SIDNEY GREIDANUS

SOLA SCRIPTURA

Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts

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Sola Scriptura

Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts
By Greidanus, Sidney
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To Marie
Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION .............................................. 1

I. GENERAL ORIENTATION

HOMILETICS AND HERMENEUTICS .......................... 4
EXEMPLARY INTERPRETATION AND PREACHING .......... 8
  From Clement to the Present ........................... 9
  In Germany, America, and Holland .................... 11
THE DUTCH CONTROVERSY “EXEMPLARISCH–HEILSHISTORISCH” . 18

II. SURVEY OF THE EXEMPLARY–REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL CONTROVERSY

THE BACKGROUND OF THE CONTROVERSY ................ 22
  The “New Direction” in the Gereformeerde Kerken ...... 22
  Philosophy .............................................. 23
  Theology ................................................. 25
  Homiletics .............................................. 27
  The Critique of Contemporary Trends ................... 29
    Outwardly Directed: Dialectic Theology .............. 29
    Inwardly Directed: “Subjectivism” ................... 33
THE CONTROVERSY ITSELF .................................. 39
  The Redemptive-Historical Approach ................... 39
  The Exemplary Approach ................................ 42
  The Dilemma ............................................ 45

THE FADE-OUT OF THE CONTROVERSY ..................... 50
  World War II ........................................... 50
  Doctrinal Differences and Secession .................... 50
  Retreat of the Redemptive-Historical Approach ........ 52
  Altered Theological Climate .......................... 54
III. OBJECTIONS TO THE EXEMPLARY APPROACH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECTIONS TO THE EXEMPLARY VIEW OF SCRIPTURE</th>
<th>56</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Primacy of Scripture as Source of Illustrations</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Persons in the Historical Preaching-Text as Examples</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECTIONS TO THE EXEMPLARY METHOD OF INTERPRETING HISTORICAL TEXTS</th>
<th>60</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Illustrative Interpretation</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fragmentary Interpretation</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Atomistic Interpretation</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECTIONS TO THE EXEMPLARY PREACHING OF HISTORICAL TEXTS</th>
<th>65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Preaching</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropocentric Preaching</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture Optional</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Historical Equation Mark</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologizing</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritualizing</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moralizing</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typologizing</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECTIONS TO EXEMPLARY-SUBJECTIVE PREACHING</th>
<th>86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Objective-Subjective Combination</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Explication—Application Dualism</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Subjective Preaching</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Multiple Application</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Faculties of Man</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECTIONS TO USING THE PREACHERS IN SCRIPTURE AS EXAMPLES</th>
<th>103</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examples for Homiletics and Hermeneutics</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples for Exemplary Preaching: 1 Cor. 10, Heb. 11, James 5</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. THE REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL APPROACH

REDEMPTIVE REVELATIONAL HISTORY .......................... 121
Common Postulate: History, Unity, Progression ............... 122
Disputed Inferences ............................................. 125

THE REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL METHOD OF INTERPRETING HISTORICAL TEXTS ............................................. 131
The Foundational Function of Redemptive History ....... 131
The Organic Interpretation ....................................... 135
The Synthetic Interpretation ..................................... 137

REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL PREACHING OF HISTORICAL TEXTS .................................................. 140
Theocentric Preaching ............................................. 140
Christocentric Preaching ........................................ 141
Sola Scriptura ...................................................... 146
Historical Preaching .............................................. 148
The Psychical as a Constituent Part ......................... 149
The Events as Concrete Historical Facts ................. 150
The Intent of the Text ........................................... 151
Typology .......................................................... 151

PREACHING THE WORD .......................................... 153
The Sermon as God’s Word ....................................... 154
The Sermon as Applicatory Explication ..................... 157
The Preacher as Herald ......................................... 160
Thematic Preaching ............................................. 162
The Word Addressed to the Heart ......................... 167

TEXTUAL, EXPOSITORY PREACHING .......................... 168
The Historical Preaching-Text: its Selection and Scopus .... 169
Expository Preaching ............................................. 171
V. CRITIQUE

THE HERMENEUTIC USE OF THE PROGRESSION IN REDEMPTIVE HISTORY 174
  Schematism ........................................... 174
  Speculation .......................................... 176
  Objectivism ......................................... 180
    Progressive Revelation ............................ 181
    Progressive Redemptive History ................. 187

THE CHARACTERIZATION OF HISTORICAL TEXTS ......................... 191
  The Foundational Function of Historical Texts ................. 192
  The Identification of Historical Texts and Historical Facts .. 194
  Historical and Normative Authority .................... 195
    Inspiration and Inerrancy .......................... 200
  The Harmonization of Historical Texts ................... 203

VI. PRINCIPLES FOR PREACHING HISTORICAL TEXTS

THE SCOPE OF HISTORICAL TEXTS ................................ 214

THE SELECTION OF THE HISTORICAL PREACHING-TEXT .................. 217

THE HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION .................................. 218

THE ORGANIC INTERPRETATION ..................................... 221

THEOCENTRIC-CHRISTOCENTRIC PREACHING ............................ 224

TEXTUAL-THEMATIC PREACHING ..................................... 226

RELEVANT PREACHING ........................................... 229

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ........................................... 235

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................... 237
Introduction

Every preacher of the Word is faced with certain problems when he prepares a sermon on a historical text of Scripture. A preacher standing in the tradition of the Reformation realizes that he must preach the Word and only the Word. He professes with the Belgic Confession (art. VII): “Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom... as of equal value with the truth of God...” He realizes that the Reformation’s sola Scriptura remains the fundamental criterion also for his preaching. No matter how sound a church’s doctrine of Scripture may be, when her preachers use the texts of Scripture as launching pads for dogmas or their own ideas, the profession of sola Scriptura is undermined by those who should be its exponents. Preachers are ministers, servants of the Word, also when preaching historical texts. Perhaps the awareness of this responsibility and of the problems involved in preaching historical texts has resulted in the disuse of many Scripture passages as preaching-texts. On the other hand, an insufficient awareness of the problems involved may be the cause for the frequent misuse of historical preaching-texts. But whether it be disuse or misuse, in neither case do we honor the Bible for what we profess it to be: God’s Word to his people.

The Nature of this Study

Central in this study is a hermeneutical-homiletical controversy concerning the preaching of historical texts. This conflict, known as the exemplary — redemptive-historical controversy (“exemplarisich — heilshistorisch”), raged in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Holland during the 1930’s and early 1940’s. Although it brought many minds and pens into action, its fruit lies buried beneath the rubble of a world war and a church schism. Our major object will be to uncover this past controversy, to gain a clear view of the two opposing theories, to gather and systematize their arguments, in short, to recover the issues of the controversy. From that point of view, this dissertation may be termed a historical study.
We do not wish to stop, however, at a mere historical analysis of the theories presented some thirty years ago. The controversy offers a stimulus for rethinking our present practice of interpreting and preaching historical texts, for it exposed many weaknesses in the traditional, "exemplary" approach — weaknesses which are, in the main, still with us today. We shall try, therefore, to carry into the present the fruitful themes of this past controversy, to show its contemporary relevance, and, with the aid of present-day insights, to formulate a few guidelines for interpreting and preaching historical texts.

Mode of Presentation

For the sake of orientation and to show the contemporary relevance of the controversy, we shall begin our presentation with a brief introductory chapter (I). Starting out on the broad base of homiletics and hermeneutics, it leads via a section on past and present exemplary interpretation and preaching to the Dutch controversy. Chapter II sketches the historical context of the controversy and offers a bird's-eye view of its course. The core of this study consists of chapters III and IV, which present the issues of the controversy. Although one could follow the debate historically by tracing the development of the issues, either individually or collectively, or by tracing the development in the view of each individual author, all these procedures would be cumbersome, would lead to needless repetition, and would fail to bring the issues sharply into focus. We have, therefore, decided to follow another course. To disclose the connection of the seemingly diverse issues and to show clearly the pros and cons of each individual issue, we have opted for a topical presentation which retains the style of the debate between two camps. Chapter III contains the redemptive-historical side's objections to the exemplary approach together with the exemplary side's defense, while chapter IV presents the redemptive-historical approach together with the exemplary side's objections. These two chapters have been developed in parallel fashion. The reader thus has an option either to read through each chapter in its entirety in order to discern the interrelationship of all issues, or, by referring to the Table of Contents, to skip from one chapter to the other in order to take in the pros and cons of each individual issue. In chapter V we critically examine several key assumptions of the redemptive-historical approach, drawing into our evaluation the exemplary approach as well. In conclusion, we round off this study with a brief chapter (VI) suggesting a few guidelines for preaching historical texts.

Language, Sources, Documentation

Since we desire to acquaint English-speaking preachers with the hermeneu-
tical-homiletical insights which sprang up on Dutch soil, we have chosen to use only the English language in the text and to relegate all other languages to the footnotes. This choice has made it necessary to translate most of the quotations used in the text. Although several of our Dutch sources have been translated into English, these translations proved to be less than satisfactory for our purposes because often they fail to get across the specific point of the original Dutch text. For the sake of comparison, we frequently make a secondary reference (E) to these existing translations. When the note refers first to the original source, however, the translation of the quotation is entirely our responsibility. To avoid unnecessary duplication, the original Dutch quotation is cited in the footnotes only when this duplication is deemed of sufficient importance. We have tried to make the translations as literal as possible, retaining the liberty, however, to make stylistic changes in the interest of readability. One of these changes is the omission, without notification, of word emphasis. (In the pre-war Dutch text, it ranges from italics and letter-spacing through boldface type to normal and italicized capital letters). We have further taken the liberty of capitalizing the prefix before Dutch and German names and have entered these names accordingly in the alphabetical order of the bibliography.

The nature of this study requires that the original date of certain statements be immediately apparent. To achieve this, we have frequently entered these dates in the footnotes. When the date appears immediately behind the author’s name, it indicates the date when the statement was first made or published, while the reference is to a later, more readily available publication, such as a subsequent compilation. When the reference is to the earliest publication, the date has been entered in the usual manner, behind the title of the book or periodical. In general, however, the footnotes have been cut down to a bare minimum. Except for references to books and articles not entered in the Selected Bibliography, the notes usually will not repeat the information which can be found in the bibliography, such as: titles of articles, initials of authors, names of editors, compilers, or translators, and facts of publication. We have further reduced the size of the footnotes by freely abbreviating the titles of books and periodicals. Abbreviations which may present problems for locating the intended publication in the bibliography are explained in the List of Abbreviations. Finally, except for adding initials to identical names, both in the text and in the notes, all authors will be designated by their last name only.
Chapter I

General Orientation

HOMILETICS AND HERMENEUTICS

Central in this study is a controversy pertaining to the preaching of historical texts. Although this conflict can be called a homiletical controversy, it will soon become apparent that hermeneutics plays a major role. We do not consider this an illegitimate intrusion on the part of hermeneutics; on the contrary, it demonstrates once again that it is impossible to reduce homiletics to some formal technique concerning the art of communication.

Communication

In America much research has been done of late in the area of communication. The research clearly indicates that this discipline cuts right across the fields of psychology and sociology. One must also recognize, however, that there are various kinds of communication: a father communicates with his child, a teacher with his pupil, a chairman with his board, a senator with the senate, a preacher with his congregation. All of these are forms of communication; all have one thing in common: all use words to carry a message from the sender to the receiver. And yet each is distinct: the father speaks differently than does the teacher, the teacher than the chairman, the chairman than the senator, the senator than the preacher. The difference lies not so much in the fact that the senders are different (it may be one and the same person) nor in the fact that the receivers are different (they too could be the same). The difference lies rather in the different relationship between sender and receiver in each instance. In other words, it is the specific social structure — whether it be home, school, industry, state, or church — that determines the specific kind of communication.

Homiletics: Formal and Material

Homiletics deals with the communication taking place in the church. Because it is communication, homiletics cannot do without the aid of psychology and sociology. On the other hand, because homiletics deals with a special kind of communication — communication in the church — there is much more to it than a formal description of "how to get the message across." It is equally (if not more) concerned with "how to get the message."

This conviction is not new, of course: witness the traditional distinction between formal and material homiletics. In contrast to most English books on homiletics, however, this study places the accent on the material side. Our subject itself leads us in this direction, for we are dealing with a concrete controversy within the church — a controversy which refuses to be confined to anything like "formal homiletics." And rightly so, for, as we shall see, the root of the problem lies much deeper than the formal "how to get the message across"; it lies at the level of "how to get the message from Scripture." Although the distinction between formal and material homiletics may not be entirely fortunate, it does demonstrate that homiletics is concerned with the content of the sermon and its relation to Scripture at least as much as with the rules of rhetoric. It is by way of "material homiletics" that homiletics is firmly linked with the central concern of biblical hermeneutics.

The Preacher a Hermeneutist

Paul tells Timothy: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." 2 It requires effort to preach the Word "rightly"; it entails great responsibility, for the preacher does not speak for himself but is the spokesman for Another. 3 The preacher is in the original sense of the word a trans-lator, that is, one who transfers, who carries over the message of God. Furthermore, since he finds this message in Scripture in a foreign language, he must be a translator in the usual sense of the word. But he cannot begin to translate until he has understood the meaning, until he has interpreted the text. Thus the word "translator" shows something of the unity of the preacher's variegated task. A better but less common word is "hermeneutist." The preacher as hermeneutist expresses the fact that: (1) he interprets the Word, (2) he translates the Word, (3) he proclaims the Word, and (4) that these activities cannot be separated. 4 If the name "hermeneutist" accentuates

2 II Tim. 2:15. Unless otherwise indicated, the Revised Standard Version will be quoted throughout.
3 Cf. TWNT, III, 682-7:7, on "kerux."
4 Cf. TWNT, II, 659, on "hermeneuêo." We find this three-fold usage also in N.T.
that interpretation is part and parcel of proclamation, it might be well to call
the preacher a hermeneutist. We shall continue to use the common term
“preacher,” however, with the understanding that this word, too, implies the
unity of the task of him who would preach the Word and that its consequen-
ces will be drawn for homiletics.5

Homiletics Today

It is gratifying that, on the European continent at least, homiletics is coming
into its own. “Preaching is central in the theological discussions,” Bakker says.
“Every prominent debate touching, say, Barth, Bultmann, Von Rad, Pannen-
berg, Tillich, and Van Buren concerns the question of the content and rele-
vance of preaching. Whereas one could hardly speak of a theology of pro-
clamation in former days, and homiletics seemed to be a toolshed for tricks
of the trade, today everything seems to center around preaching: theology of
the Word, theology of proclamation, the redemptive event as Sprach-
geschehen — you name it.”6 We might say that hermeneutics has been the key
that unlocked the door of the toolshed in which homiletics had long been
imprisoned. For “the new hermeneutical discussion centers on the question
of the relevance of the Bible,”7 and that is particularly the concern of the
preacher. Although this new hermeneutical discussion gives a tremendously
broad base to homiletics, at the same time it threatens to erase the borders
between the various theological disciplines. For if Jonker is right that “trans-

Greek. Concerning (1), e.g., I Cor. 12:10, “the interpretation of tongues,” and Luke
24:27, Jesus “interpreted to them.” These instances also make clear that we are in
the habit of distinguishing that which is a unity (4) in “hermeneúō”: “the interpretation
of tongues” might equally well be rendered “the translation of tongues,” while “he
interpreted to them” might, with the King James Version, equally well be rendered
“he expounded to them.” The act of interpreting entails translating and voicing as
much as the act of proclaiming entails translating and interpreting. Concerning (2), e.g.,
I Cor. 12:10 (above), John 1:38, 41, 42, and Acts 9:36. Concerning (3), e.g., Luke
24:27 (above); cf. Acts 14:12: “Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they
called Hermes” (the Olympian god Hermes was considered to be a herald and messenger
of the gods).

5 Hoekstra says of homiletics: “Zij heeft tot object van onderzoek het ambt van
den dienaar des Woords, en speciaal die functie van het ambt, welke werkzaam is in
de diakonia tou logou te midden van de vergaderde gemeente des Heeren.” Gerefor-
meerde Homiletiek (1926), p. 12.

6 Hom., XXIV (1965), 253. In 1959 the name of this periodical was changed,
significantly, from Homiletica to Homiletica en Biblica in order to give expression to
the increased range of subjects covered. See also M. Doerne, “Homilerk,” Die
Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, III, 440, on recent developments in Germany:
“Die Predigt wird also zur methodischen Perspektive der christlichen Theologie durch-
weg . . . .

7 Koole, Hermeneutische Oriëntatie (1962), p. 4.
lating the gospel for the present is really the main motive of the theological inquiries of men like Barth, Von Rad, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Ebeling, Fuchs, Tillich, and Frör,"8 we have not only a company of theologians of different stripes but dogmatics, O.T. scholars, and N.T. scholars — all scrambled together. The connecting link is hermeneutics.9 We may fret about the obliteraton of clear-cut borders, but it is a healthy development in that it shows both the unity of the theological disciplines and their subservient nature (no theological discipline is an end in itself) to their common goal — preaching.

The idea that homiletics covers such a broad area is quite in line with the conception of the Reformed homiletician Hoekstra. He defined homiletics as "that theological science whose object of investigation is the administration of the Word in the assembled congregation of Christ."10 Although Hoekstra's definition might perhaps allow for a conception of homiletics which is purely formal, the greater part of his book deals with material homiletics. For "the administration of the Word" entails that "the minister must translate the Word of God as purely as possible."11 Here hermeneutics must of necessity enter the picture, and Hoekstra goes so far as to speak of "the homiletical interpretation"12 and, elsewhere, of "homiletical exegesis."13 The adjective "homiletical" is meant to give expression to the fact that the objective of this interpretation or exegesis is to serve the administration of the Word in the church of Christ14 — a goal for which we hardly require an adjective today.

We have tried to give some impression of the tremendous size of the field of investigation for those working in the area of homiletics. Countless are the avenues which open up to the investigator.15 Unlike most others, this disser-

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9 The connection, by way of hermeneutics, of O.T. and N.T. disciplines with homiletics is expressed by Frör, Bibliehe Hermeneutik (1964), p. 15: "Es gehört zu den wesentlichen Ergebnissen der theologischen Hermeneutik der Gegenwart, dass sie mit besonderem Nachdruck die notwendige Einheit des hermeneutischen und des kerygmatischen Dienstes betont. Beides kann nicht voneinander getrennt werden, wie es in der vom positivistischen Historismus bestimmten Theologie lange Zeit der Fall war. Die hermeneutische Arbeit zielt letztlich auf den Vollzug der Predigt heute und kommt erst darin zu ihrer letzten Erfüllung." For the relation between dogmatics and preaching by way of hermeneutics, see, e.g., Kuijpers, De Mensvormingheid Gods (1962), pp. 8f., 301f.
10 Homiletiak (1926), p. 12.
11 "Vertolken." Ibid., p. 281.
13 "Homiletische Exegese," GTT, XXXII (1932), 505–519. This exegesis is called "homiletical" to distinguish it from and to encompass other kinds, such as grammatical, historical, psychological, pneumatic, and theological exegesis.
14 "Ge kunt dus by de homiletische exegese van verschillende soorten exegese gebruik maken, wanneer ge maar bedenkt, dat alles dienstbaar wordt aan de bediening des Woords, in de gemeente des Heeren." Ibid., p. 512.
15 See, e.g., the broad range of subjects covered by Müller, Die Lewende Woord
tation will not analyze a small area in detail: to gain an over-all-view has its own peculiar advantages. Nevertheless, lest we get sidetracked, it is imperative that we restrict ourselves from time to time. We do so now as we narrow our focus to the still broad area of exemplary interpretation and preaching.

EXEMPLARY INTERPRETATION AND PREACHING

The controversy which we shall analyze in this study has gone down in history as the "exemplary — redemptive-historical controversy." It has literally gone down in history: confined to one church (among many) in a small country, it did not have the earth-shaking effect that many lesser controversies in other countries have had; and even in Holland itself, though the name may still be known, the issues have for all practical purposes (preaching) been forgotten. Though there may be explanations for this (the war, the succession, the bitterness and complexities, the altered theological climate), there is hardly an excuse. We have no desire to break open old sores, but it should be possible to recover the controversy's worthwhile considerations for the practice of preaching without raising the hostility and antagonism of a former day.

In the 1930's a number of men in the Gereformeerde Kerken raised objections to the usual practice of preaching in that church. Simply put, their complaint was that the preachers, in preaching historical texts, would display the persons mentioned in the texts as models to be imitated, as examples to be followed — hence the term "exemplary preaching." The question arises where

aan die Mens van die Hede: 'n Bespreking van die Vrae rondom die Aktuele Woordverkondiging (1961).

16 We might just mention that one doesn't lose sight of the forest for the trees, while, in addition, the trees can be seen in proper perspective. A disadvantage, of course, is that one cannot examine each and every tree in detail. Worth considering in this connection is Marshall McLuhan's definition of a specialist: "The specialist is one who never makes small mistakes while moving toward the grand fallacy." Understanding Media, p. 124 (cited by P. Schouls, Man in Communication [CP 1968], p. 64).

17 We have not been able to find evidence that members of denominations other than the Gereformeerde Kerken took an active part in the controversy, though they often struggled with some of the same problems. See, e.g., I. Kleit, Voorwerpelijke Onderwerplike Prediking: Eisch der Heilige Schrift (2nd ed., 1939), and C. Graaf-land, Verschuivingen in de Gereformeerde Bondsprediking (1965). In 1961, Die Kerklblad of the Gereformeerde Kerk in South Africa did carry a miniature debate on "Eksemplariiese Predikting" without, however, breaking any new ground. On an even more reduced scale the Christian Reformed De Wachter, April 15, 1969, carried one article on the subject.

18 On at least four occasions a proposition regarding this controversy was defended at a promotion at the Free University: Ph. J. Huyser (1941), L. Batelaan (1942), L. Pramaamsa (1945), and R.H. Bremmer (1961).
this way of preaching originated. Although we do not hear this charge in the controversy, our first inclination might be to suspect the influence of 19th century Liberalism with its personality idea. Does not Schleiermacher’s school see history as the depiction of the religious consciousness in individual persons, and the biblical texts as witnesses to cases of pious consciousness which, in being proclaimed, are beneficial to the religious consciousness of the congregation? And does not Troeltsch attempt to salvage something from the complete relativism of historical criticism by pointing in the same direction? The personality idea is used as the bridge to relevant preaching. “The great personalities in the Bible are conceived of as the visible embodiment of the religious-ethical ideas which are to affect the inner life of the hearers.” The biblical persons are models deserving imitation. Liberal theology and exemplary preaching go hand in hand — and yet, to look for the roots of exemplary preaching in Liberal theology is anachronistic. No one less than Bultmann calls attention to the fact (and that, as we shall see, not accidentally) that the exemplary approach was already practiced in the first century.

From Clement to the Present

I Clement, says Bultmann, generally uses the O.T. as a “book of ethical models,” or, in Koole’s words, as a “picture gallery.” Good examples are the patriarchs, Lot, Moses, Job, Rahab, David, Elijah, Elisha, and Ezekiel. All these are worthy of imitation. In addition to these good examples, the O.T. also contains many bad examples — e.g., Cain, the wife of Lot, Esau — whose actions must be stunned.

Although Clement clearly uses the exemplary approach, it is doubtful that he is its originator. One could point beyond him to the Greek or Roman tradition, or, as Bultmann intimates, to the homiletical tradition of the syna-

19 See Frür, p. 28.
20 Ibid., p. 30.
21 Cf. Hoekstra, Homiletiek, p. 94, on F. Niebergall: “De bijbelse persoonlijk hedens dienen als modellen, welke we moeten navolgen. Men eischt tegenwoordig Erlebnispredigt, maar daar onze eigen Erlebnisse spoedig uitgeput zijn, worden de Erlebnisse van de historische typen en gestalten voor ons van beteekenis.”
23 “Het OT is voor Clemens een beeldengalerij.” De Overname, p. 68.
24 Ibid., and Bultmann, Theologie, § 10, 2, p. 95.
25 Lord Chesterfield (1755), e.g., appeals to Dionysius, a Greek rhetorician (30 B.C.), for his thesis that “History is [moral] Philosophy teaching by examples.” Quoted by Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, p. 87, n. 3. See also below, chapter III, n. 176.
I doubt that the origin of the exemplary approach can be located in any one source; it seems to spring up wherever men are searching for the meaningfulness of past events, the relevance of history. It is this that gives the exemplary approach an almost universal appeal, and it is this that gives our topic such broad relevance.

Clement viewed the Bible as a "book of ethical models," a "picture gallery." This exemplary approach to Scripture leads, almost of necessity, to exemplary preaching. In reporting the liturgy of the worship services, Justin Martyr relates that preachers liked to choose a historical text and urge the hearers to follow the good examples sketched. In the Middle Ages preaching the O.T. was recommended because "its stories fascinate people and mirror their lives." And so it went, century after century, exemplary preaching of historical texts; not even Luther and Calvin managed to elude this traditional way of preaching. According to Huyser: "All the subsequent Reformation-minded preachers — orthodox Lutherans, Calvinists, Puritans, Pietists, Methodists, and Baptists — walked in the footsteps of Luther and Calvin.... They saw it not only as their right but also as their bounden duty... to interpret and apply biblical history in an 'exemplary' way and thus to draw the line from the past to the present." It is not our intention to present a history of exemplary preaching but merely to give an impression of its long-lasting reign — a factor which ought to caution us against a hasty condemnation of the exemplary approach. It is too easy to say: "The question whether Abraham's offer or Elijah's slaying of the priests of Baal are examples for us is typically Western, rationalistic, and 'moralistic.'" Moralistic it may be, but the history of exemplary preaching seems to belie that it is typically Western and rationalistic.

In addition to this vertical, historical sampling, we can also take a horizon-

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26 Theologie, § 10, 2, pp. 95ff., and § 54, 2, p. 468. Others, often to sanction their own exemplary preaching, point to the existence of the exemplary approach in certain Bible passages, such as I Cor. 10, Hebrews 11, and James 5. These will be discussed in chapter III.
27 See Koole, De Overname, p. 69.
28 Hoekstra, Homiletiek, p. 68.
29 Reu, Homiletiek, p. 278, quotes Luther: "This is the right understanding of the whole O.T., — to keep in mind the fine sayings in the prophets concerning Christ, to comprehend and mark the fine examples, and to use the laws according to our good pleasure and turn them to our profit." Regarding Zwingli and Calvin, Reu writes (p. 280): "Zwingli's and especially Calvin's sermons on the O.T. have the following features in common with those of Luther. They present the O.T. saints as patterns and warning examples..." Cf. Huyser, GTT, L (1950), 208ff.
30 GTT, L (1950), 211. See pp. 205–212 for a brief history of exemplary preaching from Chrysostom to Spurgeon. On the Pietists, see also Harvelt, Over Schriften en Inspiratie, p. 26. On Roman Catholics by a Roman Catholic, see Weterman in Levende Zielorg, pp. 176, 179; by a Protestant, see H. H. Miskotte, Sensus Spiritualis (1966), which gives a survey, from a dogmatic point of view, of discussions among Roman Catholic authors of many of the problems we confront in this study.
tal, geographic sampling to show the extensive use of the exemplary approach today.

Germany

We have already had occasion to mention Bultmann. Bultmann is struggling with one of the central problems in theology today: the relevance of past events. He states very frankly that "the history of Israel is past and finished" for the Christian: "The events which were meaningful to Israel... have nothing to say to us."32 And yet Bultmann cannot do away with the O.T. as easily as Marcion and Harnack could. There is still a "theological relevance," namely, when we see this O.T. history as "a history of deterioration," of "miscarriage."33 For in its miscarriage it is a promise, "and we get the right to interpret that conflict... as one which belongs to human existence as such — the conflict of being created for God and called to God, and yet of being imprisoned in secular history."34 Aside from the law—gospel dialectic, the secular—eschatological dualism, and various other motifs, we are confronted here with what Bultmann calls the "existentielle Interpretation" ("interpret that conflict [historical events] as one which belongs to human existence as such"). Though highly refined, this too is a form of the exemplary approach; as Bultmann says: "We can see our image mirrored in the O.T."35 Wester- 

männ observes:

The history of God's people, recorded in the O.T., is to Bultmann ultimately only an illustration, an exemplum of human existence; the events which are recorded do not have the character of uniqueness. The "theological relevance" does not lie in the happening as such, but rather in this: that here an example of the failure of the history of salvation meets the believer just as the false way of salvation is shown to him by the

32 "Wer in der Kirche steht, für den ist die Geschichte Israels vergangen und ab- 

33 "Eine Geschichte des Scheiterns." Ibid., II, 186. This essay, "Weissagung und 
Erfüllung," has been published in English in Essays on O.T. Hermeneutics, pp. 70—73.

34 Bultmann in Essays, p. 74. In this article, Bultmann attacks the redemptive-historical theory presented by J. C. K. Hofmann, Weissagung und Erfüllung (1841-

44). Although different from the opposing theories we are dealing with, it gives us a view of the universality of the conflict: exemplary vs. redemptive-historical. This also becomes evident in Cullmann's Christ and Time, p. xxiv. "My new book... will attempt to rescue the term 'redemptive history' from being abused.... Many scholars... feel that redemptive-historical thinking has nothing to say to modern man who under- 

stands himself existentially."

35 Glauben und Verstehen, I, 336.
law, so that he does not fall victim to this temptation.... The course of
events within which God has truly given promise and fulfillment is
replaced by the two realms of a false and a true way of salvation. 36

A similar observation might be made regarding the position of the O.T.
scholar Friedrich Baumgärtel. Even though he specifically rejects an under-
standing of the O.T. "in an exemplary sense, as if the O.T. religious-ethical
ways of behavior are to serve the Christian as an example," 37 the cause for
this rejection lies not in the deficiency of the exemplary method but in the
deficiency of the Old Testament. For "the O.T. is a witness out of a
non-Christian religion"; "the O.T. is a witness from a religion outside the
gospel and therefore from a religion strange to us." 38 Baumgärtel subse-
tively tries to rescue the O.T. from complete irrelevancy for the Christian by means
of the basic promise "I am the Lord thy God." But in order to bring out this
relevance concretely, he resorts to the exemplary approach — not in the sense
of finding good examples worthy of imitation (it is, after all, the Old Testa-
ment), but more in the line of deterrent examples. 39 For instance, Baumgärtel
rightly rejects the positive example Vischer deduces from Judges 3 (Ehud
killing Eglon is a "cogent contribution of the Bible to the right of killing a
tyrant") only to posit the negative example: "This murder becomes immediate-
ly relevant for our faith, when we... begin to realize that we desire to act
just like the brave Ehud.... Indeed, we are Ehud." We should, therefore, un-
derstand "this story of Ehud as the judgment of God on my revolt against the holy
God, on my evil desire to sovereignly change the course of history by mur-
der...." 40 Elsewhere he asks: "Do not we ourselves again and again step into
the conditioned situation of the O.T....? Are not we ourselves Jehu, who
was a fighter for his church?" "We see ourselves as in a mirror. Thus we are
'Old Testament' men in the fore-court of the gospel...." 41

Bultmann and Baumgärtel — two leading German theologians — cannot
preach relevantly on an O.T. historical text except by way of the exemplary
approach. Preaching being relevant by definition, it speaks for them that they
seek to bridge the gap between the past event and the present audience, that
they search for relevance. Here the whole German discussion around Vergegen-
würtigung enters the picture. But whether exemplary preaching — positive or
negative — is the answer remains to be seen. In any event, we cannot reject

36 Essays, p. 127.
37 Verheissung, p. 145.
38 Baumgärtel, Essays, pp. 135 and 145.
39 Cf. Verheissung, p. 84: "Die genannten Aussagen werden dadurch für uns rele-

vant, dass wir sie als unsere eignen Aussagen erkennen... und so unter dem Evangelium
zur Erkenntnis unserer Sünde kommen und dann doch mit Israel zusammen das Wahr-
werden der Verheissung Gottes an uns erfahren dürften."
40 Ibid., pp. 94f. W. Vischer, Das Christuszeugnis der A.T., II, 89, speaks of
dieser kräftige Beitrag der Bibel zum Recht des Tyrannenmordes.
41 Essays, p. 155.
their exemplary approach simply because we detect Lutheran, Pietistic, or Existentialistic overtones, for the exemplary approach reigns in a broader area than Lutheran, Pietistic, or Existentialistic circles. To demonstrate this, we move briefly to our home church — a church which prides itself in its Calvinistic heritage — and to the American scene in general.

America

The Christian Reformed Church periodically publishes books of sermons which, though not intended for this purpose, enable us to gain a general notion of the kind of sermons preached. The most recent, available books, dating from 1954 and 1955, contain a total of 43 sermons\textsuperscript{42} (although date and number are a bit of a handicap, this sample is adequate for our purposes). To determine how many of these sermons are on historical texts and, of this number, how many are exemplary presents a few difficulties. All texts, of course, can be called historical because they arise in and are addressed to a specific historical situation. Generally, though, the term “historical text” signifies a text which, in distinction from, e.g., a prophetical, poetical, or dogmatical text, gives an account of a certain historical event. This does not alleviate all difficulties, however, for a prophetical book may be said to give, in its totality, an account of a certain historical event, and most do contain historical passages, while, vice versa, a historical account may contain prophetical, poetical, or dogmatical texts. And not only do our categories break down here and there, but the strange, yet common, practice of selecting a few words as text adds to the difficulties in classification. Where does one place a sermon which is supposedly based on a N.T. dogmatical text but which, because of a reference in the text to an O.T. person, turns out to be a sermon on an O.T. historical text? And where does one place a sermon which is based on a historical text but which, by abstracting a few words of direct discourse from the account, turns out to be a dogmatical sermon? We also encounter difficulties in the category “exemplary sermons”: Must a sermon be totally exemplary to be included in this category? Here we shall follow the procedure used in the controversy of calling “exemplary” all sermons which contain an exemplary element. Because of the above-mentioned difficulties, the following figures intend to convey only a general notion of the kind of sermons preached.

Of the 43 published sermons, then, only 8 are on the O.T., and of these 8, only 2 sermons are on historical texts. Does this perhaps indicate some hesitancy on the part of Christian Reformed ministers to preach the O.T., and particularly its historical texts? Of course, the N.T. also contains many his-

torical texts, so that, all told, we have 15 sermons on historical texts in our sample. Three of these do not lend themselves to exemplary preaching — one cannot be preached that way ("The Story of the Temple Veil"), while two need not be treated that way because of the immediate relevance of Jesus' birth and death. Of the remaining 12 sermons, all are exemplary — Saul, John the Baptist, the thief on the cross, the N.T. church, Levi, Israel, Abraham, the women at the sepulchre (twice), Lot's wife, Cain, and the disciples are either good examples, warning examples, or both. The result of our analysis looks as follows in percentages:

- O.T. text ... (8 out of 43) ... 19%
- O.T. historical text ... (2 out of 43) ... 5%
- O.T. and N.T. historical text ... (15 out of 43) ... 35%
- Exemplary on historical text ... (12 out of 15) ... 80%

However interesting these figures may be, we must not infer too much from our extremely small sample. But it does demonstrate to some extent the prevalence in the Christian Reformed Church of exemplary preaching on historical texts.43

This result is not overly surprising when one considers that exemplary preaching is quite common in the English-preaching world. One can pick up English works on homiletics almost at random to find the exemplary approach either advocated or presupposed. We shall give a few excerpts from some rather recent books in the field of homiletics. Stevenson states:

The universal appeal of the O.T. lies close to the realm of art. It has little to do with dates and places but much more to do with the ageless yearnings, struggles, guiltions, expiations, and aspirations of the human spirits.... When a Jacob or a Jonah comes marching out of the pages of the O.T. and begins to live before our eyes in the living element of his own throbbing times, the years that separate us begin to melt away, and, as in any work of art, we identify ourselves with our hero or discover ourselves in our villain — wailing at Bethel in shuddering awe at the uncomfortable nearness of God, or fleeing to Joppa with bag packed for faraway places to escape divine mandates that call us out of our narrowness to the wideness of God's mercy.44

Not only O.T. texts but also N.T. historical texts can be made relevant by means of the exemplary approach.45 Davis says:

43 This is also true for the meditations, which, because of their brevity, show the exemplary structure even more starkly. More of the same may be found in the booklets for catechumens; cf. the excerpts in De Graaff, CP 1969, pp. 21ff.
44 Preaching on the Books of the O.T. (1961), p. 3. Somewhat differently, Reu, Homiletics (1922), p. 272: "The preacher who wishes to illustrate the nature of faith by living biblical examples must go to the narratives of the O.T." Note also p. 282, however: "The progressiveness of divine revelation... forbids... the portrayal of O.T. saints as direct patterns of Christian faith and life."
45 See, e.g., The Theory of Preaching, pp. 159 and 162, where Phelps (1881)
Listening to this story, if it is well told, people will first meet a human being. The truth of existence will confront them... in the concrete form of a person so like themselves that they may compare and also identify themselves with him. They can sit with him in the presence of Jesus and go with him to the moment of supreme possibility and supreme testing.  

The exemplary approach is so common in the English-speaking world that Holwerda uses an English book to further illustrate for his Dutch students the (rejected) exemplary approach. He quotes from Driver:

The importance and real significance of the narrative lies in the *type of character* which they exhibit, and in the moral and spiritual lessons which, whether they are strictly historical or not, may be deduced from them. The patriarchs are *typoi hwmoun*; and in their biographies examples of faith and goodness — and also, sometimes, of unworthiness and moral failure — are set vividly and expressively before us.

These quotations should be sufficient to show the relevance of our topic for the American homiletical tradition. For good measure we conclude this section with quotations from Perry and Koller — quotations which speak for themselves:

**Preaching on Bible Characters** gives the minister an opportunity to set forth in a clear fashion the modern counterpart to the experience of a Biblical person. The use of this type of subject matter helps to make the Scriptures come alive with real persons who faced real situations, and with whose lives, difficulties, hopes and relationships God was immediately concerned and intimately involved.

There is an inexhaustible supply of material in the Scriptures from which to preach biographical sermons. This is seen when we realize that there are 2,930 different Bible characters.

Another effective type of expository preaching is that of preaching on Bible characters. Faris D. Whitesell, in his excellent book on this subject [*Preaching on Bible Characters*], gives many reasons for placing this type of preaching in high priority. He points out that this is perhaps the easiest way to preach the Bible, the most likely to appeal to people and to hold

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47 Cf. the approach Seerveld gleaned from various English commentaries. *CP* 1969, pp. 55ff., and his critique, pp. 67ff.
their attention,... and the most likely to be remembered. And, for freshness and variety, there are approximately four hundred Bible characters from which to choose!  

Holland

We make a final stop at the Gereformeerde Kerken in Holland. We can be brief here, for in the sequel we shall be confronted with the arguments of the defenders of the exemplary approach. But because those are, in the main, voices of thirty years ago, it might be well to point out the prevalence of exemplary preaching in this church today. Again, for our purposes a small cross section will suffice.

At the time of writing, the most recent book of sermons, dating from 1966, contains 27 sermons. In classifying these sermons we encounter the same difficulties we mentioned earlier. Here too, then, one must allow for some latitude in the classification. Of the 27 sermons, 11 are on an O.T. text, but only 2 sermons are on an O.T. historical text. Happily, the N.T. provides 12 sermons on historical texts so that we have a total of 14 in our sample. Of these 14 sermons, 10 are exemplary — the Galileans, the paralytic, the thief on the cross, Peter, the N.T. church, the Canaanite woman, Mephibosheth, Adam, Philip, and the ten lepers are in one way or another held up as good or bad examples. To express our findings in percentages:

- O.T. text . . . . . . (11 out of 27) . . . 41%
- O.T. historical text . . . . (2 out of 27) . . . 7%
- O.T. and N.T. historical text . . (14 out of 27) . . . 52%
- Exemplary on historical text . . (10 out of 14) . . . 71%

We print these figures neither to present them as an adequate cross section of the thousands of sermons preached nor to prejudge this kind of preaching.

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50 Koller, Expository Preaching without Notes (1969), p. 32. Cf. p. 25 on the two approaches for a "biographical sermon": "(1) Under the first main point, tell the story of that life, preferably in chronological order; and under the second main point, draw out the lessons; or (2) tell the life story, and indicate each phase by a main point, followed by the lessons derived..." (The book of Whitesell, Preaching on Bible Characters, appeared in Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955.)

51 We confine ourselves to the Gereformeerde Kerken though similar observations could be made regarding other denominations. Opposing theories often exist side by side, even within the covers of a single book: see, e.g., Hoenderdaal's exemplary approach and Frederikse's anti-exemplary approach in Wegen der Prediking, respectively pp. 417ff. and 73. In the Hervormde Kerken one is confronted with exemplary preaching in the conservative wing (the Gereformeerde Bond) as well as the modernistic wing (e.g., B. van Ginkel in Jonker's Actuele Prediking, p. 217: "Wij kunnen... in de lieldsweeken preken over: Petrus, Kajafas, Pilatus, de vrouw van Pilatus, Herodas en Judas als spiegel van onze relatie met onze eigen innerlijke 'schaduw' én van onze relatie tot de omgeving.")

52 Menigerlei Genade, LIII (Kampen: Kok, 1966).
but merely to give an indication of the prevalence of exemplary preaching in the Gereformeerde Kerken.\(^5\)

In a way this prevalence is surprising, not only because there was such a battle in this church less than a generation ago against this kind of preaching, but also because of the present, increasing recognition of the time-conditioned character of the Bible: the words of Scripture are addressed to people living in a different time, culture, social structure, etc., and therefore cannot be read as if they were addressed to us *directly*. This historical awareness has led to a re-evaluation of several traditional interpretations and ecclesiastical practices such as barring women from holding office in the church. But if the time-conditioned character of specific *commandments* is thus recognized\(^6\), it is difficult to see why this time-conditioned character is not equally honored when it comes to the described conduct of certain persons — a conduct which lacks even the normativity of commandments. And yet, Sunday after Sunday, many Reformed preachers take these persons with them on the pulpit and invest their conduct, in one way or another, with perpetual, normative authority — as if these people did not live in a different time, culture, social structure, etc.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us merely ask at this point, Is there an alternative to exemplary preaching? What other method of interpretation gives such freedom, makes preparation so easy, leads to so relevant an application? Can preachers really do without the exemplary approach?

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We have tried to give some indication of both the meaning of “exemplary approach” and its widespread influence in the history of preaching and in present-day hermeneutics and homiletics. No one should impose a certain method of interpretation and preaching upon others, but neither should preachers be imposed upon by the tradition and relative ease of exemplary preaching. Every preacher must be satisfied in his own heart and mind that he is doing justice to the text. And how else will one attain this than by thorough-going study of the problems involved?

Because the Dutch controversy brought many such problems to light, it retains its relevance. Huyser, a defender of the exemplary approach, says: “Even


\(^6\) This, of course, has long been recognized regarding certain commandments (e.g., I Cor. 11: “A man ought not to cover his head . . . . A woman ought to have a veil on her head . . . .”), though it is not nearly as self-evident as we often take for granted today. J. Ridderbos calls attention to Calvin’s appeal to the O.T. to justify killing a heretic and to the attempts of Knox and the Pilgrim Fathers to introduce into their respective countries the O.T. civil laws. *De Betekenis van het O.T. voor de Christelijke Religie* (1913), pp. 29ff.