

Courage to preach

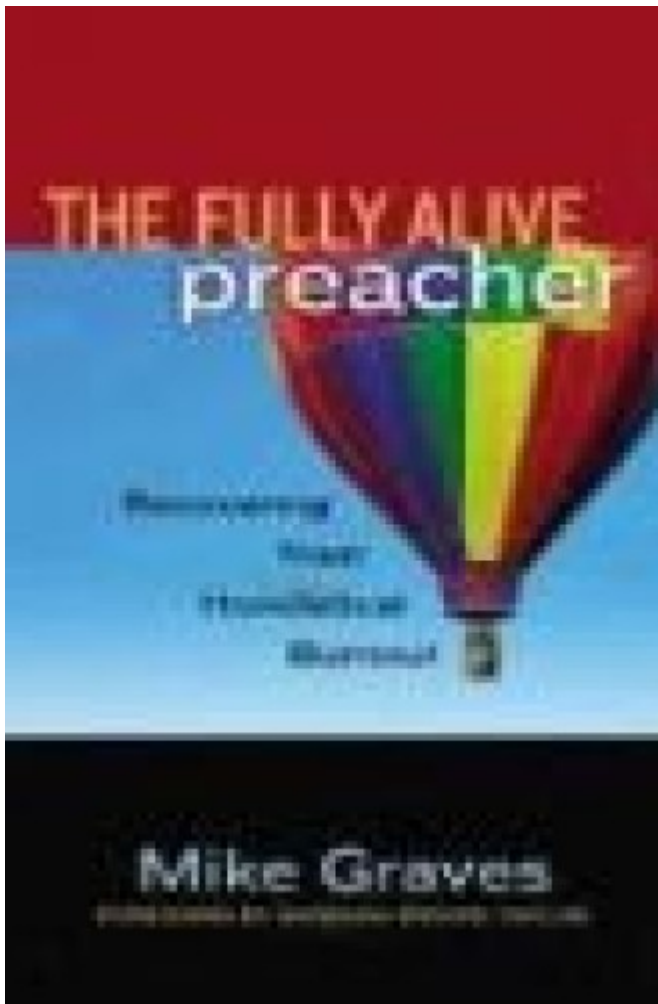
By [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Preaching as Testimony

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The Fully Alive Preacher: Recovering from Homiletical Burnout

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In a recent essay, Marilynne Robinson attributes the struggles of mainline Protestantism to preaching. She claims that the sermon, as the center of worship in the contemporary mainline church, is “pretty nearly defunct.” Is that true, and if so, why? John Ames, a pastor and the central character in Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, offers one answer. “When you do this sort of work, it seems to be Sunday all the time, or Saturday night. You just finish preparing for one week and it’s already the next week.” Most preachers will respond to this observation with a nod. Is the pressure to prepare weekly sermons the reason for a lack of good preaching?

Anna Carter Florence and Mike Graves don’t think so. In their new books on preaching, they claim that good preaching is a matter of courage and connection. It

has to do with the heart of the preacher, they say, and the problem is that today's preachers have grown faint-hearted. In *The Fully Alive Preacher*, Graves says that preachers are less than fully alive, that some are even "dead preachers walking." "If it were toilsome and dull for ministers to do their Sunday work," says Graves, quoting Karl Barth, "how could they expect the congregation and the world to find it refreshing?" In *Preaching as Testimony*, Florence goes further, proposing that preaching entails risk on several levels. "The Word," she says, "is disruptive by nature; it threatens everyone in sight."

Happily, both Florence and Graves go beyond lament, criticism and castigation. Both support preachers by offering not only deep analysis of the life-threatening occlusions of our hearts but also life-changing therapies. Florence chronicles the lives of three early American women who practiced testimony: Anne Hutchinson, Sarah Osborn and Jarena Lee. Graves offers a host of exercises designed to deepen a pastor's connection between soul and role. (His book is especially helpful for retreats or sabbaticals.)

Graves and Florence agree that poor preaching will not be solved with a homiletical pep pill or simplistic remedies, and suggest that pastors must address several factors that explain preaching's demise and the "faint hearts" of many mainline Protestant preachers. One factor is the pastor's relationship with the Bible. What is the Bible to each of us? Do we trust it and have confidence in it? Do we love the scriptures, and if we do, what does that mean?

Although those of us in the historic mainline churches are seldom guilty of bibliolatry, of worshiping the Bible and turning it into an idol, we may well be guilty of the opposite: many of us seem to need to apologize for the scriptures, as if the Bible were an uncouth childhood friend who is difficult and embarrassing but tolerated because of a longstanding relationship. Instead of confidently claiming the scriptures as a reliable instrument of God's presence that faithfully mediates God's word to the believing community, we tend to caution potential users and alert them to supposed scriptural biases or shortcomings.

Such cavalier attitudes and disingenuous dismissals of scripture, even if well intended, are troubling. Preachers are forever falling over themselves to credit "recent discoveries," "noncanonical gospels" or "modern awareness"—and when they do, they are implying that scripture requires constant correction. Listeners may begin to think that although scriptures are part of worship, they're only as important

as the flowers—nice but not necessary.

Florence insists that the biblical text is crucial. “A sermon in the testimony tradition is not an autobiography but a very particular kind of proclamation: the preacher tells what she has seen and heard *in the biblical text and in life*, and then confesses what she believes about it” (author’s italics). Underlying a definition of preaching as testimony is the conviction that the word of God is alive and that it changes everything. The word of God is not finally the words on the page of the Bible but, as Calvin claimed, what happens when the same Spirit who was present to the one who wrote is present to the one who reads. From the intersection of Spirit and scripture comes the event of the word of God. Pastors who pay a deep and expectant attention to this are present at a dangerous and life-giving encounter; they are taking the text at least as seriously as they take themselves.

Both Graves and Florence offer suggestions on how to pay attention. These are not mere techniques, but avenues into those “places of the heart” where the preacher may hear the living word and more nearly see as God sees. Graves says that we must pay attention so that our preaching is connected to our real experience of God or else we may become lost in trying to speak of what we do not know. Going to those real experiences and places of the heart will cost us something, maybe everything, even as it also gives all things. “For me,” writes Florence, “the act of preaching is really an act of dying. But it is also the act of being raised by the power and grace of God.”

Finding the courage to preach raises not only the question of the nature of the scriptures but also the question of the referent and focus of preaching. Who or what is the subject of preaching? What are its aims? Here there are two wrong answers and one right one. The most ubiquitous wrong answer is to respond that the focus and measure of preaching are the listeners, the congregation. Some preaching books dignify this with long descents into “listener theory.” More often the questions are pedestrian. Did they (the congregation) like it? Find it entertaining? Inspiring?

The other wrong answer is to say that the referent of preaching is the preacher. Was she/he vulnerable, charismatic, arresting? In either case, it’s not about the congregation or the preacher: it’s about God. One pastor tells the story of a worshiper who walked out of church saying, “Worship just didn’t do anything for me,” to which the pastor responded: “Well, thankfully, it wasn’t directed at you.” The focus of worship and of preaching is God.

On the theocentrism of preaching, Florence is clear. “If we are primarily concerned with becoming more effective communicators—whether that means being clearer or cleverer, or more down-to-earth or creative—we subtly change the subject of preaching to ourselves, rather than the God we meet in the text.”

Making ourselves the subject of our preaching has a very long history and is a hard habit to break. There are many ways that we reduce preaching and turn the good news into only good (or not so good) advice. Sometimes the sermon becomes an educational moment: “Many of you have been asking about the origins of the Advent season with its lovely wreath.” Or it’s a motivational pitch: “Let us meet the challenge of tomorrow by growing our giving today.” Or we fall into grand rhetoric: “To us falls the noble task of building a world of peace.” At other times, preaching seeks to alleviate our pains by putting a patch on our various tremors and traumas. “It’s been a trying week.” “We all need to take more time for reflection and renewal.” In all of these instances the sermon is still about us. Either we are talking about what we should do, think or feel, or we are measuring how the sermon has made us think or feel.

The focus of preaching is properly on who God is, what God has done, what God is doing. It is the good news about a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, whose ways are not our ways. It is the story of God’s relentless love, scandalous grace and persistent purposes. We, preachers and congregations, come second. Ethics is a response to grace.

If having confidence in the scriptures is one part of the courage to preach, and daring to tell God’s story is the second part of it, then the third element is preachers’ own capacity to face fear and put themselves at risk. Will Willimon points to something similar when he observes that good preachers love God more than they love their congregations. Today many pastors provide care, but fewer preachers announce gospel.

Graves shares an insight from Julia Cameron’s book *The Artist’s Way*. “A primary reason [preachers] procrastinate is in order to build up a sense of deadline. Deadlines create a flow of adrenaline. Adrenaline medicates and overwhelms the censor. [Preachers] procrastinate so that when they finally get to the preparing, they can get past the censor.” Most of us never imagined that on those late Saturday nights it was drugs that we were doing! The point is that good preaching doesn’t come easily; it will take some doing to get past the censor.

Who or what is the censor? Or are there many censors? Is the censor the congregation or the chair of the board? Is it, "What would my mother say?" It may be, "This is the way it's supposed to be done," or what a homiletics professor said. It may be the demand to be positive and upbeat, or the imperative to be serious and responsible. Are we censored by the ever-lurking lure of success? There are a lot of censors, and none of them take a number and politely wait their turn. They crowd in and around, all asking, or getting the preacher to ask, "Can I really say that?"

Florence says that this is the nature of preaching in postmodernity, when all the usual sources of security and authority have either vanished or no longer amount to a hill of beans. Hence her presentation of three women preachers who never enjoyed social sanction or conferred authority. "More and more," Florence writes, "preachers are relying not on outside authorities as the proof of their words . . . but on the authority of testimony: preaching what they have seen and heard in the biblical text and what they believe about it."

This is where Florence's "every act of preaching is a dying" comes in. It is a dying to the ego, to the anxious and fearful self. We die by staying relentlessly focused on what is worthy of our focus, the text, God, God's word in Jesus Christ, and God's word for our time and place. We must die to all else, to success and failure, to praise and criticism, and do so every week.

Often the cost is too high and our fear too great. The result is preachers anxiously wondering what they can do, what new technique or innovation they can employ to get people's attention or interest, or to bring in new members. "Maybe if I don't stand behind the pulpit but just wander up and down the aisle as I preach?" Or, "Let's toss the manuscript—'Look, Ma, no notes!'" "I'll use PowerPoint and these video clips from recent movies." There's nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these things unless they are used to impress or entertain an audience. They will not work if the pastor does not believe that when the living word is preached, God will come among us to change, heal and make all things new.

Strangely, one of the things that has deepened my own courage to preach has been more frequent preaching; these days I sometimes preach three sermons a week. Do I simply preach the same sermon? No, that has never worked for me. Instead, I've found that the well does not run dry but is actually replenished by more frequent use. I suspect that in our post-Christendom, postmodern era, congregations need more, not less, preaching, and that we preachers need to preach more and to do other things less. Of course, preaching more often means that we passionately

believe in the power of communicating God's work, in the scriptures that fuel the sermons, and in the God to whom preaching testifies.