

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

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

The stranger then acts in an extraordinary manner: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27).¹ Focus on this text generally falls to an emphasis on *diermeneuo*, which generally means “to explain, interpret.”² The emphasis being here that Jesus did not merely proclaim (*kerusso*) the good news of the gospel to these disciples, but that Jesus instructed these disciples in how the Hebrew Scriptures connected to what had happened and was happening. Fitzmyer summarizes what happened in v. 27 this way: “Then the risen Christ catechizes the disciples, teaching them the import of the Scriptures: that the Messiah was destined to suffer all this before he entered into his glory.”³

¹Unless noted, all scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ.

²BDAG, p. 244.

³Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 28a (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 1559.

The Emmaus story, however, serves as more than a transition between the resurrection and the sending out of the Church in the opening chapters of Acts. This scene serves as the culmination of Luke's "literary agenda,"⁴ set forth in his short prologue (1:1-4). As Green notes, "The Scriptures supply the salvation-historical framework for understanding their respective mission and so root their activity in the ongoing story of God's redemptive work."⁵ It is important for Luke to demonstrate Jesus acting as a fulfilling presence of all that has come before.

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

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

⁴Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 25.

but which only the Christian reader *can* ask.”⁶ And, almost as if he were waiting for his line cue from an off-stage director, Philip “began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). Yet unlike what Jesus did on the road to Emmaus, Philip proclaimed to (*euaggelion*) the Ethiopian traveler in what had happened and what was happening. Philip traced the line from Isaiah’s proclamation to Jesus’ exultation on the cross.

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

The Practice of Biblical Interpretation

The task of interpreting scripture is quite central to the nature and function of the Christian movement. As McGrath rightly notes, “Every text demands to be interpreted; Scripture is no exception.”⁷ In the simple action of reading a passage of scripture, interpretation occurs. It was this core truth that Origen of Alexandria was attempting to navigate with his “three ways” of reading scripture—“body, soul, and spirit” (*de principiis* 4.11). In doing so, Origen hoped to be able to provide a higher way of reading (and, therefore, interpreting) scripture beyond a flat, baseline reading. This concern was furthered over a century later by Jerome who

⁶Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel and Donald H. Juel, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69.

⁷Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 171.

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

In light of this note, we can see this in how Christians have read and understood the Emmaus scene. On one level, there is the act of teaching that Jesus does in the scene. For example, Cyril of Alexandria notes that Jesus, in “beginning with Moses and all the prophets” (Luke 24:27), “settles in them the ancient and hereditary faith taught them by the sacred books they possessed. For nothing which comes from God is without its use, but all have their appointed place and service” (*Commentary on Luke 24*). Jesus reminds them of what they had already learned and reinforces the mission that God has been on from the very beginning. As Rosica notes, “The Emmaus narrative’s main intention is to present the place and conditions for the recognition of the risen Lord.”⁸ This mission now finds its turning point—its new beat—in the exultation of Jesus.

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

⁸Thomas M. Rosica, “The Road to Emmaus and the Road to Gaza: Luke 24:13-25 and Acts 8:26-40,” *Worship* 68 (March 1994): 121.

Christian preaching in Acts presents an “ironic twist” because when the blind finally see, they realize that the answer was before their eyes the entire time.⁹

Again, this is seen in practice in the scene between Philip and the Ethiopian traveler. On one level, there is the act of proclaiming that Philip engages in. In the words of Chrysostom, Philip instructed the Ethiopian traveler “merely taking his text from the prophet” (*Homily on the Acts of the Apostles* 19). In the same way as Jesus, Philip provides gospel proclamation through scripture. On another level, there is the specific teaching that Philip offers. Philip, in the words of the Venerable Bede, “brought the obscurities of prophecy into the light of knowledge” (*Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*). This seems to indicate that it was understood that Philip’s focus was to articulate to the Ethiopian traveler how the Hebrew Scriptures moved the reader toward understanding Jesus as the revelation of God’s ongoing plan. Again, Rosica is helpful here, noting that “The physical presence of the risen Jesus is not at the heart of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. What matters for this foreign court official is that someone lead and guide him in his understanding of the suffering of God’s servant.”¹⁰ Again, we see the movement from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight.

Homiletic Concerns

As was mentioned above, Luke makes an intentional word selection in what he has the risen Christ do on the road to Emmaus—he has the risen Christ *diermenueo*, or “interpret.” Jesus does not proclaim (again, *kerusso*) the good news to these already-believers, but instead instructs these disciples in a deeper, richer understanding of Scripture. What is occurring on the Emmaus road is clearly a more advanced form of discipleship, not evangelism. It seems that the apostolic

⁹Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation, Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 283.

¹⁰Rosica, “The Road to Emmaus and the Road to Gaza: Luke 24:13-25 and Acts 8:26-40,” 125.

witnesses and writers understood there to be two levels—or, perhaps, functions—of early Christian preaching. The first function is *kerusso* (or *euaggelion*). *Kerusso* was a heralding action, not an instructive action, an action that announced an in-breaking that invited responsive action. We see this played out in the scene with the Ethiopian traveler in Acts 8. Unaware of who Jesus is or what he did through the cross, Philip uses a prophetic text to proclaim the gospel, centering his proclamation in a single voice who points downstream to a singular event and labels it as salvific.

The second function, then, is *diermeneuo* (and its associated terms like *didasko*). It is here that we see the teaching function of the Christian movement, an awareness that faith comes through constant and consistent instruction. Given to those who have already heard and responded, this function seeks to center the disciple in the teaching of Jesus. We see this more in Luke 24, where Jesus draws from the whole of Scripture (“Moses and the prophets”) to articulate what God has been doing throughout history. Dodd, in his classic study on apostolic preaching, noted that “For the early Church, then, to preach the Gospel was by no means the same thing as to deliver moral instruction or exhortation. While the Church was concerned to hand on the teaching of the Lord, it was not by this that it made converts. It was by *kerygma*, says Paul, not by *didache*, that it pleased God to save men.”¹¹ The Emmaus story, then, demonstrated to the early Christian movement that proclamation should be missional in nature and instruction should be Christological in nature.

Contemporary Implications

Turning to modern-day concerns regarding these texts in the life and ministry of the church, there are some questions that arise that call for consideration. First, how does the

¹¹C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 8.

approach to reading and interpreting Scripture in these texts comment on contemporary approaches to reading and interpreting Scripture? In focus here is the common evangelical proclivity to read Scripture backward, to go looking for Jesus in the Old Testament rather than following the advice of the diminutive Red King in *Alice and Wonderland* and “begin at the beginning”¹² by tracing God’s hand through the course of humor history.¹³

Second, how does the approach to reading and interpreting Scripture in these texts comment on contemporary approaches to preaching? Conversations and arguments abound in homiletic and communication circles as to what is the point of preaching today. Not necessarily whether preaching is necessary, as even scholars of contemporary worship¹⁴ and traditional liturgists¹⁵ alike note the important place that preaching holds in Christian worship. The arguments focus on what the point—the function—of preaching is today. As we have noted, the Emmaus road text is clearly an example of ongoing discipleship, not initial evangelism. Yet, the dominant model of contemporary homiletic thought is that preaching serves primarily, if not exclusively, a *redemptive* function, in that every sermon has an evangelistic function.¹⁶ Yet, as Scott Gibson argues, the preaching ministry is directly tied to discipleship.¹⁷ Evangelism is

¹²Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1869), 182.

¹³For example, see Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 17-24, Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 21-27, or Ahmi Lee, *Preaching God’s Grand Drama: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 87-97.

¹⁴For example, Kevin J. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service: Creating a Taste of Heaven on Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 137-147.

¹⁵Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 42-48, 138-139

¹⁶Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 269-295.

¹⁷Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 13-14; see also, Richard W. Voelz, *Preaching to*

certainly the starting point, yet preaching must move Christians beyond the river and into the marketplace with the confidence that they can—and should—live out their maturing faith in practice.

Finally, how does this approach to reading and interpreting Scripture in these texts comment on contemporary approaches to discipleship? Obviously, as was just mentioned, that means adopting an approach to preaching that offers more than an altar call. It offers a journey, a way, to advance in spiritual maturity. Again, when he saddles up next to the disciples on the Emmaus road, Jesus does not treat them as novices. He teaches them in such a way that they are able to connect what they already know intellectually to what they have experienced emotionally. This then leads them to an actual practice of their faith—sharing this with others. Discipleship, then, is about progression, moving from novice to scholar. These may not be the best terms possible, however it is the intent that they communicate an intention—that being that Christians are meant to grow intellectually, emotionally and practically in their faith. Whether we adopt a model for discipleship that draws from developmental theory¹⁸ or relational dynamics¹⁹, the church must strive to provide a way for Christians to grow in their faith. Jesus models it for us in Luke 24 and Philip operationalizes it for us in Acts 8. In doing so, we can lean into the “way” model for mission and discipleship clearly demonstrated in these texts.

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

¹⁸John J. Gleason, Jr., *Growing Up to God: 8 Steps in Religious Development* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975).

¹⁹Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship that Fits: The Five Kinds of Relationships that God Uses to Help Us Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).