

SCHEDULE

TIME	DESCRIPTION
9:30 - 10:30	Introduction Today's Situation Convictions Definitions
10:30 - 10:45	Break
10:45 - 11:45	The Benefits of Theocentric Preaching Stages 1-3 of Preparation Theocentric Exegetical and Homiletical Ideas
11:45 - 12:30	Lunch
12:30 - 1:15	Stages 4-6 of Preparation Crossing the Historical-Cultural Gap
1:15 - 1:30	Break
1:30 - 2:30	Stages 7-10 of Preparation Seminar Evaluation

TODAY'S SITUATION

- **Anthropocentrism has led to a *shift* within the church.**

Throughout Western societies, and most especially in North America, there has occurred a fundamental shift in the understanding and practice of the Christian story. It is no longer about God and what God is about in the world; it is about how God serves and meets human needs and desires. It is about how the individual self can find its own purposes and fulfillment. More specifically, our churches have become spiritual food courts for the personal, private, inner needs of expressive individuals. (Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling!?!*, 12-13)

A huge religious marketplace has been set up in North America to meet the needs and fantasies of people like us. There are conferences and gatherings custom-designed to give us the lift we need. Books and video seminars promise to let us in to the Christian “secret” of whatever we feel is lacking in our life: financial security, well-behaved children, weight-loss, exotic sex, travel to holy sites, exciting worship, celebrity teachers. The people who promote these goods and services all smile a lot and are good looking. They are obviously not bored...

This also is idolatry. We never think of using this term for it since everything we are buying or paying for is defined by the adjective “Christian.” But idolatry it is nevertheless: God packaged as a product; God depersonalized and made available as a technique or program. The Christian market in idols has never been so brisk or lucrative. (Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 125)

- **Pastors feel pressure to embrace this shift. It changes *everything*:**
 - **Worship** — “Contemporary worship is far more egocentric than theocentric. The aim is less to give glory to God than to satisfy the longings of the human heart. Even when we sing God's praises, the focus is on fulfilling and satisfying the human desire for wholeness and serenity,” a motivation that is not wrong but “becomes questionable when it takes priority” (Bloesch, “Whatever Happened to God?”)
 - **The role of the pastor**
 - ...the responsibility of seeking to be the Christian in the modern world is then transformed into a search for what Farley calls a “technology of practice,” for techniques with which to expand the

Church and master the self that borrow mainly from business management and psychology. Thus it is that the pastor seeks to embody what modernity admires and to redefine what pastoral ministry now means in light of this culture's two most admired types, the manager and the psychologist. (Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 101)

- **The sermon**

Evangelicals in America are creating a religion that tells them how to be happy, how to be financially secure, how to be successful, fulfilled and healthy. Evangelical Christianity in America has pushed missional values to the fringes and brought “the Good Life” so close to the center that sermons themselves are calmly titled “How to Discover the Champion In You.” To which everyone applauds. (Michael Spencer, <http://tinyurl.com/hovu5>)

According to a study by *Preaching and Pulpit Digest*, 80.5% of sermons are anthropocentric. Most sermons are not grounded in the character, nature, and will of God (Wells, “The D-Min-ization of Ministry,” 184-185).

- **People expect the sermon to be:**

- **Practical** - “Modern preachers rarely talk about anything mysterious or mystical or redemptive. 'How-to' is a more popular sermonic crowd getter” (Miller, *Preaching*, 48).
- **About felt needs**



It is, most often, spirituality of a therapeutic kind, which assumes that the most pressing issues that should be addressed in the church are those with which most people are preoccupied: how to sustain relationships, how to handle stress, what to do about recurring financial problems, how to handle conflicts in the workplace, and how to raise children. It is these issues, and a multitude like them, which prescribe where Christian faith must offer some answers if it is to remain relevant. While biblical truth is not itself denied, and while the importance of remaining doctrinally orthodox is not questioned, neither is seen to be central to the practice of meeting seekers who are looking for answers in their lives. (Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, 269)

- **Therapeutic**

Communication has become largely narcissistic – private therapy through public discourse with gurus such as Dr. Phil and Oprah. Examples of this trend are seen in contemporary preaching, a public event that uses biblical narrative to help people make their lives work. The biblical narrative thus becomes a how-to tool to help people in their private, personal lives, a kind of chicken soup for the Christian life. The biblical narrative is colonized by narcissistic, private anxieties in the service of therapy. (Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 67)

- **It's important to evaluate this shift.**

It's not that humans are unimportant — “When we look at the Scriptures I don't think we can escape the fact that all of God's activity is centered on man” (David Wayne, <http://tinyurl.com/quet2>).



- **Evaluating the message**

The therapeutic gospel is a false gospel and an enemy of mission for many reasons. First, it does not call me to love God and my neighbor, but instead only to love myself. Second, it does not call me to God's mission but rather calls God to my mission. Third, it does not call me to be part of the church to serve God's mission, but instead uses the church to make me a better person. Fourth, it does not call me to use my spiritual gift(s) to build up the church but rather to actualize my full potential. Fifth, it takes pride, which Augustine called the mother of all sins, and repackages it as self-esteem, the maidservant of all virtue. (Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.*, 24-25).

Without realising it, we have during the past century bartered that gospel for a substitute product which, though it looks similar in enough points of detail, is as a whole a decidedly different thing. Hence our troubles; for the substitute product does not answer the ends for which the authentic gospel has in days proved itself so mighty. (Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 126)

- **Evaluating the results**

Sermons that are only about the practical things of this world are often too bound by this world to help them. And this world is too weak to heal what is wrong with people's lives. People see great sermons as rooted in a transcendence that becomes their entry point into a better world. (Miller, *Preaching*, 48)

The type of preaching described here...offers people analgesics borrowed from the wider culture that are baptized with biblical texts. This preaching fails to cultivate an environment in which people can ask questions about the forces shaping their lives and fueling their anxiety and confusion. The image of Jesus calling Lazarus from the grave comes to mind; most preaching is about how to cope with a life wrapped in grave clothing that is never removed. (Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*, 67-68)

- **The way back...**

The biblical narrative is about God's mission in, through, and for the sake of the world and how God has called human beings to be part of God's reaching out to that world for God's purpose of saving it in love. *The focus of attention should be what God wants to accomplish and how we can be part of God's mission, not how God helps us accomplish our own agendas.* (Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling!?!*, 13)

The critical question is whether preachers are supposed to help people "find their stories in the Bible," or are supposed to call the hearers, as George Lindbeck has suggested, to "make the story of the Bible their story." (Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 36).

It is undeniable that this is how we preach; perhaps this is what we really believe. But it needs to be said with emphasis that this set of twisted half-truths is something other than the biblical gospel. The Bible is against us when we preach in this way; and the fact that such preaching has become standard practice among us only shows how urgent it is that we should review this matter. *To recover the old, authentic, biblical gospel, and to bring our preaching and practice back into line with it, is perhaps our most pressing present need.* (Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 127)

- It won't be easy - "The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is this: Life is a story about me." (Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, 182)

Seminar Outcome

The desired outcome for this seminar is to understand why and how to prepare theocentric sermons that are both *faithful* and *relevant*.



FOUNDATIONAL CONVICTIONS

Convictions about Scripture

1. The Bible is *theocentric*

The Bible is a book about God. It is not a religious book of advice about the “answers” we need about a happy marriage, sex, work, or losing weight. Although the Scriptures reflect on many of those issues, they are above all about who God is and what God thinks and wills. I understand reality only if I have an appreciation for who he is and what he desires for his creation and from his creation. (Haddon Robinson, “The High Call of Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 23-24)



Scripture must be interpreted theocentrically...The central actor in the biblical drama is God. Scripture witnesses to the reality of God, to the purposes of God, to the kingdom of God. The content of the biblical story is God's faithfulness in acts of judgment and mercy in the covenant with the people of Israel and in the history of Jesus. The biblical narrative has many aspects, but the central theme is the work of the faithful God who takes up the cause of justice, freedom, and peace on behalf of the creation oppressed by sin and misery. (Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 56)

2. The Bible tells the *true story* of the world

[It is] the clue to history, to universal history and therefore to the history of each person, and therefore the answer that every person must give to the question, Who am I?” (Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 128)

The critical question is whether preachers are supposed to help people 'find their stories in the Bible,' or are supposed to call the hearers, as

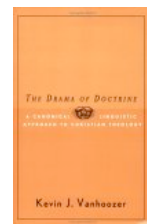
George Lindbeck has suggested, to “make the story of the Bible their story.” (Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 36)

The parts cannot be fragmented from the whole:

Many of us have read the Bible as if it were merely a mosaic of little bits - theological bits, moral bits, historical-critical bits, sermon bits, devotional bits. But when we read the Bible in such a fragmented way, we ignore its divine author's intention to shape our lives through its story...If we allow the Bible to become fragmented, it is in danger of being absorbed into whatever other story is shaping our culture, and it will thus cease to shape our lives as it should...a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers! (Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 12)

3. The Bible calls for faithful performance

The drama of doctrine is about refining the dross of textual knowledge into the gold of Christian wisdom by putting one's understanding of the Scriptures into practice...The proper end of the drama of doctrine is wisdom: lived knowledge, a performance of the truth.



...*Sola Scriptura* returns, then, not by positing the Bible as a textbook filled with propositional information but by viewing the Bible as a script that calls for faithful yet creative performance. (Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 21-22)

Convictions about God

Some seem to fear that a theocentric focus will be boring and irrelevant. God, however, is anything but boring.

For many people, God is a god who answers my questions, satisfies my desires and supports my interests. A user-friendly god you can access and download at the push of a prayer-key, a god you can file and recall when you need him (which gives “Save As” a whole new meaning!). A utility deity for a can-do culture. Evangelism becomes a form of marketing, and the gospel is reduced to a religious commodity.

The real God is altogether different. He is not a useful, get-it, fix-it god. He is not “relevant”, he is the measure of relevance. (Kim Fabricius, “Falling Over Things in the Dark,” <http://tinyurl.com/nqdgdt>).

There is nothing irrelevant about God, and nothing more important for living.

Knowing God is crucially important for the living of our lives...we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentenced yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul. (Packer, *Knowing God*, 14-15)

Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves. (Calvin, *Institutes*, 15)

The knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are intertwined. We cannot know God truly without being awakened to new self-recognition, and we cannot know our true humanity without a new awareness of the majestic grace of God. (Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 139)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)

Convictions about Relevance and Felt Needs

Is the Gospel about meeting needs?

One assumption is that the gospel has anything to do with “my needs.” As I read the Gospels, Jesus seems oblivious to most of my needs. Was Jesus about fulfilling people's desires? What a curious image of Jesus. (Willimon, “Preaching Past TiVo: A Leadership Forum.”)



Can we be trusted to define our needs?

Another assumption is that I have needs worth having. A consumer culture is not about the fulfillment of real need; it's about the creation of a need I wouldn't have without the advertising. So when I say “I need this” I shouldn't be trusted.

My point: I have tremendous respect for the power of the market to own everything, including preachers. If my sermon becomes another product that makes you feel a little less miserable this week, then that, it seems to me, is a little less than the gospel. (Willimon, “Preaching Past TiVo: A Leadership Forum.”)

Is there a danger in preaching to felt needs?

By preaching to “felt needs” we are often preaching to selfish and idolatrous cravings. What will be the “felt needs” of people who love themselves, money, and pleasure? Our job is not to preach to felt needs, but to expose such felt needs as sinful cravings that must be supplanted by Christ. Only in that way can unbelievers see their truest, deepest need for the One whose absence those distractions have sought to soothe. (Horton, “The Subject of Contemporary Relevance,” 331)

The alternative:

The world's questions are not the questions which lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer... I am suggesting that, with the Bible as our guide, we should...begin with the Bible as the unique interpretation of human and cosmic history and move from that starting point to an understanding of what the Bible shows us of the meaning of personal life. (Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119, 128)

Convictions about Re-imagination

What does it mean to be shaped by Scripture?

I shall suggest that the Christian community is invited to indwell the story, tacitly aware of it as shaping the way we understand, but focally attending to the world we live in so we are able confidently, though not infallibly, to increase our understanding of it and our ability to cope with it...*this calls for a more radical kind of conversion than has often been thought, a conversion not only of the will but of the mind, a transformation by the renewing of the mind so as not to be conformed to this world, not to see things as our culture sees them, but – with new lenses – to see things in a radically different way.* (Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 38)

A preacher helps this re-imagination take place.

When I was in seminary, someone told us in preaching class that the gospel must be translated into the thought forms of the modern world or we would not be heard. The preacher is the bridge between the world of the Bible and the world of the twentieth century. I've decided that the traffic has been moving only in one direction on that bridge. Our task as preachers is not the hermeneutical task of making the gospel capable of being heard by modern people but *the pastoral-political job of making a people who are capable of hearing the gospel.* (Willimon, "Preaching: Entertainment or Exposition?" 206)

Let us then see the first task of preaching as description. Let us move from the first goal of preaching as the production of a set of application points to the goal of unfurling a reality we could not see apart from being engulfed in the story of God from creation to redemption. The first task of preaching then is not to dissect Scripture into "nuggets" that the isolated self can put to use at its own disposal. Rather it is to preach the reality of the world as it is under the good news of the gospel, which renders all things new...

...the preacher's first job will not be to hand out more "to do" lists. Rather, it is to unfurl the reality of who God is past, present, and future so that all men and women who would submit to live in that world would then be able to understand themselves, who they are, where they are going, and what they are to do in terms of Jesus Christ and his story. (Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 142-143)

Convictions about The Importance of Preaching

Herman Melville's image of the pulpit as a ship's prow that leads the way through uncharted waters is strikingly apt: "the pulpit leads the world."



...The sermon, not some leadership philosophy or management scheme, remains the prime means of pastoral direction and hence the pastor's paramount responsibility. The good sermon contains both script analysis and situation analysis. It is in the sermon that the pastor weaves together theo-dramatic truth and local knowledge. The sermon is the best frontal assault on imaginations held captive by secular stories that promise other ways to the good life. Most important, the sermon envisions ways for the local congregation to become a parable of the kingdom of God. *It is the pastor's/director's vocation to help congregations hear (understand) and do (perform) God's word in and for the present.* (Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 449, 456)

The teaching and preaching of scripture remains, then, at the heart of the church's life...The various crises in the Western church of our day - decline in numbers and resources, moral dilemmas, internal division, failure to present the gospel coherently to a new generation - all these and more should drive us to pray for scripture to be given its head once more; for teachers and preachers who can open the Bible in the power of the Spirit, to give the church the energy and direction it needs for its mission and to renew in it its love for God; and, above all, for God's word to do its work in the world. (N.T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 139, 141)

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. (2 Timothy 4:1-2)

DEFINITIONS



Theocentric preaching is the proclamation, from Scripture, of who God is, what he wills, and what he has done and continues to do. It recounts the divine drama of creation and re-creation, which finds its center in Jesus Christ, as the true story of the world. It helps people learn their roles as faithful participants in the theo-drama.

- Scriptural
- Focuses on God (character, will, actions)
- About the theo-drama
- Centers on Jesus
- Still includes people

Anthropocentric preaching is preaching, sometimes from Scripture and sometimes about God, that centers on humans — their identity, desires and felt needs, and actions. It may include God, but it does not focus on helping people perform as faithful participants in the theo-drama.

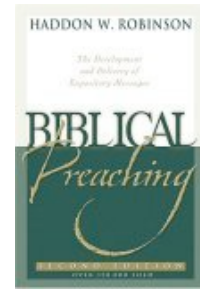
- Sometimes Scriptural
- Includes God
- Focuses on humans (identity, desires, needs, actions)
- Divorced from the theo-drama

THE BENEFITS OF THEOCENTRIC PREACHING

1. It *glorifies* God
2. It is more *accurate*
3. It tells a better *story*
4. It prepares the congregation for faithful *performance*
5. It frees preaching from "*to do*" lists
6. It is *expansive*
7. It is *sustainable*

A MODEL FOR PREPARING THEOCENTRIC SERMONS

Adapted from Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching*



Stage 1: Choose the Passage to be Preached

Before selecting a text, we should decide which particular need should be addressed in this sermon. The congregational need provides the target. Next we need an arrow that will fly straight to the target — we need a biblical text that addressed a similar need in Israel or, in the case of the New Testament, in the early church. This strategy of matching texts to end — sermons which are of one piece, shifting back and forth only between the need addressed in Israel and the similar need in the church today. By contrast, selecting the text first and then belatedly trying to apply it to a congregational need can lead to unnatural and forced applications. (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 281)

Theocentric Focus

Questions to help choose a text:

- What about God — his character, will, and activity — does this congregation need to know? What text meets that need?
- What part of our fallen condition needs to be addressed? Where does God address that need within redemptive history?
- How can the needs of the congregation be met by the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Where in Scripture is that aspect of the Gospel expressed?



Questions to evaluate the relevance of the chosen text:

- What need does the text address (assuming a theocentric interpretation)?
- Have I understood the purpose of the text in its larger context?
- How will this text help the congregation understand the theo-drama of which they are a part?

Today's Texts

Psalm 127

Ps 127:1 Unless the Lord builds the house,
the builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.

Ps 127:2 In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to those he loves.

Ps 127:3 Children are a heritage from the Lord,
offspring a reward from him.

Ps 127:4 Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are children born in one's youth.

Ps 127:5 Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their opponents in court.

Mark 4:35-41

Mk 4:35 That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

Mk 4:39 He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

Mk 4:40 He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"

Mk 4:41 They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

1 Peter 5:1-4

¹Pe 5:1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Stage 2: Study the Passage

- Literary Interpretation — Genre, form, context, literary function, placement, authorship and flow
- Grammatical Interpretation — Verbs, adverbs, nouns, pronouns, grammar, word and grammatical studies of crucial terms
- Historical-Cultural Interpretation — Author, audience, social setting, historical foreground, geography, and date

Theocentric Focus

- Theocentric Interpretation — “What does this passage reveal about God, his redemptive acts, his covenant, his grace, his will for his people? The question about God in relation to his people is probably the most important question to ask to prevent the moralistic, imitation preaching that is so prevalent today.” (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 286)
- Canonical Interpretation — What is the passage's relation to the rest of Scripture? If it is quoted elsewhere, how and why is it quoted and interpreted? What does this passage mean in the context of the whole Bible?
- Redemptive-Historical Interpretation — “What does this passage mean in the context of God's all-encompassing story from creation to new creation?...What does this passage mean in the light of Jesus Christ?” (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 286)



Does this message in the course of redemptive history lead to Jesus Christ, our Savior and living Lord? Does it promise his coming? Does it prefigure his person and work? Does it show by analogy who God in Christ is for us today? Does its theme lead into the New Testament to Jesus or his teaching? Does a New Testament author quote this passage or allude to it? Does New Testament teaching stand in contrast to this Old Testament message? (Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 288)

- Theological Interpretation — Antecedent theology, the theology of the text, and how that theology is developed in later Scriptures

Stage 3: Discover the Exegetical Idea

Taken as a whole, what is the text talking about? What is the claim the text makes upon the original audience? How is the idea developed in the passage? How do the parts of the passage relate to the idea?

Criteria:

- Is it a complete idea (subject - what the author talks about, and complement - what the author says about it)?
- Does the subject fit all the parts?
- Is it too broad? Is it too narrow?
- Is the subject an exact description of what the text is talking about?

This is one of the hardest stages. “This is sweaty, difficult work, but it has to be done.” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 70)

Theocentric Focus

The exegetical idea will be theological, because every text reveals something of God.

The proposition therefore will be stated in terms of theology rather than history. As a result the preacher will be articulating universal truth that answers the question, What does this passage tell about God, creation, and the relationship between the two? It is crucial that the theological product be clearly linked to the original passage. (Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching,” 478).



Stage 4: Analyze the Exegetical Idea

- What does it mean? (explanation)
- Is it true? (proof) — “Today we can count on an attitude of questioning and doubt” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 75).
- What difference does it make? (application) — The Bible is written to be understood *and* obeyed. Caution: “More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis” (Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 306).

The key to perceptive application is accurate exegesis. “Application must come from the theological purpose of the Biblical writer” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 88). Application is where “faithful adherence to the purpose and the audience of the text” meets “knowledge of the contemporary need” (Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching,” 482).

Theocentric Focus

Three dangers:

- Overemphasis on action. “Sermons...may properly summarize a biblical truth, but they are unconvincing. They do not reorient our thinking. We may know the bottom line, but we don't know how to live what we know” (Eclov, “The Danger of Practical Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 318).
- Individualism. “The public, corporate, and systemic dimensions of the gospel are often downplayed in favor of more personalistic themes...pastoral preaching can end up reinforcing selfishness and undermining the call of the gospel to move out of ourselves and toward others in service” (Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 32).
- Imposing an anthropocentric purpose on the text. “God reveals himself in the Scriptures. The Bible, therefore, isn't a textbook about ethics or a manual on how to solve personal problems. The Bible is a book about God. When you study a biblical text, therefore, you should ask, 'What is the vision of God in this passage?' God is always there. Look for Him.” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 94). Preaching draws on the implications for belief and behavior from that revelation of God.



Stage 5: Formulate the Homiletical Idea

“Remember that you are not lecturing to people about the Bible. You are talking to people about themselves from the Bible. This statement, therefore, should be in fresh, vital, contemporary language...The homiletical idea is simply the biblical truth applied to life” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 104-105).

The homiletical idea should be:

- Stated simply and memorably
- In concrete and familiar words
- Focused on response

Theocentric Focus

The homiletical idea must somehow include God.

“By all means, that 'big idea' should be something that helps [your congregation] understand God and their relationship to him, or you didn't think through the exegesis and its culmination in application as carefully as you should have” (Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 85).

“I am convinced that God cannot adequately be the subject of the sermon unless God is the subject of the theme sentence of the sermon” (Wilson, “The Source of Passion,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 590).

Since the text is about God in relation to his character, will, and actions (which include people), the big idea will also be about God in relation to God's character, will, and actions today.



Stage 6: Determine the Sermon's Purpose

“The purpose states what you expect to happen in your hearers as a result of preaching your sermon” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 107). The purpose of the sermon is derived from the *central* message purpose of the text. The purpose may be cognitive (giving knowledge and insight) or affective (changing attitudes and actions).

This is one of the most dangerous stages of sermon preparation, because it involves crossing the historical-cultural gap *and* application (see pages 26-28).



Theocentric Focus

One of the best ways to keep the sermon theocentric in its purpose is to focus on the way that the text calls for a response. When the sermon's is consistent with the text's purpose, the sermon is more likely to be theocentric.



This question looks for ways that this text transforms the life of the believer by renewing the mind (Romans 12:1-2) and how it sanctifies him or her (John 17:17). Does it appeal to the hearer's mind, emotions, will, conscience, sense of need, or love of truth? Does it use questions, examples, reminders, word pictures, Scripture citations, or argumentation? Is the means employed repetitive, hitting the same note again or again, or is it more cumulative, building a case for the desired response by a range of rhetorical techniques? (Scharf, “God's Letter of Intent, in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 231-232).

Vanhoozer reminds us that one of the purposes of Scripture is to help us understand the theo-drama more fully so we can learn our role within it. Theology helps us acquire “the ability to see, feel, and taste the world as disclosed in the biblical texts” (Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 268).

Stage 7: Decide on How to Accomplish This Purpose

Sermons develop in three major ways:

- deductively (an idea to be explained, a proposition to be proved, a principle to be applied)
- semi-inductively (a subject to be completed, induction-deduction)
- inductively

Theocentric Focus

The main issue in this stage of theocentric interpretation is to ensure that the form of the sermon is in line with its theocentric homiletical idea and purpose.



(1) Does this development communicate what the passage teaches? (2) Will it accomplish my purpose with this audience? If your development communicates your message, by all means use it; if it gets in the way of your message, then devise a form more in keeping with the idea and purpose of the Scriptures and the needs of your listeners. (Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 131)

Stage 8: Outline the Sermon

“Structure provides a sermon with a sense of unity, order, and progress” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 132). The outline helps the preacher in four ways:

- It helps view the sermon as a whole, heightening the sense of unity.
- It clarifies the relationship between the various parts of the sermon.
- It crystalizes the order of ideas so that they are communicated in the appropriate sequence.
- It reveals where additional supporting material is needed.

The structure of your sermon may be different from the structure of the text. It is determined by the demand of the audience without violating the message of the text.

A sermon outline should be simple with relatively few points, each one representing an idea.

Theocentric Focus

The test of an outline is that it faithfully communicates the theocentric homiletical idea in line with the sermon's purpose.



Stage 9: Fill in the Sermon Outline

Because audiences do not respond to abstract ideas, the preacher must use supporting materials that make the message clear and anticipate the questions of the congregation. The supporting materials “explain, prove, apply, or amplify the points” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 140).

Options include restatement, definition and explanation, factual information, quotations, narration, and illustrations (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 140-162). “We understand most fully what is real to us” (Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 184).

Theocentric Focus

The test for supporting material in a theocentric message is that it “works in the service of truth” by centering “attention on the idea and not on itself” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 155).



The supporting material presents the Scriptural text as a story that is alive and ongoing. It helps the congregation re-imagine the world in the light of the reality revealed within the passage. It places each text within its context as part of the theo-drama of which they too are called to participate.

Stage 10: Prepare the Introduction and Conclusion of the Message

Introductions capture interest, uncover needs, and introduces the body of the message. “Early in the sermon...your listeners should realize that you are talking to them about themselves” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 171). Introductions also introduce the speaker to the audience.

Often, the preacher's own issues with the text early in the study process lead to ideas for introductions.

In the conclusion, the preacher stops and asks for a verdict. The conclusion can take the form of a summary, an illustration, a quotation, a question, prayer, specific directions, or visualization (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 176-179).

Theocentric Focus

One of the best ways to introduce a sermon is to raise a need. “Should preachers of even limited ability bring to the surface people's questions, problems, hurts, and desires to deal with them from the Scriptures, they will bring the grace of God to bear on the agonizing worries and tensions of daily life” (Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 171).

The introduction can begin anthropocentrically and then move to what the Bible reveals about God, his will, and his actions.

The conclusion will be theocentric when it calls for a response in line with the theocentric purpose of the sermon and text.



CROSSING THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL GAP

From Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, pages 166-175:

- Transfer the specific message of the text rather than isolated elements. Focusing on the goal of the text brings us “halfway in the conceiving a relevant sermon” (Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 173).
- Highlight discontinuity between the purpose of the text, and focus on the message in light of progressive revelation, kingdom history, and cultural changes.
- Focus on two areas of continuity: God and his covenant people.

From Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, pages 306-310:

- Use the abstraction ladder. The abstraction ladder allows the preacher to cross over from the biblical world to the contemporary setting by connecting them at analogous points. Some texts do not involve climbing the ladder, because the biblical context is already analogous to the contemporary setting. Other texts require the preacher to climb the ladder of abstraction to find a principle taught from the text that applies to today. The principle must remain faithful to the message and purpose of the text.

Two guidelines will ensure that the abstraction remains congruent with the text and theocentric:

Abstract up to God. One thing I always do when climbing the abstraction ladder is abstract up to God. Every passage has a vision of God, such as God as Creator or Sustainer.

Find the depravity factor. Next I ask, “What is the depravity factor? What in humanity rebels against that vision of God?” (Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 308).

Dangers to Avoid

- **Allegorizing**, which “searches beneath the literal meaning of the passage for the 'real' meaning.” Examples: Song of Solomon as an allegory of Christ's love for the church; a message from John 2 that states, “Where we are at the end of our resources (out of wine), Jesus shows his glory” (Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 159-160).
- **Spiritualizing**, which “discards the earthly, physical historical reality the text speaks about and crosses the gap with a spiritual analogy of that historical reality” (Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 160-161). Example: the story of Jesus stilling the storm is taken as a lesson on how Jesus calms the “storms” on the “sea of life.”
- **Imitating biblical characters**, which uses the characters of the preaching text as “examples or models for imitation.” This approach “tends to shift the theocentric focus of the Bible to an anthropocentric focus in the sermon” and “is a dead end for biblical preaching” (Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 161-163, 175-181).

Avoid especially the fallacy of exemplarism (the idea that because someone in the Bible does it, we can or ought to do it, too). This is perhaps the most dangerous and irreverent of all approaches to application since virtually every sort of behavior, stupid and wise, malicious and saintly, is chronicled in the Bible. Yet this monkey-see-monkey-do sort of approach to applying the Scriptures is very widely followed, largely because of the dearth of good pulpit teaching to the contrary (Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis*, 83).
- **Moralizing**, which emphasizes “virtues and vices, dos and don'ts” without “properly grounding these ethical demands in the scriptures.” This is common in biographical preaching. It can turn “grace into law by presenting imperatives without the divine indicative.” (Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 163-166).



THE DANGER OF “BE LIKE” MESSAGES

From Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, pages 290-294:

- “Be like” messages which focus attention on the accomplishments of a particular biblical character, forgetting that Scripture also presents every character as frail, so that “we cannot expect to find, within fallen humanity, any whose model behavior merits divine acceptance.” We cannot even encourage people to be like Jesus “if we do not simultaneously remind them that his standards are always beyond them, apart from his enabling grace.” This does not mean that we should not emulate characteristics of biblical characters; it means that “when these positive qualities appear, grace is the cause.”
- “Be good” messages, which tell what to do and what not to do, which neglects to mention that sanctification is not based on human effort but “on what Jesus did eternally.” Obedience is a response of love to God's grace, not an effort to gain or maintain it.
- “Be disciplined” messages, which “exhort believers to improve their relationship to God through more diligent use of the means of grace.” “Such messages intone, 'Pray more, read the Bible more, go to church more, and have better quiet times with God.'” Such preaching can tend to present God as “the ogre in the sky who requires the daily satisfaction of our toil to dispense his favor or restrain his displeasure.”

According to Chapell, “Be' messages are not wrong in themselves; they are wrong messages by themselves.”

The bottom line of Christ-centered preaching is this: “When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to God for their security?” (Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 327)

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SEMINAR EVALUATION

Name (optional): _____

Numeric Responses

1. The delivery of the seminar was: (circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent

2. The content of the seminar was: (circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent

3. The effectiveness of the seminar was: (circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent

Written Responses

4. Did you learn anything new in this seminar?

(a) No

(b) Yes

If yes, what?

5. What do you believe this seminar's strengths were?

6. What do you believe this seminar's weaknesses were?

7. What would you suggest to make this seminar more effective?

8. Other comments