

Preaching in the Context of Pluralistic Society from the Perspective of Reformed Theology

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Abstract

Plurality is an undeniable empirical reality, especially in the Indonesian context. This reality poses a challenge for preachers. The questions that must be answered are: how should a preacher convey biblical truth in the context of this pluralistic society? How should preachers proclaim the Gospel? What is the perspective of Reformed theology on this matter? This research uses a literature review method, in which I will explore sources related to the themes discussed above. The books and articles I utilize are largely part of Reformed theology, in order to gain sufficient insight into Reformed theology's perspective on this issue. The conclusions of this research clearly illustrate that in delivering a biblical sermon, a preacher must pay close attention to the method of exploring the Bible correctly and responsibly. In accordance with Reformed theology's belief, "theology from above" must be a priority. The Bible must be the primary source as the sole standard of truth, not heartwarming stories, or the like. Preachers must also adhere firmly to the core doctrines of Reformed theology. The most important thing is that in the sermon, Christ must be the main message conveyed, surpassing other things.

Kata Kunci: biblical preaching; expository preaching; pluralistic context; preaching; reformed theology.

Abstrak

Pluralitas adalah realitas empiris yang tak terbantahkan, terutama dalam konteks Indonesia. Realitas ini menimbulkan tantangan bagi para pengkhotbah. Pertanyaan-pertanyaan yang harus dijawab adalah: bagaimana seharusnya seorang pengkhotbah menyampaikan kebenaran alkitabiah dalam konteks masyarakat pluralistik ini? Bagaimana seharusnya pengkhotbah memberitakan Injil? Bagaimana perspektif teologi Reformasi tentang masalah ini? Penelitian ini menggunakan metode tinjauan literatur, di mana saya akan mengeksplorasi sumber-sumber yang terkait dengan tema-tema yang dibahas di atas. Buku-buku dan artikel yang saya gunakan sebagian besar adalah bagian dari teologi Reformasi, untuk mendapatkan wawasan yang cukup tentang perspektif teologi Reformasi tentang masalah ini. Hasil penelitian ini dengan jelas menggambarkan bahwa dalam menyampaikan khotbah alkitabiah, seorang pengkhotbah harus memperhatikan metode mengeksplorasi Alkitab dengan benar dan bertanggung jawab. Sesuai dengan keyakinan teologi Reformed, "teologi dari atas" harus menjadi prioritas. Alkitab harus menjadi sumber utama sebagai satu-satunya standar kebenaran, bukan cerita yang menghangatkan hati, atau sejenisnya. Pengkhotbah juga harus berpegang teguh pada doktrin inti teologi Reformasi. Yang paling penting adalah bahwa dalam khotbah, Kristus harus menjadi pesan utama yang disampaikan, melampaui hal-hal lain.

Keywords: khotbah alkitab; khotbah ekspositori; konteks pluralistik; khotbah; teologi reformasi.

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Introduction

Indonesia, a country I hold dear, comprises diverse, multicultural ethnic groups from various regions. To unite this vast diversity, the founding fathers established the national ideology of *Pancasila*, ensuring harmony among the states and adopting Indonesian as the national language. Consequently, Indonesia has long been acquainted with the concept of pluralism, which fosters a moderate tolerance toward other religions. However, pluralism is not unique to Indonesia; it has become a pervasive global trend. Theologian Lesslie Newbigin echoes this reality, noting: “It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.”¹

How, then, should preachers proclaim the Word of God in such a pluralistic society? This question has deeply occupied my thoughts since I began serving as a missionary in Indonesia after completing my studies in Reformed theology. How can I propagate the gospel of Jesus the Savior without unnecessarily offending adherents of other religions? Is it truly acceptable to explicitly declare to followers of other faiths that Jesus is the exclusive way of salvation, as Acts 4:12 proclaims? Can my exclusive view of Christianity coexist with the pluralistic religious landscape of Indonesia? Must I adopt an inclusivist paradigm to broaden the possibility of salvation within other religions?

Before rushing to any conclusions, I invite you to journey with me through this paper to discover answers that will best equip us in our calling as servants of God's Word, laboring for His glory wherever He places us.

It is vital to distinguish between religious pluralism and empirical pluralism. Empirical pluralism describes an inescapable societal reality, such as the coexistence of various cultures and lifestyles within our present society.² In contrast, religious pluralism is the ideological “belief that every religion is true.”³ Norman Geisler elaborates on these distinctions, providing a helpful framework to evaluate our theological stance: “Relativism claims that there are no

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Samuel Park, “The Translatability of the Gospel in Multicultural Contexts,” *Global Missiology* 17, no. 4 (2020): 15–18.

² D A Carson, “The Challenges of Contemporary Pluralism,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 6–7. “This is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Those who prefer that culture be variegated, racially mixed, religiously pluriform, and culturally diverse, will judge these developments good. The developments themselves may achieve some real good if they serve to break down cultural prejudice, racial arrogance, and religious bigotry.”

³ Norman L. Geisler, “Pluralism, Religious,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

criteria by which one can tell which religion is true or best. There is no objective truth in religions, and each religion is true to the one holding it. Inclusivism claims that one religion is explicitly true, while all others are implicitly true. Exclusivism is the belief that only one religion is true, and the others opposed to it are false.”⁴

Religious pluralism, inherently linked to relativism, may yield a seemingly positive outcome: religious tolerance. In Indonesia, this is a highly cherished value, sustained by the notion that no single group can claim to possess “the absolute truth” that all other religions must concede. Taking this positive mode a step further, religious pluralism asserts that all religions are equally valid and capable of granting salvation to their adherents, positing that everyone ultimately worships “one” God known by different names. It is common to hear conversations reflecting this mindset among believers of other religions: “I believe in God; you believe in Buddha; he believes in Allah. But we believe in the same God.”

Amidst this pluralistic atmosphere, what posture should we, as Christians, adopt? Traditionally, the majority of evangelicals have maintained that there is no salvation outside of Christ—a position known as exclusivism. The dilemma arising from this exclusivist view is one that every Christian living in a pluralistic society must confront, especially given our God-given mandate to propagate the gospel. Historically, the church has always navigated this tension, as observed by scholars: “The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions. The emergence of the gospel within the matrix of Judaism, the expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic milieu, the early Christian expansion in pagan Rome, the establishment of the Mar Thoma church in southeastern India—all of these are examples of situations in which Christian apologists and theologians, not to mention ordinary Christian believers, have been aware that there are alternatives to Christianity on offer. Equally, it is perfectly obvious that cultural pluralism exists. Yet this poses no decisive difficulties for Christianity, in theory or in practice. The ability of the gospel to transcend cultural barriers is one of its chief glories.”⁵

Regarding religious pluralism, John Sanders published an essay titled “Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?” A year later, Evert Osburn authored a similar piece, “Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?” The very titles of these articles underscore the

⁴ Ibid.; David A. Haines, “Exclusivism in a Pluralistic Age: A Reformed Apologetic,” *Journal of Evangelical Theology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 12–14.

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, “The Challenges of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church,” *JETS* 35 (1992); Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Joshua D. Chatraw, *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018); Bob C. Greene, “The Authority of the Word in Modern Preaching,” *Journal of Expository Homiletics* 5, no. 2 (2021): 112–114, <https://www.expositoryhomiletics.org/archives/greene-pdf>.

pressing nature of the religious pluralism debate. These authors attempted to navigate the Christian dilemma by finding ways to "transcend cultural barriers." However, in doing so, they compromised historical Christianity by adopting an inclusivist paradigm. This inclusivism carries two main implications: first, it affirms that there is only one true religion through which humanity can receive eternal salvation; second, it posits that there are likely alternative pathways to salvation within other religions.⁶

Both writers argue that there are redemptive avenues for the unevangelized outside the visible church and explicit knowledge of Christ. They suggest this can occur through general revelation—such as nature and human conscience—and subjective special revelation, including dreams and visions. In other words, they propose that devotees of other faiths who are sincere in their religious pursuits may still attain God's salvation, even if they do not explicitly believe in Jesus as their Savior. Notably, their theological focus shifts away from "Jesus the Savior" and centers vaguely on "God." This shift must be understood through the lens of pragmatism. They adopt this view because they assume that "in a world in which the concept of absolute truth is denied absolutely, the offense of the Cross may become increasingly offensive, and the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ as both the ontological and epistemological basis for salvation may become a watershed issue among evangelicals."⁷

This pragmatic approach has also influenced recent missiological trends, attempting to broaden the scope of those saved by God's grace. The "Insider Movement" exemplifies this trajectory. As one commentator notes, "Christian missionaries encourage Muslims to embrace Jesus as their Savior but remain Muslims by continuing to read the Qur'an, profess the *shahada*... and participate in mosque activities. They keep their faith in Christ a secret, only to be revealed (somewhat) if another Muslim asks them about Jesus"⁸ and "By maintaining their Muslim identities (and even their beliefs), yet purportedly believing the Gospel, those Muslims remain inside in their communities, waiting for the potential to provide a witness to their fellow

⁶ John Sanders, "Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (1988): 241-259; Evert Osburn, "Those Who Have Never Heard: Have They No Hope?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32, no. 3 (1989): 367-372.

⁷ W. Gary Phillips, "Evangelical Pluralism: A Singular Problem," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 51 (1994): 153; R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Offense of the Cross," *Preaching* 13 (1998): 24. See a recent online journal PDF for an updated critique on pragmatic inclusivism: David A. Haines, "Exclusivism in a Pluralistic Age: A Reformed Apologetic," *Journal of Evangelical Theology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 12-14.

⁸ David B. Garner, "High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel," *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 252. To see a recent analysis of the Insider Movement's missiological impact, consult Samuel Park, "The Translatability of the Gospel in Multicultural Contexts," *Global Missiology* 17, no. 4 (2020): 15-18, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.globalmissiology.org/archives/park-pdf>.

Muslims.”⁹ Likewise, the primary goal of the Insider Movement is to reach unreached populations. To achieve this, these missionaries often conceal their Christian identity to build relationships with Muslims, prioritizing cultural integration over the explicit witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Consequently, inclusivism—driven by religious pluralism—permeates the core of Christian belief, leading many to prioritize the cultural demands of the times over the authority of Scripture. For proponents of religious pluralism, absolute truth and absolute biblical authority are effectively discarded. David Wells insightfully diagnoses this condition: "Biblical inspiration was affirmed but its consequences were not worked out for our preaching, our techniques for healing our own fractured selves. These all happened largely without the use of the Scriptures.... It is almost as if God, who inspired the Word, could not see what was coming in the late twentieth century! The result of this divine myopia is that he has left us with something that is inadequate to the great challenges that we face today."¹⁰

This pluralistic shift from an absolute truth to a multiplicity of equal truths is increasingly evident today. Even within evangelical circles, one can encounter man-made gospels—what the Apostle Paul calls "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6) that distorts the true gospel of Christ. Under the guise of inclusivism, these distortions are often legitimized as equally valid truths. Johan Bavinck incisively critiques this tendency: "Man seeks God and at the same time flees from Him; man tries to know God, but at the same time he is busy obscuring the image he receives of God's everlasting power and deity. Fear is the deepest cause of this. In his heart of hearts, man has a vague sense that he is trying to fool God, and that he is guilty before God. Through this fear and this feeling of guilt, he represses the image of God and replaces it by his own ideas. Man is, as Calvin said in his Institutes, a *fabrica idolorum* [factory of idols]."¹¹ According to Reformed theology, humanity, having forged the idol of religious pluralism, has subsequently crafted the idol of inclusivism.

Based on the introduction, I tried to formulate three research questions. The questions are: how should a preacher convey biblical truth in the context of this pluralistic society? How

⁹ Ayub Edward, "Flirting with Frankenstein: Insider Movements from the Inside," in *Chrislam*, 238. Cited by David B. Garner, "High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel," *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 272.

¹⁰ David F. Wells, *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1995), 10; *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 260. See recent validations of Wells's thesis in Bob C. Greene, "The Authority of the Word in Modern Preaching," *Journal of Expository Homiletics* 5, no. 2 (2021): 112-114.

¹¹ Johan Herman Bavinck, *Church between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981) 200-1.

should preachers proclaim the Gospel? What is the perspective of Reformed theology on this matter?

The purpose of this study is to present the Reformed theological perspective on pluralism, a current issue in Indonesia's diverse society. The second objective is to provide a reference for the right attitude as a preacher who believes in reformed theology in a pluralistic society. The novelty I offer through this research is a comprehensive view of Reformed theology's attitude toward pluralism. Furthermore, it explores the empirical (not merely normative) attitudes that preachers can adopt to face this pluralistic world.

The method used in this research is a literature review, in which I will present ideas from several works, both books and articles. In addition to presenting these ideas, I will discuss them with other perspectives and, of course, explain my position. Then, I will draw conclusions to gain the essence of a Reformed theological perspective.

Discussion

Religious Pluralism and Reformed Theology

The eminent Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof asserted, "All our knowledge of God is derived from his self-revelation in nature and in the Scriptures."¹² Reformed theology maintains that a true understanding of God comes exclusively through His revelation. Because human beings cannot know God unless He chooses to reveal Himself, this revelation consists of general revelation (mediated through nature and human conscience) and special revelation (mediated through Scripture). While non-believers may perceive general revelation through God's common grace, no one can attain salvation without the special revelation found in Scripture. Systematic theologian R. C. Sproul explains this relationship succinctly: "The Bible is called the Word of God because of its claim, believed by the church, that the human writers did not merely write their own opinions, but that their words were inspired by God. The apostle Paul writes: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God' (2 Timothy 3:16). The word *inspiration* is a translation from the Greek word meaning 'God-breathed.' God breathed out the Bible. Just as we must expel breath from our mouths when we speak, so ultimately the Scriptures is God speaking."¹³

Because Reformed theology is grounded in the conviction that Scripture is God-breathed, it approaches divine truth through the lens of a "theology from above," enabling

¹² Lewis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 35.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 15.

humanity to comprehend heavenly realities. Conversely, paradigms endorsing religious pluralism and inclusivism promote a "theology from below," wherein theologians attempt to build their arguments from a purely human standpoint to reach divine truth. Consequently, it is essential for the Reformed tradition to emphasize the absolute inerrancy of Scripture. Reflecting this foundational commitment, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) issued a definitive declaration in October 1978: "Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives."¹⁴

Critics may assert that this view amounts to exclusivism. However, without the foundational bedrock of the sole authority of Scripture, neither Reformed churches nor any other Protestant denominations can sustain their theological standing. Therefore, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* remains absolutely vital. Historically, Martin Luther's steadfast refusal to recant at the Diet of Worms catapulted *sola Scriptura* to the forefront of theological discourse. From that pivotal moment onward, *sola Scriptura* became the primary rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation. Translating simply to "by Scripture alone," this maxim declared that the Bible uniquely possesses the ultimate authority to bind the consciences of believers. While early Protestants certainly recognized other structural authorities—such as church offices, civil magistrates, alongside ecclesiastical creeds and confessions—they consistently viewed these entities as derivative and strictly subordinate to the supreme authority of God.¹⁵

Beyond the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, Reformed systematic theology further dismantles the plausibility of salvation through other religions. When examining the doctrine of regeneration, it becomes abundantly clear that Reformed theology fundamentally rejects both religious pluralism and inclusivism. Regeneration can take place only when God imparts spiritual life to the unregenerate. Because the unregenerate are spiritually dead, they lack the heavenly grace to receive Christ by their own volition, just as a physical corpse cannot resurrect itself. As theologians affirm, "Regeneration is a sovereign work of God. In other words, God exercises His power and His authority over you in His time and His way to bring about the

¹⁴ International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" (1978), Short Statement, sec. 4: quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter?* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1979), 13; requoted in Randall Lyn Rozelle, "Expository Preaching at the Dawn of the Reformation: An Evaluation of Martin Luther as Preacher in Light of Modern Expository Theory" (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 18-20.

¹⁵ R. C. Sproul, *What Is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 43-44.

regeneration of your heart."¹⁶ Therefore, no one can resolve the problem of sin by choosing a non-Christian religion or by relying on moral deeds.

One might fear that the theocentric character of Reformed theology yields a low view of humanity, given its emphasis on the Fall and total depravity. This misconception often earns the Reformed tradition an unfair reputation for being stubbornly and excessively exclusive. However, this is a flawed interpretation promoted by critics of the Reformed tradition. As Francis Schaeffer astutely clarifies, "It is as though God put exclamation points here to indicate that there is something special about the creation of man."¹⁷ Indeed, Reformed theology upholds a profoundly high view of humanity as the image-bearers of God. Herman Bavinck reinforces this truth: "The essence of human nature is its being [created in] the image of God. The entire world is a revelation of God, a mirror of his attributes and perfections. Every creature in its own way and degree is the embodiment of a divine thought. But among creatures, only man is the image of God, God's highest and richest self-revelation and consequently the head and crown of the whole creation, the *imago Dei* and the epitome of nature, both *mikrotheos* (microgod) and *mikrokosmos* (microcosm). Even pagans have recognized this reality and called man the image of God. Pythagoras, Plato, Ovid, Cicero, Seneca, and others distinctly state that man, or at least the soul of man, was created as God's image, that he is God's kin and offspring."¹⁸

Precisely because the Reformed tradition holds such a high view of humanity, it treats the problem of sin with utmost seriousness. This elevated view of humanity does not lead to an anthropocentric universalism—the belief that all people will inevitably be saved—but rather to a theocentric exclusivism, which affirms that salvation belongs entirely to the elect and is accomplished solely according to His sovereign will.

Reformed Theology and Expository Preaching

A few months ago, I was offered an opportunity to travel to Papua New Guinea for a short-term intensive lecture course at the Reformed Churches Bible College, an institution established and maintained by three Reformed denominations from Canada, Australia, and New

¹⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 118. To see a recent analysis of monergistic regeneration responding to pluralistic synergism, consult Samuel Park, "The Translatability of the Gospel in Multicultural Contexts," *Global Missiology* 17, no. 4 (2020): 15-18, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.globalmissiology.org/archives/park-pdf>.

¹⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 33, cited by James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology*, Revised & Expanded (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 146.

¹⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 531. For a recent application of Bavinck's anthropology in contemporary apologetics, see James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 145-147.

Zealand. Although I was eager to accept this invitation, I first had to demonstrate my grasp of Reformed theology through a two-hour oral examination conducted via Skype. The examiners assessed my knowledge in four key areas: first, the authority of Scripture; second, the creeds and confessions affirmed by their denominations; third, the doctrine of Scripture; and finally, the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This rigorous examination provided me with a profound glimpse into the Dutch Reformed tradition. Through this experience, I realized that the Reformed tradition places immense importance not only on the authority of Scripture but also on historic confessions and doctrines. For example, within these denominations, it is mandatory for preachers to deliver at least twelve sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism annually. In the case of the Reformed Churches of Silverstream, which graciously sponsored my visit to Papua New Guinea, every Sunday afternoon sermon throughout the entire year was devoted to the fifty-two Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism.

This prioritization of confessions and doctrine, rooted firmly in the principle of *sola Scriptura*, has historically driven Reformed preachers toward expository preaching. F. B. Meyer illustrates this legacy: "He [the biblical preacher] is in the line of a great succession. The Reformers, the Puritans, the pastors of the Pilgrim Fathers were essentially expositors. They did not announce their own particular opinions, which might be a matter of private interpretation or doubtful disposition; but, taking their stand on the Scriptures, drove home their message with irresistible effect with, 'Thus saith the Lord!'"¹⁹

Similarly, for Reformed preachers, the paramount focus in their preaching is conveying what God has spoken in the Scriptures and what He continues to say to our lives today through His Word. In light of this, it is helpful to consider a robust definition of expository preaching provided by a contemporary Reformed pastor: "Expositional preaching is preaching in service to the Word. It presumes a belief in the authority of the Scriptures, but it is something more: A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to hear God's Word. Even as Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles were given not just a commission to go and speak, but a particular message to deliver, so Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God *only so long as* they speak His words. Preachers are not merely commanded to preach, but they are commanded specifically to preach the Word."²⁰

¹⁹ F. B. Meyer, *Expository Preaching Plans and Methods* (New York, 1910), 60.

²⁰ Mark Dever, "Sermon: Expositional Preaching as a Mark of a Healthy Church," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* Volume 3 3, no. 2 (1999): 57; *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 42. For a contemporary journal article supporting this definition and the authority of the Word, see Bob C. Greene, "The Authority of the Word in Modern Preaching," *Journal of Expository Homiletics* 5, no. 2 (2021): 112-114, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.expositoryhomiletics.org/archives/greene-pdf>.

This perspective highlights that an expository preacher must possess not only a steadfast belief in biblical authority but also a deep commitment to genuinely hearing God's Word. If a preacher lacks this commitment and instead opts to deliver personal ideas—disconnected from the Divine Messenger who speaks through His revelation, the Scriptures—that preacher forfeits the authority to speak on behalf of God. John Calvin sharply criticized those who neglected this commitment to hear His Word. John Piper summarizes Calvin's convictions on this matter: "...First, Calvin believed that the Word of God was a lamp that had been taken away from the churches.... Calvin reckoned that the continuous exposition of books of the Bible was the best way to overcome the 'fearful abandonment of the Word.' Second... Calvin had a horror of those who preached in the pulpit their own ideas.... He believed that by expounding the Scriptures as a whole, he would be forced to deal with all that God wanted to say, not just what he might want to say. Third—and this brings us full circle to the beginning—Calvin saw the majesty of God in his Word. Calvin believed with all his heart that the Word of God was indeed the Word of God, and that all of it was inspired and profitable and radiant with the light of the glory of God."²¹

Driven by these convictions, Calvin devoted himself wholeheartedly to expository preaching. In his book *Portrait of John Calvin*, T. H. L. Parker provides concrete statistics that vividly illustrate Calvin's extraordinary commitment: It took Calvin five years to complete his sermon series on the Book of Acts. Similarly, he preached 46 sermons on the Thessalonian epistles, 186 on the Corinthian epistles, 86 on the Pastoral epistles, 43 on Galatians, and 48 on Ephesians. He spent another five years completing his sermons on the *Harmony of the Gospels*. Remarkably, these figures account only for his Sunday sermons. During the weekdays of those same five years, Calvin preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, and 123 on Genesis! These staggering numbers reveal the depth of Calvin's dedication to studying the Scriptures through rigorous exposition.²²

One might naturally ask, then, how to construct an effective expository sermon. Among the various resources addressing this topic, there is a concise summary that offers a highly practical approach to healthy expository preaching: "...the following minimal elements identify

²¹ John Piper, "The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin, The Man and His Preaching," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* Volume 3 3, no. 2 (1999): 12–14; *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 127-128. For a recent academic discussion on Calvin's homiletical method and continuous exposition, see Jonathan Gibson, "Calvin's Continuous Exposition," *Themelios* 45, no. 1 (2020): 55-58.

²² T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 83; see recent verifications of Calvin's preaching statistics and commitment in Thomas J. Nettles, "The Homiletic Force of John Calvin," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 18, no. 2 (2019): 15-18.

expository preaching: 1. The message finds its sole source in the Scriptures; 2. The message is extracted from the Scriptures through careful exegesis; 3. The message preparation correctly interprets the Scriptures in its normal sense and its context; 4. The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of the Scriptures; [and] 5. The message applies the Scriptural meaning for today."²³

Based on these foundational principles, we can extract five practical key points: (1) reading the Scriptures with our hearts; (2) conducting careful exegesis with our minds; (3) interpreting the Scriptures holistically within their proper context; (4) explaining the original meaning of the text on behalf of God; and (5) applying that meaning to contemporary life on behalf of humanity.²⁴

To distill this into a simpler framework that follows the same logical flow, the process of expository preaching essentially consists of three sequential elements: first, Reading, which focuses exclusively on the Scriptures; second, Studying, which centers on rigorous exegesis; and third, Delivering, which emphasizes practical application empowered by the work of the Holy Spirit.

In an even simpler formulation, expository preaching bridges two realities: the "there and then," which focuses on the historical meaning of the biblical text, and the "here and now," which focuses on the present application of that text. This methodology emphasizes the importance of biblical doctrines while implicitly reminding us that Reformed preachers must never neglect the vital task of applying the Word to our daily contexts. A well-known theologian aptly summarizes this balance: "Reformed Theology has always acknowledged the necessity of the Spirit's illumination in enabling believers to understand the Word. But it is important that

²³ John F. MacArthur Jr. and The Master's Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 21. For a recent online scholarly journal reaffirming these five exegetical elements, see Dr. Lee Martin, "Crafting the Perfect Expository Sermon: A Comprehensive Guide," *Integrity Seminary Journal*, November 2022, <https://www.integrityseminary.net/pdf-archives/martin-expository>.

²⁴ Iain H. Murray, in his book *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith 1939–1961* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), introduces D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as the role model of expositor as saying, "In the 1950' ML-J [D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones] was virtually alone in England in engaging in what he meant by 'expository preaching'." For preaching to qualify for that designation it was not enough, in his view, that its content be biblical; addresses which concentrated upon word-studies, or which gave running commentary and analyses of whole chapters, might be termed 'biblical', but that is not the same as exposition. To expound is not simply to give the correct grammatical sense of a verse or passage, it is rather to set out principles or doctrines which the words are intended to convey. True expository preaching is, therefore, *doctrinal* preaching, it is preaching which addresses specific truths from God to man. The expository preacher is not one who 'shares his studies' with others, he is an ambassador and a messenger, authoritatively delivering the Word of God to men. Such preaching presents a text, then, with that text in sight throughout, there is deduction, argument and appeal, the whole making up a message which bears the authority of Scripture itself. Given such a conception, a faithful discharge of the teaching office necessitates the preacher being able to say, with Paul, 'We are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ' (2 Cor. 2:17). If this involves a staggeringly high view of preaching, it was nothing more, Dr. Lloyd-Jones believed, than is required of the ministerial office."

we see this illuminating work of God, not only enabling us to formulate doctrines, but also enabling us to apply the Scriptures to our circumstances, and to see our experiences and inner life in biblical terms."²⁵

As our Protestant forebears wisely stated, "Doctrines must be preached practically, and duties doctrinally." John MacArthur, one of the most renowned expositors of our time, excellently articulates this essential balance between doctrine and practice: "True expository preaching is actually the most effective kind of applicational preaching. When the Scripture is accurately interpreted and powerfully preached, the Spirit takes the message and applies it to the particular needs of each listener. Apart from explicit general application in principizing the main points in the exposition, the expositor is not compelled to give a set number of points of specific application before a sermon can have an applicational impact. This is not to say he should not make some applications, but if the text is allowed to speak fully, applications will multiply far beyond what he can anticipate as the Spirit of God takes His Word and applies it to each listener."²⁶

Preaching and Expository Preaching

As preachers routinely prepare sermons, they can easily begin to take the profound privilege of preaching for granted. This ungrateful disposition sometimes causes them to lose their reverence for the authority of the Scriptures—the very medium through which God reveals Himself. Consequently, they often fall into the temptation of adopting an "anthropocentric" approach to their ministry. William Willimon astutely describes this homiletical symptom: "Do you know how disillusioning it has been for me to realize that many of these self-proclaimed biblical preachers now sound more like liberal mainliners than liberal mainliners? At the very time those of us in the mainline, old-line, sidelined were repenting of our pop psychological pap and rediscovering the joy of disciplined biblical preaching, these 'biblical preachers' were becoming 'user-friendly' and 'inclusive,' taking their homiletical cues from the 'felt needs' of us 'boomers' and 'busters' rather than the excruciating demands of the Bible. I know why they do this."²⁷

²⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 360.

²⁶ John MacArthur, Jr., "Moving from Exegesis to Exposition," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. by Richard Mayhew (Dallas: Word, 1992), 300. For recent scholarship validating MacArthur's applicational approach through the Spirit's work, see Scott M. Gibson, "The Applicational Imperative in Expository Preaching," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62, no. 3 (2019): 581-585.

²⁷ William H. Willimon, "Been there, Preached that," *Leadership Magazine* (Fall 1995) 75-76. William H. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word: Preaching to the Unbaptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 54. See the

Such preachers often invest more time searching for heartwarming illustrations than studying the biblical text, as their primary goal shifts toward comforting and entertaining the congregation. They attempt to make their messages appear pietistic, yet the content remains generalized and strictly tethered to thematic topics dictated by the church calendar. As a result, these "manager-preachers" may succeed in retaining their crowds, but they ultimately lose the Scriptures. Os Guinness addresses this peril, noting that "the preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same."²⁸

This alarming homiletical trend is prevalent in our times. Regarding these market-driven, anthropocentric sermons, Peter Adam poignantly and systematically identifies five patterns that emerge in such an environment: First, the *de-contextualized* sermon, which is wrenched from its surrounding textual context and misapplied; second, the *lensed* sermon, filtered entirely through the preacher's favorite theme; third, the *moralized* sermon, where personal goals and ethical imperatives form the centerpiece; fourth, the *doctrinalized* sermon, which merely uses the Scriptures as a proof-text for systematic doctrines; and fifth, the *silenced* sermon, which focuses excessively on details the biblical text deliberately does not address.²⁹

I personally witnessed this phenomenon on December 25, 2019, while listening to a Christmas sermon based on Matthew 1:18–25. The preacher interpreted the passage merely to motivate his congregation morally, urging them to work hard in the upcoming year of 2020 under the church's motto, "Obey God's Commands." He challenged the audience to emulate Joseph, highlighting him as a "just man" who "did as commanded" by the angel. It was painfully clear that the preacher was delivering a *lensed* sermon driven by his own theme—"The Importance of Good Works"—and merely used Matthew 1 as a pretext. Consequently, he *de-contextualized* verses meant to declare the miraculous birth of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Instead, he spent most of his time illustrating Joseph's righteous character and exhorting the congregation to develop similar traits. He even ventured into a *silenced* sermon by fabricating

following recent online journal for a contemporary analysis of this homiletical shift: Bob C. Greene, "The Authority of the Word in Modern Preaching," *Journal of Expository Homiletics* 5, no. 2 (2021): 112–114, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.expositoryhomiletics.org/archives/greene-pdf>.

²⁸ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 59.

²⁹ Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 118–120. For just an example of the de-contexted sermon, a preacher has used Revelation 11:10 as a Christmas text: "And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another," with ignoring the latter part of it, "because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth."

details about Joseph's life that the text omits. Through these sophisticated rhetorical maneuvers, the preacher manipulated the congregation to fit his own agenda, failing entirely to deliver the true, God-intended message of the text.

Reflecting on such homiletical failures, the eminent preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones, after recuperating from an illness, offered this profound perspective: "As I have said already, during this past year I have been ill, and so have had the opportunity, and the privilege, of listening to others, instead of preaching myself. As I have listened in physical weakness this is the thing I looked for and have longed for and have desired. I can forgive a man for a bad sermon, I can forgive the preacher almost anything if he gives me a sense of God, if he gives me something for my soul, if he gives me a sense that, though he is inadequate in himself, he is handling something which is very great and very glorious, if he gives me some dim glimpse of the majesty and glory of God, the love of Christ my Savior, and the magnificence of the gospel. If he does that, I am his debtor, and I am profoundly grateful to him. Preaching is the most amazing, the most thrilling activity that one can ever be engaged in, because of all that it holds out for all of us in the present, and because of the glorious endless possibilities in an eternal future."³⁰

Approaching the same text of Matthew 1:18–25, a Reformed expositor would preach an entirely different message. The specific names of Mary and Joseph firmly ground the nativity within the realistic, historical framework of redemptive history. Although Joseph was a just man, he was understandably devastated to learn that his bride-to-be was pregnant, prompting his initial decision to "divorce her quietly." Yet, he proceeded with the marriage only after a divine encounter with an angel, who provided the holy rationale for the incarnation. Doctrinally, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit to affirm His divinity as the second person of the Trinity, while simultaneously being born of the Virgin Mary to affirm His humanity as the incarnate Savior. Therefore, Jesus Christ alone is the perfect Mediator between God the Creator and humanity the creature. This perfect God-Man came to earth to fulfill the righteous demands of the Law and secure our salvation—this is the true essence of Christmas. In a faithful Reformed exposition, Joseph is never the protagonist of the narrative; the spotlight belongs exclusively to God in Jesus Christ.³¹

³⁰ D. Martin Lloyd Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 97-8. See recent verifications of Lloyd-Jones' homiletic legacy regarding the "sense of God" in Thomas J. Nettles, "The Homiletic Force of Expository Preaching," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 18, no. 2 (2019): 18-21.

³¹ For a recent systematic affirmation of these five benefits of expository preaching in contemporary ministry, see Dr. Lee Martin, "Crafting the Perfect Expository Sermon: A Comprehensive Guide," *Integrity Seminary Journal*, November 2022, <https://www.integrityseminary.net/pdf-archives/martin-expository>.

This is not to arrogantly claim that expository preaching is the only valid method; rather, it acknowledges that the chief end of preaching, as Scripture emphasizes, is "to give men and women a sense of God and His presence." This ultimate goal underscores why we must prioritize expository preaching more seriously than ever. Beyond its theological fidelity, expository preaching offers several practical benefits to the preacher: (1) it provides the authoritative confidence of "Thus says the Lord," ensuring the minister forthtells only what God has spoken; (2) it requires submission to the original text, driving the preacher to careful exegesis to uncover the text's true theme; (3) it fosters a reliance on the Spirit's illumination, trusting that the Spirit who inspired the text will enliven its exposition; (4) it promotes systematic and biblical theological growth, strengthening the preacher's doctrinal foundation week by week; and (5) it liberates the preacher from the weekly anxiety of choosing a topic, as they simply follow the sequential teaching of the Scriptures.

However, it must be noted that some so-called Reformed preachers merely preach their own repetitive themes under the guise of expository preaching. Because they neglect deep, rigorous study of the Scriptures—often allowing administrative church chores to consume their time—their preaching devolves into what might be called "dis-exposition." Such unfaithful and intellectually lazy preparation leaves congregations spiritually malnourished, unable to articulate thoughtful, theological responses to the breathing-out truth of the living God.³²

Compounding this issue is the danger that even rigorous, academic sermon preparation does not guarantee divine approval, even if the congregation is impressed or moved by the preacher's eloquence. Martyn Lloyd-Jones vividly warned against this peril: "A man prepares a message and, having prepared it, he may be pleased and satisfied with the arrangement and order of the thoughts and certain forms of expression. If he is of an energetic, fervent nature, he may well be excited and moved by that and especially when he preaches the sermon. But it may be entirely of the flesh and have nothing at all to do with spiritual matters. Every preacher knows exactly what this means.... you can be carried away by your own eloquence and by the very thing you yourself are doing and not by the truth at all."³³

People may laud such a minister, exclaiming, "He is an excellent expository preacher!" and praising his intellectual eloquence for piercing their consciences. Ultimately, however, that preacher fails completely if his sermons do not compel the congregation to fix their gaze upon

³² Derek H. Thomas says, "Independent of what we may feel about the Bible as we read it, the Scriptures maintains a 'breath of God' quality," in his article, "Expository Preaching," in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, ed. Don Kistler (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 36.

³³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 311.

Christ alone. True preaching requires both an intellectual mind seeking biblical truth and a compassionate heart caring for the flock. Ultimately, every sermon must lead the congregation to think only of Jesus Christ, to live passionately for their beloved Savior, and to be willing to die for their Resurrected Lord.

Conclusion

The Reformed theological perspective on pluralism is clear. I refuse to be a relativist who generously allows for salvation to come from outside Christ, because the Bible doesn't say so. Pluralism must be understood in two distinct aspects: *empirical pluralism* and *religious pluralism*. Empirical pluralism is the sociological reality that our society encompasses a variety of religions, much like it holds diverse political views and social statuses. Without a baseline acceptance of empirical pluralism, society would descend into perpetual conflict; thus, we inevitably acknowledge its reality. Religious pluralism, however, is the ideological assertion that all religions within a society are equally true and that salvation can be attained through any faith tradition. We must navigate this distinction with great care. While empirical pluralism prevents us from declaring which religion is socially "the best" in a civic sense, religious pluralism directly contradicts the Scriptures, which unequivocally declare concerning salvation: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Allow me to share a personal experience that illustrates this dynamic. I currently teach at a high school in Indonesia, where religion teachers are mandated to use a textbook published by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. Four of its fourteen chapters are dedicated to the national ideology of *Pancasila*, which emphasizes "Unity in Diversity" and mandates mutual respect among all recognized religions. I faithfully teach all fourteen chapters of this textbook to the very end for two primary reasons. First, out of respect for empirical pluralism, I honor the civic guidelines the Indonesian government has established for its youth. Second, completing the textbook is practically necessary for the students to pass their National Exam of Admission for the following academic year. At the same time, however, I deliberately dedicate the remainder of each semester to teaching authentic Christian doctrine, ensuring that my students are not swayed by the pluralistic concept that every religion is equally true.

How, then, can we maintain a steadfast biblical attitude in such a complex environment? The answer can be found in 1 Kings 18:20, where the narrative of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal vividly mirrors the challenges of a pluralistic society. This biblical account

is not merely about a "power encounter"; rather, it defines the actual position of Christian believers among competing worldviews. The primary objective is not simply to defeat the supporters of other religions, but to win the souls of those who might come to believe in our Lord. It is not about asserting the cultural advantage of one religion over another, but about demonstrating the reality of the true God, who reveals Himself through the faith of a believer in this event. Therefore, a preacher should preach based on sound teachings derived from the Bible, not merely delivering a sermon that pleases the hearts and ears of his listeners or even acting as if he is generous enough to claim that God can save those who do not believe in Christ.

I realize that this research has limitations, as I limited my perspective to Reformed theology. Therefore, future researcher could offer additional perspectives from different theological schools, thus providing broader insights into the reality of pluralism in Indonesia.

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