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Chapter One

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF DOCTRINAL PREACHING

The late Jaroslav Pelikan, the celebrated historical theologian, stated, “What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches and confesses on the basis of the Word of God: this is Christian doctrine.”¹ Peter Toon, in an insightful treatment of the development of doctrine across the history of the church, explained doctrine as “a historically conditioned response of the Church to questions put to her at a particular time and place by the world or by her members.”² However, we can define doctrine more easily than we can define doctrinal preaching. One of the ways of attempting a definition of doctrinal preaching is to show the relationship that doctrine has to preaching. William J. Carl III provides a clear portrait of the association of doctrine with preaching. He contends that:

Doctrine is not identical with the proclamation of the gospel. Doctrine serves proclamation, enriches and enlarges it, largely in a critical role, as a criterion for determining that what the church proclaims today is in harmony with scripture and its tradition, that it is truly human language about God and not about the latest spiritual trend or social ethical passion.³

In conjunction with doctrine’s critical relationship to preaching, like an arbiter or umpire of a baseball game who demands that

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

2 Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 81.

3 William J. Carl III, “Doctrine,” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 102.

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the game be played according to the rules of the baseball manual, doctrine insists that preaching be carried out in harmony with the regulations of the biblical manual.

Furthermore, Carl discerns the affiliation that the rules of English grammar have with ordinary English conversation in light of the relationship that doctrine has with preaching. He quotes George Lindbeck, who said, "There is a parallel intimate relationship between the rules of English grammar and ordinary American discourse."⁴ Carl further argues:

Not all discourse that employs Christian vocabulary is proper Christian discourse any more than a sentence using nothing but English terms, such as "He don't do no wrong to nobody," qualifies as a proper English sentence. . . . We have come to recognize its impropriety as a result of our mastery of English grammar and our use of these rules to criticize and evaluate the sentence. In much the same way, Christian doctrines should function to criticize discourse that flows from the pulpit. . . . Preachers need to concern themselves with doctrine, then, in every sermon that they preach, just as authors need to attend to grammatical rules when writing. Just as the rules of subject-verb agreement inform the writing of this paragraph, so the Trinity doctrine must inform the way preachers speak when referring to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reminding them that their discourse does not imply that Christians believe in three gods.⁵

While preachers know what doctrinal preaching is, it is difficult to articulate succinctly what it is in one descriptive and pregnant sentence. A definition is a limitation. Once something is

4 George Lindbeck, "The Nature of Doctrine," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, 102–3.

5 Carl, "Doctrine," 103.

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defined, there is the inevitability of leaving something important out of the definition.

We live in a communication-crazed community. Words, words, and more words! Left-brained people especially emphasize the value of words. Warren W. Wiersbe asks, "How do you define life and taste? How do you give a definition for the essence of the feeling of being in love?" He cites the poet Walt Whitman, who once listened to a lecture of a learned astronomer who discussed the meticulous matters of the universe and the relationship of the bodily elements of space. After growing weary of this technical, scientific lecture, Whitman went out and looked at the stars!⁶

People want preachers to define everything for them, and they are sometimes disappointed when the preachers tell them that they are unable to do so. Some things are enveloped within the realm of what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*, or the tremendous mystery. Some things have to be experienced. In a way, doctrinal preaching can only be approached in an effort to define itself because the essence and reality of doctrinal preaching is bigger than any definition. Doctrinal preaching is not a mechanical process governed by a human agent; rather, it is an event that happens under the auspices of the Holy Spirit who reveals the doctrinal truths and testifies of the person of Christ. Consequently, doctrinal preaching is shrouded in mystery. In an attempt to define doctrinal preaching, the mystery cannot be demystified, and the inscrutable cannot be scrutinized.

We can only move toward a definition of doctrinal preaching. We are on the way without any possibility of ever fully arriving! While it is true that we must experience the essence of doctrinal preaching, we must also know what we are experiencing. Among the many qualities of the effectiveness of Paul as a doctrinal preacher was his conviction about what he preached and who he preached about. He reminded Timothy that all Scripture is God breathed and is profitable for doctrine (2 Tim 3:16). Scripture is

6 Conversation with Warren W. Wiersbe, August 9, 2004, Lincoln, NE.

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just as God breathed as the body of Adam that received the breath of God; Scripture is just as God breathed as the corpses in the valley of dry bones that became a resuscitated army when the *ruach*, or breath of God, was breathed into them. Because Paul had this confidence, he could exclaim, “For I know *whom* I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim 1:12).

We are challenged by 1 Peter 3:15 to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.” Growing up in the church of my childhood, the Rose Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, the senior choir would sing the choral rendition, “It’s Real,” and do so with great passion and confidence. I can still see the streams of tears running down the eyes of those senior saints, and I can still hear both men and women shouting as they waved their hands in personal witness to the truth of the lyrics of the song: “Yes, yes, I know it’s real.” I am convinced that these lyrics must undergird the sermonic statements of our doctrinal preaching.

O how well do I remember how I doubted day by
day,
For I did not know for certain that my sins were
washed away.
When the Spirit tried to tell me, I the truth would
not receive;
I endeavored to be happy and to make myself
believe.
.....
But at last I tired of living such a life of fear and
doubt,
For I wanted God to give me something I would
know about;
So the truth would make me happy and the light
would clearly shine,

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And the Spirit gave assurance that I'm His and He
is mine.

.....

So I prayed to God in earnest; and not caring what
folks said,
I was hungry for the blessing; my poor soul—it must
be fed.
Then at last by faith I touched him and, like sparks
from smitten steel,
Just so quick salvation reached me. O bless God I
know it's real!

Chorus

It's real, it's real,
O I know it's real
Praise God the doubts are settled
For I know, I know, it's real.⁷

Doctrine has a subservient role to preaching. While doctrine may exist to make preaching as disciplined as it needs to be, doctrine's mission is to be a servant to proclamation. Doctrine's purpose is not merely to be derived, constructed, and formalized and to remain in the archives of academia for scholarly use only. Rather, doctrine is the possession of the church and must be preached. Preaching extracts its communicative strength from the reservoirs of doctrine and draws its riches from the wells of its truths. The doctrine behind and below the sermon gives it stability.

As Narcissus saw his reflection in a pool of water, so doctrine ought to see its image in the face of preaching. It gives the sermon its shape. After the sermon is preached, the hearers may not initially recognize an identifiable doctrine within the sermon because the preacher may have expounded on the doctrine of sanctification without ever using the word *sanctification* during the preaching event. But the hearer ought to be able to detect the image behind

7 Homer L. Cox, "It's Real," 1907.

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the doctrine and arrive at the intended doctrinal experience. It is better to experience repentance, joy, and justification than merely to learn about them.

I do not have in mind the lessening of the importance of knowing doctrine; I just want to remind preachers constantly that doctrinal preaching not only informs our learning but also influences our living. We can never “fully know” during our terrestrial trek. Paul was right, “*Now* we see through a glass, darkly; but *then* face to face: *now* we know in part; but *then* I shall know even as also I am known” (1 Cor 13:12). But *then!* When the terrestrial trek is terminated and the celestial course is initiated, the “now-ness” of time will, in the words of the inimitable Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, fall exhausted at the feet of the “then-ness” of eternity. Not only will we have “no less days to sing God’s praise,” but we will also have no less days to learn more fully about the One to whom doctrine points.

We have heard about the love of God over the years, but after being in the presence of the Lord for a million years, we will only know just a little bit more of what the unconditional love of God really is. We have studied about the atonement for sin for a long period of time, but after staring at the nail prints in the Lord’s hands for a billion years and gazing at the Lamb that was slain for our redemption, we will know only a smidgen of what the atonement really means. We have thought long and hard about the holiness of God, and reminded our congregants, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16). But after a trillion years we will know only a fraction about the holiness of God that causes angels to cover their feet and faces and to fly away as they sing a song that reverberates throughout the corridors of heaven, earth, and hell: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3).

Consider a scene where a seagull is dispatched every year and flies to the Rock of Gibraltar, where it brushes its beak against that granite rock formation and flies away only to return a thousand years later. If that process is repeated every thousand years until the Rock of Gibralt-

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tar is reduced to sea level, in comparison, we would have only been in heaven for a day. There will never be a moment in time or eternity in which we will fully comprehend the doctrines of the Bible that we preach. What Phillips Brooks told students at Yale still holds true: "Preach doctrine, preach all the doctrine you know, and learn forever more and more; but preach it always, not that men may believe it, but that men may be saved by believing it."⁸ Exegesis must be combined with experience, deeds must be merged with doctrine, lips must be linked to lives, and beliefs must be integrated with behavior.

Charles Bugg referred to Phillips Brooks' assertion, which compared the Bible to a telescope. The telescope is not designed to look *at* but to look *through*, to see that which is beyond us.⁹ Additionally, Bugg cited the comment of Robert McCracken, who, while senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, was asked by someone why people kept coming to Riverside to hear his sermons. McCracken replied, "They keep coming hoping to hear a word from beyond themselves."¹⁰

Dr. Greg Thornbury, a professor at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, interviewed Dr. Carl F. H. Henry, founding editor of *Christianity Today*, shortly before Henry died. Thornbury asked him what the most profound question he had ever put to his students was. Dr. Henry bypassed the conundrum of catechesis, the intricacies of systematic theology, and the profundity of doctrinal explanation and stated, "The most profound question I have ever asked my students is, 'Have you ever met the risen Lord?'"¹¹ This question goes beyond the mere recitation of a creed, the explanation of a doctrine, or the clarification of a biblical regulation. It points to a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Doctrinal preaching must move from merely learning *biblical regulations*, or

8 Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 129.

9 Charles Bugg, "Back to the Bible: Toward a New Description of Expository Preaching," *Review and Expositor* 90 (1993): 414.

10 Ibid.

11 Gregory Alan Thornbury, "Carl F. H. Henry: Heir of Reformation Epistemology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8 (2004): 62–74.

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the indication that we cannot live holy, as God requires. It must move toward *gospel revelation*, for Christ enables us to do what we cannot do—to live holy! Ultimately it must move to forging a *relationship* with Christ. For Dr. Henry it was not just a matter of testing a student on the historical claims of the resurrection of Jesus; his ultimate concern was whether the student had an experiential encounter with the Lord.

Job did not give a lecture on the person of the Redeemer; instead he declared, “I know that my Redeemer lives” (Job 19:25 NIV). The blind man in John 9 did not need a seminar on blindness; he needed his sight. He declared, “Whereas I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). People who come to hear us on Sunday morning do not merely need more *information* about Bible facts; they need *transformation*. This is why Harry Emerson Fosdick penned the classic line nearly eighty years ago, “Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.”¹² They come to have the tragedies and struggles in their lives addressed from the perspective of a God who is able to change their situations and/or to give them strength to endure them with joy. Doctrine, in its association with preaching, epitomizes the role that salt plays in protecting meat from decay. Doctrine is the protector of preaching. Without it preaching would fall into heresy.

Additionally, doctrine is inseparably and inextricably integrated with true preaching and promotes the development and health of proclamation. Like yeast, which loses itself in dough and yet causes the dough to graduate from flatness to a fully rounded dinner roll, doctrine causes preaching to rise in fullness of authority and accent. Doctrine offers a moral conscience to preaching that prevents preaching from giving all of its attention to the heights of heaven while ignoring the social inequities on earth. Doctrine confronts preaching with this truth: “These things should have

¹² Edmund Holt Linn, *Preaching as Counseling* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1966), 92.

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been done without neglecting the others” (Matt 23:23 HCSB). Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their boast concerning tithing and stated that yes, they should have tithed, but they also should not have neglected the matters of social justice. The moral conscience of doctrine makes arrangements for preaching to meet at the intersection of the vertical relationship between God and humans and the horizontal relationship between humans and humans. This moral conscience of doctrine insists that preachers be acquainted not only with the streets of gold in heaven but also with the streets of gloom in the ghetto. It unites the pulpit and the pavement, the sanctuary and the street, Bethlehem and Birmingham, the New Jerusalem and New Jersey.

Doctrine relates to preaching in the same manner that John the Baptist related to Jesus. When John the Baptist received news that Jesus was baptizing more persons than he was baptizing, John did not assume the posture of a competitor because his ministry was one of negation: he was neither the light nor the Christ. Rather, he was the best man alongside Jesus, the bridegroom. His job was to focus on the bridegroom and in the process, John the Baptist, the best man, would decrease while Jesus, the bridegroom, would increase (John 3:30). Preaching that lacks doctrine is anemic and weak. The preaching of Bible doctrine, however, is preaching that is powerful and effective.

Definitions of expository preaching provided by some of the great voices in preaching furnish assistance in the endeavor to define doctrinal preaching. They aid us in moving toward an operative definition that illustrates the positive intention and focus of this book. E. K. Bailey, late pastor of Concord Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, and founder of the International Expository Preaching Conference, defines expository preaching as “a message that focuses on a portion of scripture so as to clearly establish the precise meaning of the text, and to poignantly motivate the hearers to actions or attitudes dictated by that text in the

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power of the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Like expository preaching, doctrinal preaching is consistent with the text out of which the doctrine emerges. Preachers who would preach doctrinally must put their ears to the pavement of the text and synchronize the heartbeat of the text with the heartbeat of the doctrine so that the author’s intention is clearly seen and heard. Doctrinal preachers preach with passion and conviction, attempting to persuade the hearers to embrace the mind-set and the behavior prescribed by the doctrine in the text. Preachers who would preach the doctrine in the text must stand with Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others in the Reformation heritage who believed that when they were accurately speaking in accordance to the Word of God, Christ is speaking.¹⁴

Haddon Robinson, staunch homiletician at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston, Massachusetts, penned his classic definition of expository preaching (used interchangeably with biblical preaching):

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.¹⁵

These words ring true to preachers of Bible doctrine. The preacher must lift doctrine out of a passage instead of infusing a passage with foreign doctrine. Doctrinal preachers must also pay close attention to the grammatical elements of the original biblical languages in the passage. An examination of John 20:5–8 will reveal that there are three different Greek words for sight in the passage. In John 20:5, John “sees” the linen cloths as he stoops

13 E. K. Bailey, *Ten Reasons for Expository Preaching* (Dallas, TX: E. K. Bailey Ministries, 2003), 2:1.

14 See also Luke 10:16.

15 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 20.

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down and looks in from outside the sepulcher. In the Greek the word is *blepei* (he saw), which indicates a casual glance. John 20:6 indicates that Peter goes inside the sepulcher and also “sees” the linen cloths. The word for “see” in this instance is *theorei* (he saw), which expresses a more thoughtful and calculated look. Finally, in John 20:8, John goes inside the sepulcher the second time, “sees,” and believes. In the Greek the word for “sees” in this case is *eiden* (he saw), which conveys belief. Could these three distinct Greek words suggest the stages of faith through which some people process before experiencing mature faith?

Preachers of Christian doctrine must also attend to the historical details in the passage. For example, is the teaching from a passage applicable for a specific time, place, and people, or for all times, places, and all peoples? The literary study of the genre of a particular passage should always be taken into account. The book of Proverbs is the inspired word of God, but it is not a book of guarantees. Much harm has been done by preachers who have preached Proverbs 22:6 with a sense of guarantee: “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Many parents have incriminated themselves because their children departed from their Christian upbringing and teaching. Since the preacher proclaimed the text as a guarantee, the parents felt that they were evidently lacking in their parenting because their children did not lead exemplary Christian lives. However, this interpretation would seem to contradict the situation of Josiah, the godly king of Judah, who had an evil father (Amon), a wicked grandfather (Manasseh), and a righteous great-grandfather (Hezekiah). The book of Proverbs states the principles that, when embraced, generally will give expected results.

This text really says that children will not depart from the “way” because the “way,” or the “teaching,” is in them. The prodigal son came back home to his father not because he attended a revival and was convicted of his waywardness but because the

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“way,” or the “teaching,” of his father remained in him. Like a time-released capsule, the “way” began to speak to him in the pigpen, and he went home with a different attitude than the one he had when he left home. Christian parents whose children have departed from the teachings they were exposed to in their home need to cease punishing themselves and emulate the father of the prodigal son who kept the calf fattened in expectation of the return of the son.¹⁶

Preachers of Christian doctrine contemplate the context of the text, looking at it in light of the chapter of the particular book, the purpose of the book, its relationship to the particular testament, and even its role within the entire canon of Scripture. Doctrinal preachers recognize that the Holy Spirit, the actual preacher, preaches to them before they preach to their congregations. The Spirit applies the doctrinal message to the preacher’s life and personality and then to the hearers’.

The renowned Anglican preacher-theologian John R. W. Stott asserts that expository preaching is “the opening up of the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God’s voice is heard and His people obey Him.”¹⁷ Stott is convinced of this and contends that preachers of Bible doctrine possess at least these two convictions: first, they are firm in their conviction that the Bible is not *a* word of God, but *the* Word of God that is inspired and God breathed. They are also firm in their conviction that the Bible is a closed book that must be opened by the Holy Spirit and the truth rightly divided, or “cut straight,” by the preacher (see 2 Tim 2:15).

There are also at least two obligations of doctrinal preachers. They must be faithful to the text of Scripture, and they must be sensitive to the hearers. In reality they not only exegete the text, but they also exegete the hearers.

Finally, doctrinal preachers have at least two expectations. If they are accurate in delivering the doctrinal message, then they

¹⁶ Luke 15:23.

¹⁷ Given at a conference on expository preaching.

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can expect God's Word to be heard, although, like Isaiah who cried out, "Who hath believed our report?" they wonder if it is believed (Isa 53:1). They can also expect the people to obey God because His Word will get a hearing whether it is heard immediately or futuristically, in compliance or disobedience; His Word will not return to Him void (Isa 55:11).

Although doctrinal preaching is difficult to define, William J. Carl III offers what appears to be the fullest possible definition:

Doctrinal preaching, then, is Christian preaching grounded in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ; it starts with text, doctrine, or cultural question, but tends to focus on one or more Christian doctrines regardless of its starting point.¹⁸

In connection with Carl, doctrinal preachers locate the center of Bible doctrine not in a proposition but in the person of Jesus Christ. As Jesus admonished that the Scriptures be searched because they testify of Him (John 5:39), preachers of Christian doctrine make Christ the heart of their preaching. If the Bible is read backwards, one will see that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8). This means that in the mind of God, Calvary was a forethought and not an afterthought. God did not react to the fall of Adam and Eve, but rather He pre-acted *before* the fall of Adam and Eve. The Old Testament proclaimed that Christ is coming. The New Testament announced that Christ has come and will come again.

Doctrinal preaching might begin with a text, especially if the preacher is preaching a sermon series through a book of the Bible. It could start with a doctrine, such as an article in the Apostles' Creed, which is a summary or compendium of truths that the church believes and espouses. Or it could commence with a relevant cultural question. Paul Tillich often charged the church with answering questions that no one was asking. Doctrinal preachers

¹⁸ William J. Carl III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 8–9.

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must pay attention to the questions voiced by culture. For example, in late December 2004, tsunamis, gigantic tidal waves caused by an earthquake and the shifting of plates under the ocean, cost more than 150,000 persons their lives in Southeast Asia. Many American citizens were there as tourists, and a number of them lost their lives. The tsunamis not only ravaged the land but left people injured, separated from families, without food and clean water, and exposed to rampant and advancing disease. The overall question on the minds of those who come to church to hear us is, "Why?" The doctrinal preacher must address this question of theodicy. Sometimes the only thing we can do after speaking to this matter is to lead inquiring people to Calvary and encourage them to hear anew and ponder again the words of Jesus, "My God, my God, why . . . ?" (Mark 15:34).

But we must not leave them with this question. They must be challenged to persevere through the mist of mystery and make the commitment of Jesus, "Father, into thy hands" (Luke 23:46). Doctrinal preaching does not answer all the questions and cannot solve all the problems, but it points the listeners to God, who is sovereign yet suffers with us in our stricken situations. The Lord is not removed from human plight; He is the Immanuel on our Emmaus road. We do not subscribe to the teaching of anti-patristianism, the doctrine that teaches that God is removed from pain and the sharing of human suffering. The Lord suffers with us. As our high priest, He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Heb 4:15). Doctrinal preachers punctuate Carl's thought that regardless of the starting point, doctrinal preaching will tend to focus on one or more Christian doctrines. Doctrine is found in life, and life is found in doctrine.

How then is doctrinal preaching to be defined? As Haddon Robinson stated, "Defining becomes sticky business because what we define we sometimes destroy. . . . Preaching is a living process involving God, the preacher, and the congregation, and no defini-

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tion can pretend to capture that dynamic. But we must attempt a working definition anyway.”¹⁹

My definition of doctrinal preaching emphasizes its underlying aim: transformation through Christ. I state that doctrinal preaching is *the escorting of the hearers into the presence of God for the purpose of transformation*. I contend that the task of the doctrinal preacher is to serve as an escort who ushers the hearer into the presence of God through the proper and precise expounding of the Word of God. When this is done, the efforts of doctrinal preachers have reached their limits because they cannot transform the hearer. The hearer is left in the presence of the only One who can transform a human soul—Christ. Preachers of Christian doctrine may inform the hearer’s mind, which in turn serves to direct one to Christ, but only Christ can transform the hearer’s heart.

Doctrinal preaching is the magnifying of Jesus Christ through the explanation and application of the basic truths of the Christian faith. Doctrinal preaching must have an object. We cannot have faith in faith; we do not worship worship; and doctrine cannot exist for doctrine’s sake. Doctrinal preaching carries out the mission of magnifying Jesus Christ. To magnify Jesus Christ is not literally to make Him bigger. His influence is already felt in three worlds: heaven, earth, and hell. Heaven is His throne, and the earth is His footstool. He fills the universe with His power. Rather, to magnify Christ through doctrinal preaching is to present Him in such a way that the hearers see Him in a more glorious, majestic, holy, sovereign, just, faithful, and mighty manner than they have ever seen Him before. This is made possible when the preacher of Christian doctrine, through the power of the Spirit, explains the basic and fundamental truths of the Christian faith and shows how they apply to the Christian life. Consequently, the function of doctrinal preaching is to ferry the truths of the “was-ness” of the Word from the shore of the ancient text to the shore of the “is-ness” of our contemporary world.

19 Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 19.