

When Bad Things Happen to a Good Text

Or: When Bad Things Happen to God's Text

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Introduction

In 1981 a book was published on the secular market that has been quite influential. You will encounter it in ministry sooner or later, usually when someone in your church encounters tragedy and turns to it for help in dealing with the resulting hurts. It was written by a Jewish rabbi who attempted to deal with the problem of theodicy. How do we explain the problem of evil? It was titled, provocatively enough, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.² It is a catchy enough title to remember long after the rabbi's rationalizations have been forgotten.

I'd like to adapt that title for my comments this morning and talk to you about *When Bad Things Happen to a Good Text*. By using that title, I certainly don't intend to distinguish between good texts and bad texts. I am very deliberately referring to Bible texts, and they are all good in some sense. They may not always be equally appropriate in any given situation, but they are all inspired and authoritative Word of God. My concern is rather for the other part of that title: ***When Bad Things Happen to a Good Text***. Perhaps I should adapt, not Rabbi Kushner's title, but the title of a much more profitable volume by Warren Wiersbe (who wrote in response to Kushner's book): *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People*.³ It is, after all, not just a collection of good texts with which we deal, but it is *God's text*. So my alternate title is, *When Bad Things Happen to God's Text*.

¹ This is the transcript of a chapel address on 10 March 2000. It is not intended at this point to be a documented, journal-style article (though it may become that). On the other hand, it is not the typical sermon manuscript—indeed, it is not a sermon. It is rather a lecture about preaching. The material above and the footnotes below draw heavily from a few important discussions of preaching; they do not attempt to be exhaustive. I am an expositor (a NT prof, to be exact), not a homiletician—but that will be obvious as you read! I make no pretense of being a great preacher myself, though I have a great respect for the privilege I am accorded from time to time to minister God's Word to his people, and I spent quite a few years in pastoral ministry before I began a formal teaching ministry. I have an intense concern that those who stand behind the sacred desk handle the Word of God carefully and accurately. I see too little of that in my day. If these few comments stimulate even a few to determine that preaching must be biblical in its nature, content, and method, then it will be worth the time that I have invested in this lecture.

² Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (NY: Schocken Books, 1981).

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984).

My intentions are not to preach this morning, but rather to talk to you *about* preaching. If I may be very candid with you, at least some of the faculty find preaching to be a rather distressing experience at times. Not (at least not usually) when they are doing the preaching, but when they are doing the listening. I will not attempt to speak on behalf of my colleagues on the subject, though I will confess that some of us talk about these matters more frequently than we would like. Our concern is not just to nit-pick or to dispute questionable exegesis. Would that our concerns were such as those! My concern, at least, could be stated fairly well in the words of 1 Sam. 3:1. As the King James says, “the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision”—which, as I’m sure you know, is better translated as the NASB, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent.” I would adapt that wording and suggest that *biblical preaching* is rare in our day, a word from God is infrequently heard from our pulpits. That is not just my cantankerous opinion; some of today’s best known preachers echo the same sentiment. John Stott says that “true Christian preaching . . . is extremely rare in today’s Church”⁴ and Kent Hughes bemoans the fact that “dis-exposition . . . is a serious problem that deserves careful thought. At least in my part of the world, these abuses increasingly dominate the pulpits.”⁵

As those who will one day stand in the pulpit and open the Word of God to a local congregation, you have the same charge as that with which Paul charged Timothy: “Preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2). That is an awesome responsibility. The apostle Peter reminds us that “if anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet. 4:11). John Wycliffe, the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” described preaching as “the highest service that men may attain to on earth.”⁶ The Word of God is a most precious treasure—equal to our very salvation in worth, for if we had no Bible we would know nothing of God’s Son and the forgiveness that his crosswork provided. As John Stott has said so well,

Preaching is indispensable to Christianity. Without preaching a necessary part of its authenticity has been lost. For Christianity is, in its very essence, a religion of the Word of God. No attempt to understand Christianity can succeed which overlooks or denies the truth that the living God has taken the initiative to reveal himself savingly to fallen humanity; or that his self-revelation has been given by the most straightforward means of

⁴ *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 15.

⁵ Kent Hughes, “The Anatomy of Exposition: *Logos, Ethos, and Pathos*,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 (1999): 45–46. “Dis-Exposition” is Hughes’ term: “Though the term is new, you have all experienced dis-exposition as a listener. You can easily recall a Sunday service in which the biblical text is announced and you settle back, Bible in hand for a good Sunday meal, only to find out that the text is departed from, never to return. Dis-exposition causes Sunday indigestion” (ibid., 44).

⁶ Cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 22.

communication known to us, namely by a word and words; or that he calls upon those who have heard his Word to speak it to others.⁷

Although the Word of God has been given for all, the pastor is entrusted with the Word of God in a special sense due to his primary responsibility of proclaiming that Word to a congregation. Handling the Word of God correctly is an enormous responsibility. As James exhorted his hearers, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (Jas. 3:1). There ought to be a very real sense in which we recognize and acknowledge our inadequacy for such a great task. I sense little of that in many preachers. Some are quite confident—even proud—of their ability in the pulpit. Others treat it rather flippantly. Richard Baxter, the famous 17th century preacher, saw it quite differently. He said that

The public preaching of the word ... requires greater skill, and especially greater life and zeal, than any of us bring to it. It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation and deliver a message of salvation or condemnation, as from the living God, in the name of our Redeemer.⁸

Indeed, “the pulpit is a perilous place for any child of Adam to occupy”!⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for many years, was of the opinion that

It seems to be the case that the greater the preacher the more hesitant he has generally been to preach.... A man who feels that he is competent, and that he can do this easily, and so rushes to preach without any sense of fear or trembling, or any hesitation whatsoever, is a man who is proclaiming that he has never been ‘called’ to be a preacher. The man who is called by God is a man who realises what he is called to do, and he so realises the awfulness of the task that he shrinks from it.¹⁰

My purpose today is not to teach you how to preach. You will only learn that by doing it. You will learn more about preaching in a year of pastoral ministry in which you must stand behind the sacred desk three or four times a week than you ever will in seminary. We have some classes that will get you started (and that start *is* an important one), but it is very difficult to preach in the

⁷ *Between Two Worlds*, 15.

⁸ *The Reformed Pastor*, edited and abridged by Jay Green (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971), 17.

⁹ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 320.

¹⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 107.

artificial context of a classroom.¹¹ Beyond my initial reminders of the high calling of the pulpit ministry, my purpose today is warn you of the dangers that appear to lurk in the office of many clergymen. That is where many sermons seem to originate—offices where more attention is paid to programs and technique than to the study of the Word of God.¹² The very fact that it is conceived as an office says a great deal about our modern conception of ministry. The “pastor’s study” is viewed as a quaint concept—a relic, perhaps, of the 19th century; certainly not an appropriate image for the administrator of a “dynamic organization.”¹³

To take the negative approach—to address what might be called “homiletical fallacies” (to adapt the title of D. A. Carson’s excellent book, *Exegetical Fallacies*)—has certain risks. Since I have mentioned Carson’s book, let me also read part of his introduction and adapt it to my homiletical concerns. The two issues, exegesis and homiletics, are closely related (though one might not suspect that from many sermons!). Carson acknowledges that

To focus on fallacies, exegetical or otherwise, sounds a bit like focusing on sin: guilty parties may take grudging notice and briefly pause to examine their faults, but there is nothing intrinsically redemptive in the procedure. Nevertheless, when the sins are common and (what is more) frequently unrecognized by those who commit them, detailed description may have the salutary effect of not only encouraging thoughtful self-examination but also providing an incentive to follow a better way. I hope that by talking about what should be done in exegesis [I would say, homiletics], we may all desire more deeply to interpret [read, “preach”] the Word of God aright....

... This study is important because exegetical fallacies [I would say, “homiletical fallacies”] are painfully frequent among us—among us whose God-given grace and responsibility is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. Make a mistake in the interpretation of Shakespeare’s plays ... and there is unlikely to be an entailment of eternal consequences; but we cannot lightly accept a similar laxity in the interpretation [and preaching] of Scripture. We are dealing with God’s thoughts: we are obligated to take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly. It is all the

¹¹ You might find Lloyd-Jones’ comments in this regard of interest; I read them after I wrote the paragraph above: *Preaching and Preachers*, 118–20.

¹² “The essential secret is not mastering certain techniques but being mastered by certain convictions. In other words, theology is more important than methodology.... Technique can only make us orators; if we want to be preachers, theology is what we need. If our theology is right, then we have all the basic insights we need into what we ought to be doing, and all the incentives we need to induce us to do it faithfully” (Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 92).

¹³ Yes, every pastor has some administration to do, but that should not be the primary focus of his time.

more shocking, therefore, to find in the evangelical pulpit, where the Scriptures are officially revered, frequent and inexcusable sloppiness in handling them.¹⁴

To make my homiletical fallacies a bit more palatable, and to ease the pain just a bit for anyone whose toes get trampled in the process, I have formulated the remainder of my comments in terms of a contest. I propose to present “The 1999-2000 Homiletical Awards.” And no, they are not personalized, though they frequently do have specific sermons and specific preachers in mind.¹⁵ I have tried to generalize the egregious errors in order to protect the guilty. My goal is not to criticize people, but to help you learn from the errors that are, as Carson says, “so painfully frequent among us.”

On a rough estimate, I have heard or preached something in the neighborhood of 8,000 sermons in my life, so the potential range of illustrations is fairly broad, though I confess that I have noted a higher percentage of homiletical misdemeanors in chapel than any other place.¹⁶ Perhaps that is just because one hears a greater variety of speakers there than in one’s local church. One would like to think that chapel would be a model preaching lab, but that is not always the case. To be fair, I have also included awards that some of my own past sermons deserve. (If you have preached for very long, you will realize how easy that is!) So let me come to the awards.

The 1999-2000 Homiletical Awards

The 1999-2000 Homiletical Awards are presented to worthy recipients who have excelled in significant ways in their public declamations. To qualify for consideration for these awards all that is necessary is to demonstrate that one is capable of and willing to fulfill the descriptions below in a public forum. Neither pride, embarrassment, intention, nor ignorance of having done so is necessary. Other than the grand prize, the awards are not presented in any particularly significant order.

Pearl Award

The first award is presented to those outstanding speakers who are able to string together the largest number of unrelated texts. The award is named after the practice of Jewish exegetes who considered “pearl-stringing” to be a proper way to handle the text. But the Jews certainly have no corner on this one. It is amazing how many sermons skip all over the Bible, collecting texts

¹⁴ *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 15–16.

¹⁵ I will decline, however, to identify the guilty parties.

¹⁶ Please remember that I have sat in the regular, weekly chapels of five different educational institutions for nearly 20 years altogether, so my reference is not limited to our chapel—even if speakers in that forum need not be bashful about claiming their share of the awards!

willy-nilly wherever it suits the preacher's fancy. The fact that these texts have absolutely no relationship with one another seems to be irrelevant. Sometimes the same word appears in these texts—as if that in itself justifies ignoring the contextual meaning of these passages.

It *is* appropriate to associate some texts, but only if they are discussing the same concept. Mere word association is inadequate. Such a practice also tends to ignore dispensational distinctions—arbitrarily lumping together passages from the patriarchal or old covenant eras with passages addressed to the church. There have been some major changes, e.g., in the work of the Holy Spirit and in how a believer relates to God. Ignoring such differences perverts the meaning of the text.

Moreover such a practice prevents people from properly relating passages to the Bible's storyline. Some preachers mix and match texts in such a way that people assume that is the normal way to handle the Bible. It encourages them to ignore the contextual meaning of passages in their own reading. The Bible becomes a magical book of tidbits that can be selected, combined, and applied in any random sequence that seems helpful.

Granted, such an approach can be made to look very correct homiletically. For example, consider this nicely alliterated outline:¹⁷

Theme: The Five Trees of Human Experience

1. The Sinning Man behind a Tree, Gen. 3:8
2. The Sincere Man under a Tree, Jn. 1:48
3. The Seeking Man up a Tree, Lk. 19:1–10
4. The Sinless Man on a Tree, 1 Pt. 2:24
5. The Saved Man like a Tree, Ps. 1:3

But “homiletical” or not, these are unrelated passages. The only thread that connects these “pearls” is the preacher's ingenuity. And this is one of the better such examples in the sense that if someone actually preached it (and don't you *dare* try it!), it is remotely possible that a series of five 5-minute mini-expositions might be given. But why would you settle for sermonettes when any one of the passages deserves at least the entire message all alone? And there *is* a text for each point. More commonly this pearl-stringing is the way preachers develop each point of a topical sermon—in which the points are the preacher's own, not based on any text. They are just what he wants to say. To substantiate it, he then strings his pearls in such a way so as to make it appear that his comments are biblical. But this is not biblical preaching at all.

¹⁷ This example comes from John L. Benson, *A System of Homiletics: The Fine Art of Scientific Skeletonization* (By the author, n.d.), 69—but it is *not* an example that Benson encourages. He uses it, rather, to illustrate how a sermon should be structured in a parallel fashion. His entire focus is strictly expository and contextual. He would have been aghast if anyone actually preached this message!

Memory Award

Presented to the speaker who is able to read a biblical text and then most quickly to forget it and depart therefrom. This is what John Stott calls the preacher's pitfall of forgetfulness. "The forgetful expositor loses sight of his text by going off at a tangent and following his own fancy." Too many preachers write their sermons and then go looking for "a text as a peg on which to hang them."¹⁸ They should, perhaps, be honest enough with their audience to read their text and then to say, "That is my text. I am now going to preach. Maybe we'll meet again, my text and I, and maybe not."¹⁹

Speculation Award

This award is earned by those who have the unique ability to provide more speculation about what the text does *not* say than the average preacher.

The best example (or should I say, worst?) of this that I've ever heard was a preacher who selected as his text the account of the 10 lepers whom Jesus healed (Luke 17). You will remember that only one of the healed lepers returned to thank Jesus. Why didn't the other nine do the same? The text doesn't say. It doesn't even hint at a possible reason. There is absolutely nothing in the text that suggests that it is even of concern. Yet this preacher's message consisted of, can you guess? Nine points—nine reasons why the nine lepers were not thankful. The application was pretty obvious. There are nine reasons why we might not be thankful—and we certainly wouldn't want to displease God by being unthankful like these nine lepers.

It seems that many of us are not content with what the text itself actually says. We are always wanting to know more. Yet we must be satisfied that God has told us exactly what he wanted us to know. No more; no less. We do the text (and God!) a great disservice when we forget that and attempt to fill in the blanks where God was silent. Even if we admit that the text doesn't say it, we are still speculating where God has deliberately been silent. To the extent that our sermons are based on that which the text does not say, to that extent our sermons have no authority and no credence.²⁰

¹⁸ An alternate designation for this award might be the "Interior Decorating Award"! Thomas Schreiner laments this practice: "We may even decide the main points of the sermon before we begin to study the passage from which we preach. This latter practice indicates that we believe we have a better grasp of what the church needs to hear than God—for *we decide* what the church needs to hear" ("A Plea for Biblical Preaching," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]: 3).

¹⁹ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 130.

²⁰ "The limit of our instructions should be the limit of inspired truth. We have no authority to add.... Speculation may fascinate us by its bewitching visions, but we have no right to introduce these into the realms of the pure light given by God's truth.... We have not even the liberty of supplementing the plain interpretation of that

Creativity Award

This trophy is awarded to those preachers who exhibit exceptional ability to use a text in the most creative ways, i.e., in ways the furthest removed from the author's intention and which ignore the context of the text concerning which they are speaking. These are more dangerous sermons than those which simply forget their text and expound the preacher's own ideas, for here there is a semblance of exposition. In reality, the text is too often exploited for other purposes, sometimes crassly so, other times much more subtly.

You have heard the stock examples. For example, the preacher who was opposed to women wearing their hair in a bun; his text? Matt. 24:17, "top not come down!" Or the preacher (who must have had Marcionite tendencies) who preached against the OT in the words of Matt. 22:40, "hang all the Law and the Prophets!" Kent Hughes tells of the preacher who selected Rev. 11:10 as the text for his Christmas message: "And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another."²¹ Never mind that this refers to celebrating the death of the two prophets during the tribulation! The preacher knew what he wanted to say, and it was certainly convenient that there was a text that referred to gift giving. More serious were those in the 19th C. Oxford Movement whose favorite text was Matt. 18:12, "hear the church!" Their focus was on the authority of the historical, ecumenical church—in other words, the Roman Catholic Church. As a result, they sought the reunification of the Anglican church with Rome. In response an Anglican archbishop took a slightly larger slice of the context as his sermon text: "If any man refuse to hear the Church, let him!"

We laugh at such examples, but how often do preachers in fundamental Baptist churches do the very same thing? Any time that we preach from a passage and either ignore the context, or use it in a way that is different from the author's use in the context, we have essentially said, "top not come down," "hang all the Law." When we use the angel's words to Joseph in Matt. 1:18-25 as an example of pre-marital counseling, the difference is only one of degree, not substance. The preacher who did that said in his introduction, if I remember correctly, that in preaching the Christmas texts over the years he had "chased everything that could be chased" in those passages. If his counseling message was representative, I believe him.

Why aren't we content to use texts in their context? Are we afraid that God's purpose in giving them to us isn't exciting enough? That people will listen better or respond better to our preaching if we can spruce up the text? Is creativity a commendable quality in an exegete? I'm glad to see some creativity in *how* a message is presented, but I shudder when a preacher's creativity affects

truth by our own conjectures of what must be or what ought to be.... We must take God's word as far as it goes and no farther. We must mark the boundaries which it places. We must not undertake to pass them" (James Petigru Boyce, "Thus Saith the Lord, Ezekiel 2:4," an ordination sermon preached 31 May 1874, reprinted in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]: 38–39).

²¹ Hughes, "The Anatomy of Exposition," *SBJT* 3 (1999): 44.

[or worse, “effects”!] his exegesis—when it determines the *content* of his preaching. There we have absolutely no right to be creative. We are subject to what one preacher has called “the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!”²² “In being committed to preach a passage of Scripture in context, expositively, taking as the point of the message the point of the passage, we hear from God those things that we do not already intend to hear when we set out.”²³ Exegesis is “a discipline of the utmost rigour.”²⁴

Homiletical creativity is what prompted a 19th century writer to remark,

I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign between their hands till it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half-a-dozen brilliant glass globes filled with water, and with four or five goldfish swimming in each of them. For myself, I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be amused by the tricks of a clever conjuror; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste.²⁵

Newsweek Award

The Newsweek Award is merited by the longest and most notable introduction from contemporary news media. It is certainly commendable to be relevant, but some preachers are as predictable as the sunrise. Every message begins with some recent clip from *Newsweek*, *Time*, *US News*, *USA Today*, or from some recent television show. And they are usually not brief. These fashionable introductions are usually rather lengthy. I find them objectionable because they turn the focus on the wrong object. The Word of God must be primary, not human need. I know, that’s not what the fad of baby-boomer and buster homiletics will tell you. You are supposed to touch felt needs first, then show them how the Word of God is relevant.²⁶ But what are you telling people when week-after-week the first thing they hear when you step behind the sacred desk is *Newsweek*?

²² Donald Cogan, *Stewards of Grace* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 48, as cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 127.

²³ Mark Dever, “Expositional Preaching as a Mark of a Healthy Church,” *SBJT* 3 (1999): 61.

²⁴ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 127.

²⁵ R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching*, the 1876 Yale Lectures (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1877), 127; cited in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 132.

²⁶ Kent Hughes calls this a “homiletics of consensus” in which “the preacher determines the congregation’s need from the pollsters’ analysis of felt needs, and then bases his preaching agenda on those feelings.” Hughes acknowledges that “all biblical exposition must be informed by and be sensitive to perceived needs,” but there is a problem: “our deepest needs often go beyond our perceived needs” (“The Anatomy of Exposition,” *SBJT* 3 [1999]: 4).

If you occasionally use a brief *Newsweek* clip for an introduction, that may not be a problem. Better, I think, to use that *during* your message—and even then it ought to be kept brief. You have precious little time in the pulpit each week. Use it to focus your people’s attention where it ought to be: on the Word of God. Leave the fancy, faddish introductions to others. Say enough in your introduction to get their attention, but not so much that they go away more impressed with your introduction than they are with God and his Word.²⁷

Minimalist Award

This award is presented to those who have the least need for a Bible when they speak, or who speak in such a way that their hearers have minimal need to use a Bible to understand the sermon.

I must confess to amazement as I observe some sermons “happening.” In some the preacher waves his Bible vigorously as he preaches and fills his sermon with phrases like, “the Bible says”—and yet he seldom reads any Scripture, and if he does, it has little to do with his sermon, and he certainly isn’t explaining what God’s Word says. Another thing that surprises me is that people open their Bible to the text that the preacher announces, and then keep it open on their lap throughout the entire sermon... yet not once do they have any need to ever refer to it! Perhaps it’s misplaced optimism. Perhaps they are hopeful that the preacher will, indeed, return to the Bible before he finishes. They are far too often disappointed.

I hope that you will remember that your commission is to preach the Bible. If there is little need for a Bible when you preach, I seriously doubt that you have preached the Bible. Now you may preach in some settings where people don’t have a Bible—perhaps in some evangelistic settings, or on the street, or in a prison. But if you are ministering the Word in a local church setting, then I plead with you to make the use of the Bible by your people central. Biblical preaching *requires* the Bible.

Academic Award

This award is merited by those who are best able to denigrate serious study of the Bible, particularly the value of the biblical languages. Extra points are awarded to those who manage to denigrate both Greek and Hebrew in the same sermon.

I’m not quite sure why it is that men do that so often, especially in a Seminary chapel. One would think that those who have studied the languages would realize their value and would not bad-mouth them. And one would also think that if someone had not had the privilege of learning

²⁷ I’m tempted to add another award related to introductions—for those who have such long introductions that they never get to the text until their time is nearly gone. The classic recipient here would be a chapel speaker I heard once who, with a 25 minute preaching slot, used 20 minutes for his introduction. A sad state of affairs indeed!

Hebrew and Greek, that a Seminary chapel would be the last place where they would venture any comment on the subject. You can imagine the response of students at another seminary when a chapel speaker spent much of his sermon expounding the significance of “yap” (γάρ)!

Perhaps it’s a defense mechanism by those who *did* study Hebrew or Greek, but who have long since forsaken their skills. If I may appropriate the wording of Hebrews 5, they are those who, in fact, though they ought by this time to be teachers, need someone to teach them the elementary principles of λύω and *qātal* all over again—who need milk, not solid food!

Sometimes the languages are denigrated unconsciously. How often do you hear people making snide remarks about or groaning over the horrendous burden it was to learn Hebrew—all the hours they devoted to learning Greek—implying in their comments that it wasn’t worth it, that there were more important things to study than Greek and Hebrew. Some students have heard so many of these statements that they approach their first year language courses with dread at such an impossible requirement.

Now it is true that it is easier to memorize John 3:16 in English than to learn your vocabulary and verb forms in Greek. But is that unexpected? Is it a bad thing for the Seminary to require that you take Greek and Hebrew? Would you go to a surgeon who thought that Anatomy 101 was too difficult? Who decided that Cardio-Vascular Systems was best forgotten as soon as he graduated? Who learned just enough of Anesthesia 101 to pass the course? Who thought that Pharmacology wasn’t very important?

And yet you are handling the Word of God! How you understand a passage makes an *eternal* difference. Is it an indicative or an imperative? An aorist subjunctive or a perfect participle? A Qal imperfect or a Hiphil Jussive? Are those items of little importance? Is it OK to gloss over such details? To trust an English translation when you *could* read it as God wrote it? Listen to Martin Luther’s words: The biblical languages are “the sheath in which the sword of the Spirit is contained.” “It is inevitable that unless the languages remain, the gospel must finally perish.” He goes on to say that

There is a vast difference therefore between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture.... A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without languages. Now there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough. Hence languages are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian church.

Since it becomes Christians then to make good use of the Holy Scriptures as their one and only book and it is a sin and a shame not to know our own book or to understand the speech and words of our God, it is a still greater sin and loss that we do not study languages, especially in these days when God is offering and giving us men and books and every facility and inducement to this study, and desires his Bible to be an open book.

For there is great danger in speaking of things of God in a different manner and in different terms than God himself employs. [Speaking of preachers in his own day who denigrated the languages, he said:] In short, they may lead saintly lives and teach sacred things among themselves, but so long as they remain without the languages they cannot but lack what all the rest lack, namely, the ability to treat Scripture with certainty and thoroughness and to be useful to other nations. Because they could do this, but will not, they have to figure out for themselves how they will answer for it to God.²⁸

Those words are as true today as they were in the 16th century.²⁹

There are a number of other awards that I could present. For time's sake, I can only list a few with some brief indication of the criteria for nominations.

The Bunny Rabbit Award...

I would present to those who are capable of including an exceptional number of bunny trails in their remarks—things that are only tangential to the point of the text.

The "Alligator" Award...

might be bestowed on those who exhibit special ability in allegorizing the text.

The Technology Award...

is presented to those who use technology in such a way as to draw special attention to the technology itself (or their ability [or inability!] to use it).³⁰

²⁸ Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524); available on-line at the following URL: < <http://faculty.bbc.edu/RDecker/luther.htm>>.

²⁹ The comments of Scott Hafemann about the importance of the biblical languages for preaching are well worth reading: "The *SBJT* Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 (1999): 86–89.

³⁰ It is not wrong to use technological tools in preaching, but the technology itself should never receive the attention. Learn to use it as transparently as possible or don't use it at all. Focus on the Word. That sometimes requires that these tools be used only for selected parts of the presentation. If you had attended the public presentation of this lecture, you might have noticed that there was a very deliberate distinction at this point. The introduction and the "awards" were accompanied by PowerPoint slides, but the first major section that focused on the importance and gravity of the pastor's responsibility in preaching the Word did not.

The “Majors” Award...

might be presented to those who are uniquely able to major on the most insignificant details in the text (e.g., Paul picking up sticks in Acts 28 supposedly teaches us that we should serve humbly!).

The Application Award...

is merited by those with the uncanny ability to read a text and immediately discern the proper application of it with no need to be encumbered by the original setting and meaning; for whom exegesis seems to get in the way of “relevant” preaching.

I earned the Homogenization Award...

in the first sermon I ever preached in a homiletics class, though I don’t appear to have exhausted the competition in this category! This award is earned by preachers with the ability to homogenize parallel passages and discover that they really are identical after all. (When I did that, my prof rebuked me soundly for doing so! He was right.)

The Illustration Award...

is presented to those who become so captivated by a unique and powerful illustration that the illustration becomes the basis for their sermon or their application rather than the text. Once they are captivated by their marvelous illustration (and some are quite good), they can no longer see the text clearly. The illustration determines the meaning of the text.³¹

And finally the Gematria Award...

would go to the pulpiteer who shows the most creative use of numbers, names, or colors. The symbolism of the text overshadows the plain and clear meaning of the passage. (I must say that such items are very seldom exegetically significant, and when they are, the text itself points that out.)

I must say a bit more about my final award.

The GRAND Prize...

... is presented for a sermon that demonstrated proficiency in not just one category, but was clearly outstanding in multiple categories. That award goes to a sermon that I heard recently on Gen. 5:24. The text? “And he walked with God.” In that sermon, we visited the Garden... and learned more about the preacher’s garden in Iowa than Eden. We visited the wilderness... nicely allegorized and illustrated with heart-wrenching stories of human tragedy that the preacher had experienced in his own life. We visited the mountain... and didn’t learn much... either because he was running out of time, or perhaps he just didn’t have much to say. We visited the miraculous... and discovered that the “storm” wasn’t much different than the “wilderness.” (Once you

³¹ A variation on this award might be designated as the architectural award—presented to those who can build the largest number of stories on the smallest textual foundation. These are sometimes called “skyscraper sermons”—one story on another.

start allegorizing, you can make just about any text say what you want it to say!) None of his comments had anything to do with Gen. 5:24 or the context of the other texts that we visited. He skipped all over the Bible and collected isolated snippets of texts. He did tell more funny stories, and used more good puns than I've heard in a long time, but *he never preached the Bible!* He was an excellent speaker; he was a horrible preacher.

Conclusion

Let me be very clear that this is not a “style” issue. I am not criticizing any particular style of preaching. There are many ways to preach the Bible ... Many ways to “package” it.³² The issue is *content*. What do we put in the package? If you bought a package of hamburger at the meat market and discovered when you fried it for supper that most of it was fat and bones—that there were only a few small scraps of meat—you'd be outraged. You would complain to the manager that you have been defrauded. You had paid for meat and been sold a package of fat. Yet how many Christians go to church each week for meat—for the Bible—and end up with bones instead? I must agree with John Stott that “all true Christian preaching is expository preaching.”³³

³² A biblical, expository sermon will differ greatly in style whether one is preaching the epistles, narrative, a parable, the proverbs, or prophecy. A very few may need to be packaged topically (some of the Proverbs, perhaps). Others may lend themselves to a story-telling format, perhaps even a first person dramatization (as John Reed—and Alan Ingalls—have been known to do). A verse-by-verse approach is appropriate for much of Scripture (and all can be done that way). There are many different factors that determine the *way* in which exposition is implemented, but in every case the sermon must be a biblical sermon—it must expound the text in its context or it is invalid preaching and carries no divine authority. As Mark Dever puts it, “Expositional preaching is not simply producing a verse by verse commentary from the pulpit. Rather, *expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the point of the sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture*” (“Expositional Preaching as a Mark of a Healthy Church,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]: 60–61). Lest I be misunderstood, let me be very blunt: topical and textual sermons are rarely appropriate, and even less often biblical. I first heard it from Bill Arp about 30 years ago, though he tells me that it should be attributed to Walter Kaiser: never preach more than one topical sermon a year, and confess your sin as soon as you're finished! That is, of course, somewhat “tongue-in-cheek,” but a bit of hyperbole helps make the point—and it probably isn't nearly as hyperbolic as some think!

³³ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 125. As he goes on to say, “To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor [pries] open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is ‘imposition’, which is to impose on the text what is not there.... What matters is what we do with it. Whether [the text] is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said. ... Exposition ... restricts us to the scriptural text.... The very first qualification of expositors is the recognition that we are guardians of a sacred ‘deposit’ of truth, ‘trustees’ of the gospel, ‘stewards of the mysteries of God’.... ‘The Christian preacher has a boundary set for him. When he enters the pulpit he is not an entirely free man.... It is a great thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel!’” (125-27; the embedded quote is from Donald Coggan, *Stewards of Grace* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958), 46, 48).

To do any less or any different is to pervert the Word of God and pass off bones and fat as the meat of God's truth.³⁴

Suggestions for further reading: In addition to the works that I've cited in this paper, I would recommend a few others to you that will help you think about how to preach and how to keep your sermons biblical. You may not agree with everything, but it is valuable reading.

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

Greidanus, Sidney. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

Liefeld, Walter L. *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

³⁴ Though many of us may never have a written ministry as extensive nor an influential so substantial as Calvin, may we, at the end of our ministry, be able to say as he did, "I have endeavored, both in my sermons and also in my writings and commentaries, to preach the word purely and chastely, and faithfully to interpret His sacred Scriptures" (from John Calvin's last will and testament; cited by John Piper, "The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin, The Man and His Preaching," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3 [1999]:12–13).