

“Moses and the Prophets’: The Emmaus Narrative as Homiletic and Theological Lens for Early Christian Preaching and Discipleship”

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It has been a long day. Back-breaking work. Scuffed callouses and chaff tracks mark hands and feet. One comes in with a new lash across her shoulders; another limping from an injury sustained while dislodging a cart from the mud. The host for the evening gathering and her servants have been baking and cooking most of the day in order to prepare the meal for the evening. This is a special gathering because a new letter has arrived. Generally, those who attend bring a dish or two in order to share a group meal with everyone. However, due to this being a special evening, the lady of the house has offered to prepare the entire meal. Usually the older ladies put up a fuss when she does this because, despite their poverty, they want to contribute so not to take advantage of the master’s (and the lady’s) hospitality. This time, however, she was quite insistent. “You ladies work so hard and still make time to bless us with your delicious food. However, this week, I want to bless each of you. The master has received a new letter, so we want this night to be a blessing on everyone.” So the ladies back down because, to be honest, the lady of the house makes an excellent fish, fig and walnut dish that is absolutely divine. *And her baklava?! Simply κάλλος!*

So evening comes, and inviting smells flow through the door to the master’s home when the others walk in. Kisses are exchanged and everyone takes their place around the table. Bowls and plates are passed, as a special basket of bread and jug of wine sit off from the main table. A prayer is said and the master unravels the scroll that he received. He clears his throat and begins

to read: “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: may mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance” (Jude 1-2).¹ Did anyone else feel that comforting breeze pass through here?

What did early Christian preaching look and sound like? We know that preaching occurred in “Bible times” because we still sit under scripture from Sunday to Sunday, nibbling on the morsels provided for us, whether we preach to or are preached to. We drink deeply from the wells dug by Peter, Paul, James, John and others who were the first proclaimers of the good news about Jesus Christ. Yet, while we know preaching occurred in the first century, and afterward, do we have any “real time” examples in Scripture? If Dodd, in his classic study on apostolic preaching, is correct, then “Much of our preaching in Church at the present day would not have been recognized by the early Christians as *kerygma*.”² While this comment, especially in light of the contemporary Church, may be more a critique of style rather than substance—which is not our focus—does the New Testament offer a corrective to Dodd’s concern? How can we know that contemporary preaching stands fast in the tradition of presenting the Gospel if there are no baseline examples in Scripture? On one hand, there is the notion that the letter or epistle was only a literary construction. As Malherbe noted in his classic study on moral exhortation, “the early Christian writings that have been preserved were not originally speeches.”³ Although Deissmann’s constructive and functional theories of epistles seem to have run their course, the scholastic study of the rhetorical nature of early Christian writings lags.

¹All references are from the New Revised Standard Version, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ.

²C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 8-9.

³Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, a Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 68.

On the other hand, there is a small yet stable notion that the letter or epistle is also a *rhetorical* construction, meaning that the content within the literary construction was meant to be spoken. As Malherbe notes in the very same paragraph as mentioned above, these letters “were dictated and intended to be read aloud to the congregations, *thus functioning like speeches or sermons*, meant that the writers were conscious of oral style.”⁴ Yet, debate continues as to how one should understand the substantive nature of the speeches contained within the early Christian writings. Haenchen, in a previous generation of scholarship, called for the reevaluation of Luke as not simply a chronicler but as a theological writer,⁵ and Gorman has simply stated recently that “Acts is. . . a *selective* history.”⁶ In order to understand what Gorman means here, we must discard the naïve (not Ricoeur’s concept of *naïveté*) approach to reading scripture, that what is recorded in Acts 17:22-31, for example, has been recorded verbatim. Tannehill notes that the sermon, as recorded by Luke, “provides a carefully stated theological perspective” of Paul’s mission.⁷ And as Graves has noted, “A story line is at work in Acts,” a story line that is “not, however, merely entertaining” but includes “dramatic episodes” that “serve to make

⁴Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation, a Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, 68, emphasis added. Ben Witherington echoes a similar concern by saying, “Letter discourses have both epistolary features and rhetorical features, with some overlap at the beginning of the documents,” *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 20.

⁵Ernst Haenchen, “The Book of Acts as Source Material for the History of Early Christianity,” in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 260.

⁶Michael J. Gorman, “The Writings of the New Covenant (The New Testament),” in *Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible*, ed. Michael J. Gorman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 81.

⁷Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Volume Two: The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 212. See also the exegetical discussion of this passage in Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, rev. ed., Reading the New Testament 5 (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2005), 153-157.

‘programmatic statements.’”⁸ Luke, then, is “selective” in what he communicates and how he communicates it. This is not to disparage Paul’s perceived rhetorical skill in the moment, only to highlight the rhetorical construction of the scripture preserved for the timeless preaching of the Gospel.

This, then, leads to a secondary question: Why is this conversation even important? It would seem that there are four reasons as to why delving into a conversation about the rhetorical nature of early Christian scripture is important. First, it increases the validity of scripture in a post-Christian culture. Scripture is not just some dusty old book of incantations and historical myths; it is a living and active message that speaks a transformative message in a relevant way. Second, a rhetorical view of scripture frees scripture from the chattel slavery of colonial religion. The writings contained within scripture are bound by time and space, yet the narrative message woven in through every page of scripture is timeless because it is the story of God. We, therefore, cannot bind scripture to meet our agenda; we can only serve the interests of scripture, namely speaking God’s message. Third, a rhetorical view broadens the lens of understanding the fluid nature of scripture. We see that Christianity emerges from within a certain cultural milieu and that Christianity continues to ebb and flow with each successive generation, as we seek out scripture’s meaning for our time. And fourth, a rhetorical view maintains an informed view for missionary work. We must never forget that the Church’s goal is to *speak* scripture to those who do not profess God. As such, this paper will seek to discern contemporary homiletical guidance from ancient Christian texts. To accomplish this, first, Luke 24:47 and Acts 8:35 will be examined for their significance as homiletic and discipleship touchstones. This will lead to a brief discussion on how these texts were understood by ancient Christians before to some

⁸Mike Graves, *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997), 159.

homiletical considerations demonstrated by a piece of the New Testament that stands, at least in part, in the Lukan tradition of preaching and discipleship.

Something Happened On the Way To...

As Luke begins narrating his resurrection accounts in Luke 24, he shifts the lens of his epic to the road that leads from Jerusalem out into the countryside. There two initially unnamed disciples are walking along the road discussing the recent events connected to Jesus of Nazareth. Suddenly, a stranger saddles up beside them and drops in on their conversation. When the stranger feigns confusion over this Jesus character, the two disciples, with mouths agape, ask him where he has been.

The stranger then acts in an extraordinary manner: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Focus on this text generally falls to an emphasis on *diermeneuo*, which generally means “to explain, interpret.”⁹ The emphasis being here that Jesus did not merely proclaim (*kerusso*) the good news of the gospel to these disciples, but that Jesus instructed these disciples in how the Hebrew Scriptures connected to what had happened and was happening. Fitzmyer summarizes what happened in v. 27 this way: “Then the risen Christ catechizes the disciples, teaching them the import of the Scriptures: that the Messiah was destined to suffer all this before he entered into his glory.”¹⁰

The Emmaus story, however, serves as more than a transition between the resurrection and the sending out of the Church in the opening chapters of Acts. This scene serves as the

⁹BDAG, p. 244.

¹⁰Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 28a (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 1559.

culmination of Luke's "literary agenda,"¹¹ set forth in his short prologue (1:1-4). As Green notes, "The Scriptures supply the salvation-historical framework for understanding their respective mission and so root their activity in the ongoing story of God's redemptive work."¹² It is important for Luke to demonstrate Jesus acting as a fulfilling presence of all that has come before.

This articulation is brought to bear throughout Luke's second volume, the Acts. From Peter's Pentecost sermon to Paul's defense before various worldly authorities, Luke consistently and consciously narrates Green's "ongoing story of God's redemptive work" in wondrous detail. Most of the scenes in Acts are group scenes, some large and some small. However, in one scene, Luke narrates a single missionary engaging a single seeker in a scene that harkens back to the Emmaus narrative.

In Acts 8, the benevolent servant Philip finds himself teleported away to the road that leads from Palestine to the Arabian desert. Just when he is about to question the Spirit's action, he sees a chariot on the horizon. Nudged into action, Philip saddles up beside the chariot and asks the traveler what he is reading. The confused traveler points to a passage—from Isaiah—and asks for an assist: "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else" (Acts 8:34). Conzelmann notes the paradigmatic issue at play in this question: "The verse formulates a fundamental problem of early Christian hermeneutics (cf., Justin, *Dial.* passim). The eunuch asks the question which the ideal non-Christian Bible reader *should* ask, but

¹¹Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144.

¹²Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, p. 25.

which only the Christian reader *can* ask.”¹³ And, almost as if he were waiting for his line cue from an off-stage director, Philip “began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). Yet unlike what Jesus did on the road to Emmaus, Philip proclaimed to (*euaggelion*) the Ethiopian traveler in what had happened and what was happening. Philip traced the line from Isaiah’s proclamation to Jesus’ exultation on the cross.

The scene sets up to follow in a similar fashion as Luke 24. Yet the playwright makes one major change to the script. Whereas Jesus used Scripture to instruct about himself, Philip uses Scripture—perhaps the same scripture—to proclaim about Jesus. We see the importance for Luke to demonstrate Jesus acting as a fulfilling presence of all that has come before. The question, then, is how did the ancient Christian movement understand this concept of “scripture” in both their reading of scripture and preaching of scripture, especially in light of the risen Christ?

The Practice of Biblical Interpretation

The task of interpreting scripture is quite central to the nature and function of the Christian movement. As McGrath rightly notes, “Every text demands to be interpreted; Scripture is no exception.”¹⁴ In the simple action of reading a passage of scripture, interpretation occurs. It was this core truth that Origen of Alexandria was attempting to navigate with his “three ways” of reading scripture: “body, soul, and spirit” (*de principiis* 4.11). In doing so, Origen hoped to be able to provide a higher way of reading (and, therefore, interpreting) scripture beyond a flat, baseline reading. This concern was furthered over a century later by Jerome who argued that

¹³Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel and Donald H. Juel, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69.

¹⁴Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 171.

“true intimacy with Jesus Himself” was “wrought by a common fear of God and a joint study of the divine scriptures” (*Letter 53.1*). Again, we see an emphasis on a devotion to the reading and interpreting of scripture.

In light of this note, we can see this in how Christians have read and understood the Emmaus scene. On one level, there is the act of teaching that Jesus does in the scene. For example, Cyril of Alexandria notes that Jesus, in “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (Luke 24:27), “settles in them the ancient and hereditary faith taught them by the sacred books they possessed. For nothing which comes from God is without its use, but all have their appointed place and service” (*Commentary on Luke 24*). Jesus reminds them of what they had already learned and reinforces the mission that God has been on from the very beginning. This mission now finds its turning point—its new beat—in the exultation of Jesus.

On another level, however, is the specific teaching that Jesus offers in this scene. For example, Augustine lays the foundation for the long-accepted Christological lens for reading the Old Testament: “So he opened to them the Scriptures and showed them that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and for all things to be fulfilled that were written concerning him in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms—in short, the whole of the Old Testament. Everything in those Scriptures speaks of Christ, but only to him who has ears” (*Homily on First John 2*). Tannehill, then, is correct in arguing for reading scripture as being in progress. It is common for modern readers to read back into Scripture, often reading the Christological focus of the New Testament back onto the more theocentric focus of the Old Testament. As he argues, Christian

preaching in Acts presents an “ironic twist” because when the blind finally see, they realize that the answer was before their eyes the entire time.¹⁵

Again, this is seen in practice in the scene between Philip and the Ethiopian traveler. On one level, there is the act of proclaiming that Philip engages in. In the words of Chrysostom, Philip instructed the Ethiopian traveler “merely taking his text from the prophet” (*Homily on the Acts of the Apostles* 19). In the same way as Jesus, Philip provides gospel proclamation through scripture. On another level, there is the specific teaching that Philip offers. Philip, in the words of the Venerable Bede, “brought the obscurities of prophecy into the light of knowledge” (*Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*). This seems to indicate that it was understood that Philip’s focus was to articulate to the Ethiopian traveler how the Hebrew Scriptures moved the reader toward understanding Jesus as the revelation of God’s ongoing plan. Again, we see the movement from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight.

Homiletic Concerns

As was mentioned above, Luke makes an intentional word selection in what he has the risen Christ do on the road to Emmaus—he has the risen Christ *diermenueo*, or “interpret.” Jesus does not proclaim (again, *kerusso*) the good news to these already-believers, but instead instructs these disciples in a deeper, richer understanding of Scripture. What is occurring on the Emmaus road is clearly a more advanced form of discipleship, not evangelism. It seems that the apostolic witnesses and writers understood there to be two levels—or, perhaps, functions—of early Christian preaching. The first function is *kerusso* (or *euaggelion*). *Kerusso* was a heralding action, not an instructive action, an action that announced an in-breaking that invited responsive action. We see this played out in the scene with the Ethiopian traveler in Acts 8. Unaware of who

¹⁵Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation, Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 283.

Jesus is or what he did through the cross, Philip uses a prophetic text to proclaim the gospel, centering his proclamation in a single voice who points downstream to a singular event and labels it as salvific.

The second function, then, is *diermeneuo* (and its associated terms like *didasko*). It is here that we see the teaching function of the Christian movement, an awareness that faith comes through constant and consistent instruction. Given to those who have already heard and responded, this function seeks to center the disciple in the teaching of Jesus. We see this more in Luke 24, where Jesus draws from the whole of Scripture (“Moses and the prophets”) to articulate what God has been doing throughout history. Dodd, in his classic study on apostolic preaching, noted that “For the early Church, then, to preach the Gospel was by no means the same thing as to deliver moral instruction or exhortation. While the Church was concerned to hand on the teaching of the Lord, it was not by this that it made converts. It was by *kerygma*, says Paul, not by *didache*, that it pleased God to save men.”¹⁶ The Emmaus story, then, demonstrated to the early Christian movement that proclamation should be missional in nature and instruction should be Christological in nature.

Contemporary Implications¹⁷

Turning to modern-day concerns regarding these texts in the life and ministry of the church, there are some questions that arise that call for consideration. How does the approach to reading and interpreting Scripture in these texts comment on contemporary approaches to reading and interpreting Scripture? Although not in Acts, the New Testament does contain at least one example of early Christian rhetoric: the “letter” of Jude. Our argument, then, is two-

¹⁶Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, 8.

¹⁷Some material in this section has been adapted from my article “Keep Yourselves in the Love of Christ: Preaching the Letter of Jude,” *Preaching* 30 (September-October 2014): 26-28.

fold: 1) Jude follows commonly-accepted forms of Greek rhetoric, and 2) Jude can aide biblical and homiletic scholars alike in conceptualizing the anchored place of rhetoric in the early Christian preaching.

Most preachers and Bible teachers avoid Jude as if it were the Black Plague because they think it is strange and full of odd images. To some degree, they are correct. The letter is strange and it is full of odd images. Yet, imagine how some of our sermons or Bible class lessons may seem to future Christians. References to *The Scarlet Letter* or *Mere Christianity* may one day cause scholars and laypersons alike to scratch their heads as they attempt to ascertain these strange references that show up in our sermons. Do not tell me that you would not be somewhat offended if your sermon was dismissed simply because the interpreter did not recognize the Michael Bird quote you used or your allusion to *Les Miserables*. We must give the same credit and authority to Jude that the ancient Christians did.

In truth, as I have noted elsewhere, Jude is a deeply theological, brilliantly written, well-illustrated sermon about remaining honest in and committed to our faith.¹⁸ As such, Jude provides the contemporary preacher with some guidance on how to effectively and courageously proclaim the missional word. Once we have looked at Jude's guidance, we will conclude by looking at some considerations that *we* should take when preaching from "the most neglected book in the New Testament."¹⁹ In terms of the guidance that Jude provides the contemporary preacher, we see five areas of interest. First, Jude demonstrates that good preachers know their

¹⁸O'Lynn, "Keep Yourselves in the Love of Christ," 26. Richard J. Bauckham labels Jude as an "epistolary sermon," or "a work whose main content could have been delivered as a homily if Jude and his readers had been able to meet, but which has been cast in letter form for that it can be communicated to readers whom Jude could not visit in person;" *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 50 (Waco: Word, 1983), 3.

¹⁹Although studies on Jude have picked up over the past few years, Douglas J. Rowston's maxim still holds true; "The Most Neglected Book in the Bible," *New Testament Studies* 21, no. 4 (1975): 554.

audience, his or her congregation. We see this in the opening verses of the letter (v. 1-4). One of the big debates among scholars is whether the letters that have been collected in the New Testament canon were general or occasional. Were they written and disseminated to all early Christian communities, or were they written to specific congregations to address specific concerns? Although Brevard Childs, the leading voice in the field of canonical criticism, rejects the notion that Jude is addressing “any one specific” situation, he is correct in noting that Jude addresses an issue that effecting a particular community of Christian believers.²⁰ However, it seems, as argued by Moo, that Jude was writing to a congregation that he was quite familiar with.²¹ In his opening, Jude refers to them as “beloved” (NRSV) or “dear friends” (NIV), which indicates an ongoing relationship. Jude also notes that he was planning to write a more doctrinal letter to them, yet changed his mind at the last minute because of the false teaching that was surfacing in their community. Often we preachers get so wrapped up in addressing administrative matters that we forget to get to know our people. We forget to meet them for coffee or attend their daughter’s dance recital. We do not take advantage of the conversation in the church foyer because we are fiddling with our headset. And, yet, as cliché as it sounds, our congregations will not care how much we know unless they know how much we care. Jude may not have been an elder or the located minister for his congregation. Yet it does seem that he had developed a strong, passionate relationship with his congregation, which afforded him the authority to address the congregation in such a way as we find in his letter.

Second, Jude demonstrates that good preachers are smart about when and with whom they pick fights. And the biggest fights in the early years of Christianity dealt with incorrect or

²⁰Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 492.

²¹Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 227-229.

inappropriate teaching (or “heresy,” which comes from the Greek word for “take” or “seize”). A lot of ink has been spilt by scholars regarding what kind of heresies ravaged the early church.²² However, the apostolic and early Christian writers gave little concern to the who, why and how of these heretical movements, focusing primarily on the what of these teachings. Even then, it was more to demonstrate how this false teaching was *not* orthodox Christian teaching. For example, Paul admonishes his young protégé to “not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord” and to “have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies” throughout 2 Timothy. Yet, never does Paul specify what these “senseless controversies” entail nor does he ever deliberately identify those who are teaching them. In the same way, Jude neither specifies the false teaching that is perverting the pure faith nor does he identify those who “have stolen in among” the congregation. Yet his condemnation of these wolves in sheep’s clothing is no less blistering.²³ These are men who are smooth talkers, who resist authority, and who denounce the existence of angels (v. 8). They “defile” the community because they live “without fear” of God (v. 8, 12). They care only for themselves, thereby “rejecting the leadership of the church’s true pastors.”²⁴ They are like clouds without rain, trees without fruit, waves with polluted foam, and stars without a course. Sadly, this was prophesied by Enoch (vv. 14-16; cf., *1 Enoch* 1:9) and “the apostles” (vv. 17-18). In short, they are to be avoided! Too often, we step into the pulpit confident that our words will radically alter the hearts and minds of our members in one sermon.

²²Although it is getting dated, the best introduction to ancient heretical movements is Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Heresy,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:684-686.

²³Jerome Neyrey notes that “We can only speculate about what teaching or doctrines the opponents of Jude spoke to his church. Whenever Jude speaks about them, he negatively labels them in such a way as to present them as thoroughly evil and corrupting the holy church;” *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 37c (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 31.

²⁴Fred B. Craddock, *First and Second Peter and Jude*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 142.

Yet, as Willimon reminds us, “there is much empirical evidence to suggest that people are rarely fundamentally changed by a sermon....Human beings have an unconscious resistance to self-awareness and change.”²⁵ As those called to preach, we have both the privilege and authority to denounce false teaching and to stir our congregations to action from the pulpit. Yet, as we see in Jude’s letter, the missional message of God must trump our need to harp on the deacon who disagreed with our sermon last week. For at the end of his sermon, Jude still offers an invitation in vv. 22-23! Some issues are worth going to war over. Yet the color of the new hymnals or differences in translation is hardly worth falling on a sword.

Third, Jude demonstrates that good preachers are creative. There are two ways to be creative in preaching—the use of language and the method of delivery. We are unable to go into a lengthy conversation here regarding creativity in preaching, so I will simply point the reader to the writings of Jared Alcantara, Anna Carter Florence, Richard Jensen, Alyce McKenzie, Thomas Troeger, Richard Ward, Paul Scott Wilson, and Karyn Wiseman. Yet we must say something about what we see in Jude’s letter and how he creatively delivered his message. It is no secret that Jude’s letter is unlike any other letter in the New Testament canon. For starters, he casts aside the traditional opening of the ancient letter in order to jump right in to his message. In short, he completely skips the obligatory introduction in order to put his message square in the congregation’s face. Then, Jude dismisses the traditional approach to crafting the body of his message in order to launch a litany of Scripture references in order to build up his “theme of disobedience and subsequent judgment.”²⁶ In doing so, Jude constructs a sermon that would have been, in all accounts, radically different from other sermons that his congregation would have

²⁵William H. Willimon, *Preaching about Conflict in the Local Church*, Preaching About...Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 85.

²⁶Bryan J. Whitfield, “To See the Canon in a Grain of Sand: Preaching Jude,” *Word and World* 29 (Fall 2009): 423.

heard on a week-in and week-out basis. As Craddock notes, Jude’s letter has both a “dignified” and “poetic” style about it, qualities that demonstrate that Jude was graced with great literary skill.²⁷ In many ways, Jude is unique and uniquely placed in the New Testament. Additionally, it falls just before Revelation, meaning that anyone reading the Bible will end on a linguistic, image-driven high. Most of us who have preached for an extended period of time have developed habits (or crutches) when it comes to our sermons. We find that one form that we really like and we labor greatly to make sure each sermon is delivered consistently. Then we come to Jude, and we are baffled because Jude does not follow the rules of rhetoric that Paul or even Peter used. This is a good thing! To be honest, the reason why we avoid being creative in preaching is because we are afraid of failing. However, Willobee encourages preachers to allow ourselves “permission to write a rotten first draft, trusting that God will give you the next draft, and the next.”²⁸ In approaching our craft, it is important that we take creative risks—like Jude did (remember v. 3?)—so that God can impact our congregation through our limitations.

Fourth, Jude demonstrates that good preachers use Scripture generously. Even if we cannot rattle off “book-chapter-and-verse” for each of Jude’s allusions, we can deduce that he had no problem “searching the Scriptures” with his congregation. To start off with, in v. 5, Jude refers to the events of Numbers 13:26-33. Here the twelve spies return with their scouting report on Canaan, with ten of the spies decrying the situation as nothing more than a suicide mission. However, Joshua and Caleb remind the people that God is on their side and that they will be victorious. Yet the people sided with the ten and were destroyed as a result. Next, in v. 6, Jude

²⁷Craddock, *First and Second Peter and Jude*, 131. Contra William Brosend who thinks that Jude leaned too much on his rhetorical abilities and therefore launched “an *ad hominem* attack unworthy of the faith in whose name it was written;” “The Letter of Jude: A Rhetoric of Excess or an Excess of Rhetoric,” *Interpretation* 60 (July 2006): 304.

²⁸Sondra B. Willobee, *The Write Stuff: Crafting Sermons that Capture and Convince* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 110.

refers to some angels who were expelled from Heaven because of their arrogance and lustful desires. It seems that he has some passages from Isaiah and Genesis in mind here. First, Isaiah notes that pride brought the downfall of “the star of the morning” (14:12-13), and he also reminds the people that other angels were banished from Heaven because of their pride (24:21-22). Second, Genesis 6:1-9 tells us that God decided to cleanse our race because of angels and children producing children together.²⁹ Then, in v. 7, Jude recalls the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because the inhabitants “went after strange flesh” (cf., Genesis 19:1-25), because of their cultic fascination with sexual encounters with mystical beings. This is followed by a strange allusion that many scholars believe is from the *Assumption of Moses*, which describes a debate between the angel Michael and Satan regarding the body of Moses. Satan claimed that Moses’ body belonged to him because Moses had murdered an Egyptian (cf., Exodus 2:12). Michael, however, responded in a similar fashion as Jesus did when Satan tempted Jesus in the desert: “The Lord rebuke you” (v. 9)!³⁰ It must be remembered that Jude had access to many writings that were considered edifying in his day, a day long before our current canon of Scripture was decided on. Finally, he rattles off a litany of allusions that remind us that God knows His people (cf., 2 Timothy 2:19)—Cain murdered Abel (Genesis 4:3-8); Balaam lured he Israelites into worshipping Baal (Numbers 25:1-2, 31:16); and Korah rebelled against Moses (Numbers 16). It is almost exhausting trying to keep up with Jude as he flips through his Bible! And while I advocate a more exegetical approach to sermon development (Paul Scott Wilson’s “one text”

²⁹Peter adds that God “cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2 Peter 2:4, NRSV). However, it should be noted that Peter seems to use this event as a warning committing apostasy.

³⁰For a detailed analysis of this allusion, see Bauckham’s excursus, “The Background and Source of Jude 9,” in *Jude, 2 Peter*, 65-76.

method), Jude certainly demonstrates how we can appropriately preach thematically from Scripture.

Finally, Jude demonstrates that good preachers should make strong practical applications. This is another place where Jude's preaching diverges from that of the other New Testament letter writers. Although some of the writers offer some practical applications in his letters (i.e., Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:14-22), they are generally an afterthought in order to neatly tie off the larger doctrinal message. However, in Jude, the practical applications made in vv. 17-25 become the embodiment of his theme in v. 3.³¹ How? Jude offers six exercises—six disciplines, if you will—that will strengthen us to remain faithful. First, we are to build our relationship with God through the study of His Word (v. 20). The poet says that we must “treasure” God's Word, an image that is more like engraving words on a plaque or tattooing words on the skin (Psalm 119:11). We must become so familiar with these sacred words that, like Michael in his response to Satan, they become our words. Second, we are to pray with the Spirit (v. 20). Paul encourages us that the Spirit will guide us and even speak for us in prayer when we cannot find the correct words (Romans 8:26). Speak to God whenever you can for whatever reason. Third, we are to remain in God's love (v. 21). The German theologian Paul Tillich once said, “Accept the fact that you are accepted.”³² We do not have to earn our salvation; only accept the free gift that God has already offered to us. Fourth, we are to prepare for Christ's return (v. 21). Our hope in eternity is assured in the risen Christ. Therefore, we are to live in such a way that will allow us to live with Him forever. Fifth, we are to show mercy to those who are straying (v. 22-23). Who are those who are straying? Jude says there are three types of individuals: those who doubt, those

³¹Andrew J. Bandstra, “Onward Christian Soldiers—Praying in Love, with Mercy: Preaching on the Epistle of Jude,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (April 1997): 137.

³²Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner, 1948), 159.

whom James calls “double-minded” (James 1:8); those who have been lured away, those whom Paul warns will chase “fruitless discussion” (2 Timothy 1:6); and those who live defiantly, those whom the writer of Hebrews describes as having “been enlightened. . .[yet] have fallen away” (Hebrews 6:4-6). Finally, we are to find solace in worship (v. 24-25). Those who remain in God, Jude promises, will be “kept safe” for the day of Christ’s return (v. 1). We cannot sacrifice exposition in the name of relevance. Yet we cannot sacrifice relevance in the name of exposition. They must meet in the middle so that our listeners will not only know what Scripture says but also what it means in their lives. Jude implies the same advice that I give my preaching students—applications must be concrete/action-oriented, appropriate, and measurable.

Before we conclude, we should take a few moments to consider some ways that modern-day preachers can communicate the message of Jude. Jude has a powerful message that needs to be heard today. Here is my advice. First, we must understand the allusions. Not only should we recognize the various passages and their literary contexts, we should recognize their place in Jude’s overall theme of disobedience and judgment. Jude is writing to his congregation in hopes that they will recognize the false teaching and abstain from it. Yet, he knows how crafty the false teachers are, which is why he offers such a scathing message. His hope, it seems, is to scare the faithful back on to the path of orthodoxy and to grab up those wayward souls so that they may also be saved. If we do not take the time to search Jude’s source material, however, we will continue to ignore his profoundly poetic message. Second, we must not get wrapped up in the conflict that Jude is addressing. As we discussed above, a lot of ink has been spilt in an attempt to identify the false teaching that was occurring. And we can get wrapped up in continuing the debate. However, it seems that we should follow Jude’s lead and simply acknowledge that problems exist in our congregations and focus on remaining faithful. Finally, we must focus on

the missional message of God. Although I disagree with some of his conclusions, Whitfield aptly encapsulated the message of Jude when he titled his article “To See the Canon in a Grain of Sand: Preaching Jude.”³³ The message of Jude’s letter is that salvation comes to those who remain in Christ. In a post-Christian society, this must be our message. Sure, there are other things that we could or should focus on. However, let us never lose sight that, ultimately, our message should resonate with that of Jude: “I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once entrusted to all the saints” (v. 3).

Conclusion

Conversations and arguments abound in homiletic and communication circles as to what is the point of preaching today. Not necessarily whether preaching is necessary, as even scholars of contemporary worship³⁴ and traditional liturgists³⁵ alike note the important place that preaching holds in Christian worship. The arguments focus on what the point—the function—of preaching is today. As we have noted, the Emmaus road text is clearly an example of ongoing discipleship, not initial evangelism. Yet, the dominant model of contemporary homiletic thought is that preaching serves primarily, if not exclusively, a *redemptive* function, in that every sermon has an evangelistic function.³⁶ Yet, as Gibson argues, the preaching ministry is directly tied to discipleship.³⁷ Evangelism is certainly the starting point, yet preaching must move Christians

³³Bryan J. Whitfield, “To See the Canon in a Grain of Sand: Preaching Jude,” *Word and World* 29 (Fall 2009): 422.

³⁴For example, Kevin J. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service: Creating a Taste of Heaven on Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 137-147.

³⁵For example, Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 42-48, 138-139

³⁶Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 269-295.

³⁷Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 13-14; see also, Richard W. Voelz, *Preaching to*

beyond the river and into the marketplace with the confidence that they can—and *should*—live out their maturing faith in practice.

Finally, how does this approach to reading and interpreting Scripture in these texts comment on contemporary approaches to discipleship? Obviously, as has been mentioned, that means adopting an approach to preaching that offers more than an altar call. It offers a journey, a way, to advance in spiritual maturity. Again, when he saddles up next to the disciples on the Emmaus road, Jesus does not treat them as novices. He teaches them in such a way that they are able to connect what they already know intellectually to what they have experienced emotionally. This then leads them to an actual practice of their faith—sharing this with others. Discipleship, then, is about progression, moving from novice to scholar. These may not be the best terms possible, however it is the intent that they communicate an intention—that being that Christians are meant to grow intellectually, emotionally and practically in their faith. Whether we adopt a model for discipleship that draws from developmental theory³⁸ or relational dynamics³⁹, the church must strive to provide a way for Christians to grow in their faith. Jesus models it for us in Luke 24 and Philip operationalizes it for us in Acts 8. In doing so, we can lean into the “way” model for mission and discipleship clearly demonstrated in these texts.

Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act, The Artistry of Preaching Series (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

³⁸John J. Gleason, Jr., *Growing Up to God: 8 Steps in Religious Development* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975).

³⁹Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship that Fits: The Five Kinds of Relationships that God Uses to Help Us Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).