

# EVANGELIZING ENGLAND: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BOOK OF HOMILIES FOR THE POPULAR PREACHING OF HUGH LATIMER & JOHN WESLEY

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During almost twenty years of pastoral ministry as a member of the United Methodist clergy, I have heard the name of John Wesley invoked innumerable times as an exemplar of evangelistic preaching and a source of inspiration to utilize the sermon as a means of popular evangelization. In most cases, however, this appeal has inevitably led me to conclude that in our enthusiasm to emulate Wesley's methods and replicate his impressive results, we have failed to pay adequate attention to the doctrinal shape of his faith and pastoral practice.

This paper offers a brief discussion of English homiletic history as a way of contributing to our contemporary conversation concerning preaching and the mission of the church. It revisits the Homilies of the Church of England to emphasize their importance for Hugh Latimer and John Wesley, who were arguably the most significant popular preachers, respectively, in sixteenth and eighteenth-century England. I discuss the function of the homilies as a benchmark for belief and practice, as a "rule" or "grammar" for preaching during the Edwardian Reformation, for which Latimer was the leading evangelist. I also provide a brief sketch of Wesley to show that the scope, substance and style of his preaching was shaped by Scripture and situated in a larger theological world, which, by his own acknowledgement, was significantly informed by the homilies.

Contrary to many popular notions of Wesley's evangelistic strategies, he was adamant in his insistence that Methodist preachers continue in their adherence to the manner of thinking and speaking that was displayed from the movement's very beginning. For example, in December 1751, Wesley wrote a letter on the subject of Preaching Christ in which he responded to an inquirer after pondering the matter for a full three months.<sup>1</sup> Wesley's description of preaching Christ, which is theological in scope, is constituted by rendering both the gospel—the love of God for sinners

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demonstrated in the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ and his blessings—and the law—explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ, which, in particular, are comprised in the Sermon on the Mount.

Wesley goes on to depict a pastoral method of preaching, a description of the manner of judgment required for addressing sinners, the justified, the diligent, the careless, and the feeble-minded. This homiletic wisdom is quite illuminating, as it reveals Wesley's personal knowledge of both the law and gospel and how they work in preaching in addition to his pastoral sensitivity to a wide range of spiritual and moral conditions. This homiletic wisdom was derived from Wesley's study of the New Testament in relation to his use of the Homilies, which set him against those whom he described as mere "gospel Preachers."<sup>2</sup> According to Wesley, one such gospel preacher, John Wheatley, was neither clear nor sound in the faith. Wesley asserts that Wheatley's sermons sounded like, "an unconnected rhapsody of unmeaning words ..." and, "Verses, smooth and soft as cream, in which was neither depth nor stream" (487-9).

Wesley feared the consequences of such preaching, which was most definitely not Methodist in manner, but was becoming increasingly contagious; it was long on promises but short on commands; it corrupted its hearers, vitiated their taste, ruined their desire for sound teaching, and spoiled their spiritual appetites by feeding them sweetmeats until the genuine wine of the kingdom seemed quite insipid. Wesley concludes that, while such preachers were quite popular and successful in drawing large crowds, they simply offered "cordial upon cordial," thus destroying listeners' capacities for retaining and digesting the pure milk of the Word (491).

According to Wesley, the Methodist manner of preaching provided an alternative way of construing both law and gospel; a homiletic theology capable of nourishing, strengthening, and building up Methodist societies to love, obey and praise God. He summarizes this preaching as a way that offers a narrative of salvation into which one may live by God's grace: "God loves you; therefore, love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore, die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore, rise in the image of God. Christ liveth forevermore; therefore, live to God, till you live with him in glory" (491-2).

What I have described is well known by any who are familiar with the Wesleyan movement. The content of Methodist preaching was a combination of evangelizing those not yet converted and exhorting, on holiness of life, the justified who were supposed to be "going on to perfection." In order to further this purpose, Wesley personally set out to provide Methodists, preachers and laity alike with everything they needed to know. This intention, which may be surprising to many contemporary Methodist preachers and laity, amounted to a great deal; he even expected his ministers to invest as much as five hours a day in reading and prayer. But the very keystone of this pedagogical and pastoral program was Wesley's published sermons. If, for Wesley, oral sermons were to serve as proclamation, invitation and conversion to Christ, then written sermons were for nurture and education, training for preaching Christ. They were to be the distinctive theological literature of his people as creeds, confessions, or doctrinal treatises functioned for other communities. The sermons were to be his main medium for communicating what Methodists were about, or, in other words; the sermons provided the grammar of faith and life by which the people called Methodists could order their life in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

As Ken Collins has reminded us, Wesley's was a homiletic theology; it was the preaching of the gospel that defined his vocation preeminently.<sup>4</sup> Yet we cannot understand the significance of Wesley's passion for preaching and the training of preachers apart from the larger tradition which nourished his faith; the Church of England, since the standard collection of Anglicanism's theological teachings was the two Books of Homilies published under Edward VI and Elizabeth; formularies to which Wesley was ever eager to confess his allegiance. For example, during the latter years of his ministry, after returning from a tour of Methodist societies throughout England and Ireland, Wesley reported,

The book, which next to the Holy Scriptures was of greatest use to them in settling their judgment as to the grand point of justification by faith, is the book of Homilies. They were never clearly convinced that we are justified by faith alone till they carefully consulted these and compared them with the sacred writings [Holy Scripture]. And no minister of the Church can, with any decency, oppose these, seeing that at his ordination he subscribed to them in subscribing to the thirty-sixth article of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, fifty years earlier, in an attempt to refute antinomianism, Wesley had provided a doctrinal summary for preaching by printing an extract, which included the Doctrine of Salvation, Faith and Good Works from the Homilies of the Church of England.<sup>6</sup> This tract was a kind of theological manifesto, which defined a position from which he never wavered: the fusion of soteriology and ethics, or living faith in Christ that works through love in grateful obedience to God's commands. As he writes, "I began more narrowly to inquire what the doctrine of the Church of England is concerning the much-controverted point of justification by faith; and the sum of what I found in the homilies, I extracted and printed for the use of others." For Wesley, the Homilies were to direct the readers, especially preachers, to study Scripture with diligence and burning desire, assured that God would act through the revelation of the Holy Spirit to provide right understanding.<sup>7</sup>

I want to suggest that in order to understand Wesley and the Methodist manner of preaching for which he is remembered we must situate him within the larger homiletic world created by the English Reformation, which I will briefly attempt to describe by calling particular attention to Hugh Latimer, the most prominent preacher among the first generation of English Reformers.<sup>8</sup>

Latimer's homiletic performances during both the early years of reform under Henry VIII and the Protestant Edwardian period established him as a salutary exemplar of "reformation through practice." He was the most outstanding voice among a company of preachers in Tudor England who, according to Patrick Collinson, "were living in the pages of the Bible," and whose efforts sparked a homiletic revolution similar to patterns of reform on the Continent. Latimer's status as an exemplar of reformation through practice endured through his legacy of 27 collected sermons, which were reprinted at regular intervals throughout the sixty years following their first issue under Elizabeth in 1562. Individual sermons by Latimer were printed as early as 1537 during the reign of Henry VIII, but the very presentation in a collection volume transformed the sermons into a



"classic" text of the English Reformation. The chronological ordering, which is standard from 1571, suggests a corpus of works and practical thought. This presentation of a triumphant Protestantism being spread by the spoken word is reinforced by a woodcut illustration used by John Day, editor of the works of John Foxe, which shows Latimer preaching before Edward VI. At the foot of the pulpit a woman is reading the Bible, drawing the preacher to the center of a coherent reform movement based on the government of a Protestant king and the authority of vernacular Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

Although he served as Bishop of Worcester under Henry VIII, Latimer primarily viewed himself as a prophet and evangelist whose strongest desire and central duty was pastoral in nature, to win souls in order to transform the social life of the whole nation. The goal of his preaching was to allow the biblical message to convict and convert even more than to inform, and to engage listeners with the Word of God mediated through Scripture and embodied in the sermon. Following the practical wisdom of Erasmus and other Christian humanists, Latimer viewed theological language as a means of transforming life according to its subject matter: Holy Scripture. This practical perspective led him to adopt preaching strategies which were employed through a plain, vernacular style informed by biblical speech, which enabled him to cross social barriers in a manner uncommon for high-ranking ecclesiastical officials.<sup>10</sup>

English Reformation scholarship has tended to underestimate the dramatic, subversive, and reconstructive potential of sixteenth-century reforming discourse and its antecedent reformist traditions. However, in England, as on the Continent, preaching for reform of Christian faith and life proved central, continuing and expanding a homiletic trend that emerged during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and which took a dramatic leap during the Henrician period under the leadership of Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer. Reformers effectively exploited sermons, taking over the mendicant tradition of publicly attacking corruption in church and society. The pulpit was utilized for preaching Christ, teaching new doctrine, introducing new practices, articulating new visions, and moving listeners to adopt them.<sup>11</sup>

A significant example of both confidence and fear of the efficacy of preaching was the assembling of the first Book of Homilies, which was issued in 1547 to communicate and control the central convictions of the realm, and to define a vision of evangelical faith and life for the transformation of England into a Christian commonwealth under the royal supremacy. John Wall has persuasively argued that the English Reformation was driven in large part by the printing, distribution, and use of religious books as instruments of reform, as vehicles for the dissemination of Edwardian policies and intentions for the spiritual welfare of the people. Therefore, the story of the English Reformation may be seen from the perspective provided by its great books: The English Bible, the Book of Homilies, Erasmus' Paraphrases of the New Testament, and the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>12</sup> Royal Injunctions that were promulgated in July 1547 required every parish church in England to have "the whole Bible, of the largest volume in Englishe," Erasmus' Paraphrases on the Gospels and Acts, and a collection of twelve sermons, known as the Book of Homilies, for use in reading, Bible study, and preaching. By making Scripture available in the language of the people, Thomas Cranmer intended to construct a renewed Church of England built upon a theology of the Word, since he believed that biblical speech, when properly presented in

its various forms, contains the power to absorb and transform the world in which it is spoken, heard, and obeyed.<sup>13</sup>

The Book of Homilies also represents Cranmer's ambition to issue a collection of sermons to remedy the shortage of reliable preachers in the realm. This culminated in a plan that was begun during the reign of Henry VIII, and which had predecessors in the various occasional addresses issued by Cromwell in the form of the Ten Articles and the 1537 Bishops' Book to provide insufficiently trained priests with a doctrinal summary and framework for biblical interpretation and sermon construction. Cranmer's concern in the homilies was to establish the nature of salvation as God's free gift of faith, while demonstrating to preachers and persons in the pew that this affirmation did not result in the collapse of morality and that good works still formed an essential part of the Christian life. The homilies, however, still represented a significant shift in theological emphasis, since a whole range of traditional practices were eliminated and the range of works was redefined and narrowed.<sup>14</sup>

While they resembled Medieval homiliaries, books of model sermons on which ignorant parish priests could rely when discharging their duty of regular preaching, the Edwardian homilies also introduced a new grammar, a Protestant economy of salvation in which sermons, *ex opere operata*, played the central part. This established them as significant agents of religious change and control, instruments for promoting new faith and learning, deriving their authority from two sources, a Preface issued in the name of the king, and in the thirty-second Injunction that anticipated future religious change.

Because through lack of preachers in many places of the King's realms and dominions the people continue in ignorance and blindness, all persons, vicars, and curates shall read in their churches every Sunday one of the homilies, which are and shall be set forth for the same purpose by the King's authority, in such sort as they shall be appointed to do in the preface of the same.<sup>15</sup>

This injunction made reading of the homilies for all but the few licensed preachers of the realm a binding responsibility. The Book of Homilies was published, however, to assist not only non-preaching prelates, but also to serve as an instructing and regulating guide for learned preachers such as Latimer. The Book of Homilies provided a grammar of evangelical doctrine and life, a doctrinal framework, practically ordered according to essential topics derived from Scripture, to ensure homiletic "quality control" across the realm. This was of great importance during a time of much commotion and change, when conservative priests continued to resist reform and the tolerant atmosphere created by Edward's reign encouraged maverick preachers, or "gospellers." The publication of the homilies was a manifestation of Cranmer's desire, that there be weekly pastoral instruction for the transformation of parishoners' lives through the language of Scripture spoken in the vernacular.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the homilies were initially experienced through the ear, not the eye, and with the authorization of the Book of Common Prayer in 1549, they provided regular opportunities for English people to be incorporated into Scripture's drama of salvation, the most vital impulse for re-fashioning church and nation. Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of

London, acknowledged the practical aim of the homilies that was in keeping with medieval precedence, asserting that some were "in commendation of the principal virtues that are commended in Scripture," and "others against the most pernicious and capital vices that useth (alas) to reign in this realm of England."<sup>17</sup>

John King points out that homily, "conversation, instruction," corresponds to sermon, "sermo," or "word," but ultimately derives from "crowd," or "mob" to reflect the outdoor circumstances under which Jesus, Paul, and the apostles preached. By analogy with the Incarnation, the plain style of the homilies paradoxically unties the highest and the lowest, the heavenly and earthy, in a plain, modest style that corresponds to its subject matter: revelation, instruction, and persuasion for Christian living in the world. King argues that the world of Edwardian England addressed and claimed by the homilies was a diverse world, the complexity of which parallels that of the Elizabethan stage, the "high" and "low" audiences envisioned by Cranmer in compiling the homilies, reflecting the "high to low" movement of the Word through the learned but earthy preaching exemplified by a master such as Latimer.<sup>18</sup>

Because the Bible was the chief source for the rhetoric of the homilies, their aim was to imitate the language of Scripture, and in particular, its figures and examples, thus replacing religious images with the image of the Word—*pictura* with *scriptura*. This biblically shaped style renders the sermons more forceful and vivid, while increasing their clarity and immediacy, yet keeping their teaching grounded in the soil of Scripture. Thus the vision of a Christian commonwealth set forth in the homilies offers fitting and persuasive models for imitation since the production of a Christian people is the test of true and lively faith. This way of life unfolds throughout the ordering of the homilies; people are called to knowledge of Scripture and the story of God's redeeming acts to elicit faith expressed in good works through charity and in accordance with God's commandments.

The first homily communicates this over-arching purpose, making clear the Book is Bible-centered and draws its inspiration, scope, and style from Scripture, "the heavenly meate of our soules." Through reading and hearing Scripture—devouring and absorbing its message—Christians will be transformed into the Word they digest and will be energized to do what it says to obtain salvation: "The words of holy Scripture ... have power to convert through God's promise, and to be effectuell, through God's assistance." Thus the aim of the homilies is to transfigure the lives of obedient listeners, and to enfold them into the story of biblical history and its way of salvation through consistent, disciplined speaking and hearing to the end that charitable actions will result in the formation of a true, Christian commonwealth.<sup>19</sup>

A primary aim of Hugh Latimer was to promote the Book of Homilies by speaking in its support, modeling its use, and embodying its message. In speaking as an authorized voice of the Edwardian church, Latimer utilized Scripture as his source and the homilies as a guide in crafting his sermons. By allowing the biblical scope, substance and style of the homilies to inform and shape the rhetoric of his sermons, Latimer established himself as a pastoral model for preachers and their people. Moreover, from 1550 until the death of Edward VI in 1553, Latimer was the most prominent among a company of preachers that preached the Word to evangelize popular audiences in the English countryside. Latimer's popular preaching, spoken in the form of plain, vernacular sermons embodied a



homiletic wisdom necessary for implementing the vision of religious revival and reform articulated in the Book of Homilies and Book of Common Prayer. Christopher Haigh has described these preachers as, "a remarkable group of evangelists as can ever be seen." For example, correspondence from the imperial ambassador Van der Delft, alarmed by the impact of the Reformation among ordinary people, describes how common folk, encouraged by dramatic preaching, were turning against traditional religion.<sup>20</sup>

While preaching at court during Lent of 1549-50, Latimer urged Edward to promote an increase of preaching across the realm. In addition to Latimer, Peter Vermigli, who observed the progress of the Edwardian reforms from his teaching position at Oxford, also lamented England's shortage of qualified preachers.

There is no lack of preachers in London, but throughout the whole kingdom they are very rare; wherefore every godly person mourns over and deplores this great calamity of the church. The sheep of divine pasture, the sheep of God's hand, the sheep redeemed by the blood of Christ, are defrauded of their proper nourishment of the divine word; and unless the people be taught, the change of religion will certainly avail them but little<sup>21</sup>

The Edwardians demonstrated their commitment to the advancement of reform by means of preaching in December, 1551 when a royal decision turned the Court chaplains, including Latimer, John Hooper, and Thomas Lever into itinerant preachers. Of "six chaplains ordinary," only two were to remain at court, while four were to be absent preaching in the outer provinces of the realm. Latimer confirmed his personal inclination for this task in a sermon at Lincolnshire.

I have a manner of teaching that is very tedious to them that be learned. I am wont ever to repeat those things which I have said before, which are nothing pleasant to the learned; but it is no matter, I care not for them; I see more the profit of these who be ignorant, than to please learned men (Works, I. 341).

The refashioning of a new church and polity for Edwardian England was shaped by the implementation of Cranmer's liturgical reforms, which were led by the publication of the Book of Homilies. By placing a prayer book, basic Christian texts, preaching in the vernacular, and liturgical events at the center of religious discourse, Cranmer sought the transformation of England into a Christian commonwealth through participation in Christ and active love of neighbor as the means to citizenship in the kingdom of God.<sup>22</sup>

Worship in the Edwardian church, therefore, did not seek to lift its participants to another realm or higher world, which was, for the Reformers, a point of intense attack against the practice of the Medieval mass. Rather, the evangelicals' use of the Bible in common prayer and popular preaching sought to make common places theaters of divine revelation; scenes of vivid, dramatic performances of Scripture representing the divine-human paradox of the Incarnation, the "high within the low" thus transforming ordinary parishes into holy places for hearing the Word, for celebrating Holy Communion, for offering public praise and obedience to God.

There are a number of obvious parallels between the English Reformers and the Methodists, and in particular, between their two most prominent, popular preachers, Hugh Latimer and John Wesley. However, time does not allow me to discuss further how both movements utilized the printed page to promote the spoken word for popular evangelization, which, for Wesley, in addition to his standard sermons included an abridgement of the Articles of Religion and the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>23</sup>

I want to conclude by suggesting that there is considerable pedagogical and pastoral wisdom yet to be drawn from the English tradition in our attempt to train and shape faithful preachers of the gospel today. How, in a time of great doctrinal confusion, heterodoxy, and undisciplined preaching that falls short of the fullness of Christ, might we enable students and pastors to better grasp the grammar, or wisdom, the inner logic of Scripture's way of salvation, as did the Book of Homilies for evangelists such as Hugh Latimer and John Wesley?

Interestingly, William Willimon has recently written of the knotty problems that seem to emerge in the church's desire to evangelize the world.

The way I read church history, most of our really great theological mistakes were made in the interest of evangelism. In so wanting to lean over and speak to the world, sometimes we fall in face down. We give away the store. We pare down the gospel to something that can fit on a bumper sticker, letting the consumer be the judge of just what can be demanded, said, and expected in the name of Jesus. We use the world's means of speaking only too late to realize that the medium has changed the message rather than the message transforming the world.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that in the huge task of evangelization and Christian formation that lies before us we may still have much to learn from Mr. Wesley and the Anglican preaching tradition to which he was indebted.

#### NOTES

1. *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprinted 1978) 486-92. Citations will hereafter be included in the text.

2. See the excellent discussion in Robert E. Cushman, *John Wesley's Experimental Divinity: Studies in Methodist Doctrinal Standards* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989).

3. Here I am following the discussion by Albert C. Outler, "Introduction" to *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. I: *Sermons*, I. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

4. Kenneth J. Collins, *A Faithful Witness: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology* (Wilmore: Wesley Heritage Press, 1993).

5. Cited in *Certain Sermons or Homilies* (1547) and *A Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* (1570), ed. Ronald B. Bond (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 15-16.

6. *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 121-33.

7. [W] II: 101.

8. The best biography of Latimer is Alan G. Chester, *Hugh Latimer: Apostle to the English* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954).

9. Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 64-5; In 1845 George E. Corrie edited Latimer's



extant sermons and letters for the Parker Society of Cambridge, compiling them into two volumes: *The Works of Hugh Latimer, Sometime Bishop of Worcester, Martyr, 1555*.

10. Felicity Heal, *Of Princes and Prelates: A Study of the Economic and Social Position of the Tudor Episcopate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 164-66.

11. Susan Wabuda, *Preaching During the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

12. John N. Wall, "Godly and Fruitful Lessons: The English Bible, Erasmus' Paraphrases, and the Book of Homilies" in ed. John Booty, *The Godly Kingdom of Tudor England: Great Books of the English Reformation* (Wilton, 1981) 47-138.

13. Wall, "Godly and Fruitful Lessons" 47-8.

14. *Homilies*, ed. Bond, 3-6.

15. *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray, "The Edwardian Injunctions, 1547" (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1994) 256.

16. Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 442-3.

17. *Nicholas Ridley, Works*, ed. H. Christmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1841) 400.

18. John N. King, *English Reformation Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 97-108.

19. *Homilies*, ed. Bond, 66-7.

20. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 23-4.

21. *Original Letters of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1841) II. 485.

22. John N. Wall, *Transformations of the Word: Spenser, Herbert, and Vaughn* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 11-15.

23. For a good discussion of this topic see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

24. William H. Willimon, "Its Hard to Be Seeker-Sensitive When You Work for Jesus" *Circuit Rider*, Vol. 27 No. 5 (Sept/Oct., 2003) 5.