

# Preaching from the Footnotes

## The Challenge of Textual Criticism in Expository Preaching

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the pastoral ramifications of textual criticism and canonical questions and their impact on the primary pastoral task of expository preaching of the Word of God on the Lord's Day. The thesis of this paper will be that admitting textual variants and canonical questions and carefully crafting a sermon that acknowledges them will bring a richer, fuller and more faithful message rather than complicating the task of preaching. It is in this way that I shall advocate an appropriate "preaching from the footnotes." I do not mean by that phrase that the preacher should base a Biblical sermon on human words that are used to explain a textual variant, for instance, but that the insights or controversies raised by modern scribal notes must not be ignored in the preparation of the sermon.

In order to explore this theme, the presenter will use two of the most well known problem texts to see how to preach from the footnotes: Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8.11. First we will look at the challenges that must be addressed and then consider the possibilities involved with expository preaching and textual criticism. Then the presenter will submit some preliminary issues, and a response that might be employed, using the two famous texts, to faithfully (I intend) and humbly (I hope), exposit these critical texts with loyalty to the inerrancy and infallibility of God's Word, acknowledgement of textual variants, and concern for bringing Christ's message for Christ's flock.

### Delimitations

First, I present this paper as a preacher and a pastoral theologian, not a New Testament theologian. My interests in this paper are localized to the practical work of the parish minister. As preachers and pastors, aren't we truly New Testament theologians, Old Testament theologians, or Biblical theologians when we approach the Scriptures? Indeed I think that we must be. The minister of the Gospel is the divinely appointed messenger of the Sacred Words of God and through all of the tools at his disposal must bring the Word to the congregation and to the world. But it is happily admitted that there are those who have invested the gifts of time and talent to study and become well acquainted with the issues surrounding textual concerns. For these chosen few we are thankful. So let me be clear that this paper is under the heading of pastoral theology. I have presented several papers on historical theology and pastoral theology, but was motivated to take this on as a preacher and pastor struggling with the scholarship of others and trying to make sense of it as I stand in the pulpit and look over a congregation that includes people I know: a single mother trying to figure out how to rear a 15-year-old fatherless son, a retired couple whose dreams of travel have been high jacked by an MRI report, and a

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middle aged businessman who has now left his wife for another woman. All of this is swirling about as your mother-in-law lies dying. I am afraid that these people are not the product of a preacher's imagination or something this presenter made up to catch your attention, but are the real-life results of a fallen world which this presenter has encountered on many Sunday mornings, often several on the same morning. Thus I prepare this paper for those who will minister to men and women and boys and girls in the name of Jesus Christ as well as to think critically with those who will prepare the preacher to do so.

Let me say that I advocate expository preaching as mining and bringing out and applying the eternal truths of the Word of God. I believe the most helpful way to do this is by bringing people through large sections of the Word of God. The best way to do this is through sequential exposition of Books or chapters or other major sections of the Holy Scripture. Conducting such a preaching ministry will inevitably bring the preacher face to face with textual variants and textual critique that works its way into the footnotes of our English translations. Thus, I am concerned about how to preach the Word of God in this milieu, that includes hungry sheep looking up to receive a "Word from God" for their lives and a preacher facing that flock of Christ, and God-seekers, as he also faces the footnotes.

## **Admitting the Challenges of Textual Criticism and Expository Preaching**

Let me put it this way.

It is Easter morning in your congregation. Is there any greater time to preach than when the pews are filled with the devoted disciples of Jesus waiting to hear more from God about the resurrection of Jesus? And is there any greater evangelistic opportunity than this day when the "Easter Sunday Christians" gather for their annual pilgrimage to honor the faith that still lingers in their cultural memory? Here you are about to complete your series on Mark! You have come to Mark 16:9. You know that if you tell your people to open their Bibles for the Easter sermon they are going to find a whole lot of footnotes on that page of their Bible! I have faced that very scenario. Or, how about preaching a series through John and, well, you know what I am about to say: you come to John 7:53 - John 8:11. Your congregation sees, not just the footnote, but they see, in their new ESV pew Bible, these words:

**"The earliest manuscripts do not include John 7:53-8:11."**<sup>1</sup>

One could say that this pastoral feat is really more difficult for the preacher than even preaching the end of Mark on Easter Sunday! So many of the saints of God have latched on to the beautiful, enigmatic picture of the Savior scribbling something in the sand, of the Lord standing up to the moralist scribes and Pharisees and declaring those cherished words,

**"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."**

Your people have been freed from the guilt of sin by trusting in this One who stood up for the woman caught in adultery. They have believed in the Christ of John's Gospel who said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

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<sup>1</sup> Crossway Bibles., *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments*, ESV Compact Thinline ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2003).

The footnotes do not help you, it seems. For there you read:

**“Some manuscripts do not include 7:53-8:11; others add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38; with variations in the text.”<sup>2</sup>**

Your people are not usually New Testament professors nor are they particularly interested in textual criticism, much less well versed in this theological science.

As a preacher and one committed to expository preaching, I have faced down these textual variant footnotes that I think of as gigantic icebergs, floating under the surface of your entire sermon, poised to pry open the very body of your sermon and leave you fiddling your finest sermon while people are mentally jumping off the sinking ship! What do we do?

*We must first admit the footnotes.* The people see them. You see them. So to move through the preaching of the woman caught in adultery without admitting the obvious textual elephant in the room would be homiletically, perhaps pastorally, negligent. The rest of this paper rests on this one simple but dangerous step (especially dangerous if you do not follow in your explanation and ease the tension in the sanctuary).

*Second we need to have studied the footnotes.* Perhaps in the case study I present you already know the insights and discussions, but there are many more. The pastor would want to have reviewed the monographs, JETS articles, and the more technical commentaries. But that is not enough. One needs to see how other great preachers have handled it. So you consult Calvin and Stott, Augustine and Luther, Kistemaker and Morris, Moo and Knight, as well as preachers like, say, Boice and Hughes. In doing so you will be able to get the full gamut of interpretive insights, controversies, studies and perhaps even consensus.

*Third, the preacher must now preach the text.* That may seem like a rather embarrassingly obvious point to add in the mix, but here is what I mean. I would make an assertion that you might not find to your agreement (which is the joy of doing textual criticism in the context of expository preaching!). I write as one who believes that the minister is an incarnational repository of the Church's sacred words. These include liturgy, hymnody, family stories of great preachers (all Christians should hear at some time, “As Spurgeon said...”) and casuistry but surely begins and ends with Scripture. No matter the controversies, the text is there. It may be disputed, but for some reason or another, the Church collectively through the centuries decided it should be there. It is more destructive to the work of the Church to gloss over the treasured contents of this repository than to decide to get rid of what has held the attention of the Church since the early centuries after the ascension of Jesus. For those New Testament professors who smell a simpleton church historian and pastoral theologian tinkering in things over his head (I will not argue that point), I do assure you that I am not arguing for the majority text. I am arguing for the majority *time*. The Church has held that the Scriptures we are looking at, the woman caught in adultery and the end of Mark, were authentic events in the life of our Lord.<sup>3</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> On John 7.53-8.11 a broad sampling of opinions on this includes John Calvin writing: "It is quite clear that this story was unknown to the ancient Greek Churches. Hence some conjecture that it was inserted from another place. But it has always been received by the Latin churches and is found in many Greek manuscripts and contains nothing unworthy of the apostolic spirit; so there is no reason why we should refuse to make use of it." John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959). C.K. Barrett, while commenting that it would appear that 7.53-8.11 is not original to John (p. 589) adds, "it is probably ancient" and points to Eusebius'

the case of John 7.53-8-11 we know that while the account is not in the earliest manuscripts, the very event in the life of our Lord is recounted in a letter from a church father. The suspicious end of Mark in the majority texts, redacted as it may be, passes the test of apostolic plausibility and more than that describes the miraculous events that occurred during the apostolic period of the Church. So I advocate a default to the majority text for preaching, but not a disregard for the variants from the ancient manuscripts. The issues must be explained. But then the text must be preached.

*Fourth, the way the text is handled, in such a soup of controversy, before the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, would be quite different than the way I might preach it to congregants in a church in the mountains of North Carolina.* It is not that one group is more erudite than the other, but more interested in the variants and possessing stronger opinions about the matter. Thus, an exegesis of the auditors, to the degree that one can do that, must be done. One key to preachers is, again, never to underestimate the scholarship of the people in the pew. This is actually a pat on the back of the pastor who was before you who taught them the whole counsel of God.

*Fifth, I would yield on this one point: There are those who would decide not to preach on the variants, like John 8 and the end of Mark.* To these preachers I would say: “preach the text in that old Protestant hermeneutical approach of interpreting the harder with the more perspicacious (and whatever you have decided in your textual criticism workshop you are faced with the strong force of Western Church tradition and the fact that footnotes will not make the majority text evidences go away; translation: John 7.53-8.11 and the end of Mark are there whether you like it or not!).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if such a preacher were to heed my pastoral counsel (no other authority than that), go ahead and conduct your exegetical spadework on the variants, discover and craft the exegetical statement of the pericope in question. Then, having done so, making sure from others, as you stand on the shoulders of giants, that you are within the boundaries of trusted, faithful historic interpretation, read and read and re read the text, pray the text, and then exposit the text for your people—systematically. And I mean to say that at this point with a major variant, like the one we will look at, with your hesitation checking your spirit and convicting your mind, admit that the text is there and preach the expository truths you find in it from other passages. In this way you will not harm the consciences of sincere believers, perhaps even some retired pastors or young pastors in the congregation, who do not see things your way and, in fact, cannot get over the fact that the text, despite the footnote, is staring them in the face.

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record of Papias' story which is contained in the 'Gospel According to the Hebrews (H.E. III, xxxix, 16]." C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John : An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978). Again, Morris who says "The textual evidence makes it impossible to hold that this section is an authentic part of the Gospel" (882) also says, "But if we cannot feel that this is part of John's Gospel we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic." And he footnotes (footnote 6) the *Apostolic Constitutions*, ii. 24. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981)*. And While Blomberg agrees with the opinion of most scholars who cannot call it Johannine, he yet confesses "The incident passes the double similarity and dissimilarity test with flying colours." Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel : Issues & Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002)*.

<sup>4</sup> And remember the words of Dr. Bruce Metzger, which Dr. Charles Hill rightly quoted in his fine article in *Table Talk* (Charles E. Hill, ""The New Covenant Scriptures"," *Table Talk* 32, no. 10 (2008).: "neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church (Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament, Its Background, Growth, and Content*, third ed. (Nashville: Abington, 2003).

I would like to add that this final point in the approach is not a seeking to please all sides, but to honestly hold forth the historic text, well received by the Church of Jesus Christ through the centuries, as being the Word of God that still speaks today.

## **Consideration of the Possibilities of Preaching from the Footnotes**

### *Negative*

Consider the negative possibilities from expository preaching and textual criticism footnotes. I begin with the dangerous possibilities and move, then, to the constructive possibilities.

*First, there is the danger of avoiding the footnotes.* To do so is to commit a common homiletic and pastoral blunder of not addressing the obvious. If a sparrow flies into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, at around the second point of the sermon, the preacher who continues his message without addressing the obvious flutter of little wings above the congregation, will not enjoy a congregation who hears his third point. Jesus preached and noticed the obvious and used those things to teach, or to illustrate His teaching. And so must we as we approach the footnotes dealing with textual criticism. To ignore the footnotes is to invite tension into the sermon and upstage the kerygma event.

*Second, over-emphasis, in the sermon, will detract from the exposition of the Word of God (even if you are doing it from a more systematic way and only using the textual variant as a starting point to go to other Scriptures).* As in most exegesis, a significant amount of work in the study must remain there. You display what you are able to establish the intent and meaning of the text. The common man (who heard Jesus gladly) is not interested in the operating system but in the application software. Too much emphasis will, sadly, divert attention from Jesus to you and the perception that you are strutting your exegetical stuff before the people.

*Third, one must be aware that taking strong public stands on one side or the other, in regard to the variant, will also demean the sacred treasure of the Church of Jesus which has held (at least in the case of our two studies) these texts to be a part, albeit a footnoted part, of the tradition of the Church, if not the very Word of God.* I would argue that there is a place for letting your convictions be made known about this or another text. Maybe it is in, say, your pastoral letters to the congregation or perhaps in a more didactic public worship setting (e.g., Sunday evening worship or Wednesday evening Bible study) in your church in which you can teach them in more depth about the concerns you might have.

*Fourth, it must be stated that undue focus on the credibility of a text, particularly a text held close to the heart of the Church through history, like at least one or perhaps both of the case studies I offer, can lead to a possible doubting of (1) the Bible; and/or (2) the Preacher (that is, you).* As one approaches the textual variant, this must be kept in mind and approached with pastoral wisdom.

*Fifth, too much focus on the “footnotes” can create a sense in the mind of the auditors that only “professional New Testament critics” can truly handle the Bible, or even worse, only theologians can “read” the Bible for all its worth.*

*Sixth, the “footnotes” of textual criticism can instill a Gnostic-like awe over the whole work of reading and interpreting the Scriptures.*

The theologian or pastor who routinely (is it ever routine?) handles the “footnotes” may consider any or all of these caveats and possibilities nonsense. But the presenter would humbly submit that in some congregations in the Christian Church, not saying the Apostles’ Creed in the right place in the liturgy can create murmuring in the body. Suggesting that the woman caught in adultery and forgiven by Jesus is simply extra Biblical redactor material offered in later years of the early Church to account for an event that was mentioned in a first century letter and thus might have or might not have happened in the life of Jesus could possibly lead to “rioting in the pews” (as well as injuring your pastoral relationship possibly beyond healing). Or it may be that a crowd gathers to cast a stone against one they perceive as being caught in hermeneutic adultery!

### ***Positive***

Thinking more constructively or positively here are some further considerations.

*First, a fearless approach to the footnotes on the textual variants which all of the people can see in their own Bibles can foster a desire for the people to want to understand how the canon of Scripture came to be.* Rather than thinking that some counsel met in 325 AD and just came up with it all, as some no doubt suppose, the pastor may lead his people to see that the work of canonical authenticity involved apostolic consensus and transmission of the Gospel, recognition of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and, of course, textual proofs.

*Second, by alerting the people to the presence of variants one takes away the rhetorical snipe by the atheistic ideas the people may pick up in popular culture.* Rather than “fearing the footnotes” the auditor may learn to dig deeper in his or her own walk in the Word. One will see, as all evangelical scholars would agree, that no variant is at systematic theological odds with the rest of the Word of God and no variant, however questionable, redefines the inerrancy and infallibility of the Word of God, though it may question authorship or timing or even, in the convictions of some evangelical pastor-scholars, whether the text should really be there at all.

*Third, by dealing with the textual variant, which they see, your honest handling of the text may engender trust in their pastor.* This is not showboating (hang around a real New Testament scholar and get humbled before doing this will help). It is demonstrating a faithful and pastorally fearless approach to the questions surrounding the text (often critiqued wrongly by atheists and others in popular culture) all whilst honoring the inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptures. Perhaps this will give someone in your congregation hope that they, too, can live in the tension of an anti supernatural world that disdains an idea of revelation and faith in the God who did reveal Himself and His plan of salvation in His Word.

*Fourth, it may just be that some will come to appreciate the miracle of the Word which they hold in their hands and which they hear read publicly in worship services each Lord’s Day.* Textual criticism in the hands of a wise pastor-scholar does not automatically trigger alarm for the faith of the saints, but may call them into a deeper, fuller walk with the God who through His Spirit breathing forth His Word through ordinary men brought this “Word from Another World” into time and space, and flesh and thought.

## **Preliminary Issues in Preaching from the Footnotes**

Having now proposed that the matter must be addressed, a natural question in the mind of the homilician is, “Where?” Assuming for the sake of this argument, that there is a reading and

then a prayer for illumination and then the sermon, then the exegetical commentary on the “footnote” will have to occur in one of three places: the introduction to the reading or the introductory “chain” (thinking of Chapell’s *Christ Centered Preaching*<sup>5</sup> model of the introductory chain) or in the explanation of the text under one of the divisions of the sermon body. I would argue that the decision for placement first of all depends upon the textual variant or other textual critical footnote. If, as in John 8 and the end of Mark, the footnotes are most pronounced and, one might say, more intimidating to the reader steeped in the tradition of the Scriptures, then one must address the question as soon as possible. Therefore, it would seem logical to “preach from the footnote” in the introduction to the reading, or perhaps in the exegetical link in the “introduction chain.” Alternatively, if the footnote is less problematic, though, perhaps, no less important, one might allow the explanation of the footnote to wait, or even to forego it altogether.<sup>6</sup>

The matter of “how long” is also an issue that must be addressed. This depends in part on the placement of the “footnote” issue. Wherever it goes, its length must satisfy the goal of explaining the matter without causing it to become the focus of the sermon or even a larger section of the sermon.

## **Two Case Studies in Preaching from the Footnotes**

Incorporating the concerns and considerations heretofore discussed, including the issue of placement, the presented offers two possible ways of preaching from the footnotes for both of our critically disputed texts. Again this is not an exhaustive study of commentary offerings, nor an in-depth study of the comparative texts, but a humble attempt to faithfully exposit the text supposing that, as a result of sequential expository preaching, the preacher has arrived at John 7.53-8.11 and Mark 16.9-10 respectfully.

In each case there will be a sermon fragment, with the concern for the preacher’s interaction with the footnote, a narrative explaining rationale for the choices, and then some concluding thoughts.

### ***“Preaching from the Footnotes in John 7.53-8.11”***

In the last message, we saw how Jesus’ claims created division among the people (in John 7.40-52). And we saw that He still does.

The growing tension in John concerning the antagonism of the chief priests and Pharisees and the adulation of the people over the ministry of Jesus forms a backdrop for what we will come to today. John often began new movements in his Gospel, or new chapters, as we now have then, with a story. In this chapter there is the story of the woman caught in adultery. This story of the darkness of both

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<sup>5</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching : Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> This is possible too. If this is not an exegetical paper being prepared for a judicatory but a message for God’s people and God-fearers on a Sunday morning, for instance, there may be no good reason for the preacher to explain Ecclesiastes 10.12 as saying that “The words of a wise man’s mouth win him ‘favor’” might actually be better put, “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious.” This is not unimportant. And no variation in the manuscripts of the Word of God or nuances in the language chosen by the Spirit to communicate God’s Word should be taken lightly. But the expository truth of the text, which is shaped by this exegesis, is not particularly harmed and no one reading the footnote would, normally, be alarmed. Even here, though, the preacher might use this variant on translation or nuance of the Hebrew in some good way. The point is that some footnotes are more homiletically impacting than others!

degrading sin as well as unmerciful and apparent hypocritical spirit leads to John's announcement that Jesus is the Light of the World.

But there is something we must see before going into this portion of God's Word.

There is a footnote in most of your Bibles as we come to Chapter Eight of John. It must not be overlooked. Bible publishers have rightly included this footnote because, as it says in my own Bible, "The earliest manuscripts do not include John 7:53-8:11." What does that mean? Well it means what it says in that six of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts do not contain this account. So the footnote is appropriate. But does it mean that this didn't happen? No. In fact, the event goes back, according to church historian Eusebius<sup>7</sup>, to one Papias, who died not long after 100 AD. He received the story through oral history from at least one of the apostles and said that he knew a story "of a woman who was accused of many sins before the Lord." who received, by his own words, oral history from the apostles themselves. More evidence came in the Third Century, from a document called The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles 2.24:

**"And when the elders had set another woman which had sinned before Him, and had left the sentence to Him, and were gone out, our Lord, the Searcher of the hearts, inquiring of her whether the elders had condemned her, and being answered No, He said unto her: 'Go thy way, therefore, for neither do I condemn thee.'"**<sup>8</sup>

Could it be that Augustine was right when he said that the account is true but was withheld because the Church feared that adulteress women could use it as a proof text to condone their infidelity?<sup>9</sup> Entire books have been published with that one proposition.<sup>10</sup>

Could it be another of the "Synoptic conflict stories" inserted into John to indeed provide more accordance with the other Gospel writers? Perhaps we are no better than the two scribes who approached this passage in a recently discovered manuscript in Albania:

**"Albanian National Archive (ANA) 15, an 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century minuscule manuscript...contains the four gospels...[and]...at John 7:52, the scribe simply continued on to write John 8:12. A later scribe, incensed at what he thought was an oversight, took a piece of paper and carelessly stitched it into the front of the next parchment leaf (using only five stitches!) and scribbled the [John 7.53-8.11] passage on it!"**<sup>11</sup>

James Montgomery Boice stands with Calvin in pointing out the textual variant and then advocating the preaching of it.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps William Hendriksen puts it best:

**"Our final conclusion then is this: though it cannot now be proved that the story formed an integral part of the Fourth Gospel, neither is it possible to establish the opposite with any degree of finality. We believe, moreover, that what is here recorded really took place, and contains nothing that is in conflict with the apostolic spirit. Hence,**

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<sup>7</sup> Eusebius Pamphilus, "The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Caesarea," (260-340).

<sup>8</sup> L. Joseph Kreitzer and Deborah W. Rooke, *Ciphers in the Sand : Interpretations of the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7.53-8.11)*, *Biblical Seminar ; 74* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> See William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Kreitzer and Rooke, *Ciphers in the Sand : Interpretations of the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7.53-8.11)*.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, "Greek New Testament Manuscripts Discovered in Albania," (Bible.org, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> See John 7.53-8.11 in James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John : An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Corp., 1985).



**instead of removing this section from the Bible it should be retained and used for our benefit. Ministers should not be afraid to base sermons upon it! On the other hand all the facts concerning the textual evidence should be made known!”<sup>13</sup>**

So I have done due diligence to that footnote. For some this text is “an edifying extra-biblical story about Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> But the grace and beauty and the strength and power of Jesus and his grace in this text leave no doubt that this is God’s Word to us this morning.

## **Reflections on this approach**

This approach is not without difficulty. First of all it is long. But it may be argued that as Hendriksen says nothing should be withheld. Indeed, Boice in his commentary on John, largely taken from his messages on John, does insert no small amount of detail on the matter before he turns to preaching the passage. There is also the problem of introducing this much and no more. It might be argued that a sentence or two would have sufficed since this much introduces questions that are not answered. Thus, something as simple as the following may be preferred:

“We now come to John chapter 8, actually in the majority of manuscripts, chapter 78.53 -8.11. This portion of John is not in the earliest manuscripts though the story is documented in reliable early church literature. Whether it was originally in John’s Gospel or not, many, including Calvin, have urged its authenticity and deserving to be included in the canon of Scripture. While there are those who do not think the textual evidence would support its inclusion, no evangelical or Catholic, for that matter, disputes the apostolic flavor of this passage and how God has used its beautiful object lesson in history to transform human lives.

And we would all do well to remember, when considering such major textual variants as this, the words of the noted New Testament professor, William Barclay, who said, “It is the simple truth to say that the New Testament books became canonical because no one could stop them doing so.”<sup>15</sup>

What was that lesson? That is the sermon today. As we read...”

## **“Preaching from the Footnotes in Mark 16.9-20”**

If the first case was difficult the second is more so. And so one might begin.

“This morning we conclude our messages from the Gospel of Mark. Mark, we have seen, moves like an impressionistic painter, making short strokes with his narrative brush loaded with vibrant colors of Gospel “paint” onto the canvas of the Word. But how did he stop his masterpiece? Indeed, how did God choose to complete it?

Mark 16.9-20 is one of the most disputed passages in the Scriptures. It is, as Maurice A. Robinson has written, “a flash point in NT criticism.<sup>16</sup> The pastor who prepares to preach from this section of the Bible is faced with textual criticism that is in majority agreement that the ending is not Markan in its origin<sup>17</sup>. Beyond that rather common assertion there are great differences, which give the preacher pause. Did Mark end with 16.8? Is there a missing last page never found that accounted for a scribe in the third century patching up the remnant with his own ending (based on other inspired text, of course)? Was Mark

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<sup>13</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*.

<sup>14</sup> See Gary M. Burge, *John: The Niv Application Commentary: From Biblical Text ... To Contemporary Life*, Niv Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Hill, “The New Covenant Scriptures”. 17.

<sup>16</sup> David Alan Black, ed., *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> For a good overview of the positions on the ending of Mark, see *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark*.

simply cut off in his writing? Is there an alternative manuscript ending that exists to be received as the right one?<sup>18</sup> There are certainly those out there, but are they original? And how about the majority text that do give credence to the ending? Dr. Bruce Metzger shows in his work, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* an overwhelming case for the ending of Mark to be a redactor (or redactors) who was, nevertheless, faithful to the Scriptures. But while Dr. Metzger maintains his firm opinion, based on the evidence before him, that 16.9-20 is not original to Mark, he writes this:

**“At the same time, however, out of deference to the evident antiquity of the longer ending and its importance in the textual tradition of the Gospel, the Committee decided to include verses 9-20 as part of the text...”<sup>19</sup>**

There have also been those who have argued for 16.9-20 as Markan though many consider that these voices are largely left behind in the nineteenth century now.<sup>20, 21</sup> But this we can say without reservation: the ending of Mark in no way contradicts the death, burial, resurrection, ascension and coronation of our Lord Jesus Christ. And His Church did go forth with unusual power and supernatural protection.

And perhaps we can sum up all of those verses, which find harmony in the rest of Scripture, with this studied opinion of the Westminster divines. They said of this and all of the other parts of Scripture that they were...

**“...Immediately inspired by God, and by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as in all controversies of religion the Church is finally to appeal unto them.”<sup>22</sup>**

Now, I have gone on quite a bit. But I want you to know that as I preach this morning, I will admit the questions about the text, but I will not refrain from introducing our reading this morning with these words, ‘This is the Word of the Lord...’”

### **Some thoughts on this**

This is likely too is long for an introduction. But depending on the goals of the preacher and his congregation this may be appropriate. Even here, of course, nothing approaching a New Testament technical paper is being presented! This is the bare bone. But the introduction does admit the problem, and approach it with concern for the faith of the hearer in the Word of God. It might also allow them to see that God’s Word is not only written but preserved through time for us today, as the *Confession of Faith* says.

A shorter comment in the introduction to the reading might be:

We come to one of the most debated texts in the entire Bible: Mark 16.9-20. Though an overwhelming majority of text keeps this ending in tact, the oldest and some scholars say the more

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<sup>18</sup> That ending is "But they reported briefly to Peter [and] those around [him] all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself also sent out through them, from east even to west, the sacred and imperishable preached message of eternal salvation. Amen."

<sup>19</sup> See Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament : Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1987). This may be found at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/endmark.html> (accessed November 18, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Henry Ambrose Scrivener, *A Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, fourth ed., vol. 2 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1894).

<sup>21</sup> Though we reference again the fine work, Black, ed., *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark*.

<sup>22</sup> Westminster Confession, Chap. I, Sect. VIII, in Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh ; Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958).

reliable do not. But no one, even the famous Dr. Bruce Metzger who studied so much on the subject and who was of the opinion that the ending was written by someone who followed Mark, nevertheless, did not believe that it should be removed. Mark 16.9-20 is preserved for us today because there is truth here that God wants us to hear.

Thus, a reading from the Gospel according to St. Mark, chapter sixteen, and beginning with verse 9 and reading through the end.

Hear the Scriptures as they are read:

## Conclusion

I have sought to encourage interaction with the “footnotes” caused by textual criticism and simple recognition of significant textual variants. I have sought to encourage a frank and open admission of the footnote, consideration of the problems and positives possibly associated with the footnotes, addressed some issues in preaching the footnotes, and offered examples of handling two difficult texts.

I remember having a conversation about this with Dr. D. James Kennedy. I asked him what was the most challenging thing he has ever done in the ministry. He did not hesitate in his response: “Preaching next Sunday’s sermon.”<sup>23</sup>

And into that high calling, that sacred work, and that singularly wondrous moment when the preacher stands between God and man with the Word of God in his hands and hopefully in his mind and heart as well, he can be sure that he is not alone. For in that moment, however difficult, the author of the Word has said,

**“I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13.5b ESV).**

And there are no footnotes to that. Oh, wait. There is. The footnote at Hebrews 13.5 says, “Joshua 1:5.”<sup>24</sup> And that text says

**“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1.5b).**

Preaching from the footnotes—or at least those kind of footnotes—isn’t that bad after all.

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<sup>23</sup> Kreitzer and Rooke, *Ciphers in the Sand : Interpretations of the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7.53-8.11)*.

<sup>24</sup> Crossway Bibles., *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments*.

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