

Putting the Question to *Questions on Doctrine*: “Will It Preach?”

Mervyn A. Warren, Ph.D., D.Min.

I suppose you have arrived when you no longer have need to be called by your full name and are readily recognized and instantly identified by only your initials a la “JFK” or “MLK” or “EGW.” My wife is a television fan of “QVC.” My son recently scored a movie in Hollywood for “JLo.” Many of us here at this celebration are members of “SBL.” Our cause celebre this week is “QOD.” Actually, as I recall, the moment that *Questions on Doctrine* was born in 1957, because its authorship was cloaked in mystery and published by no personal names but rather by “a Representative Group of Seventh-day Adventist Leaders, Bible Teachers, and Editors,” the common buzz around town came up with the cryptic pseudonym “F-R-E-A-D-A,” representing the combination of names of the putative mystical writers. Of course, a half century later in 2007, the acronym had long lost much of its curiosity, and “QOD” stands on its own as the only nomenclature necessary for its big fiftieth anniversary. For sure, at least in that sense alone, *Questions on Doctrine* has arrived!

Permit me to confess up front that I “crashed” this party. I am here because when Oakwood College was contacted about the sponsorship support of this event along with Andrews University and Loma Linda University, I inadvertently raised the question of an apparent distance, if not tension, between scholarship and preaching even in the Adventist professional community. My query asserted itself in the spirit of presuming that reflections on “QOD” would be generated solely by “scholars” from branches of learning other than homiletics and preaching and thereby, in my opinion, slip by an important dimension of the book that refuses to fade away into the sunset. In addition to continued editorial references to “QOD” in denominational journals and those of “independent” groups among us, master’s and doctoral theses and dissertations are sure to continue keeping graduate committees busy for the foreseeable future. My suggesting a possible relationship between QOD to preaching, however, never intended that my innocent question should boomerang and assign me the task.

Be that as it may, the apparent tension between scholarship and preaching or proclamation first jolted me almost two decades ago. I was searching for information on the subject of “preaching” in our *SDA Bible Commentary* volumes and coming up bone dry. The idea then hit me that the preacher as proclaimer is often the “invisible man or woman” when scholars decide to do some “thinking” and hard bedrock reflection even on religious and Biblical themes. At the time, I was a member of a General Conference committee which specialized in scholarly research and later charged with the responsibility of preparing the volume 12 addition to the Commentary series. So I shared with committee colleagues my experience of finding essentially nothing on the subject of proclamation with the suggestion and hope that the prospective volume 12 would at least tip its hat in the direction of preaching and avoid what I considered a serious oversight and the same mistake of the past. My observation pointed out that except for brief, almost passing comments on four New Testament texts, the subject of “preaching” was conspicuous for its absence from the entire set including volume 8 (*Bible Dictionary*),

volume 9 (*Bible Students' Source Book*), and what would become volumes 10 and 11 (*SDA Encyclopedia*). Alphabetized entries in the *Bible Dictionary* skip from the topic of “prayer” to “precept.” Topics in the *Source Book* leap from “prayer” to “predestination.” The *Encyclopedia* springs from “Prayer Meetings” to “Thomas Preble,” a Millerite of the mid- 1800’s.

My observation received an amusing, almost condescending laugh from the committee, a precursor that any reference to proclamation of preaching as an entry in volume 12 would merit nothing more. The reason? As best as I could decipher the curiously vague remarks dancing around my inquiry, preaching did not measure to the level of a theo-doctrinal subject as those earmarked for volume 12. Of course, I did not intend to presume that proclamation was one of the then twenty-seven fundamental beliefs but rather that the pulpit function must remain the principal channel for whatever teachings and doctrines deemed vital to the life of our church and that it must be expressed at every strategic opportunity. If a theological tenet is worth believing at all, it must be heard from our pulpits. And to be heard from our pulpits, it must be catalogued and highlighted in such a way to attract and feed pulpit and pew instead of packaged to appeal only to those who desire merely to “think” and “reflect.” On the one hand, information for information’s sake inevitably caves in on itself or, at best, stagnates and collects dust on the shelf except, maybe, when time arrives to celebrate its anniversary. On the other hand, information for proclamation feeds into the channel of spreading the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue and people. Paul expressed my sentiments when he asks in Romans 10:14-15: “How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” It was in this spirit that I attempted to call attention to a dynamic and active belief system. Therefore, I ventured to wave the hand of preaching to get attention and lift the voice of proclamation for a hearing.

Another General Conference committee on which I served was exploring how to improve the Adult Sabbath School Quarterly. When one of our sessions discussed ways and means of improving the lessons, the idea was placed on the table that editors and authors should be encouraged to treat Bible texts less topically and more exegetically and expositoryly for responsible meaning and interpretation. The initial response charged that idea with being “too preachy.” I never understood exactly why or how all of a sudden responsible Bible interpretation became “too preachy.” My suspicion is that it had to do more with the source of the idea—who happened to be a “preacher” rather than one of their celebrated circle of “scholars.” At any rate, I think I have noticed considerable improvement over the years in the direction of Bible exegesis and interpretation with the Adult Quarterly (or as we now call it, The Sabbath School Bible Study Guide).

Still yet a third committee which suffered my membership for about a decade provides our church with an invaluable service of securing and examining scientific evidence for Biblical creation, age of the earth, authenticity of the Noachic Flood and so on. My committee assignment for one of our meetings addressed the question of how scientific findings might best be communicated to the church at large taking into account the legitimate need for our scientific journal also to be a platform for scientists to talk to one another in their highly technical language, including intercommunication with scientific scholars not of our faith. When my report presented the idea of some kind of secondary publishing of their findings written in understandable sound-bites for the likes of our church community who read the *Ministry Magazine*, the *Adventist Review*, the

Message Magazine and the *Signs*, the committee's general response confirmed what I saw then and continue to see as essentially a great gulf fixed between SDA scholars and preachers. "We do not trust our scientific findings in the hands of preachers," the committee generally retorted, "because preachers might take the material and try to make more out of it than it warrants." I must say that the response posed a serious problem for a strategic department established by our church to study important research findings on creationism and the flood but whose findings they preferred keeping "in house" like some secret society wrapped in cryptic scientific jargon. Or, if my conclusion is too harsh, at the least we saw another cloud of doubt over the preacher's ability to appropriately handle scholarly material.

So with that backdrop behind my personal experience with our church's "brain trust" in several settings, I find myself doing what amounts to crashing the QOD party by inadvertently poking the head of "proclamation" into your business when such a topic as part of your discussion was not in the original script or plan. But I make no apologies, for my conviction is as strong as ever that our intellectual exchange and scholarly calisthenics notwithstanding, the most lasting practical value of QOD to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its mission lies in the answer to the question: **"Will It Preach?"** In a real sense, it's a bold question, a provocative question, an audacious question and maybe even a controversial question transcending any trivialities of homiletical methodology of which some preachers might be guilty. My premise affirms that one of the most critical and consequential yardsticks for measuring the value of any theo-religious material is: "Will it engage the pulpit?" Will it pass the test of harmony with Scripture? Does it contain necessary nutrients for hungry people who desire to be fed and fortified in private and public worship?

When I pose the query "Will it Preach" for QOD consideration, I am appealing that results from our time here together include also some notion of the book's intentional usefulness for those who are positioned "at the front lines of battle" against the forces of evil in spiritual warfare: all those servants who share and declare the gospel of Jesus Christ. These front line troops are composed predominantly, though not entirely, of our preaching pastors and evangelists who deliver our best word available, our "present truth," to the listening world. Apparently in 1957, QOD thought it was passing along the best word of our church through the spectacles of certain church leadership to special inquirers of our faith. Everybody in our church did not agree with that word then. Everybody does not agree today fifty years later in 2007. We may never agree. QOD was controversial at birth, controversial in adolescence, controversial in adult years, and remains controversial through its mid-life crisis. We must all agree, I trust, that QOD's present and future value, however, depends on whether or not the material between its covers offers a Biblically based witness to a loving God the Father, an atoning Jesus Christ, and a quickening Holy Spirit especially in the context of the Three Angel's Message. In other words, "Will it preach?"

As provincial as he might sound, C.K. Barrett might be on to something when he writes: "Scholarship waits upon preaching as its handmaid. Preaching is a vital and indispensable activity of the church, and scholarship must assist it.... Biblical scholarship, then, traditionally and ideally, exists in order to serve the ends of preaching; to provide the exegetically raw material out of which sermons may be fashioned; or, in perhaps a better metaphor, to supply... the exegetical skeletons... which the preacher will

clothe with flesh and sinews, and God—if he see fit—will fill with his Spirit.”¹ Gerhard Ebeling pushes the point further by commissioning the entire seminary faculty with the chief assignment of facilitating movement from Bible (or theology) to preaching.²

One method of measuring the preachability of QOD is by determining its consonance with what theologians and homileticians call the *kerygma*, a New Testament word translated “preaching” or “proclamation” but which refers also to the content of preaching or that which should be preached.³ Summarily, *kerygma* represents the gospel message believed and obeyed. *Kerygma* sees the entire Old Testament in broad outlines as “promise” of the coming Messiah and the New as simple “fulfillment” of that promise in Jesus Christ who lived in human flesh, was crucified for our sins, ascended into heaven, and will come again in judgment and redemption. Zero-based theologizing begins with these basic Biblical Kerygmatic facts which few, if any of us, would hardly disagree. Our challenge is filling the details of the Biblical story of salvation history and interpreting the meaning with all the contextual data that has flowered over the centuries from early church history until our present age. Herein lies our hotbed of disagreements about the written content of QOD which I believe has prospects for wholesome growth and ecclesiological maturity, not unlike Emil Brunner’s dialectical or crisis theology where opposites are held in tension out of which something better emerges.⁴ And perhaps this is something we might ask ourselves about the last fifty years. Has our intra-denominational tensions over QOD forged a better and more responsible understanding of God and His will among us who claim special remnant position for the end times? If the answer is “yes,” then where is that understanding recorded? Where may I go to acquaint myself with it? Is that understanding the “Twenty-eight Fundamental Beliefs”? Who dares to specify exactly where we might find that which represents the Seventh-day Adventist improved evangelical theology since QOD? Or is the message of QOD fine as it is? Whatever our answer, my question is: Will it preach? Is it worthy to proclaim as kerygmatic gospel of our Lord?

I think that QOD itself partially answers this probing question or in some sense reveals a consciousness of the question and recognizes this indissoluble marriage between theology and preaching when its seven hundred pages mention the word “preach” (or some form thereof) and “proclamation” a total of thirty-five times or about once every twenty pages. The first occurrence comes on the third page of the very first chapter entitled “Doctrines We Share with Other Denominations” and appears in these words: “That the gospel is to be preached as witness to all the world.” Probably irrelevant to our purposes but, nevertheless, a matter of interest observes that a well-known and world traveled preacher was numbered among the mystic authors of QOD identified in the acronym, “F-R-E-A-D-A.” More importantly, however, I should like to affirm, indeed, I *am* affirming that the gospel commission of Jesus Christ declared in Matthew 3:14; Luke 4:18, 19; Luke 9:2; and Luke 9:60 remain our eschatological reason for being. To borrow the words of my colleague in proclamation literature, Richard Lischer, professor of homiletics at Duke University Divinity School: “Preaching is the final expression of theology. It has been toward preaching that theology has been tending. After the exegete has told us what the text once meant, and the systematician has told us what the text means in its historical, doctrinal, and philosophical setting, the preacher... [fulfills] the text by helping it to speak to a particular time situation, and

people. The majority of Christians encounter theology only in this, its final form, preaching.”⁵

Originally, I had intended to conclude this paper right about here by leaving my title with you as a rhetorical question for each person to supply his or her answer in the quiet solitude of your own personal thoughts. But then, I was tapped on the shoulder and nudged a couple of weeks ago to proffer an answer myself from my own point of view. My brief answer to “Will QOD Preach,” an answer which certainly begs for more time and space for fuller development, is predicated on flipping the proleptic question (“**Will** it preach?”) to a historical one: “**Has** QOD preached?”

For me, it has been from the preaching clergy that I was especially attracted to QOD. I recall their sense of being “let in” on some tough doctrinal discussions within its pages. Development of rationales for certain cardinal beliefs came across as reasonable and intellectual yet simple, clear, straightforward, persuasive and, yes, Biblical. With two famous quotes by Ellen White forming the general backdrop, I observed preachers consulting QOD for reassurance of what they considered our distinct Adventist message: quotes on “lifting Christ”⁶ in every sermon and being mindful of the “old landmarks.”⁷ Like a photostatic reproduction, the Table of Contents and General Index of QOD included such topics and provided impetus to pulpits. Do preachers agree on every hermeneutical nuance of QOD’s treatment of these topics? Of course not. Nor do we have to or are expected to have full accord. Nevertheless, QOD seemed to have brought together under one published cover special aspects of Adventist thought in a way unprecedented to 1957 and probably unmatched since. Although written as a response to “outside” inquiries, QOD somehow spoke to us “in house.”

While we might wish some updating or revision of QOD to reflect whatever we think we have learned over the past fifty years, I have this feeling that for a number of reasons, no one would dare touch or tackle this “landmark” any more than attempt the same for our *SDA Commentary* series. But will it continue contributing to proclamation? If our past in any way influences our future and if the floor is open, I move and vote an optimistic “yes”!

ENDNOTES

1. C.K. Barrett, Biblical Problems and Biblical Preaching, Facet Books/ Biblical Series, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, pp. 32-33.
2. Ibid. vii (See also Carl E. Braaten, New Directions in Theology Today, Volume II, History and Hermeneutics, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966, pp. 138-142).
3. John Lawson, Comprehensive Handbook of Christian Doctrine, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1967. pp. 38, 160, 196-197.
4. William E. Hordern, Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975. pp. 119.
5. Richard Lischer, A Theology of Preaching (The Dynamics of the Gospel), William D. Thompson, Editor, Abington Preacher's Library, Nashville: Abington, 1981. pp. 27-28.
6. Ellen G. White, Gospel Workers, Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1916. pp. 157, 158. (See also Acts of the Apostles, pp. 594).
7. Ellen G. White, Counsels to Writers and Editors, Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1946. pp. 30-31.