

“I have wanted a book like this for much of my own preaching ministry because I sensed something was missing. Steven Smith has filled that void and rendered a valuable service to pastors and churches everywhere in this work. Genre was too long a neglected aspect of preaching, even expository preaching. Walking us through the entire corpus of Scripture, this professor of preaching shows us clearly how the substance and the structure of a text should shape the substance and structure of the sermon. Why we did not see this all along I do not know. With the publication of this book, we no longer have an excuse!”

Daniel L. Akin, *president,*
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Great biblical preachers are rare, and great books on preaching are rarer still. In *Recapturing the Voice of God*, one of this generation’s greatest expositors, Steven Smith, helps the preacher know how to let the text shape the sermon outline and the sermon itself. Helpfully, Dr. Smith works through different literary genres, thus bringing the reader a most helpful template of how to truly let the text speak. I highly recommend this book for all who preach and for all who love the art and science of homiletics.”

Jason K. Allen, *president,*
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and College

“If you want to preach in a way that is fully faithful to the full expression of Scripture, Steven Smith can help.”

Kenton C. Anderson, *president,*
Northwest Baptist Seminary;
professor of Homiletics at ACTS Seminaries of Trinity Western University

“*Recapturing the Voice of God* is really about how God presents the message of Scripture and preaching accordingly. Paying attention to genre matters. So read and learn to be sensitive to how God presents his message as you preach.”

Darrell Bock, *senior research professor of New Testament Studies,*
Dallas Theological Seminary

“In light of the mountains of new scholarship on the significance of biblical genre, Smith provides a much-needed and very helpful resource for preachers who want the special structure, as well as the specific content, of each biblical text to inform the message communicated to God’s people.”

Bryan Chapell, *senior pastor,*
Grace Presbyterian Church

“Steven Smith provides a refreshing and much-needed reminder that our sermons are the most biblical when they not only reflect the message of the text but also mirror the form of the text. In *Recapturing the Voice of God*, you will find wise and reliable guidance for crafting sermons that are truly faithful to Scripture.”

J. Scott Duvall, *professor of New Testament,*
Ouachita Baptist University

“It’s no surprise that much of today’s church is being fed with spiritual junk food from pulpits across the land. For some, the Bible is just a means to a sermon or, worse, a mere footnote in it. However, when the people of God return to the Word of God, reformation is inevitable. In this book, Dr. Smith has compiled all of the tools a preacher needs to hone his skills in expository preaching. In simple, practical terms, the reader is given a roadmap for preaching through every genre of Scripture. Drink richly from the pages of this book before you stand behind the sacred desk to deliver God’s Word. Your people will be glad you did.”

Robby Gallaty, *senior pastor,
Brainerd Baptist Church*

“Steven Smith carefully leads preachers through the territory of preaching various biblical genres. He helps preachers appreciate the contours of these landscapes so that they can develop sermons that respect the shape of the genre itself. This text-driven homiletic is explored in these helpful pages—and preachers will benefit from reading each chapter and applying Smith’s words to their preaching.”

Scott M. Gibson, *professor of Preaching,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

“The Word of God, proclaimed by men of God, remains the lifeblood for the gospel. In *Recapturing the Voice of God*, Steven Smith effectively articulates the need for the sermon’s shape to mirror the Scripture’s shape, theologically considering genre in text-driven preaching. Steven Smith’s experience as a pastor and professor, combined with his prowess as a pulpiteer, creates a reference work for the study and classroom alike. I highly recommend this book for all who desire to reach the world as they preach the Word!”

Robert Jeffress, *senior pastor,
First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX*

“This is a book that would have saved me from many sub-par and misguided sermons, had I read it in seminary and/or the early days of pastoral ministry. Chapter one alone, in my estimation, is worth the cost of the book. Further, I will most likely come back to the genre-specific chapters (nine in all) each time I begin a new book/series, as I seek to re-orient myself to the unique features and aims of that genre of Scripture. I’m so thankful for Dr. Steven Smith’s work to help us all grow in ‘recapturing the voice of God.’”

Ryan Kelly, *pastor for preaching,
Desert Springs Church, Albuquerque, NM*

“Books on preaching are legion. But this one stands out. It discusses preaching the way it should be done, one genre at a time, based on the premise that genre determines the shape of the text and the shape of the text (including its genre) should determine the shape of the sermon. If you long to recapture the voice of God in the Word of God, this book is for you!”

Andreas J. Köstenberger,
*senior research professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*

“One of the great overarching concerns of the preacher in faithfully proclaiming God’s Word must be the genre of the text. Finding the central thrust of a passage of Scripture is a matter of capturing the thunder of the very voice of God. Steven Smith’s *Recapturing the Voice of God* is an excellent tool for students, pastors, and all who seek to discover the larger picture of what God is saying to us through his Word. Use this book often as you recapture the true intent of the biblical text in the confident knowledge that it will not return to you void.”

Steven J. Lawson, *president,*
OnePassion Ministries

“When talking with students about preaching with genre sensitivity, I have lacked resources to offer them. Now I have one! Steven Smith helps us understand the need to re-present not just the meaning of the biblical text but also the spirit and the shape of the text in our expositional sermons. If (aspiring) pastors will implement what Steven is saying, I can’t help but believe that local churches will be enriched, blessed, and built up as they hear the voice of God from the Word of God. I wholeheartedly recommend it.”

Tony Merida, *pastor for preaching and vision,*
Imago Dei Church; associate professor of Preaching,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Expository preaching is the heart of Christian worship and central to the pastoral task. The Word of God constrains and compels every aspect of preaching. Steven Smith understands this. *Recapturing the Voice of God* helpfully reminds us that the text must drive every aspect of truly expository preaching. In this book, preachers will be encouraged and equipped for the all-important task of rightly dividing the Word of Truth.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., *president,*
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Recapturing the Voice of God* is a needed resource for sermon prep and discipling the next generation of faithful preachers.”

Anthony Moore,
Fort Worth campus pastor, The Village Church

“It’s rare to find a book that seamlessly weds a scholar’s mind with a preacher’s heart, but in *Recapturing the Voice of God*, Steven Smith provides a unique and overdue resource that will both inform and inspire preachers to more faithfully communicate God’s Word!”

R. Scott Pace,
Reverend A. E. and Dora Johnson Hughes Chair of Christian Ministry,
Oklahoma Baptist University

“If you are searching for a fresh approach to preaching, Dr. Steven Smith’s *Recapturing the Voice of God* will condition your own heart to think God’s thoughts after him and will spur your congregation to abandon the pace of the walking horse and rise to become derby racers. In a style unique to Smith, the text of Scripture leaps to life from the pages of the Bible and electrifies the heart. You have waited for this book for years. Now feast on it.”

Paige Patterson, *president,*
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Steven Smith’s treatment of the biblical genres and the directive they provide for sermon development and delivery is critical for us to hear God’s voice and help our listeners to do the same. God’s voice is our only hope of transformation into Christ’s image.”

Jim Shaddix,
W. A. Criswell Chair of Expository Preaching,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

STEVEN W. SMITH

RECAPTURING THE VOICE OF GOD



1 John 4:16



SHAPING SERMONS
LIKE SCRIPTURE



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

COLOSSIANS 1:15

The Centrality of Christ

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by Him in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.

He is before all things, and by Him all things hold together. He is also the head of the body, the church;

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He might Himself have the preeminence.

For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile everything to Himself by making peace through the blood of His cross, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

21 Once you were alienated and hostile to your minds because of your evil actions. But now He has reconciled you by His physical body, through His death, to present you holy, blameless, and blameless before Him. If you did not remain reconciled, you would not have seen His glory and remain steadfast in the faith of the gospel, that you should openly proclaim it in all glory and honor, as Paul has been doing.

Paul's Ministry

22 I am saying this so that you may receive you with persuasive argument, as if you were men of understanding, rejoicing in seeing how we are and the strength of your faith. Therefore, as you have seen Jesus the Lord, walk in the same way in Him, and as you were obedient to Him, so now be obedient to Him, the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is derived, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, and who is communicating His glory and honor to the Father, who is the Father of all things, through Jesus Christ His Son, the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, and who has become flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, like the glory of the Father, because of His truth and grace.

everyone with all wisdom, so present everyone mature in Christ for this, striving with His strength powerfully in me. I desire that you may know how much I have for you, for those who are not yet mature, and for all who have not seen you, want their hearts to be encouraged together in love, so that they may know the riches of assured understanding and knowledge of God's mystery, the treasures of wisdom and hidden in Him.

Christ versus the Colossians

I am saying this so that you may receive you with persuasive argument, as if you were men of understanding, rejoicing in seeing how we are and the strength of your faith.

Therefore, as you have seen Jesus the Lord, walk in the same way in Him, and as you were obedient to Him, so now be obedient to Him, the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is derived, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, and who is communicating His glory and honor to the Father, who is the Father of all things, through Jesus Christ His Son, the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, and who has become flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, like the glory of the Father, because of His truth and grace.

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Finally, I am extremely grateful to my wife Ashley, who through some very daunting times gave me space to write, and to Jewell, Sidney, and Shepherd for their patience with Dad. I love you all very much.

INTRODUCTION

HONESTLY, I'M NOT ALWAYS CONFIDENT IN WHAT WE REFER TO AS "EXPOSITORY PREACHING."

Theologically, I'm a fan of exposition. I've given my life to teach expository preaching in the hopes that students will fall in love with the words of the Word and give their lives to explaining it. I unashamedly hope this book contributes to the work of those who want to explain the text. However, let's be honest; much of what we call expository preaching simply isn't. The word comes from a Latin root: we *ex* (remove) the *posit* (postulate) of truth that is in the text and show it to the people. Though the use of the word *exposition* has been well intended, I fear it has often become a referent for a tired, formulaic preaching template—so much so that when we say "exposition" we are using the word to refer to a *style* of structuring sermons. But I'm not willing to call students to give their lives to a style. That's nonsense since styles change with each generation. Expository, text-driven preaching is not a style but a theologically driven philosophy of preaching whose purpose is to get as close to the text as possible.

Don't get me wrong: a template to help us start preaching is not a bad thing; it's a helpful thing. But if we only have one template then eventually we will find that one template does not serve every text. The word is organically dynamic, not static. When a text does not fit a template we have to decide, will we preach the template or preach the text? This was my struggle for years.

It's not that I didn't have a formula, a template. The reality is that I was concerned that using my template on every text could misrepresent the text, as if I were trying to get it to fit my pre-determined outline. I thought there must be a better way, and I don't think I'm alone. But let's say for a minute that I am, and that every other preacher in the world is perfectly satisfied with his sermon structure. What is the justification of this book on the relationship of genre to sermon structure? Good question. The rationale for the book hangs on two axioms.

1. Preaching is re-presenting the Word of God. We are not making things up. This is a theology of preaching in one sentence: we speak for God because he has already revealed himself in his Son and his Son has revealed himself in his Word. This book is God's communication with us. Therefore, as my friend David Allen says, we are not preaching sermons, we are preaching texts. Preaching is more than explaining Scripture, but it is no less. So, when I sit down after the sermon, whatever else has

happened, I must know that I have re-presented what God has already said to people. This is because in seeing the text they see Christ and in seeing Christ they see the Father. Therefore, to keep people from the Word is to keep them from Christ. We have an obligation to re-present what God has already said. So, we have to get at the meaning. Which leads us to our second axiom.

2. The structure of a text influences its meaning. Why does God speak through at least nine different genres? Why are they not all lectures, each with four points and three corresponding sub-points? An attempt to answer is ridiculous: that's in the mind of God. However, I'm so glad we have the robust poetry of the Psalms, the direct wisdom of Proverbs, the biting irony of Ecclesiastes, the shocking narratives of the Old Testament, the richness of the Gospel narratives, the personal nature of the epistles, and the glorious joy of kingdom consummation in Revelation. And each of those genres influences the meaning of the words that they communicate. While I don't like the word *per se*, they also influence the *feel* of the text—that is, the author-intended emotional design of the text. Since the Word of God is perfect, the respective genres were ordained to be conduits for particular texts. The question then is, do I have a sermon structure that allows me to re-present the text in the way it was originally presented? Which leads to our conclusion.

Therefore, we preach the Word of God as influenced by the voice of God. By “voice of God” we mean genre. This is saying what God says, the way God says it. The question is, how can I capture the voice of God while I am preaching the Word of God? To ignore the genre is to miss some of its meaning. The humble ambition of this book is to show a preacher or teacher how the genre influences the meaning of the text and give practical help for those who want to know how we can shape our sermons to reflect this meaning. This is genre-sensitive preaching. This raises two questions. Are we arguing for imitating the text? No, not imitation. We are not imitating but re-animating the text. In other words discovering the meaning imbedded in the genre and allowing it to influence the sermon. More on that later. Secondly, isn't it enough to preach the Bible verse by verse without any attention to genre? The problem is that could possibly lead to forcing texts into pre-determined forms, forms that do not allow the text to breathe and miss some of the meaning.

Not every preacher wants to be an expositor. I get that, but that is another discussion. For now one could wish that those of us who claim to be expositors would not mask the meaning of the text under the guise of explaining it. We can't suggest we are taking the homiletic high ground by preaching “exposition” when all we do is walk through a book serially while drawing points from a text with the same capriciousness that one would pick a topic at random and assign a text that had some semblance of that topic in it.

Perhaps this paper-thin veneer of “exposition” as a pre-made template laid over a text is the reason so many younger preachers are walking away from it.

Please hear my heart: I'm not implicating my brothers as much as expressing my own frustration and failure. For years, maintaining a homiletic form kept me further from the text, not closer. I was too naïve, and perhaps willful, to admit that the form of the sermon did not accurately re-present the form of the text.

There has to be a better way.

There is.

We should let Scripture breathe.

If Scripture gives life, then our sermon forms should be the open windows through which the breath of life blows. As preachers, we are conduits whose task is not to filter out what is unpalatable—as if God’s Word was somehow too explicit for a modern world. To allow the text to breathe means that we allow the shape of the text to drive the shape of the sermon. This commitment flows from our doctrine of inspiration. If the content of the Word of God is inspired, and the shape of a text influences its content, should not our sermons be re-presentations of what God already presented? It is not the task of the preacher to flatten the literary genre in a quest to mine out theological truth. The structure of the text is actually part of the message, and we must pay attention to it.

For those of us who believe in inspiration, preaching really is a re-presentation of a text of Scripture. This truly is exposition. Our simple proposition is that the shape of the sermon should be influenced by the shape of the text. It is as simple as that. And since Scripture has many different genres, it is as complicated as that as well. If God is gracious, reading this will free you to let the text determine the sermon structure and be a primer to aid when the practice of genre-sensitive sermons gets complicated. And it does get complicated. So we will attempt to toggle between a work that is informed by recent scholarship yet has the daily application to the preacher in mind. Thus you can keep it at your elbow in the study when preaching through a specific genre. This is just an introduction so you will want to use the bibliography in the back for further study. Preaching, for me at least, is always daunting. This is written in the hope of washing the feet of other preachers.

I don’t have all the answers. Later today I’m going to fight my flesh as I prepare the next sermon. I certainly don’t know *the* way to preach each text. And this is part of the point. There is a thrill to being forced to think through each genre of Scripture on its own terms. However, I do want to stand on the shoulders of our predecessors who helped us with sermon form and enable us to get closer to the text. I do want to imitate Jesus, who was the exact voice of God. We are not perfect; we are weak prophets with a burning desire to get closer and to be clearer.

In an effort to get closer and clearer, we will study the genres of Scripture—their shape—so that the shape of the text informs the shape of the sermon. In this way we are recapturing the voice of God while we preach the Word of God. May he be gracious as we get closer and clearer.

RECAPTURING THE VOICE OF GOD: PITCH, RATE, VOLUME

INTRODUCTION

SCRIPTURE IS THE WORD OF GOD PRESENTED IN THE VOICE OF GOD. Preaching is re-presenting the Word of God by recapturing the voice of God. Therefore to capture the meaning of God's words we must present the Word of God in the voice of God. To say it negatively, to capture the words of God without the voice of God is to miss the meaning of the text. Scripture is God's Word in God's voice. This book is about capturing the meaning of the text—the Word of God—in sermons influenced by the genre of the text—the voice God chose to speak his words.

I love the way my toddler runs. He flails his arms and runs with abandon. Our driveway leads down to a busy street, so when he comes near the street I muster up my deepest baritone, and raising the volume of my voice while lowering the tone of my voice at the same time, I bellow, "Shep!"

There are only three ways the voice can be adjusted. We can modify the volume, the pitch (think intensity), or the rate (the speed). I'm not thinking about all that at the moment. I don't have to. The emotions I am feeling simply emerge in a heightened pitch and volume. And it works. Shep has heard me say his name hundreds of times: in joy, in gratitude, or in playfulness. As a growing parent I am learning that variety in voice is a useful tool for discipline and for the demonstration of affection. I am motivated by love. And at this moment, I want to protect him; I am protecting him with my voice as much as my words. In fact, it's not the word that stops him; it's the tone of voice. To say his name in a soft way would misrepresent the way I feel. There are times I want to communicate all sorts of emotions, but in that moment I want to communicate fear, danger, and warning—for no other reason than that danger exists. I'm not being dramatic. It's real. Because I love my son I want him to fear what could cost him his life.

Scripture also has pitch, rate, and volume, nuances that are represented in the genre of the text. There is one Bible, many genres. There is one Word in many voices, all motivated by the love of the Father toward us.

The first question of the Bible, “Where are you?” is a haunting inquiry of paternal love and disappointment.¹ In the flood, God rains a word of judgment from a cloud of grace.² God screams a word of warning through the story of Israel so that we will obey.³ The great people of faith in the Old Testament are not presented for our amusement. While stories of Old Testament heroes are legendary, that’s not their purpose. Their lives represent the very voice of God cheering us to run well, to know that the very pain we are experiencing is the birthmark of a child of God.⁴ The race is real, so the encouragement is real. The psalms express the range of human emotion, yet the psalms are not authored merely by a human, but by God. In the psalms, God expresses his love to us by telling us the ways we might respond to him. God loves us so completely that he speaks to us, and then gives us a voice when we don’t know how to respond back to him.

God speaks triumphant hope in stories like Ruth and Esther. He pleads and argues with us in the prophets.⁵

The gospel story is the last word.⁶ God has nothing more to say about the revelation of himself. Christ is the ultimate and fully expressive Word from God to us. The voice of God is so loud in the incarnate person of Christ that Christ does not have to scream. His presence is enough, the deafening roar of invitation spoken in the Son’s humiliation. Christ concealed his glory so that the Father would be revealed at the right time.⁷ This is why many did not recognize him. As Jesus spoke, it was God from heaven speaking to the world in a voice they had never heard before. It is the single most dramatic story of all time. But the message is not the drama; the message is the Word of God to us. Many miss the Word for sake of the story. They love the drama of death to life, but are not willing to die so they can live. They have heard the story; they have not heard the Word.⁸ Yet the story is the vehicle for the spoken Word. God is condescending. And condescension brings accountability. To hear the story of Christ and not respond is to assume that he came for entertainment. Every story in Scripture awaits a response, especially the ultimate story of Christ. He humbled himself by taking a human form for one reason: to speak to us the right word in the right voice. He awaits a response.

He instructs us in the Epistles. The Epistles are the very words of Jesus explaining to us, through the voice of the apostles, how we are to live in light of the Gospels and Acts.⁹ They are God’s spoken commentary on his Son and his church.

In the last book, the book of Revelation, God ends the battle the same way he began the world. All things begin with one word. All things end with one word.¹⁰ Revelation is Jesus-spoken. God the Father revealed to Jesus, who revealed to the angel, who revealed to John the encouraging word for the church, so that she might hope in the definite physical return of Jesus the Warrior Messiah to right every

1. Gen 3:9.

2. Gen 6–9.

3. Heb 10:26–39.

4. Heb 12:1–6.

5. Isa 1:18; Mic 6:8.

6. Heb 1:1–2.

7. Phil 2:8.

8. Matt 13:9.

9. John 14:25; 15:26; 16:12–13.

10. Gen 1:1; Rev 19:21.

wrong, redeem his bride, and bring justice on his enemies. It is a loud book for the reason that the encouragement is so needed. It is the last word on the last word. The Bible is one Word in many voices.

God, who knows every situation that we will ever encounter, uses a tremendous amount of vocal variety. To say it another way, God, who is unchangeable, varied his vocal approach out of a desire to communicate himself to us. This is why the Bible is not a flat one-dimensional book. It is a rich granular voice speaking to every condition in multiplied variety. There is pitch, rate, and volume in Scripture.

If God changes his voice, shouldn't we preachers change ours? People do not think God is boring from reading his Word. They think that God is boring because we have trained them to think such by monochromatic, flat, uniform, one-size-fits-all approach to preaching. This misrepresents the many variations in God's Word for the very reason that no one ever heard the voice of God and was bored. God is not boring. The work of boredom is not the work of God but the work of man. God has a voice and he uses it.

This book is an encouragement to identify the voice of God in the Word of God. This is not principally intended to teach you how to interpret the Word, nor is this book about how to craft sermons from beginning to end. It's not so much about mining what God is saying from the text, but help on identifying how God is speaking by study of the genre of Scripture and then to shape sermons that recapture that voice in his Word. Once captured, this voice determines the tone and structure of the sermon. This implies that meaning is found not only when we identify the substance of the text, but when we identify the structure and the tone of the text as well. God has a voice and he uses it. The question is how do we use our voices to re-capture the voice of God? In other words, how do we structure sermons influenced by the genre of the God-inspired text?

BEYOND THE BRIDGE

As preachers, we want to help people. Thus, historically, one of the most helpful metaphors for preaching is building a bridge, because we do in fact want to build a bridge from the biblical text to the modern world. We mine the Scriptures for truths to help our hearers, the end result being "biblical sermons." These are sermons in which the points come from the Bible. This is what we want. We observe something in the text and we identify it for our listener. Let's call this preaching by identification/observation. Much of what we call "expository preaching" is preaching by identification/observation. We observe something in the text and then identify it for our listener.

Yet, we actually want to do *more* than observe things in the text. Here in this short volume we are calling for something more in the same trajectory. Something slightly different. This is about preaching that not only identifies what is in the text, but re-presents it in the same way the text presented it. What God said. How God said it. To speak God's Word influenced by the way God said it, to re-present the Word of God by re-capturing the voice of God. Yes we do build bridges, but when we walk across that bridge we are to re-present God's Word by recapturing God's voice. The reason this is so critical is for the very reason that this is how God has

chosen to communicate. Therefore we are after shaping sermons in God's voice. In this way, the shape of the text becomes the shape of the sermon.

THE SHAPE OF THE SERMON

The structure of a biblical text determines the structure of the sermon. This proposition is simple enough, but it's a challenge to execute. In fact, it's a radical departure from many approaches to sermon structure. However, the struggle to hear the voice in the Word and further re-present that word in God's voice is worth it. Personally, this truth has liberated my preaching from self-imposed expectations that my sermons must be shaped and structured like those of my favorite preacher. This book is about learning how to shape our sermons according to the shape of the biblical text, a conversation that is framed in the context of the history of preaching and a theology of preaching.

Closer: A Little History of Preaching

Reduce your text to a simple proposition, and lay that down as the warp; and make the use of the text itself as the woof; illustrating the main idea by the various terms in which it is contained. Screw the words into the minds of your hearers. A screw is the strongest of all mechanical powers . . . when it has been turned a few times scarcely any power can pull it out.¹¹

It is in the metaphor of the "Warp and Woof" that British Divine Charles Simeon (1739–1836) helps us understand the structure of the modern sermon. Simeon was a fellow at King's College in Cambridge and the pastor of Holy Trinity Church. Perhaps his greatest contribution was his influence on preaching and the shape of a propositional sermon. A propositional sermon is a sermon that advances certain axioms or truths, and may in fact be crafted around a central proposition. The word picture he uses above is textile in origin. A weaver lays down the thread in front of her vertically (warp). Then thread is woven through it horizontally (woof); ergo, the warp and woof in common vernacular is the "whole thing."

In the mind of Charles Simeon, this is the whole sermon. You lay down the main idea of what you want to say in the sermon then demonstrate from the text how that theme is woven throughout the text of Scripture. This is structured in a sermon with clear divisions. Simeon explains the idea of divisions around a main theme when he writes,

Division ought to be restrained to a small number of parts: they should never exceed four or five at the most; the more admired sermons have only two or three parts. There are two sorts of divisions, the first is the division of the text into its parts; the other

11. Charles Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 59. I'm indebted to the work of Denny Autry for finding this gem, as well as other insights regarding Simeon in his dissertation, *Factors Influencing the Sermonic Structure of Jean Claude and His Influence on Homiletics* (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013). Autry notes that this illustration of the screw is borrowed from Huguenot pastor Jean Claude in Simeon's *Essay on the Composition of a Sermon*.

is of the discourse, or sermon itself, which is made of the text. The division of the discourse is proper when it gives light to a text. . . .¹²

When your parts are too closely connected with each other, place the most detached first, and endeavor to make that serve for a foundation to the explication of the second, and the second to the third; so that at the end of your explication the hearer may with a glance perceive, as it were, a perfect body, or a finished building; for one of the greatest excellences of a sermon is, the harmony of its component parts, that the first leads to the second, the second serves to introduce the third; that they which go before, excite the desire for those which are to follow: in a word, that the last has a special relation to all the others, in order to form in the hearers' minds a complete idea of the whole.¹³

From these brief quotes we get the fuller picture: the sermon should have a limited number of divisions, and those divisions should fit into a unified whole. What is implicit in this quote is that this sermon is built on one particular text, not several.

This propositional approach to preaching was not new, but Simeon, borrowing heavily from the French Protestant Jean Claude, said something more clearly than any of his contemporaries: a sermon should have a single text, a single theme, and multiple points to support that theme. Simeon demonstrated this method in his sermons printed in his *Horae Homileticae* (1832). His approach was represented later in the work of John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (1898). This was the most widely used preaching text for a generation and had tremendous impact on American preaching. Broadus, in turn, influenced many significant works in homiletics. Thus, the influence of Simeon, implicit or explicit, is hard to overstate.

So again, to Simeon a sermon was laying down the warp of a proposition. The woof of the text was woven through the proposition demonstrating how the text spoke to the proposition. Those of us who are committed to letting the text speak may want to say, more precisely, that we extract propositions from the text and then demonstrate how the text supports the one main idea of the text. Nevertheless, the principal is clear—you shape a sermon by having several points from one singular text, and you explain those points woven around a singular theme.

This is why, out of all the history of preaching, Simeon is a good place to begin this conversation. He was not the fountainhead of expository preaching. To understand a careful history of the expository sermon one would have to, at the very least, look beside Simeon to the Puritans, and behind Simeon to the Reformers, and further behind him to Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome, and ultimately back to the New Testament church who, borrowing from the model of the synagogue, read and explained Scripture in early Christian worship. However, it is more than the need to keep this brief that takes us to Simeon. He is important. Simeon's model is a clear early representation of what we understand as the modern sermon—a sermon

12. Jean Claude, *Essay on the Composition of the Sermon, with Notes and Illustrations and One Hundred Sermon Skeletons* by Charles Simeon (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1:43.

13. Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1956), 21:311.

derived from a single text, driven by one main idea, and structured around several points.¹⁴

So, if you walk into an evangelical church on a Sunday morning, you will most likely hear a sermon structured in ways that reflect the ancient models with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. You might hear a hint of Simeon with the propositions coming from a general topic, or a truth exposed and then applied to life. Again, there is more to the history of preaching. But most of the offshoots of contemporary biblical preaching, expository preaching, can trace themselves to the immediate roots here; the contribution showed preachers how their sermons can be closer to the text. And this is what we want—to be closer in re-presenting what God has already said. Anything that detracts from this is an enemy to the sermon. Simeon's model was not perfect, but it was getting preachers closer to the text.

Now a question: What if a model of preaching is good for some texts but not all texts? When this happens we have a tendency to hold on to the homiletic form, even if we have to manipulate the biblical text to fit our sermon form. If we are not careful imitating the model that Simeon gave us, multiple points around a proposition often becomes the goal of preaching. Let me be clear. The goal of preaching is not to develop points, nor is the goal to develop a narrative, nor is the goal to preach without points. The goal is to re-present what God has already said. This is the goal. In order to re-present what God has said, the sermon must not prescribe form to the text, but represent the form that is already in the text. The form is given to facilitate the preaching of the text. The form is the means, not the end. The end of preaching is not to sound like preaching. The end of preaching is to sound like God's Word.¹⁵ So now we find ourselves in an odd position. Simeon helped us get closer to the text by giving us a method that would serve that goal. However, now we are tempted to serve the method instead of letting the method serve us. If we do this, what Simeon

14. Charles Simeon's approach is similar to another major contribution to homiletics, the Puritan William Perkins, who also had a high view of Scripture. In his *Art of Prophesying*, Perkins advocated what has come to be known as the Puritan Plain Style. The method was simple enough. The preacher extracted a doctrine from the text, explained the doctrine, and then applied the doctrine. Unlike the Puritan plain style, Simeon had more divisions in the sermon and was not holding to the text-doctrine-uses trichotomy Perkins advocated in his work, *The Art of Prophesying*. While both Simeon and Perkins were in the tradition of the Protestant Plain Style of preaching, the difference between the two is that Perkins followed a template of seeing text, doctrine, and uses (application). This model was perfect for one of the goals of the Puritan sermon: to extract doctrine from the text and explain the doctrine. So, while there is overlap in their approaches such that definitions tend to be reductionist, generally Perkins was aiming toward a method that extracted a singular doctrine from the text, and applications were made from the doctrine. Simeon, on the other hand, was extracting "points" from the text itself. Thus, it is in Simeon that we have the structure of much evangelical preaching today. A proposition is identified from a singular text, and then woven throughout a particular text in a sermon built on "points." While this sounds like Preaching 101, in Simeon's day this was a fairly radical idea.

15. One could rightly point to the movement of narrative preaching, most often thought of synonymously with the New Homiletic, as an attempt to correct this problem. However, a criticism of the New Homiletic is that while it challenged the notion that all sermons had to be deductive propositions, it replaced it with the notion that all sermons must be inductive narratives. If this is true, then it is still a form that is exalted above the text. For a critique of the New Homiletic, see David Allen's "A Tale of Two Roads," *JETS* 43 (2000): 489–515.

used to get closer to the text becomes a distraction that gets us further from the text. The user is now a servant to the means.¹⁶

We have inherited some forms of preaching. This is good. When those forms are found to be wanting, and we still use them, that is bad. All of us have inherited some good and bad preaching forms. So, the preacher who wants to protect himself from holding a form above the text must understand fundamentally what preaching is, which is something to reflect on for a moment. In the way that Simeon left old forms to help us get closer, we must now leave old form to get closer to the text. It's time. The question is, will you treat preaching as a borrowed template forced upon a text, or will you help the next generation get closer to what God is saying? Let me say it stronger: in the history of preaching there have always been those in each generation who have tried to get closer to the text. Our history compels us to get closer to the text, and, likewise, our theology calls us to be clearer.

Clearer: A Little Theology of Preaching

In Hebrews 1:1, God spoke in “various ways” through the prophets. The author does not elaborate on this, but he need not do so. We know the many ways the prophets spoke. And to expand on the trajectory of this verse, the Scripture is filled with variety. So God's perfect Word has variety. To say it another way, it is the nature of his perfection not to be uniform. This is mind blowing. The perfectly consistent, logical, cogent propositions in Scripture are woven through a multi-colored text. The reason we would go to such lengths to re-present what God said the way God said it is because God's communication is perfect. Preaching is an act of communication that we borrow from the source of communication, God. So before we talk about our communication, think about how perfect God's communication is.

After the writer of Hebrews discusses the many ways in which God has spoken, he now asserts that in these last days, “he has spoken to us by his Son . . . the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb 1:2–3). Christ is the exact representation of the Father. This thought is so pregnant with meaning it's difficult to fathom. This at least means that whatever the Father said, the Son said, and whatever the Father wanted him to do, the Son did (John 5:19–46). Whatever the Father would do had he a physical form, the Son did. This was ultimate communication because it was ultimate representation. The Son exactly re-presented the Father. Thus, there is nothing the Father wanted to say to us through Jesus that was left unsaid. It was complete. When Christ said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), he referred to his atoning work. No more sacrifice was needed. There is a sense of completion there. All that God wants to say has been said in Christ. All. This idea of completion is also resonate in the provocative description of Christ's nature and work in Colossians 1:15–10.

16. Preaching is principally learned through imitation. One caution: when imitation alone is our teacher we will replicate a form without a theology behind it. Imitation is the initial tutor for all of us. However, eventually the training wheels of imitation must be removed. The love for sounding like someone else must be replaced with a love for Scripture. The desire to get the text right must swell over the desire to sound right. If not, preaching will be managing our adherence to a form and not re-presenting God's Word.

The Greek *πάς*, “all,” is used nine times, in various forms, in Colossians 1:15–20.

Christ is before *all* creation. (v. 15)

By him, through him, and for him *all* things were created. (v. 16)

In him *all* things hold together. (v. 17)

In him *all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. (v. 19)

He reconciles *all* things to himself. (v. 20)

When Scripture discusses the perfect communication of Christ, the emphasis is not so much on perfection as freedom from error (though he certainly was free from it), but the emphasis is on perfection as completion. This “all” includes the communication of Christ. All that Christ wanted to say about the Father was said. It was indeed finished.

That same sense of completion is hinted at in John 14:25–26. Note the completeness of Jesus’ words when he says to his disciples,

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Christ told his disciples he was leaving them. This was a problem because of the previous verses (14:23–24). “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and the Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.” Access to the Father is granted through the Son; access to the Son is granted through his words.¹⁷ How then could they keep his words if he was leaving them? How could they be in Christ and therefore in the Father? The answer is that the Helper, the Holy Spirit, would come and reveal all things that Jesus said. The “things” refers to everything Jesus taught them.¹⁸ We can imply from that statement that it includes everything we have witness of in the Gospels, and maybe even things that Jesus said that were not written down, but later influenced the writing of the Epistles through the apostolic tradition. Now, how do we know the things that Christ taught them, that later the Holy Spirit revealed to

17. It is interesting that this is the same relationship that is expressed in 2 Cor 4:4, “. . . the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God,” and later in 4:6, “. . . the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” There is an intrinsic relationship between God the Father’s communication of himself in the Word, and the Holy Spirit’s communication of Christ in the Word, the Scriptures.

18. William Hendriksen writes, “*These things*, in view of *while still remaining with you*, which is surely very general, cannot be restricted to the words spoken that night, but obviously indicate *all* his teaching up to this very moment. Now Jesus draws a *distinction*—notice, he does not present a *contrast*; *δε* should here be translated *moreover* or *and* or *now*, not *but*—between his own teaching during the days of his humiliation, on the one hand, and his own teaching through the Spirit in the glory of his exaltation, on the other. The central idea of verses 25, 26 may be summarized as follows: ‘While yet abiding physically with you I have given you certain teachings which after my physical departure from you I, through the Spirit, will make much clearer to you (cf. 1 Cor 2:13). Moreover, I will then teach you *everything* which you need to know in order to perform the work of witnessing which is assigned to you.’” William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, Baker New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 285–86.

them? The answer is of course the Word. The Word of God is the written witness to Christ. Thus, when the Word of God is preached, John 14:26 is being fulfilled. The Holy Spirit revealed to the disciples all things they needed. We, therefore, can fulfill John 14:23–24: we can know the words of Christ, we can be in Christ, and therefore in the Father.

In the same way that God is completely/perfectly represented in the Son, the Son is completely/perfectly represented in Scripture. It is odd when someone says that we don't need the propositions of Scripture, what we need is just Jesus. How would we know who Jesus is without the propositions of Scripture? The revelation of Christ is given through Scripture, and it is perfect.

Now we see how God communicates—perfectly: with exactness or completeness. And this is our ambition for preaching. In preaching we imperfectly attempt to re-present the Word as completely as the Spirit has re-presented Christ in the Word, and as completely as Christ has re-presented the Father by his words. We may fairly ask “What would Jesus do?” but we can never ask, “What would Jesus say?” We have the perfectly complete revelation of Christ in his Word. If Christ were to show up in our churches, we know exactly what he would say. He already said it. So we preach that. This is not drawing points out of a text; this is showing the text just as it is. This is preaching that is Scripture re-imaged. This is the Word re-presented.

However, it was not only the words of Christ that communicated the Father, but the very life of Christ as well. Let's make one more visit to Colossians 1:15–22 before we make our application to preaching.

The reason Christ perfectly communicated the Father was that the very presence of Christ in the world is itself communication. He is the image of God (Col 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4). The word translated image is the Greek word *eikōn*, from which we get our English word “icon.” In Greek, an *eikōn*, or image, made visible the invisible reality that it represented. Today, in English, an icon functions much the same way. For example, the Eiffel Tower is an “iconic” image. You see a structure, but you think Paris, France. You see the Great Wall of China, but you think of the country of China. You see the Hollywood Sign and you think Los Angeles and the Golden Age of Cinema. These are all iconic images. The icon is the visual/visible symbol that surfaces a reality that is invisible/mental. There is a wide sense in which this is true of Christ. Christ was the visible image that allows us to see an invisible God. However, there is much more to Christ as the image of God than this. Christ is the image of the invisible God. However, Christ is not a symbol for God: Christ is God. To understand the nature of Christ one has to look beyond the physicality of Christ, the fact that he was God incarnate, and one must listen to Christ. Christ was not just a visible image; he was re-presenting exactly what God wanted to say.

The word “image,” *eikōn*, in Paul's use means representation, but it means more than this. It means an exact image. Precise. A mirror image. Christ is not just a visual symbol that makes us think of an invisible God. Christ is a re-presentation of the thoughts of the Father; and thus, he helps us think of the Father more precisely. Christ is the exact visible expression of a God we cannot see. When we engage Christ we know exactly what the Father would say or do because Christ, in a physical form, is the perfect re-presentation of the Father. And this is how we understand the sermon. Yes, preaching is making observations from the text and building

bridges to people's lives, but we are sketch artists first and bridge builders second. In other words, we make sure we have the Word of God captured in the voice of God before we walk across the bridge. Preaching is re-presenting God. We say what God has already said, and re-present it exactly as he said it. Yes, preaching is drawing things from the text, but it is more: preaching is re-imagining the text. In this way we stand in the trajectory of how God has chosen to reveal himself. Think of it in this reverse chronological way:

1. We re-present the text.
2. The text re-presents Christ
3. Christ re-presents the Father.¹⁹

We share truth to people in an attempt to get them to see the Word. When they see the Word, the Holy Spirit will communicate Jesus; and if they see Jesus, Jesus will communicate the Father. Then, it ends. The Father communicates no one. The Father represents no one. He speaks for no one but himself. The Father has never been told anything that needs to be communicated to others. He is the source of all. He has given everything and been given nothing. The Father is the beginning and end of communication. The Greek word is *telos*—that is, “end” or “goal.” Thus, he is the source and the completion. All communication initiated in the Godhead and all communication has as its end to bring people back to the Father.

So what you began, dear Lord, may I wield as a weapon to win people to your Word, which will lead them to Christ, who will lead them to the Father. This is the end.

There is more to preaching, but there is at least the fact that a Christian preacher aims to re-present the Word, which re-presents Christ, who re-presents the Father. This is iconic preaching. We attempt to re-present exactly the Word, knowing that the Word will exactly represent Christ and that Christ exactly represents the Father. A preacher is not striving for perfection; he is striving for precision and completion. Are we saying what God wants us to say, the way God wants us to say it? This is the question. The answer to the question has many implications, but this book is primarily about sermon structure. Let's now make an application of this theology to sermon structure.

If the structure of a biblical text influences its meaning, and we want the sermon to mean what the text means, doesn't it make sense that we can borrow the form of the text as the form of the sermon? Can we not use the voice of God to re-present the Word of God? I don't want to say that all observational preaching is bad. Rather, we want more in the same trajectory. Let a generation stand on the shoulders of the great preachers who went before us and be careful to explain the Word while recapturing the voice. It's a question of theological trajectory. If the Word is right, then it is sufficient; if the Word is sufficient, then we must say that what it said was influenced by the way it is said. There is meaning at the structural level of a text; should we not pay attention to the structure of the text and how it influences meaning? That is an argument from the doctrine of Scripture, and we have been arguing from the nature of Christ. So, let's say it another way.

The issue with sermon form is not right versus wrong. Again, the issue is that of trajectory. God has communicated perfectly in Christ; Christ communicated the

19. 2 Cor 4:4, 6.

Father perfectly; and the Holy Spirit communicates the Son perfectly in Scripture. So what sermon form continues the trajectory of completeness? The point is that the next step in that same trajectory is to shape sermons like Scripture. To say what God says in the voice that he said it. Sermons are sculptures modeled after the Master Communicator. Therefore I have the freedom to shape my sermons like the text! What sweet liberty. This leads to the application of our premise: the structure of the biblical text determines the structure of the sermon. Knowing that God inspired the structure of the text, and that the structure of the text influences meaning, this book is intended to help us shape our sermons like Scripture. This is driven by the fact that Christ exactly re-presented the Father, and I want to exactly re-present the text. I am imitating the method of Christ.

If the structure of the sermon is the goal of preaching; if the end game is adherence to a homiletic form; then the inevitable temptation will be to consider ourselves faithful when we have kept the form. However, when a means of preaching the Word is more visible than the Word, then it is no longer a means to preaching the Word. The end of the medium is not the medium. Sermon structure should serve the text.

So before we talk about the genre of Scripture, it's important to see this in its theological trajectory. God is revealed in Christ; Christ is revealed in the Word. Understanding the genre, the structure of a biblical text, helps us understand how to communicate the Word. Therefore, learning how to preach sermons that consider the genre in which God chose to reveal them is a means toward greater faithfulness when re-presenting that Word. So this book has a theological premise: God is revealed in Christ, and Christ in the Word. And this book has one plea: let's consider how the genre of each text helps us be more faithful to that Word. So, all that we will discuss about methodology has one aim: to more faithfully re-represent the text.

CONCLUSION

So, let's sum this up. From the history of preaching we learn that we have inherited a sermon structure; this is good, but becomes bad when we force a sermon structure that does not help explain the text. From a theology of preaching we learn to evaluate sermon structure by how clearly and transparently it allows the text to show through it so that in the text we can see Christ, and in Christ we can see the Father.

All of this presents a compelling case that we cannot ignore the shape of the text and resign ourselves to a life of predictable preaching forms. Not only is it amazingly boring, it misrepresents the dynamic nature of Scripture by making it something flat and predictable.

The question remains then, if we cannot preach with inherited forms because left alone they might rob the text of its full beauty, then how do we preach? The answer is to find a sermon structure that is so simple that it does not suffocate the text. The Holy Spirit of God has life giving power through the Word of God. So we use a homiletical method that allows the text to breathe; a method that helps us re-present what the text has said; and a method that is driven by the nature of the text itself. This is text-driven preaching.