THE POLITICS OF PREACHING: KEEPING SCRIPTURE SACRED IN THE LAND OF THE FREE

Introduction

Most papers don't begin with the expression of personal anxiety, but the argument of this paper stems from a fear that I have developed as a new pastor. My fear is this: in America the Bible belongs to the public at large. In his book, *The American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*,[1] Stephen Prothero argues that Jesus has become a national icon. However, Jesus has not achieved iconic status because of the strength of Christian orthodoxy but because even those outside the Christian church have the privilege to interpret him however they choose. Americans have not been transformed into Christians by the popularity of Jesus. Instead the opposite has taken place. Jesus has been remade to reflect the image of Americans time and time again. According to Prothero, remaking Jesus into one's own image functions as a kind of rite of passage into American culture.

I fear that the Bible belongs to the greater American public in the same way that Jesus does. The Bible is read in churches. But it is also read in religious studies programs at universities, as literature in high schools, and by just about any individual in the personal confines of their home for whatever purpose they choose. I am learning that this is especially true in the South, where the Bible is quoted in just about every conceivable setting. But instead of transforming people into Christians, the Bible's ubiquity only creates the assumption that each of us, by virtue of our American citizenship, is entitled to read the Bible for ourselves.

Some might laud this as a great achievement—the victory of the Reformation's principle of *sola scriptura*. I worry that this undermines our ability as pastors to preach and teach the scriptures as the sacred Word of God. If everyone is entitled to read the Bible for themselves by

[1] Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

virtue of their American citizenship, then the teaching and preaching of the church becomes just another interpretation among a number of others. The teaching and preaching done by those called into the office of the ministry become the personal opinion of one more American citizen. I fear that as a result, Americans do not come to church because they expect to hear the authoritative Word of God preached and taught by the pastor. Since each of us has an equal ability to interpret the scriptures for ourselves, the pastor does not have such expertise. Instead, American citizens look to the pastor for therapeutic purposes. His expertise lies is his ability to provide comfort and encouragement through difficult times. In fact, I suspect that in an effort to make the gospel relevant to most Americans, our preaching and teaching of the Scripture already aims at these therapeutic ends.[2]

This fear of mine may be just that—a fear with no grounds in reality. But the question is worth asking what the conditions might be that would turn this fear into a reality, and furthermore how pastors should read the scriptures so that this fear does not become a reality. The following argument takes up that task.

The Bible's Captivity to Democracy

Stanley Hauerwas begins his book, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, with a provocative suggestion. He writes, "No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christian in North America." Rather than give out Bibles to children in Sunday school or at confirmation, the church should tell children and their parents that, "they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be

[2] For a thorough analysis of this problem, see John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007).

encouraged to read the Bible on their own."[3] Hauerwas is prone to exaggeration, but the reasons for his suggestion are compelling. In America Christians are trained to think that all they need to read the scriptures is their own common sense. They do not need to stand under the authority of the church or be morally transformed to read the scripture properly. Instead Americans assume that every human being has the necessary skill set to read the Scriptures by virtue of their reason and common sense.

For instance, Hauerwas notes that conservative fundamentalists and liberal historical critics share a common distrust of traditional authorities as well as optimism that the text possesses an objective meaning that can be accessed by any rational person. Fundamentalists approach the Bible as if the hard facts of scripture lay on the surface of the text waiting to be observed, extracted, and arranged in a systematic order. And they are skeptical of so-called non-Biblical influences. Francis Pieper's description of "objective theology" serves as an apt example. Pieper writes, "The Christian doctrine is not produced by the theologians; all that the Christian theologian does is that he compiles the doctrinal statements contained in Scripture (in the text and context), groups them under the proper heads, and arranges these doctrines in the order of their relationship."[4] The fundamentalists thought the historical critical method represented exactly the kind of subjective human meddling with scripture that prevented objective readings. But Hauerwas observes that the historical critics shared the same goals as the fundamentalists—to discover the objective meaning of the text. Rather than locate that objective meaning in doctrinal statements, the historical critics thought the objective meaning lay in the author's original intent. So a correct understanding of the historical context is required to discover the author's original intent and the text's meaning. "Nevertheless," Hauerwas observes,

[3] Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon: 1993), 15.
[4] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) 1:51–52.

"the competent historian is but the person of common sense who has now received a liberal university education."[5]

The problem with these modes of interpretation, according to Hauerwas, is that both the fundamentalist and the historical critic make the church's authority and tradition incidental to the task of reading the Bible. Both fundamentalists and historical critics assume that the text has an objective meaning that any reasonable person can access on their own apart from the training of the church. Hauerwas describes the matter frankly when he writes, "The claim that the meaning of Scripture is plain, of course, goes hand in hand with the North American distrust of all forms of authority. To make the Bible accessible to anyone is to declare that clergy status is secondary. The Bible becomes the possession not of the Church but now of the citizen, who has every right to determine its meaning."[6] Put another way, the assumption that all that is required to read the Bible is our common sense underwrites the ideology of democratic politics. This requires some explanation.

In his book, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*,[7] historian Brad Gregory draws the connection between the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* and American democracy. Gregory's book demonstrates that much of what we take for granted as modern people stems from innovations and changes that took place in the Reformation. Gregory argues that prior to the Reformation Christianity unified medieval society by functioning as an institutionalized worldview. The Christian faith permeated every sector of life. The Catholic Church, moreover, operated as the umbrella authority. Its teachings directed and sustained the practice of Christianity and therefore directed and sustained medieval life. By

[5] Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 35.
[6] Ibid., 31–32.
[7] Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How A Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

questioning both the teachings and the authority of the Catholic Church, the Reformation created a crisis that fractured medieval culture and demanded a reorganization of traditional authorities. Even though our current political climate seems far removed from the conflicts of the Reformation, Gregory argues that its reorganization of traditional authorities continues to the present day.

Since medieval life was comprehensively unified, the story Gregory tells is complex, interweaving and nuanced. But he does trace a direct line between the reformers' appeal to scripture as the sole authority and the rise of democratic government. And that account sheds some light on Hauerwas' thesis.

Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church was the sole agent responsible for interpreting scripture. Since it was instituted by Christ, the church alone had authority to teach about salvation. Therefore, no distinction needed to be made between what the church taught and what the scripture said. The authority it had from Christ ensured that the Roman church's use and readings of scripture were respected and upheld. Therefore the Roman church was the primary agent responsible for directing and ordering society towards the goal of the sanctification of the baptized. But even before the time of the reformation, many within medieval society noticed that there was a discrepancy between what the church taught and what its clergy and laity practiced. According to Gregory, "The gulf between the church's prescriptions and the practices of its members—from clerical avarice in high places to lay superstition among the unlearned—inspired constant calls to close the gap, from Catherine of Siena in the 1370s to Erasmus in the 1510s."[8] But, with the exception of a select few, those reform movements did not

[8] Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 85.

question the church's teachings. "For to reject the church's teachings was to reject its authority as the caretaker of God's saving truth."[9]

The Reformation, however, did question the church's teachings. "Institutional abuses and immorality were seen as symptomatic signs of a flawed foundation, namely false and dangerous doctrines."[10] And in order to correct the abuses of the church, the reformers, from Luther to Zwingli all appealed to scripture as the sole authority. Summarizing the shared sentiment of the reformers, Gregory writes, "Their Lord commanded Christians to return to him in fidelity and holiness, in word and deed, beginning with God's own truth claims taught in the Bible, uncluttered by human traditions and clerical manipulations. Emphatically this was not a matter of individual opinion—the point was not what readers wanted or listeners thought, but simply and only what God taught. "[11]

The only problem with this common appeal to scripture as the sole authority was that few of the reformers could agree what the scriptures said. Both Luther and Zwingli, for instance, insisted that scripture is the sole authority. But their disagreements about what scripture said were interminable. As Gregory points out, "Christians who rejected the authority of the Roman church and its truth claims, notwithstanding certain alliances and reconciliations (such as the Lutheran Formula of Concord) among some of the constituent groups, never exhibited anything remotely resembling agreement about their own, alternative truth claims."[12]

Therefore, while the Reformation appeals to *sola scriptura* intended to reconsolidate Christian Europe around the teachings and authority of scripture, in reality it undermined the

[9] Ibid., 86.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 88.
[12] Ibid., 91.

umbrella authority of the Catholic Church over western culture while simultaneously splintering Christendom into a number of irreconcilable divisions as to what scripture says.

Put another way, the appeal to scripture as the sole authority had a devastating political effect. Since the culture at large could no longer agree about what counted as authentic Christian teaching, Christianity could no longer serve as the umbrella authority. In place of the church, secular authorities arose. At first, these authorities consolidated the divisions into confessional territories. Secular authorities used coercion to create a unified culture within their territory so that all members of one region would be forced to believe certain items of doctrine or face exclusion and possibly even death. Consequently, these consolidations led to the armed conflict between confessional territories known as the Thirty Years War. The bloodshed of that conflict, in turn, led to innovations in political though by the likes of Hobbes and Machiavelli, who rejected the idea that a ruler's principle obligation was to protect and promote God's truth. Western people began to embrace religious toleration in exchange for a life that was less defined by conflict. Moreover, political theories of religious toleration, like that put forward by John Locke, began to take hold. If its citizens could put aside their religious differences, they could work together for a greater good. The upshot of state imposed religious toleration was that it enabled the secular state to consolidate its power and the resources of its citizens to create greater material prosperity. As Gregory says, "Not by coercing confessional uniformity through one established church, but by permitting all individuals to worship within the respective churches of their choice, the state would maximize the obedience of citizens in a manner that reinforced its power and stability."[13]

This brings us full circle back to Hauerwas' thesis. The aim of religious toleration, established in the laws of democracy, is to ensure that each of us has the right to believe what we

[13] Ibid., 167.

want. In that way, democracy increases the control the state has over its citizens. Their loyalties are first to the democratic state that secures their own religious freedom rather than to their particular religious ideology or tradition. By assuming that the text of scripture has an objective meaning that is available to anyone with common sense, fundamentalists and historical critics try to depoliticize the text—they attempt to remove the right and authority of interpretation from any one particular community. In so doing, they enshrine the right and authority of the individual interpreter over the Bible. But this is exactly the point. In a democracy, no one—including the church or a pastor—has a right to interpret scripture for anyone else. The Bible, then, becomes common property of the American public and each of us, by virtue of our American citizenship, assumes that we have the right to interpret the Bible for ourselves.

Keeping Scripture Sacred in the Land of the Free

At this point you might be wondering what a discussion of interpretive methods and political history has to do with the assignment of this conference, namely to exegete our local culture in order to better communicate the gospel. What I'm suggesting, though, is that our political climate determines the way many Americans approach the scriptures. Insofar as this history is our history the people in our pews and the people in our communities are conditioned to read the Bible a certain way.

In a democracy, no one has the right or authority to tell us what to believe about God and no one has the right or authority to tell us how to read the Bible. According to the laws of our country, we are free to believe in God and read the Bible however we want. Americans take this condition for granted. We simply assume that religious toleration is a political achievement. The problem, though, is that American Christians do not often recognize that the religious toleration

established by our laws aims to undermine the authority of the Bible. In a democracy, no one has the legal right to interpret the Bible for anyone else. But this means that the individual interpreter alone possesses the right and authority to read the Bible. Far from depoliticizing the reading of Scripture, then, democracy only changes the location of authority to the individual by legally insuring the individual's freedom to read the Scripture for himself.[14] But if everyone has the right to read the Bible as they want, the Bible loses its authority over us. The judgment of the individual interpreter is that which has sacred status, not the scriptures themselves.

Hauerwas recognizes that this is all wrong; and he encourages the church in America to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians with the hope that they will have to place themselves under the authority of the church's preaching. The church, after all, has a politics of its own—a goal and aim for reading scripture—that is proper to the Scriptures themselves. As he says, "the Scriptures are maintained by the Church as having particular prominence because Christians have learned that the Scriptures exist to further the practices of witness and conversion."[15] And the church's preaching is the primary way the church interprets scripture. Put another way, Hauerwas offers a simple solution: If the problem is that the individual interpreter has sole authority, then the solution is for the church to take the scriptures out of the hands of individuals and submit Christians to the church's authoritative readings.

While Hauerwas' assessment of the problem is illuminating and while he is correct to identify the church's preaching as the primary way that the authority of the Bible is exercised, his simple solution stops short of actually answering the problem. What, after all, gives us the impression that the church's preaching will restore the authority of the Scriptures? What guarantees that the sermons we hear are not merely another person's interpretation of scripture?

[14] Cf. Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 153–161.
[15] Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*, 36.

How do we know we're submitting ourselves to the authority of scripture when we submit ourselves to the authority of a preacher? Or, for us preachers: how do we know that when we stand up in the pulpit to speak from the scriptures we're speaking with the authority of the scriptures? How do we know whether *we're* keeping Scripture sacred? While Hauerwas is correct to recognize that Christians must submit themselves to authority of the church's preaching, he does not give an account of what preaching looks like that speaks with the scriptures' own authority. Therefore this question must be answered: How do we preach in such a way that maintains the authority of scripture? Answering that question will require two things—an account of the Scripture's own authority and what it authorizes preachers to say.

Scripture and Preaching in the Economy of Salvation

In the Gospel of Luke, and continuing into Acts,[16] we find that God is at work to set all things right through the Lordship of Jesus. This mission begins with Jesus but then extends to the apostles, who are commissioned by Jesus to speak in his stead and by his command.

According to Luke's gospel, Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by the Spirit of God when he was baptized by John in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21-22). In the power of the Spirit, Jesus claimed to bring about the eschatological time of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:14-21). He taught with authority about how to live within the will and reign of God, he healed the sick, he cast out demons, he forgave sins, and he raised the dead. One way of summarizing Jesus' actions in the Spirit is to say that he acted with the authority and power of the almighty God.

[16] I fully recognize the problem with giving an account of the scriptures' authority from the scriptures themselves—that I assume I can interpret the scriptures' purposes by simply reading them. On the one hand, since we do not have the apostles to speak with, but only the apostolic scriptures, we must refer to the written scriptures themselves. On the other hand, this does not mean it is impossible to give a fuller account of the purpose and aims of the scriptures. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* is especially helpful in this regard. But space does not provide the opportunity to develop a fuller account here.

But this authority and power created conflict between Jesus and many of the leaders of Israel. Jesus' authority and the conflict that it raised are both on display in Luke 5:17-26. In this passage, Jesus is teaching and healing in the presence of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, when some men bring a paralytic to him by lowering him through the roof. When Jesus sees the faith of these men, he forgives the paralytic his sins. But the scribes and the Pharisees then begin to question Jesus' authority to forgive sins, asking "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). So, in order to demonstrate the origin of his authority Jesus addresses them and says, "'Which is easier, to say "Your sins are forgiven you," or to say, "Stand up and walk?" But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home'" (Luke 5:24). The man did just as Jesus said, demonstrating to all present his authority and power.

But this was not the last word in the conflict. The leaders accused Jesus of working by the power of Satan rather than God (Luke 11:14-23). And when they arrested Jesus and put him on trial from his claims to authority, he did not back down (Luke 22:66-71). So they crucified him with the help of the Roman authorities as a blasphemer. His crucifixion, then, served as what appeared to be the final test of his claims to divine authority. For "the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one" (Luke 23:35)!

But God vindicated Jesus' authority by raising him from the dead. Jesus then appeared to his disciples (Luke 24:36-43), and commissioned them to take part in the same mission for which God had sent him. Luke reports the commissioning when he writes the following:

> Then [Jesus] opened their mind to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and

> that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you receive power from on high.' (Luke 24:45-48).

Therefore, according to this still basic account, the apostles participate in God's mission through Jesus by their witness, for which they receive the Holy Spirit. The apostolic mission and the important role of the apostolic word are on display throughout the book of Acts, but especially in the story of Pentecost. Having received the Spirit from Jesus, Peter stands up and addresses the crowd.

> You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power…This Jesus, God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you now see and hear…Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:22-36).

When those present hear Peter's witness, they are cut to the heart and ask Peter what they can do. He calls them to repent and to be baptized in the name of Jesus for their forgiveness and to receive the Holy Spirit themselves. Peter explains: "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39). Therefore, God uses the apostles' testimony about Jesus to bring about faith in God and his Son Jesus.

In describing God's economy of salvation so far, we have a descending line of authority. God sent Jesus to act in his stead and on his behalf. Jesus in turn sent the apostles to speak in his stead,[17] commissioning them to bear witness to the things that happened concerning Jesus, so that those who hear it might repent of their unbelief and sin, receive forgiveness, and be

[17] Cf. Luke 10:16

incorporated into the body of those who trust and believe in the one true God. However, we have not yet spoken about the Scriptures' place within this economy. And to take a step in that direction, it will be helpful to turn to the writings of one who considered himself an apostle—Paul.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul makes a bold claim about his own words. He writes, "We constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Paul considers his own words not just human words but God's own. The reason Paul can be so bold as to make this claim about his own speech is that he has been commissioned as an apostle by Jesus to speak on behalf of God, proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus so that all who hear and believe the message might live by faith in the One who sent Jesus.

A key passage to understand Paul's description of the role and purpose of his apostleship can be found in the opening address of his letter to the church in Rome. He writes,

> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-7).

Paul understands himself as one designated by God to speak the gospel about his Son in order to bring about the obedience of faith. How does God use Paul's proclamation of the gospel to bring about the obedience of faith? Paul describes the logic of apostolic commissioning later in his letter when he writes that,

> if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?...So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:9-17).

As an apostle of God through Jesus, Paul was sent to speak on God's behalf about God's Son, bearing witness to the things that God had done through Jesus so that all who hear his words might trust in God and be saved. This proclamation about Jesus stands as the center piece of his mission to bring about the obedience of faith to the Gentiles. For he says about this gospel message, that "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith and for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:16–17). Paul also finds that his responsibility as an apostle to bring about the obedience of faith requires more than speaking the message about Jesus. It also requires exhortation to live out that faith in obedience to the commands and will of God and in conformity with the new life that Jesus initiates. So Paul frequently exhorts believers to live according to their faith in God and his Son throughout his letters.

In both cases, whether through exhortation to holy living or through proclamation about God's action in Jesus, Paul places his own writings within God's economy of salvation through Jesus. That Paul considers his own written word to have a place within God's work can be noticed in his opening greeting, where he addresses the church in Rome on behalf of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. And again, in his second letter to the church in Corinth, we see Paul using his written letter to exhort the Corinthians on God's behalf.

> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Finally, then, we are in a position to more fully account for the role of the Scriptures in God's economy of salvation. Just as Paul considers his own writings to be part of the apostolic commissioning to bring about the obedience of faith, so also are the other written scriptures in the New Testament. The New Testament Scriptures are the written form of the apostolic message. They are no different than the apostolic message, but derive their authority and purpose from the mission of the apostles.[18]

The task of the preacher, then, is to place his own words and message under the authority of the apostolic scriptures. The apostles were sent to be witnesses to Jesus—to proclaim the message about his lordship so that those who hear it might live by faith in the Son of God. The scriptures are the written form of that apostolic address. They bear witness to the man Jesus of Nazareth so that those who hear it might believe that he is Lord and Christ and be saved from the wrath of God. And just as the apostles did, the scriptures call for the obedience of faith. They call their hearers to live out that faith through holy living. Those who are called and ordained into the preaching office stand in that same line. The apostolic scriptures, therefore, authorize the preacher to speak. And if the preacher is to speak with the authority of the scriptures, he must say and do what this apostolic text authorizes him to say and do within the apostolic mission.

Apostolic Preaching and the Homiletical Gap

[18] The same can be said of the Old Testament Scriptures since the apostolic preaching about Jesus is properly expressed as a fulfillment of the Old Testament.

What exactly does apostolic preaching look like? Often preachers assume that the central task of preaching is to bridge the gap between what the text meant in its original context and how that meaning applies to the present day audience. The primary task of the preacher is to translate the text in order to apply it to our parishioners. According to John Wright, the so called gap between what a text originally meant and its present day application is not a timeless problem. In fact, it is a rather recent phenomenon. To construe the task of preaching in these terms coincides with the democratic concern to have an objective and apolitical interpretation of scripture. By Wright's account, the problem of the gap originates first with Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher sought to cut through the various ambiguities of Biblical interpretation by means of Hermeneutics—that is, by creating an objective and universally applicable method of Biblical interpretation that would discover the original meaning of the text exactly as the author intended.[19] Wright notes, however, that this quest for objectivity—for a historically situated original meaning—drove the wedge between what a text originally meant and its application to a present, specific historical situation; or between hermeneutics and homiletics. "For Schleiermacher and the legion of his heirs, hermeneutics is about obtaining meaning; homiletics is about contemporary significance. Homiletics *depends on* hermeneutics—and the technical academic scholar—that determines *the* meaning of the biblical text. The preacher must then encase this meaning into an appropriate rhetorical shell for its homiletical presentation to a congregation."[20]

[19] Not incidentally, Schleiermacher (1768–1834) lived at the precise time that sectarian denominational interpretations were being relativizd by the authority of the secular nation-state. His attempts to make biblical interpretation universal and objective serve as a strategy to place Christianity back within the new political power structures. Ironically, his efforts served the opposite ends—they actually reinforced the autonomous authority of secular political structures by making Biblical interpretation the sole job of the university trained expert.
[20] Wright, *Telling God's Story,* 24.

But if the Scriptures are apostolic discourse that authorize and direct what the preacher is to say, the gap between what a passage meant and its present application no longer holds. Or put another way, God closes the gap between the time when the scriptures were written and the present by sending a preacher. The preacher stands before the people in the stead and by the command of Jesus—just as the apostles did—and addresses them. The preacher does what the scriptures do now in the living present. For instance, if the text exhorts its hearers to live according to the hope they have in Jesus—as many of Paul's letters do—the preacher should exhort the people present in the same way. If the text warns its hearers not to live in complacency of the coming day of the Lord Jesus Christ—like many of the end-time passages do—the preacher should warn the congregation in the same way. If the text teaches Christians how to live according to the reign of God, then the preacher should teach the congregation in the same way. If the text declares the authority and Lordship of Jesus, the preacher should declare that Lordship to the congregation, emphasizing that this message is *for you*.

When an apostolic preacher stands before a congregation and speaks as he is authorized to do by the apostolic scriptures, a different kind of relationship exists between the text and its hearers. Rather than translating the text to meet the needs of the audience, the text works to translate the audience around its message. For example, the first question apostolic preachers should ask themselves is not how do I apply this text to the congregation, but what difference does this text make for these people. For instance, when Hebrews 2:5–8 declares that God has put all things in subjection to Jesus the apostolic preacher should ask himself, "what difference does this proclamation make for this people?" If my job is to stand in the pulpit and make this proclamation as the scriptures have authorized me to do, how does that proclamation matter?

What difference does it make to these people that God has sent his ordained servant here to declare that all things have been put in subjection to Jesus?

My congregation is a military congregation. Most of the people who live in the two towns near my congregation serve or have served in the military and at Kings Bay Naval Base. When President Obama was reelected several people came up to me and expressed their confusion: "Why would God allow this to happen?" For many in my congregation, America is a Christian nation. The destiny of the gospel is tied to the destiny of the United States. After all, if you have to sacrifice your life for a nation (or sacrifice your unwillingness to kill) it should be for a high purpose. For many, the way they understand their vocations is intimately tied to a belief that God has chosen this nation as the agent of the gospel. So the message that God has put all things in subjection to Jesus matters because these people believe that God has promised to put all things in subjection to the United States. The text's proclamation that Jesus alone is Lord interrupts the world as they see it. The proclamation gives them a new and different hope—a hope that transcends their false gods and their false security, a hope that redefines their vocations as soldiers.[21]

When the preacher dares to stand up in the apostolic office and proclaim the scriptures as he is called and ordained to do, the scriptures operate with authority—their own authority—killing and making alive those whom God has called through Jesus and in the power of the Spirit.

[21] For instance, the vocation of soldier/sailor should no longer be defined in terms of a holy war but in terms of just war.