Chapter 1 

What to Preach?

In the beginning was the Word . . . —John 1:1

Logos

The first passage of Scripture I ever translated from Greek to English over forty years ago when I was still a college student was the prologue to the Gospel of John. The opening line in 1:1 reads, *En archÐ Ðn ho logos*, which translates into, "In the beginning was the Word." After all of these years, that phrase continues to echo and resound in my heart—"In the beginning was the Word." I begin this book where John began his Gospel, where all preachers should begin their sermon preparation—in the beginning must be the Word.

Every sermon should be focused upon a specific message or lesson that is anchored in Scripture and transmitted to a congregation. That is the use of "the word" as spelled with a lowercase "w"—a word *from* God. In Scripture, there are a multitude of such "words." However, sermons should also be centered upon "the Word," spelled with an uppercase "W." Christian sermons should be centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ—who is the Word *of* God. Sermons should speak of Christ, elevate Christ, and point people to the teachings and blessings that reside in Christ. In sermons, therefore, preachers bring together a different word each week and the unchanging Word that is worshiped week after week.

The use of the word *logos* ("word") in John 1:1 calls to mind Aristotle's use of the same Greek word in his discussion on rhetoric where he talks about *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*.[1] A shorthand version of Aristotle's approach to rhetoric or public speaking would state, first, that when we stand to speak we need to have something to say that is worth saying (*logos*). Second, if it is worth saying, then it is worth saying well (*pathos*). Third, it does not matter how well something of importance is said if the person doing the talking is not a person of integrity whose conduct contradicts the message being declared (*ethos*).

In Greek, *logos* can have a range of nuances—word, logic, rationale, or idea. When the terminology of Aristotle is translated into the terminology of this study, the word *logos* represents the content or claim of the sermon. *Logos* constitutes what the sermon is about. That is the equivalent of the question, "What to preach?" which will be central to this chapter. In the second and third chapters, we will pay attention to Aristotle's treatment of *pathos* and *ethos*. But for now we begin where John and Aristotle begin: with the word of the sermon.

What Is a Sermonic Claim?

The phrase "sermonic claim" is meant to imply that a sermon ought to do one of the following things: assert something that is significant, ask for something that is substantial to the point requiring personal or communal commitment, or advocate for something that is sacred and deeply spiritual. Let me set forth a description of preaching that seeks to focus on this idea of a sermonic claim:

> Every sermon needs to make *one* clear, compelling, biblically centered, and contextually relevant claim that sets some aspect of God's will and God's word before some specific segment of God's people. This is done with the hope that those people will be challenged, informed, corrected, or encouraged as a result of the word set before them that day.

Plainly stated, the sermonic claim is the essence of what any sermon is about. It is the central truth or teaching of that sermon. It is a creative and engaging combination of what the biblical text says, how that message is communicated by the preacher, and some direction as regards what the listeners are being asked to do as a result of hearing that sermon. What is being referred to here as the sermonic claim

has been discussed and/or defined by other teachers of homiletics as well as by leading preachers who have consider this idea of the sermon being focused on "one clear, compelling, biblically centered, and contextually relevant claim." Haddon Robinson calls it "the main point or the big idea of the sermon."[2] Samuel Proctor calls it "the proposition or the relevant question."[3] What we are holding together in the phrase "sermonic claim"—what the sermon says and what the sermon is intended to do—Thomas G. Long discusses in terms of the "focus" and "function" of the sermon.[4]

Fred Craddock is especially helpful when he refers to this idea of a sermonic claim as "the theme" of the sermon that the preacher should be able to state in one simple sentence. He reminds the preacher that in shaping a sermon one is not only determining what *will* be said in that sermon, one is also deciding what *will not* be said, at least not in that sermon. Craddock helpfully warns the preacher that the biblical text(s) we use for a sermon may hold more than one significant message that could be usefully explored and examined. It is rare that any one sermon can be shaped so that it allows all of that material and all of those possible insights to be covered.[5] That is where the sermonic claim comes in; it helps sort through all of the things that *could* be said in any one sermon, and helps to narrow the preacher's focus down to what *should* and *will* be said in this particular sermon. As Craddock points out, there is a benefit for both the preacher and the congregation when the sermon has a single focus. He says: "To aim at nothing is to miss everything, but to be specific and clear in one's presentation is to make direct contact with many whose ages, circumstances, and apparent needs have are widely divergent. Listeners to sharply focused sermons have an amazing capacity to perceive that the sermon was prepared with them specifically in mind."[6]

The sermonic claim is not one of the many parts of the sermon. It is the basic assertion that is being made in the sermon. In fact, all of the parts of the sermon should be coordinated so that they all support, and in no way conflict with or obscure that basic assertion. Every sermon will undoubtedly have multiple parts or sections, such as an introduction, imagery, applications, and a conclusion. However, each of these components is important only insofar as they serve a common purpose, specifically helping listeners focus on the sermonic claim.

The introduction should be interesting to the point of being intriguing, but its true value is in its setting the sermon in context for the major claim that is about to be stated. Imagery is not meant to be an anecdotal diversion from the main theme of the sermon. Rather, it should serve to bring clarity and a keener comprehension of the point set forth in the sermonic claim. Applications are the places in the sermon when the relevance of the sermonic claim is being made to those who are hearing the sermon. They demonstrate why it is important that people listen to and act upon what they are hearing in the sermon. Conclusions are not simply meant to bring the sermon to an end. Rather, the conclusion is meant to refocus attention on the central sermonic claim that has just been explored, and then hint at or clearly state what the preacher hopes the listeners will do as a result of having heard the sermon. All elements of the sermon should flow out of and be in service to a singular sermonic claim.

While it may sound simple to write out a simple, declarative sentence that will focus the content of the sermon, the task is quite difficult, given the responsibility of the preacher to bring together a word with the Word. Sermons should spring up from and bear forth the great themes embedded in the Scriptures—justice, grace, the sovereignty of God, the divinity of Christ, the sinful nature of humanity, discipleship, stewardship, the authority of Scripture, and the work of missions and evangelism throughout the world. Sermons should emerge from the heart-wrenching questions and concerns that reside within the congregation and within the life of the preacher as well. Sermons should help people bridge the gap between the faith they hold dear and the troubling events they hear about in the news.

The sermonic claim we develop must challenge people concerning things that are important to their faith and to their lives. It should not be based upon things that do not matter as people are attempting to navigate their way through life. It should not engage things that are irrelevant or inconsequential. Preachers should always try to deal with things that can make a serious, positive difference in the lives of those who hear your sermons, the church in which they gather, and the world in which they live.

When I was growing up in Chicago, Illinois, in the 1950s and 1960s it was not uncommon to hear one person insult or criticize another with the phrase, "He/she ain't about nothing." There was no more dismissive or demeaning statement that one person could direct against another

than to say the person this. To say this meant that the person in question was not worthy of much attention and should not be expected to produce much in the way of accomplishment. "He/she ain't about nothing" suggested that the person in question should not be taken seriously or expected to have anything significant to contribute to any discussion or the resolution of any problem. Too many sermons on too many Sundays "ain't about nothing." Too many sermons are limited to superficial or simplistic considerations that make no real difference or have no substantive bearing on the great issues of life.

Sermons ought to be about things that are biblically and theologically compelling. Sermons ought to be about things that are intellectually challenging and engaging. Sermons ought to be about things that are contextually and personally relevant and applicable to the lives of those who hear the word on any given day.

Sermonic Claims Sunday after Sunday

If every sermon ought to have a biblically centered message that is culturally relevant and designed to challenge, inform, or encourage those who hear them, then the next issue that needs to be addressed is how preachers can efficiently arrive at preaching material that meets that goal. Preachers need to establish some system or methodology for text and topic selection. Such a system allows the preacher to move quickly from the open-ended question, "What to preach?" in general to the more compelling question of what to say regarding the specific biblical text or preaching topic that has been selected or assigned.

Choosing your approach needs to be more than following your hunches from week to week or hoping for some news that can get your creative juices flowing. While you should be able to adjust to major events when they occur, such events will likely not occur every week. Without a reliable system the likelihood is that preachers will operate within too narrow a field of texts and topics, within their theological, pastoral, or ethical comfort zone. Only some systematic approach to text and topic selection can rescue preaching from that trap. There are several systems that can be employed either as a preacher's sole approach to text and topic selection, or as they are interspersed with one another over the course of a year's preaching in order to have the greatest chance of "proclaiming the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

The Lectionary

The first method of text and topic selection that will be discussed when a preacher is considering what to preach next is the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary is a list of predetermined texts for each Sunday taken from the Old Testament, the Psalter, the Gospels, and the New Testament (usually an epistle) for three cycles through the liturgical year (Advent, Christmas, Sundays after Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Sundays after Pentecost). It leads the preacher in a journey across the canon. The lectionary is a reminder to preachers that the Bible consists of sixty-six books with a wide array of literary genres or types, and the search for preaching material should not be limited to those with which the preacher is most familiar or most comfortable. Pastors should be willing to examine and preach from every area of the canon. Preachers who are comfortable with preaching on Romans will be invited to consider the content of Ruth and Revelation as well. The Revised Common Lectionary will take preachers into passages and preaching topics that would never have considered otherwise.

While the most immediate benefit of the lectionary is the balance it brings to the work of the preacher, there is another great benefit as well. You cannot underestimate or undervalue the time the lectionary saves those preachers who face every Monday morning with the agonizing question of what to do next Sunday. That step has already been covered by these preassigned readings. The preacher is now free to devote maximum time to the larger and more substantive question of what to say about any one or all of those four texts. Instead of the harried search for a text or a topic for next week, the preacher who follows the lectionary can get down to the hard work of preparing "one clear, compelling, biblically centered, culturally relevant claim that sets some aspect of God's word before some specific segment of God's people."

In fairness, there are some preachers who have cautioned against too great a dependence upon the lectionary, believing that by following a preselected group of texts the preacher is robbed of both creativity and spontaneity in the search for relevant preaching material. For example, Ernest Campbell, a preacher and teacher of great note, has written that "the aim of the lectionary is coverage whereas the aim of preaching ought to be relevance.[7] He worries that when the preacher is locked into a blind adherence to an assigned text from

week to week the preacher may miss a "teachable moment" if and when some unexpected event should occur that might open up a wonderful opportunity for creative preaching.[8] Let me set forth several other methods for text and topic selection that will assist preachers in quickly deciding what to preach and what sermonic claim to make without losing spontaneity or creativity.

Following the Liturgical Calendar

Even though the lectionary is closely related to the liturgical calendar, one may follow the doctrinal and seasonal themes associated with the church year without using the lectionary. The thematically focused seasons extend from Advent through Pentecost.

Advent includes the four Sunday prior to Christmas. During this season the sermons can focus on texts in Micah or Isaiah that anticipated the coming of the Messiah and how the Gospel writers linked the birth of Christ to that expectation. Attention can also be given to texts in Acts and 1 Thessalonians that look ahead to the second coming of Christ as well.

The liturgical emphasis moves next to *Christmas* and the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. That season of preaching should not be limited to the familiar passages in Matthew and Luke that take us to Bethlehem and to the manger and the shepherds. Christmas is also a time to consider the prologue in John 1:1-14 and Paul's only apparent reference to the birth of Christ found in Galatians 4:4.

The last day of Christmastide is *Epiphany*, the time when the story about Christ first being revealed to the three Magi is now shared throughout the world. The Sundays that follow Epiphany would do well to focus on evangelism and global ministry, as well as issues dealing with God's sovereignty over the whole of creation. In addition to the primary Epiphany text in Matthew 2:1-12, texts such as John 4, about the Samaritan woman who tells her village about Christ, and Acts 8, where an Ethiopian eunuch carries the message back to his home country, can be considered.

The mood shifts dramatically when Lent arrives and the church is invited into a season of introspection. *Lent* begins on Ash Wednesday, which is followed by seven weeks focused on issues of self-examination, the sinful nature of humanity, our need for salvation, and themes of fasting and self-denial as spiritual disciplines that can draw us closer

to God. Lent is not simply giving up some favorite food for forty or fifty days and then going right back to it after Easter. Instead, Lent invites the listeners to take some of the time they have freed up as a result of their fasting to focus on some of the spiritual disciplines they may have been ignoring, such as prayer, Bible study, meditation, and self-examination of one's soul and of one's relationship with God. The Psalms and the way they focus prayer and spirituality in many directions can be especially helpful for preaching during this season of the year.

The next stop on the liturgical calendar is *Holy Week* and the themes that run from the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday through the crucifixion of Christ on the cross as the atonement for the sins of the world. Of course, there is much that takes place between those two events that might become the focus of preaching throughout the week.

Lent and Holy Week give way to the *season of Easter*, which is called the Great Fifty Days, extending from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. On Easter Sunday we can preach not only on the stores of the empty tomb but also on theological reflection on the resurrection, such as is found in 1 Corinthians 15. And the celebration of the resurrection need not be a one-day event. The implications of the resurrection and God's victory over death can be considered throughout Eastertide. The Sundays following Easter are marvelous opportunities to preach on such issues as what we believe about life after death, God's power that extends even to the grave, the question of faith in the face of the mystery of resurrection, and the many other wonders and miracles mentioned in the Bible. Such themes lead well into *Pentecost* and the celebration of the birth of the Christian church as reported in Acts 2. This celebration can be followed with several Sundays used to cover the many themes that emerge as a result of Pentecost. There is the doctrine of the Trinity and the role and work of the Holy Spirit (Trinity Sunday is the first Sunday after Pentecost). There is the unique issue of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples and the issue of speaking in tongues or glossolalia that is of such great importance to many in the Pentecostal and charismatic communities. It also points to the multinational composition of that first congregation vs. the homogeneous composition of most contemporary churches. Finally, it forces us to consider the communal life that was established among

those early believers, and how that compares and contrasts with how we in the modern church care for and share with one another.

Lectio Continua

Any discussion of preaching that touches upon the use of the lectionary or following the liturgical calendar should be followed by a brief reference to an approach to preaching, popularized by preachers of the Reformation era, called *lectio continua,* which simply means preaching straight through all or some significant portion of the Bible. Harold T. Bryson helpfully observes that "To preach *from* a book is different than preaching *through* a book. . . . To *cover* a book is to preach extensively from it. *Coverage* means to select texts and topics."[9] *Lectio continua* invites preachers to adopt this more expository approach to preaching and simply preach from one verse to the next; from one chapter to the next; from one book to the next; from the Old Testament straight into the New Testament; without leaving out or skipping over any troublesome passage along the way.

One might want to begin the use of *lectio continua* with a less ambitious goal than preaching through the entire Bible. Preaching through one of the Old Testament prophets or through one of the Gospels might be a good place to start. The same could be said for preaching through one of the epistles of Paul, Peter, or John. The *lectio continua* approach runs the risk of becoming tedious if the preacher returns the listeners to the same biblical material for too many weeks in a row. The preacher must take care when using this approach to be sure that each sermon in a long series is a fresh contribution and not just a restatement of material being rehashed over and over again. Bryson is helpful at this point as well when he observes, "The audience does not need to be brought up to date on previous sermons in the series. Each sermon should be designed for that particular day."[10]

Another way to use the *lectio continua* approach to preaching is to place a limit on how many weeks or months one will employ this approach before switching to some other method of text and topic selection. One leading proponent of this approach to preaching is Hughes Oliphant Old, who became persuaded about the use of *lectio continua* by reviewing the preaching of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Remembering that the Reformers and many more contemporary preachers like Donald Barnhouse, Charles Spurgeon, or John R. W.

Stott might spend years preaching through some continuous section of Scripture, it is useful to hear Old state that in his own approach to preaching "I rarely preach more than a dozen sermons on a book in a series."[11]

It should also be remembered that many of the reformers preached every day, unlike most contemporary preachers that might preach only once or twice each week. Calvin and Zwingli could accomplish in one week what could take us two months to accomplish. Nevertheless, despite the need to give careful attention to how long one might want to follow this approach to preaching there is great benefit in making occasional use of the *lectio continua* approach to preaching.

Preaching and the National Calendar

In addition to following the liturgical calendar, the claims made by our sermons can be informed by the themes and observances that flow out of the major holidays and special emphases associated with the national calendar of events. Preachers can appropriate secular celebration as occasions to make a Christ-centered claim. The minds of most people are already open to the themes and topics for those special days, and the preacher can help to sharpen and even shape the focus.

However, preachers who relate sermons to national celebrations need to beware the possibility of drifting into a form of civil religion so well described by Robert Bellah and others,[12] and so blatantly employed by many televangelists in recent years who invented the term "patriot pastors."[13] American patriotism and Christian piety are not synonymous terms. National holidays can be a good time to point out the differences between the Christian faith and contemporary American political maneuvering. As an editorial in *Christianity Today* stated: "George W. Bush is not God. The Declaration of Independence is not an infallible guide to Christian faith and practice. . . . The American flag is not the cross. The Pledge of Allegiance is not the creed. God bless America is not the doxology."[14] The idea of speaking truth to power is an appropriate way to shape a sermonic claim in relation to the national calendar. God is the sovereign of the whole creation and wants to bless all the nations of the earth, not just America.

Let's consider some of the major holidays to which sermons can relate.[15]

The secular calendar begins on January 1 with *New Year's Day*. This celebration allows for an opportunity to consider innumerable topics such as unfinished business, new beginnings, time is marching on, we have come this far by faith, and being willing to walk by faith and not by sight into an uncertain future.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the third Monday in January, is a wonderful opportunity to explore themes related to King's concerns about racism, poverty, militarism, and violence. King ceased to be only a civil rights leader, and became a cutting-edge social critic when he began discussing the redistribution of wealth in America and called for the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, D.C., in 1968. His advocacy for the garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee, was as much about economics as it was about race. His opposition to the Vietnam War was driven by his opposition to violence on the one hand, and by his belief that the money spent to fight the war in Southeast Asia would have been better spent fighting the War on Poverty that President Lyndon Johnson had declared in 1965.

While *Valentine's Day* (February 14) is traditionally celebrated with candy and flowers, preachers should not hand this day or the definition of love over to advertisers and merchandisers. *Love* is a word we should fight to redefine according to biblical principles. On the Sunday nearest Valentine's a sermon could shift the discussion from *eros*, or the emotional and sentimental passions shared by lovers, to the more demanding forms of love revealed in the Greek language, such as *phileo* that challenges us to love and care for our neighbors, and *agape* that points us to that self-sacrificing form of love that God revealed on the cross with Jesus.

Memorial Day (the last Monday in May) offers a range of pastoral issues worth considering in the pulpit: death, grief, loneliness, and longing for those we have loved and lost. The holiday allows us to remember not only those who have been killed in one of our nation's wars, but also anyone killed in the line of duty—police officers, firefighters, paramedics—as well as family and friends who have died. Moreover, the day's focus reminds us of our own mortality. Preachers who lift up these themes at times other than at funerals empower congregants to better sustain themselves when the death of a loved one rolls around.

Independence Day (the Fourth of July) is rich with possible sermonic claims about the nature of freedom, the role and authority of government, the constant threat of tyranny that endangers democracy, the equal worth of every person, and a reminder that freedom and liberty are often purchased and maintained at a very high cost in human suffering and sacrifice. One might also shape a sermonic claim around freedom in Christ and God's sovereignty over our country and world.

Labor Day is celebrated on the first Monday in September and lifts up themes that link the dignity of human labor with receiving a fair wage for one's efforts. With jobs in the United States being outsourced increasingly, with the shift in the economy from a manufacturing-based world to an information-based world, Labor Day allows many angles from which several important issues can be considered. What about a "living-wage ordinance" for our public employees? What are the implications of unionization in a world where nonunionized Wal-Mart is the single largest employer? How do Christians who believe in the sovereignty of God respond to the fact that most products once made in the United States are now made in China, and most service jobs once performed in the United States are now being performed in India?

Columbus Day (second Monday in October) and *St. Patrick's Day* (March 17) provide preachers with an opportunity to focus on issues of ethnic pride on the one hand and issues of racial and ethnic intolerance on the other hand. Columbus Day reminds us of the events of 1492 and the arrival of Europeans into the New World of the Americas. For all of the courage and valor of the explorers who risked their lives to make that voyage, the story also includes glimpses into human sin marked by greed for gold and the genocide that eventually consumed millions of Native Americans from Canada to Chile and from Hawaii to Hispaniola.

Veterans' Day (November 11) is a good time to honor those who served during one of our nation's war as well as those who served during peacetime. It is a time to remember the human and financial costs of war and to ask ourselves whether that is how God wants to see us expend our resources. It is a time to ask about the very nature of war in a world that is marked by nationless terrorist groups, unstable political regimes that have access to nuclear weapons, and about the

eschatological vision of both Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:4 of a day when nations will "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, . . . and study war no more."

Thanksgiving Day (fourth Thursday in November) very nearly speaks for itself as we pause to focus on the manifold blessings that God has bestowed upon this country. On the one hand, preachers could take a "count your blessings" approach, reminding hearers of the many reasons we all have to give thanks. On the other hand, the sermon could also shift from giving thanks to giving to others in response to how much has been given to us.

Preaching a Rotation of Doctrinal and Theological Themes

The question, "What to preach?" requires that special attention be given to the role of doctrinal preaching. For the last half-century, preachers and scholars have focused on the importance of including doctrine as a required part of the preacher's schedule. An earlier generation of preachers would have been familiar with the work of the British New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd, who observed that the preaching of the early church focused largely on a body of teachings or doctrines called the *kerygma* (Greek for "proclamation").[16] Included in those doctrines that were meant to be shared with or announced to the world were a group of theological themes deemed essential for a person who desired to have a comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith. These included the doctrines of incarnation (God was in Christ), the mission and ministry of Jesus (the things Jesus said and did), the suffering and death of Christ (the work of atonement and redemption on the cross of Calvary), the resurrection of Christ from the dead, the mission and ministry of the church in the world as witnesses (*marturias* in the Greek or "martyrs for Christ" in Acts 1:8), and the eschatological end of time or the second coming of Christ.

Such doctrinal preaching was abandoned for awhile but recently some scholars of various theological orientations have argued for the explication of theology in the pulpit once again.[17] As Robert Smith Jr., in his book *Doctrine That Dances,* states:

> While doctrine may exist to make preaching as disciplined as it needs to be, doctrine's mission is to be a servant to proclamation. Doctrine's purpose is not merely to be derived, constructed, and formalized and to remain in the

> archives of academia for scholarly use only. Rather, doctrine is the possession of the church and must be preached. Preaching extracts its communicative strength from the reservoirs of doctrine and draws its riches from the wells of its truths. The doctrine behind and below the sermon gives it stability.[18]

In an age marked by unfamiliarity with biblical content, it is equally likely that the average churchgoer has little if any familiarity with the basic doctrinal and theological beliefs of the Christian faith. Preachers can do much to address and resolve this problem by systematically working through themes such as these either during some set period of time during the year or interspersed over the course of a year's preaching. The easiest way to begin is to give some attention to the doctrinal traditions of your denomination/tradition.

The Sermonic Claim and the Individual Sermon

Having a system for planning sermons from Sunday to Sunday will save preachers time each week as they begin the sermon-preparation process. But the process of actually beginning to develop a sermonic claim for each particular sermon still needs further discussion. There are a number of possible starting points.

Starting with the Bible

Because preachers aim to offer congregations a "biblically centered and contextually relevant" word, sermon preparation often begins with a text. Preachers will never have to worry about what to preach when they begin by giving consideration to the rich resources of biblical material—a reservoir of preaching that speaks to every imaginable aspect of human experience awaits any preacher who develops a systematic way of looking directly to the Bible for the claims and content of their sermons. Preachers should look and listen closely to the teachings, parables, doctrines, prophetic oracles, human encounters, miraculous moments, and character flaws and foibles so candidly and honestly revealed in the lives of characters recorded in the Bible. There are lessons to be learned in the Bible about the divine-human encounter and about the struggle of living godly lives in a sinful world. The Bible talks about a God who can sustain and deliver people who are facing hopeless and desperate situations. It deals with issues of

immigration and the mass movement of populations of people. One cannot read about the story of Israel that begins with "a wandering Aramean" and continues with them being an essentially migrant or nomadic population and not see the connection it establishes with the millions of people in our world today who have chosen or been forced to become migrants. The Bible addresses oppression and war and as such can speak to the personal, national, and international cost of such violence. The Bible does not shy away from issues of racial prejudice, and as such it has much to say to a society still deeply divided by race and ethnicity born out of hundreds of years of African slavery, the exploitation and destruction of Native Americans, and/or the recent rise of anti-Islamic sentiment.

A sermonic claim can emerge when a preacher looks and listens to the Scriptures for questions and answers that mirror and shed light on twenty-first-century concerns, issues, and events. Preachers would do well to look to Scripture as the most regular and reliable source of preaching material. It will not take long before the issue of what to preach moves from not knowing *where to look* for a sermon idea, to not knowing *what to do* with all the ideas that can emerge out of the careful review of any passage of Scripture.

While the movement for sermon preparation is usually from "biblically centered" to "culturally relevant," it can go in the opposite direction. The following options explore this movement.

Starting with the Drama of Human Life

The sermonic claim can arise out of the heart-wrenching questions that reside within the life of the congregation, including the life of the preacher. Is there really life after death? Why did I contract HIV, cancer, or some other life-threatening disease when I have been living a good, Christian life? How do I redefine my worth and my identity now that I have lost my job as a result of downsizing or corporate takeovers, or lost my breast as a result of a mastectomy? If I get a divorce from an abusive spouse can I remarry without being considered an adulterer? What should I do if my children do not choose to embrace this Christian faith that has meant so much to me?

While it is possible that questions such as these could be addressed when the preacher begins with the biblical text and looks for points of application, what is being suggested here is that sometimes the

preacher can start with these emotional questions and concerns and then connect them to a biblical text that faithfully addresses the issues at hand. Frankly, this is how most people who hear our sermons come to the Scriptures. They are led there by their pain and their problems. There is some trial or trouble already at work in their lives and they wonder if the Bible in particular and the Christian faith in general can provide them with any assistance or direction.

This approach to preaching is as old as Jeremiah 37:17, where King Zedekiah is facing the possible conquest of his nation by the Babylonians and is in search of some direction. He brings Jeremiah from his imprisonment in a dungeon into the king's palace and asks him, "Is there any word from the LORD?" The same phenomenon is as true for us in the twenty-first century C.E. as it was for Zedekiah in the seventh century B.C.E. People come to worship with all their troubles and worries, asking, "Is there any word from the Lord?" Pastors will have an insider's knowledge of some of the deeply troubling questions and concerns alive within their congregation. All of their real-life questions can be the starting point for a sermon as the preacher searches the Scriptures for guidance, correction, or assurance for people who are caught up in the trials and temptations of daily life.

Haddon Robinson speaks to this approach to preaching in his classic book, *Biblical Preaching,* in which he says:

> The expositor must also be aware of the currents swirling across his [*sic*] own times, for each generation develops out of its own history and culture and speaks its own language. A minister may stand before a congregation and deliver exegetically accurate sermons, scholarly and organized, but dead and powerless because they ignore the life-wrenching problems and questions of the hearers.[19]

Starting with Current Events

Another source of preaching material arises from the headlines of the morning newspapers. There is concern about the war on terror, upcoming elections, climate change, the spread of highly contagious diseases, and the millions of people who may have to face that reality without medical insurance. There are regular reports of terrorist attacks, fears about illegal immigration, deep concerns about the shifting composition of the U.S. Supreme Court and what that means for

women's reproductive rights or affirmative action. Each day brings sad news about the reemergence of nooses and swastikas and the presence of hate groups and their hate crimes.

The one thing that our preaching should never lose is spontaneity and the ability either to focus upon or make some meaningful reference to events that may explode onto the national headlines or into a local community which could never have been anticipated when a schedule of preaching was being considered. Even if the preacher follows the lectionary there needs to be a way to incorporate into sermons those unexpected events that deserve and even demand some attention. Do not be so wedded to any system of text and topic selection that you cannot either break away from it in order to focus on some significant current events, or at the very least find a way to reference those events in the context of the sermon that had already been planned.

On the Sunday after September 11, 2001, every responsible preacher across America felt it important to break away from whatever their preplanned preaching schedule was, in order to preach a sermon that could put those catastrophic events in some biblical perspective—whether the preacher attempted to shape the sermon so as to assume a posture of pro-American sympathy for what appeared to be an unprovoked attack, or to view the events of that day within the context of the last quarter-century or so of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Many African American pastors faced this very challenge when racially charged issues emerged in the tiny town of Jena, Louisiana, between September of 2006 and September of 2007. On the Sunday either before or after the march on September 20, 2007, that brought sixty thousand people to that town of three thousand residents, a sermon on stewardship or the authority of Scripture would have been out of place in light of those events that demanded some word that spoke to the continuing challenge of race relations in the United States. Some preachers may have approached that day in complete sympathy with the so-called Jena 6. Others might have wondered how things might have been different if six black students had decided not to beat and stomp one white student, or how the first trial might have been different if the black people in Jena who were called for jury duty had shown up and been willing to serve. No matter which direction

the sermon took, the challenge was to avoid simply preaching "about Jena," and to ask the question, What does our faith in Christ demand from us as a result of the events in that small town?[20]

Starting with Congregational Life

A similar starting point to the two just described involves issues, initiatives, and individual struggles going on within the life of the church itself at both the national and local levels. What does it mean to be Baptist or Lutheran or United Methodist at a time of rapid growth among nondenominational churches meeting in "worship centers" that do not display a cross and do not make reference to such biblical words as *sin* and *salvation*? What does it mean to be an Episcopalian at a time when the broader Anglican Church is reeling over the possibility of schism, driven by such issues as the ordination of openly gay clergy and an openly gay bishop? Sermons need to be shaped that help Christians think about their identity in Jesus Christ in a world that is increasingly secular on the one hand, and a world that is increasingly diverse in religious expression on the other hand. How do Christians navigate the waters between those who insist that America is "a Christian nation," and the fact that America is home to an increasing number of citizens who are adherents to Judaism, Islam, as well as to many other of the world's religions? The Bible can help shape sermons that can speak to those in this country who want to use the apparatus of organized religion in order to argue for certain public-policy positions on issues ranging from abortion to same-sex marriage to prayer in public schools.

Cleophus LaRue is helpful in thinking about the shift from church at denominational or national levels to the local level. Though his focus is primarily on preaching in the context of the black church, he offers some keen insights that have relevance for all cultural settings when it comes to sermons that speak to issues that involve what he calls the "maintenance of the institutional church."[21] His concerns range from sermons that focus on how to maintain the church's physical plant, to those practices that nurture spiritual formation, to insights on how church members should interact with one another. They include sermons on stewardship, missions and evangelistic activity, and faithfulness in church attendance. LaRue is correct when he observes that this kind of preaching "gives continued life and sustenance to the institutional church, which in turn reaffirms and upholds its participants."[22]

From Biblical Text to Sermonic Claim

Whether the question of "what to preach" starts with a biblical text, with a heart-wrenching question drawn from the drama of human life, some disturbing headline in the news, or an issue in church life, one thing remains the same—the sermon itself must be a message that is relevant to the lives and world of the listeners but which is rooted and centered in the exegesis of some biblical text. It is the informed use of Scripture as a source of authority in proclamation that distinguishes a sermon from the editorial page of a newspaper or a speech given by a policy maker. Either of those two could speak at length about such issues as nuclear war, world hunger, race relations, or the implications of columnist Thomas Friedman's observation that "the world is flat."[23] The editorial writer and the policymaker could base their statements on their personal opinions, on public-opinion polls, or on a particular political ideology that governs the newspaper's editorial page or the entity for which the policymaker is working. If that is all they did, no one would criticize them for how they went about their work.

That is not true for the preacher. It is not our personal opinion on any issue that is most important. It is not some well-informed update on the present status of any social or political issue that makes for an effective sermon. It should not be the liberal or conservative slant of the congregation, or of the preacher for that matter, that determines the content of the sermon on any given day. Rather, the sermon should be based upon the truths that are being taught and the lessons that can be learned from the biblical text that has been chosen or assigned for that day.

A sermon is that form of oral communication involving human beings in which our thoughts, beliefs, and what other noteworthy sources have said are all held up for scrutiny and analysis from the perspective of the Scriptures. Exegesis is the process by which the biblical text itself is held up for scrutiny so that we can more fully understand and appreciate its historical context, the meaning of its words and terms, the lessons that text intended to offer to its initial audience in antiquity, and the lessons it holds for us today.

This volume is not the place for a full-blown discussion about the importance of or the various methodologies for doing biblical exegesis.[24] Nevertheless, it would be impossible to talk about how to shape the claim of the sermon without talking to some degree about the role

that exegesis plays right from the start in the way in which sermons are shaped. Exegesis has the potential to help the preacher discover the message of the biblical text in such a way as to understand better how that ancient message can be presented and grasped in some contemporary context. To be an effective preacher requires that those who design and deliver sermons should cultivate their skills in biblical exegesis.

For many years I have operated with an approach to biblical exegesis that involves eight steps, each one of which begins with the letter L.[25] The first five of these steps involve the background work that results in the best possible understanding of the biblical text which is being used as the focus of the sermon. The final three steps (especially the eighth one) will involve the actual preparation of the sermon itself. It is largely during that eighth step that preachers will be shaping the claim of their sermon. I will briefly review the process as a whole to set up the discussion of the move from exegesis to sermonic claim, from discovering what the text says to determining what the preacher will say.

The first step is called *Limits,* which is the initial determination about the amount of biblical material that will be used as the basis of any sermon. The second step is *Literature,* which seeks to discover what literary genre is being considered; history, laws, prophecy, wisdom materials, Gospels, epistles, poetry, apocalyptic, or biographical. There is no single way to preach all forms of biblical literature. Understanding the way a biblical genre works will help to shape the way the content of the sermon should be shaped. *Language* is the third step, which involves the search for the most accurate wording of the biblical text that is being studied. This step involves the use of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic when such facility is available. Where familiarity with the tools for original language study does not exist, this step involves studying the text in multiple, authoritative translations. Careful study of the language of the text will help us understand the intended claim the author is making.

Location is the fourth step and it actually involves two separate considerations: the first involves studying the sociopolitical context in which the biblical passage is set (for instance, twelfth-century B.C.E. Egypt, Israel during the united kingdom, and first-century Judea under the rule of the Roman Empire). The second consideration involves the

sociopolitical context in which the sermon on that text is going to be preached (for example, a working-class, black, inner-city congregation or an affluent, suburban megachurch). To determine an appropriate sermonic claim, we need to explore the connection of circumstances between these two locations. What element(s) of the human condition is found in both?

The fifth step in the process is called *Links,* which asks the question of whether there are other biblical texts that must considered if the fullest understanding of the primary text is to be achieved. In many cases, the primary text upon which our sermons are based can be enhanced by looking at other relevant texts that shed light on the words used, the characters mentioned, the doctrines discussed, and/or the locations in which those events are taking place. For example, many New Testament passages quote, refer to, or echo passages from the Old Testament.

The first five steps in this exegetical method reflect a standard approach to biblical exegesis that uses the insights and formulas of the so-called critical method. The next three steps in this methodology are less in line with the traditional, critical method for the study of biblical texts, and as such each of these next three steps will receive more detailed attention. They more explicitly begin the process of moving from the study toward the pulpit.

The sixth step is called *Leads*; it involves the decision about which of the characters in the text whose perspective will be that from which the text is read and preached. This could involve both major and minor characters, as well as people who are either virtuous and villainous. Paying attention to leads is especially important when the sermon is based upon a familiar passage of Scripture that might cause some listeners to assume that they already know where the sermon is headed. Preaching a familiar text from the perspective of a less-familiar character in that text can result in a fresh reading of the text and a more attentive audience as they are led down a path they have never before traveled. This step allows a single biblical text to become the basis of a sermon series as the text is considered and preached from the perspective of one character in the text after another.

The seventh step in this methodology is called *Lessons.* The objective here is to determine the message or messages that were intended for the original hearers and readers of the Bible, whether in the tenth

century B.C.E. or the first century C.E. Nathan had a word for David when that king was at the height of his power. Jeremiah had a word for Zedekiah when the future of Judah was hanging in the balance. John the Baptist had a word for Herod Antipas that even kings are answerable to the sovereign God. Paul had a word for the Stoics and Epicureans in Athens who were gathered near the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, to debate and discuss the newest religious ideas. None of those words were offered with twenty-first-century North Americans in mind.

Before we can fully know what the Bible has to say to say to us in the twenty-first century we need to discern what the Bible was attempting to say to its various audiences in antiquity. What was the lesson Amos wanted Israel to learn about caring for the poor in the eighth century B.C.E.? What was the writer of Luke saying to people in the first century C.E. when he noted that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea while Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire controlled that region of the world?

Only after the text has been through these initial seven exegetical steps can we then move on to the eighth and final step, which is *Life Application,* or the actual development of the sermonic claim. There are two separate and distinct outcomes attached to this final step. First, this is when a concerted effort is made to shape a sermon that is relevant and compelling for a specific audience at a specific point in time. The objective of the preacher at this point is to declare what claim a particular biblical text is making upon a particular congregation or on a particular group of believers.

This eighth step also serves another wonderful purpose: namely, it becomes the point in the process of sermon design and delivery when the unique gifts and personality of each preacher are unlocked. What any preacher might see in a text or choose to say about that text in a sermon is substantially influenced by who they are and what life experiences and theological perspectives they bring to the preaching task. Each one of us is a combination of the wonderful gifts of heart, experience, culture, and mind that make us the persons that we are. Even if each one of us was to study the same biblical text and arrive at many of the same conclusions in terms of the first steps of the exegetical method mentioned earlier, when the time came for life application of that common text, the sermons that would be preached would

undoubtedly be as diverse as the people for whom they are intended and the preacher who has prepared them. Each preacher has a unique "voice" with which she or he proclaims the word.

One way to understand this aspect of life application in preaching is to consider what Joseph Stowell says about preaching being done in two phases: the skill phase and the creative phase.[26] The *skill phase* is the technical work of doing biblical exegesis, which he equates with the task of shopping for the ingredients that will be used to bake a pie or a cake. The *creative phase* is the process of taking the results of the exegetical work and fashioning that material into a sermon. If the corollary for the skill phase is the person who shops for the ingredients for a cake or a pie, the corollary for the creative phrase is the cook or baker who skillfully mixes those items together and actually prepares a finished product that is straight from the oven. Two people can buy the same ingredients at the grocery store to bake the same dish. But the results can be quite different. Each baker mixes their ingredients in somewhat different ways; reflecting their personal tastes and their cultural preferences.

In preaching as in baking there is plenty of room for creativity and self-expression. Life application allows for the preacher to fashion sermonic content that works best with the gifts he or she has in the context where he or she is called upon to preach. Careful and systematic exegesis of the biblical text should always precede any attempt to write a sermonic claim. Exegesis allows the text to speak for itself, and it prevents the preacher from twisting the text to serve his or her agenda for the day. Only through careful research into the text has the preacher gained enough understanding of what is at stake in the text that he or she is ready to determine what word he or she will offer to the congregation. Once study of the text is concluded, preachers must shape a singular, sermonic claim that began with the word of Scripture but is appropriate to their particular pastoral, homiletical voice and is relevant for their particular audience.

One way to be sure that the exegetical process has been thoroughly explored, and also to be sure that all of the homiletical options for a given passage have been considered is to begin to shape a sermon whose central claim can be stated in a single sentence with no semi-colons or parenthetical clauses. If the claim of the sermon cannot be stated in one clear and succinct sentence, then the preacher

is probably still thinking about what it is that he or she wants to say in the life application stage of the exegetical process.

This one-sentence approach to sermon design can be extremely helpful to a preacher as it forces the sermon to move away from all of the valuable information that may have been uncovered in the exegetical process, and challenges the preacher finally to arrive at the point where the sermon can be about one clear and specific theme or topic that can be stated and restated throughout the sermon. It can become the title or the opening sentence of the sermon. However the preacher uses the one-sentence statement in the actual design of the sermon, the designing of the sermon should not begin unless and until that one-sentence statement has been determined.

The idea of developing a one-sentence statement that sharpens the claim of the sermon is in keeping with what terms and concepts referenced earlier in this chapter. Remember the "big idea" of Haddon Robinson, the "focus statement" of Thomas Long, the "theme statement" of Fred Craddock, or the "the proposition" of Samuel Proctor."[27] Each of these approaches is a way to go about shaping that single sentence around which the central claim of the sermon will be determined. As was stated earlier in the shift from lessons to life application, this is the step where the voice and perspective of each preacher will most clearly be heard.

Ten preachers might all agree to preach on the same text, whether it is assigned by the lectionary, arrived at by *lectio continua*, or adopted by common consent. Their exegetical findings in terms of language issues, literary genre, sociopolitical setting, and even the meaning of that text to its original, ancient audience might end up in perfect agreement. However, it is in the shift from exegesis (what the text says) to sermon design (what is the message of that text going to be to a specific contemporary audience), that the unique voice of each of those ten preachers is most likely to be heard. Each of them is likely to come up with their own one-sentence statement concerning the central claim they want to make in that sermon, from that text, to their particular audience.

I refer back to the definition of a sermonic claim stated earlier in this book. "Every sermon needs to make *one* clear, compelling, biblically centered, and contextually relevant claim that sets some aspect of God's will and God's word before some specific segment of God's

people. This is done with the hope that those people will be challenged, informed, corrected, or encouraged as a result of the word set before them that day."[28]

The Postmodern Challenge

Given the rise of what is labeled postmodernity, some may question the wisdom of the preacher focusing a sermon on "*one* clear, compelling, biblically centered, and contextually relevant claim that sets some aspect of God's will and God's word before some specific segment of God's people." There are some people who challenge the authority of Scripture in the twenty-first century. There are some who advocate for or practice a generalized, individualized spirituality instead of a biblically oriented, communal faith. Others argue that one path to God is as good as any other, so why should a person pay any more attention to what the Bible says than they do to what any other book or any other religious tradition has to say? In some church circles various forms of communication such as PowerPoint presentations, video clips, and small-group discussions take the place of the sermon. Sanctuaries are being referred to as auditoriums that are designed not to include a cross or any other noticeable Christian symbols. The "pulpit" is being replaced by a "podium." Worship services are being replaced with classes, spiritual formation events, and motivational messages.

It cannot be doubted that we are living in an age when the preacher can no longer assume belief in the authority of Scripture, much less familiarity with its content, in the congregation. We can also agree that we are living at a time when other religious traditions and approaches to spirituality are heard and seen everywhere we turn. That being said, those factors should not result in our sounding either retreat or surrender so far as our commitment to biblical preaching is concerned. Several helpful books have been written that assist preachers with going about their work in this postmodern context.[29]

As preachers we should be conscious of the postmodern challenges that confront us if we want our sermons to be culturally relevant. This does not mean, however, that we should be intimidated or afraid to set forth Word-based sermonic claims. Some historical perspective is helpful. This is not the first time in history the biblical message has had to struggle in order to be heard. But that word has never gone silent.

The postmodern world in which we preach is no more difficult a context for preaching than was the eighth-century B.C.E. world of Amos, the seventh-century B.C.E. world of Jeremiah, or the first-century C.E. world of Christ or Paul. All of them preached a biblical message in a world that either was unfamiliar with their scriptural authorities, unwilling to conform to them, or committed to other religious practices altogether. Our preaching predecessors were not put off by those realities. They simply preached whether it was "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2, NIV).

Sometimes their words were heeded. Sometimes their words were heard and considered. Sometimes their words were completely ignored. There is little doubt that Jeremiah faced a far more hostile and unwelcoming climate for his preaching than is the case for any of us today. His preaching about idolatry and corruption in the nation fell on deaf ears, but he continued to preach. His scrolls were cut up and contemptuously tossed into the fire by King Jehoiakim (Jer. 36:23-24), he was thrown into a cistern filled with mud as punishment for his unwelcome words (Jer. 38:1-10). Nevertheless, the prophet speaks words that give full expression to what every preacher in the postmodern world must feel from time to time:

> O LORD, you have enticed me,
> and I was enticed;
> you have overpowered me,
> and you have prevailed;
> I have become a laughingstock all day long;
> everyone mocks me.
> For whenever I speak, I must cry out.
> I must shout "Violence and destruction!"
> For the word of the LORD has become for me
> a reproach and derision all day long. (Jer. 20:7-8)

The words of Jeremiah could have been written with the preaching climate of the twenty-first century in mind. Preaching is lightly regarded and the gospel is rarely heeded in a culture that prefers the opinions of scientists, pop-music icons, and public policymakers over anything that comes wrapped in the phrase, "Thus says the LORD."

That being said, we should not only identify with the challenges faced by Jeremiah in preaching the word of God in an unfriendly and unwelcoming world, but we should seek to match his determination to continue to preach a faithful, biblically centered message no matter how hostile or dismissive the environment may be for what we have to say. That is how Jeremiah continued to describe his preaching context:

> If I say, "I will not mention him
> or speak any more in his name,"
> Then within me there is something like a burning fire
> shut up in my bones.
> I am weary of holding it in;
> and I cannot. (Jer. 20:9).

Paul experienced a similar problem of being heard by some but dismissed or denounced by others in his sermon in Athens in Acts 17:32-34. Surely Paul's attempt to preach about Christ, and especially about the resurrection of Christ in the presence of Stoics and Epicureans (Acts 17:17-18) corresponds to our challenge of preaching Christ in this postmodern world. Paul, challenging the superficial religiosity and the false gods he encountered at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31), reflects our challenge of preaching about Christ in a culture that is content with private spirituality that views any path to God as being just as true and valid as any other. We can easily recognize the various responses to Paul's preaching—the same has happened to us. What is of greater importance and of far-greater urgency is for all of us to be willing to identify with Paul's determination to preach Christ in a culture that is unfriendly, disinterested, or largely unfamiliar with our vocabulary and our values. There is no more uncompromising declaration of the gospel message than is found in Paul's sermon in Athens when he says: "Because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

That is what we should be preaching and that is the claim that our sermons should be setting forth—what God wants to say to the church and to the world, as that message is found in the Scriptures. Our task as preachers is to delve into that message, select out some

portion of it that will be the basis for a particular sermon, and then preach that message in a way that is biblically centered and culturally relevant. Our task is to be an instrument through which a word of ultimate significance claims our congregations in a transformative manner. And it is our task to do this week after week, every time we step into the pulpit.