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COOL KERYGMA
MAKING PREACHING RELEVANT IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
(FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2003)

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Early in 2003 I undertook some field research on religious and spiritual attitudes of students in the University of Edinburgh. I found that almost half (49%) of the students surveyed think of the churches as old-fashioned. Yet 44% regarded the churches as friendly, 37% viewed them as welcoming to strangers, and one in five (20%) thought of them as enjoyable. On the other hand, over one quarter (27%) thought the churches to be boring, and 20% felt they were depressing. Only 8% found them lively, although 20% thought they were challenging. (A multiple choice was permitted in the question on the churches, so the percentages quoted do not total 100.)

These figures come from a survey undertaken immediately before and after a series of focus groups set up to explore whether the contemporary interest in spirituality might provide new avenues for engagement with the biblical text by young adults. Most of the sixty-one students who participated in the survey did not have a viable connection with a local church, although a majority appear to have had some church links in the past, and indicated that their religion is Christian. One fifth of the informants professed to have no religion, and 7% belonged to non-Christian faiths.

When asked about the Bible, not a single respondent thought the Bible to be no longer relevant to our culture, although over a quarter (27%) felt it contained only moral tales or nice stories. The most popular view of the Bible – representing just over half (51%) of the respondents – was that it is part of our cultural heritage (like Shakespeare). This was significantly higher than the proportion regarding the Bible to be a holy book like others (41%). 28% thought the Bible to be the unique Word of God.

In the course of the focus groups, when participants were asked to indicate how important they felt it is for young adults to find some measure of spiritual fulfilment, 74% said this was either very or somewhat

important. One in six indicated that they viewed this as slightly important, and only one in ten thought it not at all important.

The relative smallness of the sample and the 'elite' bias inherent in its composition of university students caution us against extrapolating definitively from these results for the general population. Nevertheless, I believe the results can be interpreted as tentatively indicative of some significant trends in the society in which the churches are seeking to communicate their message and fulfil their mission. It is for this reason that I am using the figures cited to help delineate the context in which we are called to preach today.

These results point to the following scenario. The churches are currently working in a society whose characteristics include the following features:

- A large majority – perhaps as many as 90% of the population – acknowledge that finding a measure of spiritual fulfilment is important.

- The great majority have a positive perception of the Bible and appear to think the churches are welcoming and friendly.

- Yet the most widespread impression of the churches is that they are old-fashioned.

This scenario suggests that society may be much more open to the Christian message than is often assumed, but that the churches urgently need to demonstrate the relevance of their message and the plausibility of their *raison d'être* in light of widespread popular perceptions of being old-fashioned and boring. The fact that the churches appear to be widely regarded as friendly and welcoming gives them a key advantage in setting out to convince people of the significance of their message for life in the twenty-first century.

Sociological statistics like these require to be interpreted in the light of popular trends in western media and in western culture generally. The multiplication of electronic media, with the preponderance of visual communications, undoubtedly raises acute challenges to the churches which, by and large, still use verbal monologue as their preferred and principal medium of communication. And the appearance of post-modernism as a significant force in our ever-evolving western culture is tending to lodge suspicions in the popular mind about the churches (and, indeed, about all institutions), as well as casting doubt on both the value of the Bible as a metanarrative and on the churches' text-oriented approach

to it. On the other hand, both the media explosion and the emergence of postmodernism are not without advantages to the communication of the Word of God. The rapid increase in personal participation on the world wide web, and the growing popularity of radio, are signs that the electronic media are perhaps becoming more verbally focused. In addition, postmodernism – in virtue of the high value placed on personal relationships, as well as its strong suspicion of scientific historical criticism – is creating new popular avenues through which the churches can both reach people outside their membership and lead them into a creative interaction with the literature of the Bible.

In this paper I intend to explore ways and means of making our preaching relevant so that we might be better equipped to grasp effectively the undoubted opportunities facing the churches in the early twenty-first century. My assumption in making this exploration is that the gospel is relevant, but that much of our preaching is not!

I wish to begin the exploration reviewing what appear to me to be some of the most commonly followed models in contemporary preaching against the background of examples of apostolic preaching found in the New Testament. This background is important! For if Christian preaching is to be authentic, it needs to be biblical as well as contemporary.[1]

PROFESSOR RATHER THAN PRESENTER

The first model is that of the preacher as a theological expert whose primary task it is to clarify the Scriptures to a theologically illiterate laity. The preacher either assumes or is accorded a place 'six feet above contradiction', often becoming the all-encompassing authority figure in the congregation. Sermons resemble lectures more than communiqués, as the preacher puts in order theological ideas that the Bible has got jumbled up.

John Carrick's recent book on preaching[2] provides an informative résumé of recent debate in the United States about 'redemptive-historical' preaching. This school of preaching traces its origins to Klaas Schilder (1890-1952) and B. Holwerda (1909-52), and today it is perhaps most

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[1] See John Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (London, 1961), p. vii: 'We need to gain in the Church today a clearer view of God's revealed ideal for the preacher, what he is and how he is to do his work.'

[2] J. Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh, 2002).

energetically represented by Sidney Greidanus[3] and articles published in *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical Theology.* Carrick offers a robust critique of redemptive-historical preaching; it is, he claims, 'a *genre* of preaching all too often characterized by objectivism, intellectualism, and scholasticism'.[4] In addition, it tends to exclude the exemplary element in the biblical text. On this last point Carrick cites John Frame: 'Some redemptive-historical preachers seem to have an antipathy to the very idea of application.... I get the impression that some who stress redemptive history really want to avoid "practical" application. They want the whole sermon to focus on Christ, not on what works the believer should do.'[5]

Later in this paper I will advocate that something akin to a redemptive-historical approach to preaching is urgently required in this and other countries outside Holland and North America. So perhaps at this stage I ought to make clear that my advocacy will not be for an uncritical importation. The model I wish to commend will seek to reflect the balance between thematic and exemplary interpretation of sacred history which we find in Scripture itself, notably in the historical psalms and 1 Corinthians 10.

There appears to be a degree of consensus that some forms of redemptive-historical preaching are open to the charge of being more academic and theoretical than popular and practical. Such expressions of this theological approach provide us with a preaching model that is less than helpful. Of course, we need to remember that the tendency to convert the church sanctuary into a theological classroom is not by any means the sole preserve of redemptive-historical preachers in Holland and America. One suspects that if Thomas Chalmers were still with us, he might well be moved in a variety of situations to reiterate his famous critique of 'Moderate' preaching: 'A Moderate's sermon,' he wrote, 'is like a winter's day: short, clear and cold. The brevity is good; the clarity is better; the coldness is fatal.'

All brands of effete preaching contrast markedly with preaching as we detect it in the New Testament. There the preacher is a *keryx* or herald, an announcer of good news, not a sophist, philosopher or any other member of the intelligentsia. In the ancient world the herald was a relatively lowly placed servant of the king. He did not speak in his own right. As John

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[3]   See his *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto, 1970); and *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, 1988).

[4]   Carrick, *The Imperative*, p. 113.

[5]   Carrick, *The Imperative*, pp. 118-19.

Stott says in the chapter on 'A Herald' in *The Preacher's Portrait*, 'As the mouth-piece of his master he dare not add his own interpretation.'[6] One of several biblical examples of heralds quoted by Stott is that of those sent by Pharaoh to precede Joseph's chariot and to cry before him 'Bow the knee!'[7] Evidence from the ancient world suggests that the equivalent of a herald in our modern society might be an official spokesperson at a government news conference or a news presenter in the media.

EXCAVATOR RATHER THAN EXPOSITOR

In the second model preachers tend to treat Scripture in somewhat the same way as archaeologists approach long-buried ancient cities. Preachers of this type take their cue from the activities of historical-critical scholars, which Robert Alter describes as *excavative* 'either literally, with the archaeologist's spade and reference to its findings, or with a variety of analytic tools intended to uncover the original meanings of biblical words, the life situations in which specific texts were used, the sundry sources from which longer texts were assembled'.[8] The truth lies under the surface of the text, and can be recovered only after a great deal of digging which the preacher undertakes on behalf of the congregation. Thus the true meaning of Scripture is seen to lie behind the text, rather than in it, and the task of the preacher is to search for this buried meaning, discover it and then exhibit it for the benefit of the assembled congregation.

Kevin Vanhoozer contends that 'interpretations that substitute a description of events behind the text for a description of what the texts are actually saying generally teach only religion, not theology'.[9] According to Vanhoozer, it is the study of the text itself, rather than the study of the revelatory events or religious experiences to which it witnesses, that will lead to discovery of its theological message. The implication for preaching is that excavation of the context – however fascinating – is no substitute for exposition of the text.

Certainly the preachers of the New Testament were expositors. The gospel they preached was 'according to the Scriptures'.[10] Peter's sermon at Pentecost was substantially an exposition of the prophet Joel (2:28-32) and two Psalms (16:8-11 and 110:1). When Paul visited the synagogue in

[6] J. R. W. Stott, *Portrait*, p. 32.
[7] Gen. 41:43, Stott, *Portrait*, p. 32.
[8] R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1985), p.13.
[9] 'Exegesis and Hermeneutics' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (eds), (Leicester/Downers Grove, 2000), p. 57.
[10] 1 Corinthians 15:3.

Thessalonica, we read that 'on three sabbath days [he] argued with them from the scriptures explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead'.[11] Although the text does not explicitly state that Paul's intervention on that occasion took the form of public speaking, the assumption of F. F. Bruce is that in all probability this was the case, as it had previously been in Pisidian Antioch.[12] We learn from his reported speeches in Lystra and Athens[13] that, when speaking to audiences who were unaware of the Old Testament, Paul did not customarily expound these Scriptures while presenting the gospel for the first time to Gentiles. But the presence of some 250 express citations from the Old Testament in the New Testament documents[14] suggests that, however 'light' the initial apostolic approach to Gentiles may have been in terms of Old Testament quotation and exposition, Gentile converts were very quickly encouraged to use the Scriptures as key equipment for the Christian life (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16f.).

MEDIATOR RATHER THAN MESSENGER

A third popular model sees the preacher as a priestly mediator between God and congregation. In a fascinating study of the minister as outlined in twentieth-century Scottish literature, William Storrar – taking his cue from John A. Mackay's magisterial work *The Other Spanish Christ* – claims that the Scottish presbyterian minister has become a Christ substitute. 'As so many Scottish writers have recognised, the minister in the pulpit is the Calvinist Crucifix, the Presbyterian icon of Christ.'[15] Storrar's argument is that the docetic strain, which T. F. Torrance has highlighted as being endemic in Protestantism, has obscured the empathetic priestly agency of Christ, resulting in 'an inevitable substitute priesthood' in which 'the minister in the pulpit, so much a part of Scottish religious experience and folklore, becomes the mediating figure between the believing, worshipping community and its God.'[16]

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[11] Acts 17:2-3, NRSV.

[12] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, 1988), p. 322ff.

[13] Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31.

[14] E. E. Ellis, 'Quotations in the New Testament', *New Bible Dictionary* (London, 1996), p. 995.

[15] 'The Other Scottish Christ: Preaching as Crucifixion in the Scottish Novel', in *Globalisation and Difference: practical theology in a world context*, P. Ballard and P. Conture (eds), (Cardiff, 2001).

[16] William Storrar's conclusion that 'the minister in the pulpit is the visual and dramatic representation of the Scottish Christ' is drawn from Lewis

In order to demonstrate that this mediatorial model of the preacher exists in fact as well as in fiction, allow me to share with you an anecdote I heard some thirty years ago during a visit to the Isle of Skye. An event had been recently organised by Portree High School at which senior pupils had opportunity to ask questions of a panel of clergy representing the main denominations on the island. One of the questions raised by the young audience was this: 'What must I do if I want to be converted?' According to my informant, one of the replies from the platform was the telling one-liner: 'Telephone the nearest Free Church minister'!

A somewhat similar attitude lies behind the misunderstanding still prevalent in some conservative Reformed circles that preaching from the pulpit is the divinely ordained means of salvation, thus unwittingly elevating the preacher towards some kind of mediatorial role. This conviction about preaching results from the unfortunate translation of 1 Corinthians 1:21 found in the King James Version: 'it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe'. Modern translations rightly recognise that the Greek term here is *kerygma* (in its genitive singular form) – i.e. the reference is to the message proclaimed. It is not *keryxis* – the act of proclamation, which would be required to justify the KJV rendering.

In passing, it may be observed that the mistake of the King James translators in taking 1 Corinthians 1:21 to refer to the preaching method, rather than to the message preached, may sadly have deprived countless churches of both the vision to train and mobilise the whole people of God as heralds of the good news, and the capacity to grow, under God, by geometric progression. One is tempted to ask whether this translation, which became so embedded in the presbyterian psyche, is one of the reasons why, for the year 2000, there were reckoned to be almost twice as many Baptists in the world as Presbyterians and almost three times as many Pentecostals.[17]

We do well to recall that the Grimm-Thayer *Lexicon* defines *keryx* as 'a herald, a messenger vested with public authority who conveyed the official messages of kings, magistrates, princes, military commanders, or who

Grassic Gibbon's *Scots Quair* trilogy, Fiona MacColla's *And the Cock Crew*, and Robin Jenkins' *The Awakening of George Darroch*. See also Storrar's *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 86-109.

[17] *World Churches Handbook*, P Brierley (ed.), (London, 1997). The respective membership totals are given as: Presbyterians, 24 million; Baptists, 43 million; Pentecostals, 63 million.

gave a public summons or demand.' This surely suggests the preacher is a messenger rather than a mediator.

ARTIST RATHER THAN AMBASSADOR

Yet another model becoming popular today is to minimise the importance of the sermon by seeing the whole worship service as a communication event. Expository preaching is regarded as a hangover from Enlightenment rationalism, and is viewed as a western, individualistic and, indeed, chauvinistic model of communicating the good news. The postmodern 'pick and mix' mindset, it is argued, calls for a more anecdotal and less cerebral approach, involving drama, mime, dance, movement and colour. In his book *Picking up the Pieces*, David Hilborn seeks to answer the question he poses in his subtitle: 'Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?' He observes that 'The expository model is being overthrown by alternative worshippers keen to return to a "pre-modern" emphasis on ritual, mystery and communality in worship.'[18] In this model the pastor is more artist than ambassador, more choreographer than preacher.

There is little doubt that both Old and New Testament practices suggest that occasions of worship are, indeed, intended to be communication events (e.g. Neh. 8; 1 Cor. 14). But it does not follow that preaching is secondary! In a survey of worship in church meetings in the New Testament, Howard Marshall concludes that instruction and teaching were of great importance. 'From the New Testament it is plain that Christian meetings were occasions for instruction of the congregation.' Marshall goes on: 'to think of Christian meetings in terms primarily of our worship of God is to put what should be secondary into the primary position, and, as we have seen, to create the danger that the Word and action of God may be lost from sight or at least thrust into a corner. To think of a Christian meeting in terms of worship is to stifle the voice of God. Surely our Christian meetings should be patterned on the fundamental drama of redemption in which God acts and we respond: God speaks through his human agents and then the congregation respond to his Word.'[19] Certainly Paul viewed the preacher as an ambassador, not an entertainer.[20]

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[18] D. Hilborn, *Picking up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?* (London, 1997), p. 151.

[19] I. H. Marshall, 'Worshipping Biblically', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 20 (2002), pp. 154-5. W. Storrar, *Scottish Identity*, sees the Church as 'the new acoustic community of all nations', pp. 118-24.

[20] 2 Cor. 5:20; cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5.

Undoubtedly preachers in the twenty-first century can learn from the dynamics of, say, a TV variety show, or the sound bite culture of local radio. But if such learning means that preaching is dumbed down to chat show level, or relegated to a liturgical corner, the heart of New Testament worship will be lost.

MARKETER RATHER THAN MIDWIFE

Finally in this review of contemporary models of preaching I want to look at a model that owes much to the consumerism of western culture. We have already looked at a preaching model that seeks to help the audience identify the significance of the Bible with what lies behind the text. This fifth model, in contrast, focuses the attention of hearers on what is in front of the text. In it the preacher encourages listeners to discover their own meaning in the biblical text. The text, the preacher explains to the congregation, contains an infinite range of options. Members of the congregation are then urged to discover the option which means most to them. The congregation are regarded as consumers; the object of the preaching is to help each member of the audience create and appropriate a meaning in the biblical text which will help them maximise their potential for fulfilling themselves.

Such postmodern approaches to the text are tersely assessed by Vanhoozer: 'every attempt to describe "what it meant" is in fact only an assertion of *what it means to me*, or worse, *what we will it to mean*'.[21]

But does not this fostering of Narcissism stand rather uncomfortably alongside Christian nurture as we detect its practice in the early church? The great objective of primitive Christian nurture was articulated by Paul writing to a group of churches which, having started their Christian lives in the Spirit, were trying to become perfect by their own human effort. With deep emotion the apostle writes: 'Now it's wonderful that you are eager to do good, and especially when I am not with you. But oh, my dear children! I feel as if I am going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives.'[22] The focus here is not on maximising our sense of consumer fulfilment, but on the conceiving of the Christ life within us. Leonard Sweet challenges contemporary preachers to confront consumerism rather than hitch a ride from it. 'Like the church of the first century, the twenty-first-century

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[21] 'Exegesis and Hermeneutics' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (eds), (Leicester/Downers Grove, 2000), p. 55.

[22] Gal. 4:18-19, NLT; cf. 3:3.

church must measure success not by the size of bank accounts or biceps but by the strength of brains and birth stools. In the midst of a consumer culture that is built on earnings, yearnings, and bottom lines, the church must be a conceiving culture that is built on God's grace where the "top things" and "top of the lines" in life are given freely, tended and tilled conservatively and distributed liberally. If conception doesn't replace consumption as the primary GNP in the church first, it never will in the wider culture.' [23]

This quick review has taken in five contemporary models of preaching: the preacher as professor rather than presenter, as excavator rather than expositor, as mediator rather than messenger, as artist rather than ambassador, and as marketer rather than midwife. It has sought to set each of these models against the backcloth of preaching as evidenced in the New Testament documents. One inference of the review is that the apostolic preacher of the good news was essentially a communicator with words. This inference is confirmed by John Stott's well-known word study of five common terms employed in the New Testament to describe the preacher and the preacher's task.[24] These terms are: *steward, herald, witness, father* and *servant*. It is clear from Stott's study that, although some of these have strong pastoral overtones, all are employed to describe the preacher as communicator.

I now wish to pause in this brief appraisal of preaching and its relevance, to consider the preacher's message. I have said earlier that I believe this message is already relevant. It, therefore, follows that I am persuaded that we don't need to *make* the *kerygma* relevant. And clearly the implication of my opening contention that the church is regarded as old-fashioned, is that it is the *keryxis* – the act or method of proclamation – that requires to be made relevant. Allow me now to proceed to state why I believe the biblical *kerygma* is relevant in the twenty-first century. The *kerygma* undoubtedly *is* cool! But I wish to contend that the *keryxis* is not! Later I plan to return to the *keryxis* to suggest some ways in which it might become more relevant.

NARRATIVE AS MATRIX

I wish to give the term *kerygma* in the title of this lecture the broad sense of the entire biblical message, rather than the narrower connotation of 'the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world' taken by

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[23] L. Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims* (Nashville, 2000), p. xxi.

[24] *Portrait.*

Dodd when he popularised the Greek word as a theological term in the English language.[25] I hope you will agree that this enlarged sense is permissible in this context. Stott, following Robert Mounce, argues that Dodd's rigid distinction between *kerygma* and *didache* ought not to be over-pressed. The verbs *keryssein* and *didaschein* are used interchangeably in the gospels.[26] The Scriptures as a whole can, I believe, be described as kerygmatic in that they over-arch all the themes of the Christian proclamation. We read in 2 Timothy 3:15ff. that the Holy Scriptures are able to impart the wisdom that leads to salvation, and that 'all Scripture' is 'useful for teaching', etc.[27] For these reasons, this paper is treating the terms canon and *kerygma* as, in a sense, coextensive.

What is the profile of this macro *kerygma*? Well, the Bible is fundamentally a story, a story that begins with the creation and ends with the consummation. This is to say that both Old and New Testaments have a narrative shape. That shape is reflected in the Old Testament psalms known as 'creedal recitals' which follow the biblical storyline up to the time of their composition. And the earliest examples of Christian preaching are similarly a simple narrative of God's dealings with Israel finding its culmination in the mission of Jesus.[28] True, the Bible exhibits a variety of literary *genres* – poetry, law, gospel, epistle, parable and more – as well as narrative. But there is little doubt that the narrative storyline of God's dealings with his world and people acts as the matrix that holds the biblical texts together.

In a paper published in 1975 entitled 'Bible Stories: Message and Matrix',[29] Jacob Loewen relates how the recognition of this narrative shape of Scripture by those leading a translation project for the Choco people of Panama, and the subsequent reflection of it in their publishing plan (which, incidentally, employed voice rather than print), led to much greater comprehension by the Chocos of both the meaning and the relevance of the biblical texts. Loewen relates how in the 1950s and 1960s translators working on tribal languages in Central America reacted to problems caused

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[25] C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London, 1936).

[26] Examples of this inter-changeability cited by Stott are: Matt. 4:23 (teaching) = Mark 1:39 and Luke 4:44 (preaching); and Mark 1:21, 22, 27 (teaching) = 1:38 (preaching). *Portrait*, p. 33 n.

[27] 2 Timothy 4.15f, GNB.

[28] See Acts 2:14-36; 7:1-53; cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-11.

[29] In *Culture and Human Values: Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective* (Pasadena, 1975), pp. 370-76.

by the 'negative restructuring'[30] of biblical information gleaned from early translations of Bible stories by various indigenous peoples in Central America. To illustrate the main points of the gospel, Loewen and others identified a series of twenty-six stories that could be told as a sequence. In this sequence, major gaps were bridged by such phrases as 'after a long time,' 'much later,' and the like. Loewen informs us that this core of Bible stories provided a framework which enabled the Chocos and others tribes to make sense of the message of the stories.

'We soon realized,' he wrote, 'that sequence was as important as were the truths contained in the stories.'[31] In his article he argued that the gospel begins to make fundamental changes only 'within the framework of a fuller understanding of the program of God and not on the basis of a few isolated truths'. Loewen went on: 'In the light of this conviction, we would like to assert that over and above form, point of contact, emphasis, or even the meeting of felt need, the individual parts of the message need a matrix, a setting, which will meaningfully relate them to a whole and which will provide somewhat of a barrier against negative restructuring.'[32]

I now want to take you back from the premodern cultures of Central America to the postmodern world, a transition that may not be as difficult as we might imagine. In what has turned out to be a seminal paper given in the London Bible College as The Laing Lecture for 1989, on the subject 'How can the Bible be authoritative?',[33] N. T. Wright observes that the scriptural writings are mostly narrative, and he asks 'how can a story, a narrative, be authoritative?'[34] The answer proposed is to construe the biblical narrative as an unfinished drama script of five acts. Middleton and Walsh have adapted Wright's five biblical acts into a six-act dramatic structure in which each act contains a multiplicity of scenes.[35] Middleton and Walsh's six acts are as follows:

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[30] Among examples of such restructuring, Loewen cites polygamists among the Lolo people reinterpreting church membership of first wives as eternal security for husbands, and church members among the Kaka people restructuring communion as magic to circumvent punishment in analogy to one of their traditional ceremonies.

[31] 'Bible Stories', p. 373.

[32] 'Bible Stories', p. 373.

[33] *Vox Evangelica* 21, (1991), pp. 7-32.

[34] 'How can the Bible be authoritative?', p. 18.

[35] J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, *Truth is stranger than it used to be* (Downers Grove/London, 1995), p. 182.

Act I   Creation. The Author's plot intentions are initially revealed.
Act II   Fall. The first major incursion of plot tension.
Act III The story of Israel
Act IV   The story of Jesus. This is seen as the decisive, pivotal act which begins to unravel the plot conflict at its deepest roots.
Act V   The story of the church
Act VI   The *eschaton* or consummation.

A critical point in this schema is that the script breaks off in the midst of Act V, resulting in a gap between Act V, scene 1 (the story of the early church) and the grand finales of Act VI. And it is precisely in this gap in the unfinished drama that we find ourselves. Our task is to tell God's story as outlined in Acts I to V and to let that story exercise its power in the world. We are not only to tell it, but also to carry the story further forward toward its eschatological goal, by working out in our own lives and in our own generation the current scene in the Fifth Act. Middleton and Walsh see this type of response to Scripture as the essence of Christian living; they call it 'faithful improvisation' in which obedience to the Word of the Lord is rendered in creative, innovative and flexible ways. Such faithful improvisation is possible only as we immerse ourselves in Scripture through serious, passionate Bible study and as we are guided by the Holy Spirit sent to us by the primary Author of the Story.[36]

Wright's thesis is that it is precisely at this point that God invests the church with that divine authority of which Scripture is both a witness and a vehicle. Wright's key question is: how may we 'be able to stand humbly in the councils of God, in order then to stand boldly in the councils of men?' The answer, he says, is: 'By soaking ourselves in scripture, in the power and strength and leading of the Spirit, in order that we may then speak freshly and with authority to the world of this same creator God.'[37]

At this point, the emphases of Wright on the one hand and Middleton and Walsh on the other appear to differ slightly. Wright focuses on the church being able to speak authoritatively, Middleton and Walsh on the church being able to live faithfully. But both agree that the church's telling (and living) of the story involves inviting those to whom it is told to enter into it. The story which the Spirit sends us out to tell the world, says Wright, 'is the story which breaks open all other world-views and, by so

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[36] *Truth*, pp. 183-5.
[37] 'How can the Bible?' pp. 22-3.

doing, invites men and women, young and old, to see *this* story as *their* story'.[38]

The key point to make here is that writers like Loewen, Wright, Middleton and Walsh enable us to see more clearly that Scripture has a God-given narrative shape. Our task as preachers is essentially to tell and retell the Bible's story as summarised in Middleton and Walsh's six acts. The creed of ancient Israel was the story of Yahweh's dealings with his people and is powerfully articulated in the historical psalms.[39] The Pentecost preaching of Peter in Acts 2 and the apologia of Stephen in Acts 7 are both a retelling of that story together with an affirmation of its fulfilment in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Paul's summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is cast in narrative form, as is also the Apostles' Creed.

Rousas John Rushdoony sees this emphasis on historical narrative as constituting the uniqueness of Christianity: 'The faith of all other religions is in *a body of ideas or claims concerning reality....* The Apostles' Creed is radically different: it offers a synopsis of history, created by God the Father Almighty, requiring salvation by Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, who entered, lived, died, and was resurrected in history. His holy congregation is operative in history, which culminates in the general resurrection and everlasting life. The whole creed therefore is *a declaration concerning history.*'[40]

Surely, therefore, the telling and the retelling of this metanarrative – this biblical master-story – ought to be at the heart of our preaching. I believe that we do the Bible a grave injustice if we regard and preach it as a book of ideas, a book containing 'the four things God wants us to know' of the Scripture Gift Mission, or 'the four spiritual laws' of Campus Crusade. Ideas there are, of course – great and wonderful ideas! But these ideas are living, not abstract; they emerge from the story, rather than being illustrated by it. I fear we help to detract from Scripture, and to desiccate theology, if we allow a wedge to be driven between biblical narrative and biblical theology. My plea, therefore, is for a recovery of that which might appropriately be called 'narrative preaching'.

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[38]   'How can the Bible?', p. 24.

[39]   Psalms 77, 78, 105, 106, 136.

[40]   R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order: Studies in the Creeds and Councils of the Early Church* (Fairfax, 1978), quoted in Carrick, *The Imperative,* p. 14.

NARRATIVE AS GENRE

The swing of the pendulum in recent decades from a historical-critical approach to the Bible to a literary approach has highlighted the importance of narrative as one of the most important – perhaps the most important – of the many literary *genres* identified in the biblical literature.

In contrast to the historical-critical approach, literary study of the Bible tends to be holistic in recognising the literary integrity of the canonical texts. 'Modern biblical criticism,' says Vanhoozer, 'while professing to study the text scientifically, in fact approached the text with the anti-theological presuppositions of secular reason and hence with a bias against the unity of the text and an anti-narrative hermeneutic. Perhaps nothing is so typical of the historical-critical method than its tendency to fragment the text. By contrast, the most exciting developments in biblical theology are those that approach the texts with a sense of their literary integrity, a sense that stems from a postcritical hermeneutic which is open to being shaped by Christian perspectives.'[41]

Vanhoozer points out that the later approach seeks to interpret biblical texts on their own terms rather than fragmenting them by undertaking a minute study of sources. The frameworks through which texts are interpreted are constructed less from the norms of modern historiography and more from criteria commonly employed in literary analysis and appreciation.

A number of the leaders in this field are Jewish scholars, notably Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg and Shimon Bar-Efrat. Others include Stanley Hauerwas, David Gunn and Danna Fewell, and Edgar McKnight. Some of these write from a postmodern reader-oriented viewpoint. Notable contributions from an evangelical perspective have come from Kevin Vanhoozer, Philips Long, Francis Watson and others.

Some contend that narrative prose was first used by the ancient Israelite writers. Alter doubts this, but contends that these writers rejected epic (the prevalent literary form of religious texts in the ancient near east) because it was inseparable from myth and, therefore, unsuitable for historical writing. Alter views Hebrew narrative writing as 'fictionalized history', although, rather confusingly, he also describes it as 'historized fiction' and 'prose fiction'. But he is of the opinion that 'the historical impulse' lying behind Hebrew narrative disqualified the epic *genre* from becoming its medium. Sternberg accords a greater degree of historical 'happenedness' to Hebrew Bible narrative, and helpful evangelical evaluations of the debate on history

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[41] 'Exegesis', p. 58.

versus fiction in biblical narrative have been made by Craig Blomberg[42] and Philips Long,[43] to mention only two.[44]

In his Grove Booklet *Preaching Old Testament Narrative*,[45] Bob Fyall demonstrates just how helpful for expository preaching are the insights from the current literary treatment of biblical narrative. Fyall emphasises the importance of noting in preaching how the biblical writers develop plot, how they portray characterisation, and how they deploy the range of literary devices available to them. He illustrates from a series of ten of his sermons on 1 and 2 Kings how an understanding of such literary features enables the biblical text to speak today in new and exciting ways.

The literature in this area constitutes, I believe, a veritable gold mine for preachers. Robert Alters is not alone among these literary critics in illustrating his appreciation of Hebrew narrative prose by exegeting passages from the Joseph story, the David cycle, the Book of Judges, etc., as he goes along. Such exposition is holistic, and draws out a host of fascinating thematic insights and nuances which many historical-critical commentaries miss through their focus on minutiae. While the historical-critical approach helps us to recognise the trees, the literary approach enables us to see the forest.

NARRATIVE PREACHING

Having looked at biblical narrative as matrix and as *genre*, it is now time to face the question: How will acknowledgement of the narrative shape of Scripture and recognition of the literary devices of narrative prose help to make preaching relevant in the twenty-first century? Allow me to offer the following answers to this question:

First, narrative preaching is relevant because it is biblical. It is precisely because the Word of God is living and enduring,[46] that it is applicable in all ages. So to be relevant, preaching needs not only to be contextualised in today's culture, but also to be anchored in Scripture. And narrative preaching is, as we have already sought to demonstrate, the principal model of preaching found in the Bible. The narrative shape given to biblical preaching is seen in the farewell discourses of Moses (which

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[42]   C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Leicester, 1987).

[43]   V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids, 1994).

[44]   I. H. Marshall's *I Believe in the Historical Jesus* (London, 1977), which has made a key contribution to understanding the historiography of the Gospels, was re-published in a new edition in 2002.

[45]   B. Fyall, *Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Cambridge, 1997).

[46]   1 Pet. 1:23.

constitute most of the Book of Deuteronomy), the four Gospels and the examples of apostolic preaching recorded in the Book of Acts. It is true, of course, that large parts of the Old Testament are prophecy rather than narrative. It is also the case that in my Good News New Testament the epistles and the Book of Revelation between them cover 144 pages, or 44% of the whole. But the message of the prophets is directed to the events related in the narrative, and, indeed, parts of the prophetic writings are in narrative form (e.g. Hosea). The message of the epistles is consequent on the events recorded in the Gospels and Acts. The preaching of both prophets and epistles is dependent on the narrative storyline and, therefore, in a secondary sense, might be described as narrative preaching.

Second, narrative preaching is relevant because it resonates with where many people are. That is, it is 'cool' today. It is important to recognise that it is 'cool', not because it is new, but precisely because it is old! There are many links between postmodernity and premodernity; one of these is a fascination with traditions. It is significant that in the United States some younger Christians are reacting against attempts to dumb down preaching and to convert the church sanctuary into a TV studio set. They are moving to churches with a high liturgy. In some cases 'low' churches are becoming 'high' churches. Leonard Sweet reports that an entire charismatic network in Southern California has converted to Orthodoxy, forming the Antiochian Orthodox Church.[47] One of the attractions of liturgy is its dramatic re-enactment of the redemptive story. Similar moves in the UK are not impossible, perhaps not improbable; Paul Thompson, who works with the Oasis Project of the Edinburgh West End Churches among clubbers, has told me that when he has opportunity to introduce young adults to the Bible, they quickly want to move into the Old Testament. 'They're looking for roots,' he explained.

Third, narrative preaching is relevant because people today are captivated by stories. While it is true that many with a postmodern mindset are suspicious of metanarratives, they are, nevertheless, intrigued by stories in general – even big stories. Witness, for example, the extraordinary success of the Lord of the Rings films. In the light of this, I believe it *is* likely that people today will engage with the biblical story if we present it to them as it is, i.e. as a story, rather than as a set of abstract ideas. In my current research I hope to investigate the possibility of the contemporary interest in spirituality becoming an entry point to the Bible for postmoderns. In particular, I want to investigate whether the Old Testament Psalms might be the gateway to the gospel for this generation.

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[47] *Postmodern*, p. 72.

Fourth, narrative preaching is becoming increasingly relevant because today human consciousness is recognised as having a narrative structure. According to Stephen Crites, human consciousness 'is itself an incipient story'. The 'form' of consciousness, which allows for 'coherent experience' is, he claims, in a 'rudimentary sense narrative'.[48] Crites argues that without memory, human experience would have no coherence at all.[49] This fresh awareness that each individual person conceives his or her life as a story surely provides us with a key 'point of contact' as we seek to tell 'the old, old Story' in the early twenty-first century.

Fifth, narrative preaching is relevant because it encourages the congregation to engage with the biblical story. It is here that both preacher and people must learn to use imagination much more that is our wont in the context of worship. I suspect that rather too much preaching – and I include my own preaching here – short circuits the narrative with its atmosphere, its details, its colours and its smells, in an attempt to get to the meaning of the story as quickly as possible. But such short-circuiting deprives the congregation of the right to engage with the text for themselves. We challenge them to engage not with the text, but with our 'take' of the text. The implications of this are very serious. We may be robbing our hearers of having a personal, naïve, raw interaction with the Word of God straight, by providing them with a substitute in the form of the Word of God mediated through a homiletic package.

I am convinced that narrative preaching calls for a much greater use of imagination by both preacher and congregation than either currently appears to give it. This will require effort, for we have inherited a religious tradition which has generally frowned on the use of imagination in worship, and we live in a society dominated by visual media which tend to atrophy human imagination. The recovery of a sanctified use of imagination will not be easy. But it is essential, for without the renaissance of Christian imagination for which John McIntyre,[50] Trevor Hart[51] and others are pleading, we will be unable to speak one of the key 'languages' used and understood by postmoderns.

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[48] Stephen Crites, 'The narrative quality of experience', in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, S. Hauerwas and L. G. Jones (eds), (Grand Rapids, 1989), p. 72, quoted by Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge, 1999).

[49] 'The narrative', p. 73.

[50] J. McIntyre, *Faith, Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh, 1987).

[51] T. Hart, *Theology and Imagination*, audio tape course, Vancouver, 1997.

Sixth, narrative preaching is relevant because it helps us see both forest and trees. One of the disadvantages of expository preaching as traditionally practised is that it allows the congregation to get lost in detail. The preacher focuses so much on the trees – perhaps on only one branch, or even one leaf – that the congregation loses sight of the forest! Of course, narrative preaching in its concern to provide a panoramic perspective of the forest, must be careful to avoid neglecting the trees, as some redemptive-historical preaching is accused of doing. The Dutch speak of preaching as 'bicycling through the Bible'.[52] Narrative preaching will seek to do this, but it must also provide opportunities to dismount and take in the scenery at particular points of the journey.

Seventh, narrative preaching is relevant because it enables the preacher to present the truth claims of the gospel out of the biblical context in which these claims were first made. Donald Bloesch takes to task narrative theologians who downplay the truth of the story in its telling. 'The proclamation of the church consists of more than telling a story,' he says. 'It involves proclaiming the divine commandment as well as celebrating the divine promise.'[53] Narrative preaching will seek to be faithful to the text, recognising that the biblical narrative includes divine claims, commands and promises. These claims, etc., are embedded in the story, or are inferred from it. Perhaps Gerard Loughlin can help us here. In a footnote he reacts to John Millbank's refusal of the Gospels as realistic narratives and of Jesus as a character within them, on the ground that metaphors of Jesus as way, word, truth, life, water, bread, vertically invest universal significance in Jesus. Loughlin sees these 'vertical' metaphors as 'closely folded within the "horizontal" narratives'.[54] The preacher must take care to proclaim the 'vertical metaphors' as well as expound the 'horizontal narratives' in which the metaphors are 'folded'.

Eighth, narrative preaching is relevant because the preacher challenges his hearers to incarnate the story and carry it forward towards its *telos*. The preacher will help his congregation understand Christian obedience to Jesus Christ in terms of contextualising the biblical story first within their own personal story and then within their own involvement in the wider story of society and of the world. Having invited the congregation to enter the biblical Story – to linger in it, to absorb it, to revel in it, to give God thanks for it – the narrative preacher will then call on the congregation to

[52] Carrick, *The Imperative*, p. 115.
[53] D. G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Carlisle, 1994), p. 213.
[54] G. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 76 n. 58.

look out on the world through the lens of the biblical Story, seeking to understand their humdrum, every-day existence in terms of the world-view they have just discovered or rediscovered. The preacher will then urge the congregation on leaving public worship to return to the world determined to work out for themselves the next scene in the fifth act of the drama. Middleton and Walsh remind us that this 'improvisation' of the next scene must be 'faithful to the thrust, momentum and direction of the biblical story. Any action (whether that be adopting a moral stance, responding to postmodernity or making cultural-political decisions) that is inappropriate to this story (for example, sexual promiscuity, entrenched denial of the force of the postmodern critique or rabid cultural-political nationalism) must be judged in the light of the story. But if our praxis is to be faithful to the story, this requires taking the risk of improvisation that is creative, innovative and flexible.'[55]

Ninth, narrative preaching is relevant in that it provides us with a model for evangelism that is at one and the same time both dominical and contemporary. This form of evangelistic preaching tells the biblical story, inviting hearers to enter that story and make their own discoveries within it. This is how Jesus told his parables; he appears seldom to have interpreted them; rather he invited his hearers to make their own discovery of the good news they contain. Such an approach today would deliver us from stereotyping evangelism into four rigid steps which leave little room for the idiosyncrasies of the individual and the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Ought we not to trust the Word more to do its own work?[56] Did not Luther say that, as we enter the Scriptures, Jesus will step out of the text and meet us? The theological inadequacies of stereotype evangelism apart, stereotyping is distinctly unpopular today. Postmoderns prefer to buy products that are customised to their own requirements. I suggest that narrative evangelistic preaching creates space for the Holy Spirit to customise the gospel to the particular needs of individuals. This is not to say that the 'Four Things God wants You to Know' or the 'Four Spiritual

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[55] *Truth*, p. 183.

[56] Cf. Loewen, 'Bible Stories': The language of a primitive people presents fewest difficulties to the narrative form of address; a very simple man can understand a story. And, lo, the teller of Bible stories discovers that a new religious world is dawning upon the heathen through the simple narration of what God has done for men; that these stories are better fitted than any well though-out address for making blinded idolaters acquainted with the living God; that the simple telling of what God has done in the course of human history makes his image plastic to them and himself, no longer a bloodless idea, but an acting, thinking, feeling person.' (p. 371).

Laws' ought to be dispensed with. But they may be better used as a checklist after encountering the gospel rather than as a list of steps leading to salvation.

To think of narrative preaching as simple storytelling is to misunderstand it. It is much more. Narrative preaching is interpretive preaching; it will help the hearers to make sense of the passage. It will also be expository – although to capture quickly the 'big picture' of a biblical book, the exposition might sometimes be by paragraph, rather than by verse. Narrative preaching will also be theological preaching, as the preacher draws from the text teaching about God, his purposes and his promises. It will be ethical preaching, highlighting the divine standards and sanctions as they come to light in the text. It will be challenging preaching, calling on congregations imaginatively to enter the world of the text – interacting with its situations and characters – so that they might faithfully live the text in the everyday world of Monday to Saturday. This interpretive, expository, theological, ethical and challenging preaching, I call *narrative* preaching simply because the preacher will seek to set every sermon in its place in the matrix of the biblical storyline, and in exposition will draw as appropriate upon the literary features of narrative prose.

CONCLUSION

For all of these reasons I believe the Christian *kerygma* is 'cool' in our postmodern age, as, indeed, it has also been cool in previous eras. In my view, we do the *kerygma* a disservice if we dumb it down to make it more acceptable to the tastes of our age, for in so doing we run the danger of robbing it of its power. The *kerygma* is cool! The *kerygma* is powerful! Let us all – preachers and congregations – tell it enthusiastically! Let us proclaim it creatively! Let us contextualise it meaningfully! And let us pray, and let us expect, that our postmodern contemporaries may, indeed, come to recognise and experience this message as the very power of God![57]

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[57]   1 Cor. 1:18.