
Pro Rege

Volume 19 | Number 2

Article 2

December 1990

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Greidanus, Sidney (1990) "Redemptive History and Preaching," *Pro Rege*:

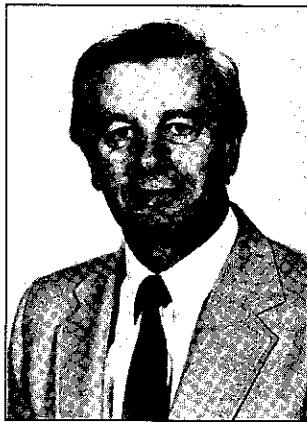
Vol. 19: No. 2, 9 - 18.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol19/iss2/2

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Editor's note: The following articles by Greidanus and De Jong were originally presented at the college's 1990 annual spring ministers conference.

Redemptive History and Preaching



by Sidney Greidanus

The 1930s and 40s saw renewed interest in the development of redemptive-historical methods of interpretation and preaching. German scholars worked with *heilsgeschichte*, North American scholars with biblical theology, and Dutch scholars with *heilsgeschiedenis*. Although this essay will concentrate on the redemptive-historical approach as it developed in the Reformed churches in The Netherlands, we should be aware that this concern

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with salvation history was not an isolated phenomenon. The *heilshistorische prediking* of Klaas Schilder and the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos are close cousins.

In The Netherlands, however, the implications of a redemptive-historical approach for *preaching* were worked out more explicitly than anywhere else. The reason for this was a public controversy between promoters of *heilshistorische prediking* (redemptive-historical preaching) and defenders of *exemplarische prediking* (traditional, example preaching). This controversy, which was carried on in various church papers, sharpened the issues considerably. For the details of this controversy I would refer you to my doctoral thesis, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*.

In this essay we shall first consider four valuable insights of the redemptive-historical approach for preaching, next note some of its shortcomings, and subsequently seek to overcome the shortcomings while retaining the valuable insights.

Biblical Preaching Continues God's Redemptive History

The first valuable insight of the redemptive-historical approach is its view of the essence and effect of preaching: biblical preaching continues God's redemptive history.

God's Word for Today

As I studied the controversy in The Netherlands, I became impressed by the importance redemptive-historical preachers attached to preaching. There seemed to be a heightened awareness that biblical preaching is nothing less than the word of God for today.

This insight was not new, of course. The apostle Paul, among others, viewed his preaching as the very word of God. He wrote the Thessalonians: "We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (I Thess. 2:13, RSV). In II Corinthians 5:20 Paul three times identified himself and his fellow preachers as spokespersons for Christ and thus for God: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." As God's very word, Paul's preaching had astonishing power. Paul wrote the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (1:16; cf. I Cor. 1:18).

At the time of the Reformation, John Calvin returned to this high view of preaching. In his Genevan catechism, he called preaching the primary medium by which God communicates himself to us. And he wrote in his *Institutes* (IV, 1, 5): "Among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them." Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli, incorporated this high view of preaching in the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566: "*Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*" ("The preaching of the word of God is the word of God"). This creed continued: "Wherefore, when this word of God [Scripture] is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very word of God is proclaimed and received by the faithful."

God's Redemptive Act Today

This biblical, Reformed vision of the essence of biblical preaching was carried forward by the redemptive-historical approach in the 1930s and 40s. Its representatives saw preaching not only as the word of God for today but as God's redemptive act today. For example, C. Veenhof maintained: "The church's preaching is *the* means by which Christ makes his spoken and subsequently written word into a living present. . . . In the proclamation Christ comes and calls and warns and conquers." "Preaching is not merely a *story* about one or more moments of redemptive history—no, preaching is itself a moment *in* the redemptive history made by Christ. Jesus

Christ continues his work of redeeming and liberating the world in and through proclamation." "Wherever preaching takes place in accord with Christ's command, it becomes a redemptive event and the Kingdom of God forges ahead. . . . It is Christ himself who leads the way. . . . He it is who comes along in Spirit and power" (*Sola Scriptura*, 154-55).

Thus every biblical sermon was seen as a redemptive event. God himself is present in our preaching; God speaks in our preaching; God acts in and through our preaching. God uses our preaching to pass on his gospel, to bring his salvation today, to build his church, to extend his kingdom. Hence contemporary preaching is an indispensable link in the chain of God's redemptive activity which runs from Old Testament times to the last day (see Matt. 24:14).

The Preacher's Responsibility

This high view of preaching can never be the preacher's boast, of course. Rather, it underscores the preacher's responsibility faithfully to proclaim the word of God. For preachers are heralds and ambassadors of the King of kings. Heralds and ambassadors are not to speak their own words but the words of their Sender. Contemporary preachers find the words of their Sender in the Bible. Hence they are to preach the Scriptures as intended by God. Preachers must submit themselves, their thoughts and opinions, to the Scriptures and echo the word of God. Preachers are literally to be ministers, servants of the word.

The Necessity of Expository Preaching

The call to be *ministers* of the word requires expository preaching; that is, preaching that exposit Scripture, preaching that exposes the meaning of the text in the context of the whole Bible. In the midst of much confusion about expository preaching, Merrill Unger helpfully elucidates: "No matter what the length of the portion explained may be, if it is handled in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers, it may properly be said to be expository preaching. . . . 'What saith the Lord' is the alpha and the omega of expository preaching" (*Principles of Expository Preaching*, 33). Unger's statement gets

at the heart of expository preaching: before preachers can truthfully say, "Thus saith the Lord," they must carefully study the preaching-text in its context and ask, "What saith the Lord?"

Hence the concept of expository preaching implies the preacher's responsibility to be true to the Scriptures. At the same time, expository preaching gives preachers the assurance that God will use their preaching to speak his word to his people today and thus continue his redemptive history today.

Biblical Preaching Is Theocentric Preaching

A second major insight of the redemptive-historical approach concerns the content of biblical preaching: true biblical preaching is theocentric preaching, God-centered preaching.

Theocentric Preaching

The demand for theocentric preaching follows from the fact that the Bible is God's *self-revelation*. The center of the Bible is God. The goal of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament is to relate the mighty acts of God so that people will respond with repentance and commitment, with faith and hope in this God. The Bible may, therefore, be described as theocentric. The biblical sermon, similarly, will wish to be true to the Bible by being theocentric. The biblical sermon will wish to relate the mighty acts of God and in this way call people to faith and hope, to repentance and commitment.

Unfortunately, many sermons fail precisely on this point of being God-centered. Although all biblical preachers will acknowledge that God should be central in our sermons, our sermons all too easily shift the focus from God to human characters such as Moses or David or Mary. In spite of our best intentions, our preaching frequently is anthropocentric rather than theocentric.

Opposition to Anthropocentric Preaching

In the English-speaking world this anthropocentric preaching is not only tolerated but it is promoted under the names of biographical preaching and character preaching. For example, Andrew Blackwood, one of the foremost American homileticians in the forties, recommends biographical preaching as follows:

The easiest way for the young minister to start preaching from the Bible may be to prepare a

biographical sermon. . . . The biographical sermon is one which grows out of the facts concerning a biblical character, as these facts throw light upon the problems of the man in the pew. . . . The simplest sort of biographical sermon . . . has to do with an episode in the life of a well-known hero. For instance, on Mother's Day one can preach about the way in which God watched over Baby Moses, and used his mother in sparing him for his life work. . . . What a dramatic scene! A strange woman, a princess, moved with pity by a baby's cry, offers the baby's mother wages for doing what her heart most longs to do. In the

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resulting sermon . . . one can hold aloft the biblical ideal of motherhood (*Preaching from the Bible*, 53).

Clearly, biographical preaching results in sermons that center not on God but on human beings.

In 1955 Faris Whitesell published a book titled *Preaching on Bible Characters*. In this book Whitesell states that "the enthusiasm of lay people for Bible character preaching goes along with the upsurge of public interest in biography and personality articles generally. . . . The purpose of this book is to spur preachers on to capitalize on this modern trend. The man who can preach on the people of the Bible interestingly and helpfully is bound to have a hearing" (9).

Anthropocentric sermons are usually made "helpful" for the hearers by turning the biblical characters into models or examples for contemporary Christians. The examples can be either good or bad or a combination of both: Hannah praying for a child is presented as a good example; Lot showing greed in selecting the best land is a bad example; Jacob's deceit is a bad example, but his perseverance in struggling with the Lord is a good example. In the New Testament, Mary in her submission to the Lord is a good example; Zechariah in his unbelief is a bad example. The wise men are a good example while king Herod is a bad example for us.

Drawbacks of Example Preaching

In spite of its popularity, however, example preaching has some serious drawbacks. First, instead of being theocentric, example preaching tends to become anthropocentric, that is, the biblical character tends to take center stage. As such, example preaching is no longer true to the Bible.

Second, the biblical character tends to be isolated from its historical and literary contexts in order to function as an example for people today. In isolating biblical characters from their biblical context, example preaching subverts the biblical account.

Third, example preaching tends to ignore the purpose or goal of the author. Since it desires to draw a moral from the biblical story, it simply turns the author's description of persons into prescription for people today. However, to displace the goal of the biblical author with our own moralistic scheme is bad interpretation.

Fourth, example preaching is forced into applying mere atoms or elements because it just cannot transfer to today the whole biblical example. In his *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (80), Edmund Clowney points out some serious complications faced by example preaching:

Those who find only collected moral tales in the Bible are constantly embarrassed by the good deeds of patriarchs, judges, and kings. Surely we cannot pattern our daily conduct on that of Samuel as he hews Agag to pieces, or Samson as he commits suicide, or Jeremiah as he preaches treason Dreadful consequences have ensued when blindness to the history of revelation was coupled with the courage to follow misunderstood examples. Heretics have been hewed in pieces in the name of Christ, and imprecatory psalms sung on battlefields.

In the New Testament, preachers face similar complications. On the basis of Jesus' remarks about the poor widow who put her last pennies into the temple treasury (Luke 21), should we preach that the poor give their last pennies to the church? On the basis of Acts 4:32, should we recommend that Christians today hold their possessions in common? On the basis of Paul's conversion experience, should we preach that all Christians should have such an eye-blinding conversion experience?

Clearly, the good deeds of the past are not necessarily models for us today. We sense instinc-

tively that many so-called biblical "examples" simply won't transfer to the present; we cannot ask our hearers to do exactly the same things the biblical characters did. The easiest solution to this problem is not to transfer the whole example but only a few of its elements. A few atoms are isolated from the example and carried over to today. The three most common ways of doing this are moralizing, psychologizing, and spiritualizing.

Moralizing will usually isolate a few elements of a character's conduct. For example, when David cries out in anguish at the death of his son Absalom, moralizing preachers will focus on David's conduct as a father. Although the Bible says nothing about this, preachers infer that David did not spend quality time nurturing his son Absalom. Consequently, the application is readily made that we had better spend quality time with our children lest we cry out a similar lament at the grave of one of our children. Moralizing thus seeks to isolate from the text a few elements that have universal moral validity in order to transfer a few dos and don'ts to hearers today.

Psychologizing, by contrast, concentrates on those elements that describe what happens to the Bible character's soul. For example, although the text may tell us about Elijah, his journey, the food he ate, his posture in prayer, his clothes, etc., the preacher will single out his faith struggle in order to preach on Elijah's doubt—don't we all doubt sometimes?

Spiritualizing changes the physical reality of the past into a spiritual reality for the present. For example, the physical blindness of the two men in Matthew 9 becomes our spiritual blindness; the woman reaching to touch the border of Jesus' garment becomes our spiritual reaching to touch the heavenly Jesus; and the Cana wedding invitation to the earthly Jesus becomes our invitation to the heavenly Jesus. As can be seen, at bottom spiritualizing is nothing other than a form of allegorizing.

Advantages of Theocentric Preaching

In contrast to example preaching with its attendant problems, promoters of redemptive-historical preaching insisted on focusing not on the human characters but on God. The central question to put to the preaching-text is, What does this passage say about God and his will for his people? This question will focus our attention on what is important in the Bible, and its answer will lead to theocentric sermons.

This theocentric emphasis also alleviates the pressure to draw speculative lines from a text in the Old Testament to Jesus in the New Testament. For since Jesus Christ is God, at work in Old Testament as well as New Testament times (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-20), a theocentric sermon is fundamentally already Christocentric.

Historical Progression

A third valuable insight of the redemptive-historical approach is its view of historical progression. God works his mighty acts of salvation in human history not all at once but progressively.

The key verse for the redemptive-historical approach is Genesis 3:15, which characterizes human history as the gigantic battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, with the implied promise that the seed of the woman will finally be victorious. God works in history and moves it forward from promise to fulfillment to further fulfillment. God comes ever closer to his goal of redeeming his creation. History moves towards God's ultimate goal of his perfect kingdom.

With its emphasis on history, the redemptive-historical approach was open not only to the idea of progression in redemptive history but also to that of progression in God's revelation. Biblical passages are not all on the same level: some are Old Testament and some are New Testament; some are pre-exilic and some are post-exilic. To interpret correctly, preachers must, on the one hand, do justice to a passage in its own historical context while recognizing, on the other hand, that God's revelation has since progressed and that the church addressed today is also at a later stage of redemptive history. Because of this sensitivity to historical progression, the redemptive-historical approach underscored the need for historical interpretation. We shall return to this topic later.

Thematic Preaching

A fourth valuable insight of the redemptive-historical approach is its emphasis on thematic preaching. Every sermon has to bring one message; it has to be constructed according to the *one* overriding theme in the preaching-text. This emphasis on thematic preaching was not new—witness H. Hoekstra's *Gereformeerde Homiletiek* of 1926. But

the idea of thematic preaching received new impetus from the redemptive-historical approach, for its adherents sought to counteract moralistic preaching which attached morals to mere elements in the text.

In the 1940s Benne Holwerda illustrated the point of thematic preaching in a most helpful and memorable way. He drew the following analogy with chemistry: "When I want to speak of the significance and characteristics of water (H₂O), I should not speak about the merits of hydrogen (H), but rather about H as it forms a compound in synthesis with O. And when I speak about sulfuric acid, I should not speak about H, but about that entirely different compound H₂SO₄" (*Begonnen Hebbende van Mozes*, 92).

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Although the elements in many texts are the same or similar, these elements combine in a unique synthesis in each text. The theme tries to capture not the elements but that special synthesis in each text, and it is that theme that needs to be preached and applied, and not its elements.

Shortcomings of the Redemptive-Historical Approach

Having acknowledged these valuable insights, we should also note some of the shortcomings of the redemptive-historical approach of the 1930s and 40s.

The first shortcoming, as I see it, is that the redemptive-historical approach is so eager to discern redemptive history and its progression that it looks right through the text at the history it relates. It looks through the text as if it were a clear windowpane and thus ignores the text itself. It fails to observe that the author has shaped the written text to meet a particular need for the church in his time. In short, by concentrating on the historical referents, the redemptive-historical approach tends to overlook the Bible's literary/historical dimensions:

A second shortcoming of the redemptive-historical approach is that it becomes speculative as it seeks to trace in detail God's progression in redemptive history. Although one can speak of an overall progression in redemptive history as God moves from his Old Testament promises to Jesus in the New

Testament and on to the new creation, one should not assume that we can trace this progression in detail. As is evident from biblical history, God's progression in redemptive history is not predictably linear but consists of stops and starts and even setbacks (e.g., the exile) while gradually moving forward to the perfect kingdom of God.

A third problem concerns objectivism in preaching. Some people experienced redemptive-historical preaching as objective and irrelevant, rooted in the past but not linked with the present. To get a handle on this criticism, it may be helpful to consider John Stott's description of the sermons of fellow conservative, evangelical preachers: "I would have to draw a straight line which begins in the biblical world, and then goes up in the air on a straight trajectory, but never lands on the other side. For our preaching is seldom if ever earthed. It fails to build a bridge into the modern world. It is biblical, but not contemporary" (*Between Two Worlds*, 140).

A fourth shortcoming of redemptive-historical preaching is that it seems to shortchange the human characters in the preaching-text. Granted that the Bible as a whole is theocentric, it will not do to ignore its human characters in the interest of doing justice to its theocentricity.

In my theorizing about biblical preaching, I have sought to work with the valuable insights of the redemptive-historical approach while trying to overcome its shortcomings. For the details of this attempt, I refer you to my recent book *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. We shall next consider some key areas where I think it necessary to move beyond the redemptive-historical approach of the 1940s.

Redemptive History And Biblical Characters

We noted earlier that the theocentric emphasis of the redemptive-historical approach tended to slight the human characters in the Bible. Although the theocentric emphasis is to be applauded, the slighting of biblical characters cannot be justified. The question is whether we today can move beyond the standoff between theocentric and example preaching. Further reflection on the function of biblical characters in redemptive history may prove helpful.

The first thing to notice about biblical characters

is that they are incorporated into the biblical text not for their own sake but 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. God advances his kingdom through his images on earth and through his anointed office bearers: prophets, priests, and kings. Human beings, then, are a natural part of God's kingdom history. The redemptive-historical approach is right in asserting that the Bible does not present a collection of biographies of interesting characters, but one history—the history of the coming kingdom of God. But that theocentric history naturally includes human beings.

From another angle, biblical history can be described as covenant history. Human beings have a natural place in this covenant history: God, after all, is the God who makes covenant with people. But these people in the Bible have their meaning not apart from covenant history but as part of that covenant history related in the Bible. To isolate biblical characters from covenant history, as happens in biographical and character preaching, is to short-circuit interpretation, since biblical characters have their meaning, also for today, in that one covenant history. An important rule of biblical hermeneutics is not to isolate biblical characters from the kingdom history of which they are an integral part.

We should be aware, however, that the biblical author may have intended his audience to identify with certain biblical characters. Gerhard von Rad writes this concerning the Abraham narratives: "Now there is no doubt that in reading this ancient story ancient Israel recognized itself in Abraham as believing community, as people of God (and not primarily as individuals)" (*Biblical Interpretations in Preaching*, 27). In a model for self-recognition, the people of God recognize themselves at an earlier stage of their existence. Israel saw itself portrayed in the biblical narratives about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel). What God did for these patriarchs, he did for his people Israel. Thus Israel learned about its identity as God's covenant people—saved by grace—and about its obligation—to keep the covenant. Since there is but one covenant of grace and one kingdom history, even today God's people may use these patriarchal narratives for learning their identity and obligation—provided, of course, that we take into account that we today live at a later stage of kingdom history.

It must be admitted that these “models for self-recognition” may open the door again to example preaching with all its attendant drawbacks. Note, however, that the biblical models for self-recognition are quite different from the models for morality in example preaching. Models for self-recognition are not isolated from their biblical context but are meaningful precisely in that context. They are not dismembered into a few elements that may transfer to individuals today, but function holistically. Also, they are relatively few in number and are entirely dependent on the intention of the author. Finally, models for self-recognition do not undermine the theocentric nature of Scripture or of the sermon, for they are models for the church of all ages precisely in their covenant relationship with God.

The Necessity of Historical Interpretation

A second area for further reflection is that of historical interpretation. In seeking to understand the Scriptures, we can continue to build on the insight of the redemptive-historical approach that history entails progression and therefore calls for historical interpretation. Since the Reformers reintroduced historical interpretation after centuries of allegorical methods, they are credited with what has become known as “grammatical-historical exegesis.” Today, strangely, the case for historical interpretation needs to be made again over against structuralism and the new literary criticism. This modern attack on historical interpretation is all the more reason to underscore its significance.

In historical interpretation, preachers must transport themselves back to the time and place of the original hearers and hear the word as it came to them in their situation. Historical hearing leads to better understanding, for it hears the word in its original historical-cultural context.

The value of historical interpretation lies not only in gaining a better understanding of a text but also in gaining a standard for controlling interpretation—an objective point of control of the text’s meaning. Today we can interpret ancient texts in many different ways, but only historical interpretation can decide which interpretation is wrong and which is right.

Historical Progression

A third and related insight of redemptive history for biblical exposition is that we must acknowledge

historical progression and that it takes place at various levels.

At its most obvious level we recognize progression in God’s redemptive history itself. Redemptive history has moved on from the Old Testament church to the New Testament church to the contemporary church. The impact of progression in redemptive history on interpretation can be seen even in interpreting the decalogue. For example, in Exodus 20:8 God teaches his Old Testament church to keep the seventh day holy. Orthodox Jews and Seventh Day Adventists ignore progression by keeping Saturday holy. But Reformed Christians have felt free to acknowledge progression of redemptive history with

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Jesus’ resurrection on Easter Sunday. New Testament revelation responds to this progression in redemptive history by showing a gradual shift from celebrating the sabbath on Saturday to celebrating the Lord’s Day on Sunday.

Accompanying progression in redemptive history, the Bible reveals progression in God’s revelation. This progression in God’s revelation may also make a difference in the way we preach certain texts. For example, Genesis 17:14 teaches that “any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” I don’t know of any preacher who would use this text today to preach that all uncircumcised males have broken God’s covenant and must be excommunicated. This example makes clear that we may have a text and we may have a sound exposition of what our text meant in the past, but if we preach that past meaning for today, our sermon may not be the word of God for today. For what has been overlooked is progression, the forward movement of God’s revelation. God’s word to Abraham was not his final word. God continued to speak throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. After Jesus shed his blood, God revealed to the early church that bloody sacrifices and bloody sacraments were no longer required. In Acts 15 we read the astonishing account that after 2000 years of circumcising children in obedience to God’s central covenant command, the Holy Spirit and the

apostles agreed that circumcision should no longer be the sign of covenant membership. The new dispensation required new signs. Redemptive history and divine revelation had moved on.

Along with the progression in redemptive history and revelation, contemporary preachers need to be aware of the change in human culture—over the years, our historical-cultural customs have changed. For example, Jesus washed his disciples' feet and told them to do likewise. But if the point of our sermon on this passage would be that we today are to wash one another's feet, we would not speak the word of the Lord for today. In our present culture, the Lord would probably point at some other form of humble service, such as washing dishes, changing diapers, or cleaning the bathroom.

Thus there are various complications in delivering the word of the Lord for today. We have to take into account the progression in redemptive history, the progression in God's revelation, and the change in cultural customs. These various progressions lead me to suggest a distinction between the textual theme and the sermon theme.

Textual Theme And Sermon Theme

Twenty years ago when I wrote my doctoral thesis I generally agreed with the redemptive-historical approach that the text provides the theme for the sermon. But now, because of greater awareness of the various levels of progression in redemptive history, I would suggest that the contemporary preacher needs to distinguish between the theme of the text and the theme of the sermon.

The theme of the text is the fruit of historical interpretation and is formulated in the light of the book's theme. The theme of the sermon, by contrast, needs to be formulated in the light of the whole of Scripture and the progression in redemptive history and human culture. These themes may frequently be the same because of the continuity of God's message to the church then and to the church today. For example, the textual theme of Jeremiah 9:23-24, "Glorify in knowing the Lord," can serve as sermon theme any time and any place. But our method should allow for themes to change in the light of progression in redemptive history and in God's revelation. For example, the theme of Genesis 17:14 for the Old Testament church, "Cut the uncircumcised off from the people of God," cannot

function as sermon theme for a New Testament congregation, for according to Acts 15 the uncircumcised are to be welcomed among God's people. Because of the progression in redemptive history and in revelation, we need to distinguish between the theme of the text in the past and the theme of the sermon for today.

Even though we need to distinguish between the textual theme and the sermon theme, expository preaching demands that these two themes be intimately related. In expository preaching, the theme of the sermon is rooted in the theme of the text; it grows out of the theme of the text. But the sermon's theme is to express the specific point of the sermon for the congregation here and now. The sermon's theme needs to take into account the progression in redemptive history, in God's revelation, as well as the change in human culture.

Theme And Goal

Another refinement to my theory of thematic preaching of twenty years ago is that we must distinguish between the theme of the text and its goal or objective. Fred Craddock helpfully distinguishes between what the text is saying and what the text is doing or is intended to do. What the text is saying is the traditional theme. But with that theme the text is also doing something. "As things are being said, persons are informing, correcting, encouraging, confessing, celebrating, covenanting, punishing, confirming, debating, or persuading" (*Preaching*, 122).

The goal of a text differs from its theme as a point or score in hockey, baseball, or football differs from the play. As the play is the means to the goal, so the theme (the message) is the means to the goal of the author/preacher. In hortatory passages (command), the theme and the goal will be the same. But in other passages, the two can be distinguished. The clearest example I have found of the difference between theme and goal is that between the theme and goal of the message of certain Old Testament prophets. For example, Amos announces impending destruction upon Israel. His theme clearly is this: The Lord will destroy his people Israel. But his goal is just the opposite: Repent and the Lord will as yet save you.

The biblical author may have various goals in mind. According to Paul in Romans 1:16 the

goal of the gospel is salvation: "The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Further, the goal of the biblical text may be to build up the congregation, to encourage and console (I Cor. 14:3), to equip the members for service (Eph. 4:11-12), to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness (II Tim. 3:16). In short, the goal of a text is the expected response from the hearers, such as faith, obedience, repentance, love, zeal, joy, praise, prayer.

How does one discover the goal of a text? It will help to remember that the goal of a text is the response the author seeks to his message. Hence, if one can determine the specific historical situation behind the text—the needs of the church being addressed—one is half-way to discerning the author's goal. For example, Hosea addressed himself to Israel's idolatry; Amos to Israel's unjust treatment of the weak; Paul to the Galatians' reliance on good works; Paul later to the Corinthians' bragging about the gifts of the Spirit.

Note that discovering the goal of a particular author ties right in with historical interpretation. To discern the goal of a particular passage, one must ask: Why did the author write the way he did in these circumstances? What effect did he expect to have on his readers? That effect is the goal of the text. The goal of the text, in turn, is directly related to the goal of the sermon.

A preacher should always have a goal in mind, just as a teacher has teaching objectives. Frequently we just preach a text and let the chips fall where they may. But I think now that good preaching envisions a goal, a specific response from the audience. In its broadest sense the goal of all preaching, of course, is the faith of the hearers and their salvation. But preachers can be more specific in formulating their goals: Do we seek to call to faith or strengthen faith, encourage the weak, comfort the bereaved, correct the wayward, give hope to the despondent, broaden the horizons of the narrow-minded, lift the burden from legalists?

The response we seek from a congregation (the goal) guides us in selecting a preaching-text, for the goal of a sermon should be in harmony with the goal of the original author of a passage. After we have selected a suitable preaching-text, the goal of the text and sermon will guide us in developing the sermon: its structure, introduction, conclusion, illustrations, style, and delivery. For example, if my goal is to

teach a difficult biblical concept, my style may be lucid but matter-of-fact and I may quote one or two authorities, but if I aim to *move* the congregation to action I would not use rather boring quotations but moving illustrations.

Redemptive History And Application

To be truly relevant, expository preaching, which anchors its message in God's word addressed to an ancient church, will need to cross the historical-cultural gap between the ancient church and the church today. Although many sermons crash

*Spiritualizing is nothing
other than a form of
allegorizing.*

attempting to cross this gap, redemptive history provides not only the challenge of progressions and discontinuities but also reliable guidance.

In seeking to bridge the historical-cultural gap, our view of one redemptive history provides a reliable connection between past and present because it makes us aware of several forms of continuity. The most basic continuity in redemptive history is the faithfulness of the covenant God who worked then as well as now. Moreover, in that one redemptive history there is only one people of God, one church. In spite of the discontinuities, therefore, there is a basic continuity between the ancient church and the church today.

Because of the continuities in redemptive history, preachers can detect analogies between the church God addressed in the past and the church God calls us to address today. These analogies will usually enable us to carry God's message from the past to the present.

Sometimes, admittedly, the original message is so strongly conditioned by its culture that there appears to be no direct analogy. In such cases, one should focus on the principle behind the original message. The question to ask is, What is the biblical principle which receives a particular application in this passage? Discovering this principle will enable us to apply it to a specific contemporary setting. For example, Paul's command, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (II Cor. 13:12), though culturally

specific, is a particular application of the principle that Christians ought to greet each other in a physical, warm way. Phillips' translation reapplies this principle for our day and culture as follows: "Greet one another with a hearty handshake."

It would be beneficial if we learned to see all passages of Scripture as focused responses to specific historical needs. As John Bettler argues, "All of the Bible's teachings are for living. It is application. Scripture grew out of real life situations. When Paul wrote about justification by faith in Galatians, he had in mind real people who were polluting their salvation with attempts at righteousness [In Thessalonians] instruction about the second coming was aimed at confused and frightened readers, some of whom had quit their jobs out of ignorance about Christ's return" ("Application" in S. T. Logan's *The Preacher and Preaching*, 335). All biblical passages should be seen as inherently practical in their time and as remarkably practical in similar situations in the present.

Steps in Sermon Preparation

In conclusion and by way of summary, let me suggest five steps in preparing sermons.

First, the preaching-text should be selected with an eye to the needs of the congregation being addressed. This procedure will ensure that the goal of the sermon harmonizes with the goal of the text. The contemporary preacher should address similar situations and needs as the ancient author did.

Second, once we have selected our preaching-text, our questions ought to be specifically, Why did the author write this passage to these people? What needs did he address? What responses did he seek? The answer to these questions will give us the original goal of the biblical author. This original goal is the original relevance of the text. This past relevance forms the bridge to disclosing the text's present relevance.

Third, we need to ask, What is the specific theme

of the text? What is the author's message to his original audience? We should formulate that theme in a simple sentence. This single sentence seeks to capture the point of the message; it seeks to articulate the synthesis of the various elements in this particular text addressed to a specific church in the past. Having caught the focal point of the author in this preaching-text will immunize us to some extent from adding practical asides to the various elements of the text.

Fourth, with the goal and theme of the text clearly in mind, we are now ready to formulate the theme of the sermon. In doing so, we must shift our focus from the past, trace the textual theme through the Scriptures from the Old Testament to the New Testament and on to our present position in redemptive history. As we trace this theme to the present, we will notice that the history of revelation has progressed to the New Testament, that redemptive history has progressed to the year of our Lord 1990, and that historical-cultural customs have changed to those of our urban, post-industrial society. The sermon's theme must be rooted in the text's theme but may require adjustment in the context of this multilayered progression.

Finally, with the goal and theme of the sermon clearly in mind, we are ready to start writing our sermon. Whenever possible, it is advantageous to follow the order of the text, for seeing the sequence enables our hearers to trace in their Bibles the development of the sermon, to test the sermon for biblical validity (I Thess. 5:20-21), and to recall it later. Keeping our hearers in mind throughout the sermon-writing process is important for many reasons; one of the most important reasons is that our hearers should accept our words as the word of God, not because we say so but because they can see that our preaching agrees with the inscripturated word of God. Thus our hearers, too, will experience first-hand the amazing good news that it pleases God to continue his redemptive history through the preaching of his word.