

PREACHING THE GOSPELS: METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Alan Johnson, in his ETS presidential address on December 17, 1982, addressed the question of the value of the historical-critical method. While recognizing the concern of the conservative faction to protect Scripture from "Cartesian skepticism and enlightenment historicism," he quotes with favor from Carl F. H. Henry's "The Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism": "Freed from the arbitrary assumptions of critics who manipulate it in a partisan way, the method is neither destructive of biblical truth nor useless to Christian faith. . . . The task of historical criticism is to hear the claims of the Bible and to weigh them on merit."¹ Johnson calls for a nuanced use of historical criticism that employs a "careful discrimination, scrupulous criticism of our personal presuppositions and methodologies, humility in the face of our limited knowledge, and a patient, loving, yet penetrating analysis of the attempts of our colleagues to bring historical criticism to the aid of a believing interpretation of the Biblical materials."² Donald Hagner goes further in seeing the task as an absolute necessity, saying that "there is also much truth in modern scholarship, as any reasonable person can see. And if the evangelical does not reach out and affirm the truth that is there, thus showing that the truth of scholarship is not necessarily inimical to the faith of orthodox Christianity, who will? That is the challenge that faces evangelicalism."³ The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of critical tools, specifically of redaction criticism, for the preaching task. It is the thesis of this study that the positive techniques of this school will greatly enhance the preaching of the gospels and other historical literature.

However, these generally positive appraisals do not by any means meet universal approval. A deep-seated dissatisfaction remains in evangelical circles, caused by the fear that radically revisionist tendencies cannot be eradicated from critical methodologies. These center upon the current debate regarding redaction criticism, the issue that formed the core of the 1982 ETS national conven-

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¹A. F. Johnson, "The Historical-Critical Method: Egyptian Gold or Pagan Precipice?", *JETS* 26/1 (1983) 11, 13. The quote is from Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1979) 401. See Henry's ten guidelines for a proper use of historical criticism in Johnson, "Method" 13; Henry, *God* 403.

²*Ibid.*, p. 14.

³D. A. Hagner, "Interpreting the Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest," *JETS* 24 (1981) 38. Quoted also in Johnson, "Method" 14-15.

tion at Northeastern Bible College and that is featured in the Spring 1983 issue of *JETS*. The recent commentary on Matthew by Robert Gundry is the center of the controversy. He accepts the premise that Matthew embellished traditional historical accounts (such as the shepherd incident of the birth narratives) via Jewish midrashic techniques to produce nonhistorical stories (such as the Magi pericope). This has caused considerable consternation, and redaction criticism has come under renewed criticism.⁴ Certainly there are several valid criticisms of the discipline:⁵

1. *Redaction criticism continues the same fragmentation process as form criticism.* For these critics the theology comes not through the tradition but rather through the additions of the author. Therefore it reverses the emphasis of the scissors-and-paste form critics but still fragments the text into sub-units. Many have called this a "dis-integration" process.

2. *The radical historicizing reconstructions of tradition criticism continue.* The criteria of this school have been too often criticized to need detailed discussion here. Instead we will simply note the speculative base and uncertain results of such decisions. There is no basis for continuing the gulf between the gospels and the historical Jesus. Recent work on both oral transmission and note-taking techniques provides a strong basis for the basic reliability of the gospel records.

3. *Redaction critics assume that the evangelists were interested in theology and not history.* But this is based upon a false dichotomy between fact and value. It is far more likely that the gospels combine history and theology. Recent studies on the gospel genres⁶ note that they are unique and yet blend many types of literature. Ancient historians worked with their traditions, and so do the evangelists.

4. *There is a tendency to read far more composition into the records than is necessary.* While there is a freedom in highlighting some aspects of the tradition over others, as well as in selecting and omitting details, this does not necessitate wholesale creation of stories and sayings. One major problem is the great differ-

⁴See the eight successive articles in *JETS* 26/1 (1983) 31-115, four of them by Gundry himself.

⁵In addition to my "The Evangelical and . . . Redaction Criticism," *JETS* 22/4 (1979) 309-315, see Hagner, "Interpreting" 24-35; D. A. Carson, "Redaction Criticism: On the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of a Literary Tool," in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 123-128; R. S. Barbour, "Redaction Criticism and Practical Theology," *Reformed World* 33 (1974-75) 263-265; E. Guttgemanns, *Candid Questions Concerning Gospel Form Criticism: A Methodological Sketch of the Fundamental Problematics of Form and Redaction Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979) 277-342; R. Lautourelle, *Finding Jesus through the Gospels: History and Hermeneutics* (New York: Alba, 1979) 211-214; J. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (Chico: Scholars, 1980) 9-10.

⁶See D. Aune, "The Problem of the Genre of the Gospels: A Critique of C. H. Talbert's What Is a Gospel?", in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2 (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981); R. Guelich, "The Gospel Genre," in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (ed. M. Hengel and O. Hotius; Tübingen: Mohr, 1983).

ences between the style and content of the *logia Jesu* in the synoptic and Johannine records. Many believe that the Johannine sayings (and many in the synoptics) are the result of later "inspired prophets." Yet the criteria for distinguishing such is too nebulous, and we must be skeptical. Moreover the stylistic differences, while significant, do not preclude an historical core behind both.⁷

5. *There is too much dependence upon the Streeter hypothesis regarding the priority of Mark.* While challenges regarding the priority of Matthew or independence of the evangelists have not won the day, a much more nuanced view of source criticism is needed. We must speak of "differences" rather than "changes" or "alterations." In fact, this is probably Gundry's primary error. His tracing of minute changes between Matthew and Mark or Q makes his delineation of Matthew's "theological art" highly suspect. The actual situation was undoubtedly far more fluid in the evangelists' use of sources. The combination of sources and the contextualization of them is far more complex than most theories allow.⁸

6. *There is too much stress on a reconstruction of the evangelists' Sitz im Leben and too little reflection on the speculative nature of such an enterprise.* Attempts to describe the church behind Matthew's gospel, whether Gentile or Jewish, for instance, cannot be asserted with the type of confidence often seen. The message of the gospel is more important than sociological guesswork.⁹

7. *The greatest challenge to redaction criticism stems from advocates of a holistic approach to Scripture.* Rhetorical critics have banded together with the canon criticism of Brevard Childs (more than Sanders) to argue that the final form of the text as a whole rather than individual segments carries the meaning.

⁷On Christian prophets see D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979). On the historical worth of the Johannine material see D. A. Carson, "Historical Tradition and the Fourth Gospel—After Dodd, What?," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2; S. S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978).

⁸Carson, "Redaction Criticism" 126, says, "Redaction critics far too often see the knots on the trees; only occasionally do they see the trees. Rarely indeed do they perceive the forest." J. Breckenridge, "Evangelical Implications of Matthean Priority," *JETS* 26/1 (1983) 117-121, presents a good overview of arguments against the Marcan hypothesis. However, his basic thesis that "we seem to have two choices: Either we opt for Matthean priority and a reasonable exercise of form criticism, or accept Marcan priority and suffer the consequences of a more severe redaction criticism" is singularly unconvincing. There is little difference between the critical work of Farmer, Dungan *et al.* and other scholars. It is better to see with Carson, "Redaction Criticism" 124, the basic validity of Marcan priority but a sufficiently complex situation so that we should speak of "differences" rather than "modifications." See also my "Redaction Criticism" 315. For the relative independence of the gospels see R. L. Thomas, "An Investigation of the Agreements Between Matthew and Luke Against Mark," *JETS* 19/2 (1976) 103-112.

⁹For recent discussion of the place of sociology in hermeneutics see my "Christology and NT Hermeneutics: A Survey of Recent Discussion," forthcoming in the *Semeia* volume on Christology; J. Riches, "The Sociology of Matthew: Some Basic Questions concerning Its Relation to the Theology of the New Testament," *1988 SBL Seminar Papers* (Chico: Scholars, 1988) 259-271.

Old theories regarding interpolation and fragmentation are disparaged in favor of the structural unity of the text as it is. The distinction between tradition and redaction is thereby replaced by a literary approach that looks for narrative flow.

Nevertheless, the very delineation of these difficulties contains within itself the seeds of revision. By taking cognizance of such cautions we might rework the methodology to retain the positive elements and avoid the negatives. In fact this is exactly what several recent evangelicals have concluded. Carson says, "If redaction criticism is applied with these kinds of reservations to the study of the Gospels, it will certainly help us to discern more precisely the distinctive witness of each Evangelist to Jesus Christ and may legitimately take its place alongside other literary tools."¹⁰ Millard Erickson adds, "Biblical criticism . . . if carefully used and based upon assumptions that are consistent with the full authority of the Bible, can be a helpful means of shedding further light on the meaning of Scripture."¹¹ In short, there are very positive reasons for the utilization of critical tools. Properly defined and structured, they are indispensable aids both in the exegesis and proclamation of Biblical truth.

In an earlier article I spoke of two sets of criteria for using redactional techniques:¹² (1) Note external differences between the gospels, studying the seams, summary statements, editorial asides or explanations, and especially the alterations (the expansions or omissions). These will highlight peculiar interests of the evangelist and act as a control to a subjective reading of the structure. (2) These redaction tendencies are then seen as they relate internally to the structure of the narrative plot in the writer's arrangement of the pericopes.

This paper will seek to add the insights of rhetorical criticism or narrative hermeneutics to those of redaction criticism. Narrative or story theology seeks to avoid historicizing tendencies by stressing the text itself. Yet we should not react too eagerly, for this ahistorical tendency is often more closed than open to the possibility of *Historie* rather than *Geschichte*. John J. Collins states:

The rediscovery of biblical narrative has been largely a consequence of the negative results of historical research. This point has theological importance. Many conservative biblicists have invoked literary criticism as a way of avoiding unwelcome historical conclusions. . . . It should be clear that such evasions will not work. . . . "Story" is not "history." It is essentially fiction, material which has in some measure been invented.¹³

¹⁰Carson, "Redaction Criticism" 141. See also the balanced critique of D. L. Turner in "Evangelicals, Redaction Criticism, and the Current Inerrancy Crisis," *Grace Theological Journal* 4/2 (1983) 263-288. In it Turner provides a fair critique of Ned Stonehouse, myself, and Robert Gundry, with an excellent summary regarding criteria for deciding when and if the results threaten the doctrine of inerrancy (pp. 283-288). See especially his critique of N. Geisler's "methodological unorthodoxy" principle (pp. 283-285).

¹¹M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1. 104 (cf. pp. 95-104). See also P. D. Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy* (ed. N. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 301.

¹²Osborne, "Redaction Criticism" 316-321.

¹³J. J. Collins, "The Rediscovery of Biblical Narrative," *Chicago Studies* 21 (1982) 47-48. This results also from structuralism and post-structuralist concerns. For instance D. Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and

This would be in basic agreement with evangelicals who dismiss the possibility of working with critical methodology. The argument is that one cannot employ a tool without accepting the theory upon which it is based. Therefore narrative criticism or "story theology," as it is often called, demands recognition of the nonhistorical nature of the Biblical records. However, this is by no means the case among practitioners of the method. Collins' thesis is that "the power of a story comes from our ability to identify with it, and to feel that it is true for us."¹⁴ Yet Biblical truth is not observable only in the "shifting sands of human experience," as Collins would say, but in the claims of the text itself. Joanna Dewey states that the "procedure is in a sense arbitrary: one can enter the circle of literary criticism at any point." She believes that "the two approaches, rhetorical-literary and redactional-critical, are complementary. Both seek to understand the meaning of the gospel, and they can aid each other in the task."¹⁵ We agree with Dewey that Collins has "arbitrarily" chosen to accept the results of radical tradition criticism, and we do not.

There are still several problems with narrative criticism, however, and these must be considered before we attempt to utilize the tool: (1) The text must determine the structural cohesion, but when we remove it from the author or its link with an historical situation there is no control against subjective readings. (2) There is a reverse epistemic flow in the act of interpretation: The original author moved from the historical situation (in the case of the gospels, both the situation of Jesus' day and of the author's own time) to the narrative, while the interpreter must reverse the direction by moving from the narrative to its historical meaning. This is the diachronic element within interpretation. (3) There are two dynamics at work. Some episodes in the gospels follow a chronological rather than literary pattern, and we dare not impose too rigid a logical structure upon those narratives. We must ask whether the episodes are arranged topically or chronologically and cannot presuppose either (e.g. the miracle section of Matthew 8-10 and parallels). (4) Some gospels have a more literary flow of thought (e.g. Mark and Luke), while others tend to clump episodes and sayings (e.g. Matthew and John). Each one must be treated separately and judged by its own style.

Kenneth Gros Louis agrees with Collins that a literary approach places "emphasis on the text itself—not on its historical and textual backgrounds" and "assumes unity in the text" as well as "conscious artistry" but states also that literary and critical methodologies are "complementary."¹⁶ Narrative criticism

the Gospel of Mark," *JAAR* 50 (1982) 413, states that "the integrity of the narrative" demands that we accept the "story" as "a literary creation of the author" with "an *autonomous integrity* quite apart from any resemblances to the real world of Jesus' time" (italics his). He recognizes the possibility of history but believes that it is both unrecoverable and irrelevant to the fictive dimension of the text.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁵Dewey, *Markan* 10, 9. See also the programmatic essay by J. Mulenberg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969) 1-18. This was the 1968 SBL presidential address and argued that critical studies should place literary criticism at the top of the list. In this way it would balance and supplement historical approaches.

¹⁶K. R. R. Gros Louis, "Some Methodological Considerations," *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (New York: Abington, 1982), 2, 14-15.

studies plot development, character interplay, place and fictive themes but makes no comment regarding historical details. As such it is a valuable addendum to redactional study, since the unity of the text and the intentional message of the author supplement one another. Rhetorical study detects the thematic development of the text and its theology, while historical research derives the meaning of the text in the context of the first century.

David Rhoads provides the key when he admits that "knowledge of the history and culture of the first century is a crucial aid to understanding Mark's story-world" and adds "but that is a different matter from using elements of a text to reconstruct historical events."¹⁷ Here is a meeting point for evangelical concerns. We too are opposed to arbitrary reconstructions. We do so, however, from the standpoint of historical verifiability rather than textual autonomy. Nevertheless the tools of narrative criticism provide a very real supplement to an evangelical use of redaction criticism. The tools themselves are summarized by Rhoads: "plot, conflict, character, setting, narrator, point of view, standards of judgment, the implied author, ideal reader, style, and rhetorical techniques."¹⁸ He expands this on the basis of Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (1978) into "what" (chronological chain of events, characters, details) and "how" (arrangement of events, type of narrator, point of view, style, rhetorical devices).¹⁹

For the preaching task, the value of such methods cannot be overstated. Such a holistic approach is obviously what the Word of God was intended to be. We were never meant to fragmentize and atomize God's revelation into proof-texts or verses separated from contexts and dogmatized into covering laws. Narrative criticism is an important aid toward a recovery of true "Biblical theology" that emerges from below, from the text itself, rather than being imposed from above, from systematic concerns.

Richard L. Pratt alters Gadamer's imagery of pictures, windows, and mirrors to describe the three levels of exegesis. The canonical character of Scripture leads to a consideration of the text-as-picture, leading to a literary analysis of the dramatic portrait the story presents to its audience. The historical nature of the Bible demands that we consider the text-as-window, an historical analysis that studies the intended presentation of the author in the discourse. Finally, the relevance of Scripture for life today leads to a study of the text-as-mirror, a thematic analysis that notes the subject matter and themes of the passage as they relate to the believing community.²⁰ The reader relates to all three levels in turn as he/she interacts with the narrative world of the text.

This leads us to a consideration of the third level mentioned by Pratt: contex-

¹⁷Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism" 413.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 412.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 414. Another approach is taken by M. Kessler, "A Methodological Setting for Rhetorical Criticism," pp. 8-10, who takes the nine categories of W. R. Winterowd, *Rhetoric: A Synthesis* (1968) 180-196, and arranges them according to diachronic (authorship, setting) and synchronic (whole piece, medium or genre, stance, form or structure, style, metastyle, ratio) modes.

²⁰R. L. Pratt, Jr., "Pictures, Windows, and Mirrors in Old Testament Exegesis," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 158-159.

tualization. This is certainly one of the most significant developments in the field of hermeneutics during the 1970s. It is significant that it was made not by philosophers or Biblical scholars but by missiologists. By definition contextualization is "that dynamic process that attempts to interpret the significance of a religion or cultural norm for a group with a different (or developed) cultural heritage." In other words, its purpose is to move from "what it meant" to "what it means." As such it comprises what homileticians call "application" and is exemplified in the Bible itself.

On the whole, the Jews in the first century were tolerant of Hellenism and even gave certain towns in Palestine Greek names. However, the assimilation lay more in externals, in form rather than content.²¹ The early Church did the same. Paul refused to demand social change on the external scale but did require an internal change on the relational level.²² The early Church used pagan language and customs and sought "redemptive analogies" in its presentation of the gospel, for instance, in Paul's Areopagus address (Acts 17) and in turning the language of the Church's opponents against them (2 Corinthians 10-13; Col 1:15-20). Yet at the same time the Church refused to compromise the content of her message. When the Judaizers or the proto-agnostics tampered with the soteriological core of Christianity, as at Colosse or Ephesus, the reaction was immediate and severe (cf. Colossians, the pastorals, 1 John, Revelation 2-3). Therefore we must make certain that external, cultural forms are contextualized but that internal, supracultural norms remain inviolate.

The application of Biblical principles is one of the more difficult areas of preaching, since it depends on a prior decision as to whether or not the principle is cultural or supracultural. Of course, we recognize that the very term "cultural" is a red flag for many. But we cannot avoid the fact that even those opposed to the concept treat passages concerning the holy kiss or the veil or footwashing as cultural expressions. Therefore we believe that it is valid to utilize the terminology. It is one thing to demand adherence to the fact of worship or evangelism, but quite another to read any particular type as "Biblical" to the exclusion of others. Debates on both these topics often assume the validity of a particular style but ignore that Scripture does not demand any one method. In fact, it is obvious that the style of evangelism and worship changed as the Church moved from Jewish to Gentile settings.²³ Therefore we must determine the degree to which any command transcends the cultural situation of the day. For

²¹See S. Safrai, "Relations Between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel," *The Jewish People in the First Century* (ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 1. 184-185. They adopted the language and literature, even participating in the gymnasium, but did not depart from their loyalty to Torah.

²²See N. R. Ericson, "Implications from the NT for Contextualization," *Theology and Mission* (ed. D. J. Hesselgrave; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 74-79. He notes Paul's refusal to demand circumcision and yet request that the Gentiles respect Jewish customs, his acceptance of Gentile cultural liberties and yet stress on the waiver of such freedom for the sake of new converts (1 Cor 9:19-23) and others. Paul clearly followed cultural modes when they were conducive to the gospel.

²³For the different evangelistic techniques see M. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970) chaps. 4-5. For worship styles see R. D. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) chaps. 2, 12.

instance, this is the crucial issue in "women in the church" debates on the basis of Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:8-15. Few assume that all are normative, and fewer still employ a consistent hermeneutic in determining the issue. For both sides it often seems that tradition is more determinative than Scripture.

In determining the degree of supracultural material in any passage I would suggest five steps:²⁴ (1) Determine the underlying theological principle and its distance from the surface command/situation of the text; (2) note when the writer depends upon traditional teaching or applies a temporary application on the basis of a specific situation; (3) determine whether the teaching transcends the cultural biases of the author; (4) in the opposite sense, determine the extent to which the teaching is tied to the cultural situation, utilizing cultural indicators in the text and local customs or specific situations behind the text; and (5) note commands that by nature are moral or theological in essence and are thereby connected closely to the progress of revelation. Biblical authority is not connected only to the "deep structure" behind the text. Scripture is not culture-bound, but on the other hand it is not automatically normative at the surface level. Principles like these are crucial for ascertaining the extent to which a narrative or command is applicable to our day, whether at the level of the specific or surface situation or at the level of the principle behind it.

Therefore preaching must consider three aspects: (1) the connection between meaning and significance—i.e., the necessity of delineating the original meaning of the text and then its application to the present context; (2) the determination of cultural and supracultural elements in the text; and (3) the separation between form and content, with the contextualization occurring at the former level. In other words, we transform the surface form of the text forward into our modern situation but keep the supracultural element inviolate. The propositional content of Scripture is essential for a proper communication of God's revelation to the modern hearer. We must establish a dialectic in which the world of the text addresses the receptor culture of our time. As Kenneth Pike has said,²⁵ theology is communicated not from the "etic" (outside the culture) dimension but from the "emic" (within the culture) perspective. This demands a relevant theological formulation that communicates truth and avoids culture-bound perceptions.

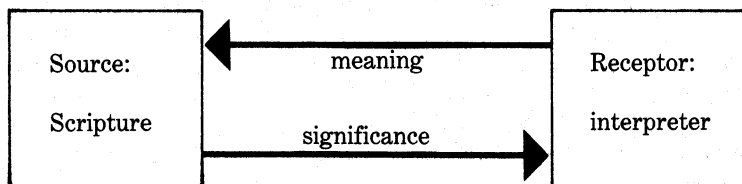
The two horizons of the text, that of the author and of the interpreter, are fused²⁶ by means of grammatical-syntactical exegesis and historical-cultural

²⁴For expanded discussions see my "Hermeneutics and Women in the Church," *JETS* 20 (1977) 337-352; G. Fee, "The Genre of NT Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics," and A. Johnson, "History and Culture in NT Interpretation," in *Interpreting the Word of God* (ed. S. Schultz and M. Inch; Chicago: Moody, 1976) 105-127, 128-161; J. Scott, "Some Problems in Hermeneutics for Contemporary Evangelicals," *JETS* 22 (1979) 67-77; C. Guth, "A Hermeneutical Approach to the Normative Nature of 1 Corinthians 5" (master's thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1981) chap. 2.

²⁵K. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967) 37-72. See also C. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 274-312. He argues for a "transculturation" of the Biblical writer's intended meaning by reproducing the process of the original meaning and not merely the finished product. However, he fails to distinguish sufficiently between form and content.

²⁶This of course is Gadamer's terminology. For an excellent discussion see A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: NT Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

background, which reshape the interpreter's preunderstanding and help him/her to allow the text to speak. Contextualization occurs as this process of fusion reaches out in another and broader hermeneutical circle to encompass the interpreter's life and situation.



The receptor culture/interpreter goes to the source/Scripture to determine its meaning. The source then yields not only meaning but challenges the receptor to accept its significance for the current situation.²⁷ This significance is grounded in the text's content but in a dynamic act applies it to the many-sided situations of our time. Divine revelation thus is perceived as both static and dynamic, both propositional and relational. The dictates of Scripture are allowed to challenge and then transform the receptor culture.²⁸ Further, this is a two-way process in which the preacher/missionary interacts with the text himself/herself and then applies it to the receptor culture within which s/he is working. Finally, this demands an exegesis of the world as well as the text. The proclaimer must do a sociological life-situation analysis of the receptor culture before contextualizing the text to fit it.

It is interesting to note the parallels between the more radical forms of contextualizing and popular forms of preaching today. The basic issue is which context determines meaning—the original context of the Word, or the current context of our culture. Evangelical hermeneutics strongly stresses the primacy of propositional truth, but popular preaching often gives the original meaning of the text little voice in the message. Two recent examples of this dearth will suffice: In the recent volume of *Leadership* devoted to the sermon there were articles on preaching in the Vulgate, imagination, sermons on suffering, planning a series, illustrations, the audience, and burn-out—but not a single article on exegesis and preaching.²⁹ Furthermore, in the most recent annotated bibliography there is not a single category on exegetical preaching, and in the one section that could apply (“General Works”) there are few works on this topic.³⁰

²⁷On meaning and significance see esp. E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976).

²⁸See D. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 87-94; C. R. Padilla, “Hermeneutics and Culture: A Theological Perspective,” in *Gospel and Culture* (ed. J. Stott and R. T. Cook; Pasadena: William Carey, 1979) 90-91, for further aspects of this.

²⁹*Leadership* 4/2 (1983).

³⁰*Recent Homiletical Thought: An Annotated Bibliography. Volume 2, 1966-1979* (ed. A. D. Litfin and H. W. Robinson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

The rest of this paper will utilize a test passage—Mark 9:14-29—to illustrate the kind of sermon from the gospels that we are attempting to encourage.

The first step in rhetorical analysis is to note the larger context in which the episode occurs. It is part of the major cycle of events in which Jesus is teaching his disciples the true meaning of his messianic office (8:27-10:52). The previous section (6:7-8:26) centered upon the blindness of the disciples (6:52; 8:17). It concluded with the two-stage miracle of the healing of the blind man (8:22-26), which is found only in Mark and thematically catches the motif of blindness, preparing for the two-stage awakening of the disciples at Caesarea (8:27-33) and the mount of transfiguration (9:1-8). These events launch this major section, which is organized around the three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). In it Christ seeks to correct the major deficiency in the Marcan messianic secret, the inability of the disciples to understand the type of Messiah Christ came to be.³¹ This episode comes between the transfiguration and the second passion prediction and highlights just the sort of problem Jesus faces in his attempt to open the eyes of his disciples to the truth.

Mark 8:27-10:45 primarily centers upon Jesus' teaching regarding the way of the cross. The disciples are the focus, as Christ seeks to increase their understanding regarding (1) his own path of suffering and (2) the necessity of their participation in that messianic path. Quentin Quesnell has shown that Mark has concentrated nearly all of his "universal moral directives" in this section.³² These primarily concern radical discipleship—e.g., "losing one's life" (8:35) or "taking up one's cross" (8:34) and "being last and servant of all" (9:35). Quesnell goes so far as to say that the entire first half (1:1-8:26) anticipates this section, when the true impact of the Son of Man would become known.³³ Therefore the passage must be understood in light of the ongoing discipleship stress of this section. It is interesting to note that the scene comes at the same position in this section that the temptation scene occurs in the first half of the gospel. As the latter follows the baptism—the first supernatural revelation of Christ's significance—and tests Jesus' faithfulness to that event, this follows the transfiguration—the second supernatural manifestation—and tests the disciples' faithfulness.

Just as importantly, several major Marcan themes coalesce in this episode, primarily the cosmic conflict with Satan and the discipleship failure motifs. These combine with the ongoing lifting of the messianic secret, which had begun in the transfiguration event but would occur only in stages until the final solution in the resurrection event. Here we have one of the few episodes where Christ allowed publicity (cf. Mark 5:19-20 with 1:25, 44; 3:22; 4:10-11; 5:6-7, 43; 7:36; 8:26; 9:9). With this context in mind, it is amazing that Eduard Schweitzer could

³¹On 8:22-10:52 see chap. 3 of the forthcoming doctoral dissertation by G. Waybright, "Discipleship and Possessions in the Gospel of Mark: A Narrative Study" (Marquette University). In it he states that "Christology is . . . linked to discipleship in such a way that the latter cannot be separated from the former."

³²Q. Quesnell, *The Mind of Mark: Interpretation and Method Through the Exegesis of Mark 6,52* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 134-138.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

make the major theme the "father's lack of faith"³⁴ for, as we will see below, the father is actually a foil for the disciples' lack of faith. Nor can I agree with Achtemeier: "The point is that God's power at work in Jesus is so strong that neither imperfect (verse 24) nor even absent (verse 19) faith can thwart it."³⁵ While this is much closer to the primary themes, Achtemeier reacts too much to the internal intricacies of the story itself and fails to take sufficient cognizance of the surrounding text. Much closer is Rudolf Pesch, who sees in it the juxtaposition of the disciples' misunderstanding and the power of faith.³⁶ When we add to this the cosmic conflict theme, the background of the story is complete.

1. *Introduction (vv 14-16)*. Several elements in this scene form a transition from the idealistic glory of the transfiguration scene to the realistic problems of discipleship in a sinful world. First, the contrast is laid between the three who were with Christ on the mount and the "other disciples" (v 14a) who were arguing with the crowd. Second, the "large crowd" is often seen in Mark (5:21, 24; 6:34; 8:1; 12:37) as a group flocking to Jesus but "like sheep without a shepherd" (9:35) and without understanding. Here the stylistic use of contrast is utilized as Mark stresses the conflict in the situation between Jesus' approach (as they are "arguing" with the other disciples) and their reaction upon seeing Jesus (they are "greatly amazed"). The contrast is quite stark. "Wonder" is a favorite Marcan concept and elsewhere occurs only as a reaction to Jesus' deeds. Only here does it occur at the beginning of a story, and the turn-around of the crowd is significant. As Lane states, its effect is to place Jesus in the center of the narrative. All attention is focused upon him.³⁷ Jesus' question apparently silences the debate as he takes control of the situation.

2. *The conflicts (vv 17-22)*. In this section the basic themes are introduced. Due to the centrality of these motifs, we will discuss them in order.

(1) The cosmic conflict. The importance of the demonic is exemplified in even a cursory reading of the passage. The effects of the demon are repeated four times (vv 18, 20, 22, 26). The repetition is so startling that it is a prime reason why many think two different versions of the episode have been combined by

³⁴E. Schweitzer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Richmond: John Knox, 1970) 186. In contrast N. Perrin, *Christology and a Modern Pilgrimage* (ed. H. Dieter Betz; Missoula: Scholars, 1974) 7-8, compares 9:14-29 to 9:38-50, arguing concerning the two "symmetrical appendices" in the narrative flow of 8:22-10:52 that "the first concerns disciples unsuccessful in exorcism and the second a non-disciple successful in exorcism. . . . Mark is throwing the failure of the disciples themselves into very sharp relief."

³⁵P. Achtemeier, *Invitation to Mark* (Garden City: Image, 1978) 135.

³⁶R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium, II Teil, Kommentar zu Kap. 8,27-16,20* (HTKNT; Basel: Herder, 1977) 84-86. R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 2. 24-25, speaks of "the necessity of faith"; and L. Williamson, *Mark* (Interpretation series; Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) 164, describes it as "faith and lack of faith."

³⁷W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 33 ff. H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (Greenwood: Attic, 1976) 230, speaks of Jesus' "supreme authority" in the scene.

Mark.³⁸ Further, Matthew's version in 17:14-19 stresses only the epilepsy, and the demonic is only mentioned in passing, when Jesus "cures" the boy in 17:18. In Luke 9:37-42 the demonic element is more central, but even there the symptoms are mentioned only twice (vv 39, 42). Mark's redundancy, I would argue, is not a wooden compilation of sources but rather is due to thematic reasons. It has long been recognized that Mark's portrait of Jesus as a miracle-worker centers especially on his conflict with Satan. The scene is set initially in his triumph over Satan in the wilderness, but the programmatic statement occurs in 3:27 where Satan is in effect "bound in his house" by Christ.

The exorcisms in the book in effect are the demonstration of this theme. At Capernaum and in Gennesaret the demons' plea that Jesus not destroy them (1:24; 5:10-12), and their tendency to state his name (e.g. 1:24; 5:7), is actually part of the conflict, as they seek by uttering his hidden name to gain control over him. Jesus' victory is final³⁹ and is offered to the Church. In fact the battle is lopsided, for the victory is secure. There is never a question as to who will win, for Jesus' authority over the spirits is absolute.

Rhoads and Michie note a crucial aspect at this point.⁴⁰ While Jesus has bound the strong man/Satan and plundered his goods, his authority over people is not absolute. The only limitation on his power occurs when the people of Nazareth reject him. Then "he could no longer perform any miracle" except healing a few sick people and "marveled at their unbelief" (Mark 6:5-6). While he could control demons, he could not force faith upon people. Moreover this conflict is central in our episode and bridges over into the next theme. Power over demons is a sign that the kingdom was present, and Jesus' disciples participate in that power. In 3:15 he extends his authority to the disciples, and in 6:13 they actually exorcise demons. Yet while the kingdom has begun and Satan is defeated, the latter continues to be the "god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4) and "prince of the powers of the air" (Eph 2:2).

The conflict in this period between the "already" and the "not yet" is distinctly reflected here. The symptoms, with the combination of severe epilepsy with an inability to speak or hear, are aggravated by repeated attempts on the part of the demon "to destroy the youth by hurling him into a fire or water" (9:20, 22, 26) and "indicate that the purpose of demonic possession is to distort and destroy the image of God in man."⁴¹ The demons cannot stand against Jesus

³⁸See Anderson, *Mark* 229; Pesch, *Markusevangelium* 84-85; Williamson, *Mark* 164. The theory is that the first tradition encompasses vv 14-19 and is centered upon the faithlessness of the disciples, while the other is found in vv 20-27 and concerns the "paradox of 'unbelieving faith'" (Anderson) on the part of the father.

³⁹P. Achtemeier, *Proclamation Commentaries: Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 72, states: "Jesus' acts of power, particularly his exorcisms, thus demonstrate his mastery over Satan, and show to that extent at least that the power by which he acts is the power of God." See also his "Miracles and the Historical Jesus in Mark 9:14-29," *CBQ* 37 (1975) 471-491, where he applies this to this passage.

⁴⁰D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 78.

⁴¹Lane, *Mark* 331.

but have great power in this age. The disciples are in between, with power derived from Jesus (3:15; 6:13) and yet a tendency to trust in themselves rather than their Lord, with the resultant failure seen in this episode. This leads us to the following theme.

(2) Discipleship failure. The disciples somehow cannot maintain the pace begun in 3:15; 6:13 and are unable to surmount their own inadequacies. It is clear in the context that this is a crisis of faith. This is seen in the context of Jesus' reaction in v 19. Certainly the epithet "O faithless generation" is part of Jesus' grief at the dilemma of man as a whole. However, it is primarily directed at the disciples, who are unable to cast out the demon.

This must have reminded Jesus of the similar failure of the disciples to understand his coming demise in Jerusalem, for he adds, "How long am I to be with you? How long am I to put up with you?" This is in keeping with the basic tone of this central section. The disciples' failure to experience victory in the cosmic conflict is connected to their failure to understand Jesus' messianic office and its implications for their own lives.

In fact, this explains the narrative role of the father. While in one sense he has an incomplete faith, on another plane he is the perfect foil to the disciples. Mark has already used the Syrophenician woman's faith (7:24-30; cf. 6:52; 8:17), and the father here has the same function. Note that his incomplete faith (vv 21-22) immediately follows upon the disciples' faithlessness (vv 18-29) and repeats that phenomenon. At the same time the father's faith is deeper than that of the disciples and shows a glimmer of hope upon which Jesus builds his challenge ("If you can").

Rhoads and Michie discuss the development of the narrative place of the disciples and Jesus in Mark.⁴² From the disciples' perspective things move much too fast for the disciples. They cannot understand either Jesus' deeds or his words. The concept of a Messiah who must die is beyond their comprehension. Their value system is still tied to this world (this explains the constant comparisons between the disciples and the authorities, as in this episode), and they are unable to adjust to the new value system of the kingdom age. For Jesus there is frequent frustration as his power over the demonic and natural realms is not extended to the disciples. The tension that results from this conflict is never quite resolved, for the failure extends up to the moment of the resurrection as the women "say nothing to anyone, for they are afraid" (16:8). Yet there are glimmers throughout, and the reader is left with the explanation that the resurrection will resolve the messianic secret and the problem of discipleship (9:9; 14:28; 16:7).

Rhoads and Michie believe that the text has the reader identify with Jesus, but I do not think it is as simple as that. The reader is in the post-resurrection setting and has reverence for the disciples. S/he is caught up in the optimism of the early chapters, and the disciples are called (1:16-20), commissioned (3:13-19), and sent (6:7-13) to partake of Jesus' authority. As they stumble, fail, become blind and experience the ultimate "hardness of heart" (6:52; 8:17) in 3:14-8:26

⁴²Rhoads and Michie, *Mark* 89-100, 122-129. J. C. Meagher, *Clumsy Construction in Mark's Gospel: A Critique of Form- and Redaktionsgeschichte* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979) 137, shows how often Mark stresses the disciples' failure and follows it up with Jesus' remonstrance and then resolution of the problem: 4:40 (cf. vv 38-39); 7:18 (cf. vv 19-23); 8:33 (cf. vv 34-38); 9:19 (cf. vv 28-29).

the reader cannot fail to see his/her own discipleship problems in them. In the central section (8:27-10:52) Jesus is not so much frustrated as patient. The key here is Jesus as teacher,⁴³ and the best analogy would be a "learning disabilities" instructor. The disciples are "learning disability" children, and Jesus portrays all the characteristics of such a teacher—patience, love, repetition, and a realism that refuses to allow the disciples to rationalize their failure. Thus the outcome is not so negative as Rhoads and Michie assert. Mark's intention in 9:14-29 is to allow the reader to come to grips with both his/her own lack of faith and Jesus' acceptance of disciples in all ages in spite of failure.

3. *The solution (vv 23-29)*. In one sense this bridges the sections of the pericope, for vv 23-27 complete the miracle story while vv 28-29 form the concluding episode within it. On the other hand, in the narrative flow the disciples are corrected in two stages, first in the lesson for the father (vv 23-24) and second in Jesus' response to the disciples' question (vv 28-29). Therefore this outline reflects that dimension. The transition, as stated above, is the father's confession of his incomplete faith, and Jesus immediately builds upon that. The opening phrase of Jesus' response, "If you can," could be translated "with reference to 'if you can'" and shows he is sympathetic with the father's dilemma. Then Jesus gives him the first answer to discipleship failure: "All things are possible for the one who believes." In other words, the key is faith contra the disciples, the "faithless ones." Jesus is defining faith as that surrender to the power of God who alone can accomplish the impossible (Mark 10:27; cf. 5:36; 11:23-24). In the midst of unbelief and incomplete faith Jesus calls the father to a capitulation to the presence of the Father.⁴⁴ This in essence is the key point of the entire narrative. Indeed both aspects (in vv 23-29), the call to faith and the call to prayer, center upon the necessity of dependence upon God.

The father's response ("I believe; help my unbelief") is the high point of the narrative. Far from an incomplete faith, it expresses the type of realism that is the hallmark of discipleship. In the dynamic of narrative development, the placement of this between Jesus' challenge and the healing of the child renders the plea the key to the operative power of God in the situation. In fact the two-stage healing acts this out in history. As with Jesus' challenge in v 23, the first state occurs at the level of the father's belief-unbelief tension. The conflict with the demonic again occurs, and the boy seems to be dead. The scene in vv 26-27 is certainly reminiscent of the raising of Jairus' daughter (5:35-43),⁴⁵ and again the

⁴³For an excellent discussion of this see R. T. France, "Mark and the Teaching of Jesus," *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1 (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 101-136. He correctly shows that Mark is much more than an action-oriented gospel, for he centers upon Jesus' teaching office. This is especially true in this central section.

⁴⁴See Lane, *Mark* 333-334; Pesch, *Markusevangelium* 92-97; J. Grilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* 11/2 (EKKNT; Zürich: Benziger, 1979) 47-50. As E. Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981) 69, asserts, "His simultaneous possession of faith and his need of it represent the attitude of those who would become disciples, who wish to experience in themselves the saving power of Christ."

⁴⁵Lane, *Mark* 334-335, thinks that the death-resurrection language is literal and that this was truly a two-stage miracle. However, the text specifically states that "many said that he was dead." There is no hint that actual death occurred.

power of God was victorious.

The epilogue (vv 28-29) restates this central theme but does so now in private.⁴⁶ Such scenes occur frequently (4:10; 7:17; 9:28; 10:10) and continue the theme extending from 4:11, that the "mysteries of the kingdom" are reserved for the elect. The disciples' question ("Why could not we do it?") returns to the issue of discipleship and powerlessness. Jesus' response that such exorcisms cannot occur "except by prayer" points the disciples in the same direction in which he had pointed the boy's father—namely, toward faith in God. Jesus' followers undoubtedly thought they had control or authority over demons in and of themselves. The message here is that it is a vertical rather than a horizontal authority. Power to live the Christian life and to be "more than conquerors" (Rom 8:37) in the cosmic conflict is not an automatic guarantee but a constant need for renewed submission to the divine power within. "Prayer in Mark is not pious manipulation of God to get what we want, but communing with God in the wilderness where Satan is confronted and overcome (1:12, 35; 6:46) and wrestling alone in the night to submit one's own will to that of God (14:32-42)."⁴⁷

The cosmic conflict, contra many nonevangelicals, is a supracultural phenomenon that is at the epicenter of spiritual problems today. We do not have to elaborate such aspects as the growth of the occult or demonic elements within government (2 Thess 2:3-5; Revelation *passim*). Suffice it to state that no Christian dare ignore the spiritual warfare within which we are embroiled and the necessity of preparation for that conflict (Eph 6:10-18).

More must be said about the whole issue of discipleship failure, in Mark so closely tied to the messianic secret. In the success-oriented society within which we reside, Christians tend to believe that discipleship failure should not occur. For this the healthy realism of Mark is a valuable antidote. Jesus does not reject the floundering follower. Rather, he forces each one to recognize his/her deficiencies and to come to grips with them.⁴⁸ One passage constantly misused in this regard is Ps 66:18, which in many versions reads, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear." That verse is part of a thanksgiving hymn (vv 13-20) in which the psalmist is praising God for listening to his prayer. The statement of v 18 is a past reflection and therefore should be translated, "If I had *cherished* sin in my heart." Individual "sins" do not close the doors of heaven to our prayers. The old adage, "Your prayers go no higher than the ceiling," is not always true. As Delitzsch has stated, "A hypocritical prayer coming from a heart which has not its aim sincerely directed towards Him, He does not hear."⁴⁹ The

⁴⁶Grilka, *Evangelium* 49-50, and many others call this a secondary Marcan conclusion, but the parallels with the earlier statement to the father (vv 23-24) make this unnecessary. The prayer statement expands the basic theme of the episode. See the discussion of "watchfulness and prayer" in H. C. Kee, *Community of the New Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 160-162.

⁴⁷Williamson, *Mark* 166.

⁴⁸A parallel passage is John 20:1-29, where Christ meets each (descending) level of faith at the point of his/her need and raises it to ever greater heights.

⁴⁹F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 2. 238.

key is that one's spiritual direction has changed, not that failure has occurred in this or that area. The disciples had clearly been misdirected here in Mark 9, but they had not lost their "aim."

The major focus is the necessity of faith and prayer to counter both the cosmic forces arrayed against us and the problem of self-dependence. First, we are pointed beyond ourselves to the ultimate source of power—God. As Williamson concludes, "To disciples of every age, the text offers a great promise: 'All things are possible to him who believes.' Its deepest thrust, however, points beyond the faith or prayer of disciples to the source of healing and wholeness: 'Bring him (her) to me.'"⁵⁰ Second, faith and prayer becomes the ordained means by which the disciple "denies self" (8:34; cf. 9:35) and partakes of that divine strength.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to update the issue of the place of a nuanced redaction criticism and to provide a practical demonstration of its value. In preaching the gospels we must allow each evangelist to present his own message. The old days of automatic harmonization are over. No longer can we stress the single intent of every author in the Bible *except* the four evangelists. While they did not create episodes, each one did select and color specifically chosen stories to present a unified message to a specific audience within a specific situation. Therefore a combination of redaction criticism and narrative hermeneutics can best unlock those divinely inspired homilies. While in one sense this is not different from schools of the past, especially the Antiochian school in the late patristic period, in another sense the gospels were never treated quite this way because of peculiar views regarding the primacy of Matthew and a general harmonizing approach to the gospels. In actuality this is not new, for we are applying to the gospels techniques that have been utilized upon the rest of Scripture for centuries. In effect we are simply Biblical theologians, seeking to let the individual emphases of each sacred evangelist speak to us.

⁵⁰Williamson, *Mark* 167.