

PERICOPAL THEOLOGY*

Abraham Kuruville

INTRODUCTION

THE OTHER DAY IN A CHURCH I VISITED, I found a copy of a popular daily devotional that can often be seen in the foyers of many churches. Skimming through its pages in an idle moment, I spotted this devotional on Acts 28. Paul was shipwrecked in Malta. He joined everyone else in helping out and picked up sticks for a fire. So, the devotional recommended, we too should be willing to do menial jobs in churches. Always be willing to do even the lowliest job. Of course the writer of the devotional conveniently forgot about the viper that came out of the cord of wood and bit the hapless apostle.

I, being the clever guy that I am, could use that part of Acts 28 to recommend exactly the opposite: *Never* do menial tasks, because—who knows?—a poisonous snake may sink its fangs into you. And, needless to say, there are lots of these deadly species with two legs in churches. So, *never ever* engage in lowly jobs, for fear of venomous beasts lurking in the shadows.

How do we go about the task of finding valid application for an ancient text? Throughout the two millennia of the church age, this has been the gaping hole in every theory of preaching. A robust hermeneutic for making this move from text to audience has been lacking. It has remained somewhat of a black box in the history of the church. David Buttrick once said,

Many books have been written on “biblical preaching”; specifically on how preachers can move step by step from the Bible passage to a

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sermon But in all such books there seems to be a gap There's something left out in between The crucial moment between exegesis and homiletical vision is not described The shift between the study of a text and the conception of a sermon—perhaps it occurs in a flash of imagination—is never discussed So alert readers are left with the odd impression that we move from the Bible to a contemporary sermon by some inexplicable magic¹

I struggled with this in my seminary days and, thereafter, in my preaching ministry It was with scrutiny of 2 Samuel 11–12 that I first caught a glimmer of light ²

2 SAMUEL 11–12

THE SEND MOTIF

A striking feature of the opening episode of the narrative (2 Sam 11 1–5) is the recurrence of the verb שלח (“to send”) Altogether in 2 Samuel 10–12, this term appears twenty-three times In the larger unit of 2 Samuel 9–20, it is utilized forty-four times, only thirteen instances occur in the rest of 2 Samuel For the most part, it is the king who does all the sending here he *sends* to inquire about Bathsheba, he *sends* for Bathsheba, he *sends* for Uriah, he *sends* Uriah back to the battlefield bearing his own death warrant, and so on (11 1, 3, 4, 6 [3x], 12, 14, 27) This repeated element, “send,” then, is a motif indicating regal power and imperial authority, as David, supreme in his kingdom, sends people hither and thither, they all jump to do his bidding This “sending” emphasizes David's selfish transactions with Uriah (and with Bathsheba who belonged to Uriah), callously undertaken and with an utter disregard for consequences, even if it meant denigrating God's name in the process (12 9–14) It was clearly not what God expected from his chosen, he does not condone such odious behavior—the shameless flaunting of power and the total contempt for the victims of abuse Here was a potentate abusing his power in the service of his immoral desires, in fact this power was not inherently his, but had been granted him in the first place Yahweh, exercising his sovereignty, had chosen David, an insignificant shepherd, to replace a predecessor who had himself been warped by his own fantasies of omnipotence David, exercising *his* “sovereignty,” had chosen to have his own way, not God's

¹ David G Buttrick, *A Captive Voice The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 89

² For more details see Abraham Kuruvilla, ‘Fericopal Theology An Intermediary between Text and Application,’ *Trinity Journal*, n s , 31 (2010) 265–83

THE OPHTHALMIC MALADY

In light of the overarching theology of 1–2 Samuel, one would have expected this evil perpetrated by David to incur the wrath of Yahweh. However, quite strikingly, the narrative of 2 Samuel 11 makes no mention of Yahweh until verse 27. There, the main character in the *dramatis personæ*, Yahweh, finally makes his appearance.

Wanton sexual morals, rooted in base self-indulgence, had culminated in a tyrannical unconcern for the wounded “third-party.” Uriah was heartlessly slaughtered, the zenith of an unbroken sequence of escalating malignity. Indeed, this last act gets not just one man killed, but many, some of them the nation’s best warriors (“valiant men,” 11:16). David’s reaction is a cavalier comment to Joab, his commander, through a messenger: “Don’t let this thing be evil *in your eyes*” (בְּעֵינֶיךָ, v. 25). But immediately afterwards, divine disapprobation is registered in no uncertain terms (in fact, it employs the same metaphor of sight): “But the thing that David had done was evil *in the eyes of Yahweh*” (בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה, v. 27).³ There appears to have been an ophthalmic incompatibility between David and Yahweh; the king and God were not seeing eye to eye. What David saw as not evil was expressly seen and condemned as evil by Yahweh. The conflict between David and God becomes most intense at this juncture: Who gets to decide what is evil and what is good—David or Yahweh?

Perhaps David imagined that God was nowhere present. In that case, he was only deluding himself—God is one character who cannot be written out of the narrative script. Not only was Yahweh implicitly present as David went about his nefarious activities, but Yahweh had also seen them (11:27)! There is no deed so shrouded in darkness that it will be invisible to an all-seeing, omnipresent God. As if to rectify any misconception about the presence of deity on stage, from this point onwards, Yahweh, “absent” in the previous scenes, becomes almost tangible: the Tetragrammaton occurs thirteen times in 2 Samuel 12, in sections that detail the judgment, sentence, and punishment of the king (an example of the author’s literary *doings*). God had seen, and now would take action to bring justice and closure to this sinister episode; punishment was now inevitable. The verse that points to God’s seeing, 11:27, turns out to be the focal point of the chiasmic structure of 2 Samuel 10–12, emphasizing the crux of the narrative—what God considered “evil in his eyes.”

³ This parallel in the Hebrew is, unfortunately, often lost in translation.

10:1–19	A	War—partial victory over the Ammonites
11:1–5	B	Sin; Bathsheba conceives
11:6–13	C	Concealment of David's sin
11:14–27a	D	Murder of the innocent Uriah
11:27b	E	Evil in the eyes of Yahweh
12:1–6	D'	Murder of the lamb
12:7–15a	C'	Exposure of David's sin
12:15b–25	B'	Death; Bathsheba conceives
12:26–31	A'	War—complete victory over the Ammonites

Figure 1: The chiasmic structure of 2 Samuel 10–12

Interestingly, an addendum in 1 Kings 15:5 again points out this malady with David's eyesight, as it asserts that David did what was right *בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה* all the days of his life, "except in the case of Uriah the Hittite." Rather than recognize evil for what it was in the eyes of God, David had here despised God's word and denigrated God's name (2 Sam. 12:9, 14).

THE PUNISHMENT MERITED

That the climax of the narrative has been reached in 2 Samuel 11:27b (the crux of the chiasm, **E**; see Figure 1) is also indicated in the very next verse as the prophet Nathan is commissioned to play the prosecuting attorney. For a change, Yahweh is the one doing the sending (שִׁלַּח, 12:1—"Then Yahweh *sent* Nathan"). The tables had been turned! Resolution was forthcoming. The punishment would fit the crime: Yahweh would take David's wives (לָקַח, 12:11)—a grim reminder to David of how he had taken Bathsheba (לָקַח, 11:4; 12:9, 10), just as the rich man had taken the poor man's ewe lamb in Nathan's parable (לָקַח, 12:4). This taking by Yahweh would be "in his [David's] sight"—his wives would be lain with "in the sight" of the sun (12:11; see 16:22 for Absalom's fulfillment of this curse, upon the same roof whence David had commenced his contemptible conspiracy). The scorning of Yahweh and his word (12:9, 10) was heinous indeed, and that not by a private individual but by Yahweh's anointed himself, the king of God's chosen people (Israel/Judah is mentioned five times in 12:7–15). The fact that these scandalous affairs had given occasion for the enemies of Yahweh to blaspheme him (12:14) would also not be forgotten. Indeed, the fourfold punishment (12:6), when exacted, would take the life of four of David's children: Bathsheba's newborn, Amnon, Absa-

lom, and Adonijah. Only faithfulness to God yields blessing; unfaithfulness will yield its just deserts.

What happened in this exegetical exercise from 2 Samuel 11–12? From the text itself, from a close reading of the text, we have a sense of what it is all about: God alone gets to decide what is “evil” and what is “good,” and unfaithfulness to God, in the disrespect of his word and his name, and in the uncontrolled, wanton indulgence of one’s passions, produces discipline (loss of blessing). Is this possible—can the text itself give us its *thrust*? Over the years, I started seeing evidence of this everywhere I looked in Scripture. So the first two articles in this series will essentially report what I’ve found and have continued to work on for the last decade.⁴

HOW LANGUAGE WORKS: AUTHORS *Do* THINGS WITH WHAT THEY SAY

Take this piece of Jewish folklore, in the form of a letter:

Dear Riwke,

Be good enough to send me your slippers. Of course, I mean “my slippers” and not “your slippers.” But, if you read “my slippers,” you will think I mean your slippers. Whereas, if I write: “send me your slippers,” you will read *your* slippers and will understand that I want *my* slippers. So: send me your slippers.⁵

Whose slippers are being asked for? The distance in time and space between the writer and future reader, Riwke, necessitates the enterprise of interpretation: What is this communication all about? What is the author referring to, where and when, why and wherefore? In other words, to respond to the writer with valid application, Riwke must figure out the *thrust* of the letter, what the author was trying to *do*, i.e., whose slippers were being referred to in that letter.

The same issues surface in the interpretation of Scripture: the human author is unavailable and readers are far away from the origins of the text. Yet unique discourse that it is, the Bible man-

⁴ For further details, see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013)

⁵ From Marina Yaguello, *Language through the Looking Glass: Exploring Language and Linguistics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8

dates its own application in times and spaces distant from the circumstances of its writing.⁶ So if Scripture is to be employed in new locales of reading, the *thrust* of the text—what it is all about—must be recovered and communicated. This is the role of the preacher, as intermediary between God’s word and God’s people: to understand the thrust of the text, and to convey that thrust to listeners.

Communication of any kind—sacred or secular, spoken or scripted—is now increasingly being recognized as a communicator *doing* something with what is communicated. Authors, including those of Scripture, *do* things with their words; a specific thrust is being conveyed.

Take the case of the narrative in 1 Samuel 15, where the prophet Samuel passes on God’s message to king Saul that he should annihilate the Amalekites: שָׁמַע לְקוֹל דְּבַר יְהוָה—“Listen to the *voice* [or *sound*] of the words of Yahweh” (15:1).⁷ Saul, however, does not obey; rather than eliminate all the animals and humans, he saves the good ones of the former and the chief of the latter. Soon after, Samuel confronts Saul. The king declares he has done everything that God told him to do. Whereupon Samuel replies, “What then is this *voice* of the sheep in my ears, and the *voice* of oxen which I hear?” (15:14).⁸ Did you catch the thrust of the text? The author is *doing* something here, telling readers that *the child of God listens to the voice of God, not the voice of worldly seductions*.⁹ So rather than parse and slice and dice and atomize the text to extract propositions and then preach a theological sermon on genocide, or a historical discourse on the egregious sins of the Amalekites, or some such, the preaching thrust of the text is clearly the issue of listening/obedience to God; שָׁמַע can be translated “listen” or “obey” (15:1, 4, 14, 19, 20, 22, 24). That is what the author is *doing* with what he is saying here. Such a thrust must be the interpretive

⁶ See Deut. 4:10; 6:6–7, 20–25; 29:14–15; Matt. 28:19–20; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6, 11; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; etc.

⁷ Surprisingly, such a literal translation of the Hebrew is found only in the King James Version and its heirs. The seeming redundancy of “voice” is swept under the rug in most major English translations that essentially have “Listen to the word of Yahweh.”

⁸ Again, unfortunately, most English translations render “voice” in each case here as “bleating” and “lowing,” respectively, and thus, combined with the omission of “voice” in translations of 15:1, the thrust of the text is almost completely negated. These translational missteps are a clear indication that translators and scholars do not think in terms of what biblical authors are *doing* with what they are saying.

⁹ Also see 1 Samuel 15:19, 20, 22, 24, for other significant *voices* in the story.

goal that a preacher seeks from any text, and that thrust must be the communicational goal a preacher aims for in any sermon.

One sees this even in folk tales. Take the old one by Aesop about the dog that found a bone. On its way home with its booty, the canine happened to cross a bridge over a stream, and as it looked into the water it spotted “another” dog with a bone. Greed took over, the real animal barked at the virtual one and thereby lost the bone it had. While the story deals with dogs, bones, bridges, streams, and reflections, the thrust of the story is about being content (and the loss one incurs otherwise). This is what the text is all about, its thrust; this is what Aesop was *doing* with what he was saying; and that is what he would want readers to catch and respond to: *One practices the prudence of contentment rather than lusting for the ephemeral*. Indeed, only after grasping this thrust of the text can one ever move to valid application consonant with the author’s purpose. So we have this scheme of interpretation:



Figure 2: Scheme of interpretation

This notion of authors *doing* things with what they say falls into the field of language philosophy called pragmatics.

PRAGMATICS

Pragmatics, studying communication as an event, deals with the thrust of the communication event—what authors/speakers *do* with what they write/say. To catch what communicators are doing takes more than just a dissection of the lexical, grammatical, and syntactical aspects of an utterance—the operations of *semantics*. Semantics, though a necessary foundation of interpretation, does not by itself yield the thrust of the text, its *pragmatics*.

In other words, it is not enough to comprehend what authors are saying (the semantics of the utterance); one must also arrive at what authors are *doing* with what they are saying (the pragmatics of the utterance)—the text’s thrust. In the fable by Aesop, the semantics deals with the description of the specific events—the dog-and-bone theater; the pragmatics, on the other hand, is an endorsement of contentment—that was the thrust of the story. It is obvious that without catching the pragmatics of the text, valid application is impossible.

For interpretation for preaching, too, the thrust of a text of Scripture must be discerned. Only then can God's people discover valid application. In that earlier illustration using 1 Samuel 15, unless one catches what the author was *doing* with those word-plays on "voice," one will not be able to respond appropriately to the demand of that text. *Trust God's fairness without doubting* (from God's severe treatment of the Amalekites) or *Watch out for sin's serious consequences* (from the fate of those wicked people) is not what that text is recommending. Rather, it is something like *Listen to God's voice, not the voice of anyone else or anything else* (from the textual clues dealing with "voice"). Authors *do* things with what they say, and therefore preachers are obliged to discern what was being *done* with what was being said in the text and communicate that thrust to their audiences. This, according to Buttrick, is "critical" for preaching, and "may well mark the beginning of homiletical obedience."¹⁰ Only by catching the author's *doing* in and with a text of Scripture can God's people discover valid application.

THE WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

One might interpret the Bible in many ways depending on one's purpose for that interpretation. But when we interpret the text *for preaching*, we must focus upon what the author is *doing* with what he is saying in that particular text in order to elicit valid application for readers. Let me move this notion another step forwards.

A text is not an end in itself, but is the means to an end, a literary instrument of the author's action of projecting a transcending vision—what Paul Ricoeur called the *world in front of the text*.¹¹ Here is an example: Earlier, I utilized the story of the dog and the bone. The folk tale is projecting (or if you wish, "painting") an ideal world for readers, a world in which inhabitants practice contentment: that's what Aesop wanted us to catch. Or in the 1 Samuel 15 narrative discussed earlier, the biblical author projects an ideal world in which inhabitants listen to/obey the voice of God, disregarding the seductions of all other voices. In essence, these worlds are the thrusts of those texts, and this is what their authors are *doing* with what they are saying; indeed, this is what those writers would want their readers to respond to. Both with uninspired Ae-

¹⁰ David G. Buttrick, "Interpretation and Preaching," *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 58.

¹¹ "Naming God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34 (1979): 217. And see Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue*, Library of New Testament Studies 393 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 19–35.

sop and with inspired 1 Samuel 15, readers are being invited to dwell in such ideal worlds, abiding by the demands of those worlds. Here's Aesop: "Come, live in this ideal world by practicing contentment"; and here's the author of 1 Samuel: "Come, abide in this ideal world by obeying only God's voice." To live in the worlds projected is to adopt the values of those worlds—practicing contentment in one, obeying God in the other. Thus, in texts, a view of life is portrayed, projecting for the reader a world beyond the confines of the text. A *world in front of the text* is portrayed, an invitation to that world is extended, and lives are changed as listeners respond by inhabiting the world and living by its values.¹²

All literary texts function in this manner to project worlds in front of themselves; thus, texts serve as instruments or agents of that world-projecting action and, in this way, such texts have bearing upon the future. That is to say, a text's projected world enables subsequent application. Because Scripture is intended for future application by God's people, its interpretation cannot cease with the elucidation of its lexical, grammatical, and syntactical elements (semantics), but must proceed further to discern the *world in front of the text*—the thrust of the text, what the author is *doing* (pragmatics). So this projected world forms the intermediary between text and application, and enables one to respond validly to the text. And when the text is rightly applied, its readers are, in effect, inhabiting the world it projects.¹³



Figure 3: The move to application

Indeed, *all* communication functions this way. For instance, if A tells B, "Hey, you are standing on my foot!" the semantic meaning (what the author is saying) asserts the spatial location of B upon the lower limb of A, while the pragmatic meaning (what the au-

¹² Needless to say, the fables of Aesop have nowhere near the authority or the transformational power of Spirit-inspired Scripture.

¹³ For all practical purposes, these elements—labeled *world in front of the text*, the thrust of the text, and the pragmatics of the text (i.e., what its author is *doing*)—may be considered equivalent. Later, I will call this entity the "theology" of the pericope.

thor is *doing* with what he is saying—the thrust of the utterance) attempts to get *B* to relocate from that traumatic situation upon *A*'s anatomy. In fact, what *A* was *doing* with what *A* said was projecting a *world in front of the text*, an ideal world in which no one is ever stationed upon *A*'s lower extremities to produce distress. *A* desired *B* to inhabit such an ideal “nobody-ever-standing-on-*A*'s-foot-to-cause-*A*-pain” kind of world. That inhabitation could be accomplished only by conforming to the demand of that world—moving the burden off *A*'s foot, thus alleviating the latter's agony, for in that projected world nobody ever stands on *A*'s foot to cause *A* pain.

Unfortunately, that is not how biblical texts are looked at in the “old” homiletic style. For instance, if that statement by *A* to *B* (“Hey, you are standing on my foot!”) were an inspired utterance in Scripture, a preacher in the traditional camp expositing that “text” on Sunday morning would conceivably expatiate on the derivation of the word “foot” from the Old English *for* from the Latin *pes* from the Greek *pos*. The preacher might discourse upon the foot's kinesiology (twenty-six bones, thirty-three joints, over a hundred muscles, tendons, and ligaments), its hematology (blood vessels), and its neurology (nerve supply). This preacher would, no doubt, wax eloquent about the pathology of that extremity (the various abnormalities: club foot, flat foot, athlete's foot, skew foot, rheumatoid foot), but might completely miss the thrust of the utterance and its intended valid application: “*Get your foot off mine!*” In other words, unless one catches what *A* is *doing* with what he is saying, valid application in response to *A*'s utterance is impossible. Without a comprehension of the pragmatics, without grasping the *world in front of the text* (an ideal world in which no one stands on *A*'s foot to cause *A* pain), all this regurgitation of kinesiology, hematology, neurology, Christology, ecclesiology, or one's favorite “-ology” *du jour*, can never bring one to valid application.

So also for the biblical text. The biblical canon as a whole projects a *world in front of the text*—God's ideal world, individual segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes.¹⁴ Taken together, the integrated composite of all such segments makes up the canonical projection of God's ideal *world in front of the text*—the plenary canonical world.

¹⁴ Though “pericope” has the technical sense of a demarcated portion of the Gospels, I use the word in this series of articles simply to designate a preaching text, irrespective of genre or length.

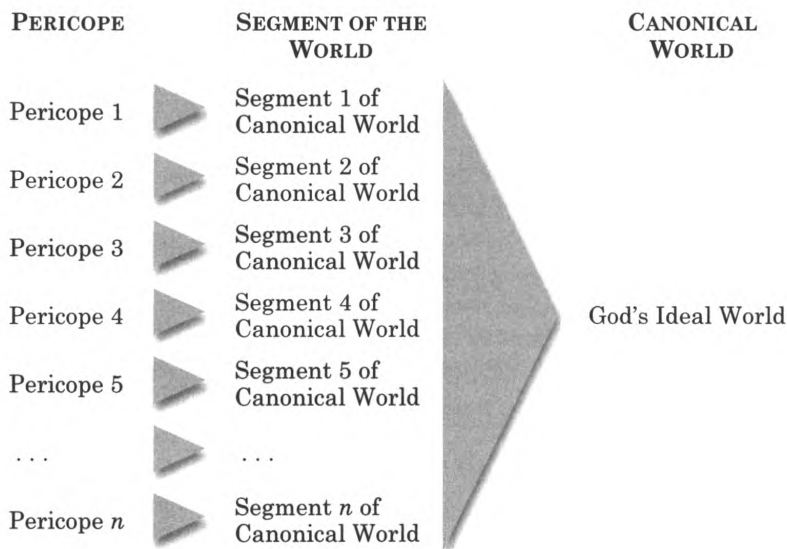


Figure 4: God's ideal world in pericopes

Thus each sermon on a particular pericope is God's gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the thrust of that pericope—i.e., the requirements of God's ideal world as called for in that pericope's world-segment. And as mankind accepts that divine invitation, week by week and pericope by pericope, God's people are progressively and increasingly inhabiting this ideal world and adopting its values. One pericope at a time, the various aspects of Christian life, individual and corporate, are gradually being brought into alignment with the will of God for the glory of God—God's world is becoming reality. This is the goal of preaching.

THEOLOGY OF THE PERICOPE

Because this world speaks of God and how he relates to his creation, this projected world may rightly be called "theology"—"that skein of thought and language in which Christians understand themselves, the Bible, God, and their everyday world."¹⁵ Speaking as it does of God and his relationship with his creation, and bearing as it does direction for life-change, this projected world is the

¹⁵ Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 9. As Kaufman noted, "Theology is, and always has been, an activity of what I call the 'imaginative construction' of a comprehensive and coherent picture of humanity in the world under God" (Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, 3rd ed [Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1995], ix).

concern and focus of theology as a discipline.

Thus, the segment of this ideal world that each pericope projects becomes the theology of that pericope. To live by the theology of the pericope is to accept God’s gracious invitation to inhabit his ideal world; by so doing, his people align themselves to the precepts, priorities, and practices of that ideal world—i.e., to the will of God.

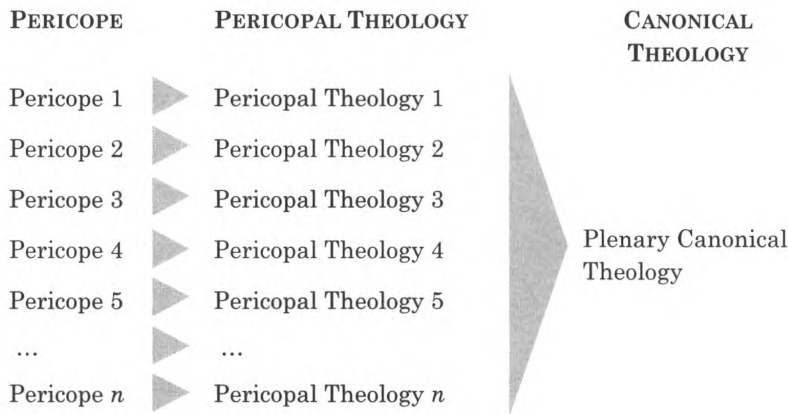


Figure 5: Pericopal theology

In sum, each sermon must point out the theology of the pericope under consideration, elucidating what that specific text affirms about God and his relationship with mankind—the values of the *world in front of the text*. This “theological interpretation” is exegesis done with theological lenses: the preacher essentially discerns and describes elements of the text that serve as clues to the theology of the pericope (the repetitions of “voice” in 1 Samuel 15, for example), synthesizing these clues to arrive at the theological thrust of the pericope. And what the pericope so affirms in its theology forms the basis of the subsequent move to derive application. Biblical interpretation for application that does not elucidate this crucial intermediary, pericopal theology, is *de facto* incomplete, for without discerning this entity, valid application can never be arrived at.

So, sermon by sermon, and pericope by pericope, more and more facets of life are aligned to divine will. God’s call to be aligned with his will is a gracious invitation to his people to inhabit his ideal world and to enjoy its fullness of blessing in the presence of God. As Miroslav Volf put it, “At the heart of every good theology

lies not simply a plausible intellectual vision but more importantly a compelling account of a way of life.”¹⁶ It is a divine offer that should capture our imaginations and set afire our affections for God’s ideal world, for “our action emerges from how we *imagine* the world.”¹⁷ This vision of the good life captivates us not with propositions and points but with “a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well” in every facet of our existence—a vision cast by the preacher from the Word of God in the form of pericopal theology.¹⁸ This is the vision of a *world in front of the text*, God’s ideal world painted by Scripture and portrayed in preaching—a glimpse of the divine kingdom. And as this world is gradually unveiled by faithful preaching, and as the community of God inhabits this ideal world pericope by pericope in faithful application,

the goods and aspects of human flourishing painted by these alluring pictures of the good life begin to seep into the fiber of our . . . being (i.e., our hearts) and thus govern and shape our decisions, actions, and habits. . . . Attracted by it and moved toward it, we begin to live into this vision of the good life and start to look like citizens who inhabit the world that we picture as the good life. We become little microcosms of that envisioned world as we try to embody it in the here and now.¹⁹

It is the biblical canon, preached pericope by pericope, that portrays what this divine world and kingdom looks like, how it functions, and how the community is to inhabit it. Thus, sermon by sermon, the theological panorama of God’s ideal world is unveiled. This is the world God would have; and that is the kind of people God would have us be.

THEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS

What is necessary for preachers, then, is to grasp the thrust of the text, what the author is *doing* with what he is saying, to comprehend the projected world, the theology of the pericope. I propose, therefore, a *theological* exegesis that privileges the text, looking for clues to its theology—not a random excavation through the text, but a directed exploration that searches specifically for those gold

¹⁶ *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 43.

¹⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 31–32.

¹⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

nuggets of pericopal theology. Within every text there are literary and stylistic traces of authors' agendas, evidence pointing to the authors' *doings*, signs that lead to the discovery of pericopal theology. But only a privileging of the text by theological exegesis will discover that precious ore.

Texts, both sacred and secular, and particularly those intended to influence behavior over a lengthy span of time (i.e., the "classics"), are created by their authors as agenda-driven compositions.²⁰ It is no different for the inspired text of Scripture. Its authors were writing with an (inspired and authoritative) agenda and their (inspired and authoritative) productions are intended to convey that agenda—the theology of those texts.²¹

In sum, it is the *text* that must be privileged, for it alone is inspired. Events *behind* the text (the bleating and lowing in 1 Samuel 15) are not inspired and therefore not expressly "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). All this to say, for the goal of life transformation—and I am speaking exclusively from a homiletician's viewpoint—for the purposes of preaching, it is not the events that must be attended to, but the Holy Spirit's *accounts* of those events: the *text* must be privileged. Or to put it differently, the text is not a *plain glass* window that the reader looks *through* (to discern some event[s] behind it—traditional exegesis in the "old" homiletic). Rather, the narrative is a *stained glass* window that the reader looks *at* (theological exegesis in the "new" homiletic).²² The glass, the stains, the lead, the copper, and everything else that goes into the production of the stained glass are meticulously planned for the appropriate effect, to tell a particular story. So too with narratives, textual or otherwise. The preacher must, therefore, pay close attention to the text, not just to what is being said, but also how it is being said and why, in order that the agenda of the author may be discerned—i.e., the theology of the pericope.²³ For each pericope,

²⁰ Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis*, 41–51.

²¹ We have briefly looked at examples from 1 Samuel 15 and 2 Samuel 11–12; I will work through more in the following articles.

²² The stained glass metaphor is borrowed from Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 196.

²³ To be sure, there is a place for the chronological organization and harmonization of events *behind* the text. However, the focus for preaching, I claim, ought to be not on events *behind* the text, but on the inspired text, and its projected world *in front of itself*—pericopal theology. It is this interpretive product that leads one to valid application and life change for the glory of God.

its particular world-segment is what the author wants us to catch; this is what he would want us to respond to—this is theology of the pericope, i.e., how things should be in God’s ideal world.

This theological exegesis is exegesis done in order to arrive at the theology of the pericope, for only from this intermediary may valid application be discerned. Buttrick was right: “The odd idea that preachers can move from text to sermon without recourse to theology by some exegetical magic or a leap of homiletic imagination is obvious nonsense.” He calls for “theo-logic” to grasp the thrust of the text.²⁴ Let me repeat: Biblical interpretation for application that does not elucidate this crucial intermediary, pericopal theology, is *de facto* incomplete, for without discerning this entity, valid application can never be arrived at.

So here is my definition of pericopal theology: *Pericopal theology is the theology specific to a particular pericope—representing a segment of the plenary world in front of the canonical text that portrays God in his relationship to his people—which functions as the crucial intermediary in the move from text to application.* Living by the theology of the pericope, God’s people are accepting his gracious invitation to inhabit his ideal world; and by so doing, his people align themselves to the will of God. Here’s the scheme of preaching I espouse:



Figure 6: Scheme of preaching

The next article will continue this theme, but focus more on the *impact* this hermeneutic has for preaching and spiritual formation.

²⁴ Buttrick, “Interpretation and Preaching,” 57.

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