ABSTRACT

SACRED IMPROV: NARRATIVE PREACHING THAT OFFERS ENTRANCE INTO THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

by

Dan Meek

This study found that narrative preaching that holds plot and character together invites hearers to participate in the gospel story, much like actors are drawn into improvisational drama. Those who heard quality narrative sermons entered the story when they improvised a faithful response to the main character, God.

The purpose of the study was to identify the elements of good narrative preaching and to develop a rubric for pastors to use in evaluating and enhancing narrative sermons prior to delivery. I constructed the pre-study rubric based on the literature review. I then preached four sermons that I prepared according to the pre-study rubric. In response to the sermons, a total of thirty-one listeners participated by journaling or interview. I also made field observations throughout the study. I subjected the data to directed and non-directed content analysis. Under this structure, the study employed elements of qualitative phenomenology, grounded theory, and field study. Finally, I adjusted the pre-study rubric based on insight gained by the research.

The literature review suggests that narrative preaching is a rediscovery of a method with no means of evaluation. I offer these pages, including the recommended rubric, as assistance in the production and evaluation of quality narrative sermons. The ultimate goal is to help preachers invite hearers to participate in the ongoing drama of God's story, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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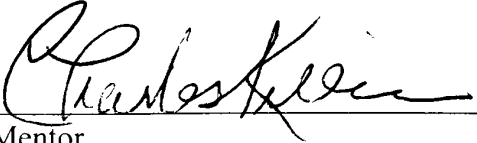
Daniel Wayne Meek

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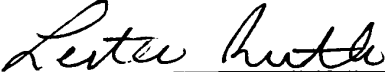
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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

The following passage offers advice from a Russian monk named Father Zossima:

> Do you suppose the ... [people] don't understand? Try reading them the
> touching story of the fair Esther and the haughty Vashti; or the miraculous
> story of Jonah in the whale. Don't forget either the parables of Our Lord,
> choose especially from the Gospel of St. Luke (that is what I did) and then
> from the Acts of the Apostles the conversion of St. Paul (that you mustn't
> leave out on my account), and from the Lives of the Saints, for instance,
> the life of Alexey, the man of God and, greatest of all, the happy martyr
> and seer of God, Mary of Egypt — and you will penetrate their hearts with
> these simple tales. (Dostoyevsky 327).

A few decades ago, preachers in America began to take Father Zossima's advice (Rice 9;

Buttrick 106). I am one of them. I continue to believe that Scripture and life possess a

narrative structure; therefore, I continue to preach the narrative style.

I began my preaching life as a youth pastor with this view of preaching. While

serving in that role, I took a seminary class entitled preaching the Old Testament. This

class served as my introduction to narrative homiletics. I devoured works by Fred

Craddock, Eugene Lowry, Tom Long, and others. The professor required each student to

write and deliver a sermon on an Old Testament passage. I chose the story of Noah from

Genesis 6. The sermon progressed toward the final sentence, "When God searches the

turbulent chaos that thrashes all around you, looking for someone who walks with him,

someone through whom he can bring salvation into your situation, will He see you?" This

question represented my best effort at a classic Fred Craddock open ending (*As One* 125).

The professor glowed. That moment gave me great encouragement. I preached the same

sermon a few weeks later in church. Students in the class and listeners in the church

complimented the sermon. However, one individual in each of those two settings said something such as, "You did a good job, young man, but you just didn't finish it."

Years later I left the role of youth minister and became a senior pastor. During a time of strong fruitfulness in the Church I served, I sat in my office with a couple of long time members of the Church. They smiled gently and said they liked the fact that people were coming to faith, but they were concerned because I was "not preaching." After some conversation, I discerned this particular couple felt they needed to be told three or four "helpful things they needed to know" and what they "should be doing" each week if a speech was to be considered a sermon.

According to scholars, including Thomas G. Long and Michael Pasquarello, III, narrative preaching has been involved in a similar conversation with the church and with the academy (Long, "What Happened to Narrative Preaching" 9-14, Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 179; Lischer 24). Listeners in both places seem to say, "You are just telling stories. We want to hear some *preaching*!" In fact "the whole narrative enterprise in homiletics is under assault from the right, middle and left" (Long, "Out of the Loop" 127).

If narrative preaching represented just a momentary fad that the church needed to leave behind, then the issue discussed in these pages would not be so important. Instead narrative communication has been an essential element of the church's preaching throughout its existence (Rice 7; Allen, "Theology" 34-37; Buttrick 100; Meyers 142; Harris 87). Narrative thought expressed on the lips and in the lives of believers has been essential to the Christian faith since the testimonies of the Apostles and their followers (Acts 2:22-36; 7; 22:6-21; 26:1-29).

Given its historical place, the very idea that narrative preaching suffers the criticisms described above seems strange. Also puzzling are the differences between individual hearers' responses to different narrative sermons. Some ministers share personal stories that resonate with biblical text. Their sermons invite hearers to enter into the gospel of Jesus Christ. When other ministers share personal stories, they sound as though they simply like to talk about themselves. Early in my ministry, personal experience and conversation with listeners suggested that differences in the quality of narrative sermons may not necessarily happen just because different preachers possess different skill levels. From those conversations, I learned that one week *I* could narrate an entrance for people into the story of God and the next week merely settle for telling emotionally touching or moving tales about the way things are. Through these pages, I hope to reveal why some narrative preaching invites a community to act out the gospel, while other narrative preaching settles for nice stories that are "in no apparent way the word of God" (Boomershine 133).

At least in part, narrative preaching suffers the critiques mentioned above because it often settles for telling the wrong story simply for the purpose of gaining interest and empathy (Wright 100; Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 179, 182). This dissertation asserts that the problem is not narrative preaching per se, but *poor* narrative preaching. Such preaching allows hearers to assimilate disjointed stories of Scripture or disconnected contemporary stories into their own life stories rather than inviting hearers to enter God's story (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 190; Harmless 235).

Purpose

These words by Paul Scott Wilson capture the need addressed in these pages:
"Through narrative preaching we have a newly recovered form, genre, function, and style
[but] we have not yet found sufficient ways to identify quality whatever the form"
(*Practice* 209). The purpose of the study was to use qualitative phenomenology along
with grounded theory and some facets of field study to identify which elements of
narrative sermons serve to draw worshippers into the story of God, allowing them to
participate in the ongoing gospel of Jesus Christ. From the knowledge gained, I hoped to
develop a tool preachers can use to enhance the quality of narrative preaching.

Research Questions

1. To what degree do hearers at Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene sense that
narrative preaching invites them into communion with God in a gospel-shaped
community?

2. What themes emerge to explain why worshippers believe narrative sermons
have created openings for them into the story of God?

3. Is an opening in one particular part of a narrative sermon more crucial in
providing worshippers an offering of entrance into the story of God?

4. How does feeling drawn in by narrative sermons affect hearers' ability to
articulate a free and faithful community response?

Definition of Key Terms

1. *Thread* is a generalized term emerging from the literature review used here to
denote the element that holds the sermon together. A thread serves as a dominant image
in a visual sermon, a question developed throughout a conversational narrative or a

repeated refrain in more poetic narrative (Craddock, *Preaching* 197; Wilson, *Practice* 183; Boomershine 76; Cantalamessa 34, 84; Tate 77). Here the term *thread* also includes what have been referred to as "master images" or "archetypes" in Scripture (Tate 77). As a result of this inclusion, thread also encompasses the concept of typology that sees Christ implanted in all Scripture (Cantelemessa 34, 84). For instance, Genesis chapter one, includes at least three threads. First, the phrase "and God said" is repeated (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29). Creation springs from the word of God. Second, in the following verses, God sees his various creations as "good" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The third thread begun in Genesis 1 describes "the image of God" (1:27).

2. Homiliticians borrow the term *Verisimilitude* from poetry. In these pages, verisimilitude suggests that the sermon imitates reality, making the sermon ring true to life and calling from the listeners a "nod of recognition" (Craddock, *Preaching* 160; Wilson, *Practice* 263).

3. *Script* is a general term used to refer both to a delimited pericope of Scripture and the "rule of faith" or the "Master Story." In short, the gospel script is the story of God's grace in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Vanhoozer 115-41; Craddock, "Story" 95).

4. *Improvisation* describes the script-based creative responses of all of the actors. In preaching, improvisation denotes material in the sermon that faithfully springs from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Improvisation also describes the faithful and creative responses of those who hear the sermon. The church has long depended on improvisation in order to preach and live out the gospel in new and changing situations. Practical wisdom requires creative responses to contemporary challenges. However, improvisation

is not unscripted action. It is a way of living and speaking that is so familiar with the script that it creates fresh lines and actions *within the story line* of the drama of salvation. The word is used also in theater and jazz music (Vanhoozer, 128-29, 335-44, 348-49; Meyers, 131-44; Campbell, "Apocalypse" 166).

5. *Adlib* is also derived from theater. Usually an adverb, in these pages *adlib* is also used as a noun and a verb. The script "places limits on the variety of telling" and living that can be done in faithfulness to Christ (Green, "Reading the Gospels" 51). Operating from a desire to be original, some preachers and hearers speak lines and take actions based merely on the minister's or hearer's personality or the dominant stories of the culture in which the community exists. Hearers and preachers adlib when they respond in ways not fitting to the script. Extreme cases have been deemed heresy (Vanhoozer 338).

6. *Offer*, or *opening*, also emerges from improvisational drama describing an opportunity for an actor to enter a scene and participate. Here it refers to evangelistic opening of the story of God so that listeners can enter the drama of the gospel of Jesus (Vanhoozer 338-39).

Ministry Intervention: A Rubric to Be Refined

In the fall of 2008, I wrote four narrative sermons endeavoring to make strong creative connections in each sermon to the script and to the lives of the listeners. I sought to pay especially close attention to the level of faithfulness to the script and verisimilitude to life in the areas of ambiguity (bad news), resolution (good news), character development, thread, and response. (These five areas of will receive greater treatment in Chapter 2). As always, my purpose in preparation and delivery was to preach the word of

God to the people of God. In doing so, I consciously attempted good improvisation while seeking to avoid ad lib.

While editing the manuscripts prior to preaching, I read them in light of a descriptive rubric developed from insight gained in the literature review and from fifteen years of experience in narrative preaching. The purpose of the rubric was to make sure the four sermons sprang from the script and offered openings into the sermon and the gospel in the five areas mentioned above. While reading the manuscript, I used the descriptions in the left hand column and the cells in the right hand column to identify any weaknesses in the sermons.

Two other preachers also read the sermons in light of the rubric and rated the quality of each narrative sermon from one to five, describing the reason for the rating. In the two cases where one of the preachers said the sermon showed a need for improvement, I again looked at the parts of the rubric to see how attention to any of the five elements on the rubric could enhance the sermon. I then made appropriate changes and preached it.

One of the sermons ended with a much more implicit rather than explicit response, leaving the hearers more leeway for creative response. After the study, I adjusted the rubric based on the findings. The pre-study rubric Table 1.1 follows, and the post study rubric, Table 5.1, is found in Chapter 5 (p. 153).

Table 1.1. Pre-Study Rubric

Element	Needs in Each Element	Evaluation of Each Element in Particular Sermon
Bad news/ ambiguity	Improv. or ad lib? Verisimilitude to life? Deepens/progresses?	
Good news/ resolution	Related to and resolves bad news? Is it God's action? Presence of reversal? Enough good news?	
Character/ his and ours	What character dominates? How is God portrayed? How is community character shaped?	
Thread	Where is it from? Does it develop/reverse? Repeated in life? Time travel?	
Response	How open-ended? Is it communal? Improv. or ad lib	

Context

This project's immediate context involved the Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene, a twenty-five year old congregation with over 220 members and about 150 to 160 in Sunday Morning worship attendance. The congregation is located between two growing suburbs of Oklahoma City. I began pastoring this church at thirty-three years of age and had served this congregation for just over five years at the time of the study. In the broad field of pastoral ministry, my specialty and main ministry is preaching. From the beginning of my tenure, the congregational leaders prioritized preaching and leadership development as my primary roles and acted upon those priorities. In short, the church has structured to give me enough time to do the best I can in the area of preaching.

As mentioned previously, through my academic training and practice, I most often preach narratively. I practiced narrative preaching for about seven years before arrival at Canadian Hills and continued throughout the first five years of service there.

During this time, the average age of the congregation had decreased dramatically due to an influx of young families. As of the time of this writing, Canadian Hills reflects a good mix of ages in most of the ministries in the church. Accordingly, of the twelve board members, five are thirty to fifty, six are fifty-one to sixty and one is sixty to seventy years of age. The church involves a strong group of people who are over sixty-five. Older members make up a large, active Sunday school class and continue activity in other ministries in the church.

After the first influx of new attendees, two years prior to this study, the church launched a second Sunday morning worship service. This service featured contemporary

music. This addition allowed the existing service to remain (and even become more) traditional in style. The preached message served as the uniting factor between the two services. Preaching the same message in both services kept the entire congregation on the same word journey.

Early in my ministry tenure at Canadian Hills, nearly every person at the church was a longtime and/or second generation believer; a significant group were second or third generation Nazarenes. As of this writing, the church's growth pattern suggests that some members of the congregation, including a few lay leaders, have regularly attended worship for less than five years. This diversity of religious background among attendees has created a couple of distinct groups within the Church: attendees who know the language, life, and practice of faith from their childhood and those who are learning these practices afresh and new. My sermons must provide openings into the gospel and openings into the gospel-shaped community for members in each of these groups.

Methodology

This venture was a qualitative, phenomenological study aimed at providing rich description of the manner in which worshippers enter the story of God through narrative preaching. Accordingly this study differs greatly from more prevalent quantitative studies.

Participants

I gathered a stratified, purposeful sampling from Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene. The sample accounted for gender, age, and worship style and paid specific attention to obtaining responses from listeners who began attending church within the past five years and listeners who have practiced regular church attendance for more than

five years. The sample also represented the view of listeners who attended both the first service (traditional) and the second service (contemporary). The primary purpose for the selection of individual participants was their ability to generate rich data through journal exercises as described below.

Instrumentation

I designed journal questions in order to elicit comments about which elements of the sermons drew hearers into the sermon and then into the gospel story. I edited the journal prompts based on emerging themes in order to allow for theoretical sampling to occur throughout the month. The initial five prompts were as follows:

1. Describe the moment in the sermon, where you felt drawn into it. What was the pastor saying? Why did those words draw you in? If you never were "drawn in," write that you were not drawn in and why you think you were not drawn into the sermon. (Remember this study seeks to evaluate a style of sermon not to evaluate you, the pastor, or your faith.)

2. Describe how God (Father, Son, or Spirit) was portrayed in this sermon. What was God doing? What is he doing? What will he be doing? What did God's actions in this sermon tell you about God?

3. How did this sermon help you see yourself?

4. At what point, if any, did you sense God was speaking to you. What was the preacher saying at that time? What was God saying to you?

5. What do you intend to do in response to this sermon? Be specific.

The independent variable was the preaching of narrative sermons written with a trained eye for the narration of the gospel story as springing from particular texts and

previewed in light of the rubric (see Table 1.1) with strong openness offered to all those

who might be hearing. The dependent variables were (1) whether or not the listeners

believed they entered the sermon (2) whether listeners' journaling suggested that they

entered the story of God, (3) whether listeners could articulate a free, faithful,

participatory response to what they heard, and (4) new themes that emerged, describing

why participants entered the gospel in response to narrative sermons. Intervening

variables included the relationship between the participants and the preacher, possible

absences due to sickness and participant mortality, or failure to complete the project

sequence, a process requiring four different times of action lasting between thirty minutes

and one hour each.

I introduced the initial journal prompts at a participant meeting by simply reading

the prompts, answering any questions participants had. I then described the project's time

frame. I explained the procedures to assure anonymity and reinforced that *sermons* were

being evaluated, rather than the preacher or the listeners. I also gave clear instruction as

to the method of distributing the weekly journal prompts and the method of submission of

journal entries.

Data Collection

I collected data over a period of four weeks as participants submitted journals that

the office administrator coded for anonymity. During the same four weeks, I made field

observations of conversations via unstructured impromptu interviews in order to

corroborate data gained by journal entries.

Data Analysis

Throughout the study, content analysis helped identify consistent themes in each individual listener's responses and consistent themes among all hearers in response to individual sermons. I conducted initial directed coding according to categories based on a researcher-developed rubric (see Table 1.1, p. 8). After directed coding, I took some time away in order to bracket (see Chapter 2) these results. My next coding procedure employed a more free-flowing content analysis to indentify themes not related to the pre-study rubric. Each week, I added to the initial categories any new categories identified from the coding process and assimilated insights gained from observations and impromptu interviews.

After four weeks of this process, I constructed a new rubric for evaluation of future sermons. Changes from the old rubric to the new were based on triangulation between the insights gained from the analysis of data from journals, interviews, and field observation (see Table, p. 153).

Rigor, Delimitations, and Generalizability

This study is limited to Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene and will be transferable to suburban congregations composed of mostly Anglo, but some minorities, where preaching is the studied art of biblical narrative homiletics. Varying ethnic or socio-economic factors may or may not undermine the study's usefulness. Congregations in which preaching follows a deductive/informational or self-help model will not benefit from this study until the preaching model is adjusted. Through this study, I sought to gain insight into a particular church situation that may be transferable and testable in other contexts, but claims of generalizability are not warranted (see Chapter 2).

Theological Framework of Project

The apostle Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom. 1:16-17 NRSV). If the gospel is *the* power of God for salvation, preachers must pay attention to the nature of the gospel.

Reading the Script as Dramatic Plot

Understanding the gospel as a narrative drama represents the crucial issue in this study. Like a powerful dramatic performance, the gospel begins with threads that pass through conflict or "bad news." Throughout the middle scenes, the bad news *intensifies* or *deepens* toward a reversal that yields resolution or good news (Vanhoozer 39; Green, "Reading the Gospels" 44; Thompson 83, 85; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 25). Improvisational drama invites hearers to respond by entering the story and creating lines that spring from the script. In the gospel story, hearers are invited to become actors who both improvise from, and adhere to, the script (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 41; Cantalamessa 67; John 13:17; Jas 1:18-25; Matt. 17:24; Wilson, *Practice* 186).

While the gospel's narrative structure involves bad news, good news, threads, and response, character development exists at the very heart of any narrative. In fact, good narrative makes separation of plot and character impossible (Frei, *Eclipse* 14). The plot reveals the identity of the characters. At the same time, the characters' actions and words create the plot (Boomershine 20; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 41). In the gospel story, the main character, God, as revealed in Christ, creates the plot *and* he is revealed by the plot. Accordingly, through the Holy Spirit, God shapes the community of people who enter the drama and enact the script in response to him (Vanhoozer 44; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Summarizing the Plot and Introducing the Characters

This section uses one particular thread to summarize the dramatic story of the gospel as it is written in the canonical script. Because of the forever-present nature of the ongoing gospel drama, material from the canonical script is presented here and in Chapter 2 in the present tense.

The plot of the canonical drama begins with the main actor, God, speaking words that create the world, thereby setting the stage for the drama of the gospel (Gen. 1:1-25; 2:4-14; Vanhoozer 44). Like a theatrical stage, earth is a lit, dry space that contains provision for the humans. At center stage, stand the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In Genesis 1 and 2, God also creates supporting actors, humans. In Genesis 1:27, God creates them "in his image, in the image of God." God blesses them and then tells them to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). These two phrases, "image of God," and "be fruitful and multiply," mark the initiation of a thread that weaves throughout the canonical narrative. In speaking these words, God invites the humans to act with him to fill the earth with his image. By procreation, humans improvise a faithful response to God's offer. God's invitation in Genesis 1 establishes his pattern of offering humans opportunities to enter the story and act with him in moving the drama of the gospel forward. Throughout the rest of the script, God makes similar offers to many other characters. Examples include Noah, Abraham, and the Apostle Paul (Gen. 6; 12; Acts 9). As characters improvise responses to God's offers, they enter the story and become coactors with God in the ongoing gospel drama.

Genesis chapter 3, narrates bad news. The humans use their freedom to respond to God's command by unfaithful adlib (sin). Both Adam and Eve act contrary to God's word by taking forbidden fruit. Their actions bring bad news. They are cursed and will eventually die (Gen. 3). Because of their adlib, the image of God in humanity is somehow changed and needs to be restored (Dunning 150-51; Purkiser, Taylor, and Taylor 255). Bad news intensifies throughout the rest of the canonical script, as each generation follows a similar pattern of adlib in response to God. By the time of Noah, the script says, "The earth ... [is] corrupt in God's sight" (Gen 6:11). In the New Testament, the bad news is so prevalent, the apostle Paul declares "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). As the drama unfolds, God makes gracious offers of entrance to men and women, but humans continue to act out unfaithful adlib. This recurring pattern (God's gracious action met with human ad lib) causes the plot of the drama to descend lower and lower as bad news deepens in each generation.

Introducing a Hero

The New Testament introduces Jesus Christ, a hero who, at first, seems to be a new character. The prologue to the gospel of John, however, points back to Genesis chapter 1, identifying Jesus as God and declaring he was with God in creation (Gen. 1, John 1). The New Testament also returns to the image of God thread, by suggesting that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Other New Testament references identify Christ as the beginning of the restoration of the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3; Rom. 5). The script's return to this thread highlights the importance of the character, Christ, for the ongoing gospel story.

Offering Entrance

In sending Christ to earth, God once again invites men and women to participate in his work of filling the world with his image. God's gracious actions through the Holy Spirit allow communities of people to be changed, or restored in the image of Christ (Romans 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:7; 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). Such transformation takes place as people see "the glory of the Lord." (2 Cor. 3:18; Dunning 156-57; Lodahl 68). Seeing, or beholding, the glory of the Lord requires people to know at least something of the identity of Christ, who is God's image.

Christ's character is revealed to humans through the dramatic plot of the gospel (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 190; Frei, *Identity 104;* Wilson, *Four Pages* 270; Noble, Lectures; Hooker 502-03; Cantalamessa 86-87). The gospel plot sinks into bad news and then dramatically reverses. The plot then ascends toward good news. In taking on flesh, Christ descends into the realm of earth as a man. He then descends even further, allowing himself to be killed as a criminal and laid in a grave. The empty cross exemplifies a dramatic reversal. After three days, Christ is *raised* from the dead to walk the earth again. After forty days, he *ascends* into heaven (Noble, "Lectures"; Hooker 502-03).

God, the Holy Spirit, uses the sinking, reversing, and rising plot of the drama, to invite people to participate in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:5, 2:5). As hearers do so, they enter the gospel and, as a community, act like Christ (Cantalamessa 67; John 13:17; Jas 1:18-25; Matt. 17:24; Wilson, *Practice* 186).

Preview

This project sought to discover how God uses narrative sermons to offer people entrance into the gospel of Jesus Christ. Chapter 2 consists of a review of biblical, theological, and homiletical literature, as well as a review of literature on qualitative design. Chapter 3 describes the method of research employed by the study. Chapter 4 reveals the findings of the research. Chapter 5 interprets the findings in light of the literature review. The final chapter also recommends a series of steps for writing quality narrative sermons and a rubric for evaluating sermons before they are preached.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

Scholars have identified at least thirty-four different styles of sermons. Those styles include among others: verse by verse, deductive pointed, inductive journeys, and dramatic monologues (Allen, *Patterns* xiii). This study does not seek to argue for narrative preaching against another style, but to discover the elements that produce quality within the category of narrative preaching. The section entitled "Preaching the Drama: Narrative Homiletics" contains a description of what qualifies as narrative preaching in this study (pp. 55-84).

This chapter begins with a review of biblical literature identifying the canon the script for the gospel drama. Next, in the "Problem" section, Chapter 2 sketches historical trends leading to postmodern narrative sermons that fall short of offering entrance into the gospel of Jesus Christ. The problem stems from a division between plot and character in narrative preaching that allows preachers too much undisciplined license in deciding what stories to tell. This division also allows listeners too much undisciplined license in constructing their own individualistic stories. The review then moves to literature regarding the production of the gospel script. This section suggests that the cannon springs from God's offer and humanity's faithful participation with God. The section on character shows the identity of Christ visually by a modified Christological parabola (see Figure 2.1 p. 47) used as a lens for reading the gospel. This lens focuses attention on the names of Christ as threads, Christological hymns as poetic renderings of the plot, and the creeds as early improvisation on the script. The plot of Christ's identity includes bad news, good news, uniting threads, and an invitation to response. The section on

homiletics reviews literature on preaching regarding the manner in which the five elements of narrative sermons may be both evaluated and enhanced. Finally, the section on design reviews literature pertaining to qualitative research and content analysis for interpreting data from journaling and field observation.

The Gospel Drama: Review of Biblical Literature

Like a powerful dramatic performance, the gospel begins with threads that pass through conflict or "bad news." Throughout the middle scenes, the bad news *intensifies* toward a climax or reversal that yields resolution or good news (Vanhoozer 39; Green, "Reading the Gospels" 44; Thompson 83, 85; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 25). Improvisational drama invites hearers to respond by entering the story and creating lines that spring from the script. In the gospel story, hearers are invited to become actors who both improvise from, and adhere to, the script (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 41; Cantalamessa 67; John 13:17; Jas. 1:18-25; Matt. 17:24; Wilson, *Practice* 186).

Setting the Stage

The plot begins, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep while a wind of God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:1). If this story were a fairy tale, it would begin with "Once upon a time…"; however, because of the nature of this story, its first words can be said, "In *the* beginning [emphasis mine]" (Genesis 1; Craddock, "Story" 96-98). This passage is poetic, but this poem has a plot. Before this lyric storyteller pauses for his first breath, he introduces *bad news* with the two words used to describe the universe in the beginning. "Darkness" and "deep" consistently signal the

"absence of order" and a "threat to life" (Gowan 19). Ambiguity appears early in the biblical story.

Against a formless and void backdrop of darkness and deep, God (the main actor) begins to speak. He says, "Let there be light," and then separates the darkness from light. The darkness is night and the light is day. The ambiguity of darkness remains, but like a stage curtain it is pushed back, creating a category called day, a time suitable for the carrying on of life. The drama's first scene displays movement from darkness to light, ambiguity to resolution (Buechner 47).

Next God acts on the deep:

> And God said, let there be a dome in the midst of the waters and let it separate the waters from the waters. So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome and he called the dome sky. (Gen. 1:6-7)

By the second day, God creates a category called "sky," a place cleared of the deep cosmic "waters" (Gen 1). He makes a time between the darkness and a space between the waters. Then God says, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together in one place and let the dry land appear…. The dry land he called earth and the waters he called sea" (Gen. 1:10). By the third day, the poetic story causes readers to picture a well-lighted and dry space called earth, a space suitable for habitation. In the language of drama, God's spoken word, has "set the *stage* [emphasis mine]" a clear, lit, dry place upon which the rest of the drama will be played out (Vanhoozer 44).

Creating Coactors

After establishing lights in the sky and calling forth vegetation from the earth and creatures from the sea, the sky, and the earth, God turns to his masterpiece. On the sixth day, God creates humanity, male and female, in his image and likeness. These human

actors have the ability to "correspond or (co-respond)" (Lodahl 68) with God in the drama played out on earth's stage (Vanhoozer 378-79). Then he commands the humans to be fruitful, to multiply, and to exert dominion over all creation. He also calls them to fill the whole earth. This story's plot involves a stage, the lit, dry space God creates in the cosmic dark deep, and the manner in which God chooses to fill the space with his image. Chapter 2 will show that the phrase "the image of God" constitutes a thread moving throughout the entire drama.

God chooses not to complete his project of filling the earth with his image on his own. He invites the humans he created to step onto the stage and help carry the plot of his story toward completion (Gen. 1:27).

Though it carries the rhythm and cadence of poetry, Genesis 1 can be read as a dramatic narrative because it also possesses the parts of a narrative. As such, the Genesis 1 narrative moves from ambiguity (bad news, darkness covering the face of the deep) to resolution (good news, a lit, dry space called earth) with humanity created to inhabit and have dominion over the created space and its contents. Though clearly a story, Genesis 1 is more than just a nice story because it calls for a response. The creation poem invites humans to become creative characters in the plot by responding to God's voice as the main character.

Improvising Early Then Adlib

As the story unfolds, God continues to speak, act, and allow Adam to participate with God in the drama by speaking and acting. In chapter 2, the stage God has set is called Eden and on that stage God speaks a line. "You may eat of every tree in the

garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat for in the day

you eat of it, you will surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). God's words constitute a clear warning.

God's next line introduces the ambiguity (bad news) of man's individual

aloneness; namely, the man needs a companion. Again God acts, but this time he does not

act alone. "Out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every

bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And

whatever *the man* [emphasis mine] called every living creature; that was its name" (Gen

2:19). In Chapter 1, God does all the naming (e.g. "light," "darkness"). In Chapter 2 God

entrusts to the man the naming responsibility and God is content "to see what he [man]

would call them" (v. 18). In the second chapter of the story, the first man is given the

freedom to improvise and God continues to respond to man's improvised response to

God.

The ambiguity continues and intensifies, because God's creating and man's

naming the animals produces "no companion suitable for him" (Gen 1:19, NLT). God

then acts to create the one that will later be called Eve. Adam's improvised response is,

"At last,… woman[!]" (Gen 2:23). The current prevalence of humans on the earth seems

to suggest that Adam and Eve did, in fact, learn to improvise the two becoming one flesh,

becoming fruitful, and multiplying (Gen. 2:24).

In Chapter 3, a new character speaks lines and a new facet of the drama is

introduced. The serpent begins to speak to the woman about God. The serpent's words

indict the intentions of God. In this conversation, the woman sins by "wrongly imagining

how the world works" (Green, "(Re)turn" 36). Then the serpent offers her the fruit that

God had forbidden. She takes it and offers some to the man. In this scene, creation moves

from faithful improvisation in response to the word of God to destructive adlib.

Beginning with the serpent, the words and actions of the supporting cast no longer

emerge from God's words and actions, but operate counter to them, creating dissonance

in the drama. At this point in the drama, the human actors attempt to write their own

counter-story.

Ambiguity is everywhere. The first consequence is that the humans realize they

are naked and try to clothe themselves and hide from God. Then the tension builds in

their encounter with God, causing readers to wonder if the man and woman will die as

God earlier warned. The dialogue and action show that no one is going to die that day.

God responds to their unfaithful adlib by improvising something creative (Brueggemann

49). Curse is present. They *will* be banished but not killed. Also God deals with the first

consequence of their sin, shame. Because they "can't deal with it themselves," God

sacrifices an animal and clothes them with "garments of skin" (Brueggemann 50; Gen.

3:21). The absence of death "that day" and the covering for their shame are God's actions

that bring resolution. The plot continues. They must still till and fill the earth, but change

has come. The image of God, this thread begun in Chapter 1, is somehow altered by the

bad news of sin and needs to be restored (Dunning 150-51; Purkiser, Taylor, and Taylor

255).

Sin's ambiguity increases in intensity through the story of Noah. While God's

response looks to be annihilation, at the last minute, God gives Noah an offer of entrance

(command to build the ark). Noah takes the offer. God responds to Noah's righteousness

by saving rather than destroying (Gen. 6-8). God repeats the command to Noah "multiply

fill the whole earth" and the thread "for in his own image God made human kind" (9:2,

6). Again the stage is set for a second chance. Immediately the plot reveals ambiguity in the form of human adlib, first with Noah's family, and then with the story of Babel (Gen. 11). The people's fear-based desire to run to a city rather than obey the command to fill the whole earth reflects the bad news (Brueggemann 100). God responds to this sinful situation by confusing the city's language in order to scatter the people.

Calling for Cast Members: A Patriarch and a Deliverer

In Genesis 12:1, God offers a role to Abraham. In order to join the drama, Abraham must leave his homeland. Immediately, the ambiguity (bad news) centers on place and lineage. Abraham accepts the offer and wanders homeless and childless for twenty-five years. He makes some errors, but he believes. Abraham's continued belief along the journey constitutes faithful improvisation (Rom. 4:18-25). Abraham fathers a son and dies with only a tomb for land and only one legitimate heir to the promise. The story evokes questions about the location of land promised and the descendents that will inherit the land.

These ambiguous questions remain for generations and intensify until Abraham's descendents find themselves slaves in Egypt, seeing an entire generation of baby boys threatened by the murderous Pharaoh. At this point, God offers Moses entrance into the drama of salvation (Exod. 3). He is reluctant to play his part, rebuffing God's offers with declines. Finally God's burning anger convinces Moses, but God also responds with an improvised concession. God offers to send Aaron with Moses. If Moses will take the offer and go, "He [Aaron] indeed shall serve as mouth for you, and you will serve as God for him" (Exod. 3:16). This promise relates to the "image of God" thread identified

earlier. Moses, a man, who takes the offer and enters the story, then goes on to represent God to a people.

After ten plagues, the children of Israel leave Egypt, but Pharaoh pursues. Facing the Red Sea with their backs to the Egyptian armies, Israel fears and begins to turn on Moses. Now Moses, the one who was afraid to respond to God's call in the first place, speaks, seemingly without a direct prompt: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish; for the Egyptians you see today you shall not see again" (Exod. 14:13). Here by the Red Sea, Moses can speak this dramatic improvisation because of the lines God has already spoken and the moves God has already directed. In Exodus 14:1-4, God had already told Moses to situate the Israelites against the Red Sea, where he promised to "gain glory for [himself] over Pharaoh and all his army and all the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." By 14:13, Moses is familiar enough with the story line to improvise well.

After Moses' faithful improvisation in 14:13 (not before), God prompts him to raise his staff over the waters once for their parting for Israel and again for their closing on Egypt. Chapter 15 features songs of celebration and praise to God, much like actors breaking into song during a musical drama. These songs find their place in the drama because of where they fit on the plot line that is "hospitable" to poetry and music (Green, "(Re)turn" 28).

Similarly, the list of the Ten Commandments also finds its place within the plot line. The statement, "You shall have no other gods before me," makes no sense unless spoken by the one who can say, "I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt." In the story of deliverance, the offer reenacted in the Passover feast (Num. 12) is God's

continued offer for Israel to enter the divine drama at the historical point of God's deliverance.

The law (including the commandments) serves as the script setting up "limits" and guidelines for Israel's improvised response (Green; "Reading the Gospels" 51). Israel enters the drama by collectively living the commandments. The second commandment's prohibition against making a "graven image" addresses the thread of the image of God (Exod. 20:4, KJV). The command to fill the earth with the image of God will not be obeyed by crafting idols. The image of God will be humans who are *created* in the image of God. They, the people, the community, will constitute "the image of God" if they enter the drama and act in response to God, according to the script. (Gen. 1:26; Fretheim 225-26).

After sending them on the desert journey, God makes another offer to Israel. This time he calls them to cross the Jordan and occupy the land that he promises to give them. Nonetheless, they balk at the obstacles and consider choosing a captain to lead them back to Egypt. This desire to become slaves to Pharaoh again, rather than to live free to follow God, constitutes unfaithful and unwelcome ad lib in God's drama. God's anger burns. He speaks to Moses of destroying the people and starting over with Moses (Num. 14:11-12). This speech by God constitutes an offer to Moses. In response, Moses speaks a prayer reminding God of his own divine desire for Egypt to know his power to bring his people into the land and reminds God that he has described himself as "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving" (Num. 14:18). The prayer exemplifies faithful improvisation. God responds to the prayer by forgiving. God will not wipe them all out. They will wander in the desert until a generation dies.

In response to this pronouncement, the next day Israel mourns their missed opportunity and attempts an attack. At this point, their military action reflects adlib that does not spring from the offer of God. The Lord declines the Israelites' offer to march with them and they are routed (Num. 14:45).

Retelling by a River, Improvisation, and Adlib

After forty years of ambiguous wandering, God brings Israel to the banks of the Jordan River. At this point on the plotline, the book of Deuteronomy consists of a retelling of the entire story of God's action to deliver his people. There by the banks, Moses preaches in the manner this dissertation suggests. He gives the next generation a story to enter. The book of Joshua shows that this time Israel takes the offer and responds according to the word of God entering the land.

Judges 1:10 reintroduces the bad news saying "another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel." Presumably the stories of God's work had not been told to the next generation. Much like the later generations of modernity, the generation described in Judges had no way to inhabit the story not told.

In the gospel script, the ambiguity of human ad lib that forgets or seems to ignore the story of God is repeatedly interrupted and countered by God who continues, throughout the rest of Scripture, to give offers to characters from the Judges to Ruth to Esther to Ezra and Nehemiah to Samuel to Saul, David and Solomon, and the other kings. Often God makes offers through the voices of the prophets he sends to individual featured characters. God's offers give kings and other characters lines to speak and actions to take that will carry on the plot of salvation. Each featured character and the

community together respond, sometimes in faithful improvisation and sometimes in unfaithful ad lib. No matter what the response, God continues to make offers.

Portraying a Hero

Against the storied Old Testament backdrop, the New Testament begins with one genealogy in Matthew and contains another in Luke's gospel. Genealogies are not narrative material, but are designed to bring to mind much of the previous gospel narrative and locate the main character of the gospels within the unfolding drama of God. These supposedly non-narrative lists of names evoke in the memory, moments of both ad lib and improvisation, and locate Jesus within the unfolding story of God's work.[1] Like a good story or play, the plot's unfolding gives shape to the whole narrative gone before (Cantalamessa 89, 224).

Ironically, the generational sin of humanity and the failure of previous characters to draw God's creation back to the mission of filling the world with the image of God, in a way, constitute an offer to God. He takes that offer by extending an offer to a virgin girl and a carpenter who accept God's offer and improvise a life as the parents of the son of God (Matt. 2; Luke 1). The last sentence about offers being made in both directions seems confusing, because in the gospel drama "acting and being acted upon tend to go together in such a way that it is not always possible to determine who is acting and who is being acted upon" (Frei, *Identity* 82). Action in the divine drama is mutual co-action.

In cooperative performance with Mary and Joseph, God sends his son to earth's stage to create a decisive change in the flow of the drama. Jesus enters the earthly stage through the waters of the womb and enters public life through the waters of the Jordan in

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[1] Matthew's genealogy begins at Abraham and moves toward Jesus, locating him within the story of God's work through Israel. Luke's begins with Jesus and moves backward through Adam, locating Jesus within the story of the acts and words of God toward all humanity.

baptism. As such, Jesus entered the story of Israel, who crossed those same waters to take the land that was theirs by the promise of God. Though Israel as well as John the Baptist balked at the waters of Jordan, Jesus did not balk. Like Israel, he spent hungry days in the wilderness being tested, but unlike Israel he did not fail the tests (Long, *Matthew* 36; Hare 24; Hagner 69). The failure of Israel and of all humanity constitutes an offer to Jesus. He enters the story of Israel as an Israelite and enters the story of humanity as a man. Jesus' story and our story are one and the same.

As soon as he emerges from the desert, he begins to preach like a prophet (Matt. 4:8-17; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:18; John 1:50). When he does so in his home town, the people refuse the offer. Without the interplay of Jesus healing power *and* the responsive faith of the people, he "can do no deed of power there" (Mark 6; Tolbert 180). At this juncture, the drama stalls for a moment. Even with the Son of God on the scene, other faithful actors are required to improvise response for the gospel plot to reach its healing potential.

As if he is playing the part of a prophet from the Old Testament story, Jesus preaches. Also, as if to play the part of God, Jesus makes offers of entrance to people when he speaks the line "Follow me" (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:27; John 4:43). At times people respond and enter through faithful improvisation as Simon Peter does when he recognizes Jesus as the son of God in Matthew 16:13-19. At times they adlib, playing exactly the wrong part as Simon Peter does moments later when he becomes a "stumbling block" to Jesus and receives from the Lord the name "Satan." Peter adlibs again on the mount of transfiguration where, seeing Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, he opens his mouth suggesting the building of three dwellings, only to hear God narrow the focus to Jesus alone (Matt. 17:1-1; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Pet. 1:16-18). Jesus also makes

offers to the other characters, always leaving them freedom for faithful improvisation or unfaithful adlib.

The plot of Jesus' life follows the plot discussed above. He begins as exalted with God before creation. He enters flesh, then dies on the cross and descends into death. All this "bad news" creates a downward trend in the plot that reveals Jesus' character. Nonetheless, the resurrection narrates the good news that reverses the plot of Jesus' life. He is raised from the dead, walks the earth for forty days, and ascends to heaven (Phil. 2:6-11). His call to "follow me" invites all hearers into the sinking and rising drama that is the life of Christ (Noble, Lectures; Hooker 502-03).

Calling for a Community of Cast Members

In the book of Acts, the community receives the offer of entrance into the story. Jesus' prophesy regarding the disciples receiving power when the Holy Spirit came upon them invites them into the ongoing story of God's work. Speeches from Acts 7 and Acts 15 synopsize Israel's story, suggesting that those who act under the power of the Spirit in book of Acts continue the telling and living of God's story (Green, "Reading the Gospels" 51). Also within the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul, usually associated with essay-discursive material in his epistles, preaches narrative sermons in Antioch, Jerusalem, and Corinth (Baird 111). Acts makes clear that participation in the gospel is a community production. "*Church* [emphasis mine] is the creation of the ministry of Christ in the Spirit" (Pasquarello, "Who's Story" 72). In Acts, the church enters and participates or acts out in Jesus' story.

Completing the Thread: Letters within the Drama

To continue to speak about the canon as a plotted drama when moving into the letters seems dubious at best. They are discursive and logical rather than narrative. Despite the discursive nature of his letters, Paul grounds his discourse in the narrative. His assertions presuppose, and are structured and shaped by, the gospel story of Jesus (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 120, 205; Baird 108; Hays *Faith* 5-6). In the letters, Paul becomes a character in the drama often summarizing or evoking the story of Jesus for people who read them (Rom. 15:3; 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6-11; 86). Historical background work on the epistles can help "locate the letters within the story in order to allow the letters to be used to 'locate the [hearing] community within the story'" (87). A studied read of the letters shows that Paul assumes the story of Israel and Christ even when he doesn't narrate them explicitly (Thompson 87-89). In fact, Paul uses the letters to locate himself with the story of Christ and Israel (Thompson 89).

The New Testament letters are important, particularly where the thread "the image of God" is concerned. The letters present Jesus as the "exact imprint" or the "image" of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3; Fretheim 227; Donelson 25; deSilva 88; Bauckham 10). The character of Jesus restores the image of God in the vision of the Church. Furthermore, 2 Corinthians 3:18 suggests that as the community beholds the glory of the Lord, we are transformed "into that same image." As members of the congregation see Christ's image as revealed through the script, by "the work of the spirit" they enter the story of Christ and as a community act like Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). By doing so, the supporting characters reflect the image of Christ, the main character (Dunning 156-57; Lodahl 68).

Ending Scenes

The last book of the canon speaks mostly of endings for the story in a maze of different images and symbols. Nonetheless, the ongoing story of Israel and Christ orders and gives meaning to each symbol and image. Revelation tells again the holistic story of Christ and of creation "in a new way with new images" (Sanders 120, 128). Like the rest of Scripture, "the defining moment of the apocalypse is not the second coming but the death and resurrection of Christ" (121). The sinking and rising motion of Christ's death and resurrection provide the shape of the main character of this drama.

With the confusion of the cyclical and swirling images throughout Revelation, linear-enlightenment thinkers attempt to reduce Revelation to a list of propositions about the end, or a timeline that can be adopted or assimilated. Such reductions violate the nature of the writing. Instead, this kind of cyclical apocalyptic works to draw hearers into the drama and elicit the community's current participation in the coming kingdom (Saunders 123-24, 128; Bauckham 163). According to claims within its text, Revelation was meant to be read aloud (1:3). The Church can learn much about how to inhabit a creation-encompassing cyclical apocalyptic story from oral cultures like those of traditional Native Americans. Looking through indigenous eyes dominant Westerners can see the entire world as more holistic, inter-related, multilayered cycles in which communities and individuals participate. (Fixico 41-61; Sanders 123).

This kind of reading pulls back the curtain on heavenly worship and enables the Church's worship to offer hearers a chance to participate with Christians who have gone before (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 187; Rev. 8:3-5; Campbell *Preaching Jesus*

159). All creation is invited into the heavenly worship service. Revelation 3:21 offers an opening for all hearers to take their place one day on a throne with God (Sanders 141-43).

The gospel is recorded in a dramatic script that tells the story of God and his creation. In the script, God and creation move together through the bad news of devastation brought on by sin and the surprising good news of redemption brought about by God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Threads move through the drama to show progression as the scenes unfold across time. Such threads reveal the gospel as *one* drama. The drama's plot serves to reveal the identity of the main character, God, accurately portrayed in Jesus Christ. This drama offers invitation for people to respond by improvising words and actions that spring from the script and are performed by the community as a way of life. In taking these offers, people enter and participate in the gospel of Jesus Christ by reflecting the image of the main character in the world (Phil. 1:5; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Problem

The problem has arisen over an approximately three hundred year period. In simple terms, the Church began with the story in premodern times, deconstructed the story in modernity and has made a problematic effort to return to the story in postmodernity.

Beginning with the Story

Prior to the eighteenth century's birth of historical criticism, biblical interpretation depended on three elements. The first element involved a literal reading of the text that referred to actual events in history. Second, the various biblical stories from both the Old and New Testaments "fit together in sequence" in order to form an overarching plot

depicting the story of the universe (Frei, *Eclipse* 2). Links between different parts of the

story (i.e., between the Old and New Testaments) were made by interpreting the story

figuratively, thereby giving texts multiple layers of meaning. Third, this narrative world

consisting of the joint episodes of the biblical story was viewed as the "real world" and

was thought to encompass the life of anyone who read or heard it. Life possessed a

narrative structure. The lives of people who experienced the story were figuratively

incorporated into the story. They "inhabited the story" (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading"

179; see also Frei, *Eclipse* 1-3; Wright 50). This narrated real world did not so much

invite the hearers to assimilate the text into the structure of *their* lives, but to respond to

the story by being assimilated into the narrative of the text. In short, "the drama was

salvation. Its script was scripture and its actors were everyone" (Pasquarello, "Narrative

Reading" 190; Harmless 235). In this narrative context, the two age old questions were

answered: "Who is God?" and "Who am I?" (Cantalamessa 72). The answers to these

questions gave people who inhabited the narrative an identity as characters within the

story of God.

Deconstructing *the* Story

As early as the sixteenth century, interpreters such as John Calvin synthesized the

gospels rather than treating them in their narrative wholeness (Green, "Reading the

Gospels" 40). By the eighteenth century, with the coming of biblical criticism, questions

were raised about the factualness of miracle stories and the nature of the "fulfillment of

Old Testament Prophesy in the New Testament" (Frei, *Eclipse* 66). With the advent of,

and supreme confidence in, the scientific method, no longer was the story allowed to

create a community that would point beyond the verifiable world to a storied universe

(Craddock, *As One* 27-28, 61). In the nineteenth century, interpreters such as

Schleiermacher no longer assumed that the "theme of a [biblical] author's work and his

words coincide[d]" (Frei, *Eclipse* 301).

Over two centuries, these two hermeneutical trends separated the various parts of

Scripture from each other. Scripture was also believed to be removed from the meaning

intended by the original authors and distinct from reality that it tried to describe. For both

liberals who gave less authority to script and conservatives who gave more, interpretation

became a search behind the text to the actual reality to which the text made reference. No

longer did the plot line of the gospels spring from the narrative proper. Now the plot of

gospel study was based on the developing traditions that later became the gospels (Green,

"Reading the Gospels" 41).

Liberalism endeavored to "purify the Bible historically" (Wright 50; Buttrick

102). Conservatism denied a need to do so, because the Bible was seen as only historical

(Wright 50; Buttrick 102). At best, the narratives (plural) of Scripture were used as

illustrative material. Because of these trends, the narrative character of Scripture has not

been honored by enlightenment reading (Green, "Reading the Gospels" 37-8).

The focus on what was behind the text caused preaching to suffer because "most

interesting to the imagination is not what lies behind the text but what lies in front of it"

(Willimon, "Preaching the Letters" 108). Because of the scientific method of study to

which Scripture was subjected, modern interpreters got the "blasphemous idea that we

can master [the text]" by dissection (Cantalamessa 84; see also Buttrick 102).

The story, now a collection of thoughts, was no longer thought to structure the

real world. Subsequently, interpretation no longer involved getting the life of the reader

or hearer into the text (Green, "(Re)turn" 18; Craddock, *As One* 81). All hearers had left were individual stories of their own making (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 179). Rather than being invited to enter the story, hearers were called to conform to a system of non-narrative "universally accessible truth" (Wright 49).

Beginning with the Enlightenment and lasting until the mid-twentieth century, interpretation of the gospel script amounted to collections of propositions or dogmatic statements revealed by God and/or gleaned from Scripture or tradition. Since then the Church has tended to think of truth as a set of abstract ideas, divorced from the story. These ideas are then to be accepted into our lives (Boomershine 17). Propositions can be described as pieces of information revealed by God in order to deal with ignorance, thereby *enhancing* people's lives. The gospel is a narrative that reveals the character of God and functions to deal with sin, thereby *transforming* our lives (Knight 87).

Due to the story's fragmentation, there exists a desire to build a "single coherent theological theme scheme" by reconciling multiple "de-dramatized propositions." "De-dramatized propositions are statements about God devoid of their narrative-dramatic context (Vanhoozer 269). Such propositions are removed from the rich plot line of the gospel and reorganized according to an outline by which people can package the script in a system thought to be better than the original. Interpreters thereby "master divinity." (87, 269). The required response of the reader or hearer is merely to "*accept* [emphasis mine] the truth of that revelation so that he or she can respond in faith and *receive* [emphasis mine] salvation" (Knight 87). In this way, propositions reveal new information which individuals are required to assimilate.

Hearers of the propositions do the accepting and receiving and assimilating. If a person accepts the proposition that Jesus is the Son of God, if a person accepts the proposition that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and if a person accepts the proposition that Christ died and rose again, that person is a Christian. The hearers of the propositional revelation are for the most part receiving and accepting factual knowledge that does not necessarily create change. If divorced from the narrative, "cognitive-propositional models of preaching allow information to accrue on top of old convictions like layers of varnish on an old piece of furniture" (Wright 85), never challenging the base convictions or providing a new scripted context for the information assimilated (Buttrick 102). Such preaching allows the Church to assent to Scripture, but fails to require the community to embody the text (Wright 86). Because "the character Jesus will not be reduced to propositions," propositional preaching, devoid of narrative context, fails to bring about fundamental change (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 192). People are not transformed by hearing statements about Jesus. They are transformed by having "Jesus presented to them" (Cantalamessa 43).

De-dramatized propositional preaching has allowed the Bible to become a source for living rather than a context for new life. This trend is exemplified by self-help preaching that merely gives hearers pointers for life (Wright 51; Long, "Out of the Loop" 129). With only individual lives to depend on for structure, the church and the world in general are poorer. This poverty exists because "we cannot peel away the layers of metaphor [or the nuances of story] and get the literature down to some abstract theological statement without doing damage to the intent of the literature" (Willimon, *Pastor* 121). Sacrificing narrative form and context means sacrificing essence.

Such de-dramatized study dissects the text until it is dead rather than "living and active" (Heb. 4:12; Cantalamessa 21; Craddock, *As One* 8). Created in the height of the enlightenment, Father Paissy, another of Dostoyevsky's monks, agrees in an insight shared with Alyosha:

> Remember young man, unceasingly, that the science of this world, which has become a great power, has, especially in the last century, analyzed everything divine handed down to us in the holy books. After this cruel analysis, the learned of this world have nothing left of all that was sacred of old. (190)

For some reason, as people groups develop, a disdain for narrative seems to go hand in hand with movements toward education. In developing countries, narrative preaching and teaching are prevalent but regarded as backward and unsophisticated by people newly educated (Salisbury 86-87).

Returning to Story with Problems

On the other hand, in postmodernity even scientists concerned with subjects such as computer-generated artificial intelligence now find that human minds work to find narrative structure to provide context while they process new data. Scientists, theologians, educators, and preachers, once consumed with objective and verifiable data, now believe humans are dependent on story for knowing and being (Green, "(Re)turn" 15; Schank xli; Craddock, *As One* 55; Buttrick, 104; Whitaker-Johns 853). Thus, next steps in theology and subsequently preaching can, once again, be guided by narrative (Green, "(Re)turn" 28). This emergence of story as structure for reality is not something new; rather it is a rediscovery of the historical art of preaching (Eslinger 87; Meyers 142-43).

Dramatic/narrative theology and narrative preaching refuse to reduce the gospel to an outline of propositions to be accepted. Rather these fields view the gospel as the plot line of an all encompassing drama that *contains* propositions, but is not in essence propositional (Allen, "Theology" 36; Craddock, "Story" 98). Within the drama's script, theological propositions serve as prompts that spring from the script. By these prompts, readers and hearers are *propositioned* (Vanhoozer 107). To accept such a proposition is really to enter or to be accept*ed* into the story. Accepting such an offer is not merely to agree, but to "join up" (Willimon, *Pastor* 129; see also Frei, *Eclipse* 3).

In this move back to narrative theology and preaching, "many preachers have grooved on narrative preaching because they believe it is 'natural' or 'easy' to tell stories and they enjoy them. However, to tell a story so that theological meanings form in the mind of the listeners is much more difficult than the preacher realizes" (Buttrick 109). Many preachers who have embraced a narrative homiletical technique have done so with "faddishness" or a naive confidence that interesting stories sprinkled through a sermon, or a plotted structure for the entire sermon, will bring about transforming experiences for hearers (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 144; Buttrick 125; Harris 87). As a consequence, "the whole narrative enterprise in homiletics is under assault from the right, middle and left" (Long, "Out of the Loop" 127).

The trend toward weak narrative preaching exists in part because much narrative preaching encourages psychoanalyzing, thus reducing the story to fodder for private therapy rather than a text for community transformation (Wright 18; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 140). If a preacher merely desires to conduct therapy in the pulpit, nearly any story will do. This shallow move to a bland narrative form with undisciplined

content produces preaching that is vague and unconnected to the script. Such groundless story-telling is often allowed to represent narrative preaching, causing educated listeners to call to question the use of narrative and once again to seek out propositional-deductive sermons (Wilson, *Practice* 214; Long, "What Happened to Narrative?" 12; Salisbury 88; Harris 86; Meyers 136). When shallow narrative preaching is embraced, it allows the hearers merely to assimilate disjointed Bible episodes and unconnected contemporary stories into their own individualistic stories. Such assimilation mirrors the way hearers accept the de-dramatized statements of propositional preaching (Wright 60).

Renewal in narrative preaching will feature a "rediscovery of *the* [emphasis mine] gospel" (Lischer 25). This gospel is more than preachers can evoke from people's own consciousness. The gospel is a narrative that calls hearers beyond their own experience into a story that will become theirs (Long, "Out of the Loop" 125). In order to enter the story, hearers must embrace *the* narrative, the "unifying plot that holds together what would be scattered." (Green, "(Re)Turn" 28; see also Lundblad 154). The story preached must clearly narrate the gospel of Jesus and must offer a clear call to enter its divine drama (Salisbury 81; Harris 86). Such accurate narration demands an understanding of the script of the drama to which this review now turns (King 102).

Cannon/Gospel as Dramatic Script of God's Story

The canon, including the Old and New Testaments, is God's revealing himself to humanity. "God's word is ... most clearly revealed in Scripture itself rather than in historical method" (Wilson, *Practice* 144). In the gospel, God reveals himself raising the curtain on his identity by means of the dramatic story of salvation (Vanhoozer 38; Wright 80). The gospel of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the canon of Scripture, is the authoritative

script of the "theo-drama" to be enacted by the Church (Vanhoozer 39, 141; Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 180-81; Wright 80). Christians read and tell the script in order to "find themselves in the pages" so they may enter the drama (Wright 50). The canon "places limits on the variety of telling" that can be done in faithfulness to Christ (Green, "Reading the Gospels" 51). Preachers who wish to adhere to the script must understand the nature and background of the script (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 246; Vanhoozer 39).

Coauthoring the script

For the group called "Evangelicals" to which the church of the Nazarene belongs, the Bible receives its authority because it is inspired by God. In the view of most evangelicals and for early Christians, the Bible was, and is, the written word of God for the Church (Pinnock ix; Wright 83).

Such a statement does not assert the Bible as an exclusively divine document. While inspired by God, the words were written by humans who lived in the context of culture and time. It is a document developed by humans under the transcendent and personal agency of God. (Abraham 58; Cantalamessa 78-79). While such a statement could seem to undermine the Bible's authority, when seen against the backdrop of the incarnation, the Bible's human element makes it "more, not less the word of God" (Bloesch 71). A strict fundamentalist inerrancy doctrine tends to make the Bible docetic (divine only) and fails to recognize the "inexhaustibility" of the script's meaning as humans participate in the word (Cantalamessa 81; Craddock, *As One* 45). Ironically the drama of the gospel was in progress through the Church before there was a written canon (Craddock, *As One* 87). As a result, by inspiration, God invited Israel, and then the Church, to join him in the drama of the gospel by playing their parts in the initial

production of the script. Now the church, its preachers, and listeners participate in the drama by interpreting scripture in light of centuries of previous ecclesial interpretation within the apostolic tradition. Even more importantly and more accurately, as the Church interprets the script, the church is interpreted by the gospel (Cantalamessa 20; Craddock, *Preaching* 44).

Structuring the Script

The Church clearly understood the canon as an unfolding story when they ordered the books in the canon. The order is not by date of authorship or by theological hierarchy. The councils ordered the books by placement on the plot line of the unfolding story of God, Genesis to Revelation. Few scholars believe that Matthew was the first New Testament book written, but simple observation suggests that it finds itself first in the New Testament canon at least in part because it contains birth narratives and a genealogical link to the previous story line (Kummel 98, 120). This ordering of canonical books by the early Church suggests that anyone who wants to understand who Jesus is must also get to know "the one he called 'Father'" by experiencing the Old Testament episodes of the gospel story (Green, "(Re)Turn" 24).

While not all material in Scripture is narrative, its overall narrative shape manifests a "hospitality to the other forms" of communication found there (Green, "(Re)-turn" 28). The metaphor drama accounts for the presence of non-narrative poetry and prose materials. In a specific scene of a play, an actor may stand on stage and wax poetic or even sing. A proverb may be placed in the mouth of one character as a part of dialogue within the story. A character may read a letter or an official proclamation written to an individual or a group of people.

More than merely a question of genre, the narrative shape to the canon is the "central logic and function of the *particular* [emphasis mine] narrative of the Christian community—the real 'world' of the Bible" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 55, see also 37; Vanhoozer 39). "There is conflict; there is climax; there is resolution" (Vanhoozer 39). The story has a plot. The different genres within the script serve to fill out the story and find themselves situated along the overall "paradigmatic" plot line of the story. (Hays, *Moral Vision* 295; Wright 80).

In Scripture, "the story of God moves from creation and fall through redemption and new creation" (Allen, "Theology" 32). The previous sentence denotes a sinking movement with the word *fall*. The gospel is bad news first (Buechner 7). The quote by Allen also contains a climax or reversal in the word "redemption." The gospel contains a surprise (Buechner 57; Craddock, *Preaching* 195). Finally Allen describes the fallen *rising* to the reality of "new creation." As Vanhoozer suggests "There is conflict; there is climax; there is resolution" (39). The story has a plot.

Plot, however, is only one aspect of good narrative. Narrative preachers fail when they study parables to preach *like* Jesus but fail to actually preach Jesus (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 178). Contemporary preaching, narrative included, has often lacked a focus on the person of God, the main character in the drama (Wilson, *Four Pages* 155).

Character in the Drama

In the media-driven self-centered culture, thousands of heroic characters compete for attention. The prevalence of hero options makes it difficult for preachers and hearers to keep central the main character of the gospel (Pasquarello, "Who's Story?" 69-70).

While the structure of the gospel is narrative in nature involving ambiguity, resolution, and a required response, character development occupies the heart of God's story.

Though important in all narrative, character is crucial in Scripture. The character, Jesus Christ, becomes present through plot (Boomershine 20; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 41). At the same time, Christ's character gives the plot its shape. In the gospel, plot and character "render each other" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 190; see also Frei, *Identity 104;* Wilson, *Four Pages* 270). The character of Jesus creates the plot and the plot reveals the character of Christ.

The gospel script has authority precisely because it reveals the character of Christ (Marshall 119; Cantalamessa 30; Bloesch 67-78). In a sacramental way, the Bible acts as a sign pointing beyond itself to God. "God becomes incarnate in Christ, not in words. The Bible is not the incarnate Word of God, but the document of the revelation of God's word" (Bloesch 67-68). The Word revealed in Scripture is the Word made flesh, the character Jesus Christ (John 1:14). The plot of the script exists to reveal a character, namely, Jesus Christ.

To separate the character Christ, from the narrative of the gospel is to lose the true character of Christ (Frei, *Identity* 46, 14). The Jesus whom readers and hearers encounter in the gospels, by his intentions, words, and actions is the Jesus who lived and died and rose again. His identity "comes into sharpest focus in the death and resurrection sequence" (Frei, *Identity* 14; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 200). Through death (bad news) and resurrection (good news), listeners know Christ. Reading the rest of Scripture without knowledge of the ambiguity of death and the resolution of resurrection, renders readers incapable of faithful improvisation, because the main plot of the script is not known

(Cantalamessa 86-87). The gospel story lifts the curtain on Christ's identity by moving through ambiguity and resolution. In this narrative movement, his personal identity authenticates the story by giving shape to the plot.

The Shape of Plot and Character

James D. G. Dunn warns against squeezing all of Christology into one common shape (267). Scripture speaks the word of God in a symphony of voices. Nonetheless, the diverse collection of biblical material is unified by a "single chorus" (Green, "(Re)turn" 30; "Reading the Gospels" 55). The previous sentence moves from the metaphor of drama to the field of music, where the term improvisation is also at home (Meyers 131-45). If the gospel were a musical score located on a treble clef, it might show that the melody line in this chorus can be seen as a parabola beginning high above the treble clef. Here the preexistent Word of God is involved in creating and sustaining the world. The melody line would then descend into the treble clef, where Christ takes on flesh. Then the melody line would descend below the clef to its lowest point, death by the basest of methods, crucifixion, followed by burial. Then the melody would rise back into the musical clef (earth), where the disciples saw him, and then ascend to be glorified at God's right hand, achieving the same preexistent level above the clef while remaining incarnate (Noble, Lectures; see Figure 2.1; Hooker 502-03).[2] The sinking, reversing, and rising journey taken by Christ gives structure to the gospel. This narrative movement, in turn, gives structure to effective narrative preaching and subsequently gives structure to the life of the listening community. The gospel symphony or chorus becomes more like a jazz jam session or an improvisational musical drama. The preacher improvises sermons

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[2] The parabola idea comes from Dr. Noble's lectures. The music clef imagery and the concept of a melody line are my efforts to account for the diversity of biblical material and the unity of the character of Christ experienced through the plot of the gospel script. A similar picture is found later in Hooker 502-03.

and the Church learns the script or score and is invited to enter the musical drama by

faithful improvisation (Campbell, "Apocalypse Now" 166, *Preaching Jesus* 236, 237,

240; Vanhoozer 138, Meyers 131-144)

Heaven

Earth

Grave

Death
and
Resurrection
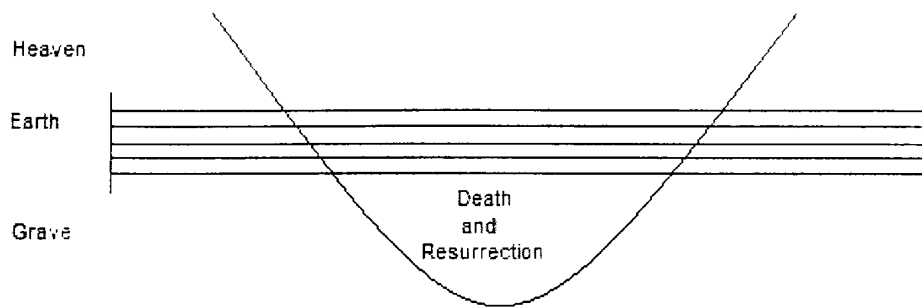
Figure 2.1. Modified Christological parabola

Names for a Hero

Narrative clues to Jesus' parabola-plotted identity are given in the names used for

him in the gospels. The following section shows that these names, given within the plot

of the gospels, act like threads to locate Jesus within the unfolding of the story begun

before his birth in the Old Testament. Christ's names also project his story beyond his

earthly life to his second coming. The use of Christ's names within the script reveals the

above parabola-shaped identity of Christ as narrated in scripture.

The title *Son of God* both informs the narrative and takes form from it. To be sure,

Jesus is obedient as a son (John 5:10); however, from the baptism of Jesus to the

temptation in the desert, the use of the term by demons in exorcisms suggests something

more than mere obedience is meant in this title. In the birth narrative in Luke 1, the angel

suggests that Jesus will be called "Son of God" and in Matthew he is called "God with us." Both narratives make clear the power for this life comes from the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit rather than from human potential. These relationships within the narrative, along with explicit statements in Paul's writing such as Romans 9:5 and Titus 2:13, imply Jesus "shared a oneness with God that was impossible to ordinary men" (Ladd 169). According to Reginald H. Fuller, in Hebrews 1:2 and possibly John 1:18, "son of God" denotes preexistence (109). Canonically, the birth narratives show the *Son of God* beginning very exalted.

Another name is that of *Christ* or *Messiah*. These terms mean *anointed* one, thought of as a son of David who, in the story of Israel, had been promised a never-ending line of earthly rulers. The terms constitute a thread begun in the plot line at 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Expecting a champion to free them from Roman oppression, Jews looked for someone to come and ascend to an earthly throne to give them political-nationalistic justice against Rome (Purkiser, Taylor, and Taylor 323). What Jews contemporary to Jesus were looking for could be characterized as an earthly Christ, a *man* who would be exalted on earth. When Jesus stepped on the cosmic stage of earth, he must have been seen as either a great disappointment, or a radical reinterpretation of this hope. The plot of the gospel shows he refused to assume the long-expected, upwardly–mobile mission and embraced descending bad news (Vanhoozer 39; Ladd 138-43).

Against such expectations, after the messianic confession of Peter in Mark 8:27-33, Jesus' lines contain a prediction of his death and a rebuke of Peter for not accepting the reinterpretation. Jesus' response paints the popular interpretation of Messiah as not

merely erroneous but diabolical (Fuller 109). Jesus does not intend to be a well-born ascending human figure, but a descending person. As Figure 2.1 shows, the plot line moves downward. Jesus' true identity presents bad news to both Jewish zealots looking for a conquering king and upwardly mobile twenty first century readers.

The third New Testament name for Jesus is *Son of Man,* the term Jesus preferred for himself (Ladd 146). Probably borrowed from Daniel 7:13, the *Son of Man* would be given "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages would serve him" (Purkizer, Taylor, and Taylor 307). Again, Jesus comes as unexpected fulfillment. This name is said to have, in the New Testament, three usages: Jesus' *self-designation,* the *suffering* use, and the *future* use (307). These three uses qualify *Son of Man* as a thread that shows Jesus' identity throughout the drama, beginning in Daniel, used through the gospels and projecting to the second coming. This use of a thread collapses time around Christ as the main character, making the whole story and this dissertation present tense.

The last two uses, the *suffering* and *future* uses, bear directly on the shape of the plot by which the character Jesus is identified in the New Testament. Suffering denotes ambiguity or bad news. The future use points to the good news of exaltation.

The identity of the *Son of Man* had been representative of a community and never adopted as a concept to be applied to a certain individual until the time of Jesus (Dunn *Christology* 96). Such a community definition of the term constitutes an offer to the Church to travel the parabola-shaped plot line with Jesus.

The three names, *Messiah, Son of God,* and *Son of Man,* converge in the dialogue contained in the dramatic scene between Caiaphas and Jesus (Matt. 26:63-64). Caiaphas

uses the first two (Messiah and Son of God) in his adversarial demand, "Tell us if you are the Messiah, the son of God" (v. 63) Jesus answers affirmatively, claiming these high names even while in captivity just before the lowest point in the plot of the New Testament identity of Christ. Jesus' extended answer then moves to the title, Son of Man, giving this term eschatological power by pointing toward the final stage of New Testament *exaltation*, "seated at the right hand of power, coming in the clouds of glory" (v. 64).

The use of these names in this way reveal New Testament Christology moving in two directions: first downward in the earthly suffering ministry of Jesus, reversing at the cross and resurrection, then moving upward toward exaltation as the risen Christ (Fuller 160). Jesus' unwillingness to be made king by force and his reinterpretation of the titles suggest the trend of his earthly ministry was first ambiguity, the downward movement toward the bad news of suffering and death. This downward trend came to a reversal (the cross) that brought the good news of resurrection and *ascension* to exaltation.

Songs of a Hero

In the New Testament letters, the gospel plot line is concentrated in poetic sections that are often referred to as hymns because of their literary character (Hooker 501; Lincoln 597, 601; Kelly 75). Even though the so-called hymns are not narratives, the same narrative structure of Jesus' identity can be discerned within them. The next section views Philippians 2 as a representative of the Christological hymns, discerning the plotted character of Christ.

Philippians 2:6-11 concentrates the movements of Christology narrated in rich diversity in the gospels. Here Christ begins in "equality with God" implying exalted

preexistence with God. Christ then moves toward emptying himself of that status taking

the form of a slave "being born in human likeness" (Hooker 502-03; Phil. 2:7). The one

who had God's form now has human form, flesh, through incarnation. The first

movement in Christology is a downward movement from equality in the form of God

through self-effacement into flesh toward the ultimate in low, a criminal's cross-death

(Athanasius 226). Ironically *because* of this lowering "God ... highly exalted him"

(Bauckham 69; Phil. 9). In this way the empty cross displays a dramatic reversal.

Through obedience, Christ moves from *preexistence* in the form of God down to

incarnation in human form and then down to the point of death. Then Christ moves up to

exaltation, receiving a divine name "that is *above* [emphasis mine] every name" (Phil.

2:11; see also Guthrie 351; Bauckham 34). The hymn follows the parabolic plot line.

The calls located before and after the hymn in Philippians 2 also contain insight

for this study. Prior to the hymn, Verse Five says, "Let the same mind be in you that was

in Christ Jesus." Following the hymn, readers are invited to "work out your own salvation

with fear and trembling" (v. 12). Before and after the plotted hymn of Christ's life, these

two calls (vv. 5 12) serve as offers of entrance into the same plotted identity for hearers.

Jesus' life sings the parabolic melody, while everyone who hears is invited to join the

chorus by improvisation. The pronouns in this passage inform the nature of faithful

response to the dramatic hymn. "You" is plural here (Newberry and Berry). Philippians 2

is an invitation offered to the *community* to enter parabolic Christ-plotted life.

Other poetic hymn-like sections with similar parabola-plotted identities for Christ

include 1 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 1:20, 3:18-22, Hebrews 1:1-4, and Colossians 1:15-20. In

these last two passages, the thread "image of God" is associated with Christ. (Bauckham 10; Fuller 216, 218-19; Guthrie 361).

Early Improvisation on the Gospel: Dramatic Shape of the Creeds

The Church set down its corporate experience of Jesus through the word in the creeds. A close reading reveals the narrative underpinnings of the early Church's dogma (Allen, "Theology" 35; Buttrick 108). The Chalcedonian Definition presents one example. The Definition functions as a footnote to the original Nicene Creed (AD 325) and the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381). This study took interest in the plotted nature of the creed and the Definition, how they preserve the narrative shape of Christ's identity while improvising for Greek culture, and how they offer hearers entrance to the gospel.

Plot and character in the Caledonian definition Simply reading the creeds reveals a movement from preexistence to incarnation and on to exaltation (see Figure 2.1, p 47). This study focused on the footnote added to the creed by Chalcedon in 451 and its relation to scripted identity of Christ. Allowing the previously defined parabola-shaped plot of New Testament Christology to guide the reading showed the phrases of the creed also follow the same plot.

The definition upholds the high and glorified beginning found in New Testament Christology by suggesting that Jesus Christ was "begotten of the Father before the ages as regards to his Godhead" (Chalcedonian Definition). In line with the narrative of the gospel, Chalcedon saw exalted preexistence in Christ's identity (Barth 136).

The line, "In the last days ... born of Mary, who is the God-bearer in respect to his humanness," refers to Jesus' incarnation (Mendelsohn). Giving Mary the identity

"God-bearer," Chalcedon preserved the narrative (downward) move referred to above, because in the Baby Jesus, through obedience of a woman, God dwells incarnate (Mendelsohn). He came down to earth and into flesh.

Readers must look closely at the tense of the verbs to find exaltation (or upward movement) in the symbol. The symbol speaks of one who *is* (present tense), thus begging the question. If Christ *is*, where is he? In the creed for which the symbol serves as a footnote, Christ is *exalted* "at the right hand of God." The narrative shape of the canonical script locates Christ in the same place (Mendelsohn; Heb. 12:2; "Nicene Creed" 14). In the creed and in the Chalcedonian Definition, Christ makes the parabola-shaped journey. He descended to flesh through a womb and into death through the cross. Then he ascended to glory through a tomb.

Improvisation in the Greek culture. Preaching and teaching in Greek culture required the early church fathers to adhere to the gospel script while responding to a culture that communicated through complicated metaphysical categories rather than by narrative forms. The conversation between the church and culture created questions about how to hold the divine and human natures of Christ as distinct, yet unified. The fathers needed to explain how a man could be omniscient and how an omnipotent one could be crucified (Runia 101; Macquarrie 68).

A new culture with a new way of talking required a new way of presenting the same gospel. Karl Barth writes "The notion that two natures are united in one person is constantly assumed though not formally defined in the New Testament" (156). This assumption of two natures became formally stated in the definition. In short, the plot of the script demanded the Church to speak these lines in early Greek culture. Responding

to this offer, the fathers improvised a response concerning the nature of God. They improvised a concept, but their improvisation sprang from the script (Vanhoozer 128). Jesus' lines in the script say, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). In hearing these lines and knowing the story, the fathers wrote:

> We unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul (meaning human soul) and a body. (Mendelsohn)

Chalcedon adheres to the narrative script of the gospel.

The negative statements from the definition, "without confusion, change, division, separation, not parted or divided" (Mendelsohn) disallowed argument that would try to explain logically the nature of Jesus as anything but fully God and fully man as narrated in the birth narratives of Scripture (Runia 101). Rather than allowing the narrated mystery to be explained away, Chalcedon affirmed both the unity of the person of Christ and the diversity of the two natures of Christ springing from story in the gospel script (Baillie 119; Noble "Gregory" 3).

While using Greek concepts, rather than accommodating to that culture, the Church maintained the mystery of Christ narrated in the gospel, which was in itself different than the ontological categories of Greek culture (Runia 102). The concepts from Greek culture were assumed into the story by way of the creeds, rather than the story being co-opted by the culture. This assumption of culture by the story was necessary, because the mystery of Christ's identity sprang, not from ontological categories, but from the narrative of the gospel. Chalcedon would not allow the story to be explained away or set aside in favor of some kernel of truth. The Definition forced the Church to keep the identity of Christ located in the story of the gospel as scripted in the emerging canon. The

Chalcedonian Definition had power, because even in the midst of sophisticated Greek

culture, its writers were not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16-17).

      The creeds as offered entrance. Not only do the dogmatic words of the early

Church preserve the narrative shape of Christ's identity, they also open an entrance into

the gospel of Jesus. In stating that the Son is "of the same reality as we ourselves where

our humanness is concerned, thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted"

(Mendelsohn), Chalcedon suggests that "[i]n our unholy and human existence the eternal

Word draws near to us" (Barth 156). Chalcedon suggests that from the point in the

parabola where the line descends into the clef, (see Fgure 2.1, p. 47) the word *assumes* or

takes on our flesh. This assumption of the flesh brings transformation. Because this one

man was without sin, the incarnation expresses a "sanctification and blessing that

excludes sin" (Barth 155). The symbol of Chalcedon confesses that in order for Christ to

redeem humanity, he had to assume flesh.

      This action of assumption happened "because of us and because of our salvation"

(Mendelsohn). When God assumed flesh not only was the flesh of the one man, Jesus,

sanctified, but all flesh is sanctified. In this way the God-man paved the way for

humanity's ultimate participation in deity "as Christ dwell[s] in the heart by the Spirit"

(Noble, "Gregory" 9-12). While this participation in deity was not explicitly stated by the

New Testament, it is the logical conclusion drawn from the shape of New Testament

Christology and implied in 2 Peter 1:3-4, where humans are offered the hope of

becoming "participants in the divine nature" (Noble, "Gregory" 9-12; 2).

      Chalcedon helps to focus attention on the God-man (Christ) as a pattern through

which to view the life of faith. (Baillie 128-31). In descending to flesh and then into death

on the cross, God has forever honored and sanctified flesh and showed the plotted shape

of Christ's character as a prototype of the shape of all Christian character. Because Christ

entered humanity, humans are offered entrance to divinity (2 Peter 1:3-4). Women and

men are invited to take the parabolic (sinking and rising) journey by being baptized unto

death and raised to new life (Romans 6). The creeds are faithful improvisations of the

narrative script by the early church. The early church and its creeds invite us into the

Christ–shaped drama as a community of contemporary actors.

The story of three: God in community. The narrative shape of Christ's identity

places him now in Heaven exalted. This placement of Christ in Heaven creates a problem

because "we cannot know who he is without having him present" (Frei, *Identity* 67). John

Wesley believed that at the end of time, humans would have opportunity for "a deep, an

intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his

son Jesus Christ through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of

all creatures in him" (510). Humans have a foretaste of this relationship now. Not only

are people invited to participate in deity by the canonical script, but also by the doctrine

of the Trinity springing from the script (Seamands 2).

Figure 2.2. Rublev's *Icon of the Trinity*.

In 1425, another Russian monk, Andre Rublev, reflected on Genesis 18. The

passage featuring the story of three angels visiting Abraham and language that equates

them with God, gave Rublev a glimpse of a place in the script for readers to sit with the

Trinity. His painting by that name depicts the three angels from Genesis who also

represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Figure 2.2). Their heads and faces tilt

toward each other in relationship. Their scepters and clothing suggest equality among

them. The icon focuses on the lamb in the chalice on the table:

> The hand of the Son, represented by the middle figure, points with two
> fingers directly at the lamb in the chalice, acknowledging his mission to be
> the 'lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' [locating this
> painting in its gospel narrative context (John 1:29)]. The hand of the
> Father, the figure on the left, is raised in blessing over the chalice, thus
> encouraging the Son in his work. The hand of the Spirit, the figure on the
> right, is pointed to a rectangular opening that signifies the world.
> (Seamands 3)

Springing from the narrative, this icon shows the Spirit extending an invitation from the

Trinity to humanity. The invitation gives an offer for humanity to join in divinity

(Seamands 3; 2 Pet. 2:14). When humans respond to this invitation, Jesus' story becomes

their story (Boomershine 41).

The importance of this early improvisation is clear because "only the doctrine of

the Trinity adequately accounts for how those who are not God come to share in the

fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Vanhoozer 43). Even early dogma, that

seems to be anything but narrative, springs from the gospel as faithful improvisation and

functions as an offer of entrance into the "theo-drama" for humans who will respond

(128).

Preaching the Drama: Narrative Homiletics

Although many preachers look askance on any real attention paid to the form of

sermons, the identity of Christ is inseparable from the plot through which hearers

experience Christ. As a result, the form of the sermon in which people experience Christ

takes on great importance (Lischer 25; Wilson, *Four Pages* 130; Craddock, *As One* 43).

The form of the sermon also greatly influences the level of participation required by the listeners (*Preaching* 174). Preaching that honors the narrative structure of the gospel and Christ's identity will take the congregation on a journey in which they must participate. Such preaching avoids sermons that merely describe to the congregation the destination at which the preacher arrived after long hours of study (*As One* 115-16). Good narrative preaching works with the congregation and with God as partners in the sermon process. In the language of this dissertation they are all improvisational co-actors on the stage (Wilson, *Four Pages* 258).

Abducting the Hearers

Unlike self-help preaching, the story of Scripture does not primarily exist as a resource for a value-added life. The gospel functions to provide a whole new way of life (Boomershine 16; Wright 136-37). Great narrative preachers do not hope to "break it down" so the hearers grasp the meaning, but tell the story so that they are grasped by the gospel (Willimon, *Pastor* 136). Such preaching has recently been called "abductive preaching" (Windsor 20; McClaren and Haselmayer 31.). Rather than giving people kernels to assimilate into their lives, effective narrative preaching endeavors to "draw people into a new imaginative world so that they make their home there" (Green "Reading" 66). Such narrative preaching endeavors to "seize people by the imagination" and give them a new place to inhabit (Sweet, McClaren, and Haselmayer 31; see also Windsor 20; Allen, "Theology" 28).

Conforming Narrative

Often times, narrative preaching has settled for intersecting the story of God with the story of the hearers (Boomershine 20). Charles Campbell describes two forms of

narrative preaching: the storytelling approach exemplified by Richard Jenson and the approach that springs from plot, exemplified by Eugene Lowry. Although he values the contribution by both scholars, Campbell asserts much preaching based on these paradigms falls short of preaching the gospel ("Apocalypse" 165-6).

True to contemporary psychological makeup, one of the reasons for a turn to narrative preaching emerges from the narrative quality of common life experience (Boomershine 18). While life experience has been reflected in most narrative preaching, the fundamental worldly script has not always been replaced by the story of God (Wright 92). Wright and Campbell correctly assert that narrative authorities such as Eugene Lowry ask preachers to psychoanalyze biblical characters (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 90). Such therapeutic analysis can easily become an exercise in projecting the hearer's emotions on the biblical character, thereby allowing the individual hearer to remain the central actor in the drama portrayed on Sunday morning. Such self-centering makes the spiritual movement of the individual hearer the dominant plot line (Wright 52-55). If not disciplined by the particulars of the gospel, narrative preaching will merely explore the "subjective, private, therapeutic realm of the individual" (18-19). When poor narrative preaching endorses therapeutic, individualistic or nationalistic stories, congregations become collections of individuals who *feel* better. The gospel of Jesus invites a community of hearers to enter the story and *be* better (60).

Narrative therapy in the pulpit happens as preachers embrace *comedic* preaching. Comedic preaching means that the bad news declared springs from the generic human condition and then moves to resolution found within the dominant stories of individuals or of the surrounding culture. Such preaching produces a happy ending each week,

allowing the hearers to absorb a sermon into their personal narrative, without questioning

the cultural and individual stories that give shape to their lives (Wright 19, 36-37, 43;

Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 123). Such preaching removes individual episodes of

Scripture from their context within the greater story of God in order to give them a new

context. In doing so, such sermons give greater power to a competing secular story

requiring no change in the hearing community (Green, "Reading the Gospels" 52,3;

Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 179; Wright 52).

Preaching Plot *and* Character: A Particular Story

An alternative to such preaching is to adhere to the plotted actions of the main

character of the gospel and preach tragic moments that shatter the standard sinful plot

lines. This kind of preaching dislodges the hearers from the dominant story of culture and

invites them to enter the biblical story instead of constantly assimilating gems from the

Bible into their stories (Wilson, *Four Pages* 88; Wright 40, 44).

If preachers are to preach the story of God in Jesus Christ, they must do more than

tell stories or generate a scintillating plot each week. They must begin with the particulars

of the narrative or more accurately *the* particular gospel (Campbell, "Apocalypse" 166;

Preaching Jesus 207; Hays, *Faith* 5-6). Most specifically they must begin with the

particular character revealed by the gospel story.

Having said that, preachers *can* take great help in the structuring of sermons if

they allow the above parabola, to give shape to their sermons (see Figure 2.1 p. 47).

Lowry also has proposed a very familiar plotted structure for sermons. His structure is

shown in Figure 2.3. The sermon begins with normal life then moves though five

"stages" (*Homiletical Plot* 25). The language in these pages suggests Lowry's structure

be viewed as a five act play: "1) upsetting the equilibrium 2) analyzing the conflict 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel. And 5) anticipating the consequences" (25).

1 ⇨ 2   5

                                                4

3
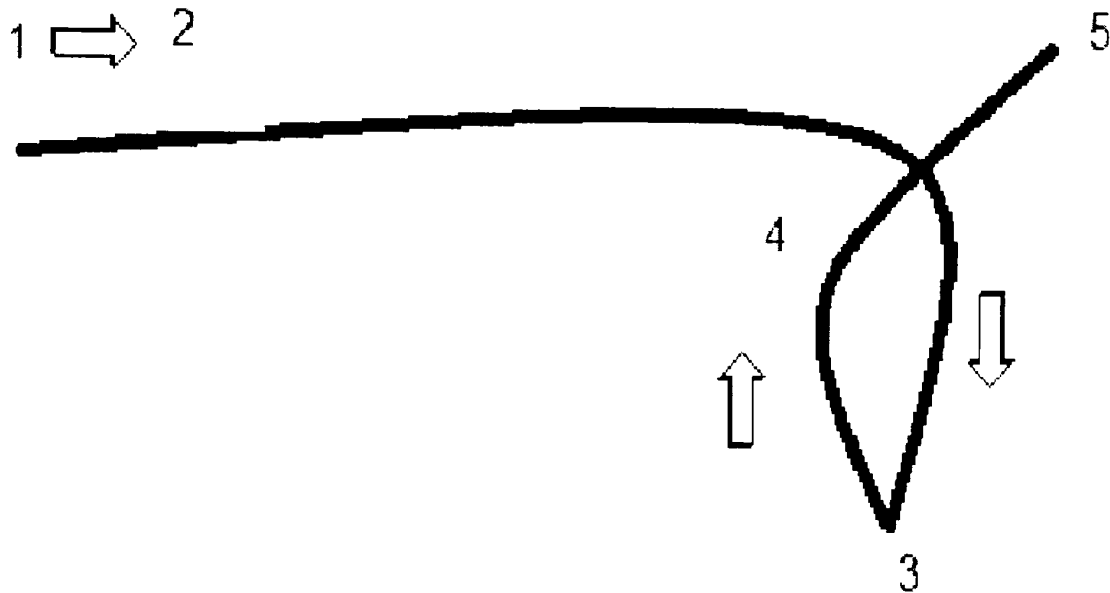
Source: Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 25.

Figure 2.3. Lowry's loop

Without careful application, Lowry's format can become a formula for communication that fails to pay attention to the particular story of the gospel and to the main character in that story, Jesus Christ. One possible solution calls narrative preaching to hold these two diagrams together (i.e, Figures 2.1 p 47, and 2.3). In this way, preachers can force themselves to see the plot line in Lowry's diagram as none other than the parabolic sinking, reversing, and rising character of Jesus Christ. The following sections

show that this joining of plot and character in sermons provides strong enough

connections to the script to give preachers freedom to improvise without moving into ad

lib. Sermons with these strong connections can draw hearers into faithful, improvisational

participation in the gospel *of Jesus*.

Preaching Bad News

Both diagrams begin with descending action (see Figures 2.1 p 47 and 2.3).

Narrative preaching has been described as "less outraged at evil" when compared to other

styles (Lischer 24). If this quote suggests narrative preaching ignores evil, the preaching

described might be better characterized as *poor* narrative preaching. A narrative sermon,

meaning one that has narrative structure, cannot avoid bad news and continue to have a

plot (Wilson, *Practice* 248). In strong narrative preaching, early ambiguity is "essential"

in order for the hope that comes later to have credibility (Wilson, *Four Pages* 20;

Practice 103, Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 76). "The gospel [itself] is bad news before it is

good news" (Buechner 7). Therefore in narrative preaching avoiding the reality of sin and

evil in order to tell "nice stories" makes no sense and leaves the congregation wondering

if the preacher has ever left the study and entered the world (41). Bad news that names

sin and its devastating results is essential.

The shape of authentic bad news. In Figure 2.1 (p. 47), the parabola descending

into the music clef represents Jesus descending into flesh. By so doing, Christ has made

human ambiguity his own by taking it upon himself. God, the father, was involved in this

move from glory to flesh. First Corinthians 5:21 says, "For our sakes he made him to be

sin who knew no sin." Romans 8:3 says, "God sent his son in the form of sinful humanity

to deal with sin in the flesh." In obedience to God, Jesus descended into flesh in order to

deal with sin in the flesh. Figure 2.3 also begins with a descending line. In order to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, sermons must deal with sin and the resulting brokenness of the world (Wilson, *Four Pages* 108).

Ambiguity in a good narrative sermon functions as much more than merely a felt need. Gospel ambiguity is theological in nature (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 21; Wilson, *Four Pages* 110-11, 121-22, 147-48). In good narrative, "the actual need of the congregation is not determined apart from Scripture" (Wilson, *Practice* 31). In order for bad news to have the quality of theological reality, it must spring from or have overt connection to the gospel itself (Wilson 122; Craddock, *As One* 107; Salisbury 89; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 162).

Sometimes simply reading the text brings enough confrontation with conventional wisdom or common cultural ethic to introduce proper ambiguity (Craddock, *As One* 107; Lowry *Homiletical Plot* 85; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 109). Other times, ambiguity can be accomplished by searching the context in the book or throughout the canon for opposing sentiments and then reading or telling two texts that seem to create dissonance between each other (Craddock, *Preaching* 147). Some preachers will be very good at finding good news but struggle to find bad news. Such one-sided talent needs not prevent sermons from dealing with the reality of sin and brokenness. If at first, a text yields only good news to a preacher, the inverse or opposite of the good news is often the unstated, but implied, bad news (Wilson, *Four Pages* 56-60, 81, 123).

Bad news that rings true. When preachers tell bad news early, sermons take on the shape of the gospel with integrity and are also being true to something else. When Jesus met Mary and Martha beside the tomb of their brother, he eventually gave them

good news in the form of theological talk about resurrection and a demonstration of resurrection in Lazarus' case. Before that conversation and miracle, however, Jesus simply cried with them (Buechner 35; John 11). Similarly, narrative preachers must be willing to begin where listeners are. Some sermons in a year need to allow Christ to weep with people who come heartbroken. Such empathy is incarnational and effective in gaining the ear of the congregation and newcomers (Wilson, *Four Pages* 125). While bad news must spring from or be connected with the text, "it isn't preachable" until listeners can *experience* the ambiguity (Lowry *Homiletical* 30, 38).

Preaching bad news must produce "nod of recognition" (Craddock 15, 160) or "verisimilitude" (Wilson, *Practice* 263). In order to achieve such recognition, sermons can begin with induction in order to meet congregational expectations and take them somewhere (Wright 90). When preachers allow the text to illuminate bad news in the lives of the listeners, they have not ceased to be theological, their sermons have merely become incarnational. The word is becoming flesh, all human flesh. As the text illuminates the bad news in human lives, exegesis of the communal situation will often shed light on the text (Wilson, *Practice* 166). Such illumination springs from the incarnational nature of the text and of the community of faith. Preaching true-to-life bad news allows people to enter not only the sermon, but also to enter the divine drama.

If hearers merely look at the text but do not see themselves in the story, metaphorically, they look at themselves in a mirror, not realizing or forgetting what they look like. The word can be preached so as to act as a mirror, showing hearers who they really are, that is, revealing their identity within the context of the divine drama. Such preaching allows hearers to own and confess the bad news in which they participate so

change can take place. (Jas. 1:22-24; Cantalamessa 71; Wilson, *Practice* 111; 2 Cor. 3:18).

Fostering a sense of empathy enables people to *identify* with the bad news (Wilson, *Four Pages* 62-63). If preachers tell stories of bad news well, paying close attentions to the particulars, they can evoke experiences that listeners on their own cannot recall (Craddock, *Preaching* 161; *As One* 47).

Verisimilitude or recognition is more likely when sermon preparation is a longer process. If background work for individual sermons is done as much as a month in advance, once preachers have discovered the bad news that springs from the script, they can walk through life, looking to do the incarnational work of reshaping an everyday life issue into a theological issue, (Wilson, *Four Pages* 132-33). By speaking true Scriptural bad news in an everyday issue, the preacher provides an offer of entrance.

In poor narrative preaching, bad news is too often only personal and individualistic. If hearers are going to find themselves named in the bad news of the script, preachers must speak the real life drama of *communal* sin in Adam and its continued expression in every generation. God must be portrayed as concerned with communal bad news. Such a portrayal only happens if narrative sermons are so concerned (Wilson, *Four Pages* 111, 117).

Bad news improvised. Once the text has yielded bad news and preachers have seen analogous bad news in everyday life, they are prepared to faithfully improvise. In a sermon on Mary and Martha, Lowry models such improvisation. Before he narrates Martha asking Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help with the meal, Lowry pantomimes Martha standing behind Jesus looking at Mary sitting there. Lowry's gestures reflect

Martha emphatically motioning Mary back to the kitchen (Lowry, *Mary and Martha*).

Such antics are not explicitly narrated in the passage but they constitute faithful

improvisation on the story. Few hearers will be totally unfamiliar with a similar awkward

entertaining situation. Nevertheless, Lowry does not allow the hearers to merely

assimilate a familiar story about entertaining into their every daily lives. He goes on to

tell the story of the coming death of Christ in order to give context to both the story of

Mary and Martha and to give a context for the hearers to enter.

From bad to worse. The plot of the story must have some movement (Lowry

Homiletical 35). Merely to name the bad news and give a few illustrations of it is not

enough (Lowry 39-40; Eslinger 76). "The trouble [in the sermon] should build," or

"deepen perhaps by viewing it from a fresh perspective" (Wilson, *Four Pages* 129, 134-

35). Such building ambiguity is motivation; as action descends, people's minds will not

rest until resolution is reached (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 21, 29; King 103). Analyzing the

conflict allows the preacher to diagnose a problem in the world in light of the text

(Lowry, *Homiletical Plo,* 37). The bad news becomes more than the congregation's

immediate felt needs or what on the surface makes for a bad day. "The tragic moment

needs to unsettle the congregation [and progress] so that by the end" they are drawn into

the biblical narrative (Wright 44).

When the bad news in a sermon springs from the script and develops and deepens

in ways that are recognizable in life, hearers find themselves drawn into the story by their

communal involvement in the death of Jesus brought on by "sinful human communities"

(Boomershine 167, 170). The deepening story of sin narrates a place for sinners to enter

the story of God.

Preaching Good News

In truth, many sermons are preached with enough bad news. Anyone who can read a newspaper or watch the news can find plenty. Preachers are taught to look through the lens of Scripture to find discord in the world, but often they are not taught how to find grace (Wilson, *Practice* 155-57; Eslinger 79). Graceless preaching is the equivalent of a gospel story that moves the disciples from Good Friday straight to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 without the benefit of the resurrection scene. With the exception of the yearly Good Friday or Tenebrae service, if preachers are going to preach the gospel, sermons must contain and, actually, *be* good news. Due in part to Lowry's advice to delay good news, in many narrative sermons, grace comes so late that the graphic and long images of bad news totally outstrip the good news for space in hearers' memories (Wilson, *Four Pages* 163; Eslinger 79). Preachers who tell the bad news without telling the good news are like doctors who diagnose problems well, but tell patients to heal themselves (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 37, 60).

Preachers that strictly follow the enlightenment rules of critical biblical study can still write sermons that lack good news. Such sermons are produced when preachers confine themselves to a single passage of Scripture that doesn't contain good news. In doing so, they preach sermons completely devoid of hope. Such sermons create a graceless Christian community (Wilson, *Practice* 102; *Four Pages* 164-65). Some canonical improvisation on the part of the preacher can locate grace in the gospel when it is not found in the pericope chosen as the text for the sermon. The gospel is full of good news and the overarching, unfolding master story will answer the bad news experienced in any text. One may only need to ask a question based on the shape of the gospel (see

Figure 2.1, p. 47) to find some good news. That question is "What difference do the cross

and resurrection make?" (Wilson, *Four Pages* 192).

The missing actor. Graceless sermons or sermons with weak good news often

move from bad news directly to steps listeners need to take to remedy the problem,

making the call to commitment central. Such a structure for sermons confuses the bad

news with the good news and places hearers at the center of the sermon or in the spotlight

of the drama (Wilson, *Practice* 157; *Four Pages* 160-61; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 69).

Sermons focusing heavily upon human commitment are, at their heart, merely a disguised

form of bad news. In order to find grace in a tough text, the preacher must shift the focus

away from people and toward God (Wilson, *Four Pages* 191). When the good news is

about what humans do, hearers settle for *ecstasy* (delighting in themselves) and never

enter the realm of *awe* at something or someone beyond themselves (Craddock,

Preaching 75). Good news must be about God, his actions and nature.

A reversal: good news experienced. The good news of the sermon must not

merely be heard in a didactic transfer of factual information. Information *about* God is

not good enough good news. Listeners must hear the words in the context of a

relationship with *God* rather than a merely relationship with "ideas about God" (Wilson,

Practice 23). This need for a relational reality means the good news of the sermon is

vastly more than preachers can orchestrate. Preachers can speak the words and share the

gospel good news as they have experienced it, but in the telling of the story, by the Holy

Spirit, Christ must become present (Boomershine 20; Vanhoozer 100-03). The gospel

must not just be told; it must be experienced as "hope rooted in Jesus,… a gift from

God." (Wilson, *Practice* 100). At some point in the sermon, in answer to the honest

treatment of bad news with adequate good news, the congregation must experience enough good news to celebrate saying, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 67; Wilson, *Four Pages* 230). A congregational experience of good news requires something dramatic accomplished by the divine actor in concert with the preacher.

Alyosha, Dostoyevsky's hero, experiences descending bad news as his mentor's life expires. The ambiguity deepens, because if father Zossima is really to be considered holy, the characters believe that his body will not decay, and therefore, stink after his death. Dread (bad news) progresses as the inevitable tell tale sign approaches. Ironically it is at the moment Alyosha "experiences the odor, the reality of death, and the absence of God, that he realizes the presence of God" (Buechner 45). At that point, the tone of the story reverses dramatically. This dramatic turnaround is analogous to the gospel in which mourners approach a tomb to anoint a body after death and burial and leave the tomb amazed. Reversal also occurs as the disciples who were walking away from Jerusalem, dejected because of "those things that happened there," wind up returning and sharing the good news with others who had seen him, saying, "The Lord is Risen!" (Matt. 28, John 20; Mark 16; Luke 24).

At the bottom of both Figures 2.1 and 2.3 (pp. 47 and 62), the direction of the plot reverses. Christ rises from the dead and then moves back into the world (music clef), eventually ascending back to glory. The cross, the most tragic moment in the story, gives way in just three short days to the resurrection, displaying a dramatic reversal and calling for one in sermons (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 60).

If good news in a sermon is going to be more than mere information exchanged or a call to create good news by human wisdom or effort, everydayness must break down, giving way to another reality. The hearing community must experience an "impossibly possibility" springing from the gospel that allows for resolution of the bad news (Windsor 22; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 48, 50, 53). Though the bad news is "unavoidable" (Buechner 57), the good news has power to answer bad news when, as much as possible, it is presented as "unforeseeable" (57), a moment of "Aha" (Craddock, *Preaching* 195).

The grace of the cross and empty tomb narrate *the* reversal of the gospel. After such a reversal, "nothing can ever be the same" (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 48). In order to find grace, preachers need to begin with *the* reversal of the script and ask again in the midst of the bad news "What difference do the cross, resurrection and ascension make?" (Wilson, *Four Pages* 192).

If sermons are to be the gospel of Jesus Christ, the dramatic reversal and the good news it introduces must be the grace of God beyond, and even counter to, human wisdom. Otherwise the gospel becomes a nice story to be absorbed into the dominant consciousness of the hearers, never "challenging their horizons" (Wright 43). The good news needs to open a "new door" to new life through which the gospel of the canonical script can be heard anew and entered as a new context for living (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 61).

The burden to surprise the congregation each week with the reality of the gospel can put great pressure on preachers, until they discover that such reversals characterize reality of the created world as well. Preachers can take courage in knowing that "God never leaves us without signs of his action in the world" (Wilson, *Four Pages* 199).

Though Christ has ascended to the right hand of the Father, the gospel is incarnate in the world through the work of the Spirit (201). God's work in the world means "priceless moments are all around us" (Killian 66). The story of God "intersects my story and *our story* ... [with] Jesus' story" (Boomershine 20). The intersection of the gospel with the created world invites preachers to, within the context of the gospel, tell stories that come from places thought to be outside religious circles (Wilson, *Four Pages* 20).

The cue for finding these stories must be the gospel. Where good news is concerned, improvisation must spring from and be faithful to the script (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 162). If they manifest verisimilitude to life and adhere to the narrative logic and structure of the gospel script, stories from news or from art can become the skin in which the gospel is presented with improvisational faithfulness, because the gospel is a story of incarnation. Such gospel-shaped stories from the everyday allow hearers to experience the drama of life in the context of grace (Wilson, *Four Pages* 203, 225, 263; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 203; Frei, *Identity* 168). A preacher who fosters an awareness of God in everyday life prepares a community to witness to Jesus everywhere (Wilson, *Four Pages* 29).

Preaching Threads

According to Chapter 1, threads are present throughout the script. The following sections show their uses for effective preaching.

Threads and time. The use of threads allows readers and hearers not only to see the connections between all Scripture throughout the story, but also to see the past, present, and future as an "unbroken story" (Wilson, *Practice* 264). Such a phenomenon in the script allows preachers to tell the story "as though once upon a time is now"

(Buechner 91; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 251). Threads make the tense of the drama present.

Typology, a kind of thread, helps hearers see the Son of God implanted throughout all of scripture in the sense that Jeremiah prefigured Christ in his passion (Cantalamessa 34, 84). In this way, Jesus is *the* thread that holds the plot together. Still, he is not the only thread. For example, the wind that blew across the waters in creation is the Spirit at Pentecost and the Spirit that descended on Jesus at the Jordan River (37). Typology uses biblical threads to give the present day listener a sense of the connections between temporally separate episodes (or scenes) of the grand drama. Such uniting of times provides the current day listener an offer of entrance into an ancient story (Craddock, *Preaching* 141; Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 256, 251).

Threads and movement. The absence of any linear thought marks poor narrative preaching. It causes listeners to ask "Where is this going?" (Wilson, *Practice* 220-21). In preaching, threads provide what poets call "metonymy" or a "dominant movement of thought" (227). Movement can be seared into the imagination of the listener if the sermon's ending points back to the dominant image or repeated refrain, drawing the sermon together by the thread (209). Threads that develop assure hearers that the sermon is headed to a destination not only for the sermon, but for all of history (231-32). A strong thread allows the sermon to digress in order to involve listeners in the overall experience and still to continue a powerful sense of the movement of thought (183-85, 238).

More practically, threads serve as "memory hooks that enable the remembering and retelling of stories" (Boomershine 46). They give unity, memory recognition,

anticipation, and intimacy (Craddock, *Preaching* 169). Threads also help assure good

connection between the good news and the bad news by linking stories begun in the early

section of the sermon with their resolution in the later sections (Wilson, *Four Pages* 229).

Threads display change by being heightened, reversed, or reshaped in order to move the

plot along (Boomershine 76).

Where threads are found. Threads appear as images or metaphors drawn from

the biblical text. The fact that threads are often metaphors does not necessarily mean that

they are not real. They display the kind of reality that a metaphor can supply (Hays, *Faith*

48). Threads that spring from, or at least bear strong connection to, the text give

preachers freedom to improvise during moments of digression without fear of slipping

into ad lib. Threads keep the sermon within the context of the script "acting as a magnet

holding a cluster of reflections and emotions together" (Craddock, *Preaching* 197). In the

imagination of the hearers, great threads cannot be separated from the content of the

message, the gospel (Craddock, *As One* 65; Wilson, *Practice* 246-47).

Though often threads will and should come from Scripture, they also may be

found in other places. If imagery and artistry are sparse in a text, the thread may have to

come from contemporary experience (Wilson, *Four Pages* 184; *Practice* 183). In fact,

effective threads will already be familiar to the hearers (Craddock, *As One* 75). When

drawing threads from everyday life, good sermons work with secular, even pagan

imagery, in the same way, the Bible works with such material. Arguably the most

recognizable thread ever drawn from the secular world was assumed by the gospel two

thousand years ago when Christ turned a secular symbol of Roman brutality into the

universal symbol for sacrificial love—the cross (Twiss 135). Because of the work of

Christ, such sanctifying of pagan cultural imagery as material for threads in sermons is still possible today (110-35).

Good threads usually emerge during the writing of the sermon and require a sensitivity to life and to the text (Craddock, *As One* 65). Such threads can make for powerful cohesion in the sermon. If theological unity around the thread is "organic" (Wilson, *Practice* 205) or a natural fit, then the theology of the sermon is holistic, drawing content and form together. A "static unity is a unity brought by a thread that is *imposed* on the material in the sermon" and feels to preacher and hearer like forced ad lib (205).

Often threads are visual. Art gives power and identification to any thread and enhances the likelihood of good memory (Wilson, *Practice* 266). On the other hand, threads do not *have* to be visual in nature. They can simply be a phrase that functions like a refrain in poetry or song (Wilson, *Four Pages* 54-55). While ideas and concepts are not as gripping as images, using a theological idea as a thread allows for theological progression throughout the sermon, an aspect every thread should create. Developing a theological thread gives a narrative structure to a more theological sermon (Craddock, *Preaching* 201; *As One* 45; Wilson, *Practice* 154).

Developing Character(s)

As mentioned previously, one of the great short falls in much of narrative preaching, especially some that is heavily influenced by Lowry's *Homiletical Plot*, is to settle for just that, a plot. Too heavy a reliance on the structure offered in the Figure 2.3 (p. 62) or any other structure for sermons, allows preachers to stop short of painting a clear and gripping picture of Christ and the Trinity he reveals (Lischer 25). Attention to

the main character of the story can move sermons beyond generic plotted religious speeches to gospel improvisation.

Plot and character. When Preachers merely fill up a narrative sermon form, with touching narrative material, "Jesus gets absorbed into human experience and [in our sermons] loses his unsubstitutable identity" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 39). As mentioned before, one of the chief ways narrative preachers err, is to run to the parables and preach *like* Jesus but fail to preach Jesus (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 178). As if to answer this problem, when Paul speaks of preaching, he refers to Christ as the object of his preaching and Paul's story "gets supplanted by the Christological story" (Hays, *Faith* 30; see also Baird 106; 1 Cor. 1:13).

In narrative preaching, *character* makes the plot specific enough to be gospel (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 172, 191; Vanhoozer 108). Simon Peter, preacher of Pentecost, refused to separate plot from character. "God has made Lord and Messiah that very Jesus humans Crucified" (Acts 2:36; 10:38-40; Cantalamessa 37). Jesus is referred to as Lord and Messiah, but also the one crucified. Peter did not leave out the plotted nature of Christ's existence. The gospel story simply revolves around Jesus Christ, "the archetypical (or prototypical) hero who, through his faithfulness unto death on the cross, wins deliverance and access to God for his people" (Hays, *Faith* 255). The parabola structure of the plot in which the identity of Christ is communicated is evident even in that previous quote. As mentioned before, the sinking and rising character of Christ constitutes the thread that holds the plot together. He is the descending, then ascending, line on both Figures 2.1 and 2.3 (pp 47 and 62). Therefore, the "medium [Christ] is the message" and the character creates the plot while the plot reveals the character

(Cantalamessa 37). Jesus is the divine-human *character* in the plot of history. but he also embodies the "final *event* [emphasis mine] of the word of God in history" (12). The gospel is *of Jesus*.

More than an example. Literature often presents a hero as a model to be emulated. As Jesus enters the story, his faithfulness to God forms the "typological antithesis to Adam's unfaithfulness" (Hays, *Faith* 248; Rom. 5:12-15; Achtemeier 97). The main character shows what faithfulness looks like as a pattern for the life of the disciple (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 212).

The main character, however, does more than merely set a pattern. When Jesus' character is only presented as an example, sermons call hearers to imitate Jesus. Such example-only preaching places the burden of imitation squarely on the hearers, who despair very quickly. In an example–only homiletic, good news is not really good news. Jesus viewed simply as pattern says more about what hearers cannot accomplish than what they can. "In order for grace to be perceived as grace it must [not merely be the imitation of God]. It must be the action of God" (Wilson, *Practice* 118). Jesus must be more than example. He must be (through the work of the Spirit) the "equipper" (*Four Pages* 209). To preach the action of Christ is to preach Christocentrically (158, 165). Such preaching moves beyond mere human optimism, bringing a God-sized hope to the sermon (103).

Active current work on the part of the main character of the gospel (the Trinity) represents the core of what is called faith. In fact the faith of Christ plays a role in the community's faith in Jesus (Wilson *Four Pages* 142-9; Hays *Faith* 156-57). Jesus is presented not only as a portrait of a faithful life, but as "a portrait of a person who can

elicit faith in others" (Baird 107). The scriptures speak of Christ, but Christ himself speaks to us through them (Cantalamessa 10). Confident that the Spirit makes Christ present through the Word, humans must write and preach and listen to sermons, expecting to hear from God who is speaking (Wilson, *Practice* 18; Cantalamessa 9-10).

Christ is not just an example; he is "the individual in whom the destiny of others is embodied" (Hays, *Faith* 225). More than merely exemplary, Christ's faith is "vicariously efficacious" (248). Christ is not merely the object of the community's faith, he is the subject who increases their faith (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 222, 227). Faith in the hearers is not first and foremost their faith, it is "incarnate faithfulness" (Hays *Faith* 161). In short, the main actor still continues to act with, for, and on the community as they play their parts in the gospel drama.

Developing other characters. Not only does the gospel function to portray the character of the Trinity by narrating his actions in the world. It also functions to develop the character of the hearing community. Because individual, personal, even private salvation has threatened "to replace the Biblical narrative in structuring Christian life," preaching must help the congregation "rediscover its role as the visible body of Christ in the world" (Wright, 52, 78). Good inductive-narrative preaching moves from Christ to the Church (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 193).

God is the major actor in the story of Christ, but he is also the major actor in the story of others, like Paul (Thompson 104). Although Paul's character is supplanted by the story of Christ, Paul still says "imitate me" and "goes unashamedly auto-biographical" in order to invite the saints in Corinth into the story (2 Cor. 5; Willimon, "Preaching the Letters" 109). Such auto-biographical invitation can be described as Paul participating

with Christ in salvation. "This participant soteriology possesses a narrative logic, because Paul understands salvation as sharing in the destiny of a representative figure whose story is the enactment of God's [saving] purpose" (Hays, *Faith* 213, 234; Gal. 3:15-29; Phil. 1:5).

Incarnational storytelling. The law of *theandric* reality says that the divine element is discovered only as it is approached by way of the human (Cantalamessa 82). One can only fully experience God in Christ and one can only fully experience Christ within his body. This necessitates the telling of the stories of the Church in the pulpit. Such storytelling puts recognizable skin on the gospel.

At times such telling includes stories about the preacher. Developing the community as characters who follow the lead of Christ requires care on the part of preachers. Listeners must see a visible consistency between the life proclaimed and the life of the one doing the preaching (Cantalamessa 22). Even with an exemplary life, to move the identity of the preacher to center stage represents a devastating pitfall (Craddock, *Preaching 24*). When preaching personal narratives, preachers' personal stories, like Paul's, must be supplanted by the story of Christ. Such supplanting happens if preachers accept as the goal of preaching the gospel, the transformation of the listeners into characters capable of acting with God in the drama. Preachers must first allow *themselves* to be transformed, within the context of the gospel (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 86). The parabola-shaped story of Christ must shape the story of the preacher (Baird 111). In the fashion of Philippians 2, the personal journey of preachers must be down first *then* upward only exalted by God. In this way, a preacher who personally inhabits the story lives out an effective sermon (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 189).

Telling stories of others moves the preacher from center stage. Such inclusions will allow non-clergy hearers (the vast majority of those who listen) to enter the sermon and eventually enter the gospel (Craddock, *Preaching* 162-63).

Wanting to see themselves in the best possible light, listeners often identify with the heroes in stories, Jesus or Paul (Craddock, *As One* 110-11). In response to this congregational tendency, preachers can craft the narrative using contemporary stories to invite the congregation to identify with the Pharisees or a prostitute (110-11). When including extra-biblical narrative material, good narrative preachers preserve the ambiguity in characters, both villains and heroes, so that listeners can empathize with even the worst and best of characters (Wilson, *Four Pages* 62-63, 101; Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 38). When strong narrative preachers tell stories of the saints they maintain a proper distance between them and Christ in order to avoid the mistake of those who create "Christ figures" rather than faithful followers or disciples (Boomershine 74-75; Frei, *Identity* 11). Preachers must not merely tell the stories of the saints (Craddock, *As One* 75). Sinners need to be present in the stories as well (Wilson, *Practice* 276). A broad array of supporting cast depicts God as he really is—God of all. Sermons must develop the supporting characters as real and human if narrative is to be incarnational.

Character transformation. Although recognition and identification provide entrance to the *sermon,* if the hearers are actually to enter the *gospel story*, the goal is not merely identification with a character in the sermon. Good narrative preaching refuses to settle for getting people to assimilate Jesus into individual personal lives. Instead good narrative preaching requires real transformation in the lives of the hearers (Hays, *Faith* 253). As hearers act out the gospel in concert with the main character, their character

changes by the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Hearers, including preachers, must not merely recognize the story, but must also allow God through the biblical story to "redescribe" their stories (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 197).

To elicit this kind of transformation, the preacher can locate the congregation in the drama by telling the stories of the saints—local, individual, and historical (Wright 101). Doing so requires a balance of stories from women and men, young and old, personal, local, church, and world (Wilson, *Practice* 278). Faithful improvisation requires us to include narratives about contemporary, historical or fictional characters through whom God is working in the world. As preachers include such varied material, God can use the identity of supporting characters in their humanity to open the particular gospel of Jesus to the Church and through the Church to the world (Wilson, *Practice* 28; *Four Pages* 208; Ford 27).

Including good narrative improvisation assures preachers that their stories of contemporary and historical people will show the gospel encompassing and even critiquing the Monday through Saturday world (Wilson, *Practice* 35). Preaching well the story of Scripture through other stories enables preachers to "set … [congregational] experience within the context of Christ's presence" (Boomershine 66). These stories help develop the character of the congregation as a reflection of the character of Christ. In this way, hearers see their stories "within the action of God" and the faith community is invited into the ongoing story of Christ (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 186).

Learning to Improvise: A Life of Response

Logic suggests that in order to determine if a congregation has entered the gospel story through narrative preaching, one must observe their response to narrative sermons. The following section surveys the literature with regard to response.

Being the gospel. "Faithful preaching enacts on behalf of the entire Church an interpretive performance of the story of Jesus" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 216-17). However, the interpretation of the script "involves [its] enactment" by a group that carries out the life narrated within the script (Campbell, *Preaching* 107, 227-27; Hays, *Moral Vision* 295). Narrative preaching is not just a performance of the preacher. Faithful *and* effective preaching invites the Church to join the performance of the story. In baptism, all are enabled by Jesus to participate, symbolically by emersion, in the downward and upward movement of the gospel through what Paul calls "Baptism unto death." But it is not just a liturgical participation. We also walk in "newness of life" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 215; Wilson, *Four Pages* 206; Rom. 6:4). Preaching invites hearers not only to *experience* good news, but also to *be* good news.

Thomas Boomershine says, "People become the stories they love to tell [and hear]" (19). Narrative preaching must be more than just the telling, hearing and retelling of the gospel. Although Lowry says that sermons should progress "beyond the behavioral level to analysis"(*Homiletical Plot* 41) a good narrative sermon focuses on the gospel in order to create actors who actually do act (Cantalamessa, 67; John 13:17; Jas 1:18-25; Matt. 17:24; Wilson, *Practice* 186). The gospel must be told in a way that "re-narrates the lives of the listeners [and tellers] into the Biblical world" (Pasquarello, "Who's Story" 71). The call of the gospel allows hearers to enter the family of Christ, becoming his

"sister, mother and brothers" by playing the part of those who "hear the word and *act* [emphasis mine] on it" (Luke 8:21; Jas 1:25; Cantalamessa 74).

Although God is the main actor, "the final sequence of the gospel casts believers back into the subject role" (Hays, *Faith* 261). In short, however indirect the approach, if narrative preaching is to be adequate for the Church, it must require a response and give people the real opportunity to say "yes" or "no" (Craddock, *Preaching* 89). Response, however, is more than what we say. To embrace the parabola–shaped story of Jesus is to actively "participate in Jesus' journey" (Boomershine 197). In the words of Paul, the gospel calls hearers to a life of "participation in the gospel" (Philippians 1:5 NASB). When the church wants to show the world that they are God's people "We don't trot out our little doctrines. We trot out our little lives" (Willimon, *Pastor* 129; see also Campbell, "Apocalypse" 167).

Responding together in freedom. Individual response is crucial but not sufficient. "The one great preacher is the *Church* and the preacher's job is to be sure she preaches well" (Forsyth 53). In an individualistic culture, the Church must reassume its identity as the *body* of Christ in the world so that people have a place to enter the story through community (Wright 78; Hays, *Faith* 251). Response "is where *we* [emphasis mine] [the church] assume *our* [emphasis mine] place in the drama … and are shaped by our participation in the Spirit-Filled practices given" as our way of life (Pasquarello, "Who's Story" 76-7, 178; see also Ford 32; Lischer 25; Craddock, *As One* 26-27). The script is not really all that it can be until the church as a *community* picks it up and enters the drama (Sanders 139; Wright 20, 27).

The church must respond in unity but not in uniformity. The gospel drama allows freedom, leaving more than one way to respond faithfully (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 70; Vanhoozer 109). For example, birth narratives elicit different kinds of responses from different people: "Fathers, mothers, siblings all have different contributions to make" (Boomershine 36). Dramatic community response requires the words and actions of all of the actors. More than one of these different responses can function as faithful improvisation. Such varied participation makes living life an act of interpretation of the gospel (Wright 27). Responding calls for spirit-led improvisational skills as we act out the script in our settings.

As the story preached gives a paradigm of behavior and a narrative "shape" for life (see Figure 2.1 p. 47; Hays, *Moral Vison* 295), improvisational action can be evaluated as to whether it "fits" within the story (Hays, *Faith* 224; Vanhoozer 109, 111). This evaluation of the "fitness" of our improvisation is present in the ongoing preaching , teaching and living out of the script in the Church. "People tend to learn improvisation, not as hermeneutical or homiletical technique, but through immersion in ... [the script], participation in the liturgical practices of the church, and through engagement in the alternative [ethic] of the faith community" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 257).

Finishing well. Faithful narrative preaching requires a fitting community response, but such a statement causes preachers to wonder how they can know if the community is responding by fitting improvisation or are engaged in unfaithful ad lib. Preachers can often tell by how the sermon is finished. In good narrative preaching, hearers are treated as participants in the action. They help shape, by faithful improvisation, how the story ends (Wilson, *Practice* 209). "The goal of the sermon is not

a 'general conclusion' but the ongoing story of the Church—the future life of the people

of God in and for the world" (Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 158; see also Pasquarello,

"Narrative Reading" 178).

The narrative nature of the gospel, produces preaching that is at least sometimes

"open-ended, giving [hearers] power of participation in the outcome" (Green, "(Re)Turn"

32-33). The final move will often lead not to an end, but to "a new door opened," an

ellipsis or a question mark rather than a period (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 68; see also

Craddock, *Preaching* 190). Such open-endedness allows preachers to move from

language like "should" "must" and "have to" to "nothing can prevent us from" (Wilson,

Four Pages 207). Narrative sermons end with enabling, participatory language.

In Chapter 1, I told of preaching from Genesis 6 and concluding the sermon with

an open-ended question. Though many hearers were complimentary, two said something

such as, "Good job, young man but you didn't finish." Not long after that incident, in

another setting, a couple said they did not think I was preaching because I was not telling

them what to do. Coincidentally within a few days of both comments, I read these words

from Fred Craddock:

> "She who preaches inductively [and I would say narratively as well] must
> be prepared for frequent comments from the congregation to the effect that
> her sermons seem to be long introductions with a point stated or implied at
> the end. The minister may interpret this a number of ways. She may reflect
> critically upon the sermon; is she being too subtle and inconclusive? She
> may recognize that the congregation is having to adjust its own psyche and
> ear to hear this preacher... She may, however, detect that for which she
> has hoped: The congregation cannot shake off the finished sermon by
> shaking the minister's hand. The sermon not finished yet, lingers beyond
> the benediction, with conclusions to be reached, decisions made and
> actions to be taken." (Craddock, *As One* 125)

If the sermon is good narrative, the preacher will not be able to finish it. The hearing community will have to bring it to completion.

In her commentary on the book of Mark, Mary Ann Tolbert urges the reader/hearer to move beyond what the text *means* to what the word *does* (289). She traces a thread that weaves through the gospel of Mark. Throughout the second gospel, Jesus tells those who have been offered healing to keep things quiet (Mark 1:25, 44; 5:43; 7:36). In the end of the shorter ending of Mark,[3] the young man at the tomb reverses the previous thread. "Tell no one" becomes "go, tell." This reversal amounts to an offer of entrance into the gospel story. The women are offered the role of narrator, the chance to be tellers. Their response; "they went out and fled from the tomb and *told nothing* [emphasis mine] to anyone because they were afraid" (Boomershine 181) is quite obviously adlib.

Such a conclusion to a story frustrates hearers who listen only in order gain information and master or grasp the content. Similar to what Kevin J. Vanhoozer calls an "offer" or a "proposition," this enigmatic ending suggests that the reader/hearer of the drama is *propositioned* and can thus become a player in the drama. It is a line in the story that allows another actor into the story, who can then carry the drama forward using faithful improvisation (18, 129, 333-44). The tragic twist on the end of the gospel of Mark constitutes an offer of entrance, calling all those who experience the story in any age to get out and tell someone about the resurrection of Jesus (Tolbert 297; Jenson 198-99).

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[3] To argue for the shorter ending of Mark is outside the purview of this study. Simply stated, nearly every translation offers it.

The presence of several million followers of Jesus today suggests that the ending of the story of Mark indeed got people just frustrated or intrigued enough to go out and obey the command on the lips of the young man, thus contributing to the ongoing story of God's grace. Invitations to finish the story are not confined to the portions of Scripture that are found in narrative form. The epistles also invite hearers into the story at its middle and allow them to participate in the drama's completion by their own faithful improvisation (2 Cor. 5:21; Thompson 104-05).

When the plot of the sermon has revealed something of the character of Christ and the shape of the world, preachers who desire to invite people to participate in the gospel actively and freely must occasionally leave some things unstated or merely hinted at toward the end of the sermon (Lowry *Homiletical* 77; Windsor 22). The community must finish.

Sacramental acting. In baptism, hearers respond to the word by participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in new birth as it is narrated in the gospel and acted in the sacrament (Rom. 6; 1 Pet. 1:23-2:2; Cantalamessa 66-68). Communion constitutes a quintessential example of how the story gets finished. The congregation, coming to the table in the context of the body of Christ, gives "sacramental realism" to the drama (Hays, *Faith* 253). For this reason, the sacraments must not be allowed to function divorced from the narrative, but must be seen as a practice within God's story (Wright 143; Cantalamessa 7). The offer of forgiveness in communion is an offer of open space for all at the table of the Lord (Wright 143; Seamands 2-3). In accepting the offer, hearers are then commissioned to invite others to the open space offered at the table, thereby responding by participating in God's invitation (Wright 144).

In preaching the story of God, ministers can never be satisfied when the results are merely personal achievement or personal advancement, whether spiritual or ethical. A preacher of the story of God tries to narrate a world that can produce a *community* of people who *act out* together the character of Christ (Green, "Reading the Gospels" 45).

Literature on Design

In designing any study, the research questions should determine the kind of research to be done (Corbin and Strauss 13). While quantitative research is helpful in answering some questions, inquiries that are formed by the words "how" and "why" cannot be adequately studied by a quantitative approach (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 557; Gardner 70).

Qualitative Design

In studies like this, where meaning is likely to be multiple and varied, qualitative analysis, including more systematic and circular methods, is much more helpful in interpreting phenomena experienced by people (Starks and Trinidad, 1372; Leech and Onwuegbuzie; 558; Hsieh and Shannon 1278; Berrios and Lucca 182; Fixico 41-59).

Qualitative research focuses on a concept data rather than on numerical data, making the methods and findings sections of such studies much more descriptive than those of quantitative studies (Corbin and Strauss 156, 316; Wiersma and Jurs 201-02, 421). "Qualitative [research] is defined as a research method for the *subjective* [emphasis mine] interpretation of the content of text data through systematic classification" (Hsieh and Shannon 1278). A qualitative approach aims at producing an in-depth and accurate understanding and description of a phenomenon as it occurs in its natural environment. Insight is found in the natural language of participants whose responses give the

researcher the data needed to *tell the story* of the phenomenon (Berrios and Lucca 181; Corbin and Strauss 10; Hsieh and Shannon 1278; Wiersma and Jurs 13, 206, 243; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 560; Starks and Trinidad, 1375-76). Because of the degree of depth in the subject studied (i.e., community response to narrative preaching), qualitative research provides a holistic understanding of participants in community as they experience the phenomenon under study (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 558; Wiersma and Jurs 14, 201-02).

At least five types of qualitative research gave background to this study. A *case study* is a detailed examination of something, an event, an organization, or a social system (Wiersma and Jurs 210). *Ethnographic* research involves field study conducted in a completely natural setting, employing the notes of a field worker in order to allow themes and concepts to emerge from experience (Enriquez 121). *Phenomenology* studies "embodied experiences" trying to reveal "taken for granted assumptions" (Starks and Trinidad 1373). *Discourse analysis* studies how participants use language to accomplish outcomes, both individually and in community (1374). Research based on *grounded theory* endeavors to produce a theory that emerges from social interaction and requires no initial hypothesis (Strijbos et al. 30; Starks and Trinidad, 1374).

While originating with different researchers and initially springing from different philosophies, these five ways of interpretation are similar enough that the "boundaries … between them are porous" (Starks and Trinidad, 1373, 1375). For example, although grounded theory requires no hypothesis or *a priori* structure, it "can be used to generate or expand a [pre-existing] theory of social phenomenon" much like phenomenology (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 559).

Participants and Sampling

In qualitative research, gathering participants remains objective because it is done by a series of steps. This section of the review will show how selection in qualitative research differs from selection in quantitative research.

Role of researcher In qualitative research, the researcher must recognize and identify the level of his or her involvement either as participant-observer or as a detached observer (Wiersma and Jurs 204). The process of qualitative research is unavoidably "researcher driven," but at the same time, the researcher must distance himself or herself from personal experience to allow the data to speak all of the possibilities (Corbin and Strauss xi, 67). Pertinent to this particular study, Valerie J. Janesick says that "qualitative researchers spend a great deal of time and energy inquiring into the social settings and the meaning of the *actors'* [emphasis mine] lives in those settings (15). In other words, given the time to immerse themselves in the data, relax, and think, the best tools the researchers have are their own mind and intuition (Corbin and Strauss 160). Because of this facet in this kind of study, the researcher *is* a participant.

Philosophically, phenomenological qualitative research assumes that "different ways of experiencing will be logically related through the common phenomenon" (Åkerlind 322). As the researcher and the other participants *act* in response to narrative sermons, qualitative research can help preachers understand both how and why the community enters the story.

Sampling: other participants. In quantitative research, "random sampling is required in order to quantify results based on a representative sample drawn from the population" (Wiersma and Jurs 295-96). Qualitative research, on the other hand, allows

the researcher to conduct "purposeful sampling" in order to "identify specific groups that either possess characteristics or live in circumstances relevant to the phenomenon" (Strang 912; see also Wiersma and Jurs 15). Such sampling is purposeful rather than statistical (Strang 915). This type of sampling admits that some sources are much richer in information than others. Because the qualitative researcher is looking for rich description, purposeful sampling allows the researcher intentionally to seek out information–rich sources that will produce rich data (Wiersma and Jurs 311; Strang 912-13). While this method does yield the richest data, it can lead the researcher to believe that the sample may vary from the population. If such variance occurs the researcher should admit it, adjust if possible, and move on realizing that all data [in any study] can be characterized as "adequate but not ideal" (Worthington and Whitaker 816). This nuance must be given attention when interpreting and reporting (Wiersma and Jurs 318).

When the population is made up of several smaller groups, occasionally both qualitative and quantitative research will use what is called "stratified random sampling," whereby the sample is made up of those who are drawn randomly from each group (Wiersma and Jurs 302-03). In seeking both a rich pool of data and good representation across the different groups of the congregation, logic calls for a kind of *stratified purposeful sample,* where people are selected based on their ability to provide rich data *and* their membership in certain segments of the population. Stratified purposeful sampling is akin to "maximum variation sampling," where purposeful samples are taken from groups who model the greatest differences in characteristics within the population (Wiersma and Jurs 312).

In qualitative research, the size of the sample is relatively small and researchers are not always able to predict the number needed (Wiersma and Jurs 315). Because a single person can articulate thousands of concepts, large samples are unnecessary in the production of rich data (Starks and Trinidad 1374). Phenomenology tends to use from one to ten participants while grounded theory uses from ten to sixty (1375). This limit on sampling, however, is not a hard number; rather, sampling should continue until there is enough data for themes and findings to be repeated, with the expectation they will continue to be repeated (Strang 913; Corbin and Strauss 325). This repetition of themes and findings and the expectation that they will continue to be repeated is called *theoretical saturation* (Strang 913; Corbin and Strauss 325). Of course, even with the goal of theoretical saturation, the process of sampling is limited as it must operate "within the constraint of resources" such as time and money (Strang 913; Corbin and Strauss 325).

The goal of theoretical saturation opens the process to "theoretical sampling" meaning participants are added throughout the study based on concepts that emerge during the study (Corbin and Strauss 195, 198). Rather than being completely established before the research begins, "theoretical sampling" or "intermittent sampling" (Wiersma and Jurs 314) responds to the incoming data. Such sampling develops throughout the research and gives continued insights even through the writing of findings (Corbin and Strauss 144, 149; Wiersma and Jurs 314; Scannell-Desch 602). This kind of sampling allows for the ongoing seeking of data throughout a study including the adding of participants.

Instrumentation

The researcher is responsible to "maximize the appropriateness and the utility of the instrument" (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 561). While the instrument for interacting with the participants in qualitative research is often interview, studies may employ units of text as sources of data. In fact, content analysis (see later section) employed by qualitative research is primarily used for analyzing data from text, including narrative text (Starks and Trinidad 1374; Hsieh and Shannon 1277- 78).

Therefore, journals by participants can provide the kind of rich text needed for content analysis. Journals are used in education as a means to subjectively link experience with course learning and to "ground their learning in lived experience" (O'Connell and Dyment 678, 672; Starks and Trinidad, 1374; Hamdan 610, Dinapoli 19-21; Rourke and Anderson 14). Researchers have also found journaling "help[ed] immeasurably" in providing personal insights about what participants experience (Scannell-Desch 605). As detailed above, qualitative researchers seek this kind of rich material.

Faculty members, in higher education, suggest that journaling exercises help class participants express more clearly what they have learned. The relationship between the content and the participant is enhanced because journaling blunts the influence of the person in authority (O'Connell and Dyment 674, 680; Hamdan 608-609). Anonymous journals are thought to provide a better opportunity for "natural speech" about facts as well as emotions and insights (O'Connell and Dyment 675; Scannell-Desch 603). As was mentioned previously, qualitative researchers seek natural language.

Good journal prompts begin with open-ended questions and then ask more targeted questions based on early responses (Hsieh and Shannon 1281). Time suggestions for journaling are important in order to relax the participants so that the data will be rich throughout the study (Hamdan 614).

Data Collection

In qualitative research, data collection may be interactive or non-interactive (Wiersma and Jurs 204). Because I preached the sermons, interaction did occur. Admitting such interaction up front allowed researchers to distribute a handout about the research and give a brief description of what an entry in the journal could look like (Hamdan 611).

In trying to elicit candor, qualitative researchers employ "anonymous diaries," giving greater confidentiality than can be gained in an interview format (Dinapoli 21; Corbin and Strauss 31). Evidence from education also suggests if they are not used as a primary means of evaluating the participant, journals provide a safe place to make critical evaluations and a place where participants need not write what a person in authority wants them to write (O'Connell and Dyment 678, 683). In order to insure candor, the journal data must be collected with anonymity.

Qualitative research uses "inductive inquiry" for collecting data (Wiersma and Jurs 204). Journals normally meet, and some exceed, the expectation of faculty who use them making them good for the developmental nature of qualitative research (O'Connell and Dyment 680). This tendency to exceed expectations, along with the fact that the longer a student journals, the deeper the journal entries become, allows for the expectation of a growing richness in the journal articles as the study progresses (678).

In qualitative studies, emerging themes may send the researcher into the field to

make observations, to conduct completely unstructured interviews using observation and

intuition to make connections in data. These techniques allow a researcher to employ

"every part of himself/herself to experience and understand trends in the data" and gain

the "insights that come from being directly involved in the setting studied" (Corbin and

Strauss 28-30, 124). In this way, data comes to the researcher along multiple avenues.

Because of the amorphous nature of this kind of research, as data is collected by

structured journal responses and unstructured interviews and observations, the researcher

must carefully document thoughts about the data collected and record reasons for

decisions made about collection avenues (Corbin and Strauss, 30, 108, 117; Wiersma and

Jurs 205)

Data Analysis

As journaling "grounds [participants'] learning in lived experience," careful

analysis of journals can ground research in the lived experience of the participants

(O'Connell and Dyment 672; Dinapoli 19). In order for subjective, qualitative research to

be scientific, it must employ objective rules to govern a process. These rules consist of a

series of tasks (Garb 991; Wiersma and Jurs 211; Hsieh and Shannon 1286-88). This

series of tasks makes up a "working plan" or "preliminary design" (Wiersma and Jurs

203). In qualitative research, the process of analysis begins immediately as the first data

is collected (Hsieh and Shannon 1281; Corbin and Strauss 163).

First the researcher reads the text in its context in order to immerse

himself/herself in the data. Then the researcher gives closer examination of the sections

in greater depth and begins the required process of "coding," whereby text is divided into

meaningful units taking the text to a the level of concept (Hsieh and Shannon 1279-81; Corbin and Strauss 66, 163; Enriquez 119; Strang 914; Starks and Trinidad 75-76; Wiersma and Jurs 206-07). Coding means to "identify *themes* [emphasis mine] and *roles* [emphasis mine] as signified through language use" (Starks and Trinidad, 1376). The definition is pertinent here because I looked through language in journals and casual conversations to find participants relating to the *thread/theme* and playing a *role* in the narrative.

While grounded theory and conventional content analysis begin in open coding, allowing the data to determine the initial coding system, *directed content analysis* starts with a theory or relevant research to construct initial codes (Hsieh and Shannon 1277; Starks and Trinidad, 1375-76; Wiersma and Jurs 206-07). An "abductive" approach to content analysis allows the codes to emerge from both the prior research and collected data (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 565). Directed and/or abductive systems of coding allow the structure of grounded theory to be used not only to generate a new theory, but to "expand an existing theory of social phenomenon" (559). Such blurring makes clear that "different approaches [to qualitative research] converge in the analysis phase" (Starks and Trinidad 1372).

After initial coding is complete, the next step involves allowing concepts to emerge that cluster coded groups together in the units of meaning. In grounded theory, this second step is called "axial coding" (Corbin and Strauss 195, 198). It is a part of a broader concept called "de-contextualization." If data is allowed to remain completely in context, researchers will only learn what individuals experience rather than the experience of the joined sample (Åkerlind 327; Starks and Trinidad 1375). As the

researcher continues to interact with the data, comparisons are made between responses by different participants and often new categories emerge (Hsieh and Shannon 1282). While the process of directed content analysis begins deductively with pre-determined codes, the second step in the process requires induction, where the researcher adjusts and readjusts to produce meaningful results through recurring patterns emerging from the data produced by the participants (Worthington and Whitaker 808; Hamdan 612). This process involves action and interaction, reading the data on an emotional as well as technical level (Corbin and Strauss 100). The multiple steps for this particular study are made explicit in Chapter 3.

Such interaction and induction may employ "focusing," examining data for topics, "free association," seeking common metaphors that immerge, asking questions and making comparisons, or studying opposites (Corbin and Strauss 68, 79-84). Comparisons between pieces of data or categories must function on both the theoretical and incidental levels (73). This type of analysis done early on can identify new essential categories that influence the way subsequent data is gathered, allowing the researcher to validate inferences by comparing them to incoming data (Strang 913; Corbin and Strauss 48; Berrios and Lucca 181).

Such flexibility allows the researcher to build from the data and from previous knowledge a "new paradigm" or "core category" for viewing complex incoming data thereby obtaining a new perspective. This process requires the researcher to use his or her judgment and wisdom to expand the study without being limited to the safety of predetermined categories (Berrios and Lucca 181; Wiersma and Jurs 212; Corbin and

Strauss 8, 89 104). Qualitative researchers must develop an intuitive sense or "feel" for what is happening in the data (Corbin and Strauss x, 16).

The reason to perform all of the steps of coding is not simply to break the data apart into individualized meaning units. These steps enable researchers to "recontextualize" or "to make inferences about the whole" (Corbin and Strauss 46; Starks and Trinidad 1375). Therefore,as mentioned before, all instances of data "must be seen as related," causing the researcher to look for the implications that a change in one category has for all remaining categories (Åkerlind 323, 325). Qualitative content analysis is the systematic search for those relationships. Researchers seek not only an array of divergent meanings, but a framework that relates those different meanings, "an outcome space for looking at common human experience in a holistic way" (323).

Despite all of the scientific preparation, something happens in content analysis that is beyond the qualitative researcher's ability to predict. Sensitivity to the phenomenon through the interplay of researcher and data produces a dramatic discovery (Corbin and Strauss 9, 33). As the data repeatedly affirms the discovery, the study reaches "conceptual saturation" and inductive discovery is made and affirmed by repetition (195-98).

Rigor

In general terms "research studies must be valid and reliable" (Wiersma and Jurs 3). Validity justifies a study by the "extent to which a study investigates what it aimed to investigate or the degree to which the research findings reflect the phenomenon being studied" (Åkerlind 330; Wiersma and Jurs 5). Internal validity evaluates whether the results are interpreted rightly. External validity addresses the extent to which a study can

be generalized to the population (Wiersma and Jurs 5). Reliability requires the use of the appropriate "methodology for ensuring quality and consistency in data interpretation" (Åkerlind 331).

The requirements of rigor *do* apply to both qualitative and quantitative research. But while both are expected to address issues of truthfulness, methods of qualitative and quantitative research cannot be evaluated by the same criteria (Åkerlind 329; Strang 915).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this kind of study involves many acting subjects (God, the preacher/researcher, the participants). With this many acting subjects, all the data is subjective. Because of the human element in preaching, gathering and analysis of content, and the level of hermeneutic work involved here, interpretation, whether done by a team or an individual, is subjective as well (Strang, 915-16; Starks and Trinidad 1376). In light of similar studies, some go so far as to say that "objectivity in qualitative research is a myth," but the fact remains the subjective phenomena of life are worth studying (Corbin and Strauss 32). Qualitative research employs scientific steps and trained intuition in order to study something beyond the objective—something subjective such as preaching.

Because of the subjective reality of much of qualitative research, qualitative researchers use different words and criteria for evaluation of rigor. "Trustworthiness" and "credibility," "confirmability" and "dependability" are used to evaluate whether the text and the interpretation of the text are consistent with each other (Hsieh and Shannon 1285; Strang 915; Onwuegbuzie and Leach 234; Corbin and Strauss 301-02).

Credibility in qualitative research is insured partly by a highly organized but fluid process of data collection and analysis in which meticulous records are kept of insights

gained from both participant responses and researcher observations, as well as records of any changes in procedure based on data and interpretation (Wiersma and Jurs 215; Strang 915; Hsieh and Shannon 1283; Corbin and Strauss 307-08; Strijbos et al 42).

Credibility is undermined by any kind of unidentified researcher bias. The above-mentioned "directed" or "abductive" approaches to coding admit that the researcher is looking for something specific and may be biased in finding it (Hsieh and Shannon 1283). Recognizing this possible bias is crucial and will require the researcher to go through a self-reflective process of "bracketing," whereby desired outcomes are set aside before the more inductive second step in coding (Corbin and Strauss 32, 80-01; Starks and Trinidad 1376).

One strong, though not very practical, way to enhance credibility is to make sure that coding is done by a consensus of multiple researchers (Berrios and Lucca 176; Åkerlind 331; Strang 915-16). While consensus does enhance credibility, it is not always feasible or apparently necessary. "The large number of existing phenomenographic doctoral theses indicates that high-quality phenomenographic research can be accomplished as an individual researcher working on one's own" (Åkerlind 328). In this study, because of the constraints of funds and time, the analysis and collection was done by a single researcher. Another "dialogical" method of enhancing credibility is peer debriefing, possibly employing a short peer review form (Hsieh and Shannon 1280; Strang 915-16; Trochim et al. 15; Starks and Trinidad 1376). Peer review provides parameters to intuitive jumps.

Other ways to bolster credibility include "prolonged engagement." with the data. This study involved a month of concentrated engagement. Accountability is enhanced by

member checking, where participants or non-participant members of the population are given opportunity to evaluate analytical and interpretative decisions through a focus group, or where a single member represents the whole to give feedback or a nonparticipant member of the population performs such a check. Credibility is also gained in qualitative studies by "triangulation" between data gathered by journals and by field observation and theory gleaned from literature review, as well as insights from peer debriefing and member feedback (Åkerlind 330; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 579; Hsieh and Shannon 1280; Corbin and Strauss, 273).

Maintaining credibility and trustworthiness also requires the researcher to avoid claiming too much, especially in the area of generalizeability. Generalization is not a goal in qualitative phenomenological research. The goal is to study a phenomenon *in context.* This makes generalizabililty unreasonable (Corbin and Strauss 319; Scannell-Desch 605; Wiersma and Jurs 215-16). However, "transferability" allows something learned from one case or population to be attempted in another without generalizing ahead of time (Corbin and Strauss 320; Strang 916).

Ultimately the judgment of credibility does not lead to a dichotomized true or false or valid or invalid verdict, but is a matter of degree (Wiersma and Jurs, 215; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 239). With the level of subjectivity in this type of study, the researcher must convincingly argue for the interpretation proposed by the data and its good analysis (Åkerlind 330; Starks and Trinidad 1376). Communication is a key element. Findings and discussion chapters must be sufficiently grounded in data and logically and clearly presented so that other researchers can understand the results. (Wiersma and Jurs 215-16).

Such grounding in data can be shown in the findings section by revealing codes using descriptive evidence (Hseih and Shannon 1282). A good smattering of quotes from transcripts can show linkage. For this practice to be credible, the quotes selected must accurately represent the meaning of the larger body of data (Corbin and Strauss, 319; Åkerlind 329).

It is "not likely there has ever been a perfect study" (Wiersma and Jurs 2). All will have some "shortcomings" (Rourke and Anderson 11). Realizing that fact, the credibility sought in this kind of study is measured in a similar way to verisimilitude in poetry and sermons. This type of study is judged by a different set of criteria. The criteria ask questions such as do the findings: "shed light, fit, or resonate with experience" Is the analysis "thoughtful innovative and nuanced?" Does it have "power," resonate with experience or "fit"? (Corbin and Strauss 301-02, 205) Are the results "useful"? (Wiersma and Jurs, 20).

Summary of Review

The literature review finds that narrative preaching has come under fire because of the prevalence of poor narrative preaching, often involing a separation between the plot of the gospel and the character of Christ. This failure allows the preacher to ad lib anything with a plot. The backlash against poor narrative preaching threatens to remove narrative as a viable option for preachers.

Good narrative preaching is found to attend to a Christ-shaped plot. This plot begins with *bad news* that springs from Scripture, is true to life, and deepens or develops. The plot of good sermons is also found to move to *good news*, which is the dramatic action of God sufficient to reverse the downward motion of the bad news. Good narrative

sermons are found to contain visual, verbal, or theological threads that come from Scripture, life, or both. These threads develop throughout the sermon, highlight the dramatic reversal, and often collapse time, allowing present day hearers to enter the ancient story. Ultimately, good narrative preaching is found to present God, revealed in Jesus Christ, as the main actor who initiates action and shapes the character of the hearers. Such preaching is also found to offer entrance into the gospel of Jesus Christ by re-telling the hearers' stories in the gospel context and inviting them to improvise a response to God. Such God-empowered participation creates the character of Christ in communities, whereby they carry the gospel story forward.

The review found that qualitative research based on the content analysis of journal articles, field observation, and spontaneous interviews is a credible means of producing the rich description needed to study people's entrance into the gospel.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Problem

This dissertation studied the problem of poor narrative preaching that allows

hearers to assimilate disjointed stories of Scripture or disconnected contemporary stories

into their own life stories, rather than inviting hearers to enter God's Story (Pasquarello,

"Narrative Reading" 190; Harmless 235). Because of such ineffective narrative

preaching, some preachers have begun to question the validity of the practice itself. Low

confidence in narrative communication threatens, once again, to remove the very

structure of the gospel of Jesus Christ from the structure of sermons. Removing narrative

form from the presentation of the gospel sacrifices the narrative essence of Christ's

identity. Such a sacrifice allows hearers to settle for living their own self-centered,

individualistic stories or the dominant stories of the surrounding culture, rather than

entering God's story.

Purpose

While narrative preaching represents a return to a long used form, the field of

preaching lacks a means to identify quality in narrative preaching. (Wilson, *Practice*

209). The purpose of the study was to identify which elements of narrative sermons serve

to draw worshippers into the story of God and offer them opportunity to participate in the

ongoing gospel of Jesus Christ. From this knowledge gained, I hoped to develop a tool

for preachers to enhance the quality of narrative preaching.

Research Questions

1. To what degree do hearers at Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene sense that narrative preaching invites them into communion with God in a gospel-shaped community?

The first question in the journal prompts was specifically designed to elicit data from the opinion of the participants in answer to the question of entrance; however, all of the questions can yield data on the question of entrance. Journal prompt 2 was designed to provide insight about whether the participants entered the gospel by learning how the they felt God was portrayed in the sermon. Prompt 3 was designed to allow the sermon to act as a mirror and reveal whether or not participants see themselves within the story. The fourth prompt was crafted to elicit data regarding "communion with God." Prompt 5 was constructed to provide data as to whether or not participants actually did enter the gospel by acting out the story.

2. What themes emerged to explain why worshippers believe narrative sermons have created openings for them into the story of God?

Do the different participants' responses point to similar places where they entered the sermon or entered the gospel? Do individual participants consistently enter at the same place? Numbers 1 and 4 of the journal prompts asked the participants what the pastor was talking about when they entered into the story and when they believed they were addressed by God. These questions were written to yield data with common themes among the different participants' responses.

3. Is an opening in one particular part of a narrative sermon more crucial in providing worshippers an offering of entrance into the story of God?

Is it clear that people feel drawn in by moments of bad news, good news, or response? Does the use of the thread of a sermon or development of characters within the sermon provide entrance? Does one element draw them into the sermon while another draws them into the gospel? Again prompts 1 and 4 were designed to yield data as to what portion of the sermon offered entrance the most often.

4. How does feeling drawn in by narrative sermons affect hearers' ability to articulate a free and faithful community response?

Are they longing to live a continuation of the story? Do their responses articulate actions and intentions that are faithful improvisation on the gospel or do their responses reflect ad lib that springs from the surrounding culture or personal psychological issues? Can the hearers see themselves acting as a part of the community of faith? Number 5 of the journal prompts was crafted in order to produce data for research question 4.

Participants

Participants were drawn by stratified purposeful (maximum variation) sampling from the population of adult regular Sunday morning worship attendees at Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene. Approximately half of the participants were between 18 and 50 and half were 50 years of age or older. Approximately half of the participants were from each gender. Approximately half had attended church regularly for more than five years and approximately half had attended church less than five years. The search for rich data took precedence over hard adherence to equal representation of the strata in the sample.

The sample size began with twenty, but grew throughout the study by theoretical sampling, in order to find rich data and in order to reach theoretical saturation. To provide anonymity, I read only ten entries each week even as the sample pool grew.

Instrumentation

I designed journal questions to elicit data regarding elements and themes that drew hearers into the sermon and into the gospel story. The prompts were flexible and could be changed based on emerging themes in order to allow for theoretical sampling to occur throughout the month. The initial set of prompts and written instructions read as follows:

Sometime on Sunday, please spend at least thirty (30) minutes and not more than one hour responding in your own words to these questions about the Sunday morning sermon of that day. Please return responses to Karen Parker at the Church or e-mail them to her by Monday morning at 10:00 AM. She will send your responses on to the pastor without revealing to him who you are. He will not know your identity unless you choose to reveal your identity in your writing.

1. Describe the moment in the sermon where you felt drawn into it. What was the pastor saying? Why did those words draw you in? If you never were drawn in, write that you were not and explain why you think that is. (Remember this study is evaluating a style of sermon, not you or the pastor or your faith.)

2. Describe how God (Father, Son, or Spirit) was portrayed in this sermon. What was God doing? What is he doing? What will he be doing? What did God's actions in this sermon tell you about God?

3. How did this sermon help you see yourself?

4. At what point, if any, did you sense God was speaking to you? What was the preacher saying at that time? What was God saying to you?

5. What do you intend to do in response to this sermon? Be specific.

The literature review traced the effectiveness of journaling in allowing respondents to reflect on an experience and relate teaching to life. The literature review also showed anonymous journals were effective in generating insight into phenomenon experienced. Such effectiveness occured partly because journals give students a safe place to critique and respond despite relationship with the researcher.

Pretest Procedures

Some weeks prior to the study, I asked the research and reflection team to use journal prompts to respond to a sermon in order to simulate use of the instrument (see section following on data collection). This pretest trial gave me a chance to rehearse presentation. After they were finished journaling, in our next meeting, I asked the research and reflection team to verbally evaluate the instrument and my presentation. I made the changes they suggested. This pretest allowed the team to learn first-hand what the study was asking participants to do. It also allowed me to see problems in time to solve them prior to the official beginning of the study.

Variables

The independent variable was the preaching of narrative sermons written with a trained eye for the narration of the gospel story as springing from particular texts and offering strong openness to listeners. The independent variable was controlled by trained preparation of sermons, assured by my use of the rubric (see Table 1.1, p. 8) to evaluate elements of each sermon prior to preaching. The rubric helped me look for faithful improvisation or unfaithful ad lib and for the presence of offered openings in the different sections of the sermon. Two other preachers familiar with narrative preaching also helped control the independent variable by reading the sermons and providing feedback before

each sermon was preached. This step increased assurance of open offers and decreased the possibility of ad lib in the pulpit.

Dependent variables in this type of study emerge from within the study itself, are discovered along the way, and are reported in the findings and discussion sections. Therefore, they are not treated in this section.

Intervening variables included the relationship between the participants and the preacher. Giving anonymity to the individual participants helped control this variable; however, preaching takes place in a relational context and this variable cannot be completely controlled. Other intervening variables included possible absences due to sickness, or mortality, or failure to complete the sequence because the process required four different times of action. These possibilities were countered by my freedom to add participants to the study if needed and by the anonymity procedure's requirement that only ten of the twenty responses were analyzed.

Data Collection

I gathered participants three days prior to the first sermon to be evaluated and told them that honest answers were the best help they could give to me and to any other preacher that would be reading this study. I also assured them that *they* were not being evaluated. I told them I would read their responses, but could not determine their identity because the office administrator would assign a number to their names and retype or copy and paste their responses before sending them to me. I would read the typed version with only the number for identification. I also said that I was not being evaluated. I told them that they were evaluating *sermons* for the good of the art of preaching, and, most importantly, for better communication of the gospel to people who needed to hear it. I

read each item and explained the terms. I then asked if participants had any questions about the items.

The journal prompts were distributed each of the four Sundays, both electronically and by hard copy. Participants were asked to spend thirty minutes to one hour journaling and then turn in their journal entry by fax, e-mail, or in person by the following Monday at 10:00 am.

The church office administrator assigned codes to each participant (e.g., P1, P2, P43). Each week on Monday, she cut and pasted text from e-mails and typed handwritten journal entries into word files named for each Sunday (P1-S1 meant participant one's response to sermon one). In an effort to find the richest data, I asked the office administrator to evaluate for richness according to the criteria of length (number of words), sensibility (meaning her ability to understand what was said), and insight (meaning depth of response). I instructed her to send the ten richest to my e-mail account by Tuesday at noon or as soon as possible thereafter so that I could begin analysis by Wednesday.

If an individual source proved particularly rich in data and insight, without knowing the identity of the participant, I asked the office administrator to send me that participant's journal for the remaining weeks unless, in her judgment, it was extremely poor one week. If an individual source showed twice not to be rich at all, or a specific participant was not able to articulate well enough through writing to be understood, without knowing who it was, I asked the office administrator not to send me that source for the rest of the study. In the case of the office administrator becoming unable to perform these tasks, I had identified two possible substitutes.

During the four weeks of data collection, I made field observations and conducted two unstructured, spontaneous interviews which could be described as pastoral conversations about my sermons. On the day of said conversations, I took notes to be transferred to my computer. I labeled notes from each conversation ("I1," "I2"..."I8") and used yellow ink in printing to recognize them. If such conversations yielded rich data, I asked the person in the conversation to journal for the remainder of the Sundays and secured permission to use his or her words (anonymously) in the study.

Data Analysis

Upon receiving the data each week, I read all responses twice through in order to immerse myself in the comments within their original context. During these initial reads, I jotted notes in the electronic margins about possible emerging themes.

The third read was performed in order to code the data by copying and pasting phrases into five word processor files corresponding with the five rows on the rubric constructed from the literature review (bad news, good news, character, thread, and response from Table 1.1, p. 8). Next, I read each file, making notes in the margins in order to track observations. At this point, I read field notes from interviews taken during the week and coded the data by adding those phrases to the same five files (see Table 1.1, p. 8).

At the end of that week's entry in each of the five files, I wrote a summary with a description of any themes that emerged in these files. These summaries also included notes about the relative length of each file and the overall tone of the entries. These five files were then compared to find relationship between the five different categories and whether any new category might emerge through initial directed coding.

Next, I took an hour break, which allowed me to take time to bracket what was learned from coding based on predetermined categories. Following the break, directed analysis gave way to more free-flowing content analysis to find themes that emerged not related to the pre-study rubric. I returned to the raw data, including any notes I had made previously about new categories. If more than one respondent mentioned the same insight, I read the other sources in light of the new category. If more than three respondents yielded data on a new category, I created a file named for this new category, including a summary like the first five. I then reread the week's field notes in light of the new category and added any insight from field notes to the new category file. The next week, the new category became a part of the directed analysis for subsequent weeks in the process. As data from subsequent Sundays was added to the file, the category name was changed to reflect an enhanced understanding of the phenomena associated with that category or possibly combined with another; the new category was then renamed.

At the end of each weekly analysis, if any new categories emerged, I evaluated the journal prompts to see if they needed to change to enhance the production of data rich in information for the new category. I made any needed changes to the prompts before distribution the next Sunday.

I relied on simple recollection in order to allow early data to speak to categories that emerged later in the study. After performing this weekly analysis on the data generated the fourth Sunday, I again refined categories to create the new rubric and all data was read in light of the new rubric to allow all data to inform the new rubric.

Rigor

Credibility in qualitative research is ensured partly by a highly organized but fluid process of data collection and analysis. In this process, meticulous records were kept of insights gained from both participant responses and researcher observations, as well as changes in procedure based on data and interpretation (Wiersma and Jurs 215; Strang 915; Hsieh and Shannon 1283; Corbin and Strauss 307-08; Strijbos et al. 42). The study was credible (valid and reliable), in part, due to the detail of the above explanation of the method of sampling, collection, and analysis of data.

In addition to this process of rigor, to eliminate or at least severely limit any bias in selection, I presented the list of attendees of the church and the list of selected participants to the research and reflection team, which consisted of the ministry team directors of the Church. I asked team members to help me make sure that I found what they believed would be sources of rich data across the strata of age, worship style, gender, and years of worship attendance.

To ensure validity in analysis and interpretation, in addition to the proposal hearing before my dissertation team, I met twice with a colleague for peer debriefing. We met once before I collected data to evaluate the structure of the process and once afterward to evaluate interpretive decisions based on the notes taken throughout the process. Finally, after a preliminary writing of the findings, I conducted a focus group, including four members of the population, in order to perform member checking.

This study was limited to Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene and could be applicable to suburban congregations composed of mostly Anglos, but some minorities, where preaching is the studied art of biblical narrative communication. Changing the

ethnic or socio-economic factors may or may not undermine the study's usefulness. Clearly congregations where preaching follows a deductive or informational or self-help model will not benefit from this study until the preaching model is adjusted.

Ethics

As mentioned previously, I did not know the identity of individual journal participants. When the office administrator assigned codes to the initial twenty participants, she used numbers between one and one hundred, so when I added a participant, I did not recognize the new participant as next in the line of alpha numerical values. I employed a covenant in order to gain consent to use phrases and words from journal responses (see Appendix B). I did know the identity of those I interviewed. I received verbal permission to use any information gained by field conversations before placing interviewees in the study and no names were attached to any quotes.

The research and reflection team was composed of the five ministry team leaders at Canadian Hills Church. One of the five members is a part-time paid staff member. Less than 20 percent of his income is through church salary. For that part of his professional life, he reports to me. Our relationship is collegial. He is encouraged to speak his mind and give honest feedback in all areas, but our working relationship could affect his willingness to question procedures and/or findings. The other four members of the research and reflection team were lay leaders at the church and were in no way professionally accountable to me.

Summary

In trying to study how narrative sermons allow people to enter in and participate in the ongoing story of an active God, this study was focused on the interplay of at least

three subjects who act to perform the script. These subjects include God (the Trinity), the hearers, and the preacher. In order to gain insights into this phenomenon, methodology must match the subjective reality of the field of study. Therefore qualitative phenomenology using content analysis of journal entries and field notes, provided the lens through which this study observed narrative preaching.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The following chapter contains a description of the pretest procedure, a profile of participants and the findings of content analysis presented according to three different structures. First, the findings are presented as they emerged from directed analysis, based on the five sections of the pre-study rubric (Bad News, Good News, Character, Thread, and Response). The second section contains findings that emerged beyond the categories of the pre-study rubric. The third section applies both types of findings to four specific research questions. The sections regarding findings employ triangulation of data from journal entries, spontaneous interviews, and researcher observation. Quotations were chosen based on three descending criteria: first, how well the quote represented a phenomenon found in the whole of the data; second, how clearly it presented the phenomenon; and third, how powerfully the quote allowed readers of the study into the overall experience of the group of participants. Quotes from journal entries (marked with a "P" followed by a number) are anonymous, so gender assigned in the use of pronouns is either a guess based on the content of the quote or an alternating random assignment. I knew the identity of interviewees, so gender of quotes marked with an "I" is accurate in pronouns.

Pretest Procedure

The pretest procedure in this qualitative study served only to test the efficiency and effectiveness of the instrument. Three weeks prior to the study, five nonparticipant members of the population used the journal prompts to respond to a single narrative Sunday morning sermon. I gave them the same instructions I planned to give to

participants. They used the stated procedure for submission of journals. The office administrator coded their responses and then ranked their five entries from the richest in her view to the poorest in her view. Her criteria were (1) length of the entry, (2) clarity of the language of the entry, and (3) depth of insight in the entry. The following week, I read all five entries and agreed with her ranking. I also practiced the steps of content analysis on the five pretest responses. I then met with the five people who participated in the pretest and discussed any problems with the instrument. Based on their insight, I made one minor change to wording on the instrument. Before each sermon in the actual study, two other preachers read the manuscript and gave feedback to assure each sermon exemplified quality narrative preaching.

Profile of Participants

The study began with a stratified purposeful sampling of twenty journal participants and eight interview participants from Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene. The sample accounted for gender, age, and worship style and paid specific attention to gaining responses both from people who began to attended church within the past five years and people who have practiced regular church attendance for more than five years. The sample was also chosen to reflect both the views of people who attended the first service (traditional) and the second service (contemporary). In addition to journal participants, two people each week were interviewed each Sunday, one from each morning worship service. The primary purpose for the selection of participants of both types was their ability to generate rich data through journal exercises or interviews. Theoretical sampling allowed for the addition of three participants during the course of the study. Two were believed to be able to generate rich data, but not available at the

beginning of the study. One made particularly rich comments in an interview in the third

week. Table 4.1 shows the number of participants involved in each week of the study.

Table 4.1 Number of Participants per Week

	Journal Participants	Interview Participants	Total Weekly Participants
Week 1	20	2	22
Week 2	20	2	22
Week 3	22	2	24
Week 4	23	2	25

Thirty-one people participated—twenty-three by journal and eight by spontaneous

interview. Eighteen were men and thirteen were women. Thirteen participants heard the

sermons in the first (traditional) service. Eighteen participants heard the sermons in the

second (contemporary) service. Nine participants had worshipped regularly for less than

five years at the time of the study. Twenty-two had worshipped regularly for over five

years. Fourteen participants were 50 years of age or over. Seventeen were under 50.

This study took place after I had pastored Canadian Hills Church for more than

five years. This long-term relationship means that the participants were accustomed to

hearing narrative sermons and, more specifically, my narrative sermons. Such a

relationship may have influenced their responses toward well-wishing or ill-wishing.

Findings According to Rubric Sections

The following five sections correspond with the rows of the pre-study rubric

(Table 1.1, see p. 8). These five sections formed the initial categories for directed content

analysis.

Bad News

According the literature review, the bad news comes early in the sermon. With the

exception of only two or three entries, bad news represented participants' first point of

entrance into the sermon. Responses that addressed the bad news could be sub-grouped in

four separate categories corresponding to the needs column section of the rubric (p. 8).

The first, recognition, and the second, identification, work together to make the bad news

true to life or give it verisimilitude. The third subcategory is intensification, which means

the bad news deepens or progresses. The fourth section traces findings of improvisation

and adlib. The following paragraphs described data trends in all four of these sub

categories of bad news.

Recognition. Participants displayed recognition when their responses suggested

the bad news in the sermon described the world as they found it through personal

experience. Entries displayed recognition when the text of journals revealed that in the

eyes of the participant, the world the sermon narrated was the world the participants

inhabited. Recognition was communal in nature suggesting that participants sensed that

the *shared* existence of the world was narrated in the sermon.

Over the four sermons, the sample made repeated references showing recognition

in response to the bad news. Some responses included specific recognition of the bad

news in someone else's life. P 23 said, "It [the subject of the bad news] encouraged me in

my hopes that some nameless, stubborn loved ones might absorb some of the pastor's nicely executed message." P 34 said in response to a completely different sermon, "I was drawn in thinking about the loved one sitting next to me who was dealing with this exact thing." Clearly, the sermon was narrating a part of the world this respondent had witnessed.

For other participants, it was a more generalized recognition of the human condition, reflected by the italicized words in the following two quotes. In response to a sermon in which waves denoted the bad news, the fourth interviewee (I 4) said, "*We all* [emphasis mine] face waves." In response to a section of sermon showing human tendency to confine the work of God to the Church, P 39 wrote, "I find this in my everyday life *people* [emphasis mine] only associate God with a place, Church." In response to a sermon on the weeds and the wheat, P 67 said, "I was drawn in when the pastor put on the gloves to weed the field.... This drew me in as it is so true *with us as humans* [emphasis mine] that when we feel there has been something or someone who has done wrong we want to get rid of it ourselves, or rid ourselves of them." Participants saw bad news as the shared experience of the world.

However, bad news was not only recognized as the situation of a fallen world or the actions of fallen people. Sometimes God was seen as active in the ambiguity. In response to the same sermon, P 71 recognized the seeming bad news or ambiguity in the way God relates with the fallen world and wrote, "Why does God allow weeds (bad people) to grow and prosper along side of the wheat (godly people)?" P 77 also recognized God's activity in the bad news, "God will call you into waters so deep that you would drown without him. There are many times that we feel scared." Participants at

Canadian Hills Church demonstrated recognition of the world they inhabit in the bad news sections of the four sermons preached for this study.

Identification. In the data, identification went a step further than recognition. Where recognition suggested that participants saw the bad news in the sermon as accurately portraying the world they inhabit; identification suggested that the respondents see themselves as participants in that bad news. Identification accounted for an even greater level of repetition in data than did recognition.

Some participants saw themselves as victims of the bad news that they recognized in the world. P 23 said, "If humans were responsible, I would have been labeled and pulled out as a weed." P 39 said, "It wasn't the church/religion itself that ran me away, originally, it was the people." In reflecting on the church's tendency to wed itself to a political party, with noticeable tension in her voice I 8 said, "I was always told as a child the Republican party was *the* Christian party. That is not the case." In these and many other instances, participants found themselves victims of the bad news, but not necessarily as perpetrators.

In other responses, participants identified themselves as causing or at least participating in the bad news. In response to the sermon about the premature separating of weeds and wheat, P 46 admitted, "I see that I have a tendency to try to separate myself from the weeds in the world." In responses to the parable of the ungrateful servant, P 71 wrote, "I sometimes feel that I identify with the 'ungrateful servant' who was forgiven much but could not forgive one who owed him so very little." P 58 agreed with a very specific reference about personally contributing to the bad news of unforgiveness, saying "I have let this kind of thing hinder me way too long! My child has to hear my

unforgiving attitude on a daily basis." In response to a political sermon just before the

election, P 85 wrote, "I had to admit to myself some of my intolerance to the 'other'

party's difference in opinion. And I had to admit some of my opinions are just that—

opinions based on feelings rather than on scripture." P 43 identified with the bad news in

the character of Peter who left the boat behind. This participant said, "I see myself more

like Peter, regardless of circumstances I want to take matters in my own hand." These

quotes represent a significant trend showing general recognition of the bad news giving

way to identification within the bad news.

In a few cases, in response to the sermon on the parable of the weeds and wheat,

participants identified themselves as both the causes and the victims of the bad news. I 2

reflected, "I saw myself as the lady who put on the gloves and weeded herself out of the

field." P 82 saw how "'putting on the ... gloves' and plucking myself out from fellow

believers is not what God wants." These quotes suggest that the participants have

displayed judgementalism (part of the bad news). They also have suffered from the fact

that they have directed their judgementalism toward themselves, excluding themselves

from the community of faith. A similar response to a sermon on the unforgiving servant

follows:

> I have been known to hold a grudge for quite some time if someone hurts
> me deeply, but I always come around and forgive at some point. But there
> is one person in my life that I haven't forgiven. My ex-stepfather used to
> physically abuse my mom. For several years my brothers and I watched
> helplessly as he hit her, called her horrible names, even choked her once
> until I threw my shoe at him and told him to stop. I was in the 3rd or 4th
> grade. In the 5th grade he threw her through a window. A year later they
> finally divorced, but I've never been able to forgive him for what he put us
> all through, and the long term psychological affects his abuse caused for
> all of us. He is the one person I find it most difficult to forgive. But all sin
> is black and destructive, and Jesus didn't just die for my sins. (P50)

P 50 both suffers from the bad news of repeated abuse and perpetuates unforgiveness, thus playing the part of victim and villain.

   Intensification. As shown in the rubric, intensification suggests that the bad news deepens and progresses. In a sermon about Jesus walking on the water, I told a personal story about a boat outing with some friends. In response to the story, a few participants noted a deepening of the bad news. P 74 wrote, "The visual picture you painted when you spoke of your *increasing* [emphasis mine] fear of being in the place where you felt helpless and not in control of the situation was especially drawing." P 50 mentioned, "The point where the pastor was talking about the noise they heard behind them and when they turned and saw the storm … that is when the *plot thickened* [emphasis mine]." In naming when she was drawn into the sermon, P 62 wrote, "When the four young men began rowing against the wind." All three of these references refer to the same point in one sermon, a point where I intentionally deepened the conflict. The bad news got worse. At that point in the sermon, by observation from the platform, I sensed silent attention as if the entire congregation were leaning toward me, hanging on my words.

   Improvisation or ad lib. Comments about the bad news did not mention ad lib in the sermons and no respondent displayed adlib in response to a bad news section of any sermon.

   In some cases, participants displayed the ability to improvise on the bad news from the sermon by naming similar bad news. More than one participant even shared experiences that showed enhanced understanding of bad news. Although P 50 felt he was distracted, his narration of the experience revealed some very good recognition as

described above. In response to the sermon on the disciples being in the same boat together, against the wind and tortured by waves, P 50 wrote the following:

> The reason I became very distracted during the sermon is because as I looked around at my fellow church-members I truly began to understand how we really are in the same boat, even with our personal problems. I looked at someone who lost his wife last year, and at someone who is going through a difficult divorce, and at someone who is struggling with their finances and worried about losing their home.

While the sermon did mention the loss of home, it said nothing about the loss of a spouse or divorce. Beyond recognition, this participant sat in the pew and improvised storms not mentioned in the sermon, but very appropriate to the sermon and the passage. P 71 displayed similar improvisation on a sermon regarding forgiving seventy times seven. His comment falls within the subcategory of identification because of its confessional nature. "I always come back to 70 X 7 is 490. But, who is keeping track. I ... have to be pretty petty to keep track of each time I forgive." While not featured in the sermon, the pettiness of counting would have fit nicely and does fit within the bad news of the gospel drama as well.

Content analysis of journal entries, interview notes, and researcher observation found that participants experienced bad news through recognition, identification, and intensification. A smaller number were able to improvise appropriate bad news beyond what I stated in the sermon.

Good News

According to the pre-study rubric, responses categorized as pertaining to good news were sub-categorized as to whether they revealed the good news (1) was related to and resolved the bad news (2) was God's action (3) contained a reversal and (4) was

ample enough to resolve the bad news. The following paragraphs relate findings to these subcategories.

Relates to and resolves bad news. A majority of the good news responses were found as part of an answer to a question or even a part of a sentence. Often a participant's sentence or answer began with bad news and ended with good news. Repetition of this occurrence suggests the good news was strongly related to the bad news. In response to a sermon on the weeds and wheat, P 67 wrote, "I start to feel that way about someone being a weed in the field of wheat; then [realize] that all things are possible with God." In response to the sermon about the disciples in the boat on the waves, P 90 said, "I could see how little my faith is and how big God is." P 74 said, "I sensed that God was speaking directly to me when you spoke of the church as a group of people called together to sail against the winds" (P 74). These sentences, and the others they represent, demonstrated the participants' ability to construct thoughts relating to good news and bad news in a way that describes resolution.

God's action. The participants recognized good news as divine action. Of all responses categorized "good news," only two could be interpreted as ad lib that made human initiation the source of good news. In response to Jesus walking on the water, P 62 wrote, "I have been rowing against the wind for a long time. I have finally reached the shore." For I 3 the good news seems contingent first on human action: "Keep your eye on Jesus and he will not let you drown." This quote suggested that humans initiate God's faithfulness. With the exception of these two responses, all other responses related to the good news of the sermon involved either an action or an attribute of God. In response to the same sermon, P 74 wrote, "God designed the Church to work as one body to stand

against the storms of life and in constant support to each other." In response to the

sermon about the unforgiving servant, he wrote, "God was portrayed as the ever-

forgiving master who urges us to forgive in return." The weeds and wheat inspired this

comment: "He has the opportunity to perform the miracle of transformation" (P 23). A

prevalence of similar comments suggested that in the eyes of participants, good news is

based on God's action.

Including all responses from all four Sundays of the study, in response to the

journal prompt, "At what point, if any, did you hear God speaking to you?" only one

participant (P 43) responded in a negative way. "It didn't happen explicitly, but I am sure

that God was speaking to me by generating thoughts in my mind. It was through the

whole sermon. God was telling me to trust him." While writing his journal, P 43 seems to

have concluded that God *was* in fact speaking. Every other journal response selected by

the office administrator and every interviewee gave instance that they believed God

spoke to them. Participants named specific parts of the sermon where God spoke. In the

sermon on the waves, P 77 wrote, "I felt God was speaking to me through the comments

of the 'old woman.'" In response to the weeds and the wheat, I 1 said, "God spoke to me

when the landowner said, 'let them grow together.'" Some comments suggested a

specific message from God. "God was telling me that we all look like weeds at times in

the field but...we can become a healthy plant (P 67). Such pervasive claims of God

speaking suggest participants experience God as protagonist who spoke the first and main

lines within the drama preached.

God's actions and words in relation to the good news of the sermon were not

confined to the time duration of the sermon. One week, at the time of the reading of the

passage, before I began to preach, P 34 "silently whispered a prayer of thanks for God's amazing timing. Just the right message for just the right time." P 46 said, "I felt God speaking to me after the service on the way home.... He was telling me to quit avoiding what I perceive as weeds." P 27 said, "I didn't feel God speaking to me until the praise group began singing a song that tied into the topic. Hearing the music allowed me to reflect on what was said" (P 27). The above responses set God apart as the main actor in the drama before, during, and after the sermon

Presence of a reversal. Although the "Good News" row of the pre-study rubric asked the preacher to make sure the good news contained a reversal, the rubric also evaluates reversals in the section marked "Thread" (p 8). Response to reversals in the sermons was much more discernable in the comments categorized as related to the thread. As a result, findings concerning reversal will be treated in the section that follows entitled "Thread."

Good enough good news. Of all respondents, only one participant (P 46), on only one Sunday, said nothing related to the good news. When the journal responses were coded and categorized, the file marked "good news" and the file marked "bad news" were roughly equal in length. Both files totaled approximately eleven single-spaced pages of text. Sheer volume of response suggested that the good news at least matched the bad news. Nonetheless, neither of these two categories, was the largest of the five.

Character

Of the five categories selected for initial content analysis, character was the largest. The filed marked "Character" totaled seventeen pages of single–spaced text. It

consisted of comments in the journal responses and interviews related to the character of God, the character of the community, and to the character of the individual respondent.

God's character. One of the sub–categories of statements about character, reflected statements made by participants about the character of God. Some comments centered on God's nature or attributes "Your sermon portrayed a patient God" (P74). "God was portrayed as loving and compassionate" (I 6). Other comments showed impressions of God's character springing from actions. The verbs in the following quotes highlight actions of God that give shape to His character. "God was putting his guys together in the boat" (P 71). "God will call you into waters so deep you'll drown without him (P 77). "Jesus turns the poem of endless revenge into one of limitless forgiveness" (P 39). "God was portrayed first … [as] Jesus telling the parable, and then as the father forgiving us of our sins" (P 34). In the preceding quotes the presence of the verbs "was putting," "will call," "turns," "forgiving" and "telling" demonstrate the portrayal of God's character as springing from his actions. In the last quote, P 34 identified two persons of the trinity revealed in the actions of telling and forgiving.

Other participants were able to articulate the character of God through metaphor. P 82 said, "God was portrayed in this sermon as the farmer who desires to keep and raise the wheat and weeds together. God, creator of the soil… is also Judge who will divide." P 23 wrote, "God is portrayed as teacher." Using attributes, metaphors and actions from the sermons, respondents were able to describe God as portrayed in sermons and in the gospel script.

Individual's character. Respondents commented on their own individual character slightly fewer times than they commented on God's character. Such comments were the second most prevalent among statements concerning character in general.

Some participants seemed to erupt in praise for discovery of a grace-defined identity. "I'm a cross-pollinated weed! Praise God!" (P 71). Others felt the weight of a role that they were being called to play. Talking about forgiveness, I 5 said, "I saw myself helping my son work through some things that have happened between him and his in-laws." In response to the sermon on politics, P 39 said, "It made me think of the big picture, to be a good steward of the earth." Steward and helper were two representative character roles that participants felt they had been invited to play. Some saw a character or character trait they did not want to emulate, for example, the unforgiving servant: "I never want to feel the condemnation of an unforgiving spirit" (P 34).

Participants also saw their character in light of individual characters from contemporary material found in the sermon. Responding to weeds and wheat, P 82 wrote, "I felt God was speaking to me when Pastor ... spoke of the lady who removed herself at times. God was telling me to ... let him work through my weakness that I may not hide my weaknesses." P 74 wrote, "When you spoke of Corrie Ten Boom speaking forgiveness, God answered how to forgive others." Other participants identified with a character from the Bible. Simon Peter walking on the water and then sinking allowed P 74 "to see myself as Peter, full of fear and doubts but still loved by God. I also saw myself as stepping-out with my own ideas and frequently needing Jesus to take my hand and lead me back to safety." Such comments demonstrated the respondent's ability to

enter the gospel by stepping into the role of a biblical or contemporary character. As mentioned in the section on bad news, repetition showed respondents identifying with characters as they participated in the bad news.

Participants showed an awareness of development in their own character. Just before the national election, I preached a sermon intended to show Jesus speaking a prophetic word to people on both the political right and the political left. 18 responded, "I don't see myself on one side anymore. I don't know if I want to be one-sided. I want to see myself trusting God for the country." While this life-long and generational Republican suggested a strong a possibility of voting Democrat, another interviewee, a lifelong Democrat admitted to actually voting Republican. Though politically neutralizing, such changes of life pattern suggested character development as participants entered the story. Journal data also displayed character development. For example, P 39 wrote, "I wanted to feel like a weed, and then realized I'm a hybrid." Responses showed that participants saw themselves as individuals narrated into the story and as such displayed development in their character through the story.

Community's character. Few responses spoke purely of the church's character. One such comment was "we are all in the same boat" (P 26). Such purely communal statements about character identity were rare. Most comments that did mention community character also mentioned either the character of God and/or the character of the individual. These mixed responses will be treated in the next section.

Mixed statements. Of the emerging subcategories of comments about character, the third in the order of prevalence was labeled "mixed statements." This subcategory

included responses that displayed a mixture of thoughts about the character of God, the character of the individual, and/or the character of the community.

Some of the responses in this category mixed two of the three talking about the character of God influencing the character of the community. "We were reminded that we cannot turn weeds into wheat but God can. We were reminded to hold our tongues about the weeds so that He can perform a miracle" (P 23).

Some character comments mixed data on individual character and the character of the community. In response to weeds and wheat P 39 wrote the following:

> I always had a debate, yet always felt restless and empty. Then I came across a group of Christians, who were like me, with a troubled past. I was treated so differently, and accepted regardless of appearance, or ideology.... Now that I am becoming a Christian, I am trying to walk the walk, yet I am no longer walking it alone.

Here, P 39 talks about his character and the character of the community.

In response to the disciples sailing against the wind, P 50 wrote, "This sermon helped me to see myself in the boat with others in the Church." Such comments defy a clear separation into individual/communal subcategories.

Other comments about character were mixed reflections about the character of God and the character of the individual. In response to the parable of the unforgiving servant, P 39 wrote the following:

> When the Pastor said, "Consider what we owe God"... [and] mentioned that what is more important to a king than money is his son, the heir. I realized that God forgave all my sins through his son's sacrifice, so why can't I forgive limitless?

The most striking character comment mixing the three came in response to Jesus being in the boat with his disciples, "This sermon showed me it isn't just me and Jesus, it is me, Jesus and others" (P 74). The presence of comments that mixed reflections about the

characters of God, the community, and the individual demonstrated development of the community and the individual, based on the character of God revealed in the sermons and the gospel script.

Thread

Comments categorized as relating to the thread, either specifically mentioned the intended thread, or contained language overtly related to the thread. To a sermon containing a maritime thread about sailing against the wind, several participants responded with something like "Jesus is in the boat with us during the storms" (P 23). P 88 picked up on the thread of debt in the sermon about forgiveness. "With each story, I felt more and more drawn in, especially as each story ended with the same ending 'they owe me.'" P 88 also answered later "every time I heard him say, 'they owe me' I knew God was speaking to me." These responses show thread helped hearers track the progression, enter the story, and hear from the main actor.

Other less explicit references used language that showed that the thread gave context to their comments. In a sermon about politics, the thread was actually the place where I stood on the platform in relation to the political right and left. In response to that sermon, respondents used the word "stance" or "position." Those two words had framed the thread for the sermon.

Prevalence of thread comments. Nearly all respondents, whether by journal or by interview, referred to the intended thread or at least used language related to the thread. Two of the four Sundays, all of the participants did so. On any Sunday, no fewer than eight of twelve participants used thread language to make their comments, either

about themselves, God, the church, and/or the world. The intended thread noticeably influenced the language participants used to express themselves.

Repetition in life and identification. The rubric called for threads, when possible, to be repeated in life. I intentionally designed one of the threads with such repetition in mind. I reversed the thread of accumulating personal debt for sins against God by using a paper shredder against the back drop of the cross to signify God destroying the sin-debt. An example of a comment that would have affirmed repetition in life would have been, "I'll never pass the shredder at my office again without thinking about the forgiveness of God." No such comments were made.

While no one overtly suggested the thread would be repeated, several comments did suggest that the *phenomenon* represented by the one of threads would be repeated in life. These respondents couched their phrases in thread language. In response to weeds and wheat, one identified with the bad news using thread language. "The pastor made the comment that when we look into the fields of the world we see weeds. But sometimes we look into a mirror and we see a weed also" (P 67). Some identified with the good news using thread language such as "I'm a 'cross–pollinated' weed. Praise God!" (P 71). In response to Jesus putting the disciples in the boat P 74 wrote, "God puts others in my boat to help me through those tough times" (P 74). Seeing boats could trigger remembrance of this sermon. Some described the community in thread language. "We all may look like weeds in the field" (P 67). Participants' casual use of all these threads from common life; weeds, a boat, a mirror, suggested at least the possibility of repetition.

Reversal of the thread. Data on reversal was more prevalent and discernable among comments categorized as pertaining to thread than in any other category.

Comments on reversal refer to specific moments in the sermon where good news brings dramatic change shown by a change in the thread.

The previous quote from P 71 about being a "cross-pollinated weed" represents this group of comments. Toward the end of the weeds and wheat sermon, I asked the congregation to look around the sanctuary at the people there and told them that they were seeing a field full of wheat that used to look an awful lot like weeds. My observation of body language and expression on faces, showed that it was a powerful moment of recognition. After a pause in that moment of recognition, I pointed to the cross and said, "a clear case of CROSS-pollination." When asked when God spoke, P 71 wrote, "When we looked around and saw the 'weed-wheat' transformations-including myself" (P 71). When P 39 wrote, "I wanted to feel like a weed, and then realized I'm a hybrid," he displayed both identification and some very appropriate improvisation on the reversal of the thread in that sermon. The word "hybrid" sprang from CROSS-pollination, the reversal moment in the sermon.

In response to the sermon on the debt of the unforgiving servant, I 5 said, "When you put that paper in the shredder, God was saying to me … why do you keep asking my forgiveness for the things I've already forgiven" (I 5). In both services, when shredder ate the paper (our sin debt) against the backdrop of the cross, a powerful moment silence followed. Three days later completely unsolicited, college age ministry interns described it as very powerful.

In the sermon on politics, after speaking prophetically to the right and then to the left, I came back to the center of the platform and showed Jesus reaching out and bringing both sides together, noting that he brought together the Herodians and the

Israelite zealots. I said "and these groups united together ... [long pause] to crucify him."

After taking several political positions around the platform, at the speaking of that phrase,

I stood in the center cruciform and said, "The church must assume the political position

of our savior." P 71 said, "It as very moving when the pastor stood erect as a 'cross.' It

had a profound message." The presence of these comments and observations suggest the

reversal of the thread is a memorable and powerful moment in the sermon and may be

repeated when the thread is encountered in the world.

Time travel. Data contained some evidence that the thread collapsed time for

listeners. In one sermon the thread "political position" painted the Herodians and the

Zealots (right and left of the platform respectively) as parallels to the two current

American political parties. Such movement in the sermon produced phrases like "I was

particularly interested in his explanation of two political leaning groups present in Jesus

day. I always like to compare the things from the Bible to what's going on with us today;

amazing the similarity" (P 34). P 74 said, "I was fascinated to learn that the Herodians

and Zealots mirrored the political parties of today." Such comments suggest some

participants heard the biblical story as current.

Response

Comments categorized as response came chiefly from the fifth journal prompt

that asked the participants what specifically they planned to do in response to the sermon.

Answers to other questions also yielded data on response. Examples from the various

sermons follow:

> I intend to let God shine in me and not hide from other wheat or weeds for
> that matter. I intend to pray that I will allow God to move in my weakness
> and do things that I could never do myself. (P74)

P 77 related, "He has proven his faithfulness so many times that I can stay in the boat." P 27 committed, "I will be praying that I will be aware of God's forgiveness granted me so I can once and for all forgive." These quotes represent the whole in which participants repeatedly committed to actions that sprang from the actions, words, or attributes of God.

Directed and open-ended. Of the four sermons, three had more of an obvious directed response while the last one left the specifics of the response up to the listeners. The sermon about Jesus and the question about taxes left the greatest room for creative response. This particular sermon addressed politics on the Sunday before the general election (2008). The call was to spend as much time in prayer and Scripture as in the news and be prophetic toward both parties. Participants' freedom to respond in different ways was exemplified by the fact that one of the two interviewees moved from staunchly Democrat to voting Republican while one moved from generationally Republican to considering voting Democrat. There was also one seemingly frustrated response to the one open-ended sermon. "This sermon was a fair description of both political groups, but it ended too soon. I was left hanging, wanting to hear more" (P 62). While others were concerned that I might endorse a party or a candidate, this participant seemed disappointed that I did not tell the church which candidate they should vote for.

Community and individual. The level of community language in the data was directly related to the subject matter of the sermon. When the sermon was about the field (world and church), all but one participant used community language such as "God expects us to respect others" (I 1). When the subject matter was forgiving someone, the response language was predominantly individualistic like, "I will be praying that I will stay aware of the forgiveness God gave me, so I can actively forgive" (P27).

Improvisation or adlib. The only discernable presence of adlib in comments

characterized as response, came from an interview in response to a sermon about staying

in the boat with other believers. I 3 said he planned to respond by "keeping my eyes on

Jesus." While this response sounds important enough, it was not mentioned in the sermon

or in the passage. The comment actually takes an opposite view from the sermon by

suggesting that if Simon had just kept his eyes on Jesus, he would have been able to keep

walking on the water. The bad news of the sermon was that Simon doubted, when he

asked Jesus to prove himself by asking Simon to come to him on the water in the first

place. The desired response is not "keep your eyes on Jesus" but "stay in the boat." This

answer while adlib in response the particular sermon I preached, it was possibly actually

a response to a previous sermon I 3 heard on this passage.

Respondents displayed improvisation when their responses showed them

participating with God as supporting actors, speaking lines in response to his lines, or

sometimes not speaking. In response to the weeds and the wheat, P 23 wrote, "He wants

us to hold our tongues so that he has the opportunity to perform a miracle."

The following response to the same sermon exemplifies two kinds of

improvisation:

> He is not willing that any should perish and so He is giving as much time
> as possible for the "planters" and "waterers" to do their part to help build
> His kingdom before it is time for the "reapers" to do their part in the
> harvest when the weeds will be tossed into the "fire." (P 71)

P 71 improvised our participation as a planters or waters. She also improvised on the

theme of growth and harvest, incorporating the imagery of Paul from 1 Corinthians 3:7-8.

The inclusion of this language from Paul set her response within the context of both the

parable and the broader canonical script.

The following table displays the findings of directed content analysis of journal entries, interviews, and researcher observation. The table's structure is based on the pre-study rubric (Table 1.1, p. 8). Whereas the third column in the pre-study rubric functions as space for the evaluation of individual sermons before they are preached, the third column in Table 4.2 reflects the trends of data gained through directed analysis.

Table 4.2. Findings of Directed Analysis Described on the Rubric

Element	Needs in Each Element	Trends of Participant Responses
Bad news/ ambiguity	Improv. or ad lib? Verisimilitude to life? Deepens/progresses?	• No adlib; some improv. • Verisimilitude repetitious recognition • Verisimilitude repetitious identification • Intensification repeatedly mentioned
Good news/ resolution	Related to and resolves bad news? Is it God's action? Presence of reversal? Enough good news?	• Related to and resolves bad news • God main actor speaks/acts in/around Sermons • Reversal yes (treated in Thread) • Good news comments equal with bad news
Character/ his and ours	What character dominates? How is God portrayed? How is community character shaped?	• God most dominant • God portrayed accurately • Mixed character comments about God, individual reveal inter-related character identity. • Showed human character development
Thread	Where is it from? Does it develop/reverse? Repeated in life? Time travel?	• Script and life • Development and reversal noted in data • No direct evidence of repetition in life but noticeably influenced response language in journal and interview • A few comments support time travel
Response	How open ended? Is it communal? Improv. or ad lib	• Diverse responses to the one open ended sermon • Only one frustrated "not finished" comment • Communal/individual responses based on communal/individual nature of sermon • Little adlib, repetitious improvisation

Findings Not Accounted for by the Pre-Study Rubric

The next two sections contain findings that were not accounted for by the pre-study rubric. The first unforeseen finding emerged during directed content analysis and the second such finding began to emerge after bracketing during nondirected content analysis during the first week.

A Dual Categorization

The first unforeseen, but logical trend, revealed by content analysis was the fact that nearly all the phrases categorized as good news were also categorized under the character of God. Statements like "Anything is possible with God" (P 67) obviously qualify both as good news and as comment on the character of God. This dual characterization represents the vast majority of comments about the character of God and many of the comments about the good news.

A New Category

According to the predetermined procedure detailed in Chapter 3, the second round of coding called "nondirected content analysis" generated one additional category that appeared in the very first week. In order to qualify as a new category response, data not foreseen by the rubric had to be repeated three times over the course of the study. In the first week alone, in response to journal prompt number 1, three different individuals answered the first question by saying that they were drawn into the sermon at the reading of the passage. The second week, one more participant answered similarly. The third week, five respondents named the reading as their entry point. The final week, two more respondents answered similarly. In only one of these instances was the same respondent

repeating a similar answer for two different weeks. The responses that described being drawn in at the reading of the text can be separated into two different subcategories: a respect for the script and a hook in the text.

Respect for the script. For some participants, citing the reading as entrance had little to do with the particular content of the individual Scriptures I read. One interviewee said "Scripture had my full attention. It always does because it is the word of God." (I 1) For I 1, entrance at the reading of the text, seemed to come from his high value of the script in general.

Hook in the text. For other participants, the individual passage read seemed to contain a hook that drew them into the sermon. "I was drawn in from the reading of the scripture.... This is one of those scriptures that you read, scratch your head, and ask why?" (P 74). For some, the hook in Scripture did more than just get attention. The hook seemed to point them toward the ambiguity of the sermon. In referring to the reading of Scripture P 62 wrote, "I wanted to know where the Pastor was going to go with this one."

Findings Applied to Research Questions

The following section takes the findings from the content analysis and uses them to answer the four research questions. Gender in quotes is handled in the same fashion as the rest of Chapter 4.

RQ1. Degree of Entry

Research Question One asked to what degree hearers at Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene sensed that narrative preaching invited them to enter communion with God in a gospel-shaped community. On each of the four Sundays, journal prompt number 1 specifically invited all participants to declare they were not ever drawn into the sermon.

Respondents had complete anonymity if they did so. Even so on the four Sundays of the

study, not one of the analyzed entries showed any participant felt a sermon failed to draw

him or her in. Journal and interview answers to the first prompt suggested participants

entered the sermons. They were also asked if and when they heard God speaking to them.

Only one participant struggled to name a specific moment when God spoke to him or her

through the sermon. This participant then suggested God spoke through the whole

sermon. To the degree that all participants sensed they were drawn into the sermons and

sensed they heard from God while in the sermons, logic suggests they were drawn into

communion with God through the sermons.

The character section of this chapter noted comments on character that mixed data

between information on the character of God, the character of the individual and the

character of the community. The presence of this mixed data suggests that to a large

degree, participants saw themselves as people within a community who commune with

God.

RQ2. Reasons for Entry

Research Question 2 was concerned with themes that describe why hearers

believed sermons created openings. The journal responses and interview notes suggested

that participants believed they entered the sermons because they first recognize the world

narrated in narrative sermons to be the world they inhabit. Secondly, they identified with

the characters portrayed in the sermon. Also comments describing the power of the

reversal moments, suggested the possibility that a gospel-shaped, God-initiated reversal

opened entrance into not only the sermon, but into the gospel as well.

RQ3. Point(s) of Entry

Research Question 3 was concerned with whether an opening in one particular part of the sermon was more crucial than an opening in other parts. The congregation is accustomed to this type of preaching as reflected by P 23 who makes nearly the same comment twice. First he wrote, "I felt drawn into the sermon from the beginning as I usually do. I enjoy the pastor's style of opening the sermons it usually captures me from the beginning." The follow-up similar statement was "I believe I replied last week by saying that I'm almost always drawn into the sermon from the beginning." While most were not this overt, repetitive responses to journal prompt Number One named bad news moments in the sermon as the place they first entered the sermon. Bad news comes at the beginning of a narrative sermon. In the data, entrance to the sermon was most prevalent there.

For a researcher to determine when a hearer entered the gospel seems to tax inquiry beyond its limits. However, the development of the listening characters and their answers to journal prompt Number Five concerning response, suggested that at least by the moment of response, participants repeatedly showed evidence of participating with God in some kind of improvised gospel-shaped action.

RQ4. Entry and Response

Research Question 4 explored how being drawn into narrative sermons affects hearers ability to articulate a free and faithful community response. Participants showed changes in their behavior that ranged from subtle to the quite dramatic. After the sermon on sticking with community, one participant displayed a movement from "I" language to "we" language in journal response. Similarly, two individuals, whom I had observed as

extremely individualistic, spoke in interviews of feeling convicted to become more involved and active in the life of the community of faith.

Summary of Findings

Based on content analysis of interview and journal data and based on insights from observation, this study found that hearers at Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene entered the gospel through narrative preaching in the following fashion:

1. During the telling or reading of the bad news, they recognized that the world narrated was the real world they inhabit and they identified with bad news characters.

2. Listeners heard from God, who acts to reverse the bad news in world-changing, good news ways.

3. They saw themselves as individuals within a community relating to God and described the transformation of their character.

4. They were able to improvise free and faithful, community and individual, responses to the gospel as it was presented in narrative preaching.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Problem and Purpose

While narrative preaching represents a return to a long used form, the field of preaching lacks a means to identify quality in narrative preaching. (Wilson, *Practice* 209). This dissertation examined the problem of poor narrative preaching that allows hearers to assimilate disjointed stories of Scripture or disconnected contemporary stories into their own life stories, rather than inviting hearers to enter the story of God. (Pasquarello, "Narrative Reading" 190; Harmless 235). These pages chronicle an effort to find a way to identify, and thereby, produce quality narrative sermons that invite people to enter the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Interpretation

In interpreting the findings, the story of one participant in particular gave shape to the experience of all. For the purpose of anonymity, I will use the pseudonym Steve. Steve was baptized as child, but at the time of the study, had not practiced his faith for years. By his late twenties, he was a millionaire. After living an opulent life for years, his fortunes changed dramatically. Relationships fractured, leaving him depressed, though wealthy. At this point, he left the source of his earthly wealth in search of something more. He searched for fulfillment in work and in several other religions as well as in worldly addictions like alcohol, descending even lower. His search proved so intense, he had the words "in search of..." tattooed on his back. In the midst of the search, he met a young woman who has been a member at Canadian Hills Church from childhood. As they moved toward marriage, they began to attend the Church.

They had attended about eight weeks when I selected him to participate in the study. In response to the first sermon about weeds and wheat, Steve wrote "I think I'm a hybrid" and used the word "skeptic," suggesting he was between belief and unbelief. On his own, he came to me later to talk about the sermon and mentioned the "hybrid" comment. He was not concerned I knew his identity. Naturally, I began watching his responses. Two weeks into the study he wrote "now that I am becoming a Christian,... I don't have to walk ... alone."

A gregarious personality, at the time of this study and writing, he was rarely absent in worship, and began greeting visitors at the door. More than once, I heard this formerly wealthy man's compassionate response to the poor. He and I, his wife, and a few others spent the evening sitting with another man on the first anniversary of his wife's death. I could not help but think of the story of Jesus weeping with Mary and Martha. Steve's journaling, displayed a discernable sinking and rising, from millionaire down to depressed searcher up to Christ-follower. I believe through the process of this study, I have been privileged to watch Steve enter the sinking and rising gospel of Jesus Christ and begin to coact with God.

The Holy Spirit used many characters and life episodes as offers to invite Steve to enter the gospel. To hear him tell it, the people God used were acting out the gospel before his eyes. Such people and occurrences included family, friendships, a romance, a Bible study, and also the gospel as it was preached. This study asked one very specific question: How can preachers write narrative sermons that the Holy Spirit will use to invite all hearers, whatever their background, to enter the drama with God and the community and act out the sinking and rising gospel of Jesus Christ?

The apostle Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who has faith" (Rom. 1:16-17, NRSV). The literature asserts and the data affirms that the gospel is *the* power for salvation. In order to offer entrance into that gospel, preachers must pay attention to the narrative structure of the gospel.

Like a powerful dramatic performance, the gospel begins with the main actor speaking repeated threads that then fall into conflict or bad news, usually because of the unfaithful adlib of humans. In the middle scenes, the bad news *intensifies* or descends further, getting worse.[4] (Vanhoozer 39; Green "Reading the Gospels" 44; Thompson 83, 85; Lowry *Homiletical Plot* 25). Whether they saw it at the reading of the text or the beginning of the sermon, participants were able to recognize and name the deepening bad news as they heard it in the sanctuary and had seen it in the world. The Holy Spirit seemed to offer people entrance through the telling of bad news that bore an incarnational likeness to the world they inhabit.

Hearers also recognized that as human actors they participated in the descending bad news by the lines they had spoken and the actions they had taken. Again, the Holy Spirit seemed to use the narrated actions and words of bad news characters to further draw listeners into the descending story as they saw themselves as actors in that drama.

Both the gospel script and the literature review showed God himself acting and speaking when the gospel is preached. Also, not one participant failed to say he or she heard from God during the four sermons studied. All participants showed the ability to

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[4] The descending and ascending lines of both diagrams from Chapter 2 will give shape to the continuance of the conversation (see Figure 2.1 p 47 and Figure 2.3 p 62).

name God's actions, suggesting communion with God happened because God was active as the drama was preached.

By mixing their comments about the character of God, their own character as individuals, and the character of the community, participants revealed an awareness of their place in the transforming gospel story as they related to God and the church. (Steve actually joined.) The gospel script, the literature review, and the data in this study suggest that God, the Holy Spirit, was present, acting and speaking, inviting the community of hearers to enter communion with the Trinity by inhabiting the story as told from the pulpit (see Figure 2.2 and discussion p 57).

In the response of the hearers, the character of God adhered so closely with the good news section of the plot that the study strongly affirms the theological assertion that it is impossible to separate the plot of the gospel from the character of Christ. Such an adherence also affirmed the proposed homiletical solution that good preaching holds plot and character together. Good narrative preaching narrates the gospel *of Jesus*.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God acts decisively to reverse the downward trend of the gospel from bad news to good news (See figure 2.1, p. 47) Participants affirmed the use of that theological concept as a model for narrative preaching by both recognizing the general trend displayed by the downward movement of the threads in sermons and by naming the moment of reversal of threads as the moment when God spoke to them. The Holy Spirit seemed to use the reversals as offers of entrance.

In the gospel story, hearers are invited to become co-actors with God by improvising from and adhering to the script. (Lowry, *Homiletical Plot* 41; Cantalamessa

67; John 13:17; Jas 1:18-25; Matt. 17:24; Wilson, *Practice* 186). Chapter 4 found

participants planning such co-action. Sometimes they plotted actions explicitly called for

by the sermon. In other cases, they improvised actions that the preacher did not intend,

but were easily recognized as faithful improvisation. As was predicted by the literature

review, one participant chafed at a more open ending. Such a response serves as a subtle

warning that too many open endings in a row may only serve to frustrate rather than offer

entrance.

Implications

If hearers at Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene could enter the gospel of

Jesus Christ by responding to narrative sermons that use threads to hold plot and

character together, then perhaps such a phenomenon can be repeated in other settings as

well. This study suggested that despite the current criticism of narrative preaching,

postmodern preachers need not jettison the practice for a completely modernistic

propositional approach. Instead, they need to write and preach sermons that hold the plot

and character of the gospel together, inviting hearers into the particular gospel story. A

tool for evaluation can help.

Limitations

The literature review suggested that good threads would be repeated in life.

Participants gave little evidence that such repetition had taken place. The absence of

evidence for the repetition of threads may be explained by conceding the threads in the

sermons did not successfully bond the sermons to lived experience and therefore, would

not reintroduce the sermon later in life. The absence of such evidence in the data could

also be attributed the timing of data gathering. Journal responses were due by Monday

morning each week. Nearly all wrote on Sunday afternoon and all but two interviews were held on Sunday afternoon. In the case of the paper shredder image used for a thread reversal, no participants would have seen such a machine in time for it to trigger a memory of the sermon before they journaled. In order to study the lasting effect of the thread, the journaling portion of the study would have had to follow the sermon by at least a few days.

Another limitation was caused by the procedure of anonymity. In not knowing which morning service (contemporary or traditional) individual participants attended, it was nearly impossible to tell how the other parts of the worship service influenced a hearer's ability to enter. In order to study degrees of entrance according to which service they attended or which element of the service offered them entrance, I would need to have developed separate contemporary and traditional groups and compared them.

One other possible limitation is a debatable issue. After more than five years of pastor-congregation relationship, my relationship with participants may have influenced the data because of well-wishing or ill-wishing. Anonymity does much to account for this possibility. A more nuanced response to this limitation springs from the very nature of the study. To study the art of preaching in a local congregation is to study people in relationship. Rather than a limitation, this relationship is better described as a condition of this type of qualitative research.

One additional limitation is the fact that this study required journaling in response to known questions. Subconscious or conscious preparation for journaling may have caused participants to listen more carefully than they normally would have. While journal participants did know ahead of time that they were going to write in response to the

sermon, interviewees were not contacted until the sermon was already preached. While some interviewees did yield rich data, journal entries yielded much more, probably because journal participants were prepared ahead of time.

Unexpected Observations

One of the two preachers who evaluated the sermons prior to their being preached gave completely positive response and no suggestions for all four sermons. The other gave praise for two of the sermons and expressed concerns about the other two. After going back to the rubric a second time, I made the changes we agreed upon before preaching those two sermons. The unexpected observation centered on the relative level of richness in response to the different sermons. The two sermons that were evaluated as needing work produced richer data (as defined in Chapter 3) than the two that were thought by both evaluators to be ready on the first writing. This trend could be attributed to the fact that the preacher who evaluated those sermons was not in tune with how people at Canadian Hills would respond. More likely the phenomenon reflects the value of his constructive criticism. His evaluations kept me praying and thinking about those two sermons further into the week. In the case of both sermons that needed work, I experienced Saturday brain storms that greatly enhanced the good news and gave better organization and flow. Such a discovery suggested that tracking the difference between responses to sermons that have and have not received prior peer evaluation might constitute an interesting and profitable future study for the art of preaching.

Recommendations: A Rubric for Evaluation and Steps for Use

The following rubric and steps for its use are offered to pastors for assistance in the writing and evaluation of narrative sermons (see Table 5.1). I adapted this rubric from

the pre-study rubric introduced in Chapter 1 (p. 8). Changes include the addition of the first line in the second column "Springs from or is script." This change better reflects the need for the bad news to be a theological concept (see literature review) and the surprise finding that many participants entered the sermon at the reading of the text because the script itself brought the ambiguity. This change shows that the script itself can initiate the bad news of the sermon. In the bad news row the line "Verisimilitude to life" has been changed to "True to life" to simplify language. In the needs column, at the good news row, the word "cross-based" was added to the line "Presence of a reversal" to remind preachers that good reversals mirror *the* reversal of the gospel story, which took place in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Most significantly, the line between the "Good news" row and "Character" row has been changed to a broken line to display the crucial close relationship between the good news and the character of God. This change functions as a visual way to remind preachers to hold plot and character together. It also reminds them that the gospel good news is God's action before it is the action of people.

Table 5.1. Recommended Rubric for Narrative Preaching

Element	Needs in Each Element	Evaluation of Each Element in Particular Sermon
Bad news/ ambiguity	Springs from or is script Improv. or ad lib? True to life? Deepens/progresses?	
Good news/ resolution	Related to and resolves bad news? Is it God's action? Presence of cross-based reversal? Enough good news?	
Character/ His and ours	What character dominates? How is God portrayed? How is community character shaped?	
Thread	Where is it from? Does it develop/reverse? Repeated in life? Time travel?	
Response	How open ended? Is it communal? Improv. or ad lib	

While the rubric is actually for evaluation of sermons, the sections of this rubric can be used as help in the actual writing of a narrative sermon. Based on fifteen years of experience and the insights gained from this study, the following steps represent a path toward effective narrative preaching. In good narrative preaching, God acts and speaks, so the entire process should be supported and guided by prayer. With that foundation, the following twelve steps give directions for using the sections of the rubric in sermon writing, and evaluation prior to preaching.

1. On a notebook or a computer file, write the following headings with ample space for notes under each: Bad News, Good News, Character of God, Human Character, Thread, and Response (The rows on the rubric).

2. After prayerfully deciding the particular portion of the gospel script to be preached, read the text looking for what God is doing. Note His actions or attributes under "Character of God" (Note: Don't reveal this early in the *sermon*. Starting here in *preparation* simply helps preachers make sure that the sermon will hinge on what God is doing). Because they are so closely related, in this first step, preachers can make notes under both the "Character of God" and the "Good News" headings.

3. Now read the text again looking for anything that can be considered bad news and make appropriate notes under that heading. Here, pay careful attention to what humans are doing. (Human adlib is often the source of bad news)

4. Next read the text searching for anything that could be the thread, such as repeated phrases or visual imagery (Reading the passage five times is often helpful. Read once for each sense: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Sensory material

often produces good threads.) If possible of threads do not come immediately, move to the next step and come back to this one when an idea of a thread springs from study.

5. Now read the text again looking for any response the text invites and make notes on how the community is invited to participate under "Response" and/or "Human Character."

6. After making these notes, broaden the context of reading and thought. How do the surrounding passages, the book, and the whole gospel script relate to this passage according to these headings? Make more notes.

7. Next spend some time thinking about how life experience, news, movies, and books have mirrored the notes in each section and note all those connections. (This compiling of real life experience may last up to a month—the longer, the better.)

8. Consult scholars as to word meanings, cultural situations, and historical critical concerns that pertain to the text.

9. Choose a thread and sit down and write the sermon around it. Take the congregation down into bad news that deepens toward a cross-based reversal, that signals the ascending good news that is God's action. Then invite a response where participants can coact with God.

10. After writing the manuscript is written, and taking a break of at least a few hours, read it with the rubric in hand, noting in the third column the strengths and weaknesses of the sermon based on the five elements.

11. Make needed changes. Pray some more and preach the sermon.

By these steps, or similar ones, the sections of the rubric can help preachers write good narrative sermons and the rubric itself can serve as a final quality control in order to assist narrative preachers to invite hearers to enter and act out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Similar steps were followed in the writing and evaluation of all four of the sermons that were preached for the study. The following is a sample evaluative rubric for a sermon on Mathew 14:22-33 entitled *In the Boat.*

Table 5.2. An Example Rubric for Mathew 14:22-32

Element	Needs in Each Element	Elements springing from Matthew 14:22-32
Bad news/ ambiguity	Springs from or is script Improv. or ad lib? True to life? Deepens/progresses?	• From script wind waves • Improvises Headwind - Building/Economy/children • Improvises Waves batter - foreclosure layoff • Improvises also college boat story as thread be careful not to over do it. • Needs progression - move from wind to waves
Good news/ resolution	Related to and resolves bad news? Is it God's action? Presence of a cross-based reversal? Enough good news?	• Boat with Jesus calms waves • Jesus comes on waves and calms • Reversal out of boat to in Boat With Jesus • Much of the bad news "in the boat" was actually good news. Boat is God's grace
Character/ his and ours	What character dominates? How is God portrayed? How is community character shaped?	• God is even active in the bad news Jesus made them get in the boat • Jesus is the difference maker • God is with us in Jesus/walking in waves/calming • Community is portrayed as together in the boat against wind worshipping
Thread	Where is it from? Does it develop/reverse? Repeated in life? Time travel?	• From Script In boat against wind waves • Progresses to out of the boat and sinking • Reverse back in the boat • Drive by lakes in OKC and see boats often • "Headwind" imagery for building and raising kids allows us to identify with ancient disciples.
Response	How open ended? Is it communal? Improv. or ad lib?	• Somewhat open ended stay in the boat can mean a lot of different things • Very communal staying in the boat means living in worshipping community • Invites good improvisation as to what it means to stay in the boat

The third column of Table 5.2 contains evaluative comments on the sermon mentioned. The last bullet point in the upper right hand box reflects an evaluative moment I had with this sermon. Based on the assertion found in the rubric that bad news should progress or deepen, I made the sermon move from wind to waves, which brought about a deepening that participants recognized and commented on. This sermon holds plot and character together as Jesus' action dominates both the good news section and the bad news section. The reversal happens as Jesus makes the disciples get into the boat, which seems at first to initiate the bad news but in the end *is* the good news. It was after this sermon that P 39 and three others joined the Church, getting into the boat. The manuscript of the sermon can be found as Appendix A page 153.

Postscript

While narrative preaching represents a return to a long used form, the field of preaching lacks a means to identify quality in narrative preaching. (Wilson, *Practice* 209). This dissertation and the rubric it produced are offered as way to identify quality in narrative preaching, thereby increasing the likelihood that sermons will offer people entrance into the gospel. I hope that some preachers will find this study and rubric tool helpful as I have. Those who already have a method for writing good narrative sermons may need to use only steps ten and eleven to evaluate and refine. For many, these pages may simply serve to further the conversation. As I write this closing I am thinking about the encouragement I personally received from the story of Steve. My prayer for all preachers is that under the direction of the Holy Spirit, we preach openings into *the* divine drama, so that all who hear may enter the gospel of Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX A

IN THE BOAT: A SAMPLE SERMON

The summer after my freshman year of college three of my friends and I took a whirlwind trip from the Midwest to Orlando Florida. One of them had a connection that got us a free night of lodging in a small no-frills lake front cabin somewhere in Alabama. The cabin came complete with a dock and a rowboat. We got there early in the afternoon and being invincible nineteen-year-olds, we decided that we were going to take the rowboat across lake and back before dark. Oh, we chose to do it but there wasn't really a lot of choice about it; four 19 year old guys, a row boat and a lake. Something in us just said that we *had* too. We got in the boat and rowed and rowed and rowed until we were tired and sore and that got us ... almost to the other side of the lake. About that time we heard something and turned to look back at the shore where our cabin was, only to realize that, while we could still see the shore, we couldn't see the cabin. No, we hadn't rowed all that far. What we'd heard was thunder and what we saw when we looked back were black clouds opening up and dumping buckets of rain on shore were the cabin was. The storm was headed our way. We had a decision to make. We could row on across the rest of the way, pull the boat out and look for shelter or we could turn the boat around and row back to the cabin as fast as we could perhaps beating the storm or perhaps having to row through it back to the food and beds and the car. Did I mention that we were 19 and invincible? We turned around toward the storm. I suppose we'd rowed about 30 yards when the wind ahead of that storm hit me in the chest. We slowed to a crawl and the shore line began to look very, very far away. There we were together in the boat a long

way from the shore line, wind against us. I know, I know never get in a boat and row against the wind. But do we always have a choice?

If you are rowing toward the shores of a retirement that will be propelled by investments in the stock market, in case you haven't noticed you are rowing against the wind. The prevailing winds of the Wall Street are probably not blowing your vessel toward the shores of financial security. After the last few weeks you may be a lot further from shore than you thought. Rowing against the wind is a tough thing but sometimes you just don't have a choice.

Take the disciples of Jesus for example. In the story we read they find themselves a long way from the shore sailing or possibly rowing. The wind is against them. Now how was it they got there? Scripture says Jesus *made* them get into the boat and head to the other side, while he went up the mountain to pray. He made them? Other translations say Jesus *constrained* the disciples to get into the boat. Even the *Message* and the *New Living* translation get in on the act by saying Jesus *insisted* that the disciples get into the boat. It sounds like they didn't have much of a choice at all. How did Jesus *make* them get in the boat? Well that day they'd watched Jesus take five loaves and two fish and break them up and feed 5000 people. It was while Jesus was dismissing that huge crowd he told the disciples to get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side of the lake. I suppose there was some choice in it but when the one who has fed 5,000 with a sack lunch says "get in the boat," you get in the boat. They were followers of Jesus and obedience meant a boat ride against the wind, by morning they were a long way from the shore.

Would Jesus really make people get into a boat that was going to have to sail against the wind? From Noah's ark to all the boat stories in the New Testament, Scripture tells us that God likes to put groups of people together in boats. To quote a really old cliché, following Jesus we don't have a choice we are all in the same boat and there is usually some kind of storm. Throughout history people have looked at these stories of God putting people in boats and seen God calling people together in the Church.

Two weeks ago we had five people from ages 15 to 90 join this Church. Since then, I've had conversations with about four or five more about membership. Not conversations that I have started, people coming to me and talking about it. One told me that he really isn't into that sort of thing but God just seems to have it on his mind right now. Would Jesus really make his followers get into a boat together knowing that the boat was going to sail against the wind and sometimes seem to be so far from the shore line?

Well we are here aren't we? Do you know that two years ago this local church discerned that God was leading us to build a children's facility and do some improvements to the west building for youth ministry. We started on that journey 2 years ago and it took us 21 months of drawing and re-drawing and negotiations and architects just to get a permit from the city to build? Twenty-one months just to get permission. I'd call that a stiff head wind wouldn't you?

Building this building is an important part of our journey but it isn't the main destination. Our goal is to *reach thousands who will become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.* (Church Slogan used in closing liturgy each week.) That includes raising up another generation of children and teens who become adults that follow after Jesus

Christ. Personally, Earla and I are trying to raise up two girls who will grow up to follow after Jesus whole heartedly. When I look around the Church and I see young adult women who are serving God and following Jesus, I see the shore. That is the destination for the journey. My kids are five and eight so the rowing is pretty smooth and it seems like we are moving pretty fast toward the shore; but every once in a while I feel a gust of wind that reminds me that the adolescent years are coming. I have a sneaking suspicion that the prevailing winds of culture will not be blowing my kids in the direction I want them to go.

When I look around the church and I see parents and grand parents and aunts and uncles and Sunday school teachers all with that same goal in mind, I see that Jesus has made us all get in the same boat together and we are all headed toward another generation of faithful followers of Jesus. But if you read statistics about what happens to faith in many young people, it becomes pretty clear the wind is against us.

If it had just been the wind, things probably would have been fine out on that lake in Alabama. But where there is wind there is always something else. I sat in the bow so I looked ahead squinting to see if I could make out the cabin. Instead, I noticed something at the edge of the rain, white stuff on the water. An hour before when we got into the boat the water was calm as glass and now the other side of this lake had white caps on it. Before long, the aluminum hull on our little rowboat began to tell us that not only were we going to be rowing against a consistent wind, we were going to be pummeled by waves beating out a rhythm on the bow of our vessel for the rest of the voyage. Splash splash, splash.

It was no lake the disciples navigated it was called a sea. Have you ever been to the sea? Do you know what it feels like to be in the surf when wave after wave breaks over you. Scripture says that their boat was battered by waves. Some translations even read that their boat was tortured by the sea.

Felt any waves lately? When you turn on the news and they start talking about the rising of unemployment and the falling of the stock market [gesture: rising falling wave motions] or the rising of lending standards and falling of home values, does a look a the financial news just kind give you a wave of nausea? Has all this financial rising and falling made you sea sick? Maybe the waves have hit even closer than that. Has the announcement of a foreclosure crashed in on you or someone you love and nearly swept you off your feet. When the creditor's call comes, does a wave of terror sweep over you making you wonder if you or someone you love is going to drown in a sea of debt? When you look in your in-box do you get a wave of anxiety wandering if there will be a layoff announcement? Maybe you get hit with a wave of apprehension when you come to the Church and see a new building going up in the midst of a world wide financial storm.

Perhaps the waves that crash are not just financial for you. All the stress in the economy that is making waves for you at home at work or even here at the Church. Perhaps it is relationships. The people God has placed you in the boat with are making waves and all together the wind and the waves are feeling a little like torture.

If we had a choice we probably wouldn't row against the wind subjecting ourselves to the waves, but often times we don't have a choice. Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and by morning they were far from shore and the wind was against them and the waves were battering literally their boat. But early in the morning Jesus came to

them walking on the water. When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they thought he was a ghost. They were terrified.

About two weeks ago, I drove up to the Church with the radio on and I was hearing news about the winds and waves of our current financial storm and I thought to myself. God why are you getting us into this building now? We've been praying for two years that you would pace this project and you get us a permit the week the stock market crashes? What kind of a pace is that? Are you sure about this? About three hours later I stepped out of my office and was hit by a cold wave when I looked up and realized the parking lot was gone. But the wave of apprehension was short lived because instantly I remembered a story I heard from mentor pastor fifteen years ago. He was about 50 at the time and we were walking around a pretty nice facility at the Church he pastored. I commented about how nice it was and how it was pretty amazing that the Church the size it had been had built such a place to grow into.

He said, "Dan 12 years ago when we were talking about building this facility I went to one of my mentors. She was a great lady of the Lord but was housebound. I told her about the project. I told her it was quite an undertaking and I was concerned she said to me, 'young man if God is calling you and your church to *his* ministry you might as well know that he will always send you out into deep water where if he doesn't come to you, you will be overwhelmed.'" Then he told me a dozen stories about times Christ showed himself faithful in difficult times.

Have you noticed that it is when the wind is hard in our face and the waves are battering the boat that Jesus seems to walk up close? We are so afraid of the wind and the waves and the water but it is those things that tend to bring Jesus close to us and

sometimes we are even afraid of him because he comes to us on those things. Water is scary but He walks on Water.

Jesus said, "It is I, don't be afraid" nearly the same words that God said to Moses at the burning bush, it is I "I am that I am." Simon Peter said, if it is really you tell me to come to you on the water. Jesus said 'come.' Simon Peter got out of the boat and began walking toward Jesus on the water.

I don't know about you but I've always loved this part of the story. I'll bet he felt invincible. I'll bet he wanted to turn around to all the disciples in the boat and say "look at my faith! No boat, nobody else, just me, I'm walking on the water to Jesus." I've always loved this story. In fact, I think everyone does, especially 19-year-olds or anyone else who thinks they are invincible.

You see I need to fill you in on a detail about our little boat trip. It was a three man row boat and there were four of us. One of the guys was in life jacket out in the water holding on to the stern of the boat while we paddled it. When the wind blows, some of us, the mouthier tend to overcome our fears with some faith in our own faith. While we paddled away from the cabin he was very talkative relaxed, sort of invincible. But after we made the turn and headed back into the wind and the waves started to hit, he got pretty quiet and then said, "Do you think there is anyway you guys could get me up into the boat?"

Out of the boat, walking toward Jesus on the water Simon Peter saw the wind and waves he became frightened and he began to sink, why? Jesus words say that it was because he doubted. Yah he sank because he doubted, but I'm not sure his doubt started when he was out there walking on the water. I think his doubt may have started before

that. In fact whose idea was this walking-on the-water-thing anyway? Jesus said "come" but it was Simon Peter who said, "If it is you Lord, tell me to come to you walking on the water." Is that a statement of faith or is that a statement of doubt? "If it is you Jesus, prove it to me. Let me leave the boat and the other disciples behind so it is *just me* walking to you on the water."

I've always thought that Jesus response was 'come' 'come on Peter' (Exuberant like a parent wanting a kid to walk). But what if Jesus' response included and eye role 'come' (big sigh). What if Jesus knew full well what was about to happen? After all it wasn't Jesus' idea that Simon get out of the boat. That was Simon's idea.

I can't tell you how many times I've seen followers of Jesus who face winds and waves that batter their lives and sometimes buffet the Church just up and decide to get out of the boat. "I don't need the boat don't need community. It's going to be just *me and Jesus* out there against the wind and waves." Pretty soon they are out of the boat. They leave the Church, the Christian community behind.... We can usually walk a *few* steps like that, but if it goes on too long, faith in our own faith produces bad choices with no accountability and frankly, we begin to sink.

Simon Peter cries out, "save me." And Jesus reaches out and catches him and says 'You of little faith why did you doubt?' You know where Jesus took him? Back to the boat, back to the other disciples, and there was Simon and the other disciples and there was Jesus in he boat with them (Pasquarello, *Christian Preaching* 105-09) "And those in the boat worshipped him."

A while back, for various reasons having to do with the economy and lending crises, one of the men of this Church had to sell his business. This successful man was

held in high esteem, I'm sure it was tempting for him to leave the boat behind and try to negotiate those waves on his own, just quietly sell out and find another job somewhere else. Truth is, I know this story because I got a phone call one morning from another man in the Church who said, "Our brother is hurting and needs our prayers can you come." When I got here interestingly enough, I was approximately the 12th man around the altar, all in the same boat with our brother. We prayed with Rocky the immediate storm calmed but he'll tell you it still gets windy. The good news we are still in the boat together and the better news is Jesus is right here in the boat with us.

It's windy in Oklahoma, and I'm sure some waves have probably crashed this week. The good news is, Jesus has come to us even walking on the waves. No need to prove your faith first. No need to leave boat and walk on water. *Jesus* walks on water. *He* has come to *us*. Why don't you just kneel and tell him about the wind and the waves see if, at least for a little while, he doesn't make them cease. If it is particularly windy and the waves are really torturing you and you are tired sinking you may need to just cry out "save me!" I promise he will.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT/RESEARCHER COVENANT

Date:

Dear

As a Doctor of Ministry participant at Asbury Theological Seminary, I am conducting research on the field of narrative preaching. I would like learn from journal responses of 20 members of the congregation and you have been selected as a possible participant. Each participant will be asked to spend 1/2 hour to 1 hour each of 4 consecutive Sundays, (October 12th through November 2nd) journaling in response to the Sunday morning sermon, then turn in the entry by fax, e-mail or in person by 10:00 AM Monday morning.

In order to give you the freedom to respond with candor and without worry of affecting our relationship, should you choose to participate, you will submit your journal responses to Karen Parker our office administrator, who will either copy and paste your response (if you use a computer) or retype your response, if you write with pen and paper. She will assign a code to your response rather than your name. When I read your responses I will not know who wrote them unless you choose to reveal your identity by what you write. In any case, if I use your words in my writing, I will not use your name. Also please know that this study is not evaluating you or your relationship with God or even me personally. This study is an effort to learn the elements of good narrative sermons. Honest reflections based on the five questions are the best help you can give me.

I believe the clear preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is crucial to the future of the world wide Church as well as Canadian Hills Church. Your assistance will help me to better preach the gospel story and I believe this study can help other preachers as well. Once the research is completed, in approximately three months, Karen will destroy/delete you're actual responses. In the mean-time these will be under lock and key and/or password protected on her computer. The anonymous responses that she gives to me will be kept for an indefinite period of time, at least until my dissertation is written and approved.

Please know that you can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions found in the journal prompts. I realize that your participation is entirely voluntary and I appreciate your willingness to consider being part of the study. Feel free to call or write me at any time if you need any more information. My number is 405-324-5661 ex. 301 and my e-mail is danmeek@canadianhillsnaz.org.

We will hold an orientation meeting on Tuesday evening October 7th at 7:00 PM in the Fellowship Hall. If you are willing to assist me in this study, please sign and date this letter below to indicate your voluntary participation. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

John Smith

I volunteer to participate in the study described above and so indicate by my signature below:

Your signature: _____ Date:_____

Please print your name: _____

APPENDIX C

NARRATIVE IN EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

This section surveys the use of and attitude toward narrative in the fields of education and psychology. In those fields of study narrative has been seen as an entry point or hook for attention, but not always respected as a way of teaching the mature (Salisbury 88; Fixico xiii). Some educators say that good education is about removing the power of the story or demythologizing, but others suggest that students who have a storied structure perform much better (Freire 83; Dymock 162; Salisbury 86-87).

What is the Context

In education meaning is constructed in the minds of the students largely because of the context in which meaning is organized (Richert 193). This requires scholars to define the context. Some scholars see community as the context for learning giving a prominent place to narrative because community involves stories, and dramas (Fleischer 329; Gallagher 87; Fixico 23, 29). Community also requires stories and dramas that allow students to enact beliefs (Fleischer 329).

For scholars such as Howard Gardner, narrative is not the context. Narrative relfects but one of at least seven means of accessing the true context of learning. For Gardner the *topic* is a room or context with at least seven different intelligences that provide entrance into the *topic*. "Narrative intelligence" is but one of the entrances to the room. Learners may enter a *topic* through narrative or any of the other six intelligences (Gardner 139, 141).

Making topic the context to be entered is, however, inadvertently undermined late in his book when Gardner inadvertently admits that the topic may not be the context. In

the chapter *At the Workplace* he suggests that in a job interview setting, an employer can tell what level of other kinds of intelligence a person has by asking them to *tell stories*. Gardner suggests that if the interviewee uses body language or gesture when telling stories they are kinesthetic (learners who need to move objects). If they draw diagrams they are logical or spatial learners or if they use word pictures or move to different spaces as they talk they are spatial. (224). Gardner's example more than his philosophy informs narrative preaching by the fact that for narrative preaching, the *topic* is not the room (context) to which the intelligences offer entrance, the *story* provides the context into which the other intelligences provide entrance.

Gardner's own observation suggests that "the telling" of a story done well takes on the nuances of a well blocked, well gestured, spatially oriented drama that can involve multiple intelligences as access points not into *a topic* but *the story*. His observation calls narrative preachers to employ gestures, movements and blocking (like theater) and visual language as well as visual cues, and logical progressions (see from Bad to Worse in chapter 2) in order to allow everyone into *the story*.

Good Stories for Education

Educators who employ narrative technique agree with the homiliticians that stories need to be about people and everyday experience but must evoke what all feel in community. Stories used for religious education have clear connections with the scripture (Fixico 13, 28, 95; Salisbury 89). Educators agree the stories of teaching must be *faithful* improvisation on the script but must also possess verisimilitude to life.

The Structure of Narrative

For educators, "Story Grammars identify the basic parts of a story and show how the parts fit together in order to form a well-constructed story" (Dymock 162). The rubric constructed by this project is a similar grammar. Effective story grammars move away from simplistic structures like "beginning, middle end" toward other elements such as plot, character and theme, as well as others such as time and place (Dymock 162; Fixico 25). The pre-study rubric found in Chapter 1 served as a type of story grammar for me as I prepared the four sermons. The post-study rubric found in Chapter 5 is offered as a story grammar for use by pastors in the writing and evaluation of narrative sermons prior to their preaching.

The next section gleans from the fields of education and psychology concerning the five areas outlined in the rows of the pre-study rubric and reviewed in Chapter 2 (i.e., bad news, good news, character, thread, and response).

Bad news Christian psychologists in general are friendly to a doctrine of the Fall embracing the bad news that springs from scripture but their focus in exploring bad news is often internal and individual, "mind, emotion, body, individual behavior" (Day 536; Richert 192). Psychologists in the field of narrative therapy focus less on individual behavior as revealed by the mantra "the person isn't the problem, the problem is the problem." This phrase suggests the bad news is more than one persons bad behavior (Day 536; Richert 188).

The field of education also recognizes the reality of bad news in the world (Fixico 27). Education's response to bad news has often been to tailor make learning by individualizing learning procedures and outcomes (Gardner 56). This phenomenon could

be part of what causes some narrative preaching to settle for individualistic, self-centered stories rather than the grand all-encompassing Christ-shaped epic that defines the character of a Christian community (Whittaker-Johns 847).[5]

While the focus on the individual is very strong in education, there also exists a growing sense of communal participation in the bad news. "Contemporary social problems involve complex networks of power systems, including large-scale institutions and mega-structures" (Fleischer 320). Such realities move educators from individual responsibility to community responsibility (Fleischer 324; Freire 43-44). When placed together education and psychology paint a picture of bad news that is both communal and individual while in many secular writings is not spiritual.

In helping students see bad news Paulo Freire calls for problems to be posed that are, concrete, existential and present (96). One native American educator requires build in intensity much like we heard from Eugene Lowry that the conflict must deepen (Fixico 28). One check from education on the crafting of bad news would say that allowing for too much ambiguity can trivialize the teaching and cause it be irrelevant (Salisbury 90).

Good news. Relationship provides the context for narrative therapy but the gospel provides the context for transformation (Richert 195). Narrative therapy endeavors to "reshape the client's relation to the problem through ... stories of preferred outcome" (Richert 191). Where good news is concerned, disagreement exists between narrative education and psychology on the one hand and narrative preaching on the other. This disagreement stems from the fact that the main actors in education are students and teachers who co-investigate and in narrative therapy the main actors are the client and

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[5] Whittaker-Johns speaks not of the gospel of Jesus but of the "epic of evolution" however in using this phrase, she still makes the point suggesting a need to inhabit a story larger than our own individual plot.

therapist who together rewrite a person's story (Fiere; Richert 192). As has been shown, God who is the main actor in narrative preaching.

Developing Character(s). Often in religious or secular education, the character of God is made fuzzy and unclear due to a lack of particular characteristics (Whittaker-Johns 850). Such blurring of the character of God allows some educators and psychologists to endorse "a kind of personal scripture" by stringing together "encounters" to create a personal master story (Whittaker-Johns 839). This type of personal script causes faith to be very individualistic, subjective, and inward focused (Day 537). While personal faith journeys inevitably includes a measure of personal improvisation "personal scriptures" not accountable to the script of canon will not shape Christ like character in the hearing community. Canonical narratives counter this tendency by speaking in specifics of the character of God as it is narrated in the drama that springs from the script.

Educators from oppressed cultures quickly reveal this individualism as a part of dominant North American culture. The educators of the oppressed believe stories have the power to empower people and also remind that "we are not as powerful as we think we are" (Fixico 28). For them learning through such stories is "a community event." Latin American and Native American cultures recognize the fact that character is social in nature (Fixico 14; Fleischer 322). Narrative preaching has much to learn from the fields of education and psychology but narrative preaching must do more than synthesize and shape personal stories for individual people. It must invite people into the community that inhabits *the* particular story of God the Trinity.

Like good narrative preaching, good narrative education does not however allow the listeners to become passive receivers of the narrative. Teachers tell us that when

teaching is just information transfer our communication can be described as "banking": meaning knowledge is deposited by teachers and students become "docile listeners," simply receivers (Freire 72, 81). The goal for the teachers of the oppressed is to turn "docile listeners" into "co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (72, 81). In "co-intentional education teachers and students, people and leaders are both Subjects" (Freire 69; Richert 189).[6] Therapy holds a similar intension trying to "recruit the client into an active collaborative effort to re-story" (Richert 192).

In the gospel story, meaning rises out of the interaction between God and the community. In the field of psychology "co-created" meaning rises out of the interaction between two people, the therapist and the patient (Richert 206, 202). In education the field seems to be much larger. "The primary educator is the ... community" (Fleischer 325). In this context, character building must arise out of relationship and must involve "not only cognitions [but pathos in the form of] love for life and for people" (Freire 90). Good religious education must be more than the transfer of knowledge. It must be character development that involves the teaching of wisdom which works itself out as skill for life in community (Fixico 90; Gardener 196, 198).

Threads in Psychology and Education. Educators say that symbol and the systems of symbol (which are the substance of a good thread in preaching) are necessary for human survival (Gardner 8). Symbols play in our imagination, therefore the core of faith is more a matter of transformed imagination than of correct ideas (Gallagher 86). Good teaching and therapy as well as good preaching must take symbol into account. If the teaching is held together by a thread embedded in the imagination, it makes the

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[6] Freire always capitalizes Subject(s) presumably order to make the point that they are the ones who act on the knowledge.

content more than just "history" or psychological strategy for communication but a current *transforming* experience (87). "As a student continues to create within a certain genre, he or she gains familiarity with the criteria of that genre and learns to create within the symbol and system of that genre" (Gardner 117). As mentioned previously, this holds true for the genre the church calls gospel and the sacramental symbols that accompany the gospel. Good threads in narrative transform the situation *by* transforming consciousness and thereby transforming the character of the hearing community. Much like narrative preaching that contains a good thread, narrative education has proven to collapse time and making what happened long ago really about shaping experience for the present (Fixico 22).

Response or Outcome. In improvisational acting, dialogue or conversation, provides the right metaphor which is also a key metaphor for education. Education is a conversation. "The dialogical theory of action does not involve a Subject who dominates [the conversation] and a dominated object who just listens and assimilates information. Instead there are Subjects who are to [all] *name* the world in order to transform it" (Freire 167; Vanhoozer, 290-92). In this way teachers and students fuse their knowledge of an object and learning is "reciprocity of action" (Freire 107; Salisbury 90). Freire's idea that education is participating in naming the world corresponds with the first improvising God asked Adam to do was to name the animals of the created world (Gen. 2:18-21).

Such scholars believe humans have a calling "to act upon and transform his world, and in doing so moves toward new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively" (Shaull 32; Freire 67). This kind of education invites students to be immersed or "plunged" into all kinds of active participation in lessons

where they enter the learning. One technique in teaching journalists to be storytellers is to give them the tools and ask them to start telling stories so that they will create an appetite for telling more stories (Emmett 41).

In a similar way, the goal in good narrative counseling is not just therapy but to change a person's way of living or acting by empowerment (Richert 205, 208; Gallagher 90; Fleischer 318). In education "The quality and depth of the story conveys a strength of the power of the story and thereby such power is waiting to be *acted* [emphasis mine] upon by the story teller and the audience" (Fixico 27).

The plurality of this last quote must not be overlooked. While too much individualism in exploring the bad news causes us to miss our corporate participation in sin, individualism in the call for response can make it impossible for us to "envision and carryout community praxis" (Fleischer 322). Again this quote is plural. Even educators that stress the individual nature if intelligence and speak for "specialized" education eventually acknowledge the common links among students holding expectations as to their "*collective* [emphasis mine] accomplishments" (Gardner 138; see also Richert 206; Gardner 116; Salisbury 90). Although the fields of education and psychology tend to be highly individualized environments they possess an emerging recognition of the need for community goals and community responses.

Improvisation or Adlib. In evaluating actions taken in learning experience one definition of intelligence is a "fit" execution of an assignment in response to teaching or in the language of this dissertation intelligence is the ability to faithfully improvise (Gardner 33). In narrative therapy where responses by the client interrupt the flow of the story are described as a "lack of fit" corresponding with what this dissertation labels ad

lib (Richert 199). Both fields posses an obvious parallel with the ideas of adlib and improvisation treated earlier. In narrative preaching the pastor is hoping for what educators call "creativity." "Creativity" is achieved when students display the ability to do something new that is recognized as acceptable within an appropriate context (Gardner 42). Gardner's concept of creativity is very close to the definition of faithful improvisation found in this study. Communally such creative improvisation becomes contagious. "As students respond to the challenge of a problem posed in the bad news their response poses another challenge" (Freire 81). In the language of this dissertation one person's faithful improvisation is an offer of entrance to the next.

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