Midwestern Journal of Theology 2.2 (Spring 2004), 146-55.

The Alarming Peril of Texual Subsidence: The Case from Church History*

David L. Larsen
Professor Emeritus of Preaching
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, IL 60015

Reading from St. Paul to Titus, chapter 1; Titus 1—

> Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness, a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior.

Preaching was not incidental for the apostle Paul; nor should it be for us. In these lectures we are attempting to build the case for the ongoing viability of preaching in our time, for the urgent necessity of biblical preaching in our time. I think that it's a case that needs to be made again and again, particularly in the face of a mounting chorus of critics and challengers who keep insisting the day of preaching is over. We tried to canvass briefly yesterday the biblical case and the theological case. And now this morning I want to share with you concerning what we learn from the history of preaching, 2000 years of going at it. What do we deduce? What can we learn from preaching as it has existed, flourished, and anguished in the 2000 years of its history? Biblical preaching is, of course, preaching which says what the Bible says. Now that's the only kind of preaching we are interested in—preaching which says what the Bible says. In that broad sense, actually a topical sermon can be a biblical sermon. Now we, with some reluctance, use a topical sermon. But in the history of preaching, much of the great preaching has been topical, and probably because it's relentlessly unitary. It tends to have one thought that stays with you, and, after all, if that's the topic you do remember it. But there's nothing inherently wrong with topological thinking; after all, biblical theology and systematic theology are

* Dr. Larsen delivered this address on February 26, 2003, as part of Midwestern's annual Hester Preaching Lectures. It is transcribed here as delivered with his permission.

topological. And every pastor knows—I'm not sure all homileticians and scholars I have known realize this—but all pastors know there are occasions when the pastor needs to deliver a topical sermon. There's a topic which needs addressed. Let's say abortion. One text, or will it be a collage of texts? The place of women in the church; what the Bible teaches about divorce; what is God's attitude toward homosexual behavior? There's not a single text in these instances. But the great challenge of topical preaching is to use a battery of texts and use these texts in their context. And you've got to reproduce that effort with every text that you use. It's formidable, and, of course, you present to your congregation the fruit of your own labor. The glory of expository preaching, on the other hand, not only does the expository sermon say what the Bible says, the expository sermon says what this text of Scripture says, the natural thought unit, a paragraph, two paragraphs, whatever, which has been selected and has been read in the congregation in the experience of worship. And now we are going to look at this text; we are going to bite into this text; and there's something which resonates very, very warmly in the hearts of those who have a high view of Scripture with a sermon which is so oriented to a text of the Bible. Now, of course, the great danger in Bible exposition is that we have the unraveling of a ball of twine, that we have a series of sermonettes, clusters of one great truth after another, not particularly organized. This is the challenge of the expository sermon. It should not be running commentary. There needs to be a division of the text in the interest of marking progress, advance in thought, which is reflected in the divisions of the sermon. That's expository preaching. There needs to be a correspondence of ideas obviously between what the text says and what the sermon says. That's the beauty of exposition. There needs to be a correspondence in mood. If the text is a dirge you do not preach it with euphoria and ebullience. If the text is Psalm 11, you don't preach that like a dirge. There needs to be a correspondence in proportion. We have no right to build a temple where the text has only a tent. There's got to be a correspondence in proportion and in emphasis. This is a big challenge. That's the glory of expository preaching. And beyond that in biblical exposition we are modeling for the congregation how you handle Holy Scripture. You see that has it all over topical preaching or textual-topical preaching. We're showing people how to work their way through a text. How do you handle Scripture? How do you interpret Scripture in its context? Now, there is a chipping away at that definition and my definition there is the broadest Anson Phelps, Lloyd Perry, Haddon Robinson definition. That's "big idea" preaching and that's not a bad company to be in as far as I'm concerned. That's "big idea" preaching, and that's where we seek the basic thought of the passage, preach it as

developed in the passage, drawing our mains and our subs from the natural order of the text. Now I'm a little uneasy with my friend, Harold Bryson, in his book on biblical exposition; he's so good in urging us to *lectio continua*—that is, preach book series—not *lectio selecti*. I mean, preach in series so you are dealing constantly with the issue of the context of that particular book. But he says exposition consists of this: if you take the main thought out of the passage and preach that, that's exposition. But, my friends, there's a difference between preaching *out of* a text and preaching *the* text. You've got to preach that thought as it is argued and developed in the passage. That's exposition. And I'm afraid that many times we preach over a text. We really disregard what the inspired writer is saying to support and strengthen the big idea. And my good friend, Bryan Chapell, in his book, *Christ Centered Preaching*, which in my view is one of the finest more recently published, he argues, and I do take issue with him, he says, "The pattern of the text does not need to appear as the pattern of the sermon." And I say, "Why not?" Would there be any better pattern for the sermon than the one that is in the text itself? But all of this I say in view of a major paradigm shift which is happening right now in evangelicalism in this county and around the globe. And I lament it; I bemoan it, and I am prepared to joust against it. And here's what's happening in evangelical preaching now. We are seeing, very widespread, a move from text-driven, text-derived preaching to need-driven, audience-centered, problem-solving preaching. Folks, that is not right. We are getting away from the text—dismissing the absolute indispensability of grappling with that text. The word of God, that's all we've got to give in the final analysis. We can't leave the word in that way. In one jurisdiction, up our way, they made a study—ninety preachers. Almost all of them are graduates of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who were schooled and taught within the definition I have just given of what expository preaching is. One-half of those preachers have given up any serious wrestling with the text. And they move right on to stories and application and blah-blah. Now that just terrifies me. One-half! Look, if there's nothing more to exegesis than that, we had better totally reconfigure seminary education. I'm not going to make that surrender, one bit. Ours must be a fascination with the text, a fixation on the text, an obsession with the text. We've got to have that text; then we move to its application. But everything depends on grasping that text and being gripped by that text. Let me as an analogy suggest: here's a playwright. The playwright has written a play—let's say William Shakespeare or Ben Johnson. Look, the director and the actors better take the text seriously. This is *Measure for Measure*, or *Macbeth*, or whatever it is. I mean, we owe that to the author of the text. Now the individual directors and actors get into the text. They make it

their own. Each will play the part, say, of Hamlet just a little differently, but there must be fidelity to that text. Here is Terrence McNally, a well-known modern playwright and I quote him,

> If you think that one of things I look for in an actor or a director is 100 percent fidelity to my text, you are 100 percent right. "Who do you think you are, Shakespeare?" one actor snarled at me when I objected to his nonverbal emendations to my text. "No," I replied, "I think I'm Terrence McNally and the only way you will find the characters I intended is to speak and use the text exactly as I wrote it."

Folks, I think that is God's expectation of his preachers. I love what they used to say about Sir Lawrence Olivier, "He really stood in awe of the text." Don't you love that? Now the same goes for musicians, be they conductors or virtuosos on the violin or piano. They've got the score. I mean, they don't have license to just do whatever they please with it. They've got to pay attention to what was written and the directions that are given. But no two artists will do it exactly the same. We have this treasure in earthen vessels, after all. When Eric Leinsdorf retired, here is what *Time Magazine* said about Eric Leinsdorf, the great symphonic conductor, "It was perhaps just that paradoxical combination of regard for the text," I love that, "with fresh thinking." That's the combination. Regard for the text with fresh thinking that made Leinsdorf a world-class conductor and vaulted him to his legendary leadership of Philadelphia and Boston. Christoph Eisenbach, who leads our Ravinia in the summer, the *Tribune* critics said of him, "He knows the importance of the text." I love that! Do our auditors realize we know the importance of the text? Here was a pianist at Orchestra Hall in Chicago, Richard Goody, "when it comes to Beethoven's works for solo piano, the sonatas especially, Goody is unique. No other performer puts a masterly technique so totally at the composer's service. He seems intent not just on playing well, but on having us meet Beethoven face to face." Folks, that's what the preacher is to be and do. And of another guest conductor, the *Tribune* said, "He is self-effacing to the point of disappearing altogether into the music." But our critic was very displeased last summer when Lang Lang took off at Ravinia, on Grieg's piano concerto particularly: "He so far exceeded the limits of interpretive license as to amount to gross musical distortion." Oh, he really goes after him with tooth and tongs: "This array of swooning expressions, choreographic nonsense, it was hard even to watch him. And the conductor indulged the soloist's shameless behavior. He always seemed happy to play co-conspirator as Lang's slowed tempos ingrieved to a funereal crawl or tore through Rachmaninov's faster variations as if he had to catch a train for Philadelphia." Folks, you know, what do we do to the text is the issue. That's the issue.

Now, in this obsession with the text, this concern for the text, here's what the history of preaching shows us. P. T. Forsyth stated it so succinctly. Forsyth said—and factor analysis would certainly indicate there are a number of factors in this—but this is what Forsyth said, "Where biblical preaching has been strong, the church has been strong. And where biblical preaching has been weak, the church has been weak." I say there are a number of factors, but that is a constant factor. And I want to suggest that over the 2000 years—and you are not all going to agree with me on every one of these, but put me on your prayer list if you feel that I'm off the mark—I want to indicate to you in a number of concrete examples out of the 2000 years of the history of preaching, where the subordination of the text, the effective loss of the text in preaching, has been disastrous. It's a kind of negative series of lessons from church history, but we need the power of negative thinking as well as positive thinking.

First, the subordination of the text to liturgy has been disastrous in many circles. Thomas Torrance in Edinburgh wrote an amazing little book, *The Doctrine of Grace and the Apostolic Fathers*, and he shows how quickly by grace through faith alone, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, how quickly that was lost. And you've got a smothering and a suffocating of high church sacramentalism very quickly setting in. And my friends, you see that in the post-Constantinian era. Preaching becomes less and less significant in the church. And you've got a further sacralizing in the fifth and sixth centuries, in which, by the time you come to the Middle Ages, there are many local churches where there is no preaching at all. The only preaching that is going on is in the monasteries. And the local pastors did not preach; it was the bishops who preached. Folks, just think what a perversion that is. At Port Royal, this is before, of course, that marvelous Augustinian renewal, Jansenism, hit them, out of which came Pascal and all of that. For thirty years there had not been a single sermon preached at Port Royal. Now what do you have here? The text is subordinated to liturgy. And folks, I think, I'm speaking as a low churchman, but free liturgy. Folks, whether you come to Roman Catholicism, or whether you come to Anglo Catholicism in the Church of England, whether you come to Eastern Orthodoxy, I mean, think of the great preachers in Eastern Orthodoxy: Chrysostom, the Cappadocian Triad, Gregory and the Basils and all of that—there was a great history of preaching. Today, there is virtually no preaching whatever in Eastern Orthodoxy, in Russian Orthodoxy, the pulpit is not there. There is no exposition of Holy Scripture. There is some gospel in the liturgies, especially the Russian liturgies—but folks, no preaching. The only preaching actually going on of any consequence in Eastern Orthodoxy today is a Coptic priest in Alexandria, Egypt, who is filling the Cathedral

every Friday night with expositions from the Gospel of Matthew. That's just scarce as hen's teeth. Now there was, and I treat it in my history of preaching, the Isaurian dynasty in Asia Minor in the seventh century where they left all of this high sacramentalism aside, scrapped the priority of liturgy, put the pulpit in the center—folks, if that seventh century revival in what is today Turkey had really persisted, think of the challenge it might have been to the rise of Mohammed and Islam to the south; and the whole history of the Middle East and North Africa might have been different. Here was sort of a last gasp protest and I say the subordination of the text to liturgy can lose the text. I had a marvelous low church Episcopalian as a doctoral student, a marvelous fellow. But he said to me, "You know, really I've just got one problem with you, Dr. Larsen." I thought, well that's encouraging. But he said, "You know, with what I need to do in the sixty minutes there is only room for a fifteen minute sermon." Well now, dear people, I think he's only moving on one cylinder there. This is a serious problem. I don't see how you can do justice whatever to a natural thought unit of the text if you don't have at least thirty or thirty-five minutes. And I want to tell you it's happening as we are losing our evening meetings around the country in evangelicalism and the announcements expand and the other things take more time and the thing that always is cut and suffers is the sermon.

The second point I would like to make: the subordination of the sermon to doctrine is dangerous. Oh, oh, oh, oh, what is this? I'm a doctrinal animal. I mean, doctrine twelve times in the pastoral, sound doctrine. Doctrine is of the essence. But the subordination of the text to doctrine is dangerous and we see it in Puritanism. I'm going to make a critique of Puritan preaching. We love the Puritans. I mean, really, there's never been a culture in which the sermon was so prominent. Studies in New England, the average New Englander heard 5,000 sermons in his or her lifetime—listen, 17,000 hours to preaching. That's unheard of, unparalleled. But I've got some students, former students; I call them my "neo-Puritan yahoos." Their dedication in life is to recover Puritanism for our time. Forget it. God does not repeat past epics like that. Besides, there is a downside to the Puritans. I like Christmas. I like Easter. I like musical instruments and I don't like that legalism. And great as their preaching was, it had a downside and that downside was one of the factors which ended Puritanism in Britain and in America. I'll argue that. They were not expositors. Now, there may have been a few. It's hard to make sweeping statements. There were Arminian Puritans, you know; mild Calvinists, some systems Calvinists; it's hard to say for every single one of them. But in the main, they were not expositors. They preached textual, topical sermons. They exposed a very small piece of text. They did not take a natural thought unit. They exposed—I call it the

inverted pyramid—expose a small piece of text and then ransack Scripture for its doctrinal reverberations, implications, corroborations. This is how one of my favorite preachers, Martin Lloyd-Jones, could preach 7 years of Sunday mornings through Ephesians. I mean, he took a sentence, half a sentence, one word, for a sermon. I mean, I'm hooked on him, but he is not the model. He was not an expositor. Look, John Howell, Puritan preacher, preached 18 sermons on the expression, "We are saved in hope." Now I think that's remarkably ingenious. I would like to expose a little more of the text than that. John Howell preached 17 sermons on "that which is of the flesh gives birth to the flesh, and that which is of the Spirit gives birth to the spirit." 14 sermons on "if you can't love people you see, how can you love God whom you don't see?" Thomas Brooks preached 58 sermons on Hebrews 12:14, half a sentence: "without holiness, no man can see God." He didn't even take the whole verse. Over one year on "without holiness, no man shall see God." Now that's a principial statement. But how about the whole counsel of God? Thomas Manton did 190 sermons on Psalm 119. Thomas Shepherd, the founder of Harvard University, spent 4 years Sunday mornings on Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Ten Virgins. It is a fertile parable, but I tell you—four years? What about other literary genre in the Bible? What about the whole counsel of God? Can you really find the whole counsel of God in the Parable of the Ten Virgins? I say it's ingenious. I think there was a mistake. William Gouge spent 31 years in Hebrews. One Puritan spent 21 years in the first chapter of Isaiah. One Puritan preacher never preached from any book beside Ezekiel in his 60 years of pastoral life. I say that's not our model. We've got to have more text. Don't you see? This is one of the factors which I think weakened the Puritan fabric. With all their strengths, this was weak. And it warns us. The subordination of the text to anything is dangerous.

Thirdly, the subordination of the text to a higher-critical worldview is disastrous. Here is Scotland, that little country, small population. What country has given us the preachers in the 19th century that Scotland gave us? The theologians? I mean, the Spirit of God had moved so powerfully; the divinity halls were full—an amazing phenomenon. In 1844 Thomas Chalmers led in the Disruption as the Free Church of Scotland was formed and a new college in Edinburgh. But a brilliant young man, Robertson Smith, educated in enlightenment rationalism in Germany, came back, brilliant, gifted, and began to write articles for *Britannica*, which reflected enlightenment rationalism—the whole evolutionary underpinning that everything begins primitively, denied Mosaic authorship, two Isaiahs, Daniel is history, not prophecy. You know, the whole schmear—big church controversy. Listen, the people in the Free Church of Scotland almost to a man were sound, but they were irenic

many of them to the point that they didn't realize the issue. William Raney, who presided at the trial of Robertson Smith, he was a sweet man; he did not grasp how critical this issue was. Alexander White, the greatest preacher living at the time, had Robertson Smith as an associate at Free St. George's, and he would not speak on the issue. A. B. Davidson, the Old Testament professor was silent. Robertson Smith is convicted of heresy by one vote. The conservatives won the battle but they lost the war. They lost the heart for really facing this issue any more. And my friends, by 1920, the Free Church is back in the Church of Scotland and the present result is there. What happened? The text was subordinated to a higher-critical worldview. And you can repeat that again and again and again and again, where the precious text of God's holy word is lost in the maelstrom of human rationalistic and evolutionary thinking. No question.

Fourthly, the subordination of the text to rhetoric or oratory is dangerous. Now, as one who loves to cavort about a little bit in public, an old Shakespearean actor like myself, this is a dangerous thing. But dear people, by too ornate a delivery and too much attention to style we can lose substance. Do you believe that's right? You've got some examples of that in the Southern Baptist Convention—I mean, some great preachers. I mean, they were barnburners; they were paint-peelers. I mean, they titillated with alliteration. They could alliterate every second word. And it was a volcanic and a seismic production. But it almost made you lose what was being said. George Lorimer in the north was the same, preached in Chicago, in New York City, in Tremont Temple, Boston. I mean, there was such a mass of impressive oratory. The verbiage was so thick, you just sat there saying, "How can a man do that? Oh, by the way, what did he say?" I'm just saying, there are many ways we can lose the text. I don't want to speak, you know, as if it's only some others that have the difficulty and the temptation. I wish I had time this morning to talk to you a little bit how in the modern move on narrative we can lose the real text. I'm into learning how to do narrative. There is so much narrative in Scripture. Two-thirds of our Old Testament, Bruce Waltke says, is narrative in his definition. We've always loved narrative and we've done narrative a lot. But we've tended, basically, to impose a rather rationalistic grid on the narrative, often losing the power of the storyline. And I've got in the fifth chapter of the book to which our president made reference a method by which we can divide a narrative into its narrative blocks. I think there is no escape from dividing a text and then letting the divisions of the text be reflected in the sermon, but with some little squiggles of ongoing application, so we're not telling the story and then kind of giving a commercial at the end which is easily dismissed. This thing of narratology and, of course, we've got down

narrative theology and narrative ethics and narrative spirituality, in large portions of which there is no concern whatever for historicity. I trace in the book—now this really goes back—this present renaissance of interest goes back to H. Richard Niebuhr in 1940, *The Meaning of Revelation*. We've lost it all pretty well to higher criticism; but look, let's tell stories. No one ever asks too much about the historicity of Jack and the Beanstalk. Tell the story. But the problem in narrative in the mainline—and I think we evangelicals need to learn some things about doing better our narrative preaching—but the problem in the mainline is reducing the canon to just narrative. Buttrick says, you know, "I've never preached from the wisdom literature or eschatology. That just doesn't fit into my can. It's got to be story." Well, how sad! What a loss! The problem in this movement is that the story becomes my story. That's the problem in it. And Fred Craddock comes to the point, he says, "It is condescending and patronizing to tell anyone what a story means, so there is no application." You know, that's not right. But it fits in after all with the modern approach and sense today because you don't build doctrine off stories. Stories illustrate doctrine. You don't build doctrine on a narrative. That's what liberalism did with the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. They built soteriology on a parable. No, you learn the doctrine from the didactic teachings of our Lord or the apostles. And the stories illustrate that teaching. Here is the peril, the subordination of the text. Sacramentarianism, doctrine, in our time the danger is the subordination of the text to application. That's what is happening. When you move from text-driven, text-derived preaching to need-driven, audience-centered, problem-solving preaching, you see what you are doing is you're feeling the poignant sufferings of people in the congregation. So you read the text and then you jettison any serious interaction with the text, and you cut to the bottom line right away, and you want to begin to help them with stories and palliatives; you know, suggestions of how you can feel better and get out of this jam. I'm saying that is not the pattern in the word of God. Ephesians 1 to 3: God, who God is, what Christ has done, what the Holy Spirit does; then 4 to 6: application. Application is critical and it's essential. But you can't begin with the application. There's a lot of preaching today which is application. Rick Warren says, "My mains are the application. The content you get in the Sunday School." Careful with that. You look at the Epistles, in the main, Romans, you start with who God is. Here's the contrast. Preaching in the tradition of the enlightenment, theology has become anthropology. Preaching in a tradition of the Reformation, it's God-centered, Christ-centered. Now, you know, which way are we going to go on this? You cut to the bottom line—you're leaving God out. And his is the power and the grace and the mercy. You can't preach 1

Corinthians 13, “Now abide faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love.” Look, you need the chapter which builds love is essential, love is expressed, love is eternal. Now we are ready to say, “and the greatest of these is love” because this is what God says and what God through his Holy Spirit has inspired and authorized. Dear friends, I’m sorry I’m getting a little carried away, but I feel this so deeply in my soul that the temptation to be helpful now is causing us to too quickly abandon serious exegesis which is going to set forth God, and he is the answer. Little Gypsy Smith was such a darling little man; he was in the Salvation Army after his conversion. Rodney Smith, Gypsy Smith, I heard him; my brother was converted under his ministry. He was invited by Alexander MacLaren to come to the Union Chapel in Manchester where MacLaren had presided in regal splendor for many, many years. He was there forty-five years. Smith felt intimidated. He says, “I’m just a little gypsy preacher. I’m an evangelist. What can I do? This man is so scholarly. He is such an expositor, the prince of expositors. I mean, what hope is there? I don’t think I’m going to go.” And then the Holy Spirit wouldn’t let him desist, and he went. For two weeks he preached in the Union Baptist Chapel in Manchester—500 people came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. God blesses his word. That’s what he has promised to bless: the text of Holy Scripture held up, interpreted, explained, shared. That’s what we’ve got to do, and I’ll tell you, the history of 2000 years of preaching says, “Yea and amen. That’s what you’ve got to do.” Amen.