

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

EDITORIAL

I occupy a pew far more often than a pulpit. Perhaps that contributes a slightly different perspective for reflecting on the nature of preaching than that of the serial sermonizer. The formulation that has emerged in my thoughts on what constitutes effective preaching runs something like this: a ‘good’ sermon combines patient explanation with pastoral application, and leads to a spiritual confrontation. And, while doing that, it shows me how to preach to myself.

Among other prompts for this reflection was reading the fine Festschrift for Donald Macleod, *The People’s Theologian*.¹ It does what such volumes often do—beyond honouring the honorand, of course: it juxtaposes contributions which take up differing points of view. Shared admiration for the person to whom the volume is dedicated is no guarantee of seamless development from one chapter to the next. Such appears to be the case with a troika of articles that appear under the heading of ‘Theology and the Church’: two on preaching by Carl Trueman and Alasdair I. Macleod (chapters 11 and 13) provide the bread for which Fergus Macdonald’s piece on reading the Psalms with ‘postmoderns’ (chapter 12) is the sandwich filling. Reading these, my growing sense about ‘explanation plus application equals confrontation’ as capturing something worthwhile about ‘good’ preaching initially took a bit of a knock, but came good in the end.

Explanation is needed wherever a guide is needed—or at least appreciated. It’s that experience of looking at a painting in the company of an expert, for example, and seeing it through ‘new’ eyes. I well remember wandering, mystified, through an exhibit of modern art in Leiden in the company of a fellow *Alttestamentler*. We paused before one imposing but, to me, incomprehensible work. I must have admitted my complete bewilderment, for he took pity on me. He began to explain how the work defined space, pointing out various aspects of what the artist had achieved. As it happened, my companion was not only a distinguished scholar and kind colleague, but an exhibited artist in his own right. In one sense, what I saw before his brief commentary was no different from what I saw after. It was still just a massive, empty square hanging on the wall! I can’t claim I found it more appealing in the aftermath of his commentary, but my level of comprehension was transformed, as was my appreciation for what I was gazing at.

¹ Iain D. Campbell and Malcolm Maclean (eds), *The People’s Theologian: Writings in Honour of Donald Macleod* (Fearn: Mentor, 2011).

This sort of experience—be it with art, architecture, music, technology, sport, literature, or what have you—is fairly common. It enhances our capacity to see what, unaided, we would remain blind to. And so, when explanation brings deepened understanding, it changes the relationship one has with that ‘object’. This is also true of Scripture. After one of my own recent forays into the pulpit as a visiting preacher, I was chatting with a member of the congregation over a cup of coffee. We were reflecting on the considerable gifts of their recently retired minister. In that minister’s preaching, he said, ‘You always felt he was showing you things you had never seen before.’ Just so.

Explanation in its own right is a powerful thing. It gets a rough ride from Carl Trueman, however, who is alert to the dangers of ‘explanation’ usurping the deeper claims of the task of preaching. ‘If the preacher thinks he is merely explaining the Bible, he will probably be incapable of distinguishing what he does in the pulpit from what he does in the lecture theatre.’² There are the key qualifiers ‘If’ and ‘merely’, to be sure, and on the same page he offers one anecdote describing how what was promised as ‘explanation’ was transcended. Besides the lure of the lecture, there is also the danger that passing on information can be confused with explanation. Too often I’ve been told that ‘the Greek [less often, a Hebrew] word here is...’, when that made no difference whatsoever to understanding the passage. Telling the congregation that ‘Nicodemus’ means ‘conqueror of the people’ (if it does—but that’s another story!) during a sermon on John 3 would simply be a distraction. Explanation brings illumination and aids understanding, but information overload is to be resisted.³

Even well understood, though, how does this ‘word’ exert a ‘claim’ on the listener? This is where patient explanation gives way to pastoral application. If explanation has to do with understanding, then application has to do with relevance: of what relevance, if any, is this text pertinent to my life, my community, my culture? On this front, Fergus Macdonald’s reflection on postmodernity and the Psalms is suggestive.⁴ Although there are dangers lurking here, too, the ‘performance’ of the biblical text in the postmodern framework represents a personal engagement with Scripture from the outset. In this scenario, the individual reader’s sense of needs and the values that appeal to their own quest for meaning provide

² Carl R. Trueman, ‘The Preacher as Prophet: Some Notes on the Nature of Preaching’, in *The People’s Theologian*, pp. 197-215, quote from p. 198, repeated with variations on pp. 200, 206, and 213.

³ Thanks to Peter Grainger for this reminder; see his ‘Information Overload’ article for a helpful discussion <<http://j.mp/PGoverload>>.

⁴ Fergus Macdonald, ‘David and Derrida: The Psalms and Postmodernism’, in *The People’s Theologian*, pp. 217-241.

the points of contact with Scripture. While this might ensure a sense of ‘relevance’, it might do little to provoke a response and locates authority (whatever that might mean in this context) in the reader rather than the text.

It need not be so, however. I was struck while reading Andrew Hoffecker’s fine biography of Charles Hodge how ‘The Plan’ of Princeton Seminary positively commends time in the Bible in terms that bear a striking resonance to the sort of reading that Fergus Macdonald’s article commends. Thus, in Section 1 of Article V., ‘Of Devotion, and Improvement in Practical Piety’, the following guidance is given:⁵

It is expected that every student in the Theological Seminary will spend a portion of time every morning and evening ... in reading the holy Scriptures, solely with a view to a personal and practical application of the passage read, to his own heart, character, and circumstances...

Those who framed ‘The Plan’ anticipated the results of the 2004 ‘Psalm Journey’ project that Macdonald describes. Discussions with participants, he notes, ‘often focused on specific actions respondents felt the psalm was asking them to take in real life.’⁶ This is not simply reading for enjoyment, let alone duty: the outcome is a scripture-shaped life—even a transformed life.

Both of these threads—of explanation and application—come together in Alasdair I. Macleod’s article, and the clue as to how they do so is contained in the sub-title: ‘The Preacher as Reader of Scripture’.⁷ Two aspects of Macleod’s contribution strike me in particular. The first is the account he gives of how the preacher-as-reader must be claimed by the text—‘changed by what I have read’—before ever it is proclaimed to others. The second is his perception that such ‘faithful reading’ is, in some sense, exemplary. That is, those who sit, week by week, under such preachers should begin to have their own engagement with the Bible attuned by this mode of patient attention and personal transformation. Such preaching should, I believe, lead from the ‘preacher as reader’, to a community of those for whom reading becomes ‘preaching’. And here,

⁵ [Ashbel Green], *Plan of the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*. 2nd edn (Elizabethtown, 1816), p. 17. See <<http://j.mp/SeminaryPlan>>, and W. A. Hoffecker, *Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2011), p. 52.

⁶ Macdonald, ‘David and Derrida’, p. 239.

⁷ Alasdair I. Macleod, ‘Layered Reading: The Preacher as Reader of Scripture’, in *The People’s Theologian*, pp. 243-264; see especially pp. 246 and 249 for what follows.

time is the precious commodity: not simply the week by week exposure to faithful explanation and application, but the growing desire simply to 'linger' in the Bible. Sometimes, we fail to see things simply because we haven't taken time to give the proper quality of attention required.

Of course, there is much more that could be said. In the end, however, this trio of contributors seems to me to be singing from the same hymn sheet—or, at least the same Psalter (considering the context for their articles!). The church must not only be served by those faithfully proclaiming the whole word of God, but filled by those who take care how they listen (Luke 8:18), and who preach that Word to themselves.

CONTRIBUTORS IN THIS NUMBER

Dr Jamie Grant is Vice Principal of Highland Theological College (UHI); his article was the lead paper of the SETS 2012 Conference, 'A Godly Commonwealth? The Gospel and Scottish Identity'

Ian J. Vaillancourt is in pastoral ministry, and a ThD student at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

Revd Dr Fergus Macdonald is Chairman of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society

Dr Martin Spence is Assistant Professor of History at Cornerstone University, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jonathan Furst is a graduate of Regent College, Vancouver, and serves as Pastoral Assistant at Bread of Life Anglican Church, Ithaca, New York

Justin Roberts is a PhD student in Systematic Theology at McMaster Divinity College

Revd Dr Mark Garcia is Pastor of Immanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania