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Doctor of Ministry Thesis

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The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

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An Examination of an Ongoing Process of Transition of  
an Older Generation Church to a Narrative Form of  
Preaching

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Ministry

by Tim Ford

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I acknowledge a great debt of thanks to my immediate family, my wife Jan, our daughter Christy and son Sam who have been supportive and patient in many ways throughout my research.

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my dear mother

DOROTHY TURNER

1936-2015

who always encouraged me in faith, life, ministry and study  
and who enjoyed an increasingly flourishing faith as she 'greyed gracefully'.

# An Examination of an Ongoing Process of Transition of an Older Generation Church to a Narrative Form of Preaching

Tim Ford

## Thesis Abstract

Preaching remains central to the Evangelical Church tradition. This research examined whether the style of preaching in one such church could usefully be transitioned into another style which might be more widely helpful for congregants. Analysis of this church's archives suggested a preaching pattern that tended towards a single style, often in 'points' and 'sub-points' irrespective of the literary genres of the biblical text preached upon. The style primarily conveyed information to the listeners and in varying degrees offered 'application' to their lives. The aim of the research was to examine whether a focus on the narrative of the Bible, from individual texts to the biblical meta-narrative, and setting this within the congregational life narratives, would offer a better and more varied style of preaching. The proposed preaching style emphasises engagement with the text rather than primarily offering information about it.

Richard Osmer's reflective cycle was adopted as the methodological framework for this thesis. The research was conducted within the church community and was largely a qualitative inquiry. Congregants reflected on past and present preaching, and on a series of sermons preached in a narrative style. The congregational research was then examined in the light of established homiletic literature. The main findings were a positive response to the new style, and unexpectedly that there was an interest in congregants being directly involved in sermons through interjections, particularly in offering life illustrations that relate to what the preacher is saying. This moves away from a preacher and hearer framework to that of the sermon being a shared event. As a result of the research a preaching model called 'threefold narrativity' is proposed in the thesis. This model allows for variations of the style of individual sermons within the model, and a means by which a preacher may monitor the balance of sermons is offered. Ways of implementing change in order to utilise this model were then considered, and a final meta-reflection of the process is made.

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## Summary of Portfolio

This thesis represents the culmination of the programme of studies for a professional doctorate. I entered the programme with a particular desire to examine my own preaching practice, and with a particular interest in the preaching of parables. Pre-thesis components included a reflective paper on my preaching at that time, a literature review, a publishable article, a thesis proposal and a written portfolio of my own learning and experiences during the process. All these served to inform and shape this thesis. The reflective paper introduced me to theology as a practical endeavour and to homiletic literature with which I had not previously engaged. This served as essential groundwork for my thesis. I wrote a publishable article on the two parables in Luke 16 as set within the content and context of the chapter. This started an important process of change for me in how I might preach parables: not as finding and preaching 'kernels' of truth from within individual parables but by engaging with them in their interconnectivity and their narrative style and setting. Overall learning and reflection led to a different approach to the thesis than when I first started the program.

The church tradition from which I have come and by which I am shaped, particularly emphasised faith as belief. I sensed that the church in which the research was conducted and where I was the main preacher did the same, and hence my sermons in this church tended towards being informational and belief based. My personal and professional growth led to being motivated to find a preaching method that would appeal to and facilitate the faith flourishing of the whole person of the hearer: the emotions, volition and actions alongside cognitive belief.

As I came towards the thesis proposal I faced a major turning point. Having previously assumed my research would be entirely personal study about preaching and based only on established literature, I made a fundamental shift. I decided that congregational involvement would be beneficial and might provide useful research, although I was concerned as to how willing people would be to offer their assistance. However, my decision was justified in that at least 32 people from around typically 40-50 congregants assisted in some way, and created a rich source of data.

With this crucial input from volunteers, I examined the possibility and suitability of a change in my preaching style as part of an ongoing process of transition for both preacher and congregation.

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## Abbreviations

ABBC	'AB' Baptist Church (Pseudonym)
BU	Baptist Union of Great Britain
FGT	Focus Group Transcript
FIEC	Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches
GN	Good News (Church Magazine Pseudonym)
I1T [x]	Interview 1 Transcript [Number]
I2T [x]	Interview 2 Transcript [Number]
JSNTSS	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
MI	Multiple Intelligences
M[x]	Member [Number] of Focus Group
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PRD	Personal Research Diary
Q[s].[n]	Questionnaire [section number].[question number]
RQ[x]	Research Question [Number]
SECD	Supplementary Evidence Compact Disc
SN	My own Sermon Notes

## Introduction

We, whose signatures are hereto attached (with others) having in the course of Divine Providence been led to assemble ourselves together as a congregation holding Baptist sentiments; and desiring to have the word of God, faithfully and in simplicity held forth in our midst; and having recently on several occasions to our satisfaction and pleasure, heard you expound portions of that living word, do hereby express our desire and request, that, in case the proposition find grace in your sight, you unfold it to us for the space of six months, and should this request prove agreeable to your feelings and convenience, we further ask that your public labour amongst us commence on or before Christmas-day next. [names of 56 signatories] Dated December 7th 1864.<sup>1</sup>

This early record, written in the year the church was founded, reveals a strong sense of the importance of preaching when it called its first minister. Shortly after my appointment as the minister of ABBC in 2005, I was told that if I were not a ‘good preacher’, I would never have been called by this particular church. Alongside reservations I or others may have about the compliment, it raises the question of what makes a preacher (or sermon) good. As will be seen, the appointment of a minister in ABBC (who then becomes the primary preacher), is a community and electoral decision. As with that first appointment, there is still a desire for faithfulness and simplicity on the part of the preacher and satisfaction and pleasure to the hearers. Clearly the gathered local church should sense that the preaching is helpful and nurturing to all who hear it. It ought to be understandable and relevant, meaningful

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<sup>1</sup> AB Baptist Church Archives, *Church Record 1864-1917*, pp.2-3. This pseudonym for the church will be used for anonymity, and hereafter abbreviated to ‘ABBC’.

and beneficial. My research investigated how the act of preaching can assist in the whole-life flourishing of the congregation.

My theoretical framework in examining preaching comes from within the Christian tradition, from the Bible, and within gathered congregational worship. Whilst the local church setting I investigated is formally known as Baptist, it does not belong to an association of Baptists, and it is more distinctly self-perceived as evangelical.

From my personal and professional perspective, I consider preaching to be a calling from God and therefore a great privilege, yet this is counterbalanced by my human responsibility for ongoing learning and development, and I am convinced that there is ample room for personal improvement. My preaching should constantly develop whilst remaining faithful to God, to those to whom I preach, and to myself. This research has been undertaken to assist in that development.

I show in Chapters 1 and 2 that my own background, and my impression of that of the church, is predominantly an informational and educational approach to preaching: teaching. My overall research question was a simple one: would a change to a narrative form of preaching be beneficial and increasingly faithful to God, the church and the preacher? Importantly, my research subject broadened beyond my initial expectations, and as the title suggests, is part of an ongoing process of transition. Although the thesis itself reaches an end-point, ongoing development will not.

In Chapter 1 I set out my personal upbringing within evangelicalism and the background situation of ABBC. This both highlights the confessional bearing of my study and sets the theological framework which I use as part of my methodology. I address my initial sense of why and how my preaching might develop in this church setting. This essentially comprises suggesting the application of the principles of

narrative criticism to the biblical text, something not instinctively utilised in the churches to which I have belonged. I then assess some tenets of narrative criticism and how I might use them in ABBC. Although at the outset narrative-critical principles were my particular research interest, they proved to be more of an entry point for a journey rather than the (sole) destination of it. I list six particular research questions which guided the research.

In Chapters 2 to 5 I adopt the approach of Richard Osmer's *Practical Theology* to examine whether ABBC would benefit from a transition to narrative-critical preaching.<sup>2</sup> I draw upon the four 'tasks' of his reflective cycle, setting them in the context of the research situation: *listening to the congregation, understanding the congregation, evaluating the situation and transitioning preaching*.

Chapter 2 sets out my methodology in terms of the non-theological foundations of my research, and draws together numerous methods used to garner data in order to address the descriptive task: records of sermons preached by others before my tenure in ABBC, architectural clues, a questionnaire, interviews, a focus group, examination and comparison of some of my past and present sermons preached in ABBC and the use of my personal research diary (PRD). I offer first level interpretation - my own perceptions - of the situation under investigation, and particularly aim to assess how congregants respond to narrative-critically prepared sermons. Chapter 2 inevitably proved to be highly important and raised unforeseen aspects of my intended research, such as a desire among interviewees for direct congregational involvement in preaching rather than simply viewing themselves as recipients of the sermon.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2008).

Osmer's interpretive task is taken up in Chapter 3 as I collate my own findings with those of homiletic and other literature to interpret the church situation.<sup>3</sup> Three areas emerged at this point in relation to my situation and the corpus of my reading: circumstances relating to ministry in an older generation church; the relationship between the preacher and the congregation; and matters relating to various learning styles.

In Chapter 4 I extend the research further into examining what ought to be happening in preaching within the confessional stance of this church: its normative theology. Given the findings to this point, I address this under the rubric of threefold authority: that of God (through the Bible), the congregation (taking up its rightful authority) and the preacher (standing under both of these in a healthy balance). It is only at this point in the thesis that I am able to define what I mean by a 'narrative form' of preaching, and suggest a preaching model.

Chapter 5, in line with Osmer's final task, is appropriately practical in orientation. I look at ways (some of them very simple) of applying the findings of my research to the practice of preaching. Along the way the wider findings have been distilled down to a preaching model for myself and other preachers as I highlight some potential aspects of transferability. However, as a small scale examination of one church, I remain cautious about claiming more for this thesis than is appropriate. Any transferability will of course, depend on local factors in another church, although my lifelong experience of some other similar churches causes me to think that my model could be useful elsewhere.

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<sup>3</sup> I do not include a formal literature review here for two reasons. Firstly, this was done as part of the pre-thesis study, and secondly, the multi-disciplinary nature of the literature I use means it is broad, and is more appropriately reviewed as and where I call upon it in the thesis.

Finally, and especially given that Osmer's model arrives at the pragmatic task and completes the reflective cycle, rather than offering 'conclusions' to my thesis I conduct a meta-reflection of the whole process.

Although this thesis is written with an eye and ear towards the academic community, I have also tried to keep a focus on the community to and from which it belongs, the church. I would be delighted if churchgoers, those who enjoy or endure sermons, consider its outcomes 'down to earth' and of practical benefit to individuals and local congregations.

## Chapter 1. Looking at the Church: The Context of Research

I like your sermons because they are like watching Open University on the television.

We prefer your sermons to tell us what the Bible means for our lives rather than telling us the history about it.

I liked your sermon today. It was shorter and it got straight to the meat without having any of the fat you sometimes have, if you know what I mean.<sup>4</sup>

These three responses to sermons were genuinely and graciously offered, for which I was grateful, yet equally they each brought concern as well as appreciation.

The first was offered with gratitude for the freshness, learning style and content, including reference to the use of PowerPoint presentations in my sermons. My appreciation was counterbalanced by a concern that the sermon seemed to be described more like a lecture.

The second was spoken on behalf of a married couple who had seemingly filtered out from my sermons that which was useful from that which was perceived to be unnecessary. My concern, unspoken at the time, was whether it was possible to do what they wanted without the historical background.

The third comment was offered after I preached a sermon which was in part a second person direct style, asking people to imagine they were 'there' in the events of the text for that day's sermon. I was delighted that the person felt a sense of 'meat',

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<sup>4</sup> These comments were made to me before commencement of my research, and therefore before commencement of my PRD, so they are my recollections of comments made.

something I took to mean 'good food' but was surprised by the genuine but honest reference to 'fat'!

These comments all touch on critical issues for any preacher. The first raises the highly important issue of what a sermon does. Is it, as highlighted, about education? Is a sermon (primarily) aimed at the mind? One of my concerns in this thesis is to examine how one local congregation perceives the purpose of a sermon: does it address the mind, the emotions, the volition, the spirit or something else, or a combination of these or other things? As the preacher, what do I and what should I seek to address: that which people perceive to be right or good, for example, 'Open University style' education, or not? The first comment highlights the issue of the fundamental purpose(s) of the sermon.

The second comment highlights a hermeneutical issue. Can we take a text and ask what it means for us today, in our world and perceptions, without any reference to the Bible's historical meaning? Can the text of the Bible be preached in only 'our lives'? My concern as a preacher is how I respond to this perception, whilst welcoming the congregants' desire for the sermon to have meaning for them today.

The third comment touches on some homiletical issues. How long should a sermon last? Does a different style to a church's conventional expectation produce a different and possibly more helpful sermon? I suspect (but did not establish at the time) that this comment also returns to the teaching issue of the first comment, 'meat' referring to the local and common church parlance of good teaching: 'the meat of the Word'. One might ask, within the analogy, whether a balanced meal consists of only meat. Is a sermon only 'meaty' teaching? Like food, might the preaching meal serve the whole body, not just feed the mind?



These issues bring me to the core of my spiritual and professional calling, and the reason for this thesis in practical theology and preaching. Having touched on three brief but useful comments from within ABBC, in this chapter I first set out my personal context for this research and then the context of the church in which the research was conducted. Finally, I survey the main tenets of narrative criticism, reflecting on how I consider they might help create more effective preaching in my ministry context.

## **PERSONAL CONTEXT**

I have been a minister in three independent (non-denominational) evangelical churches since 1988, having trained with a first degree in theology and a diploma in pastoral studies.<sup>5</sup> My training in biblical interpretation and preaching at the time was largely historical-critically focused and preaching was constructed on exegetical exposition, followed by application.<sup>6</sup> When I commenced regular preaching in my first congregation, I quickly found the need to gather a body of sermon illustrations as I sensed a heaviness about repeatedly preaching to the same congregation, and congregational faces silently called out for breaks in the intensity of sermon ‘information’. As a consequence of my training, and a childhood background in a small evangelical church whose preaching I remember as abstract and stodgy, I have always sensed a need to try and connect with the congregation and offer real-life connections with preaching.

In my first ministerial post, I preached a series of sermons on Gospel parables, and read Luke 16 to prepare one particular sermon. The puzzling story titled ‘The Parable

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<sup>5</sup> ABBC is not a member church of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BU).

<sup>6</sup> Conventional exegetical steps are usefully summarised in Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2004), p.26. See also Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors, 3rd edn* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

of the Shrewd Manager’,<sup>7</sup> was a preaching challenge, but as I read it and the following text (the sayings on resources, the judgement that ‘The Pharisees loved money’ (16:14), the further sayings and then the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus), I can only describe what I felt to be a ‘eureka moment’. I perceived that the two parables, intermediate sayings and change of audience were textually connected and that preaching might be enhanced by using the connections and literary style to make the sermon more attractive and relevant.<sup>8</sup> So began my embryonic interest in New Testament (NT) narrative criticism, and in particular Luke’s parables and the use of narrative techniques.

In order to develop my preaching, I here examine the tenets and possibilities of narrative criticism for preaching, with special reference to preaching Lukan parables as a case study. This will, I hope, give added benefit to my preaching over the coming years, a freshness for myself as a preacher and hopefully for the congregation(s) I serve. Bearing in mind the limitations I stated in the introduction but given that there are many small evangelical congregations in the United Kingdom, I hope that other preachers and congregations, by connecting with my research, may be assisted in preaching the scriptures. However, as the thesis unfolds it will become evident that my research widened beyond narrative-critical interpretation to a broader preaching model.

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<sup>7</sup> As described in the then church Bible, *The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Luke 16:1.

<sup>8</sup> I subsequently wrote a dissertation on this: Tim Ford, *Parables, Possessions and Perspectives: A Literary Examination of Luke 16* (Unpublished Master of Arts Dissertation, London Bible College, 1995).

## CHURCH CONTEXT

ABBC is relatively small, independent and evangelical, established in 1864. Attendance at the Sunday morning service during the research period was typically 40-50 people, and 20-25 at the evening service. The congregation largely comprised retired people. The church has its own written *Constitution and Basis of Faith*, administered by a leadership team comprising elders and deacons, and a membership structure through which people formally identify with and belong to the church. Anyone is free to attend the services and events of the church, but only the leaders and members have voting rights. Both legally, in terms of the Charity Commission, and spiritually in terms of the ABBC *Constitution and Basis of Faith*, it is the duty of the membership to uphold the values of the church. In this context, a pastor leads and serves the church.

The two descriptors of the church as independent and evangelical are crucial to the research context. The significance of the description 'independent', derives from its departure from being a member church of the BU. In the late 1960s the church chose to part company with the BU over perceived liberalism and ecumenism, something deemed incompatible with the *Constitution and Basis of Faith*. Records show that within weeks of parting company the church changed all of its notice boards and letter-heading, introducing '(Independent)' to the title.<sup>9</sup> Whilst not at odds with the BU in terms of the self-governance of local Baptist churches, this meant that the church became more rooted in its own independent life and leadership, without formal connections, support or external input. Therefore, and particularly importantly in terms of this thesis, by the time I was appointed as the minister, the preaching

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<sup>9</sup> ABBC *Deacons Meeting Minutes Book*, 1964 to 1969, p.73.

ministry in ABBC had become insular.<sup>10</sup> It was evident that there had been very little contact with other churches (which had in some cases been actively discouraged),<sup>11</sup> and consequently a healthy cross-fertilisation of preaching styles also disappeared. In my perception, through hearing ABBC lay-preachers, preaching seemed to repeat and verify established beliefs but offer little or no personal and corporate application to the specific congregation.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, this was at least in part because of a proud insularity, though some people seemed open to change. During my interview process I was asked, if appointed, to introduce 'constructive change'.<sup>13</sup> I deemed the preaching ministry to be part of this.

Practically, the normative situation is that the pastor is responsible for the preaching ministry on a week by week basis (at two Sunday services with different sermons) and decides what should be preached. The general style (as will be overviewed in Chapter 2 from written records of sermon outlines), was that preaching would be largely expository and sectional preaching of a Bible text, and, judging from his regular visits during the 1960's and early 1970's, perhaps was influenced by, or at least was appreciative of, the preaching style of Martyn Lloyd-Jones.<sup>14</sup>

This reveals something of the church position in terms of the wider evangelical theology and tradition regarding preaching. ABBC preaching could be described as

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<sup>10</sup> The church later joined the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC), but again the stress was on independence. By the time of my appointment in 2005, there was no dynamic connection between the church and the FIEC at all.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the first Easter after my appointment, I encouraged the church to attend a march of witness with other churches in the town, which would conclude with a public service. I was told by some church attenders that they had been previously 'banned' from attending despite wanting to do so.

<sup>12</sup> On arrival as the minister, I asked to hear all the lay-preachers preach.

<sup>13</sup> My appointment process was conducted entirely verbally, without any written church profile or role description. I accept this section contains personal memories and perceptions, but this oft-repeated statement has remained clear in my mind.

<sup>14</sup> His visits to the church were at least annual, as recorded in the church magazines at the time.

evangelical expository preaching from within the reformed tradition. Joel Gregory acknowledges that 'expository preaching does not define any single mode of preaching' but 'connotes more an attitude towards biblical authority'. It 'usually embraces a biblical unit of thought' and typically 'the smaller the text, the more exhaustive the exegetical examination of its details'. Gregory cites Lloyd-Jones as exemplifying this approach.<sup>15</sup> Amongst other example preachers of this kind cited by Gregory, George Campbell Morgan and Frederick Brotherton Meyer are cited in the church magazine archives I examine in chapter 2, and Warren Wiersbe was also a guest preacher. So ABBC preaching fits into this wider context, one largely of preaching as teaching, drawing out, 'exposing' meaning. The preacher, in this respect is therefore a Bible teacher, a term that congregants would readily use of the preacher.

Another facet of ABBC preaching, however, is that of preaching as proclamation. David Lose states, 'We define a kerygmatic [proclamatory] sermon as the authoritative proclamation of God's decisive saving activity in the person of Jesus Christ as witnessed in Scripture so as to make a claim upon the individual in the present'.<sup>16</sup> Evangelicalism is concerned to proclaim, to herald the 'Good News'. Whilst not dissociated from biblical exposition, and without assuming that proclamation is only 'evangelistic' preaching, the purpose of preaching as proclaiming the good news to 'unsaved' people (a popular term in ABBC and wider

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<sup>15</sup> Joel C. Gregory, 'Expository' in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, ed. by Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville TN.: Abingdon Press, 2008), 381-383 (p.381 – all quotes).

<sup>16</sup> David J. Lose, 'Sermon as Proclamation' in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, ed. by Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville TN.: Abingdon Press, 2008), 414-416 (p.414).

evangelicalism) is based on an evangelical theology of conversion, and is considered crucially important.<sup>17</sup>

These twin focal points of teaching and proclamation set the framework for preaching and therefore the role of the preacher in ABBC, and establish the context of my research findings. They also highlight the important and responsible role of the preacher. As Karl Barth states:

Proclamation is human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God Himself speaks...<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, but not surprisingly, the preaching must conform to the *Basis of Faith*. This leads to the other important descriptor, 'evangelical'.

The church *Basis of Faith* is distinctly evangelical, and is a self-contained schedule within the *Constitution*. The point of reference for this research is that, as Tidball points out, 'The most characteristic feature of evangelicalism is the place it gives to the Bible'.<sup>19</sup> The *Constitution* states, as the first point of nine, belief in,

The Divine and full inspiration of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as not only containing, but being in themselves the Word of God, and therefore authoritative as the supreme and sufficient rule of faith and practice.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Derek J. Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?: Tracing the Roots of the Modern Movements* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), pp. 116-136. I am aware that there are what Andrew Rogers calls 'competing schemas for defining evangelicalism' but I only refer to general aspects that are pertinent to this thesis and my ministry setting. For wider reference, see Andrew P. Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics: How Do We Read?, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2015), pp.68-69 (p.68).

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God* Study Edition, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T & T Clark, 2010), p.49. I make further reference to the ABBC view of 'Preaching the Word' and the preacher's human speech in Chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> Tidball, p.79.

<sup>20</sup> ABBC *Church Constitution: Schedule 1, Basis of Faith*, p.12.

This 'high view' of the Bible is very significant for the preaching life of the church. It is one that I willingly uphold, but must do so constitutionally:

The office of Pastor shall be filled by one holding the Truth as set out in Schedule 1 of the Church Constitution.<sup>21</sup>

The *Church Rules* state that failure to adhere to this will result in dismissal of the pastor.<sup>22</sup> This highlights the importance of the evangelical context of the church, which underpinned this research. There were two particular points of significance to the research. First, I willingly took it both personally and formally that any transition in the preaching style would remain faithful to the spiritual and constitutional position of the church, and therefore any contribution to preaching that this thesis makes will be within the church framework and consistent with a high view of the Bible. Whilst I will not seek to defend the high view, I recognise it as an underlying presupposition. However, the investigation in this thesis may influence and inform what is understood by the authority of the Bible, more precisely how the texts are authoritative.<sup>23</sup> Second, and importantly, the *Constitution* does not prescribe that a particular preaching style must be used in order to maintain a high view of the Bible. My argument above was simply that ABBC has largely known and been accustomed to one particular style. So, linking back to my personal context, this thesis represents my intention to explore a different style of preaching (though I will argue that this particular change is not a paradigm shift) that may be more useful to the congregation, both because it is fresh and moves beyond a largely informational approach to preaching.

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<sup>21</sup> ABBC *Church Rules*, 2.4.2. The Pastorate, p.5.

<sup>22</sup> *Rules*, p.8.

<sup>23</sup> I take up the theme of authority in Chapter 4.

## **PREACHING CONTEXT**

When people walk into ABBC for a Sunday service I doubt that they think of what is required by the church *Constitution*. In terms of the sermon, I assume they come to focus on and hopefully develop their Christian faith, or explore it with interest or even casual curiosity. A typical congregation in the church would comprise people who had belonged for many decades, some would have become Christians in recent years and some would not describe themselves as Christians. A few may have come to the church for the first time so their faith position would be unknown. As someone who has been committed to preaching for over thirty years, and takes it to be a privilege and responsibility, I try to make my preaching as helpful and relevant as possible for all who hear it.

However, my research asked whether the conventional style of preaching in ABBC was the most useful, a question implicitly raised by the opening recollections of comments made to me after sermons. A number of specific concerns arose, which I posed as six particular research questions. First, would a narrative approach to preaching reach a wider range of people in the congregation than the current style? Second, had the previous style become expected and predictable, and therefore dulled, and would my proposed style be refreshing? Third, would the change I propose improve things with regard to depending on extra information, for instance historical background? Fourth, would engaging with narrative help people develop and flourish in what they perceived as a more useful way than the past style? Fifth, given the context that this is an older generation church (as will be evidenced in Chapter 2), would there be a willingness to change a long-standing preaching style?



Sixth, would I find that my suggested new preaching style is helpful to me personally as a preacher?<sup>24</sup>

With a rising interest around these questions, and since that personal ‘eureka’ moment in perceiving that Luke 16 was about both content and form, I gradually attempted to change my sermon preparation. I suspected that a transition to a narrative-critical approach to preaching and consequential homiletical developments would be helpful to the congregation and individual congregants, addressing whole-life spirituality rather than just Christian education. I also suspected it would offer a more relevant and appealing style to visitors to the church. My suspicions, however, needed to be tested: would congregants sense a positive change or not? The core of the thesis then, was to examine more precisely what the change would be and whether the congregation would find it helpful.

## **NARRATIVE CRITICISM**

I have laid out some contextual reasons why personally, and for the perceived good of the congregation, I chose to explore what I have called narrative-critical interpretation. In this section I clarify what I mean by this, and then review the main tenets of narrative criticism with reference to how they are useful in preaching and how they assimilate with an evangelical preaching ministry and theology.

Eugene Lowry, credited with taking a narrative approach to the sermon with his eponymous ‘Lowry loop’, advocates that the sermon structure itself moves from problem to solution, via an inevitable twist in the plot.<sup>25</sup> In doing so he built on Fred

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<sup>24</sup> Reference to these questions will be made by the abbreviation (RQ) and the number of the question as stated here, e.g. (RQ1) relates to the question on relating to the range of people.

<sup>25</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot, Expanded Edition: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

Craddock's inductive approach to preaching.<sup>26</sup> To Lowry, the sermon has its own narrative form: 'The term *narrative preaching* has come to include several kinds of quite similar sermons - linked together by the fact that all involve some kind of procedural plot', but there are 'substantive differences' in various approaches to it.<sup>27</sup> More widely, the word 'narrative' is also applied to preaching in terms of using first-, second- or third-person speech based on characters in the text.<sup>28</sup> My initial 'narrative' focus, however, was not homiletical but hermeneutical: interpreting the Bible text using the principles of narrative criticism. However, I did not assume that a move towards a narrative-critical approach to a sermon text would necessarily leave my previous sermon style unchanged. That my aim was to move the preaching experience beyond cognitively informational teaching would likely require a development, not only in my interpretative method, but in my homiletical method too. To develop a narrative interpretation of the biblical text and remain only in a cognitive style of sermon (which could be done) would undermine and under-use the narrative nature of the biblical text. Ultimately, however, my sermon style did not move as far as Lowry's narrative sermon style, but as part of an ongoing process further development always remains possible.

Although not fully developed until chapter 4, my own definition of 'narrative preaching' extends beyond using the principles of narrative criticism considered in this chapter, and is rooted in biblical interpretation rather than (as Lowry) directly referring to the sermon form. I develop a threefold approach to interpretation: first, utilising narrative-critical principles to interpret a biblical text within a sermon; second, setting this within

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<sup>26</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, 'Narrative Preaching' in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, ed. by Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville TN.: Abingdon Press, 2008), 201-203 (p.201 and p.202).

<sup>28</sup> For this and wider areas relating to narrative style preaching, see for instance, Roger Standing, *Finding the Plot: Preaching in a Narrative Style* (Milton Keynes; Waynesboro, GA.: Paternoster Press, 2004).

the meta-narrative of the Bible;<sup>29</sup> third, the preacher's attention is given to interpreting the congregational narratives (which includes the cultural narratives in which the congregation is immersed). I will call this 'threefold narrative preaching'. Although rooted in interpretation rather than primarily addressing sermon form, homiletical change inevitably became an important area of research. So the dynamic in terms of hermeneutical and consequential homiletical changes was an important area of research. To that end, it will be important to delineate which sense of the word 'narrative' is being referred to at any given point, and this will be made clear in context.

I will first look at some aspects of the principles of narrative criticism and then some perceived challenges to using it in my ministry context.

### **Aspects of Narrative Criticism**

I will consider two main aspects of narrative criticism that may be helpful for a preaching transition in ABBC. First, the nature of narrative and second, the rhetorical devices used in the text that I believe will enhance preaching. I address these in turn, through the filter of how they relate to an evangelical context.

First, a narrative, according to J. M. Adam, requires a temporal succession of actions/events, an agent-hero drawing the story to a close, a plot integrating the events and a relationship of causality and consecutiveness to structure the plot.<sup>30</sup> Narrative is dynamic not static, action rather than simply information, set on the 'rhetorical axis of communication' rather than 'the mimetic axis of representation',<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I will address issues concerning meta-narrative later in this chapter.

<sup>30</sup> J. M. Adam, *Décrire des Actions*, quoted in Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (London: SCM, 1999), p.16.

<sup>31</sup> See Marguerat and Bourquin pp.4-7.

so is capable of drawing readers or hearers into its plot and action. It therefore has a great potential for engaging preaching. What then is its contribution to a church like ABBC?

Most of the congregation in ABBC would be familiar with the individual texts of say, a Gospel, and would have heard many sermons over the years. My perception is of the congregation being focused only on the immediate text, and of sermons framed informationally. 'This is what Jesus taught' (from direct speech), 'This is what God is like' (from, say, a parable) or 'This shows the power of God over...' (from, say, a miracle account). Another perception I gained, also explored in Chapter 2, is of a previous preaching style which was largely 'sectional points' through a Bible text (not just the Gospels), rather than looking at texts in their narrative settings.

The power of narrative criticism in such a setting would be to place the specific text (say, a parable) back into the overall narrative and plot of a Gospel, making it part of an ongoing drama and thus giving it fuller and (to this particular congregation) new meaning. It would also allow the congregation the opportunity to enter the bigger 'story', and action, and feel that an old text can communicate in a new way (which was their original 'narrative' way).<sup>32</sup> Consequently, congregants could be more engaged using emotions, volition, imagination, and identification with characters: dynamic involvement. Green and Pasquarello summarise well the power of a narrative approach to the Bible and preaching. It allows us

to enter and to make our home in "God's story," with all that this means in the transformation of our allegiances and commitments, realizing that this

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<sup>32</sup> Roger Senior, writing in what appears to be a similar church tradition to mine states, '[I]t is doubtful whether most preachers use narratives in a way which is faithful to their original form'. Roger Senior, *Understanding and Preaching Narrative: Making Luke's Gospel Live Today* (no place: Xulon Press, 2012), p.10.

transformation will manifest itself in behaviors and practices appropriate to our social worlds.<sup>33</sup>

The second aspect of narrative criticism that I found to be potentially useful in ABBC is narrative's numerous literary and rhetorical qualities. Plot, characters, voices, settings, time frames, and themes move it forward. Other devices such as repetition, chiasmus ('crossover'), intercalation ('sandwiching'), analepsis ('flashback'), point of view and even gaps in the text all serve to help the text draw the reader in, not only to communicate the 'matter of fact' detail of the narrative but stimulate interest, intrigue, identification, challenge and aesthetic pleasure. Hence, we reach another important tenet of narrative criticism, namely that 'Form and content are generally regarded as an indissoluble whole'.<sup>34</sup> This offers a number of helpful possibilities regarding preaching the narrative in ABBC and more generally in an evangelical setting.

Although in my own church background the aesthetic and literary qualities of biblical texts have been largely undeveloped in preaching, they are natural and useful aspects of the creative and revelatory God fundamental to evangelical belief: an obvious outworking of the understanding that He inspired the scriptures and the human authors who wrote them. To examine the literary techniques used by those authors, and reflect on the form besides the content, provides aesthetic pleasure whereby the literature itself is part of the richness of God's revelation. Augustine saw the Scripture(s) as 'a text possessing literary merit' and 'his sole resource for the

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<sup>33</sup> Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello III, eds, *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2003), p.56. They are speaking beyond simply a narrative-critical approach to a particular text here, something I will address in forthcoming chapters.

<sup>34</sup> James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2005), p.19.

moral, spiritual, and practical guidance of his congregation'<sup>35</sup> His dictum '*docere, deletare, flectere* - to teach, to delight, to influence' is therefore powerful and pertinent.<sup>36</sup> The delight of my own 'eureka moment' described above convinced me that there is significant benefit in paying attention to an author's literary skills and aesthetic qualities, as emphasised in narrative criticism. Even gaps in the narrative allow for engagement and imagination. In a context where congregants have largely been accustomed to deriving cerebral and static information these literary skills and qualities hold the attention of the reader/hearer in a new way.

One simple benefit of narrative criticism in churches like ABBC, where sermons are typically built around a Bible book rather than following a lectionary, is that a sermon series is immediately understood to be linked sermons that are connected to a larger narrative. Clearly each sermon will be independent, but never entirely isolated. This is a very useful corrective in a context where, exegetically, the tendency has been to isolate the pericope rather than connecting it with the whole narrative.<sup>37</sup>

The contribution of narrative criticism, particularly through these various devices, is in generating wider connections, aesthetic pleasure, and greater engagement and experience for congregants, rather than them simply being recipients of information. There is also, according to Robert Kysar and Joseph Webb, a further benefit.

*[C]oncentration on the present form of the text does not require specialised expertise as do the historical methods. [...] While the literary methods have developed their own complicated jargon and theoretical foundations, the novice*

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<sup>35</sup> Carol Harrison, 'Augustine' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer and others (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2005), 76-78 (p.77) (both).

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching That Connects: Using the Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact to Your Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1994), p.19.

<sup>37</sup> I acknowledge that there are those who question the concept of narrativity, perhaps most stridently Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

can work with the surface of a biblical text in creative and productive ways. The weakening of historical criticisms challenges the notion that only the experts can read and interpret Scripture, thereby returning the Bible to the people.<sup>38</sup>

Such outcomes, I concluded, would be a positive development in ABBC, yet at the time (before the congregational research) I was unaware of how significant the aspect of 'returning the Bible to the people' would become. Narrative criticism, therefore, presented a good opportunity to meet the criteria of my hopes for the development of preaching in this church context: a move from a cognitive informational based focus to one which integrates the whole person and leads to a whole-life flourishing for congregants. This thesis investigates how narrative-critical interpretation (along with ongoing developments as the thesis proceeds) might (re)shape the preaching ministry and congregational response to it in the church.

### **Challenges of Narrative Criticism**

The term narrative criticism was used in relation to the NT by David Rhoads to describe his approach to a Gospel text, in a paper entitled, 'Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark'.<sup>39</sup> It refers to a focus on the narrative of a complete unit of text as the locus of interpretation. It is therefore fundamentally text-based, and in its purest form is considered to hold no intertextual or historical concern. He and Donald Mitchie, writing of Mark's Gospel, highlight various tenets and implications:

In narrative study, we cannot legitimately use the other gospels to "fill out" or to "fill in" some unclear passage in Mark's story. Rather we need to read Mark's gospel more carefully as a self-sufficient story. [...] Mark's narrative contains a

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching to Postmoderns: New Perspectives for Proclaiming the Message* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p.87, their italics.

<sup>39</sup> See Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?: A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993), p.6 and David Rhoads, 'Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 50 (1982), 411-434, in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials <<http://search.ebscohost.com>> [accessed 16 August 2014].

closed and self-sufficient world with its own integrity, its own imaginative past and future, its own sets of values, and its own universe of meanings. When viewed as a literary achievement the statements in Mark's narrative, rather than being a representation of historical events, refer to the people, places, and events *in the story*.<sup>40</sup>

Two important issues arise here. First, there is the total independence of a Gospel account, in contrast to an evangelical tradition that has typically used the four Gospels to present the one Gospel: a rich tradition of collating the Gospel accounts '*synoptically*'. Second, there is, to evangelical ears, a potentially disturbing reference to a transition from historical events to 'story'. At first blush, there seems to be an incompatibility with evangelical preaching, so I must address these concerns if narrative criticism is to be useful in ABBC.

First, the independent focus. There are four NT Gospels. If within a framework of Divine Revelation in the whole of scripture, we have three synoptic Gospels and that of John, rather than a single account, then the individual Gospels must be significant by virtue of their individuality ('The Gospel according to...'). Evangelicalism has always recognised this within the understanding of inspiration: 'The books are stamped with differences which clearly arise from the varying personalities and creative gifts of the people who lie behind them'.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, to examine their individuality, particularly against a background of at least some evangelical preaching that has been too keen to synthesise the Gospels into a unified account, is simply to restore what may have been neglected and do what is consistent with evangelical belief. Furthermore, so doing will reap the benefits of the relatively unused perspectives of the individual Gospels, and thereby offer a fresh dimension in

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<sup>40</sup> David M. Rhoads, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p.3 and p.4, his italics.

<sup>41</sup> Tidball, p.83.



preaching to a congregation such as ABBC, one largely unaware of the individual nuances of a Gospel.<sup>42</sup>

Conversely, given that a Gospel for example, is set in the Bible as a whole, it is not a fully isolated narrative. For example, the Gospels each pick up Old Testament (OT) themes, quotes, cultural perspectives, are re-contextualised to their intended readership/audience, and subsequently have been re-contextualised in each generation, right down to the re-reading and preaching in ABBC. To ignore all these aspects in favour of an isolated interpretation of the text would be to lose some highly valuable interpretative and homiletic possibilities. So an evangelical narrative-critical approach would not seek to be true to the text at the cost of any reality outside it. Indeed, it is only in the wider narrative that the specific narrative can be seen and respected for its individuality.

Second, is the issue of historicity and the word 'story'. Evangelicalism stands upon belief in the historical reality of the Gospel. Though no description like 'historical reliability' is specifically mentioned in the *Basis of Faith*, it speaks of...

The *true* and proper Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ; His virgin birth; His *real* and perfect manhood; the authority of His teaching and the infallibility of His utterances; [...] His *bodily* Resurrection and His Ascension into heaven; [...] The future *personal* return of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory for His church (*sic*)...<sup>43</sup>

Any notion that a Gospel should be described as 'story' needs careful attention within an evangelical tradition, particularly when the word 'story' might popularly infer that

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<sup>42</sup> I recall being asked to preach as a ministerial student on the Centurion's faith from either Matthew or Luke (I do not remember which). I spent much time trying to reconcile whether it was him personally or the Jewish leaders who came to Jesus. Afterwards my preaching supervisor simply said, 'why didn't you just preach the text you were given?' Wise words!

<sup>43</sup> *Basis of Faith*, points 3 and 8, my italics.

something is without historical basis, and especially since literary and narrative techniques are used in wider literature. Resseguie highlights the tension:

It may seem strange to apply the techniques of modern literary criticism to a corpus of literature that for many is a religious foundation for beliefs, values, and norms. Yet biblical narrative literature exhibits literary characteristics that are also apparent in literature in general: characters, rhetoric, style, syntax, plot, imagery, setting, tone, point of view, narrators, and much more. Narrative critics recognize that the types of questions literary scholars ask of secular literature are also important to ask of biblical literature.<sup>44</sup>

Given the evangelical understanding of revelation from God through human authors, there need not be a tension point in using a narrative approach to the Bible that is applied to other 'secular literature', including fictional works. The potential tension points in ABBC would be that most congregants would be unlikely to wholeheartedly endorse a preaching framework that suggested the Bible should be equated with fiction, or that a Bible text would be read in isolation from its historical framework. Despite my opening recollection of a comment casting doubt on the value of historical information in sermons,<sup>45</sup> my congregational research showed, as will be seen in Chapter 2, that people saw the need for historical detail at times. It is possible to have a nuanced perspective that recognises the narrative qualities of the biblical text without having to assume that it is a 'closed and self-sufficient world' outside of historic reality. Joel Green represents the balance well:

[A] narrative representation of historical events irrepressibly locates events in a web of significance, events that have themselves been chosen with an eye to their significance for that narrative web.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Resseguie, *Criticism*, p.19.

<sup>45</sup> See p.6, n.4.

<sup>46</sup> Joel B Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2011), Apple iBooks Chapter 2, section 2 'History is Narration, not Imitation' paragraph 3, sentence 1. [No locations or fixed page numbers]

In an evangelical setting, a term like ‘account’ may serve to allay fears of an insinuation of being non-historical, as may be implied with the word ‘story’. The evangelical perspective of an integrated historical and narrative-critical approach is quite possible, as Petri Merenlahti states:

In contrast to the traditional notion of poetics that regarded ‘literary’ approaches and historical, sociological or cultural approaches as mutually exclusive, poetics as conceived in the framework of the new paradigm would inevitably be historical, social and cultural.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, I conclude that in the context of this research and the church setting, there is no need to reject narrative criticism as unusable because of its ‘story’ framework.

Thus far, however, I have only addressed narrative criticism in terms of the genre of ‘story’, or a Gospel account. Clearly, the Bible is not all written in the genre of narrative. How might a narrative-critical approach to the text be applicable to biblical texts that are not specifically narrative in genre, for instance NT epistles? Literary devices in the epistles equate with a narrative interpretation with things like repetition, development, refrain and recurring themes. Each epistle has its narrative background, the occasion of the letter, seen clearly in, for instance 1 Corinthians where Paul is directly responding to issues in dialogue (‘Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...’, 1 Corinthians 7:1, NRSV). Furthermore, this epistle can be set in the narrative of the book of Acts and Paul’s formative role in the life and existence of the Corinthian church. The background and authorship is not always clear, but the principle remains that all epistles bear literary qualities, have historical occasions, and are set within the meta-narrative of scripture as a whole. Even in a work seeing some weaknesses in a narrative-critical approach to modern preaching,

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<sup>47</sup> Petri Merenlahti, *Poetics for the Gospels?: Rethinking Narrative Criticism* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2002), p.117. He speaks here of a new paradigm within narrative criticism, rather than as I introduce the word above in rejecting a paradigm shift in my preaching.

James Thompson states, 'I wish to place Paul's preaching in a wider context in order to demonstrate that his pastoral and discursive preaching actually participates in a larger narrative'.<sup>48</sup> Mike Graves makes the useful point, for instance, that the vice and virtue lists of epistles are poetic statements, perhaps using similar sounding words, and should be read as units of thoughts in keeping with the whole epistle rather than elaborating on every detail. Indeed, instead of preaching about a concept in an epistle, 'A well-told story can help capture the mood of a passage in concrete terms'.<sup>49</sup> More widely still, Calvin Miller specifically advocates supporting other (non-narrative) genres in the Bible with a 'correlating narrative text'.<sup>50</sup> So narrative criticism can help and guide the reading and preaching of the whole of scripture. For the congregation to see a part - say, a Gospel or an epistle set in the whole meta-narrative of God's story - gives a sense of continuity and completeness, and yet a sense of the particularity and relevance of the immediate narrative.

However, I need to clarify my use of the term meta-narrative in light of critique of the term. Meta-narrative essentially refers to an overarching story that stands over, encompasses and explains other stories. However, the notion of a meta-narrative has for various reasons been challenged and rejected. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean François Lyotard spoke of 'incredulity toward metanarratives'.<sup>51</sup> He identifies two types of Modern era meta-narratives, the speculative meta-narrative, which is dependent on progress through increasing knowledge, and the emancipation meta-

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<sup>48</sup> James Thompson, *Preaching like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p.40.

<sup>49</sup> Mike Graves, *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA.: Judson Press, 1997), pp.179-188 (p.187).

<sup>50</sup> Calvin Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2010), Amazon Kindle e-book (Chapter 3, paragraphs 14-15, location 991).

<sup>51</sup> Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff. Bennington and Brian Massumi, Foreword by Fredric Jameson, *Theory and History of Literature* 10 (Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

narrative, the liberation of people through human progress. Simon Malpas usefully summarises and connects these two aspects in Lyotard's thinking:

'[A]ll the different areas of knowledge are brought together to achieve a goal that is projected forward into the future as being the answer to the problems facing society. Under a grand narrative, all the social institutions such as law, education and technology combine to strive for a common goal for all humanity: absolute knowledge or universal emancipation. Knowledge thus acquires a vocation and a role for the greater good'.<sup>52</sup>

Lyotard argues, however, that in contemporary ('post-modern') society, 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation', because knowledge is no longer used to reach goals but 'has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means'.<sup>53</sup> Knowledge, has become a commodity for efficiency and profitability now rather than bringing human liberation.

Lyotard also rejects the idea of metanarratives because they are self-legitimising, inherently oppressive and make a Modernist universal truth claim, under which everyone should come, something which has been called 'a 'totalizing' framework'.<sup>54</sup>

My approach to the Bible as meta-narrative is based on a confessional Christian faith position that the Bible is a gathered source of diverse writings on the unfolding plan of God for his world, and that individual texts and books within it are precisely that - set within the whole of scripture. This could variously be called the big story of the Bible or God's grand story, but I choose 'meta-narrative' as it is conceptually linked

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<sup>52</sup> Simon Malpas, *Jean-François Lyotard* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.27.

<sup>53</sup> Lyotard, p.37 (all three).

<sup>54</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2003), p.87.

to the 'micro-narrative' (the specific preaching text and the Bible book therein) and what I will later in this chapter call the congregational narratives.

It could be argued that the Bible is not a metanarrative by Lyotard's description. Richard Bauckham states that 'When Lyotard rejected grand narratives he was not thinking of the Christian story. A metanarrative as he defined it is a characteristically modern, post-Enlightenment phenomenon'.<sup>55</sup> However, there is a biblical meta-narrative of emancipation, but the final liberation is not brought through human achievement as per Modernist meta-narratives, but by God.

This over-arching biblical meta-narrative, however, is not neatly presented as a single storyline narrative. As I have stated, it contains non-narrative material of various genres, and it is multi-authored: it therefore has multiple voices and (sub)narratives. I have already argued that the individual voices (say, the Gospel writers) should not be entirely subsumed into each other thus losing the individual and diverse narratives. The multiplicity of biblical authors, narratives and voices show that there is openness and fluidity within the meta-narrative. Therefore, 'it is hospitable to considerable diversity and to tensions, challenges and even seeming contradictions of its own claims'.<sup>56</sup> This internal failure to 'totalize' is a helpful perspective with reference the recognition of multiple metanarratives.

The metanarrative of the Bible itself recognises other meta-narratives. From Israelite interaction with, say, Egyptian or Canaanite meta-narratives in the OT, to NT Christians working out their faith within the Roman Empire, the biblical meta-narrative sits in a world of other meta-narratives. This is equally so in today's world.

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<sup>55</sup> Bauckham, p.90. He recognises, however, that this does not make Lyotard's critique entirely irrelevant and that it is 'implicitly critical' of older metanarratives such as that of Christianity (p.88).

<sup>56</sup> Bauckham, pp.93-94.

David Lose observes that ‘we live not in an era that has seen the end of metanarratives, but rather during an age that is simply saturated by grand stories, none of which, as Lyotard suggests, reigns self-evidently supreme’.<sup>57</sup> Bauckham makes a similar point regarding the biblical era: ‘the biblical metanarrative itself took shape partly in opposition to the globalising powers of its day. Within the Bible, the biblical metanarrative is rarely portrayed as the dominant metanarrative of its world’.<sup>58</sup> The biblical meta-narrative did not, and does not force everything and everyone into it in a domineering and oppressive way. The witness and proclamation of the Church is to interact with other meta-narratives, and without force or oppression, to encourage and invite people to enter and live within the biblical meta-narrative.

In sum, despite a rise in cynicism towards them, I do not deny the validity of meta-narratives. My perspective on the biblical meta-narrative has some clear differences to Lyotard’s perspectives. Drawing together the various nuances I have addressed, I shall use the term meta-narrative as I have here qualified it.

Having seen the benefits and challenges of narrative criticism, I return to the key areas of concern in my research questions: The range of people (RQ1), sermon predictability and an informational framework (RQ2), whether a new sermon style may be helpful (RQ3, 4), especially in the context of an older generation church and whether there would be a willingness to change (RQ5). My perception at this early point in the research was that a transition would be beneficial, but this needed to be tested. Chapter 2 shows how I addressed my perceptions and the research questions by listening to the congregation.

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<sup>57</sup> David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads. How the World – and Our Preaching – Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p.84.

<sup>58</sup> Bauckham, p.103.

## Chapter 2. Listening to the Congregation: The Descriptive-Empirical Task

### METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In Chapter 1 I looked at the local church and my own ministry context, in order to set the scene for my research. In Chapters 2-5, I shall use Richard Osmer's reflective model to examine the ongoing process of transition in relation to using narrative-critical interpretation and what will develop into my 'narrative form' of preaching in the church. There is therefore a double focus in the examination, the focal points of hermeneutics and homiletics, which though distinguished are dynamically connected, as detailed in Chapter 1.

Why Richard Osmer? He is one of numerous people offering a model, in four phases or what he calls 'core tasks' of a reflective cycle to approach ministry situations with appropriate skills to conduct practical theology.<sup>59</sup> I initially considered using Laurie Green's four phase model of *experience, explore, reflect* and *respond*,<sup>60</sup> but found that Osmer's model, even in its descriptors, is more nuanced regarding both the task and the researcher. He describes the four tasks as descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic. It is particularly useful in my context because of his strong perspective on a biblical model, as emphasised in his requirements for the researcher: priestly listening for the descriptive-empirical task, sagely wisdom for the

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<sup>59</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.4.

<sup>60</sup> Laurie A. Green, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology* (London; New York: Mowbray, 2009).



interpretive task, prophetic discernment for the normative task and servant leadership for the pragmatic task. These are all descriptions and aspirations rooted in the Bible. Furthermore, he considers that collaboration and 'work[ing] with others to achieve shared goals' is particularly important.<sup>61</sup> This is highly apt for my research as being *with* rather than *about* the congregation, and in doing so helps create a non-hierarchical approach. His work has been well received and respected: 'Osmer models an excellent example of how practical theology should look in practice, whilst also demonstrating how theory underpins his method throughout'.<sup>62</sup>

However, Osmer has attracted some criticism that his model can seem complicated. For instance, Robert Kinast suggests it can seem 'daunting', and that 'the subtitle, "An Introduction," is somewhat misleading if the reader expects a streamlined, simplified overview of practical theology'.<sup>63</sup> I did not find his process particularly daunting, but did find it had a slight tendency towards being too modular, particularly in relation to my normative (theological) task. Whilst my Chapter 4 looks at overarching theological issues, I would not wish to conclude that the other tasks are devoid of theological perspectives. For example, shortly in this chapter I will describe my methodology as inherently theological, and in Chapter 3 my interpretive task will use direct theological perspectives and resources alongside those from non-theological disciplines. I would therefore consider my research to be theological throughout whilst acknowledging the particular theological focus in Chapter 4. Furthermore, just as my theological task is less modular than Osmer suggests, so

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<sup>61</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.26.

<sup>62</sup> Elaine Graham, review of *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, by Richard R. Osmer, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 64 (2011), 493-494 (p.493), in *Cambridge Journals Online* <[http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0036930610000220](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0036930610000220)> [accessed 17 November 2013].

<sup>63</sup> Robert L. Kinast, review of *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, by Richard R. Osmer, *Theological Studies* 71 no 1 (2010), 240-241 (241), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials <<http://search.ebscohost.com>> [Accessed 17 November 2013].

too are the discrete cycles of investigation and change. I comment on this in my concluding meta-reflection,<sup>64</sup> but given that the four-task cycle in this thesis took over three years to examine, and since there were developments within the cycle itself as part of the 'ongoing process' of working practice, it is clearly not possible to accurately describe this ongoing process in terms of a single discrete cycle. However, notwithstanding these evaluations, I considered Osmer's model to be useable and productive.

The descriptive-empirical task addressed in this chapter requires examining 'What is going on?'.<sup>65</sup> It means 'attending to others in their particularity' and may be informal, semi-formal or formal.<sup>66</sup> This stage of my research aimed to attend to individuals' views and concerns regarding preaching in a formal way, largely through using qualitative semi-structured interviews, which offer 'flexibility balanced by structure'.<sup>67</sup> This allowed me to explore and understand more fully what is happening in the act of preaching. In Osmer's terminology my research could be described as '[f]ormative evaluation', to improve the preaching ministry and its effectiveness.<sup>68</sup>

My overall intention stated here raises numerous issues concerning my methods and methodology. As a professional doctorate, the methodology I adopt is that of mode 2 knowledge production:

Mode 2 knowledge production reflects the world of working practice, with all its existing complexities and, by its very essence, is multidisciplinary in its focus.

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<sup>64</sup> See p.201.

<sup>65</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.4.

<sup>66</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.34 and pp.37-39.

<sup>67</sup> Bill Gillham, *Research Interviewing: The Range of Techniques* (Maidenhead; New York: Open University Press, 2005), p.70.

<sup>68</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.49.

[...] Its key features are the social nature of the knowledge, the problem-orientated focus of the research and the multidisciplinary nature.<sup>69</sup>

Using qualitative methods and the congregation to describe the preaching situation showed that this research was from the community and for the community. Being the primary preacher and part of the community meant that situationally I was positioned as an insider researcher, which created both challenges and benefits. Challenges included inherent bias and difficulty in being able to stand back; a key benefit was in knowing systems and people, which aided understanding and helped me to correlate what people said with how I saw them behave.<sup>70</sup> ‘Standing back’ implies movement, and carries the assumption of gaining a detached perspective, a useful repositioning from being an ‘insider’ to becoming an ‘outsider’. My research therefore would benefit from a variety of standpoints, and this in turn could reduce some dangers such as bias. Anna Tarrant prefers the term ‘betweenness’ because she finds ‘the language of insider/outsider problematic: it risks reproducing rigid binaries that are unhelpful and uncritical and obscures some of the complexities operating in research relationships’.<sup>71</sup> Based on numerous action research studies, however, Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson categorised a continuum of six insider/outsider positionalities.<sup>72</sup> In their continuum, my research would largely fit their position (1) where the

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<sup>69</sup> John Fulton and others, *The Professional Doctorate: A Practical Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.14. They summarise Michael Gibbons and others, *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (London; Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1994).

<sup>70</sup> See John D. Brewer, *Ethnography, Understanding Social Research* (Buckingham; Philadelphia, PA.: Open University Press, 2000), pp.59-63; Karen O’Reilly, *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, SAGE Key Concepts (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), pp.109-118; Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2011), p.93.

<sup>71</sup> Anna Tarrant, ‘Betweenness’ and the Negotiation of Similarity and Difference in the Interview Setting: Reflections on Interviewing Grandfathers as a Young Female Researcher’, in *Gender Identity and Research Relationships*, Studies in Qualitative Methodology Vol. 14, ed. by Michael R. M. Ward (UK; USA; Japan; India: Emerald Group Publishing, 2016), 43-62 (p.49). Her use of ‘Betweenness’ is based on H. Nast, ‘Women in the Field: Critical Feminist Methodologies and Theoretical Perspectives’, *Professional Geographer*, 46 (1) (1994), 54-66.

<sup>72</sup> Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (Thousand Oaks, CA.; London: Sage, 2005), 29-48. Their useful summary Table 3.1 is on p.31. Their continuum poles define (1) as Insider and (6) as outsider. All following quotes are taken from table 3.1.

researcher studies 'own self/practice' (contributing to 'Improved/critiqued practice, Self/professional transformation') and position (2) where the insider is in 'collaboration with other insiders' and this contributes to 'organizational transformation'. Furthermore, I considered that my positionality as the insider minister/preacher was not the same as my position as researcher. As a researcher, I sought to be 'outside', deliberately attempting to acknowledge and minimise any tendency towards bias and deliberately stand back from my personal and professional role as I researched my practice within the church (my PRD was a helpful way of reflecting on my insider practice from a critical-thinking outsider perspective). However, I was not as far across the continuum as position 6, where 'Outsider(s) studies insider(s)' but was at position 5, that of 'Outsider [myself as researcher] in collaboration with insiders'. This important balance created a healthy tension that allowed for the benefits of insider research (knowing and working in the system) but helped minimise its dangers (by creating critical distance).

The concept of positionality was therefore useful for knowing where and when I stood in relation to the research, and helped to create greater integrity (and caution) with it.<sup>73</sup> There are, however, further aspects to positionality. An important concern Anna Tarrant highlights is that of relational factors such as generational position. In this research, I almost entirely related to an older generation than my own,<sup>74</sup> although being in my 50's I felt close rather than very distant generationally; furthermore, as an 'insider' the older generation and I were accustomed to conversation and interaction, so this did not seem to be a major issue). She considers that 'betweenness' recognises negotiation of 'multiple selves' (rather than positions) and

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<sup>73</sup> By using a range of studies to correlate their continuum, Herr and Anderson are delineating the varied positions rather than advocating a particular one. Their purpose is not to recommend any particular positionality as an ideal but believe that 'knowledge production from all positions is valid as long as it is honest and reflective about one's multiple positionalities'. Herr and Anderson, p.48.

<sup>74</sup> In chapter 3 I address what 'older generation' means in this research.

furthermore, that 'researchers are complexly positioned in a nexus of intersecting power relations' which affect the research; 'However, the recognition and naming of these processes is still important in challenging the perceived power of the researcher, and rigour in the research process.'<sup>75</sup> Tarrant's point about insider/outsider positioning as failing to account for certain factors like generational positioning is well made – my comments above made no reference to generational differences. However, I described my insider/outsider positionality above as more than simply positions; they were role positions. Tarrant usefully takes that further, and includes the important nuance of relational and power positioning, to which I now turn.

Given a large proportion of my research used interviews, it was important to minimise power issues. Gillham states the need for 'sensitivity to differences between the interview and the interviewee on the extent to which these may inhibit, offend or disadvantage the interviewee. Differences of gender, race and perceived social class [...] are commonly seen as dimensions of power'.<sup>76</sup> I deliberately chose semi-structured interviews to avoid what is seen in structured interviews as an 'asymmetrical relationship' where 'the researcher extracts information from the research subject and gives nothing in return'.<sup>77</sup> Semi-structured interviews are more flexible, as stated above,<sup>78</sup> and allow for a more open relationship. Although I offered questions as a guide, relationally I determined to position myself with minimum connotations of hierarchy/authority. I asked interviewees to choose the time and place that would suit them and where they felt most comfortable, which also reduced

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<sup>75</sup> Tarrant, p.49 (all).

<sup>76</sup> Gillham, p.14.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Fifth edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.217. The particular critique here is of hierarchic issues in interviewing from within feminist literature.

<sup>78</sup> See p.33, n.67.

the appearance of me ‘controlling’ procedures; I dressed casually to avoid a sense of formality or status, and sat at an angle in relation to the interviewee, in order to avoid a direct face-to-face posture that may create a sense of intimidation. I avoided use of the word ‘interview’; I sought to convey that interviewees were the ‘experts’ and I was a ‘faithful listener’ who would not challenge any perceptions, and so help allay (or even reverse) any perceived sense of hierarchy. Second round interviews were offered only to those having given a first round interview in order to build trust and confidence, so facilitating greater openness and honesty. I offered gratitude and appreciation of people’s time and contribution both at the outset and conclusion of the interview. All transcripts were made available to participants both for comment and to endorse a sense of joint ownership of information. Gillham states that, ‘Courtesy and respect will dilute the relevance of this variable’ (power).<sup>79</sup> As far as I could, I tried to create an open and non-hierarchical space and conversation.

Further still, the questionnaire prior to the interviews was deliberately anonymous to allow honesty (people did not have to state their gender), and for comparison with interview results. In the post-interviews focus group, I helped to reduce any sense of hierarchy as lay-leaders and I symbolically sat together in a circle. The verbalised research was supplemented with the archives for comparison/contrast in order to add more rigour to the research.

Finally here, researching my preaching role with the congregation (something that was previously unheard of in the church), was itself a signal that the preaching and research about it did not belong to me. Indeed, this thesis will show that preaching belongs to and is for the congregation. This helped to affirm a non-hierarchical perspective: all the congregation ‘own’ it, and therefore all may equally share in the

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<sup>79</sup> Gillham, p.14.

conversation about preaching. That non-hierarchical principle undergirded the research.

In sum, I used well-known tools of ethnography, 'writing about peoples',<sup>80</sup> to describe what this church thought about preaching, and did so in ways which minimised as much as possible any sense of hierarchy.

However, 'writing about peoples' raises questions about interpretation, even before coming to what Osmer means by the interpretive task. His suggested purpose is to interpret the garnered descriptive-empirical data with multi-disciplinary tools from the arts and sciences, recognising that multiple perspectives are required, and the resultant interpretation 'presupposes fallibilist and perspectival understandings of theoretical knowledge'.<sup>81</sup> Methodologically, the nature of my research was interpretative at this and at an even more fundamental level. The act of listening, reading interview transcripts, categorising themes right through to drawing my conclusions was unavoidably interpretative. Furthermore, especially given I interviewed church attendees about their views of what was largely my preaching, their own words were interpretative within the dynamics of the interview. Might they have seen an uncomfortable flinch in me, or a twitch of a frown, and so controlled or changed their words? Might their thoughts and words have been affected by an event prior to the interview, or nervousness in it? I suggest ways in which I sought to manage the situation, but my research is without doubt interpretative. I agree with Kathy Charmaz that, 'Conducting and writing research are not neutral acts'.<sup>82</sup> Other

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<sup>80</sup> O'Reilly, p.227.

<sup>81</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.83.

<sup>82</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Introducing Qualitative Methods, 2nd edn (London; Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE, 2014), p.240.

interpretations could be made at other times by other people (or myself), but these were the ones at that point in the examination of an ongoing process.

My choice to follow Osmer's model also highlights that my methodology is based on more than congregational research. The normative task asks what ought to be happening theologically in preaching by using established literature. Underpinning my preaching situation is the conviction that God is directly involved in preaching as both object and subject. Preaching is a theological task, God-words ('theo-logy'), and therefore to consider only human words about preaching would be grossly deficient. The theological task therefore introduces another important methodological perspective of my thesis. The human words must be brought into interaction with the God-words: the project is inherently theological.

Having garnered the small scale congregational research and set it within a theological perspective of preaching, my intention is not specifically to arrive at a formal theory that comes out of the research. I consider the scale of the research far too small to make any all-encompassing theory. I am simply examining one local situation, and therefore consider the congregational research to be descriptive of this situation. My interpretational coding remains simple, by using the descriptive information to draw out themes rather than using more complex coding. As Charmaz explains, 'Coding for themes rather than analyzing actions contributes to remaining descriptive'.<sup>83</sup> I choose to remain with themes because of the small scale of my research: the limited number of interviewees did not lend itself to more complex coding that would be reliable. The purpose of knowing the themes, especially the desires and concerns coming from the research, was to advance the preaching

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<sup>83</sup> Charmaz, p.246.



ministry. Speaking of practical ethnography, John Brewer states, 'the point is to intervene in the setting and improve the position of the people studied'.<sup>84</sup> I am deliberately seeking to move, with Osmer, from description to practical change with the result that congregants will have a fuller and richer faith through the preaching in this local church. My foundational and final aim is practice, the creation of a model for preaching by using Osmer's descriptive, interpretive and normative (theological) tasks: it is practical theology.

Finally, here, Osmer's required qualities for pursuing his four tasks (listening, wisdom, discernment and leadership) highlight the significance of the person and character of the researcher, myself. I was, of course, both researcher and preacher. My research was deeply rooted in how I might need to change and improve my skills to be a more effective preacher, and therefore personal reflection and reflexivity were important parts of my methodology. I felt confident that Osmer's model applied to my situation with the methodological tools and awareness stated would facilitate reflection and reflexivity.

In the course of each section of this chapter I will offer particular details of any methodological issues relating to that part of the research, but I now briefly overview the component methods of descriptive-empirical research I undertook.

The methods I used for research were highly important and significant. In the early and preparatory stages of research I was concerned about how well a largely older generation congregation would cope with the required formalities of research like receiving and filling in forms, being asked questions that they might struggle with,

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<sup>84</sup> Brewer, p.147.

having their speech recorded, and generally entering into something new and uncertain to them. This was not an age prejudice, but being involved with many of their lives, for example in helping them fill in forms, I know the sense of worry that can develop when receiving formal paperwork. I have also seen how people fearfully shy away from a microphone in church, so wondered whether they would avoid recorded interviews. It was therefore crucial to keep the research simple and guided where it related to people directly. I also know from experience that there is a tendency for people, when in discussion groups about church policy, plans or even in thematised prayer meetings, to wander away from the subject in hand. People would therefore need clear guidance, but without being straight-jacketed and unable to express themselves and their views. I deliberately planned a method (an anonymous questionnaire)<sup>85</sup> that would start with the least demanding interaction and people could opt in to further stages as confidence grew. They would be guided with advanced information for following stages that would help engender confidence and keep things on subject but allow for freedom of expression. First, however, I turned to archives.

The research commenced with an examination of written records of sermons preached in ABBC before my appointment as the minister, taken from an archive of church magazines. This was followed by the anonymous tick-box only questionnaire to current attenders, and then I conducted a first round of recorded semi-structured interviews on general perceptions about preaching. After my analysis of the interviews, there was a second round of recorded interviews in which people were asked to respond to a four-week series of sermons. As a researcher on what was largely my own practice of preaching in the church, and for the freedom of

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<sup>85</sup> See copy in Appendix 1.

interviewees to say exactly what they felt appropriate, I adopted a posture of being a faithful listener in interviews rather than a dialogue partner. I responded only to thank or affirm, clarify what was being said or to summarise comments in order to confirm that I had understood correctly. This was both to reduce any tension interviewees might have about commenting on my own preaching, and also to signal that I considered them to be 'experts' and in order to 'establish equality, not authority'.<sup>86</sup> After preaching each of the sermons, and before the second interviews, I conducted my own reflections in my PRD and then wrote a more thorough reflection. Finally, the church leadership were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss the responses to the interviews and consider the benefits and challenges of a transition.

As I gathered the congregational data, I assimilated it by making a spreadsheet of questionnaire responses and transcripts of the interviews and focus group which I then correlated and thematised in spreadsheets.<sup>87</sup> Observation of empty cells where information may have been missed allowed for double checking the transcript for possible omissions in the summary, thus potentially increasing interpretative accuracy. Given the small scale of my research and that I was only looking for themes, I chose not to use computer-based analysis software. I wrote process documents for each stage and reflected on the results in terms of first-level interpretations of the data. All this has been reduced into this chapter, and with nearly seventy-eight thousand words of transcripts, inevitably not every detail can be stated and evaluated here. The dual focus on material relating to narrative-critical interpretation and particular homiletical perspectives has been prioritised.

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<sup>86</sup> Charmaz, p.70 and p.71.

<sup>87</sup> The transcripts and spreadsheets are on the SECD.

## THE BACKGROUND: SERMON ARCHIVES AND THE QUESTIONNAIRE

### The Sermon Archive

Sermon notes are archival records of the outline of previously preached sermons, as written in the church magazine, here called '*Good News*' (GN).<sup>88</sup> Bible study notes were similarly produced in the magazine, typically after a mid-week Bible study. For simplicity, and given that the midweek Bible studies appear to have been preached, usually by the pastor or an elder, I will simply refer to this data as sermons. That they are written notes makes it self-evident that these are simply records of the sermons and not the full sermons themselves, and clearly lack the various preachers' personalities and styles, or congregational dynamics. They simply show the material record. However, this is sufficient to give a brief overview, which is all I seek to show here, of how the Bible was used and the sermon structure as displayed in the written, but editorially selected form within the magazine.

The church archive contains a total of a hundred and twenty-three written sermons taken from two hundred and fifty-three extant magazines spanning thirty years (1963-1992) until it ceased to be produced. Eighty-eight sermons were written in numbered and lettered sections and sub-sections, down to as many as five levels. Of these, the most complex comprises a total of twenty section/subsection points. There is an average of seven section/subsections points per sermon among these sermons.

Thirty-five sermons were recorded in prose paragraph style. It is not possible, of course, to conclude as to whether the sermons themselves were presented 'paragraph' style rather than sectionally, since by definition 'paragraph' is a literary not an oral term, but neither is there any reason to suspect that sectional sermons

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<sup>88</sup> This is a pseudonym. The spreadsheet showing the sermon archive is on the SECD.

were constructed in this way only at the time of the written record, so it is likely that the paragraph style records indicate a less sectional but more flowing style of the spoken presentation.

Very few sermons, just eight, fail to have a stated Bible text but appear to have a directly circumstantial cause, though they may cite texts later. Seven of these use points and one is paragraph style, though one paragraph included three points. One occasion was the commissioning of a Christian worker, and one record is clear in stating that a particular study was in response to the pastor being asked a conversational question at a coffee morning, and the answer had obviously created some disagreement, whereby this rare written study, showing the same section-based form as many others preached, addressed the theme.<sup>89</sup>

The spread of the hundred and fifteen sermons clearly identified as based on a particular text or texts were numerically as follows: forty-four from the Epistles; thirty-one from the Gospels; eleven from Acts, and five from Revelation. From the OT, twenty-one from narratives; ten from the Psalms; seven from the Prophets; three from the Law and two from Wisdom Literature.<sup>90</sup> This suggests that whilst a variety of biblical genres were preached on, they predominantly developed into sermons of a single style of sections and points. Despite the example given below, there is a noticeable absence of evangelistic preaching, although there were sermons on '[W]itness', '[C]onversion' and 'Seven Reasons Why We Must Win Souls'.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> 'Is there healing in the Atonement?', *GN*, May 1977, pp.4-6.

<sup>90</sup> Only main texts of sermons were counted, rather than passing references to texts. Some sermons had multiple main texts, and hence the total here is in excess of the 115 sermons with stated main texts.

<sup>91</sup> *GN*, February 1964 (first and second unnumbered pages); January 1979, pp.3-4; July 1980, p.4.

In relation to a narrative-critical approach to preaching, using the thirty-one recorded sermons from the Gospels as an example, there is little sign of narrative elements being used. Take one sharply contrasting example to my own sermon detailed later in this chapter. A sermon on Luke 15:1-10 was approached along the line that 'The whole Chapter [sic] is really one parable in three parts'.<sup>92</sup> The Shepherd speaks of Jesus, the woman with the lost coin of the Holy Spirit and the prodigal's father of the love of God. No narrative context was set (as stated in Luke 15:1), no development of the characters was made, and an imposed theological (Trinitarian) connection rather than a narrative one was made across the chapter. Five alliterative points are offered as a 'suggested outline' of the parable of 'The lost piece of silver' with the conclusion, 'Do you know what it means to have the joy of being "found" by the Saviour?'.<sup>93</sup> However, another sermon based on Mark 5 was built around three characters, the man, the woman and the girl as 'three hopeless cases'. The sermon links the three by pointing to Jesus as Lord over all - demons, disease and death. The notes make brief reference to 'narrative' but only loosely ('Narrative [is] not primarily to tell us how many pigs were lost!'), but reference is made to considering the plight of the woman in her condition, thus seeking to enter into the events.<sup>94</sup> In summary, attention to narrative qualities in the archive is rare.

The sermons varied greatly in moving from Bible content to the listeners' lives. Some had little or no direct application, perhaps just a sentence at the end, although some had more: a rare but notable one addressed the theme of church division, with two

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<sup>92</sup> *GN*, September 1977, pp.5-6 (p.5).

<sup>93</sup> *GN*, September 1977, pp.5-6 (p.5 twice and p.6), original underlining.

<sup>94</sup> *GN*, December 1976, pp.6-7 (p.6).

paragraph-style pages based on the Bible, then two pages directed to the listeners.<sup>95</sup>  
Overall, the style seems to be a text-then-application approach.<sup>96</sup>

In summary, the written notes of preaching suggest a strong focus on Bible text but largely without using narrative-critical principles. Sermons were mainly preached by the use of a sectional structure, with some use of a prosaic paragraph style, and gave varying degrees of application to congregants.

These observations of the written notes, and particularly the largely standard format of sermons despite using texts from various Bible genres suggests a sense of general routine in relation to RQ2.<sup>97</sup>

## **The Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was open to all who had attended the church for at least three months. This time requirement allowed for respondents to have heard a reasonable range of sermons and answer questions about them. Although questionnaires do not generally produce high response rates, within the church setting, with a 'captive' group having stakeholder interest, a relatively good response rate was likely. Conducted anonymously, the questionnaire allowed for complete freedom of expression, and although a questionnaire by definition is theory-laden, it offered a means to present general research topics to start people thinking. Offering fixed answer options set in clear and straightforward questions, I intended to elicit views in a guided and relatively straightforward way, to engender confidence so that

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<sup>95</sup> GN, November 1973, pp.9-12.

<sup>96</sup> This coheres with an exegesis-to-application approach in, for instance Fee, *Exegesis*. Wilson describes a part of expository sermons as 'apply[ing] the text to our own lives': Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, Revised Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p.145. See my p.8 for my own training in this method.

<sup>97</sup> See pp.15-16. From hereon these page numbers will not be repeated.

respondents might be willing to move on and become interviewees. In all but one question, respondents were asked to choose only one answer, though a relatively small number of questions were unanswered or double answered by some respondents and were considered spoilt.

The questions, set in five sections, included general ones about experience, preferences and expectations of preaching and towards the end, some questions were designed to elicit responses to regarding general aspects of narrative criticism in relation to preaching.

I prepared the questions myself, and set them within the framework of my research interests, breaking them down into sections for ease and clarity for respondents. Given the research related to an older generation church, section 1 aimed to see clearly what age groups had responded.

Section 2 looked at general perspectives on respondents' frequency of hearing sermons and what continuity is maintained with sermons after they have been heard. This was to ascertain how much impact they had for individuals beyond the sermon event. I considered that this was an important aspect to ascertaining the level of whole life change through preaching.

Section 3 was designed to glean information from those who had attended and heard sermons in the church prior to my appointment, and therefore to facilitate comparison of past and present preaching. Therefore Section 4, which gleaned the same information from current attenders, asked the same questions and had the same response choices as section 3. In both these sections the response options were deliberately set to ascertain whether people wanted to start with the Bible or a life situation, whether they wanted to be clearly directed by the preacher or left to work



things out for themselves, and (given my concern for sermons to address whole life flourishing) what priority people gave to sermons with regard to various aspects of life like the mind, emotions, behaviour or a direct sense of nurturing faith.

This important area of information gathering also continued in Section 5, which addressed how people preferred to approach sermons, what they find useful or not in them, and whether they found the use of sermons in a series useful. This section was designed to draw answers that would loosely connect with some perspectives of my interests in 'narrative preaching' as I defined it in chapter 1. For instance, questions asked what types of 'story' people like or dislike, about the development of themes, or whether people liked sermons left open-ended so they could develop their own responses. This would help me to make some tentative conclusions as to whether respondents might be open to a changing style of preaching.

I hoped for about twenty-five responses (about half of the congregation) and ultimately received thirty-two completed questionnaires. Given my intention was to elicit general perceptions and set people thinking, the results and observations made here will be brief and largely descriptive to set the scene for research, although I make some observations. This also befits the inevitably very small-scale quantitative research in the church setting.

Section 1 comprised only three questions which showed the respondents' profiles, Appendix 1, Chart 1 summarises the results. The sample fits with a general perception of church attendance, in that there are proportionately far more women than men and that it is an older generation church.

Section 2 examined respondents' general expectations of preaching, their responses to it and contact with preaching elsewhere. Appendix 1, Chart 2 summarises the results.

The most popular general preference regarding sermon length was for not more than thirty minutes (Q2.2).<sup>98</sup> The majority of respondents do not read the sermon's Bible text afterwards (23 of 32, Q2.3) or reflect/pray about what they have heard in sermons in an uninterrupted way (22 of 32, Q2.4). Twenty-three of thirty-one attend a home-group which routinely discusses and reflects on a sermon, and all but one attender who responded (21 of 22, Q2.6) said the home-group helps their understanding. It may therefore be that the general preference is for corporate reflection on sermons. Only five of thirty-two respondents catch up on a missed sermon (Q2.7). Regarding the perceived most important purpose of a sermon in terms of four answers, building faith took the highest response as a first choice (15 of 31, Q2.11), followed by Bible understanding (13). Behavioural or emotional change were rarely regarded as top priorities (2 and 1 respectively).

Section 3 examined the recollections of longer-attending congregants towards previous preaching in ABBC, before I became the minister. Appendix 1, Chart 3 summarises the results. Seventeen people completed this section. Recollection was almost entirely that the past style was a mixture of verse-by-verse preaching and preaching on life issues (15 of 16, Q3.2), a detail that surprised me given what the archive sermons notes seemed to suggest. It may be that recollections differ from reality, or that the sermon notes are incomplete records, but if the latter, this is itself of interest regarding the editorial choice. Another possibility is a potential link to

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<sup>98</sup> References to the questionnaire will follow the pattern Q[section number].[question number].

another type of material I categorised from the *GN* archive as 'Devotionals'.<sup>99</sup> They were short articles written mainly by the pastor, which had a greater focus on church people, life issues and circumstances than the sermons. It may be that current recollections have conflated direct preaching in the past with this other ministry input. Nobody looked back on preaching as primarily changing their behaviour amongst four options (Q3.4), 8 said that it mostly built their faith and 7 that it mostly taught them the Bible. All but one of fourteen respondents considered that preaching tended to tell them what God or the preacher wanted to say rather than making them think things out for themselves (Q3.5).

Section 4 looked at respondents' perceptions of current preaching in the church. Appendix 1, Chart 4 summarises the results. Most people considered sermons to be a mixture of verse by verse and life issues (21 of 32, Q4.1) Few respondents said that preaching generally tends to bring behavioural change (2 of 31, Q4.3) or made them feel positive (1), whereas most respondents thought that preaching tends to teach the Bible (17) or build faith (11). Almost all said sermons work by 'telling' (28 of 31, Q4.4) rather than making congregants think for themselves (3). Perceptions were therefore similar to that regarding past preaching.

Section 5 sought to ascertain what is helpful or unhelpful for congregants in the approach to, structure and flow of a sermon/series, and expectations regarding sermon outcomes. Appendix 1, Chart 5 summarises the results. The majority of respondents (26 of 31, Q5.1) found it most helpful for a sermon to start from a biblical text rather than a life-situation. Despite this, when asked about what they find most useful in a sermon in terms of (1) learning what the text means, (2) finding what it tells me I need to do, or (3) when it makes me feel positive, only twelve of thirty found

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<sup>99</sup> Extant *GN* editions contained 218 devotionals.

it most useful to learn what the text means (Q5.4). In this respect, it seems that understanding the text is not the central concern of congregants. Neither did they appear to be over concerned about the history behind the text: twenty-two of thirty-two wanted only minimal detail (Q5.3).

Despite the majority conclusion in section 4 that sermons ‘tell’ what God or the preacher wants to say rather than causing the congregant to think for themselves about how to respond, twenty-three of thirty-one said in section 5 that they want to be left to think out for themselves what they need to do (Q5.2), suggesting a change in approach would be appreciated. However, out of three choices of what is ‘most useful’, half of the respondents (15, Q5.4) said they find it most useful when a sermon tells them what they need to do. Only twelve said it was more useful to learn what the text means, and three people chose ‘when it makes me feel positive’. ‘Practical suggestions for action’ was also listed second highest in another ‘most useful’ list containing five options (10 of 32, Q5.5), yet when asked of the same list what is ‘least useful’ it was the second highest (8 of 32, Q5.6), behind only ‘the use of illustrations’. This suggests some divided opinions and it is therefore not possible to reach a strong conclusion other than that respondent preferences vary, and that the overall balance is perhaps to offer clear guidance, as *suggestion*, with a preaching awareness that the congregant needs to make and own any change, decisions and actions.

Section 5 also revealed a lack of appeal of illustrations, chosen least in a question about what is ‘most useful’ (2 of 32, Q5.5) and chosen most in a question on what is ‘least useful’ (11 of 32, Q5.6). Within a list of five options regarding stories, general life stories are most related to by respondents (17, Q5.7), followed by Bible stories (8). In the same question the preacher’s life stories along with media/world stories do not rank highly (3 and 2). The preference towards general life and Bible stories

suggests a potential warmth towards narrative-critical interpretation and preaching, but equally it could be resisted if it is perceived as a story-based form of preaching where, say, a more abstract form of preaching is preferred.

The response to being asked about sermons as part of a series is that twenty of thirty-two respondents find it helpful (Q5.8), four find it 'OK but I don't need the bigger picture', but eight prefer self-contained sermons to the point that a series is 'unhelpful'. It is clear that there is no strong desire to independently catch up if a sermon is missed as respondents either do not sense a problem (9 of 31, Q5.10) or find the following sermon allows them to catch up (18). Only four catch up via a recording.<sup>100</sup> All respondents see value, in varying degrees, to a weekly 'catch up' introduction in a series, most finding it a useful prompt either for themselves or possibly for others (19 and 9 of 32, Q5.11). Seventeen people find repetitions and themes in a series useful, fourteen find them 'OK but they don't add much' and one person sees repetitions as 'not helpful' (Q5.12). In terms of narrative-critical preaching in a series of sermons, this suggests that whilst reference to the wider and previous narrative is mostly welcomed, minimal reference rather than 'overkill' seems appropriate.

The questionnaire yielded useful insights to the congregants' views, though inevitably it showed variety and contrast. With a high uptake, it served its purpose well by generating interest and general information for my enquiry. At the point of the questionnaire people seemed to have sensed little change from the past regarding the mixed approach towards texts and situations, and the 'telling' nature of preaching, so a transition did not seem to have been perceived to have commenced. However, there were indications of a sense of wanting a transition (RQ5) from the preacher

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<sup>100</sup> This coheres with Q2.7 cited above as one person did not answer Q5.10.

'telling' to congregants handling sermon outcomes more for themselves and within community (evidenced by the perceived value of home-groups). There was little expressed concern for emotional and volitional responses to sermons (RQ4), something I consider an important area for whole-life flourishing and therefore in need of change, but this could prove difficult as it is not seen as important by the respondents.

## **THE FIRST INTERVIEW**

The first part of the qualitative congregational research comprised semi-structured interviews with volunteers, to elicit their views and experiences of past and present preaching and sought to develop people's thinking as general preparation for the second and more specific interview. It gave me an opportunity to see how open this sample was to the possibility of change.

Apart from the three-month requirement explained above, anyone could volunteer to become an interviewee, so there was no selection bias: eleven accepted. Each was given a sheet in advance containing ten starter questions, so they could prepare their responses thoroughly before the interview. They were told in advance I was there to listen to them and not engage in dialogue. Being the only interviewer made the 'interviewer effect' constant, and along with free choice to volunteer and therefore having relatively 'random' interviewees, this moderated the potential distortion of a face-to-face technique of gathering data.<sup>101</sup> During the interviews, the starter questions were read out despite interviewees having seen them before. This was

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<sup>101</sup> Brewer, p.65.

both to give a pause for interviewees to mentally compose themselves and also in order to 'increase the equivalence of the answers'.<sup>102</sup>

To further alleviate any potential interviewee anxiety, I informally called the interviews 'feedback sessions', and interviewees were encouraged to write down any thoughts in advance if they wished, simply for their self-assurance. This proved to be useful, though at times one or two interviewees seemed fairly rigid with the questions. Interviewees were verbally told that, 'there are no right answers, no wrong answers, just honest answers'.<sup>103</sup> It was important that interviewees felt free to express concerns, criticisms and their desires for change. I made brief notes in the interview in order to assist my writing and add any notes on things like body language or gesticulations. Interviewees were advised that my note-taking indicated nothing in terms of the significance of what they had said that caused me to take a note at that particular point. The guide questions inevitably created themes across the interviews, though interviewees interpreted and opened out the questions in various ways, and the final question was a 'catch all', giving the opportunity to raise things that may not have been covered elsewhere.

All interviews were transcribed entirely by myself and I then second-checked the script with the recording to correct any hearing errors. Simple and personally made conventions were used as follows:

- ... = pause in conversation/non-specific utterance, usually 'eermmm'
- ( ) = non-verbal communication, like (laughing)

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<sup>102</sup> Gillham, p.76.

<sup>103</sup> As variously recorded in interview notes in my PRD.

- [ ] = transcribing comment to clarify context
- + = 'positively', for an expression like 'mmm', based on tone
- (neutral) = 'mmm' but neither positive or negative tone
- = negative tone
- Bold** = emphatic speech

Alternation of speaker was denoted by a new line, but for further clarity in transcript citations, the text of my own speech is also italicised. In order to retain authenticity, the transcript text is cited as recorded and has not been changed into correct grammar, so for ease of reading, and to avoid copious repetition the use of [sic] will be omitted from all direct interviewee quotes. For simplicity and ease of reading, transcript footnote references will only be used for direct quotes and gathered interviewee quotes on a single theme will be referenced in one footnote. Besides interviewees speaking of various general preferences regarding sermons, two main themes were the preacher's connection with the congregation and a desire for direct involvement by the congregation in sermons. As I proceed through the responses and themes of the interviews, I will add reflective comments on them.

**General Preferences**

Interviewees came from the 40 to 80+ age bands. All interviewees commented on the preferred length of a sermon, their range spanning from fifteen to forty-five minutes, though the questionnaire response range was from fifteen to fifty minutes. The general reasons for the time limitation were stated as concentration or retention issues.



Identifying with my concern in RQ1, interviewees recognised a wide range of diversity in terms of preferences, circumstances and preaching needs, summed up by one interviewee:

[I]t is very hard to address such a varied congregation, especially in the morning, where you've got [details omitted for confidentiality]...who are in a way searching to see what the truth is, and you've got Christians that are, Christians, people that have been in the pews for fifty years plus and it is very hard to be relevant to both groups I imagine a lot of the time.<sup>104</sup>

## **Sermons**

Unsurprisingly in ABBC, there was a clear sense that sermons should be from God and based on the Bible: 'true to the word of God', 'God's word to us through that preacher' and 'inspired by scripture'/'inspired by God'.<sup>105</sup> However, only two of the eleven explicitly stated a preference that a sermon should start with a Bible text. Five interviewees were content for the commencement of a sermon to be either with text or a current life situation or topic, and four liked the start to be specifically from a life situation or topic. Yet those who preferred a current life start were clear of the need to then turn to the Bible: 'I think commence with a real life issue then follow it, and, and seek the answers if you like, by using the Bible'.<sup>106</sup> Reasons for a contemporary life starting-point were given as 'so it connects God's word with his wishes for my life, our life. I like it to capture the imagination, be relevant and inspiring', 'I feel I can direct myself to it, and it, it keeps me more focused cos I think to myself "Ooh yes, that's me"', and that 'Jesus used everyday situations'.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Interview 1 Transcript 02, pp.4-5. I will use the format I1T [number], and in due course I2T [number] for the second round of interviews.

<sup>105</sup> I1T 01, p.1; I1T 06, p.1; I1T 08, p.1 and p.7.

<sup>106</sup> I1T 04, p.5.

<sup>107</sup> I1T 04, p.3; I1T 10, p. 3; I1T 11, p.5.

This sample of the congregation showed flexibility towards the traditional approach of starting with a Bible text, and a desire for a wider engagement with sermons rather than simply receiving information.

The purpose of the sermon was variously described with words like message, teach or teaching, and understanding. However, expressions denoting less cerebral purposes were equally used, words like apply, relate, worship, encourage, support, strengthen, challenge, reconsider, rectify, grow, love, and hope. Comments using forms of the three words, *relate* (to life), *apply* and *relevance*, collectively account for words on the lips of all eleven interviewees. It is therefore appropriate to say from this sample that contemporary practical significance is a required characteristic of sermons. Commensurate with this expectation of relevance, though not used by all interviewees, would be that it should be easy to understand/listen to/follow, a term used directly by four people. One used two keywords about sermons: 'shorter' and (sometimes) 'simpler', and another spoke of sermons, on occasion being too 'academic'.<sup>108</sup>

Concern was also raised about the need for sermons to address both mature Christians and those who do not yet have a faith (RQ1). There is no clear indication whether this was simply a reflection on an inevitable reality or something that needed to be actively addressed, but by virtue of it being said it would seem at least possible that there is 'room for improvement':

[I] just feel that each, each time, maybe it should be something that's easily understandable for folk that just walk in the door and haven't got a clue about, sort of, church and, and, and things like that, that...it, sort of, but then you've still got to get it on all levels from non-believers to, through to people who've got a

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<sup>108</sup> I1T 05, p.10; I1T 11, p.2.

strong faith and they're a lot further along the road than some other folk, which is a difficult thing for the preacher to do, but it's just one of those things that struck me.<sup>109</sup>

Conversely, another said,

[ABBC] has always been known for its sound preaching...which I'm very pleased with...I think that trend continues with you [...] I think it's the way you develop the biblical text...with your research, your background...and putting it...you know, succinctly for today's generation... [...] I'm quite happy with it.

*OK*

Very, very happy with it.<sup>110</sup>

That a sermon should be relevant is clear in these comments. What is also clear is that a sermon is not considered to be simply about furtherance of knowledge, but should be set within contemporary and practical life. Two people cited 2 Timothy 3:16 as the basis for the purpose of preaching.

Reflecting on this, I am encouraged knowing that interviewees recognise the complexity of the church congregation. I was disappointed that some people felt that my preaching was considered too academic, especially as I have always wanted to make the Christian message simple and accessible to all. This is therefore something that challenges me to continue to strive to make preaching simple enough for casual attenders yet compelling and attractive for those who have moved on in faith and need ongoing challenges and freshness.

There were seven clear perceptions about the flow of the sermon (in some cases distilled from wider comment and not necessarily exact quotes). Here are four, using a slash to delineate the elements they identified:

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<sup>109</sup> I1T 06, pp.6-7.

<sup>110</sup> I1T 09, p.1 and p.7.

Topical explanation (of life issue)/God's word and Bible text/Bring it to life/  
Logical end of sermon (not a 'cliff hanger').

Life issue/Seek answers from Bible including for 'non-Christians'/Resolve  
issues/Confirm the solution/ Conclusion [but uncertain who makes it].

Bible Text/Context/Pressing matter/Old Testament use (if applicable)/Advice or  
instruction given then/Today's life/Implications for today/Reiteration of main  
points and concept.

To me it should be beautiful in its simplicity [...] to me a sermon just progresses.  
It has a beginning, a middle and an end, a conclusion, and the whole lot is just  
as important.<sup>111</sup>

This list, amid obvious variations, shows an overall sense of agreement, namely that immediately or via a current life situation, the Bible has primary importance in guiding a sermon to a conclusion and possibly a practical life response. There was no overall clarity about whether the preacher or listener is responsible for defining the desired outcome of the sermon.

Numerous forms of illustration were suggested by eight interviewees: general illustrations from life and everyday things; current affairs; PowerPoint screen pointers of the sermon's direction, or simply pictures; visual aids of any kind (all said to aid memory); anecdotes, including light-hearted ones; humour; true life examples; examples and events from the Bible; contemporary examples, especially Christian celebrities and sports people; testimonies of people's lives (from within the church), perhaps given by the preacher, and finally the preacher's own personal examples to identify with 'me' as a congregant. So the interviewees were entirely positive about illustrations of various kinds, nobody citing any type as unhelpful. This offers an interesting comparison to the questionnaires, where the use of illustrations was seen less positively. It may simply reflect the reality that those more comfortable with a

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<sup>111</sup> I1T 03, pp.4-6; I1T 04, pp.5-6, 8; I1T 07, p.6; I1T 08, p.2 and p.4.

sermon style including these types of illustrations (which are already utilised in my preaching style), were more forthcoming in offering interviews precisely because they feel positive. It is, of course, not possible to glean or interpret anything more from those who passed comment anonymously in the questionnaire.

### **The Preacher and the Congregation**

An important theme in the interview was the connection between the preacher and the listeners. This was in response to a written starter question:

5. What do you think is the connection between a preacher and a listener in a sermon? Perhaps you could tease this out with images. These are some to get you going, but do not assume they have to be your answers: pastor/attender; teacher/learner; carer/cared for...? You can answer it in Bible images or those from your own world - whatever you think describes the connection!

All eleven commented on the relationship. Inevitably people were drawn in to the examples given, despite the comment they were only to 'get you going'. A number of people highlighted or adapted one of the suggestions. The teacher/learner was directly affirmed by three interviewees, one with a clear sense of the physical circumstances of a lectern creating the imagery, 'so it does feel like there's the teacher and we're the ones that are learning'.<sup>112</sup>

One person used the imagery of navigator/pilot, with the 'navigator supplying important information, the pilot controlling the flight, me controlling my life'.<sup>113</sup> I particularly appreciated the congregant's sense of personal responsibility as the pilot. Other images were messenger/receiver, interpreter/student, teacher as friend/listener, comforter/comforted (explained by using the Emmaus Road twosome

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<sup>112</sup> I1T 02, p.2.

<sup>113</sup> I1T 04, p.5.

when Jesus came alongside, and a 'Mary moment'<sup>114</sup> in the garden on resurrection day, when Jesus appeared), shepherd/flock, and mentor/attenders. One interviewee illustrated the relationship with the words, 'a bit like a mountain guide getting us through the tricky bits in the Christian life'.<sup>115</sup>

Once again, the perceptions here extend beyond teaching and learning, to care, direction, guidance and being together as friends and helpers. This suggests that a preaching style that addresses whole-life flourishing would be appreciated (RQ4).

### **Sermon Continuity and Narrativity**

The use of a sermon series and narrative aspects as part of a series were commented on by seven interviewees, though only four commented directly on narrative issues. More widely than the seven, memory issues were repeatedly raised as a concern and therefore repetition was appreciated, variously described as 'I don't always remember', 'a week is a long time', 'the brain cells are dropping off', or the need for a 'memory jogger'.<sup>116</sup> One interviewee said that 'we always need to be, be reminded', in the sense of reiteration rather than memory loss, and another said, 'Jesus used many times when things were repeated...so I think yes, repetition I think would be good'.<sup>117</sup> Despite awareness that this is an older generation church, I was surprised to find such a heightened sense of concern over memory challenges and sermon retention. Though repetition as a memory aid is not an exclusive privilege of narrative-critical interpretation, the presence of themes, repetition and ongoing continuity as

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<sup>114</sup> I1T 01, p.3.

<sup>115</sup> I1T 06, p.2.

<sup>116</sup> I1T 01, p.7; I1T 03, p.7; I1T 04, p.10; I1T 06, p.4 (twice).

<sup>117</sup> I1T 09, p.5; I1T 08, p.5.

core principles within it, suggest that it may be useful at a very practical level in such a setting.

However, concerns regarding repetition and a series of sermons were raised, for example, in the form of ‘a slight danger...that if you try and recap every week particularly for those that aren’t there, it can become a little bit boring’.<sup>118</sup>

A reconciling balance, and one that shows a perception of a whole narrative, was in seeing a sermon series as analogous to a book,

In a way each sermon have its own theme but the sermons in a series they all have link because the outcome, the outcome of each individual sermon has its own end [...] It’s like a chapter of a book.<sup>119</sup>

One interviewee raised various useful elements of continuity and narrativity, along with a recent preaching example, in order to convey perceived benefits:

I think it is important to the context of a passage or themes because you can make any verses say anything or else...and we have been currently going through the miracles in Matthew, haven’t we, and the emphasis that you’ve brought out and you have explained the structure of the book and how it works out and it gives a much fuller picture than if you just heard one sermon on the feeding of the five thousand...you can see that the author actually had a bigger intention than just telling the story that we all like from Sunday School.<sup>120</sup>

These comments suggest not only an openness to sermon continuity, but an awareness of both narrativity and that sermons are better when reflecting the wider text rather than what single verses may say. It seems there is no overriding objection to the use of a sermon series despite some preference for stand alone sermons, and

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<sup>118</sup> I1T 02, p.4.

<sup>119</sup> I1T 01, p.7.

<sup>120</sup> I1T 02, p.4.

good reasons why a series, including narrative-critical elements like structure and repetition of themes, can be useful.

### **Involving people**

Six people of the sample each made comment, in one way or another, about involving people in selecting sermon subjects through a sermon suggestion box or being asked verbally for sermon subjects. The most direct way was to encourage interjection by a congregant within a sermon. One interviewee described it as ‘resolve those issues, and then confirm the solution from illustrations in the Bible and perhaps from...other lives [*Right*] from within the congregation’,<sup>121</sup> and another expressed it as,

[S]omeone could be asked, “Was there anything that happened this week that you felt relates to this sermon?”

*Right*

because sometimes it does doesn't it? [...] It would be lovely because I think that testimonies or witnessing, what people say really means a lot to others.<sup>122</sup>

The purpose of the interaction is to introduce specific congregant experience which others in the congregation might find helpful. Though unstated the clear implication in context was that it would relate to the subject of the sermon.

Interestingly, all three who suggested some form of direct congregational input recognised that it might be seen as problematic, but in all three interviews I added a note about their speech: [excitedly], [enthusiastically] and [amusingly said] respectively. Despite potential challenges, these people were keen on congregant contribution within sermons. Though only three spoke of this, observing their enthusiasm and their willingness to have such a dramatic style change (RQ5) gave

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<sup>121</sup> I1T 04, p.6.

<sup>122</sup> I1T 10, p.7.



it a particular significance. Additionally, direct and unanticipated contributions would undoubtedly remove a sense of predictability (RQ2).

These interviewee comments suggesting congregational involvement have been very helpful to me. What has been only hinted at here is the lingering background of a church tradition with an expectation that preaching, indeed the whole of a service, should be conducted by the minister and the congregation is simply the 'recipient'. I felt optimistic about potential for a more communal experience of preaching, though the interviewees did not exhibit any thoughts reaching as far as full collaborative preaching.<sup>123</sup> However, there seems to be good evidence at this point of at least some interest in the community experience of preaching, whilst acknowledging there are some challenges too.

### **Summary, Reflections and Potential Developments**

The first interviews sought general perspectives on the preaching within the church. They were greatly encouraging, not only to me as the main preacher but in the openness and fulsome information on which I was able to reflect after the interviews. Much of what has been shared, to my knowledge has never been discussed in the church before, and the richness of the material garnered is both encouraging and challenging. One would be perturbed if all of the responses from interviewees were positive and no potential developments were stated. I observed that people genuinely expressed both appreciation and heartfelt concerns. However, in retrospect it also became clear to me that I did not always clarify with the interviewees the exact status of a concern: was it a concern that something was missing from preaching which needed to be rectified, or was it a concern that was already being addressed but

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<sup>123</sup> For example, John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 1995).

needed to be developed? The working assumption must therefore be that whatever was stated, if already partly accomplished, is worthy of further attention and development.

This round of interviews gave a rich sense of the relevance of sermons to interviewees' lives over and above receiving information. An unforeseen issue regarding preaching in an older generation church was exposed: memory retention. This leads to questions about how much should be contained in a sermon and therefore how long it should last. It is not surprising that in line with the questionnaire results, some interviewees suggested reducing the length. As one interviewee put it, 'I felt just rather than talk about a whole passage, just focus on a thought or an idea'.<sup>124</sup> My own sense, with an inclination to narrative principles of interpretation, and the desire to develop Christian faith and maturity, slightly baulks at focusing on 'a thought', preferring more developed perspectives on the text in question. Whilst there is nothing wrong with 'a thought', there are also others who appreciate more 'meat', as described in my introduction. An acknowledged challenge is the spectrum of positions and perspectives within the congregation (RQ1). This gives legitimacy to pursuing more effective ways of preaching that connect with a broad range of people, views and experiences. If (biblical) narrative-criticism is helpful because 'the novice can work with the surface of a biblical text in creative and productive ways',<sup>125</sup> then both first-time and long-standing attenders, ought to be able to experience and perceive God irrespective of their level of faith understanding. That was tested and examined in the second interviews. As these sought to develop the research by

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<sup>124</sup> 1T 11, p.9.

<sup>125</sup> See pp.21-22, n.38.

asking interviewees to respond to a specific set of narrative-critically prepared sermons, I will first describe and reflect on my preparation of the sermons.

## **THE SERMONS FOR THE SECOND INTERVIEW**

The second phase of semi-structured interviews involved asking respondents to comment on a short sermon series that I preached on parables in Luke's Gospel using a narrative-critical approach to the text. In terms of my own preparation of and reflection on the sermons, I implemented various procedural factors to help render this part of the research credible and appropriately reflect my ministry practice.

First, I chose not to refer to my notes of previously preached sermons on the texts in Luke that I would be using for this series until after presenting these sermons. This was to facilitate reflection on my ongoing development as a preacher by comparing the old and current sermons.

Second, I chose to make the series relatively short, spanning four consecutive Sunday morning services, in order that interviewees would not think there was too much material on which to comment.

Third, I would write up my own reflections on the series before the second phase interviews. Notes about preaching the series were made each week in my PRD, and my own reflections of it were written before the interviews. This was to minimise bias and ensure that I shaped my own thoughts about the sermons independently. However, this had to be counterbalanced with the need for fairly quick second interviews after the sermons, so that respondents could offer their views whilst the series was fresh in their minds, especially after comments about memory retention!

Fourth, I planned the sermons as normally as I could in terms of time and study in my ministry context. This was to ensure they were as fair a reflection as possible on my general ministry practice, though my particular historical and academic interest in the literary interpretation of Luke's parables clearly gave the preparation a sense of having already prepared the ground. However, I concentrated on reading works with a narrative focus.<sup>126</sup> I spent my usual five to ten hours of preparation per sermon, beside general series preparation in advance of that. In my usual pattern, the sermon texts were accessible on the church website, study notes were available for personal and home-group use, and each sermon was accompanied by a PowerPoint display. I did not make reference in church services to the fact that these sermons were the subject of research interviews, so people would not consider them any different to any other sermons.

I preached a short series under the title, 'Downside-up', based on a reversal theme in the book of Luke, primarily looking at nine parables in relation to each other and their narrative setting.<sup>127</sup> I now describe the content and shape of the four sermons, particularly focusing on the first one, as the others followed the same overall style.

In a short series introduction, I quoted Luke 1:52-53 as an anchor text, which was cited or alluded to each week. Sermon 1 was based on The Samaritan in Luke 10, along with the subsequent account of Jesus at Mary and Martha's home, under the sub-title, 'Who cares?' (Each sermon commenced with a key title question.) I

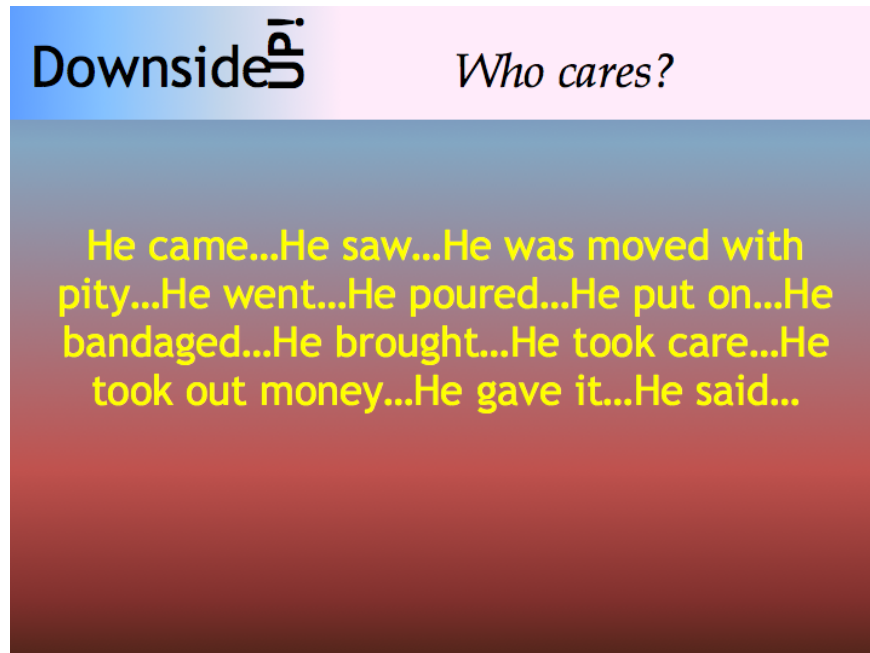
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<sup>126</sup> R. Alan Culpepper and Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX: The Gospel of Luke, The Gospel of John* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon, 1995); John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI.; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997); Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); Lauri Thurén, *Parables Unplugged: Reading the Lukan Parables in Their Rhetorical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Stephen I. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller: Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?* (London: SPCK, 2014).

<sup>127</sup> For the theme and various forms of reversal in Luke, see John O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke*, JSNTS Supp. 46 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1991).

highlighted the barrage of actions performed by the Samaritan, as shown in diagram 1.

Diagram 1: PowerPoint Screen from Sermon 1



I asked the congregation to picture themselves as a 'first generation reader' after the time of Jesus, assuming they had just received the text, and in this way I drew people into the account:

It turned out in this story that the one who was actually near, the one who came physically near, was the one who broke the barriers, the one willing to cross social boundaries. The words of Jesus ring in your ears: Go and do likewise. Go and do likewise.

Just like Mary said, 'Rulers he has brought low but the humble he has lifted up'.<sup>128</sup>

I then imagined 'you' (the first reader) being shocked yet gripped. Reading on you come to a different kind of story, the Mary and Martha account. You find that Martha

<sup>128</sup> Sermon notes (SN), '*Downside-up*' 1: *Who Cares?*, p.2. My sermon notes for 'Who Cares?' are in Appendix 1. The text is as originally used. The colour coding will be explained in Chapter 3.

cares too, but when she complains to Jesus about Mary not helping, as the first reader you probably expect that, like the Samaritan, she will be endorsed by Jesus. Yet Mary is commended. Again, there is a reversal of expectation.

The Martha account then shouts out a loud corrective: it is good to do good, but it must be balanced by sitting at the feet of Jesus. The Samaritan loved his neighbour. Mary loved her Lord. Both are needed.<sup>129</sup>

I then turned back to the context, the teacher asking about eternal life in 10:25-28 and the now sharp comment about loving the Lord...and your neighbour. The sermon concluded with three questions and an example:

What about you? Do you love the Lord with all your heart? What about your neighbour? It might only mean walking across the church, breaking the boundary of speaking to a stranger rather than sticking with a friend. Love God, and love those who are nearer than you may think.<sup>130</sup>

The reversal in the expectation that the Priest and Levite did not actively care but the Samaritan did, is familiar ground in this local church, but the narrative-critical concern I developed was to show that the Mary and Martha account helps interpret and counterbalance the parable. The ongoing account thus creates a further twist. The homiletical outcome of the sermon was caring about faith-devotion and faith-action. Two comments I received afterwards expressed interest at this juxtaposing of the texts, with each saying they had never thought of or heard this being expressed before.

The second sermon was based on Luke 15. I set the sermon in the context of the developing theme in Luke 14 especially the parable of the wedding banquet, and going back to Luke 5:30. With the complaint described in 15:1-2, I developed the

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<sup>129</sup> SN, *Who Cares?* p.3.

<sup>130</sup> SN, *Who Cares?* p.3.

theme of 'Who Celebrates?', by taking the congregation back to being the 'first reader'. Focusing on what I considered to be the overarching theme of celebration as an outcome in each parable, I spoke what was only a short eight to ten line paragraph in my notes about each of the three parables in terms of the final celebration in each. I then returned to the concept of 'you' as the first reader, surprised at the open-endedness of the third parable:

You scour your book. Is a page missing (or a bit of the scroll)? "Where's the ending?" you shout, but it is not there. Then you realise this is part of the action of the book.<sup>131</sup>

The real-life reversal was that those not expected to be eating with Jesus were doing so, whilst others simply complained rather than celebrated. I asked people where they sit in this narrative, who they identify with, and raised the open question for Christians today as to whether we are a genuinely celebrating community. I again stated the anchor text from Mary's Magnificat to endorse the theme. I received a comment the following day from a congregant expressing joy at the 'the missing page', saying 'the door is still open'.<sup>132</sup> That was not an explicit point I had made, but it presented me with clear evidence that someone had taken something new (to them) from the narrative-critical approach.

The third sermon was based on the two parables of Luke 16 and sub-titled, 'Who prepares?'. I set Luke 16 in the context of the grumbling Pharisees, and mentioned the thorny issue of the so-called 'dishonest manager'<sup>133</sup> without addressing any historical, cultural and interpretative explanations about his behaviour. I established

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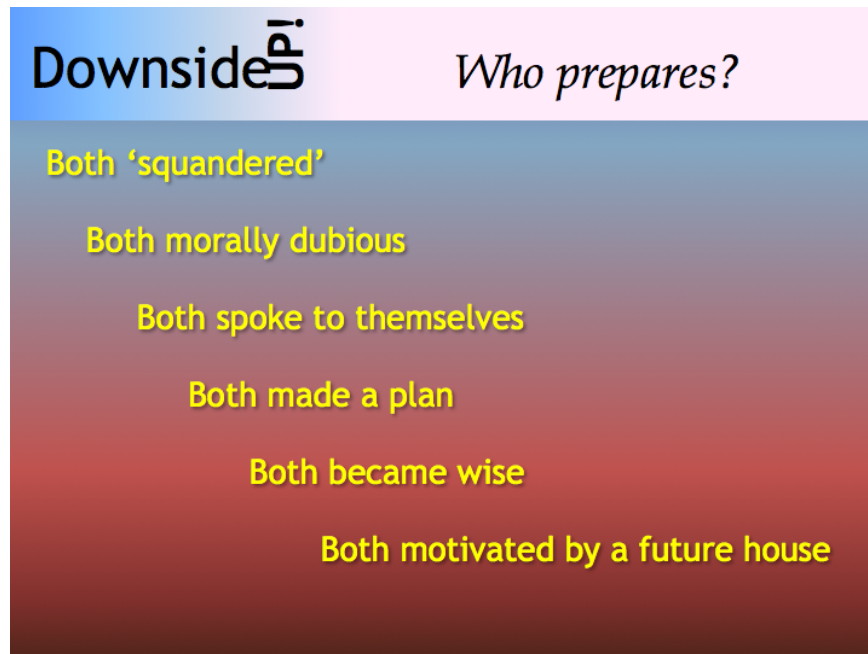
<sup>131</sup> SN, *'Downside-up', Who Celebrates?* p.3. I deliberately tried to use informal language like 'Where's' rather than 'Where is', but maintained 'it is not there' rather than 'it's not there', for emphasis.

<sup>132</sup> PRD, 23 February 2015.

<sup>133</sup> As Stephen Wright points out, this title is unhelpful as it is too static. I simply used the title 'manager'. Wright, *Storyteller*, p.127.

the narrative and literary parallels with the younger brother in Chapter 15 using the PowerPoint screen in diagram 2:

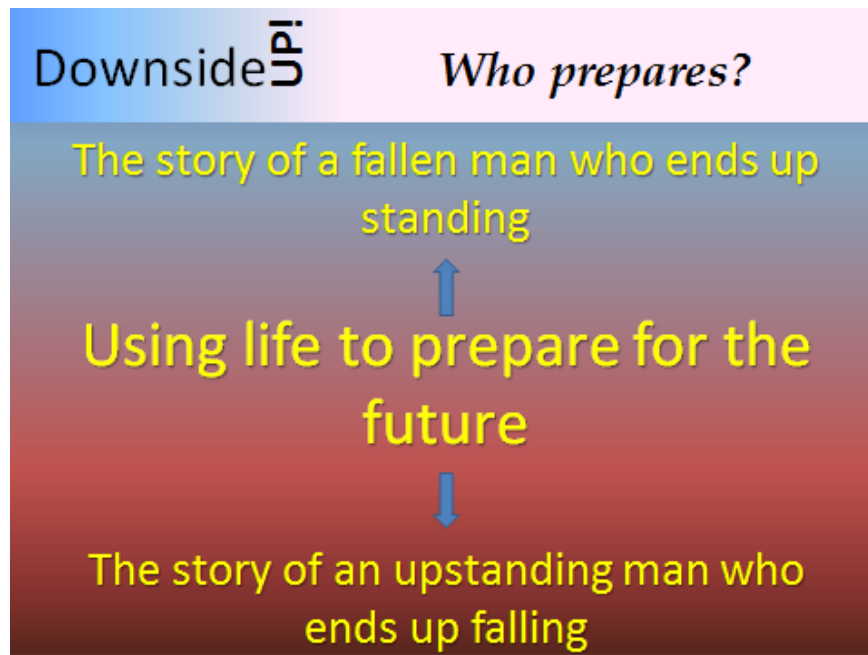
Diagram 2: PowerPoint Screen from Sermon 3



Then, omitting most of the intermediate sayings except briefly that of 'use worldly wealth...' (verse 10), I highlighted the transition in verse 14 and looked at the second parable and pointed out that the rich man did not use his resources properly (just as the manager initially did not) but failed to turn around, so in narrative-critical terms stood in contrast to the manager. Being ill-prepared by not using his resources, in the parable he experienced reversal in relation to Lazarus in their post-mortem states. A PowerPoint screen presented to the congregation, as shown in diagram 3 below, showed the narrative-critical situation. The centre section and two arrows appeared after the two opposing statements for visual effect.



Diagram 3: Final PowerPoint Screen from Sermon 3



The homiletic situation became instantly visible here too. I came to the question, ‘Who Prepares?’ asking people to reflect on whether they are among those who prepare (like the manager) or those who do not (like the rich man). There were no particular comments offered to me on this sermon.

The fourth sermon, ‘Who wins?’, looked at the two parables in Luke 18 and referred to the subsequent text with a final hint of reversal when the disciples incurred Jesus’ disapproval by attempting to turn away children. Given the elderly congregation, I commenced with a statement of hope that people had sensed the care and provision of God through their lives, whatever the circumstances had been, using this to help people enter the story of the persistent widow who forces the decision of a disinterested judge, thus securing justice. I made two observations: first, if justice can be gained from a dishonest judge, how much more will God, who is just, offer what we need? Second, the previous theme of the future (Luke 17) was picked up at the end of the first parable, along with the previous sermon theme, ‘Who prepares?’, and

that God's final day of reckoning will come, for which we must be prepared. In the meantime, God, who sees even sparrows (Luke 12:6) will look after his people. So the 'Downside-up' is that a widow victoriously out-manoeuved a judge. Similarly, in an equally unlikely 'win', the tax collector returned justified, in contrast to the 'Pharisee': the humble, not the proud man, won God's approval. To conclude the series, I drew in a recurring theme of 'home'. The humble man went home justified, the younger son went home, the dishonest manager prepared for a home, and Lazarus went to his eternal home. I cited 1 Peter 5:5-6, '...Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time' (verse 6, NIV). The twist at the end of this sermon and the series was that the disciples, people positive towards Jesus, also needed a reminder after all they had heard, that they needed to be like the infants they were *sending away* - we all need ongoing reversal to turn our downside up (Luke 18:15-17)!

My observations and reflections on preaching the series comprise the following, firstly in terms of benefits and then considering some challenges:

I thoroughly enjoyed the preparation and felt that I flourished by exploring the material in a more developed narrative-critical way, which gave me a sense of freshness towards the preaching task and personal development.

A homiletical dynamic that I enjoyed using was that of setting each congregant as a first reader. The idea of imagining yourself as a next generation person who never met Jesus but you are privileged to get a book/scroll, and that you avidly read it, yet at times find there is no filling out of a conclusion to a story, became a powerful tool. It gave a personal and dynamic connection that I sensed assisted people to engage with the text. I am mindful, however, that people have different learning styles, and

some people might prefer to enter the scene rather than the 'book', though the two are not mutually exclusive.<sup>134</sup>

I used numerous principles of narrative criticism without any sense of inconsistency in an evangelical setting: plot movement through the scenes and parables, changing settings, recurring themes, irony, chiasmus, use of information gaps and a lack of denouement. In keeping with both my desire and interviewee comments that sermons should not be 'too academic', the use of these principles informed my sermon preparation but technical terms were not used in sermons themselves. I consider that these narrative techniques were useful to the sermons, bringing freshness to the text and congregation, as evidenced by congregational faces enlightened with a smile. For instance, I said the lady who found her one lost coin threw a 'girly party' (explaining simply that the text here is written in the feminine gender) that probably cost more than the coin she found. Strictly speaking this is simply a grammatical issue, but when all the three parables of Luke 15 were considered together in the sermon, that a story with an all-female cast sits between two male-only stories, it offers a powerful witness to another group of people who can celebrate, a detail that did not seem to be missed by smiling faces.

Since preaching these sermons, it has become clear to me that using the principles of narrative-critical interpretation for preaching is likely to influence and change my homiletic style, highlighting a dynamic connection between my interpretative method and my preaching form. So, for instance, in seeking to help people enter the text rather than look at it (a principle as much linked to the New Homiletic as it is to narrative criticism), my homiletical approach has become one of flowing thoughts and movement rather than a staggered or sharply structured movement of sections,

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<sup>134</sup> I will address perspectives on different learning styles in Chapter 3.

points and mental concepts. This is illustrated, by example, in a simple but revealing manner, and in contrast to the past, as I chose not to show ‘bullet points’ on PowerPoint screens. I used screen word connections to what I was saying, perhaps a single pertinent word, or simply a picture. The significance is in the ‘connections’ rather than ‘teaching points’. This visual transition itself pictures my homiletic transition in the process of moving towards narrative-critical interpretation.

In summary, I concluded after this short series that narrative principles can be very helpful for both interpretation and preaching, bringing fresh appeal to the congregation, having heard positive comments about receiving new insights, and having observed smiling faces (RQ2). It confirmed to me that an interpretative and homiletical change was beneficial, touching upon RQ3 and RQ4, but perhaps most significantly my pleasure in preparing the series in a fresh way answered RQ6. Furthermore, I had no sense of having compromised evangelical identity and values.

However, having completed this albeit small preaching exercise, there are some challenges. There was a strange challenge for me in preaching the sermons which may have simply been a personal transitional issue, and therefore potentially other preachers may experience it in a similar position: I found that I had to be much sharper in my mind as to the progression of the sermon because of the smoother homiletical flow of the sermons rather than using clearly defined ‘points’. In the second week I noted in my diary,

I felt well-prepared with the material linked up into a coherent theme but somehow felt it was a bit difficult to preach. One point I got ahead of myself in my notes and had to slightly backtrack and maybe this gave me a slightly less helpful sense of the flow [of] my material.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> PRD, 22 February 2015. Quoted notes are cited without grammatical corrections to maintain authenticity.

It may be the case that I should consider having simpler sermon-notes in keeping with this style of sermon, perhaps having scene reminders akin to the material rather than more formal paragraphs of notes. However, given the shortness of the series I did not feel I wanted to potentially confuse the research with multiple variables of change at the same time. The two subsequent weeks did not present this problem.

Though there were undoubted benefits to preaching with this interpretative approach, it also struck me through these sermons that although a narrative-critical approach has some benefits such as the connection of personal story with the Bible story, it still bears the potential, at least for some people, to appear 'academic' (looking at formal structures and principles), for instance when I was trying to show that the account of the erstwhile dishonest manager had numerous parallels to Luke 15. This could potentially be perceived by congregants as too technical, which in turn highlights that there will always be a (lesser or greater) tension between explaining the text informationally and maintaining the involvement of the listener. The preaching task inherently needs to explain in order to involve, to open a door in order that people may enter. Sometimes the door might be heavier than other times, but the task of opening it remains. However, the need to explain the text in narrative-critical terms shows that the sermons remained (at least in part) descriptive rather than being more radically changed into narrative sermons in the way Eugene Lowry, for instance, would understand narrative preaching. This not only leads toward clarifying my definition of 'a narrative form of preaching' but also reflects a less radical, gentler transition to my preaching style, something I considered to be appropriate in the context of ABBC.

## Previous Sermons on These Texts

Having reflected on the current sermons, I turned to notes of my previous sermons on these texts, in order to perceive any changes in my own preparation and preaching. The first of my previous sermons was entitled 'The Parable of the Bad Samaritan'. Explanation of the parable comprised four bullet points about travelling that road, followed by talking about the Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan, rather than the perhaps expected 'ordinary Jew'. Bullet points illustrated six acts of kindness about the Samaritan, and then applications based on six areas of our lives led to a general summary pointing to 1 John 3:16.

The second sermon, called 'One lost, one found' (which now seems rather static and unappealing!) introduced all three parables of Luke 15 and the setting in verses 1-2, but the sermon only looked at the third parable and largely followed Kenneth Bailey's cultural perspectives.<sup>136</sup> Four bullet points were based on 'There are a number of things we can learn'. The older brother was considered under the theme of 'insiders and outsiders' and a brief comment was made about celebration.

Two previous sermons comprised what was the text of my 'Downside-up' third sermon. In the first of these, 'A rogue comes good' looked at the 'unrighteous steward' in Luke 16. After describing attempts made to justify his behaviour, I gave reasons why we might accept him as dishonest (two bullets), set the parable within Luke 16 as a whole and asked, 'What can we learn from this crook?'. I answered this with two points: The Gospel and the use of our resources (the latter having three sub-points). The second previous sermon, 'Good man proves bad' was set in the run of parables

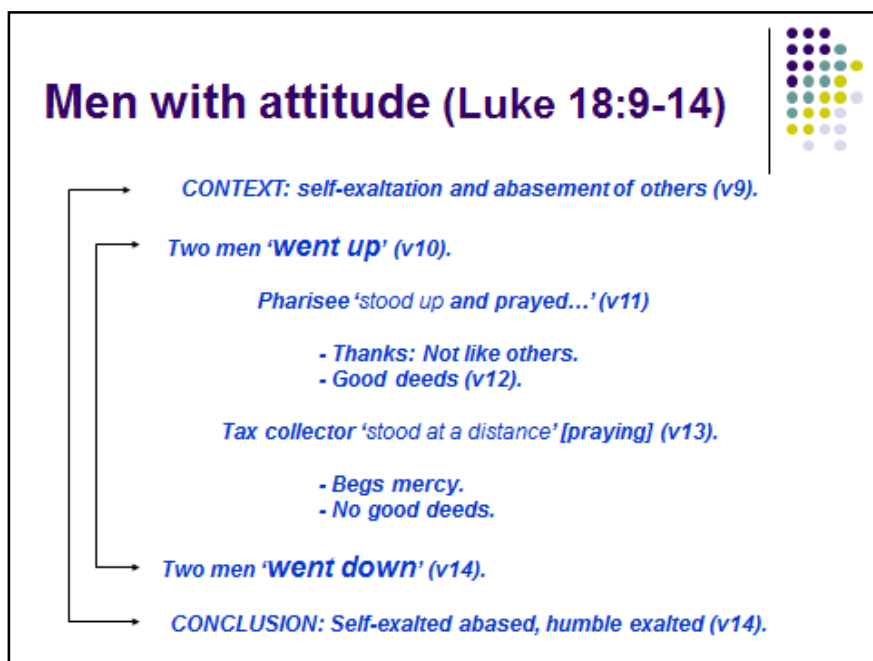
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<sup>136</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*; and, *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* Combined Edition (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1983).

here in Luke, the storyline was explained, and then, 'Where is this parable going?' was answered in the context of verses 13-14, the four subsequent sayings, then four bullets about the rich man, who stands in contrast to both Lazarus and the rogue. 'Some lessons' comprised three bullet points, a chapter conclusion and challenge was made: 'Stepping stone or stumbling block?'

Two previous sermons comprised what was my current fourth sermon. The storyline of 'A battling widow' was told, along with reference back to Chapter 17. Jesus' conclusion (18:9) was linked to 1 Peter 2:23 then five 'lessons' in bullet form were given. The second sermon, 'Men with attitude' was linked to Matthew 21:31-32. An outline of the account was made and explained, as demonstrated by the original PowerPoint screen in diagram 4:

Diagram 4: PowerPoint Screen from Previous Sermon on Luke 18



I proceeded to 'Note three main points': the genuine but futile intention of the Pharisee, the brokenness of the taxman and that, 'The way up is the way down'.

Three particular areas of observation presented themselves in comparing past and present sermons. The first and probably the most overt was that although at that time (2008), I had an interest in what I would have then called literary features of the text, I was still using a sectional, 'bullet-point' structure for sermons. My own perception was that the current sermons reached more than the mind: they asked people to enter the events, feel the surroundings, identify with characters, to sense, feel and choose, thus creating a more rounded experience from the sermons. Connected to this, re-reading the past notes highlighted how many modern illustrations I had used, bringing a realisation that the recent series had far fewer. This was not an intentional plan, and I can only conclude that because the narrative-critical approach is so naturally story- and life-based, it needs less illustrative stories. I do not conclude from this that it is inappropriate to use illustrations, simply that using narrative principles and encouraging people to enter the story integrates more directly with people's lives.

A second area of reflection relates to a liberating sense of not having to attend to every detail of concern in a text in a sermon. I previously supposed that ideally, everything in a text needed to be accounted for, and that everyone in the congregation ought to have the detail, explanations and factors in and around the text. I suspect that led, in part, to sections and bullet points that attempted to give complete detail to all the text along with historical and cultural perspectives. Focusing narrative-critically on the text brought a sense of liberation. So for example, in the parable of the manager, I stated words to the effect, 'there are various ways where people have sought to justify the manager's dealings but maybe that is not the point'; I felt no need to elaborate, because the essential feature of the narrative was what became of him in light of his impending redundancy. From the point of preparation and execution of sermons, this gave me a stronger sense of singular focus, 'clean-ness', clarity and connectedness ('Who cares?; ...celebrates?; ...prepares?;



...wins?). This, of course, does not mean there are no other themes in individual parables (for instance I chose not to develop the theme of repentance in Luke 15) but that parables in their literary setting have a narrative purpose, especially when read together, as in all but the first sermon of this series. A further outcome of preaching like this was that, perhaps strangely, by not covering every verse or sentence, I felt that I was being more faithful to the overall text in question, being more 'biblical' by seeing the narrative context, and so actually treating the Bible with greater respect and increasing my sense of adherence to a high view of scripture. These reflections impinge on RQ3, as I had a reduced sense of having to call on external information like historical perspectives.

Third, on reading my old notes it instantly came to my attention how much shorter my recent sermon notes had become. The previous notes used from five to seven double line-spaced pages each, whereas my current sermon notes (with the exception of the first which had a series introduction) were contained within three pages of double-spaced text. The previous series had six sermons on the same overall texts, compared to four in 'Downside-up'. Though I have no memory of the time length of the previous sermons, the length of the notes suggests they were longer than those in the current series, but having more information may not have been proportionately more helpful! The current series inevitably had a faster pace for the same material, which I believe was beneficial.

In summary, this section has mainly shown that I found value and personal benefit in this preaching style (RQ6). That I found this is perhaps unsurprising in that I was unlikely to explore something which I had felt at the outset would not help me flourish as a preacher, but nevertheless it has, in my mind, satisfied an important research question in a positive way.

## **THE SECOND INTERVIEW**

In preparation for the second interview, I slightly revised my original plans in two ways. First, I decided that rather than having an open choice from all congregants to offer a second phase interview irrespective of whether they had been involved in the first phase or not, I would offer the opportunity only to those who had conducted a first phase interview. Having seen people at that interview, sometimes with understandable nervousness but also growing in confidence, I decided progression from within this group would be more beneficial.

Second, only as the second interviews approached did it dawn on me that some congregants might feel that knowing people were listening to sermons in order to assist research could be interpreted as the series being used primarily for this purpose. Though nothing had been suggested to me about this, I did not want to introduce anything that distracted attention from the preaching, and along with the first reason it seemed appropriate to keep this part of the research inconspicuous, though general information previously given to the congregation stated that direct sermon feedback was part of the research. The rationale for who amongst the first group was interviewed was simply that there would be a maximum of six, to facilitate interviews soon enough after the series that they would reasonably remember their thoughts and reflections. In the case of more than six offering, as was the case, I took those who had attended all or most of the four sermons, making this clear so nobody felt they had been unfairly side-lined. Those who I accepted had attended all four, or three but had listened to the recording of the one missed. Only two people had offered a second interview that I did not complete, one who missed a week but did not hear the recording and a second who missed two weeks. In retrospect I might have been able to accept these, but alongside there being some missing elements for them, it

proved to be quite an intense time conducting and transcribing the interviews in a week, the time I had deemed to be a reasonable target.

Interviewees were again given the interview sheets before the series so they could make notes. As far as I could see they did not use these sheets during the sermons. The starter questions asked for general perceptions of the series, links, style and structure, how the sermons worked, what response they created and how more responses might have been created. It sought views on any particular strengths and weaknesses, what might be eliminated or developed, and any other concerns, comments or suggestions. In sum, it tried, without using technical language, to see how people accepted and utilised sermons preached using narrative-critical principles, along with seeking views on the homiletical changes that are dynamically linked to such a change, as argued above.

General perceptions of the series were that it was well accepted, as seen in responses like 'I enjoyed it' (four interviewees) and 'successful' (five interviewees). However, given an interview question asked, 'how successful do you think it was?', interviewees may have been simply reiterating the word choice of the question. One person described the series as 'very refreshing' and another of it creating 'quite a positive feeling'.<sup>137</sup> Comments were made about the series creating 'a captive congregation' and that it was 'done in the spirit of "we're all on this journey together", and...we're sharing the discovery of how to apply these lessons to our everyday lives'.<sup>138</sup> Four interviewees spoke positively of the series as challenging, one using the word 'challenge' seven times in the interview.<sup>139</sup> No interviewees gave an overall

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<sup>137</sup> I2T 02, p.8; I2T 01, p.8.

<sup>138</sup> I2T 02, p.15; I2T 03, p.1.

<sup>139</sup> I2T 03, 04 (seven times), 05 and 06.

negative response. These comments clearly address RQ2 positively regarding the new style.

### **Style and Structure of the Sermons**

When invited to comment on the style and structure of the sermons, interviewees responded in two predominant ways. One way looked at the interpretative style, explained by one interviewee as, 'to take a well known parable, and take it apart completely...explained in detail, then put together with an understanding in a modernised style', by examining the 'Who?, What?, Where? and When?'.<sup>140</sup> Another said the style was 'contrasting' different parables and 'highlighted...the highs and lows, the comparisons, or, and the parallels'.<sup>141</sup> A third one spoke of using 'a block of text not just an individual verse', attention to Jesus' audience, the context, the 'bigger picture' and 'what Luke was trying to do'.<sup>142</sup> The other way looked at the homiletical style. One interviewee said, 'the style and the structure was question followed by illustration and this was an analogy which was examined, leading to the answer'.<sup>143</sup> Another reflected on style in terms of congregation rather than the text, 'the style, a sort of reaching out [...] reaching out to the, to your listeners'.<sup>144</sup> The third described the style entirely in terms of the individual congregant:

[...]it's so much more...individualised, personalisable, if you know (laughing) what, what I mean. It, it can be seen so much more as a personal way of receiving the word of God.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> I2T 01, p.1 and p.2.

<sup>141</sup> I2T 02, p.1 and p.2.

<sup>142</sup> I2T 05, p.2 (all).

<sup>143</sup> I2T 03, p.4.

<sup>144</sup> I2T 06, p.2.

<sup>145</sup> I2T 04, p.15.

Commensurate with my desire not to overcomplicate language, interviewees said, 'the language isn't complicated'; 'quite easy listening'; 'easily understandable...and words and phrases were being used that were...modern'.<sup>146</sup>

All interviewees made reference to the links across the sermons. They 'worked really well together', 'each sermon followed on perfectly from the one before' and 'built on the week before and the overarching theme'.<sup>147</sup> The links not only united the sermons but brought further benefit: 'so it stayed in people's minds more I think', as you 'slowly build that picture up, rather than just come away with one sermon'.<sup>148</sup> This style therefore helps address one of the concerns of the first interviews: memory retention.

Two interviewees spoke of the usefulness of setting the context of the first generation reader and one of the openness to all of 'let's just look at this as a completely fresh story'.<sup>149</sup> This endorsed my intention to develop a preaching style that would bring a freshness and sense of entering the text rather than simply studying it.

Interestingly, one interviewee who previously preferred a short sermon length, expressed a development in thinking following the style of this series, as seen in this conversation in the interview:

[I]t didn't seem so long either. You know me, I say oh I, I said in the past I think a sermon should only last about fifteen minutes

Yes

because of people's concentration spans, now I think they probably were longer than that.

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<sup>146</sup> I2T 04, p.11; I2T 02, p.8; I2T 01, p.8.

<sup>147</sup> I2T 01, p.1; I2T 02, p.8; I2T 05, p.1.

<sup>148</sup> I2T 02, p.8 and p.9.

<sup>149</sup> I2T 03, p.14.

*They, they probably tended to average out nearer half an hour rather than fifteen minutes.*

Yes, well it didn't seem like it, you see, because there was more of a mix in it.

[...] I think the stories carry really well[.]<sup>150</sup>

This comment chimes well with my own perceptions about sermon length and style compared to my previous sermons on these texts.

### **Sermon Effects**

One interviewee said this series 'impacted straight...to you, right, and it was straight to the point, [...] straight...to the heart'.<sup>151</sup> Another said that it 'made you think more really, when you go home'.<sup>152</sup> Other effects included creating an awareness of personal responsibility: 'what appealed to me was that it involves the listener. We have to do some work [Yes] and I think that's always a good thing', and 'it isn't just a fact-finding exercise because it involves...a response not just from your, your mind but how you're going to put that into practice'.<sup>153</sup> Other specific and individual forms of response included wanting to know more, changing priorities, re-examination of deep-rooted Christian principles, making the right decisions and willingness to take actions to see them through, looking for what God is doing and being part of it, and being more open and shaped by God. Cumulatively this is an interesting outcome compared to the questionnaire, where changed behaviour as the outcome of hearing sermons was valued very low, suggesting there is a higher sense of life-engagement in this sermon style (RQ4).

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<sup>150</sup> I2T 02, p.13.

<sup>151</sup> I2T 01, p.6.

<sup>152</sup> I2T 02, p.6.

<sup>153</sup> I2T 03, p.8; I2T 05, p.3.

What, then, might be the reasons for these particular responses to this specific series? In addition to aforementioned comments that the sermons seemed to hold the attention and offer freshness and therefore increase the potential for engagement, elements of the inherent nature of parables and the genre of story as a form of communication were named. Particular features of the parables were contrasting characters, good and bad, and with whom one may identify. In particular, the use of shock endings or open endings in parables were clearly engaging:

A lot of the parables were open ended. You don't know what happened, like the older son, and it, you can almost put yourself into those positions of thinking, "If I was there what would I have done?", and I found that quite helpful. [...] You can work it out for yourself, and...that's quite, quite good to be able to put yourself in there and ask God to be able to speak to you through that.<sup>154</sup>

On a general level, interviewees valued the power of story:

[Y]ou were you know, able to reach out and draw in, to absorb the, the fellowship into the story, and...and they actually...were able to...to me, I mean I felt like part of, I was, you know, I was walking the same road as you.

A story is always so much easier to remember [...] Story is something that we are able to look at together, you know,

*Right*

the minister and the congregation can examine this together.<sup>155</sup>

One interviewee saw the value of setting parables within the bigger story of (in this case) Luke's Gospel:

[Q]uite often, when you have teaching on a parable it is the parable completely in isolation. You may possibly get...the immediate...situation before hand, but not in an overarching way that's been presented in, in this series, so you miss out quite a lot of the rich themes and understanding that you get from, you know, a, a far more overarching look at the whole of Luke.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> I2T 05, p.3.

<sup>155</sup> I2T 01, pp.10-11; I2T 03 p.11 & p.14.

<sup>156</sup> I2T 05 p.4.

Cumulatively, the use of stories set in narrative, along with a change of homiletical style by using a flowing style rather than bullet points, was considered to be useful. It was more engaging and memorable, and yet addressed more than the mind. The comments resonated with some of my personal sermon reflections above.<sup>157</sup>

A further benefit to this style of sermon, albeit that 'story' is not mentioned here, was its usefulness for a wide range of people, hence addressing a concern raised in the first interviews and relating to RQ1:

[I]t was made very easy. I mean, a non-Christian could have gone into church, a non-Christian or someone who doesn't know anything about the Bible at all, and they would have been able to see what you was getting at from those sermons.<sup>158</sup>

Further evidence of a perceived effectiveness of this style of preaching was seen in various comparisons with previous styles of preaching experienced by interviewees:

Most of the sermons I can sort of think of were more like Bible studies, following verse after verse after verse, which can be...a bit tedious

*Right...so that's, that's how you perceived the previous ones, how would you say this sermon series compared to that then, what you were used to in the past...experience?*

The strength in this style is...it gives a broader view, overview, and is easier to apply to one's personal life situation.

I think people especially in this day and age, find it very difficult, their concentration levels, to just to sit down and...hear a sermon a bit on the old type, the old idea years ago where you

Yes

passed God's message on but it's literally, you know, a lot of Bible readings, and perhaps, you know, what happened in the Bible but there's not much...instruction on, on what you can do.

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<sup>157</sup> See p.79.

<sup>158</sup> I2T 02, p8.



I've heard sermons in the past years and different churches and...I think failing, quite a lot of them, I've just gone to sleep because it hasn't reached me,

*Right*

but these sermons I think did reach, certainly reached me and I'm pretty sure they reached everybody else.<sup>159</sup>

Unfortunately, I did not think to ask this last interviewee on what basis they thought they reached others, but the personal comment remains valid.

One interviewee spoke with animation about someone who in preaching a sermon,

read...the text from the Bible

*mmm* (neutral)

and just spoke about that text...and that was it. I mean I could do that myself, I could read the text. [...] [He] literally just re-stated it

*Yes*

but in his own words.<sup>160</sup>

These interviewees clearly found 'Downside-up' more relevant, applicable, and 'more emotionally gripping'.<sup>161</sup> This preaching approach is clearly more broad ranging than preaching that speaks *about* a text, or is a 'message', as cited above. It therefore points towards a positive answer to RQ4 from these interviewees: preaching that moves toward whole-life flourishing rather than simply addresses the mind.

A number of thoughts were raised about further developing the benefits, particularly in terms of affirming the 'joint enterprise'<sup>162</sup> and creating a greater response, including asking questions to the congregation for verbal response or seeking life illustrations from individuals during the sermon. Though these thoughts do not relate exclusively to narrative-critical interpretation or homiletical changes that flow from it (one might

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<sup>159</sup> I2T 04, p.9; I2T 02, p.11; I2T 06, p.5.

<sup>160</sup> I2T 01, p.9.

<sup>161</sup> I2T 02, p.11.

<sup>162</sup> I2T 03, p.14.

assume a greater likelihood that direct congregational interaction would arise from an interactive teaching model of preaching), they build on the comments made in the first interviews about involving the congregation.<sup>163</sup>

In summary, this group were optimistic about the effects of these sermons. Their observations and reflections, though expressed informally rather than through the formal language and principles of narrative criticism, showed a clear perceived benefit of a narrative approach to the interpretation and consequent preaching style of these Gospel texts. Two comments from people who each had heard sermons for many decades highlight their sense of enthusiasm and potential:

I have enjoyed and learned from this research project. Before, preaching was preaching, but now I understand why the sermons are like a breath of fresh air.

This style, I believe, is good and right.

*Right. Got you.*

I mean I'd be quite happy to go to church every morning for the rest of my life if I could listen to this sort of, similar sort of...you know, don't know...just got something there with it. You're eager to get in and listen.<sup>164</sup>

Interviewees revealed what I consider is an extraordinary openness and enthusiasm to development and change (RQ5). Along with my surprise at the perceived difference of these sermons, I never expected that ABBC congregants would actively seek spontaneous personal stories or verbal interaction within sermons. However, change of this kind has its challenges too, and the interviewees were not unaware of them.

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<sup>163</sup> See pp.63-64.

<sup>164</sup> I2T 04, p.15; I2T 06, p.8.

## Weaknesses and Concerns

Whilst people were supportive of information gaps that produced positive tension and intrigue, contrary to my own reflections, they seemed less positive about a lack of historical detail that they considered to be important (RQ3). This surfaced almost entirely in the third sermon, and the parable of the so called 'dishonest manager'. As noted above, I was content to accept in sermon terms that he misbehaved in the parable. I consciously chose to resist using any arguments or interpretations about how and with what authority (or not) he specifically restored the situation. I concentrated on his preparation for the future, in contrast to the rich man in the subsequent parable. Three of the six interviewees pointed out this parable as the one they found most difficult and confusing, and seemed to sense one way or another, a lack of resolution about what was happening in this parable. They did not seem to relate to my narrative-critical approach in comparing it to the next one.

Interestingly, this endorsed my suspicion in my personal reflections that in this sermon I tried to use too many narrative-critical elements and made it too technical.

I would consider this sermon to have the strongest narrative style yet. I enjoyed preaching it, though it also struck me that in its own way it could be seen as quite 'academic' in that it described numerous connections in the text, as above [stated earlier in entry] but also scene alternation, characterisation (of the Pharisees as lovers of money, reference to OT law...) and I therefore wonder whether feedback might not be as optimistic as I may hope about a simpler and more appropriate style of preaching, but only the feedback will tell! Of course, that may not be prohibitive but could be part of the challenge of transition.<sup>165</sup>

One interviewee said 'there were so many aspects in the sermon, I found that quite difficult to grapple with', suggesting that it is not necessary or beneficial to include

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<sup>165</sup> PRD, 01 March, 2015.

every element.<sup>166</sup>

On reflection, these concerns raise two responses in my mind. Firstly, regarding historical detail, this is a good example of why I have posited that a transition to the principles of narrative interpretation is not a paradigm shift. Although I remained within the parameters of what I believed the text contained, that clearly introduced dissatisfaction. By preferring the larger textual perspective, comparison with the following parable, I failed to satisfy interest in an intriguing detail in a particular parable. I do not deny that a sermon could have been usefully preached on the one parable, and in a different way; rather I am seeking to ascertain whether preaching in a narrative-critical way will bring a new, and hopefully refreshing insight to people who may have previously utilised a different frame of reference. What these comments suggest is that despite many benefits, there may be tension points in trying to see the text from a different angle, and these should not be underestimated. This leads on to my second reflection.

Inevitably, the sense of someone's own past experience, expectations and approach to sermons affects how they respond to a sermon and any change in sermon style. I noticed that some interviewee perceptions of what the parables were saying were not what I was explicitly saying, or in some cases not even what I was implicitly saying. Take, for instance, the interviewee who said the thread of the series was, 'the faithfulness of God and in all four sermons, God worked in the background but nobody was actually aware of it'.<sup>167</sup> My explicit focus, certainly from the sermon titles, was not on God but the people and happenings as the thread: Who Cares? The Samaritan cares. Who wins? The tax collector. The interviewee later stated,

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<sup>166</sup> I2T 04, p.5.

<sup>167</sup> I2T 04, p.3.

[I]t's God that made sure that the man that got caught by the robbers wasn't going to be neglected [...] It was the same with the lost son. It was God that had his eye on him[.]<sup>168</sup>

It seems that, God was directly imported into the meaning of the parables in a way I had not described; theology was brought from previous generalised assumptions, where I was seeking to use the literary and narrative elements of the text to develop thinking about God, rather than an instantaneous merger.

For another interviewee, a different concern related to mind-set:

Trying to imagine yourself in a, in situations, I find personally quite difficult. It's not something that I've been used to be asking to do so it's quite a, I'm not saying it's wrong, but it's something you have to discipline yourself in to think about because it's, it isn't generally something I've had to do when listening to a sermon [...] but putting yourself in the story, which I think is really helpful, doesn't come easily.

*Would you say that's because of the type of preaching you've been used to?*

Yes.<sup>169</sup>

So, for all the acknowledged benefits of a changing approach to interpretation and my own homiletical developments, there are clearly some concerns and challenges. Being aware of these, and seeking to alleviate or at least acknowledge them will be important to any transition. However, there was a fundamental transitional concern among the second phase interviewees. Directly relating to RQ5, five of the six interviewees raised concern that not all this older generation congregation might endorse a different style of preaching. For example:

It is a style, perhaps which will not appeal, as I said, to maybe very elderly traditional people who prefer something more in the lines of Victorian era preaching. Maybe I'm being judgemental. I'm sorry about that.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> I2T 04, p.4.

<sup>169</sup> I2T 05, pp.6-7.

<sup>170</sup> I2T 06, p.7. It should not be assumed that this comment was made by a younger congregant!

However, none of the comments reflected a firm sense of the impossibility of acceptance, but a sense of uncertainty:

I think that when, stroke if, [when/if] the congregation finds blessing in this type of preaching and gets used to it...the congregation can grow together.<sup>171</sup>

These comments make an important contribution to the research. Firstly, by raising concerns they show honesty, and thereby help to validate research authenticity. Secondly, given that all the interviewees are themselves largely optimistic about the style of the sermons, it raises the possibility that the research has not directly exposed the concerns of less optimistic congregants, who perhaps felt unable or unwilling to communicate their thoughts. However, in my opinion, opportunity was warmly given for anyone to freely and honestly respond, along with the safeguard and assurance that I would interview only as a faithful listener rather than by interaction.

One other important observation is that at no point in the interviews, or in known church conversation, was there any suggestion that this form of preaching is inconsistent with evangelical belief. So whatever disappointments, preferences or challenges it may engender, it does not appear inappropriate within this evangelical church.

A final comment here relates to my own professional development. One interviewee commented with gentleness and care about my own presentation in this series, highlighting a perceived weakness yet set in the context of strength:

I thought you...brought these...sermons to life [...] I thought you were more open, I thought you were...you had more feeling...because I thought you were enjoying the sermons you were giving[.]

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<sup>171</sup> I2T 04, p.13.

But,

[Y]ou are a very good teacher in my view, a **very** good teacher of the word, and you are able to impart that to people, but sometimes, and I do...feel you, well I, I, and I don't mean this with any disrespect whatsoever, but let yourself down I think sometimes because you, you, you're trying to...please all the people all of the time, when you don't need to please all the people, because those people can't be pleased[.]

So,

[B]e yourself, be the person you are[.]<sup>172</sup>

This valuable contribution reflects my own observation of pleasure in preparing and preaching the series, but also what has been seen generally through the congregational research, that there is a wide variety of people, with varying needs and preferences. However, it goes further in suggesting that there is more I can do in terms of deeply-held opinions regarding change by some people. Yet, in two words, the personal transition suggested is simple: 'Be yourself'. So whilst benefits were seen, they are not without challenges, and this constructive criticism shows that I must be involved in the challenge and the change.

## **THE FOCUS GROUP**

The primary purpose of having a focus group within the research plan was to take the findings of the research in the interviews to the stage of examining them with regard to potential implementation of change in the interpretative and homiletical preaching style of the church. However, as a focus group, there was to be no formal decision-making. This was not simply because the research community does not generally consider this to be the purpose of such a group,<sup>173</sup> but in order for members

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<sup>172</sup> I2T 01, p.7, p.14, p.11 and p.12.

<sup>173</sup> Lia Litosseliti, *Using Focus Groups in Research* (London: Continuum, 2003), p.9.

of the group to offer their own contribution without concern that it may differ from those of others and require negotiation in order to make a corporate decision.

I decided on inviting only the church leadership team because, as leaders, they are key 'gatekeepers',<sup>174</sup> and are more generally aware of church life, potential tensions and handling any decision making at the appropriate time if required. However, as the research progressed there was an even greater reason to invite the leaders to the group. I had wrongly assumed when planning the research that church leaders would be the most likely of all congregants to be involved in the interviews, simply based on their high level of commitment to church life. However, only one of the five offered a first interview, and subsequently progressed to the second. To not have some leadership contribution would seem to have missed a good opportunity for input. It is not possible to know, of course, whether leaders completed an anonymous questionnaire, nor appropriate to ask why most did not offer an interview. Nevertheless, all five accepted the invitation to join the group. We met after they had each received and reflected on a general information sheet including two main questions, along with a list of brief summaries of the various responses to the questionnaire and interviews.<sup>175</sup> Given this, and that it was a pre-existing team, O'Reilly would perhaps describe this as an ethnographic planned discussion rather than a focus group.<sup>176</sup>

A second purpose of the group was that it would be a way of building on what the interviews had established, in the same way that I had planned the second interview

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<sup>174</sup> O'Reilly, pp.132-137 (p.132). Although as 'gatekeepers' the leaders were formally my employers, they neither funded my research nor had official authority over it, although as a courtesy I sought their agreement to conduct the research in the church. I therefore was able to report my findings and seek their views freely and without acting within a formal power structure.

<sup>175</sup> The handout is on the SECD.

<sup>176</sup> O'Reilly, p.80.



to build on the thinking of those who had conducted the first interview. This worked in an unexpected but useful way: being introduced to the findings meant that the leaders could largely comment and reflect on other people's responses, and therefore there was an element of research triangulation in seeing how the views of the leadership compared with the views of others in the church. As with the interviews, the focus group meeting was recorded, transcribed, analysed into themes by spreadsheet, and a process document was written. As with the interviews, this group brought encouragements and challenges to the research.

In the focus group, each member was given time to make their own comments without interruption and then there was an interactive group discussion. The two starter questions asked them to reflect and comment on the findings of the research so far, and about their perceptions regarding the benefits and challenges of any potential change in the preaching ministry. As there were quite a lot of summary statements (twelve general statements based on the questionnaire and first interview, along with nine positive responses and eleven challenges to the second round interviews on 'Downside-up'), I explained in advance that it would not be realistic for everyone to comment on every summary statement but members were free to comment on whatever they thought to be most significant. I considered that the very act of individual selection could be of research interest, observing what members had prioritised in relation to each other. I tried to make the summary statements as neutral as possible in order not to bias members towards a particular interpretation. My analysis of the group falls naturally into the two areas of the starter questions: responses to the research so far, and then areas of potential change.

## Responses to the Previous Research

The first question referred to the summaries of the previous research and asked, 'How much do we each support or have concern about them?'. Responses contained some positive elements. One particular note of agreement was made in relation to the 'Downside-up' series:

[T]he comments that are made [...] with regard to the 'Downside-up' series are, are, are encouraging...and I can understand why people would be saying that, and...you know, I'd go, I'd go along with it and agree with it..<sup>177</sup>

However, maybe because I had given the group the opportunity to respond to any of the responses so far, it took more of a direction towards general preaching concerns rather than my particular interest around narrative-critically prepared sermons. There was a perception that the evidence fitted expectations:

*Was there anything in this list that shocked you or surprised you?*  
No, not so much shocked me[.]

[I]t is very predictable what has come out [...] things I would have expected to see there...and...much of it, of course, with regard to preaching...is a matter of personal preference[.]<sup>178</sup>

So the focus group recognised a level of credibility in the research summary and conclusions from the interviews.

The general make-up of the congregation, and particularly reaching people with various levels of faith was one of two areas that all group members commented on,

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<sup>177</sup> Focus Group Transcript (FGT) Member (M)4, p.9.

<sup>178</sup> FGT M1, p.1 and M4, p.7.

but with differing perspectives on the balance between having Christians and those who have not as yet become Christians in the congregation:

[T]he one thing I found...hit me a bit, is how some people found it difficult to imagine how we cope with different people and differing faith in, differing types, not types of faith but different levels of faith, but this is how family would be and in some ways if you have a good preacher the preaching would somehow go to, to all the different stages of, of people's faiths[.]

[Y]ou could be preaching a Gospel message here, somebody could be on a Sunday, and in fact the whole congregation as far as anybody knows, this side of glory, are saved people...so I wasn't really too sure what was behind all that. You know, you're not getting any non-Christians here.<sup>179</sup>

As I listened, it became clear to me that some of the focus group members had interpreted the interviewee comments in a way that I believed the interviewees had not meant them. Maybe, in retrospect, albeit in my concern to not make things overcomplicated, I had made the summaries too brief: the group was largely reiterating what interviewees had said about not separating general from evangelistic preaching.

I was, however, surprised by the sentiment that ABBC was said to have no 'non-Christians' attending. When transcribing from the recording I wrote a note in the transcript at this point:

Actually on the Sunday morning prior to this FG, I knew of one invited casual visitor, one who has been coming for a while as a visitor and that week had asked for baptism, (along with another person), and two first time visitors, but I did not know whether they were Christians or not.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> FGT M3, pp.4-5; M4, p.7; M2, p.3.

<sup>180</sup> FGT p.3. The significance of those asking for baptism is that this church holds to a doctrine of believer's baptism on confession of faith, as stated in the *Constitution*.

However, notwithstanding the need for more detail and clarifications, the group offered perspectives and further thinking on the previous congregational research. There was a strong sense as there was in the interviews that the preaching ought to connect with both Christians and non-Christians. However, only the member who had been an interviewee picked up on the potential of the specific sermons to reach both groups:

[O]ne of the useful things we did have in the 'Downside-up' series, cos it was a series and it was...very good at that, that they did actually....follow on, and it was good that they did follow on, and it became a story that could be understood by Christians and non-Christians alike.<sup>181</sup>

Another member said:

[M]y view on that is that, you've got to preach to your congregation. Now, that can be very difficult because I would strongly be of the opinion that if, if you are aware as a preacher that there are some non-Christians present, then I would hope that in virtually every sermon there is some reference to the Gospel and how, you know, you can become a Christian[.]<sup>182</sup>

A further one asked a question, and then answered it affirmatively, '[C]ould a well trained preacher actually change, and say something totally different, because the congregation is different?'.<sup>183</sup> So the group endorsed the need to preach to Christians and non-Christians but it did not really address *how* to preach to your varied congregation. Group members did not appear to acknowledge the second interviewee perceptions that the narrative-critical sermons had a greater impact across the range of attenders. I would have expected them to pick up on it but cannot be sure why they failed to do so. One possible but speculative reason is that the comment above that the church is not getting any 'non-Christians' was made slightly

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<sup>181</sup> FGT M1, p.1.

<sup>182</sup> FGT M5, pp.10-11.

<sup>183</sup> FGT M3, p.11.

irritatedly, and whilst I did not comment on this in view of my faithful listener approach, I wonder if it cast a slight heaviness over the discussion and stifled comment.

This connection for non-Christians also raises an important question about what it means to 'preach the Gospel'. My long developed perception is that in ABBC it means to directly address the Easter message of the redemptive work of Jesus, and to seek response to it. Yet there is a gulf between someone walking through the door of the church for the first time (possibly lacking informational knowledge) and accepting and committing to the Gospel. A narrative approach to biblical interpretation that encourages hearers to be drawn into story might create a different and richer homiletic style of preaching whereby Christians and non-Christians can be addressed together. That the 'Downside-up' series was said to be good for Christians and non-Christians alike may be a useful clue to a way forward since everyone can engage with story, and also point towards another level of narrative which gives a richer perspective on what the Gospel is: God's full story that climaxed at Easter.

When, in later chapters, I widen the narrative perspective and look at the whole of the Bible as God's story, it will become evident that everyone is part of it, is somewhere in the story. That offers a mandate to address the whole congregation. At this point, however, I am satisfied that concern for sermons to reach the range of attenders has been clearly stated throughout the research process, and that a story/narrative approach has at least equal and probably more potential to reach those familiar with faith and those not yet so (RQ1).

Whilst, as stated, most of the group discussion was around general preaching, there was some comment about the length of a sermon series:

The one thing I was surprised didn't come out anywhere, was, and this is from sort of comments I've heard in the, you know, around the church, is the length of a sermon series...and I was surprised that that wasn't actually sort of mentioned, mentioned anywhere

*Right*

...cos, I think the majority of people have no problem with a sermon series but I have had, heard comments in the past about the length of some sermon series, and again it would be down to people's sort of preference.<sup>184</sup>

One other member agreed but others did not comment, and as nobody in the interviews raised this, I emailed the whole group afterwards asking them to comment on what would be perceived as the top number of sermons in a series. One response came back, saying,

I consider about 6 seems a reasonable number for a series with a maximum of 8, as any series spread over more than a couple of months is likely to come in for criticism from some quarters about being too long. If a particular series was especially well received and a sequel was thought desirable, then there would be nothing to have a subsequent series after a reasonable gap (minimum probably 6 months).<sup>185</sup>

Later a second replied:

I wonder if 6 is helpful but if there are more needed to have a break for 2-3 week and have a special service may be Family Service or a one off sermon and then go back to the series again.<sup>186</sup>

Having only six to eight sermons in a series is, to me, quite a significant factor in terms of sermons based on the principles of narrative interpretation. Clearly one could set a maximum within this suggested limitation, as I did with 'Downside-up', and I noted positively above the sense of faster pace,<sup>187</sup> but I could foresee some challenges too. Were one to narrative-critically preach through any of the Gospels, it

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<sup>184</sup> FGT M5, p.10.

<sup>185</sup> My email sent 27th April 2015; response by email on 28th April 2015.

<sup>186</sup> Email response, 11th May 2015 (written as sent).

<sup>187</sup> See p.80.

would necessarily be very limited. A further complication may be caused in terms of one suggested gap before a sequel (perhaps, say by doing a block of a Gospel then returning to it), namely that interviewees said memory issues were a significant concern, casting doubt on whether a six-month interlude would maintain any sense of continuity. Clearly a shorter, week or two break is manageable, and this in fact occurs due to special events and through visiting speakers having their own one-off sermon theme.

I would add another concern. Church attendance during my years of ministry has moved from weekly attendance (short of illness or holidays) to more casual and irregular attendance, and in a shorter series the proportion of missed sermons could therefore be greater. However, shorter series and more of them potentially alleviates the boredom factor (RQ2).

In line with the benefit of congregational involvement as stated in the first interview, the focus group also saw the potential of congregational involvement. One member stated that 'conversational intervention, interaction, I think is quite important actually in preaching these days'.<sup>188</sup> However, one member also recognised that it could cause personal anxiety for some people. This highlights the need that if involvement is introduced, it must be entirely optional, but nevertheless such congregational involvement was seen as entirely appropriate and possible.

A final observation here that connects directly with my research interests was the expressed surprise that so little attention was given by questionnaire respondents to behavioural change as the outcome of preaching. Again, previous evidence

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<sup>188</sup> FGT M4, p.17.

suggested that narrative-critical approach along with the ensuing developed homiletic has potential to address these things.

This section of the focus group gave a sense of the credibility of the interviews as 'predictable' and has added clarity to RQ1 regarding addressing the range of people. It has raised a new concern regarding the length of sermon series as part of RQ3. My reflection on the group's comments have hinted at wider usefulness in and beyond narrative-critical preaching (RQ4).

### **Addressing Change**

The second question asked, 'What do we each think of the future implications for preaching in ABBC?', asking for thoughts on implementing change and any perceived potential tension in doing so. Again the members took turns to respond and all made some direct comments about change. The first mentioned the relatively recent church vision statement for spiritual development in the church, and that during their time at the church (less than ten years) they had seen change to the buildings (a major renovation and redevelopment had occurred). These perspectives were the backdrop for saying, presumably now applied to preaching:

[S]ome people will take change a lot quicker than others, and I, I do see that. And I certainly wouldn't push to the point whereby it made people feel uncomfortable and it made people feel not wanted, [...] [W]e don't want to make them feel as though they're not part of...our church life.<sup>189</sup>

This was a balance of a sense of needing to move on yet recognising that some people may find it difficult. The key factor in all member comments was addressing it slowly. Someone said, 'I think in some ways people probably would eventually accept

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<sup>189</sup> FGT M1, p.20.



a change of preaching if it's done slowly' and another, 'I think the important thing on change is as much as possible, you do it on a gradual basis'.<sup>190</sup> One member suggested broader and frequent change in the service (not just sermon) order, because '[if] you changed it around on a regular basis in any case, people aren't going to think of a change so much'.<sup>191</sup>

Clearly there was no sense of wanting to rush into sudden change that would destabilise individuals or the church as a whole. This is pastorally appropriate and also endorsed my own thinking regarding a modest change to preaching. In relation to the title of this thesis, 'An Examination of an Ongoing Process of Transition...' it strongly suggests that the process must be slow and gradual, thus offering a criterion for RQ5. However, one comment suggested that the process was well underway:

I don't think we should underestimate how much change we've already seen...because we, you know, we are a country mile away from...you know, where we were...ten years ago.

*Right.*

How long have you been here? [Playful tone]

*Ten years* (Laughing)

Absolutely. I thought I was right [Playful tone], that's what I meant.<sup>192</sup>

This member went on to affirm the value of basics like using PowerPoint, having missed it when visiting another church that did not do so. This illustrates why the thesis title was so stated, reflecting my own sermon interests in introducing a different style to preaching, even before my formal research into this subject. It may go some way to addressing, at least in part, why the focus group did not seem to have more comment about the findings of the interviewees on 'Downside-up'. Perhaps they

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<sup>190</sup> FGT M3, p.5 and M5 p.20.

<sup>191</sup> FGT M2, p.21.

<sup>192</sup> FGT M5, p.19.

themselves have been subject to the gradual and continual change that is relatively slow but significant, and yet when reflecting they are more aware of it.

A final comment on future change suggests a perspective of either being in the latter stage of transition or a subtle desire not to move on, although knowing the individual, resistance to change seems extremely unlikely: 'I can't really see any drastic need to change the preaching...in its content, in its style...really in any major way'.<sup>193</sup>

Personally, I would never want to consider a process of sermon change to ever reach a sense of completion. Learning styles, longings, needs and culture are all in constant change, so preaching will constantly need to change. Given that any preacher must necessarily exegete the congregation,<sup>194</sup> to reach the focus group aspiration to 'preach to your congregation', as that congregation changes, so too must the preaching. Therefore, there will be an ongoing need to re-examine the style of preaching since the congregation and culture are in constant change.

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<sup>193</sup> FGT M4, p.15.

<sup>194</sup> For a thorough and thoughtful study of this, see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

## Chapter 3. Understanding the Congregation: The Interpretive Task

### INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, I listened to the congregational voices about preaching: Osmer's 'descriptive-empirical task'. Using various methods, I sought to understand people's perceptions and understanding of preaching in ABBC. I offered personal reflections and some first-level interpretations of the descriptive-empirical data. I now turn to a second level of interpretation of the data, Osmer's 'Interpretive Task', using what he calls sagely wisdom to move from 'What is going on?' to 'Why is this going on?': 'Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring'.<sup>195</sup> Osmer recognises the need for intellectual growth in leadership to be linked with spiritual life,<sup>196</sup> but also the need to retain a sense of the difference between theory and the reality it maps.<sup>197</sup> Three required qualities that constitute sagely wisdom are thoughtfulness, theoretical interpretation and wise judgement.<sup>198</sup> This sagely wisdom is important and useful but Osmer recognises that it is not flawless: 'A framework is offered that allows interpretive guides to learn from the knowledge of the arts and sciences, while

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<sup>195</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.4.

<sup>196</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.81.

<sup>197</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.80.

<sup>198</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, pp.82-86.

reminding them that such knowledge is fallible and grounded in a particular perspective'.<sup>199</sup>

Using the imagery of orienteering, Osmer advocates the use of 'theoretical maps' for the research terrain, which 'offer a picture of the lay of the land [...] and possible paths that might be taken'.<sup>200</sup> The range of my research findings suggests that various 'maps' will be required, since distilling the material from the congregational research in Chapter 2 revealed a number of themes. Most obvious is that the congregation largely comprises an older generation, which presents its own preaching benefits and challenges. The research showed that people want life help besides informational teaching about the text, and this impacts on the way people understand the relationship between the preacher and the congregation. That preaching should relate to people of faith and 'folk that just walk in the door'<sup>201</sup> came into focus, and the research elicited various comment on learning together and visual learning (especially with PowerPoint).

In this chapter I will seek to understand what the congregation is saying by relating the congregational research to literature and external research in these areas. I will also include in this chapter occasional new references to my congregational research, ones which whilst not part of the main themes highlighted in Chapter 2, are useful individual interviewee comments that connect with areas highlighted in the external literature.

There is one other important point concerning mapping here. Osmer speaks of using the theories of the arts and sciences: disciplines other than theology. I shall adapt

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<sup>199</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.100.

<sup>200</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.80.

<sup>201</sup> See pp.57-58, n.109.

Osmer's framework here by calling upon research from within theology alongside other disciplines, for two important reasons. First, the homiletical literature I shall use is itself multi-disciplinary in respect to its own use of other disciplines. For example, Tisdale incorporates observation of church architecture in seeking to develop an understanding of local theology and congregational exegesis; literature on preaching to older people incorporates physical and biological aspects of ageing; Lowry's concept of narrative preaching and my narrative-critical interpretation in Chapter 1 are derived from secular understandings of the use of narrative. So the use of homiletical literature naturally links to wider disciplines, and is a rich source for interpreting my data. Second, given my sense of the preaching insularity within ABBC, as elucidated in Chapter 1, the homiletical literature itself is an external and previously unviewed map of this situation. It would therefore seem unwise to neglect such a useful external guide in the process, and so a mixture of appropriate disciplines offering perspectives on the local situation will be used.

## **AN OLDER GENERATION CHURCH IN AN OLD BUILDING**

A clear finding from the congregational research was that ABBC is what I have called an older generation church. I now need to address more fully what 'older generation' means.

Ageing is both numerical, the sum of years one has lived, and cultural, a process of moving through eras of life within a community framework. Walter Burghardt offers a seasonal approach to literal age in writing of *Seasons That Laugh or Weep: life from Spring to Winter*.<sup>202</sup> Using previous research which he acknowledges was weakened because it was based only on men, Burghardt reflects on the journey of life. He

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<sup>202</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, *Seasons That Laugh or Weep: Musings on the Human Journey* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

connects eras with ages (childhood and adolescence, 0-17; early adulthood, 22-40; middle adulthood, 45-60; late adulthood, 65 onward), with a five year transition between each stage.<sup>203</sup> My task is first to understand the significant issues for the 'older generation' in ABBC. These brief observations highlight the need for a perspective on an older generation church which is not so much about numerical age but the perceived cultural era of life. Recognising, valuing and addressing this era, however one defines the life cycle, will aid effective preaching. In my congregation an obvious social marker point is retirement, whatever age that should be. By example, I know that of the eleven first round interviewees, nine were post-retirement, as were five of the six second round interviewees. Yet there is nominally a thirty-year age difference among them, so there is significant divergence within this group. My task will be to link the church demographic to the potential preaching style under investigation. How well narrative-critical interpretation contributes to preaching cannot be discerned until more clarity is gained about what it means to be part of this post-retirement generation in this church.

What then, does the literature about being in the older generation contribute, both generally and specifically regarding the spiritual care of older generation Christians? Joseph Jeter and Ronald Allen, in writing of preaching to different generations (albeit in an American context) would place my post-retirement congregants among the 'Silent Generation' (1925-1942) and the early 'Boomers' (1943-1960).<sup>204</sup> The Silents lived through war, established the culture after it, lived through developing technology, but as they reached their prime the world changed and they were set aside (hence 'silent') as the next generation took the lead. From a church perspective,

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<sup>203</sup> Burghardt, p.5.

<sup>204</sup> Joseph R. Jeter and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2002) pp.28-40.

Their peak years have been given to presiding over continuously shrinking churches.

These developments alert the preacher to a motif that is important to Silents, especially as they move into the era nearing retirement. They yearn to believe that their lives and works have mattered to the human community and to God.<sup>205</sup>

Some ABBC congregants have lived through the Second World War and the post-war golden era of the church. They often speak of bygone larger church attendances and show a mixture of bewilderment yet acceptance of new technology in the church. It is important that preaching affirms the older generation even whilst it is adapted in order to reach other generations.

The Boomers saw a golden era and became visionaries, and want church to be a place of excellence, making use of people rather than institutions. They want freedom of conscience to recognise 'multiple ways whereby people can relate to Christian faith' (hence more democracy and less authority), but, 'To attract the attention of Boomers, preachers need not abandon biblical preaching, but carry the hermeneutical movement forward so that the sermon offers the practical help that Boomers seek'.<sup>206</sup> Though this reflection is based on broad social and historical parameters of a large people group and therefore is a generalisation, it resonates with two particular elements of the congregational research. First, my research highlighted a desire for corporate endeavour, working together in the sermon yet where (in some interviewees' views) the listener makes their own conclusions, thus making sermons less 'authoritative'. Second, interviewees spoke of wanting sermons

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<sup>205</sup> Jeter and Allen, p.29. Those 'nearing retirement' at the time of writing will now be in retirement.

<sup>206</sup> Jeter and Allen, p.37 (both).

to give practical life instruction, by using words like *relate*, *apply* and *relevance*.<sup>207</sup> My research stands well with these external findings.

Moving more specifically to understanding the circumstances and perceptions of individual older generation churchgoers, having worked in Christian care home provision, Timothy Farabaugh has identified six types of loss in older people: material (objects and familiar surroundings), relationship, intra-psychic (self-image), functional (bodily decay), role and systemic (family and work amongst others).<sup>208</sup> Henri Nouwen and Walter Gaffney describe this era in concerning terms: 'rejection by society, rejection by friends, and rejection by our inner self'.<sup>209</sup> This is a potentially overwhelming lot placed upon older people. To glean something of how older generation individuals relate to preaching, William Carl asked such people what they consider is appropriate preaching for their circumstances. In summary: they were more interested in considering the impact of life's 'ills' on their grandchildren than hearing about ageing; do not tell them what not to do; help them deal with the fact they are not what they used to be; tell them what life eternal is like.<sup>210</sup> He suggests that homiletically they should be 'mainstreamed in both the church and the community as much as is possible' rather than creating a 'geriatric homiletic', and states that 'they have generally read and studied the scriptures more than younger generations and in turn expect more biblical references and theological substance from those who preach than do most who are younger'.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> See p.57.

<sup>208</sup> Timothy M. Farabaugh, *Ministry to and with the Elderly* (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse, 2005), pp.101-102.

<sup>209</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen and Walter J Gaffney, *Aging* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1974), p.29.

<sup>210</sup> William J. Carl, 'The Graying Temple is Here and Now' in *Graying Gracefully: Preaching to Older Adults*, ed. by William J. Carl (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 1-18 (p.3).

<sup>211</sup> Carl, p.4 and p.9.



These findings have various connections with my research. Farabaugh's conclusions allow numerous avenues of homiletic attention, but clearly connect with my research in terms of memory and systemic (family) loss. Numerous interviewee comments were made about mental attention and retention, in the form of the length of individual sermons and remembering them afterwards, and the focus group highlighted a concern about the length of a sermon series. Farabaugh asserts, however, that brain neuron loss is often overstated as an ageing issue and that normal brain ageing results in some loss of complex reaction time and response speed, 'but no major losses in the ability to learn, remember, or perform routine mental tasks'.<sup>212</sup> Development biologist Lewis Wolpert, states that 'while our mental abilities undoubtedly decline with age - we become forgetful and slower - our acquired knowledge, fortunately, seems to remain intact'.<sup>213</sup> Pertinent to my investigation, he states, 'As the length and complexity of sentences increases, older adults have more difficulty understanding and recalling them', yet

Older adults are better at comprehension of questions, and detection of absurdities. They are able to give attention to quite complex tasks, including events requiring focused attention, and also when a task requires divided attention. But if things become very complex, they may do less well than the young. There is some evidence that discourse skills improve with age, and the elderly are capable of complex narratives.<sup>214</sup>

These are useful encouragements to older congregants, and highly important for those preaching to such people, suggesting that a narrative-critical approach to preaching to older generation people could be particularly helpful. There are further benefits. Firstly, as Calvin Miller states, story not only keeps people's attention but 'it

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<sup>212</sup> Farabaugh, p.47.

<sup>213</sup> Lewis Wolpert, *You're Looking Very Well: The Surprising Nature of Getting Old* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p.4.

<sup>214</sup> Wolpert, p.48.

is easier to remember once the sermon is over'.<sup>215</sup> Secondly, David Heywood usefully nuances what is meant by remembering in a way that fits particularly well with a narrative rather than an informational form of preaching. 'Preaching for remembering' is not so much about people being able to recount a sermon, but,

The measure of what is remembered is the way a person's mental models have changed as a result of what has been heard: the way she thinks and feels about a situation and responds to it the next time it is encountered.<sup>216</sup>

Narrative-critical preaching, may therefore directly help with the acknowledged memory concerns of interviewees by both offering more memorable (story based) sermons and nuancing remembering towards action rather than recall.

Regarding systemic loss, I know that of the eleven interviewees, four are widowed and two never married (a surprisingly low number which does not seem representative of the wider church). One widowed interviewee commented on the value of discussing sermon responses over coffee time after the services, but found others less responsive. This person returns to an empty home after church and possibly feels they have no-one there with whom to reflect on sermons.

Carl's findings make for interesting coordination with mine. Though my interviewees never mentioned 'grandchildren', there was a clear focus on this-world significance, and upcoming generations were mentioned. One interviewee spoke regarding preaching to young people seven times in one interview. Although preaching to young people is not the same as preaching to older people about grandchildren, the root concern is similar. The sentiment about not being told what to do connects with responses to my research about letting people come to their own conclusions.

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<sup>215</sup> Miller, ch. 7 paragraph 8 loc. 2292.

<sup>216</sup> David Heywood, *Transforming Preaching: The Sermon as a Channel for God's Word* (London: SPCK, 2013), p43.

Preaching about 'eternity' was not raised in my interviews (though this may have been implicit in the repeated focus on 'Gospel' preaching in an evangelical context), nor did helping older people deal with not being what they used to be. In terms of mainstreaming the older generation, this is largely the reverse in ABBC: the older generation is the mainstream of the church. This focus, however, is a good reminder that in preaching to a largely older generation congregation, not everything has to be focused on things which seem to be pertinent to the older generation. Older congregants do not need an incessant reminder that they are older congregants!

Regarding biblical references and theological substance, knowledge of my local situation suggests agreement with the literature suggesting the Bible is well read and studied, yet there are also those who have come to faith later in life, so may not be as informed as others. Certainly, people in ABBC want more in a sermon than biblical information, or repetition of texts that they could read for themselves.<sup>217</sup>

Despite the many challenges of being an older generation congregant, it should not be forgotten that there are benefits too. In his reflections on 'winter' and on his own Jesuit background Burghardt 'prize[s]' some colleagues who 'grew old gracefully', and speaks of old-age as 'a time of prayer, a time of charity, and time for courage'.<sup>218</sup> Nouwen and Gaffney aptly picture a benefit of old age in this way: 'We look at the last self-portrait of Rembrandt and discover a depth that was not there before'.<sup>219</sup> The older generation church is rich with experience that can *contribute* to the preaching ministry and offers the preacher the opportunity to affirm this generation's faith in this world and help it to see hope for future generations, set within the eternal hope. This links well with the desire in my local setting for interaction in sermons. The older

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<sup>217</sup> See p.88, n.160.

<sup>218</sup> Burghardt, p.108 (all three).

<sup>219</sup> Nouwen and Gaffney, p.59.

generation can contribute precisely because they have a lifetime of experience to contribute. To lose that would be a waste.

There is one final matter in this section that connects with my concern to address preaching to an older generation church, and develops understanding of this local congregation: the ageing building itself. The church building has existed since 1866. As Tisdale points out, even architecture and visual arts can contribute to exequeting a congregation.<sup>220</sup> The buildings were built in the style of an Anglican Church: crafted stone, leaded windows and even, unusually for a Baptist Church, a short steeple. There are two transepts creating a T-shaped worship space where a large stone pulpit sits at the very centre of the head of the T.<sup>221</sup> Above the high pulpit are four columns creating three panels. On these panels sat a gold leaf picture, thought to have the text of either Moses with the Ten Commandments or The Lord's Prayer written on them. The uncertainty, according to local knowledge, is because some decades ago a minister had them covered over because he considered them a distraction to congregants listening to and focusing on him as the preacher, and therefore they can no longer be seen.

The leaded windows in the main worship area are made of plain but opaque leaded glass, with some edging in plain yellow panels, and there are no picture sections. All other rooms, however, have clear leaded glass. One high window, above the three panel picture above the pulpit has been blocked out, as people could apparently look out at the sky and it was said to have been considered a distraction, therefore it too was covered.<sup>222</sup> There are no overt religious symbols in the church at all, other than the pulpit. Formerly the church was bedecked with pews from front to rear entrance

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<sup>220</sup> Tisdale, pp.71-72.

<sup>221</sup> See Appendix 2 for photographs.

<sup>222</sup> These details were conveyed to me in general conversation prior to using my PRD.

doors along with a balcony but with no other spaces. The rear entrance had offset doors so there was no direct visibility into the church until complete access had been made. A local archive suggests (in my judgement rather generously) that there was ample seating for seven hundred people.<sup>223</sup>

The architectural evidence suggests that, with a large pulpit, this church places a high value on preaching. Removing the one significant picture in the building, along with a high window, suggests an ethos of a non-pictorial worship space and creates a sense that coming to worship was a distinct separation from the outside world, endorsed by obscured visibility from the outside-in and inside-out with opaque window glass. In my interpretation, this architectural theology suggests that preaching was abstract rather than pictorial or symbolic, and separated from ordinary life. This would endorse my archival findings in Chapter 2 tending towards abstract, sectional and point-based preaching with seemingly little focus on life application. The size of the building, along with memories of a larger attendances, might add to the sense of the failure of a generation now sitting amongst so few people by comparison.

I have established the demographic and cultural framework for preaching in ABBC, defined and observed the era, circumstances, particular needs and benefits of most attendees in this church. By noting architectural observations, I have also offered a description, to use James Hopewell's words, of 'symbols and signals' of the church, which leads to his definition of a local church congregation:

*A congregation is a group that possesses a special name and recognized members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practiced*

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<sup>223</sup> North Somerset Studies Library, Cabinet 1, 'ABBC' file.

*worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story.*<sup>224</sup>

That older people are capable of understanding complex narratives shows potential for new flourishing (RQ4), and therefore a willingness to accept a changing preaching style (RQ5), which some second round interviewees warmly endorsed. With these perspectives on the older generation congregation in ABBC, I explore how this congregation's perceptions of preaching correlate with external data regarding preaching.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PREACHER AND THE CONGREGATION**

All interviewees spoke in some way of the relationship between the preacher and the congregation: teacher/learner (or pupil), navigator/pilot, messenger/receiver, interpreter/student, leader/follower, teacher as friend/listener, comforter/comforted, shepherd/flock, mentor/attenders, and the preacher as a mountain guide. Other comments referred to the value of the preacher identifying with the congregant, and an appreciation of 'joint enterprise' in sermons was indicated.<sup>225</sup> A further theme was the use of sermon dialogue, testimonies or interjections from the congregation. However, this would need to be done in an orderly way: as I fed back my perceived understanding of one interviewee's comments about this, saying, *'It's the preacher [yes (from interviewee)] to say, would anybody like to offer?'*, the response was, *'It's [= It has] got to come from you' (speaking to me as a preacher).*<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> James F. Hopewell, ed. by Barbara G. Wheeler, *Congregation. Stories and Structures* (London: SCM, 1988), p.5 and pp.12-13, his italics.

<sup>225</sup> See p.88, n.162.

<sup>226</sup> I1T 01, p.11.

In this section I will examine two overlapping areas in relation to the research data as set alongside external theory: the person of the preacher and that of the listener, and then bridging the gap between them.

### **The Person of the Preacher and the Listener**

Achim Härtner and Holger Eschmann speak of the sermon as communication of the Gospel, a communicative event.<sup>227</sup> The congregational research suggested a view of preaching as more than simply communication (for example by being a friend or comforter) but certainly not less than that, as implied by suggested models such as teacher/learner. Using communication skills theory and the Latin root meaning of communication as ‘to declare, to talk (to someone), to confer’, and that communication is a process of giving and receiving, they explore this in terms of the preacher and the hearer.<sup>228</sup> Their definition of preaching as including conferring fits well with my local setting and interviewee responses about congregational involvement. They utilise the basis of the cybernetic communication model of a sender, a channel and a receiver, adapted by Karl-Wilhelm Dahm to describe the preacher, sermon and hearers. Each of these have variables, so for instance the preacher is ‘a human being who is exposed to many influences’.<sup>229</sup> They utilise Friedemann Schulz von Thun’s “message square”, four aspects comprising content, self-disclosure, relationship and appeal from the sender and to the receiver, which offers a fuller understanding of the complexity of communication, and enables people to ‘clarify and resolve issues in many contexts’.<sup>230</sup> From the receiver’s standpoint, the four perspectives of the sender are decoded and evaluated as ‘How am I to

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<sup>227</sup> Achim Härtner and Holger Eschmann, *Learning to Preach Today: A Guide for Communicators and Listeners* (Sheffield: Cliff College, 2004) pp.161-198.

<sup>228</sup> Härtner and Eschmann, p.161.

<sup>229</sup> Härtner and Eschmann, pp.167-171 (p.169).

<sup>230</sup> Härtner and Eschmann, pp.171-177 (p.171).

understand the subject matter?’ (from the content); ‘What kind of person is s/he?’ (from their self-disclosure); ‘How is s/he talking to me?’ (from their relationship); ‘What am I supposed to do, think, feel in response to his/her message?’ (from their appeal).<sup>231</sup> Given that each “‘four-eared receiver’” can ‘choose freely which of the ears they want to open or close’, the outcome is that communication is an interplay between the sender and receiver.<sup>232</sup>

A communicative model such as this highlights that the act of preaching, like all other forms of communication, has an inevitable degree of unpredictability. I will consider the sender/receiver issues in terms of the ‘gap’ between preacher and listener in due course, but here I observe some implications for my own research. First, variations in responses to preaching make more sense when the various ears are recognised. It reduces the surprise when listeners hear things that I as a preacher did not think I had said! Multi-eared listening also shows that misunderstandings occur for reasons other than importing a theological background.

Second, communication theory reveals a multifaceted dynamic of ‘the four-eared listener’ responding to what I might call by parallel and for emphasis, a ‘four-tongued speaker’. This external mapping highlights the importance of what I communicate regarding content, self-disclosure, relationship and appeal: how many of the ‘four tongues’ am I using? Härtner and Eschmann propose a simple and practical colour coding of sermon manuscripts to determine to what degree the four aspects of communication are emphasised. Following that comes their question: ‘How are the four aspects weighted and how can this weighting be theologically justified (in the

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<sup>231</sup> Härtner and Eschmann, p.175.

<sup>232</sup> Härtner and Eschmann, p.175.



light of the relevant biblical text)?'.<sup>233</sup> I applied the model to my preaching notes from 'Downside-up' as a test-case,<sup>234</sup> trying to keep whole sentences in one colour but occasionally needing to have two colours in a sentence. In 'Who Cares?', for instance, there were seventy-eight sentences, of which forty-two contained blue (sermon information content), two sentences were yellow (the congregation learns something about me), seven were red (revealing something of how I view the relationship between myself and the congregation) and thirty-two were green (appealing in some way to the hearers). So this sermon was largely informational with large amounts of appeal, having some recognition of the two-way relationship but little self-revelation. The full breakdown of all four sermons is shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Breakdown of 'Downside-up' Series

<b>Breakdown of sermon contents following Härtner and Eschmanns' coding</b>					
<b>Sermon</b>	<b>Sentences</b>	<b>Blue</b>	<b>Yellow</b>	<b>Red</b>	<b>Green</b>
<b>Who Cares?</b>	78	42	2	7	32
<b>Who Celebrates?</b>	93	72	0	14	13
<b>Who Prepares?</b>	80	65	0	6	15
<b>Who Wins?</b>	80	62	0	6	15

There are various aspects of critique that suggest that this is a general rather than a highly specialist tool. It does not have a strong definition of 'sermon information': what kind of information? For instance, I am personally aware that in this series I have moved from more propositional information to 'story' information. This tool does not allow for homiletical dynamics, for example where something of 'me' could be

<sup>233</sup> Härtner and Eschmann, p.182.

<sup>234</sup> Appendix 1 shows the colour coding on my first sermon.

gleaned from body language or intonation. Furthermore, the almost total absence of the congregation learning about 'me' may well have been due to my approach in this series to the congregation imagining themselves as a first generation reader, so I predominantly spoke of 'you' as that reader, minimising 'me' between them and the text/event. As a regular preacher in the church, I am fully aware that people know and see 'me' copiously, and that to show myself repeatedly in sermons may have the counter-effect of negatively distancing people from the preaching.

This leads to a further observation that the results are not only inevitably interpreted, as is always the case with anyone's conclusions from any given data, but there is no clear or assumed interpretative structure as to what good proportions should be. Nevertheless, I found the results very useful in what they offered, a clear sense of the sermons' proportions, as interpreted through this framework, as largely informational and appealing to the congregation in the sense defined. The tool is useful in what it offers but falls short of some important considerations. Probably the most significant both generally and in response to my research is its lack of detail in what is nominally stated in the system but largely unused: feedback. Essentially the tool examines one-way communication in the sermon. It recognises miscommunication but does not deal with either the potential polyvalency of words or two-way communication. I now turn to those concerns.

### **The Gap Between the Preacher and the Listener**

Roger Van Harn utilises and extends the basic communication model with reference to Romans 10:13-17 in a way that centralises hearing rather than preaching:

Within this, he states that ‘if hearing doesn’t happen, the order collapses’.<sup>236</sup> More specifically, however, hearing is not the concern but, as Mark Powell states, ‘people hear our words correctly but take them in ways we do not intend’.<sup>237</sup> Just as there are gaps in a story, as I detailed in Chapter 1, so there is ‘a gap between pulpit and pew’.<sup>238</sup> In either case a gap allows for polyvalence, ‘the capacity - or, perhaps, the *inevitable tendency* - for texts to mean different things to different people’.<sup>239</sup> Powell is clear: ‘We want our sermons to be texts that lend themselves to multiple interpretation, but we don’t want them to be texts that can just mean anything to anybody’.<sup>240</sup> This is in line with general literary criticism that allows for ‘polyvalence within parameters’ and attentiveness to different factors within readers (and consequently sermon listeners) that account for responses that ‘resist or defy what the text seems to invite’.<sup>241</sup> The reason for different responses is social location, ‘the complex of factors that can be used to distinguish groups of readers from other readers who differ from them in some respect’.<sup>242</sup> In preaching terms, these perspectives were clearly recognised by one interviewee:

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<sup>235</sup> Roger E. Van Harn, *Preacher, Can You Hear Us Listening?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2005), p.2, his italics.

<sup>236</sup> Van Harn, p.11.

<sup>237</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p.2.

<sup>238</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.25.

<sup>239</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.3, his italics.

<sup>240</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.8.

<sup>241</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.7 (both).

<sup>242</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.11. He goes on to say that ‘[t]racing the ways in which social location affects the interpretation of stories gets complicated’ and ‘there is no sure way of knowing which factor will prove to be most influential at any time’ (p.12). This caveat is one amongst others where he rightly exercises caution regarding his ‘experiments’ (ix-x). Others include ‘exceptions to the generalities’ (of a particular case or circumstance, p.8) and the potential proclivity towards equating what a text means ‘to me’ being problematic because of naivety, narcissism, or a preference for sentiment over substance (107). So, whilst his findings are useful, he considers them tentative.

[Y]ou've got the communicator who's doing the sermon, and their background and their...their sort of context, to which they come to things, but then you've also got the listener being communicated to, so often you're not sure whether what is communicated from the speaker is very closely related to what's received by the people being communicated to because we all have such diverse backgrounds and experiences[.]<sup>243</sup>

Powell has experimented and compiled data concerning how people hear Gospel texts differently in differing cultures. Firstly, he compared understandings of Americans and St Petersburg Russians in relation to the famine in the parable of the prodigal in Luke 15. He noticed a clear difference, highlighting that a 'Western' preacher in an 'Eastern congregation' for instance, would create a gap between pulpit and pew and therefore, 'Your assumptions about what seemed to be self-evident might not jibe with assumptions that seemed equally self-evident to your audience'.<sup>244</sup> Secondly he compared Americans with Tanzanians in how they each relate to characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 (finding they polarised to those walking or the victim respectively). Furthermore, clergy responded to Gospel texts differently compared to laity when asked of the account regarding eating and hand washing in Mark 7:1-8, "What does this story mean to you?".<sup>245</sup> Forty of fifty clergy empathised with Jesus in the account, yet all the laity empathised with someone other than Jesus. This highlights empathy choices, where he concluded that clergy tend towards idealistic empathy linked to Jesus but laity towards realistic empathy with other characters.<sup>246</sup> He suggests 'casting the scriptures' (as in casting a play), explicitly, if necessary, showing empathy with specific and different characters, allowing multiple responses.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> 1T 07, p.3

<sup>244</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.25.

<sup>245</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.38.

<sup>246</sup> Eight bullet points summarise some points to remember as preachers. Powell, *Hear*, pp.59-60.

<sup>247</sup> Powell, *Hear*, pp.60-64, (p.60).

Finally, Powell examined clergy and laity responses to the matter of what is meant by 'meaning' (as in 'what does this mean to you?'). He inadvertently realised in asking that question that people saw it differently, and drew on hermeneutics, epistemology and philosophy to use two concepts of meaning: as message or as effect. He experimented using the preaching of John the Baptist in Luke 3:3-17 with the question, 'What does this story mean?' ('to you' was omitted). Of the results from fifty clergy and fifty laity, twenty-six clergy referred to Luke but no laity did, and twenty clergy made self-reference ('to me') but all fifty laity still made self-reference. He concluded that for clergy, the two words 'to you' made a significant difference. With it added (regarding Mark 7) forty-six clergy made self-reference, but when omitted (regarding Luke 3) this decreased to twenty. Yet author-reference in the same terms increased from one to twenty-six. Laity self-reference moved up from forty-eight in Mark to fifty in Luke, little change, and author-reference was zero in both.<sup>248</sup> Powell's conclusions are clear:

[Laity] simply assume that the question of what a story means implies reflection on what it means to people who read it in the present day. Clergy, by contrast, tend to assume that the question of what a story means implies reflection on what it meant to its author. This is not to say that clergy are not interested in current meaning for contemporary audiences; obviously, they are. The point, I think, is that clergy prefer a two-stage process: first, identify what the author meant to communicate, and then extrapolate meaning for the present that is compatible with the author's intent. The laity, in this study, tended to skip the first step.<sup>249</sup>

Consequently, he offers six suggestions to bridge the gap between pulpit and pew: recognise that laity want to be affected; realise message-orientated sermons fail to connect with primary laity concerns; craft sermons geared to specific effects; allow

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<sup>248</sup> See his summary chart: Powell, *Hear*, p.91.

<sup>249</sup> Powell, *Hear*, p.93.

the story to work; become familiar with reader-oriented hermeneutic exegetical methods; prioritise performance.<sup>250</sup>

Powell's work is a useful interpretative tool for my own research. I offer three observations. First, the interviewee who interpreted the younger son in my Luke 15 sermon as continually being looked after by God was an example of controlled polyvalence: hearing what I had said through a personal filter, yet without creating a message that was 'anything'. The concept of polyvalence therefore gives explanation, confidence and perspective on the speaker/hearer dynamic, allowing me to understand and accept what happened without necessarily needing to clarify what I was saying.

Second, I considered that my own approach of asking the congregants to identify with particular characters connects well with Powell's research. It geared the sermons to help congregants to connect emotionally with the characters, moving beyond an informational sermon. This was displayed by the comment of an interviewee regarding my sermon, *Who Wins?*: 'whilst we'd all like to think we're perhaps not like the Pharisee, again, you know, I think there are times (laughs) when we may be'.<sup>251</sup> This shows clear engagement rather than simply receiving information about the text.

Third, and perhaps the most challenging for me, was how Powell's research highlighted the gap between preacher ('clergy') and hearer ('laity') identification. On reading Powell I realised that I fit exactly into his conclusion and instinctively identified with Jesus in these sermons, and Luke as the author. Despite offering the suggestion that people identify with 'a character', I believe I tend to assume that they will primarily identify with Jesus and the author. Powell's findings that laity tend to look for meaning

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<sup>250</sup> Powell, *Hear*, pp.97-105.

<sup>251</sup> I2T 02, p.6.

in the present day is a sharp ‘eye-opener’ that congregants are perhaps less interested than I may think they are in authorial or textual meaning. Powell’s findings echo words spoken to me as reflected at the start of this thesis, ‘We prefer your sermons to tell us what the Bible means for our lives’.<sup>252</sup>

In summary here, Powell offers a useful framework for understanding and developing sharpness in my preaching, particularly adding important perspectives on reader-oriented exegesis. His conclusion that clergy tend to find meaning in a sermon’s *message* but laity in terms of its *effect*,<sup>253</sup> is an important warning regarding a potentially unhelpful gap in my preaching. Nevertheless, this simultaneously encourages me since the desire of the laity recognised in his work was confirmed in my research, in that my congregants wanted preaching to affect their lives. I want to preach sermons that relate to hearers’ whole lives rather than simply attempt to communicate information, which as I have shown through the established research and my own, is an impossible challenge for me alone as ‘the speaker’.

Thus far I have examined the gap between preacher and hearer, and looked at some ways of closing it. I found in my research an unexpected but useful response from interviewees towards congregational involvement in sermons such as interjections or spontaneous testimonies of life experiences. This was, in effect, a research response from interviewees agreeing with the premise of a gap that could be closed by bringing the preacher’s words into direct connection with congregants’ lives. As such it was like finding a ‘golden nugget’ in my research that connected with established research.

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<sup>252</sup> See p.6, n.4.

<sup>253</sup> As summarised in Powell, *Hear*, p.97.

I referred briefly in Chapter 1 to John McClure's concept of a 'roundtable pulpit' where a group discusses and plans sermons in order to make them more communally established rather than the preacher's individual work.<sup>254</sup> Lucy Rose has extended this concept in *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*.<sup>255</sup> Though her concept is different to my interviewee suggestions, it nevertheless introduces some wider aspects regarding a dynamic of group involvement in preaching. Rose offers an overview of preaching methods, in order to establish what she felt she could not previously articulate, 'a coherent theory of preaching'.<sup>256</sup> In establishing her coherent theory, her work more naturally fits Osmer's 'normative task' which I will attend to in Chapter 4, but her work offers some interesting perspectives on interpreting my research. Rose critiques the developing stages or 'voices' of preaching in terms of purpose and content: classical, kerygmatic, transformational and conversational preaching. Conversational preaching is her preference: 'I propose that one form of preaching aims to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the people of God are fostered and refocused week after week'.<sup>257</sup> The gathering of the community as the core of her proposal has a dramatic effect on the gap and also on the purpose of a sermon:

For us the gap shifts. The preacher and the congregation stand together as explorers, while a text, meaning, or mystery lies on the other side or confronts us as Other. Thus situated, we as preachers have no message, gospel or experience for the congregation to receive. In the pulpit we are not senders, and in the pew we are not receivers.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> See p.64, n.123.

<sup>255</sup> Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

<sup>256</sup> Rose, p.1.

<sup>257</sup> Rose, p.93.

<sup>258</sup> Rose, p.90.



Rose's work offers useful perspectives on my research interests. The ongoing transition I examine in this thesis has clearly progressed from what Rose calls classic and kerygmatic stages seen in the background of the church context and my own training, into what she calls the transformational stage. She describes the primary transformational purpose as 'to facilitate an experience, an event, a meeting, or a happening for the worshipers', and that 'Preaching's goal is to facilitate a sermonic event that changes the worshiper's values, worldviews, or reality'.<sup>259</sup> I would not, however, say with Rose that kerygmatic communication is 'missing or de-emphasized',<sup>260</sup> or even that the desire for transformation is new in the preaching of my church tradition, but simply that it has been under-represented. Second, her theory reduces the gap between preacher and congregation, so that at least *in theory* they stand together, which helps me make sense of interviewees' comments in my research about working together in a sermon. However, I doubt that standing together as she suggests removes a gap between sender and receivers during the delivery of a sermon. This leads to further departures from my findings.

First, her understanding of conversational sermons is not the same as what my research showed to be interactive sermons, where people might interject with a thought or experience. Rose rejects "dialogue sermons" or "interactive sermons"; for her the preacher reflects 'ongoing conversations' between preacher and congregants.<sup>261</sup> I conclude that the interaction suggested in my research is more radical and spontaneous than Rose's method. Furthermore, interjection during a sermon maintains first-person 'live' communication rather than second-person representation by the preacher. Second, Rose's theory raises the issue of authority

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<sup>259</sup> Rose, p.60.

<sup>260</sup> Rose, p.60.

<sup>261</sup> Rose, p.96. Heywood looks at interaction more akin to my research. See Heywood, pp.134-149.

in preaching. She reduces the preacher to an equal colleague, 'not the one-in-the-know', who is there to acknowledge the variety rather than offering a final or single answer.<sup>262</sup> As one interviewee put it, however,

I can read the Bible and I can surmise what it might be, but I need a person like your good self, to actually bring...a sermon, like this series that we've had here, that actually opens my eyes if you like.<sup>263</sup>

This is clearly more than 'acknowledging variety', and implies a preaching distance, though it does not need to imply a 'final or single answer'. Regarding Rose's imagery of being explorers together, the comment made by one of my interviewees both connects with but stands against this, namely the imagery of the preacher being a mountain guide.<sup>264</sup> A guide is a fellow explorer, but needs to be one 'in-the-know', who has particular experience and local knowledge not simply in order to stand and converse with a potentially lost explorer (without a gap), but to offer guidance and lead the lost to safety. I therefore conclude that my research findings show similarities to her approach, but also highlight some clear differences.

I have in this section so far examined various considerations around reducing the gap between preacher and listeners. My divergence with Rose's suggested removal of the preacher to the listeners' side of the gap leads me to a final twist regarding the gap, namely its potential usefulness. In the established research there are arguments for keeping a gap. Fred Craddock advocates maintaining some distance, seeing the preacher addressing what is synonymously an 'audience' and a 'congregation'.<sup>265</sup> Listeners are addressed at a distance as the 'audience', hence utilising the gap, but

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<sup>262</sup> Rose, p.96.

<sup>263</sup> I2T 01, p.5.

<sup>264</sup> See p.61, n.115.

<sup>265</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp.84-98 (p.86 and p.90).

as the 'congregation' they are addressed more closely, thus reducing the gap. The purpose of audience distance is 'to understand and accept the listeners in and of themselves, apart from their relationship to the minister'.<sup>266</sup> He also advocates a distance between text and listener, where 'For the message, distance preserves its objectivity as history, its continuity as tradition, and its integrity as a word that has existence prior to and apart from me as a listener'.<sup>267</sup> The concept of positive distance has been taken up more recently by Michael Brothers, who argues that the congregation needs this vital space to listen.<sup>268</sup> Craddock's approach highlights that reducing the gap is not the only objective in the dynamic relationship between preacher and listeners. This distancing aspect, however, did not figure highly in my own research, unlike the clear responses on being and working together within the sermon. The suggestion was even made that the physical gap might be closed to assist the togetherness:

[M]aybe you come off the front bench [low platform] and you come, actually because of the microphone you've got [wireless], you come actually into the, like you would come into an audience, and that could be part of the audience so that the audience is part of you, if you know what I mean.<sup>269</sup>

However, a long-term observation in ABBC and other churches I have attended suggests a subliminal distancing, as the congregations always seem to fill seats from the back row. This could work against the above suggestion and cause tension to some people.

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<sup>266</sup> Craddock, *Preaching*, p.87.

<sup>267</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Those Who Have Heard it All Before*, Revised and Expanded (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2002), p.104.

<sup>268</sup> Michael Brothers, *Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Space to Listen* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2014).

<sup>269</sup> I2T 01, p.12.

Desire for distance occurred obliquely in the questionnaire where twenty-three out of thirty-one people stated that having heard a sermon they want to be left to think for themselves (Q5.2). This was further hinted at in the interviewee imagery where the preacher was seen as the navigator for a pilot, namely the congregant. In the analogy the final responsibility and 'flight decisions' were the pilot's, implicitly creating a sense of distance from the navigator. I conclude that my research showed signs that positive distancing should not be forgotten or abandoned but kept in healthy juxtaposition with the laudable intention of closing the gap. I will now turn to my final section in the interpretive task, looking at various research findings around learning.

### **LEARNING STYLES, LEARNING TOGETHER AND VISUAL LEARNING**

My interview research has shown that people are concerned about personal faith development and navigating through life as Christians, yet are equally concerned that anyone who steps into church, even for the first time, is able to engage with the sermon in a way that is helpful for them to enquire about faith. Interviewees and the focus group expressed awareness of the range of congregants' faith positions and personal learning needs. For instance, some people spoke of visual learning such as using PowerPoint and others appreciate a question or concept and then work towards a conclusion. How then do sermons reach a range of people with differing levels of faith and varying preferences about how they learn? Two direct research responses concerning these issues were that the narrative-critical sermons preached were deemed to have something for everybody, and that the preacher needs to be sensitive to unknown attenders and if necessary adapt or even change the sermon on the spot to something more appropriate.<sup>270</sup> Whilst this might be technically possible, there is no accurate mechanism with which to judge a situation where

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<sup>270</sup> See p.99, n.183.

change may be required. It is therefore more appropriate to examine the issues through the lens of established research around faith positions and learning styles and implement 'sagely wisdom' at the point of sermon preparation rather than modify or change a particular sermon during the service it is to be preached.

It will be clear thus far in this thesis that I do not refer to learning as simply educational learning. Heywood utilises the 'learning cycle' formulated by David Kolb, the cycle of learning as experiences, reflection, concept formation and action, to locate the sermon as a learning event.<sup>271</sup> This intersects with my research findings that congregants value inclusive and self-directed learning for all attenders, along with whole-life significance. In my view, Heywood's approach, though useful as a general system, does not address specific individuals and the various levels of faith within the congregation. Developmental psychologist James Fowler conducted research regarding individual faith development.<sup>272</sup> He defines six stages of maturing faith, and although his work allows for differentiation of levels of faith, I did not find that my research was conducive to accurate definition of the stages people were at, since his system has its own interview procedure and analysis. Even if used, this of course would not allow for assessment on a circumstantial level in terms of newly attending congregants, and so it was not the most appropriate way to interpret my data or research situation.

I turned to psychologist and educationalist Howard Gardner's research on multiple intelligences (MI), along with homileticians who have used his theory, as a way of exploring how people learn. He defines intelligence as '*a biopsychological potential*

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<sup>271</sup> Heywood, pp.32-60.

<sup>272</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture'.<sup>273</sup> He later describes intelligence more distinctly as 'a species characteristic', as 'individual difference' and as 'fit execution of an assignment'.<sup>274</sup> This definition and the perspectives accord with my goal to offer preaching that offers learning for all congregants in a personally relevant way, whereby the information produces life value in their faith.

In *Intelligence Reframed*, building on his previous work *Frames of Mind*,<sup>275</sup> Gardner reaffirmed seven forms of intelligence, and added an eighth, recognising the potential of other 'candidate intelligences' and that other people may make their own conclusion concerning them, so long as they 'rest on a fair-minded examination of the available data'.<sup>276</sup> The seven were linguistic (language sensitivity), logical-mathematical (using logic and science), musical (performance, composition and appreciation), bodily-kinesthetic (using the whole or part of the body to fashion products), spatial (recognise and manipulate patterns of space), interpersonal (understanding the intentions, motivations and desires of others) and intra-personal (understanding oneself).<sup>277</sup> In his review process, the eighth was added: naturalist intelligence, the ability to recognise and classify one's environment.<sup>278</sup> He later suggested that, 'our entire consumer culture is based on the naturalist intelligence'.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York, NY.: Basic Books, 1999), pp.33-34, his italics.

<sup>274</sup> Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (New York, NY.: Basic Books, 2006), pp.32-35 (p.32 and p.33), his italics.

<sup>275</sup> Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York, NY.: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>276</sup> Gardner, *Reframed*, p.47 and p.66.

<sup>277</sup> Gardner, *Reframed*, pp.41-43.

<sup>278</sup> Gardner, *Reframed*, pp.48-52. Two candidate intelligences that did not enter the list were spiritual and existential, although in 2007 he saw promise in existential intelligence. However, with a dearth of evidence regarding brain function, he spoke of '8 1/2 intelligences': *Horizons*, pp.20-21. He had 'joked' about this previously: Gardner, *Reframed*, p.66.

<sup>279</sup> Gardner, *Horizons*, p.19.

Gardner stresses that each person has a 'unique blend' of intelligences, based on genetic inheritance and life conditions, and that each intelligence is 'strictly amoral'.<sup>280</sup> For my purposes this requires caution against assuming congregants have only a singular intelligence type, yet gives a working perspective as a preacher on ways in which people may route sermon material into their lives, not least by their sermon 'consumer choices'!

Before considering the interpretive merits of MI for my research, it must be noted that Gardner has his critics. Daniel Willingham reviewed and criticised Gardner's work, stating that he is incorrect in claiming that psychometricians' tests are unitary, that he shows a lack of clarity of how the intelligences can be proven to be independent rather than correlated, that his criteria by which new intelligences are posited assumes extreme modularity of the mind, and questions whether Gardner's intelligences are anything more than talents.<sup>281</sup>

Three perspectives led me to conclude Gardner's work is useful beyond these criticisms. First, I contacted the Local Education Authority with a general enquiry, albeit in terms of school education, as to its thinking on educational practice, but without naming any of my sources.<sup>282</sup> The reply stated that Howard Gardner 'is the key reference point', acknowledged that other models are now more fundamental, but Gardner's work is still important.<sup>283</sup> Given the other aspects of current thinking

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<sup>280</sup> Gardner, *Reframed*, p.45.

<sup>281</sup> Daniel T. Willingham, 'Reframing the Mind. Education Next Issue Cover. Howard Gardner and the theory of multiple intelligences', *Education Next*, 4:3 (2004), 19-24.  
<[http://educationnext.org/files/ednext20043\\_18.pdf](http://educationnext.org/files/ednext20043_18.pdf)> [accessed 21 August 2015].

<sup>282</sup> Email correspondence, 20 October 2015.

<sup>283</sup> Email correspondence, 22 October 2015. (Used with permission)

particularly relate to childhood, I was encouraged by the direct reference to Gardner. I was also directed to a teaching website that endorses the usefulness of his work.<sup>284</sup>

Second, Gardner's work has been taken up by homileticians as a useful tool for interpreting preaching. I first came across Gardner's work in that of Thomas Troeger and Edward Everding.<sup>285</sup> It is also noteworthy that Osmer also values Gardner's work as useful for facilitating formation and participation in religious communities.<sup>286</sup>

Third, the deeper arguments as to whether these 'intelligences' are formally independent or correlated, intelligences or talents, are not in my view fundamental for my purpose so long as they prove to be genuine descriptors in relation to congregants. The intelligences he highlights (I will continue his terminology) serve as useful descriptors of congregants' approaches in my research findings as I now show, first by summarising Troeger and Everdings' work.

After listing and explaining Gardner's eight intelligences,<sup>287</sup> Troeger and Everding look at the implications of each for preaching along with exercises to help teach the theory, concluding with an example Bible study to show how the intelligences are used.<sup>288</sup> With brevity that hardly does justice to them, examples of the implications for preachers include using language and rhetoric wisely (linguistic intelligence) and largely in short sentences, to reach goals; using analytical/mathematical intelligence to give reasoning to texts; using musical intelligence includes not only church singing

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<sup>284</sup> Mike Fleetham, *Thinking Classroom* <<http://www.thinkingclassroom.co.uk>> [accessed 22 October 2015].

<sup>285</sup> Thomas H. Troeger and H. Edward Everding, *So That All Might Know: Preaching That Engages the Whole Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

<sup>286</sup> Richard Robert Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*, (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), especially pp.95-97.

<sup>287</sup> They write after his *Intelligence Reframed*, but not in light of his *New Horizons*.

<sup>288</sup> Troeger and Everding, pp.25-54.



but the tone and voices of the preacher; and naturalist intelligence can be employed, 'to nurture the faithful stewardship of the ecosystem of planet earth'.<sup>289</sup> What struck me strongly and encouragingly was their sense of the usefulness of MI for the Church and preaching:

In our experience some people learn more by seeing. Others prefer to learn by doing, especially young children. Certainly preaching involves talking and making logical connections, but MI suggests we can also involve congregations in seeing images, singing songs, using gestures (dancing?), exchanging comments, exploring their feelings, or appreciating a floral arrangement.<sup>290</sup>

This cuts to the core of that with which my thesis engages: how preaching might connect with the whole life of congregants. As the authors went on to exemplify the use of MI in sermon preparation on Luke 15:1-7 (in part a text I used in my own investigative sermons), they briefly stated how the eight intelligences might relate to the account of the lost sheep, and I wrote in the margin of my copy of their book, 'All these could be incorporated into narrative-critical preaching'.<sup>291</sup> By that I did not mean that they could only be incorporated in narrative-critical preaching, but that they would fit so easily and well into a narrative-critical approach. With all this in mind, I draw this chapter towards a close with observations about my research through MI mapping.

The theory of MI particularly helped me to understand comments of interviewees about varying learning styles and church attenders. One interviewee used linguistic intelligence to summarise the theme of the sermon series as, 'Who?, What?, Where? and When?',<sup>292</sup> and general awareness was shown about using modern language. Comment was made about analysing a question or issue through to a resolution

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<sup>289</sup> Troeger and Everding, p.47.

<sup>290</sup> Troeger and Everding, p.51.

<sup>291</sup> Troeger and Everding, p.53.

<sup>292</sup> See p.83, n.140.

(logical-mathematical intelligence) and learning through pictures or alternatively, struggling with imagination (visual composition, artistry). I did not detect anything overtly of a bodily-kinesthetic intelligence in the research, though one comment was made about people writing notes to aid their learning.<sup>293</sup> Relating to musical intelligence, one interviewee said that during a sermon, ‘sometimes I get a thought into my mind that brings the text of a hymn to my mind and I feel like shouting it out. (laughing)’ and suggested that as a congregant, ‘if there was a certain thing and even a thought comes to my mind “oh this reminds me of” make a comment about it and perhaps sing that particular chorus’.<sup>294</sup> Interpersonal references flowed freely from interviewees and the focus group, showing concern for others, those of longstanding faith or none, and interviewees showed self-awareness about the need for growth and change: intra-personal intelligence. Spatial intelligence was referred to in relation to the lectern and changed layout of the seating area, my moving around as the preacher and potentially coming among the congregation to a greater degree. Naturalist intelligence did not actively appear in research responses, but would account for listener choices in selecting which parts of sermons to dwell on and to what degree, in the same way Gardner speaks of the consumer choices world which we all inhabit. Given the small sample size of my research there is a surprisingly large connection with Gardner’s categories.

MI has helped me to interpret the data in a way that will help tailor preaching to individual learning styles. Implicit in MI theory, however, is the acknowledgement that different individuals have differing levels of each intelligence type, and it is here that I perceive MI theory to have an inclusive and positive impact in learning together. My research uncovered participant mindfulness that it is a difficult task to satisfy a diverse

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<sup>293</sup> I2T 01, p.10.

<sup>294</sup> I1T 01, p.15 and p.16.

range of people, styles and needs. I found MI theory a useful remedy to this dilemma. That Gardner sought but for various reasons did not find a clear and self-contained 'spiritual intelligence'<sup>295</sup> affords the ability to appeal to all the various human intelligences in order to reach what I will call spiritual awareness (rather than intelligence, in order not to contradict Gardner's terminology). In other words, whoever comes into the church will have human intelligences of some and various kinds, and this places everyone in the same human framework, rather than the categories of Christians, non-Christians, regulars, visitors, longstanding Christians, young Christians or whatever description may be used. We all enter church as humans seeking God. That unites everyone. That is not to say all sermons have to be all-inclusive and without a particular focus, say on becoming a Christian or remaining strong in faith having been a Christian for many years. It means that the variety of human intelligences will always be present in multiple forms, and they can be utilised in sermon construction in a way that will enable diverse yet corporate learning. MI theory therefore, when incorporated into narrative-critical preaching, simultaneously explains and solves the issues around learning together found in my research (RQ1, with hints at a new freshness as part of RQ2).

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter has endorsed the value of Osmer's interpretive cycle by nuancing and enhancing my congregational research. Established literature has shed light on the local setting and my first level interpretations of the congregational data in relation to preaching, and on my own sermons.

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<sup>295</sup> Gardner, *Reframed*, pp.53-60 (p.54).

Returning to my research questions, the interpretative material has helped in the following ways. Regarding RQ1, awareness of MI and connecting it with narrative-critical interpretation as Troeger and Everding have shown, will help reach the range of people in the congregation. Given the older and long-standing attendees of this church typically have a good Bible awareness and rich life experience, when set with the albeit limited evidence of understanding complex narratives, there is a good possibility that older people at ABBC would both flourish with the new approach (RQ4) and be willing to adopt change (RQ5), as evidenced by the second round interviewees. Whilst having an ongoing personal sense that a change of preaching style would facilitate my own sense of flourishing (RQ6), this chapter has also highlighted that there are challenges for me too, especially in being aware of polyvalency and preacher/congregant differences and that I should not assume that everyone approaches the narrative as I do.

In summary of my six research questions some clear answers are available: The research suggests that a narrative approach (interpretatively and homiletically) could reach a wider range of people (RQ1); whilst there was no apparent sense of predictability in the former style, the new one was refreshing and retrospectively was in some cases seen to be better (RQ2 and RQ4); whilst people did not want to be overwhelmed with historical detail, the new form of preaching should not exclude it entirely, so suggests judicious use (RQ3); interviewees were very open to change in the preaching style (RQ5); I myself found this style refreshing and stimulating, and perceive it to be helpful for my preaching task (RQ6). My overall conclusion is therefore an affirmative 'yes' to the research questions.

More broadly, the surprising research finding that some interviewees wished for direct involvement in the sermon has taken on new clarity, particularly through interacting

with Rose. The range of preaching needs and perspectives has become a positive challenge rather than a problematic concern as I have developed an inclusive perspective on the congregation, a group of people with various and multiple intelligences. Having examined the research through this multidisciplinary mapping, in Chapter 4 I advance to the theological task: 'Why is this going on?' moves to 'What should be going on?'.

## Chapter 4. Evaluating the Situation: The Normative Task

Osmer's third phase of practical theology is the normative task. Asking the question, 'What ought to be going on?', he advocates three specific tasks: 'Using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good practice"'.<sup>296</sup> His normative task is biblically located in 'prophetic discernment', which, based in part on a brief overview of the prophetic office in the OT, 'involves both divine disclosure and the human shaping of God's word'.<sup>297</sup> Of significance to Osmer and befitting the local church context in terms of its *Constitution and Basis of Faith*, is that the NT draws on this prophetic tradition but extends it, where Jesus is seen as not just a messenger of God's word but he is God's Word himself. This means that prophetic discernment by congregational leaders does not 'look for other words from God alongside of or in competition with this Word'.<sup>298</sup> This coheres with the ABBC *Basis of Faith* statement about the Bible being the Word of God, the Deity of Jesus Christ and his authoritative teaching.<sup>299</sup> ABBC implicitly recognises Jesus as the Word of God, although he is not explicitly stated as such in the *Basis of Faith*. Preaching in ABBC is seen as 'preaching the Word' when the preacher calls upon the Bible as the textual Word of God to preach Jesus as the embodied Word of God. ABBC would therefore agree with Osmer in regarding preaching as human words that should be in conformity rather than competition with God's Word. Indeed, I perceive that my own developing preaching style has increased awareness in ABBC of the human shaping of

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<sup>296</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.4.

<sup>297</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, pp.134-135.

<sup>298</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.135.

<sup>299</sup> See p.24, n.43.

preaching as a form of God's Word. Both the suggestion for other voices within sermons and the clear desire among some people to make their own sermon conclusions indicate a growing awareness of 'the human shaping of God's Word'.

In this chapter I take up Osmer's normative task, mainly to examine the theological undergirding for preaching and in particular the narrative-critical approach to preaching that, amongst other things, I examine in this thesis.

First, I must clarify what 'normative' means in context. The church has, by definition, its own normative position, for example on its approach to the Bible, set within the *Basis of Faith* as stated in Chapter 1. It is normative that those formally in membership of the church affirm the *Basis of Faith*. With the church's clear attention to the centrality of the Bible in preaching, evidenced among other things through the archives, its historical normative position is clear. With no denominational association, however, evaluation of what ought to be normative must be centred in wider Christian tradition, but this raises the question of which tradition or theological norm. Helen Cameron and others worked as a team to develop a methodology for 'better understanding and articulating the mystery of "God in practice"' using four theological 'voices': normative theology, formal theology, espoused theology and operant theology.<sup>300</sup> In this chapter I primarily consider normative theology but this is not to exclude other voices. Cameron lists as part of normative theology, 'Scriptures', 'The creeds', 'Official church teaching' and 'Liturgies'.<sup>301</sup> These will inevitably be self-selecting to a degree: which creeds, official teaching or liturgies? My own tradition almost totally ignores formal liturgy or creeds (other than its own *Basis of Faith*, which in my perception seems to be used mainly for protection of belief rather than active

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<sup>300</sup> Helen Cameron and others, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, (London: SCM Press, 2010), p.49 and p.54.

<sup>301</sup> Cameron, p.54, as part of figure 4.2., The Four Voices of Theology.

confession). Whilst these factors are themselves good reason for reflection and external normalisation, the lack of creedal or denominational involvement leaves only the centrality of the Bible as normative and the basis for preaching in this church.<sup>302</sup>

Formal theology will largely assist my task in the absence of a denominational connection.

With these perspectives in mind, I shall use the framework of ‘authority’ to consider the normative task: what authority does the Bible have in preaching?; what authority does the congregation have?; what authority does the preacher have? Authority as the framework is particularly apt for three reasons. First, I have highlighted in chapter 1 that ABBC places central priority on the Bible as being authoritative. Second, chapter 2 showed that both the church sermon archives and research interviewees regard the position and authority of the preacher as important in bringing ‘God’s word’ to the congregation. Third, however, the research highlighted a desire for active congregational involvement, suggesting that preaching authority should not be the sole prerogative of the preacher. These reasons collectively endorse an appropriate framework for examination of the normative task through the lens of ‘Authority’.

I will also focus on the narrative-critical perspectives that are central to this thesis in terms of an extension into narrative theology, which offers a wider theological and normative perspective to narrative-critical interpretation. Narrative theology insofar as it intersects with themes in this thesis, first, recognises the literary form of scripture and invites us to reflect on story, affirming that God meets us and speaks to us in

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<sup>302</sup> As the first draft of this Chapter was being written, however, I preached through ‘The Apostles’ Creed’ on the back of a narrative overview of the Bible, in an effort to integrate creedal material with the (ongoing) meta-narrative of the Bible.



history.<sup>303</sup> Second, it self-consciously engages and reflects on theology's task in relation to its ecclesial settings, and third, it concretely embodies scripture rather than seeking to 'lift' teachings or moral truths from the text.<sup>304</sup> These aspects of narrative theology relate directly to the three areas of authority that I will address.

## **AUTHORITY AND THE BIBLE**

It is axiomatic that the Bible has a central role in Christian preaching. Simply put, 'The Bible has always been central to the life of the Christian church'.<sup>305</sup> Stephen Wright asserts that 'it is irreplaceable, and will continue to be so throughout this present age of gospel proclamation'.<sup>306</sup> The way in which the Bible is used, however, and the degree to which it is seen as authoritative across the Christian tradition is far from normative. My concern here is not to attempt to evaluate the wider perspectives of authority with respect to the Bible, since (with Osmer) I both personally and within my professional church role acknowledge the authority of the Bible as 'divine disclosure', which is therefore confessionally 'authoritative'. The aspect of authority in relation to the Bible that is in my opinion unclear in ABBC, is *in what way* the Bible is authoritative. In response to my research conclusions so far, and along with the need for a clear theological grounding for the ongoing potential use of a narrative-critical approach to interpretation, it is precisely here that there needs to be a clearer

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<sup>303</sup> See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction, 5th edn* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 129-130.

<sup>304</sup> See James Fodor, 'Postliberal Theology', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. by David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd edn (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 2005), 229-248, especially 230-231. Fodor notes the sometimes interchangeable language between 'narrative theology' and 'postliberal theology' (p.230). Other overviews include, Joel Green, 'Narrative Theology' and David Lauber, 'Yale School' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* ed. by Kevin J. Vanhoozer and others (London; Grand Rapids, MI.: SPCK; Baker Academic, 2005), 531-533 and 859-861. The entry in that work for 'Postliberalism' states 'See Narrative Theology; Yale School' (600).

<sup>305</sup> N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005), p.1.

<sup>306</sup> Stephen Wright, 'The Future use of the Bible in Preaching' in *The Future of Preaching*, ed. by Geoffrey Stevenson (London: SCM Press, 2010), 84-100 (p.84).

understanding of how the Bible should be seen as authoritative. In order to explore this, I turn to N. T. Wright's article, 'How can the Bible be Authoritative?'.<sup>307</sup>

The problem with biblical authority within evangelical views, Wright states, is a perception that it is used for doctrinal control, ensuring that 'the church does not go off the rails doctrinally or ethically', and hence such views approach the Bible as a book of rules and regulations.<sup>308</sup> Wright's response is that most of the Bible is not rules, regulations, commands and creeds, but is narrative.<sup>309</sup> Having looked at three ways in which the church down the centuries has sought to see the Bible as authoritative (timeless truth, witness to primary events and timeless function), he concludes that these approaches 'belittle the Bible' and 'imply [...] that God has, after all, given us the wrong sort of book and it is our job to turn it into the right sort of book'.<sup>310</sup> In turning to the Bible's own view of authority rather than this derived one, he concludes that 'what we are actually *saying* when we use the phrase "authority of scripture" [...] is a shorthand way of saying that, though authority belongs to God, God has somehow invested this authority in scripture'.<sup>311</sup> Taking the Bible as an 'ancient narrative book' rather than what it has been made to be (a rule book), the question becomes 'what is God *doing* with his authority?'.<sup>312</sup> The answer is, 'God's authority vested in scripture is designed, as all God's authority is designed, to liberate human beings, to judge and condemn evil and sin in the world in order to set people free to be fully human'.<sup>313</sup> How is God's authority exercised in the Bible?: 'through the

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<sup>307</sup> N. T. Wright, 'How Can the Bible Be Authoritative? (The Laing Lecture for 1989)', *Vox Evangelica*, 21 (1991), 7–32 <[http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol21/bible\\_wright.pdf](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol21/bible_wright.pdf)> [accessed 06 January 2016].

<sup>308</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.9.

<sup>309</sup> Wright, 'Bible', pp.9-10.

<sup>310</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.13 (both).

<sup>311</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.14, his italics.

<sup>312</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.14 and p.15, his italics.

<sup>313</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.16.

spoken and written authority of anointed human beings God brings his authority to bear on his people and his world'.<sup>314</sup> Through the Bible,

the authority which God has invested in this book is an authority that is wielded and exercised *through* the people of God telling and retelling *their* story as the story of the world, telling covenant story as the true story of creation.<sup>315</sup>

He later states,

It is enormously important that we see the role of scripture not simply as being to provide *true information about*, or even an accurate running commentary upon, the work of God in salvation and new creation, but as taking an active part *within* that ongoing purpose. [...] Scripture is there to be a means of God's action in and through us - which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information.<sup>316</sup>

Here we see that Wright's narrative approach to biblical authority locates the outworking of authority within the framework of the active and ongoing purposes of God in his people and world rather than simply in a knowledge-based informational framework.

As a possible model for the ongoing story, Wright takes the imagery of a Shakespearean play with a missing fifth act, which becomes the outworking of the unfinished drama, the forward movement whereby the actors must enter the story as it stands, but they speak and act to complete it with both innovation and consistency.<sup>317</sup> When applied to the Bible, the five acts are creation, fall, Israel, Jesus

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<sup>314</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.17.

<sup>315</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.18, his italics.

<sup>316</sup> Wright, *Scripture*, p.22, his italics.

<sup>317</sup> Wright, 'Bible', pp.18-19.

and the New Testament, where, 'The church would then live under the "authority" of the extant story'.<sup>318</sup>

The Bible functions through people and the church, who by the Spirit, 'have their life moulded by this Spirit-inspired book'.<sup>319</sup> It is '[s]tory authority'.<sup>320</sup> Wright's approach to the Bible and authority has a number of useful insights that could shape preaching, although preaching is not his direct focal point here.

First, he highlights the divine focus: God is the source of authority but has invested it in scripture. This normative perspective must guide preaching. Preaching is for people to hear and interact with God's authoritative word in the Bible, rather than hearing the preacher. James Kay expresses it well, 'Preaching is the Word of God if, and only if, it preaches the Word of God, that is, the scriptures as witnesses to the will and way of God'.<sup>321</sup>

Second, and as a consequence of God's authority through scripture to his people and world, is the interrelationship between the Divine and human. Kay's 'only if' is a small but highly significant qualifier. In Wright's words cited above, the people of God tell and retell their story within God's story. If we extend this to preaching, the preacher's task is not simply to convey information, nor faith propositions, nor even to offer opinions of life nor comment on the contemporary world story. It is not even primarily to reflect on the congregational story, but to set these things in the ongoing

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<sup>318</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.19.

<sup>319</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.21.

<sup>320</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.22.

<sup>321</sup> James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology, Preaching and Its Partners* (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2007), p.18.

Bible story. Undoubtedly, the theological task shows that preaching has a wider 'field of vision' than the current one in ABBC.

Third, then, is the question of what is meant, or ought to be meant in ABBC by the *Basis of Faith* statement, 'The Divine and full inspiration of the Holy Scriptures [...] being in themselves the Word of God'. The apparent consequence of the scriptures being the Word of God is that they are 'therefore authoritative as the supreme and sufficient rule of faith and practice'. This clarifies to a degree the authoritative purpose of the Bible: the creation of a 'rule of faith and practice'. I surmise, and that is all I can do from the statement itself, that 'faith' and 'practice' might mean appropriate 'belief' and 'behaviour'. Inferences from ABBC sermon records suggest the past preaching style focused much more on belief than practice (some showing little or no 'application'). The normative task examined in this chapter suggests that preaching in ABBC should have an increased focus on what I will hereon refer to as practical faith. By this I mean behavioural faith alongside espoused beliefs, and, in keeping with this thesis, whole life faith that attends to the will and the emotions and fosters appropriate virtues: Christ-like character in everyday life, in God's story and God's world.

The descriptor of the 'rule' regarding faith and practice in ABBC places the working concept of biblical authority within the 'rule book' approach to authority that Wright criticises. Correlating with my archival research which showed sermons to be primarily informational, I conclude that this church should give some attention to clarifying how the Bible is authoritative. Simply replacing the 'rule of faith and practice'

statement *in the Basis of Faith* with Wright's 'means of God's action in and through us'<sup>322</sup> alters the focus dramatically and would read that the church believes in

The Divine and full inspiration of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as not only containing, but being in themselves the Word of God, and therefore authoritative as the supreme and sufficient means of God's action in and through us.

If grasped by the local church, I consider that this would move the focus of the authority of the Bible, and consequently in preaching, from being a mine of information to a drama, in which God's people are actors on the stage of His creation. Hence, through formal theology (here Wright's model), the normative theology of the church regarding the scriptures alters the balance between belief and practical faith. I believe this would help effect the transition from a knowledge-based framework for faith to one of a dynamic and whole-life faith.

Fourth, and finally, I consider and adapt Wright's model of a five act drama. In Wright's fifth act, the era of the NT, the 'actors' (the Church) both act and speak with '*innovation and consistency*'.<sup>323</sup> This gives a direct link into the drama for people and preacher today, yet this act does not explicitly close the drama: it is a 'yet unfinished drama'.<sup>324</sup> The Bible drama closes with the New Creation, the full and final Kingdom of God. Indeed, literary links in the last scene of The Revelation of John and the beginning of Genesis, for instance (creation of a new heaven and earth, a garden, river and tree of life, and the removal of the curse), suggest a final and victorious closure deliberately connecting with the opening.<sup>325</sup> I therefore concur with Craig

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<sup>322</sup> See p.146, n.316.

<sup>323</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.19, his italics.

<sup>324</sup> Wright, 'Bible', p.19.

<sup>325</sup> I recently preached through the book of Revelation, and found a Narrative approach to be very helpful, as exemplified in James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2009).

Bartholomew and Michael Goheen in adding a sixth act in the model of the Bible drama, that of the New Creation.<sup>326</sup>

This sixth act not only finalises the drama of scripture, but in my view highlights in sharp focus that Christians are actors both on the same stage and in the same act as those in the NT, albeit in a later 'scene'; nevertheless, like all the actors in this act, they still await the final act of the New Creation. This, I suggest, has an important dynamic effect on the biblical authority of preaching and on how the people of God live. I examine this in the following sections, but in concluding this section, I have suggested that in my ministry context the authority of the Bible ought to be adjusted and clarified to reflect the unfolding drama of God's action in his world and the coming New Creation. This coheres with my research interest in narrative at the immediate textual level (narrative-critical interpretation). It could be said that this is a connection of convenience. To that I would answer that it is indisputable that a high proportion of Bible text is not 'rules' but comprises events in which rules occur (for instance the 'Ten Commandments' are offered in the context of liberation and how to live under God - after and in light of the high drama of the Exodus). If, therefore, the Bible is legitimately seen as fundamentally a narrative rather than a rule book, it would strongly suggest to me that to frame preaching within the greater narrative (the whole Bible), with narrative-critical interpretation of the smaller narrative (the particular text) is entirely congruous.

In summary, the normative task here shows that the authority for preacher and congregation flows from the authority of God, narratively given in the Bible. I will, in

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<sup>326</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2014). The authors point out they were not the first to add this to Wright's model (p.235, n.6). Other variations are cited in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), pp.96-97. Vanhoozer adopts a five act structure including the new creation but places the fall within the Creation act: p.98.

ongoing sections of this chapter, unless otherwise stated, use the term ‘narrative’ in connection with this overarching approach to scripture and, where necessary, link it to ‘narrative’ in the previous context of this thesis, that is narrative-critical interpretation. Together, and with a third one, these perspectives become the ‘narrative form’ of preaching in the thesis title.

## **AUTHORITY AND THE CONGREGATION**

In my initial chapter design, I would have now considered the authority of the preacher. My thinking was to show the preacher as standing between God’s authority through the Bible and the congregational encounter with God in the sermon. On reflection, addressing the authority of the congregation before that of the preacher seems more appropriate for a number of connected reasons. As Thomas Long asserts, theologically preachers come from,

*within* the community of faith and not *to* it from the outside. [...] We are not visitors from clergy-land, strangers from an unknown land, ambassadors from seminary-land, or even, as much as we may cherish the thought, prophets from a wilderness land. We are members of the body of Christ, participants in the worshiping assembly, commissioned to preach by the very people to whom we are about to speak.<sup>327</sup>

I have previously noted that in my ministry situation the membership directly appoints the minister by election. That I could not be the primary preacher without the direct appointment highlights the institutional authority in the congregation that commissions the preacher. That, however, in keeping with Long’s statement, should not be the normative authority of the congregation. The congregation is not simply the attending individuals, a numerical mass of people who authorise and attend the

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<sup>327</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1989), p.2 and p.3, his italics. His comment regarding prophets fits his not-from-outside thinking here rather than necessarily contradicting Osmer’s focus on ‘prophetic discernment’ that I consider below.



preaching; it is the body of Christ, the community of faith (and those seeking faith), who are together a part of God's ongoing story and are seeking to live faithfully under his authority. To speak and act appropriately as a preacher means to speak from and within and to this gathered community. This community perspective, set within the drama of God's world as considered above, highlights a number of issues that impact on the preaching task in my local situation.

First, is what I consider to be a sense of individualism within ABBC. A focal point of evangelicalism is that of personal (individual) salvation: 'Faith is the exercise of personal trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour'.<sup>328</sup> This ironically tends, in my experience, to create an impression of the church gathering as a collection of individual believers rather than a single spiritual community.<sup>329</sup> Indeed, my research sermons were described as 'individualised [meaning to the individual] and personalisable', and 'applicable to individual lives',<sup>330</sup> and my own conclusions in the interpretive task included connecting with individuals in preaching through awareness of Multiple Intelligence theory. Despite the rightful focus on individuals, theological awareness of the gathered church reminds the preacher that there must also be a clear sense of preaching to one congregation. Not only is over-individualism deficient in itself, but it is doubly tragic in light of the perspective of the ongoing community dynamically living 'within' the Bible story before the sixth act, the final completion of God's story. This community is authorised into being as part of God's world-stage action. The normative task impacts on preaching, including my narrative-critical approach to it, with the reminder that the congregation requires a deeper sense of being the present

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<sup>328</sup> Tidball, p.118.

<sup>329</sup> I am setting aside at this point the open-to-all nature of the church that faith-enquirers are welcome in the church community.

<sup>330</sup> See p.83, n.145 and I2T 04, p.11.

and ongoing community of the people of God. Preaching should therefore not simply be addressed to a collection of individuals.<sup>331</sup>

Given this evaluation it is nevertheless encouraging that the congregational research in this thesis offers some solution to this concern. Recognition was shown of the ability to speak to individual and congregation simultaneously: ‘...you talk to the congregation but you’re talking to me...as an individual at the same time’.<sup>332</sup> This suggests that a balance of attention towards individuals in a sermon does not have to be at the expense of the community focus which the theological task shows to be important.

The second issue is that in the churches where I have been the lead preacher, including at ABBC, I have been largely left individually responsible for the preaching planning. On occasion I have asked people, and specifically leaders to whom I am more directly accountable, for suggestions about preaching subjects and content. Usually I have gained little response but rather perceived an underlying sense that it was my task (delegated authority?) to assess and manage this before God. This makes my research findings about a positive desire for greater congregational involvement all the more startling. It seems to me that despite some interviewees’ wishes to be involved, the congregation has ignored, or perhaps doesn’t know of its legitimate authority to participate in preaching other than being recipients of it. Conversely, this also suggests that I have accepted a norm that I perhaps ought to have resisted before now. Whatever the causes or reasons, a position where the

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<sup>331</sup> Strangely, the sense of individualism I perceive in ABBC may also connect with the past sense of individualism that the church had, highlighted by the ‘Independent’ signage I found in Chapter 1, although I concluded that it extended even further, into isolationism. Though I have no direct connecting evidence, this suggests the possibility of a context of multi-layered individualism.

<sup>332</sup> 1T 04, p.3.

congregation is actively engaged beyond being hearers is a necessary corrective. As Van Harn aptly states, 'A sermon is not the possession or product of an elite few; it is the responsibility and privilege of the whole church'.<sup>333</sup> This fortuitously connects with the quote and my comment in Chapter 1 regarding a benefit of narrative-critical interpretation as 'returning the Bible to the people'.<sup>334</sup> If my narrative form of preaching does that, it fits perfectly well with the authority of preaching, alongside the Bible, being returned to the congregation.

The third issue, a consequence of the two previous ones, is that of striking a balance between focusing on the congregation and the individual. Osmer's 'What should be going on?' was given at least a partial answer in my research. Interviewee interest was shown in congregational involvement within sermons by contributing life illustrations, testimonies, examples or suggestions of hymns and songs. One interviewee made a direct connection in saying that an 'interruption' to the sermon, 'can build up individuals and it can build up the fellowship'.<sup>335</sup> This helpfully recognises and amalgamates the personal and corporate perspectives within the gathered community. Furthermore, it creates a greater action-event dynamic that is appropriate within narratively-focused preaching. A narrative Bible authorises a narrative community, although this community comprises individuals. This returns me to the issue of precisely where the balance should lie between the two.

In *Preaching Jesus*, Charles Campbell locates preaching firmly as within the community not the individual,<sup>336</sup> developing what he calls his 'cultural-linguistic model

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<sup>333</sup> Van Harn, p.125.

<sup>334</sup> See pp.21-22.

<sup>335</sup> 11T 01, p.10.

<sup>336</sup> Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

of Christianity' from what Hans Frei and George Lindbeck applied more generally to religion.<sup>337</sup> Lindbeck's approach views religion as 'a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought' and significantly for my concerns here, states that, 'Like a culture or language, it [religion] is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities'.<sup>338</sup> The turn is from what Lindbeck describes as cognitive or 'experiential-expressive' models, or a combination of the two.<sup>339</sup> Applying this to the Bible, the cultural component is that, 'The normative or literal meaning must be consistent with the kind of text it is taken to be by the community for which it is important'.<sup>340</sup> Campbell draws out the community implication for preaching:

[T]he community is logically prior to the individual, and the individual exists only within the context of relationships and roles played in a particular community. This understanding of preaching does not ignore the individual, but rather views the individual within the context of a faithful community. In fact, this approach does not even ignore the needs of individuals. Rather, it assumes that the fundamental need of persons is to be faithful disciples in a truthful community; and it assumes that this is the reason people are listening to sermons in the first place.<sup>341</sup>

My reaction to this is one of affirmation of the community, as stated above, yet with a concern that the individual must not become lost within it, and furthermore the individual has to live faithfully in the world when physically outside the gathered community. Campbell is clear that 'the church lives in service to the world for which Jesus died'.<sup>342</sup> In that sense, the community that authorises preaching also (perhaps

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<sup>337</sup> Campbell, p.64, n.5.

<sup>338</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age, 25th Anniversary edn* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.19.

<sup>339</sup> Lindbeck, p.2.

<sup>340</sup> Lindbeck, p.106.

<sup>341</sup> Campbell, p.222 n.3.

<sup>342</sup> Campbell, p.221.

passively) commissions the individual who is part of the church community and recipient of its preaching to represent the church and the Gospel to the world. The community becomes the community at large, but the individual is still part of the community, and has every right to ask, even demand, that preaching helps individuals to be what they are meant to be when physically away from the community and are 'acting' on God's stage of the world. Individuals must sense that their personal needs, life situations and challenges are being addressed, therefore I want to maintain a sharper focus on what Campbell seems to subsume within the communal model. Preaching must address both the congregation as a single community, and the individuals within it. Furthermore, my research highlighted the legitimate demand of the participants that preaching should address those who attend church as enquirers and visitors, those who therefore are not (yet) explicitly or even necessarily implicitly part of the community. This is a demanding task, as recognised in research interviews, but it is not impossible. Indeed, the individual and community are integrally and dynamically related. In *Telling the Story*, Andrew Walker, albeit speaking of evangelical revivals, says, 'Revivalism, by definition, involves the notion of mass crowds as the matrix in which God will visit his people individually'.<sup>343</sup> That community matrix and individuality is equally appropriate in the local church setting. The church community and the individual sit in balance.

Finally, how does preaching within this biblical narrative and community contextual model relate to the other models? Lindbeck recognises that models can co-exist and even sees advantages of hybrid models,<sup>344</sup> but does not consider them necessary or workable for his primary purpose, an examination of the potential for ecumenism

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<sup>343</sup> Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture*, Gospel and Culture (London: SPCK, 1996), p.64.

<sup>344</sup> Lindbeck, p.2.

using his cultural linguistic-model. Nevertheless he utilises the perspectives of the other models within his.<sup>345</sup> There is nothing in the cultural-linguistic model that necessitates rejection of cognitive theories, for instance, but that ‘the conditions under which propositions can be uttered are very different in cognitivist and cultural-linguistic approaches’ and whereas for the cognitivist they are for ‘technical theology’, for his new model the propositional focus is to ‘mold lives’.<sup>346</sup> This is directly relevant to my situation, where my research has suggested a culture of an informationally focused faith. In the practical, working terms of the church, it affirms the importance of sharpening the focus on practical faith rather than simply espoused beliefs. Focusing on God’s authority in the Bible, which establishes the authority of the church as the ongoing narrative community (comprising the individuals within it), the preaching task should be to facilitate active faith from within the authority of the church community, remembering that this congregational authority is itself logically and theologically preceded by that of God’s authority in the Bible. The congregation is therefore not the final authority in preaching, as will be evidenced in the next section. I will also highlight a significant fault line in the cultural-narrative approach to the faith community. The preaching task cannot be fully understood until the authority of the preacher is considered, which, I will show, counterbalances and at times outweighs though certainly does not remove the congregational authority.

## **AUTHORITY AND THE PREACHER**

Having set out the narrative authority of God in the Bible, and the logical authority of the congregation of which the preacher is a part, the local church (as part of the whole

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<sup>345</sup> Lindbeck, pp.3-4.

<sup>346</sup> Lindbeck, pp.54-55 (p.55).

Church) is seen as central to the ongoing narrative of God's drama. A preaching implication is, as Campbell states,

letting the church be the "middle term" as the preacher moves from text to sermon. [...] The focus is not simply on what a text "means" but on how a particular passage of Scripture functions to "build up" the people of God in and for the world. The movement, again, is from the narratively rendered identity of God in Jesus Christ to the identity of the church as a character in that ongoing story.<sup>347</sup>

Preaching's preliminary purpose as moving from text to sermon, set within the church community and with the goal of building-up Christians and helping those outside Christian faith, all intersect with my research concerns. Campbell states that 'the very *act* of preaching itself is a performance of Scripture'.<sup>348</sup> Campbell moves preaching beyond (without excluding) the preacher as conveyor of information, to a facilitator, guide and actor helping the community of the church be of appropriate character in God's world: the preaching task *functions* to build up the church. I suspect, however, that reframing preaching in terms of performance could raise concern in ABBC that the preacher is a 'show-person', so it would need to be clarified that 'performance' is appropriate terminology within and under God's narrative authority.<sup>349</sup> Certainly, in Campbell's argument, the role of the preacher as performer has no hint of meaning show-person. He sees the role of preacher as a humble one:

Preachers accept a strange kind of powerlessness, which finally relies on God to make effective not only individual sermons, but the very practice of preaching itself; like the Word made flesh, the preacher's words must be "redeemed by God" to be effective.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Campbell, p.230.

<sup>348</sup> Campbell, p.216, his Italics.

<sup>349</sup> I am mindful that when ABBC underwent modernisation in 2010, and plans were made for arced rows of chairs rather than having the former pews. Two people left because they said they wanted to worship in a church not a 'cinema'.

<sup>350</sup> Campbell, p.216.

Given he goes on to say that the preacher ‘enacts the way of Jesus in the world’, the preacher as performer ought not to be seen as anything other than a genuine, Christ-like person acting in the ongoing drama of scripture.<sup>351</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer uses the language of performance in a model he calls theo-drama: Theology is dramaturgy, scripture is the script to ‘enable, and in some measure regulate, performance’.<sup>352</sup> Theological understanding is performance, the Church is the company and the pastor is the ‘director’, but is later described as ‘an assistant director at best’.<sup>353</sup> Within this model he says, ‘*It is the pastor’s/director’s vocation to help congregations hear (understand) and do (perform) God’s word in and for the present.*’<sup>354</sup> Authority is neither of the preacher’s own making nor entirely delegated by the congregation in this preaching performance, but reliant on God. Furthermore, the congregation accepts, by virtue of authorising preaching, that it requires ongoing divine input to appropriately characterise its role. A brief reading of the epistles, say the Corinthian letters, or the failures of five of the seven churches in John’s Revelation (Chapters 2-3) highlights the need for ongoing input and transformation within the Church. Certainly contributors to my research recognised this, in terms of needing a ‘navigator’, a ‘mountain guide’ or someone to ‘bring a sermon [...] that actually opens my eyes’.<sup>355</sup> I therefore question Lindbeck’s conclusion that ‘the normative or literal meaning must be consistent with the kind of text it is taken to be by the community for which it is important’.<sup>356</sup> Whilst the community focus is highly important, the

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<sup>351</sup> Campbell, p.217.

<sup>352</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p.235. However, in his later work he draws back from calling Scripture the script, calling this partially true. Changing the imagery, he says the Bible ‘provides stage lighting’. Vanhoozer, *Faith*, pp.23-24 and 63-65 (63).

<sup>353</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama*, xii and p.448. I have not included references to his main themes stated here as they run through the book.

<sup>354</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p.456, his italics.

<sup>355</sup> See p.60, n.113; p.61, n.115; p.129, n.263.

<sup>356</sup> See p.155, n.340.



community is not the all-defining authority, and it does not necessarily know how to 'take a text', or how to act in God's drama. Vanhoozer aptly states,

If church practices serve as both source and norm for theology, how can we ever distinguish well-formed practices from those that are *deformed*? [...] It is important to recognize that there is something in the nature of theology's subject matter - God, the gospel - that resists being designated as "local custom".

[...]

Interpretative communities too can get it wrong, fall prey to false ideologies, and succumb to the lust for power.<sup>357</sup>

God's spokespersons in previous acts or scenes of his drama have had a necessary role of aligning the community of faith with God, not simply affirming what God's people necessarily saw as appropriate. Osmer's normative task being 'prophetic' means there is a sense of speaking to and directing the community rather than just echoing it. Interviewees recognised the need for this kind of help. For example, 2 Tim. 3:16-17 was cited from the 'Living Bible': 'Help us realise what is wrong in our lives. Straighten us out and help us to do what is right'.<sup>358</sup> Another said, 'challenge me if I am straying in any way', and a third, 'I think it [the sermon] should open our hearts to things that maybe we've not thought of...'.<sup>359</sup> It is important to clarify however, that the preacher has no more a claim to perfect representation of appropriate authority than does the congregation. Both flow out of divine authority and neither perfectly represents it. An appropriate balance of the congregation's and preacher's authority is a dialectical one set under God's authority. James McClendon utilises a particularly good image of the dynamic situation of all the human perspectives moving around God's authority like

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<sup>357</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p.7 and p.303, his italics.

<sup>358</sup> I1T 11, p.3.

<sup>359</sup> I1T 09 p.2; I1T 06, p.2.

a Ferris wheel of discernment, interpretation, obedience, and action that has no top chair, no priestly summit - not 'the clergy', not the solitary 'believer-priest' with his or her Bible, not 'the whole church in council,' [sic] since each of these is secured to and depends on others in the wheel, and since each in turn must swing beneath the discerning judgement of God.<sup>360</sup>

To further establish some pertinent aspects of the preacher's authority I will utilise Stephen Wright's work, where he similarly sets the 'authentic "performance" of Scripture' within the framework of 'unfolding narrative'.<sup>361</sup> The 'moments',<sup>362</sup> the previous chronological eras of God's unfolding purposes, 'in which God spoke and humans sought to relay to others what he had said', 'foreshadow' today's preaching ministry.<sup>363</sup> Here I take up three areas from his work that most notably connect with both ABBC and my thesis. First, there is no assumption that God has ceased to speak in our 'moment'. Like all the previous moments, God's speech and actions are mediated (amongst other ways) in preaching, by helping the community of faith to see and hear God in this moment and be enabled to act appropriately. That God still speaks is a tenet of evangelicalism, but a narrative focus shifts the emphasis of preaching. Properly authoritative preaching occurs when the preacher proclaims, performs and empowers the church to live appropriately within the unfolding narrative rather than just focusing on 'Bible truths', as in cognitive-propositional preaching. This narrative approach to preaching, then, chimes with my research interest in preaching that facilitates whole-life experience.

Second, whilst preaching is framed in the context of unfolding narrative, as in all previous moments, it is by virtue of being preaching, a human task despite being

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<sup>360</sup> James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Doctrine*, Systematic Theology Volume 2 with a New Introduction by Curtis W. Freeman (Waco, TX.: Baylor University, 2012), p.478.

<sup>361</sup> Stephen Wright, *Alive to the Word: A Practical Theology of Preaching for the Whole Church* (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp.82-105 (p.85 and p.84).

<sup>362</sup> Defined as such in Stephen Wright, *Word*, p.85.

<sup>363</sup> Stephen Wright, *Word*, p.107 (both).

divinely authorised. Wright notes that in the biblical moments there are reports of people giving their own opinions on matters without divine authority, on which the Bible gives 'a ruthlessly negative evaluation'.<sup>364</sup> That the same could happen in our moment is incontrovertible, in relation to preacher or congregant. A guard against inappropriate preaching authority is on one side the congregation's authority that comes from God, and on the other the preacher's hopefully humble sense of standing between God and the congregation, knowing God gives authority to both. The preaching task therefore demands deep and genuine humility. I concur with Wright: 'We are neither claiming to be the sole spokespersons for God in that place, nor to have an immediate access to God's will and purpose that is denied to others'.<sup>365</sup> Whilst a narrative approach to preaching does not have a unique claim to the need for preaching with humility, this narrative model emphasising preaching as from within and to the community through a God-empowered and community-empowering preacher, in my consideration has a less authoritarian tone than a primarily didactic approach.

I take as an example to illustrate this, the archival *Good News* article cited in Chapter 2, written in response to a coffee morning discussion when someone asked the (then) pastor about healing. The resulting article was written because, 'There were some who did not altogether accept the Pastor's [sic] answer, which, was based on the Scriptures, and not what others had thought or experienced'.<sup>366</sup> Although the pastor immediately proceeded to say 'I am therefore "putting into print" exactly what I said, and you must now judge for yourselves', it carries an authoritarian tone, and an assumption of a static 'truth' mediated through the minister. A 'narrative' and softer

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<sup>364</sup> Stephen Wright, *Word*, p.107.

<sup>365</sup> Stephen Wright, *Word*, p.124.

<sup>366</sup> See p.44, n.89. *GN*, May 1977, p.4. Underlining original.

reply might have asked if the situation could help the church consider together how God might be speaking and acting in this moment of his drama. Whilst it is clearly not the case that didactic and cognitive preaching necessarily lacks humility, it seems to me that a narrative approach to the Bible and the faith community facilitates a gentler approach to preaching, and it therefore represents an appropriate theological and ethical position for the preacher.

Third, the task of preaching, as set within God's unfolding narrative, requires a clear interpretation of the world in which the church lives.

The good sermon contains both script analysis and situation analysis. It is in the sermon that the pastor weaves together theo-dramatic truth and local knowledge. The sermon is the best frontal assault on imaginations held captive by secular stories that promise other ways to the good life.<sup>367</sup>

A narrative view of scripture, the story of creation to new creation, is about more than being in the local church. God's drama in the Bible is the largest possible meta-narrative: a whole-world narrative. A narrative approach to preaching will be both world-affirming and world-critiquing. It is affirming because this is God's world, which by his authoritative word will finally lead to the new creation. As God has not abandoned his world, neither should his Church. The positive narrative ending offers great hope and peace, especially in an older-generation church that has lived through immense cultural change, change which ABBC interviewees are willing to embrace, not only in preaching style but in accepting technology such as PowerPoint. However, in terms of critique of the world, if the local church is to reach those outside its walls, it will inevitably have to reach those who live in a different narrative and persuade them to embrace the biblical one.

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<sup>367</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama*, p.456.

Whether a person of faith or not, all congregants inhabit the world, the stage for God's great drama. To live in the world without faith is to be on his stage but following another narrative. Here I draw upon useful material by Timothy Keller. He writes of 'Baseline Cultural Narratives' also calling them 'foundational cultural narratives', 'things that "everybody knows", premises that seem so self-evident as to be nearly invisible and unquestionable to those who hold them', but are "un-thoughts".<sup>368</sup> He names five such storylines: human rationality, history, society, morality and identity and then engages with them as the technology, history, freedom, morality and justice/identity narratives. Here, preaching actively engages with the world outside the church, helping people to see the 'invisible' narratives that govern their lives, and invites them to draw into a Christian narrative.<sup>369</sup> This is contextual communication whereby the preacher uses accessible vocabulary, employs culturally respected authorities, understands doubts and objections, affirms people in order to challenge them and offers the Gospel as appropriate to believers (who are themselves profoundly shaped by cultural narratives) and those who do not yet believe.<sup>370</sup> Keller's emphasis on contextualised preaching and the effect of culture on believers is highly significant in that it draws everyone into understanding and critiquing life narratives:

If you solve Christians' problems with the gospel every week, secular people are [...] seeing how faith in Christ actually works and brings about life change. [...] They are being evangelized very effectively, not superficially, even as Christians are being built up.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), pp.115-156 (p.115, three times, and p.127).

<sup>369</sup> As they are cultural narratives, it does not mean all cultures will share the same narratives.

<sup>370</sup> This wider context is addressed in Keller, pp.93-120.

<sup>371</sup> Keller, p.120. By 'the gospel' here he means the solution to every problem and advancement in Christian life, not just 'the "ABCs" of Christian doctrine only' (p.119).

Keller's approach gives attention to the wider world-narratives that inhabit the Church story than Campbell, whose attention is more on scripture as functioning to "build up" the people of God in and for the world'.<sup>372</sup> Interviewees recognised the need for help to live in the world. One interviewee spoke of the desire for a sermon to address, 'living, but not only inside the church but outside and how we should live our lives as a whole' and another said that 'It's got to relate to being on this earth'.<sup>373</sup> This attention is vitally relevant in preaching in that it acknowledges and confronts the world-narratives, equips Christians to resist them and draws people from them into God's Church and his meta-narrative, so allowing the Bible story to influence the whole world. Hence, and at last, I arrive at the final component of my 'narrative form' of preaching: preaching into the congregational and world narratives. I join them as one (though for convenience will refer to them as 'congregational narratives') since, as shown in interviewee comments, it is not possible to live in the congregation without living in the world outside it too, and as stated above, churchgoers are profoundly but not necessarily knowingly affected by world narratives too. Another perspective on the preacher's authority is therefore established here. If the congregation cannot see these 'invisibles', it is impossible for it to directly authorise the preacher to address them. The preacher's authority therefore must come from God as prophetic awareness of the church and the world to which the congregation may be blind.<sup>374</sup> Therefore, part of the congregational authorisation for the preacher must include a sense of, 'Help us even when and where we do not know we might need help'. In turn, this must be balanced by the preacher's willingness to speak gently, humbly

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<sup>372</sup> See p.158, n.347.

<sup>373</sup> I1T 10, p.2; I1T 04, p.12.

<sup>374</sup> Keller's work on cultural narratives makes an interesting parallel with my comments on individualism above. He calls the baseline 'Identity Narrative' the "'sovereign self'" (p.133). Given the evangelical focus on individual salvation, it is not outside the realm of possibility that an imbibed understanding of individualism from a cultural narrative could skew the sense of individual faith, thus creating (partial) blindness.

and helpfully, to woo the congregation into a greater sense of involvement in God's world.

This point of humility in the congregation and the preacher subtly hints at the importance of what has hitherto been unmentioned but is of fundamental and theological importance to preaching, namely the involvement of the Holy Spirit. In Osmer's introduction he speaks of leaders' openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>375</sup> Each of his four tasks commence with a spirituality pertinent to that task.<sup>376</sup> Not only the need for humility mentioned here, but the entire task of preaching is dependent on the involvement of the Spirit. Within a Trinitarian perspective on preaching, Michael Quicke affirms that 'the Holy Spirit is everywhere - in the revealing, preaching, listening, and living. Minds, hearts, mouths, ears, individual lives, and communities are all within his influence'.<sup>377</sup> Timothy Keller states, 'What the Holy Spirit is to do in the hearts of your listeners he will normally do first in and through you', and that the outcome of this for the preacher is (amongst other things) 'authority without swagger'.<sup>378</sup> The ABBC *Basis of Faith* affirms, 'The necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, conversion and sanctification, ministry and worship',<sup>379</sup> yet there was only one interview where the Holy Spirit was mentioned:

But you know as we sit in congregations the preacher might say something and...as has been said to me, you know, when you've been preaching people say, "How did you know about that?", and of course you don't...it's the Holy Spirit that's spoken through you[.]<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.27

<sup>376</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, pp. 33-41; 81-86; 135-139; 183-199.

<sup>377</sup> Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), p.59.

<sup>378</sup> Keller, p.205 and p.206.

<sup>379</sup> *Basis of Faith*, point 6.

<sup>380</sup> I1T 09, p.6. The word 'spirit' was elsewhere used in a human context. The lack of attention to the Holy Spirit in interviews could be of significance but it is not possible to be certain as to why there was no other comment. The starter questions did not ask for interviewees thoughts on the Holy Spirit and preaching.

Though this stands worryingly alone,<sup>381</sup> it highlights like the formal theology of the written literature that the whole endeavour of preaching is dependent not ultimately on the (albeit indispensable) human voice and words, but on the Holy Spirit, who must work in the preacher, preparation, performance and people for a sermon to be of value. The absence of similar comments by other interviewees may also passively suggest an espoused theology of the Holy Spirit: belief in the Holy Spirit is stated in the *Basis of Faith*.

Returning to Keller, it is not without a sense of irony in my mind that he largely adopts in his work a conventional exegetical approach to preaching whilst incorporating these crucial life-narrative perspectives. This again suggests that the narrative approach to preaching I am advocating is not a paradigm shift, as I stated in Chapter 1. It also suggests to me, however, that a focus on meta-narrative and the congregational narratives in preaching would be beneficial to ABBC: they naturally connect with narrative-critical interpretation, and together they offer great potential for culturally contextualised preaching which engages the range of individuals who comprise the congregation.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter I have examined the theological and normative task by which preaching should be shaped, using the rubric of authority in relation to the research findings. I conclude with a preaching framework and then a preaching model based on three core areas needing redress in light of ‘What should be going on?’.

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<sup>381</sup> Three members of the focus group spoke of the importance of the Holy Spirit.



The examination throughout this thesis has been a transition to a narrative form of preaching. I can now define my 'narrative form of preaching' as preaching set within the framework of three types of narratives: the particular sermon text(s), the meta-narrative of the Bible and the narratives of the congregation/world. This I call threefold narrativity. Seeing the Bible as the narrative to be indwelt enables the preacher to encourage the congregation to 'enter the text' or, as I encouraged people to do, position themselves as first-generation readers in my narrative approach. However, others use the reverse narrative process to mine: 'We are not so much enjoined to get inside the text, as to let the text get inside us, so that we are nourished by its word and enabled to perform its story'.<sup>382</sup> Either way round, the objective is to be in the action: 'not mere storytellers but *story-dwellers*'.<sup>383</sup> Setting this alongside my congregational research findings, I conclude that a transition to threefold narrativity as a form of preaching would be a helpful one.

Within this narrative model for sermons, the preacher's role would not so much be a facilitator/actor (following Campbell) or a stage director (following Vanhoozer) but would naturally be described in narrative terminology. I see benefit in the concept of the preacher as 'narrator'. Take the following quote about the literary role of the narrator. It seems quite pertinent to me that if one substitutes the word 'preacher' for narrator, and 'congregation' for (implied) reader, the role of the preacher fits rather neatly in terms of the themes and concerns of this chapter:

The narrator is a voice in the narrative itself that guides the reader to some understanding of the story. The narrator's voice provides a point of view for the story, which the reader may assume is the perspective from which the narrative makes sense. Readers are usually required to trust the narrator and how that

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<sup>382</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.139.

<sup>383</sup> Vanhoozer, *Faith*, p.29, his italics.

voice interprets events and characters. However, narrators are not always reliable and may mislead the implied reader. Furthermore, they are not always all-knowing in their perspective and are therefore limited in what they can say about the narrative.<sup>384</sup>

This, for myself, as I move towards the pragmatic task, sets a useful framework for the task of preaching. Before addressing that task, however, I further clarify my preaching model, which is made up of three core areas, each needing redress in the light of 'What should be going on?'

First, *threefold narrativity* in preaching. The Bible is the meta-narrative of God's drama. In applying the narrative/script concept to specific Bible texts of individual sermons, I consider that my nuance of narrative-critical interpretation is an ideal complement. It is the micro-narrative parallel to the meta-narrative of the Bible, as both aim to elicit integration, involvement, absorption and action. Preaching in this framework is much more than offering cognitive information. The third crucial narrative is that of the current-world moment, the context and situation(s) of the congregation. Threefold narrativity is the inter-relationship of these three narratives.

Second, *involved community*. As I have shown, the preaching significance of God's authority links directly with the congregation: no congregation, no preaching. I conclude that in the local setting a greater emphasis should be placed on both preacher and congregation being dynamically involved in the preaching task. The logical flow of authority via the congregation needs to be substantially increased, creating a community that is more than simply a gathering of listeners.

Finally, *bold humility* must be the hallmark and outworking of God's authority for the preacher. This oxymoron reflects the constructive tension of the preacher being

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<sup>384</sup> Kysar and Webb, p.79. I would prefer another word for 'understanding', perhaps 'indwelling'.

logically subsequent to the congregation but theologically positioned by God to nurture, develop and if necessary challenge or confront the community. The boldness required to do this remains short of arrogance and authoritarianism precisely because of the humility of being one of the congregation as the preacher, being aware that preaching is a human task alongside a divinely authorised one, and knowing that God has authorised the preacher to nurture and help, not rule over or dominate the congregation.

The final part of the reflective cycle is to address the practical task of how to establish what has come out of the normative task. Osmer calls it the pragmatic task. I call it transforming the congregation. To this I turn in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5. Transitioning Preaching: The Pragmatic Task

The final task in Osmer's cycle is pragmatic: 'How might we respond?'.<sup>385</sup> His answer is by 'forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable'.<sup>386</sup> After examining three forms of leadership, task competence (performing the leadership tasks well), transactional leadership (influencing others through trade-offs) and transforming leadership, Osmer concludes that although all are needed it is transforming leadership that is most needed for the pragmatic task: 'Leading an organization through a process of "deep change" in its identity, mission, culture and operating procedures'.<sup>387</sup> This requires a 'Spirituality of Servant Leadership', which is best thought of as '*leadership that influences the congregation to change in ways that more fully embody the servanthood of Christ*'.<sup>388</sup>

This has a twofold bearing in my preaching situation. Embodied servanthood applies to both the congregation and myself as the preacher. I have noted through this thesis that my research has suggested a past perception of preaching in ABBC as one of informational teaching, a focus on knowing God rather than serving him, as shown in the predominance towards conveying information rather than outworking of faith in the archival sermon notes. Osmer's language of servanthood, a word conveying a sense of obedient action, is therefore particularly apt and pertinent in redressing this and leading the congregation to what he calls 'covenant-as-service-of-God'.<sup>389</sup> His

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<sup>385</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.4.

<sup>386</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.176.

<sup>387</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.178.

<sup>388</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.183 and 192, his italics.

<sup>389</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.194.

approach is highly relevant for (potentially) effecting a transition in ABBC from preaching-as-learning to preaching-as-doing: eliciting service. His pragmatic task also addresses the servant leader, and therefore I must reflexively attend to myself as servant-leader-preacher. The preacher's task is not simply to teach but to 'prepare God's people for works of service' (Eph. 4:12, NIV). This links directly back to the 'bold humility' with which I ended Chapter 4. Furthermore, given the hardship of servant leadership (which inevitably leads to 'fellowship of Christ's suffering'), Osmer states the paradox that the less you are attached to the congregation the deeper your relationships will be.<sup>390</sup> By attachment he means here the leader's dependence on the congregation for personal affirmation, security, self-worth and power, especially in view of the fact that deep change promotes conflict and resistance. This has a particular connection to the subject of distance in preaching. I considered this in Chapter 3 in relation to Michael Brothers' work, which was itself set in the framework of Craddock's work on the distance and closeness between preacher and the audience/congregation.<sup>391</sup> I highlighted that Brothers defined distance as the vitally important space in order that people can willingly choose to listen. For Brothers, unlike Craddock, the framework was for those who 'have *never heard* it before'.<sup>392</sup> My approach to 'distance' will take a different turn again, by both distancing from the congregation by standing 'opposite' (metaphorically standing back to better understand and address difficulties), but also by my own distancing from *self*, particularly in relation to developing bold-humility. I will return to this later in the chapter.

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<sup>390</sup> Osmer, *Theology*, p.196 and p.198.

<sup>391</sup> See pp.129-131.

<sup>392</sup> Brothers, p.146. The 'it' in his statement relates to Craddock's subtitle to *Overhearing: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Those Who Have Heard it All Before*.

My primary situational concern is how the ongoing process of transition is going to be brought about in a desirable way to achieve benefits to preaching that I have concluded are available through a narrative form of preaching. The general answer to this, stated clearly in the focus group, is that it must be done gradually. With that in mind, and with the positive comments made about this style of preaching, I conclude that no formal decision has to be made at a membership or congregational level, as that would itself be a 'rule-book' approach, the very thing I am seeking to change. It may be that in due course the church might see the need to revise the *Basis of Faith* regarding the purpose of scripture, as I suggested in Chapter 4.

In this chapter I will suggest mechanisms to effect transition in the three core areas with which I concluded Chapter 4. These relate to the preaching method, the preaching context and the preacher: threefold narrativity, congregational involvement and bold humility. However, I will also look to the potential transferability of findings by occasional interjections on how preachers and churches outside of my own situation and tradition might benefit from this research.

### **THREEFOLD NARRATIVITY**

In Chapter 1 I established that there was no fundamental inconsistency with using narrative principles of interpretation with biblical texts in an evangelical church setting. In Chapter 2 I established through congregational research that interviewees found the narrative-critical sermons I preached to be helpful, even advantageous. My wide-ranging Chapter 3 considered the links between my own and established research in matters like age-related issues, differences between how preachers tend to approach texts compared to congregants and understanding how different learning styles within a congregation can inform preaching. In Chapter 4 I set my narrative-critical approach within the meta-narrative of God's overall narrative and also

examined the congregational context in terms of world narratives. This led to my conclusion that preaching could usefully be set in the framework of threefold narrativity. The question now is: *how can the preaching context in ABBC be transformed to maintain this threefold narrativity?*

At the micro-narrative level, general principles of narrative criticism as detailed and adapted in Chapter 1 can continue to be implemented, given the endorsements made of my narrative-critical sermons by interviewees and focus group members. Furthermore, lack of any stated concerns about the sermon style being inappropriate within an evangelical context is a further sign of acceptability. On the meta-narrative level, preaching needs to focus on the Bible as an overall narrative. The ongoing conscious shift towards narrative must reduce but not remove the focus on the Bible as propositional truth, the latter being set within the overall narrative framework. The storyline, the 'acts' of God's drama must set the perspective that shapes the immediate preaching text, irrespective of that text's literary genre. To complete the threefold narrativity, preaching will seek to fully integrate and where necessary change the personal and congregational narratives in order to appropriately connect them with the micro- and meta-narratives of the Bible. This overall aim is ambitious but important, necessitating a transition that requires a mental and church cultural shift to seeing the Bible as much more than a collection of micro-texts which are mined for information in sermons, but rather seeing it as a whole narrative: God's story. As congregants increasingly indwell this story, any world narratives that are inconsistent with it will be seen as deficient and unhelpful to flourishing of faith. Even so, the transition will be a challenging one, as I now show.

It is important to consider the inter-dynamics of the three narrative forms. I see the homiletical task not so much as that of merging the biblical micro- and meta-narrative

with the congregational narratives, but more of a pulling back and pulling forward. The pulling back is into the biblical narrative from the congregational and cultural (world) narratives. Whilst this inevitably has a sense of historical backwards movement ('back to Bible times'), by virtue of the detail that we are still in the NT (Church) act, the pulling back is more from our world narratives to our biblical act rather than a time shift. It means to think, feel, act and live in the biblical narrative rather than the current world narrative. This is therefore not strictly a 'merging of horizons' but is potentially a clash of narratives in preaching, a clash which intends that the congregant (whether an established Christian or someone seeking faith) is absorbed into the biblical narrative rather than that of the world.<sup>393</sup>

Here, my proposal converges with that of John Wright in *Telling God's Story*.<sup>394</sup> His homiletical method is premised on the biblical meta-narrative,<sup>395</sup> along with the importance of utilising 'comedic' and 'tragic' moments in preaching.<sup>396</sup> The tragic moment challenges ('convictions are cast open') whereas the comedic moment affirms ('Comedic preaching never opens up the hearers to the genuinely new, the possibility of a different narrative').<sup>397</sup> Although 'not fun to experience', the outcome of the tragic moment is positive:

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<sup>393</sup> The language of 'Horizons' and merging them ('fusion') originated in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Bloomsbury Revelations, revised second edition, trans. by J. C. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), the original German of which was first published in 1960. By 'horizons', Gadamer means multiple stand-points and views, and by merging them (fusion) a greater understanding occurs. I emphasise here that there is a tension ('clash') between the biblical and contemporary horizons/narratives. As Andrew Roger's states, 'Gadamer is careful not to imply that complete fusion can occur between horizons, since in every horizontal encounter there is "the experience of a tension between the text and the present"'. Rogers, p.61.

<sup>394</sup> John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2007).

<sup>395</sup> He cites the five/six Act drama in relation to Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*. Wright, p.80.

<sup>396</sup> Wright, pp.32-45. Wright's comic/tragic terminology here, and mine following, is distinguished from the use of the same terms by Hopewell (esp. pp.58-61).

<sup>397</sup> Wright, p.39 and p.38.



To speak theologically, the tragic moment of application provides the opportunity for repentance - a personal turning arising out of genuine self-knowledge - and conversion - the incorporation of human life within the biblical narrative of God's redemption of all creation through Jesus Christ.<sup>398</sup>

If this outcome is successfully accomplished through threefold narrative preaching, then congregants' faith will instinctively have a whole-life focus rather than simply being mentally engaged with scripture. I will address ways of moving towards this outcome shortly, but first I address the other 'pull' of threefold narrativity.

Threefold narrative preaching ought to instinctively pull the congregation forward. Having moved back into the biblical narrative and situated the congregation in the NT, the great hope and climax is clearly focused on the New Creation, the full and final reign of God, as seen in what I called the 'Final Curtain' when preaching through the book of Revelation. This denouement pulls the Church forward. Threefold narrativity will always have this eschatological pull: the drama is not over, as we await closure and completion. This is the final and glorious 'comedic' moment that prevents the pain of 'tragic' preaching from becoming overwhelming. Preaching in ABBC should therefore regularly affirm God's ultimate reign and the New Creation. If a threefold narrative preacher has not drawn the congregation both back and forward (as here defined), the task has not been effected properly.

From the position of this threefold narrativity, it is clear that preaching will not be structured as Bible-based information offered in 'points', followed by a brief 'application' (or none!). I offer three reasons for this. Firstly, 'points' tend towards informational learning and separate off 'application' in a way alien to narrative engagement. Secondly, the congregation does not simply comprise 'recipients' of application, as highlighted in both my congregational and scholarship-based

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<sup>398</sup> Wright, p.42 and pp.42-43.

research (Chapters 2 and 3). Thirdly, interviewee responses suggested involvement in making conclusions and outcomes from the sermon: 'we have to do some work',<sup>399</sup> whereas 'application' as a distinct part of a sermon largely suggests that it is the preacher's role and responsibility.

It is critical that the congregation (not simply the preacher) addresses the real but earthly narrative that completes the threefold narrative. It is the congregants, individually and corporately, who must face and resolve the 'tragic moments' and be increasingly absorbed into the biblical narrative. This form of preaching therefore depends on and must reflect a more equilateral (triangular) threefold narrative appearance rather than a straight line of information to application. Congregational relevance, engagement and outcomes (more appropriate words than 'application') should be embedded in the triangular sermon, not left as an 'afterword' (other than the afterward 'work' of congregants). The sermon will then be less compartmentalised. Furthermore, a word such as 'engagement' implies more than mental involvement but is appropriate to the whole person and community entering into the sermon with mind, emotions, will, and spirit in the context of the personal and congregational narratives.

My own pragmatic question is: *how can the preaching context be transformed?* I have so far delineated how threefold narrative preaching in ABBC should be constituted and highlighted the significant benefit of creating whole-life faith. The question remains as to how this might be implemented. Two specific preaching activities beyond narrative-critical interpretation will help the congregation to refocus its

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<sup>399</sup> See p.85, n.153.

perception of both faith and preaching towards threefold narrativity: drawing attention to the meta-narrative and the congregational narratives.<sup>400</sup>

A meta-narrative perspective on preaching requires a conscious and informed change in how the congregation approaches the Bible, a move away from sole dependence on biblical sentence statements, ‘The Bible says in [Chapter and verse]...’ to what the Bible shows in its big picture. However, conveying the big picture only passively in preaching would, I consider, lead to an inadequate awareness of its central importance among the congregation. The congregation will need to be actively, clearly and regularly informed of the narrative status of the Bible. Since being drawn to a narrative approach to preaching, I have used various tools and opportunities to help people see the big picture. I suggest three that can help transform a congregation’s approach to the Bible.

First, overviewing a book of the Bible in one session has proven useful. Once a month I did this with what I called ‘Book of the Month’ showing where a book fitted into the Bible and outlined its main structure and themes. Numerous people said how useful they found this.<sup>401</sup>

Second, resources that convey the meta-narrative of the Bible in visual ways help a congregation to refocus on the Bible as a whole account rather than thinking of it simply as a collection of books. These include a pack produced by Matthias Media called *Bible Overview*,<sup>402</sup> Bartholomew and Goheen offer their own resources and a

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<sup>400</sup> I will address helping people to understand the micro-narrative in the following section on language.

<sup>401</sup> This was before my formal research and therefore I have no PRD references, and hence my casual reference here, although my perception of those occasions is clear and positive.

<sup>402</sup> M. Brain and others, *Bible Overview Leaders Resource DVD* (Matthias Media, 2007); M. Brain, and others, *The Bible Overview Workbook* (Matthias Media, 2001).

thirteen week course to go with *The Drama of Scripture*,<sup>403</sup> easy level reading and personal or group study material such as Vaughan Roberts', *God's Big Picture* could be used.<sup>404</sup> My own experience is that people find it a new but really helpful experience to see the Bible as a whole. This therefore usefully 'kickstarts' an understanding of meta-narrative. From there, ongoing specific opportunities should be made to affirm the narrative framework both for reinforcement and for the benefit of newer congregants.<sup>405</sup> For ongoing preaching, resources like the emerging volumes in *The Story of God Bible Commentary* series, which seeks to 'explain and illuminate each passage of Scripture in light of the Bible's grand story' could help the preacher maintain a whole Bible focus.<sup>406</sup>

Third, following Keller in my Chapter 4, highlighting cultural, world and personal narratives will be crucial in effecting a good transition to threefold narrative preaching. This requires that the preacher will need to be constantly aware of and assessing culture in order to implement this aspect of the framework. In line with Karl Barth's adage of sermon preparation as taking the Bible and the newspaper in each hand,<sup>407</sup> threefold narrative preaching by necessity requires careful and committed study of culture, but the dividends are significant.

Utilising Keller's insights, I preached a series of five sermons in ABBC to address the subject of what I called 'Life Narratives'. After the first week, which included a series introduction before looking at 'Identity', a home-group leader explained that she had

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<sup>403</sup> Bartholomew and Goheen, p.15.

<sup>404</sup> Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009).

<sup>405</sup> More will be said regarding ongoing and more general references to meta-narrative in the following section on language.

<sup>406</sup> HarperCollins Publishers, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 'God's Great Story – Brought to Light', para. 1 <<http://www.storyofgodseries.com>> [accessed 22 March 2017].

<sup>407</sup> John Stott notes a prior and similar comment by C. H. Spurgeon. John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), p.149.

started the group discussion based on the sermon by asking whether people understood what the series was about. Amongst other comments, the leader stated,

2 [sic] people said they were not sure where the sermon was going when you started because what you said was new to them but by the end of the sermon they could follow your train of thought. They also said they had never thought about what there [sic] identity was or from where they derived it. So it had been a thought provoking exercise.<sup>408</sup>

What is striking here is that the sermon was seen as being 'new', and that something as central as 'identity' had never been considered, or from where a sense of it was derived. This confirms a matter I raised relating to the normative task, namely that the preacher must address things that are unrecognised by the congregation. It highlights that my threefold narrative form of preaching is bringing a new dimension to the attention of congregants, an encouraging sign that people are 'latching on' to the changing form.

Having looked at ways of establishing and maintaining threefold narrativity as a framework for preaching, I now turn to ways in which it can be affirmed in language used in the sermon itself.

### **Preaching Language**

The primary task, at least as a preacher in ABBC, has been to help people understand the meaning of 'Narrative'. On various occasions I have tried to take it to basic principles, for instance using the illustration of a murder mystery with its connection of events, sometimes with a 'twist' that reaches a conclusion and where a value system is seen: murder is wrong and justice should be done. The preacher

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<sup>408</sup> Email correspondence, 12th July 2016.

may have to start with basics. Clearly, to use the model of threefold narrativity, the congregation must understand what narrative is.

Through a process of time and explanation, a congregation under transition would become more informed and aware of narrative vocabulary and principles. In keeping with the premise cited in Chapter 1 that specialised expertise is not required in order to focus on the present form of the text, the preacher should avoid technical terms since they would introduce the ‘complicated jargon’ that Kysar and Webb highlight.<sup>409</sup> Furthermore, as shown by the comment of one interviewee, appearing overly academic must be avoided.<sup>410</sup>

A clear preaching implication of threefold narrativity will also require a fundamental language change in approaching the Bible. It will transition from language like, ‘The Bible says’ (an informational approach) to expressions like, ‘How does this make you feel?’ or ‘What does this make you want to do?’. This kind of language speaks of engagement, self-reflection and action. These language choices clearly convey a sense of wider life connection than cognitive learning; the words have the tone of a narrator rather than a teacher, and they are an important part of refocusing preaching. As I found from my ‘Downside-up’ series responses in Chapter 2, it is helpful for the preacher to ask congregants to put themselves in the position of being an enthusiastic early generation reader of the text, thus linking the narrative worlds of past and present, or to place themselves within a character in the story, which is significantly different to ‘what can we (cognitively) learn’ language.<sup>411</sup> To a church that has a stronger sense of faith as belief than practice, any preacher’s language

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<sup>409</sup> See pp.21-22, n.38.

<sup>410</sup> See p.57, n.108.

<sup>411</sup> Choosing their own character association overcomes the wrong assumption of the preacher that congregants will share the preacher’s character association, as considered in Chapter 3.

needs to convey a sense of affirming that we believe by what we *do* alongside that to which we assent. Some time ago I was drawn to a simple but profound detail noted by Peter Hicks regarding English translations of the NT Greek verb, *pisteuō*. Its associated noun, *pistis* translates as 'faith'. However, as English has no verb 'to faith', it often uses the verbs 'persuade' or 'believe' instead.<sup>412</sup> Hicks concludes: '[A] profound influence that has affected our concept of faith is the stress on reason'.<sup>413</sup> Having explained this to the congregation, I often assert that to believe we must be 'faithing' in God in our lives and actions. Having repeatedly explained this, I sometimes even use the verb 'to faith', even in direct Bible reading when appropriate. This simple change of language is consciously planned in order to transition people to a stronger sense of belief as action: faith as a verb.

Preaching in ABBC and similar churches seeking a transition must increasingly use the language of narrative and practical faith in action whilst not ignoring the language of faith as belief. It would, in my opinion, be extremely unlikely that preachers in ABBC or similar churches would be unaware of the need for action-based faith, yet ironically, an espoused belief in such faith does not itself necessarily create it! The simplest way to check the balance and ensure a practical emphasis, until it becomes 'second nature' is for the preacher to continually re-read and assess their notes, in a similar way to how I overviewed my own sermon notes in Chapter 3 as per Härtner and Eschmann, but specifically look in order to compare the number of sentences containing believing faith and practical faith, and where necessary rebalance the sermon.

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<sup>412</sup> Peter Hicks, *What Could I Be? A Handbook on Becoming More like Jesus* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2005), pp.34-35.

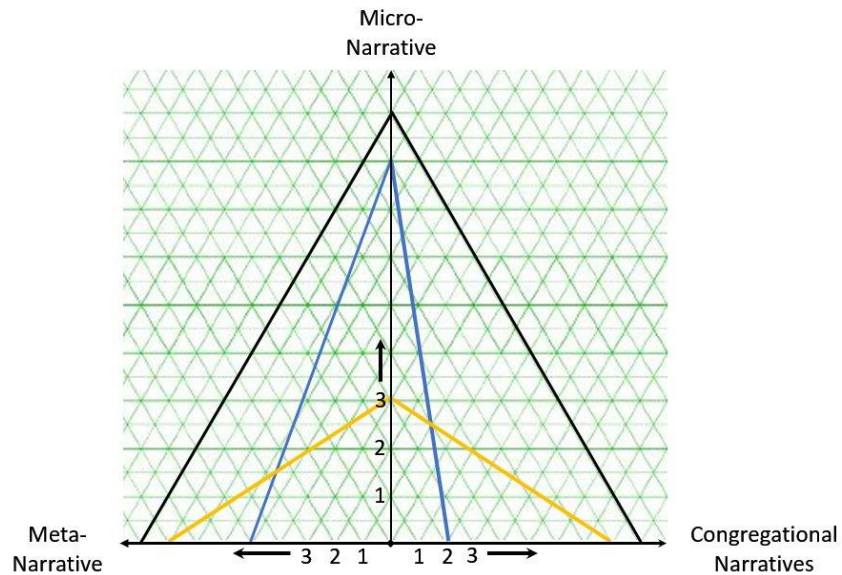
<sup>413</sup> Hicks, p.35.

Finally, whilst I propose a model of threefold narrativity, I do not propose a particular or even general structure for all sermons. Since not all biblical material is directly narrative, and by definition of my model being threefold, there will inevitably and appropriately be particular emphasis at particular times in particular sermons. This will lead to particular styles. By example, the 'Downside-up' was intentionally set with a strong micro-narrative focus and so adopted strong narrative-critical principles directly commencing with the biblical text. The 'Life Narratives' series focused on human experience in our world and then led to the biblical narrative, and thus was a more inductive style of preaching. Threefold narrativity sets a conceptual framework for preaching rather than a direct sermon structure, and therefore offers flexibility, giving a positive variety of sermon styles, as highlighted in my two series mentioned above. As with the preacher's monitoring of the believing/behaving balance using sentence counting, the preacher could look at the threefold balance in sermon notes to see relative proportions. I would add the caveat that, because of the variety of sermon styles and proportions, an ongoing average through a number of sermons and series should be taken rather than expecting a perfect 'equilateral triangle' for each sermon or series.

If a preacher so wished, the relative proportions of a sermon could be shown on isometric triangular graph paper to visualise the sermon balance. Diagram 5 below shows this overall visual perspective with a visualization of two hypothetical sermons, though the numbering is for display purpose here and does not realistically reflect the number of sentences in a sermon.



Diagram 5: Threefold Narrative Triangle



The yellow triangle represents a sermon containing strong elements of congregational narratives and the Bible meta-narrative but is lacking a micro-narrative focus by not being strongly rooted in a particular text. The blue triangle is highly focused on the micro-narrative, is moderately connected with the meta-narrative but largely lacking in active connection with congregational narratives (by drawing people into the text rather than starting with their current lives). Such a sermon will leave the congregation with work to do in order to connect it with their lives. Although there is less connection with congregational narratives, strong engagement with a micro-narrative (particularly the type, for instance, in ‘Downside-up’) should still leave congregants deeply involved at a personal level, and may implicitly connect with congregational narratives although these connections may not be directly stated.

However the preacher utilises the model, it is important to assess the ongoing balance or to be clear why a particular sermon is developed as it is. However, the model facilitates sermon planning in that ongoing series can be planned to

deliberately focus on a particular ratio of the three, and if deemed appropriate, a different emphasis to the previous series.

Having examined the pragmatic aspects of threefold narrativity, I now turn to my two other requirements that will facilitate this form of preaching: congregational involvement and the inner person of the preacher.

## **INVOLVED COMMUNITY**

My unexpected research finding of the desire amongst interviewees for direct involvement in the sermon was not directly connected with a narrative form for preaching. It is serendipitous, however, that the congregational finding occurred in my research regarding the potential of transitioning to a narrative form of preaching. Speaking of a turn away from preaching that uses 'Sovereign models' (dependent on the preacher's unilateral authority as God's mediator, in an hierarchical relationship) McClure states, 'Inductive and narrative preaching have gone a long way toward overcoming some of the problems associated with sovereign preaching'.<sup>414</sup> Inductive and narrative preaching create symmetrical rather than hierarchical relationships, and despite little direct attention to what he means specifically by 'narrative',<sup>415</sup> McClure makes the important point that narrative and congregational involvement sit comfortably together, as do my interest in a narrative form of preaching and interviewee interest in sermon involvement. One simple but repeated proposal for involvement was to have a 'suggestion box' for people to nominate sermon topics or series. At one point I took this a stage further. Having planned to conduct a series based on hard hitting 'one liners' from Jesus' words in the Gospels that I called 'Shocking sound-bites', I asked people to offer their suggestions. Ultimately, the nine

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<sup>414</sup> McClure, p.31 and p.42.

<sup>415</sup> The fact that he cites Lowry's *The Homiletical Plot* is suggestive (*Pulpit*, p.41).

sermon series I planned was reshaped because five ‘sound-bites’ were suggested from the congregation. This impacted both my preaching and congregant interest:

I preached on one of the offered ‘Shocking sound bites’ this morning. The person who offered it thanked me after the service showing appreciation. Two more were offered today. It gives me a genuine sense that people are willingly and usefully involving themselves in the preaching material, and also that as I preached there was an increased sense of relevance because I knew the text had been suggested...<sup>416</sup>

Simple mechanisms like a suggestion box and verbal requests for suggestions are an easy way to signal that congregational involvement is acceptable and significant.

A more dramatic suggestion from interviewees was for direct interaction during the sermon: offering a life example or experience. Attention in homiletic literature is often focused on congregational involvement at the sermon preparation stage. McClure’s approach is a weekly roundtable collaboration of about ten people prior to the sermon.<sup>417</sup> Doug Pagitt suggests a more informal ‘sermon discussion group’ which ‘looks different from week to week depending on who shows up’.<sup>418</sup> This differs from my interviewee responses that suggested direct and spontaneous involvement. What potential does each offer in an ongoing transition in ABBC? I will examine the two possibilities.

First, my instinctive concern about pre-sermon discussion or collaboration in ABBC is that the church is not yet ready for such a mechanism for involvement. Weekday activities in the church rarely stretch towards double figure attendance, the oldest of the congregants often attend church for no more than the Sunday morning service, and for numerous people, attendance will be weather-, travelling assistance- and

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<sup>416</sup> PRD, 09 August 2015.

<sup>417</sup> See especially McClure, pp.59-94.

<sup>418</sup> Doug Pagitt, *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2014), p.185.

health-dependent. Those who might be able to attend without these concerns are inevitably the 'core' workers in the church, having numerous other tasks, and so even if good reason was given to promote attendance for pre-sermon preparation, I suspect it would be highly unlikely to be taken up at the moment or produce a representative group from within the church. It could, of course, become a realistic opportunity in a future reflective cycle, where pragmatic changes in this cycle lead to new opportunities in further cycles. Other churches looking at this model might judge the possibility to be more immediately realistic.

There seems to me a possibility that the ABBC home-group system might have latent potential for pre-sermon involvement. The arrangement is the use of study notes prepared for groups to utilise after the sermon. It would be possible for the home-groups to examine the sermon text or theme before it was preached and feed into the preparation by sending notes via email or a representative of the group speaking to the preacher, so that congregational involvement is ensured.<sup>419</sup> However, I am also mindful that questionnaire respondents almost universally found it helpful to reflect on the sermon afterwards, and might question why it should be changed. Furthermore, the home-groups are not fully representative of the whole church (but is any group - certainly a discussion group based on a 'who shows up' basis?) and without clear explanation and acceptance of this reversal of home-group study approach, I could imagine some resistance towards the transition. Nevertheless, it offers a means for congregational involvement in advance of the sermon.

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<sup>419</sup> The reference to email points to another interesting opportunity, but one which is more difficult in ABBC, namely that of using the internet to involve the congregation in sermon preparation. All the home-group leaders are computer literate and have email, and although I have highlighted an openness of this congregation to embrace technological change, there are numerous congregants who would not be able to directly be involved in web-based methods of involvement. For a positive assessment of its possibilities, however, see Michael J. Quicke, *Preaching as Worship: An Integrative Approach to Formation in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2011), Amazon Kindle e-book, pp.189-194.

The second aspect to congregational involvement in preaching is spontaneous involvement within the sermon itself. A clear advantage is in having first-person direct involvement, so avoiding preacher representation of congregational voices. My research findings regarding older generation church attenders and their lifetime of experience and wisdom, along with the suggestions from ABBC interviewees for direct involvement, reveals a powerful possibility for interactive preaching. This involvement needs to be directly encouraged by the preacher in terms of offering opportunities to contribute, and repeatedly making clear that this is entirely appropriate. However, disadvantages may include potentially hostile or inappropriate interruptions which could become a distraction, and concern to some people that they would have to join in or be asked to contribute against their will, a further distraction that would prevent them entering into the sermon. The preacher must therefore make clear that involvement is entirely voluntary.<sup>420</sup> It would be wise to note from this that a small setting where people know each other well may offer a more fruitful possibility for such interaction.

Another caveat, looking beyond myself as the regular preacher in ABBC, is that the preacher must be comfortable with it. I know from occasional interruptions from unknown 'fringe voices', visitors who present a hostile tone can be disruptive. Any discomfort I may have is not that they should interrupt - in principle I see it as a powerful mechanism - but that other congregants may become uncomfortable, depending on the tone and length of the interjection. I know from experience that it requires delicacy to prevent the interjector from overwhelming other congregants. Not all preachers might feel comfortable with having to lead the congregation through this, and therefore a preacher's personality and abilities need to be respected and

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<sup>420</sup> Heywood wisely notes six caveats to direct involvement, concluding that involvement is 'not to be lightly undertaken', pp.136-138 (p.138).

possibly developed. The positive side, however, is a clear message that the preacher is not authoritarian or the solitary voice in a sermon. Furthermore, by inviting spontaneous contributions to the sermon, the preacher is showing the bold humility with which I concluded Chapter 4 and will return to below. The boldness is in not knowing what might be said and how much it might change the dynamics of the sermon, and humility is seen in the affirmation that all congregants have a right to contribute.

Potential interjections from the congregation should not be assumed to be inherently challenging or confrontational, as indicated by suggestions of life illustrations or examples being offered. The assumption in the suggestions was to have positive and helpful life-experience contributions. This naturally connects with the congregational narrative within my narrative triangle. This, I posit, is the most critical area where the congregation can and must contribute, not because it cannot contribute to micro- or meta-narrative considerations in the sermon (I hope that increasing awareness of these things would lead to increasing contribution in those respects) but precisely because the congregational narratives (personal and corporate) by definition are within the congregation. To have only the preacher's voice representing congregational narratives is fundamentally limited. Whilst not being the exclusive contribution to the sermon (the preacher listens to God's narrative too), congregational life examples are a central and critical resource for preaching that should be developed in ABBC. This is a principle that could be beneficially transferred to other churches, depending on the other factors stated above.

What then of progress so far in ABBC? Following the positive suggestions for involvement I created opportunities to draw congregants into sensing a freedom to interject and be publicly involved in sermons. I gave verbal cues and opportunities

for people to be spontaneously involved. Unsurprisingly, some congregants were more willing than others. Initially the level of interaction tended to be general, like a nod of identification or occasional show of a hand of assent if I encourage people to identify with something or express a variant view. When I invited verbal interaction, it tended to be at most a brief comment rather than a filled-out life experience. I looked for ways to develop this further, and found that the most productive way seemed to be to interact with the congregation at the beginning or end of a sermon as an ‘opener’ or closing community reflection. I noted one occasion of how I commenced a sermon:

We thought and discussed the issue of being lost. I asked people to give illustrations of when they had been lost or had lost someone temporarily. Numerous people responded and we went on to think together about different perspectives, like who allowed them to get lost or different reactions to being lost, which ranged from fear to going and having an ice cream even as a child! We set up a practical base for speaking about the subject. It worked really well as an example of congregational involvement in thinking about the sermon material.<sup>421</sup>

Conversely, I recorded elsewhere,

Preached a sermon today where at the end I deliberately chose to ask the congregation for reflections and areas of life that people would like the sermon material to affect them. After a slight pause, four people raised areas of personal or corporate church concern, which we then reflected on together and prayed for. It seemed a really useful time to embed the material and showed a strong sense of engagement from the congregation.<sup>422</sup>

Interaction at the beginning or end offers natural points for the congregation to be involved, and also has the advantage of not breaking up the preacher’s contribution

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<sup>421</sup> PRD, 26 July 2015. McClure wisely points out that congregational input into sermons should not simply be used to ‘shore up’ the preacher’s messages (p.23). This is equally true in spontaneous contributions as it is at his round-table.

<sup>422</sup> PRD, 24 April 2016. This is an excerpt from a longer record.

or train of thought. However, I also tested out the possibility of creating interjections deliberately throughout a sermon:

I structured the sermon around four areas where God is not like us - he is eternal, independent, unchangeable and everywhere. I said at the outset that after reading Bible verses and offering brief thoughts about each that I would ask if anyone had any reflection on how they responded to each part in terms of understanding God, an emotional reaction or a behavioural response to the material. Twenty-one people were present, and I recall eight making responses, some multiply. Responses were varied and included someone coming to the front to give a visual illustration, a personal testimony, and an appreciation that God would want to make and love us.<sup>423</sup>

Clearly, with advanced notice, a number of people in this particular congregation were comfortable about being directly involved in the sermon as it progressed.

Afterwards I noted,

[O]ne person [A first time visitor] spoke to me afterwards saying they were (positively) surprised by the style and found lots to think about, seemingly suggesting that the group input had been fertile and stimulating.<sup>424</sup>

What is crucial here is the willingness of the preacher to be an agent of transformation: servant leadership. A congregation may wish to be actively involved in sermons, as ABBC has shown, but it will require the preacher to willingly encourage and lead the congregation into involvement. I have suggested some ways in which this might be done actively, but neither should more passive ways be ignored. Language use can remind the congregation of its corporate responsibility. I have long since pointed out, for instance, where NT textual language speaks of the plural 'you' where we cannot clearly distinguish it from the singular 'you' in English.<sup>425</sup> This simple

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<sup>423</sup> PRD, 19 September 2016.

<sup>424</sup> PRD, 19 September 2016.

<sup>425</sup> Michael Quicke makes the same point in *Worship*, p.153.



ongoing reminder states that the congregation is one and must work together, including within sermons. Other language, for instance verbally recognising Multiple Intelligences, reminds people that we can usefully bring, use and relate to our differences.<sup>426</sup> The more the church imbibes the reality that one congregation has many and varied human narratives and intelligences that can be brought to the preaching, the more impetus will be given to challenge the historical privilege of the preacher to solely own the sermon. Congregational involvement is the clear evidence of a transformation to shared and common ownership: returning the Bible and preaching to the congregation.

## **BOLD HUMILITY**

This aspect of the preaching task directly relates to the person and character of the preacher. Though the person and character of the preacher is significant in all types of preaching, I will address areas that particularly intersect with my narrative form of preaching. I deliberately chose this oxymoron to reflect something of the sense of oppositeness the preacher needs to adopt. Along with the oppositeness of the two words, bold humility also requires distance, a positional oppositeness ('oppositeness' rather than 'opposition' avoids any pejorative or hostile implication) in relation to the congregation and possibly to the preacher's instinctive self. Bold humility is essential to successfully transition the preaching, the congregation and the preacher in order to facilitate greater flourishing. That one interviewee suggested that I sometimes let myself down by trying to please people too much, shows this area is clearly applicable to me.<sup>427</sup> It is therefore highly appropriate that I complete the reflective cycle on which I have embarked: personally, in terms of continuity for any other preachers in ABBC

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<sup>426</sup> In a similar way, Calvin Miller speaks of the 'collage' of right- and left-brained people in the congregation. Miller, Chapter 3, paragraphs 14-15, location 991.

<sup>427</sup> See pp.93-94, n.12.

if a transition is to be maintained, and by any preacher who would choose to adopt threefold narrativity for preaching.

### **Distance from the Congregation**

Bold humility is required because of the prophetic task of speaking from God to the congregation, standing 'opposite' the congregation as the human means by which God speaks to his people. This exemplifies the critical distance I considered in Chapter 3. In terms of my narrative form of preaching this can be described as recognising any challenging ('tragic') moments and helping the congregation to enter rather than avoid them. Bold humility is crucial to facilitate successful resolution to the clash of congregational narratives with the biblical one. Boldness with humility will address and direct this, but a clear temptation for the preacher (a possible subconscious narrative?) may be a preference to 'please people' and avoid clashes. Yet as I concluded in Chapter 4, the authoritative call of God to preach to his people even in their folly is not negotiable. To preach peace when there is no peace is not an option, and in threefold narrativity the preacher is required to stand back, to see a problem the congregation cannot see, expose the problem and bring people through it.

How then, does one preach of a dramatic clash of narratives when people would rather be affirmed than challenged? As stated in threefold narrativity, one important way forward is the pull towards the ultimate end, the overcoming of challenges by setting them in the context of the ultimately victorious ending. The congregation must be pointed towards and motivated by hope, ultimate good, the final act of the drama, when all people and all things in God's New Creation come into ultimate and appropriate peace. The preacher's task here clearly illustrates Osmer's key tasks of prophetic discernment and servant leadership. Both must be present, boldness to

stand aside and see and declare the ‘tragic’ situation, but with the humility of a servant leader, negotiating the moment with the congregation and before God, turning the congregation from inappropriate narratives to the biblical one.

The faithfulness of the preacher to the call of God is therefore paramount in this delicate task. Michael Quicke uses the term ‘full blooded preaching’ to refer to things such as having ‘theological spine’, being ‘grounded in a particular congregation’s transformation’ and a willingness to face conflict: ‘it is *courageous* because the preacher is first exposed to God’s challenge and then dares to tell out what it means’.<sup>428</sup> The threefold narrative preacher will need to be bold and yet filled with humility, fully respecting that the community cannot be coerced or pressurised into transformation. This to not to say that bold humility necessitates that all sermons will be heavily loaded with narrative clashes, or assumes that there is no affirmation for the congregation. Humility is constantly required in preaching, but when narrative clashes occur, the preacher’s bold humility will not ignore the reality that the need for transformation will inevitably induce tension. The combination of the boldness and humility of the preacher will hopefully guide the congregation to appropriate and willing transformation.

One small but significant practical strategy I have developed, which occurred spontaneously in a sermon one day, is what I light-heartedly called a ‘prickle alert’ to the congregation. I preached a sermon series on a theme called ‘Better Together’.<sup>429</sup> I sensed that there would be a number of what I now refer to as tragic/clash moments in the series. During one sermon, I casually suggested something like ‘let me give

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<sup>428</sup> Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Leadership: Preaching to Transform Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2006), Amazon Kindle e-book (Chapter 2, para. 52, locations 961-966). Conversely, thin blooded preaching amongst other weaknesses, ‘Avoids Conflict’ (loc. 525) and ‘offers no impelling counterstory’ (loc. 265).

<sup>429</sup> My records show it was in 2013, the year before I commenced my doctoral studies, and therefore I have no PRD record.

you a prickle alert that what I am about to say might challenge you, prickle you'. It was a preparatory cue for congregants to be able to gently absorb what I was about to say, and also offered an acknowledgement on my part that I understood that some things might sound harsh or judgmental (which doesn't necessarily mean they are!). This small but significant cue allowed me to raise appropriate boldness. Through the series and beyond, I have occasionally repeated this cue to the point that I do not have to explain it every time, though might do if I observe relatively new people are present. However, the fact that I do not use it regularly and only use it in relation to corporate church issues, suggests that it does not, in my opinion, dominate my preaching.

As an example in terms of a concern I have raised in this thesis, I might say in a sermon, having set a context for it, 'Prickle alert! As a congregation, we seem to be too individualistic, focusing on our own needs rather than looking to the whole'. This both prepares the congregation to hear something that it probably does not want to hear yet needs to, and also helps me to speak boldly, while hopefully also conveying gentleness and humility. It would ideally be followed with a connected statement like, 'It is important to deal with this because we all feel better when there is an overall peace rather than tension. We are better together'. Adding 'One day we will be together in eternal peace with each other and God' connects boldness, humility, tragic moment and eschatological hope. I am not suggesting this as a formula, but an example of how a preacher's calling, leadership, gentle honesty and preparatory language might combine to serve the congregation well.

I do, however, offer a caveat. In this position of oppositeness, the preacher must paradoxically not remove a sense of closeness to and with the congregation. That is why, in the illustration I gave, I said '*... we seem to be too individualistic*', in order to

include myself among the whole.<sup>430</sup> Furthermore, interviewees' comments such as the lectern being a potential barrier, advocating walking into the aisle and commending me for 'talk[ing] to the congregation but you're talking to me...as an individual at the same time',<sup>431</sup> highlight the desire for the preacher to be with the congregation. Distance without a sense of being with the congregation or preaching out of the congregation would lead only to separation and isolation of the preacher: opposition rather than oppositeness.

### **Distance from Self**

In Chapter 1 I stated that I am not suggesting a paradigm shift in relation to preaching. That related to my conclusion regarding narrative-critical interpretation of a micro-narrative. It is clear to me at this point that if it is still not a paradigm shift (I will return to this subject), it has significantly larger implications to my preaching than just at the micro-narrative level. Possibly the greatest of these is not directly in the text-to-sermon process but in sensing the respective authorities in the dynamics of the sermon, particularly the logical priority of the congregation in dynamic relation to the theological priority of the preacher acting for and before God.

The outworking of this for myself as a threefold narrative preacher affects the framework in which I look at the Bible (narrativity rather rule book), the attitude towards preaching (a gentler approach than the proverbial, 'Thus says the Lord') and the practical outworking for the congregation (absorption into God's story rather than 'teaching and application'). Being significant changes, these things move closer to becoming a paradigm shift. The personal significance is not so much whether moving

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<sup>430</sup> I am aware that there are varying views on we/you language when preaching, but it seems to me that a regular preacher should not seek to stand outside the tension or indeed the community when describing the local church.

<sup>431</sup> See p.153, n.332.

to the model I propose is a complete change or an adaptation, but the need to personally stand outside and distance myself from my previous instinctive preacher-self and be an increasingly bold yet humble threefold narrative preacher. Old habits die hard. Having been examining and changing my preaching style for some years now, and having considered ongoing changes, I still revert at times to old ways and language, for instance spontaneously and instinctively referring to 'application'. That sends old signals to the congregation. It has been effortful for me to stop using 'points' or reverting to a logical and sectional structure that has been so normative in sermons within my church tradition. When looking at a Bible text on which to preach, familiarity and sometimes time pressures tempt me to revert to my previous approach. Being an orderly and disciplined person by character, it would be much easier to prepare sermons without consultation with the congregation (something I readily admit I have not yet perfected) or have the uncertainty of spontaneous interjections as discussed above.

Inevitably I inhabit my own life and preaching narrative, which may create its own clashes. By definition every preacher will have their 'preacher narrative'. In recent years (prior to and including my doctoral studies) I have been exploring my own preacher narrative. I do not conclude that my previous preaching style was 'terminally ill', but became increasingly aware that it offered an informational rather than whole-person growth for the congregant. My early proposal regarding narrative-critical interpretation did not offer a paradigm change to my preaching but a development. However, through my research, reflection and reflexivity I have now come to a model that has greater change than I foresaw simply by utilising narrative-critical interpretation. In the fuller sense, my preaching model is significantly different to that prior to my research, in terms of my narrative approach to the Bible, the purpose of preaching (whole life flourishing rather than 'teaching') and active involvement of the

congregation. Together this is much more evidently a paradigm shift. However, it is not a paradigm shift to 'narrative sermons' (as per Lowry) since the examination of the process of change encompassed within this research (particularly the sermon series) did not lead to adopting a full shift from a didactic style of preaching. Rather, it extended my preaching to engage the whole person (rather than just the mind) and reached the whole and varied congregation, through threefold narrativity. This more limited transition was to effect manageable ('gradual') change within ABBC. By definition of an ongoing process, there is nothing to prevent narratively plotted sermons in the future. Indeed, such sermons could be used within my preaching framework precisely because it offers a model rather than a specific sermon type.

Conversely, it could be said that I am not proposing a forward change, a new development at all, but a return to the essence of the Bible as the narrative of God's story rather than a rule book; a return to a perspective where everybody is part of the community in the current act in God's drama and therefore is equally part of the sermon. In this sense, I have returned to a more 'biblically' normative understanding of preaching. Paradoxically, by standing in oppositeness to myself I have come closer to myself and am more fully aware of the task of preaching. I am therefore closer to what God always wanted of me as a preacher.

As this reflective cycle comes full circle, I have established for my own preaching what I have experienced personally and from the congregation to be an important and significant development to my form of preaching. It is by no means a complete revolution even though the cycle has come around. In the next cycle I plan to further pursue the investigation of stronger ways to involve the congregation alongside the spontaneity suggested and partially implemented in this cycle. I was delighted to realise, albeit late in my studies, that the Greek word from which we get 'homiletics'

means 'conversation'.<sup>432</sup> The conversation, whether about preaching or in preaching, must continue. Of one thing I can be sure: there will always be room for growth. 'The one golden rule of preaching is that God's preachers never cease needing to improve'.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Quicke, *Worship*, p.85.

<sup>433</sup> Quicke, *Worship*, p.248.



## Meta-Reflection

In following a reflective cycle in this thesis, I completed the cycle with the important task of implementing pragmatic change rather than simply reaching abstract conclusions. I have stated that preaching and improvement thereof does not reach a point of completion but is in constant flux. In drawing this thesis to a closure I shall not seek to conclude what remains ongoing, but rather reflect on this cycle. The end-point of my thesis, then, is a meta-reflection.

By using Osmer's reflective cycle my primary research question asking whether this church would benefit from a change of sermon style has been given a clear 'yes', given the conclusions from my six particular research questions. Congregational appreciation of narrative-critical preaching along with a desire for wider congregational involvement in sermons led to a preaching model that surpassed my initial expectations. The model reflects congregational concern for life engagement with, and in, sermons rather than assuming them to be the giving and receiving of information. At a deeper level this suggests to me that my narrative form of preaching, as I have defined it, touches upon a foundational issue. People live and function in both their narrative world and God's world, and there is therefore an instinctive human connection with narrative based sermons. As Klyne Snodgrass aptly puts it, 'Children

(and adults) do not say, "Tell me some facts"; they want a story'.<sup>434</sup> This is an important conceptual conclusion to my research.

In terms of my own process of change, my reflection is one of incalculable benefit. Even within the process of this cycle, I look back on the Downside-up sermons and note they were preached relatively early in my research and therefore lack the influence of some important insights that came into focus in the interviews and subsequent parts of the cycle (for instance utilising congregational interaction). In retrospect, it would have been useful to have some interviewee responses to sermons preached at the end of the cycle, but that was not possible practically, and arguably would constitute the start of a new cycle. Nevertheless, the cycle has exposed me to new thinking, a far more appropriate congregational framework for preaching by the removal of a binary dynamic simply between myself and God, which was then passed on to the congregation but primarily saw the listeners as recipients. My newfound triangularity of God - Congregation - Preacher is an element that in one sense is independent of a narrative preaching framework. It should be present in any form of sermon, and yet it sits perfectly comfortably with my threefold narrativity in that, as I have shown, the congregational narrative is critical to preaching. The richness of this finding parallels my unexpected discovery that people were willing and eager to offer themselves as research participants, something that I found only by overcoming my profound doubts regarding the likely willingness of people to wish or expect to contribute. That a significant finding from participants was a desire to be actively involved in sermons at the point of delivery was not only surprising but deeply ironic given my initial doubts.

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<sup>434</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2008), p.1.

However, my end-point delight regarding this is tempered by the reality that it is only a modest finding even in terms of the ABBC congregation. Although the voluntary cohort of interviewees represented around a quarter of the congregation, there still remained a significant number who doubtless could have had a significant contribution but may have offered very different, even opposing thoughts and desires, yet for whatever reason, chose not to do so. I would have liked to interview more people at the second stage interview for wider data, but I have stated why this was not possible. Subsequently, the small scale of the research meant that more complex coding, for instance across gender or the attitudes of longer standing compared to newer attenders, could not be established with a level of confidence. These would be useful factors to consider in future and larger research.

Osmer's cycle has been extremely helpful to me, not simply because of the four vital components that facilitated my broad ranging and interdisciplinary study, but because his essential leadership characteristics for each stage caused it to be deeply and personally reflective. The descriptive task rendered very different results to what I would have obtained without consultation. The interpretive task drew me to material I would never have otherwise considered. The normative task refocused my view towards approaching the Bible as (meta) narrative rather than rule book, and the pragmatic task comprised things I would never have considered as potential changes in my preaching style. As I reflect on and over the whole process, the prophetic task, with the need for discernment and courage has struck me as being highly significant personally for my task as a preacher. It was at this point in the cycle that my research focused more on normative theology rather than the direct congregational research, and standing back from the congregation, reflecting on the need to do so, and along with considering the narrative shape of the Bible gave me a sense of having a fresh framework for preaching in ABBC. However, I also sensed that change and challenge

could bring tension, and therefore needs prophetic courage. Nevertheless, it was at this point that the strands of my thesis came together, and in doing so it seemed to me that this was the core point of my own modest but (to me) significant contribution to knowledge in terms of a potentially transferable model for preaching.

Conversely, there are numerous areas of research that I was not able to include in the thesis but may well have been useful. I have not, or only briefly touched upon issues like the preacher's tone, body language, movement and personality. Neither have I drawn in some important areas that could contribute to narrative and active aspects to faith such as the liturgical year as an enacted faith narrative, or even preaching within the context of the sacrament of Holy Communion, itself an enactment of what in my tradition is often called 'The Lord's Supper'. These omissions further confirm my modest contribution, and yet positively the framework for preaching I have developed and adopted implicitly enables me to address some of those aspects. For instance, I now more clearly focus Holy Communion as an enactment – '*Do this* in remembrance'.

Finally, with a detail that was unexpected at the commencement of this research, as I approached the end-point of this formal study, but not for any reasons of the ongoing process of transition researched and suggested in this thesis, my time as the minister at ABBC drew to its conclusion. It was with some sadness of thinking that after the effort to produce this thesis, personally and from the congregation, it would in reality have no further cycles and development for me within ABBC. But its groundwork and production, along with the encouragement of those who expressed joy and gratitude at its development, remains. Furthermore, I have a preaching framework that will continue to develop elsewhere. Its personal transferability remains and I believe it will continue to shape and lead me into what I believe will be a greater sense of flourishing

in my own preaching ministry, and hopefully offer greater faith flourishing for those who share in and contribute to it.

## Appendix 1. Questionnaire on Preaching



### Questionnaire on Preaching

Tim Ford: [ABBC]

Thank you for being willing to help with research on preaching. Though it may not seem so, every question is helpful in understanding your needs and thoughts so please try to answer all of them by placing a tick in the appropriate bracketed box. Unless stated otherwise, in each question you must only tick **one** box only. If you change your mind, clearly cross out the wrong option and also put circle round the correctly ticked one. You must submit only one questionnaire.

#### Section 1: About You

1.1 Please state your gender Male [ ] Female [ ] Prefer not to say [ ]

1.2 Please state which age group you are in

18-29 [ ]	60-69 [ ]
30-39 [ ]	70-79 [ ]
40-49 [ ]	80+ [ ]
50-59 [ ]	

1.3 How long have you been attending [AB] Baptist Church [ABBC]?

Less than a year [ ]
1-4 years [ ]
5-9 years [ ]
10-14 years [ ]
15 years or over [ ]

## Section 2: General Preaching Expectations within [ABBC]

2.1 How often do you generally hear sermons in [ABBC]?

A weekly morning sermon

A weekly evening sermon

Weekly morning and evening sermons

A sermon less often than weekly

2.2 How long do you think a sermon should last? Not more than...

5 minutes  30 minutes

10 minutes  35 minutes

15 minutes  40 minutes

20 minutes  45 minutes

25 minutes  50 minutes

2.3 Do you routinely read over the Bible text(s) on which the sermon is based in your own time after hearing a sermon?

Yes  No

2.4 Do you regularly spend uninterrupted time reflecting and praying about what you heard in the sermon?

Yes  No

2.5 Do you attend a home group, at least in part because you see it as an opportunity to reflect on the sermon with others?

Yes  No

2.6 If you answered 'yes' to 2.5, does the home group help you to better apply the sermon to your life? If you answered 'no' to 2.5 please move on to the next question.

Yes  No

2.7 Do you regularly listen to a CD/MP3 recording of a sermon if you are not able to be in church for a service?

Yes [ ] No [ ]

2.8 Do you regularly listen to a CD/MP3 recording of a sermon as well as hearing it in church?

Yes [ ] No [ ]

2.9 Do you regularly listen to sermons outside of [ABBC]?

Yes [ ] No [ ]

2.10 If you answered 'yes', to 2.9, where do you hear other sermons? **You may tick as many of these boxes as is appropriate.** If you answered 'no' to 2.9, please move on to the next question.

At other churches [ ] Radio [ ]

TV [ ] Internet [ ]

Books/magazines [ ]

2.11 What do you think is the most important purpose of a sermon from this list?

To change my behaviour [ ] To teach about the Bible [ ]

To make me feel positive [ ] To build my faith [ ]

2.12 What would you put as second in this list?

To change my behaviour [ ] To teach about the Bible [ ]

To make me feel positive [ ] To build my faith [ ]

2.13 What would be third in the list?

To change my behaviour [ ] To teach about the Bible [ ]

To make me feel positive [ ] To build my faith [ ]

The next sections largely move from direct questions to a 'complete the following sentence' style, so tick the box that best completes the sentence. **Only complete section 3 if you have been at [ABBC] for over 12 years. Otherwise, go on to section 4.**



### **Section 3. Previous Preaching at [ABBC] (if you have been at [ABBC] over 12 years)**

3.1 I have been at [ABBC] for

12-19 years [ ]

20-29 years [ ]

Over 30 years [ ]

3.2 My general recollection of the style of previous preaching in [ABBC] is that it was

Verse by verse through a Bible text [ ]

About real life issues [ ]

A mixture of verse by verse and life issues styles [ ]

Neither verse by verse or life issues [ ]

or, (alternatively to completing the sentence)

I do not recollect anything about the preaching style [ ]

3.3 My recollection about the style of preaching is that it was generally

Very easy-going [ ]      Quite easy-going [ ]

Quite hard-going [ ]      Very hard-going [ ]

3.4 Looking back on previous preaching I have heard in [ABBC], most of all it

Changed my behaviour [ ]      Taught me about the Bible [ ]

Made me feel positive [ ]      Built my faith [ ]

3.5 Looking back, I think that the preaching tended to

Tell me what God or the preacher wanted to say [ ]

Make me think things out for myself [ ]

## Section 4. Current Preaching at [ABBC]

4.1 I think the preaching at [ABBC] tends to be

Verse by verse through a Bible text [ ]

About real life issues [ ]

A mixture of verse by verse and life issues styles [ ]

Neither verse by verse or life issues [ ]

4.2 I would say the style of preaching is generally

Very easy-going [ ]      Quite easy-going [ ]

Quite hard-going [ ]      Very hard-going [ ]

4.3 Generally, the preaching in [ABBC], tends to

Change my behaviour [ ]      Teach me about the Bible [ ]

Make me feel positive [ ]      Build my faith [ ]

4.4 I think that the preaching tends to

Tell me what God or the preacher wants to say [ ]

Make me think things out for myself [ ]

## Section 5. What is Helpful or Unhelpful to You in Sermons

5.1 I find it most helpful for a sermon to start from

The Bible text, and say what this means for my life [ ]

My life situation, and ask what the Bible says about it [ ]

5.2 I think a sermon should leave me

With clear and simple instructions as to what to do next [ ]

With questions and issues I can work out and then decide  
for myself what I need to do about it [ ]

5.3 I like to know the history and background to the Bible text used in a sermon

In lots of detail [ ]

In minimal detail [ ]

or,

I don't like to know the history and background [ ]

5.4 Among these options, the thing I find most useful in a sermon is

Learning what the text means [ ]

What it tells me I need to do [ ]

When it makes me feel positive [ ]

5.5 The thing in this list that I find most useful in a sermon is

An explanation of the text [ ]

The use of illustrations [ ]

The use of real life stories [ ]

Practical suggestions for action [ ]

To have clear conclusions [ ]

5.6 The thing in this list that I find least useful in a sermon is

An explanation of the text [ ]

The use of illustrations [ ]

The use of real life stories [ ]

Practical suggestions for action [ ]

To have clear conclusions [ ]

5.7 I most relate to stories in sermons that are

The preacher's own life stories [ ]

General life stories [ ]

Bible stories [ ]

Current media/world stories [ ]

or,

I don't like the use of stories [ ]

In reality, a sermon in [ABBC] is usually part of a series. These last few questions relate to how you respond to that.

5.8 To what degree do you find it helpful when a sermon is linked to other sermons in a series?

It is helpful, as it gives the bigger picture [ ]

It is OK but I don't need the bigger picture [ ]

It is unhelpful as I want each sermon to be self-contained [ ]

I didn't realise sermons were in a series [ ]

5.9 Assuming you are aware of sermons being in a series, do you find the bigger picture

Sets the framework for this sermon? [ ]

Affects this sermon too much? [ ]

Doesn't really make much difference? [ ]

5.10 If you miss a sermon from a series, do you

Listen to a recording to fill in the gap? [ ]

Find that the following sermon fills in the gap? [ ]

Not really sense any problem? [ ]

5.11 Do you find that an introduction to a sermon saying 'where we have got to' is useful? (Like when you watch a TV series with a 'Previously...' section before the opening lines and music!)

It usefully prompts me as to where we have got to

It is OK but I don't really need it

I do not need it but understand it may be useful for those who missed the last sermon

It would be better without it as people could catch up

5.12 Do you find repetitions in a series (themes, looking back etc.) are

Useful to you because they add emphasis?

OK but they don't add much?

Not helpful?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. It will be very useful for research and for the future ministry of the church.

This questionnaire will be followed in due course with some one-to-one interviews to build on the research. The interview will be partly structured in that there will be questions, but they will be 'open' questions so you can freely answer as you wish. Unlike this questionnaire, the answers are not 'fixed choices' and so an interview gives more chance for a person to express their own views. If you would like to be part of that research, please feel free to ask to be involved. Though you obviously cannot be anonymous in the interview, what you say will not be linked to you personally in the research. You will not be named as an individual.

## Appendix 1. Questionnaire Summary Charts

### Chart 1: Summary of Questionnaire Section 1

Section 1: About You			Total
1.1 Please state your gender			32
Male: 9	Female: 20	Prefer not to say: 3	
1.2 Please state which age group you are in			32
18-29: 0	30-39: 0	40-49: 1	
50-59: 5	60-69: 12	70-79: 10	
80+: 4	-	-	
1.3 How long have you been attending AB Baptist Church (ABBC)?			32
Less than a year: 1	1-4 years: 6	5-9 years: 8	
10-14 years: 3	15 years or over: 14	-	

### Chart 2: Summary of Questionnaire Section 2

Section 2: General Preaching Expectations within ABBC						Total
2.1 How often do you generally hear sermons within ABBC?						32
Weekly morning sermon: 7			Weekly evening sermon: 2			
Weekly morning and evening sermon: 20			A sermon less often than weekly: 3			
2.2 How long do you think a sermon should last? Not more than (minutes)						32
5 mins: 0	10 mins: 0	15 mins: 2	20 mins: 5	25 mins: 5	30 mins: 12	
35 mins: 2	40 mins: 3	45 mins: 1	50 mins: 2	-	-	
2.3 Do you routinely read over the Bible text(s) on which the sermon is based in your own time after hearing a sermon?						32
Yes: 9			No: 23			
2.4 Do you regularly spend uninterrupted time reflecting and praying about what you heard in a sermon?						32
Yes: 10			No: 22			
2.5 Do you attend a home group, at least in part because you see it as an opportunity to reflect on the sermon with others?						31
Yes: 23			No: 8			

**Chart 2: Summary of Questionnaire Section 2**

2.6 If you answered 'yes' to 2.5, does the home group help you better apply the sermon to your life? If you answered 'no' to 2.5 please move on to the next question.		22	
Yes: 21	No: 1		
2.7 Do you regularly listen to a CD/MP3 recording of a sermon if you are not able to be in church for a service?		32	
Yes: 5	No: 27		
2.8 Do you regularly listen to a CD/MP3 recording of a sermon as well as hearing it in church?		31	
Yes: 1	No: 30		
2.9 Do you regularly listen to sermons outside of ABBC?		32	
Yes: 16	No: 16		
2.10 If you answered 'yes', where do you hear other sermons? You may tick as many of these boxes as is appropriate.		32 (box ticks)	
At other churches: 9	On TV: 5		Books/Magazines: 6
On the radio: 8	On the internet: 4		
2.11 What do you think is the most important purpose of a sermon from this list?		31	
To change my behaviour: 2	To make me feel positive: 1		
To teach about the Bible: 13	To build my faith: 15		
2.12 What would you put as second in this list?		31	
To change my behaviour: 6	To make me feel positive: 2		
To teach about the Bible: 10	To build my faith: 13		
2.13 What would you put as third in this list?		32	
To change my behaviour: 17	To make me feel positive: 9		
To teach about the Bible: 5	To build my faith: 1		

**Chart 3: Summary of Questionnaire Section 3**

<b>Section 3. Previous Preaching at ABBC (if you have been at ABBC over 12 years)</b>			<b>Total</b>
<b>3.1 I have been at ABBC for</b>			17
12-19 years: 5	20-29 years: 4	Over 30 years: 8	
<b>3.2 My general recollection of the style of previous preaching in ABBC is that it was</b>			
Verse by verse through a Bible text: 1	About real life issues: 0		17
A mixture of verse by verse and life issues styles: 15	Neither verse by verse or life issues: 0		
I do not recollect anything about the preaching style: 1			
<b>3.3 My recollection about the style of preaching is that it was generally</b>			16
Very easy-going: 0	Quite easy-going: 12		
Quite hard-going: 3	Very hard-going: 1		
<b>3.4 Looking back on previous preaching I have heard in ABBC, most of all it</b>			17
Changed my behaviour: 0	Made me feel positive: 2		
Taught me about the Bible: 7	Built my faith: 8		
<b>3.5 Looking back, I think that the preaching tended to</b>			14
Tell me what God or the preacher wanted to say: 13	Make me think things out for myself: 1		

**Chart 4: Summary of Questionnaire Section 4**

<b>Section 4. Current Preaching at ABBC</b>			<b>Total</b>
<b>4.1 I think the preaching at ABBC tends to be</b>			32
Verse by verse through a Bible text: 6	About real life issues: 2		
A mixture of verse by verse and life issues styles: 21	Neither verse by verse or life issues: 3		
<b>4.2 I would say the style of preaching is generally</b>			31
Very easy-going: 2	Quite easy-going: 15		
Quite hard-going: 13	Very hard-going: 1		



**Chart 4: Summary of Questionnaire Section 4**

4.3 Generally, the preaching in ABBC, tends to		31
Change my behaviour: 2	Make me feel positive: 1	
Teach me about the Bible: 17	Build my faith: 11	
4.4 I think that the preaching tends to		31
Tell me what God or the preacher wanted to say: 28	Make me think things out for myself: 3	

**Chart 5: Summary of Questionnaire Section 5**

Section 5. What is Helpful or Unhelpful to You in Sermons			Total
5.1 I find it most helpful for a sermon to start from			31
The Bible text, and say what this means for my life: 26	My life situation, and ask what the Bible says about it: 5		
5.2 I think a sermon should leave me			31
With clear and simple instructions as to what to do next: 8	With questions and issues I can work out and then decide for myself what I need to do about it: 23		
5.3 I like to know the history and background to the Bible text used in a sermon			32
In lots of detail: 10	In minimal detail: 22	I don't like to know the history and background: 0	
5.4 Among these options, the thing I find most useful in a sermon is			30
Learning what the text means: 12	What it tells me I need to do: 15	When it makes me feel positive: 3	
5.5 The thing in this list that I find most useful in a sermon is			32
An explanation of the text: 12	The use of illustrations: 2	The use of real life stories: 3	
Practical suggestions for action: 10	To have clear conclusions: 5		
5.6 The thing in this list that I find least useful in a sermon is			32
An explanation of the text: 5	The use of illustrations: 11	The use of real life stories: 4	
Practical suggestions for action: 8	To have clear conclusions: 4		
5.7 I most relate to stories in sermons that are			32
The preacher's own life stories: 3	General life stories: 17	Bible stories: 8	

**Chart 5: Summary of Questionnaire Section 5**

Current media/world stories: 2		Or, I don't like the use of stories: 2		
5.8 To what degree do you find it helpful when a sermon is linked to other sermons in a series?				
It is helpful, as it gives the bigger picture: 20		It is OK but I don't need the bigger picture: 4		32
It is unhelpful as I want each sermon to be self-contained: 8		I didn't realise sermons were in a series: 0		
5.9 Assuming you are aware of sermons being in a series, do you find the bigger picture				
Sets the framework for this sermon?: 18		Affects this sermon too much?: 7	Doesn't really make much difference?: 6	31
5.10 If you miss a sermon from a series, do you				
Listen to a recording to fill in the gap?: 4		Find that the following sermon fills in the gap?: 18	Not really sense any problem?: 9	31
5.11 Do you find that an introduction to a sermon saying 'where we have got to' is useful? (Like when you watch a TV series with a 'Previously...' section before the opening lines and music!)				
It usefully prompts me as to where we have got to: 19		It is OK but I don't really need it: 4		32
I do not need it but understand it may be useful for those who missed the last sermon: 9		It would be better without it as people could catch up: 0		
5.12 Do you find repetitions in a series (themes, looking back etc.) are				
Useful to you because they add emphasis?: 17		OK but they don't add much?: 14	Not helpful?: 1	32

## Appendix 2. Sample Sermon Notes

### Downside-up 1: Who Cares? (Luke 10)

*Preached at ABBC, 15.02.15*

Colour coding:

Blue: sermon information

Yellow: congregational learning about me

Red: the way I view church relationship with me

Green: appeal

One thing I find interesting about Luke's Gospel is just how many things get turned upside down, or as we might say, role reversals. Right at the beginning Zechariah, a priest in the temple, is told of the birth of his son and he can't believe it: he's struck dumb. As a priest, he fails to believe God, yet his wife, Elizabeth, has no trouble believing! The very last account in Luke is of the two on the Emmaus Road. They are disconsolate, confused and walking away from Jerusalem on Easter day. When they see Jesus their downside turns upward, they are filled with joy and return to Jerusalem to spread the good news. A theme through Luke's Gospel is that of reversal. As Mary said,

***He has brought down rulers from their thrones***

***but has lifted up the humble.***

***He has filled the hungry with good things***

***but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:52–53)***

We are going to look at four sections of Luke with parables and other material, to focus on **Downside-up**, what it might mean for us to have things turned around.

Downside-up: Who cares? (Luke 10)

Downside-up: Who celebrates? (Luke 15)

Downside-up: Who prepares? (Luke 16)

Downside-up: Who wins? (Luke 18)

Luke wrote his Gospel for a new generation of people, probably not Jews and at least a generation after Jesus' earthly life. Try to think of it like a new exciting book you've been waiting to get your hands on: when you do, you can't put it down! Try to put yourself in that first excitement, expecting some twists and turns, puzzles and solutions.

In our first **downside-up** we meet a man who is very self-assured about faith. He claims to have obeyed the Jewish law all his life. As you read this (or hear it read) you think, 'my goodness, he's pretty arrogant!' Then Jesus starts to tell him a story that you understand in terms of how it was first told but it also translates into your own circumstances too, especially when Jesus says '*there was a man...*' It means anyone: 'some man'. Anyone, someone in your culture. Someone trudging home at the end of a long day perhaps, someone of whom you think, I wouldn't go that way on my own. You see the inevitable coming; he gets mugged and left for dead. Then two very respected members of society come along and completely ignore him. At

the first telling it was a Priest and a Levite. To us today it might be a MP and a police officer. The story turns downside when you hear that they just walk on. Then a socially dubious person came along, and listen to the rapid-fire description of how he behaved:

**He came...He saw...He was moved with pity...He went...He poured...He put on...He bandaged...he brought...He took care...He took out money...He gave it...He said 'Take care of him'...**<sup>435</sup>

He was a total shock. You might have expected, within the flow of the story, an MP, a police officer and a *paramedic* but it turns out to be the least obvious type of person: fit in your own category/person!

As you read or hear the story, you start focusing on the educated person who spoke to Jesus, but now who are you fixated on? I guess it is either the victim or the supposedly 'dubious' Samaritan. What are you thinking? Is your admiration for him overtaken by your shock at the other two? Is your mind buzzing and bemused? Do you want to cry out, 'my brain needs a rest', or as a friend of mine used to say, 'you're doing my head in'?

You see, you read from the outset that the educated man said to Jesus, '**who is my neighbour**'. What he actually said was 'who is the one **near to me**'? It turned out in this story that the one who was actually near, the one who came physically near, was the one who broke the barriers, the one willing to cross social boundaries. The words of Jesus ring in your ears: **Go and do likewise. Go and do likewise.**

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<sup>435</sup> See Stephen I. Wright, *Jesus the Storyteller*, (London, SPCK: 2014) p.107. (Original note)

Just like Mary said: **'Rulers he has brought low but the humble he has lifted up'**.

Who cares? Who is helping whom? What does Jesus mean when he says to you, go and do likewise?

As you listen to or read the powerful story you are shocked at the radical nature of what it means. Yet it is not over. There is yet another twist in the account. You can't help but read on, to a different type of story. As Jesus went on his way, he came to the home of 'some woman' (like 'some man' previously). She was called Martha and had a sister called Mary. Martha was a busy carer. Who cares? Martha cares. Mary, however, was a studious listener. Martha was on the same side of the equation as the Samaritan: an action person. So when Martha complained to Jesus about her sister, and in view of your buzzing mind about being a good carer like the Samaritan, what do you expect Jesus to say? *'Mary, go and do likewise'*? Probably. Does he say it? NO!

***"Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*** (10:42)

Yet again, Jesus reverses the expectation. Mary is down at Jesus' feet and he lifts her up, he commends her. I guess many of us have read this little account and felt for Martha. What if the answer to our concern is that Luke wants to say, look at the two stories together? The first says that religion without compassionate action is visibly odious. However, it might also suggest on its own that only action counts. Do good, and the Kingdom of Heaven is yours. The Martha account then shouts out a loud corrective: it is good to do good, but it must be balanced by sitting at the feet of Jesus. The Samaritan loved his neighbour. Mary loved her Lord. Both are needed. Let's go back to the opener from the enquiring man:

***“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”***

***<sup>26</sup> “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”***

***<sup>27</sup> He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”***

***<sup>28</sup> “You have answered correctly,”***

What about you? Do you love the Lord with all your heart? What about your neighbour? It might only mean walking across the church, breaking the boundary of speaking to a stranger rather than sticking with a friend. Love God, and love those who are nearer than you may think.

### Appendix 3. Illustrations



1: Opaque South Transept Window



2: Original Picture Panels (Circa 1932)<sup>436</sup>

Unfortunately, the scene remains unclear.



3: Original Front Window (and Picture Panels Below) Before Being Obscured (Unknown Date)<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Electronic file sent from Australia by descendants of the minister shown.

<sup>437</sup> Original photograph in North Somerset Studies Library, Cabinet 1, 'ABBC' file.



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Ford, T., Appendix 2 Photograph 1, South Transept Window

North Somerset Studies Library, Cabinet 1, Appendix 2 Photograph 2, 'AB' Baptist Church Photograph

Unknown, Appendix 2 Photograph 3, Picture Panels Electronic file from Australia

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