

The Reading and Preaching  
of the Scriptures  
*in the*  
Worship of the Christian Church

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*Volume 3*

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

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## THE READING AND PREACHING OF THE SCRIPTURES

scriptorium that preserved this wealth of Christian literature. It was the monks who took the time and had the patience to copy out the manuscripts of the Bible, the works of the Church Fathers, and even the literature of pagan antiquity. No one else in those days had the leisure to follow such literary pursuits. This point has often been made.

The point we want to make now is that this kind of literary activity produced a particular approach to preaching. Because the monks gave so much time to copying out the commentaries of Jerome, Augustine, and Origen, it was only natural that their sermons would use this material. If one was to preach on the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, for instance, one wanted to know how Augustine understood the passage. One was aware that the Church had a Holy Scripture, to be sure, but one was also aware that there was a definite tradition of its interpretation. Benedictine preaching was interested not only in preaching the Scriptures but in preaching the traditional interpretation of them as well. In fact, the Benedictines often simply re-preached the sermons of the Fathers. They took the sermons of Augustine, Ambrose, Leo the Great, Gregory the Great, Caesarius of Arles, and Maximus of Turin, expanded them, elaborated them, and preached them again. Benedictine preaching was traditional, that is, it passed on the biblical interpretation of the past to the next generation. It put a high value on the traditions of biblical interpretation that the Church had built up over the centuries.

### I. Charlemagne (ca. 742-814)

The genius of Charlemagne was that he recognized that religion is the basis of culture. It was not his army that made him the founder of Europe; it was his faith. It was a faith that opened the way to understanding and encouraged learning, for at its center was the Word. From the very beginning the Word was with God and in fact was God. The Jesus in whom Charlemagne believed was the very Word of God, and he came preaching, as we learn from the Gospels. The new culture Charlemagne was forming would be the result not of a political system, but of the preaching of the Word.

Emperor Charlemagne understood the importance of preaching.<sup>5</sup> He

5. On the Carolingian reform, see Donald A. Bullough, *The Age of Charlemagne*, 2nd ed. (London: Elek, 1973; reissued 1980); Donald A. Bullough, "Europae Pater: Char-

knew it was going to take more than the sword to bring the Saxons into his empire, and more than politics to forge the rival barbarian tribes, the Franks, the Gauls, and what was left of ancient Rome, into the new Europe. Charlemagne was more than a statesman; he was the creator of a culture. He envisioned uniting the whole continent of Europe together, with everyone professing one Christian faith, speaking one Latin language, and claiming the heritage of classical civilization and the traditions of ancient Rome. To bring together the Holy Roman Empire that he envisioned, he depended on his nobles, his soldiers, and his bureaucrats, to be sure, but he was also counting on the Church, on her bishops, on the cathedral and monastic schools, and above all on the monks, the Benedictines with their libraries. It was they who were to provide the spiritual and intellectual framework of this new culture. For Charlemagne one of the bonds that would bring together the empire was the liturgy, and at the heart of this liturgy was to be regular preaching.

The Carolingian revival cultivated missionary preaching. Whether it was Charlemagne himself or really Alcuin who perceived the necessity of missionary preaching is not too clear. The fact is, somehow Charlemagne got the message and insisted that when the Saxons were baptized they were to be preached to as well. Alcuin emphasized the well-known text from the last chapter of Matthew that directs the apostles to teach those they baptized, and Boniface, Pirmin, and their successors had already made preaching an important part of their missionary program, as we have seen. So it was not as though this was a new program. Charlemagne was simply encouraging what, theoretically at least, was already the practice. The emperor, however, realized that more was needed than the elementary preaching of the missionaries. The speed with which the missionary work was being done and the political and cultural motives for which many accepted baptism meant that great masses of only partially converted people had been received into the Church. Basic Christian doctrines were poorly understood, the Christian life was poorly practiced, and the ways of paganism were not entirely left behind. Introductory preaching and teaching was still needed. It had to become a permanent part of the life and worship of the Church.

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lemagne and His Achievement in the Light of Recent Scholarship," *English Historical Review* 85 (1970): 59-105; and Gerhard Seeliger, "Conquests and Imperial Coronation of Charles the Great," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1911-36), 2:595-629, and by the same author, "Legislation and Administration of Charles the Great," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, 2:655-84.

It was to this end that Charlemagne made the encouragement of preaching an important plank in his official policy of Church reform. As early as 785 the emperor decreed that everyone was to attend church on all Sundays and holy days and listen to the preaching of the Word of God.<sup>6</sup> The bishops were to see that in every parish church the priest was to preach each Sunday and holy day. This was not completely an innovation. As we have seen, plenty of preachers in the first two or three centuries were not bishops. Although at the beginning of the sixth century Caesarius of Arles had tried to insist that parish priests should preach as well as bishops, his urging went largely unheeded. By the end of the eighth century preaching was not regularly heard except in cathedral churches, and not always there.

Not only was the emperor concerned that regular preaching be available to all those under his rule, he was also concerned with the content of this preaching. The bishops were to see that the priests preached sacred Scripture rather than their own ideas, and when Charlemagne spelled this out, he did it in terms of catechetical preaching. They were to explain the basic Christian doctrines, the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and Christian virtues. The outline given is very similar to the one Pirmin had drawn up a century before. What is interesting here is the implication that catechetical preaching be brought into the center of the preaching ministry of the Church.

No doubt there was some very practical wisdom in this move. Surely it was catechetical preaching that met the need of the day, but a bit further on we must ask a number of questions about this.

The goals of Charlemagne's program of regular preaching in every parish were indeed laudable and farsighted, and it is to the credit of both the Church and the emperor that genuine and realistic attempts were made to reach them. But achieving these goals was not easy, because the number of parish priests who had the literary and theological training to do regular preaching was limited.<sup>7</sup> The situation at the end of the eighth

6. On Charlemagne's initiative in this matter, see Johann Baptist Schneyer, *Geschichte der katholischen Predigt* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Seelsorge Verlag Freiburg, 1969), p. 100. On Charlemagne's legislation regarding preaching, see Thomas L. Amos, "Preaching and the Sermon in the Carolingian World," in *De Ore Domini: Preacher and Word in the Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas L. Amos, Eugene A. Green, and Beverly M. Kienzle (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), pp. 41-60, esp. pp. 43-45.

7. On the obstacles to achieving these goals, see Schneyer, *Geschichte der katholischen Predigt*, pp. 103-4.

century, particularly north of the Alps, was about the same as the situation at the beginning of the sixth century in Provence. Parish priests had very few opportunities to get the sort of training needed to carry on a preaching ministry. To train them to realize this goal demanded a tremendous effort in establishing schools and libraries, and in many quarters Charlemagne's bishops made a heroic effort to supply this need. What he commanded did not immediately appear, as one might easily understand, but several important steps were taken that shaped the preaching ministry of the Western Church for centuries to come.

For our interests the most important step taken by Charlemagne to insure regular preaching was regularizing the lectionary, requiring its use throughout the empire, and providing a homiliary with sermons that could be preached, or could serve as guides for the preachers, for each of the occasions at which a sermon was required.

#### *A. Alcuin (ca. 735-804) and the Lectionary*

The lectionary had been developing for several centuries. The tradition that certain Scripture lessons were appropriate to particular feasts first began to appear toward the middle of the fifth century. But with the coming of the barbarian invasions through the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, maintaining an educated ministry became increasingly difficult. One way of meeting this problem was to conventionalize worship, and the lectionary was seen as a way of doing this. Each region of the Church developed its own traditions in regard to the lectionary. Some of the selections were obvious, of course: the nativity narratives for Christmas and at Easter the story of the resurrection. But as the cycle of annual feasts and fasts became more elaborate, so did the lectionary. While the lectionaries of Rome and Jerusalem influenced those of many churches, strong local traditions also played a role, so that by the beginning of the Carolingian Age several types of lectionaries existed in western Europe. The churches of Gaul, the churches of Mozarabic Spain, the church of Milan, and the church of the city of Rome all had their own distinct traditions. Much scholarly effort has been invested in tracing the development of these lectionaries. We have already spoken at considerable length about the lectionary of Jerusalem, the Syriac lectionaries, the Gallican, the Mozarabic lectionaries, and finally the Roman lectionaries.