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Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching: An Analogical Approach

Abstract: It is argued that responsible therapeutic preaching is theocentric. Such preaching points listeners to the divine therapy in the text. God’s therapy is God’s healing love expressed through compassion, understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness. When an appropriate text presents itself, counseling psychology can be employed to fund analogues that are not only illustrative of God’s therapeutic action portrayed in the scripture passage, but which also have the power to stimulate openness to that therapeutic action. It is further argued that the analogical work in the therapeutic sermon should take its lead from analogia fidei, but also incorporate analogia entis.

Zusammenfassung: Es wird die Behauptung aufgestellt, dass verantwortliche therapeutische Predigt theozentrisch ist. Solche Predigt verweist die Hörer auf die göttliche Therapie im Text. Gottes Therapie ist Gottes heilende Liebe, die sich in Mitleid, Verständnis, Annahme und Vergebung ausdrückt. Wo sich ein passender Text bietet, kann Psychologie Analogien beisteuern, die nicht nur Gottes therapeutisches Handeln im Evangelium aufzeigen, sondern die auch Offenheit für das therapeutische Handeln erzeugen können. Es wird ferner argumentiert, dass die Arbeit mit Analogien in der therapeutischen Predigt von analogia fidei geleitet sein sollte, aber auch analogia entis einschliessen sollte.

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Therapeutic preaching has its fair share of critics.1 The primary reason is that the term is often associated with a form of preaching in which the gospel is psycholo-

gized. Common forms of human suffering such as anxiety, depression, workplace stress, relationship problems, and grief and loss are addressed from the pulpit and mini-doses of therapy are administered to ease the pain. Preaching should be about God’s saving act in Christ. What the therapeutic preachers give us instead, so the complaint goes, is half-baked serves of psychotherapy. Despite the problems, therapeutic preaching can be rehabilitated. I contend that what we need is theocentric therapeutic preaching. Therapeutic preaching needs to be construed as pointing listeners to divine therapy. God’s therapy is God’s healing love expressed through compassion, understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness.

The understanding of preaching that my approach is constructed around is that the sermon is essentially an announcement of God’s grace in Christ. That God in Christ should be at the center of the sermon is the core message of the Reformers, neo-orthodox theologians, theologians of the new hermeneutic, post-liberal theologians, and leading contemporary homileticians such as Tom Long, Paul Scott Wilson, David Buttrick, William Willimon, Fred Craddock, and Mike Graves. In line with this general thrust, I contend that therapeutic preaching needs to have God’s therapy rather than psychology as its primary focus.

I propose an analogical approach to theocentric therapeutic preaching. When an appropriate text presents itself, psychotherapeutic psychology can be employed to fund analogues that are not only illustrative of God’s therapeutic action portrayed in the scripture passage, but which also have the power to stimulate openness to that therapeutic action. That is to say, the analogical theology in the sermon is not simply didactic; it is also catalytic of deeper openness to divine therapy.

A debate has been going on for a very long time between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians over the right understanding of analogical God-talk. As is well known, two main approaches have been proposed—namely, *analogia entis* (analogy of being) and *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith). The former is associated with Catholic theology; the latter with theologians of the Word such as Karl Barth and Eberhard Jüngel. In very general terms, the analogy of being assigns primacy to knowledge of the being of God, while the analogy of faith privileges knowledge of the action of God received through faith. While some Protestant theologians flatly reject the analogy of being, I will argue below that it is appropriate to incorporate it into theological reflection, as long as it is subordinated to the analogy of faith. I will further argue that when we use therapeutic analogues in pastoral preaching, it is proper to take our lead from the analogy of faith (God’s communication of therapy in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit), but also to incorporate analogy of being (reference to human therapeutic virtues gives us a revealing glimpse—and it is no more than that—of God’s healing love, compassion, and acceptance). It will be noted that here primacy is assigned to God in the
analogical relation. In using therapeutic analogues in a sermon, a preacher needs to be careful lest she give the impression that her message is that God is like a therapist. Rather, what needs to shape her approach in sermon preparation and delivery is the notion that God’s therapy is the condition of the possibility of all human therapy.

The essay has the following structure. There is first a discussion on correlational preaching. Since I am arguing for a correlation between psychotherapeutic psychology and divine therapy, it is important to note the main objections to the correlational approach and to offer cogent responses. In the second section, there is a treatment of analogical God-talk. The main positions—namely, *analogia entis*, *analogia fidei*, and a combination of the two—are outlined and critically reviewed. The third and final section consists of an outline of the basic principles that emerge from this discussion of analogical theology pertaining to the responsible use of therapeutic analogues in preaching.

**Correlational Preaching**

In his essay on correlational preaching, Ronald Allen avers that the concepts, symbols, and language in the text that is the focus of the sermon need to be shaped to accord with the worldview of the modern person. Allen contends that the sermon “needs to ask the congregation to believe and do things that are intelligible in the contemporary world.” Tillich clearly has this in mind in his famous sermon, ‘You are Accepted.’ ‘Sin’ and ‘grace’ are deemed to be strange words for the modern person. Two new words—words that are likely to be immediately meaningful for the 20th century person—are proffered: ‘alienation’ and ‘acceptance.’ The clear danger here is that in the translation exercise the inner meaning of the text is partially or even totally lost. Hans Frei draws attention to this problem in a number of places in his writings. He refers to the problem of ‘the great reversal’ effected by the ‘mediating theologians.’ For this group of theologians, interpretation is “a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story.” What Frei and the other narrative theologians plead for is entry into the biblical world on its own terms. In this approach, the biblical narratives are construed as realistic, as ‘history-like.’ Frei refers to the “curious, unmarked

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frontier between history and realistic fiction” that one finds in the Bible. The interpreter of the Bible should aim to “set forth a temporal world,” as this is the way in which the realistic narratives make sense. Here, of course, we hear an echo of Barth’s famous call to bravely enter “the strange world of the Bible.” From this perspective, it is deemed that the correlational preacher runs a very real risk of constructing her own world. The concepts from the cultural self-interpretations that she employs, far from illuminating the deeper meaning of the symbols in the text, actually distort it. The biblical narrative is twisted out of shape in order to meet the taste, interests, and assumptions of the modern person. What about, inquires the narrative theologian, telling the biblical stories in all their depth and power so that the modern person is formed by them?

The problem of ‘the great reversal’ is a very real one for the preacher employing a correlational approach. There is an ever-present temptation to allow the concepts from psychology or philosophy to take over. The various parts of the text are manipulated until they align with the contemporary discourse. If the correlational preacher is to avoid this pitfall, she needs to be firmly committed to maintaining the integrity of the text. In her interpretive work, she needs to allow the meaning to unfold rather than forcing it to align with a pre-understanding conditioned by a particular psychological or philosophical theory. The concepts from whatever theory is used are meant to bring out important aspects of the deep, inner meaning of the text. The psychological or philosophical theory is the servant of the text, not its master.

Framing the task of the preacher in this way brings me into conflict with the approach that the narrative theologian, Mark Ellingsen, advocates. He construes the task of theology as describing the character and identity of the world of the Bible. The task of preaching he sees as telling the Bible’s stories about that world. Ellingsen contrasts his narrative approach with that of the correlational preacher:

“[W]hen preaching becomes understood as the task of narrating the biblical account, Scripture effectively functions as its own interpreter. It interprets itself insofar as such preaching rejects the imposition of extraneous categories upon itself, and it allows its narratives to speak for themselves.”

Ellingsen’s argument is that Scripture is self-interpreting; reading it through a lens supplied by an “alien” discipline constitutes a failure to allow it to speak for itself. I contend that provided the lens is appropriate and is properly applied, the

5 Ibid., 150.
text will speak even more clearly than it would in an unaided interpretation. Tillich puts it well: “[The one] who reads Ecclesiastes or Job with eyes opened by existentialist analyses will see more in either than he was able to see before. The same is true of many other passages of the Old and New Testaments.” What Tillich says in relation to existentialist thought can, of course, be more widely applied to include other cultural self-interpretations. I am advocating the use of psychotherapeutic psychology as an aid to biblical interpretation because I am convinced that it helps us to grasp an important aspect of the meaning of the text that would otherwise have remained hidden.

Of course anyone who follows the theological line of Karl Barth will necessarily reject my argument. Barth holds to the absolute primacy of the revealed divine Word; it is the sole source and criterion for theology. He rejects the claim that psychology, philosophy or any other cultural discipline captures the deep meaning of human existence. The Word alone is illuminating; we are the ones who are illuminated by it. Our sin prevents us from truly understanding who and what we are: “Human sin excludes us from understanding human nature except by a new disclosure through the perception of divine grace addressed to [the human] and revealing and affirming true humanity in the midst of human sin, i.e., a disclosure which is genuinely new, involving faith in the divine revelation.” In the end, the rightness or wrongness of this approach is a question of judgment. The mediating theologians take the view that, despite their limitations, philosophy and the human sciences do reveal something really important about the nature of human existence. Moreover, it is held that these disciplines have insights that are not fully present in the scriptures. It is acknowledged that the ideas developed by the philosophers and the psychologists, or at least most of these ideas, are implied in biblical stories and teachings—and sometimes even explicitly dealt with. Freud’s notion of unconscious conflict, Jung’s archetypes, the existentialist concepts of estrangement, meaninglessness, guilt, and despair, and more can all be found in either implicit or explicit form in the Bible. According to correlational theologians, what the cultural self-interpretations provide is an alternative way of interpreting the basic existential categories that the biblical writers knew about. The alternative development of the categories is grounded in sophisticated and penetrating analysis. Barth looks at these analyses and simply comments that sometimes they confirm in a general way the insights provided by the revealed Word. This is to be expected, and it is not particularly exciting. It is

interesting to observe the correspondence, but the theologian does not need to have her work confirmed by cultural self-interpretations:

"[Theological anthropology] is led to statements which are very similar to those in which humanity is described from a very different angle (e.g., by the pagan Confucius, the atheist L. Feuerbach, and the Jew M. Buber)... We need not be surprised that there are approximations and similarities. Indeed, in this very fact we may even see a certain confirmation of our results—a confirmation which we do not need and which will not cause us any particular excitement..."

This statement points up the essential difference in the approaches of a Barthian and a correlationalist. The correlationalist does get excited when she finds lines of connection between a Christian symbol and a piece of cultural self-interpretation. Moreover, she contends that for her work to be relevant she needs to correlate it with the questions and answers that the creative thinkers in the culture are generating. While it is true that it is most often the case that only a relatively small number of people in a given congregation on a Sunday morning are well-versed in contemporary psychological and philosophical thinking, the majority have sucked in the air surrounding these disciplines. That is, they think in the general categories provided by the psychologists and the philosophers. Terms such as unconscious thought, repression, self-actualization, alienation, angst, meaninglessness, and despair float around in their consciousness and generate existential questions and concerns. The correlational preacher rejects the view that these categories do not need to be explicitly addressed. She does not accept that simply telling the biblical story creates its own relevance. It is the contention of the correlational preacher that explicitly drawing lines between the experience and thought of those inhabiting the contemporary and the biblical worlds is an indispensable contribution to a meaningful and impacting sermon.

In the end, all this is of course a matter of judgment. Some preachers will be strongly drawn to the idea that the two worlds need to be correlated. Others will support Frei and the narrative preachers who follow him in the contention that correlation in theology (and preaching) results in the "the great reversal" that is so lamentable. Those who take this line argue for scripture as self-interpreting; psychology or any other non-theological discipline is considered to be alien to the world of the Bible. My view, clearly, is that creative cultural self-interpretations—in the present context, those of the psychotherapists—can be very profitably employed. But I also recognize the force in the counter-arguments. It is easy—frighteningly so—to apply the psychological concepts irresponsibly and so to

9 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III.2, 277; cited in Harrison, Correlation and Theology (n. 8), 71.
distort the inner meaning of the text. The correlational preacher needs to be disciplined and honest with herself lest she fall into this trap.

The kind of correlational work in preaching that I am proposing has a particular form. The aim is to find in psychotherapeutic theory suitable analogues to the divine therapy that features in the text. It is argued that such work should take its lead from analogia fidei, but may incorporate analogia entis.

**Analogia Fidei, Analogia Entis, and Psychotherapeutic Analogues in Preaching**

A good place to begin is with Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas employs analogy entis in his discussion on the names of God. The question of the divine names, in turn, is indissolubly linked to the question of the knowability of God. In order to assign a name to something, it must be known.

Aquinas asks whether or not it is within the capability of human beings to name God (STI.13.1). In the dialectical style that characterizes the *Summa*, Aquinas begins with the position that is diametrically opposed to his own. Pseudo-Dionysius states in the first chapter of *On Divine Names* that “of God there is neither name nor opinion.” In reply, Aquinas acknowledges that the human intellect cannot cognize the essence of God. However, he adds that it is possible to know God from creatures, to the extent that God is the source of our mode of being in the world. Taking this path, it is possible to name God, but not in such a way that the name expresses the essence of God as it is.

Though Aquinas notes that the fact that God is the source of our mode of being makes the naming of God possible, he expressly rejects an interpretation of this according to which in calling God good, the meaning is that God is the cause of goodness in things (STI.13.2). If this were the case, it would mean that in stating that God is the cause of bodies, it must follow that God is a body. It would also mean that all names said of God would be said derivatively of God. The analogy he draws here to make this clear works with the relationship between health and medicine. On one view, health is derivative because it is caused by medicine: a sick dog is made healthy through the efficacy of a medicine. But on another view, health is said primarily of an animal: “This dog is in a state of good health.” It is

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the latter view that corresponds to the relationship between God and God’s creatures. The primacy is with God. It is not that God is like us; rather, we are like God. We can only find names for God on the basis of our human experience. What we know of God from creatures, we know only to the extent that they represent God. God is perfect; therefore God prepossesses in God’s self all the perfections. So creatures represent imperfectly the divine excellences. The effects—goodness, wisdom—have some likeness to God. This is the basis of the analogy.

Thus, when we say “God is good” the inference we take should not be that God is the cause of goodness; rather, we should take this to mean that what we call “good” in creatures pre-exists in God—albeit in a perfect form. So the salient fact is not that we can call God “good” because God is the cause of goodness in creatures. The really important point is that the reason we observe goodness in creatures is because it exists in a preeminent way in God and it is God’s essential nature to share this goodness through infusion into creatures. Aquinas quotes Augustine from On Christian Doctrine: “Because God is good, we are.”

The reasons for Aquinas’s assignment of primacy to God in analogical theology become clearer when he turns his attention to the issue of a metaphorical naming of God (STI.13.3 and STI.13.6). Aquinas rejects Pseudo-Dionysius’ opinion that we name God from creatures (God is king, a lion etc.,). His objection is that a metaphorical naming of God means that God is assigned a secondary status:

“[A]ll the names that are said metaphorically of God are said primarily of creatures rather than of God, since what is said of God in this way signifies nothing other than a likeness to such creatures. For just as to say that a meadow is smiling signifies nothing other than that it is similar in beauty when it flowers to a person who smiles, according to some likeness of proportion, so too the name “lion” when said of God signifies just that God is the sort of being that acts powerfully in his works, just as a lion is. So it is clear that when these terms are said of God, their signification cannot be defined except through what is said of creatures.” (STI.13.6)

Only an analogical naming of God maintains the primacy of God. The analogical names of God are said of God not only causally but also essentially. The essence of the Godhead is goodness, and it is therefore in the essential nature of God to diffuse what God is to the created order. “Accordingly, it should be said that with respect to the thing signified by the name, it is said primarily of God rather than creatures, since perfections of this kind flow from God to creatures” (STI.13.6). Thus, while it is true that the basis for analogical theology is human experience—it cannot be otherwise because we cannot comprehend the essence of God—the flow in its logic is ultimately from God down rather than from creatures up.

In the Church Dogmatics, Karl Barth rejects the method of analogia entis because it places God and humanity together on the plane of being. An analogous relation at the level of being—goodness, wisdom, etc.—is established between
humanity and God. Barth argues that the analogy is more properly established on the level of act—viz., the act of God in coming to humanity and the act of faith through which this revelation is acknowledged.

Barth’s point is that through faith—which is ultimately an event that is only possible because of the free grace of God—the Word of God is acknowledged, known, thought, and spoken about. The thoughts and words that arise in and through the faith encounter with the Word constitute a similarity, a likeness, an analogy to that Word. Barth, in contrasting the analogy of faith with the analogy of being, expresses it thus:

“Our reply to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis* is not, then, a denial of the concept of analogy. We say rather that the analogy in question is not an *analogia entis* but according to Rom. 12⁶ the *αναλογία της πίστεως* [analogy of faith], the likeness of the known in the knowing, of the object in thought, of the Word of God in the word that is thought and spoken by man, as this differentiates true Christian prophecy in faith from all false prophecy.” (CD I.1, pp. 244–245)¹¹

Barth rejects the use of parallels with human concepts and experience in the quest for knowledge of God because he considers that in the end these parallels are more of a hindrance than a help. The essential problem that Barth sees is that what supposedly analogous terms such as lord, cause, redemption, and reconciliation entail is so vastly different from what is entailed in divine revelation that to pay attention to them in developing one’s theology can only result in error and confusion (see CD II.1, pp. 76–79). Barth refers, for example, to the fact that we know of lords. But to use our experience of human lordship to refer to God the Lord is not efficacious. All that it succeeds in doing is to turn us back on ourselves; it takes us not one inch toward a true understanding of the nature of divine rule. Similarly, Barth suggests, we know of originators and causes. But the revealed fact that God is the Creator means something completely different. The Creator means that one alone truly exists and everything else exists as a result of the Creator’s will and Word. The notion of creation *ex nihilo* can only be received as something absurd. It is a concept that is absolutely unique; therefore any analogies that we draw based on human experience will lead us away from the Creator rather than toward him. The situation is the same with other possible analogical terms such as reconciliation and redemption. If analogy is to be useful as a theological tool, there needs to be some point of real contact between the

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¹¹ The version of the Barth’s Church Dogmatics that I have used is the Alexander Street Press online version.
human term and the divine being and nature. Barth claims to have shown that no such point exists.

In *Church Dogmatics* II.1 §26, Barth records another fundamental objection to *analogia entis*—namely, that it suggests that God can be known without revelation (CD II.1, p. 82). Barth sees in the doctrine the notion that because the human person is a being, she can know being as such. She can extend this knowledge of being even to the being of the One who absolutely transcends human being. Knowledge of being, then, is considered to be the starting point for a true knowledge of God. Barth finds this unacceptable.

It should be noted that Barth developed his position not so much in opposition to the *analogia entis* of Thomas Aquinas, but to that of the German Jesuit philosopher-theologian, Erich Przywara. Przywara contends that he has developed an approach that, while different in some important respects to the classic treatment by Thomas Aquinas, is nevertheless in continuity with it. The German theologian has a different understanding of the relationship between essence and existence in the human to that of Aquinas. Essence is what a thing is. Przywara has a dynamic understanding of the essence of a person. That is, he avers that what a person is *qua* human being is not a fixed thing but rather a state of becoming. Essence is immanent in existence, but at the same time it transcends it. Existence, then, is the coming to be of essence. Przywara therefore defines human being as “unity-in-tension” of “essence in-and-beyond existence.” Essence is in existence (immanence), and it is also beyond it (transcendence). This vocation of becoming that is the very nature of humans is a participation in the divine life analogically. In the divine life, essence and existence are identical. God’s expresses the divine essence (love, goodness, and wisdom) fully, perfectly, in the divine mode of being. That is, there is nothing in the divine nature that is not fully actualized. There is no becoming in God; God is Being itself (pure Being). The analogy between the being of God and that of the human person, then, is this. The essence and the existence of a human being form a unity just as God’s essence and existence do. But this similarity between the human and God contains within it an even greater dissimilarity. Whereas the unity within God is an absolute unity, in the human it is a ‘unity-in-tension’ because essence is not only

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13 This summary of Przywara’s approach to *analogia entis* is drawn from Betz, 21–30, and Johnson, Rejection, 635f.
immanent in existence but also transcends it. In their being, humans express Being (God’s being) analogously. God is Being; the being of a human person is a participation in Being. Because the being of a human person can only be understood in the context of relationship with God, the human person’s existence is itself a revelation of God.

Aquinas also suggested that there is a real distinction between the essence and existence of a human person. He likewise does this to emphasize the very substantial dissimilarity with God. But his way of distinguishing essence and existence does not have the dynamic quality of Przywara’s approach. Aquinas simply observes that a human being, imperfect being that she is, can never fully express her essential nature through her existence. Goodness is part of the essence of a human being, but in her existence a person is never truly good. What Przywara is doing, on the other hand, is to posit a dynamic view of essence in order to show that human being is only that which is reaching up for God. The becoming that is the nature of essence is expressed through movement in the direction of God. The human vocation is ever greater conformity to God. Christ is the true image of God (Heb 1:3). Therefore, what a person is (her essence) can only be determined ultimately by her relation to Christ.

Przywara and Barth engaged in an extended dialogue on the role of analogy in theology. In the course of this dialogue, it became obvious to Przywara that what he thought he was doing in his approach to analogia entis and what Barth thought he was doing were two quite different things. Indeed, in In Und Gegen, Przywara sees his work—far from representing the antithesis of his interlocutor’s approach—as affirming the very values that Barth holds dear. He makes two important points in this regard. The first is that analogia entis adopts the principle promulgated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215—namely, that in noting any similarity between God and humanity, it is necessary to note an even greater dissimilarity. Thus, analogia entis is not a philosophically driven theology in which the created world is ordered to God. It does not therefore attempt to situate God, creation, and creature on the same plane of being. In the theology of both Aquinas and Przywara, God is Being; humans simply participate in it. This fact points to God’s “dynamic transcendence,” according to which God is above and beyond everything that is external to God.

Przywara’s second point is that an analogia entis does not denote a natural theology, but rather operates in the domain of “the supernatural and the genuinely Christian.” The primary datum in analogical theology is the perfections of God attested to by Scripture.

14 See Betz, 9 f.
We have seen that Barth claims that an *analogia entis* seeks to bypass revelation in developing knowledge of God. In a work published in 1927, Przywara explicitly rejects this position: “... *analogia entis* means neither a calculation of God nor a limiting of God within the limits of the creation, but a reverent looking to God as the one whose self-condescension is already [what constitutes] creation as creation.”

That is, it is God’s self-communication in and through the Word that establishes the true meaning of the created order.

While the perspectives we have just considered may indicate an affinity between the approaches of Barth and Przywara to analogical theology that is not immediately obvious, it would be wrong to overlook the substantial differences between them. The most important of these is as follows. An analogy of being is founded on the conviction that God’s revelation in creation corresponds to and is fulfilled by God’s revelation in the reconciliation of sinners by Christ. That is, if the knowledge of God that can be obtained by rational reflection on created being is to be true knowledge, it must not be in conflict with knowledge of God that comes through God’s saving Word. Barth, however, cannot accept such a broad approach to revelation. The problem for Barth is that revelation through the creation relies upon the effective use of reason. But reason, while possessing a certain power, is ultimately defective as a result of the effects of sin. In order for God to break through the darkness that is in fallen human beings, God needed to speak a completely new Word—the Word of redemption in and through Christ. Revelation is nothing other than this new Word in Christ. Thus, any talk of being must be set in the context of divine redemption of human being.

The question of the relationship between *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei* is a complex one. In making the points that I have, the intention is not to attempt a settlement of all the major disputes. This is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. I have devoted space to this discussion because I see it as useful for identifying a number of principles that I take to be indispensable for any responsible analogical theology. These principles are as follows. First, the starting point in our knowledge of God is what God has revealed. Analogical theology is founded on the advent of God in Christ. Related to this is the principle that analogical theology generates true knowledge of God. An analogy of advent reveals God as the one who justifies sinful humanity in and through the death of Christ. Third, while analogical theology reveals similarity in the relation between humanity and God, it reveals an even greater dissimilarity. The profound otherness of God is acknowledged and respected in responsible analogical God-talk. The fourth principle is

15 Erich Przywara, Religionsphilosophie katholischer Theologie, in: Schriften 2, Einsiedeln (Johannes Verlag) 1962, 442; cited in Betz, 6f.
that primacy in the analogical relation is with God. That is, God has all the
perfections perfectly and originally; we have them only imperfectly and deriva-
tively. Finally, analogia entis and analogia fidei are not mutually exclusive op-
tions for analogical theology. I contend that these guidelines need to be adhered
to in developing therapeutic analogues for preaching.

This last principle is not clearly articulated in the preceding discussion. It is,
however, a very important one in the context of my approach to analogy and
therapeutic preaching. It is therefore necessary to discuss more fully what is at
stake. In his statements in the Dogmatics, I think that Barth overstates the case in
relation to the failure of analogia entis. There, as we have seen, he avers that an
analogy drawn from human experience can only hinder our efforts to know God.
Barth contends that any human concept or experience that may on the surface
seem to be analogous to something in God’s being and nature is in the end so
utterly different from it that it is of no use in knowing God. There is a chasm
between the being and action of God and human being and action that is so vast
that there is no way to build a bridge over it. It is certainly true that all human
experiences are inevitably more dissimilar than similar to God’s nature and
action. It is said that every analogy ‘limps.’ There is never a perfect correspon-
dence between a thing and its analogue. In relation to analogical theology, the
limp is an especially pronounced one because the finite is set as a likeness to the
infinite. Nevertheless, analogues based on human nature and modes of being do
have the capacity to throw some light on who God is. As we all know, Jesus
constantly used ordinary human experience to teach his listeners about life in the
kingdom. There are no human words or concepts that can communicate fully the
meaning of God’s reign in the world. All that Jesus had, all that anyone has, are
analogies and metaphors that give some sense of it. Thus, to reflect on human
love, goodness, and wisdom does give us a glimpse—an important one, limited
though it may be—of the being and nature of God. This is very significant in
relation to my project in this essay. My approach to therapeutic preaching is
grounded in the assumption that an analogous relation holds between the em-
pathy, compassion, and acceptance that a therapist displays and the divine
therapy. If there is no place for an analogia entis in theology, my project fails. I
contend that there are good grounds, however, for the view that responsible
analogical theology makes room for both an analogia fidei and an analogia entis.
Even Barth finally came to this position, as we shall soon see.

Analogia fidei refers to a correspondence between the Word of God and the
word that is thought and spoken by humans. But, as we have just seen, this
correspondence requires an analogia entis. All of the concepts that we apply to
God’s being and nature are also to be found in human being and nature. There is
no fund of pure God-language for us to draw from that is uncontaminated by
human constructs and thought forms. The only way that the Word can come to us is through the language that is expressive of human experience. We speak of God the creator, ruler, judge, and Savior; of God the Father and Mother; of the One who is wise and just; and of the One whose very nature is love and goodness. Our knowledge of God through God’s revelation relies on drawing an analogy between the human expression of these terms and concepts and the divine expression of them. To be sure, there is a great dissimilarity between the two expressions (Barth is right to underline this fact). God creates, rules, judges, and saves in a qualitatively different way to human creating, ruling, judging, and saving. But I differ from Barth in that I do not accept that the fact of this massive dissimilarity means that any attempt to draw a point of comparison is futile and misleading. According to Barth, God alone uses language properly; our words are necessarily caricatures of what is in the pure divine language: “The use to which [words] are put [by God] is not, then, an improper and merely pictorial one, but their proper use. We use our words improperly and pictorially—as we can now say, looking back from God’s revelation—when we apply them within the confines of what is appropriate to us as creatures” (CD II.1, p. 229). The way in which Barth expresses this idea that God alone knows the real meaning of words could be construed as slightly odd. Graham Ward picks up on this: “Barth seems to write as if God spoke an idealized German—a German sounding and appearing the same to both God and human beings, but which each employs, reads and understands differently.”

Barth is relentless in his attempt to point up what he sees as the infinite qualitative distinction between divine and human words. I think his position is an extreme one. As long as one continually reminds oneself that the true and full meaning of words such as goodness, wisdom, redemption, peace, joy, and righteousness is communicated through God’s Word, and that the meaning associated with everyday expressions of these words is flawed and imperfect, it is quite legitimate to draw an analogy between God’s way-of-being and human ways-of-being. What I mean by this distinction between divine and human meanings assigned to a word can be illustrated through a reference to Christ’s gift of peace. The peace that Christ gives is perfect, complete, and a gift of grace; the peace that is generated solely from human resources is imperfect, incomplete, and a human work. If we do our theology with our minds focussed sharply on distinctions such as this, it is quite appropriate to incorporate an *analogia entis*.

God is perfect goodness and I am only imperfectly good. The gap here is clearly immense. But even though I cannot fully conceptualize perfect goodness,
I am at least able to grasp it dimly because I have experienced very good people. It is therefore true to say that an *analogia fidei* requires an *analogia entis*. The real question is the nature of the relationship between the two. That is, to which one should we assign primacy? Do we start with rational reflection on relevant human experience in order to develop knowledge of God? Or do we start with revelation and use an *analogia entis* to help us explicate what the Word has disclosed to us? In *Church Dogmatics* II.1 §26, Barth discusses a pair of articles by the Romanic Catholic theologian Gottlieb Söhngen in which he, Söhngen, argues for “*analogia entis* within an *analogia fidei*.” The Catholic theologian goes on to state that “[t]he knowledge of the being of God is to be subordinated to the knowledge of the activity of God.” Barth indicates his approval of this formula. He is prepared to welcome *analogia entis* into the theological fold, if, and only if, primacy is given to the analogy of faith. In answering a question after a lecture given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1962, he elaborates on this position:

“Yes. Exactly speaking it is true that in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics* I said something very nasty about *analogia entis*. Later on I began to see that the notion of analogy cannot totally be suppressed by theology. I didn’t at first speak of *analogia entis*. I spoke of an *analogia relationis* and then in a more biblical way of the analogy of faith. And then some of my critics said: “Well, after all, an *analogia relationis* is also some kind of *analogia entis*."

And I couldn’t completely deny it. I said: well, after all, if *analogia entis* is interpreted as *analogia relationis* or analogy of faith, well, I will no longer say nasty things about *analogia entis*.”

What is true for systematic theology is also true for the theology in the therapeutic sermon. This latter theology needs to take its lead from *analogia fidei*, but it may also incorporate *analogia entis*. Now that the theological principles that I take to be adequate have been established, let me present my model of theocentric therapeutic preaching.

**A Model of Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching**

The approach that I take in relation to the use in preaching of analogies drawn from therapeutic discourse and practice accords with the Word theology principle

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18 I can only give a sketch of my approach here. For a full description, see Neil Pembroke, Divine Therapeia and the Sermon. Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching, Eugene, Oregon (Pickwick Publications) 2013.
of the subordination of the analogia entis to the analogia fidei. The gospel is not primarily about reason and knowledge of the being of God, though these things are certainly implicated. It is primarily about the address of God to humanity through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The central event in God’s address to us is the word of the cross. It is this word that reveals God as the God of all love, compassion, and forgiveness. It is in God’s nature and being to reach out to suffering, confused, disoriented and disordered humanity with a word of love that heals and restores. This is the divine therapy. It is an important dimension of the gospel (there are other equally important aspects, to be sure), and therefore of Christian proclamation. The analogues that are drawn from therapeutic discourse and practice do not serve as the starting point for the theological reflection on God’s therapy that takes place in sermon preparation and delivery. That is, I am not suggesting that we should use therapeutic insights to develop some new knowledge of God’s healing love. Rather, the aim is to use insights from counseling theory and practice to find appropriate analogues that not only help to explain the nature of God’s therapy as expressed in the particular text, but that also facilitate greater openness to that therapy. That is, the analogues should not be seen as merely didactic aids. The aim is not simply to provide some interesting insights. The analogues should be seen first and foremost as instruments that serve to open the heart and mind of the listener to God’s healing grace. That is, they are used in an attempt to strike a chord in the listener; to stimulate openness to renewal and transformation through divine therapy.

A second important principle in my approach to therapeutic God-talk in the pulpit is assigning primacy to God in the analogical relation between God and human experience. Though from the perspective of Word theology, the starting point for theological reflection needs to be the gracious self-communication of God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, the approach of Aquinas does have something important to say to us. It is true that in the analogia entis there is a move from human experience to knowledge of God. One identifies good effects in the human person—goodness, wisdom, etc.—and then attributes these by analogy to their source. Using this method, one can assign the names Goodness and Wisdom to God. But in this method primacy is not actually assigned to human being, but rather to divine being. In analogical theology, the names that are used constitute the essence of God—God’s essential nature is goodness and wisdom—and therefore the primacy is with God. Goodness and wisdom in the human person are only imperfectly realized; in God they are perfectly realized. This is because they only exist in humans because God has infused them in us.

This observation bears importantly on the question of the theological legitimacy of using therapeutic analogues in preaching. There are two ways one can construe the use of therapeutic images in preaching. First, there is an approach in
which it is said that God is like a therapist. Second, there is the view that it is appropriate to talk about God in therapeutic terms because God is the condition of the possibility of all therapeutic healing.\(^\text{19}\) The first is to be avoided. God is the ground of all human acts of empathy and acceptance. To put it in Aquinas’ terms, God is the source of the effect that is empathy or acceptance. It is therefore legitimate to talk about an empathic God, an acceptant God, etc.

The final principle is that the ultimate aim is to use analogues from psychotherapeutic psychology to draw listeners more deeply into the divine therapy featuring in the text. The temptation to concentrate on the insights from psychology and counseling needs to be resisted. What the preacher is trying to do in practical terms is to use an appropriate piece of psychotherapeutic psychology to give a fresh articulation of the story of God’s therapy that is told in the text. What she is doing theologically is to use an analogy to expose another facet of the diamond that is the comforting and confronting love of God. She is saying to the listener: “Here is a parallel from the world of counseling that may help you grasp a little more of the wonder, depth, and beauty of God’s healing love that appears in our text.”

Let me use the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11–32) to provide a concrete example of how therapeutic analogies can be profitably used in a sermon. I will not provide a complete sermon, but rather simply sketch the outlines. Further, I have not tried to write in a homiletic genre; the language is generally more formal than I would use for a sermon. The aim is simply to give an idea of how the theory might work out in practice.

I believe that a case can be made that a shame/acceptance dynamic features in the story of the prodigal along with the more familiar guilt/forgiveness dynamic. Thanks to the work of a large team of psychological researchers, we now have an in-depth understanding of shame.\(^\text{20}\) The first thing to say about it is that

\(^{19}\) Tom Oden makes this point in Kerygma and Counseling, Philadelphia (Westminster Press) 1966, 21. Oden argues that there is a “tacit ontological assumption” in all psychotherapy. It is not just that the therapist accepts the client, but that the client is considered acceptable as a human being by the ground of being itself.

you can feel shame about almost anything. Some people condemn themselves as socially awkward, clumsy, and gauche. Others feel dull, incompetent, and ignorant. Cowardice and betrayal are especially potent sources of shame. It is possible to feel ashamed of one’s appearance, height (or lack of it), weight, disability, or disfigurement. Shame can be associated with familial or national identity. In Middle Eastern societies, shame is the flip-side of honor. Honor is a claim to worth and the social recognition of that worth. In such societies, there is an honor code. A person feels shame when she or he breaks the code. She or he experiences a loss of face.

Shame is about feeling inferior, inadequate, flawed. Shame-prone people don’t think they are worth very much. There is an overlap with guilt, but there are also differences. I feel guilty over the bad things I’ve done, but I am my shame. The guilty person thinks, “I’ve done some bad things.” The shame-prone person thinks, “I’m no good.” In her mind, the problem is not what she has done, but the self that she is.21 Her thoughts are shot through with self-loathing: “I’m stupid. I always mess things up. I’m a complete bore. I’m a loser.”

Inferiority shame is linked to what a person sees as defects in her personality or her abilities—or in both these areas. If we are referring to inferiority shame, it is possible to make neat distinctions in relation to guilt. There is no guilt associated with having a dull personality. There is no guilt associated with feeling like you don’t quite measure up at your job. But when we get into the moral zone, shame and guilt can’t be so cleanly separated out; they are tangled up together. I think that this is the case with the prodigal. He feels guilty about his moral transgressions, but he is also feeling a global sense of inferiority and worthlessness. When people talk about their shame they use images such as ‘dirty’, ‘polluted’, and ‘unclean’. All three seem to fit in the case of this unfortunate young man. His self-esteem is almost non-existent. The polite way in which a Middle-Easterner got rid of a hanger-on was to give him a task that he knew would be refused. How could a self-respecting Jew take a job taking care of swine? This one did because he wasn’t in fact self-respecting. The first words this lad will speak when he sees his father are, “I’m not worthy to be called your son.”

Shame is all around us. Many people who suffer from it do not look dirty and unclean like the prodigal. But they do feel that way. I got quite a shock when I read an article written by a scholar that I know and discovered that this is his story. Since it is in the public record, I am free to recount it for you. Richard

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presents as confident, self-assured, and seemingly comfortable in his own skin. He’s certainly good at what he does. While this is one side of Richard, there is another side that very few people see. This is the story that he tells in his article:

“Two years ago...I assisted, as a home hospice care volunteer, a person who was suffering from AIDS, who died during the last period of my care. After farewelling him and awaiting his end, I returned home, and woke up in the middle of the night in a state well described by [the psychotherapist] Kohut [when he talks about shame]... “empty, exhausted, drained, demoralized...deflated...passive, and weak.” I cried inconsolably over this tragic loss, as I thought about him.

[Richard goes on to say that the man who died was like a mirror for his own shame.] [T]here is the self that had successfully done many useful things, and continues to do so, and the self who for almost as long as I could remember continually told me, ‘You are shit’.”

When Richard says, “I think I’m a piece of crap,” he isn’t looking for forgiveness. What is he supposed to repent of? Is he supposed to say, “I’m sorry that I don’t like myself very much”? When a person is feeling shame, what he or she is really looking for is acceptance and affirmation. The guilty person longs to hear, “You are forgiven.” The shame-prone person aches for a loving, affirming embrace.

The father gives the son who was lost an embrace and a kiss. It is certainly true that there is some forgiving to be done. The son has seriously injured his dad. The kiss says, “I forgive you, son.” But what stands out even more prominently for me is the healing of the son’s shame. The way in which the father goes out to greet his son says a great deal. In the Middle Eastern culture, a man of his age was expected to maintain honor by walking at a dignified pace. To run as the father does means showing one’s undergarments like a teenager. So great is his compassion, so great is his urgency to heal his son’s shame, that he is prepared to bring shame upon himself.

There are some other strongly affirming actions performed by the father. The father calls for a robe. This is a symbol of honor. The shoes he calls for are a sign that he is a son and not a slave. The ring he places on his finger is an indication of authority. Think, lastly, about the party. The father doesn’t plan a quiet family gathering. He makes a public gesture so that the whole community will know about his acceptance of this wayward son.

This is the most wonderful story of grace and acceptance shown by a truly extraordinary father. It’s also a story about divine grace and acceptance. The height, length, and breadth of grace are too much for us to grasp. This story helps

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us get a handle on it. The grace of God is like that of this amazing man. The word ‘like’ is important here. Human goodness can only ever be a pale reflection of divine goodness.

In thinking about the divine acceptance and validation the parable points to, the image that came to my mind was the ‘mirroring God’. Let me explain what I mean by this. In the extract from Richard’s article that I mentioned, he refers to Heinz Kohut. Kohut was a psychotherapist who worked extensively with shame-prone people. He found that the most effective way to help such people is to be consistently empathic. Kohut uses the expression “vicarious introspection” to describe empathy. That is, the therapist attempts to view the patient’s subjective experience from her or his internal frame of reference. In a word, the therapist aims to be fully responsive to the patient and her experience of herself and the world. Shame-prone persons commonly report that they feel ignored, misunderstood, treated in a dismissive manner, and rejected. Kohut developed a therapeutic approach in which such persons are genuinely understood, confirmed, and recognized as unique individuals. An important aspect of the empathic process is what he called “mirroring.” Mirroring is a relational stance which communicates confirmation, admiration, and approval. It is descriptive of what naturally takes place when loving parents interact with their young children. When the child reacts with delight over something good that she has done, the parents mirror her joy and excitement. Their faces light up in response to the child’s beaming expression. The child sees her delight reflected on the faces of her parents. In this way, they confirm her achievement and, more significantly, they confirm her. This dynamic is an important part of the process of building self-confidence and a sense of worth.

It’s always a risky thing to draws lines of connection between God’s activity and human activity. There is an infinite, qualitative distinction between us and God. There is therefore more dissimilarity than similarity between the way God mirrors and the way a therapist mirrors. But thinking of God as a mirror, as an infinite source of understanding, acceptance, and validation, helps me, at least, to go deeper into the story of the father who threw his arms wide open to greet his wayward son.

25 See Kohut (n. 23), 1971 116f.
I also want to make it clear that it’s not the case that God is like a mirroring therapist. It’s the other way round. God is the ground of every empathic and affirming act by a therapist. Every such act is a participation in divine love, acceptance, and confirmation. The power of God’s love and grace makes mirroring possible—even when a therapist is not aware of it.

The mirroring God says to us, “In my eyes, you are right, good, full of quality.” It’s not that we are so wonderful that God cannot help but offer positive mirroring. Is the prodigal a wonderful person? We are talking about grace here. But we don’t know how to talk about it, really. We don’t have the words or the concepts to fully capture the nature of divine love and acceptance. So we tell a story of a father who rushes toward his wayward son to give him a kiss and a bear hug. Or we point to the child who is the gleam in her mother’s eye. Most people at some point feel deep shame and guilt. Tragically, some of us are plagued by these feelings most of the time. But there is good news. The gospel offers hope, peace, and healing. The gospel offers a word of grace.

The word of grace is that faith in Christ and in the power of his death justifies us. Christ’s loving act heals both our guilt and our shame. Not only are we declared right with God, but we are also affirmed as good and full of quality. We say, “I am not worthy”; God says, “Let me take you in my arms.” We may take the word of grace to heart: “In my eyes, you are right, good, full of quality.”

Conclusion

I have argued for a rehabilitation of therapeutic preaching through establishing a theocentric focus. God in Christ, not therapeutic psychology, needs to be placed at the center of the sermon. This does not mean, however, that psychology should be side-lined. I have recommended the use of counselling theory to provide fresh images of God; these images are used to breathe new life into the proclamation of divine therapy.

What I have proposed, then, is a correlational approach. Correlation is a controversial method in theology. The nub of the issue is as follows. The correlationists contend that the use of psychology or philosophy allows us to grasp an important aspect of God’s Word that would otherwise remain hidden. That is, when we approach the Bible with a relevant cultural self-interpretation in hand we see more than we saw before. The opponents, on the other hand, argue that

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26 I am indebted to Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell for this expression. See her Self-love and Self-acceptance, in: Pacifica 5, 1992, 288–301.
the use of a correlational approach inevitably means that the story of the Bible is forced into a preconceived pattern. That is, the biblical story gets fitted into another world with another story (the story that psychology or philosophy tells). These concerns are certainly real ones. There is a genuine danger that as soon as a preacher begins to make connections between the text and a particular psychological theory, she will start to manipulate the theological message to align with that theory. I have opted for a correlational approach because I make the judgment that the risk is worth taking. Provided one approaches the text honestly and with discipline, and provided one is judicious in the selection of the counseling theory that is employed, the correlational work will be legitimate. Moreover, it will produce valuable insights that would not otherwise have been available.

The type of correlational work proposed in the model has a particular shape: counseling theory is used to fund analogues to divine therapy. When it comes to analogical theology, the two contending approaches are analogia entis and analogia fidei. In the style of therapeutic preaching that I have argued for, the analogy of faith is primary, but there is a very definite role assigned to the analogy of being. Proclamation of the divine therapy takes its lead from analogia fidei (God’s revelation of healing love in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit), but it also incorporates analogia entis (God’s healing love is the source of the compassion and empathy communicated by a therapist).