Preaching on Hell

RESOURCES FOR SERMON CREATION

Using *Second Thoughts about Hell*,
by Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall, in the Pulpit

While we wrote *Second Thoughts about Hell* for group study and individual reading, ministers could focus sermons on hell as well as on the broader notion that God punished people in the past and/or punishes people today. These resources here are intended to help preachers prepare sermons that deal with hell, and often by extension, with other aspects of divine punishment. The preacher might do so in in the whole of the sermon or in part. Incorporating these concepts into sermons can be particularly helpful for carrying on the conversations had during church group study of the book.

We begin by urging preachers to name their own responses—thoughts and feelings—that come to the surface at the prospect of preaching about hell. We then explore some opportunities the preacher may have to bring hell into the pulpit, and we suggest some strategies a preacher might incorporate into the sermon. We conclude by illustrating an approach to bringing hell into a sermon in a familiar sermon structure.

Talk about hell should take place under the umbrella of respect. Preachers and members from church to church and within the same congregation often hold diverse beliefs about hell. As is seen in the book, some people affirm hell as a literal reality. Others understand hell in the figurative sense. Still others do not believe that a loving God could allow hell. Some listeners are agnostic—they are not sure whether they believe hell exists. Others are disinterested.

We mention the importance of speaking about others and their points of view with respect because occasionally people in each of these camps caricature others, make fun of their viewpoints, engage in name-calling, and otherwise show disrespect. Such behavior is inappropriate in the Christian community whose members are to "love one another" (1 John 4:7–21). Moreover, disrespectful behavior only reinforces the polarization and partisanship so destructive to our time. To be sure, preachers and congregants are called to reflect critically on all understandings of hell and to determine which are more and less appropriate to their deepest convictions about God. But Christians, including preachers, should communicate these perspectives with respect.

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Naming the Preacher's Own History and Feelings and Those of the Congregation

All sermon preparation should begin with preachers taking account of their existing thoughts and feelings. This process is sometimes called "naming your preassociations" or "identifying your embedded theology." Our preassociations or embedded theologies are made up of things that we assume but about which we seldom think critically. Even preachers who have worked in systematic or constructive theology sometimes retain untested assumptions about hell or encounter the doctrine of hell and have an immediate reaction that determines their views without giving deeper consideration to the matter.

This aspect of preparation can help preachers in two ways. First, when we recognize the interpretive lens and the penumbra of associations we bring to the idea of hell, we lessen the likelihood that we will simply reproduce these ideas and feelings in the sermon without further casting the light of critical reflection on them. The preacher can never be a blank slate who approaches hell with complete neutrality. But awareness of the thoughts and emotions with which ministers approach the sermon increases the likelihood that our preassociations and embedded perspectives will not control the sermon.

Second, the preacher might be able to use some of the data that surfaces in this exercise in the sermon itself. This can often be a way of establishing identification with the congregation. The chances are good that some in the listening community will have questions, perceptions, and feelings similar to those of the preacher. For example, the preacher may share some of these orientations:

- Many parishioners may be nervous about a message that deals with hell.
- Many may think about hell in caricature.
- Many may be confused about what they believe.
- Many may have questions about hell.
- Many may be in situations in which other Christians call the authenticity of their Christian faith into question because they do not believe in the necessity of punishment in the afterlife.
- Many may have turned away from thinking about hell because they are so focused on this life.
- Many may have been traumatized by Christian communities that emphasized hell in frightening, hurtful ways.
- Many may not believe the God of love would consign people to hell.
- Many may be agnostic with respect to whether they believe in hell.

In addition, preachers may be anxious about how members of the listening community may respond to the sermon.

While the preacher could share such things almost anywhere in the sermon, we tend to think the preacher is likely to use them in the early part of the sermon as a way of inviting identification with the congregation and easing them into the sermon. When it comes to referring to such things directly in the sermon, whether at the beginning or elsewhere, preachers may want to calibrate their own preassociations with those in the congregation so the preacher does not unintentionally drop an emotional or intellectual bomb that will distress many in the pews to the point that they shut down listening.

Being Clear about the Preacher's Own Convictions While Respecting Others

It should go without saying that the preacher should be as clear as possible about their own theological convictions regarding punishment in the afterlife. The preacher may have come to this book (and to the task of preaching on hell) with a clearly formed viewpoint. If so, it is always worth reviewing one's perceptions and why one holds them. If the preacher has come to the book and the task with an unformed or partially formed conviction, the theological method abbreviated in the introduction of the book may be a help toward clarification along with the review of historical and contemporary points of view. Preachers may be agnostic with respect to punishment in the beyond; that is, the preacher may think it is impossible to have confidence that hell does or does not exist. As someone said to one of us, "There could be a hell. There could not. We won't know in this life."

Of course, the preacher must decide the degree to which to share their beliefs in the sermon. Generally, we think it is good for the preacher to do so, along with why the preacher finds that way of thinking to be convincing. But each preaching context has its own dynamics. On the one hand, in today's world, when people polarize so easily, the preacher who reveals too much too soon may run the risk of closing communication with many listeners. On the other hand, of course, holding back also runs the risk of denying the congregation an opportunity that could lead to creatively engaging the issue. Only the local minister embedded in a congregation can make this call.

Preachers may be able to make use of their autobiographies with respect to hell in the sermon itself. One of the best ways to invite the congregation to consider a particular understanding of hell is to recount one's own journey, especially if it involves a change of perspective. What did the preacher assume initially? On what basis? What factor(s) prompted the preacher to open the file on hell, so to speak? What were the stages of the journey and what prompted the moves from one stage to another?

While a preacher who is agnostic regarding the afterlife may initially be hesitant about saying in the pulpit something like "I really do not know what I believe," some listeners may find that such honesty gives them permission to identify and claim their own honest similarities. Such an admission may open the door to creative interchange. Of course, some listeners might react very negatively to such a statement. "What do you mean, you don't know, pastor? You are supposed to know these things."

We emphasize the importance of respecting viewpoints that differ from the preacher's because, as mentioned above, the early twenty-first century is noted for its polarization, hyperbolic rhetoric, and authentic conversation being replaced by partisan confrontation intended to draw boundaries in an atmosphere devoid of critical thinking. When the preacher dismisses other viewpoints (and those who hold them) in the same mode, the preacher compounds the reactivity of the present ethos.

Moreover, such approaches can undercut the witness of the church. We once witnessed such a slash-and-burn interchange in which one person said to a preacher after the service, "And you stand up there in the pulpit and ask us to 'Love one another.'" The preacher is advised to respond to such outbursts with pastoral, active listening, in search of keeping the relational door open. But when the respondent seems adamant and hostile, the preacher may show wisdom by simply acknowledging that "we have different points of view," and withdrawing from the interchange, hoping to re-open the door another day.

Opportunities to Preach on Punishment in the Afterlife

We observe that preachers often give short shrift to references to hell in biblical and theological materials, sometimes even passing over such mentions without comment. To be sure, when hell appears in a biblical text or in a doctrinal statement or in some other venue, the preacher does not have to devote the entire sermon to that aspect of the material. But we do think that a preacher might often acknowledge the presence of the concept so that listeners do not become sidetracked by puzzling over what the text means by hell. Moreover, acknowledging the presence of a reference to hell is a part of respecting the otherness of the text. Avoidance shortchanges congregations with respect to understanding the full fabric of what the text or doctrine invited listeners to believe and do in antiquity. Congregations, then, sometimes have a deficit of resources with which to make theological sense of a passage or doctrine for today. Indeed, such avoidance can leave listeners with their pre-existing notions in place. These ideas are often a caricature of the assumptions of the biblical writers and churches through history.

The preacher has many opportunities to bring punishment in the afterlife into the pulpit. The preacher could approach hell through engagement with biblical texts or themes, or by way of a topical sermon with a doctrinal focus. Hell could be a focus for an entire sermon or a series of sermons. The preacher could also comment on hell as part of the exposition of a

biblical text that contains a direct reference to hell or assumes that the listeners in the ancient world had an awareness of hell as part of their cultural setting.

Preaching in Conversation with the Christian Year and the Lectionary

Many congregations, especially in the historic denominations, organize their worship and preaching around the Christian Year and the Revised Common Lectionary. The Christian Year is not simply an organizational tool but provides a theological framework within which to understand Christian theology and to understand the biblical passages in the lectionary. Both the Christian Year and the lectionary call for the preacher to consider the subject of God punishing people in hell or in some other way. To reiterate a theological theme that runs throughout the book (and is most prominent in Part Three and the Study Guide), the preacher is not called to reiterate conventional understandings of hell but to take advantage of opportunities presented by themes in the Christian Year and the biblical passage in the lectionary. These materials can help the congregants consider what they truly believes about hell and about God punishing people actively, or allowing people to bring punishing circumstances on themselves, or some other consideration.

We join many other scholars of worship and preaching in recommending that preachers periodically help familiarize or re-familiarize the congregation with the theology and purpose of the Christian Year. Even Christians who have been in congregations observing the Christian Year for long periods of time can lose sight of its purposes. Folklore can replace history and theology. A good many people come into the church without having grown up learning about the Christian Year or under the weekly tutelage of the lectionary. An occasional sermon or series of sermons on the Christian Year can help the congregation remember its purpose and live accordingly.

The Christian Year focuses on God's gracious work of salvation and on how to live in response. The motif of salvation is particularly notable in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, as well as during Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, the Sundays after Easter, and Pentecost. The other Sundays of the year are in Ordinary Time. To make a general statement, Ordinary Time brings our attention to how to live in response to the gift of salvation.

The Christian Year does not have a season of punishment under the rubric "Hell." But the focus on salvation in the Christian Year implicitly presumes the notion of hell. As we noted in chapter 3, all the Gospels and Letters presume that salvation includes salvation not only from the brokenness of the present world but also from some form of punishment in the afterlife. The book of Revelation, for instance, anticipates the violent destruction of the Roman Empire and the punishment of those who allied themselves with Rome. The writer, John, pleads with members of the congregation to which he wrote to repent of any collusion with Rome and to witness faithfully in the face of the Empire and thereby to avoid sharing in the fate of Rome.

The Christian Year is based on an apocalyptic theology. While many preachers tend to gloss over the presence of hell in many lectionary readings from the Gospels and Letters, a closer look often reveals that a text assumes the possibility of threat of punishment in the next world or even in this one. For instance, as we point out in chapter 3, while Christians often say that Advent is preparation for Christmas, the readings from the ministry of John the Baptist that begin the Christian Year anticipate the ministry of Jesus and point toward the second coming as the ultimate goal of the first coming. The events around the apocalyptic return of Jesus include a final judgment, at which time God welcomes the faithful into the Realm of God but assigns the unfaithful to punishment.

Preaching on the Christian Year itself gives the preacher the opportunity to reflect theologically with the congregation on the degree to which they do (or do not) think some kind of punishment is present or ahead and if so, what kind. For many apocalyptic theologians, punishment in the afterlife might be literally burning in the flames or some other form of punishment such as annihilation or something else. For some theologians, the future contains no punishment but unfolds into universal salvation. A sermon or series of sermons can help the congregation sort out what they believe and how to act in ways consistent with their beliefs.

The biblical passages in the lectionary often present the preacher with opportunities to address the subject of hell. For example, the parable in Luke 16:19–31 pictures two people—the wealthy person in this life who lived sumptuously and Lazarus who lived in poverty outside the wealthy person's gate and ate scraps. In the parable, they are consigned to eternal life with Lazarus in the place of comfort and the wealthy person in torment, begging Lazarus for a drop of water. Luke, of course, is not attempting a straightforward description of hell but is using the parable to stress the importance of Jesus' disciples sharing their resources with the impoverished in the community. Threat of punishment in hell was one of the most potent motivators in Luke's world. By using it in the parable, Luke underscores the importance of sharing resources, which Acts later describes as "having all things in common" (Acts 2:42–47).

Preaching in Conversation with the Ecumenical Creeds and Theological Families

Many preachers in congregations whose theologies center in the ecumenical creeds wisely preach series of sermons on a creed as a way of helping the congregation think comprehensively about Christian faith. Preachers often devote a sermon to each element of the creed, calling attention to what the congregation might believe about God, Christ, the church, and the life to come. Indeed, the Apostles' Creed affirms that Christ "is seated at the right hand of God . . . almighty; from there [Christ] will come to judge the living and the dead."

The latter statement evokes the notion of a final judgment. While the creeds do not give details about this judgment, many people in the initial historical contexts of the creeds assumed the view articulated in our study of the New Testament (see chapter 3 of the book) that God

would welcome the faithful into eternal life and consign others to punishment. The preacher might use this conceptuality as a door opener into what they really believe about a final judgment and about the creed's later affirmations regarding "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." This network of beliefs includes what the people believe—or do not believe—about hell.

The creeds further open the door to considering the various interpretations of Christ descending into hell, including comparing and contrasting traditional voices with the views of Ephesians 4:7–9 and 1 Peter 3:18–20 set out on pp. 46-47 and 49-50 in this book. The preacher could deal with the specific theological substance of the creed and the text while also taking account of the differences between the conventional theological affirmations about Christ's descent into hell as an introduction to a study in how different interpretations make their way into the tradition and how to decide which interpretations are more and less persuasive.

Preaching in the Mode of Free Selection of Texts

Many preachers follow the pattern of free selection of biblical texts. Even preachers whose ordinary practice is the lectionary sometimes depart from the assigned readings. Free selection comes with both an opportunity and a caution. The opportunity, of course, is that when the preacher senses the need to think with the congregation about hell, the preacher can go immediately to a text that brings that subject into focus. The caution is that such a movement opens the window a little wider than usual for preachers to impose their own predispositions onto the text.

Preachers who select their own texts may refrain from choosing a text because it refers to punishment in the afterlife. They may choose a text for another reason but find that the passage contains a reference to hell. In this case, our advice above pertains: it would be good for the preacher to acknowledge this presence and to offer a brief explanatory word even if the message does not delve into hell in depth.

Preachers who operate under the banner of free selection have an excellent opportunity to create a series of sermons. One such series might begin with the emergence of movement from Sheol to punishment in the afterlife to diverse viewpoints in the Gospels and Letters. The preacher might pick a text as the starting point for each sermon and then develop the message or a study of the biblical theme with respect to hell as it is evoked in the text:

— Sermon 1: From Sheol to Punishment in the Afterlife in Judaism. Material from chapters 1 and 2 might be pertinent here (p. 19).

— Sermon 2: Punishment in the Afterlife in the First Three Gospels. Material from chapter 3 focusing on Mark, Matthew, and Luke might be helpful here (pp. 36-42).

— Sermon 3: Punishment in Paul. Material from chapter 3 focusing on Paul might be helpful here (pp. 42-45).

— Sermon 4: Punishment in the Fourth Gospel. Material from chapter 3 focusing on John might be helpful here (pp. 53-54).

— Punishment in the Book of Revelation. Material from chapter 3 focusing on the last book of the Bible might be helpful here (pp. 52-53).

Another possible series might focus on texts that deal with hell within a particular biblical writing. The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, offers a number of texts that offer different nuances on hell under the unifying banner of stressing the urgency of repenting and of ordering the life of the individual and community around the values of the Realm of God or facing condemnation.

Preaching in Conversation with a Topic

We join the great majority of preaching scholars in thinking that week-in, week-out preaching should ordinarily take place in conversation with a passage or theme from the Bible. However, occasions come up when a preacher might turn to a topical sermon rather than to a sermon centered in a biblical text. For example, some listeners may come from backgrounds in which they were subjected to harangues about hell in ways that damaged them and that undermine community. The subject might come up in a study group and then become a locus of conversation in the wider community or as parishioners interact with members of other congregations.

In a topical sermon, the preacher does not center the message in the exposition of a biblical passage but takes the preacher's deepest convictions about hell as the "text" for the sermon. A topical sermon allows the preacher to get immediately to the issues at hand and to think through them from a theological point of view without having to deal with the particular historical, literary, and theological background of a biblical text and then having to make a hermeneutical contact with today's community. An important feature of many topical sermons is the preacher setting out not only a particular posture of interpretation but explaining why that posture emanates from the preacher's overarching set of theological convictions.

Multiple Possibilities for Preaching on Hell

There is no one formula for preparing and preaching a sermon on hell. In this instance—as in any event of preaching—ministers need to take account of the context (the dynamics within and around the congregation), as well as the theological, pastoral, and social need(s) at the time of the sermon. Furthermore, sermons should be in the preacher's voice, even while adapting that voice to the purposes of the sermon in the moment. One size does not fit all. There can be as many approaches to preaching on punishment in the afterlife as there are preachers. All preachers need to find a size, so to speak, that fits the occasion while maintaining theological integrity.

The preacher can embrace a recent stream in thinking about preaching that calls for a shift from placing the weight of sermon preparation almost entirely on what the preacher wants to say to listening to where the congregation is on a text or issue and shaping the sermon, as much as possible, to give the congregation optimum opportunities to interact with the message. This move does not give up what the preacher wants to say but urges the preacher to think about how to say what they want to say in light of what strategies are more and less likely for congregational identification.

When Using a Big Screen

Preachers who use a big screen during the sermon can find a plethora of paintings, drawings, and other visual representations of hell, and even occasional snippets of movies and television shows. There are also many cartoons and line drawings of people—many of them humorous—related to punishment in the afterlife. Several considerations come with using such visuals. One is to respect the copyright rules that pertain to specific representations: while some are in the public domain, some also require permission. Another consideration is to use visuals that serve the purposes of the sermon and not to include such images gratuitously. People often enjoy humorous opticals (especially cartoons) but should place them in the sermon where they fit the immediate context and do not detract from serious materials that deserve thoughtful contemplation. While the sermon can contain humor in connection with viewpoints other than the one the preacher is espousing, it should always be respectful.

Another consideration is harder to take into account and applies to both graphics for the big screen and also the preacher's use of descriptive language about hell. The preacher needs to ponder the potential that a given visual representation or a vivid description might have to spark negative psychological reactions among members who have been damaged by their earlier encounters with preaching and teaching on hell. Of course, such trauma may be buried in the parishioner, and the preacher may not know anything about it. But if it comes to the surface, the preacher could make pastoral contact with the parishioner.

Formulating the Purposes of the Sermon

The preacher needs to formulate a purpose for the sermon. Toward this end, the preacher can recall what the congregation thinks and feels with regard to punishment in the afterlife or other manifestations of hell and correlate the things that are in the minds and hearts of the congregation with the purposes of the sermon. A sermon can have multiple purposes. Here are some examples.

— If many in the congregation are nervous and fearful about a message that deals with hell, the preacher can acknowledge these dynamics by recognizing such feelings and easing them into the subject in reassuring ways.

— If many in the congregation think about the idea of hell in caricature, the sermon may need to provide adequate information about what the church has actually believed.

— If many in the congregation are confused about what they believe, the message could help them sort out what they find more and less convincing.

— If many have questions about hell, the preacher might name such questions and draw on voices from Christian tradition past and present that reinforce the validity of such queries, affirm the values of questions in discovery, and offer resources in responding in ways that respect the sincerity and depth of the questions.

— If many are in situations in which other Christians have called the authenticity of their Christian faith into question—insisting that the beliefs of participants in the congregation are inadequate because they do not affirm the necessity of punishment in the afterlife—the preacher might help them formulate possible responses that demonstrate the logic of their convictions. The sermon could also prepare these members for the possibility that their opponents will not be persuaded and may continue to question them.

— If many have turned away from thinking about hell because they have been so focused on this life, the preacher might reinforce their commitment to the present while explaining that one reason for the emergence of hell was to emphasize the importance of accountability.

— If many have been traumatized by Christian communities that emphasized hell in frightening, hurtful ways, the preacher could bring this trauma into the open and help listeners recognize the prior misuse of the notion of hell and offer theological resources that can have healing effects. The sermon is not a substitute for the explorations that might take place in one-on-one or small-group therapy, but "theological counseling" can offer important resources.

— If many do not believe that a God of love would consign people to hell, the sermon could expand on why this belief is credible as a way of helping the congregation gain confidence in this viewpoint and explore its implications for the mission of the church. We have noticed that a fair number of progressives have an intuition away from hell and toward universal salvation or annihilationism.

— If many are agnostic with respect to whether they believe in hell, the message might explore the limits of our knowledge and explain what responsible thinkers on both sides of the matter suggest about believing or not believing in hell. Ron explains his own agnosticism in the afterward, "What Ron Believes about Hell."

A Sample Pattern of Movement for a Sermon on a Text that Threatens Hell

When it comes to organizing the sermon itself, there are multiple possibilities. In fact, one book describes and illustrates 37 different ways of structuring sermons, and there are many more. In addition, many preachers develop their own "voices," that is, their own distinctive ways of bringing the sermon to expression. We cannot offer a library of possibilities for shaping sermons on hell, but we can put forward an example of a sermon that demonstrates the movement from exegesis through theological reflection and hermeneutical point of contact to illustration when developing a sermon on a text that highlights punishment in the afterlife.

We illustrate with a sermon in the Puritan Plain Style. Readers may be surprised to find the Plain Style here. We turn to it for two reasons. For one, it has a proven record of helping preachers arrange material in the sermon and of helping listeners engage sermons. Additionally, the Plain Style is a kind of emergency preparedness kit for preaching. When the preacher has bits and pieces of a sermon, but does not yet have a message, this formulaic approach gives the preacher a form into which to pour thought. While preachers sometimes caricature this form as "exegesis-application," in its fuller expression it offers the preacher a logical arrangement for bringing exegesis, theological consideration, and contemporary possibilities into the sermon. This style has six parts. For the purposes of this illustration, we're referring to the parable of the faithful enslaved persons and the unfaithful enslaved person in Matthew 24:45–51.

Part 1: Introduction

This part of the sermon introduces hell as the subject of the sermon in a way that seeks to invite listeners to engage the message. We often begin the sermon by referring to something puzzling or otherwise engaging in the text. In this case, the idea of the master of the house cutting up the unfaithful enslaved person and dispatching that person's parts to the place of gnashing of teeth immediately raises questions and interest. Does God do this? But, of course, there are many ways of beginning. Other examples come to mind: the preacher might recall a recent conversation that raised questions about punishment in the afterlife; the preacher might admit their uneasiness with the text (and the idea of punishment in the world beyond) and wonder whether others share that uneasiness.

Part 2: Statement of the Direction of the Sermon

In a sentence or two—certainly no more than a short paragraph, the preacher indicates what the sermon is about. Some preachers like to state the main point of the sermon here, but we

think it is usually better to indicate the direction of the sermon rather than to give away the big point. The preacher needs to move into this statement in a graceful way. For example, after puzzling over the master cutting up the enslaved person and posing the possibility that the master might represent God, the preacher might say something like, "That is a disturbing image. That is why I want to think with you for a few minutes this morning, in conversation with our text, about what the church has believed about God consigning people to the 'gnashing of teeth,' which is another way of speaking about hell. Why was such an idea important in the past, and what might we make of this notion today?"

Part 3: Exegesis of the Biblical Text

The preacher cannot put forwards an entire exegesis of the text in a Sunday sermon. But the preacher can focus on the aspect of the text that is most germane to the sermon while honoring the text as a whole. The goal is to identify what the text invited people in antiquity to believe and do. We recommend dividing this aspect of the sermon into two parts.

First, a summary of the historical, literary, and theological setting of the writer of the biblical book that contains the text.

The preacher wants to provide the larger backdrop into which to set the purpose of the text. When preaching on a text from the Gospels and Letters that refers to hell, the preacher could offer a little history on when and how hell came into the Jewish tradition and came to voice in the Jesus movement. When preaching on a text from the Gospel of Matthew, for example, the preacher could deftly refer to the tensions between those outside the church and those inside the church. Matthew is concerned that the community is disengaging from its mission to embody the values of the Realm and especially its call to welcome gentiles. Matthew seeks to motivate the congregation toward faithfulness by both carrot and stick (carrot: faithfulness as opening the door to being included in the Realm; stick: unfaithfulness as leading to "weeping and gnashing of teeth").

Second, draw out the specific purpose of the text in the larger context.

Here the preacher explains the details of the text and shows both how the larger purpose of the writer helps explain the purpose of the text and how that purpose comes alive and is deepened through the text. In the case of the parable of the faithful and unfaithful enslaved persons, the preacher could explain household relationships in antiquity (master/slave in charge/other slaves) and show how the story reinforces Matthew's larger purpose. While the text is not, strictly speaking, an allegory, Matthew indicates that the plot that develops in the story is similar to what happens at the second coming: God provides a future life in the Realm for those who have been faithful but punishes those who have been unfaithful. The details are grisly, but they are in the service of trying to encourage the congregation to continue faithful

life and witness as they live toward the second coming and the final judgment. Matthew wants the congregation to believe.

Part 4: Theological Reflection

Today's popular version of the Plain Style often goes directly from the exposition of the text to the application to the contemporary community. This pattern suits preachers whose theological families assume that the text contains an adequate word for today: the preacher's task is to find a bridge from the world of the Bible to something the preacher can commend to church and world today.

However, the Puritans went from exegesis to doctrinal considerations to application. Preachers whose theologies allow for give-and-take between the Bible and today can recover this and repurpose the middle phase of the sermon so that it now asks the preacher to make a theological assessment of what the text asks the audience to believe and do in light of the preacher's deepest theological convictions about God, God's purposes, and our response. The preacher might make one of three possible responses. (1) The preacher can agree with the text, in which case the preacher needs to apply the text to the life of the congregation and world today. (2) The preacher can agree with some aspects and disagree with others, in which case the sermon needs to explain which is which, why the preacher accepts some but not all, and to help the community to identify points of relevance for today. (3) The preacher can disagree in a basic way with the text, in which case the preacher needs to clarify why the preacher finds the text theologically inadequate and help the congregation envision more adequate ways of thinking or drawing out implications for today.

With respect to the parable in Matthew 24, we lean toward the second response. While Bob and Ron have differences in our theologies, we share the conviction that God is pure unbounded love and do not believe that God would punish persons in the manner of the text or in some other analogous way. At the same time, we share Matthew's conviction that God seeks for the world to manifest the values and practices of the Realm of God. The preacher's positive tasks, then, include helping the congregation feel the same kind of urgency for working for the Realm as Matthew intends to invoke.

Part 5: Application or Considering Implications

In this part of the sermon, the Plain Style calls for connecting the sermon to the life of the congregation and world today. As just noted, for many preachers this move is a straightforward application while for other preachers it is more a consideration of implications. In the latter event, the preacher helps the congregation imagine how the interaction of the text can open the door for the congregation to think and act in ways that are consistent with their deepest beliefs As in the case of the exposition of the text, we think this dimension of the sermon

works well when it contains two parts, moving from general perspective to specific stories of the general perspective in action.

First, make a general statement about the application or about considerations for today.

In a way similar to the first part of the exposition of the text when the preacher highlights the setting of the text and the writer's purpose (see above), the preacher might summarize the preacher's interpretation of what God offers and what God asks in broad strokes that relate to the congregation's world. For instance, in a sermon on prayer, the preacher might set out a little theology of prayer and how to pray in this section and then illustrate with concrete examples of people who pray in the next. In the case of Matthew 24:45–51, the preacher might expand the contrast between the Realm of God and the current state of the world and emphasize God's desire for the world to manifest the values and practices of the Realm (e.g., love, justice, peace, dignity, freedom, abundance). Matthew emphasized the importance of people joining this movement by contrasting that with the possibility of gnashing of teeth. The preacher might help the congregation identify positive reasons they want to join this movement today.

Second, tell a story (or stories) that illustrates the positive application to the world of the congregation or that helps the congregation tune into specific things they can do to respond faithfully to the sermon.

Such things might include direct actions, but they might also include nurturing attitudes and other more interior but still significant responses. In the case of a sermon on prayer, for instance, the preacher might tell a story or stories of a person or people who deepened in prayer. When taking the parable of the unfaithful and faithful enslaved persons into the pulpit, the preacher might tell a story or stories of individuals or communities who sense the seriousness of moving towards the Realm and join the journey towards the Realm. As preachers, we might re-introduce the Matthean motif of threat here by pointing out that if the world does not move in the direction of the Realm, many people in it, and eventually the world itself, will be cut into pieces (at least figuratively speaking).

Part 6: Transition into the Rest of the Service and Life Beyond the Service

Preachers often refer to the last part of the sermon as the "Conclusion." To be sure, the preacher stops speaking, but the last thing the preacher wants is for the listeners to conclude their interaction with the sermon. The preacher hopes to end the sermon in ways that foster continued consideration and that might even eventuate in actions. In connection with Matthew 24:46–51, we might take a cue from Matthew. The gospel writer implicitly invites listeners to imagine what their world would be like as they are chopped up and gnashing their teeth.

We might invite the congregation to imagine what their worlds would be like if we join the movement to the Realm.

We take advantage of this occasion of writing to note that many preachers get to the end of the sermon and continue talking long after the sermon has reached its purpose and its natural ending. The result is that listeners grow weary and tune out of the sermon. At the end of the sermon, our observation is usually that less is more.

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While we have used the Plain Style as an example, we reiterate the importance of preachers finding their own voices, and we underline the wide variety of approaches to preaching that are otherwise available. The important thing is that a preacher approach preaching on matters of hell with open eyes, as aware as possible regarding the history of the emergence of the notion of hell, the preacher's own convictions, and the congregation's wavelength(s) with regard to its perceptions of hell. Regardless of the preacher's theological family and views, the preacher should also remember that the preacher's perception is partial. As Paul says, "For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror" (1 Cor. 13:12). In due time, we will all know the truth.