing something with, in, and to us. If the preacher’s life is being changed through his encounter with God in the “living and enduring Word” (1 Pet. 1:23 NIV), he really does have a message to proclaim, not simply from the written page but from the heart.

This is why prayer is so central to the process of preparation. We are entirely dependent on God’s Spirit to open our blind eyes, unstop our deaf ears, and soften our hardened hearts, so at every stage in preparing to preach we seek the author’s help to rightly hear and handle his Word of truth. From the first reading of the text to the final words of the sermon, we are entirely dependent on the gracious work of the Spirit, in preacher and hearers alike, to bring understanding, to generate faith, and to empower obedience.

Learning to listen by opening our eyes is one of the key skills for the biblical preacher to develop. We need to see what is really there and what is not. Like a person with hearing difficulties, we need to strain to catch every detail of vocabulary and nuance of tone in our Lord’s conversation with us in the unique and specific parts of Scripture. But the problem with a written text, which increases the more familiar we think we are with it, is our tendency to skim-read it in order to find what we already know is there. We then deal with general ideas rather than give attention to detail, and the resulting sermons exist in a world of theological abstraction. So much preaching is bland and predictable because there has been no move toward studying the text beyond its general themes and familiar ideas to the uniqueness of this particular Word of the Lord. The preacher has been content with a superficial, surface reading in which he has viewed the text through the prescription lenses of his own evangelical framework. This means that he has been in control of the text, assessing it, dissecting it, allowing it to illustrate the principles of his framework that he is determined to preach, but not permitting the text to be in the driver’s seat, controlling the sermon.

What needs to be happening in the preparation process is for the text to be challenging our framework, and this is achieved by questioning. Obviously, our first question will always be, “What precisely is this text saying?” But then there are other key questions with which we can sharpen our listening skills. For example, “Why does the biblical

author say it in these words?” This may alert us to specialist vocabulary that often opens up major themes in the rest of the book of which our preaching passage is a part. Or it may challenge our pastoral rules of thumb, or even our doctrinal formulations. Additionally, we can ask, “Why is the author saying it to these people (his original readers)?” This raises the whole issue of contexts, both historical and theological, both of the book in the Bible and the passage in the book. Finally, “Why does the author say it here, at this particular point in his work?” This is an inquiry about the literary context, which helps us to build a picture of the development of the book’s major teaching themes, which will also greatly help with application of the passage to the context of today.

These questions help to discipline us to read the passage with our antennae up, specifically on the lookout for the challenges and surprises. Anything that pulls me up short and makes me say, “I wouldn’t have said that” or “I wouldn’t have used those words” is a great step forward in helping me listen to the message of this particular text. My presuppositions are being challenged and my habitual ways of thinking are being reshaped as the text, with its own specific content, questions my framework.

Approaching a Text Inductively

Like a lens sharpening the focus, careful observation of this sort enables the reader to probe beneath the immediate surface meaning of the text to begin to grapple with its intended purpose and significance. That is what produces clarity in exposition and gives the sermon an edge to penetrate beyond confused half-understanding and generalized notions. It enables the unique richness of the detail of a passage to have its intended effect, and when that happens the Bible really does speak. But it doesn’t happen without a good deal of effort and hard work. The reason for this is that we all read the Bible through our own presuppositions. Inevitably, we cannot approach any text without inputting our own cultural conditioning into our reading of it. We have a particular background. We live at a particular time in history. Our past experience, values, and priorities have all combined to build up a personal, individual framework of thought and behavior, convictions and attitudes, that makes each of us the unique people we are. But this framework can be the enemy of careful observation.

The danger is that certain words or ideas in the text will trigger ideas in the preacher’s memory bank that are then downloaded and uncritically included in a sermon. So we end up preaching our frame-

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work rather than the biblical text, unless the Bible text is questioning our framework every time we are preparing. It is not that framework preaching is wrong if the framework is itself biblically orthodox. What is said will probably be true, but the preaching will soon become reductionist and predictable. The problem is that such preaching does not challenge the church, and it will not change the world. It becomes impository of the preacher's word upon the text, which has to dance to the preacher's tune—the agenda that he has constructed—rather than being expository of the fundamental meaning of the Bible, with all its necessary challenges and unsettling disturbance to our inherently sinful, this-worldly patterns of thought and behavior. In John Stott's words, it is the function of biblical preaching both "to disturb the comfortable and then to comfort the disturbed." And that process begins with the preacher in his preparation.

There is an old saying that a text out of context is merely a pretext. Its truth is constantly demonstrated in many a pulpit, where the preacher's "angle" on the subject becomes the key constituent of the sermon, irrespective of why the text was originally written or even what it actually teaches. But it is a very important inference from our evangelical doctrine of Scripture that God's revelation will itself provide us with divinely given authoritative keys as to how to unpack and use its contents. Our submission to Scripture, as a vital part of our submission to Scripture's Lord, means that we must be prepared to teach the Bible not only in its truth-content but also to use its own distinctive methodologies. We must cut with the grain of the biblical text. This should affect our preaching schedules and the shape of the pulpit diet for our congregations, as much as it does the contents of an individual sermon.

Much of the benefit that has flowed so consistently from the College Church pulpit is attributable to the systematic consecutive exposition of Scripture, book by book, as the solid "given" of the preaching ministry. We should study and preach the Bible book by book since this is how God has provided it for us. Indeed, there is a real sense in which the whole Bible is one book, comprised of its sixty-six separate but clearly integrated units, each one having its own specific purpose and major themes. The principle of the "melodic line," or the theme tune of every book, is an important tool to work with. What does this particular book contribute to the one great story of salvation history, as God's plan to rescue humanity from its rebellion and to reconcile rebels to himself is worked out through the ages and comes to its culmination and fulfillment in Christ? What would we *not* know if this book were not included in the sixty-six? What is its distinctive value and message? What is the tune it plays?

The Journey to the World of the Biblical Text

This is where the preacher will need to travel back to the original setting and context of the first hearers in order to bring the unchanging meaning of this particular book or passage with penetration and obvious relevance into the world of today. It might seem strange to say that we must travel to first-century Corinth or Galatia in order to hear the Word of the living God for twenty-first-century London or Chicago, but it is absolutely true. If we do not wrestle with what our text meant to *them*, when it was first spoken or written, we shall never be able to apply its message with any sort of accuracy or penetration to our hearers today. This does not mean that we all need to be scholars in the original languages or in the biblical historical background, though we are thankful to God for those who are, and we can benefit greatly from their labors. But it is the genius of a teaching ministry, with time set apart for the study of the Scripture, to enable those who listen to the preaching to be as close to the situation of the original readers as it is possible to be so as to remove as many barriers to understanding as we can.

The expository preacher wants always to be giving the Bible back into the hands of the congregation. The Bible is not the preserve of the expert but the Word of God for everybody, everywhere. However, it does come to us in the form of words spoken by and to people in human history. There is a particularity about all its contents, tying its origin to a particular time and place, to specific spokesmen, and its purposes to particular groups of recipients. Yet what is revealed is of eternal significance and validity precisely because it is the “forever” Word of the infinite and eternal God, working in and from its original historical context but transcending those limitations as it addresses the whole human race across planet earth at every point of time.

God did not produce a book of rules or a set of systematized theological propositions, though both can rightly be adduced from the Bible. Its fundamental format is neither abstract nor theoretical. God spoke to real people in real situations. He intervened in space-time history, explaining his actions before and interpreting them afterwards. Scripture is the story of the loving purposes of God in our redemption from paradise lost in Eden, to the appearance of the holy city, the New Jerusalem, and the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom. But if we don’t get right what the revelation of Scripture meant to its original recipients, we shall certainly not get right its meaning and significance for us today.

The Genres of the Bible

That is why we must take seriously the different types of biblical literature through which God speaks still—poetry, historical narrative, prophecy, proverbial sayings, apocalypse, parables, allegories, sermons, letters, theological arguments, and so on. They are very different styles of writing with specific patterns and accepted conventions governing their use and referencing their meaning. In recent years a good deal of attention has been given to genre studies, so that each type of biblical writing is properly understood within its own framework of reference. This too will be an important set of tools for the biblical preacher to be able to own and use.

One of the most obvious examples would be the symbolic language of the apocalyptic tradition in Jewish literature, exemplified for us in books like Daniel, Zechariah, or Revelation. To read the numerical and other symbolic ingredients “in the flat” as literal facts or events would be to misunderstand how the genre works. This is not to devalue or avoid the plain meaning of Scripture in any way, but rather to recognize that its truth is not literal where the writing is metaphorical or symbolic, where that literary convention is being employed. After all, I have yet to meet anyone who imagines that Isaiah 55:12 will have a literal fulfillment: “The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands”! However, we are not always so aware of how the genres work in other areas of the Bible.

To understand something of the chiasmic structure of Hebrew thinking can be a great help in getting to the heart of a detailed Old Testament narrative or to the main burden of a prophetic oracle. With the central point as the focus of the passage, all that precedes and follows it augments or explains its significance. At the heart of a conflict narrative there is usually a key turning point that resolves the issue and after which everything is different. To see that as the major teaching point can unlock all the details of the story to accomplish their intended purpose. To realize that a prophetic oracle can have more than one point of fulfillment or level of significance can enable the message of the prophet to come alive to us today. We do need to explore what it meant to the people of God when the oracle was first delivered, and we do need to realize that what it reveals of God is unchangeably true. But we cannot simply put the contemporary Christian congregation into the same position as Old Testament Israel. Both are covenant peoples, but what is the significance of the coming of Christ and of the new and better covenant? And what of the prophecy remains to be fulfilled

through Christ in the eternal kingdom, beyond the present gospel age? As Martin Luther said, “We can only read the Bible forwards, but we have to understand it backwards.” We must always read the Old Testament in the light of the New if we are not to reinstitute sacramental religion or look for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Recognizing the different types of gospel materials, understanding the intricacies of apostolic theological argument, looking for the affective, emotional ingredients of biblical poetry—these and other genre-specific tools will be a great help to the Bible preacher in allowing the text to speak for itself in its own authentic voice.

All too often, evangelical preaching has put every text through the same mincing machine of a particular systematized theology so that its content is dissected and laid out in terms of doctrinal propositions with ethical applications, in an identical way, irrespective of whether the original was poetry or prose, proverb or parable. This can give expository preaching a bad name because its content is abstract and predictable, which often becomes irrelevant and boring to the hearers. It also fails to recognize that the God of the Bible, whose love of variety and endless ingenuity are reflected in his physical creation, is hardly likely to reveal himself with any less diversity in his inspired written text. Good expositors learn to work with the literary distinctives of the genres and not to iron them out into a standard, flattened three-point sermon. We need to learn how to value and benefit from the intricate arguments and precise vocabulary of the epistle, the twist in a parable, the punch line of a gospel pronouncement story, the provocation of a wisdom saying, the turning point of a narrative, the multiple fulfillment levels of a prophecy, and the emotive, affective ingredients of a poem.

The Return Journey: Applying the Biblical Text

Every expositor knows that once the meaning of the biblical text has been stated and explained, its application to the contemporary hearers still remains to be spelled out. Some preachers assert that this is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and not for us to try to accomplish. But the pattern of the New Testament epistles strongly underlines the practical application of the propositional teaching content, and while we know we cannot ourselves root God’s Word into anyone’s life, we should surely expect the Holy Spirit graciously to do this work as we apply the Word to our current situations. Application that is faithful and authentic is largely stimulated by context. To understand the original significance helps us to direct God’s truth in its life-changing power

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with penetrating accuracy into our own lives and the lives of those who listen to us.

This process does not start with us in the modern world but with the given text. The Bible is not provided to answer the spiritual whims and fancies of the twenty-first century. We can and do come to it with our own cultural questions. But the good expositor is more interested in asking the Bible's questions, which, since they are God's questions, are going to be much more important and far more significant than any we, in our ignorance and spiritual blindness, could ever pose. To do the contextual work faithfully at the biblical end will ensure that the unchanging text is truly heard in the modern world, with all its potency to teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness. Then it really is the Word that is doing its characteristic work. And that work really is the Lord's.

The biblical method of application has another great advantage. It delivers us from the tyranny of the currently fashionable norms of our own particular Christian subculture. So often in preaching, the application is mass-produced out of the current orthodoxies and enthusiasms of the wider church scene. The latest book, the newest ideas, the most exciting models are bolted onto a biblical text with very little authenticity. Because such applications are usually in the form of obligation: "We ought to . . .", followed by the challenge, "so *are* you . . .?" they quickly develop into legalism and soulless duty. The emphasis is then more and more on doing Christian things (giving, praying, witnessing) so that grace is effectively evacuated from the preaching. Attention becomes focused on the present—on me and my world, on my current concerns, or on our congregation and its growth and prosperity. It is almost as though there is no great eternal plan and no universal church. We become entirely obsessed with our own concerns, the prisoners of our inflated egos.

There is a dangerous and immediate consequence of this contemporary sort of preaching. The hearers soon become adept at screening out the all-too-predictable challenges that masquerade as application. Successful life-changing application, however, is launched from the text in its original context and flies under the radar screen with an irresistible power. When the text surprises me, so that my response is "so, *that's* what it means . . . of course!" then the Word is really at work. The mind is persuaded by the truth and the heart is softened to receive it and put it into practice. Finally, the will is energized to active obedience, to make the necessary life changes in thought and behavior, in the power of that same Holy Spirit who has been communicating through his inspired Word.

The Heart of Expository Preaching

These are some of the skills we seek to develop in the courses, conferences, and media products of The Proclamation Trust. They are not new, nor are they complex, but they are largely neglected and sadly underpracticed. Of course, they call for hard work, which demands time, energy, and application, and these, in turn, are things that many preachers have decided are not a priority in their schedule. I believe it is greatly to the detriment of our churches. This collection of essays celebrates a different set of values, modeled consistently over the many years of Kent's ministry as he has put the Word of God in the hands of the Spirit of God to accomplish his own unique, Christ-glorifying work. Such preaching priorities badly need to be reclaimed across our enfeebled Western churches.

Homiletics, the introduction of novel multimedia presentations, or any other new techniques are not where we need to look for a revival of the Word of God in our culture. We need to look to preaching that has developed from listening passionately to Scripture and to preachers who incarnate that truth in their lives and seek to channel it to their hearers. We shall all do it differently, since, in Phillips Brookes's famous definition, preaching is "truth through personality." But we need to pray and work for an army of young preachers to be raised up by God to reclaim the pulpits of Western culture for faithful, penetrating, and life-changing proclamation of God's Word as "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Effective exposition finds its origin and power not so much in clever sermon construction, as in detailed, obedient listening to God's voice in the text. The Bible really must be in the driver's seat, dictating the content of the message, its contemporary application, and even its shape. When we serve God's Word in this way we come to realize that the Bible is a book about God long before it is a book about us, and that its strongest relevance and most urgent application is to teach us how to live rightly in the light of his unchanging nature. There will, of course, be parallels between God's old covenant dealings with Israel and his new covenant dealing with us, the universal church, which is the body of Christ. We shall find many similarities between ourselves and the men and women we meet in the Bible's pages. But we shall come to recognize that we are not the focus of the story, and that we should not read our circumstances or experiences into theirs. This is God's book, and it is about God first before it is our book about our relationship with him. Consecutive biblical exposition seeks to guard and propagate these

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revelatory distinctives in every generation to the greater glory of God and for the blessing of his people and the rest of his world.

In a wonderful insight into his own ministry priorities and goals, the apostle Paul revealed to the Colossians the nature of the stewardship that God had given to him for the church. It was “to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:25–27). This is the contemporary preacher’s task in the only valid and authentic apostolic succession—that of the gospel, focused and fulfilled in Christ, who is in the believer now and the guarantee of glory to come. So Paul continues, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (vv. 28–29). That is the goal. Those are the resources. This is the cost. As we thank God for a wonderful example of such apostolic ministry at College Church through our brother Kent, let us dedicate ourselves to that kind of prayer and hard work, so that through the agency of the Simeon Trust and others whom the Lord will yet raise up, this kind of ministry will be multiplied across the world in the coming days far beyond all that we might ask, or even imagine, as the Word does the work.