


The Living Pulpit



Sermons
That Illustrate Preaching in the
Stone-Campbell Movement
1968-2018

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Preface

For much of the twentieth century, the churches in the three streams of the Stone-Campbell movement often kept their distance from each other, relating warily or even with hostility. However, over the past generation a spirit of rediscovery and reconciliation has taken root. This volume comes from that spirit as it brings together sermons from the three streams of the Stone-Campbell movement—the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Bruce Shields explains the nature and purpose of this book in relationship to our common heritage and to the three streams in the “Introduction to the Volume: Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement 1968–2018” (below).

The sermons in this volume are not considered “best” sermons. The editors view them as “typical” of the preaching that takes place in various preaching venues in the three streams—congregations, lectureships, meetings, conventions, and assemblies.

The sermons from preachers in each stream are presented in the approximate chronological order in which they were preached. Thus, sermons from early in the era appear first, from the middle of the second half of the twentieth century in the middle of the sermons, and the sermons from the latter part of the period at the ends of each section.

Many preachers today make use of electronic media in preaching, such as projections on a big screen. We indicate the presence of such media in this book by the use of brackets and the term “Project,” and include a short description of the projection, as in [Project: Ephesians 2:9]. When ellipses occur in the sermons, they indicate notations in the preacher’s manuscript and not deleted material, unless otherwise noted in the sermon introductory piece.

Where the preacher has given a specific biblical passage or passages as basic to the sermon, we cite that biblical material under the title of the sermon. While all the sermons deal with the Bible, not all preachers list a biblical text or texts at the outset of the sermon as the basis or bases for the message. In the latter cases, we simply give the title to the sermons with the preachers referring to biblical passages within the messages. In the introduction to each sermon, the editors indicate the primary Bible translation the preacher quotes. Other translations used within the sermon are indicated in parentheses. Places where preachers paraphrase Scripture are also noted in parentheses.

Joseph R. Jeter Jr., Granville T. Walker and Earline Walker Professor of Preaching Emeritus at Brite Divinity School conceived this project.

Several Stone-Campbell scholars of preaching who meet at the Academy of Homiletics informally became the contributing editors listed on the title page. The scholars in each stream selected 13 sermons typical of their stream and wrote the interpretive essays orienting readers to their stream. Bruce Shields prepared the Introduction to the book. Mary Alice Mulligan served as General Editor.

The editors express gratitude to the Oreon E. Scott Foundation for a generous grant that made possible the publication of this book, and to Matthew Myer Boulton and Verity Jones of Christian Theological Seminary—President and Executive Vice-President, respectively—for supporting this project. Several of the editors also helped underwrite publication.

The Living Pulpit 2018 is dedicated to Professor Joseph R. Jeter Jr., who embodies the core emphases of our movement in his own preaching, scholarship, and person—salvation by grace, restoring the vitality of the church with the spirit of the Gospels and Letters, and witnessing to the ecumenical unity of the church.

We send this volume into the churches with the prayer that it will contribute to the mutual respect, cooperation, and reconciliation at work across our movement.

Introduction to the Volume: Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement 1968-2018

by Bruce Shields

The book before you is the fourth in a series of collections of representative sermons preached among congregations related to the Stone-Campbell Movement. The first was published in 1868, about 60 years after Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* was printed, so it surveys the earliest preaching of the reformation begun by Barton Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell. William Thomas Moore edited that collection and also the second one in 1918.¹ The third was edited by Hunter Beckelhymer and published in 1969 under the title, *The Vital Pulpit of the Christian Church*.² Since each of these collections surveys about 50 years of preaching, it is time for another. Our decision to include the three streams of the movement necessitated a broad-based editorial committee. You can find our names elsewhere in the book.

In any endeavor such as this, readers will think of preachers who are not represented here. To present a balanced picture, we had to limit each of the three streams of the movement to 13 preachers. Some preachers we contacted turned down our invitation for one reason or another, but we are convinced that those we feature on these pages present a good representation of the movement and the half-century that we are studying.

When the editorial committee commissioned me to write this essay, I began to think of the changes I have lived through. Born when my parents and grandparents were just getting over World War I and the Great Depression that followed it, I was introduced to a society preparing to fight a second world war. Lightweight airplanes had been used in the first war for reconnaissance, but now big ones were bombing cities and eventually carrying an atomic bomb to Hiroshima and then, on my eighth birthday, to Nagasaki. As I grew toward adulthood, the war was in Korea, then in early adulthood in Vietnam. As I write this, war is being waged by drones controlled from thousands of miles distant from the battlefield. Computers have developed in sophistication as they have become ever smaller. I recall wooden telephones screwed to walls that we cranked before giving a number to an operator. Now I carry a computerized phone in my pocket. The upcoming generation of preachers never knew a society without the ubiquitous computer and smartphone, yet preaching continues. It might be at a drive-in church or in a warehouse-type building, or even in a Gothic

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cathedral, but it is still somebody talking to somebody else, as it has been for two millennia and more.

Our book listens to preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Churches of Christ, and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ—in the period beginning about 1968 and ending around 2018. This period saw some rather radical changes in the world, including the world of homiletics, both as preaching was taught in colleges and seminaries and as it was practiced in local congregations. This was especially the case in North America. The 1960s were years of ferment in many areas of our society. This was a decade of anti-war demonstrations, racial unrest, and general questioning of authority. The generation of people born soon after the close of World War II was not satisfied with the status quo, and they were generally suspicious of authorities. For these so-called “Baby Boomers,” the action was in the streets, with young people marching, sitting in, or otherwise demonstrating for one cause or another. Professors of preaching were driven to offer courses on the relevance of preaching, because many students saw sermons as totally out of touch with where the real action was.

Yes, many people questioned whether or not preaching would survive the century. Into this quagmire came a book by Fred Craddock (who was a lifelong member of the Stone-Campbell Movement) titled *As One Without Authority*.³ Craddock had prepared to teach New Testament, but when called to teach both New Testament *and* preaching at the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University, he had to do some hard thinking about preaching. Until that time, preaching had followed the template of developing a proposition with three or four points of analysis and argument and a conclusion to apply the proposition to life. Illustrations and poems seasoned the presentation, but the basic form was argumentation. Preachers were often educated to think and present in the same way lawyers were. They were “preaching for a verdict.”⁴ This meant that they were passing on information from a position of authority—what Dr. Paul Scherer liked to characterize as “eight feet above criticism.”

Craddock’s education in New Testament and his personal ability to tell stories (he credits his father for this⁵) led him in a different direction. He was already familiar with the so-called “new hermeneutic” that was flowering in Europe and reaching the shores of North America. It appeared to be time for a matching “new homiletic.” He recognized that seminary students were now spending time in the relatively new disciplines of pastoral psychology and congregational management or leadership.⁶ These fledgling specialties were emphasizing dialogue and conversation as tools in the minister’s workshop. Preaching, on the other hand, was still seen as a monologue, with a few exceptions in which preachers were experimenting with staged

dialogue. Newly minted preachers were feeling the tension. The practice of preaching was in search of new ways to practice.

Therefore, when *As One Without Authority* was published in 1971, its intended readership was ready. The response from reviewers was not unanimously positive, but it was soon the talk of the homiletics community. It was a plea for appreciation of the spoken word as not just a neutral conveyance of information, but rather as a communion of persons, including the person of God. It insisted that the preacher take seriously the Scriptures as speaking first to the preacher and then to the congregation. And it reminded the preacher that the divine word is primarily speech, and must be spoken to accomplish its purpose.⁷

Craddock urged a switch from deductive presentation of statements of general truth with an application at the end to inductive description from start to finish, permitting the hearer, who is now involved in the discovery of truth, to make application to her or his life. This paragraph represents his thinking:

The plain fact of the matter is that we are seeking to communicate with people whose experiences are concrete. Everyone lives inductively, not deductively. No farmer deals with the problem of calthood, only with the calf. The woman in the kitchen is not occupied with the culinary arts in general but with a particular roast or cake. The wood craftsman is hardly able to discuss intelligently the topic of “chairness,” but is a master with a chair. We will speak of the sun rising and setting long after everyone knows better. The minister says, “All people are mortal,” and meets drowsy agreement; he announces that “Mr. Brown’s son is dying,” and the church becomes the church.⁸

This emphasis on pragmatics instead of generalities Craddock sees as the way the Christian Scriptures come to us. His insistence that each sermon should be based on a careful study of one or more biblical texts is the foundation of his homiletic. Whether the preacher follows the guidance of a lectionary or chooses his or her own texts to study, the sermon should find its foundation and often its form in the text. Quite often Craddock invited the congregation to join him in an investigation of a text, asking questions and dealing with puzzling issues. Overall, Craddock called for inductive preparatory study and inductive presentation, which led to mutual discovery of biblical meaning for life. His influence on preaching is so deep and broad that we have elected to feature one of his sermons to stand alone in this collection.

Craddock’s book was followed by a flood of books on preaching, after several decades of drought. Homiletics was interesting once more.

Churches' involvement in social issues was growing. Meanwhile preachers saw again that the sermon could instruct, motivate, and inspire action on the street. European American churches were learning what African American churches had known for decades: that preaching is an important influence in the congregation. Consider the influence of the preaching of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights struggle. Following Craddock's model, when the congregation is encouraged to participate in the unfolding of the sermon and sometimes even to draw their own conclusions, the preacher catches their interest and sends them back into the world with an important discovery.

As you read the sermons in this volume, you will note the change of the shape of sermons between preachers educated before 1975 and those educated more recently. Listen to the increase in narrative content and the decrease in analysis and argument. Watch how the sermon moves ever forward toward a destination without making the roadmap obvious. Note how younger preachers invite the listener to participate in the sermonic process instead of just sitting passively taking in information. Listen also to an increase in the amount of Scripture quoted and referred to in the sermons.⁹ Perhaps most important, watch how you are positioned in relation to the sermon. By that, I mean, Are you in it as a participant as it unfolds, or are you outside it as a receiver of information?

This newer way, which is very similar to how Jesus used parables in his preaching, we should not see as demeaning the older way. Communication styles change as listeners change. In the 19th century people were accustomed to listening intently to orations that often lasted an hour or more. Many people who heard Lincoln's address at Gettysburg went away disappointed. They considered it a flop because it was so different from other speeches of the time—even others of that day. It was over before most people were ready to listen. Yet today we look at it as a masterpiece of human communication. In the same way, people who listened to sermons in the first half of the twentieth century were accustomed to proposition, analysis, and proofs, with an application tacked on at the end. However, the effect of having television sets in our living rooms changed our patterns of receiving communication. Eugene Lowry recognized this connection, and in his book, *The Homiletical Plot*, he lays out a pattern for sermons that follows the format of the TV mystery show.¹⁰

The template of the Sunday morning sermon changed ever so slowly, but change it did. Not only did the form change, but also even the length of sermons. In contrast to the 20-minute sermon many of us professors insisted on in preaching classes, some congregations are now willing to pay attention for 45 minutes or more. I recall listening to Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" for the first time and realizing that my

bemoaning the ever-briefer attention spans of late-twentieth-century people was overblown. People would sit for two hours listening to a man spin yarns over the radio about the fictional town of Lake Wobegone, and that meant a preacher should be able to hold their attention for 45 minutes if what the sermon communicated was real life, and not vacuous metaphysics.

So preaching has changed during these 50 years, just as it has in other time spans. It adjusts as the way people hear changes, and if it doesn't, it won't be heard. You will note also transformations in the preachers. Perhaps the most momentous difference is the inclusion in this volume of a number of female preachers. Their contributions mark another important shift in the Stone-Campbell Movement. We recognize that there remains resistance in some quarters to women in congregational leadership, but that resistance appears to continue to weaken as we go to print.

Momentous changes in the world and in the church, accompanied by important renovations in preaching during these last 50 years, are all reflected in this collection of sermons. We offer them to the movement and to the church in general as instruction in how communication changes and as a challenge to the upcoming generation of preachers to let the word go forth boldly. Preaching styles have varied and changed many times over the centuries, and they will again. Preachers should keep in mind the advice of Fred Craddock: "The goal is not to get something said, but to get something heard."¹¹

A Sermon Acknowledging the Importance of Fred B. Craddock to Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement

In the Introduction, Bruce Shields sets out the importance of the work of Fred B. Craddock to the larger world of preaching. In addition, Craddock probably traveled in the three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement more than any other ecclesial leader from 1968 to 2018. He was a white man who spoke comfortably in congregations of diverse racial ethnicities. His ecumenicity of spirit was especially unusual in the early years of our period, and that contributed to the growing rapprochement among the streams. In many ways, he embodied the best of our movement's commitment to the Scriptures and the vision of Christian unity. It seems appropriate to include his sermon in the broad flow of our movement rather than within one stream. Craddock paraphrases Scripture throughout the sermon.

“Attending a Baptism”¹

Matthew 3:13–17

Our Scripture text for today invites us to attend a baptism. I do not have to tell this group how important baptism is. In the Gospel of Matthew, from which our text comes, the story begins with baptism, John baptizing in the river Jordan, and ends with baptism. The final words of Jesus at the end of Matthew are, “Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And, lo, I will be with you always, to the end of the age.”

As important as baptism is, I do not have any instructions for how you are to behave during one, probably because every significant occasion tends to create its own atmosphere and itself modifies the behavior of people in appropriate ways. If you attend a funeral, say, even though it may be the first funeral you have ever attended, you need no instruction. Beforehand, people are standing around talking about everything under the sun.

“Did you have any pipes that burst?”

“Yeah, yeah. My kitchen floor was all wet and everything.”

“Has Lucille had her baby?”

“Yeah, yeah, she had it Thursday.”

“Really? What is it, a boy or a girl?”

“A girl.”

“How many does that make now? Is that five?”

“No, that’s her sixth.”

“Why do they keep having them? They can’t feed the ones they have. Why is it people that are poor seem to have the most kids?”

“Did your husband go deer hunting?”

“Yeah, yeah, didn’t get anything—never does—but he still thinks he’s the big hunter.”

“Been awfully cold. Did it kill the rest of your collards, or did you bring them in?”

“Well, I have about two messes in the refrigerator, but...”

And then everything stops when the widow comes in—this woman who now must face life without her husband—and the children, who overnight must grow up and help their mother without a father. You do not need instruction on how to behave. The occasion modifies and sweetens your disposition appropriate to the occasion.

The same thing is true at a wedding. Before a wedding begins, people are laughing and talking, exchanging bad jokes and stale talk and this and that. What are they discussing? Shaving cream all over the windshield and tying tin cans to the bumper and all that kind of stuff. But then the bride comes down the aisle and the nervous groom looks up the aisle hoping he will not faint, trying to keep his eye on her, and then they fold themselves together before the minister and the words begin: “Will you, in sickness and in health, poverty and wealth, forsaking everybody else, keep yourself only unto her as long as you both shall live?” You do not need instructions. The occasion modifies the behavior.

It is like children when great-grandmother comes. She is so old and has suffered so much. The children come in laughing from playing outside, and suddenly they see her and they grow quiet. They are in awe. They want to touch her; they want to hear her. She is so old, has experienced so much, and you do not have to say, “Now children, this is the way you behave around your great-grandmother...” They know.

It is the same way with a baptism. I know before a baptism that some people are kind of silly, laughing and talking and doing this and that. It is nervousness, really, but then when the minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” anyone who is not hushed into the sacredness of that moment is shallow.

So I have no instruction on how to behave as we attend a baptism. The baptism we will attend is the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth. That is a bit surprising, because of all people the one who should be exempt from baptism is Jesus. Why should he not stand high on the bank and watch the others? Why should he not let all the others come for baptism, those who need a second chance, those who messed it up, those who have waded out so deep into trouble that going across and going back is all the same? Let the people who have drifted so far from mother’s prayers and father’s instruction that nobody can help them, let them come. Let the people whose

lives are just a tangle of bad relationships, who have messed everything up and out of ambition and greed think they are going everywhere when they are actually just circling the parking lot going nowhere, the people who are rich in things and poor in soul, let them come. But Jesus? Why is Jesus here? That is what John says: “Jesus, you should baptize *me*. I should not be baptizing you.”

And Jesus replies, “Leave it alone, John. It is appropriate to do God’s will. Let us do it.”

So Jesus presents himself for baptism. He is 30 years old. Why is he coming now? We can speculate. In Israel, anyone entering public life did so at age 30. Maybe that’s reason enough; I do not know. Maybe in the synagogue, listening to the rabbi read the Scripture while others are dozing off, something strikes him and says, “That’s it—now!” Maybe in the afternoons after work in the carpenter shop, Jesus goes for long walks and communes with God and there is this stirring within him. Maybe he remembers something he saw when he was a teenager south of Nazareth. The Romans came in and gathered up some of the men of the town and strung them up on poles just to warn the people that they did not want any trouble, and there is this burning desire for justice and fairness. Maybe that is it. I do not know. Maybe it was his mother’s prayers. Or, maybe he still remembers when he was twelve years old in the temple, saying, “I have to be in my Father’s house.”

Why now? That’s a good question. I do not have an answer, but it is a good question. It is a good question if somebody 60 years old comes. Why now? It is a good question if someone 12 years old comes, stays after church, wants to say something, awkwardly stands on one foot and then the other, and finally asks, “Uh, can I be baptized?”

“You want to be baptized?”

“I want to be baptized.”

“Have you been thinking about this very long?”

“Ever since I was little.”

“Well, how old are you now?”

“12.”

“And you have been thinking about this since you were little?”

“Yes”

“Have you talked to your folks about it?”

“Well, I mentioned it once to my mother. I don’t talk to Dad much about this sort of thing.”

“Well, what did your mother say?”

“She said to talk to you.”

“Okay, let’s talk about it. Why do you want to be baptized? Why now, why you, now?”

“I don’t know.”

You do not know the stirring of the Spirit of God. John says you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; you hear the sound of it and you say, “Whew!” The wind. You did not see the wind. There is a tree standing straight and tall and proud, and then you see that tree go over, bending and touching its top to the ground, and you say, “What in the world?” It is the wind. You did not see the wind, but you saw the tree bend. And I saw a person proud and independent and arrogant, bent. What did that? The Spirit of God. I saw a ship, a sailing boat out on the lake, just hanging out there, derelict, rocking, rocking, with its sails hanging limp like they were dead. Suddenly the sails filled and the boat began to knife its way through the water, and I say, “What was that?” You say it was the wind. Did you see the wind? I didn’t see the wind. How do you know? Well, look at it.

Just so, you have seen it in life. A person works six months here, six months there, moves somewhere else and does a little of this and a little of that. Then, suddenly, a transformation. Now this person has a purpose, a goal in life, and what was that? You do not know. You do not really know why now, or why this, or what happened.

All I know is this: One day, Jesus folded his carpenter’s apron, having shaken the shavings from it, put it on the bench, left the shop, and went to the house and told his mother and brothers and sisters goodbye. He made his way through the grain fields of Ezdralon, down through the dark valley of the gap of Jezreel, and presented himself to John for baptism. This was God’s will.

On that occasion, we learned a great deal about Jesus. A voice said, “This is my son.” No question about it. *This is my son*. What does that mean? The line is a quotation from Psalm 2. It was spoken on the occasion of the crowning of the king of Israel, and now it is quoted at Jesus’ baptism. He is now king. What does it mean that he is God’s Son? Does he go around now in a chariot with silk cushions and wear a crown and say kingly things and elevate himself above the common folk, saying “Don’t touch me—I am the Son of God. I am the king and I say kingly things and make pronouncements? Now I am going to the palace and have a nap and a banquet”?

The last part of the quotation—“My Son, my beloved, in whom my soul takes pleasure”—do you know what that is? It is a phrase from Isaiah 42. It is a line from the description of the suffering servant of God, the one who gives his life. It means touching, loving, going, doing, caring for people. *Here is my Son, the servant*. And so it was. Still wet from his baptism, Jesus left the Jordan and went about God’s business. Every crying person, every brokenhearted person, every hungry person, every diseased person, every alienated person, every suffering person was his business. I am the

king? I am the Son of God? Oh, no, no, no, no. What this means is, God's business is my business. And what is God's business? To serve the needs of every human being. He is a servant. Did you know that? Well, of course you knew. He actually knelt down and washed people's feet. The Son of God washed feet.

Luther said, "Remember your baptism?" How can people do that? In Luther's church, most of the baptisms were of infants. They were brought by their mothers and fathers and they were baptized. So how could they remember their baptisms? Luther knew that when they became 12 and 13 they would be confirmed in the church and they would claim their baptisms. "Yes," they would say, "I accept my baptism. I remember my baptism." So Luther wanted to know, "Do you remember your baptism?" Why did Luther say that? To make you feel guilty? "Aha! You've strayed from your baptism." No, no. Every one of us strays from our baptism, forgets our baptism, denies our baptism. Every one of us. Show me a bird who can say, "I look like my song." None of us can do that. But what Luther had in mind was this: Remember your baptism by claiming yourself to be a child of God and by going about God's business—serving other people.

In southwest Oklahoma, near the Washita Creek where Black Kettle and most of the women and children of his little tribe were massacred by General Custer's army when they swept down in the early morning hours on those poor people, a little community is named for the general: Custer City. My wife, Nettie, and I ministered there for three years. The population was about 450 on a good day. There were four churches: a Methodist church, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church, and a Christian church. Each had its share of the population, and on Wednesday nights and Sundays, each church had a small collection of young people. The attendance rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat.

The best and most consistent attendance in town, however, was at the little cafe where all the pickup trucks were parked and all the men were inside discussing the weather and the cattle and the wheat bugs and the hail and the wind and whether we were going to have a crop, while their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches. The churches had good attendance and poor attendance, but that cafe had consistently good attendance—better attendance than some of the churches. Men were always there.

Once in a while they would lose a member there at the cafe because his wife finally got to him, or maybe his kids did. So you would see him go off sheepishly to one of the churches. But the men at the cafe still felt that they were the biggest and strongest group in town, and so they met on Wednesdays and Sundays and every other day to discuss the weather and such. They were not bad men. Indeed, they were good men, family men, hardworking men. The patron saint of the group at the cafe was Frank.

Frank was 77 years old when I met him. He was a good man, a strong man, a pioneer, a rancher, a farmer, and a cattleman. He had been born in a sod house, and he had prospered. He had his credentials, and all the men there at the cafe considered him their patron saint. "Ha ha," they said. "Old Frank will never go to church."

One day I met Frank on the street, and he knew I was a preacher. It has never been my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus, so I just shook hands and visited with Frank. Then he took the offensive. He said, "I work hard and I take care of my family and I mind my own business." He said that as far as he was concerned, everything else is fluff. He was telling me, "Leave me alone; I'm not a prospect."

So I did not bother Frank. That is why I was surprised, indeed the church was surprised and the whole town was surprised and the men at the cafe church were absolutely bumfuzzled, when old Frank, 77 years old, presented himself before me one Sunday morning for baptism. I baptized Frank. Some in the community said that Frank must be sick, said he must be scared to meet his maker. Some said, "He's got heart trouble, going up to be baptized. I never thought old Frank would do that, but I guess when you get scared..." There were all kinds of stories. But this is the way Frank told it to me. We were talking the day after his baptism and I said, "Frank, do you remember that little saying you used to give me so much? 'I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business?'"

He said, "Yeah, I remember. I said that a lot."

"Do you still say that?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Then what's the difference?"

He said, "I didn't know then what my business was."

Frank discovered what his business was. It was to serve human need. So I baptized Frank. I raised my hand and said in the presence of those who gathered, "Upon your confession of faith in Jesus Christ and in obedience to his command, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Do you remember that? Do you remember that?

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