Exegesis and the Preacher

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I wish to focus on an issue that is surely one of the most problematical for the task of preaching today. This is the clash between the *uncertainty of exegesis and the conviction of the preacher*. Careful attention to Scripture opens up to the serious student many questions which admit of no straightforward answers, sometimes no accessible answers. And yet we still find ourselves impelled to proclaim good news, using Scripture, with conviction and joy. How can we, and should we, live and speak creatively within this tension?

The uncertainty of Exegesis

Etymology is no sure guide to definitive meaning (which does not exist anyway), but it can wake us up to new and sober perspectives. So it is with 'exegesis'. This word, which carries to this day (in many circles) such strong connotations of analytical rigour and precision, derives from the Greek verb *exēgeomai* meaning lead, guide, command; and thence prescribe, expound, interpret, narrate. The *exēgētēs* was an interpreter of oracles. The verb occurs in John 1:18: no one has ever seen God, but God the only-begotten who is in the bosom of the Father has 'interpreted' him. Jesus is the exegete of the Father. Precise, rigorous, analytical? 'Full of grace and truth'.

This background reminds us of the *power* of the exegete—a power he (mostly not she) has always exercised, whether or not it has been acknowledged. Whether we do exegesis for ourselves or for others, we exercise power over the text, power over persons, the power

which reads words and says 'this meant that' or, still more, 'this means that'. Christian preachers do well to pause and ponder their use of this power. The power, for instance, that we exercise when we read Isaiah 53 from the Hebrew Bible, the Bible of the Jews, and say 'this servant is Jesus'. The power of leadership, for good or ill, as the exegete invites hearers, or herself, into a world of meaning that can exercise a tremendous grip upon minds and hearts. Exegesis is dangerous, dangerous in the influence it exerts, dangerous in the possibilities for error and deception, as the fragile and fallible exegete brings his or her own self to bear upon the text. What of the way in which the creation ordinance of dominion over the earth has sometimes been used to justify irresponsible environmental exploitation, or the Parable of the Wicked Tenants to bolster anti-Judaism[1]?

If the power of the exegete is always in play, that spells uncertainty. How are we to be sure of meanings when the person offering them to us inevitably invests so much of his/her volition, perspective and personal history in them—whether consciously or not? This need not imply that we are imprisoned, never able to get at what a text meant in another time and place. Uncertainty does not equal blind ignorance. But it does mean that there is a constant dialogue between exegete and text, in which the exegete brings personal insight and knowledge to the text and the text addresses the exegete in its difference and strangeness. It is not therefore possible firmly to divide 'exegesis' from some other activity that we call 'exposition', 'interpretation' or 'application', as if 'exegesis' were able objectively to establish a fixed, fundamental meaning for a text, and 'interpretation' were a less certain business by which we connect that meaning to some larger whole—Scripture, our lives, the church, the world. To some extent, all exegesis is also interpretation.

So far, so familiar in our late twentieth-century philosophical milieu, Postmodernism simply exposes the epistemological uncertainties already deeply embedded in the thought-world of the Enlightenment. Roy Clements surely misses the point when he writes about a 'general drift towards subjectivism'[2]: it is the subjective/objective opposition itself which is now under scrutiny.

Should we then be embarrassed about trying to do exegesis? Not at all. Christian exegesis of our ancient Scriptures is but one instance of the universal impulse to understand, to communicate, to respond to the other, above all the other human, and ultimately to God: the impulse to relate, to be united in a bond of comprehension. And as with all exercises in understanding and communication, a drive for clarity must go hand-in-hand with a caution about closure. The analogy of human relationships is helpful here: indeed, it is more than an analogy, for we must surely part company with much contemporary theory and re-emphasize the *human* origin of texts. As in the case of getting to know another person, in which the impulse to find out 'what makes them tick' co-exists with a sense that we must not too readily pigeon-hole them, so in reading texts the impulse to comprehend should co-exist with a sense that it is quite proper for some ambiguity to remain.

There are, of course, some texts where ambiguity cannot be tolerated. Imagine a telephone directory in which the emergency number was given as 99, to be completed by a digit of one's choice. On the other hand, there are texts where ambiguity (which is not, of course, the same thing as sheer obscurity) pertains as closely to the nature of the text as clarity, or more so: supremely, poetry. Exegesis is for ever warily treading the border between clarifying what must be made clear and appreciating the richness of what cannot be made clear. Exegesis *of Scripture* will be shaped according to the exegete's perception of where Scripture is to be placed on that spectrum between telephone directory and poem. For much of the last two hundred years, both liberals and fundamentalists have tended to treat it more like the former.[3] We seem now to be in the period of reaction in which there are moves in some quarters to suppress the drive for clarity altogether.

We do well to revisit at this point the matter of the meaning of meaning.[4] G.B. Caird made a simple distinction between 'public' meaning (approximating to Gottlob Frege's 'sense') and 'user' meaning (approximating to 'reference'). I suggest, however, that as exegetes we deal in at least five major kinds of meaning, and that we should recognize honestly the level of uncertainty which surrounds each of them. Only then will we be in a position to see clearly the true foundation upon which exegetical preaching depends.

First, *intentional meaning*. We read a text to find out *what a person means*. This aim of reading is unfashionable in some quarters, but it cannot be escaped if we are to affirm the importance of the human and the personal in texts. Within the category 'intentional meaning' we may place the meaning suggested for a particular text by the larger context in which it is embedded and which implies a particular purpose for it. Discovering intentional meaning, however, is quite a complex matter, and not least in reading Scripture. We must ask first whose intention we are seeking to discover.

There may be at least three layers. In a prophetic book, we may need to ask: what did the prophet mean in this prophecy that has been recorded? what did the compiler of the book mean by including this prophecy? and what may God have meant on both occasions—inspiring the speech, overseeing the writing? Jeremiah 4:7 says, 'A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out'. Jeremiah no doubt meant a specific enemy; but his intention in

speaking—to pass on God's warning in a particular historical crisis—is different from the intention of whoever compiled his prophecies, which, broadly speaking, seems to have been to demonstrate that God's word comes true, and to help his people to learn the hard lessons of experience. God had an intention on both levels, we may presume, parallel to these two human intentions: to warn, and to teach. Many would also affirm that his intention is present as well as past. Not only did he have a certain will and design at the time of the original speaking and writing; he has a certain will and design as people read and hear the words today.[5]

In the example just given, God's intention, past and present, may reasonably be seen as closely aligned with what appear to be the human intentions involved. But when we turn to a verse such as Jeremiah 20:7, 'O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived', we must surely say that God did not 'intend' those words in any straightforward sense. His intention may be discerned, perhaps, only in the fact that he sovereignly *allowed* the words to be recorded, a witness to the sufferings of his servant.

We should note that discerning intention is risky, not only when the volition concerned is God's, but even when it is human volition. We should not be under the illusion that texts give us a window straight on to the mind of an author, whether human or divine. Clements writes that the first question asked by the 'expository method' of preaching is 'what is the intention of the divine author in this text?'[6], but gives no hint of the remarkable complexity of the question. The discernment of intention *per se*, and still more the discernment of a divine intention in human words, are matters not readily open to verification. For instance, discourse analysis lays bare the many levels on which the 'meaning' of a text may be shaped by the purposive movement of its context. The paradox is that the modern era which placed the discovery of intentional meaning so squarely at the centre of its exegetical aims (a position still reflected in Caird's chapter) tended always to suppress the need for *insight* into intention, what Schleiermacher openly named *divination*.[7] We are back to the exegete as interpreter of oracles. Modernist exegetes may often have been commendably cautious about their own conclusions, but frequently gave the impression that objectively verifiable results could be just around the corner. It cannot be so simple.

The second type of meaning we could call *conventional* meaning (corresponding to Caird's 'public' meaning). We read a text to find out what 'it' means—whatever a *person* might or might not have meant by it. We discover from dictionaries and history books what the normal meaning of the words may have been in their historical and cultural setting. The establishment of conventional meaning acts as a check upon our discernment of intentional meaning. But the quest for conventional meaning itself throws up uncertainties, especially when we are dealing with ancient language use. Most words have a plurality of conventional meanings rather than a single one.

It is worth pausing here to note that for many a text, we will both grasp its clarity and appreciate its richness only when we see in it the *intersection* of intentional and conventional meaning.[8] This is the case with figurative language. In Jeremiah 4:7, the metaphor is used of a lion coming out of its lair. If we stayed with the conventional meanings of 'lion' and 'lair', our exegesis would not get far: we need to discover how they are being used *intentionally* in this context. But if we did not realize that 'lion' and 'lair' had a conventional meaning at all, we would not appreciate the power of the image. When Job says to his friends, 'You are the people, and wisdom will die with you' (12:2), conventionally he means that when his friends die, the world will have lost all wisdom. Intentionally he means almost the opposite: he is speaking ironically. Without the intentional twisting of conventional meaning, we would have no such thing as irony—or many other figures of speech. Such figures, to be accessible at all, call for insight on the part of the exegete; and there are cases where the insight of one exegete will differ from that of another.

A third sort of meaning we may designate *resonant* meaning. When we read a text, we often hear echoes of other texts.[9] Whether those echoes are intentional or not on the part of the author, we may not be able to tell. Sometimes we may be fairly sure that they are—in which case the interpretation of one text depends on our appreciating the way that its author has used another. But such echoes can be very important clues to 'meaning' quite apart from the question of the author's intention. They may indicate the author's place in a particular stream of tradition, whether the author is aware of it or not. When we compare similar texts from different books, from different periods, it helps us to locate the individual texts, as it were to measure difference or uniqueness. For instance, what was fresh and special about Jesus' famous one-liners? 'No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit' (Lk. 6:43). It is an image familiar from the Old Testament: for example Proverbs 15:4: 'a gentle tongue is a tree of life'. Whether or not Jesus intended specific echoes, what impression do his sayings give when set against the backcloth of similar, yet different, sayings of an earlier period? What do we learn about his originality or traditionalism from such comparisons? It goes without saying that there is a good deal of room for uncertainty in the discernment of this kind of meaning also.

Fourthly, there is *responsive* meaning: the meaning we put into a text ourselves. In the nature of the case, there is uncertainty here, for we are dealing with a whole gamut of responses. Exegetes have been

frequently warned against turning into eisegetes; but such warnings miss the point if they imply that exegesis without *some* element of responsive meaning is possible. This is not just a matter of 'presuppositions', a notion with a narrowly cerebral ring. It is also a matter of all that the exegete brings to the text by way of emotional reaction, cultural formation, and societal location. Evangelical exegesis has bought into the modernist attempt to establish objective meaning[10], and regarded 'application' or 'interpretation' as a secondary activity to be carried out once this first task is completed[11] (although in practice, both in pulpit and discussion group, the ultimate privilege is often accorded to 'what the text means to me'). The division is flawed not least because it privileges meaning which can be pinned down, translated, literally expressed, above meaning which can be apprehended only in a more affective manner. It gives the impression that the 'real meaning' of Scripture is something cold and clinical, whereas the 'interpretation' is the activity whereby we discover Scripture's exciting relevance to today. Such a division distances the reader from Scripture and casts the professional exegete (who can tell us the 'real meaning') in the role of latter-day priestly mediator between reader and text.[12] Paradoxically, it lets Scripture down by eviscerating people's sense of its inherent richness and accessibility.

Finally, there is a kind of meaning that could be called *universal*. Generations of increasingly sophisticated historical awareness have taught us the importance of appreciating the cultural context of texts; we have learned that the Bible is not 'timeless' but rooted in time. Yet there are certain texts—texts that form what we call a literary 'canon', however delimited—which speak from and to conditions of human life which transcend space and time. This, David Jasper suggests, is the function of poetry: 'The task of poetry, it may be claimed, is precisely to draw into a complex unity the seemingly diverse in time and space and passionately to hold in one moment an infinite complexity.'[13] The uncertainty here belongs to the essence of literary criticism; to the impossibility of 'translating' poetry; to the absurdity of thinking that there could be such a thing as a definitive critical reading of any literary text which would render all further readings superfluous. Universality of meaning is to be discerned, explored, wondered at, but never captured.

It can be argued that much of Scripture consists of such texts. The existence of 'universal' meaning does not negate the importance or inherent interest of the other types of meaning. Without some comprehension of conventional meaning, in particular, we shall have no access to universal meaning. But we need to recognize universal meaning, or we shall operate with an emaciated idea of what meaning is. For example, the exegete of Is.43:2—'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you'—ought certainly to enquire of the conventional meaning of the words, the intention of the human and divine authors, the resonance of the text with other texts, and the response she makes to the text herself, and will profit thereby. But there is surely a 'meaning' of the text (not merely an 'application') which goes beyond any of these meanings, a meaning arising from the depths of life itself. Furthermore, the presence of this 'universal' meaning, though it gives us no licence to bypass the other types, does relativize their importance. We may never be certain about the authorship of Isaiah and therefore about authorial intention in Is. 43:2, but that does not mean we are left with little to show for our exegesis. Some texts possess an overflow of meaning which cannot be limited to intention, convention, resonance or response. The larger theological question prompted here is whether that 'universal' meaning is in fact to be equated with divine intention: and the further question which follows is the relationship of such meaning in *Scripture* to that which is found in other texts.

Uncertainties, then, are inherent in the quest for 'meaning' in any of the senses just outlined. But if certainty is an unrealistic exegetical goal, what should replace it? I suggest *honesty*: about the different types of meaning, about the uncertainties they entail, about the limitations of our own standpoint as exegetes. Such honesty will help make transparent the exegetical power which we exercise as we enter the text and steer its data around so as to make sense of it for ourselves and others.

For a final example, consider Isaiah 53. The responsible exegete will recognize different levels of meaning, and reveal his/her awareness of those levels to the discerning hearer, without of course burdening a congregation with pedantic philosophical analysis. The exegete will see that 'it meant Jesus' would not be true of the *conventional* meaning of this chapter. Nor, surely, would 'he meant Jesus' be true in a straightforward way of the *intentional* meaning of human speaker or writer. Christians, however, affirm that in some overarching, far from matter-of-fact sense, *God meant Jesus* in this passage. Similarly, 'this means Jesus' is true in the sense of resonant meaning within the echo-chamber of Scripture, and of responsive meaning for the early Christians and ourselves. And is it not also true in a 'universal' sense—by which the prophetic text and the person of Jesus are united across the divergence of space and time in one passionate moment of superabundant significance?

The convictions of the preacher

A colleague once told me of a preacher who regularly prefaced concluding remarks with the words 'I think we may safely say that . . .' Such caution epitomizes the

careful exegete aware of the uncertainties of his task, but ill becomes the preacher called boldly to declare good news. If the vagaries and varieties of meaning such as I have outlined highlight the hazardous nature of exegesis, where does that leave the preacher's convictions?

I believe we cannot but return to Luther's provocative opinion that the Bible existed for preaching, not preaching for the Bible.[14] The Christian preacher announces, by whatever means, the good news.[15] He/she tells people that there is, in Jesus, an offer to be received and a demand to be taken up. This good news has come to us through other human beings whose story we have trusted. That is, it has come through the medium of tradition: the tradition that takes shape in the life of a church or para-church group, in the witness of individuals, in the translation and dissemination of Scripture, and so on. As we have trusted others and received the word with joy, so we speak out of our own joyful conviction and invite others to trust us. *The handing on of the good news is not itself to be equated with the exegesis of Scripture.* It is, rather, a person-to-person process revolving around trust and joy.

Where does this leave Scripture and the preacher's exegesis of it? First, the preacher *uses* Scripture to expound the gospel. That is to say, Scripture is the prime vehicle by which the preacher brings the gospel to expression for the hearers. In a multiplicity of ways, Scripture presents us with God's good news; and that good news is our prime interpretative grid, the central element of the response we bring to Scripture to generate responsive meaning. But finding the gospel in all sorts of places in Scripture is no guarantee of good exegesis, and conversely, it is possible to have perfectly sober exegesis without much of a whiff of the gospel. Exegesis must be honest *and* evangelic.

For an anti-example, I take an evangelistic sermon I once heard on Ruth 3:3 in the A.V., where Naomi tells Ruth her daughter-in-law: 'Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor' (the threshing-floor where Boaz was to spend the evening and night). This was interpreted as the gospel command to come to Christ for cleansing, to receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit, be clothed in God's righteousness and humbly give one's life to him ('get thee down to the floor').

Why, precisely, is such preaching unsatisfactory? If the Bible is used and the gospel preached, does it matter so much if the text is handled rather eccentrically? After all, allegorical exegesis has an ancient pedigree, and especially in the case of the Old Testament, which we recognize to have been fulfilled in Christ. 'Ten thousand thousand were his texts, but all his sermons one': and why not, if the gospel is indeed one, and unchanging?

The answer must be twofold. Such preaching does justice neither to the gospel nor to Scripture. This is because of the message it gives out indirectly. Such a sermon may state clearly enough the promise and demand of the gospel, but it implies that instead of being an open message of good news inviting trust, the gospel is an arcane body of knowledge to be obtained through an almost gnostic type of insight into ancient texts. Equally, such a sermon may stick closely to the words of Scripture, but it implies that intentional and conventional meanings count for little or nothing, and it elevates resonant and responsive meanings into universal, indeed absolute meanings.[16] In other words, it misrepresents the nature of the gospel and evacuates Scripture of much of its richness by ignoring important levels of meaning and confusing others. It therefore dishonours the God who is held to be the author of gospel and Scripture alike.

Preaching, then, involves the right *use* of Scripture as our primary source and resource. But, second, Scripture also functions as a *check* upon our proclamation, to test it and refine it. We let Scripture challenge the tradition through which we have received the gospel. As we do so, it is not a question of the uncertainties of exegesis winning the day over the convictions of the preacher, gradually whittling away at his confidence and dampening his fire, with the result that sooner or later he 'loses his cutting edge', to use the standard evangelical catch-phrase. It is, rather, a process of honing, with conviction becoming sharper as false props and accretions are stripped away. So we do not only use Scripture, even use it responsibly; we listen to it.

In the ministry of the preacher, then, Scripture and tradition are constantly in dialogue: Scripture interpreted and used as proclamation of the good news, Scripture testing out that same proclamation.

How can we sum up this marriage between the uncertainties of the exegete and the convictions of the preacher that is called for today? Perhaps by saying that the preacher as exegete is called to 'let the light shine', in four ways. Think of the text as a building.

First, we are to let the light of the gospel shine *on the text*, as a floodlight on a great building. This light will not exclude light from history, from other texts, from the interpretative tradition, but will transcend them all. It is light that will bring understanding of what Scripture is and how it is to be located in culture, literature and religion.

Second, we are to let the light of the gospel shine *in the text*, like a brightly-lit building into which one peers from a dark night outside, fascinated by its inhabitants (the characters of the biblical story) and furnishings (its stories, structures, patterns, and logic): so that we behold its mystery and wonder, and above all that of its central figure. In this activity, the joy of our conviction expresses itself not in a false certainty about biblical meanings, but in a true appreciation of the wealth of this God-given book, in its openness and ambiguities as well as its ringing affirmations and clarity.

Third, we are to let the light of the gospel shine *through* the text, like a building with windows on both sides acting as conduits for great rays of horizontal winter sunshine. The preacher's *goal* is not the text; it is the people to whom God, in gospel and Scripture, wishes to reveal himself. In our textual exegesis we must remember that great and controlling act of exegesis that was personal (Jn.1:18). The dynamics of personal trust co-exist with, and transcend, those of exegetical uncertainty.

Fourth, we are to let the light of the gospel shine *from the text*, like a lighthouse from which powerful beams are projected for the safety and guidance of seafarers. Scripture becomes the vehicle of the gospel-flare shedding the light of understanding, judgement and love upon humanity and the world, upon history, the present, and the future.

Who is sufficient for these things? I suggest that just as exegesis must aim above all for *honesty*, *exegetical preaching* can only work through a many-sided bond of trust.

1. We trust God that through these human writings, sometimes so puzzling, he has expounded to us his good news; and that the best efforts of our mind which he created, humbly directed and with the insight of his Spirit, will not negate that view but only confirm it.
2. The preacher trusts the hearers that they will not simply 'take the preacher's word for it', but discern the intention and meaning of God sovereignly using and overruling what the preacher says about the meaning of Scripture.
3. The hearers trust the preacher that notwithstanding personal human fallibility, he/she is bringing their message with faithful intent, and that it carries with it the trustworthiness of God himself.
4. God trusts us! That is the most astonishing thing about preaching. It is also the truth without which one would never have the confidence to begin. 'Just as we have been approved by God to be *entrusted* with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.' (1 Thess. 2:4)

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Footnotes

1 See Aaron A. Milavec, 'A Fresh Analysis of the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen in the Light of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue', in Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 81–117: 81–84.

2 Roy Clements, 'Expository preaching in a postmodern world', Cambridge Papers 7.3 (1998), 1.

3 See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/IVP, 1994), esp. 100–136, on the application of notions of scientific exactitude to Scripture on the part of liberals and fundamentalists alike.

4 Cf. the chapter with this title in G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997, first published 1980), 37–61.

5 On the question of God's speech cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine discourse: philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

6 'Expository Preaching', 3.

7 Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (London/New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 221–227; Paul Ricoeur, 'Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics', *Monist* 60, no. 2 (1977), 185–188.

8 Cf. Madeleine Boucher, *The Mysterious Parable: A Literary Study* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), 26f.

9 For a brilliant example of exegesis that is attentive to echoes, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989).

10 For the background to this see Noll, *Scandal*, 104.

11 Precisely this distinction is reaffirmed by Clements, 'Expository Preaching', 3.

12 Clements, interestingly, sees *those who dismiss expository preaching as elitist and authoritarian* as in danger of a pre-Reformation style clericalism, keeping the masses from biblical education (ibid., 2). I agree, but this need not (and, I would argue, must not) mean that we maintain a rigid distinction between 'meaning' and 'interpretation' in exposition, a distinction which can itself produce another kind of clericalism. To be fair to Clements, he rightly points out that '[s]ome of the literary genres used by the Bible do invite a high degree of reader involvement' (ibid., 3).

13 David Jasper, 'The Twenty-Third Psalm in English Literature', *Religion and Literature* 30.1 (1998), 1–11.

14 Cited in David G. Buttrick, 'The Use of the Bible in Preaching', in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 188–199: 190.

15 It will be seen here that I focus on the preacher as herald. A somewhat different slant would be required in approaching the question with reference to the preacher as teacher.

16 Cf. Noll, *Scandal*, 125f. on the astonishing self-confidence of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in its interpretation of obscure texts.