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John Calvin on Theatrical Trifles in Worship

by Richard A. Ray

The late Middle Ages held a raging ferment of opinion concerning one's search for the knowledge of God, the means of grace, and the experience of the holy.

There were, moreover, woven within these general topics, questions concerning the precise understanding of some of the most sublime issues: the role of Jesus Christ, the meaning of ecclesiastical authority, the capacity of the human will, the meaning of salvation, and many others. The focal point of the whole flow of the debates was, of course, the power of worship.

It was all quite complex. The movement which is generally referred to as the Renaissance had many wonderful currents: the recovery, editing, and translation of both classical and monastic documents; the discovery of earlier patterns of legal procedures; and a revival of concern about one's internal spiritual experience. And the promise that seemed to energize so much was the realization that both the doctrinal heritage of the church and the opening of the Scriptures, freshly acquired and read, could dynamite the blockage that seemed to so many to be locked in place by the Roman curia.

The amount of devotional literature that began to appear all over Europe is itself a remarkable phenomenon. Bernard of Clairvaux's twelfth century homilies on *The Song of Songs*, Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, Catherine of Siena's *The Dialogue*, Walter Hilton's *The Stairway of Perfection*, Teresa of Avila's autobiography and *The Way of Perfection*, Richard Rolle's *The Fire of Love,* and, anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, were among the most widely read. And if you were to pause, look to the Orthodox communities, and begin to follow the books that were becoming available from the East to the West you would soon discover an additional pattern to Christian spirituality.

Most of this, of course, antedated the life of John Calvin. Nevertheless, these books soon began to leave their mark in the quest for forms of church order and worship that would be more directly rooted in the practices of the early church. There was certainly no way that they could be easily ignored. And they contributed to the process in which Calvin began to look, as if for the first time, at the liturgical components of church services with new eyes.

The criterion by which he began to evaluate the practices of worship soon became a clear exegesis of Scripture based on Greek and Hebrew texts and his understanding of the core of the doctrinal heritage of the church. The number of books that have been published since Lucien Richard's fresh study of the spiritual background of the Reformers in 1974 has only increased.[1]

John Calvin was not the first to turn away from the liturgical practices of medieval Europe, as the flood of these volumes illustrates. However, what is notable is the

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way in which Calvin cites authors who led him more clearly into the Christological center of worship. Calvin's emphasis on the power of God's salvation through the presence of Christ within the true preaching of the Word became definitive in the Reformed churches. It may be a little difficult for us to appreciate today the uniqueness in Calvin's adherence to the movement which stripped away five of the seven sacraments.

Calvin's Reform of Worship

When Calvin published the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536, he devoted eighty-seven of its 226 pages to an exposition of what he had come to see as the true sacraments. It could hardly be a surprise to those who knew his thinking that it included a screamingly adverse critique of the remaining "false statements." Over one third of his book is thus devoted to an analysis of the sacraments. And what this can suggest to us is that, rightly administered, they could become a Christ-centered means of grace.

The painful urgency in his concern lay in his conviction that the use of rituals, practices, and preaching that had no specific direction from God in his Word carried within it the curse of idolatry. Randall Zachman quotes Calvin's fourteenth sermon on the Epistle to the Ephesians where he criticizes those who "take a sprinkling of holy water, cross themselves endlessly … keep this and that vigil … gad about on pilgrimage … babble so many paternosters … say so many *mea culpas*."[2] What would Calvin think, one might ask today, if he could see the flood of newly adopted rituals, decorative fabrics, and, perhaps above all, the sermons which have hardly any recognizable foundation in a doctrinally sound exegesis of Scripture?

The issues in contemporary Protestant church life have frequently superseded those that aroused Calvin's anger in his day. Nevertheless, the question of somewhat parallel problems may continue to diminish the recognition of authority in Christian worship. One could argue that the texts for the Pentecost passages are deeply commanding about the power of the Triune God in the life of the church. If that is so, why do some congregations seem to become fascinated with the color red itself? Even the wearing of red trousers is occasionally encouraged. Yet the purpose of these texts is not really about the symbolism of a color.

What is one to make of the way in which services for the end of a person's earthly life have let slip the New Testament's awareness of the risen Christ as the Victor over such grim opponents as sin, death, and the devil? In contrast to the Reformed concern to point the bereaved beyond medieval preoccupations, many congregations today are led to focus on them. Though the service is now almost universally depicted as a "witness," it begs the question: A witness to what or to whom? Rather than pointing to or focusing on Christ, it typically becomes a mostly anthropocentric "celebration of life." Is there not more focus today on the natural traits, attributes, abilities, characteristics, or personality of the deceased than on Christ? When the unique power of the risen Christ throughout the life of his church becomes diminished the role of a humanistic vitalism, in all of its personal manifestations, offers itself as a substitute.

The heart of the sacramental controversy which leads to Calvin's denunciation of "theatrical trifles" is the question of God's instruction to his people (see *Institutes* 4.17.43). As Calvin understood it, these instructions are limited in detail, but they are remarkably direct. Though there is much that falls within the realm of that which may be considered *adiaphora* or matters of indifference, what is *adiaphora* is hardly determined by aesthetic appeal. It is to be strictly guided by that which leads the believer to Christ and thereby builds up the church.

When it comes to a sacrament, Calvin's concern came to settle on that which, in keeping with the Word of God, is appropriate for its witness to Christ in its particular time and place. Other ceremonies and activities are to meet the same criterion.[3] However, James H. Nichols points out that Calvin could also advise patience and adaptability concerning certain local situations, particularly for Reformed congregations which were located in largely Lutheran communities.[4] In holding a foundational principle for worship, Calvin's well known admonition is that it is the Word of God which must precede to "make a sacrament" (*Institutes* 4.9.2).

Heinrich Bullinger, in the Second Helvetic Confession, propounded this same Christological intent when he said that "the principal thing which God promises in all sacraments … is Christ the Savior—that only sacrifice and that Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world" (Chapter XIX). The trinitarian implications of this with regard to the Patristic insights concerning the eternal Fatherhood and the eternal Sonship of Christ are thus very far reaching and should certainly have a forceful impact within the contemporary discussion of the appropriate language in worship.

The Geneva Confession, which reflects something of an early Reformed consensus, and which was presented to the magistracy on November 10, 1536, frames the structure of Calvin's thinking within a single sentence when it declares that Christ and our redemption through him is the crucial issue. The sufficiency of Christ is the key to this understanding, and the implication from this is that we do not need anything else in worship but that which leads us to him.

This is the course of his thinking that influenced the production of the *Articles Concerning the Organization*

of the Church and Worship in 1537. Calvin, Elie Corauld, and Guillaume Farel presented these articles to the Council of Ministers. It is interesting to consider the four issues they urged to be followed in the development of the church. They did not, of course, include some of the things that might be considered crucial today. Instead they were frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper, the singing of psalms, the instruction of youth, and the establishment of marriage laws.[5] As was consistently the case, it is noted that these were to be followed because they were according to the Word of God. What is also to be understood is that by communion we are to be made participants in the body and blood of Jesus.

How We Come to Know

What is also important to grasp is that this involves a very unique epistemology. It moves beyond the categories in which the Eucharistic debates of the Middle Ages were argued. It takes the discussion beyond the specific debates, for example, by Radbertus and Ratramnus at the monastery at Corbie in Picardy, France. The argument assumes a different kind of realism than even that which was understood by Martin Luther. It is also very significant that Enlightenment philosophical theories of knowledge which were soon to manage the empirical debates in Europe, such as John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, had no room for this Christological realism.

This observation is relevant for a critique of the theatrical trifles in any age because it involves a theology that goes deeper than sheer human subjectivity, emotional gratification, or even the psychology of learning theories. To know, in this case, involves a metaphysics of participation which differs from that of the Aristotelian transformation of substance on which the explication of medieval worship depended. It is also a metaphysics that defeats the extremes of both the Anabaptists and the Libertines. It is a Christological, spiritual discernment which rests upon God's Word and is wholly lost to us until we are regenerated (*Institutes* 2.2.18).

Carlos M.N. Eire takes this argument a little further when he observes that Calvin forged a new form of theologically based metaphysics in which the lines between the material and spiritual were sharply demarcated and the idea of a transcendent spiritual reality became the cutting edge.[6] It was undoubtedly this renewed interest in the transcendence of God that gave Calvin the high ground from which to attack not only the more blatant idols, but anything that he saw as a theological trifle in the service of worship.

If we pose this position against the efforts to construct models of process theology in the twentieth century, which applied the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and others to formulate a unified structure of the divine and the physical, Calvin's words, blunt or soft, become a withering point of criticism. His recognition of the importance of transcendence was the prerequisite of his theology. The thrust of all of this is that if we attempt to supplement the preaching of God's Word and the proper celebration of the sacraments by other ceremonies we are not just adding persuasive techniques but also approaching the problem of idolatry.

In *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva That is a Plan for Instructing Christians in the Doctrine of Christ* published in Latin in 1545, Calvin cites Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 as crucial texts for dealing with the problem of idolatry which he believes to have become embedded in the life of the church. Calvin explains it this way: "For to move and affect the heart, to illumine the mind and to render the conscience sure and tranquil is the business of the Spirit alone, so that it ought to be considered wholly his work and be ascribed to him, lest his praise be transferred to another." That is remarkably blunt. Elsewhere Calvin states, "We are not to cling to the visible signs and there seek our salvation, or imagine the virtue of conferring grace to be fixed and confined in them. Rather we are to regard the sign in light of an aid, by which we may be directed straight to Christ and from him seek salvation and real felicity."[7]

If one is to grasp Calvin's perspective in a more sustained way, it is necessary to recognize that his understanding of prayer was integrally woven into his view of the Christian's union with Christ. In Book 3, Chapter 20 of the *Institutes*, Calvin began a seventy-page description of prayer as the "chief exercise of faith." Since God has placed all that we need for salvation in Christ we must "dig up by prayer" the bounties that await us there. Calvin thus regarded prayer as a diligent, intentional pursuit, in which we use our intelligence as well as our hearts. It is highly dynamic for it is rooted in the intercession of Christ himself which, without a doubt, suggests that for the devout Christian prayer becomes an encounter with the Holy Trinity.

In the Catechism of 1545, Calvin goes even further concerning the participation of God in our prayers and the way in which this distinguishes Christian prayer from any other kind. He kindles within us the longing to pray, arouses within us the "groanings that cannot be uttered and shapes our minds to those desires that are required in prayer." People should thus be wary of coming to God in a passive way or attempting to create within themselves a centering, calming state of mind that is sometimes suggested by "spiritual" directors today.

They should rather, as Calvin puts it in no uncertain terms, "Forthwith flee to God and demand that they be inflamed with the fiery darts of his spirit, so as to be

rendered fit for prayer." Furthermore, when our prayers are directed in this way to God's honor, we are praying that he push back the sin and darkness that comes from Satan by his very own righteousness. When this truly occurs, the Spirit imbues us with the love of righteousness and the hatred for sin. There seems to be little place for theatrical trifles in this outlook.

Theatrical Trifles Today

Is there any doubt that in the last few decades Reformed worship has been pushed in a broadly different direction? The shift was not to be simply suggested in an off–hand way. It was not to be heralded as *adiaphora*. It was declared to be the only way. This turn became apparent some years ago when the Office of Theology and Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) produced a document entitled "Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism, Supplemental Liturgical Resources 2 (1985.)

One might pause and look again at the phrase, "the renewal of baptism," which alone could raise considerable perplexity among the Reformers of the sixteenth century. The publication proceeds to speak of receiving "the gift of the Kingdom" with baptism. But what is this "gift of the Kingdom"? This could become an undefined gift, one that seems hard to correlate with the death and resurrection of Christ, and also one with no significant admonitions. What is missing in such generalizations is the cutting edge, the character of prayer in which one's mortification and regeneration in Christ goes to deep places, perhaps involving as much pain and remorse as gratitude. What has occurred in many circles is a very quick sense of transition into a forgiven state. Was this approach to be appreciated as a softer, more likable notion of worship?

At the same time, there was a similarly persuasive approach to the sacrament of baptism. The "Order for Holy Baptism" provides a flurry of gracious phrases which are intended to suggest the beneficial significance of the service. Is there, we might ask, enough emphasis placed on the gravity of the sacrament? What we are given in this description is a very familiar moralistic tone, which is described as "Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice." And in the discussion of the prayer which follows the pouring of the water, nearly twice as much attention is giving to the pouring of water per se than to the significance of Christ himself. The minister is then to request that God "bless the water." The water? As interesting as it may be, the water—notwithstanding its micro-organic content—is an inanimate object! Nevertheless, the following explanation follows:

> Water is the primary and essential [sic] symbol in baptism. In early civilization, water was regarded as one of the four basic elements of the universe … the power of the symbolism of water is particularly dramatic where there is a baptismal pool or font which is kept full of flowing water … but in our day fonts have become so small they are no longer able to hold enough water to symbolize its meaning and power … Water may be poured into the font from an ewer or a large pitcher, held high enough above the font so that the falling water may be seen by all and the sounds of its splashing may be heard … we lose impact when minimalism shapes the liturgy. It is crucial [sic] to the integrity of baptism that water once again be used visibly and generously" [53, 55].

In keeping with what we have read, if Calvin had any fears of minimalism it hardly concerned the amount of water distributed. It would rather, I suspect, pointedly concern the reduction of emphasis on Christ.

Reflecting this same point of view, "The service for the Lord's Day: Supplemental Liturgical Resources 1" declares about the Lord's Supper, "When accompanying the manual acts, the words should be spoken slowly and in careful rhythm with the gestures. Gestures need to be expansive and smoothly paced … the loaf should not be precut but actually broken …" To the contrary, the Second Helvetic Confession expresses not only the critique of Calvin and Bullinger but all of their colleagues when it urges that "our hearts are to be lifted up and not fixed on the bread" (Chapter 21).

Perhaps the shift toward a more emotionally expansive experience was sensed to be heading in this direction when James H. Nichols wrote in 1954, "The dignity and objective character of Reformed worship was corroded by the effort to be emotionally stimulating."[8] It was intended as a reference to the movement of revivalist evangelism but perhaps it is as relevant to our situation today. Significantly, the momentum in the publications and practices of many Reformed denominations in America today continues in this direction.

We might note the elaborate discussion of the primacy of water, including a concept of power which is not associated with the Holy Spirit or with the underlying word of promise, as Calvin would put it, but with the values inherent in the natural symbol. The phrases "particularly dramatic" and the "centrality of water" certainly draw special attention. Is it significant that the authors instruct us to lift up the pitcher so that "the falling water" may be seen and the "sounds of its splashing may be heard"?

In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes with remarkable penetration that in baptism "we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life … for Christ's purity has been offered us in it: His purity ever flourishes."[9] The phrase "his purity ever flourishes" is

particularly apt. It is vital, dramatic, and powerful. It is decidedly *not* theatrical. Nor is it oriented toward natural processes. The activity of the Holy Spirit moving within our hearts secures us within the very flourishing of Christ himself. Calvin had no objection to dramatic imagery. He is concerned, however, lest our natural attraction to that imagery draw us into the imagery itself. Janos Paztor quotes Calvin as saying "let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above our senses." Calvin continues, "How much better it would be to omit from baptism all theatrical pomp which dazzles the eyes of the simple and deadens their minds … There is nothing holier or better or safer than to be content with the authority of Christ alone." If we adhere to this practice, Calvin writes, baptism "would shine in its full brightness." [10]

Should we wish to defend this approach in secular academic circles, we could try a model that would be formed on the basis of the technical terminology of Kantian philosophy. We could, again, describe Calvin's approach as having a distinctive spiritual epistemology. Our faith, from this perspective, would certainly be influenced by but not limited to the structures of ordinary knowing. It would be in Immanuel Kant's terms a kind of transcendental *a priori* understanding which is entirely unique. It is radically different because it is a creative gift by the holy will of the transcendent living Lord. Without a doubt this perspective would in some places be characterized as "obscurantist."

I cannot imagine, however, that Calvin would accept that critique lightly. For Calvin, the Christian faith, in this context, would not likely become more convincing by an appeal to attractive processes of nature. He does write with great persuasion concerning our awareness of the glory of God in the natural world but we must continue to recall that for Calvin the central role of Jesus Christ and the God given "spectacles" of scripture provide our perspective from which we can see the world around us. In the *Institutes* 3.2.34, Calvin writes:

> Therefore, we cannot come to Christ unless we be drawn by the spirit of God, so when we are drawn we are lifted up in mind and heart above our understanding. For the soul illuminated by him takes on a new keenness as it were to contemplate the heavenly mysteries, whose splendors had previously blinded it. And man's understanding, thus beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit, then at last truly begins to taste those things which belong to the kingdom of God.

The operative and all–important phrase that leaps out at us is "above our understanding." Even though this phrase remains mysterious for us, it provides the lynchpin for a daring attack upon all worship that indulges a humanistic approach and, in the process, unwittingly perhaps, trivializes it. In his sermon entitled "The Nativity of Jesus Christ," Calvin makes the point that in the Lord's Supper the symbolism of bread and wine in themselves assure us of nothing. On the contrary, we must draw near to Christ himself. [11]

Regaining Our Focus

One difficulty in this modest reflection on Calvin's disturbance about "theatrical trifles in worship" is that it remains challenging to move from the issues of the sixteenth century to those of the twenty-first century. We may understand the words that are used but it is not so simple to place them within their cultural context. We have attempted to use his phrase as a way of regarding the current practices in many of the Reformed churches. It has provided a sort of lens. But, even so, a lens may become cloudy, and circumstances may move out of focus. What does strike me as interesting, however, is the way in which this phrase might help to illumine the diminishment of Christological and theological focus in our services. There do seem to be many instances in which such subjects have become less prominent and seem simply to slip into the services almost as cameo appearances in a movie. References to the Trinity and to the significance of Christ then become somewhat formulistic and ornamental. The references to power gravitate in other directions.

We find within Calvin's writings reference after reference to the transcendent power and authority of Jesus Christ. And it is his mission to say to his readers that we could discover there more of that power and authority than we have ever dreamed. It is Christ who is made known to us in surprising ways when the scripture is read and the Word of God is truly preached. Calvin's views were transmuted into those of the English Puritans in time, and it is worth recalling that the simplicity if not the austerity in their worship lay in an attempt to protect their minds and hearts from all that would distract them from hearing the Word of God. We have no right to trifles, however persuasively they may be presented. Could it really be true, we must ask ourselves from time to time, that Jesus Christ himself actually comes to us in worship and completely mystifies us?

What Calvin suggests, by several approaches, is that Jesus Christ comes to us in a realized eschatology of invisibility. When he comes to us, he lights flames that remain invisible to us, both saints and sinners. What we should also remember is that he has rarely come to us as the Northern Lights. Nor are we ever to consider that we are in competition with the best that Hollywood has to offer. Worship is not really marketing. And Holy Communion is not really the joyful feast that we so frequently hear mentioned. It is the *holy* feast and therefore open to unseen mysteries of judgment and restoration. Largely unpredictable, we can only take our

guidance from the Word that is read and preached and the hymns that carry a message of the grace of God.

Thus, no matter what such publications may say about it, Communion is not comfort food. Quite the opposite, it might well sometimes usher us into remorse more profound than we have ever known before. The Word is, after all, sharper than a two-edged sword, sometimes a scalpel before it supplies a poultice. The tarnished and tangled layers of our minds do call for help beyond that expressed in the particular forms of bread and the abundant embellishments of water. What is crucial for us in worship is only the way in which Christ comes mysteriously and magnificently into our lives. We have been alerted, we might want to remember, by Calvin to the likelihood that many times we have allowed our lust for trifles to break into our minds. The glory of God the Father in Christ, Calvin would say, is far too great and abundant for that.

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[1] Lucien J. Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974).

[2] Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 167f.

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.19.2. See Thomas Watson Street's "John Calvin on Adiaphora: An Exposition and Appraisal of His Theology and Practice." Unpublished Th.D. dissertation. Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1954.

[4] James H. Nichols, "The Liturgical Tradition of the Reformed Churches," *Theology Today*, 11 (July 1954), 212.

[5] See Wulfert de Greff, *The Writings of John Calvin*. Expanded Edition. Trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 106ff.

[6] Carlos M.N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 196.

[7] *Calvin's Theological Treatises.* Ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 131-132.

[8] Nichols, "The Liturgical Tradition of the Reformed Churches," 212.

[9] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 96.

[10] Janos Paztor, "Calvin and the Renewal of the Worship of the Church" *Reformed Worship*, 40/2, June 1988, 914.

[11] See Leroy Nixon' s translation of Calvin's *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 139.

Earl Palmer on Expository Preaching

An Interview

On May 21, 2019, Theology Matters' *Managing Editor, Richard Burnett, interviewed Earl F. Palmer at University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, Washington, where he was ordained in 1956. One of the most gifted and sought-after preachers and teachers in America, Palmer also served as pastor of Union Church, Manilla, Philippines, First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, California, National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C., and continues his teaching ministry through Earl Palmer Ministries in Seattle. See www.earlpalmer.org.*

TM: Thank you for taking the time to be with us today.

Palmer: Well, I'm honored.

TM: Your preaching has been such an influence on so many lives. You have been called "the best expository preacher in America of our time." I am curious to know and think others would be curious to know how this way of preaching became so important to you?

Palmer: It all started with how I became a believer. I went to Cal Berkeley as a young student, a freshman, and growing up in a very warm and supportive family. Our mother was a devout Episcopalian, and my dad was then really nothing as far as having any Christian background. So, it was not really part of our lives. Then I came to Cal. In my first two years I didn't particularly go to church or anything that I can remember. And then in the middle of my sophomore year, a man who became a dear friend of mine, who was in a study group with me in Barrington Hall, which was a male dorm at Cal. He said that we have an all–male Bible study group. Just a little group of us. It was a large hall, but I knew who they were, and they said, "Why don't you come?" So I went.

They were just sort of inching their way through New Testament books, and when I went, I had to look on because I didn't bring a Bible with me. So that week I went out and bought a Bible. And for one dollar extra I got my name on it! I still have that Bible, but it was a King James Version, which I'm glad I've got because I really like the King James. But I went to the Bible study group the next week and I said, "I have my Bible!" They said, "O that's nice, but we're reading the RSV." So, then I had to go out to the local Safeway and buy another Bible that week! To make a long story short, I thought to myself, "I think I would like to be a pastor like our college pastor, Carl Thomas," who was the college pastor at the church. I thought I'd like to do that because I'm enjoying this so much. I went and talked with Dr. Munger [Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley] and he said, "Well, you have to go to seminary."

So, I applied to Princeton Seminary, and I went as a really raw recruit in terms of knowing really anything about theology or great historical verities. While I was there, I began to yearn for the same sort of small male Bible study group that I had had in Berkeley. So, I went over to the University and I'll never forget, Glen, who was a student there, stood up in this rowdy place and he shouted out, "Hey you guys! This guy is from the Seminary and he said he would like to lead us in a Bible study group. Do you wanna do that?" And they said, "Okay," and so that's how my three years at Princeton began. That was the beginning of my career. As a matter of fact, Princeton Seminary forgave me the need to have Field Ed. because I had five of these small Bible study groups at the University and at Rutgers University.

I became convinced that if I could get somebody to look at the text, sooner or later, the text would always point them to its Living Center. The Old Testament points in anticipation to Jesus Christ. The New Testament points in fulfillment to Jesus Christ. *He* wins their respect, and I concluded at that point, while a student at Princeton, that the best ethics would come when you are focused on Jesus Christ. That's far better than looking at grim passages to find guidance in the Old Testament that have yet to be fulfilled. And they were fulfilled by Christ.

I came up with a definition of exposition. It's enabling a text to make its own point. That's very important. You've got to let a text make its own point, within its own setting, its own context. And then, because it points to Christ, always, then, in its gospel fulfillment setting, you can let it make its point. But wait it out. Let it happen. When I came here to Seattle after Seminary, I decided to build my ministry with youth around small Bible study groups.

TM: So, your Bible studies then were the means by which you began to build this ministry, and it transferred to your pulpit ministry?

Palmer: Yes. C.S. Lewis has one of the best quotes: "Tell me what the hard words mean, and you've done more for me than a thousand commentaries." See the words and then ask, "Why was that word ever used? What did the word mean when St. Paul used it?" That's

important: for a person or a pastor not to jump in too quickly to give major interpretations. Let the text unfold. And I think that approach honors the text and also protects us from a lot of what you might say are extravagant statements. I always say about Bible study that lean is better than luxurious. The leanest interpretation is usually the best. The extravagant interpretation is usually an agenda foisted upon the text.

TM: Did you realize how deeply rooted this way of preaching was in the Reformed tradition when you began?

Palmer: I did when I read Luther's commentaries. I love Luther. And he's in our Augustinian-Reformed tradition. But Calvin also. What I loved about Calvin is how clear he is. And how words are so carefully chosen by Calvin, and the way he does his summaries at the beginning of each chapter. It's very expositional. As a Bible expositor he wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible except for the Book of Revelation. And his commentaries are always clear. Like Barth said, "He didn't much care whether you liked him, but he wanted to be sure you understood him." There is that clarity of letting the words say what they are really saying and that lean rather than luxurious model of interpretation which protects you from a lot of nonsense that can happen.

TM: But also this commitment to *lectio continua* preaching, that is, preaching through books of the Bible consecutively rather than from a common lectionary, or topical or thematic preaching. This is what distinguished the Reformed from the Lutherans from the beginning: *lectio continua* preaching. And you have modeled this so brilliantly for so many years. Did you see it modeled before? Had you heard that kind of preaching"

Palmer: I wouldn't say that Bob Munger modeled it as much. Bob Munger was in the Pietistic tradition, almost the Methodist-Pietistic tradition. But he was also Reformed. His big secret was his Christ centeredness. But his approach to the text would be to honor the text and then focus on Christ, and that's what he did that really helped me.

But John Mackey [President of Princeton Seminary from 1936 to 1960] was expositional, and I always credit John Mackey as a bigger influence. And also Helmut Thielicke [German theologian, 1908-1986] because he always tries to make three or four observations. I borrowed that from him. I always try to make "observations." First, let the text speak as best you can, and then make some observations. And then the observations, like in John Mackey's sermons, are often fireworks. It's because the text is now being allowed to explode, being allowed to really break free. And I think that is a wonderful moment when that can happen."

TM: Does this kind of preaching tend over time to shape congregations in ways that thematic or topical preaching might not?

Palmer: Well, I think it does. … Luther often ended his sermons rather abruptly (I discuss this in one of my articles on exposition). The influence of Luther's Lectures on Romans was quite substantial on me because he would often end a section by saying: "That's enough for today." So, in my own article, I said that exposition should end quickly. End your sermon quickly. Yesterday, even here at UPC I did it and people kidded me afterwards because they knew that George Hinman [Senior Pastor of University Presbyterian Church, Seattle] had asked me to preach on Romans 4 and Romans 5 in his series on Romans. So, I took him literally. In Romans 4, I set it up and didn't say, "Well, that's enough for today." I said, "Now next week." I was famous for that. "Next week we will watch how Paul makes this really clear. He's making it clear now. But he's going to make it *really* clear." But rather than to steal from Paul or take one of his great lines from the future, let it come when it comes. So, you're taking a risk with people because sometimes they want to hear the most spectacular line first. I try not to do that. So, I often ended the sermon, "Okay, next week then …"

TM: "So not necessarily tying things up with a nice bow, you simply drop them. I've experienced that. It leaves questions open. … You've spoken of Dr. Mackey and his influence. But are there others that have been major conversation partners over the years in preaching?

Palmer: Dale Brunner and I have done a lot of things together and we have been great friends through the years. But Dale is very bold. Bolder than I am. When he does exposition, he always prepares his own translation. Just like the Anchor Bible. He prepares his own translation of the text. Now maybe he should honor the RSV or say that the NRSV or Jerusalem Bible puts it this way … I often do that. I like to let people know the way that the translations will handle the text. Dale rarely will do that. He just does his own translations of the text and you discover it. You journey through it. And Dale has done that for years.

TM: Are there resources that you typically use when you prepare?

Palmer: *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*." And that takes time. I have them right there in my study at home in front of me. And I have, of course, Arndt and Gingrich, and all the lexicons. I have all the lexicons of the Hebrew and international lexicons. And they all help. It takes time to do the sleuthing. But I love the sleuthing of words. And I get

that from Lewis, and Lewis got it from Tolkien. Tolkien was absolutely captured by language. In fact, that's one way to describe it. Lewis was also captured by the surprise. The surprise of joy, the breakthrough. So was Tolkien. But Tolkien saw the surprise in language. Lewis said, "How did you dream up *The Lord of the Rings*? How did you create that story?" Tolkein says, "I didn't create the story. I found it. I found the story." Lewis asked, "Where did you find it?" Tolkein said, "In the language. I found it in the words." And I think that that is really what exposition is trying to do too.

TM: Are there theological resources that help you in that process of translation and using language?

Palmer: Bonhoeffer, for sure. I think Bonhoeffer is a really interesting expositor. Sometimes not as helpful as other times, but usually. Like his unfinished book, *Ethics*, where he talks about penultimate and ultimate. It is so important in handling the next to the last word and the last word. You cannot hear the last word until you've heard the next to the last word. That's Bonhoeffer. And that's an expositional comment. You have to let a text get you ready for a great breakthrough. And I like him and have read him extensively. And I love Karl Barth's attention to words as well. I just love it. Even in the little book, *Dogmatics in Outline*, his understanding of language is so good. And Lewis, of course, and Tolkien. I love Tolkien's brilliant essay "On Fairy Tales," which is in his *Letters to Charles Williams*. That's the best part of that book. Better than Dorothy Sayers' story. Better than Lewis. But Tolkien got it. That sudden turn of joy and his explanation of that sudden turn of joy. And really, he's sharing his 'eucatastrophe' argument that won Lewis to Christ. It was that argument from Tolkien. And it was a word study.

TM: [A follow-up question about C.S. Lewis …]

Earl: You know I love this about Lewis. In 1939 he broke his silence because he'd blundered in *Pilgrim's Regress* and lost a lot of friends in Oxford. In fact, that's the real reason he was defeated for a professorship with three votes at Oxford. They were offended by the fact that he wrote this and was so careless about what he said about Sigmund Freud. That's why I love the play, *Freud's Last Session*, which is about Lewis. It's wonderful because Lewis did make fun of Freud, and he needed to make peace with Freud. That's another story. But, anyway, Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* and James Welsh read it and didn't know anything about C.S. Lewis. But he read *The Problem of Pain* and said it changed his life. And then James Welsh, who was the head of the BBC's religious broadcasting, and the one who got Dorothy Sayers to do *Man Born to Be King*. But he got Lewis first, and did her episodes starting in December of 1941. Lewis starts in 1942 and the heart of it is this: it's a grim time. James Welsh writes a letter to him and says, "I've read your book, *The Problem of Pain* and it changed my life. And I think England needs this now because we are in pain. Would you be willing to give some broadcast talks?"

TM: You mentioned Bonhoeffer a moment ago and there's this line in his lectures on preaching in *No Rusty Swords* that perhaps I heard first from you or at least I've heard you practice it. Bonhoeffer says:

> The source of preached word is not the pious Christian experience of consciousness of the preacher, nor the need of the hour of the congregation, nor the desire to improve and influence others. All of these things quickly collapse and lead to resignation. These motivations and forces are not enough, the only valid source of the sermon is the commission of Christ to proclaim the gospel. The contemporary situation is not sufficient to determine the content of the sermon. The dealings with God and men as they are testified to in the Bible and made known through the teachings of the church is sufficient.

Palmer: O yes, of course, I agree with this too. If you have too much of an agenda it can't be a godly agenda. I've said this to a lot of young pastors. Don't throw in at the end of the sermon a lot of rhetoric that is all true, but it is not explained. [Then it becomes] almost a mantra. You're throwing it in. "We want to go to the foot of the cross." "Now the ground is level there." "And the blood of Christ will cleanse us." Notice all those amazing words being used but not explained and, therefore, are not understood. Don't do that. When you get to the end of a main discovery point that's been made in the text then stop! Stop earlier and don't feel that you have to say, "Now given all we're going through in the world today ..."

[As far as being relevant], I did get published by Will Willimon at Duke. He said, "What sermon did you preach at UPC the Sunday after 9/11?" So, I sent my sermon to him. He published it with a lot of very famous people, such as Henry Sloan Coffin, … and then me! I was really the only one that just stuck to my text. And then we prayed, which is how I often treated national tragedies. In the pastoral prayer we are going to pray about it. But for the sermon we are just going to stick with the text that we're in, and let it speak, and hope that by the Holy Spirit's power He will make it relevant anyway. But it just so happened that the text that I had and was in the midst of turned out to be a great text for that Sunday, according to Willimon.

TM: I stuck to the *lectio continua* text as well, and I learned this from you and also from Barth and Bonhoeffer, that the text somehow absorbs the world,

and this business of trying to make the Bible relevant to "my world" is part of our problem.

Palmer: Barth has a line that shows he didn't like Tillich's approach. Tillich's [method of] correlation is that we will discover what the huge crises are and then we will see where the Bible is relevant. But Barth had that great one liner. I think it's in his letters to Bultmann: "If *we* are the ones that get to ask the questions, what happens if *God* can ask questions?" Let the text ask questions. And it does and it will.

TM: Many congregations—I suppose because they have experienced expository preaching in ways that have been boring or poorly executed—might be a little wary of having someone who says, "I would like to do expository preaching." Many congregations do not want, or think that they do not want, this sort of preaching. What advice would you give to ministers or congregations who want expository preaching? Are there conditions for the possibility for this kind of preaching in a congregation?

Palmer: I would say, and I've said this to a lot of young pastors, "Model it without telling them what you are doing." One way you can model it is to offer a special class that sounds very interesting to people and maybe it's about something that is very current on their minds. And in that time find opportunities to let a text really speak in the midst of that in that study.

TM: Can you say something about the mystery of preaching?

Palmer: There *is* a mystery and I think it has several components. And I do think it includes the mystery of the Holy Spirit. The fact that God himself makes his own validation and does the validating. The other is the fact that we need "people fluency." You need to know people. If you're near a High School, you need to know about that High School. And you need to know the kids in that High School. And, of course, studying so that you do understand the text yourself. And that's hard work. You have to make that a major goal.

Arrange your week so that your week has time. Don't ever write a sermon on Saturday. I learned that a long time ago. I always had my sermon done by Thursday and that then brewed in my brain from Thursday until Sunday. Pastors who write their sermons on Saturday or even Sunday often fill them with analogies and stuff they borrow from somebody else. Or maybe they include something that happened to them that week. The text isn't the big thing. If the text had been the big thing up until Thursday and you really go for following the text, then it's just ruminating in your brain. And that helps. I would call that the "message fluency." You've really got to understand that message as best you can, and what the hard words mean ...

TM: Calvin has this line about preaching with one's "eyes open," that is, not being oblivious to who is sitting in front of you. You've said that reading people's faces is important. Could you say more about that?

Palmer: Yes, it's true. All the years that I was here, when I would meet people in grocery stores, airports, or wherever, I would have people say: "I go to your church." And I would say, "Where do you sit?' And they would say, "I sit over on the left side." And I would say, "I'll watch for you. I now know where you sit." And I did. …

TM: Well, you have reached many people through your sermons, and you've reached a lot of people you could not see and I just want to thank you on behalf of many of us who didn't sit under your teaching directly, but indirectly, from a distance, we've been so nourished by you and your ministry.

Palmer: I will tell you one funny thing. I was asked to give a sermon and tape on [the radio program], "The National Pulpit." It was NBC and they had a crew come and did it in this this church. They had to turn the entire air conditioning system off in this church because it was fouling up their recording and they had to turn it all off and I went into a room. And then I was really nervous because I don't like to preach in front of a mic. And then one of them said to me (this guy was a pro), "When you talk I want you to see a truck driver in Nevada who's driving his truck, and he might get a little sleepy … but he's driving his truck and he's turned you on and he's listening to you." And you know, I got through that sermon that way. And I did two sermons. I don't know if they are very good. But he [the truck driver] suddenly became a person to me. He did help me with that. …

Palmer: It's such a reward for me to see you taking on this post and I love *Theology Matters* and I love the whole idea of it, that it does matter. …

TM: Thank you, sir, you have been such a blessing to our lives.

Palmer: Thank you.

To see and hear this interview in its entirety, go to the website of *Theology Matters*, theologymatters.com under the rubric, "Interview with Earl Palmer" or go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMFnDaMXLbo

Preaching according to the *Lectio Continua:* Practical Questions & Considerations

by Hughes Oliphant Old

Editor's Note: There are advantages to preaching from "the lectionary." Saving congregations from the whims and pet agendas of their preachers is not least among them. Yet the Reformed tradition was shaped from the very beginning by its recovery of the ancient patristic practice of lectio continua *preaching, i.e., preaching through books of the Bible consecutively. This approach also has advantages. In fact, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran, discusses why the* lectio continua *approach is so "salutary" in his book,* Life Together *(see "Reading the Scriptures"). But preaching the* lectio continua *also raises questions, especially for those who attempt to do it in our times. The late Hughes Oliphant Old, one of the world's foremost experts on Reformed worship, discusses some of these questions in the following essay, which comes from the introduction to a little–known book of sermons he published on the Book of Micah.*[1] *Like the previous interview (though with differences too), it gives practical insight into 'how the sausage is made,' as it were, from a seasoned practitioner.*

What began the discussion was a chapter on preaching in my book, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture.*[2] In this chapter I showed what a prominent place the preaching of the *lectio continua* has occupied in the ministry of the Word, as it was exercised both by the Fathers of the ancient Church and by the Reformers of the sixteenth century, but then I suggested that this method is quite viable today. It is this which sparked the discussion. The question which many of my readers raised was whether it really would be profitable to preach the *lectio continua* in a modern American Church.

Would not most of our congregations find it tedious? Surely one would not want to preach two hundred sermons on Deuteronomy straight through as Calvin did in Geneva! Or again, I have been asked how one could preach the *lectio continua* and still observe the Christian feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. These questions I take as a challenge to show how I have adapted this ancient tradition to my own preaching. As these sermons will show I have not simply performed an archaeological reconstruction of Patristic or Reformation preaching practices. I have adapted the practice quite considerably.

In the first place, I preach the *lectio continua* more rapidly than many of those who have practiced this discipline before me. While Calvin devoted seventeen sermons to Micah I have covered the book in six sermons. This requires a study of the whole book by the preacher and a selection of the passages of the book which appear to be the most significant for the congregation to whom one is preaching. The selection is part of the job of interpretation.

On the other hand, I sometimes preach through a book more slowly. I once took some twenty–five Sundays to preach through the Sermon on the Mount. But then I figure that these three chapters which make up the Sermon on the Mount are among the most weighty passages of the New Testament. The decision to give so much to them was a matter of interpretation on one hand and on the other hand a matter of pastoral care. It seemed important at that point in the life of my congregation to emphasize what Jesus taught about the living of the Christian life. In preaching Jeremiah, I limited myself to fourteen sermons while Calvin preached eighty-seven. But then Calvin was preaching five times a week and I was preaching only once a week.

For the most part I limit myself to about a dozen sermons on a single book at a time. In preaching through Romans, for example, I divided the book into three parts. The first six chapters I preached in the early Spring arranging it so that I was preaching on chapter six at Easter. Then in the following Fall I took up again with chapter seven preaching through to the end of chapter eleven just before Thanksgiving. Once more I broke the series for several months and then continued with chapters twelve to the end of the book during the following summer. Here again, as with the Sermon on the Mount, it seemed that the preaching of Romans deserved so much attention because it is the rich center cut of the Gospel. To give it so much attention at a particular point in the life of a congregation was an important pastoral decision.

Now, of course, one of the objections to preaching the *lectio continua* is a certain uneasiness about emphasizing the Bible too much in preaching. Leander Keck has spoken about this problem with a great deal of sensitivity. For several generations, controversy over science and the Bible and over the historical sources of

the Biblical texts has made biblical preaching in any of its forms more difficult than it once was. It has seemed so much easier to cut oneself loose from these problematic texts and simply base one's preaching on Christian principles. So many biblical texts had begun to appear inauthentic or hopelessly confused by interpolations. Busy parsons themselves hardly knew what to make of them; how were their congregations going to understand them? Most sensitive preachers in the last generation have been troubled by this problem, but the appearance and the acceptance of Dean Keck's book indicates that the Church is beginning to recover from this uneasiness about Biblical preaching. [3]

A second question which has been posed is whether the *lectio continua* is the only kind of preaching I use. Let me hasten to make clear that I use a number of other of forms. … I do catechetical preaching. During the first year I preached through the Apostles Creed. Here, too, I had plenty of patristic examples to follow as one could easily gather from the chapter on preaching in my recent book. The Reformers of Strasbourg had likewise taken the lead of the Fathers in this matter. They began a long tradition of *catechetical preaching* in the Protestant pulpit, a tradition which I enthusiastically labor to maintain.

Occasionally I find good reason in the life of the congregation or in current events to depart from my schedule. Besides that, I feel obligated to preach the traditional stewardship sermon, an appropriate sermon for Thanksgiving Eve or the Sunday before the Fourth of July. Somewhat inadvertently I have gotten into the habit of preaching on the Christian witness of such great saints of American public life as Woodrow Wilson, John Witherspoon, or Stonewall Jackson on some of these civil holidays. So obviously I have to admit to preaching biographical sermons. Such sermons I would prefer to deliver at some time other than the Lord's Day service. But then I try not to be sticky about such things. More and more I find that I am asked to preach at funerals and weddings. I am well aware that some of the greatest sermons in the history of preaching have been funeral sermons. One remembers John Knox's sermon at the death of the Earl of Murray or Jacques Bossuet's sermon at the funeral of Queen Henrietta.

In my own ministry the emphasis has been on preaching to the Christian congregation when it is assembled for worship on the Lord's Day. This I understand to be the natural context or accustomed place of *lectio continua* preaching. It is when the Church regularly comes together for the worship of God that the Scriptures are to be preached in a systematic way. There are other places where other types of preaching are appropriate and even necessary. Evangelistic preaching occupies an important place in the history of preaching, but it is rarely found in the context of worship. That is not its appropriate place. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus was preached in the open air to those who were not Christians. He did not preach on a text of Scripture. The Celtic monks who evangelized Northern Europe and the Franciscan and Dominican preachers of the Middle Ages were great preachers and yet their preaching was not usually in the context of the celebration of the Mass. John Wesley and George Whitfield preached in fields and on street corners rather than in the ordinary service of worship. Evangelistic preaching by its very nature is outside the liturgy. It has a different context. *Lectio continua* preaching, on the other hand, is liturgical preaching. It is a particular ministry of the people of God which consists in listening carefully and systematically to the Word of God.

The preaching of the *lectio continua* can very easily be fitted into the observance of the major Christian feasts. Oecolampadius, the Reformer of Basel, did this very clearly even if Calvin seems to have made very little of the feasts in his preaching schedule. We know, for instance, that Oecolampadius preached a *lectio continua* of the First Epistle of John during Advent in 1523. In doing this he was following the example of the great patristic preachers. Oecolampadius knew that John Chrysostom often used the great feasts as the terminal poles of his *lectio continua* preaching. In Antioch the great Chrysostom had preached his series of expository sermons on Genesis during the forty days of Lent and his series on Acts during the fifty days of Pentecost. Again, one must remember that both Chrysostom and Oecolampadius preached daily.

The sermons which I am presenting in this book were preached between the Sunday after Thanksgiving and the Feast of Epiphany. I figured that is the time span which to my congregation makes up the Christmas holidays. As soon as Thanksgiving is over the merchants begin to put up Christmas decorations and announce their pre–Christmas sales. The university gets wound up for finals. Then students take off to celebrate Christmas with their families. Those who are permanent residents fill the Church on Christmas Eve with visiting relatives and then many of them take off for a week or two before the semester begins. The two Sundays after Christmas are apt to be very sparse in regard to attendance. But then by the Sunday after Epiphany the university has usually started up again and the holidays are over.

In years past, the passages I have selected to preach at Christmas might be regarded as the more usual sort of fare. I have done a *lectio continua* series on the nativity story in Matthew and the one in Luke, the Prologue to the Gospel of John, a series on the traditional Messianic passages in the first eleven chapters of Isaiah and a series on the so-called salvation oracles in chapters

thirty to thirty-three of Jeremiah. Some of these, of course, I have done more than once in my eighteen years of preaching.

The fact that I was preaching these sermons during the Christmas holidays has obviously influenced my selection of texts and my approach to these texts. Some twenty years ago I preached on Micah in my first Church. That series was preached in the summer and it treated the book in only five sermons. What I thought needed to be preached then was quite different from what it seems to me needs to be preached now.

One of the beauties of preaching the *lectio continua* is that it allows the text to interact with the changing of the times. Micah should not always be preached at Christmas nor should Acts always be preached between Easter and Pentecost. In the same way I must confess that what interested me in the prophecies of Micah in the sixties is not quite the same as what interests me now. Times have changed and the message which needs to be preached is obviously quite different. At one point I actually looked into my barrel to see if some of those twenty–year–old sermons could be revamped for this series. I decided that not a single one would do. I found that I divided the book up quite differently now than I had back in the sixties. Different texts had caught my attention. It is not that they were not good sermons or that I do not believe the same things I used to believe. It was much more that God has a way of having different messages for different times.

Brevard Childs in his introduction to Micah has made this quite clear. In putting together the collection of Micah's prophetic oracles into what is now recognized as the canonical text there was an attempt on the part of the editors to make the book speak to a different age. There was an attempt to make Micah's message contemporary. This was not a corruption of the text but rather a deepening of the text.

In turning to Micah to hear his prophetic message at Christmas, I have depended greatly upon the second Scripture lesson. That was the original point of having a second Scripture lesson. Even in the days of Jesus, the preacher was supposed to choose a passage from the Prophets as the basis of his interpretation of the Law. I pointed this out in the chapter on the ministry of the Word in my book. In some of the sermons I have made more use of the second lesson than in others. In some of the sermons the use of the second lesson was more implicit than explicit; nevertheless, what I have always aimed at is a Christian interpretation of the Hebrew prophet.

The sermons in this little publication are real sermons. They were preached at Faith Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana, from December, 1984 to January 6, 1985. They are typical of the way I preach. They have behind them the amount of preparation which realistically a practicing pastor can come up with in a week's time. I have resisted the temptation to restudy the text in the course of preparing the manuscript for publication. It often happens that late on Saturday night I discover some facet of the text I would like to chase down, but the sermon has to be preached the next morning. I obviously do not have time to chase down more material. I do the best I can with the time I have.

In the same way I have contented myself with the limitation of my own library. Fortunately, I have a good library. My first year in seminary, Bruce Metzger admonished me to start building a library appropriate to a minister of the Word. I have been working on it ever since. Important to my library are the classics: the commentaries of John Calvin from the Reformation period, Matthew Henry, "the most pastoral of Presbyterians," from the beginning of the eighteenth century, and George Adam Smith, that poet of Scottish Old Testament scholars, who wrote at the end of the last century. For modern commentaries I have only three: James Luther Mays, René Vuilleumier, and Delbert Hillers. From our church library, which I have stocked with commentaries over the years, I borrowed the commentary of Leslie C. Allen.

It may surprise some homileticians that I often refer to my favorite commentators in the course of a sermon. There are people in my congregation who find this of interest. This is particularly the case because often when I begin a series of sermons on a particular book of the Bible I will write something for the church newsletter about the series I intend to preach. Among other things, I usually introduce the major commentators. There are people at Faith Church who find it important that their preacher has done research on the text and on how the text has been interpreted down through the centuries. They also find it interesting to know that saintly and learned interpreters have often differed quite considerably on the meaning of a text.

These sermons are written by an "inductive method," to use Fred Craddock's term. I am one of whose preachers to whom he refers who must confess to writing the sermon before deciding what the text means. For me the writing itself is the process of thinking out what the text has to say. After I have written about ten pages then I spend Saturday evening and early Sunday morning outlining it, patching it up here and there, taking out irrelevant material and typing it up. What gets preached is very different from what is written. To reduce the preached sermon to a written sermon, therefore, takes quite a bit of work after the preaching. I have to take the outline from which I finally preached and try to

remember what I actually said. Then I revise my written manuscript.

As I regard it, there is a big difference between the way the language should be written and the way it should be spoken. I like to think of myself as a practitioner of the art of preaching. I like to use all the devices of rhetoric of which great preachers like Chrysostom, Donne, Bossuet, and Spurgeon were masters. One uses these devices to keep people listening. I find myself in agreement with Elizabeth Achtemeier, "A preacher's tools are words shaped into the rhythms and cadences, the fortissimos and whispers, the conversation and confrontation of oral speech."[4] But often many of these devices while they may be effective in the pulpit do not look quite right on the printed page. I have sometimes had tapes of my sermons transcribed and have never found them too satisfactory once they were written out. In finishing up these sermons, I have tried to make a compromise between how I would say it in the pulpit and how I would write it for publication.

Finally, before you begin to read these sermons there is one more thing you need to know. You need to know something about the congregation to which these sermons were preached. As others have put it before me, a sermon is not only an exegesis of the text but an exegesis of the congregation as well. These sermons were preached to a very particular congregation after I had been the pastor of this congregation for more than twelve years.

Faith Presbyterian Church is in West Lafayette, Indiana, the seventh Presbyterian Church in our community. There is the big church downtown. There is an even bigger congregation on the north side of town. Then there is University Church right next to the Purdue University campus and two more neighborhood congregations in various parts of town. We even have a Reformed Presbyterian Church where metrical psalms are sung, in pure Covenanter tradition, without the embellishments of instrumental accompaniment. For the most part the adult members of Faith Church are university educated people. We have a good number of professors and an abundance of graduate students. Mostly they are trained in the various fields of engineering and agriculture in which Purdue specializes. They are not likely to know a great deal about history or literature. They are scientists of one sort or another, but they expect their minister to be as well prepared in the academic disciplines of interpreting Scripture as they are in their academic disciplines.

Faith Church is made up for the most part of young professionals entering the world of "high tech." This is a rapidly growing segment of our society. Our congregation is not typical of the average American Protestant Church of a generation ago in which the highly educated were an exception. Most of our members have several college degrees. They are intelligent, thinking people who have been turned off by sermons aimed at twelve–year–olds. If they come to Church, it is because they are looking for more than a purely secular education has given them. They are looking for sacred learning, but they have high expectations of this sacred learning. They expect it to be at least as serious and as dedicated as secular learning. The congregation abounds in amateur theologians who are interested in reading the more popular writings of Augustine and Luther, Barth and Bultmann. It is to such people that Faith Church has made an appeal and the fact that this church has grown and prospered demonstrates that there are people who have been looking for this kind of ministry. To be sure, the largest response has been from people in their twenties and thirties, but this class of highly educated technicians is a growing element in our society and increasingly the Church will need to serve such people.

It is for this sort of person that the preaching of the *lectio continua* has a special appeal. It provides an opportunity for a systematic and scholarly hearing of the message of Scripture. Preaching the *lectio continua* makes it possible for the minister to sustain a disciplined study of Scripture, and it makes it possible for the congregation to enter into and follow that discipline.

Hughes Oliphant Old (1933-2016) is the author of many important books on worship, including *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite*, *Leading in Prayer*, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Church*, and a seven–volume series on preaching entitled *The Reading and Preaching of Scripture in the Worship of the Christian Church*, published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company from 1998-2010.

[1] Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Prophecies of Micah and the Gospel at Christmas* (Danville, Illinois: Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc., 1985).

[2] Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture* (Westminster/John Knox, 1984; revised edition, Geneva Press, 2004).

[3] Leander E. Keck, *Pauline Letters: Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).

[4] Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 22.

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