

THEOCENTRIC PREACHING

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DARRYL DASH

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DEDICATION

To Charlene, Christina, and Josiah,
Three of God's greatest gifts to me

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the issues involved in preaching sermons that are both theocentric (God-centered) and relevant. This model is based on theological convictions on the relevance of theology, the nature of God and Scripture, and on human participation in the divine theo-drama.

This thesis outlines the hermeneutical issues related to theocentric interpretation. It also presents a model for sermon development, based on Haddon Robinson's book *Biblical Preaching*, which focuses on issues related to God-centered, relevant preaching.

This thesis forms the basis of a seminar on theocentric preaching.

CHAPTER ONE

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

Most preachers understand that good preaching connects with people's needs. Effective sermons “try to face people's real problems with them, meet their difficulties, answer their questions, confirm their most noble faiths, and interpret their experiences in sympathetic, wise, understanding cooperation.”¹

While addressing people's needs is good, there is a corresponding danger: to make the sermon about us rather than about God. A desire to be relevant can lead to anthropocentric sermons that provide answers to life's dilemmas, meet the questions, issues, and needs of the moment, but miss the bigger picture.

The alternative is to preach theocentrically, with God at the center of our sermons. Haddon Robinson writes:

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.²

¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, quoted in Calvin Miller, *The Sermon Maker: Tales of a Transformed Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 130.

² Haddon Robinson, “The High Call of Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 23-24.

Good preaching must, therefore, be primarily about God and his story. As Thomas Long writes, “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.’”³ Our challenge in preaching is to call the listener to enter into God's story and show how that story addresses life today.

This thesis-project will develop a model, in the form of a seminar, on how to preach theocentrically.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS PROJECT

Sermons that are irrelevant are of little benefit to the listener. A good sermon is one that “the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.”⁴

Relevance is an important trait of an effective sermon.

However, relevance can come at a price. Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen write:

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 ac-

³ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 36.

⁴Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

tually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshippers!⁵

In trying to be relevant, we face the danger of absorbing Scripture into our story, rather than being absorbed into God's story, revealed in Scripture.

The preacher must learn how to prepare messages that are centered on God, not on humans, but have application to the preacher and the hearers. Otherwise, the preacher will be preaching about God but have nothing to say to the listeners, or have lots to say to the listeners but very little that is centered on God and his unfolding story.

The goal, ultimately, is to prepare sermons that are both theocentric *and* relevant. William Willimon writes, “A sermon is a sermon when it's about God. We learn implications for human behavior only after we learn who God is and what God is up to.”⁶

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS PROJECT

This project will answer the following questions:

- What is theocentric preaching?
- What is the difference between theocentric and anthropocentric preaching?
- Why should we preach theocentrically?

⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 12.

⁶ William Willimon, “Damn Preacher,” *Religion Online*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2951> (accessed March 12, 2006).

- How does a preacher prepare relevant, theocentric sermons?

The main part of this project will be the presentation of a model for the preparation of biblical sermons that are both theocentric and relevant.

THE NATURE OF THIS PROJECT

The result of this project is a seminar for pastors that will define and argue for theocentric preaching, and present a model on how to prepare theocentric sermons. Pastors who attend the seminar will give evaluative feedback on the clarity and usefulness of this material.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Every week, preachers begin to prepare messages for the coming weekend. The preacher faces many tasks: choosing a text; studying the text; understanding the original meaning and purpose of that text; understanding how that meaning and purpose relates to the audience; and crafting a sermon that communicates the passage and its meaning to the audience. Preaching involves many disciplines: exegesis, hermeneutics, theology, and communication. This is enough to intimidate any preacher; and yet God's Word must be preached, and God calls ordinary people to carry out this important task.

This thesis will focus on one type of preaching: theocentric preaching. It will present a model for the preparation of theocentric sermons. While practical, this model must do more than present a series of steps. It must understand theology as it relates to theocentric preaching in four different areas: God, revelation, humanity, and preaching. Chapter 2 will provide a theological framework for the task of theocentric preaching.

GOD

Theocentric preaching begins with a theology of God, since it aims to preach about God. Developing a theology of God is foundational to theocentric preaching.

John Calvin begins writing theology by describing the importance of the knowledge of God: “Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves. Surely, we ought for the present to learn the following things about God.”¹ We learn about ourselves by first learning about God.

Because of who God is, all things must be understood in relation to Him:

God is the great original. Everything else is, in one way or another, a mere reflection of him. How simple this great truth. Yet how seldom do we see it consistently maintained in the thinking of men...Is it not perfectly evident that the creature could never do anything more excellent than reflect God as his image? How can a reflection add anything to that which it reflects? The unavoidable truth is that God alone is in and of himself really “something.” And man (as also any other creature) is, in and of himself, nothing. For he is utterly dependent upon God.²

Some may worry that a theocentric focus is boring and irrelevant. J.I. Packer challenges the assumption that “a study of the nature and character of God will be unpractical and irrelevant for life.”³

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

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 15.

² G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 33-34.

³ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 14.

understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.⁴

Nothing is more relevant to life than good theology.

Ultimately, preaching is a reflection of our theology of God. If one believes that God is all-sufficient, and that all things exist in relationship to him and for his glory, then preaching will center itself on God. If one has a lesser view of God, then that preacher will speak on lesser things. The belief that God is the only true God, and that “we understand ourselves, our experience, and even the world itself from the perspective of our acknowledgment of the God who chooses to be known by his creatures,”⁵ is the basis for a theocentric approach to all of life, including preaching.

REVELATION

Christian theology asserts that it is possible to know God because God has revealed himself. Millard Erickson writes, “Because man is finite and God is infinite, if man is to know God it must come about by God's revelation of himself to man.”⁶ Theocentric preaching is based on the belief that God has

⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 36.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 153.

spoken, and that God's revelation is the basis for all preaching. "True preaching begins with this confession: we preach because God has spoken."⁷

Theologians speak of two types of revelation. One is general revelation, which refers to "God's self-manifestation through nature, history, and the inner being of the human person."⁸ While important, general revelation is not sufficient for theocentric preaching.

A second type of revelation is God's particular or special revelation, which is "God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him."⁹ Special revelation is necessary because humanity's relationship with God has been disrupted, and because humanity is limited by finiteness and sinfulness.¹⁰

Scripture is one type of revelation. "God has spoken to man, and the Bible is His Word, given to us to make us wise until salvation."¹¹ The Bible is more than a record of God's mighty speech acts;¹² it itself *is* God's mighty speech acts. It is not merely "the record of the redemptive acts by which God

⁷ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "A Theology of Preaching," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Dudit (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 14.

⁸ Erickson, 154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹ Packer, 15.

¹² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2002), 158.

is saving the world, but as itself one of these redemptive acts, having its own part to play in the great work of establishing and building up the kingdom of God.”¹³

Scripture is essential for theologizing and for preaching theocentrically. “The Bible is foundational for believers in every generation in that it provides the interpretive framework for the Christian community.”¹⁴ Stan Grenz explains why commitment to Scripture is so important:

Our commitment to the Bible is crucial, for Scripture forms the foundation for our Christian ethos. At the heart of the community of faith lies a vision that arises out of our common experience with the Lord. As a result, the Bible is significant. Scripture provides the categories by means of which we understand ourselves and organize the stories of our lives. In addition, it determines what constitutes presence within the community of the faithful followers of the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. In short, from the message of the Bible we gain our identity as the people of God. And through Scripture we learn what it means to be the community of faith in the world.¹⁵

To preach Scripture, one must understand the main characters and the plot. Scripture is centered on a central character (God) and storyline (the work of God in the world).

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

¹³ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 161.

¹⁴ Grenz, 508.

¹⁵ Grenz, 526-527.

the faithful God who takes up the cause of justice, freedom, and peace on behalf of the creation oppressed by sin and misery.¹⁶

A theocentric reading of the biblical story identifies the triune God as the central character of Scripture. It is Christocentric, for “all the strands of the witness of Scripture to the identity and purpose of God converge in Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ Yet it is trinitarian, not Christomonistic (focusing only on Jesus).¹⁸

Preachers face the challenge of saying something that will help listeners make sense of the world. To some, it looks like the Bible is of little help. It is seen as a dry book about events that took place long ago and far away. Preachers are tempted to look outside of Scripture to bring answers to the real needs of those who listen.

When preachers understand the importance of theology, and that Scripture is itself a redemptive act of God which orients us in the world, they will be better able to resist the temptation to look outside of Scripture to make sense of the world. They will understand the centrality of God within theology, Scripture, preaching, and all of life.

¹⁶ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 56.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

HUMANITY

One of the central issues in theocentric preaching is the place of humanity within a God-centered message. If the sermon is about God, where do people fit in? The answer is found in a biblical doctrine of humanity.

A theocentric approach does not ignore humanity. Calvin wrote, "Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves."¹⁹ Knowledge of ourselves, while secondary to knowledge of God, is important. Erickson describes five reasons why the doctrine of humanity is important:

1. The doctrine of man is important because of its relationship to other major Christian doctrines. Man is the highest of God's earthly creatures. Thus, the study of man brings to completion our understanding of God's work and, in a sense, of God himself, since we do learn something about the Creator by what he has created...
2. The doctrine of man is important because it is a point where the biblical revelation and human concerns converge...This suggests that our preaching might well begin with some common aspect of human experience. In particular, the introduction might focus on an issue which is uppermost in the mind of the listener...
3. The doctrine of man is particularly significant in our day because of the large amount of attention given to man by various intellectual disciplines...
4. The doctrine of man is important because of the present crisis in man's self-understanding...
5. The doctrine of man is important because it affects how we minister.²⁰

¹⁹ Calvin, 15.

²⁰ Erickson, 456-462.

Congregations need a biblical understanding of humanity. Inaccurate understanding leads to confusion and frustration. A poor doctrine of humanity can result, for instance, in sermons on self-improvement through self-effort, or on the fulfillment of needs that the Bible labels idolatrous.

Grenz describes our human identity as creatures of God in three postulates: “We are the good creation of God, we are marred through our fall into sin, but we are also the object of God's redemptive activity.”²¹ Humans are creatures, sinners, and some are also new beings in Christ.²²

A biblical understanding of humanity leads to six implications for theocentric preaching.

First, theocentric preaching does not preclude preaching to and about people and their situations. Theology and Scripture are theocentric, and yet they do not minimize the place of humanity. Therefore, preaching can retain its theocentric nature even as it addresses people. The Scriptures, which are theocentric, speak much of humanity, and so can theocentric preaching.

Second, theocentric preaching recognizes that God and his revelation speak most powerfully to what it means to be human. “God is the source or ground of the essence called 'human.' God has the prerogative to declare what it means to be human.”²³ Preaching can remain theocentric as it ad-

²¹ Grenz, 162.

²² Migliore, 139.

²³ Grenz, 185.

dresses people, but only if the sermon is centered on what God has revealed to be true about humanity. “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.”²⁴

Third, the sinfulness of humanity means that humanity has a distorted understanding of self and of God. The human heart is deceitful and beyond cure.²⁵ Self-improvement, or pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, is not an option. Although people express felt needs, and often propose solutions to these needs, human judgment is not to be trusted as much as God's judgment.

Fourth, it is not wrong to appeal to some aspects of human nature. The image of God has been marred in humanity, but it has not been destroyed. Good theology recognizes that people have real needs that must be addressed, even if they are not always aware of what those needs are. It is not wrong to use creativity in our communication, since creativity is a trait that we share with God.

Fifth, God's redemptive activity means that humans are both the object of and participants in God's saving action. Thus, one of the tasks of theocen-

²⁴ Migliore, 139.

²⁵ Jeremiah 17:9.

tric preaching is to prepare us to faithfully participate in what God is doing, because God has chosen to include us.

Sixth, theocentric preaching reminds us where humanity will find its happiness. The chief end of humans is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²⁶ C.S. Lewis writes:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²⁷

John Piper argues that the pursuit of pleasure is not optional; it is essential.²⁸

Theocentric preaching reminds us that our desires and our pleasure are ultimately satisfied in God.

PREACHING

A theology of preaching acknowledges what is at stake in the preaching task:

Through the work of the Spirit, the simple, ordinary Sunday sermon is the conduit through which the eternal power and wisdom of Christ the exalted Lord of the entire cosmos are made manifest to every new age of the church...Impressive or not, the office of preacher is constituted

²⁶ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Westminster Shorter Catechism Project, http://www.shortercatechism.com/resources/wsc/wsc_001.html.

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 1-2.

²⁸ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 10th anniversary edition (Sisters: Multnomah, 1996).

by Christ himself for the purpose of serving as his voice for every new generation of the church.²⁹

A theology of preaching requires that preaching be both contextual and biblical. First, preaching is contextual. Daniel Migliore writes:

The proclamation of the Word of God always takes place in particular situations. If Christian witness always has a text, it also always has a particular *context*. It does not deal in general truths about God, the world, and humanity. If that were the case, the content of proclamation would not be the living Word of God but timeless truth that leaves everything as it is. As witness to the living Word of God, Christian proclamation speaks to particular people in a specific time and place. It addresses a particular situation here and now with a specific message. It calls men and women to concrete decision and concrete action.³⁰

It is therefore not enough to repeat the theology and sermons of others. “The Christian message must be interpreted again and again in new situations and in concepts and images that are understandable to people in those situations.”³¹ We are to ask the question posed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Who is Christ for us *today*?”³²

Not only is preaching contextual, it is also textual. Because preaching is contextual, some are tempted to look for a message outside of Scripture. Haddon Robinson describes what happens when a preacher gives any other message than that of Scripture:

²⁹ Paul C. McGlasson, *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 148-149.

³⁰ Migliore, 279.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 279, quoted in Migliore, 14.

Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach Scripture, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.³³

If preaching is to be effective, it must also be biblical. “Preaching accomplishes its spiritual purpose not because of the skills or the wisdom of a preacher but because of the power of the Scripture proclaimed.”³⁴ In order to be effective, a preacher must proclaim Scripture and correctly handle “the word of truth.”³⁵ The preacher stands “in submission to the text of Scripture. The issue of authority is inescapable. Either the preacher *or* the text will be the operant authority.”³⁶

In expository preaching, one is faced with a question: “Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?”³⁷ In order to preach biblically, the passage must govern the sermon. Preaching must be shaped by the message of Scripture.

³³ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 20.

³⁴ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 26.

³⁵ 2 Timothy 2:15 (Today's New International Version).

³⁶ Mohler, 15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

SUMMARY

Preachers face the pressure of standing before a congregation with a word from God. But preachers also face other pressures, such as the lure of building bigger and better churches by preaching what people want to hear, versus what they need to hear. At times, the pressure to bring a word of hope leads preachers away from Scripture, or to add some other word to Scripture. Perhaps that preacher believes that knowing God is not interesting or practical, or that Scripture does not make sense of the world. Or perhaps that preacher senses human need so deeply that the Biblical view of humanity is lost. The real issue is theological: good preaching begins with good theology.

Theocentric preaching requires that sermons be both theologically sound and relevant to people. This is both possible and necessary, because Scripture leads to doctrine which is both faithful to Scripture *and* relevant.

Theocentric preaching emphasizes the importance of knowing God as the basis for living. It holds to Scripture as the redemptive revelation of God which orients us in the world. It sees people in relation to God, and avoids the mistakes of thinking too lowly or highly of humanity. Finally, it understands what is at stake in preaching, and that the messenger must communicate a message of God from Scripture in order to be both faithful to God and relevant to those who are listening. With this theological base, the preacher is ready to begin to prepare theocentric sermons.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Preaching faces a tension: it involves humanity but it is primarily about God and his activity in the world. The challenge of preaching theocentrically is not new, but is an ongoing struggle for preachers. Theocentric preaching involves a number of related disciplines, and many authors have written on themes related to preaching that is both theocentric and relevant.

This chapter will review literature on themes and disciplines that touch on issues related to theocentric preaching. First, it will examine literature that describes anthropocentrism within Christianity. This literature describes an anthropocentric focus, primarily within the North American church. It suggests some factors that have led to its rise and outlines some of the dangers of this focus.

If preaching is to be theocentric, it will be so primarily because Scripture itself is theocentric. To preach the message of Scripture, one must begin by understanding its nature. The second category of literature to be examined is on the nature of Scripture, which informs the use of Scripture in preaching.

Even when one understands the nature of Scripture, it is still important to understand how to interpret and apply it. This chapter will examine literature on hermeneutics, (the art and science of biblical interpretation), especially as it relates to theocentric preaching.

Finally, theocentric preaching involves homiletics, or the art and science of preaching. Once the passage has been interpreted, the preacher faces the task of communicating that passage to the congregation. How does a preacher move from the hermeneutical task to crafting a theocentric sermon? Can a theocentric sermon be relevant? This section will review literature on homiletical issues related to theocentric preaching.

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The opposite of a theocentric focus is anthropocentrism, which puts humanity, rather than God, at the center of the sermon. Many are writing on the prevalence and effects of anthropocentrism within the church and its preaching, primarily within North America.

Alan Roxburgh describes a fundamental shift in the understanding and practice of Christianity in the Western world:

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.

The result is a debased, compromised, derivative form of Christianity that is not the gospel of the Bible at all. 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.¹

Roxburgh is not alone in observing this shift. Michael Spencer warns that Christianity is being shaped into an American religion in which “God becomes the means to provide us with the comforts, material blessings, experience and ‘necessities’” in line with an American lifestyle, even though the values of the Kingdom of God are radically different from this life:

...should we go to a typical successful American evangelical church, listen to the sermons, read the educational offerings, observe what is printed and projected, look at how money is spent, observe the activities the church sponsors, we will see that the idolatry of the “the Good Life,” not the values of a cross-cultural, Gospel centered, church planting movement, are what increasingly prevails.

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.²

Eugene Peterson describes this new emphasis as a Christian form of the old sin of idolatry:

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

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling!?: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle: ACI Publishing, 2005), 12-13.

² Michael Spencer, “American Idolatry: The Good Life,” <http://www.internetmonk.com/archive/american-idolatry-the-good-life>.

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.³

The shift to anthropocentrism has been subtle but dramatic. J.I. Packer states:

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.⁴

This "gospel of fulfillment" puts us in God's place, and God in our place, according to Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle:

In this framework, I do not exist for God but rather God exists for me. For example, if the Lord's Prayer were rewritten according to Maslow's priorities, it would read, "My kingdom come, my will be done, for mine is the kingdom, the power, and glory."

The contemporary church's gospel of fulfillment essentially accepts Maslow's faulty hierarchy and teaches that God exists to actualize our full potential. So in this therapeutic gospel, you use Jesus to achieve your ends, which can vary from health to wealth to emotional contentment, or whatever personal vision you have for our own glory. What hinders the fulfillment of our full potential is not that we are sinners but rather that we don't love ourselves enough and don't have enough self-esteem and positive thinking. God exists to worship us, by telling us how lovable we are and how valuable we are. In this gospel, the cross

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 125.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 126.

is an echo of my own great worth, since God found me so lovable and so valuable that he was willing to die for me so that I could love myself, believe in myself, and achieve my full glory.⁵

This shift in focus leads to a change in the ministry of the local church.

Churches face pressure to offer “spirituality without theology:”

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.⁶

Churches are driven not only to meet people's needs, but to do so in an accessible way, better and faster if at all possible. “This leads...to books on spirituality that read like the owner's manual for operating a machine, replete with steps, easy-to-follow directions, and practical 'how-to-do-it' formulae.”⁷ These, in the end, “come to differ very little from all the other small, manageable formulae for success of the secular therapeutic kind which are also on the market.”⁸

⁵ Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 24-25.

⁶ David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 269.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

Anthropocentrism changes 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.”⁹ These worship services can tend to pursue “the arousal of emotions and the 'worship experience' as an end in itself, which inevitably turns narcissistic.”¹⁰

Anthropocentrism also changes the role of the pastor. David Wells describes how this happens:

...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.¹¹

Anthropocentrism also affects the role of the preacher and the sermon. According to *Preaching and Pulpit Digest*, most sermons tend to be anthropocentric in focus. The digest studied 200 sermons preached by evangelicals

⁹ Donald G. Bloesch, 'Whatever Happened to God?', *Christianity Today*, February 5, 2001: 54.

¹⁰ David E. Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism, and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 96.

¹¹ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 101.

between 1985 and 1990. The study analyzed how many of the sermons were grounded in the character, nature, and will of God. Only 19.5 percent met this test. Wells reports:

The findings were, then, an attempt to measure the prevailing spirit of the age in today's pulpit. Is it anthropocentric, centered on human beings, or theocentric, centered on God? The overwhelming proportion of sermons - more than 80 percent - were anthropocentric. It seems that God has become a rather awkward appendage to the practice of evangelical faith, at least as measured by the pulpit. Indeed, from these sermons it seems that God and the supernatural order are related only with difficulty to the life of faith. He appears not to be at its center. The center, in fact, is typically the self. God and His world are made to spin around this surrogate center, for our world increasingly is understood within a therapeutic model of reality.¹²

Preachers face pressure for sermons to be practical. "Modern preachers rarely talk about anything mysterious or mystical or redemptive. 'How-to' is a more popular sermonic crowd getter."¹³ Practical sermons, however, can come at a cost. "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."¹⁴

Preachers also face pressure to address felt needs. Unfortunately, according to Will Willimon, many have come to identify "orgasm, a satisfying ca-

¹² David F. Wells, "The D-Min-ization of Ministry," in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 184-185.

¹³ Calvin Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 48.

¹⁴ Miller, *Preaching*, 56.

reer, an enjoyable love life, a positive outlook on life” as needs, “stuff the Bible has absolutely no interest in.”¹⁵ When we preach on felt needs, we make some assumptions:

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.

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.¹⁶

Preachers also face pressure to preach therapeutically. Alan Roxburgh and co-author Fred Romanuk write:

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.¹⁷

¹⁵ Will Willimon, “Preaching Past TiVo: A Leadership Forum,” interview, *Leadership Journal* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 58.

¹⁶ Willimon, “Preaching Past TiVo,” 59.

¹⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 67.

Roxburgh and Romanuk argue that society offers fewer opportunities to engage in discourse to become aware of, and give language to, the forces shaping our lives. Contemporary preaching also fails to name these forces.

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.¹⁸

The worship service, including the sermon, then takes on one primary purpose: “meeting the private, personal needs of each individual member.”¹⁹

An anthropocentric emphasis obscures our view of the gospel. Will Metzger writes, “Christians often rely...on a deficient gospel. They also become me-centered when they focus on their fears, guilt, weaknesses and so on...The Christian can end up presenting a what's-in-it-for-you gospel.”²⁰

Not everyone agrees that anthropocentrism is all wrong. David Wayne warns us of framing the discussion in these terms, arguing that “God is very man-centered:”

...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. The centrality of man in God's plan is shown in many ways.

1. Man is the pinnacle of creation.

¹⁸ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 67-68.

¹⁹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 68.

²⁰ Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 38.

2. The image of God is displayed in man.
3. The glory of God is most clearly displayed as God takes on human flesh...
4. The whole plan of redemption is first and foremost a plan to redeem man, although we must acknowledge that all of creation is to be redeemed (Romans 8:18-21).
5. The entire plan of redemption hinges on God taking the form of man (Philippians 2:5-11).
6. The eternal destiny of man is to be perfected as man, not to somehow transcend humanness.²¹

Others, however, warn of the danger of this trend. Mark Driscoll writes:

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.²²

James Hamilton, assistant professor of biblical studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, calls well-meaning pastors who preach a therapeutic gospel “the greatest threat to evangelical churches today.”

Many pastors are a threat to their churches because they show from what they say and do that they do not understand what Christianity is. They think Christianity is the best form of therapy. They think Christianity is about self-help. They think Christianity is about better marriages,

²¹ David Wayne, “Is God Man-Centered?”, *JollyBlogger*, http://jollyblogger.typepad.-com/jollyblogger/2006/07/is_god_mancente.html.

²² Driscoll, 24-25.

better parent-child relations, better attitudes and performance at work, and on and on. You can see that this is what they think because this is what they preach. Fundamentally, they think that Christianity is about success here and now. Also, for them, when it comes to how we do church, what the Bible says does not matter. What works best is what we should do.

But Christianity is not primarily about any of that. Christianity is primarily about the gospel...

Pastors who present Christianity as therapy and self-help do not present Christianity. They are like the liberals that J. Gresham Machen denounced. Machen said that people who don't believe the Bible should be honest and stop calling themselves Christians because they have in fact created a new religion that is not to be identified with Christianity.²³

Kim Fabricius identifies this focus as one of the main problems with contemporary Christianity:

Indeed I'd suggest that the fundamental malaise of contemporary Christianity is precisely its substitution of a problem-solving God for a God who is ultimate mystery.

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. Indeed best think of God as good for nothing and totally unnecessary, playful rather than practical - and whose game is hide-and-seek: "such a fast / God," as the poet R. S. Thomas puts it, "always before us and / leaving as we arrive." The Bible speaks of God as a desert wind, too hot to handle,

²³ James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Greatest Danger Facing the Church," *For His Renown*, <http://jimhamilton.wordpress.com/2006/06/26/the-greatest-danger-facing-the-church/>.

too quick to catch. A God who is only ever pinned down - on the cross.²⁴

Eugene Peterson, who believes we live in a culture that has “replaced soul with self” and sees people as either “problems or consumers,”²⁵ agrees.

He states:

The great weakness of North American spirituality is that it is all about *us*: fulfilling our potential, getting in on the blessings of God, expanding our influence, finding our gifts, getting a handle on principles by which we can get an edge over the competition. And the more there is of us, the less there is of God.²⁶

Packer argues that dealing with this trend within the modern Church is one of the most urgent tasks of the Church today:

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.²⁷

This may not be an easy task. One author confides, “The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is this: Life is a story about me.”²⁸

²⁴ Kim Fabricius, “Falling Over Things in the Dark,” *Connexions*, <http://theconnexion.net/wp/?p=2120>.

²⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

²⁷ Packer, 127.

²⁸ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Nelson, 2003), 182.

SCRIPTURE

Haddon Robinson defines expository preaching as:

...the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of a preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.²⁹

The nature of preaching is therefore closely related to the nature of Scripture.

If Scripture is primarily theocentric, then expository preaching will also be theocentric. If Scripture is anthropocentric in its focus, then it makes sense that expository preaching should also be anthropocentric in nature.

Scripture is full of both people and God. Is Scripture anthropocentric? If not, how can Scripture be theocentric while seemingly speaking so much about people? Examining Scripture's nature may provide some direction on how to preach theocentrically.

This section will examine literature on the nature of Scripture, with specific reference to how Scripture should function within the Church.

N.T. Wright

N.T. Wright examines how Scripture and its authority is to function within the Church in his book *The Last Word*.³⁰ The book's central claim is that “the phrase 'authority of scripture' can make sense only if it is shorthand for

²⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 21.

³⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005).

'the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow through scripture.'³¹ In other words, Scripture is closely tied to the Kingdom, which is "Scripture's own preferred way of referring to such matters, and indeed to the saving rule of Jesus himself."³²

Wright states that the "word of God" played a critical role in the early Church. It:

...lay at the heart of the church's mission and life...It was the story of Jesus (particularly his death and resurrection), told as the climax of the story of God and Israel and thus offering itself as both the true story of the world and the foundation and energizing force for the church's mission.³³

The New Testament "understands itself as the new covenant charter, the book that forms the basis for the new telling of the story through which Christians are formed, reformed, and transformed so as to be God's people for God's world,"³⁴ says Wright.

Scripture plays a specific role within the Kingdom:

...in scripture itself God's purpose is not just to save human beings, but to renew the whole world. This is the unfinished story in which readers are invited to become actors in their own right...Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us – which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information.³⁵

³¹ Ibid., 23.

³² Ibid., 28.

³³ Ibid., 48.

³⁴ Ibid., 59.

³⁵ Ibid., 29-30.

We therefore come to Scripture not just to receive information but “in order to have one's life reordered by the wisdom of God.”³⁶ It is not written to provide facts about the past, but to tell a story that is the “embodiment of YHWH's call and purpose,” written “to shape and direct the life of God's people.”³⁷ “The whole point of Christianity,” he says, “is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.”³⁸

A story, according to Wright, is “the best way of talking about the way the world actually is.”³⁹ Worldview-stories “are the basic stuff of human existence, the lenses through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and, above all, it is the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are.”⁴⁰ These stories are “like the foundations of a house: vital, but invisible. They are that through which, not at which, a society or an individual normally looks; they form the grid according to which humans organize reality.”⁴¹ They “include a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world.”⁴² Our basic beliefs are “shorthand forms of the stories which

³⁶ Ibid., 34.

³⁷ Ibid., 40.

³⁸ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 41-42.

³⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁴¹ Ibid., 125.

⁴² Ibid., 124.

those who hold them are telling themselves and one another about the way the world is.”⁴³

Wright argues that during the Reformation the Reformers lost the sense of the Bible as “the great *narrative* of God, Israel, Jesus, and the world” in their attention to the details.⁴⁴ Scripture as story also suffered in the Enlightenment, which continues to influence the world today. The Enlightenment offered “its own rival *eschatology*, a secular analogue to the biblical picture of God's Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus.”⁴⁵ This has changed the nature of Christian faith:

Much would-be Christian thought (including much would-be “biblical” Christian thought) in the last two hundred years has tacitly conceded these huge claims, turning “Kingdom of God” into “the hope for heaven after death” and treating Jesus' death, at the most, as the mechanism whereby individual sinners can receive forgiveness and hope for an otherworldly future – leaving the politicians and economists of the Enlightenment to take over the running, and as it turns out, the ruining, of the world...Scripture itself, meanwhile...is squelched into silence by “secularists” who dismiss it as irrelevant, historically inaccurate and so on – as you would expect, since it might otherwise challenge their imperial dreams. Equally worrying, if not more so, it is squashed out of shape by the devout, who ignore its global, cosmic and justice-laden message and treat it only as the instrument of personal piety and the source of doctrine about eternal salvation.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 124-125.

⁴⁴ Wright, *The Last Word*, 76.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 88-89.

Postmodernity is equally damaging, having challenged and deconstructed the “big, older *stories* of who we are and what we're here for.”⁴⁷

All we can do with the Bible, if postmodernity is left in charge, is to play with such texts as give us pleasure, and issue warnings against those that give pain to ourselves or to others who attract our (usually selective) sympathy. *This is where a good deal of the Western church now finds itself.*⁴⁸

Wright concludes that Scripture must play an important role within the Church, a role which is different from that assumed by modern and postmodern understandings of Scripture:

The whole of my argument so far leads to the following major conclusion: that the shorthand phrase “the authority of Scripture,” when unpacked, offers a picture of God's sovereign and saving plan for the entire cosmos, dramatically inaugurated by Jesus himself, and now to be implemented through the Spirit-led life of the church *precisely as a scripture-reading community*...But the emphasis I want to insist on is that we discover what the shape and the inner life of the church ought to be only when we first look first at the church's mission, and that we discover what the church's mission is only when we look first at God's purpose for the entire world...We read scripture in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our own part within it ought to be.⁴⁹

Therefore, the “teaching and preaching of scripture remains, then, at the heart of the church's life.”⁵⁰ God is at work through Scripture “to energize,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 114-115.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 139.

enable and direct the outgoing mission of the church, genuinely anticipating thereby the time when all things will be made new in Christ.”⁵¹

Wright suggests that the biblical story is like a five-act play, in which part of the final act has been lost. ⁵² We are called to improvise the concluding act in a way that is faithful to the first four acts.

Consider the result. The first four acts, existing as they did, would be the undoubted 'authority' for the task in hand...This 'authority' of the first four acts would not consist in an implicit command that the actors should repeat the earlier parts of the play over and over again. It would consist in the fact of an as yet unfinished drama, which contained its own impetus, its own forward movement, which demanded to be concluded in the proper manner but which required of the actors a responsible entering in to the story as it stood, in order first to understand how the threads could appropriately be drawn together, and then to put that understanding into effect by speaking and acting with both innovation and consistency. ⁵³

The five acts, according to Wright, are (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus; (5) Church.⁵⁴ We also know how the story ends after the fifth act. The responsibility of the Church is to live under the authority of the extant story as it improvises and performs its part of the final act.

⁵¹ Ibid., 138.

⁵² Ibid., xi.

⁵³ N.T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?”, *N.T. Wright Page*, http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Lesslie Newbigin

Lesslie Newbigin argues in his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*⁵⁵ that the Bible tells the story of the world:

The way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life is a part? That is the question which determines what we believe to be success and what failure. In our contemporary culture...two quite different stories are being told. One is the story of evolution, of the development of species through the survival of the strong, and the story of the rise of civilization, our type of civilization, and its success in giving humankind mastery over nature. The other story is the one embodied in the Bible, the story of creation and fall, of God's election of a people to be the bearers of his purpose for humankind, and of the coming of the one in whom that purpose is fulfilled.⁵⁶

It is “not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.”⁵⁷

Newbigin says that the gospel “gives rise to a new plausibility structure, a radically different vision of things from those that shape all human creatures apart from the gospel.”⁵⁸ It is a “set of lenses, not something to look at, but for us to look *through*.”⁵⁹ The point of the Bible is “not to understand the text but to understand the world *through* the text.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

Newbigin argues that the gospel is more than a private religious document. 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?”⁶¹

It is highly relevant to individuals seeing them as “responsible actors” within that story. ⁶² Our lives are “part of a story which is not a story made up by you, not just the story of your decisions and actions, but the story which is being enacted under God's creative and providential control of the events of contemporary history.”⁶³

The church finds itself at a specific time within the story:

...I have suggested that we are to understand the mission of the Church in light of the fact that the meaning of contemporary history is that it is the history of the time between Christ's ascension and his coming again, the time when his reign at the right hand of God is a hidden reality, the time in which the signs are granted of that hidden reign but in which the full revelation of its power and glory is held back in order that the nations – all the human communities – may have the opportunity to repent and believe in freedom.⁶⁴

The Church is also called to participate in that story:

...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

⁶¹ Ibid., 128.

⁶² Ibid., 89-91.

⁶³ Ibid., 67-68.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 128.

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.⁶⁵

The Church is a “community that lives by this story” by rehearsing and reenacting the “story of the self-emptying God in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”⁶⁶ But the Church does not merely interpret history; it is actually a “history-making force...through which God brings history to its goal.”⁶⁷ The congregation becomes the place where “its members are trained, supported, and nourished in the exercise of their parts of the priestly ministry in the world.”⁶⁸

The story of Scripture invites our participation, and also gives the Church its unique mission within the world:

What is affirmed here is that a particular community in history, that community which bears the name of Jesus, will be given, through the active work of the Spirit of God, a true understanding of history – the ongoing history that continues through the centuries, after Jesus, and understanding which is based on the particular events of whose memory they are the custodians. But this privileged position is not for their own sake but for the sake of the world into which they are sent as the witnesses to Jesus in whom God's purpose for his entire creation has been disclosed.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 230.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 78.

Newbigin emphasizes the relationship of Scripture and the Church, because a plausibility structure “is not just a body of ideas but is necessarily embodied in an actual community.”⁷⁰

According to Newbigin, this understanding of Scripture will influence the way that the Church addresses issues and needs. It will not focus on addressing the questions people ask. “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.”⁷¹ Rather than beginning with the individual to understand salvation and extrapolating to wider issues, Newbigin suggests that we should begin in the other direction. “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.”⁷² It will indwell the story and then move to people's needs:

I am saying that authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their own terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so

⁷⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁷¹ Ibid., 119.

⁷² Ibid. 128.

that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God.⁷³

Newbigin may overstate his case. Biblical writers addressed practical questions about how to live in a particular context. Newbigin, however, argues that this is not where our mission begins:

...neither those desires and needs, nor any analysis of the situation made on the basis of some principles drawn from other sources than Scripture, can be the starting point for mission. The starting point is God's revelation of himself as witnessed to us in the Scripture... True contextualization happens when there is a community which lives faithfully by the gospel and in that same costly identification with the people in their real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus. When these conditions are met, the sovereign Spirit of God does his own surprising work.⁷⁴

Walter Brueggemann

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sees Scripture as “an alternative script.” This script is not conveyed through abstractions but through “concrete, specific, local texts that in small ways provide alternative imagination.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid. 151.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 153-154.

⁷⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 31.

Preaching, therefore, is an “act of imagination...through which perception, experience, and finally faith can be reorganized in alternative ways.”⁷⁶ It is the “enactment of a drama in which the congregation is audience but may at any point become participant.”⁷⁷ The audience is invited to “abandon the script in which one has had confidence and to enter a different script that imaginatively tells one's life differently.”⁷⁸ It is through this re-imagination that transformation takes place:

I shall argue that in a conversation wherein doctrinal argument and moral suasion are operative, people in fact change by offer of new models, images, and pictures of how the pieces of life fit together – models, images, and pictures that characteristically have the particularity of narrative to carry them. Transformation is the slow, steady process of inviting each other into a counterstory about God, world, neighbor, and self. This slow, steady process has as counterpoint the subversive process of unlearning and disengaging from a story we no longer find to be credible or adequate.⁷⁹

According to Brueggemann, the task of ministry is to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception to the dominant culture around us.”⁸⁰ Evangelism means “inviting people into these stories as the definitional story of our life, and

⁷⁶ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 24-25.

⁸⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways.”⁸¹

Eugene Peterson

Writing as a former pastor, Eugene Peterson says, “The pastor knows that the story of God's revelation is a comprehensive narrative that includes everyone,” leaving the task of helping people to “understand their own lives as chapters, or at least paragraphs, in the epic narration of God's saving history.”⁸² The challenge, according to Peterson, is to get Scriptures “read, but on their own terms as God's revelation,” to read them “formatively, reading in order to live” – a task which is anything but easy.⁸³

Peterson writes that Scripture is best understood not as a moral code or a system of doctrine, but as a “large, comprehensive story, a *meta-story*,”⁸⁴ into which we are invited to live:

The biblical way is not to present us with a moral code and tell us, “Live up to this,” nor is it to set out a system of doctrine and say, “Think like this and you will live well.” The biblical way is to tell a story that takes place on solid ground, is peopled with men and women that we recognize as being much like us, and then to invite us, “Live into this.

⁸¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 10.

⁸² Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 76.

⁸³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), xi.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

This is what it looks like to be human. This is what is involved in entering and maturing as human beings.”⁸⁵

Understanding Scripture as story is crucial. “The Hebrew way to understand salvation,” Peterson writes, “was not to read a theological treatise but to sit around a campfire with family and friends and listen to a story.”⁸⁶ Scripture brings this form of Hebrew storytelling to us in as a form of “divine self-disclosure” that “invites, more *insists* on, our participation.”⁸⁷ We cease to understand Scripture when we use it apart from its story:

Within this large, capacious context of the biblical story we learn to think accurately, behave morally, preach passionately, sing joyfully, pray honestly, obey faithfully. But we dare not abandon the story as we go off and do any or all of these things, for the minute we abandon the story, we reduce reality to the dimensions of our minds and feelings and experience. The moment we formulate our doctrines, draw up our moral codes, and throw ourselves into a life of discipleship and ministry apart from a continuous re-immersion in the story itself, we walk right out of the concrete and local presence of God and set up our own shop.⁸⁸

Peterson outlines a number of ways in which we fail to read Scripture faithfully. One is to try to fit God into our own story or into history. Instead, we follow the example of the biblical writers, who “do it the other way around; they fit us into the history in which God is the primary reality.”⁸⁹ Expecting God

⁸⁵ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 140.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

to be relevant and practical can lead to seeing God as a commodity to be used and controlled.⁹⁰ We must not enter Scripture “in order to figure out how to get God into our lives, get him to participate in our lives.”⁹¹

It is important, and yet difficult, to read the Bible as story. Its importance comes because “the way the Bible is written [narrative] is every bit as important as what is written in it.”⁹² Peterson writes:

Stories are the most prominent biblical way of helping us see ourselves in “the God story,” which always gets around to the story of God making and saving us. Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what was said. We find ourselves involved in the action. We may start out as spectators or critics, but if the story is good (and the biblical stories are very good!), we find ourselves no longer just listening but inhabiting the story.⁹³

Reading the Bible as story is difficult. Our culture makes this type of reading challenging:

We live today in a world impoverished of story; so it is not surprising that many of us have picked up the bad habit of extracting “truths” from the stories we read: we summarize “principles” that we can use in a variety of settings at our discretion; we distill a “moral” that we can use as a slogan on a poster or as a motto on our desk... We hardly notice that we have lost the form, the form that is provided to shape our lives largely and coherently. Our spirituality-shaping text is reduced to disembodied fragments of “truth” and “insight,” dismembered bones of information and motivation...⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 48.

⁹³ Eugene Peterson, *The Message Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2003), 1673.

⁹⁴ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 48.

The Bible must be read not as a collection of stories, but as one story centered on Jesus. “It takes the whole Bible to read any part of the Bible.”⁹⁵ “No text can be understood out of its entire context,” Peterson writes. “The most 'entire' context is Jesus.”⁹⁶ We read the story and every text “in the living presence of Jesus.”⁹⁷

One reason that we lose the sense of this grand story is that we often atomize and privatize Scripture:

We obscure the form when we *atomize* Scripture by dissecting it, analyzing it like a specimen in the laboratory...when the impersonal objectivity of the laboratory technician replaces the adoring dalliance of a lover, we end up with file drawers full of information, organized for our convenience as occasions present themselves. It ceases to function as revelation for us...We also obscure the form when we *privatize* Scripture, using it for what we are wont to call “inspiration”...the revelation draws us out of ourselves, out of our fiercely guarded individualities, into the world of responsibility and community and salvation – God's sovereignty. “Kingdom” is the primary biblical metaphor for it.⁹⁸

Peterson is not opposed to exegesis, which he calls “an act of love,” loving “the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right.”⁹⁹ He is, however, concerned with exegetes who see the Bible as a “warehouse of information” or anything other than a “story that is intended to shape our entire lives into the story of following Jesus, a life lived to the glory

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 102.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 55.

of God.”¹⁰⁰ “Exegesis doesn't take charge of the text and impose superior knowledge on it; it enters the world of the text and lets the text 'read' us.”¹⁰¹

Peterson warns us of another danger – attempting to control, tidy, or systematize the Bible:

It is far too common among us to develop a problem-solving habit of approach to the Bible, figuring out what doesn't seem to fit and then sanding off the rough edges, so that it slips into our ways of thinking more easily. We want to use it for comfort, and if that doesn't work comfortably we can reconfigure it so it will...

But nothing in our Bibles is one-dimensional, systematized, or theologized. Everything in the text is intimately and organically linked to living reality. We can no more diagram and chart the Bible into neatly labeled subjects or developments than we can our gardens.¹⁰²

Comparing the Bible to a garden or a country fair, Peterson says, “Such things...can only be *entered*.”¹⁰³ It is a book with answers, but it is also a book of questions, some of them uncomfortable. “You can't reduce this book to what you can handle; you can't domesticate this book to what you are comfortable with. You can't make it your toy poodle, trained to respond to your commands.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 55-56.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰² Ibid., 65.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 66.

We also misuse the Scripture when we use it for our own purposes,¹⁰⁵ making self the authority rather than Scripture,¹⁰⁶ replacing the Bible with personal experience¹⁰⁷ and the Holy Trinity with the individualized trinity of “my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.”¹⁰⁸ Peterson warns of the subtle shift that takes place when we trade “in our Holy Bibles for this new text, the Holy Self,” consulting our needs, dreams and preferences while still seeming to honor the Holy Scriptures. “None of us is immune to the danger.”¹⁰⁹

We also err when we think of the “biblical world as smaller than the secular world.”¹¹⁰ This happens often:

Tell-tale phrases give us away. We talk of “making the Bible relevant to the world,” as if the world is the fundamental reality and the Bible something that is going to fix it. We talk of “fitting the Bible into our lives” or “making room in our day for the Bible,” as if the Bible is something we can add on or squeeze into our already full lives...

As we personally participate in the Scripture-revealed world of the emphatically personal God, we not only have to be willing to accept the strangeness of this world – that it doesn't fit our preconceptions or tastes – but also the staggering largeness of it. We find ourselves in a truly expanding universe that exceeds anything we learned in our geography or astronomy books.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 67.

Our imaginations have to be revamped to take in this large, immense world of God's revelation in contrast to the small, cramped world of human "figuring out."¹¹¹

Peterson compares us to warehouse dwellers, who spend our whole lives in a warehouse and don't even know that a world exists outside. When we open the Bible, we enter the unfamiliar world of God. "Life in the warehouse never prepared us for anything like this."¹¹² We:

...open this book and find that page after page it takes us off guard, surprises us, and draws us into his reality, pulls us into participation with God on *his* terms...

...when we open the Bible – we enter the totally unfamiliar world of God, a world of creation and salvation stretching endlessly above and beyond us.¹¹³

We do not try to fit Scripture into our experience, because this would be like "trying to put the ocean into a thimble."¹¹⁴ Nor do we "read the Bible in order to reduce our lives to what is convenient to us or manageable by us."¹¹⁵ Instead, we "want to get in on the great invisibles of the Trinity, the soaring adorations of the angels, the quirky cragginess of the prophets, and...Jesus."¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹¹² Ibid., 6-7.

¹¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

Reading Scripture properly becomes a participatory act:

We enter the world of the text, the world in which God is subject, in order to become participants in the text. We have our part to play in this text, a part that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. As we play our part we become *part*-icipants...

If we have not entered this text as participants we aren't going to understand what is going on. This text cannot be understood by watching from the bleachers – or even from the expensive box seats. We are in on it.¹¹⁷

We enter this world by cultivating a “life of worship and prayer, obedience and love – a way of life open to what *God* is doing rather than one in which we plot strategies to get God involved in what *we* are doing.”¹¹⁸ We read Scripture liturgically, presenting “the Holy Scriptures in the context of the worshipping and obeying community of Christians who are at the center of everything God has done, is doing, and will do.”¹¹⁹ We learn to live the text in Jesus' name through practicing *lectio divina*.¹²⁰ “The Christian life is the practice of living in what God has done and is doing,”¹²¹ In other words, it is the practice of living within the story of Scripture.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁸ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 46.

¹¹⁹ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 74.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 90-117.

¹²¹ Ibid., 54.

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen

Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen wrote *The Drama of Scripture*¹²² to tell “the biblical story of redemption as a unified, coherent narrative of God's ongoing work within his kingdom.”¹²³ According to the authors, most of us do not read the Bible in the context of its one story line:

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.¹²⁴

The danger of reading the Bible in a fragmented way is that we become absorbed into “whatever *other* story is shaping our culture,” accepting the lies of an idolatrous culture. “Hence, the unity of Scripture is no minor matter: a fragmented Bible may actually produce theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshipers!”¹²⁵

The authors present two assumptions: “the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we can depend, and each of us has a place within that story.”¹²⁶ Finding our place involves answering questions foundational to a

¹²² Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

¹²³ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 12.

biblical worldview: “Who am I?” “Where am I?” “What's wrong?” “What's the solution?” and, “What time is it?”¹²⁷

The Drama of Scripture emphasizes God's mission to redeem all of creation through Jesus Christ and through his people. Although the Bible has many themes, it sees “covenant (in the Old Testament) and “the kingdom of God” (in the New Testament)” as the “main door through which we can begin to enter the Bible and...see it as one whole and fast structure.”¹²⁸ These two terms are the “double door of the same main entrance to the scriptural cathedral, evoking the same reality.”¹²⁹

The main section of the book tells the Bible in six acts, adapting N.T. Wright's model by adding a sixth act, the coming of a new creation. The acts take place with the kingdom of God as the overarching theme.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Kevin Vanhoozer's book *The Drama of Doctrine*¹³⁰ tackles the issue of recovering the canon as the norm for Christian theology and practice. It places the canon, church and theology within the broad context of what he and others call the theo-drama, in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹³⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

principal players, but in which the audience is called to participate.¹³¹ “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.”¹³² The Bible functions “not as a book filled with propositional information” but “as a script that calls for faithful yet creative performance.”¹³³ Vanhoozer argues that viewing the gospel as a drama is not imposing a foreign concept on the text, but making manifest its implicit content.¹³⁴

This narrative or performance involves God and humanity. “The canon is at once a divine/human performance that calls for further performances (faith seeking understanding) in the church.”¹³⁵

Scripture, according to Vanhoozer, is a narrative with a cohesive sense of unity. “Despite the variety of literary material in the Bible – psalms, law, parables, prophecies, and so on – the Bible tells one overarching story from creation to consummation.”¹³⁶ While the church needs a propositional core,¹³⁷ it is impossible to reduce this narrative to propositional statements without

¹³¹ Ibid., 16.

¹³² Ibid., 21.

¹³³ Ibid., 22.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 180.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 278.

losing something in the translation.¹³⁸ The narrative does more than assert facts; it asks us to “look at the world like this.” “Narratives do more than chronicle; they configure.”¹³⁹

The key to the entire canon or narrative is found in the history of Jesus, who is the “hermeneutical key not only to the history of Israel but to the history of the whole world, and hence to the meaning of life, for he is the Logos through whom all things were created.”¹⁴⁰ The cross is “the starting point for an epistemological revolution, *a conversion of the imagination*.”¹⁴¹

The task of the theologian, then, is to “study the playscript and prepare it for performances that truthfully realize its truth.”¹⁴² Doctrine has two purposes: it is “both instruction for understanding the drama and direction for participating fittingly in it.”¹⁴³ Biblical theology does more than help us understand the propositional content of Scripture: it helps us acquire “the ability to see, feel, and taste the world as disclosed in the diverse biblical texts.”¹⁴⁴ Theologians help us live among the texts in our contemporary context, giving us practical wisdom so that we can “turn the gold of the gospel into the workaday

¹³⁸ Ibid., 93, 266.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 282.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 223.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 438.

¹⁴² Ibid., 247.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 268.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 285.

stuff of ordinary life.”¹⁴⁵ The task of every Christian is to perform the Scriptures “that attest to the covenant and its climax, the person and work of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁶ Our goal is “not simply to play a role but to project the main idea of the play.”¹⁴⁷

In order to faithfully perform within the theo-drama, we must move from Scripture to our experience, rather than from our experience to Scripture. “We understand the present by incorporating it into the larger interpretive framework of the canon, not vice versa.”¹⁴⁸ We do not look to the Bible to corroborate human experience; instead, we seek “to conform human experience to a word that precedes it.”¹⁴⁹ We tell the biblical story as our story, in which we are participants.¹⁵⁰

Doctrine plays an important role. Through doctrine, we learn who we really are: “creatures made new in Christ.”¹⁵¹ Doctrine helps us see “how to participate fittingly in the drama of redemption” and helps us become spiritually fit.¹⁵² Doctrines become “intellectual habits that draw upon the synthetic

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 309-310.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 361.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 372.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 201.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 366.

¹⁵² Ibid., 373.

power of the imagination to enable us to see this world in otherworldly – which is to say, eschatological – terms.”¹⁵³ Creedal theology helps amateur theater become masterpiece theater.¹⁵⁴ “The goal of theology is to form disciples who participate fittingly in the theo-drama precisely as compelling witnesses to the resurrection.”¹⁵⁵

Improvisation is important, because we are called to “speak in ways that fit *new* situations and address *new* problems.”¹⁵⁶ “Though the church's script is sufficient, it is not enough to simply repeat one's lines when the cultural scene changes.”¹⁵⁷ Improvising well, says Vanhoozer, requires “both training (formation) and discernment (imagination).”¹⁵⁸ Through theology, we gain “the ability to improvise what to say and do as disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that are at once faithful yet fitting to their subject matter and setting.”¹⁵⁹

The church is called to be “the company of the gospel, whose nature and task alike pertain to performing the word in the power of the Spirit.”¹⁶⁰ The Holy Spirit is the primary director, and pastors function as assistant

¹⁵³ Ibid., 377.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 449.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 358.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 335.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 336.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 337.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 401.

directors, assisted in turn by theologians. Essentially, the pastor is a theologian too. “The director's work is primarily that of communication: to the actors about the meaning of the script and then, indirectly through the actors, to the audience about the meaning of the play. *The church communicates the meaning of the play through its bodily action.*”¹⁶¹ The director trains the actors:

What the pastor/director really needs to do is to take the congregation's imagination captive to the Scriptures so the theo-drama becomes the governing framework of the community's speech and action (2 Cor. 10:5). The pastor/director needs to instill confidence in a congregation that playing *this* script is the way to truth and abundant life. Such direction is largely through preaching, an obedient “listening to the text on behalf of the church.” Herman Melville's image of the pulpit as a ship's prow that leads the way through uncharted waters is strikingly apt: “[T]he pulpit leads the world.”¹⁶²

The pastor reminds the congregation that they are part of something bigger than themselves.¹⁶³ Vanhoozer reminds preachers of their importance in the local performance of the theo-drama:

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*

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 448.

¹⁶² Ibid., 449.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 453-454.

present.¹⁶⁴

HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics, the science and art of Biblical interpretation, is a key part of sermon preparation. It is in the process of studying and interpreting a passage, that the meaning of the text is either preserved or lost. Theocentric preaching is concerned with “how to get the message” (hermeneutics) as well as “how to get the message across” (homiletics).¹⁶⁵

One of the reasons for anthropocentric interpretations of the Bible is that we rush from the text to our lives without taking time to interpret the meaning. We draw a direct line between our lives and the text, which can lead to misinterpretation. One Bible translator and linguist writes:

The Bible isn't a fortune cookie that you can crack open and get out a pithy little message that's going to help you through the day. Instead it is a collection of books, poems, histories, tragedies and more and if you want to "apply it to your life" you've first got to consider how that particular message was meant to apply to someone else's life. That's right, the Bible wasn't written to you...So you're reading someone else's mail. Or listening in on one half of a phone conversation. If you want to apply it to your life, first you've got to approach the text carefully, even humbly and ask, "What was the original author saying to the original readers and why?" That's not an easy question. You won't be able to answer it in just five minutes of Bible reading a day. You won't be able to answer that question by jumping from one section of the Bible to the next as you go through your Bible reading plan...

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 456.

¹⁶⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historic Texts* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 43.

The Bible isn't meant to be treated like a bag of "trail mix" where you fish out all the sweet parts that you like and leave the rest. There are treasures in "the Book" but only if you're willing to receive the message in the way it was intended...

The Bible wasn't written to you, but it was written for you. Read it the right way and you'll hear the voice of God.¹⁶⁶

Each passage of Scripture was "God's Word to other people before it became God's Word to us."¹⁶⁷

Good hermeneutics also respects the context in which the text was written. Ignoring the context is an act of arrogance:

Since God spoke his message in specific, historical situations...we should take the ancient historical-cultural situation seriously. The bottom line is that we cannot simply ignore "those people living back then" and jump directly to what God wants to say to us...We should not be so arrogant or prideful to think that God cared nothing about the original audience but was merely using them to get a message to us.¹⁶⁸

This section will survey literature on hermeneutics, especially as it touches on theocentric preaching.

Sidney Greidanus

¹⁶⁶ David Ker, "The Bible wasn't written to you," *Lingamish*, http://lingamish.blogspot.-com/2006/05/bible-wasnt-written-to-you_114848699729219812.html.

¹⁶⁷ William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Nelson Reference: 1993), 172.

¹⁶⁸ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 99.

Sidney Greidanus has written extensively on hermeneutical issues that related to theocentric preaching. Greidanus warns of the danger of anthropocentric interpretation:

The theocentric nature of biblical interpretation needs to be upheld especially over against an all too facile slide into anthropocentric interpretation and preaching...In this type of interpretation and preaching a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) switch takes place from the centrality of God in biblical literature to the centrality of human characters in the sermon.¹⁶⁹

Theocentric interpretation emphasizes that “the Bible's purpose is to first of all to tell the story of God.”¹⁷⁰ Human characters are in the Bible, but “never as independent characters in their own right. Human characters in the Bible are always part of the larger story, which is theocentric.”¹⁷¹

Theocentric interpretation requires that we ask: “What does this passage reveal about God, his redemptive acts, his covenant, his grace, his will for his people?”¹⁷² It also locates the text in the context of redemptive history, asking, “What does this passage mean in the context of God's all-encompass-

¹⁶⁹ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 116.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 286.

ing story from creation to new creation?”¹⁷³ It helps avoid the danger of reducing the content of Scripture to one theme: God and the soul.¹⁷⁴

Greidanus states that theocentric preaching is related to Christocentric preaching. “Christocentric preaching is the preaching of God's acts *from the perspective of the New Testament*.”¹⁷⁵ It does not require that every sermon make reference to the events of Jesus' life; instead, it requires that even Old Testament passages are interpreted in the horizon of the entire canon, understanding Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament history, promises, and prophecies.¹⁷⁶ As with a theocentric approach, Christocentric interpretation avoids anthropocentrism and “requires of a sermon that neither the people in the Bible nor the people in the pew but Christ be central.”¹⁷⁷

Greidanus calls his approach “redemptive-historical Christocentric interpretation.”¹⁷⁸ It understands every part of Scripture, even in the Old Testament, as centered on Christ. It seeks “to do justice to the fact that God's story of bringing his kingdom on earth is centered in Christ: Christ the center of redemptive history, Christ the center of Scriptures. In preaching any part of

¹⁷³ Ibid., 288.

¹⁷⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 86.

¹⁷⁵ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 119.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 118-119.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹⁷⁸ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 227.

Scripture, one must understand its message in light of that center, Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁹

This method of interpretation involves the following steps:¹⁸⁰

1. Select the preaching text
2. Read the text in its literary context
3. Outline the structure of the text
4. Interpret the text in its own historical setting.
5. Formulate the text's theme and goal
6. Understand the message in the contexts of canon and redemptive history
7. Formulate the sermon theme and goal

Greidanus insists upon a theocentric interpretation at several points in this process.

First, he includes three types of interpretation in step four (interpreting the text in its own historic setting): literary, historical, and theocentric. The theocentric strand asks:

What does this passage reveal about God and his will? The question concerns God not in the abstract but as he has revealed himself in his relationship with creation and creatures. This question, therefore, seeks to discover what the passage says about God's acts, God's providence, God's covenant, God's law, God's grace, God's faithfulness, and so on...With sound literary and historical interpretation, theocentric interpretation may not be necessary, but our predilection to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 227.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 347-348.

slight the God-centered focus...requires this additional question. Moreover, it will prove to be an important link to Christ-centered preaching.¹⁸¹

Greidanus also includes Christocentric interpretation in this step. In a sense, Christocentric interpretation is no different than theocentric interpretation: "The triune God allows of no division."¹⁸² Christocentric interpretation asks the question, "What does this passage mean in the light of Jesus Christ?"¹⁸³ This does not mean that every text must somehow make reference to the events of Jesus' life. Instead, it means that "a passage receive a theocentric interpretation not only in its own...horizon but also in the broader horizon of the whole canon."¹⁸⁴ It moves from the fullness of New Testament revelation to understanding Old Testament passages.¹⁸⁵

Greidanus describes seven ways of preaching Christ from the Old Testament:

- Redemptive-historical progression, which is the "foundational way of preaching Christ from the Old Testament."¹⁸⁶ It "sees every Old Testament text and its addressees in the context of God's dynamic history,

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 230.

¹⁸² Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 224.

¹⁸³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 232.

¹⁸⁴ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 119.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸⁶ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 234.

which progresses steadily and reaches its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and ultimately in the new creation.”¹⁸⁷

- Promise-fulfillment, which examines promises at one stage of redemptive history, and locates their fulfillment in later stages.¹⁸⁸
- Typology, which highlights “analogies between God's present acts in Christ and his redemptive acts in the Old Testament.”¹⁸⁹ Typology differs from allegorical interpretation in that it is “limited to discovering specific analogies along the axis of God's acts in redemptive history as revealed in Scripture.”¹⁹⁰
- Analogy, which looks for parallel situations between Old Testament situations and today. It “concentrates on locating the continuity, the parallels, between what God is and does for Israel, teaches Israel, demands of Israel, and what God in Christ is and does for the church, teaches, the church, or demands of the church.”¹⁹¹
- Longitudinal themes, which traces and extends themes from the Old Testament to their fullness in Christ.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 237.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 206.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 212.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 249.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 263.

¹⁹² Ibid., 223.

- New Testament references, which examines the way that New Testament passages refer to Old Testament passages.¹⁹³
- Contrast, which highlights the discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments that Christ brings.¹⁹⁴

Second, Greidanus emphasizes theocentric interpretation in step five. The theme and goal of the passage is always theocentric because each passage is about God, and the purpose of the authors is theological.¹⁹⁵ This helps avoid misunderstanding the author's intention as being anthropocentric, primarily concerned with humanity.

Third, his sixth step, "Understand the message in the contexts of canon and redemptive history," locates each text in the meta-narrative, which is theocentric. It also assumes the theocentric nature of the entire Bible. "Theocentric interpretation seeks to expose in every passage this God-centered focus of the entire Bible."¹⁹⁶ "In contrast to anthropocentric interpretation...theocentric interpretation would emphasize that the Bible's purpose is first of all to tell the story of God."¹⁹⁷ This story also includes humanity.

Fourth, in step seven, "Formulate the sermon theme and goal," Greidanus cautions us with examples of anthropocentric applications of the pas-

¹⁹³ Ibid., 269.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 224.

¹⁹⁵ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 113.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 117.

sage. In order to preach to people today, the preacher must cross the historical-cultural gap that separates the world of the text from our contemporary world.¹⁹⁸ “Unfortunately, in the laudable attempt to be relevant, many sermons fail to bridge the gap properly and as a result come to ruin.”¹⁹⁹ When this happens, “preachers transfer isolated elements of the text rather than its specific message.”²⁰⁰ This leads to preachers, for instance, using the story of Joseph being thrown into a pit to talk about the pits of depression, or of David's lamenting of the death of Absalom to talk about parenting.²⁰¹ This leads to arbitrary, subjective, and ultimately anthropocentric ways of handling the text. Examples of this approach are:

- Allegorizing, “which searches beneath the literal meaning of a passage for the 'real' meaning.”²⁰² For instance, The Song of Solomon is understood in this approach to be about the love between Christ and the church.
- Spiritualizing, which “discards the earthly, physical historical reality the text speaks about and crosses the gap with a spiritual analogy of that historical reality.”²⁰³ For instance, the story of Jesus stilling the storm is

¹⁹⁸ Greidanus, 158.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 159.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 166.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 159.

²⁰³ Ibid., 160.

taken as a lesson on how Jesus handles “storms” on the “sea of life.”²⁰⁴

- Moralizing, which emphasizes “virtues and vices, dos and don’ts” without “properly grounding these ethical demands in the scriptures.”²⁰⁵

This is common in biographical preaching. It ignores the intention of the text, can turn “grace into law by presenting imperatives without the divine indicative,” and transforms “the theocentric focus of the Bible into anthropocentric sermons.”²⁰⁶ It transforms the Bible into a set of moral precepts and examples.²⁰⁷ “The historical text itself does not moralize and hence should not be used for moralizing.”²⁰⁸

Greidanus also argues against exemplary preaching which uses the characters of the preaching text as “examples or models for imitation.”²⁰⁹ Abraham is preached as an example of faith, or Joseph as someone who moves from pride to humility. Greidanus argues that this approach “tends to shift the theocentric focus of the Bible to an anthropocentric focus in the sermon” and is a “dead-end road for true biblical preaching.”²¹⁰ “The purpose of

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 163-164.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 164-165.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 165.

²⁰⁸ Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 151.

²⁰⁹ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 161.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 163.

historical texts,” he writes, “is not to offer us human models for proper conduct but to show the progressive coming of *Christ* in history.”²¹¹ The concern of the authors is not to offer biographies, character sketches, or moral examples, but to use these characters to proclaim the acts of God.²¹² Biblical characters are in the text “to show what God is doing through, in, and for them — to show how God advances his kingdom through the efforts of human beings and sometimes in spite of them.”²¹³

The two main problems with exemplary preaching, according to Greidanus, are subjectivism in the selection of which character in the text to emphasize, and a slighting of authorial intent.²¹⁴ These two problems can be solved by asking how the original hearers understood the passage, and whether the author intended the original hearers to identify with a certain character.²¹⁵

While exemplary preaching can be anthropocentric, biblical writers themselves use characters as examples of faith. One can learn from the

²¹¹ Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 151.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹³ Sidney Greidanus, “Redemptive History and Preaching,” *Pro Rege* 19, no. 2 (December 1990): 14.

²¹⁴ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 179.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

cloud of witnesses who demonstrated faith by their actions.²¹⁶ Greidanus seems to overstate his case in arguing against all exemplary preaching.

Greidanus outlines some methods the preacher can use to avoid anthropocentric applications. These include:

- Concentrating on the original message. “Concentrating on the original message will keep the sermon from being sidetracked from all kinds of 'practical' remarks that may be related to elements in the text but have nothing to do with the intended message.”²¹⁷ It asks, “What issues did the author seek to address? What questions did he seek to answer? What is the specific message he proclaimed?”²¹⁸
- Recognizing the discontinuity that may necessitate changes in the message.²¹⁹ Discontinuity may make a difference at three levels. First, one must understand the message of the text in light of progressive revelation. Second, one must locate the text in its stage of kingdom history. Third, one must recognize the cultural changes that “do not negate the original message but make transformation in the light of our present culture mandatory.”²²⁰ An example is to transform the application of Jesus' command to wash feet into different cultural settings.

²¹⁶ Hebrews 11-12.

²¹⁷ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 166.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

- Recognizing the overarching continuity.²²¹ This continuity is evident in two areas: that the God of all Scripture is the same God today, and that there is one covenant people, despite some discontinuities. Messages that catch the theocentric focus of the text – “what it reveals about *God's acts, God's promises, God's will*” – also catch “the continuity that allows for meaningful application today in spite of discontinuity, for the triune God is constant, steadfast, faithful, the same today as he was in the distant past.”²²² The fact that there is one covenant people allows us to look for “analogies between the first recipients and the congregation today.”²²³
- Focusing on the goal of the text. Delineating the goal of the text brings us “halfway in conceiving a relevant sermon.”²²⁴ The other half is “discovering a genuine analogy among contemporary hearers.”²²⁵ When no genuine analogy exists, one may redefine the specific issue being addressed while “being careful not to generalize the issue to such an extent that the point is lost.”²²⁶ One can also search for the underlying principle and ask, “Of what principle is this a culturally conditioned ex-

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 170.

²²³ Ibid., 172.

²²⁴ Ibid., 173.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 174.

pression?"²²⁷ The preacher must view the individual elements of the text in light of their role to the main theme of the text, and "throughout the sermon this theme must be driven home as the specific message of God in this particular text."²²⁸

- Expanding our view of the text, so it is not all about individuals in relation to God.²²⁹ Although both God and humans appear in the historical text, the emphasis is primarily on God working in and through humanity. "The Koran, the Book of Mormon, and other literature may mention the same persons, but only in the Bible do they appear in this context of the great battle initiated by the triune God to redeem his people and to advance his kingdom till God shall be all in all."²³⁰

Greidanus states that the Bible is relevant when it is interpreted theocentrically. The biblical texts are "God's word addressed to his people, and therefore, already applied and relevant. Hence preachers today need not transform an objective entity into a relevant word but need only transmit a relevant message from the past to the present."²³¹ "The preacher's task is not to add applications to the Word, but to proclaim that Word today in all its rele-

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 166.

²²⁹ Ibid., 86.

²³⁰ Ibid., 147.

²³¹ Ibid., 182.

vance – a relevance which is already contained in the theocentric explication.”²³²

Graeme Goldsworthy

Graeme Goldsworthy's book *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*²³³ aims to help preachers “apply a consistently Christ-centered approach to their sermons.”²³⁴ It is concerned with “the function of biblical theology in the process of moving from the text to the hearer.”²³⁵ Biblical theology, which is defined as “allowing the Bible to speak as a whole: the one word of God about the one way of salvation,” is central to the task of preaching.²³⁶

Goldsworthy is concerned about the effects of inadequate hermeneutical practice on evangelical preaching:

Texts are taken out of context; and applications are made without due concern for what the biblical author, which is ultimately the Holy Spirit, is seeking to convey by the text. Problem-centered and topical preaching has become the norm, and character studies treat the heroes and heroines of the Bible as isolated examples of how to live.²³⁷

Goldsworthy's solution is the use of biblical theology in preaching. Biblical theology involves the “quest for the big picture, or the overview, of biblical

²³² Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 160.

²³³ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, ix.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

revelation.”²³⁸ It understands the Bible as a “remarkable complexity and yet a brilliant unity, which tells the story of the creation and the saving plan of God.”²³⁹

The Bible is theocentric, according to Goldsworthy:

The Bible is primarily a book about God and his saving acts in Jesus Christ. The human element is of course important, but it needs to be kept in perspective. Human beings are created by God, who defines our being and our destiny. God sovereignly controls all that comes to pass in human history...God and our relationship to him is the determinative characteristic in the Bible. To preach about us, our problems, and our way to a better life, and to do so without recourse to the significance of the gospel, is to radically distort the understanding of humanity and the meaning of Scripture.²⁴⁰

The Bible is also Christocentric. Even the Old Testament is Christocentric, because “Jesus says that the Old Testament is a book about him.”²⁴¹

Goldsworthy quotes Article III of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, which says, “We affirm that the Person and work of Jesus Christ are the central focus of the entire Bible.”²⁴² A sermon is measured by its “faithful exposition of the way the text testified to Christ.”²⁴³

Anthropocentrism results from isolating texts from their salvation-historical contexts and applying them to the hearer based on intuition, prefer-

²³⁸ Ibid., 22.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

²⁴² Ibid., 84.

²⁴³ Ibid., 21.

ence, or prejudice.²⁴⁴ This results in texts being used, for instance, as character studies. A theocentric approach places each text in its salvation history context, recognizing our place in salvation history between the first and second comings of Christ.²⁴⁵

A theocentric approach also locates every text within a framework of God in relationship to his creation (humankind plus the world).²⁴⁶ Rather than jumping directly from the text to our situation, which distorts the text, each text must be understood in relationship to Christ and the gospel.

Goldsworthy outlines one way that a sermon can unintentionally become moralistic and thus anthropocentric. Sermons often deal with a limited amount of text. Thus, they face the danger of separating “texts about Christian living from those texts that expound the nature of the gospel.”²⁴⁷ When this happens, we can inadvertently preach law and “leave the impression that the essence of Christianity is what we do rather than what God has done.”²⁴⁸ The alternative is to show all ethical imperatives as implications of the gospel, and to include a “gospel-based thrust” in even the ethical sections of the epistles.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 99.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 100.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 116.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 244.

Bryan Chapell

Bryan Chapell's book *Christ-Centered Preaching* covers both hermeneutics and homiletics in reference to Christocentric preaching. Chapell writes that “a message is Christ-centered not because it makes creative mention of an aspect of Jesus' life or death but because it discloses an aspect of God's redeeming nature (evident in the text) that is ultimately understood, fulfilled, and/or accomplished in Christ.”²⁵⁰ It does not “seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ.”²⁵¹

Chapell believes Scripture is theocentric. “All scriptural revelation discloses God. In its proper context, every verse in the Bible in some sense points to his nature and work.”²⁵² The goal of exegesis is to understand “a text's full meaning in the context of its God-glorifying, gospel intent.”²⁵³ An expositor can examine any text to “see what it reveals of God's justice, holiness, goodness, lovingkindness, faithfulness, provision, or deliverance.”²⁵⁴ “God remains the hero of every text,” he writes.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ Chapell., 15.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 279.

²⁵² Ibid., 275.

²⁵³ Ibid., 273.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 285.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 303.

Scripture is also Christocentric, because his redemptive work is “the capstone of all God's revelation of his dealings with his people. No aspect of revelation can be thoroughly understood or explained in isolation from some aspect of Christ's redeeming work.”²⁵⁶ “Theocentric preaching is Christ-centered preaching because to proclaim God as he has revealed himself is to make known the providing nature and character that are eternally manifested in Christ.”²⁵⁷

A key step in Christ-centered exegesis is determining the redemptive context, which asks how the passage functions not only within its immediate context but in the entire scope of Scripture:

An accurate interpretation requires preachers to ask, How does this text disclose the meaning or the need of redemption? Failure to ask and answer this question leads to preaching that is highly moralistic or legalistic because it focuses on the behaviors a passage teaches without disclosing how the biblical writer was relating those behaviors to the work of the Savior.²⁵⁸

The intent of every text must be located “within the scope of God's redemptive work.”²⁵⁹ A preacher can avoid anthropocentrism by concentrating “on what God is accomplishing with the record of every event, the account of every character, and the principles in every instruction.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 276.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 304.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 80.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 304.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 303.

Chapell encourages the exegete to locate the “aspect of our fallen condition [in the text] that requires and displays God's provision.”²⁶¹ We do this by asking:

- What does the text say?
- What concern(s) did the text address in its context?
- What do listeners share in common with those to (or about) whom the text was written?²⁶²

This helps preserve the focus on God's redemptive action within the text as it applies to human need.

A message is sub-Christian if it preaches morality, but neglects to mention God's grace in salvation and sanctification, even if the text demands such moral behavior.²⁶³ “The Bible is *not* a self-help book. Scripture presents one, consistent, organic message. It tells us how we must seek Christ, who alone is our Savior and source of strength, to be and do what God requires.”²⁶⁴

Chapell offers the following procedure for moving from text to sermonic purpose in a way that preserves a Christocentric focus:

- I. Identify the redemptive principles evident in the text.
 - A. Reveal aspects of the divine nature, which provides redemption.
 - B. Reveal aspects of human nature, which requires redemption.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 270.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid., 274.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 277.

- II. Determine what application these redemptive principles were to have in the lives of the original hearers/readers of the text.
- III. Apply the redemptive principles to contemporary lives in the light of common human characteristics or conditions contemporary believers share with the original hearers/readers.²⁶⁵

Thomas Schreiner

In an article called “Preaching and Biblical Theology,”²⁶⁶ Thomas Schreiner states the importance of preaching theologically, so that the “theological worldview that permeates God's word and is the foundation for all of life” is preached.²⁶⁷ Biblical theology focuses on the biblical story line, the “unfolding of God's plan in redemptive history, so that in every passage we preach we consider the place of the text in relationship to the whole story line of the Bible.”²⁶⁸

The main truth for preachers here is that they must preach in such a way that they integrate their sermons into the larger biblical story of redemptive history. Those in the pews need to see the big picture of what God has been doing, and how each part of Scripture contributes to that big picture.²⁶⁹

Schreiner says that every Old Testament text has to be understood at three levels of theology:

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 308.

²⁶⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Summer 2006), <http://www.sbts.edu/resources/publications/sbjt/2006/2006Summer3.PDF>.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 20.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

The first task of every interpreter is to read the OT in its own right, discerning the meaning of the biblical author when it was written. Further, as we argued above, each OT book must be read in light of its antecedent theology, so that the story line of scripture is grasped. But we also must read all of scripture canonically, so that the OT is read in light of the whole story — the fulfillment that has come in Jesus Christ...We read the scriptures both from front to back and back to front. We always consider the developing story as well as the end of the story.²⁷⁰

James Merrill Anderson

In 1997, James Merrill Anderson completed his thesis “The Priority and Practice of Theocentric Preaching”²⁷¹ as part of his studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Anderson offers the following definitions of anthropocentric and theocentric:

Anthropocentric describes a presentation that features man or woman as the focal point. It is evident hermeneutically by a concentration on the reactions, lessons and examples of biblical characters. This in turn is reflected homiletically in sermons that are man-centered in orientation, not just in application.

Theocentric refers to the interpretive approach to Scripture that focuses on God. It recognizes that God is the central figure of revelation and his redemptive work is the most significant activity recorded in the Bible.²⁷²

A theocentric approach is rooted in the understanding that God has spoken, and that the Scriptures are “a record, accurately preserved, of God's

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 28.

²⁷¹ James Merrill Anderson, “The Priority and Practice of Theocentric Preaching,” (D.Min. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1997), 7.

²⁷² Ibid., 7.

redemptive activity in history.²⁷³ Theological interpretation is a key ingredient of theocentric preaching, and its absence is a reason why anthropocentric preaching is so common.²⁷⁴ If we do not understand the theocentric viewpoint of every text, this will result in an anthropocentric sermon, “even when history and grammar are accurately understood.”²⁷⁵ It is therefore important to view the text from a redemptive-historical perspective: “Because the Scripture is 'His Story', its purpose will best be understood in terms of God's activity in relation to his creation. This is the basis for preaching that is God-centered or theocentric.”²⁷⁶

Anderson describes hermeneutical mistakes that lead to anthropocentric preaching. Examples are: texts that are interpreted by “psychologizing, moralizing, spiritualizing, or typologizing;” “failure to distinguish between the ingredients of the text and the intention of the text;” and “focus on wrong orientations: subjectivism (my experience), spiritualism (inner life), individualism (no covenant).”²⁷⁷ The solution, according to Anderson, is to use biblical theology to assist in theocentric interpretation; to resist the temptation to mute the theocentric and Christocentric offense of the gospel to avoid the offense;

²⁷³ Ibid., 11.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 30.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 31.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 89.

to be moved by the grandeur of God as much as by needs; and to reinvigorate theology.²⁷⁸

HOMILETICS

The Nature of Preaching

It is easy to underestimate what is at stake when we preach. Preaching is about more than proclaiming the Word; it also involves the shaping of a people who are ready to hear that Word. Somebody has said that preaching is about “civilizing the minds of Christian disciples.”²⁷⁹

Michael Pasquarello III writes of Augustine:

Augustine perceived that his primary pastoral task was theological in nature: to wean people from idolatry, to purify their desires, and to establish an alternative culture that was responsive to God by building up the church in love...

Augustine, moreover, was no stranger to the human struggle with disordered longings and desires. Through a long process of transformation, he learned that human loves can be satisfied only when rightly ordered through participation in the life of the Triune God; it was after a radical conversion from a world centered on himself to a world centered in God that he began to bridge the gap between what he wanted and what God gives, thereby overcoming the distance between the world he claimed as his own and a whole new world given by God.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 89.

²⁷⁹ Eccl. 3:17.

²⁸⁰ Michael Pasquarello III, *Sacred Rhetoric: Preaching as a Theological and Pastoral Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 16.

This type of preaching is at the heart of spiritual transformation, which is about transforming our ways of thinking. Dallas Willard writes, “The needed transformation is very largely a matter of replacing in ourselves those idea systems of evil (and their corresponding cultures) with the idea system that Jesus Christ embodied and taught with a culture of the kingdom of God.”²⁸¹ Again, Willard writes, “Central to the understanding and proclamation of the Christian gospel today, as in Jesus' day, is a re-visioning of what God's own life is like and how the physical cosmos fits into it.”²⁸²

Preaching that leads to Christ-likeness cannot settle for lesser priorities, such as special experiences, faithfulness to the church, correct doctrine, or external conformity to the teachings of Jesus.²⁸³ We must aim higher:

The first objective is to bring apprentices to the point where they dearly love and constantly delight in that “heavenly Father” made real to earth in Jesus and are quite certain that there is no “catch,” no limit, to the goodness of his intentions or to his power to carry them out...

The second primary objective of a curriculum for Christlikeness is to remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God, to free the apprentices of domination, of “enslavement”...to their old habitual patterns of thought, feeling, and action. These are the “automatic” patterns of response that were ground into the embodied social self during its long life outside The Kingdom Among Us.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 98.

²⁸² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 62.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 320.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 321-322.

In essence, good preaching focuses on learning to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.²⁸⁵ This type of preaching is patterned after the preaching of Jesus:

Jesus' teaching does not lay out safe generalizations by which we can engineer a happy life. Instead, it is designed to startle us out of our prejudices and direct us into a new way of thinking and acting. It's designed to open us to experience the reign of God right where we are, initiating an unpredictable process of personal growth in vivid fellowship with him.²⁸⁶

According to Stanley Hauerwas, preaching is the “proclamation of a story that cannot be known apart from such proclamation.”²⁸⁷ This flips the purpose of preaching on its head: instead of making the gospel intelligible to the world, it helps “the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel.”²⁸⁸ Preaching attacks an enemy: alternative stories which we assume to be true. “God has entrusted us, His Church, with the best story in the world.”²⁸⁹ Through preaching and sacrament, we attack the enemy story and proclaim the true story of the world. “If you preach that way you will never again have to worry about whether a sermon is 'meaningful.’”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 371.

²⁸⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 205.

²⁸⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, “Preaching as Though We Had Enemies,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 53 (May 1995), <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9505/hauerwas.html>.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Hauerwas, “Preaching as Thought We Had Enemies.”

Willimon agrees. “Our preaching ought to be so confrontative, so in violation of all that contemporary Americans think they know, that it requires no less than a miracle to be heard. We preach best with a reckless confidence in the power of the gospel to evoke the audience it deserves.”²⁹¹ Willimon suggests that part of our pastoral task is being ignored in preaching:

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.²⁹²

Brueggemann says that “prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and letting people see their history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice.”²⁹³ The task of this type of ministry is “to evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways.”²⁹⁴ It encompasses all of life, and “seeks to penetrate despair so that new futures can be believed in and embraced by us.”²⁹⁵

John Stott describes how preaching leads to a transformation:

²⁹¹ William H. Willimon, *The Intrusive Word* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 18,19,22.

²⁹² William H. Willimon, “Preaching: Entertainment or Exposition?” *Christian Century* 107 (Feb. 28, 1990): 206.

²⁹³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 117.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

...whenever the Bible is truly and systematically expounded, God uses it to give his people the vision without which they perish. First, they begin to see what he wants them to be, his new society in the world. Then they go on to grasp the resources he has given them in Christ to fulfil his purpose.²⁹⁶

David Fitch suggests that instead of trying to make churches relevant to culture, that the “church becomes relevant to its own message of God's salvation in Christ and thus relevant to evangelicals again.”²⁹⁷ Our minds and imaginations have been formed by cultures foreign to the gospel. We need to be reshaped “out of pagan experiences and emotions into the glory of God.”²⁹⁸ This can happen in preaching, but not by delivering lectures with take-home points, or motivational speeches which provide inspiration.²⁹⁹ Fitch writes:

Evangelicals then must do more on Sundays with our preaching...

In North America, we gather before the Word with our imaginations and character formed out of the omnipresent culture of a post-Christian narcissism and consumerism. And so we sit in the pews needing to be reshaped by the Word before we need reminding about the things we should be doing. We come needing to see the world as Scripture sees it before we receive another inspiring rhetorical climax that lasts but a moment...

Let us call this preaching “narrative-based” preaching. In contrast to the presentation of information to be consumed, such preaching seeks to renarrate for us the world as it is according to Scripture and call us

²⁹⁶ John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 113-114.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 96-97.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 140-141.

into that reality. It is preaching that approaches Scripture first and foremost as a narrative. Its task is description and the shaping of a new imagination for us all who have had our imaginations held captive by the foreign forces of North American, post-Christian life.

Let us then move beyond seeing Scripture as a collection of truth propositions...Instead, let us come to Scripture as the grand narrative of God in Jesus Christ where God has revealed himself down through the ages from Abraham to Moses, the nation of Israel to the ultimate person and work of Jesus Christ...it is the narrative of God into which we have been invited to participate.³⁰⁰

Fitch calls us to preach “so as to 'counter-imagine' the way the world really is under Jesus as Lord over against the dark world of consumerist materialism we live outside the church.”³⁰¹ We need, he says, “the all-engulfing story of God.”³⁰²

Under this model, the task of preaching changes:

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

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 141.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 142.

³⁰² Ibid.

they are going, and what they are to do in terms of Jesus Christ and his story.³⁰³

Instead of trying to be relevant, we instead “make compelling the world of Jesus as Lord.”³⁰⁴ We sound the reality of the reign of Christ, which all will one day see, “for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see.”³⁰⁵ The preacher then describes “what it means to live in a world under that lordship where God is sovereign and working for our salvation.”³⁰⁶

Likewise, Thomas Long writes that “the goal of the preacher's exegesis is neither the plucking of an abstract idea from the text nor some nonconceptual aesthetic experience but, rather, the event of the text's actively shaping self and communal understanding.”³⁰⁷

Preaching the reality of God's story requires imagination. In *The Preaching Life*,³⁰⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor states, “The church's central task is an imaginative one.”³⁰⁹ We are driven by our “images of ourselves, of other people, of God and the world.”³¹⁰ Scripture is “full of images that mean to tell us who we are — images of Eden, Exodus, and Easter — images of water,

³⁰³ Ibid., 142-143.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 144.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 145.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Long, 106.

³⁰⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1993).

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 39.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 41.

bread, and wine — images with the power to change lives, but only for those who choose them.”³¹¹ They are alternative images to the world's images of “wealth and dominance, self-sufficiency and physical perfection.”³¹² Faith is more than what we think or how we feel:

It is more comprehensive than that, and more profound. It is a full-bodied relationship in which mind and heart, spirit and flesh, are converted to a new way of experiencing and responding to the world. It is the surrender of one set of images and the acceptance of another. It is a matter of learning to see the world, each other, and ourselves as God sees us, and to live as if God's reality were the only one that mattered.³¹³

Conversion is ultimately an imaginative act that enables us to see the world differently.³¹⁴

Ian Pitt-Watson calls for preachers to understand that “preaching is the remembering and retelling of how our stories are being gathered into his.”³¹⁵ He says, “the Christian gospel does not come to us in Scripture as a 'theology'...The gospel comes to us as story, his story in our stories, and ours in his...As we tell and retell the Christ story we share in God's own strategy of

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid., 42.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 33.

communication.”³¹⁶ As we tell the story, “our stories become part of his, and we begin to live 'in Christ.’”³¹⁷

What is needed, according to one author, is that more preachers become poets:

Poets aren't strategists with solutions or answers. They give language out of the tradition and its memory so that people develop awareness and begin to dialogue about their current experiences...

Poets discipline themselves to see the world differently from most. They are not so much advice-givers as image- and metaphor-framers. One of the crucial needs of the liminal situation of the Christian community is for people to discern the shape of the captivities that have overtaken us. What the churches need are not more entrepreneurial leaders with wonderful plans for their congregation's life, but poets with the imagination and gifting to cultivate environments within which people might again understand how their traditional narratives apply to themselves today.³¹⁸

The Practice of Preaching

Walter Kaiser gives some basic advice on how to preach theocentrically. “Whenever we are at a loss as to what we should preach on a passage,” he says, “we will never go wrong if we focus on God, his actions and his requirements.”³¹⁹ Paul Scott Wilson reminds us, “Any text that points to the

³¹⁶ Ibid., 25-26.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 32.

³¹⁸ Roxburgh, 165-166.

³¹⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 57.

virtue of human action is likely to lead the preacher away from preaching God.”³²⁰

In preparing sermons, the focus must remain on God and on his truth. Calvin Miller reminds us, “All real preaching is doctrine...The church cannot be the church without preaching the important truths, and the important truths are all doctrinal.”³²¹ It is easy to slip from preaching about God to lesser things. Colin Smith reminds us that the gospel, and our preaching, must center on Christ:

The New Testament never offers the blessings of the gospel as separate items on a shopping list. If they are not offered in this way, then we should not preach them this way. The gospel does not invite us to take forgiveness, but to take Christ. All God's blessings are in him: none of them are found apart from him. The whole gospel finds its coherent center in him. We either take him as he is with all his gifts and demands, or we stand apart from him. We cannot divide him in pieces.

The most searching question to be asked of our preaching is not “Are we preaching forgiveness or repentance or holiness or faith?” but “Are we preaching Christ?”³²²

Various writers discuss a variety of homiletical issues related to theocentric preaching.

³²⁰ Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 194.

³²¹ Miller, *Preaching*, 49.

³²² Colin S. Smith, “Keeping Christ Central in Preaching,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 121.

One issue is the use of images in sermons. This is important because images aid us in re-imagining the world with God at the center. Fred Craddock writes:

Images are not, in fact, to be regarded as illustrative but rather as essential to the form and inseparable from the content of the entire sermon. By means of images the preaching occasion will be a re-creation of the way life is experienced now held under the light of the gospel. Here imagination does not take off on flights of fancy, but walks down the street where we live.³²³

A second issue is how to preach theocentrically while still including people. We do not have to choose between including God and humanity in our sermons. Calvin Miller reminds us that we live and preach in two worlds: the human and divine. In focusing on the divine, we must never lose sight of those before us. "Preach only on God and we shall lose both the attendance of God and people, but preach on humanity and everyone will listen."³²⁴ It is impossible to separate God and his revelation from humanity. "God's story and the human story give us not two interwoven books, one human, one divine, which we can divide at will, but one indivisible book, one Bible."³²⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of preaching as having three legs: my stories, our

³²³ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 65.

³²⁴ Miller, *Preaching*, 242.

³²⁵ Pasquarello, 35.

stories, and God's stories. "If any one of them is missing (or too long or too short), the whole thing will wobble and fall."³²⁶

Application, the task of translating the sermon into a change in thinking, attitude, or behavior, is another issue. Bryan Chapell warns us that a focus on application can lead to anthropocentric or non-redemptive messages. This "drift most frequently occurs unintentionally among evangelical preachers."³²⁷ These application-oriented messages "present godliness entirely as a product of human endeavor."³²⁸

Messages that strike at the heart of faith rather than support it often have an identifying theme. They exhort believers to strive to "be" something in order to be loved by God. Whether this equation is stated or implied, inadvertent or intentional, overt or subtle, the result is the same: an undermining of biblical faith. Such damage is usually inflicted by preachers striving to be biblical and unaware of the harm they are causing because they see their ideas supported in the narrow slice of Scripture text they are expounding.³²⁹

Examples of applications that can become anthropocentric include:

- "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."³³⁰ We

³²⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, quoted in Long, 198.

³²⁷ Chapell, 288.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid., 289.

³³⁰ Ibid., 290.

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.”³³¹ 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.”³³²

- “Be good” messages, which tell what to do and what not to do and neglect to mention that sanctification is not based on human effort but “on *what Jesus did eternally*.”³³³ Obedience is a response of love to God's grace, not an effort to gain or maintain it.³³⁴
- “Be disciplined” messages, which “exhort believers to improve their relationship to God through more diligent use of the means of grace.”³³⁵ “Such messages intone, 'Pray more, read the Bible more, go to church more, and have better quiet times with God.’”³³⁶ 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.”³³⁷

³³¹ Ibid., 290.

³³² Ibid., 303.

³³³ Ibid., 291-292.

³³⁴ Ibid., 292.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 293.

According to Chapell, “ ‘Be’ messages are not wrong in themselves; they are wrong messages by themselves.”³³⁸ 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?”³³⁹

Doug Pagitt suggests that the issue is not so much application but implication:

A better response, one that comes out of a progressional approach to preaching, is one that invites those who take part in the sermon to ask, “If this is our story, what will this mean for our lives?” Consider what would happen if the people in our communities of faith felt implicated by the story of God, if our preaching became the impetus for them to become part of the story itself and start arranging their lives around it.³⁴⁰

Questions become less about application and more about re-orientation.³⁴¹

“The first step of obedience is not, ‘Do this,’ but rather, ‘Believe this and receive this.’”³⁴²

Another issue in theocentric preaching is motivation. Craig Brian Larson says that even with sermons that appear to be theocentric, one can appeal to motives that place human interest at the center. We often appeal to self-interest as a motivation to righteousness. “The harmful side effect of

³³⁸ Ibid., 294.

³³⁹ Ibid., 327.

³⁴⁰ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 36.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 100.

³⁴² Randal Pelton, “Preaching for True Holiness,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 311.

some preaching is that we appeal to self-interest in a way that encourages hearers to continue in a self-centered way of life.” In contrast, Jesus and the New Testament writers teach both a “denial of self on one hand and a sanctified self-interest on the other...We seek God's way for God's glory rather than our way for our glory.”³⁴³ A sermon that is seemingly theocentric in its content can be anthropocentric in its appeal. It is not that the rules of Christian obedience change; the reasons do.³⁴⁴

A final issue is that of relevance. The desire to be relevant is what drives many preachers to anthropocentrism. Yet Simone Weil, the French philosopher said, “To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal.”³⁴⁵ Another writes, “God is the most qualified to say what is relevant.”³⁴⁶

If a sermon is to be theocentric as well as relevant, it must move beyond felt needs to real, unfelt 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

³⁴³ Craig Brian Larson, “Preaching That Promotes Self-Centeredness,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* 315-316.

³⁴⁴ Chapell, 312.

³⁴⁵ Simone Weil, quoted in Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 105.

³⁴⁶ Goldsworthy, 17.

need for the One whose absence those distractions have sought to soothe.³⁴⁷

Although people may not know it, “People are starving for the greatness of God.”³⁴⁸ He is their real need. “True expositors...are actually answering questions people *should* be asking.”³⁴⁹

Preaching the Bible as God's story, in which we play a part, always leads to relevance: “At its best, such [narrative] preaching brings high levels of corporate involvement as hearers recognize together that Scripture is their story.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁷ Michael S. Horton, “The Subject of Contemporary Relevance,” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* ed. Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 331.

³⁴⁸ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 9.

³⁴⁹ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Messages* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 38.

³⁵⁰ Michael J. Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 102.

CHAPTER FOUR

A DESIGN FOR THEOCENTRIC PREACHING

When Lucy first returned from Narnia, nobody believed her story:

“It's — it's a magic wardrobe. There's a wood inside it, and it's snowing, and there's a Faun and a witch and it's called Narnia; come and see.”

The others did not know what to think, but Lucy was so excited that they all went back with her into the room. She rushed ahead of them, flung open the door of the wardrobe and cried, “Now! go in and see for yourselves.”

“Why you goose,” said Susan, putting her head inside and pulling the fur coats apart, “it's just an ordinary wardrobe, look! there's the back of it.”

Then everyone looked in and pulled the coats apart; and they all saw — Lucy herself saw — a perfectly ordinary wardrobe. There was no wood and no snow, only the back of the wardrobe, with hooks on it. Peter went in and rapped his knuckles on it to make sure that it was solid.

“A jolly good hoax, Lu,” he said as he came out again, “you have really taken us in, I must admit. We half believed you.”

“But it wasn't a hoax at all,” said Lucy, “really and truly. It was all different a moment ago. Honestly it was, I promise.”¹

Theocentric preaching faces some of the same challenges as Lucy's. It invites the hearer into a story (or a theo-drama) which is unfamiliar and hard to believe. It moves us from the world as we know it into “a place none of us

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe: A Story for Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 19.

has been, a place that has to be believed to be seen.”² It is the type of preaching that, as Willimon has said, “requires no less than a miracle to be heard.”³

This chapter will outline the biblical and theological issues related to theocentric preaching by synthesizing the results of the theological framework and literature review. It will:

- define the terms *theocentric preaching* and *anthropocentric preaching*;
- outline the distinctives of theocentric preaching in contrast to anthropocentric preaching;
- outline the reasons why the preacher should aim to prepare and deliver theocentric sermons;
- discuss the issue of relevance as it relates to theocentric preaching;
- describe the convictions that are foundational to theocentric preaching;
- and
- offer a model for the preparation of theocentric sermons.

The material in this chapter will form the basis of the seminar outline for preachers on theocentric preaching, found in Appendix B.

² U2, “Walk On,” in *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (Interscope Records, 2000), <http://www.u2.com/music/lyrics.php?song=129&list=w>.

³ Willimon, *The Intrusive Word*, 22.

DEFINITION

Dictionaries defines theocentric as “having God as a central focus”⁴ or “centering on God as the prime concern.”⁵ Anthropocentric is defined as “regarding humans as the central element of the universe” or “interpreting reality exclusively in terms of human values and experience.”⁶

James Merrill Anderson offers these definitions:

Anthropocentric describes a presentation that features man or woman as the focal point. It is evident hermeneutically by a concentration on the reactions, lessons and examples of biblical characters. This in turn is reflected homiletically in sermons that are man-centered in orientation, not just in application.

Theocentric refers to the interpretive approach to Scripture that focuses on God. It recognizes that God is the central figure of revelation and his redemptive work is the most significant activity recorded in the Bible.⁷

This section will develop a definition of theocentric and anthropocentric preaching for the preaching seminar based on the following theological presuppositions.

First, the Bible is primarily about God. Although it is written by human authors and recounts the story of many people, the human characters in the

⁴Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “theocentric,” <http://www.askoxford.com/results/?view=dict&freesearch=theocentric> (accessed August 14, 2006).

⁵Dictionary.com, s.v. “theocentric,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/theocentric> (accessed August 14, 2006).

⁶ Dictionary.com, s.v. “anthropocentric,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/anthropocentric> (accessed August 14, 2006).

⁷ Anderson, 7.

Bible are at best supporting actors to the divine theo-drama. Scripture is primarily the revelation of God and his actions in relation to his creation. The Scriptures are a record of God's creative and redemptive actions in history. Scripture is therefore both the Word of God and “the authoritative word *about* God.”⁸

Second, Scripture does not present a series of individual stories. Rather, it presents an overarching meta-story that is the true story of the entire cosmos. The individual stories within Scripture must be understood in the context of the meta-story, which is the story of God and his creative and re-creative actions. They also reveal the nature of the cosmos, including humanity, as it was meant to be. His re-creative actions reveal his plan to make all things new once again.⁹ The center of this meta-story is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ: “Christ the center of redemptive history, Christ the center of Scriptures. In preaching any part of Scripture, one must understand its message in light of that center, Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ Jesus is the “hermeneutical key not only to the history of Israel but to the history of the whole world, and hence to the meaning of life, for he is the Logos through whom all things were created.”¹¹

⁸ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 105.

⁹ Revelation 21:5.

¹⁰ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 227.

¹¹ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 223.

Third, humanity plays a role in the theo-drama. Although the theo-drama's central character is God, God has chosen to create humanity in his image, and he has assigned them a central role within creation as his image-bearers. Scripture reveals God in relationship with humanity, individually and collectively within covenant. God chose to restore humanity as part of his redemptive plan. Most tellingly, God himself became human in the person of Jesus Christ. While the meta-story or theo-drama is primarily about God, it is primarily recounted as it unfolds and intersects with the lives of men and women.

Fourth, the purpose of preaching is to remind listeners of that drama and invite them to enter it as faithful participants. The theo-drama involves people. God chose Abraham; through Abraham, he created a people in covenant with him. The New Testament reveals that God continues to enact his plan by including his people. If the divine theo-drama is a six act play, act five is underway, and God's people play a role. Preaching helps people understand the entire theo-drama, so that they may learn their parts as faithful participants in God's ongoing activity in the world.

With these assumptions in place, it is possible to formulate a working definition of theocentric preaching:

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.

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.

Under this definition, theocentric preaching is closely related to Christocentric preaching. Both theocentric and Christocentric preaching places Jesus at the center of preaching and the fulfillment of God's promises. The opposite of theocentric preaching is not Christocentric preaching, but anthropocentric preaching.

DISTINCTIVES

Theocentric sermons cannot be measured by how much they talk about God. A sermon can talk about people but still be theocentric in character. Many passages of Scripture are expressed in terms of human activity, but still locate that activity in the larger context of the meta-story. The book of Esther, for instance, does not explicitly mention God, but still recounts God's saving actions from a human perspective. A sermon does not have to talk only about God to be about God. God can be revealed through people as they live and act in relation to him.

Even sermons that talk about God are not always theocentric. It is possible for a preacher to exegete a text, and fill the sermon with God, but still fail to proclaim God's saving actions. For instance, a preacher may say that Esther is a book about God's sovereignty, but use the book as a case study on female beauty and influence. A sermon can speak of God but overwhelmingly focus on human examples, needs, and actions, and thus remain anthropocentric.

Since theocentric sermons cannot be recognized by how much they talk about God, they must be identified by other characteristics. The following are three distinctives of theocentric preaching:

1. Theocentric preaching sees God as the main character

First, theocentric preaching sees God as the main character, whereas anthropocentric preaching elevates the role of people, especially individuals. Theocentric preaching affirms that people make meaningful choices; those choices, however, take place in the context of God's sovereignty. In theocentric preaching, God is the main character, and humans are the supporting actors. Even when he is not mentioned, he is in control. In anthropocentric preaching, however, human activity is emphasized.

For example, a preacher may choose to preach a series of sermons on the life of Joseph. An anthropocentric approach might see Joseph's life as series of events, in which key characters play a role in oppressing or promoting

Joseph. Anthropocentric sermons might focus on topics such as sibling rivalry, handling adversity, rising above sexual temptation, and forgiveness. The problem with this approach is that human characters such as Joseph are the main characters of the story.

Joseph's story in Scripture is not primarily about human activity. Neither is it about the character qualities that Joseph possessed that allowed him to rise to a position of prominence and be blessed by God. The whole of Joseph's life may be summarized by his words in Genesis 50:20: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."¹² A theocentric approach understands this story is about God's sovereignty in Joseph's life, and the part that Joseph plays in the larger context of God's covenant with his people.

Theocentric sermons may touch on themes such as jealousy and family relationships, but that is not the focus. The focus is God acting in human history. Humans play a role, but God is the main character.

2. Theocentric preaching focuses on the main story line

Secondly, theocentric sermons are placed within the larger story line of Scripture, whereas anthropocentric sermons tend to isolate texts within a narrower focus. In a theocentric interpretation, each passage is part of a much larger story or theo-drama.¹³ It is not that the story is minimized; instead, it is

¹² Genesis 50:20 (TNIV).

¹³ Goldsworthy, 244.

told more faithfully as part of a larger, continuing story. In anthropocentric sermons, texts are atomized and isolated from their salvation-historical contexts and applied based on intuition, preference, or prejudice.¹⁴

The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is not an isolated story on how to battle sexual temptation. If it is isolated from the larger context, it focuses on human action — in this case, Joseph's character. Joseph, not God, becomes the hero of the text. This can lead to some arbitrary applications. For instance, a preacher may select some parts of the passage that we should bring into our lives, such as fleeing from temptation, but neglect to mention that Joseph's resistance led to him being jailed. Preachers select parts of the passage that suit their purpose, and ignore the parts that are extraneous to their purpose, even if those parts were central to the story.

If one takes a theocentric view of the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, then the focus is not only about Joseph and how to handle temptation. Rather, the focus is also God, who directs the circumstances of Joseph's life and moves him into a position in which he can help preserve God's covenant people. Not even the designs of an evil and unjust character can thwart those plans. What is more, this is just one scene in the larger drama of God's activity to save his people, a drama that continues today. When we face evil and unjust people, we too can know that God's plans will not be thwarted.

¹⁴ Ibid., 99.

Within this theocentric interpretation, one can still talk about resisting sexual temptation, as this allowed Joseph to play his role faithfully in the larger context of what God was doing. But God, not Joseph, is the hero of the story.

One might question why the meta-story is important to theocentric preaching. The main reason is that it locates each person, group, and event in the context of God's ongoing activity. This helps move the focus from humanity to God, without losing the human context. It answers the questions such as: "What is the real story of which my life is a part?"¹⁵ "Where does this passage fit within the story?" "How does this text help me understand the story or drama, and prepare me for my participation in it?"¹⁶

Locating each text and each congregation within the meta-story keeps preachers on track:

To the extent that the church and its leaders are willing to be held accountable to the story which is the gospel, ministry is a great adventure of helping to create a people worthy to tell the story and live it. The faithful pastor keeps calling us back to God. In so doing, the pastor opens our imagination as a church, exposes us to a wider array of possibilities than we could have ever thought possible on our own.¹⁷

¹⁵ Newbigin, 15.

¹⁶ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 268.

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 119-120, 142.

3. Theocentric preaching re-imagines the world

Third, theocentric sermons re-imagine the world. They challenge the listener's worldview by telling the true story of the world, and by challenging worldview-stories which are false. Worldview stories “are the basic stuff of human existence, the lenses through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and, above all, it is the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are.”¹⁸ Preaching invites the listener out of one script, and into a “different script that imaginatively tells one's life differently.”¹⁹ Preaching unfurls this reality and invites the listener to live within it.

In contrast, anthropocentric preaching fails “to cultivate an environment in which people can ask questions about the forces shaping their lives and fueling their anxiety and confusion.”²⁰ Instead of re-imagining life with a biblical worldview, it focuses on how to cope with life within the listener's current worldview. Sermons which address felt needs can fail at this point. Felt needs are not always real needs, and they sometimes need to be exposed as false. Anthropocentric sermons may leave us as “theologically orthodox, morally upright, warmly pious idol worshipers!”²¹

¹⁸ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 124.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 35.

²⁰ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 67-68.

²¹ Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 12.

RATIONALE

Theocentric preaching is preferable to anthropocentric preaching for several reasons.

1. It glorifies God

One reason to preach theocentrically is that it brings glory to God, especially in comparison to anthropocentric sermons. Theocentric preaching reminds us that God is the hero of each text, and he gets the glory. Anthropocentric sermons still talk about God, but place undue emphasis on our role and our needs. God does not yield his glory to another.²² This is ultimately a form of idolatry: putting anything else in God's rightful place.

2. It is more accurate

Theocentric preaching emphasizes accuracy in the study and communication of a Biblical passage. Scripture itself is theocentric, and preaching must be theocentric if it is to stay consistent with Scripture. Anthropocentric readings misinterpret the text and lead to sermons that, while seemingly biblical, fail to recognize that “the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the principle players,”²³ and we are participants, not the main characters. When the theocentric purpose of the text governs the sermon, then that sermon is more accurate to the meaning and the purpose of Scripture.

²² Isaiah 42:8.

²³ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16.

3. It tells a better story

Theocentric preaching also exposes the false stories that hold people captive, even within our churches. It proclaims an alternate story, which is the true story of the world. The North American story promises happiness and peace to those who are successful, famous, and rich. This worldview holds people captive in the never-ending quest to accomplish more, earn more, and win the respect of others. Many in our congregations have accepted this view of reality. No matter how much one accomplishes or earns, and no matter how much praise one receives, others have done better. Happiness is elusive. Sadly, some anthropocentric preaching does not expose this world as false. Instead, it “offers people analgesics borrowed from the wider culture that are baptized with biblical texts” and “fails to cultivate an environment in which people can ask questions about the forces shaping their lives and fueling their anxiety and confusion.”²⁴

Anthropocentric preaching re-enforces a self-help approach to living. Rather than allowing the text to shape our lives by inviting us into a new way of living, it takes the text and imports it into a North American way of thinking, which aims for a better life through self-improvement. This can lead to disillusionment as people discover that the better life offered within this model is just as elusive as that offered by the world.

²⁴ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 67-68.

In contrast, theocentric preaching invites us into an alternate story in which peace does not depend on accomplishments, money, or the praise of people. Theocentric preaching likewise exposes the prevailing worldview as a lie, unfurls reality as God sees it, and proclaims the truth that leads to freedom.²⁵ It does not try to improve our lives within a false story; it tells a true story that leads to freedom.

4. It prepares the congregation for faithful performance

Theocentric preaching enables the congregation to learn the script that calls for “faithful yet creative performance.”²⁶ Theocentric preaching provides both “instruction for understanding the drama and direction for participating fittingly in it.”²⁷ It turns “the gold of the gospel into the workaday stuff of ordinary life.”²⁸ If Scripture is written to call us to perform our role in the theodrama, then only theocentric preaching can instruct and direct us on how to play that role, rather than re-enforce the roles imposed by culture and other influences.

Because Scripture is about God and his mission, a theocentric focus leads people into relationship with God and participation in his continuing mission within the world.

²⁵ John 8:31-32.

²⁶ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 309-310.

5. It frees preaching from “to do” lists

Theocentric preaching helps avoid application fatigue. Anthropocentric sermons can unwittingly place pressure on individuals to perform up to a certain standard, in order to obey a command or conform to an example in the text. Instead of leading to life change, applications can instead lead to hopelessness as they pile up, and as the listener fails to live up to expectations. The listener can begin to despair of ever being able to faithfully live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and the preacher can begin to wonder if anyone is listening.

In contrast, theocentric preaching is not about handing out more “to do” lists. Theocentric preaching recognizes obedience as a response to, not a cause of, spiritual life. Instead of handing out more lists, it unfurls “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.”²⁹ It talks about implication, not just application. The congregation is freed from the weight of commands they cannot keep, and enters into a life of dependence on Christ. Sufficiency is not found in the life of the individual, but in God.

²⁹ Fitch, 142-143.

6. It is expansive

Theocentric preaching thus leads to an expansiveness that is not characteristic of anthropocentric preaching. In theocentric preaching, we begin to understand that Scripture is an ongoing story, and that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is our God, and their story is an ongoing one that includes us. We also understand the end of the story (eschatology), and the knowledge of the story's ending gives us confidence and hope even as we live in what can appear to be uncertain times. The knowledge that our lives are part of something bigger leads us from a human-sized view of history and our lives to a God-sized view.

7. It is sustainable

One of the problems with anthropocentric preaching is that it is demanding. People's needs are never met, and a preaching ministry that is focused on meeting those needs will never do enough. People are not accurate judges of their true needs. Anthropocentric preaching can lead to disillusionment, because of the endless demands from people to have their needs met, and the inability of an anthropocentric message to satisfy those needs. It leaves pastoral ministry “doomed to the petty concerns of helping people feel a bit better rather than inviting them into a dramatic conversion.”³⁰

³⁰ Hauerwas and Willimon, 123.

Theocentric preaching does not begin with the inexhaustible demands of the human condition; it begins with the sufficiency of God. Rather than dwelling in the depth of human need, it lives within the realm of God's richness. The preacher is not pressured to only provide answers; instead, the preacher brings the congregation into the presence of God, who is on a mission to re-create the cosmos and to redeem all things. Discouragement is part of the assignment of preaching, but a theocentric approach reminds us that our sufficiency is not found in ourselves. God, not the preacher, is the only source of eternal satisfaction and joy.

RELEVANCE

The task of the preacher is not to make God or the Bible relevant; God and the Bible are already relevant. In fact, God is “the measure of relevance.”³¹ “Because the Bible is *God's Word*, it has *eternal relevance*; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture.”³²

The task of the preacher is to *demonstrate* the relevance of Scripture to a particular audience. In other words, relevance is inherent in the Biblical text, because it is the Word of God written to communicate a particular mes-

³¹ Fabricius, “Falling Over Things in the Dark.”

³² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 21.

sage for a particular purpose to people. The relevance of the text leads to the relevance of the sermon.³³

The challenge is not relevance as much as it is “transferring a relevant passage from the past to the present.”³⁴ “Every book in the Bible...has *historical particularity*; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written...Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the 'tension' that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*.”³⁵

There are many wrong ways to approach this task, such as allegorizing, spiritualizing, and moralizing.³⁶ Sometimes the original intended meaning of the text and its purpose are still relevant, and it is relatively simple to transfer the passage from past to present. For example, one can easily understand the command to love one’s enemies, and think of how this might apply to contemporary life.

When this is not the case, other methods come into play: highlighting the discontinuity between the original audience's situation; examining the development of the text's subject through Scripture; focusing on other areas of continuity, such as God and our status as covenant people.³⁷ Chapell sug-

³³ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 156-157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁵ Fee and Stuart, 21.

³⁶ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 159-166.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 166-175.

gests an additional way to cross this gap: focusing on the “Fallen Condition Focus,” which is “the mutual human condition that the contemporary believers share with those to whom the text is written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him.”³⁸ Focusing on the “Fallen Condition Focus” is one way to surface an area of need that the modern congregation has in common with the original audience.

The abstraction ladder is another method to bridge the gap between the historical setting and the current reality. 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?”³⁹

³⁸ Chapell, 48-54.

³⁹ Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 308.

Even seemingly irrelevant texts are relevant. They may not address felt needs, but they work in “shaping the spiritual mind” and “training in the ways of grace, of spiritual perceptions, and of what God is really like.”⁴⁰ A sermon that reveals God can be more useful than a how-to sermon on a felt need, which overemphasizes practicality and “may set truth in the mind of our hearers” but fail to “set the logic and pulse of God into their minds and hearts.”⁴¹ David Wells reminds us that “those who are irrelevant in the world by virtue of their relevance to God actually have the most to say to the world.”⁴² Sometimes, when faced with a text which does not deal with a felt need, a preacher can establish relevance by demonstrating that felt needs are not always real needs, and that real needs of great importance are not always felt needs.

One of the best ways for a preacher to preach in a way that is both theocentric and relevant is to work to understand the congregation. “Preachers must learn to exegete their audience as well as the text...Until preachers can be relevant as well as authoritative, their sermons will fall short of the goal.”⁴³

A theocentric approach to Scripture assumes that all Scripture reveals something about God and about the theo-drama of which we are a part. It in-

⁴⁰ Lee Eclov, “The Danger of Practical Preaching,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 319.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 301.

⁴³ Timothy S. Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 486.

volves the listener, because Scripture is our story. All Scripture is relevant to our need to know God better, and to understand the theo-drama so we can play our part more faithfully. All Scripture, properly preached, is relevant:

Understanding the glory of Christ is far more practical than listeners imagine. Properly preached, every sermon based on a passage of Scripture is fundamentally practical. Every author of Scripture wrote to effect change in God's people. It is our job as preachers to find the persuasive logic of that author and put that clearly and persuasively before our people through biblical exposition.⁴⁴

CONVICTIONS

The preacher who desires to prepare and deliver a theocentric sermon must define and clarify convictions about the following three areas:

Orientation

Before the preacher even begins to prepare the message, he or she brings an orientation to the task. This involves one's theology and understanding of what is involved in preaching. The following convictions are foundational to theocentric preaching:

- God is central, not just in Scripture but in all of life.
- Knowing God is intensely practical. Only when we understand God do we understand ourselves, our experience, and the world.
- God desires to be known, and has revealed himself in Scripture.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

- Scripture describes the world as it really is, and tells an over-arching story that encompasses everything. It is not one story among many; it is the true story of the world.
- God has called a people to understand that ongoing story and to become participants in it.
- We do not need to make Scripture relevant, because Scripture is the relevant communication of God to us. Instead, we are called to see the world through the lens of Scripture, so we can understand the world, the meta-story, and our part in it.
- The preaching task imagines this world and invites listeners to re-imagine the world according to Scripture and live within it.
- The preacher cannot borrow from alternate stories of the world in an effort to say something relevant to people. Because of sin and finiteness, people - including preachers - do not have the judgment to discern what they need to hear. Only God is qualified to decide, and he has spoken through Scripture. Scripture is not a self-help book.
- The preacher preaches in submission to the text of Scripture. The text will be the operant authority, or else the preacher forfeits any authority.
- The preacher is called to bring a word about God and the meta-story in a way that engages the interest of God's people through an appeal to those parts of humanity that reflect God's image, instead of those parts

of humanity (such as some felt needs, consumerism, and selfishness) that reflect our fallen nature.

Not every preacher will share all of these convictions. The more the preacher generally agrees with them, however, the more prepared that preacher will be to begin to prepare a theocentric sermon.

Exegesis

Good exegetical techniques will lead to a theocentric interpretation of the text. The theocentric preacher pays careful attention to exegesis and is careful not to misuse God's Word. Specifically, theocentric exegesis is based on the following convictions:

- Scripture is theocentric. The purpose of the Bible is to tell the story of God.
- Each text is best understood in relation to God. The exegete may ask, "What does this passage reveal about God, his redemptive acts, his covenant, his grace, his will for his people?"⁴⁵ God is at work in every event, the account of every character, and the principles of every instruction.⁴⁶
- Each text must be located in its canonical and theological context. All Scripture testifies to Jesus Christ as the center of God's redeeming ac-

⁴⁵ Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 116.

⁴⁶ Chapell, 303.

tion. Every part of Scripture must be understood in light of its center, Jesus Christ.

- The original meaning and purpose of the text is theocentric, and will reveal something about God and his purposes.
- Interpretations that allegorize, spiritualize, or moralize fall short of God's theocentric purpose for the text.
- Texts that command obedience, especially in epistles, must be linked to texts within the same book that expound the gospel. God's gift and his commands (theology and ethics) are always linked.⁴⁷

Homiletics

A good homiletical approach will maintain the integrity of the exegesis, and use it as the basis for a theocentric sermon to a specific congregation.

The following convictions guide this process:

- The idea and purpose of the sermon must be the same as, or congruent with, the central message and purpose of the text, rather than isolated elements within the text.
- The goal of the sermon is to re-describe the world through the lens of Scripture; to unfurl “a reality we could not see apart from being engulfed in the story of God from creation to redemption.”⁴⁸ By revealing God, it will help people “understand themselves, who they are, where

⁴⁷ Migliore, 15.

⁴⁸ Fitch, 142-143.

they are going, and what they are to do in terms of Jesus Christ and his story.”⁴⁹

- Preaching, like exegesis, must center on Christ. “All God's blessings are in him: none of them are found apart from him.”⁵⁰
- Application must remain theocentric. Theocentric preaching avoids “Be like,” “Be good,” and “Be disciplined” messages that are not tied to the gospel. At the end of the sermon, listeners must look to God, not themselves, for their security.⁵¹
- Theocentric sermons avoid appealing to self-interest and felt needs that are based on sinful cravings. If a sermon touches on such a felt need, it exposes it and supplants it with Christ.⁵²

MODEL

Preparing messages that are theocentric requires sound methods.

“Clear, relevant biblical exposition does not take place Sunday after Sunday by either intuition or accident. Good expositors have methods for their

⁴⁹ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁰ Smith, 121.

⁵¹ Chapell, 237.

⁵² Horton, 81.

study.”⁵³ Methods are important, although theocentric preaching, like expository preaching, “at its core is more a philosophy than a method.”⁵⁴

All true expository preaching is theocentric preaching. One definition of expository preaching states:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of the passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.⁵⁵

Since the Bible is theocentric, then we can assume that the “biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of the passage in its context,” will be theocentric. It will tell us something about God, his will, and his activities. Even when it tells us something about creation, including humanity, it will be in relation to God and in the context of redemptive history.

This definition states that the biblical (theocentric) concept will first be applied to the preacher through the Holy Spirit. In this stage, the preacher will be called to see the world through the lens of Scripture, to re-imagine the world and to live within the reality that God describes. While practical applications are important, obedience begins with a conversion of the imagination, in which our view of the world is transformed into a view of God's all-en-

⁵³ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

compassing plan to re-create all things. We interpret our reality in the light of Jesus Christ and the meta-story that is the true story of the world.

Eventually, the biblical, theocentric concept is applied to the listeners. Listeners are invited to re-imagine the world and to live within the reality the text describes. The preacher relates the biblical concept within the larger context of what God is doing, and describes how this reality shapes our lives. Listeners begin to imagine the world differently, and this leads to changed perspectives and ultimately to changed lives.

The following model is based on the method suggested by Haddon Robinson in *Biblical Preaching* with some minor modifications. It borrows at points from other methods (Appendix A). Robinson's methods alone, if applied carefully, will lead to theocentric sermons. This section will highlight some areas to which the preacher must pay special attention so that the sermons do not drift into anthropocentrism.

Stage 1: Choose the passage to be preached

General Principles

The selection of a preaching text is important. The text — its message and its purpose — will govern the rest of the process. Not every passage is as relevant to a particular congregation. “While all Scripture is profitable, not

every Scripture possesses equal profit for a congregation at a particular time.”⁵⁶

Many churches follow a liturgical cycle of prescribed readings. Preachers in these churches have a text, or set of texts, chosen for them. Following prescribed readings can be beneficial in helping a church see itself as part of God’s larger story.

Other churches, however, give their preachers complete freedom in selecting texts. In such a church, the preacher must be familiar with the needs of the congregation, and equally familiar with Scriptures whose theocentric message addresses the needs of that congregation. Based on this knowledge, the preacher then selects a text, a literary unit (not a clause or fragment), which addresses this need.

Greidanus writes:

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.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁷ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 281.

The main thing is that “preachers must at all cost do justice to the biblical text and not twist it into responding to a different issue than its author originally intended.”⁵⁸ If, after study, the preacher finds that the text does not address the selected need, “we must either look for a different text or develop the text into a sermon that will meet a different need than that which we first intended.”⁵⁹

The importance of the selection of the text underlines the need for the preacher to develop a broad knowledge of Scripture, and to study outside of the text for next week's sermon. Preachers with a good knowledge of Scripture will be better prepared to select texts that relate to congregational needs, and will discover congregational needs through the study of the text.

Theocentric Focus

It is important to highlight three issues in the selection of the text in relation to theocentric preaching.

First, the preacher must be certain that they have understood the need that the text addresses. Surface readings may lead to inaccurate and anthropocentric interpretations. The following questions may help the preacher to decide whether the text is relevant to congregational needs within a theocentric framework:

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

- What about God — his character, will, and activity — does this congregation need to know? Which 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?

Secondly, the preacher must be careful to locate the text within its larger context. The sermon on Joseph and Potiphar's wife appears to be a self-contained story about temptation and lust if viewed alone. When placed in its wider context, the meaning and purpose of the story changes. Many passages must be interpreted in the context of the entire book in which they are placed. Events in historical narratives are told as parts of a larger narrative. Ethical sections in epistles are tied to doctrinal sections. One cannot understand the part without seeing the whole — how each passage functions within the book, and how each book functions within the entire canon of Scripture.

Third, a theocentric approach may lead to preaching even seemingly irrelevant passages. Some passages have been preached for generations, while others are largely ignored. Theocentric preaching sees even the ignored passages as part of the theo-drama and therefore important. Sometimes the greatest need of the congregation is to be connected to the Bible's central story line, and the best way to do this is to preach on passages that others

ignore, demonstrating their relevance to the story of which we are a part. After preaching through Leviticus, Rob Bell wrote, “I wanted people to know that the whole biblical story...is alive. The Scriptures are a true story, rooted in historical events and actual people. But many people don't see the connection between the Moses part and the Jesus part.”⁶⁰ The preacher's job is to make the connection between each passage and the story line, which is centered in Jesus, and which is our story line as well.

Stage 2: Study the passage

The process of exegesis, or of studying the passage, involves a number of steps.

General Principles

First, the preacher reads the text, both as a unit and in its wider context. The focus is “to become aware of the big picture, to see the forest before we focus on the trees.”⁶¹ Craddock writes:

This first reading is a spontaneous, even naïve, engagement with the text. All faculties of mind and heart are open, with no concern for what one ought to think, much less what one will say later in the sermon. This is the time to listen, think, feel, imagine, and ask...And by all means, no other books or study aids are to be used at this point; they will have their chance later.⁶²

⁶⁰ Rob Bell, “Life in Leviticus,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 281.

⁶¹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 282.

⁶² Fred B. Craddock. *Preaching* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1985), 105-106.

As the preacher engages the text, those initial questions and insights may provide guidance for introducing the text to the congregation when it is time to preach the sermon.

The next stage is to begin to understand the structure of the text within its context. Robinson writes:

Remember that you're looking for the author's ideas. Begin by stating in rough fashion what you think the writer is talking about — that is, his *subject*. Then try to determine what major assertion(s) the biblical writer is making *about* the subject, that is, the complement(s).⁶³

The structure of the text will vary depending on its genre. Understanding the structure will lead to a greater understanding of the parts and the whole, and may give the preacher a tentative idea of the meaning and purpose of that passage.

The next step is to exegete the steps using different strands of interpretation:

- Literary Interpretation — Literary interpretation helps us understand the genre of the text, the form of the text, and how it functions within its context. It examines issues such as the literary function, placement, detail, and authorship of a text,⁶⁴ as well as the flow of the text. An understanding of how different genres function will often lead to an understanding of the meaning and purpose of the text.

⁶³ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 61.

⁶⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 12-16.

- Grammatical Interpretation — In grammatical interpretation, “we raise questions about verbs, adverbs, nouns, pronouns, and adjectives (grammar) as well as sentence structure (syntax).”⁶⁵ “Are any grammatical points in doubt? Could any sentences, clauses, or phrases be read differently if the grammar were construed differently?...Are the syntactical formulations in your passage clearly understood?”⁶⁶ At this point, the preacher also explains words and concepts that are not obvious, and conducts word studies of the most crucial words and wordings.⁶⁷
- Historical-Cultural Interpretation — “Historical-cultural context relates to just about anything outside the text that will help you understand the text itself.”⁶⁸ This step provides information about the biblical writer, the biblical audience, the social setting, historical foreground, geography, and date of the passage.⁶⁹

Douglas Stuart suggests that a preacher can expect to spend four hours on this type of exegesis, depending on the preacher's skills and experience.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 284.

⁶⁶ Stuart, 20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁶⁸ Duvall and Hays, 100.

⁶⁹ Stuart, 9-12.

⁷⁰ Stuart, 67-81.

Theocentric Focus

The preacher's exegetical work is not done. Four other types of exegesis are necessary in theocentric preaching:

- 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.”⁷¹
- 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?⁷² What does this passage mean in the context of the whole Bible?⁷³
- 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?”⁷⁴ Where does it fit within the story line of Scripture? Greidanus outlines a number of ways in which Old Testament Scriptures are linked to Christ:

⁷¹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 286.

⁷² Stuart, 81.

⁷³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 288.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

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?⁷⁵

- Theological Interpretation — The immediate goal of theological interpretation is to “identify what the writer of the text in question regarded as truth from his particular historical/theological perspective.”⁷⁶ Theological interpretation also examines antecedent theology, the theology of the text, and how that theology is developed in later Scriptures.⁷⁷ The result will be a theological proposition and structure that expresses the timeless theological truth of the passage in a way that is applicable to the original situation, and thus to corresponding contemporary situations.⁷⁸

The goal of exegesis is not to dissect a text and understand its parts. It is to understand what the text reveals about God, and about creation in relation to God. It leads us to imagine the world differently as a result of what is revealed through Scripture. It locates the individual text within the larger drama of which we are a part.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Warren, 476.

⁷⁷ Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology.”

⁷⁸ Warren, 477.

This phase of exegesis is estimated to take an additional hour of study.⁷⁹ Because the meaning and the purpose of the text governs the sermon, this is a crucial stage of the preparation process.

Stage 3: Discover the Exegetical Idea

General Principles

Study leads to a clearer understanding of the text as a whole. At this stage of the preparation, the preacher asks, “Exactly what is the biblical writer talking about?”⁸⁰ This forms the subject of the text, which should be as specific as possible and fit all the parts of the text. The preacher then asks what the text says about that subject, which forms the complement. The preacher then relates the parts of the passage to the idea. “This is sweaty, difficult work,” Robinson writes, “but it has to be done.”

This step will lead the preacher to an understanding of the claim the text makes upon the original audience. It helps to reveal the theme and purpose of the text, which will later guide the theme and purpose of the sermon.

Theocentric Focus

In a theocentric approach, 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

⁷⁹ Stuart, 81.

⁸⁰ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 66.

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.⁸¹

It is wise to check that the exegetical idea expressed at this point has a theocentric focus, to ensure that it truly expresses the meaning of the text.

Stage 4: Analyze the Exegetical Idea

General Principles

The preacher now begins to move into the contemporary world. Having understood the idea of the text, that idea must begin to enter the modern world and its questions. It must begin to encounter the world of the congregation and its issues.

In analyzing the exegetical text, the preacher goes to the text along with the congregation:

When preachers go to the Scripture, then, they must take the people with them, since what will be heard is a word for them. How does the preacher do this? In part, we do this by heightening the awareness of our own struggle to be faithful. The more honest we are with ourselves about our own lives — the places of strength and trust, the crevices of doubt, the moments of kindness, the hidden cruelties — the more we find ourselves on common ground with others who will hear the sermon. Eventually we will be the preacher of the sermon, but we must not forget that we will be one of its hearers as well. When we go to the Scripture seeking not “what the people ought to hear” but hungering ourselves for a gospel word, we will hear a word for them too.⁸²

⁸¹ Warren, 478.

⁸² Long, 64.

The preacher may study alone while thinking of the people who will hear the sermon preached. Other preachers gather a small group, “to listen to the text, to study it together, to raise questions about it, and to name the concerns it evokes.”⁸³ The preacher goes to the text from, on behalf, and with the congregation, doing the work of exegesis as the chosen representative of that congregation.⁸⁴

On behalf of the congregation, the preacher asks questions of the exegetical idea. “When we make any declarative statement, we can do only four things with it: we can restate it, explain it, prove it, or apply it. Nothing else.”⁸⁵ Restatement says the same thing in other words, but does not develop the thought. To develop the exegetical thought, the preacher can ask three questions:

- What does it mean? (explanation) — The text may be explanatory. Also, elements of the text may need to be explained to the congregation.
- Is it true? (proof) — “Today we can count on an attitude of questioning and doubt.”⁸⁶ To speak a word from God to people, the preacher must

⁸³ Ibid., 64-65.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁸⁵ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 75.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 82.

anticipate elements which the audience may not accept as true, and develop the questions and, as much as possible, the answers.

- What difference does it make? (application) — “The Bible is an intensely practical book because it is written not only to be understood, but to be obeyed.” Application is dangerous territory for a sermon. “More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis.”⁸⁷ The key to perceptive application is accurate exegesis.⁸⁸ “Application must come from the theological purpose of the Biblical writer.”⁸⁹

The importance of application cannot be emphasized enough:

Sermon is a presentation designed to apply the word of God to the lives of people. Without application, a talk is not a sermon; it may be a lecture, lesson, or the like, but it is not a sermon. Be sure that you construct a sermon that provides to your people an absolutely clear, practicable, and exegetically based application.⁹⁰

Theocentric Focus

This stage of sermon development is crucial for the development of theocentric sermons. Here the preacher can anticipate the questions that people might bring to the text, and reorient them to God's purpose within the text. The preacher can use the questions of the audience to bring the congregation to the deeper issues surfaced by the text.

⁸⁷ Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 306.

⁸⁸ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 87.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹⁰ Stuart, 86.

This stage is also where the preacher must work to keep the application consistent with the theocentric meaning and purpose of the text. Application takes place when a “faithful adherence to the purpose and the audience of the text” meets “knowledge of the contemporary need.”⁹¹

A theocentric approach will guard against three dangers of application.

The first danger is an over-emphasis on action as the response to every text. Lee Eclov warns of two fallacies about biblical preaching: The “Bottom Line Fallacy” and the “Practical Fallacy.”⁹² When we preach only the bottom line, we run into danger:

Sermons that are abstracts of Scripture 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. Without a truth trail, people cannot find their own way to the outposts of truth in their own hearts.⁹³

When we focus only on being practical, we miss the larger purpose of Scripture, which not only “addresses everyday concerns” but also civilizes our thinking:

The Bible spends much more time on shaping the spiritual mind than commanding particular behavior. We need far more training in the ways of grace, of spiritual perceptions, and of what God is really like than we do in how to communicate with our spouse. Understanding the glory of Christ is far more practical than our listeners imagine.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Warren, 482.

⁹² Eclov, 317.

⁹³ Eclov, 318.

⁹⁴ Eclov, 319.

Application may involve asking some big questions. “The pastoral preacher's query, 'How can I help people with the problems of this day?' is a powerful and important question, but sometimes it may simply be too small.”⁹⁵ The purpose may be to call for reformation and transformation by asking big questions:

What bearing does the gospel have on the everyday decisions and actions of the community of faith and its individual members? What patterns of our own life, what institutional structures that we may have long taken for granted, must now be called into question by the gospel? What structures of evil must be named and challenged if the gospel is to have any concrete impact on human life in the present? Where can we discern the signs of new beginnings in a world marked by violence, terror, injustice, and apathy?⁹⁶

A second danger in application is an overemphasis on individuals.

Thomas Long explains how this happens:

To think of the preacher as a pastor almost inevitably views the hearers as a collection of discrete individuals who have personal problems and needs rather than as a congregation, as a church, as a community with a mission. The public, corporate, and systemic dimensions of the gospel are often downplayed in favor of more personalistic themes. In a culture where people “shop” for churches and expect churches to meet their self-defined needs, pastoral preaching can end up reinforcing selfishness and undermining the call of the gospel to move out of ourselves and toward others in service.⁹⁷

Scripture passages are often written to a group, people, nation, or church.

Only a few are addressed to individuals, and even these received a wider

⁹⁵ Long, 33.

⁹⁶ Migliore, 15.

⁹⁷ Long, 32.

reading. Preaching can become anthropocentric when the purpose is shifted toward the individual, especially if it reenforces the autonomy and freedom of the individual at the expense of God's people as a whole.

A third danger is that of imposing an anthropocentric purpose on the text. The purpose of the text should be theocentric, but application can sometimes lead to anthropocentric interpretations of the text. An application may be given to imitate a character in the text. Stuart writes:

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.⁹⁸

The only time that exemplarism is valid is when the preacher is convinced that it is the intention of Scripture that the passage be applied in that way.

Haddon Robinson reminds us:

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. At different times He is the Creator, a good Father, the Redeemer, a rejected Lover, a Husband, a King, a Savior, a Warrior, a Judge, a Reaper, a vineyard Keeper, a banquet Host, a Fire, a Hen protecting her chicks, and so on.

As you study, then, there are at least four questions you want to ask of a passage:

⁹⁸ Stuart, 83.

- First, what is the vision of God in this particular text?
- Second, where precisely do I find that in the passage? (The vision of God is always in the specific words and the life situation of the writer or the readers.)
- Third, what is the function of this vision of God? What implications for belief or behavior did the author draw from the image?
- Fourth, what is the significance of that picture for me and for others?⁹⁹

Application takes place when the preacher sees what the “passage reveals about God and the way that people responded and lived before God,”¹⁰⁰ and as the preacher imagines these same factors in contemporary life. “How does the condition of people today reflect the [condition]...of women and men centuries ago? What vision of God do they need? How do they respond or not respond to that vision?”¹⁰¹ Robinson suggests that we ask questions such as these:

- Where do the dynamics of the biblical situation show up today?
- So what? What real difference does the truth about God make to me or others? What difference should it make? What difference could it make? Why doesn't it make a difference?
- Can I picture for my listeners in specific terms how this vision of God might be one they need in a particular situation? Would there ever be an occasion when someone might come to me with a problem or need and I would point them to this passage and this truth?

⁹⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Listeners feel that a sermon is relevant when they can say, “I can see how that would apply to my life.”¹⁰²

Asking questions like these “help us move with integrity from the biblical text to the modern situation.”¹⁰³ In this stage, sermons are born that are both theocentric and relevant to modern listeners.

Stage 5: Formulate the Homiletical Idea

General Principles

Preaching is a personal act. “Remember that you are not lecturing to people about the Bible,” Robinson writes. “You are talking to people about themselves from the Bible.”¹⁰⁴ In moving toward the sermon, the preacher must translate the exegetical idea into a homiletical idea, which is “the biblical truth applied to life.”¹⁰⁵ It is the essence of the exegetical idea in a sentence that communicates to the listeners.

The homiletical idea helps the listener to remember the message. “People are more likely to think God's thoughts after Him, and to live and love and choose on the basis of those thoughts, when they are couched in memorable sentences.”¹⁰⁶ It should be stated as simply and memorably as possible,

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 104.

in concrete and familiar terms, and focused on the response. The listener should sense that the preacher is talking to them about them.¹⁰⁷

Theocentric Focus

With a theocentric sermon, the homiletical idea must include God. “By all means, that 'big idea' should be something that helps [the 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.”¹⁰⁸ Another author suggests, “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.”¹⁰⁹ 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

General Principles

Every sermon needs a purpose. Biblical truth must be applied to life and call for some action. “The purpose states what you expect to happen in your hearers as a result of preaching your sermon.”¹¹⁰ The preacher deter-

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

¹⁰⁸ Stuart, 85.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Scott Wilson, “The Source of Passion,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 590.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 107.

mines the sermon's purpose by “discovering the purpose behind the passage you are preaching.”¹¹¹ The purpose of the sermon must be in line with the purpose of the biblical passage.

It is important to guard against some common mistakes in formulating the purpose, such as allegorizing, spiritualizing, imitating biblical characters, or moralizing.¹¹²

The purpose of the sermon may be cognitive (giving knowledge and insight) or affective (changing attitudes or suggesting actions). The purpose calls for a verdict or response from the congregation.

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 purpose 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?¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ibid., 108.

¹¹² Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 159-164.

¹¹³ Greg R. Scharf, “God's Letter of Intent,” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 231-232.

The purpose, and the way the text accomplishes that purpose, will help keep the sermon on target.

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.¹¹⁴ Theology helps us acquire “the ability to see, feel, and taste the world as disclosed in the biblical texts.”¹¹⁵ While each text provides its own purpose, Scripture, taken together, leads us to see the world differently, and to act in the context of God and what he is doing in the world.

Stage 7: Decide on How to Accomplish This Purpose

General Principles

The preacher walks a tightrope in preparing a sermon. The sermon can drift in one of two directions: a loss of faithfulness to the text or a loss of relevance to the listener. In the early stages of exegesis, faithfulness to the text is the primary issue. The goal in these stages is to establish faithfulness of the text through an understanding of its message and purpose, and its corresponding message and purpose to today. The message and purpose of the text governs the rest of the preparation process. In later stages, the emphasis shifts to crafting a sermon for an audience.

¹¹⁴ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 268.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 285.

In this stage, the preacher shapes the sermon to accomplish its purpose. “A sermon's form, although often largely unperceived by the hearers, provides shape and energy to the sermon and thus becomes itself a vital force in how a sermon makes meaning.”¹¹⁶ The form is “an organizational plan for deciding what kinds of things will be said and done in a sermon and in what sequence.”¹¹⁷

The sermon may be outlined 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), or inductively.

Theocentric Focus

The move toward the audience cannot begin too early in the preparation process. If the preacher begins thinking about relevance too soon, the temptation will be to sacrifice faithfulness to the text. By this stage in the process, the preacher will have already understood the meaning and purpose of the text as it relates to the congregation. For the rest of the process, the focus will be on communicating a sermon in line with that homiletical idea and purpose.

The form of the sermon is in line with its theocentric homiletical idea and purpose. To evaluate, the preacher may ask:

¹¹⁶ Long, 118.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

- (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.¹¹⁸

Stage 8: Outline the Sermon

General Principles

Some argue that the outline of the text must determine the form of the sermon. However, “the biblical writer did not have your audience in mind...Unless you remain flexible in the ways you communicate passages, you will find it impossible to accomplish the purpose of some passages with your audience.”¹¹⁹ Timothy Warren writes, “The shape, logic, and development of contemporary communication must meet the demand of the contemporary audience, though without violating the theological proposition expressed in the text.”¹²⁰

The outline serves 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.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 132.

¹²⁰ Warren, 481.

- It reveals where additional supporting material is needed.¹²¹

A sermon outline should be simple with relatively few points. Each point will represent an idea. Some points will have sub-points, which further develop the idea.¹²² Thomas Long suggests that the preacher begins with the focus and function of the sermon, divides the larger, overall tasks of the sermon into smaller components, and decides the sequence in which those tasks should be done.¹²³ Andy Stanley and Lane Jones suggest that the outline should be relational, “built around the communicator's relationship with the audience rather than content.”¹²⁴ This approach outlines material in order to maintain a conversational tone in the message:

With this approach the communicator introduces a dilemma he or she has faced or is currently facing (ME). From there you find common ground with your audience around the same or a similar dilemma (WE). Then you transition to the text to discover what God says about the tension or question you have introduced (GOD). Then you challenge your audience to act on what they have just heard (YOU). And finally, you close with several statements about what could happen in your community, your church, or the world, if everybody embraced that particular truth.¹²⁵

Thomas Long lists a variety of outline types:

1. If this...then this...and thus this.

¹²¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 132.

¹²² Ibid., 132-135.

¹²³ Long, 136-140.

¹²⁴ Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change* (Sisters: Multnomah, 2006), 119.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 120.

2. This is true...in this way...and also in this way...and in this other way too.
3. This is the problem...this is the response of the gospel...these are the implications.
4. This is the promise of the gospel...here is how we may live out that promise.
5. This is the historical situation in the text...these are the meanings for us now.
6. Not this...or this...or this...or this...but this.
7. Here is a prevailing view...but here is the claim of the gospel.
8. This...but what about this?...well, then this...Yes, but what about this?...and so on.
9. Here is a story. (single story, story/reflection, part of a story/reflection/ rest of the story, issue/story).
10. Here is a letter (addressed to the congregation or to someone else).
11. This?...or that?...both this and that.¹²⁶

The outline should provide the sermon with unity, order, and progress.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Long, 166-168.

¹²⁷ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 132.

Theocentric Focus

For a preacher who is preaching theocentrically, the main consideration in evaluating the outline is that it faithfully communicates the theocentric big idea in line with the purpose of the sermon.

Stage 9: Fill in the Sermon Outline

General Principles

Chapell writes, “The most powerful sermons bring truth to life by demonstrating and applying textual truths. Traditional expository messages fulfill these obligations when they include illustration and application along with explanation in every main point.”¹²⁸ 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.”¹²⁹

The options are endless: restatement, definition and explanation, factual information, quotations, narration, and illustrations.¹³⁰ “We understand most fully what is real to us.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Chapell, 175.

¹²⁹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 140.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 140-162.

¹³¹ Chapell, 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.”¹³² 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

General Principles

Introductions capture interest, uncover needs, and introduce the body of the message. “Early in the sermon...your listeners should realize that you are talking to them about themselves.”¹³³ 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. “Nothing is more important for the credibility of a speaker and the reception of a message than listeners' perception of the preacher's concern for them...No hearer has reason to progress beyond a sermon's introduction if it does not point to an obvious personal consequence.”¹³⁴

¹³² Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 155.

¹³³ Ibid., 171.

¹³⁴ Chapell, 241.

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.¹³⁵

Theocentric Focus

One way to introduce the sermon theocentrically is to focus on the need surfaced by the sermon:

You raise a question, probe a problem, identify a need, open up a vital issue to which the passage speaks. Contrary to the traditional approach to homiletics, which holds the application until the conclusion, application starts in the introduction. 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.¹³⁶

The introduction may be the place in the sermon in which the preacher reflects an anthropocentric view. The preacher describes the world from a human perspective, with the purpose of raising the needs that arise from an anthropocentric approach to life. Once the issues are raised, the preacher can move to what the Bible reveals about God, his will, and his actions. The preacher begins by describing the world the way we normally see it, before unfurling the reality of God and the difference that makes in all of life. The introduction can be anthropocentric, as long as it leads to the theocentric message and purpose of the text.

¹³⁵ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 176-179.

¹³⁶ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 171.

In the conclusion, the key factor in concluding a theocentric message is the purpose. “Generally speaking, sermons aim to teach, to evoke a feeling, to call for action, or some combination of the three.”¹³⁷ The conclusion asks for that response, in line with the theocentric purpose of the sermon.

Summary

Throughout all of the stages, the theocentric nature of the passage of Scripture guides the development of the sermon. The preacher moves back and forth between the text and the congregation. The preacher faces three horizons at different stages of development:

- The human horizon — At some points, the preacher represents the people — their needs, views, doubts, and concerns — to the text. At these stages, the preacher is closer to the congregation, speaking on behalf of them to the text. The needs of the congregation move closer to the view in these stages: in selecting the text, analyzing the exegetical idea, deciding how to accomplish the purpose of the sermon, and introducing the sermon.
- The textual horizon — At other stages, the preacher focuses almost exclusively on the text: in studying the passage, and determining the exegetical idea. At these stages, the preacher does not focus on the audience and its needs.

¹³⁷ Long, 193.

- The common horizon - Preaching brings the human and textual horizon together into focus as one. For most of the development, the preacher works to bring the two horizons together. Although the text and its theocentric message and purpose governs the development, the preacher moves between the text and the congregation, bringing them closer together, so that the Word of God becomes a word for them. The preacher works at this common horizon in the following stages: formulating the homiletical idea and purpose, deciding how to accomplish the purpose, outlining the sermon, filling in the sermon outline, and preparing the introduction and conclusion.

The preacher dances. The dance leads the preacher between the congregation and the text, and back again, until the sermon becomes both theocentric in nature and a relevant word for a particular congregation.

Bryan Chapell describes the goal of this type of approach to preaching:

The goal is to encourage preachers to see and proclaim the relationship God establishes with his people and reveals in all Scripture so that they may glorify and enjoy him forever. Only when people look beyond themselves for spiritual health do they find their sole hope and source of power to do what God requires. Preaching the message of God's deliverance that beckons in all Scripture turns God's people away from self and to God as the provider of their present healing and eternal hope. This is the bottom line of Christ-centered preaching: When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to God for their security? Only when they know to look to God alone has a sermon been truly beneficial and biblical.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Chapell, 327.

Preaching sermons that are both theocentric and relevant is no easy task, but it is worth it. There is no better, more helpful, God-glorifying, or satisfying way to preach and equip God's people to become skillful participants in his continuing drama of redemption.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVALUATION OF THE SEMINAR

On September 19, 2006, I presented a seminar on theocentric preaching, based on the material in this thesis, to a group of pastors. The desired outcome of the seminar was “to understand why and how to prepare theocentric sermons that are both faithful and relevant.” Appendix B contains the goals and objectives of the seminar, the seminar outline, a copy of the invitation to the seminar and seminar poster, as well as a revised copy of the seminar workbook.

Attendees were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the seminar. This chapter will describe the event, and summarize the evaluative feedback and my own reflections on the seminar.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SEMINAR

Promotion

To promote the seminar, I mailed invitations to 33 pastors and seminary faculty members. I also distributed invitations to pastors at a regional

meeting of pastors, and advertised the event on my website¹ and on a website I created on the subject of theocentric preaching.²

Attendees

Of those invited, 18 attended the seminar. Most who attended were preaching pastors from my denomination, the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada. Three were on staff in churches in which preaching is not a primary responsibility; one who attended is not on staff at a church but expressed interest in a theocentric approach to ministry. Two of the attendees were female.

Pastors who attended represent churches of various sizes, from single-staff churches of under fifty people to multi-staff churches with an average weekly attendance of 1,400 people.

The Seminar

Tables and chairs were set in a U-shape to facilitate interaction. I placed myself at the open end of the U with a stool and lectern next to the whiteboard. Each attendee received a workbook.

The day began with introductions. I asked each attendee to identify themselves, and describe why they were attending and what they hoped to

¹ Darryl Dash, "Theocentric Preaching Seminar," DashHouse.com, http://www.dash-house.com/darryl/2006/08/theocentric_pre_3.htm.

² Ibid., "Theocentric Preaching Seminar," Theocentric Preaching, <http://www.theocentricpreaching.com/2006/08/09/theocentric-preaching-seminar/>.

accomplish through the seminar. Reasons for attending were twofold: to support me, and because of interest in theocentric preaching.

After the introductions, the remainder of the first session, and the first third of the second session, were designed to present foundational material in lecture format. I aimed to describe the shifts that had led to anthropocentrism in the Church, outline convictions foundational to theocentric preaching, define theocentric and anthropocentric preaching, and describe the benefits of theocentric preaching. The rest of the sessions were designed to be interactive, applying a model of theocentric sermon preparation to three passages of Scripture.

Almost immediately, attendees wanted to interact with material that I had planned to present in lecture format. As a result, the lecture portion of the day was discussed heavily, and the interactive portion of the day was not as interactive due to time pressure. The last part of session three and all of session four were especially rushed. As a result, attendees were not able to cover all the material contained in the workbook.

The day appeared to go quickly, and attendees seemed engaged by the topic, and eager to discuss the issues related to theocentric preaching. Many within the group seemed to agree almost immediately with the content of the seminar. One attendee was outspoken in opposing a theocentric approach, arguing that it did not place enough emphasis on humanity. Others grappled with specific issues, particularly the validity of exemplary preaching,

which presents biblical characters as models to emulate, and hermeneutics — specifically the use of propositional statements such as the exegetical and homiletical ideas in a postmodern context. Many expressed a desire to see examples of theocentric preaching in practice. I had planned to illustrate theocentric preaching inductively, but time did not allow for much of this to happen. Therefore, attendees were not able to see the principles in practice as much as I had hoped.

The seminar ended on schedule. Some expressed a desire to read my thesis; one invited me to preach so he could see theocentric preaching in practice. Many expressed appreciation for the seminar, and some stayed behind to continue discussing the topic. Of the 18 who attended, 15 completed the seminar evaluation.

EVALUATIVE FEEDBACK

Quantitative Feedback

The seminar evaluation contained three quantitative questions related to the delivery, content, and effectiveness of the seminar. Attendees were asked to rate the seminar using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent

The first question asked attendees to rate the delivery of the seminar. The average (mean) score was 4.5 out of 5, indicating that the delivery was between good and excellent. The distribution of scores was fairly narrow.

The second question asked attendees to rate the content of the seminar. The range of responses to this question was identical to that of the first.

The final quantitative question asked attendees to rate the effectiveness of the seminar. This question received a broader range of responses, from 2 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Although the average (mean) score was 4.1 out of 5, slightly better than good, it is clear that not everyone agreed that the seminar had been effective.

I found the quantitative evaluation encouraging. Attendees clearly found the delivery and the content of the seminar to be helpful. Most found the seminar to be effective, although not everyone agreed. I imagine that the seminar's effectiveness was limited somewhat by the time pressures we faced in covering the material, especially the sections that were designed to illustrate theocentric preaching in practice.

Attendees were also asked if they had learned anything new in the seminar. All of those who completed an evaluation answered yes.

The next section will summarize the answers to the qualitative questions, including what attendees identified they had learned.

Qualitative Feedback

The seminar evaluation asked four qualitative questions.

First, attendees were asked to identify what they had learned in the seminar. Most identified what they had learned in cognitive terms:

- The struggle of attempting to balance the theocentric approach to preaching; I get that and it is about treating the text for what it is
- The concept of the theo-drama
- To emphasize the main actor in the theo-drama
- I now understand what the term theocentric preaching means
- Some connecting themes in the passages that we studied
- The thought of the misuse of application that can come up
- I was challenged to rethink my approach to preaching; it helped me to learn a biblical approach and method to preaching
- New perspective
- That preaching is not an easy task

Some said that they were reminded of what they already knew:

- Reminding of old truth
- A reminder that God wrote a book and it is called the Bible, and the Bible is about theo-drama

Others identified what they had learned in affective terms:

- A call back to the centrality of what my calling is
- Refreshed the desire to deliver the right message as opposed to the delivery of a message

Although attendees learned different things, the learnings identified by attendees all correlated to material that was covered in the seminar, and many of them related to the teaching objectives of the seminar.

Second, attendees were asked to identify the seminar's strengths.

Some responses identified strengths in terms of the content of the seminar:

- Relevance to the church's current state in terms of coming out of the seeker sensitive model
- Provision of an easy to follow handout
- Excellent material presented
- It revealed the complexity and tensions inherent in trying to identify how to preach Christ faithfully; gave some helpful warnings about how we can miss that
- Challenge to be true to the text in our preaching
- Helped me re-think my preaching methodology

Many identified strengths in terms of the format and delivery of the seminar:

- Size of group
- Clear and succinct
- Well communicated
- Great non-threatened interaction
- Interaction opened up more depth in approaching the subject
- Openness
- Joint learning

- Presented not as a know-it-all but as a fellow journeyer
- Courage to convey convictions
- Enthusiasm
- Darryl's obvious growth through the study
- Darryl's humility, honest, and research

There seems to be a consensus that both the material and the format of the seminar were strengths. The most commonly identified strength was the interactive format.

Next, attendees were asked to identify the seminar's weaknesses. Responses are as follows:

- Needed to be more hands-on; more time looking at specific examples
- Perhaps too much time on the up-front stuff
- I think we could have emphasized more of the theocentric application points with Haddon's model/steps
- The material should have been sent before, so that we didn't lose time to "warm up" and spend more time on "doing" it
- Too short
- Concepts easy to understand but hard to apply in the midst of the seminar
- Not enough time but good use of time
- Too much information to cover

- One text was probably all we could handle, although I appreciate the need to show some contrasts
- I would like to go through more passages and practice this theocentric idea
- Maybe it tried to do too much
- I would have appreciated more clarity on exactly what a theocentric sermon looked like

Most of the weaknesses are related to the time constraints of the seminar. There was too much material for the amount of time, and there was not enough time to fully develop or practice the methods that were part of the seminar outline. If I gave the seminar again, I would reduce the amount of material we would cover.

Finally, attendees were asked what they would suggest to make the seminar more effective. Below are suggestions offered by attendees:

- Give us some examples from Haddon Robinson and others
- I needed more time to evaluate the practice texts; perhaps cutting one out would be good
- Do it in retreat format
- Possibly offer more specific examples of anthropocentric and theocentric preaching
- Streamline the information at the beginning so that we could get to the practical examples

- Video examples
- Evaluation of other sermons demonstrating where they were not theocentric
- More contextual
- Workshops
- Small group presentations

Many of these suggestions could be summarized under two main themes: more time, and more examples. There is clearly an interest in interacting with the themes, especially as they unfold in practice.

The seminar evaluation ended with an open-ended “other comments” section. Below are the responses:

- Thanks, Darryl. I appreciate the fact that you took the time to do this!
- Most seminars I attend are “blah blah blah.” I appreciated the discussion; it was meaningful and helpful.
- In stage one, instead of speaking of needs as a basis for choosing a text, I would reframe to speak of the importance of knowing one’s audience. Reason: earlier in the seminar the concept of needs was made into a “bad” word.
- I’m thrilled by your commitment to preaching the Word.
- Thanks, Darryl. This was an oasis of confirmation on my journey.
- Bravo! Thanks for your efforts to put forth this emphasis. I believe it will help shape my thinking and preaching going forward.

- I enjoyed the seminar.
- Great job Darryl! I appreciate what you have said and am thankful for this opportunity to learn more about ministry.
- Good interaction and engagement of both instructor and participants.
- I appreciate the reminder that this seminar brings in keeping the main thing the main thing in preaching, i.e. God! When God is lifted up and preached, everything else follows through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Thanks for all your hard work. It was quite thought-provoking.
- I appreciated getting to be part of a group wrestling with this stuff and process it together. I found that enlightening and encouraging for my preaching ministry.
- More sessions like this would be very helpful and refreshing.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SEMINAR

Having spent so much time thinking about theocentric preaching, it was exciting to have an opportunity to interact with others. The interactivity seemed to foster a sense of learning together. I found it to be a stimulating day. I was fatigued and ready to quit by the time the seminar was over, but the next morning I wished that we could reconvene as a group and continue to process the issues together.

One of the highlights of the seminar was the way that people engaged with the material. There were no passive listeners; everyone recognized the

issue as important and relevant to their ministries. I underestimated how much this would be true. This topic is clearly an important one for preachers, and one that they are eager to discuss.

I was surprised when a number of participants expressed appreciation that I allowed people to disagree and to state their objections to the material. This was not conscious on my part, but it seemed to allow people to wrestle with the issues, allowing them to learn through active participation. The interaction allowed learning to take place in three ways: from presenter to attendee, from attendee to presenter, and between attendees.

I made two mistakes in planning the seminar. First, I included more material than we could reasonably cover in the scheduled time. I thought I had set a realistic schedule, but I underestimated how much time it takes to process information, especially if the format is interactive. If I did the seminar over again, I would either narrow my teaching objectives or schedule more time for the seminar.

The second mistake I made was choosing an inductive method of learning, especially given the time constraints. Participants needed to see the principles in practice. I had chosen to do this by leading the group from text to sermon outline using three passages. I vastly underestimated how much time it would take to do this properly, and we simply ran out of time. If I taught the seminar again, I would either schedule more time for this portion, or teach using examples. For instance, I could teach how to develop a theocentric ex-

egetical idea, and then give examples of theocentric and anthropocentric exegetical ideas.

I also realized that I need to spend more time developing some sections. An example is the section on exemplary preaching. Some immediately recognized the danger of preaching messages that call for us to behave like a biblical character using the exemplary approach. Others needed more time and greater clarity on this issue.

The seminar confirmed for me that this issue is one that is relevant to preachers. They feel the tension of preaching to people who are anthropocentric and who want to the sermon to address their felt needs and help them lead better lives. They are aware of the dangers of anthropocentric preaching, and many of them instinctively long for more. They want to preach theocentrically, and are eager to both learn how and to see it modeled for them.

I found the seminar to be a valuable part of my learning experience. It helped me to develop my thinking, and it has encouraged me to continue to develop material related to preaching biblical messages that are both theocentric and relevant. I look forward to continuing to learn about and practice theocentric preaching.

APPENDIX A

MODELS OF SERMON DEVELOPMENT

Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2nd edition¹

- I. Spiritual preparation: piety, planning, and prayer
- II. Read and digest the thought of the text
- III. Identify the Fallen Condition Focus
- IV. Research the text (history, grammar, exegetical outline, etc.)
- V. Consider specific applications
- VI. Collect developmental matter (quotes, statistics, illustrations, key terms, commentary, data, etc.)
- VII. Create a homiletical outline (proposition, main points, etc.)
- VIII. Place developmental matter in outline
- IX. Write conclusion and introduction
- X. Write sermon body
- XI. Reduce to outline
- XII. Practice
- XIII. Pray
- XIV. Preach

¹ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 345.

Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching that Connects*²

- I. Three-stage preparation
 - A. Study the text and develop a sermon skeleton
 - B. Write the sermon in manuscript, expanded outline, or combination
 - C. Evaluate the sermon for weaknesses, fill in gaps, polish, and spice with artistic elements
- II. Five-stage preparation
 - A. Study the Scripture
 - B. Develop the skeleton
 - C. Write the introduction and conclusion
 - D. Write the body of the sermon
 - E. Evaluate, edit, fill in gaps, spice with artistic elements

² Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching that Connects: Using Journalistic Techniques to Add Impact* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 30-31.

Sidney Greidanus, Preaching Christ from the Old Testament³

- I. Select the preaching-text
- II. Read the text in its literary context
- III. Outline the structure of the text
- IV. Interpret the text in its own historical setting
 - A. Literary interpretation
 - B. Historical interpretation
 - C. Theocentric interpretation
 - D. Review your results with the help of some good commentaries.
- V. Formulate the text's theme and goal
 - A. State the textual theme that summarizes the message (subject and predicate) to the original hearers
 - B. State the goal of the author for the original hearers
- VI. Understand the message in the contexts of canon and redemptive history
 - A. Canonical interpretation: interpret the message in the context of the whole canon
 - B. Redemptive-historical interpretation: understand the message in the context of God's story from creation to new creation
 - C. Christocentric interpretation: explore the ways of
 1. redemptive-historical progression
 2. promise-fulfillment
 3. typology
 4. analogy
 5. longitudinal themes

³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 347-348.

6. New Testament references

7. Contrast

VII. Formulate the sermon theme and goal

- A. The sermon theme should be the same as, or as close as possible to, the textual theme.
- B. The sermon goal must be in harmony with the author's goal and match the sermon theme.

VIII. Select a suitable sermon form (didactic, narrative, deductive, inductive)

IX. Prepare the sermon outline

- A. Ideally, follow the flow of the text in the body, with main points derived from the text and related to the theme
- B. The introduction should expose the need to listen to the message
- C. The conclusion should clinch the goal

X. Write the sermon in oral style

Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd Edition⁴

I. Getting the Text in View

A. Select the text

1. Lectio continua - continuous reading, or preaching through the Bible, book by book, text by text
2. A lectionary
3. Local plan
4. Preacher's choice

B. Reconsider where the text begins and ends

C. Establish a reliable translation of the text

II. Getting Introduced to the Text

D. Read the text for basic understanding

E. Place the text in its larger context

III. Attending to the Text

F. Listen attentively to the text

1. Write a paraphrase
2. If the text is a narrative, stand in the shoes of each of the characters
3. Explore the text looking for details that look out of place
4. Ask if the text has a center of gravity — that is, a main thought around which all other thoughts are organized.
5. Look for a conflict, either in the text or behind it.
6. Look for connections between the text and what comes before and after it.

⁴ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*.

7. View the text through many different “eyes.”
8. Think of the text as someone's attempt to reflect on the answer to some important question.
9. Ask what the text is doing (e.g. commanding, singing, narrating, explaining, warning, debating, praying, reciting)

IV. Testing What is Heard in the Text

- G. Explore the text historically
- H. Explore the literary character of the text
- I. Explore the text theologically
- J. Check the text in the commentaries

V. Moving toward the Sermon

- K. State the claim of the text upon the hearers (including the preacher)
 1. Focus and function statements should grow directly from the exegesis of the text
 2. The focus and function statements should be related to each other
 3. The focus and function statements should be clear, unified, and relatively simple
- L. Choose a form for the sermon
 1. Start with the focus and function
 2. Divide the larger, overall tasks of the sermon into smaller components
 3. Decide the sequence in which these tasks should be done
- M. Add supporting material
 1. Introduction
 - a) A sermon introduction should make, implicitly or explicitly, a promise to hearers

- b) A sermon introduction should make a promise that hearers are likely to want kept
- c) A sermon introduction should make a promise at the same communication level as the rest of the sermon
- d) A sermon introduction should anticipate the whole sermon, but it should also connect directly to the next step of the sermon

2. Make connections

- a) Connectors provide closure for the preceding segment of the sermon, thus assuring the hearers that they are on the right track
- b) Connectors indicate how the upcoming section of the sermon is logically related to the previous section. Types:
 - (1) and
 - (2) but/yet
 - (3) if...then
 - (4) reconsider
 - (5) new departure (discontinuity)
- c) Connectors anticipate the content of the next section of the sermon.
- d) Connectors add “color,” guiding the listeners in how to understand and what attitude to take in regard to the sermon.

3. Conclusion

4. Images and Experiences

- a) Analogy
- b) Example
- c) Metaphor Type

Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd edition⁵

I. Presuppositions

A. Definition of Expository Preaching

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.

B. An effective sermon centers on one major idea – the big idea

An idea consists of a subject (the answer to the question, “What am I talking about?”) and a complement (“What exactly am I saying about what I'm talking about?”)

II. Stages in the development of an expository message

A. Choose the passage to be preached

B. General principle: Base the sermon on a literary unit of biblical thought (with exceptions, such as with Proverbs and topical exposition)

C. Study the passage

1. Examine the context

2. Try to determine the overall idea of the passage

3. Dig into the passage, examining (as appropriate) details such as vocabulary, grammatical structure, using tools such as lexicons, concordances, grammars, word-study books, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, commentaries, and other tools

D. Discover the exegetical idea

1. Ask: “What is the biblical writer talking about?” (subject)

2. Ask, “What is the biblical writer saying about the subject?” (complement)

⁵ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*.

- a) Become aware of major and supporting assertions
 - b) Be aware of the kind of literature we are reading and the conventions that are unique to it
 - c) State how the parts of the passage relate to the idea
3. Analyze the exegetical idea
- a) What does this mean? (explanation)
 - (1) Does the biblical writer explain his statements or define his terms? Does he assume the original readers understood him and needed no explanation?
 - (2) Are there concepts, terms or connections that modern listeners might not understand that you need to explain to them?
 - b) Is it true? (proof)
 - (1) Is the author arguing, proving, or defending at length some concept that your hearers would probably accept – for example, that Jesus was human, or that Christians don't have to be circumcised?
 - (2) Is the author arguing, proving, or defending a concept that your listeners may not readily accept, and therefore they need to understand the argument of the passage – for instance, that slaves were to be obedient to their masters?
 - (3) Is the author assuming the validity of an idea that your listeners may not accept right away? Do they need to be convinced of what the passage actually states is the case – for instance, that Jesus is the only way to God, or that demons actually exist?
 - c) What difference does it make? (application)
 - (1) Is the biblical writer applying his idea? Where does he develop it?
 - (2) Is the author presenting an idea that he doesn't apply directly but will apply later in his letter? Where does he do that? How do you apply this truth to your listeners now?

- (3) Does the biblical writer assume that the reader will see the application of an assertion?

d) Notes on Application

- (1) Accurate exegesis is basic to perceptive application. This includes defining the original situation into which the revelation was given and analyzing what the modern reader shares or does not share with the original readers.
- (2) Application must come from the theological purpose of the writer.
 - (a) Test the accuracy of your application
 - (b) Ask what the passage teaches us about God
 - (c) Examine the human factor: how people did and should respond to this vision of God
 - (d) Think about how this truth would work out in experience

4. Formulate the homiletical idea

5. In light of the audience's knowledge and experience, think through your exegetical idea and state it in the most exact, memorable sentence possible

6. Determine the sermon's purpose: what should happen in the hearer as a result of hearing the sermon (knowledge, insight, attitude, skill)

7. Decide how to accomplish this purpose

- a) Deductively: Idea stated completely as part of introduction, and then developed
 - (1) Idea to be explained
 - (2) Proposition to be proved
 - (3) Principle to be applied
- b) Inductively: Introduction leads to the first point, with idea emerging in conclusion (a story told)

- c) Combination
 - (1) Subject to be completed
 - (2) Induction-Deduction
- 8. Outline the sermon
- 9. Fill the outline with supporting materials
 - a) Restatement
 - b) Definition and explanation
 - c) Factual information
 - d) Quotations
 - e) Narration
 - f) Illustrations
- 10. Prepare the introduction and conclusion
 - a) Introduction should:
 - (1) Command attention
 - (2) Uncover needs
 - (3) Introduce body of sermon
 - b) Conclusion
- 11. Deliver with effective gestures, voice, and eye contact. Look for feedback.

III. Characteristics of an effective sermon style

- A. Clear
- B. Direct and personal
- C. Vivid

Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change*⁶

- I. Determine the goal: to teach people how to live a life that reflects the values, principles, and truths of the Bible
- II. Pick a point: what are you trying to say? “Every message should have one central idea, application, insight, or principle that serves as the glue to hold the other parts together.”
 - A. Questions
 1. What is the one thing I want my audience to know?
 2. What do I want them to do about it?
 - B. Process
 1. Dig until you find it
 2. Build everything around it
 3. Make it stick
- III. Create a map (a relational outline)
 - A. Me (orientation) - introduce myself and the topic to the audience
 - B. We (identification) - broaden the issue so the audience feels the tension of the issue
 - C. God (illumination) - resolve the tension by pointing to God's thoughts on the subject
 - D. You (application) - “So what?” and “Now what?”
 1. Think of relationships — family, church, those outside church, marketplace
 2. Think of life stages — teenagers and college students, singles, newlyweds, parents, empty nesters

⁶ Stanley and Jones, 91-192.

- E. We (inspiration) - “Imagine what the church, the community, families, maybe even the world would be like if Christians everywhere embraced your one idea.”

IV. Internalize the message

- A. Own it - “You should be able to sit down at a table and communicate your message to an audience of two in a way that is both conversational and authentic”

- B. Reduce the message down to five or six pieces (not points)

1. opening story - question - text - application - challenge
2. illustration - text - challenge - application - closing story
3. introduction - tension - text - visual - application - conclusion
4. text - question - story - text - application

- C. Say it out loud - rehearse the stories, introductions, and conclusions

- D. If something does not support, illustrate, or clarify the point, cut it

V. Engage your audience

- A. Raise the need through the introduction

1. What is the question I am answering? What can I do to get my audience to want to know the answer to that question?
2. What is the tension this message will resolve? What can I do to make my audience feel that tension?
3. What mystery does this message solve? What can I do to make my audience want a solution?

- B. Check your speed

- C. Slow down in the curves (transitions)

- D. Navigate through the text

- E. Add something unexpected

- F. Take the most direct route

VI. Find your voice

VII. Use strategic questions when stuck

- A. What do they need to know? (information)
- B. Why do they need to know it? (motivation)
 - 1. What will happen to the person who never discovers the truth or principle you are about to address?
 - 2. What is at stake for them?
- C. What do they need to do? (application)
- D. Why do they need to do it? (inspiration)
- E. What can I do to help them remember? (reiteration)

Timothy S. Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching”⁷

- I. The Challenge: to preach with authority (Scripture) and relevance (“What about this audience demands a different presentation than any other audience?”)
- II. A Homiletical Method
 - A. Exegesis - a statement of the text's meaning in terms of structure, proposition, and purpose
 1. Grammatical-syntactical
 2. Historical-contextual
 3. Literary-rhetorical
 4. Literal
 - B. Theology - a statement of universal theological principle discovered through the exegetical and theological process
 1. Examination of explicit affirmations
 2. Comparison with similar affirmations in preceding passages
 3. Later theological development (noted but not imposed onto text)
 - C. Homiletics
 1. Ask developmental questions (explain, prove, apply)
 2. Develop purpose, structure, support material
 3. Guard the integrity of application (guardrails of purpose and audience)

⁷ Warren, 463-486.

APPENDIX B

SEMINAR MATERIALS AND TEACHING GUIDE

This section contains materials for a seminar on theocentric preaching, including sample promotional materials and a seminar workbook.

The seminar is designed for experienced preachers who have previous training in homiletics. A knowledge of Haddon Robinson's model for sermon preparation, described in *Biblical Preaching*, is preferred but not required.

SAMPLE PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL

Dear Pastor,

A couple of years ago, I sat in a post-graduate preaching class with a number of students. All were smart, experienced, and seminary trained. We were asked to begin to develop sermons that expressed the big idea of a text. **Most students made a common mistake: we drifted toward anthropocentric messages that missed the main Biblical message of the passage.** Our first attempts led to messages that were relevant but not Biblical. I've become convinced that this is a common problem.

Since that time, I've been on a quest to answer, “**How can preachers prepare theocentric messages that are both faithful and relevant?**” It is the subject of my thesis-project for my Doctor of Ministry degree at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Now that I am completing my thesis-project, I'd like to share some of what I've learned with you for two reasons:

- First, I hope that some of what I've learned might be useful.
- Second, I value your feedback! I'd like to hear back from you if you think my findings make sense and are useful and clear. I would welcome your suggestions to make my material as helpful as possible.

On Tuesday, September 19th, I'll be teaching a seminar on Theocentric Preaching at Richview from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. I'd like to invite you to attend. Please see the enclosed flyer. If you are able to attend, please register with Evelyne at 416-247-8701 or info@richview.org.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I hope to see you in September!

Theocentric Preaching

A Practical Seminar for Pastors



Most preachers understand that good preaching connects with people's needs. While addressing people's needs is good, there is a corresponding danger: to make the sermon about us rather than about God. A desire to be relevant can lead to anthropocentric sermons that provide answers to life's dilemmas, meet the questions, issues, and needs of the moment, but miss the bigger picture.

Join us for a seminar that will explore how to preach theocentrically. We'll cover:

- What is theocentric preaching?
- What is the difference between theocentric and anthropocentric preaching?
- Why should we preach theocentrically?
- How does a preacher prepare theocentric sermons that are relevant?

Tuesday, September 19th
9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
Richview Baptist Church
(1548 Kipling Avenue, Etobicoke, ON)

Cost: \$10 (includes lunch)

RSVP

info@richview.org or 416-247-8701

SEMINAR OUTCOME, GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND OUTLINE

Seminar Outcome

The desired outcome for this seminar is that attendees (experienced preachers) will understand why and how to prepare theocentric sermons that are both faithful and relevant.

Seminar Goals and Objectives

By the end of the seminar, attendees will be able to accomplish the following goals and objectives (objectives are indented):

- Describe and respond to the shift that has led to anthropocentric preaching
 - List two trends that have led to anthropocentric preaching
 - List two ways to respond to the shift toward anthropocentrism
- Define theocentric preaching in relation to anthropocentric preaching
 - Describe, in their own words, the difference between theocentric and anthropocentric preaching (using the workbook)
- Describe a rationale for preaching theocentrically
 - List three convictions that lead to theocentric preaching
 - List three benefits of theocentric preaching
- Prepare a sermon outline using a theocentric approach
 - Outline a theocentric sermon using the seminar notes
 - Differentiate theocentric and anthropocentric exegetical and homiletical ideas

- Explain three stages of development in which sermons often become anthropocentric

Seminar Outline

The following outlines the structure of the seminar.

The seminar materials are designed to stand on their own. However, the presenter may want to examine the background material which forms the basis for this seminar. Page numbers for the relevant background material are included in the seminar outline if the presenter requires this background information.

I. Session One: Today's Situation (9:00-10:15)

A. Introduction

1. Participants introduce themselves, state their interest, and express their expectations for the seminar
2. Introduce myself
3. Review seminar goals

B. Describing today's situation (see pages 20-31)

C. Responding to today's situation (see pages 20-31)

D. Discussion and Q&A

II. Session Two: Introducing Theocentric Preaching (10:30-11:45)

A. Definitions (see pages 98-107)

B. Convictions (see pages 117-121)

C. Benefits (see pages 107-112)

D. Discussion and Q&A

III. Session Three: Studying the Text (12:45-2:00)

A. Stages 1-3 of Preparation

1. Choose the passage to be preached (see pages 123-126)
2. Study the passage (see pages 127-131)
3. Discover the exegetical idea (see page 132)

B. Discussion and Q&A

IV. Session Four: Crafting the Sermon (2:15-3:15)

A. Stages 4-6 of Preparation

4. Analyze the exegetical idea (see pages 133-140)
5. Formulate the homiletical idea (see pages 140-141)
6. Determine the sermon's purpose (see pages 141-143)

B. Relevance: How to Cross the Historical-Cultural Gap (see pages 113-116)

V. Session Five: Completing the Sermon (3:30-4:30)

A. Stages 7-10 of Preparation

7. Decide on how to accomplish this purpose (see pages 143-145)
8. Outline the sermon (see pages 145-148)
9. Fill in the sermon outline (see pages 148-149)
10. Prepare the introduction and conclusion of the message (see pages 149-151)

B. Evaluation

SEMINAR NOTEBOOK

The following workbook should be given to each participant in the seminar. The workbook is in a fill-in-the blank format with the blanks completed for the teacher's reference. The answers can be removed before the workbook is copied for seminar attendees.

SEMINAR OUTCOME, GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND SCHEDULE

Seminar Outcome

The desired outcome for this seminar is that attendees (experienced preachers) will understand why and how to prepare theocentric sermons that are both faithful and relevant.

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 - Describe, in their own words, the difference between theocentric and anthropocentric preaching (using the workbook)
- Describe a rationale for preaching theocentrically
 - List three convictions that lead to theocentric preaching
 - List three benefits of theocentric preaching
- Prepare a sermon outline using a theocentric approach
 - Outline a theocentric sermon using the seminar notes
 - Differentiate theocentric and anthropocentric exegetical and homiletical ideas
 - Explain three stages of development in which sermons often become anthropocentric

Schedule

TIME	DESCRIPTION
9:00-10:15	Session I: Today's Situation Introduction Describing Today's Situation Responding to Today's Situation Discussion/Q&A
10:15-10:30	Break
10:30-11:45	Session II: Introducing Theocentric Preaching Definitions Convictions Benefits Discussion/Q&A
11:45 - 12:45	Lunch
12:45 - 2:00	Session III: Studying the Text Stages 1-3 of Preparation
2:00 - 2:15	Break
2:15 - 3:15	Session IV: Crafting the Sermon Stages 4-6 of Preparation Relevance: How to Cross the Historical-Cultural Gap
3:15 - 3:30	Break
3:30 - 4:30	Session V: Completing the Sermon Stages 7-10 of Preparation Seminar Evaluation

SESSION I: TODAY'S SITUATION

Preaching always takes place within a context. The context of preaching, however, often goes unexamined. What is the situation facing preachers today? How should we respond?

At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- List two trends that have led to anthropocentric preaching
- List two ways to respond to the shift toward anthropocentrism

This session will be presented in lecture format, followed by a time of discussion and question and answer.

A. Introduction

B. Describing Today's Situation

1. 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 tech-

nique or program. The Christian market in idols has never been so brisk or lucrative. (Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 125)

2. **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).

3. People expect the sermon to be:



- **Practical**

"'How-to' is a...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)

C. Responding to Today's Situation

The shift toward anthropocentrism often goes unexamined. We cannot ignore current realities. How do we respond to this shift?



1. Recognize the shift toward anthropocentrism.

We are often not aware of our assumptions and expectations. Preachers and congregations may benefit from asking, “Does this shift describe us? What unspoken expectations do we bring to the sermon?”

2. Evaluate the shift and its effects.

• **Evaluate the *message* - Is it the gospel?**

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 Reformission 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)

- **Evaluate the *results* - What is the fruit?**

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)

- 3. Avoid the pendulum effect.**

It is important to avoid going to the other extreme and underemphasizing humanity.

“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>).

- 4. Understand how to preach theocentric sermons.**

There is an alternative to preaching anthropocentric sermons. This seminar will present a model for preaching messages that are theocentric *and* relevant. This task is urgent.

“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)

SESSION II: INTRODUCING THEOCENTRIC PREACHING

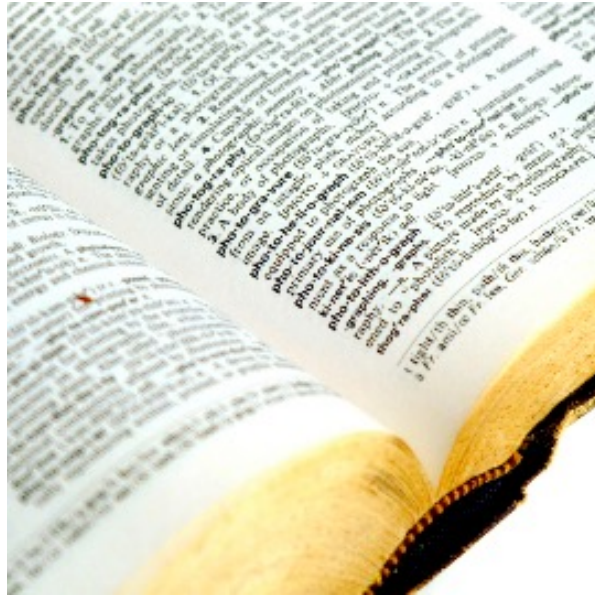
The last session described the shift toward anthropocentrism, and suggested four ways to respond. One suggestion is that we preach theocentric sermons. This raises some questions. What is theocentric preaching? Can we build a case for this type of preaching? And why should we preach this way? This lecture will answer these questions.

At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Describe, in their own words, the difference between theocentric and anthropocentric preaching (using the workbook)
- List three convictions that lead to theocentric preaching
- List three benefits of theocentric preaching

This session will be presented in lecture format with some questions for discussion (3-5 minutes each), followed by an open time of discussion and question and answers.

A. Definitions



What is theocentric preaching? How is it different from anthropocentric preaching?

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 (theo-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 primarily 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 primarily on humans (identity, desires, needs, actions)
- Divorced from the theo-drama

B. Convictions

The goal of this section is to describe the convictions that lead to theocentric preaching.

1. Convictions about Scripture

a) 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)

b) 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)

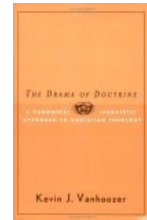
The critical question is whether preachers are supposed to help people 'find their stories in the Bible,' or are supposed to call the hearers, as George Lindbeck has suggested, to “make the story of the Bible their story.” (Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 36)

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)

c) 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)

2. 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)

3. Convictions about Relevance and Felt Needs

a) 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.”)

b) 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.”)

c) 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)

d) 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)

For Discussion: How do you think preaching can change people's perceptions of their needs?



4. Convictions about Re-imagination

a) Scripture calls us to see the world differently

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)

b) Preaching 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)

For Discussion (5 minutes)



“Let us then see the first task of preaching as description.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

5. 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)

C. The Benefits of Theocentric Preaching

What are 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*

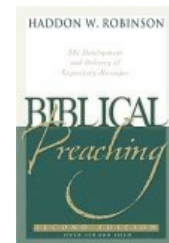
SESSION III: STUDYING THE TEXT

The desired outcome for this seminar is that attendees will understand why and how to prepare theocentric sermons that are both faithful and relevant. This session begins to answer the “how” question. *The focus in these sessions is help experienced preachers understand how to keep their sermons theocentric as they move through the preparation process.*

The next three sessions will help participants:

- Outline a theocentric sermon using the seminar notes
- Differentiate theocentric and anthropocentric exegetical and homiletical ideas
- Explain three stages of development in which sermons often become anthropocentric

The model presented in these sessions is adapted from Haddon Robinson’s book *Biblical Preaching*. The following builds on the ten stages found in this book.



We will practice each of the stages using a text from 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!”

Theocentric Focus

Each stage will include a box like this describing the issues the preacher must deal with at each stage in order to prepare a theocentric message.



Stage 1: Choose the Passage to be Preached

Some churches prescribe readings based on a lectionary. In other churches, the preacher is given freedom in selecting a text. How does the preacher select a 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)

For the purposes of this seminar, we will take Mark 4:35-41 as our text.

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?



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

Exercise (10 minutes)



Using Mark 4:35-41, answer the following questions:

- What literary details stand out?
- What grammatical issues need to be investigated?
- What historical-cultural issues help us understand this passage?
- What does this passage reveal about God, his acts, his covenant, his grace, and his will?
- What is this passage's relation to the rest of Scripture?
- Where does this passage fit within redemptive history?
- What is the theology of this text? Where else is this theology present within Scripture?

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).

Exercise (10 minutes)



Using Mark 4:35-41, evaluate the following exegetical ideas, paying special attention to theocentric issues:

1. Disciples need faith to handle storms.
2. Jesus can handle the storms.
3. Jesus proves who he is because he can handle storms.
4. Jesus calms the storms of life.
5. The Kingdom of God is secure because of the power of Jesus.

Write your own exegetical idea from this passage:

SESSION IV: CRAFTING THE SERMON

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.

Exercise (10 minutes)

Take your exegetical ideas from stage 3 and submit it to the three developmental questions.



Which developmental question or questions will dominate this passage as you develop it into a sermon? Why?

- What does it mean?
- Is it true?
- What difference does it make?

As you think about using the developmental questions, ask:

- Am I emphasizing action at the expense of belief?
- Am I focusing too much on the individual?
- Is my sermon overly focused on ethics or how to handle personal problems?
- Am I capturing a vision of God and his kingdom?

How can you sharpen the exegetical idea and its development to reflect the theocentric nature of the text?

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.

Exercise (10 minutes)



Suggest a homiletical idea for Mark 4:35-41, based on your exegetical idea:

Evaluate your homiletical idea:

- Does your homiletical idea help the listener understand God and their relationship to him?
- Is God the subject of this sermon?
- Does the sermon place us in the context of our relationship to God's character, will, and actions?

How can you improve your homiletical idea?

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 227-229).



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 and 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).

Exercise (10 minutes)

Write a first draft of the purpose of this sermon that seems consistent with the text's purpose:



Relevance: How to Cross the Historical-Cultural Gap

1. Steps to Crossing the 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).

2. Dangers to Avoid in Crossing the Gap

- a) **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).



- b) **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.”
- c) **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).

QUESTION: Is exemplary preaching always wrong?

- d) **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).

e) “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)

SESSION V: COMPLETING THE SERMON

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.



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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

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VITA

Darryl Dash was born on July 26, 1967. He grew up near Toronto, Canada and is a graduate of the University of Waterloo (Waterloo, Ontario) and Heritage Theological Seminary (Cambridge, Ontario). He has served as pastor of Park Lawn Baptist Church, Toronto, and currently serves as Senior Pastor of Richview Baptist Church, Toronto. His writings have appeared in *Christian Week*, *The Evangelical Baptist*, and *Preaching Magazine*.

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Darryl Dash currently lives in Toronto with his wife, Charlene, and their children, Christina and Josiah.