

3-1-1934

The Thorough Exegetical Study of the Sermon Text the Conditio sine qua Non for Good Sermonizing

J. H. Fritz

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fritz, J. H. (1934) "The Thorough Exegetical Study of the Sermon Text the Conditio sine qua Non for Good Sermonizing," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 5 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol5/iss1/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

seinen Spott mit mir, wenn er mich zur Seligkeit ruft." Er muß sich im Gegenteil sagen: „Gott will mich selig haben; denn deshalb beruft er mich ja durch sein wirkungskräftiges Evangelium.“ „Mich hat er auch angenommen!“

Doch wir müssen abbrechen. Auf die calvinischen und papistischen Antithesen weiter einzugehen, erlaubt der Raum nicht. Unsere Aufgabe müssen wir damit gelöst sehen, daß wir dargelegt haben, wie die Konfessionsformel einerseits positiv das ganze Wort Gottes, das uns die ewige Seligkeit verbürgt, zur Geltung bringt und so die certitudo salutis sicher verankert, und wie sie andererseits alle Irrlehren abweist, die einem Christen die Heilsgewißheit schwankend machen. Überall ist die Konfessionsformel nicht ein „Totenader trockener Lehrbesprechung“, sondern ein lebendiges, mit göttlichem Geist und Trost pulsierendes, ganz praktisch eingestelltes Lehrbuch, das immer nur den einen großen Zweck verfolgt, die certitudo salutis aktuell zu machen.

„Fazit Deus omnipotens, Pater Domini nostri Iesu Christi, ut per gratiam Spiritus Sancti omnes in ipso consentientes et concordemus atque in consensu pio, qui ipsi probetur, constanter perseveremus! Amen.“ Num. 24, 18: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה. J. E. Müller.

The Thorough Exegetical Study of the Sermon Text the Conditio sine qua Non for Good Sermonizing.

The questions, Shall the preacher use a text? and, Shall the preacher preach the Word of God? are not identical. The preacher should *always* preach the Word of God, but this he might do without the use of a sermon text. The use of a sermon text, however, has not only come to be an established custom, but there are good reasons for continuing this custom: it makes for better preaching.

After a text has been chosen, not only good homiletics, but also good common sense, tells us that *that text* should be preached. Why should a text be chosen and read in the pulpit if it is not the intention to preach *that text*? The very reading of the text prior to the preaching of the sermon is a promise to the congregation that the preacher will preach *that text*. Therefore the homiletical rule *Preach the text*.

If the text is to be preached, the preacher must understand his text. In order to understand it, he must prayerfully and carefully study it. One cannot teach what one does not know, nor can one teach clearly what is not clear in one's own mind. *All good homiletical work must therefore be based on thorough and sound exegesis.*

When studying his text, the preacher must from the very outset keep in mind that he must *apply the material of the text to the*

needs of his congregation. The last book of the Bible was written almost two thousand years ago; but the Bible was written for men of all times unto the end of days. That this is true is seen from the fact that Christ says that on the Day of Judgment all men will be judged by the Word which He has spoken: "He that rejecteth Me and receiveth not My words hath one that judgeth him: the Word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the Last Day," John 12, 48. Therefore the Savior also says: "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," John 8, 31. 32. And Peter tells us that, while the world and all things in the world shall pass away, "the Word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the Word which by the Gospel is preached unto you," 1 Pet. 1, 25. We should not look for any new revelation; nor is any needed, for God is still the same unchangeable God, and despite all the changes that have taken place in this world in the course of centuries, and especially in modern times, man in his essential nature has not changed.

Unless the Word of God is applied to the needs of the people, preaching does not serve its purpose. The preacher who copies sermons (or outlines) that were preached twenty-five, fifty, or a hundred years ago and recites or reads them from his pulpit to-day—aside from the fact that such plagiarism is unworthy of a minister of the Gospel—does not understand the purpose of his high calling. He might just as well dispense with his preaching and recommend a good book of sermons to his people, asking them to read them in their homes. The pastoral care of souls is the very purpose of a *living* ministry, and this pastoral care requires the application of the Word of God to present needs. These needs vary in accordance with conditions under which people live—their environment, their education, their reading, their work and business connections, their wealth or poverty, their social obligations, the trend of the time with its own peculiar temptations, the spiritual condition of the people, their opportunities for doing good, etc. We are convinced that one reason why much of our preaching to-day does not show greater results in promoting a deeper spirituality in the hearts and lives of our church-members is the lack of the application of the Word of God to their needs. Says Pastor Paul Lindemann in his tract *Christian Stewardship and Its Modern Implications*: "We preach the truth from heaven, and we preach it in all its glory, and we permit our people to draw the inferences. The trouble is that these inferences are not drawn. The pulpit statements are accepted as general theories. But do we not often fail clearly to portray the practical application? Do we show our hearers the courses along which they may exercise their faith, how they may live it out in their daily lives and in the work of the Church?" In our day we are facing a very serious situation

as far as the spiritual needs of our people are concerned; the Word of God meets this situation fully, but it cannot serve its purpose if it is not applied. If, however, the preacher is to apply his text, he must carefully study it and "come to grips with the problems of the Church and the individual church-member" and not "treat the truths of the text objectively and without pointed references to existing conditions," as Professor Friedrich says in the foreword to his *Outlines for Mission Lectures*.

This is not an easy task; it cannot be done hurriedly in the last hours of the week, but it requires much time and attention. That is perhaps the reason why in our busy time, with its many distractions at that, there is such a great demand on the part of preachers for sermon helps of one kind or another, ready-made material that makes sermonizing easy, but *that does not make for effective preaching*.

What, then, are the exegetical requirements? Taking for granted that the preacher has "an unction from the Holy One," 1 John 2, 20, and that he approaches his text in a prayerful attitude, Ps. 119, 125; Acts 16, 14, the first requirement is that the *setting of the text* be studied. We should not study the Bible after a piecemeal fashion. The context should be read; it may even be necessary, for instance, to read the entire epistle of Paul from which the text is taken in order clearly to understand the situation at the time when the words were written and thus to arrive at a better, or even a correct, understanding of the text and its application to the needs of to-day.

Next *the words and phrases* of the text and their *grammatical construction* should be carefully studied. This should be done on the basis of the Hebrew and the Greek originals, not because we have a poor or even an incorrect translation, — if that were true, the average Bible-reader would be in a sorry plight, — but because the preacher is a teacher, who must thoroughly know his subject. We should think it absurd for a teacher to teach Shakespeare in a German translation without himself having thoroughly read and studied the original English or for a teacher to attempt to teach Goethe or Schiller on the basis of an English translation without having read and studied these authors in the original German. Every one who has a knowledge of more than one language knows that no translation, though it be correct and good and fully sufficient for the average reader, can reproduce *all the fine shades of meaning* of the original. While this is not necessary for a correct understanding, it will often help to a better understanding. Says Luther: "*Wenn wir die Sprachen fahren lassen, werden wir nicht allein das Evangelium verlieren, sondern auch endlich weder Lateinisch noch Deutsch recht reden oder schreiben koennen.*" (St. Louis, X, 470.) "*In der Christenheit soll das Urtheil sein ueber allerlei Lehre; dazu ist vor allen Dingen von-*

nosten, dass man die Sprachen wisse." (474). While not every theological student can, even if he would, be a linguist, which is not at all necessary, he can acquire a good reading knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. The man who during his college and seminary days has studied Greek and Hebrew for the *sole* purpose of being able to use it later in his sermon work should not after his graduation dismiss these languages from his mind; nor should he neglect to use such books as in the light of modern research (papyri, vernacular Koine) will give him a better understanding of New Testament Greek.

Since it is in the very nature of the case that the Bible should be its own interpreter (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*), the parallel passages should, by means of a good concordance, be looked up and carefully studied, and some of the most pertinent and clear passages should be embodied in the sermon. Some of us perhaps have made the mistake of always citing the same proof-texts and have thus deprived our hearers of a great wealth of Scripture material and at the same time have failed to give to our sermons variety and freshness.

The homiletical exegete should work with pen or pencil in hand and make notes of the important thoughts which the text presents. If the text has been properly chosen, it will present a main or general thought and subordinate thoughts; more than that, it will present something *specific* in reference to the main thought, which distinguishes that text from other texts treating the same subject. The sermonizer must find this specific thought of his text; otherwise he will not be preaching *that* text. The topical sermon method invites a superficial treatment of the text: the preacher chooses some topic suggested by the text and then treats it on the basis of dogmatics and not on the basis of the exegesis of the text. As a result the preacher is not preaching his text at all; his text is merely a motto or starting-point. Such sermons will be of a general nature and lack that variety and freshness and practical application which sermons have that present the text in its own peculiar physiognomy. The finding of the specific thought of the text and its presentation in the theme of the sermon is not always an easy task, but it does make for the most effective preaching.

While it goes without saying that we cannot approve of *allegorizing*, that is, of giving a spiritual meaning to all the embellishing details of a narrative text, we also cannot approve of the so-called *symbolical* interpretation. The words of Luke 17, 11—14, for instance, speak to us of the healing of the ten lepers; they say that and nothing else. While it is true that all men are afflicted with the leprosy of sin and that only Jesus can heal us from this leprosy, yet that text does not say this and should not be used as though it did. As a mere illustration it may be so used, but *not for the purpose of*

building up an entire sermon on such a symbolical explanation of the text. The record of Christ's miracle of healing the ten lepers has an altogether different purpose, as we learn from the verses that follow, vv. 15—19. — What has been said should not prevent us from saying, for instance, that Matt. 21, 19, refers to the unbelieving Jewish people; but that is a *parabolic*, not a symbolic application.

In reference to the exegetical treatment and the sermonic use of *miracle* texts and *parable* texts the warning needs emphasis that we should not make the Bible say what it does not say. John speaks to us of the purpose of Christ's miracles, saying: "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, ye might have life through His name," John 20, 30. 31. In the various miracles Christ's deity and Messiahship are brought into close relation to the various phases of the Christian life, and that gives to each miracle text its *specificness*: when Christ reaches out His hand to sinking Peter, whose faith had grown weak, He teaches us that He likewise upholds us when our faith grows weak; when at the wedding of Cana the Savior changes water into wine, He teaches us that He also supplies those things which we need for this life; when the Savior raises Lazarus from the dead, He bids us look to Him for our bodily resurrection, etc.

The parables present a different exegetical problem. A parable teaches a Scriptural truth by means of an incident taken from the daily life of men. Christ Himself has told us why He spoke in parables, Matt. 13, 10—17. From the same chapter, Matt. 13, we also learn how a parable is to be explained, vv. 1—9. 18—23. 24—30. 36—43. From these examples we learn that those details which have a direct bearing on the lesson of the parable should be used. But from such a parable as that of the unjust steward, Luke 16, 1—12, we learn that such details of a parable as have no direct bearing on the lesson should not be used, for we are expressly told that the lesson of the parable is that the unjust steward "had done wisely; for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light," v. 8. The fact that the steward was unjust is not a lesson of the parable; in that respect the steward is not an example for us. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Matt. 20, 1—16, teaches us the lesson of salvation by grace; it does not teach us that in the commercial world a laborer who has worked but one hour of the day should receive the same pay as he who has worked the entire day, for the Scripture says, "the laborer is worthy of his hire." In other words, every parable has its *tertium comparationis*, and beyond this no use should be made of what is related in the parable.

The sermonizer must be careful in his exegetical treatment of many Old Testament texts; he must not give them a *typical* interpretation unless the text directly invites it or the New Testament so interprets it.

We have no right to make the Bible in any given text say what it does not say, even though what is said be in accordance with the analogy of faith; for the Bible is not like a waxen nose, to which we may give this or that shape as our fancy directs. This fact, however, does not compel us to teach only that lesson which is stated in *so many words* in the text (direct application); we should also teach that which is *implied* (indirect application). Scripture either tells us *directly* what we are to believe or to do ("Thou shalt have no other gods before Me," Ex. 20, 3; "Repent ye and believe the Gospel," Mark 1, 15), or it would have us arrive at this *by way of inference*. (John 4 merely relates to us the historical fact of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman and its glorious results. But from this narrative a number of very valuable lessons may be deduced: As Jesus did not disdain to speak to that lonely woman, a great sinner at that, so we should reach out after one individual soul, v. 7, nor should we think that the most vile sinner cannot be saved, vv. 17, 18, but we should be encouraged by the power of the Gospel to believe that the preaching of it will not be in vain, vv. 28—30, 39—42; we also learn that we should tactfully, even as Jesus did, make an approach when trying to win a sinner, v. 7, and that Jesus knows the thoughts of our hearts and that our entire life is unto Him an open book, vv. 16—19, etc. While these lessons are not stated in *so many words* in the text, they are *implied*; the story has been recorded for our encouragement along these lines.) Speaking of the Old Testament, Paul says: "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written *for our learning*, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope," Rom. 15, 4. Paul so uses the story of Abraham's faith; he says: "Now, it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but *for us also*, to whom it shall be imputed if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus, our Lord, from the dead," Rom. 4, 16—25.

In the exegetical treatment of texts *the relation of one truth to the other in the body of Bible doctrine* must be carefully preserved. The great fundamental truths of Christ's saving acts must ever be made to stand out prominently and need to be frequently presented, even as the church-year suggests. But also the proper relation in reference to the logical order of Bible truths should not be lost sight of; faith, for example, must always precede good works, and not *vice versa*; a text which encourages Christians to do good works must not be used in a sermon without reference to its relation to the central doctrine of the Christian religion, justification by faith.

184 Thorough Exegetical Study of Text Absolutely Necessary.

In conclusion, the demand that the preacher, who is God's messenger of truth to the world, should carefully study the Bible in order to make sure that he is *in all respects* preaching the *divine* message, needs special emphasis at our time. It needs this emphasis, first, because of the danger that in the course of years we are inclined to accept the doctrines of the Church as they have been handed down to us by our teachers without always making sure on our part that they are in full agreement with the Bible. If the average Christian should take the Bereans for an example, who "searched the Scriptures daily whether those things were so" which Paul and Silas brought unto them, Acts 17, 10, 11, we who are called to be teachers in the Church should much more do so. To the young pastor Timothy, Paul not only wrote: "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them," 2 Tim. 3, 14, but he also added these words: "And that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works," vv. 15—17. The demand for a careful study of the Bible needs special emphasis to-day, secondly, because of the spiritual indifference found among so many Christians and of the large number of religious sects and false teachers who "wrest the Scriptures," 2 Pet. 3, 16, and even "by cunning craftiness lie in wait to deceive," Eph. 4, 14, being "deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel, for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light; therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works," 2 Cor. 11, 13—15.

To God Himself the preacher will have to give an account of his stewardship. Therefore Paul writes to Timothy: "I charge thee before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: *preach the Word*; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine," 2 Tim. 4, 1—3a. That Church is blessed indeed whose preachers can say with Paul: "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly and from house to house. . . . Wherefore I take you to record this day that I am pure from the blood of all men, for I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God," Acts 20, 20, 26, 27.

JOHN H. C. FRITZ.