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Foreword to 'Sermons from Mind and Heart: Struggling to Preach Theologically'


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Foreword

ONE DOES NOT FLIP through a car manual and mistake it for poetry. Nor does one pick up the Sunday comics and mistake them for a Physicians Desk Reference. That is because native speakers seldom make mistakes of genre when reading ordinary English texts. Yet pick up a collection of sermons, and one may feel at a loss: What is going on here? What am I to make of *these* sentences? What sort of genre is *this*? What am I, as a reader, to expect (or not to expect) from a *sermon*, especially from a *printed* sermon? Should I expect entertainment, like the comics? Instruction, like the car manual? Inspiration, like the poem? Information, like the Desk Reference?

Ordinary living is generally adequate for schooling readers for shifting effortlessly from novels to phonebooks to newspapers and back again. But unlike bygone eras inhabited by our grandparents and great-grandparents, ordinary living today may *not* sufficiently equip us to read sermons *as sermons*. Our aim in this Foreword is to help you, the reader, to understand the genre of “sermon” in general and to locate this particular batch of sermons in the life of First Baptist Church of Dayton, Ohio in the year 2010.

What then is a sermon? As tempting as it is to approach a sermon as one might an op-ed piece or a longish blog, we claim that it is mistaken to do so. *A sermon is a performative speech act that brings an occasioned, but ongoing conversation to bear upon a canonical text.* This definition is only as clear as are its terms. So, let us unpack them one at a time.

First, a sermon is a “performative speech act.” The notion of a “speech act” derives from the work of twentieth-century Ordinary Language philosopher, J. L. Austin. At the time of Austin’s work at Oxford, it was widely believed that the most natural use for language was description. Sentences were thought to benignly mirror the world, like a digital photo captures a moment without disturbing the furniture. But that was before Austin slogged through the *entire* Oxford English Dictionary (all eigh-

teen pounds, two thousand four hundred and twenty-four pages of print so tiny that the OED is sold with a magnifying glass!) and catalogued verbs dealing with speaking in order to show that the vast number of speaking verbs have not to do with describing but with *doing something*. (Thus the title of his philosophical work, *How To Do Things with Words*.) He called them “performative” verbs: asking, thanking, greeting, praying, joking, ordering, promising . . . and so on, almost endlessly. Such words do *not* describe states of affairs, but rather *get things done* in our social world. Austin later realized that even “describing” itself is a kind of action; all speech is action and all sentences undertake to perform some work or other. So, by calling a sermon a speech act, we underscore Austin’s point that a sermon is an action undertaken. It aims at doing real work.

Second, a sermon involves a conversation. (Austin himself spent a great deal of energy explaining how speaking is like a game of catch—here is the mechanics of the throw, there is flight of the “ball,” and then comes the “catch” or uptake by the listener(s). These mechanics need not trouble us here.) By the term “conversation” we do not mean chit-chat about the weather! Rather, we mean something more like the Latin root, *con-verso*, namely, *to go round and round with* or, more colloquially, *to live with*. This implies that a sermon, properly speaking, *cannot* be a unilateral monologue, but rather a moment in the spoken life of a community. As a conversation, the sermon necessarily involves others in the exchange and is only capable of making full sense in light of things spoken both before eleven Sunday morning as well as after.

It is important for understanding this volume to underscore, third, that the conversation called “sermon” is an *ongoing* conversation. In other words, a single sermon is never a self-contained event, or even a riposte within a stand-alone conversation, but a thread in the ongoing tapestry weaving of a community. The very English word, “sermon,” owes much to its Latin root, *serere*, which means *to join or link together*. This is the important work that a sermon does: a skillful sermon links persons to persons within a congregation; it links people to their authoritative texts, or “canon”; and it links *this* community (ca. 2010) to *that* community, namely the great cloud of witnesses named in Hebrews 12, a community that extends through the ages, through the present and onwards to the Eschaton. Of course, a given Christian community (like the one at 111 W. Monument Ave., Dayton, Ohio) is never alone in this endeavor to join the

historically extended conversation called the Church. Therefore, a skillful sermon links this congregation with all other contemporaneous communities of Christ-followers worldwide. The fact that First Baptist Church of Dayton follows the Revised Common Lectionary is but one small part of our congregation's attempt to "keep in step" (Gal 5:24) with the rhythm and seasons of the Spirit's annual labors in the global Church.

Fourth, a sermon brings an "occasioned but ongoing conversation to bear upon a canonical text." This latter phrase indicates that the wide river of theological conversation has its origins in the authoritative voices and texts of Christian Scripture. A primary impetus for keeping the conversation alive is the ever-unfinished business of answering: "What do these canonical texts mean?" and "What, exactly, is the Good displayed therein?" And "What then is human life *for*?" Central to answering these kinds of questions is understanding the scripture as *canonical*. The term "canon" is Greek in origin. It means roughly, "rule" or "metric" or "criterion." As an adjective describing the Bible, the word calls for a distinctive reading strategy. Consider: our scientific age has taught us to *critically* examine texts. We assess a text's argument. We evaluate a text's rhetoric. We judge a text's historicity and veracity and coherence. But notice that in reading critically, we the readers are positioned "over" the text in order to pass judgment on it by means of criteria or metrics derived from somewhere other than the text. In sharp contrast, in reading *canonically*, or approaching a text as canon, the position of readers and text is reversed. Rather than readers being positioned over a text, the text is approached from underneath: a canonical text stands over the readers. Rather than we interrogating the text for its veracity, a canonical reading strategy *invites the text to interrogate us*. The metrics for evaluative judgment are all internal to the canonical scriptures; we—our lives together—are the "text" being scrutinized by the Scripture. Granted, this reversal is counterintuitive because it is countercultural. And therein lies the crucial importance of the sermon: *the sermon is the school in which parishioners learn to read Scripture properly*.

Finally, a sermon is "occasioned." By this term we do not mean that sermons commemorate special occasions like Mother's Day or the Fourth of July. After all, Christians follow the Church's calendar, not Hallmark's. We observe Holy Days, rather than mere holidays. By "occasioned" we mean that sermons are akin to the New Testament Epistles. St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church (actually his second letter, but that's

another story; see 1 Cor. 5:9) is rightly understood as a letter written by Paul to a particular group in a particular place at a particular time for particular reasons. As we know, social particularities morph over time. Thus the need for additional correspondence (2 Corinthians, etc.). Like the NT letters, the occasioned (or “sited”) nature of the sermons contained in this volume require at least a quick sketch of First Baptist Church of Dayton—both its history and the character of the people in the pews—in order to help you as reader imaginatively inhabit the world of these sermons.

The First Baptist Church of Dayton was founded on May 29, 1824—only nineteen years after the city itself was incorporated—by a small band of Calvinist Baptists. After three years of supply pastors, in 1827 the church hired its first regular pastor, D. S. Burnet. The young (nineteen years old at the time of hire!) Burnet was a powerful preacher, and within two years First Baptist membership had jumped from thirteen to eighty-four, making it the largest church in the town (which in 1830 had a population of two thousand, nine hundred fifty). Numerical growth notwithstanding, First Baptist was bucking dramatic changes in the American religious landscape. It was the time of the Second Great Awakening, marked by an emphasis on evangelical revival and fierce opposition to Calvinism. Alexander Campbell was one of the leading figures in the Awakening, and in the wake of his 1829 visit to Cincinnati the Campbellite movement—which emphasized the right of each layperson to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, and which sought to replace denominational “systems” with the New Testament—swept southwest Ohio. First Baptist’s D. S. Burnet heard Campbell, was persuaded, and began preaching sermons at odds with the church’s statement of faith, in particular the Calvinist doctrine that redemption was only for the elect. Most church members followed Burnet into the Campbellite movement. This majority succeeded in instituting a new statement of faith that substituted the New Testament for the list of doctrines. They were bitterly opposed, however, by eight members who were determined that First Baptist hold fast to Calvinist orthodoxy. For their resistance they were kicked out of the congregation. But while the Campbellite majority departed from the Baptists—and D. S. Burnet became a leading figure in the nascent Disciples of Christ—the “faithful eight” (as they are

commemorated to this day on a plaque in First Baptist's foyer) held onto the name of "First Baptist Church of Dayton."

Interestingly, after having paid such a high price for their Calvinism this tiny band of loyal Baptists did not remain rigidly Calvinist. Instead, in the five years after the split they began to incorporate practices more in keeping with the Second Great Awakening, instituting a Sunday School and actively supporting missions. Both Sunday School and missions work were anathema to the hard-core Calvinists who dominated the Miami Valley Baptist Association. As a result, in 1836, the First Baptist Church of Dayton (along with three other Baptist churches in southwest Ohio) was booted from the organization.

But as First Baptist increasingly moderated and eventually abandoned its Calvinist commitments, its numbers grew dramatically (by the late nineteenth century the Sunday School had over seven hundred members) while the hyper-Calvinist churches struggled to survive. This determination to stake out a moderate theological course—better stated, this determination to navigate between theological extremes—sets the pattern for First Baptist's history. And it is not the only way in which the church's early history prefigured what was to come. From the very beginning, with D. S. Burnet, the First Baptist Church of Dayton has prized gifted preachers and strong leaders as senior pastors. This point is underscored by the photos of the First Baptist ministers that currently line the hallway between the sanctuary and the Christian education complex, photos that go all the way back to Burnet (a photo which serves as a telling counterbalance to the plaque in the foyer honoring his opponents).

In the latter part of the nineteenth century that man was Henry Francis Colby, who pastored the church from 1868 to 1902, while also serving as president of the American Baptist Missionary Union, the president (for twenty-two years) of the Board of Trustees of Denison University, and the president of Miami Valley Hospital (nineteen years). Colby cemented a third characteristic of First Baptist, that is, it has always understood itself as playing an important role in the city of Dayton and in the larger church. This was clear in the hiring of J. C. Masee as senior pastor in 1912. Masee had been pastor of First Baptist in Chattanooga since 1908, and in that time the church membership roll had increased by five hundred. More than this, Masee was an internationally renowned evangelist—as First Baptist's pastor he organized a number of revival meetings in Dayton, as well as continuing his larger evangelistic

campaigns—who had published two books and had received an honorary doctorate from Mercer University. He assumed the First Baptist pastorate just in time to shepherd the congregation through the building of a new church. Ground was broken just three months before the devastating March, 1913 flood that swept the city, killing three hundred sixty people (and swamping the standing First Baptist building with nine feet of water, as well as the foundation for the new church). But Massee expertly guided First Baptist through the crisis: when the floodwaters abated, and the city had begun to recover, the building resumed. The cornerstone was laid on May 31, 1914; on June 26, 1915 the magnificent Gothic structure opened its doors, the back of the building abutting the Miami River, and its grand entrance—befitting its understanding of its role in the city—proudly facing Dayton’s downtown. This beautiful edifice remains the home of First Baptist Church today.

Massee was strongly committed to Biblical inerrancy and dispensational premillennialism. Given his prominence it was not surprising that he was present for the first meeting of the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association in Philadelphia in May 1919. Not coincidentally, in 1919 Massee also left First Baptist of Dayton for the more prominent pulpit of Tremont Temple in Boston; from this location he served as one of the major leaders of the emergent fundamentalist movement (although, in keeping with the Calvinists who founded First Baptist, he ended up being excoriated by fundamentalist leaders for not being sufficiently fundamentalist).

One might take from the Massee pastorate—which was clearly a great success—that by the early twentieth century First Baptist Church of Dayton had lined up on the conservative side of the great divide in American Protestantism. But as indicated above, First Baptist has historically resisted affiliating itself with one theological extreme or the other. So but twelve years after Massee left for Boston—in 1931—the church hired Charles Seasholes as senior pastor. With a doctorate from Newton (now Andover Newton) Seminary, Seasholes was a charter member of the Roger Williams Fellowship, a liberal group in the American Baptist Convention that prized diversity of opinion on the denomination, and that was committed to the notion that “the New Testament is the all-sufficient ground of our faith and practice” (which of course D. S. Burnet and the Campbellites proclaimed at First Baptist in 1829, much to the consternation of the “faithful eight”). Seasholes was also very involved in

the ecumenical movement, even serving as a delegate to the initial meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1948. At First Baptist Seasholes introduced the practice of ministers and choir wearing robes and organized Wednesday evening lectures on world problems and Sunday evening book review discussions. He served on innumerable city committees and boards, helped bring Planned Parenthood to Dayton, and presided over Orville Wright's funeral in February of 1948.

Charles Seasholes was pastor from 1931 through 1965. He presided over First Baptist's glory years, the memory of which remains strong among some at First Baptist today. Of course, it is no accident that First Baptist's glory years correspond with the decades in which mainline Protestantism dominated American religion; even more to the point for this urban church, the Seasholes years were the same years that Dayton—an industrial powerhouse for the first half of the twentieth century—was booming, with a vibrant downtown and a population of 262,332 in 1960. But corresponding with the fracturing of mainline Protestantism and the hard times besetting Dayton—the 2010 census revealed a population of 141,527 in what is now understood as a “Rust Belt” city—the church endured a time of decline, punctuated by a scandal in the 1990s involving the pastoral staff. By the early years of the twenty-first century the once-glorious First Baptist Church was down to fifteen families rattling around in the large Gothic structure in the middle of a city struggling to survive.

But these families had not surrendered. In 2003 the First Baptist Church of Dayton called Rodney Wallace Kennedy to be senior pastor. Even in its diminished state First Baptist was determined to have strong preaching from the pulpit. It was a masterstroke. A refugee from the fundamentalist-captured Southern Baptist Convention, with a PhD in rhetoric from Louisiana State University, Rod Kennedy fits very well the profile of a First Baptist Church senior pastor. As you will see in the sermons that are to come, he is a fabulous preacher who cannot be—and does not want to be—pegged as liberal or as conservative. More than this, Rod has a prominent local profile, thanks to five books, a blog, and numerous columns in the local newspaper; membership on innumerable community boards and involvement in a variety of civic reform efforts; and, a leadership role at the local United Theological Seminary (which includes the establishment of a Baptist House of Studies) and an ongo-

ing teaching gig at the University of Dayton Lifelong Learning Institute (where his classes attract an outrageous number of loyal students).

Thanks to Rod's preaching and leadership, the work of a dedicated pastoral staff, and a good number of energetic laypersons, in the past ten years worship attendance has risen from the depths to over two hundred on an average Sunday morning (and this while Rod and his colleagues aggressively eschew anything that looks like the stereotypical "church growth" strategy). In keeping with many mainline churches, the congregants are a remarkably diverse lot. Almost the entire theological spectrum is represented (which various folks find disconcerting on one occasion or another). Ditto for the political spectrum: a number of folks are very conservative politically (a few would identify with the Tea Party movement); another group has deep loyalties to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in particular and the military in general; others are theological pacifists and politically liberal or leftist. Economically, there are some wealthy members, which is in keeping with the early twentieth century when First Baptist was perhaps the elite church in Dayton—but this is certainly not the norm. It is fair to say that a good number of professionals attend the church; unlike many Baptist congregations, First Baptist has a good number of MDs and PhDs, as well as a healthy contingent of graduate students from the University of Dayton. Finally, while the church remains quite "white," over the past five years it has started to become more racially diverse.

In keeping with many or most historic downtown congregations, the First Baptist membership is spread across a vast geographical area, thus making it a substantial effort for many members to make the trip to church once a week. During the Kennedy years the church has moved to more liturgical worship (Baptist-style), which includes the use of a common lectionary, but which also includes an invitation at the end of the service. While the Lord's Supper is celebrated once a month, a few years ago an optional communion service was established, held every week after the regular worship service in a small chapel off the sanctuary.

First Baptist is not really a church of "small groups"—unless one counts choir, Sunday School, and the like—and even these activities are understood as voluntary, in the sense that one shows up only if one wants to. Of course, there are "heroic" members—often, but not always, women—who do an enormous amount of labor to make the church run. On the other hand, church members are great givers of money—even

in times of economic hardship. Even more striking, virtually everyone pitches in one way or another to do social justice, be it packing sack lunches (six hundred per month) for the homeless, participating in the annual renovation of a poor person's home, attending civic and political rallies, and/or advocating for the various marginalized in the city. Put succinctly, it is striking how many First Baptist members who live outside the city understand that they have a responsibility for Dayton. The church steps still lead directly into downtown.

We hope that the notion of "sermon" is a little clearer: *A sermon is a performative speech act that brings an occasioned, but ongoing conversation to bear upon a canonical text.* As you'll discover, some of the sermons in this volume have an academic feel, complete with footnotes for further study. Others have an impressionistic force that might be compared to the paintings of Monet or the music of Debussy. Some paragraphs are tightly woven philosophical argument. Other paragraphs pile sentences moving in opposite directions on top of each other in ways vaguely akin to poetry. Perhaps the best advice we can offer is that you as reader *work* to imaginatively inhabit 111 West Monument Avenue, Dayton, Ohio, remembering the liturgical season and envisioning your own elbows rubbing with those of fellow worshippers. Then *listen* (more than read) to the Voice that speaks through these sermons.

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