

DOCTRINE
That
DANCES



Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life

Robert Smith Jr.



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

CONTENTS

	Acknowledgments	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	Dr. James Earl Massey	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	Is There Any Word from the Lord?	1
<i>Chapter One</i>	Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching	11
<i>Chapter Two</i>	A Metaphorical Rationale for Doctrinal Preaching	26
<i>Chapter Three</i>	Lord of the Dance and the Escort	45
<i>Chapter Four</i>	The Preacher as an Exegetical Escort	75
<i>Chapter Five</i>	The Preacher as a Doxological Dancer	103
<i>Chapter Six</i>	Maintaining Doctrinal Balance	127
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	The Jazz of Doctrinal Preaching	141
<i>Epilogue</i>		168
<i>Sermon 1</i>	“The Other Side of Grace” Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10	173
<i>Sermon 2</i>	“Living on the Edge of Whatever Happens” Text: Philippians 1:1–2, 12–13, 19, 27	185
	Author Index	197
	Subject Index	199
	Scripture Index	203

Foreword

DR. JAMES EARL MASSEY

Books which treat the theme and craft of preaching steadily appear, answering the need among preachers for insight, inspiration, and encouragement to handle their perennial task, but books about how to sermonize Christian doctrine are comparatively few and far between. There was a considerable span of years between Henry Sloan Coffin's *What to Preach* (1926) and Andrew W. Blackwood's *Doctrinal Preaching for Today* (1946), or between Merrill R. Abbey's *Living Doctrine in a Vital Pulpit* (1965), William J. Carl III's *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (1984), and Ronald J. Allen's *The Teaching Minister* (1991), all of them works prepared by seasoned and respected practitioners.

By means of the present book, Dr. Robert Smith Jr., himself a seasoned and respected preacher, joins the ranks of those concerned to treat the preaching of doctrine. The insights he has shared here have been gathered from firsthand pulpit responsibilities in a long-term urban pastorate, many engagements as a guest preacher in denominational and ecumenical pulpits, and years of study and reflection and service teaching preaching in a respected divinity school.

Given his background and experience, Dr. Smith has offered something more than theory here, and he has shown both wisdom and warmth in handling his subject so expressively by letting his preaching style both dictate and dominate his expression at so many places in these pages. No overview of his treatment is necessary in this foreword, but it must be stated that the foundational issue that binds these chapters is the importance of preaching

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

doctrine, and to do so in a loving and lively treatment so that it is experienced as an expression of faith and a means to faith.

This book by Dr. Robert Smith Jr. now takes its place among a steadily growing number of resources for those who preach, and rightfully so because the guidance and encouragement it offers can help preachers and their hearers to experience the benefits which essential doctrines embody and make available.

In the introduction he wrote to one of his books about preaching, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), the celebrated Baptist preacher, commented thankfully about the warm reception his first book on the subject had received. Spurgeon wrote: “It is comforting to know that you have aimed at usefulness, pleasant to believe that you have succeeded, and most of all encouraging to have been assured of it by the persons benefited.”¹ Robert Smith Jr. has written and released this book with usefulness to preachers as its aim, and I commend it as timely, theologically apt, and readily beneficial.

James Earl Massey
Dean Emeritus and Distinguished Professor-at-Large
Anderson University School of Theology

1 See Charles H. Spurgeon, “Introduction” to *Lectures to My Students* [Second Series] (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House/Guardian Press reprint, 1977).

Introduction

IS THERE ANY WORD FROM THE LORD?

This book is about doctrinal preaching, about handling biblical truth as the “true and living Word” that it is, with the sermon functioning as a privileged partner with doctrine in what can be described as a joyous doxological dance to the glory of God.

“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matt 19:6 NIV). These are the words of Jesus. Used in the context of preaching, they reflect a critical linkage between *didache* (teaching) and *kerygma* (proclamation). Doctrinal preaching is both content centered (teaching to instruct the mind) and intent centered (preaching to move the heart). Doctrine and joy interpenetrate and are intertwined.

The attitude of the doctrinal preacher must be, “Hallelujah! What a privilege it is to preach about a great God.” The truths of Bible doctrine are appropriated, and the preacher serves as a personal witness of those truths because the text of Scripture not only works *on* the preacher but works *in* the preacher as well. The apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:15, admonishes the minister to rightly divide the word of truth. The writer of Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the Word of God as a “two-edged sword” that divides. Ministers who dare to preach doctrinally must always remember that they not only participate in rightly dividing or “cutting straight” the Word of truth before their congregations but that they are also divided by that same Word. Ministers can be guilty of spending much of their time preparing messages that will impact others but not enough time allowing the text of Scripture to impact themselves.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

Preachers cannot effectively, with the gospel, address people by an intellectual engagement alone. This is exactly what biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad has asserted:

No understanding at all is possible without some form of inward appropriation. It would be an illusion to think that we could deal with the transmitted intellectual content as a foundry worker handles molten ore with long-handled ladles—and thus keep them at a distance from ourselves. Moreover, no understanding is possible unless what is to be interpreted is applied to ourselves, unless it touches us existentially.¹

The preacher who handles the Word must first be touched by that same Word. Doctrinal preaching has an impact within both the cognitive and the emotive sectors. Preaching that leaves the cognitive untouched produces hearers who may leave the sanctuary feeling better but without having been helped by the deep doctrinal truths of the Scriptures. Classical rhetoricians attempted to be holistic in the speech act: enlighten the mind, touch the heart, and move the will. Preaching that avoids head engagement will lead to blindness, and preaching that ignores heart engagement—the emotive realm of the believer’s existence—does so at the cost of boredom and dullness, which prevents the result of an engaged hearing for a transformed life.

Believers who receive solid doctrinal messages find help to persevere during times of crisis. This is exactly what took place during the period of nazification under Adolph Hitler. The Confessing Church endured persecution and threats under the Nazi regime because their pastors refused to compromise the doctrinal verities of the Bible and proclaimed the Word of God substantively. Pastors like Theophilus Würm, Martin Neimöller, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer refused to replace the cross with the swastika

1 Gerhard von Rad, *Biblical Interpretations in Preaching*, trans. John Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 12.

Introduction: Is There Any Word from the Lord?

and Christ with the Führer. Their nonnegotiable creed was, “Jesus is Lord.”

Preaching that is not joyous comes across as sterile and is often not received. Dorothy Sayers challenged the thought of many naysayers of her time who claimed that doctrinal preaching led to boredom and a lack of interest. She wrote:

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as bad press. We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—“dull dogma,” as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.²

The naysayers were aware, however, that while some actors can read a script based on fiction in such a moving and convincing manner that it becomes real in the minds of the audience, some preachers voice their message in such unconvincing and unpersuasive ways that it comes across as fiction in the minds of the worshippers.

After Peter preached the pentecostal sermon and approximately three thousand people were added to the church, the church continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42). Let the rocks cry out as an indictment upon us if we fail to pick up the mantle of doctrine!

Does theology exist in order to make preaching as hard as it needs to be? Can the same be asked about doctrine? Doctrine frames and monitors the church’s proclamation of the gospel. It also serves as a reservoir from which preaching draws its resources. Doctrinal preaching not only serves as corrective surgery on a congregation; it also offers an element of disease prevention. It

2 Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged,” in *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 13.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

is more than attaching a Band-Aid to a wound; it is also a prophylaxis to prevent the affliction. Doctrinal preaching is trifocal in nature. Apologetically, it affirms what is orthodox, or correct, teaching; it contends for “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3 NIV). Apologetics argues for what the church has believed on the basis of God’s Word. Polemically, doctrinal preaching stands against false teaching; it sets the church in order when heresies have infected her life. Catechetically, doctrinal preaching nourishes the congregation and thus edifies the body of Christ; the sheep are fed.

From Doctrine to Doxology

Doctrinal preaching serves not only to usher people into the presence of God to learn about Him but also to worship the God who is the object of study. Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, “You worship what you do not know” (John 4:22 ESV). The doctrinal preacher must prevent the church member from engaging in unintelligible worship. The nineteenth-century Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard critiqued the liturgical model of his national church and many other churches. He argued that God is the audience. C. Welton Gaddy explains:

Concerned about attitudes toward worship and practices in worship in the churches of his time, Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century Danish philosopher/theologian, compared what was taking place in the theater and what was happening in Christian worship. In a theater, actors, prompted by people offstage, perform for their audiences. To his dismay, Kierkegaard found that this theatrical model dominated the worship practices of many churches. A minister was viewed as the on-stage actor, God as the offstage prompter, and the congregation as the

Introduction: Is There Any Word from the Lord?

audience. Unfortunately, that understanding of worship remains as prevalent as it is wrong.

Each ingredient of the theatrical model mentioned by Kierkegaard is an essential component in Christian worship. Crucial, though, is a proper identification of the role of each one. In authentic worship, the actor is, in fact, many actors and actresses—the members of the congregation. The prompter is the minister, if singular, or, if plural, all of the people who lead in worship (choir members, instrumentalists, soloists, readers, prayers, preachers). The audience is God. Always, without exception, the audience is God!

If God is not the audience in any given service, Christian worship does not take place. If worship does occur and God is not the audience, all present participate in the sin of idolatry.³

Preaching is an act of worship. Preaching that simply investigates a body of truth without leading people to worship the God who is truth personified in the person of Jesus misses the mark. Doctrinal preaching desires to bring people into the presence of God, singing,

Then sings my soul, my Savior, God to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!⁴

Doctrine without worship is empty. Worship without doctrine leads to ignorance.

What then shall we say to this matter of doctrinal preaching? What if people remain disinclined about hearing it? What about the reports of killing a church if a consistent diet of doctrine is served from the pulpit? These are some of the questions that

3 C. Welton Gaddy, *The Gift of Worship* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 35.

4 Stuart K. Hine, "How Great Thou Art," 1953.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

R. W. Dale of Birmingham, England, had to consider when he was interrogated by a minister many years ago. Dale had insisted on preaching doctrinal sermons to his congregation of the Carr's Lane Church. His son, A. W. W. Dale, recorded this pertinent incident:

One day, soon after he was settled in the pastorate, he met in the streets of Birmingham a congregational minister—a Welshman and a preacher of remarkable power. “He had reached middle age, and I was still a young man, and he talked to me in a friendly way about my ministry. He called: ‘I hear that you are preaching doctrinal sermons to the congregation at Carr’s Lane; they will not stand it.’ I answered: ‘They will have to stand it.’”⁵

Ministers who are called by God must preach doctrine even when it is unpopular. Doctrine must be preached because ministers are under divine compulsion and have been given a divine mandate to preach the Word. Paul reminds us that we can be confident in the Word, for “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine” (2 Tim 3:16). The church of Jesus Christ is often concerned about fanaticism; the greater concern should be about infanticide. Christians are experiencing spiritual immaturity and spiritual death. One of the reasons for this is that worshippers are being served sermonic snacks instead of the doctrinal meat of the Word of God. If doctrine is presented with joy and accuracy, the hearers will not only stand it, they will crave more of it.

I began my work on the idea of this book in 2002. In 2005 I discovered a statement made by Dorothy L. Sayers that confirmed the idea of “doctrine that dances.” In a low moment of her life, Sayers’ reading of G. K. Chesterton reinforced her faith. In the preface of Chesterton’s autobiography, *The Surprise*, Sayers composes

5 A. W. W. Dale, *The Life of R. W. Dale of Birmingham* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1902), 108–9.

Introduction: Is There Any Word from the Lord?

the words of the preface and pictures Chesterton as a Christian liberator who “like a beneficent bomb . . . blew out of the Church a quantity of stained glass of a very poor period, and let in gusts of fresh air, in which the dead leaves of *doctrine danced* with all the energy and indecorum of Our Lady’s Tumbler” (emphasis added).⁶

This Is My Story

As a teenage boy I had the misfortune of not knowing how to dance. I remember giving one of my friends a dollar to teach me. He made a diligent effort but to no avail. As a result, I did not go to community parties or junior high dances after school. I did not even attend our senior high school prom. Although a teenager, I was a preacher, and everyone in my church knew that preachers did not dance. I was attracted to Ian Pitt Watson’s work, *A Primer for Preachers*, because in the book I saw a glimpse of my story. In the chapter “Biblical Truth and Biblical Preaching,” Watson admitted that as a teenage boy of fourteen, he could not dance. He was awkward and uncoordinated. He missed out on certain social fringe benefits because of his inability to dance. He was envious of his friends who could dance. He decided to master the art of dancing by buying the book *Teach Yourself to Dance* and practicing in private until he perfected his dancing skills. Then he would come out of his privacy and step into the public arena with confidence and coordination. The book contained detailed dance instructions and elaborate diagrams which he learned and memorized. He acknowledged:

I really knew the book. Intellectually, I had mastered the subject. I also spent many hours trying to put what I knew into practice. I did so alone in my bedroom, using a pillow for a partner and studying my progress in the wardrobe mirror. What I saw in

6 G. K. Chesterton, *The Surprise* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1953), 5.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

the mirror was not reassuring! I was putting my feet in all the right places, for I knew the book, and I was doing what the book said. But something was clearly missing. I was thinking the right things and doing the right things, but I couldn't get the feel of it, and in consequence everything I did seemed clumsy—graceless.⁷

Watson said that he attended a party one night and was befriended by a girl who could see that he was having difficulty transferring content into coordination. She invited him to dance with her. He had been accustomed to dancing with a pillow in front of the mirror in his bedroom. Initially, he was quite reluctant to dance because she was so graceful in her movements, and he was so awkward and uncoordinated in his attempts to dance. Finally, he yielded to her invitation. After she began to dance with him, he immediately became aware of a tremendous transformation. He revealed:

Then something strange happened. A little of her grace seemed to pass to me and I began to get the feel of it. For the first time, all I had learned in the book began to make sense, and even the painful practice in front of the mirror started to pay off. What had been contrived now became natural, what had been difficult now became easy, what had been a burden now became a joy—because at last I had got together what I was thinking and what I was feeling and what I was doing. In that moment I experienced a kind of grace, and it was beautiful.⁸

Preaching is both cranial and cardiological; it involves head and heart, fact and feeling. It is important to proclaim, "Thus

7 Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 102.

8 *Ibid.*, 102–3.

Introduction: Is There Any Word from the Lord?

saith the Lord.” This is the prophetic signature of one sent from God; but one cannot proclaim, “Thus saith the Lord” until that person knows, “What saith the Lord.” Once again Watson gives preachers a much-needed and refreshing word that calls for the remarriage of the substance of the text and the style or delivery of the message:

It comes to us when we get together truth thought, truth felt and truth done. We’ve got to know the Book; that comes first. And we’ve got to know what the Book says, follow in Christ’s steps. But we can know truth and even do it and still be awkward, inadequate, graceless, until we get the feel of it. That is when we need to remember that it is not meant to be a solo dance. Christ wants us, his church, his clumsy bride, to try it with him. To begin with, we often feel more inadequate than ever when we do that, because we are so awkward and he is so full of grace. Then it happens, in our preaching as in our Christian living. We share in his grace. All the Book says comes alive, and, when we preach it, what used to be contrived now becomes natural, what used to be a labor now becomes spontaneous, what used to be a burden now becomes a blessing, what used to be law now becomes the gospel. Why? Because we are learning the meaning of grace; because now God’s truth, thought, felt, and done, is embracing us in the dance—the Truth that stood before Pilate but that Pilate never recognized, because Pilate thought truth was a proposition not a person, a diagram not a dancer.⁹

If preachers doxologically dance as they escort the hearers into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation, they must relinquish their solo sermons and dance with the Savior. The One

9 Ibid., 103.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

who is full of both grace and truth will teach us to dance doxologically as we escort exegetically. We are invited to follow in His steps (1 Pet 2:21). “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14 NIV).

I received an e-mail from Rebecca Pounds George which further illustrates the truth of John 1:14. The e-mail was titled “Dancing with God”:

When I meditated on the word GUIDANCE, I kept seeing “dance” at the end of the word. I remember reading that doing God’s will is a lot like dancing. When two people try to lead, nothing feels right. The movement doesn’t flow with the music, and everything is quite uncomfortable and jerky. When one person realizes that, and lets the other lead, both bodies begin to flow with the music. One gives gentle cues, perhaps with a nudge to the back or by pressing lightly in one direction or another. It’s as if two become one body, moving beautifully. The dance takes surrender, willingness, and attentiveness from one person and gentle guidance and skill from the other. My eyes drew back to the word GUIDANCE. When I saw “G,” I thought of God, followed by “u” and “i.” “God ‘u’ and ‘i’ dance.” God, you and I dance. As I lowered my head, I became willing to trust that I would get guidance about my life. Once again, I became willing to let God lead. My prayer for you today is that God’s blessings and mercies be upon you on this day and everyday. May you abide in God as God abides in you. Dance together with God, trusting God to lead and to guide you through each season of your life. . . . And I hope you dance!!!¹⁰

¹⁰ Anonymous e-mail received on November 9, 2004 by Rebecca Pounds George.

Chapter One

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF DOCTRINAL PREACHING

The late Jaroslav Pelikan, the celebrated historical theologian, stated, “What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches and confesses on the basis of the Word of God: this is Christian doctrine.”¹ Peter Toon, in an insightful treatment of the development of doctrine across the history of the church, explained doctrine as “a historically conditioned response of the Church to questions put to her at a particular time and place by the world or by her members.”² However, we can define doctrine more easily than we can define doctrinal preaching. One of the ways of attempting a definition of doctrinal preaching is to show the relationship that doctrine has to preaching. William J. Carl III provides a clear portrait of the association of doctrine with preaching. He contends that:

Doctrine is not identical with the proclamation of the gospel. Doctrine serves proclamation, enriches and enlarges it, largely in a critical role, as a criterion for determining that what the church proclaims today is in harmony with scripture and its tradition, that it is truly human language about God and not about the latest spiritual trend or social ethical passion.³

In conjunction with doctrine’s critical relationship to preaching, like an arbiter or umpire of a baseball game who demands that

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

2 Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 81.

3 William J. Carl III, “Doctrine,” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 102.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

the game be played according to the rules of the baseball manual, doctrine insists that preaching be carried out in harmony with the regulations of the biblical manual.

Furthermore, Carl discerns the affiliation that the rules of English grammar have with ordinary English conversation in light of the relationship that doctrine has with preaching. He quotes George Lindbeck, who said, "There is a parallel intimate relationship between the rules of English grammar and ordinary American discourse."⁴ Carl further argues:

Not all discourse that employs Christian vocabulary is proper Christian discourse any more than a sentence using nothing but English terms, such as "He don't do no wrong to nobody," qualifies as a proper English sentence. . . . We have come to recognize its impropriety as a result of our mastery of English grammar and our use of these rules to criticize and evaluate the sentence. In much the same way, Christian doctrines should function to criticize discourse that flows from the pulpit. . . . Preachers need to concern themselves with doctrine, then, in every sermon that they preach, just as authors need to attend to grammatical rules when writing. Just as the rules of subject-verb agreement inform the writing of this paragraph, so the Trinity doctrine must inform the way preachers speak when referring to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reminding them that their discourse does not imply that Christians believe in three gods.⁵

While preachers know what doctrinal preaching is, it is difficult to articulate succinctly what it is in one descriptive and pregnant sentence. A definition is a limitation. Once something is

4 George Lindbeck, "The Nature of Doctrine," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, 102–3.

5 Carl, "Doctrine," 103.

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

defined, there is the inevitability of leaving something important out of the definition.

We live in a communication-crazed community. Words, words, and more words! Left-brained people especially emphasize the value of words. Warren W. Wiersbe asks, “How do you define life and taste? How do you give a definition for the essence of the feeling of being in love?” He cites the poet Walt Whitman, who once listened to a lecture of a learned astronomer who discussed the meticulous matters of the universe and the relationship of the bodily elements of space. After growing weary of this technical, scientific lecture, Whitman went out and looked at the stars!⁶

People want preachers to define everything for them, and they are sometimes disappointed when the preachers tell them that they are unable to do so. Some things are enveloped within the realm of what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*, or the tremendous mystery. Some things have to be experienced. In a way, doctrinal preaching can only be approached in an effort to define itself because the essence and reality of doctrinal preaching is bigger than any definition. Doctrinal preaching is not a mechanical process governed by a human agent; rather, it is an event that happens under the auspices of the Holy Spirit who reveals the doctrinal truths and testifies of the person of Christ. Consequently, doctrinal preaching is shrouded in mystery. In an attempt to define doctrinal preaching, the mystery cannot be demystified, and the inscrutable cannot be scrutinized.

We can only move toward a definition of doctrinal preaching. We are on the way without any possibility of ever fully arriving! While it is true that we must experience the essence of doctrinal preaching, we must also know what we are experiencing. Among the many qualities of the effectiveness of Paul as a doctrinal preacher was his conviction about what he preached and who he preached about. He reminded Timothy that all Scripture is God breathed and is profitable for doctrine (2 Tim 3:16). Scripture is

6 Conversation with Warren W. Wiersbe, August 9, 2004, Lincoln, NE.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

just as God breathed as the body of Adam that received the breath of God; Scripture is just as God breathed as the corpses in the valley of dry bones that became a resuscitated army when the *ruach*, or breath of God, was breathed into them. Because Paul had this confidence, he could exclaim, "For I know *whom* I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Tim 1:12).

We are challenged by 1 Peter 3:15 to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you." Growing up in the church of my childhood, the Rose Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, the senior choir would sing the choral rendition, "It's Real," and do so with great passion and confidence. I can still see the streams of tears running down the eyes of those senior saints, and I can still hear both men and women shouting as they waved their hands in personal witness to the truth of the lyrics of the song: "Yes, yes, I know it's real." I am convinced that these lyrics must undergird the sermonic statements of our doctrinal preaching.

O how well do I remember how I doubted day by day,
For I did not know for certain that my sins were washed away.
When the Spirit tried to tell me, I the truth would not receive;
I endeavored to be happy and to make myself believe.

.....
But at last I tired of living such a life of fear and doubt,
For I wanted God to give me something I would know about;
So the truth would make me happy and the light would clearly shine,

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

And the Spirit gave assurance that I'm His and He
is mine.

.....

So I prayed to God in earnest; and not caring what
folks said,

I was hungry for the blessing; my poor soul—it must
be fed.

Then at last by faith I touched him and, like sparks
from smitten steel,

Just so quick salvation reached me. O bless God I
know it's real!

Chorus

It's real, it's real,

O I know it's real

Praise God the doubts are settled

For I know, I know, it's real.⁷

Doctrine has a subservient role to preaching. 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.

As Narcissus saw his reflection in a pool of water, so doctrine ought to see its image in the face of preaching. It gives the sermon its shape. After the sermon is preached, the hearers may not initially recognize an identifiable doctrine within the sermon because the preacher may have expounded on the doctrine of sanctification without ever using the word *sanctification* during the preaching event. But the hearer ought to be able to detect the image behind

7 Homer L. Cox, "It's Real," 1907.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

the doctrine and arrive at the intended doctrinal experience. It is better to experience repentance, joy, and justification than merely to learn about them.

I do not have in mind the lessening of the importance of knowing doctrine; I just want to remind preachers constantly that doctrinal preaching not only informs our learning but also influences our living. We can never “fully know” during our terrestrial trek. Paul was right, “*Now* we see through a glass, darkly; but *then* face to face: *now* we know in part; but *then* I shall know even as also I am known” (1 Cor 13:12). But *then!* When the terrestrial trek is terminated and the celestial course is initiated, the “now-ness” of time will, in the words of the inimitable Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, fall exhausted at the feet of the “then-ness” of eternity. Not only will we have “no less days to sing God’s praise,” but we will also have no less days to learn more fully about the One to whom doctrine points.

We have heard about the love of God over the years, but after being in the presence of the Lord for a million years, we will only know just a little bit more of what the unconditional love of God really is. We have studied about the atonement for sin for a long period of time, but after staring at the nail prints in the Lord’s hands for a billion years and gazing at the Lamb that was slain for our redemption, we will know only a smidgen of what the atonement really means. We have thought long and hard about the holiness of God, and reminded our congregants, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16). But after a trillion years we will know only a fraction about the holiness of God that causes angels to cover their feet and faces and to fly away as they sing a song that reverberates throughout the corridors of heaven, earth, and hell: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3).

Consider a scene where a seagull is dispatched every year and flies to the Rock of Gibraltar, where it brushes its beak against that granite rock formation and flies away only to return a thousand years later. If that process is repeated every thousand years until the Rock of Gibal-

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

tar is reduced to sea level, in comparison, we would have only been in heaven for a day. There will never be a moment in time or eternity in which we will fully comprehend the doctrines of the Bible that we preach. What Phillips Brooks told students at Yale still holds true: "Preach doctrine, preach all the doctrine you know, and learn forever more and more; but preach it always, not that men may believe it, but that men may be saved by believing it."⁸ Exegesis must be combined with experience, deeds must be merged with doctrine, lips must be linked to lives, and beliefs must be integrated with behavior.

Charles Bugg referred to Phillips Brooks' assertion, which compared the Bible to a telescope. The telescope is not designed to look *at* but to look *through*, to see that which is beyond us.⁹ Additionally, Bugg cited the comment of Robert McCracken, who, while senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, was asked by someone why people kept coming to Riverside to hear his sermons. McCracken replied, "They keep coming hoping to hear a word from beyond themselves."¹⁰

Dr. Greg Thornbury, a professor at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, interviewed Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, founding editor of *Christianity Today*, shortly before Henry died. Thornbury asked him what the most profound question he had ever put to his students was. Dr. Henry bypassed the conundrum of catechesis, the intricacies of systematic theology, and the profundity of doctrinal explanation and stated, "The most profound question I have ever asked my students is, 'Have you ever met the risen Lord?'"¹¹ This question goes beyond the mere recitation of a creed, the explanation of a doctrine, or the clarification of a biblical regulation. It points to a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Doctrinal preaching must move from merely learning *biblical regulations*, or

8 Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 129.

9 Charles Bugg, "Back to the Bible: Toward a New Description of Expository Preaching," *Review and Expositor* 90 (1993): 414.

10 Ibid.

11 Gregory Alan Thornbury, "Carl F. H. Henry: Heir of Reformation Epistemology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8 (2004): 62–74.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

the indication that we cannot live holy, as God requires. It must move toward *gospel revelation*, for Christ enables us to do what we cannot do—to live holy! Ultimately it must move to forging a *relationship* with Christ. For Dr. Henry it was not just a matter of testing a student on the historical claims of the resurrection of Jesus; his ultimate concern was whether the student had an experiential encounter with the Lord.

Job did not give a lecture on the person of the Redeemer; instead he declared, “I know that my Redeemer lives” (Job 19:25 NIV). The blind man in John 9 did not need a seminar on blindness; he needed his sight. He declared, “Whereas I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). People who come to hear us on Sunday morning do not merely need more *information* about Bible facts; they need *transformation*. This is why Harry Emerson Fosdick penned the classic line nearly eighty years ago, “Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.”¹² They come to have the tragedies and struggles in their lives addressed from the perspective of a God who is able to change their situations and/or to give them strength to endure them with joy. Doctrine, in its association with preaching, epitomizes the role that salt plays in protecting meat from decay. Doctrine is the protector of preaching. Without it preaching would fall into heresy.

Additionally, doctrine is inseparably and inextricably integrated with true preaching and promotes the development and health of proclamation. Like yeast, which loses itself in dough and yet causes the dough to graduate from flatness to a fully rounded dinner roll, doctrine causes preaching to rise in fullness of authority and accent. Doctrine offers a moral conscience to preaching that prevents preaching from giving all of its attention to the heights of heaven while ignoring the social inequities on earth. Doctrine confronts preaching with this truth: “These things should have

12 Edmund Holt Linn, *Preaching as Counseling* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1966), 92.

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

been done without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23 HCSB). Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their boast concerning tithing and stated that yes, they should have tithed, but they also should not have neglected the matters of social justice. The moral conscience of doctrine makes arrangements for preaching to meet at the intersection of the vertical relationship between God and humans and the horizontal relationship between humans and humans. This moral conscience of doctrine insists that preachers be acquainted not only with the streets of gold in heaven but also with the streets of gloom in the ghetto. It unites the pulpit and the pavement, the sanctuary and the street, Bethlehem and Birmingham, the New Jerusalem and New Jersey.

Doctrine relates to preaching in the same manner that John the Baptist related to Jesus. When John the Baptist received news that Jesus was baptizing more persons than he was baptizing, John did not assume the posture of a competitor because his ministry was one of negation: he was neither the light nor the Christ. Rather, he was the best man alongside Jesus, the bridegroom. His job was to focus on the bridegroom and in the process, John the Baptist, the best man, would decrease while Jesus, the bridegroom, would increase (John 3:30). Preaching that lacks doctrine is anemic and weak. The preaching of Bible doctrine, however, is preaching that is powerful and effective.

Definitions of expository preaching provided by some of the great voices in preaching furnish assistance in the endeavor to define doctrinal preaching. They aid us in moving toward an operative definition that illustrates the positive intention and focus of this book. E. K. Bailey, late pastor of Concord Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and founder of the International Expository Preaching Conference, defines expository preaching as “a message that focuses on a portion of scripture so as to clearly establish the precise meaning of the text, and to poignantly motivate the hearers to actions or attitudes dictated by that text in the

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

power of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Like expository preaching, doctrinal preaching is consistent with the text out of which the doctrine emerges. Preachers who would preach doctrinally must put their ears to the pavement of the text and synchronize the heartbeat of the text with the heartbeat of the doctrine so that the author’s intention is clearly seen and heard. Doctrinal preachers preach with passion and conviction, attempting to persuade the hearers to embrace the mind-set and the behavior prescribed by the doctrine in the text. Preachers who would preach the doctrine in the text must stand with Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others in the Reformation heritage who believed that when they were accurately speaking in accordance to the Word of God, Christ is speaking.¹⁴

Haddon Robinson, staunch homiletician at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston, Massachusetts, penned his classic definition of expository preaching (used interchangeably with biblical preaching):

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.¹⁵

These words ring true to preachers of Bible doctrine. The preacher must lift doctrine out of a passage instead of infusing a passage with foreign doctrine. Doctrinal preachers must also pay close attention to the grammatical elements of the original biblical languages in the passage. An examination of John 20:5–8 will reveal that there are three different Greek words for sight in the passage. In John 20:5, John “sees” the linen cloths as he stoops

13 E. K. Bailey, *Ten Reasons for Expository Preaching* (Dallas, TX: E. K. Bailey Ministries, 2003), 2:1.

14 See also Luke 10:16.

15 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 20.

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

down and looks in from outside the sepulcher. In the Greek the word is *blepei* (he saw), which indicates a casual glance. John 20:6 indicates that Peter goes inside the sepulcher and also “sees” the linen cloths. The word for “see” in this instance is *theorei* (he saw), which expresses a more thoughtful and calculated look. Finally, in John 20:8, John goes inside the sepulcher the second time, “sees,” and believes. In the Greek the word for “sees” in this case is *eiden* (he saw), which conveys belief. Could these three distinct Greek words suggest the stages of faith through which some people process before experiencing mature faith?

Preachers of Christian doctrine must also attend to the historical details in the passage. For example, is the teaching from a passage applicable for a specific time, place, and people, or for all times, places, and all peoples? The literary study of the genre of a particular passage should always be taken into account. The book of Proverbs is the inspired word of God, but it is not a book of guarantees. Much harm has been done by preachers who have preached Proverbs 22:6 with a sense of guarantee: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Many parents have incriminated themselves because their children departed from their Christian upbringing and teaching. Since the preacher proclaimed the text as a guarantee, the parents felt that they were evidently lacking in their parenting because their children did not lead exemplary Christian lives. However, this interpretation would seem to contradict the situation of Josiah, the godly king of Judah, who had an evil father (Amon), a wicked grandfather (Manasseh), and a righteous great-grandfather (Hezekiah). The book of Proverbs states the principles that, when embraced, generally will give expected results.

This text really says that children will not depart from the “way” because the “way,” or the “teaching,” is in them. The prodigal son came back home to his father not because he attended a revival and was convicted of his waywardness but because the

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

“way,” or the “teaching,” of his father remained in him. Like a time-released capsule, the “way” began to speak to him in the pigpen, and he went home with a different attitude than the one he had when he left home. Christian parents whose children have departed from the teachings they were exposed to in their home need to cease punishing themselves and emulate the father of the prodigal son who kept the calf fattened in expectation of the return of the son.¹⁶

Preachers of Christian doctrine contemplate the context of the text, looking at it in light of the chapter of the particular book, the purpose of the book, its relationship to the particular testament, and even its role within the entire canon of Scripture. Doctrinal preachers recognize that the Holy Spirit, the actual preacher, preaches to them before they preach to their congregations. The Spirit applies the doctrinal message to the preacher’s life and personality and then to the hearers’.

The renowned Anglican preacher-theologian John R. W. Stott asserts that expository preaching is “the opening up of the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God’s voice is heard and His people obey Him.”¹⁷ Stott is convinced of this and contends that preachers of Bible doctrine possess at least these two convictions: first, they are firm in their conviction that the Bible is not *a* word of God, but *the* Word of God that is inspired and God breathed. They are also firm in their conviction that the Bible is a closed book that must be opened by the Holy Spirit and the truth rightly divided, or “cut straight,” by the preacher (see 2 Tim 2:15).

There are also at least two obligations of doctrinal preachers. They must be faithful to the text of Scripture, and they must be sensitive to the hearers. In reality they not only exegete the text, but they also exegete the hearers.

Finally, doctrinal preachers have at least two expectations. If they are accurate in delivering the doctrinal message, then they

¹⁶ Luke 15:23.

¹⁷ Given at a conference on expository preaching.

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

can expect God's Word to be heard, although, like Isaiah who cried out, "Who hath believed our report?" they wonder if it is believed (Isa 53:1). They can also expect the people to obey God because His Word will get a hearing whether it is heard immediately or futuristically, in compliance or disobedience; His Word will not return to Him void (Isa 55:11).

Although doctrinal preaching is difficult to define, William J. Carl III offers what appears to be the fullest possible definition:

Doctrinal preaching, then, is Christian preaching grounded in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ; it starts with text, doctrine, or cultural question, but tends to focus on one or more Christian doctrines regardless of its starting point.¹⁸

In connection with Carl, doctrinal preachers locate the center of Bible doctrine not in a proposition but in the person of Jesus Christ. As Jesus admonished that the Scriptures be searched because they testify of Him (John 5:39), preachers of Christian doctrine make Christ the heart of their preaching. If the Bible is read backwards, one will see that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8). This means that in the mind of God, Calvary was a forethought and not an afterthought. God did not react to the fall of Adam and Eve, but rather He pre-acted *before* the fall of Adam and Eve. The Old Testament proclaimed that Christ is coming. The New Testament announced that Christ has come and will come again.

Doctrinal preaching might begin with a text, especially if the preacher is preaching a sermon series through a book of the Bible. It could start with a doctrine, such as an article in the Apostles' Creed, which is a summary or compendium of truths that the church believes and espouses. Or it could commence with a relevant cultural question. Paul Tillich often charged the church with answering questions that no one was asking. Doctrinal preachers

18 William J. Carl III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 8-9.

DOCTRINE *That* DANCES

must pay attention to the questions voiced by culture. For example, in late December 2004, tsunamis, gigantic tidal waves caused by an earthquake and the shifting of plates under the ocean, cost more than 150,000 persons their lives in Southeast Asia. Many American citizens were there as tourists, and a number of them lost their lives. The tsunamis not only ravaged the land but left people injured, separated from families, without food and clean water, and exposed to rampant and advancing disease. The overall question on the minds of those who come to church to hear us is, "Why?" The doctrinal preacher must address this question of theodicy. Sometimes the only thing we can do after speaking to this matter is to lead inquiring people to Calvary and encourage them to hear anew and ponder again the words of Jesus, "My God, my God, why . . . ?" (Mark 15:34).

But we must not leave them with this question. They must be challenged to persevere through the mist of mystery and make the commitment of Jesus, "Father, into thy hands" (Luke 23:46). Doctrinal preaching does not answer all the questions and cannot solve all the problems, but it points the listeners to God, who is sovereign yet suffers with us in our stricken situations. The Lord is not removed from human plight; He is the Immanuel on our Emmaus road. We do not subscribe to the teaching of anti-patipassianism, the doctrine that teaches that God is removed from pain and the sharing of human suffering. The Lord suffers with us. As our high priest, He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Heb 4:15). Doctrinal preachers punctuate Carl's thought that regardless of the starting point, doctrinal preaching will tend to focus on one or more Christian doctrines. Doctrine is found in life, and life is found in doctrine.

How then is doctrinal preaching to be defined? As Haddon Robinson stated, "Defining becomes sticky business because what we define we sometimes destroy. . . . Preaching is a living process involving God, the preacher, and the congregation, and no defini-

Toward a Definition of Doctrinal Preaching

tion can pretend to capture that dynamic. But we must attempt a working definition anyway.”¹⁹

My definition of doctrinal preaching emphasizes its underlying aim: transformation through Christ. I state that doctrinal preaching is *the escorting of the hearers into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation*. I contend that the task of the doctrinal preacher is to serve as an escort who ushers the hearer into the presence of God through the proper and precise expounding of the Word of God. When this is done, the efforts of doctrinal preachers have reached their limits because they cannot transform the hearer. The hearer is left in the presence of the only One who can transform a human soul—Christ. Preachers of Christian doctrine may inform the hearer’s mind, which in turn serves to direct one to Christ, but only Christ can transform the hearer’s heart.

Doctrinal preaching is the magnifying of Jesus Christ through the explanation and application of the basic truths of the Christian faith. Doctrinal preaching must have an object. We cannot have faith in faith; we do not worship worship; and doctrine cannot exist for doctrine’s sake. Doctrinal preaching carries out the mission of magnifying Jesus Christ. To magnify Jesus Christ is not literally to make Him bigger. His influence is already felt in three worlds: heaven, earth, and hell. Heaven is His throne, and the earth is His footstool. He fills the universe with His power. Rather, to magnify Christ through doctrinal preaching is to present Him in such a way that the hearers see Him in a more glorious, majestic, holy, sovereign, just, faithful, and mighty manner than they have ever seen Him before. This is made possible when the preacher of Christian doctrine, through the power of the Spirit, explains the basic and fundamental truths of the Christian faith and shows how they apply to the Christian life. Consequently, the function of doctrinal preaching is to ferry the truths of the “was-ness” of the Word from the shore of the ancient text to the shore of the “is-ness” of our contemporary world.

19 Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 19.