



TRINITARIAN PREACHING

AN INTERVIEW WITH
THEOLOGIAN ROBERT DEAN

Robert Dean (ThD) is the Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Providence Seminary. In 2024, he received the Vital Worship, Vital Preaching Grant for teacher-scholars in the amount of \$17,000 US from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship in Grand Rapids, which is awarded to those pursuing ministry-related research within a North American context. In conjunction with his sabbatical, the grant will be helping to fund his current book project examining various approaches to contemporary preaching through a Trinitarian lens.

PROVIDENCE: What is distinctive about the education one can expect to receive from a seminary?

ROBERT: The word “seminary” originally comes from the Latin term for seed bed, so I think the conception is that seminary is a place where people can grow in faith and character for service. Historically, seminaries trained people for ministry in the church, but this has expanded in recent years to include counsellors, missionaries, parachurch workers, and laypeople who want to go deeper in their faith.

PROVIDENCE: Practically-speaking, how has studying at seminary changed over the years?

ROBERT: I think there has been an expanding vision of what seminary education can be, given that we have many part-time and distance students for whom a traditional three-year residential model is no longer possible or desirable. There are great benefits to online education as it’s opened up opportunities for people who would not be able to study otherwise. But I also think studying in-person best facilitates community character formation, which remains a standard option through our on-campus classes and modular program weeks at Providence.

PROVIDENCE: As a professor, what do you most enjoy about teaching?

ROBERT: The combination of both the subject matter — studying theology — and sharing time and space with students is a great privilege. To be able to talk about the things that ultimately matter with people from various walks of life is compelling in a number of different ways, and a profound discovery for me has been that the Holy Spirit is the primary teacher in the classroom. The Christian life is a pilgrimage of ever deeper immersion into the life of the Trinity, and my hope is that students experience a breadth and depth to God than they may have previously fathomed.

PROVIDENCE: Describe the focus of the book that you're writing about preaching.

ROBERT: A lot of contemporary preaching is driven by certain desires or common assumptions — that it should be relevant, ethical, contextual, pastoral and political. Usually, these adjectives are left theologically uninterrogated and they end up driving the “homiletical bus.” What I want to do is to question those terms and reestablish them on firmer Trinitarian grounding.

PROVIDENCE: From your perspective, is there a difference between teaching and preaching?

ROBERT: Preaching relates to the announcement or proclamation of something; it has to do with a happening and with the impact, significance or implications of that happening for the listener. As for teaching, the New Testament often speaks of what the disciples taught, but the distinction can be somewhat erased if we consider the subject of the teaching. If it's Christ clothed with His Gospel, the difference between teaching and preaching isn't quite as apparent.

PROVIDENCE: How would you describe an effective sermon?

ROBERT: Faithful preaching bears witness to the enduring and all-encompassing beauty, truth, and goodness of Christ, and allows the hearer to find their life within His story. Related to this, for every preacher, there need to be moments of spiritual introspection or reflection where one asks, “Is what I'm saying completely transparent to Christ? Or is there something here in myself that is distracting?” That's a continuing spiritual discipline that pastors need to be involved in, because it's the compelling beauty, goodness and truth of Christ that captures hearers and brings them into the light.

PROVIDENCE: What kinds of crossroads might the Church be facing today and how should Christians respond?

ROBERT: The great temptation we face is to abandon the living Lord for the sake of maintaining cultural influence. Churches are swayed by both the political left and right, so this challenge exists for churches and Christian organizations of various stripes. Will we remain focused on our mission, or will the desperate attempt to hang onto diminishing power and privilege lead us astray? The only hope that we have — or the only thing we have to offer to the world that's of any significance — is Christ and Him crucified. It's about coming to the table, which involves bringing our deepest convictions with us into dialogue and conversation, because the One that we follow is the One who goes by the way of the cross. He doesn't operate by coercion and compulsion but extends hospitality and welcomes people into the family of God.