

# Topical or Textual Preaching?

by Gerald Hoenecke

“What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is preached; and therein do I rejoice, yea, and I will rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). These words of the great apostle to the gentiles reveal, as do so many others from his pen, how intensely and completely Paul was absorbed in and dedicated to the cause of preaching the saving Gospel. At the time of this writing a prisoner for the Lord in Rome, Paul was overjoyed at hearing that “many brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear” (v. 14). Alas, the motive of some of these was anything but noble and proper. Paul says, they were doing it “of envy and strife” (v. 15), and he by no means approved of this. By his very mentioning of it, in fact, he was implying that this called for amendment and change on their part. Yet there was one redeeming feature about the preaching of these men also: they were preaching the truth, they were preaching Christ. And, as Paul himself was ever determined not to know anything among men “save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (I Corinthians 2:2), so he could find cause for joy when he saw others preaching Christ, even though their motive left much to be desired.

If we begin our study of the subject of topical versus textual preaching with these words of St. Paul, we want it understood that we are by no means intending to put any sermon method even remotely on a par with the false, sinful motives of some of the preachers of Paul’s day. Our purpose rather is to show from the outset that our prime concern in what we are to say about preaching is, as it was Paul’s and ever must be ours, that the aim and purpose of the Scriptures be carried out by all our preaching: to make men “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (II Timothy 3:16). We, too, are always happy whenever and wherever we hear that Christ is preached as the crucified and risen Savior, through whom the world was reconciled to God, justified in His sight. For no matter what method or style of presentation is used, this message is bound to bear fruit, in souls won for Christ and salvation, which He in His Word promises and assures.

For this reason, however, to conclude that we should not concern ourselves about sermon methods would certainly be unjustified and improper, to say the least. Without implying that any one method is *per se* wrong, the question surely is valid: Is one sermon method better than another, better suited to unfold and present the truths of Scripture? And should we not, in dealing with God’s Word, thus also in preaching it, strive to employ the best ways and means at our disposal? This applies to everything connected with preaching, from the preparation of the sermon right up to the preaching itself. Dr. R. Lenski, in a chapter on “Art in the Sermon,” has stated it well: “In all sermon construction the sum and substance of Homiletics amounts to what is contained in this little word ‘better.’ ... It is better to use a text than to do without one. It is better to have a unit text than one that merely offers a subject or a key thought. It is better to have a full, rich text, than a mere scrap or pretext. So in all that has to do with texts. Likewise, it is better to have arrangements than mere loose material; better to have a subject than no subject at all; better to have a real theme than a mere subject; better to have a true division of the theme than haphazard cutting up of material. So in all that pertains to the outline. It is better to have homogenous material than heterogeneous; it is better to organize this material than to work it loosely; it is better to focus this material than just to string it out. Always and always it is the *better* that counts.”<sup>1</sup>

It is in the interest of trying to determine and then using what is best, that we are herewith presenting this study of the question: Topical or Textual Preaching?

Before actually setting out to answer this question, we need to be agreed on what we mean by topical and textual preaching. If these terms were used, as they are by Dr. M. Reu,<sup>2</sup> as merely another way of distinguishing between the synthetic and analytic sermon methods, they would actually be dealing only with one part of our subject, with textual preaching. For our purpose we are operating with the commonly understood

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<sup>1</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *The Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1968), pp. 62f.

<sup>2</sup> M. Reu, D.D., *Homiletics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint, 1967), p. 425.

use of the two terms: In the topical sermon, the preacher begins by choosing a topic, which he may or may not have found in a Scripture text, and proceeds to treat and unfold this topic to suit himself or the occasion, irrespective of the text, if he has one. In the textual sermon, the preacher begins by choosing a text, and not only finds his topic or theme in this text but also all the basic material for his sermon parts. One further clarification before proceeding to evaluate both methods and determining which is the better one: When speaking of topical sermons, we are of course thinking of a message which actually brings God's truth to men, and not one which concerns itself with other than spiritual topics.

To illustrate the two methods, we shall use as text Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, John 3:1–15. The topical preacher might take from this text the topic "The New Birth" and with little or no further reference to the text proceed to treat various aspects of this topic, as its: 1. Essence. 2. Source. 3. Evidence. Since this subject is frequently treated in the Scriptures, he would have no difficulty finding material there to produce a Scriptural and edifying sermon. The textual preacher, upon careful study of the text and comparison with other texts dealing with the same subject, recognizes as the distinctive feature of this text, that it throughout stresses the *necessity* of the new birth. He might accordingly arrive at the theme: "Jesus' Pronouncement, 'Ye Must Be Born Again!'" In the text the preacher finds the following three reasons for this pronouncement: 1. There is no substitute for the new birth, vv. 1–3. 2. The new birth is the only way into the kingdom of God, vv. 4–6. 3. The new birth is God's aim in all that He provided for our salvation (His Spirit, His Word and Baptism, His Redemption), vv. 7–15. One further illustration, using as text Luke 18:1–7: Following the topical method, a preacher might choose as topic "Christian Prayer" and speak on various aspects of such prayer, even some not found in the text. Following the textual method, the observing preacher readily sees the distinctive feature of this text on prayer in its opening verse: "And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and *not to faint*." To support this encouragement not to lose heart in prayer, Jesus, on the one hand, bids us not to interpret the Lord's delay in answering prayer as a refusal to answer and, on the other hand, assures us that the Lord will not fail to answer the prayer of His own in His good time.

Which of the two is the better sermon method? Andrew W. Blackwood lists as advantages of the topical method: "1. It allows the minister to discuss *any subject he thinks needful*... 2. The topical method allows *breadth of treatment*... 3. The use of this method *encourages a man to seek unity*... 4. The wise use of a subject enables a man in the pulpit to *keep moving towards the goal* of the sermon... 5. This way of preaching, topically, *brings out a man's literary gifts*."<sup>3</sup> In justice to Blackwood it should be added that he also lists four objections to topical preaching. Other arguments advanced in favor of this method are that it is more practical, more relevant, more interesting, also, that the preacher is more interested in it, since it gives him more freedom and better opportunity to speak on subjects of current need.

These arguments for topical preaching are not too convincing. With respect, for example, to the last point, mentioned first by Blackwood, we might ask: Is there any subject of current need for the Christian which is not dealt with in the Bible and which could not be satisfied by the proper exposition and application of an appropriate Scripture text? Dr. Lenski puts it well: "But let us suppose I have a theme for which I cannot find a suitable text. Either there is no text for my theme—then I ought to drop it as really not proper for the pulpit, or I do not know my Bible sufficiently to find the proper text readily."<sup>4</sup> To the point is also the remark of Christian Palmer (1811–75), quoted by Dr. Reu: "We admit it to be possible that in the course of his ministerial life a preacher may come upon a thought worth preaching on, for which no special text expressing that thought can be found. But that there can be anything essentially evangelical that no prophet or apostle has expressed or that is not contained in a biblical book, either as corollary, presupposition, or application—this we will not believe until we see it."<sup>5</sup>

As for allowing "breadth of treatment," this might well be used as an argument *against* topical preaching, in that the preacher might attempt to exhaust a subject as far as possible, thus leaving little if anything or else leading to repetition when the same subject appears in a subsequent text. It was just this that led

<sup>3</sup> Andrew W. Blackwood, *The Preparation of Sermons* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1948), pp. 104ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 294.

to what Dr. James Black refers to as “a dreadful experience during my first few months as a minister, which I may use as a warning for you.” After stating how during those first months he followed the procedure of choosing a subject and then looking for a text on which to tag it “like a label,” he laments: “And I tell you frankly, at the end of three months, I thought I had exhausted all available truth; and certainly I had exhausted myself.”<sup>6</sup>

Topical preaching claims to encourage a man “to seek unity.” But unity is one of the indispensable characteristics of every good oration, and so of every good sermon. It may indeed be more readily achieved in a topical sermon, but should not be missing in a textual sermon, nor need it be, providing the preacher has through careful study and meditation sought out the scope and unity of his text. That topical preaching should be more practical, more relevant, and more interesting, is hard to accept. What could be more practical and, therefore, more relevant and interesting, than to take a given text, present its background and situation as well as its meaning for those to whom it was first spoken or written, and then show its meaning and relevance for us today? That a preacher should be more interested in topical preaching might actually not speak too well for him. It may mean that for certain reasons, good or bad, he does not spend time, at least not sufficient time, on the study of his text before setting out to prepare an outline and to write his sermon. As a result, the text becomes little more than a pretext. Thus Dr. John Fritz comments: “The homileticians who sponsor this method admit that the text is a mere starting-point, or a mere motto. Knott says that the topical sermon is ‘the easiest to prepare,’ but also ‘the least effective.’ It gives the preacher a wide range and invites the preaching of platitudes; it has breadth, but not depth... In making use of the ‘topical method,’ the preacher does not preach the text; that is sufficient reason for eliminating it entirely.”<sup>7</sup> One of Dr. Fritz’ successors as instructor in homiletics at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Dr. Richard Caemmerer, does not take this dim view of the matter. While not failing to point out the “pitfalls” of topical preaching, he adds: “Almost every preacher, nevertheless, must employ the topical method frequently.”<sup>8</sup>

In refuting the claims for topical preaching, we have at the same time given some of the reasons for favoring textual preaching, yes, favoring it so strongly as to discourage the other sermon method almost completely. In what follows, we shall endeavor to bring further support for our position in the matter. We are, as Paul instructed Timothy, to “preach the word” (II Timothy 4:2). Now, while selecting various subjects or truths found in that Word and discoursing on them would indeed be preaching the Word, our aim in preaching must also be, that our hearers’ knowledge of and acquaintance with the Bible itself be increased. What better way to do this in the sermon is there than to expound a Scripture text? Dr. Lenski has said it well: “The preacher is to preach the Word of God, that is, something definite out of the Word of God. It is obvious at once that the simplest and most direct way to meet this requirement is to take a text, a portion of the Word of God, and expound that.” A little farther on he adds: “The text is to be the real source from which the substance of the sermon is drawn. Once this is fully settled, there will be no question about employing a text and using it in the right way after it is selected. Whatever else we may use in the sermon, other passages of Scripture, elucidating thoughts, illustrations, applicatory ideas pertinent to our circumstances and times, everything must be amalgamated with the central contents of the text. The thoughts furnished by the text are always chief and supreme. Whatever leads away from these thoughts is unsuitable material.”<sup>9</sup>

The advantages of this sermon method, for the preacher as well as the hearer, ought to be obvious. As for the preacher, it will compel him really to study his text, also in the original, its context, its motivation and background, also its distinctiveness with relation to other texts, which treat the same subject or doctrine. Thus, apart from his occupation with and study of the Scriptures otherwise, every sermon preparation will deepen his understanding and appreciation of the Word and should contribute to making him not only a better Bible scholar, but also an increasingly better preacher. Contrary to the opinion of many, this kind of sermon preparation and preaching, far more than topical preaching, will also lend real variety to preaching especially if

<sup>6</sup> James Black, D.D., *The Mystery of Preaching* (London: James Clarke & Company, Ltd., 1934), p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> John H.C. Fritz, D.D., *The Preacher’s Manual* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), pp. 31f.

<sup>8</sup> Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. Cit.*, pp. 9f.

the preacher makes judicious use of the options textual preaching offers: the analytic type, which uses the natural divisions of the text in their natural order for the parts of the sermon and chooses a theme to cover them; the synthetic type, which begins by choosing a theme suggested by the scope of the text and divides this theme, using the supporting thoughts of the text for the parts, which are arranged in whatever order is considered most effective and adaptable to the occasion; and occasionally the less formal, yet strictly speaking most textual, homily, which, it is generally agreed, is not as easy as it might seem to develop into a really good sermon. If the preacher wisely employs this variety which textual preaching offers, this method should prove itself far more interesting to him than topical preaching.

For the same reasons, such textual preaching should also be far more interesting to the hearer, especially the discriminating hearer and eager learner, who having heard the text read wants to hear it used, expounded, and applied. Every such sermon will serve to lead him more deeply into the Scriptures, increase his appreciation of the treasures to be found there, and thus incite him to more diligent, personal study of and meditation on the Word. At the same time, the preacher's message will ring with greater authority for the hearer when he notes that the sermon says what the text from God's Word says.

It might be argued that strictly following the textual method of preaching prevents the preacher from including in his sermon essential thoughts not found in the text, which however should not be missing in the sermon. What, for example, should the preacher do when preaching on a text made up of exhortations to Christian living, which does not include the Gospel motivation for such living? He should keep in mind that the text is addressed to Christians and that in its larger if not immediate context such motivation is given, which he is bound to supply, if in no other place, then at the end of his sermon. Neither law nor gospel, which must have a place in every sermon, need be slighted, nor need anything essential to good preaching be sacrificed in textual preaching.

As a fitting summary of our thoughts on the overwhelming advantages of textual over topical preaching, we list the eight points given by R. Ames Montgomery: "1. It will express the mind of God to your people. 2. It will preserve the balance of emphasis in your preaching. 3. It will produce the most opulent returns for your study. 4. It will save you from garrulous tendencies and aimless utterances. 5. It will supply pertinent subjects for your preaching. 6. It will often readily suggest the plan of treatment for your subject. 7. It will guarantee the Scriptural development of your people. 8. It will guarantee the blessing of God on your people and preaching."<sup>10</sup> In closing, we shall let Dr. Herrick Johnson speak, as quoted here by Montgomery: "Fidelity to your text will secure the greatest variety in preaching, the best exegesis, the most Scriptural instruction, the best honor to the Spirit, and, hence (the conditions being in all respects the same) the most success in winning and building souls."

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<sup>10</sup> R. Ames Montgomery, D.D., LL.D., *Preparing Preachers to Preach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949), p. 57.