

Big Ideas and Bad Ideas

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Abstract

Abraham Kuruvilla has proposed an alternative to “Big Idea” preaching, in which he rejects both the practice of distilling a proposition from a text and also the subsequent preaching of the proposition, that is, the Big Idea.¹ Kuruvilla proposes instead that a preacher is a “curator,” who must help congregants to “experience the text+theology—the agenda of the A/ author—in all its fullness.”² Asking whether it is time to kill Big Idea preaching, Kuruvilla urges a sea change in evangelical homiletics. After summarizing his proposal, this paper offers an alternate understanding of the hermeneutical foundations that undergird Kuruvilla’s disagreements with Big Idea preaching. In so doing, this paper ultimately rejects Kuruvilla’s proposal while reaffirming the value of propositional preaching for evangelical homiletics.

THE KURUVILLA PROPOSAL

Kuruvilla proposes that preachers should neither distill propositions from texts nor preach the propositions they have distilled:³

My concerns with this approach . . . stem from the assumptions that behind every text is an essential truth that can be reduced and expressed in a propositional form as a Big Idea (distilling the text), and that the Big Idea is what is to be preached to listeners (preaching the distillate).⁴

Against the practice of distillation, Kuruvilla asserts that texts are irreducible to propositional forms, that a proposition necessarily results in a loss of meaning, and that a proposition “overdetermines” the text, subsuming its specificity under a too-broad generalization.

Against the practice of preaching the distillate, Kuruvilla asserts that Big Idea preaching fails adequately to address authorial “doings,” fails to understand the text as art, that is, as a vehicle of non-discursive communication, and fails to demonstrate the pericopal theology of the text, which can only be expressed by the text *qua* text.

This paper briefly summarizes each of these points before engaging their respective value for evangelical homiletics.

¹ Abraham Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 4 (December 2018): 825-46. Steven Mathewson offered a reply to Kuruvilla. See Steven D. Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live! A Response to Abraham Kuruvilla,” *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 19, no. 1 (March 2019): 33-41. Kuruvilla subsequently issued a rejoinder to Mathewson. See Abraham Kuruvilla, “Big Idea—*Requiescat in Pace!* Authorial Rejoinder to Steven Mathewson,” at www.homiletix.com. Accessed 5 August 2019.

² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 842.

³ “These are the two problems I inveighed against in my original essay: distilling the text and preaching the distillate.” In Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 10, note 47.

⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 828.

AGAINST DISTILLATION

Texts are Irreducible

Kuruvilla is convinced that texts are irreducible, and he states: “The text is what it is and will suffer no transmutation into anything else.”⁵ Arguing that “changing any word in the account alters the text’s thrust in some way,”⁶ he asks: “[I]s it even possible to reduce [the text] into a Big Idea propositional statement that fully captures the thrust of the text and which needs to be conveyed to sermon listeners as the all-important take-home truth? I think not.”⁷ Instead, he asserts, “The text . . . is inexpressible in any other form, and cannot be substituted by a condensate, reduction, or distillate thereof.”⁸ He summarizes, writing:

I am registering my opposition to distilling the text: pericopal theology (irreducible) cannot be expressed in a Big Idea (a reduction) without crippling loss of power and pathos, and without denuding the text of its experience-creating thrust and force; a distillation of a text can never be an adequate substitute for the text.⁹

According to Kuruvilla, texts are irreducible to propositional forms.

Propositions Result in a Loss of Meaning

Kuruvilla’s conviction regarding the irreducible nature of texts means that any attempt to create a proposition from a text will necessarily result in a loss of meaning. Arguing that the formation of a Big Idea tends toward a form of “eliminative reductionism,”¹⁰ Kuruvilla cautions that “to convert a text into a Big Idea is surely going to entail significant loss of its details, meaning, power, and pathos.”¹¹ He reiterates:

Since distilling the text into a Big Idea entails considerable loss when compared to its source—loss of meaning and power and pathos, not to mention attenuation of filigrees of structure and nuances of language that contribute to the experience of the text—such reductionistic operations cannot be condoned.¹²

Kuruvilla thus agrees with Fred Craddock, who alleges that in Big Idea preaching “the minister boils off all the water and then preaches the stain at the bottom of the cup.”¹³

Kuruvilla does not reject all propositions, noting, “I am not against reductions *per se* in homiletics,” and he encourages preachers to develop a “Theological Focus,” which is “a lossy reduction of the irreducible pericopal theology.”¹⁴ Whereas Kuruvilla describes a Big Idea as a

⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 836.

⁶ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 7.

⁷ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 10.

⁸ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 839, note 86.

⁹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 843-44.

¹⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 829.

¹¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 832.

¹² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 835.

¹³ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 829. Cited from Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 123.

¹⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844.

“distillation of what the author is saying,” his Theological Focus represents “a reduction of what the author is *doing*,” and Kuruvilla uses it only for “sermon shaping,”¹⁵ not for preaching. In other words, the Theological Focus helps the preacher to map out the curation of the text, but is never shared with listeners in the sermon, lest it misrepresent the pericopal theology of the text.

Reductions have no place in the act preaching itself, for according to Kuruvilla, a Big Idea necessarily “result[s] in significant loss of textual meaning.”¹⁶

The Danger of “Overdetermination”

Kuruvilla therefore warns Big Idea preachers against that which he calls “overdetermination,” in which “the specificity of a particular pericope is . . . lost with its reduction into a Big Idea.”¹⁷ Because Kuruvilla “is convinced that no two biblical pericopes can ever have the same thrust or force,”¹⁸ he cautions that “reductions raise the possibility of *other* texts having the same Big Idea.”¹⁹ This possibility strikes Kuruvilla as an “untethering”²⁰ of the particulars from the text, for the “uniqueness of wording and structure and context of any given passage renders is impossible for one pericope to have the same thrust/ force as another.”²¹ The preacher can avoid this error only by allowing the “precision” of the “wording [in] the sacred text”²² to stand as is, *without* propositional reduction.

To Kuruvilla’s mind, Big Ideas overdetermine the text, washing out the inspired particulars of a pericope with a too-general proposition.

AGAINST PREACHING THE DISTILLATE

Authorial “Doings”

Kuruvilla suggests that Big Idea preachers have fallen prey to “a misunderstanding of how language functions, why texts work, and what a sermon does.”²³ Citing the lingering influence of classical rhetoric, Kuruvilla maintains that “we still remain burdened” by an understanding of “preaching as argumentation.”²⁴ He therefore urges preachers to adopt a “new rhetoric” centered on the recognition that “[a]uthors, including those of the Scripture, *do* things with what they say.”²⁵ Asserting that this “*doing* of the authors ought to be the interpretive goal of preachers,”²⁶

¹⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 845 [emphasis original].

¹⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

¹⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

¹⁸ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

¹⁹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 833 [emphasis original].

²⁰ See Kuruvilla, “Time To Kill,” 834, note 53.

²¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

²² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

²³ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 836.

²⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 837.

²⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 838 [emphasis original].

²⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 838 [emphasis original].

Kuruville laments: “I suspect that, fundamentally, Big Idea advocates have not understood pragmatics, authorial doings, and pericopal theology.”²⁷

Describing that which he believes the biblical authors to be doing with their texts, Kuruville asserts that each pericope “is projecting a transcending vision—what Paul Ricoeur called the *world in front of the text*.”²⁸ Describing in full the interaction of authorial “doings” and evangelical preaching, Kuruville writes:

For Scripture, this *world in front of the text* is God’s ideal world, individual segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes. So each sermon on a particular pericope is God’s gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the thrust and force of that pericope—that is, the requirements of God’s ideal world as called for in that pericope’s world-segment. As mankind accepts that divine invitation and applies the call of the pericope (its thrust/ force), week by week and pericope by pericope God’s people are progressively and increasingly inhabiting this ideal world and adopting its values. This is the goal of preaching.²⁹

According to Kuruville, this kind of preaching, which demonstrates authorial “doings” in the sermon, “facilitates the conformation of the children of God into the image of the Son of God.”³⁰

The Text Acts like Art

Continuing his emphasis on the distinction between authorial sayings and authorial doings, Kuruville suggests that the “doings” of the biblical text stand akin to art, writing: “Hermeneutics for homiletics involves more than just decoding the semantics of a text to decipher and comprehend its saying (science). Additionally, it involves discerning the pragmatics of a text to infer and experience its *doing*/ theology (art).”³¹ Stating, “Pictures, photographs, painting, and poetry . . . differ significantly from a linear, verbal code that must be deciphered,”³² Kuruville explains that whereas “a discursive symbol is rational, denoting something,”³³ and is useful for the formation of propositions, “there are [also] non-discursive symbols capable of addressing nuances of mental states and emotions unavailable to purely discursive modalities.”³⁴ While these non-discursive symbols do things to a reader, Kuruville sees Big Idea preaching as having largely ignored non-discursive realms of communication. He asserts:

I claim that a canonical text such as Scripture is both discursive (authorial sayings with tangible information that deals less with images, and that must be deciphered: science) and non-discursive (authorial doings with intangible experiences that deal mostly with

²⁷ Kuruville, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 2.

²⁸ Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 839 [emphasis original].

²⁹ Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 839 [emphasis original]. Kuruville helps to clarify his terminology when he writes, “For all practical purposes, the theology of the pericope, the *world in front of the text*, the thrust/force of the text, and its pragmatics (i.e. what the author is doing), may be considered equivalent terms.” In “Time to Kill,” 839, note 86 [emphasis original].

³⁰ Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 840.

³¹ Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 840 [emphasis original].

³² Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 841.

³³ Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 840.

³⁴ Kuruville, “Time to Kill,” 840.

images, and that must be inferred: art). Preachers are not simply to major in the science of semantics, but must graduate in the art of pragmatics, discerning authorial doings and the theology of the pericope so as to experience the text as intended. And this calls for a major shift in how preaching is conceived.³⁵

According to Kuruvilla, the Big Idea hermeneutic “does not see texts as non-discursive *objets d’art*, but only as discursive subjects for scientific examination.”³⁶

The Text qua Text

If the artistic and non-discursive nature of texts is as Kuruvilla describes them, then Kuruvilla argues that only the text—in all its fullness—can convey the text. The “intangible experiences”³⁷ that the text produces in the reader are not simply irreducible to a proposition, but are also inexpressible with human language. Kuruvilla therefore asserts that the text’s theology is “inexpressible in any format other than the text itself,”³⁸ such that no reduction can substitute for the “inexpressible text+theology.”³⁹ Rather, the theology of the text is “inextricably interwoven with and inexpressible apart from, the text.”⁴⁰ Kuruvilla concludes: “To think that pericopes of Scripture can be distilled into Big Ideas without loss, and that those Big Ideas are what need to be conveyed sermonically to an audience is, in my opinion, a misconception of both hermeneutics and homiletics.”⁴¹

In essence, Kuruvilla asserts that the reader’s experience of the non-discursive thrust of the text is part of its theology, and that this text+theology can only be experienced by the text *qua* text.

PREACHING AS CURATION

That being the case, Kuruvilla proposes nothing less than a redefinition of “theology.” Theology, according to Kuruvilla, includes the reader’s experience of the inexpressible, non-discursive, force/ thrust of the text. If this is true, then it demands a redefinition of preaching itself. Kuruvilla offers that redefinition by suggesting that preachers view themselves as curators of the text.

The Preacher is a Curator

Kuruvilla proposes a model of preaching in which the “primary role of the preacher” is the “curation of the text: discovering textual clues for listeners, thereby facilitating their discernment of pericopal theology.”⁴² He therefore states: “I propose the analogy of a curator guiding visitors

³⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

³⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 845.

³⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

³⁸ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844.

³⁹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844.

⁴⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 846.

⁴¹ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 11.

⁴² Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 6.

in an art museum through a series of paintings,” and, fleshing out this analogy, Kuruvilla explains:

I invite my audience to zoom in on the critical details—*how* the story is told—in order to discern pericopal theology, to catch the author’s agenda, his *doing*, how he wants his text to be experienced, how he intends it to hit us. This is text curation, just as a museum docent does for, say, Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* These textual curators are enabling the word of God to be apprehended by the people of God for its thrust.⁴³

Thus viewing preachers as “handmaids to the sacred writ, as midwives to Scripture,”⁴⁴ Kuruvilla describes the preacher as “facilitator,”⁴⁵ and explains the work of curation through an anecdote Eugene Lowry shared about the self-conception of a fellow preacher: “‘I see myself as a stagehand who holds back the curtain so that some might be able to catch a glimpse of the divine play—sometimes—perhaps—if I can get it open enough.’ . . . If we could just get a better handle on how to pull back the curtains.”⁴⁶ To which Kuruvilla replies, “Precisely—that’s the role of the preacher . . . pulling back the curtains!”⁴⁷

Preaching Aims at Listener Experience of the Text

Kuruvilla envisions this curtain-pulling as a demonstration of the pericopal theology of the text, writing that “Scripture calls for its experience to be demonstrated, not for any Big Idea to be argued,”⁴⁸ such that by faithful curation of the text “the theology of the text may be demonstrated to listeners who are unable to see the clues in the text that point to pericopal theology.”⁴⁹ This demonstration facilitates listener experience of the text in its fullness, for “preachers facilitate listeners’ experience of the text as they encounter God and his ideal *world in front of the text*—the theology of the pericope.”⁵⁰

According to Kuruvilla’s proposal, preachers should curate the text *qua* text—which is irreducible to any other form—thereby demonstrating the inexpressible text+theology so that listeners might experience the force/ thrust of the text in the only way possible, according to “the agenda of the A/ author—in all its fullness.”⁵¹

SUMMARY

Homiletical models stand on hermeneutical commitments. Abraham Kuruvilla is to be commended for recognizing this truth, for articulating his own hermeneutical commitments, and for self-consciously building a homiletic to serve his hermeneutical convictions. Unfortunately, the hermeneutical commitments on which Kuruvilla has chosen to take his stand suffer deep

⁴³ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 7, note 33.

⁴⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 843.

⁴⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 843.

⁴⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 843. Cited from Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 52.

⁴⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

⁴⁸ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 842.

⁴⁹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 842.

⁵⁰ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 842 [emphasis original].

⁵¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 842.

flaws. The remainder of this paper will offer an alternate way to understand the hermeneutical foundations that undergird Kuruvilla's disagreements with Big Idea preaching, and will ultimately reject his homiletical proposal.

IN DEFENSE OF DISTILLATION

Texts are Reducible

Biblical authors, by skillfully employing rhetorical strategies—literary forms or genres, with all their attendant features—“do things”⁵² to readers, and Kuruvilla is therefore correct to give careful attention to textual details. Both *what* an author means and *how* he means it matter. But Kuruvilla goes too far.

The New Homiletic of the late twentieth century taught that literary form is not merely a rhetorical strategy for *how* an author means, but also a part of *what* he means.⁵³ To alter the form of the text is thus to alter the meaning of the text. In response, preachers attempted to replicate the literary form of the text in the form of the sermon, believing that literary form comprises a part *what* the author means.⁵⁴ Narrative sermon forms multiplied, even as homileticians struggled to produce workable sermon forms for poetic, proverbial, or apocalyptic literature. The mistaken hermeneutical conviction that literary form comprises a part of *what* the author means, and not simply *how* he means it, sent evangelical homiletics on an impossible rabbit trail.

A more nuanced understanding recognizes that literary forms comprise rhetorical strategies that authors use with skill to predispose readers to yield to the author's intent and to receive his ideational content as he desires. Jeffrey Arthurs therefore suggests that literary forms represent “means of managing a relationship with readers and listeners, moving them toward predetermined beliefs, values, and actions.”⁵⁵ Biblical authors manage these relationships skillfully, *doing things* to a reader—in ways the reader may not recognize—to influence the reader to receive the text as the author intends. Homileticians therefore strive to address not only *what* an author means but also *how* he means what he means—his “doings.” That, however, is very different than saying that an author's rhetorical strategy is a part of his ideational content. *How* a text means and *what* a text means are not the same thing. Mike Graves notes:

The form and content go together, but do they have to? No. The factual information conveyed in an obituary could be reported in story form (which often happens when celebrities die). The story would have to be sensitive to the mood of the death announcement. But sensitivity to mood does not require *duplicating* structure.⁵⁶

⁵² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 838 [emphasis original].

⁵³ For one such example, see Ronald J. Allen, *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1998), 73; 216.

⁵⁴ Dennis M. Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching: Theory and Practice in Sermon Design* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 133-34; J. Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching: The Steps from Text to Narrative Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 126.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 24.

⁵⁶ Mike Graves, *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1997), 22 [emphasis original].

Simply put, meaning transfers across literary forms. A skillful author can retain *what* he says even when he alters *how* he says it.

Kuruvilla's proposal therefore represents yet another iteration of an old hermeneutical error. He teaches that a listener's *experience* of the author's "doings"—rather than the literary form itself—is not just *how* an author means, but also a part of *what* an author means. In either case, the result is the same: a change in the literary form of the text—or even in the wording, details, or structures of the text—alters the meaning of the text.⁵⁷ Texts are therefore irreducible, and distillation is necessarily bad. The New Hermeneutic, and the New Homiletic which served it, travelled this path decades ago. With a subtle change, Kuruvilla is asking evangelical preachers to travel it once more.

Consider Kuruvilla's dialogue partners—Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, Henry Mitchell, William Willimon, Paul Ricoeur, David James Randolph, David Buttrick—all of whom are either liberal or neoorthodox in their view of Scripture, and each of whom wrote during the heyday of the New Homiletic. These men rejected the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, and opposed propositional preaching, not so much because they—like Kuruvilla—were concerned to protect the uniqueness of each pericope, but because they repudiated propositional truth. Self-consciously building homiletical models on the hermeneutical conviction that the Bible is not the very Word of God,⁵⁸ these men stand far from offering sure guidance for evangelical preachers. At the same time, Kuruvilla rejects the testimony of evangelical hermeneutical and homiletical luminaries—John Broadus, Haddon Robinson, Bryan Chapell, John Stott, Sydney Greidanus, John MacArthur, Walter Kaiser—in favor of appropriating the hermeneutical commitments of men whose doctrine of Scripture is antithetical to evangelical Christianity.

Kuruvilla's appeal to Paul Ricoeur is especially troubling. When Ricoeur speaks of the *world in front of the text*, he, unlike Kuruvilla, does not use that phrase to describe "God's ideal world."⁵⁹ To the contrary, Ricoeur personifies the text, ascribing to it intentions distinct from authorial intent,⁶⁰ describing the text as projecting new ways of the reader being in the world, such that for Ricoeur meaning is "dynamic," and signifies "the direction of thought opened up by the text."⁶¹ When Kuruvilla appropriates Ricoeur's phrase, but imbues it with his own meaning, he is using Ricoeur's *saying* but ignoring his *doing*, while at the same time castigating evangelical homileticians for ignoring doings. The irony is potent.

Kuruvilla's commitment to the notion that a text is irreducible has forced him to lodge with odd hermeneutical bedfellows. But as Steven Mathewson correctly asserts in his reply to Kuruvilla's proposal, reductions are not reductionistic.⁶² Reductions, in fact, recognize a fundamental truth that Kuruvilla rejects: Neither that which authors "do" with their texts—*how* they mean what they mean—nor the listener's experience of the author's "doings," alter *what* the author means.

⁵⁷ Kuruvilla, "Requiescat in Pace!," 7.

⁵⁸ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Revised and with New Sermons* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2001); David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Move and Structures* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987); David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1969). For a fuller critique, see Scott M. Gibson, "Defining the New Homiletic," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 5, no. 2 (September 2005): 19-28.

⁵⁹ Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill," 839.

⁶⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 1976), 29.

⁶¹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation*, 92.

⁶² Mathewson, "Let the Big Idea Live!," 34.

To reduce a text alters *how* an author means, and changes the rhetorical effects exerted upon the reader, but it does not alter *what* the author means. Again, a skillful author can retain *what* he says even when he alters *how* he says it. To reduce a text is not to lose or to alter meaning, but to impart the same *what* using a different *how*. For, whether Kuruvilla recognizes it or not, a proposition is a legitimate rhetorical strategy.

Propositions Result in a Clarification of Meaning

When preachers understand that authors can transfer information across forms, then it is clear that a Big Idea does not necessarily lose *what* an author means. Instead, it marshals the details of the text—using a different *how*—to clarify and reinforce the same *what*.

This is, in fact, how theology works. From the details of the text, comparing text with text, theologians identify broader principles—doctrines—that capture the sum of all the detailed information pertaining to a given subject. If, as Kuruvilla asserts, the “uniqueness of wording and structure and context of any given passage renders it impossible for one pericope to have the same thrust/ force as another,”⁶³ then no two passages of Scripture actually teach the same doctrine. The Bible offers no single doctrine of justification: there are multiple, unique, individual doctrines of justification, for no two pericopes teach the same theology. By redefining theology to include the listener’s experience of the non-discursive, affective qualities of the text, Kuruvilla precludes the possibility of theology as traditionally understood, and forbids the preacher its use in the pulpit.

Propositions, however, are necessary, not only for the work of theology in the pulpit, but also because the people of God must be taught, and thus the Scripture shows that Jesus himself used propositions to clarify his meaning. In Mark 4:3-8 Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, and because his disciples did not understand it, he explained the parable in the form of reductions, that is, propositional statements that clarified what he meant. In fact, Mark reveals in verse 34 that “privately to his own disciples,” Jesus “explained everything.”⁶⁴ Jesus used propositions to clarify the meaning of a story, and contemporary preachers can use propositions too, for far from representing a loss of meaning, propositions use a different *how* to clarify the same *what*.

“Overdetermination” is a Good Sign

No doubt Kuruvilla is correct that any given Big Idea can be too generic. But the presence of generalizations *per se* does not indicate an inherent weakness in Big Idea preaching. Evangelical Protestant hermeneutics stands on an interpretive principle called the analogy of Scripture. It is a simple principle: Scripture interprets Scripture. Because this is true, a preacher knows that if he or she has “discovered” something in one passage of Scripture that contradicts the plain teaching of another passage, this “discovery” is in fact a false interpretation. The Scripture agrees with itself, and this internal consistency means that we ought to find any given doctrine or teaching of Scripture in multiple places in the Bible.

⁶³ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 834.

⁶⁴ All Scripture references in this paper reflect the English Standard Version of the Bible.

Mathewson therefore rightly notes, “[S]ome overlap between big ideas . . . of multiple pericopes is inevitable since the same themes keep re-surfacing in the Scriptures.”⁶⁵ If a given Big Idea bears striking similarities to the Big Idea from another text, then the preacher should rejoice! The sermon is probably on the right path. The Scripture teaches the same principles and doctrines again and again and again, and like a good preacher the Lord uses repetition and restatement, teaching the same truths through a variety of literary forms in a variety of places in the Bible. Evangelical preachers should fear an absolutely unique Big Idea far more than an overdetermined one.

IN DEFENSE OF PREACHING THE DISTILLATE

Big Idea Preachers Already Address Authorial “Doings”

Kuruvilla emphasizes the distinction between authorial sayings and doings, stressing the latter almost to the point of ignoring the former, while charging evangelical homiletics with a near exclusive fixation on sayings.⁶⁶ As Mathewson notes: “[T]his is too simplistic,”⁶⁷ for doings and sayings work together, and have in fact worked together in evangelical homiletics.

Kuruvilla’s suggestion that evangelical homileticians have neither understood nor engaged with authorial “doings” simply cannot be sustained. If anything, concern for “doings,” in the form of the New Homiletic, exercised decades of undue influence on evangelical preaching. The endeavor among evangelical homileticians to replicate the form of the text in the form of the sermon reflects an eagerness to attend to authorial “doings”—the *how* of the author. Moreover, Jeffrey Arthurs, from the field of rhetoric,⁶⁸ Leland Ryken, from the study of literature,⁶⁹ and Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, from the perspective of hermeneutics⁷⁰—among many others—all engage authorial doings and offer evangelical preachers resources by which to understand not only *what* an author means, but also *how* he means it—as well as the rhetorical effects his strategies exert on his readers. Arthurs, in fact, offers an entire book that is specifically designed to help preachers replicate these rhetorical effects in their spoken sermons!

Mathewson likewise recalls a classroom discussion on Mark 4:35-41, in which Haddon Robinson demonstrated significant concern for the authorial “doings” of the passage,⁷¹ and while Kuruvilla disputes Robinson’s hermeneutical conclusions,⁷² Mathewson’s point stands: Big Idea preachers care both about what the text says *and* what it does.

It bears mention, moreover, that Bryan Chapell’s teaching on the Fallen Condition Focus represents a clear concern for authorial “doings.” Whereas the Proposition answers the What question—What is this text saying?—the FCF answers the Why question—Why was this text

⁶⁵ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!,” 35.

⁶⁶ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 3-4.

⁶⁷ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!,” 37.

⁶⁸ Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*.

⁶⁹ Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature . . . and get more out of it* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

⁷⁰ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981).

⁷¹ Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live!,” 37.

⁷² Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 2-4.

written? In other words, what is the author *doing* with the information he is presenting? How does he intend it to address these particular recipients in their human need? Chapell insists, “Until we have determined a passage’s purpose, we are not ready to preach its truths, even if we know many true facts about the text,” and he states in no uncertain terms: “We must determine the purpose (or burden) of the passage before we really know the subject of a sermon.”⁷³

Despite Kuruvilla’s assertion to the contrary, Big Idea preachers suffer no lack of attention to authorial doings.

The Text Acts like More than Art

The biblical authors employ literary forms with skill and artistry, and Kuruvilla is therefore correct that biblical texts are artistic, but they are not purely art. Kuruvilla does not suggest that biblical literature is mere art,⁷⁴ but his emphasis on the artistic features of biblical texts, almost to the exclusion of their ideational content, runs the danger of equating a biblical text with a sculpture, painting, or song. Kuruvilla’s proposal heavily emphasizes the *how* of the text over against the *what* of the text.

Kuruvilla insists that Big Idea preaching “does not see texts as non-discursive *objets d’art*,”⁷⁵ but also suggests that the experiences produced in the reader by these non-discursive elements of the text are, in fact, inexpressible, such that human language cannot capture them, except by the text *qua* text. But preaching, which is more than mere reading of the text, necessarily employs human language. Kuruvilla’s argument is therefore oddly self-defeating. If the experience of the non-discursive, artistic “doings” of the text is inexpressible, and can only be experienced through the text *qua* text, then the preacher can do nothing but read the text, or point out particular details of the text, hoping that congregants will “experience” what the preacher believes they should.

Contrast that with Scripture. John describes with artistic skill several signs that Jesus performed, but in John 20:30-31 he writes: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John’s texts, which artfully describe Jesus’ signs, are more than mere art. They are discursive texts, intended to communicate information—a truth with which Kuruvilla no doubt agrees—and John summarizes his own texts with a propositional statement, teaching what they mean and how his readers should respond to Jesus. Whatever the experience a reader enjoys of the non-discursive elements of John’s texts as *objets d’art*, John purposes his narratives for more than listener “experience”—he purposes them to convince the reader that Jesus is the Christ. Kuruvilla’s insistence on the text *qua* text forbids the apostle from doing that which he clearly has done.

Texts Demand Interpretation

⁷³ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 49.

⁷⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

⁷⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 845.

Nineteenth century Congregationalist preacher, R.W. Dale, asked: “Have we any reason to believe that even intelligent Christian men and women read the Scriptures intelligently?”⁷⁶ His question contains his answer, and it is an answer that many preachers can confirm. The text *qua* text does not explain itself. Preachers must interpret and teach.

Consider the resurrection of Jesus. Matthew 28:11-15 reveals that the unbelieving Jews offered an alternate explanation for Jesus’ empty tomb. The tomb did not explain itself, but required explanation. The New Testament offers the divinely inspired and authoritative interpretation of the person and work of Jesus—including the one correct explanation for his empty tomb. The preachers of the New Testament did not leave that event to explain itself.

Neither did they leave Scripture to explain itself. When Peter preached at Pentecost, he employed Psalm 110:1, interpreting the text, teaching clearly what it meant and how it was fulfilled in Christ. So far from expecting the text *qua* text to teach his listeners, Peter understood that Psalm 110:1 had in fact been a mystery to Jews for centuries. “The LORD says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” How could David refer to his own descendant as “Lord?” Peter answered in verse 36, declaring, “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” *That* is why David called him, “Lord.” The descendant to whom David referred is the resurrected and reigning Christ. Peter did not fear that his propositional statement represented a “loss of meaning and power and pathos, not to mention attenuation of filigrees of structure and nuances of language”⁷⁷ because his purpose was to proclaim salvation, not to help his listeners experience the “filigrees” of Psalm 110.

In a similar act of interpretation, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:7, quotes Exodus 32:6, which says, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” Paul in fact says, “Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.’” In a single verse Paul gives a reduction of a narrative text, stating in a propositional form the meaning of Exodus 32:6. The meaning is that some of them were idolaters. Again, Paul does not appear concerned that he is violating the text as an *objet d’art*, but that his readers stand in danger of violating the 2nd Commandment.

The entire Book of Hebrews proceeds in the same vein. The author to the Hebrews employs Old Testament Psalms, narratives, and prophecies, interpreting them for his audience, explaining them in propositional terms. Scholars debate whether Hebrews was initially a sermon,⁷⁸ but whether or not it was, the author is clearly uncomfortable with the assumption that the text *qua* text of the Hebrew Bible is sufficient to instruct the people of God in the way of Jesus.

CURATION IS INADEQUATE

⁷⁶ R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Libraries, 2015), 226. Originally published as *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877).

⁷⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 835.

⁷⁸ See among others Donald Guthrie, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

The Preacher is Not a Curator

Mere “curation” of the text, as Kuruvilla describes it, is thus an inadequate understanding of preaching. Among the New Testament descriptions of the various tasks associated with preaching are the following:⁷⁹

kerusso—to proclaim

euangelizo—to announce good news

diermeneuo—to unfold the meaning of

dianoigo—to open up or thoroughly disclose

dialegomai—to reason or discuss

diangello—to declare

katangelo—to proclaim

parresiazomai—to preach or to speak boldly; to correct or reprove

elencho—to expose or to correct; to convict

epitimao—to rebuke or warn

parakaleo—to encourage or comfort

martureo—to witness

homologeo—to say the same thing with or to agree

homileo—to converse; to talk with

laleo—to speak

didasko—to teach

suzeteo—to examine together or to dispute

metadidomi—to share the gospel as a gift

Notably absent are “curating,” “facilitating,” “discerning,” “portraying,” and “mediating,” which are the words Kuruvilla uses to describe the preaching he envisions. The Scripture simply bears no witness to the preacher as “docent,”⁸⁰ and gives no example of preacher-as-chaperon of non-discursive experiences. The preacher is described neither as a handmaid nor a midwife.⁸¹

Nearly all the terminology Kuruvilla chooses to employ to describe his homiletic, and the images and comparisons he provides, stands at odds with the plain terminology of, and the images and descriptions provided in, the Bible. Kuruvilla’s proposal appears to have been built on

⁷⁹ This list, which is not exhaustive, is borrowed and adapted from Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 96-97.

⁸⁰ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 7, note 33.

⁸¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 843.

contemporary language theory rather than direct biblical testimony, and the result feels oddly out-of-touch with the teaching of Scripture about the role and calling of a preacher.

Preaching Aims at Listener Obedience to the Text

In emphasizing the necessity that preachers help listeners to “experience the text as intended,”⁸² Kuruvilla does not ignore listener obedience, but he appears to expect obedience to be the natural byproduct of “experience.” Kuruvilla suggests that as God’s people “appl[y] the call of the pericope,” they “are progressively and increasingly inhabiting” the *world in front of the text*, “align[ing] themselves to the requirements of that ideal world,”⁸³ such that “sermon by sermon, God’s people become progressively more Christlike as they align themselves to the image of Christ displayed in each periscope.”⁸⁴ The Bible, however, gives little reason to believe that human beings willingly “align themselves” to righteousness,⁸⁵ and every reason to believe that preachers must warn,⁸⁶ correct,⁸⁷ exhort,⁸⁸ reprove,⁸⁹ implore,⁹⁰ point out sin,⁹¹ step on toes,⁹² and use the Scripture to probe the conscience,⁹³ all while trusting the Holy Spirit to wield the Word as a sword, “piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”⁹⁴ Biblical preaching does not so much aim at facilitating an experience of the text, through which self-“aligning” takes place, as much as it aims to call men and women to trust and obey Jesus Christ, directly applying the Scripture to the often-resistant hearts of listeners.

Even when people in the Bible display conviction by and interest in listening to the Scripture, the Bible does not depict them as having a moving, non-discursive experience. In Acts 17:11, the Jews at Berea, after listening to Paul preach, “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” In other words, they did not search the Scriptures to see if Paul accurately curated the text *qua* text, but rather to discern if the information Paul presented was true. Why? Because each of us understands intuitively that the artistic components of the literature of the Bible serve its ideational content. In other words, *how* the text means serves *what* the text means, and listeners rightly privilege the *what*.

Kuruvilla’s proposal specifically precludes the question of application, which he intends to treat elsewhere.⁹⁵ But one wonders why and how application could proceed under Kuruvilla’s conception of curation. Why seek to apply the text if its theology, which includes the listener’s

⁸² Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

⁸³ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 839.

⁸⁴ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 840.

⁸⁵ Romans 3:10-11.

⁸⁶ Colossians 1:28-29.

⁸⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16.

⁸⁸ Acts 2:40.

⁸⁹ 2 Timothy 2:4.

⁹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 5:1-3.

⁹² Galatians 1:10.

⁹³ Romans 2:15.

⁹⁴ Hebrews 4:12.

⁹⁵ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 835; see also “Time to Kill,” 839, note 85.

“intangible experiences,”⁹⁶ is in fact “inexpressible”⁹⁷ in any other form than the text itself? If the preacher states the theology that his or her congregation is supposed to apply, the preacher has changed that theology *by* stating it. Kuruvilla is adamant that any change to a single word of the text alters its pericopal theology:⁹⁸ only the text *qua* text can express it. The preacher cannot retell the text,⁹⁹ summarize the text in his or her own words,¹⁰⁰ or state it as a proposition. Exactly what, then, can a preacher do to “apply” the text when any language other than the text *qua* text alters the very theology that the preacher purports to apply?

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most striking feature of Kuruvilla’s proposal is its impracticality to a parish preacher. A pastor who weekly stands before a congregation, refusing to tell the flock plainly what the text means, instead “curating” their theological experience of the text *qua* text, might not remain long employed. Kuruvilla’s “curator” does not feed hungry sheep the Word of God as much as he or she invites the sheep to look upon a Thanksgiving feast, facilitating their appreciation of the culinary expertise of each dish, while in fact feeding them none of it. In describing his turn toward preaching as curation, Kuruvilla asserts: “With the blossoming of language philosophy in the late twentieth century, our understanding of how language works has grown considerably.”¹⁰¹ But that is not true. *Theories* of language have “grown considerably,” and each preacher and homiletician must submit those theories to the light of Scripture, searching the Bible to confirm or deny the accuracy of the theory in question. The way that Kuruvilla asks preachers to understand and to employ language in preaching simply does not reflect the way the Bible understands and employs it, and he appears uncritically to have accepted theories of language that simply do not agree with the Word of God.

Kuruvilla asks if it is “Time to Kill the Big Idea?,” to which evangelical preachers should politely reply, “No.”

⁹⁶ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 841.

⁹⁷ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 844.

⁹⁸ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 7. “[C]hanging any word in the account alters the text’s thrust in some way.”

⁹⁹ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 7.

¹⁰⁰ Kuruvilla, “*Requiescat in Pace!*,” 11. “No humanly created verbiage . . . can substitute for” the text.

¹⁰¹ Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill,” 838.