From text to gospel: Beyond Bibleland

by Peter J Gomes in the October 25, 2000 issue

Those of us who preach or teach preaching are always looking for the right words to convey biblical truth. How do we do it? How do we invite congregations to "Bibleland," that ancient world where we go week after week, and then connect them with the good news, news that is supposed to inform the way we live our lives here and now?

We try to communicate the essence of the story, exegeting the text with care, looking at the language and its context, subtext, pretext. We make sure we have the syntax right, and spend time with our Hebrew and Greek. We check commentaries, and then we distill it all down and present it with sincerity and authority.

Most of us take preaching very seriously. We believe that our job is to open up the treasure hidden in the biblical text. Because we wish to be known as biblical preachers, the greatest insult that can be hurled in our Protestant circle is to say, "Well, he or she is not a biblical preacher." We are reassured when we hear the preacher say, "I take as my text . . ."

We believe that some texts in the 66 books are more equal than others, but sometimes we look for obscure texts in order to provide variety, like the vicar who stood up and announced as his text, "My brother Esau is a hairy man, and I [Jacob] am a smooth man," then based the entire sermon on this utterly inconsequential text. This is "textual harassment," the notion that no matter what the text, it will offer some knowledge of what the gospel is all about. It's not necessarily so.

As theologian Edward Farley suggests, we can make such efforts to preach the Bible yet lose the gospel. We must remember that the Bible is not an end in itself, but the means to revealing the gospel. Let's not confuse the good news with the means by which it is communicated. That leads to the sin of idolatry, the sin of bibliolatry and the Protestant danger of worshiping the text.

We find ourselves “preaching Jesus” instead of what Jesus preached. We confine Jesus to one place and one medium, and the result is that his message is inhibited, blunted and stunted. Often we’re invested in the *context*—which side of the Jordan Jesus stood on, the temperature of the Sea of Galilee—while the content of Jesus’ preaching remains elusive.

Jesus did not come preaching the New Testament. In his first sermon, he offered an interpretation of the book of the prophet of Isaiah, announcing that Isaiah’s prophecy had been fulfilled. His listeners and his followers sat up and paid attention, both those who liked what he said and those who did not. He was preaching “good news.”

His news was future-oriented. He was interested in the past, but didn’t linger there. He applied the past to the present so that the people could be instructed by it and could face the future, embrace it and transform it.

The gospel is for the time that is to come. Its good news is centered in a real world that struggles with questions of suffering, evil, idolatry, hope and freedom. Those issues were as prickly and elusive then as they are now. Take the moneychangers at the temple. Jesus charges these people with idolatry, with giving loyalty to something incapable of rewarding their loyalty. He is dealing with misapplied affections and devotions. His act is revolutionary in that he gives a name to an offense that appears natural and normal and turns an apparently permanent order of events upside down.

The gospel of Christ is transformative. He is in the business of changing people and changing circumstances. There is no more effective, no more powerful a transformation than making someone who was sick well, someone who was crippled whole and someone who was dead, alive. These are serious and powerful changes that suggest that change, not conservation, is the order of the day.

The good news is inclusive. It is meant to destroy all exclusive categories and to include all those who were previously excluded, marginalized, humiliated or reduced to objects of charity or derision.

Think about that marvelous dinner party, that wild social gathering at the house of Levi the tax collector. The Pharisees and the doctors of the law were horrified by Jesus’s presence. They called Jesus a “winebibber,” said he consorted with lowlifes, and accused him of bringing the name of the religious community into disrepute by

violating the social laws of religious apartheid.

Some of the most pious Christians in America sustained and maintained my ancestors in chattel slavery, not out of some perverse wickedness and evil, but out of a notion that this was perfectly consistent with the gospel. The practice, however, is incompatible with the gospel, which is inclusive, transformative and future-oriented.

What is the result of a gospel of that sort, appropriately and clearly understood? The result is crucifixion. To recognize the implications of the good news is to be at risk. Everything, including our lives, is at risk until we realize that we gain lives worth living and worth giving up when we respond to that good news.

Preaching the gospel is a summons to faithful existence in the face of whatever happens. This is more than textual tag, more than biblicism or bibliolatry. As another preacher said, “Take your text; truly depart from your text; never return to your text, but go to where your text sends you.” That’s good advice, especially if it leads us to the gospel, the liberating good news for needy people.