CHAPTER ONE

PROLEGOMENA TO A PREHISTORY OF
CHRISTIAN PREACHING

To deal with the problem of the preacher and the homily in the earliest church is to wrestle with the problem of evidence. As Brilioth puts it:

The sources for a history of preaching in the post-apostolic era are very scanty. It is possible that a thorough consideration of the literary documents from the second century would be able to put together faint descriptions and similarities and thus make some contribution toward a clearer picture.1

This book is precisely such an attempt to contribute towards a clearer picture, and the main part of the work will be taken up with an examination of the literature which either reflects preaching, or which has been widely believed to have homiletic origins. This first chapter is intended to lay down some guidelines by which the examination of the literature may proceed. As a result of the paucity of evidence for early Christian preaching, histories of preaching typically devote a few pages to the origins of the homily and begin their real treatment with Origen;2 it is at that point that this book concludes.

In the past it has been considered axiomatic that the earliest Christians preached, indeed for early form-criticism the sermon provided the rationale behind the shape of the New Testament documents. But for all that there is the working assumption that the earliest Christians preached there is nothing extant from the first two centuries which is self-confessedly a homily preached in the synaxis. The discussion, particularly with regard to preaching in the period of the New Testament, is confused by the number of activities which might be so described; in particular missionary preaching has been

1 Brilioth, *Brief history*, 18.
2 Thus, typically, Schütz, *Geschichte*; Edwards, “History of preaching”; Brilioth, *Brief history*; Old, *Reading and preaching*, is the exception, as he devotes a volume to this period. Sadly he makes no attempt to justify the classification of any of his examples as homiletic.
subsumed under the heading of preaching. But although both missionary preaching and preaching in the assembly are both forms of communicating the Christian message they should be distinguished carefully from one another since their audiences differ, as do their aims, and so the content of the messages is distinct to each. Thus Edwards makes the helpful functional distinction between liturgical, catechetical and missionary preaching. The first takes place within the assembly, the third outside, whereas the second has the function of bridging the gap between those outside the Christian assembly and those within. Olivar makes a similar distinction, focusing on purpose rather than locus, in distinguishing between preaching intended to convert, preaching intended to catechize and preaching intended to confirm the faithful in their practice. We shall observe in the course of this investigation that the aim of liturgical preaching is intended to confirm the faithful, and that Edwards' and Olivar's divisions are thus equivalent to each other.

The focus of this study is liturgical preaching, that is to say we shall be solely concerned with preaching within the Christian assembly to those who are already Christians, and therefore exclude from consideration ab initio missionary preaching such as that found in Acts 2 and Acts 7. Whereas it is possible that these accounts may reflect something of the approach taken to preaching within the assembly, the fictive audiences are not believers and the aim of the addresses is therefore to convert rather than to edify a body of those who already believe.

The fact that there is no self-identifying homily extant is itself interesting, indeed it begs explanation. A similar situation exists with

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4 Olivar, Predicacion cristiana, 35.
5 These are more helpful than the distinctions made by Old, Reading and preaching, 8, who makes the generic distinctions between expository preaching, evangelistic preaching, catechetical preaching, festal preaching and prophetic preaching. What Old means by prophetic preaching (namely a challenge to the established order of things) is not what the early Christians would have understood by the term and so this is to be excluded from our consideration, whereas both expository and festal preaching might take place in the assembly, but need not be exhaustive as genres of preaching to be found there. The problem derives from the fact that, for Old, a scriptural basis defines preaching, whereas we shall note in the course of this investigation that this is neither a sufficient nor a necessary part of any definition. The result of this is that Old's generic distinctions are capable of including virtually any spoken communication within Christianity.