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# PACKER ON PREACHING: A RECOMMENDATION

*Benjamin Dean*

*50/50 exposition and application is Packer's advice drawn from Puritan preachers. This article analyses the issues surrounding contemporary preaching, in particular the vital place systematic theology, biblical theology, and application must hold.*

It is surely one of the great ironies of our time that the battles over the Bible's authority in the 1970s and '80s that secured for many a belief in its inerrancy did not secure a certain role for its truth in our churches subsequently. The disappearance of pulpits, perhaps insignificant in itself, points to a much greater disappearance. Serious preaching, preaching that not only engages conscientiously with the text but is also effective in bringing hearers into the presence of God, is rare. And just as rare is the preacher who can, from a biblical vantage point, bring understanding to life with depth, clarity, and wisdom. The fact is that the meaning of life, in all of its grandeur, complexity, and tragedy should be understood nowhere more profoundly than in the church on Sunday morning.<sup>1</sup>

## A Strategic Retrieval

In an essay of striking lucidity, J.I. Packer sets out his impression of Puritan preaching.<sup>2</sup> The main sources are Perkins' *Arte of Prophecyng* and the Westminster Assembly's *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, with Baxter's sermons being the best exemplar. Early Anglican Evangelicals like Simeon maintained this tradition and were followed by Ryle. Among non-conformists Spurgeon, Whyte, and then Lloyd-Jones bore this torch forward into the twentieth century. It is Packer's belief 'that the well-being of the church today depends in large measure on a revival of preaching in [this] Puritan vein.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind. How the Holy-Love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013), p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness. The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), pp. 277-289.

<sup>3</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, p. 281. The gravity and primacy of their preaching in Packer's advocacy of the Puritans is generally overlooked by, for instance, Mark Dever, 'J.I. Packer and Pastoral Wisdom from the Puritans,' in *J.I. Packer and the Evangelical Future. The Impact of His Life and Thought* (Timothy George, ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2009), pp. 87-97; and Alister E McGrath, *To Know*

For Puritan homiletics Packer regards the following principles as axiomatic: 1) The ‘*primacy of the intellect*’ (hence the priority of *teaching* the word of God). 2) The ‘*supreme importance of preaching*’ (thus the imperative of substantial sermon *preparation*). 3) The ‘*life-giving power of Holy Scripture*’ (thus the centrality in pastoral work of feeding people with *text-based* address): ‘The only pastor worthy of the name...is the man whose chief concern is always to feed his people by means of his preaching with the enlivening truths of the word of God.’<sup>4</sup> 4) The ‘*sovereignty of the Holy Spirit*’ (once suitable instruction and exhortation is supplied, it is God’s special arena to make the message effective in lives).<sup>5</sup>

The key features of preaching born out of these convictions can be summarised as a type of biblical exposition marked by doctrinal concentration and sensible structure, which is then presented in a clear style that is Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, and effective in growing disciplined Christian experience.<sup>6</sup> The next (and most characteristic) element is what Packer calls ‘piercing’ application.<sup>7</sup>

We may assume, along with Baxter, that a mixture of listeners will be present. Some will be ignorant, others teachable (or un-teachable), knowledgeable or proud. There will be those who are humble and hungry, those who require correction, those who are depressed, as well as mature disciples who are consciously seeking to move on in wisdom and

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*and Serve God. A Biography of James I. Packer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), pp. 54-58. A fleeting exception is Don J. Payne, *The Theology of the Christian Life in J.I. Packer’s Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), p. 54. Questions about the accuracy and legitimacy of Packer’s appropriation of Puritan homiletics may initially be referred to the recent important work of Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), pp. 681-710; see especially the vast bibliography supplied on p. 681, n. 5. Recognition of the forefront concern of biblical preaching in Puritan ministry is a theme curiously muted in John Coffey and Paul Chang-Ha Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), despite the brief remarks of Charles B. Hambrick-Stown (pp. 195-196). A far superior account of the profundity, energy and primacy of preaching within Puritan understanding of public worship is evident in the valuable introduction and overview of Perkins, Sibbes, Preston, Goodwin, Manton, Watson, and Flavel by Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Volume 4: The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 251-329.

<sup>4</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, p. 283.

<sup>5</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, pp. 281-284.

<sup>6</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, pp. 284-286.

<sup>7</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, p. 286.

experience. These seven sorts of people are, according to the *Directory*, catered for by six kinds of application: instruction, correction, exhortation, rebuke, comfort, and the call to self-examination.<sup>8</sup> The applicatory task is of such importance that:

The quality of a preacher depended ultimately, in the Puritan estimate, on the clarity, wisdom, authority, and searchingness that hearers found in his application. It was not, of course, possible for any preacher to make all six types of application to all seven types of listeners in any one sermon. Forty-two distinct applications would take all day! But Puritan pastoral preachers would spend half or more of their preaching time developing applications, and anyone making an inventory of their published sermons will soon find examples of all forty-two specific applications, often developed with very great rhetorical and moral force. Strength of application was, from one standpoint, the most striking feature of Puritan preaching, and it is arguable that the theory of discriminating application is the most valuable legacy that Puritan preachers have left to those who would preach the Bible and its gospel effectively today.<sup>9</sup>

## The Question of Proportion

In Reformed and Evangelical theology, biblical preaching is usually taken to be a primary means of Divine grace to the church. Mounting his case on his reading of the Puritans, Packer believes that preaching's purpose is not, like teaching, primarily to furnish the mind with information—however interesting or important that may be—as one does in a lecture. Decisive here is recognition that preaching, more than teaching, is concerned with *what God is saying to his people living today*: 'Christian preaching is *the event of God himself bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction through the words of a spokesperson*.'<sup>10</sup> That is why preaching which expounds the written word of God should be first priority. It is the main form of communication God has given the church through which he speaks to the whole person. Preaching, Packer argues, is more basic, more

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<sup>8</sup> *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, n.d.); p. 381, as cited by Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, pp. 287n.20, 357.

<sup>9</sup> Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, p. 288.

<sup>10</sup> J.I. Packer, 'Some Perspectives on Preaching,' in *Preaching the Living Word. Addresses from the Evangelical Ministry Assembly* (David Jackman, ed.; Fearn: Mentor/Christian Focus, 1999), p. 28 (italics orig.).

important, more urgent, and more necessary than mere teaching. The preacher's overriding concern is to deliver a message from God, and his main aim is to prepare a meeting between God and his people. His goal is not merely to expand his hearers' intellectual grasp of the material but to bring about this encounter with God in and through it.

If preaching is one of the main public means by which God impacts lives, good preaching will necessarily make Christian teaching directly relevant for Christian living. It will deliver 'God-taught information set forth with God-given freedom and forthrightness in a God-prompted application.'<sup>11</sup> It will be directed at the entire person and his or her whole being, 'for whereas one lectures to clear heads and ripen minds, one preaches to change lives and save souls.'<sup>12</sup> For Packer, preaching is not a reduction of teaching but an addition to it; it is essentially 'teaching plus application.'<sup>13</sup> Elaborating this point, Packer writes:

The *perspective* of preaching is always applicatory...As preaching is God-centred in its viewpoint and Christ-centred in its substance, so it is life-centred in its focus and life-changing in its thrust. Preaching is the practical communication of truth about God as it bears on our present existence. Neither statements of Bible doctrine nor talk about Christian experience alone is preaching, not even if the speakers get excited, emphatic, and dogmatic, and bang the table to make their points. Religious speech only becomes preaching when, first, its theme is Bible truth, or rather, the God of Scripture, in the hearers' lives—when, in other words, it is about the Father, Son, and Spirit invading, inverting, illuminating, integrating, and impelling us, and about ourselves as thereby addressed, accused, acquitted, accepted, assured and allured—and when, second, the discourse debouches [emerges into the open] in practical biblical exhortation, summoning us to be different in some spiritually significant way and to remain different whatever pressure is put on us to give in to unspiritual ways once more.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> J.I. Packer, *Truth and Power. The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw, 1996), p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Packer, *Truth and Power*, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> Packer, 'Perspectives on Preaching,' p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> J.I. Packer, *Honouring the Written Word of God. Collected Shorter Writings. Volume 3. On the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*. (Vancouver: Regent College, 2008. Orig. 1998), p. 253. Chapters 17–23 of this book comprise Packer's homiletics *in nuce*.

Packer goes on to analyse applicatory preaching in three different respects.<sup>15</sup> The first of these regards the individual's *relationship with God*. Since relating to God in appropriate ways is the most pressing issue Christians face, Packer thinks that preaching should concentrate on providing general counsel directed towards this. Quite apart from cultural variations, the elements of a life in friendship and fellowship with God are permanent concerns for every human being. These are matters of faith, hope, love, forgiveness, faithfulness, service, obedience, suffering, fighting sin, facing evil, dealing with death, prayer, praise, giving, sacrifice, study, the promised end in heaven and, not least, the dangers of hell. Preaching involves application of the biblical text to every facet of life, and must cover these and other elements of godliness in detail and depth. Application of the biblical message to the whole person means counselling about the unchanging virtues, secrets and disciplines that will help people build their lives for God and with God.

Secondly, applied preaching finds its centre of gravity in *the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ*. It is in *him*, his grace, power, love, teaching and example that everything is held together. The Lordship of Christ, his eternal kingdom, gospel, judgement, demands and summons to discipleship *are* the heart of biblical theology. Preaching with such a Christ-oriented application constantly draws connections between the particular text being expounded and the love of God in Christ, referring directly to the problems, challenges and opportunities that people face as they follow him. Knowing him, trusting him, serving him and his people, is the substance of Christian life. And so as 2 Tim. 3:15–16 reminds us, biblical exposition—'bringing out of the texts what God...put in them'<sup>16</sup>—aims to achieve a presentation of Christ's person, outlining the manifold resources he makes available to move people on to a full-hearted confidence in him for salvation.

Thirdly, preaching that is applicatory addresses *the conscience* of the hearer. A vital aspect of the preacher's duty is to look carefully into his own conscience and to survey his sense of moral sensitivity regards duty before God, with the aim of developing applications that will resonate deeply within the consciences of his hearers. Again, the preacher should not be trying to cover every angle in every message but, over time and as circumstances prompt, to satisfy and stimulate spiritual hunger through

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<sup>15</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, pp. 332–334.

<sup>16</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 272.

a steady diet of biblical wisdom that connects with people's God-given sense of moral aspiration and obligation.<sup>17</sup>

Packer delineates four kinds of application: to the *mind* (education, correction, expansion), to the *will* (addressing behavioural implications, positive and negative), to *motivation* (offering sufficient reasons for patterning life one way or another), and to a person's present *condition* in connection with the various truths under discussion. Of course, the preacher will have to exercise judgement regarding which practical approach to pursue with respect to a particular text and occasion. What is remarkable about Packer's perspective is the importance he assigns to applied teaching:

A good rule of thumb for pastoral sermons...is that half the message should be in essence instruction in biblical truth about God and man, and half should be in essence specific application of that truth. Observing these proportions, it seems to me, one cannot go far wrong.<sup>18</sup>

In another place, Packer explains how he arrived at this estimate:

Study of printed sermons from past generations reveals that older evangelical preachers kept a careful balance between doctrinal content as such (biblical orthodoxy) and practical and experiential applications (orthopraxy)—something like half and half in most messages. In our day, however, the balance has largely been lost, and sermons tend to be either all doctrinal content without application, or all exhortation without doctrinal content; and to the extent which either form of imbalance prevails, both types of utterance become non-preaching, and very inadequate models, therefore of what preaching ought to be. Many in our churches have never experienced preaching of this historical evangelical sort at all.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. John Webster, 'God and Conscience,' in *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics* (Alan J. Torrance and Michael Banner, ed.; London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 156-157: 'Conscience is an aspect of our fellowship with God...In the broadest terms, this means that a theology of conscience will describe the ultimate context of conscience as the fact that, in and as Jesus Christ, God has acted to effect the entire reordering of human life, judging and excluding the hostility to himself which has issued in our ruin. In Christ he has restored us and enabled us to fulfil our human vocation by gathering us into fellowship with himself.'

<sup>18</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 334.

<sup>19</sup> Packer, 'Perspectives on Preaching,' pp. 31-32.

Pivotal here will be fair-minded assessment of the distribution displayed in Scripture itself. In view of the role Scripture assigns to multiple genres including story, narrative, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic etc., as well as the impact of significant contemporary work on literary and genre related theological interpretation and rhetorical criticism, Packer's half-half analysis might strike a somewhat naïve note.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, study of Puritan homiletic practice suggests three main parts to the sermon: exegetical/expositional, theological/doctrinal, and practical/applicatory.<sup>21</sup> But whatever eventual conclusions may be drawn concerning exact proportion—and this will vary in any case according to text, audience and occasion—Packer's overarching point about serious, extensive and carefully developed substance in sermonic application to pierce, penetrate, drive home and screw into mind, conscience, heart, life and experience is surely well taken.

## Making Connections

In *The Courage to Be Protestant*, David Wells, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, notes two contrasting approaches in contemporary evangelical preaching.<sup>22</sup> One starts with a conviction of the divine authority and enduring validity of biblical truth, and operates on the assumption that people need to be informed about scriptural concepts in detail and depth. Acquaintance with the written Word of God is of first importance, and fulfilling this is the main sermonic task. The other approach feels that the cultural situation of the hearers should dictate the style and much of the substance of a sermon. Contextual communication requires that proclamation be smoothly dressed, with a generous scattering of illustrations, anecdotes, humour, movie-clips, stories and so forth, all intended to effectively convey a message from and about Christ *in situ*. Wells' opinion is that each tactic carries important weight. On the basis of Scripture's sufficiency, the first view concludes,

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<sup>20</sup> E.g. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Daniel J. Treier, and Nicholas T. Wright, eds., *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008); Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, pp. 690-695.

<sup>22</sup> David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant. Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich. / Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 230-233.



that preaching is no more than simply doing exegesis from the pulpit. It is God who must apply that truth, it is assumed, and he will do so because Scripture is all we need for a life of godliness in this world. The preacher's task is finished when the text has been explained. Personal applications are sometimes added, but little effort is typically made to place that text's truth in the context of the world that people inhabit and have to understand, and that must be coped with every other day of the week.<sup>23</sup>

The second view rightly recognises the mediums, perplexities, bewilderments, attractions, pressures and particularities of modern experience, and deliberately tries to connect Christian truth with felt needs, actual circumstances, and real-life stresses or strains, presented in a style that comforts, excites, consoles and inspires. Granted that this presentation is slightly polarised, if a choice has to be made between the two approaches, Wells opts for the former. But the clear concern that effective biblical preaching ought to result in a text-based 'summons, which nourishes the soul'<sup>24</sup> and provides a congregation with this-worldly, widely-engaged, wisdom from God that is spiritually useful and culturally sensitised cannot easily be gainsaid. Regurgitation either of biblical texts and technical commentaries or of fashionable culture is ultimately unpersuasive. To preach the Word with God-given immediacy and power, a preacher has to 'toil effectively on both ends of this trajectory',<sup>25</sup> constantly asking himself, *What does this Word mean for this group of people in this part of the world?*<sup>26</sup>

It will be instantly evident to the experienced that one of the main challenges preaching pastors face is the week-on-week pressure for fresh material. They have to prepare quickly, given the constraints of time and energy, to draw out the appropriate significance of a given passage. Commitment to lifelong, intensive study of both text and the world it

<sup>23</sup> Wells, *Courage to Be Protestant*, p. 231.

<sup>24</sup> Wells, *Courage to Be Protestant*, p. 232.

<sup>25</sup> Wells, *Courage to Be Protestant*, p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> '[W]e must ever remember,' urged "the Doctor", 'that the Truth of God while meant primarily for the mind is also meant to grip and to influence the entire personality. Truth must always be applied...and to handle a portion of Scripture... in a purely intellectual and analytical manner is to abuse it' (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans. Exposition of Chapters 3:20-4:25. Atonement and Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970), p. xii). For what still remains probably *the* classic presentation of criteria for sermons as applied biblical exposition, employing the image of 'bridge-building' (i.e. declaring the radical relevance of Scriptural teaching to *today's* real world), readers might consult afresh John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), pp. 135-179.

must address is both demanding and unavoidable, and Packer, who has never held a pastoral charge for any length of time, sees himself less as a major player himself than as a coach of other preachers.<sup>27</sup> His greatest contribution has less to do with the cultural analysis or psychological profiling, in the vein of Wells, and more with discerning *theological* connections. The distinctive hallmark of Packer's reflections is that he explores the relation of biblical preaching and systematic theology.<sup>28</sup>

One of the major methodological challenges in drawing a fitting application from biblical texts is *accuracy*. How can one be sure that what is being recommended *actually follows from the text*? Packer believes that thinking systematically helps show how significant applications can be correctly identified and responsibly developed. Systematic theology

rethinks [the fruits of exegesis and] biblical theology with the help of historical theology in order to restate the faith, topic by topic and as

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<sup>27</sup> It is possible to convince at preaching without full-time pastoral responsibility in the local church. See for instance published sermon collections from Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father. Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, trans., John W. Doberstein (London: James Clarke, 1960) and D. A. Carson, *Scandalous. The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), each models of textually acute engagement. Thielicke wrote, 'Of all my duties, the preparation necessary for my [St Michael's] sermons required the most time. I regarded, and regard, the sermon as the greatest intellectual achievement that can be demanded of a theologian' (*Notes from a Wayfarer: The Autobiography of Helmut Thielicke* (trans., David Law; New York: Paragon House, 1995), p. 291). A contemporary exemplar working from both 'ends' and with a lecturing background is Timothy Keller, whose recent spate of titles experienced previous lives in the pulpit. Perhaps Keller's most consistently penetrating combination of exegetical intelligence and vivid cultural analysis is *Counterfeit Gods* (New York, NY: Riverhead, 2009). Another notable collection fusing understated scholarship with compelling existential resonance is John Webster, *The Grace of Truth* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Oil Lamp Books, 2011). A more politically inclined but companionable example of exposition from the majority world is David Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season: Sermons to a Nation* (Oxford, Regnum: 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Our subject's treatise on the topic appeared first in J.I. Packer, 'The Preacher as Theologian: Preaching and Systematic Theology,' in *When God's Voice Is Heard: Essays on Preaching Presented to Dick Lucas* (David Jackman, ed.; Leicester: IVP, 1996). The chapter is reproduced in Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, pp. 301-316. Despite huge success as a popular-level writer, Packer's failure to produce a full systematics leaves some wistful (see Carl Trueman, 'J.I. Packer: An English Nonconformist Perspective,' in *J.I. Packer and the Evangelical Future*, p. 129). Packer's patent understanding, however, of what theology is *for* rarely disappoints.

a whole, in relation to current interests, assumptions, questions, hopes, fears and uncertainties in today's church and world.<sup>29</sup>

Its importance lies in the function it performs, synthesising biblical materials and historical intelligence, furnishing theological content—supplying raw material, as it were—that will fundamentally determine the effectiveness of apologetics, ethics, spirituality, mission, liturgy, pastoral and practical theology. As the 'main garment of the Queen's outfit,'<sup>30</sup> systematics supplies an ordered account of the faith across the range of its teachings, determined by its central themes, and with an eye for contemporary context, providing Christian intellectual resources for church and world.

It is interesting to observe how clearly Archbishop Jensen (for whom, also, application *is* the sermon) echoes the point:

Systematic theology is the central, organizing subject of the theological curriculum. It is most close to the knowledge of God that is the one great theme of the whole curriculum. It summarizes the teaching of the Bible on all the major subjects of the Bible and shows how they interrelate. It deepens and corrects exposition in the light of the whole biblical Word. It enables ... the task of comparing and critiquing the theological systems that lay claim to being a Christian. It sets the foundations for the study of theological ethics and pastoral theology. It is the bridge over which Christian truth marches to confront and interact with the ideas and practices of the world ... A failure at this point is fatal to the enterprise of producing preachers ... Systematic theology is a crucial discipline for bringing out the implications of the Word and showing its relevance to the world we inhabit.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 302. With some justification, perhaps, Packer has been criticised for neglecting a thematic or developmental approach to biblical theology, restricting it to topical summary rather than continuous exposition which recognises the context of a given passage in relation to its position in the whole canon: 'unless a role is consciously assigned to the developmental approach, it will be omitted, to our loss' (Peter Jensen, 'Teaching Doctrine as Part of the Pastor's Role,' in *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (R.J. Gibson, ed.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), p. 79).

<sup>30</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 303.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Jensen, 'The Seminary and the Sermon,' in *Preach the Word. Essays on Expository Preaching in Honor of R. Kent Hughes* (Leyland Ryken and Todd Wilson, ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), p. 214. More concisely, 'Systematic theology attempts a conceptual articulation of Christian claims about God and everything else in relation to God, characterized by comprehensiveness and

One of Packer's central themes is that systematic theology is an *integrative* discipline, involving 'integrated spelling out of revealed truth,' that 'takes all truths, visions, valuations and admonitions with which the Holy Spirit feeds the church through the Scriptures and seeks to think them together in a clear and orderly way.'<sup>32</sup> Systematics attempts to integrate Christian teaching on God, revelation, humanity, Christ, the Spirit, church and future in a coherent synthesis. This entails putting different parts into place, drawing and pulling together different elements of truth, and explaining or presenting some aspect/s of Christian teaching in terms of a unified whole, thereby setting out a 'systematic understanding.'<sup>33</sup>

This is not to suggest that systematic theology maps out every component of faith in exhaustive detail. Neither is it speculative, but assumes rather that biblical truth comprises an organic whole. Through a process of conceptual clarification it undertakes a cohesive and coherent combination of various elements, aiming to give a bird's-eye view of Christian doctrine as it applies in each particular circumstance and relates to the comprehensive sweep of reality.

Underlying all this is the concept of a biblical *canon*—literally, a 'rule.' In practical terms, this means that although Scripture contains a wide variety of truths, perspectives, approaches, genres, and texts, these form a complementary body of literature, and are to be looked at as a single entity and organism because they all reflect the mind of the one

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coherence' (John Webster, 'Introduction: Systematic Theology,' in *The Oxford Handbook to Systematic Theology* (John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 2). For more on this theme, see Michael Horton, 'What God Hath Joined Together: Westminster and the Uneasy Union of Biblical and Systematic Theology,' in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries* (David VanDrunen, ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), pp. 43-71. In another essay in the same valuable volume, Jay E. Adams warns about the dangers and harm posed to preaching by an 'overwhelming emphasis upon biblical theology' (p. 263). Regarding the ultimate insufficiency of exegesis and biblical theology *alone* for preaching, Jensen's further remarks are telling and germane to our theme: 'If we pursue the question of why biblical theology is not adequate on its own, the clue is found in the concept of the doctrine of the Bible. That is, we have a legitimate interest in the teaching of the Bible as such, and to give a final answer to that question requires the resources that Christian doctrine can bring. It needs the procedure of topical investigation, of summary statements, of the testing by history and the application to the present which are characteristic of doctrine' (Jensen, 'Teaching Doctrine,' p. 84).

<sup>32</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 303.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith. A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), p. 27.

God. The Bible's individual teachings hang together as a living body of truth about God and his works, and the resulting canon is designed for functional use among his people. As Horton explains:

To assume [otherwise] that we cannot derive from Scripture a systematic teaching about God, creation, humanity, Christ's person and work, the application of redemption, the church, and our future hope is at least implicitly to assume that the Bible itself is self-contradictory or at least insufficient for providing a unified faith and practice. ... To assume that the Bible itself gives us a system of doctrine and practice is simply to acknowledge its organic unity as a single canon: the interdependence and coherence of its various teachings.<sup>34</sup>

The task of systematics is to trace the logical connections between various aspects of Christian teaching (atonement and Trinity, for instance). But in biblical reading and interpretation this operates in both directions. On the basis of exegesis, discerning wider patterns within and across the whole of the Bible helps us to interpret the details and parts more accurately and responsibly. At the same time, close attention to detailed reading of individual texts will challenge us to rethink the great truths so often taken for granted. To work systematically is less about building a system to contain the parts, and more about moving back and forth between the parts and the whole, so that the presentation of things like atonement and salvation becomes clearer, finer, more authentic and satisfactory. In this way, 'the system can change.'<sup>35</sup>

It is of capital importance to recognise that a systematic theology of some kind is inevitable. *Everybody* (believer or unbeliever) has a theology; the question is whether it is a good, true theology or not. In this sense, all Christians have a systematic theology. Everyone has preconceptions, general assumptions, and a tacit grasp of biblical texts, doctrines and practices. A 'system' of some kind is therefore unavoidable; 'we have a working systematic theology, whether we want to or not.'<sup>36</sup> Realising this puts us in a better position to assess, judge, analyse and verify the substance of our own theology both biblically and logically.

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<sup>34</sup> Horton, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 27, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 28.

## Systematic Theology and Expository Preaching

The preacher (congregational leader) or teacher (smaller group setting) is one through whom God's Word is brought to bear upon people's lives. As such he is a 'principal agent in the theological and spiritual formation'<sup>37</sup> of his hearers, and is responsible for introducing, explaining, recalling and reinforcing fundamental theological matters. To fulfil the task, Packer opines, 'a preacher needs to be a theologian of some competence.'<sup>38</sup>

Systematic theology involves intensive reflection about communication of the Gospel through orderly exposition of Christian teaching. Its *general* relation to preaching is obvious. Preaching similarly requires logical coherence, relative objectivity, even-handed analysis and critical reasoning. Preaching also involves the comprehensive exposition of biblical doctrine, of sufficient range and depth that people are exposed to its full scope and consequences. As teaching plus application, preaching is practised in a context where the hearts and minds of the listeners are forever melting pots of opinions, values, assumptions, and beliefs. Packer's general point is that 'unless [the preacher] knows his way around in the fields of systematic theology, apologetics, ethics and spiritual life' he cannot address this situation adequately and reliably.<sup>39</sup>

An effective preacher is one who is well acquainted with God's character, will, works and ways. He understands the basic structures of God's creation and of the place of human life within it. His knowledge of the effects of sin, morally, intellectually, spiritually, must be realistic without being jaundiced. His mental grasp of salvation—God's deliverance from evil through Christ's person and work in the Spirit's power—should be calm, clear and sure. A preacher of substance will appreciate the essential themes of revelation and regeneration, conversion and Christlikeness, transformation, trial, prayer, service, fellowship, hope, suffering, and eternal destiny. Above all, he will have a deep comprehension of how these things interrelate. It is here that systematic theology is of greatest help.<sup>40</sup>

Effective applications in preaching 'should doubtless issue from a maximally comprehensive grasp of the interrelationship of every strand

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<sup>37</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 310.

<sup>38</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 310.

<sup>39</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 311. Jensen argues similarly, that effective expository preaching necessarily follows the route of exegesis, biblical theology *and* systematic theology, and only thus impacts 'the culture beyond' (Jensen, 'Seminary and Sermon,' p. 217).

<sup>40</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, pp. 311-312.

in Scripture.<sup>41</sup> However, '[i]t is not the preacher's task to reconcile truths of apparently opposite tendency, but to preach them in all their particular force.'<sup>42</sup> And so the more *specific* relation of systematic theology to preaching lies in the discernment of which applications of any given biblical text are best suited to the specific situations and circumstances being addressed. Herein lies a significant aspect of the value of teaching systematics in an African or any other context—its enabling contribution to the applicatory aspect of expository preaching.

In sum, according to Packer, communicating 'the whole counsel of God' requires skill in systematic theology at every step. Accurate exegesis and exposition ('present-day meaning via historical meaning')<sup>43</sup> are necessarily harnessed to the sufficient 'coverage' of every point of fundamental theological significance: providence, justification, atonement, the Spirit's presence and power, divine sovereignty, human freedom, and the Trinitarian dimensions of every action of God.<sup>44</sup> Yet the vital ingredient for genuine interpretation in preaching is adequate application to the life of the believer.<sup>45</sup> 'Because the preacher shows what the text means for us today, and does not stop short at what it meant for its first readers, he rather than the academic commentator is the true interpreter of the Bible.'<sup>46</sup> What has most value in changing people's lives for Christ is an ability to press home great truths and correct recurrent errors and weaknesses, realistically, aptly, and winsomely. Systematics assists here through fostering summative biblical judgment and discernment, helping to develop an awareness of historically proven success or failure, as well as providing an overarching thrust towards ethical, apologetic and pastoral application.

Packer believes that by 'comparison with the Puritans, pioneer evangelicals' and other older exemplars, 'the applicatory aspect of pastoral

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Williams, 'Observations on the Future of System,' in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (A.T.B. McGowan, ed.; Leicester: Apollos, 2006), p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, 'Observations on the Future of System,' p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 313.

<sup>44</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 312.

<sup>45</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 314.

<sup>46</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 313. 'To pass on biblical content, unapplied, is only to teach, not to preach...One's adequacy as a preacher, interpreting God's word to God's people, is finally determined not by the erudition of one's exegesis but by the depth and power of one's application' (Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, pp. 331-332).

preaching today is underdeveloped.<sup>47</sup> Here he cites the *Westminster Directory*'s famous section 'Of the preaching of the Word.' The preacher

is not to rest in general doctrine...but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers: which albeit it prove a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant; yet he is to endeavour to perform it in such a manner, that his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart; and that, if any unbeliever or ignorant person be present, he may have the secrets of his heart made manifest, and give glory to God.

Many of the Puritans, who were the 'all-time specialists in application,' devoted up to fifty percent of their sermons to this task. Packer supposes that one reason for the relative neglect of scripturally driven experimental wisdom in much current preaching is the lack of 'full-scale biblical and theological understanding of the Christian life—a systematic spirituality,' such that speakers simply 'do not see what applications need to be made.'<sup>48</sup>

As outlined above, systematics is an integrative enterprise and therefore skill in that discipline feeds directly into preaching with application. Theology supplies a 'ready-made grid' for application, where the logic runs thus: 'if this principle is truth from God, what difference should it make to our thinking, our resolves, our emotional attitudes, our motivation, and our view of our spiritual state at the moment?'<sup>49</sup>

Applicatory messages therefore need not exhibit the same shape or tone. Indeed, the text itself as well as events and the condition of listeners should determine the particular nature and tactics of application. A multidimensional understanding of application helps avoid sermonic moralism. Application is not merely telling people to *do* things, because the life of the mind, inner attitudes, desires, and will as well as behaviour are each to be variously addressed. As Phillip Jensen counsels,

When we think that no sermon is complete until it tells the congregation to *do* something, we have started to become Arminian preachers...Some Bible passages are not telling us to *do* anything, and we shouldn't be looking for something to tell people to do on the basis of these passages. It may be enough to preach the greatness of God in creation and redemption

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<sup>47</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 315.

<sup>48</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 315.

<sup>49</sup> Packer, *Collected Shorter Writings* 3, p. 314.



(if that is what the passage is about). It may be enough simply to open the congregation's mind to the wisdom of God, and the goodness of God, and especially the grace of God.<sup>50</sup>

The overriding theme of systematic theology is 'God and everything else in relation to God.'<sup>51</sup> By its very nature it is concerned with the world to which God speaks, and so issues and questions of present-day life, culture, anthropology, philosophy, social theory etc. are automatically its conversation partners. This is likewise the task of a competent ministry of the Word. For Packer, the real and ultimate value of theology for preaching is in its coordination of a broad-based, critically acute, contemporarily attuned, spiritually sensitised, knowledge of God that both enlightens minds and transforms existence here and now. Expository preaching that is sufficiently applied communicates the Word of God to Christian and non-Christian experience with effectual power, practical wisdom, and the kind of spiritual resonance that influences people's lives for Christ.

Packer's vision of the preacher-theologian calls for a firm grasp of integrated biblical truth, combined with broader learning that is historically sensitive and spiritually coherent. The good preacher knows the world that he and his listeners live in at both the popular and more aesthetic levels. Only by understanding such matters profoundly will he be able to communicate to people the pressures, pleasures, pains and possibilities inherent in Christian faith and repentance.

Systematic theology is taxing intellectually and spiritually, but preaching consistently well is in many respects more so, because it combines deep biblical-theological knowledge with sharp historical awareness, cultural sensitivity and unvarnished spiritual stature. Only thus will preaching impact the hearts, habits, opinions, affections, and lifestyles of individuals and communities with moral force and intellectual persuasion.

The demands of the sermon are so exacting because all the different disciplines that comprise the theological curriculum – biblical languages, church history, dogmatics, philosophy etc. – contribute to it. A rigorous, classical and full-scale 'theological education must be imprinted on the mind and memory of the preacher.'<sup>52</sup> But the preacher has to surpass the professor:

<sup>50</sup> Phillip Jensen, *The Archer and the Arrow: Preaching the Very Words of God* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2010), p. 46; cf. p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Webster, 'Introduction,' p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> Old, *Age of Reformation*, p. 266. Further elaboration on this theme may be found in Jensen, 'Teaching Doctrine,' pp. 88-89.

he must bring together, focus, and use all the resources that the seminary gives him at one moment in time. Even if he makes no formal reference to church history in his sermon, his knowledge of history is what helps create the depth and texture of the sermon, part of what gives it authority. In other words, the preacher has to *integrate* all his learning as well as all his experience in a few moments.<sup>53</sup>

Packer claims that unless the groundwork for our preaching includes a mixture of rigorous theological study and a significant comprehension of what older writers called casuistry—i.e. biblical exposition that is ‘realized, experienced and tested in life’<sup>54</sup>—the pastoral needs of Christ’s people will be largely unmet. The all-embracing significance of systematics for preaching is simply this: theological comprehension (ranging across the main disciplines, themes and fields of knowledge), combined with genuine practical wisdom for life, remains a sure and reliable recipe for effective pastoral work. Anything less leaves the preacher’s task unfulfilled and believing persons worryingly undernourished.

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<sup>53</sup> Jensen, ‘Seminary and Sermon,’ p. 219.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, ‘Observations on the Future of System,’ p. 51. ‘Casuistry is practical theology, training Christians to live uprightly, humbly, and gladly in the presence of God every day of their lives’ (Becke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, p. 927; cf. the vastly helpful ensuing exploration of interplay between public instruction and private counsel in biblical godliness).

