In what follows, sixteen theses are set forth and developed, suggesting that evangelical preaching finds itself now in a quite new cultural, epistemological context.

(1) Ours is a changed preaching situation, because the old modes of church absolutes are no longer trusted.

It is not that the church’s theological absolutes are no longer trusted, but that the old modes in which those absolutes have been articulated are increasingly suspect and dysfunctional. That is because our old modes are increasingly regarded as patriarchal, hierarchic, authoritarian, and mono-logic. The mistrust that flies under all these adjectives, however, is due to a growing suspicion about the linkage between knowledge and power. The mistrust of conventional authority, now broad and deep in our society, is rooted in the failure of positivism, positivism that is scientific, political, or theological. Many are increasingly aware that “absolute knowledge” most characteristically means agreement of all those permitted in the room. Such “absolutism” in “truth,” moreover, characteristically has pretensions to “absolute power” as well, surely an adequate reason for suspicion. Those at the margins of dominating knowledge will no longer permit the practitioners of dominating power to be supervisors of absolute knowledge.

(2) Along with the failure of old modes of articulation, we now face the inadequacy of historical-critical understanding of the biblical text as it has been conventionally practiced.


I do not say the failure or bankruptcy of historical criticism but its inadequacy, for historical criticism has become, in Scripture study, a version of modes of absolutism among the elitenly educated. It is increasingly clear that historical criticism has become a handmaiden of certain kinds of power.\(^2\) This not only refers to the control of the agenda through academic politics, but it also recognizes that the rise of criticism is deeply related to the banishment of the supernatural and to the dismissal of tradition as a form of truthfulness.\(^3\)

One can note that in academic circles, where methodological discussions are conducted, there is a growing tension between old-line historical criticism, which serves to distance the text from the interpreter, and the emerging criticisms (sociological, literary, and canonical).\(^4\) A probable generalization can be made that critical scholars who most resist change and who regard the transfer of social power and influence as only modes of political correctness cling most passionately to older modes of historical criticism, whereas scholars who advocate and benefit from redistributions of interpretive power engage in sociological and literary criticism. Indeed, old-line historical criticism is our particular form of positivism in the biblical, interpretive guild and so receives its share of the suspicion I have more generally noted in thesis 1. I am aware that moves from historical criticism are easily judged to be obscurantism, advocacy, or ideology, but those labels only have lethal connotations in the context of self-satisfied positivism.

\(3\) A great new reality for preaching is pluralism in the interpreting community of the local congregation.

All but the most closed and sheltered liturgical congregations are indomitably heterogeneous.\(^5\) That emerging pluralism, moreover, can no longer be overcome by absolute assertion. For such absolute assertion,

\(\text{"The more frantic our zeal to maintain the oneness and wholeness of 'our truth,' the more divisive does such practice become."} \)
whether by strong pastoral authority or by denominational dictum, can only serve to excommunicate those who see and take and experience reality otherwise. The more frantic our zeal to maintain the oneness and wholeness of "our truth," the more divisive does such practice become.

An honest facing of pluralism can only be pastorally and usefully engaged by an open-ended adjudication that takes the form of trustful, respectful conversation. Such a conversation is joined with no participant seeking to convert the other and no participant knowing the outcome ahead of time but only entering with full respect for the good faith of others and the willingness to entertain the troublesome thought that new "truth" received together may well be out in front of any of us. While such an approach sounds like relativism, an answering objectivism is destructive not only of the community but of any chance to receive new truth together. Preaching thus must be conducted in a context where one makes proposals and advocacies but not conclusions.

(4) **Pluralism as the perspective and orientation of the community that hears and interprets is matched by an emerging awareness of the polyvalence of the biblical text.**

Texts are open to many meanings, more than one of which may be legitimate and faithful at the same time. This is evident, in its most simple form, in the awareness that many preachers on any given occasion preach many sermons on the same lectionary texts. While not all such sermons may be legitimate and faithful, many of them would qualify as such, without mutual exclusiveness. Notice that such a polyvalence flies in the face of old-line historical criticism, which tried to arrive at "the meaning" of the text.

The claim of polyvalence is an invitation for Christians to relearn from Jewish interpretive tradition. Indeed, Jewish interpretation does not seek to give closure to texts but can permit many readings to stand side by side, reflecting both the rich density of the text and the freedom of interpretation. Such a way of reading reflects the mode of midrashic
difficult to identify any basis of consensus. Such heterogeneity is very different from a kind of diversity rooted in a shared core of perspective.


7Alasdair Maclntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), has observed that even in such a formidable situation as the Gifford Lectures, a changed epistemological climate now permits the lecturer only to make a proposal but not to announce a conclusion to be received by the audience.


interpretation, a Jewish affirmation that the voice of the text is variously heard and is not limited by authorial intent. It is now suggested, moreover, that midrashic interpretation is strongly, even if unwittingly, reflected in Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and in his practice of dream interpretation. Freud understood that dreams are endlessly open to interpretation. In this regard, the reading of dreams is not unlike the reading of texts. At the same time, it is important to note that dreams are no more unreal fantasies than are texts but contain a profound truth that is available only upon a rich reading. It is unhelpful for the text interpreter, and therefore the preacher, to give heavy closure to texts because such a habit does a disservice to text and to listener, both of which are evokers and practitioners of multiple readings.

(5) Reality is scripted, that is, shaped and authorized by a text.

Paul Ricoeur has done the most to show us that reality lives by text. By "text," Ricoeur means written discourse that is no longer in the control of the "author" but makes its own testimony and insists upon interpretation. Interpretation, moreover, is "to appropriate here and now the intention of the text." But such intention is derived not from the "author" of the text but from the work within the act of interpretation.

That text may be recognized or invisible. It may be a great religious classic or a powerful philosophical tradition or a long-standing tribal conviction. It is an account of reality that the community comes to trust and to take for granted as a given that tends to be beyond reexamination. This text describes reality in a certain way and shape. In a world where there is more than one text, that is, a world of plurality, a given text may describe, but if another text intrudes, it is possible for that text to redescribe reality.

It is important, on the basis of this thesis, for the preacher to recognize that there are no "textless" worlds. Such an assertion may be much disputed; at a practical level, however, it is no doubt true. People come to the preaching moment with texts already in hand that describe the world. The preacher who interprets the text, who "appropriates here and now the intention of the text," does not act in a vacuum. There are always rival and competing texts, in the face of which the biblical text may be a

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10Ibid., pp. 21, 34, et passim. See also Moshe Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah," in Midrash and Literature, edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 141–157; and, more generally, the entire volume.


13Ricoeur, From Text to Action, p. 121.


counter-text that does not primarily describe but subversively redescribes reality.

(6) The dominant scripting of reality in our culture is rooted in the Enlightenment enterprise associated with Descartes, Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, which has issued in a notion of autonomous individualism, resulting in what Philip Rieff calls "The Triumph of the Therapeutic." 16

It is difficult to take in the radical shift of assumptions in "world making" that occurred at the beginning of the seventeenth century. 17 The collapse of the hegemony of medieval Christianity, hastened by the Reformation, the Thirty Years War, and the rise of science, produced, as Susan Bordo has made clear, a profound anxiety about certitude. 18 It was clear that certitude would no longer be found in "the truth of Christ," for confessional divisions had broken that truth. Believers henceforth could appeal only to reason guided by the spirit, or the spirit measured by reason, clearly a circular mode of truth. Indeed, Descartes introduced his massive program of doubt as an attempt to link the new truth to the claims of Christianity. What emerged was the individual knower as the decontextualized adjudicator of truth. 19

That autonomy in knowledge, moreover, produced autonomy in action and ethics as well, so that the individual becomes the norm for what is acceptable. The end result is a self-preoccupation that ends in self-indulgence, driving religion to narcissistic catering and consumerism, to limitless seeking after well-being and pleasure on one's own terms without regard to any other in the community. 20

While this scripting of reality has profound critical thought behind it, the practice of this script is embraced and undertaken by those in modern culture who have no awareness of the text, of its rootage, or its intention. 21 Thus it is clear that very many folk in our culture who come to preaching events are reliant upon this "text of reality" that is permitted to describe the world. The preacher perforce preaches in a world shaped by this text.


18 Bordo, The Flight to Objectivity, suggests that the loss of "mother church" required finding another certainty that could nurture like a mother.


20 For a positive alternative to such individualism, see Paul R. Sponheim, Faith and the Other: A Relational Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

This scripting tradition of the Enlightenment exercises an incredible and pervasive hegemony among us.

(a) In economics, this text-generated ideology issues in consumerism, which operates on the claims that more is better, that most will make happy, and that each is entitled to and must have all that one can take, even if at the expense of others. Such a value system, of course, must discredit the claims of any other who is a competitor for the goods that will make me happy. Television advertising is a primary voice in advocating this view of reality, and television is closely allied with spectator sports, which move in the same direction.22 Witness the "shoe contracts" of college coaches.

(b) In political affairs, this same ideology is rooted in the privilege of European superiority and colonialism, although in recent time that political dimension of the text has found its primary expression in the notion of Pax Americana. That ideology assumes that the world works best if the United States adjudicates from a position of dominant power, which, in turn, guarantees and endlessly enhances the privileged position of the United States in terms of prosperity and standard of living. Thus the public administration of power guarantees the private capacity to consume without limit. The deepness of this claim is evident in the political requirement of a commitment to a strong America.

"This defining text of the West is exceedingly hard on and dismissive of those whose lives do not measure up to the norms of competence, productivity, and privilege."

In political affairs, this vision of political hegemony perhaps was given authoritative voice by Elihu Root, Secretary of State under Theodore Roosevelt, and his expansionist notions. Root, in turn, was the mentor to Henry Stimson who moved the United States, almost single-handedly through his advocacy and political mechanizations, to take responsibility for the world.23 Stimson, in turn, was the patron and mentor of the "Wise Men" who guided foreign policy, produced the Cold War, and finally overreached in Viet Nam.24

But of course the end is not yet. The United States, as the remaining superpower, can have it all its own way, so it thinks, finding itself most often on the side of the old colonial powers and allied with the forces of reactionism in order to preserve the old hegemony that goes unexamined.

(c) The Enlightenment text, as practiced in the Euro-American world, thus provides an unchallenged rationale for privilege and advantage in the world in every zone of life. This not only means political ascendancy and economic domination but also makes its adherents the norm for virtue. In turn, this shows up even in the church, where it is assumed that the Western church is the privileged norm by which to test the rest of the church. In the end, even truth is tied in some way to Western virtue.

(d) This defining text of the West is exceedingly hard on and dismissive of those whose lives do not measure up to the norms of competence, productivity, and privilege. This text has resulted in a kind of social Darwinism in which the fast, smart, well-connected, and ruthless are the “best” people. And the counterpart is impatience with those who are not so competent-productive-righteous. Very many of the enormous social problems and social inequities in our society are legitimated by this text.

(e) This definitive text exercises great authority over the imagination, even of those who set out to resist its claim and power. As Karl Marx saw, it exercises a powerful attraction for those who do not share in its promised benefits but are in fact its victims. Marx’s dictum is “The ideas of the dominant class become the dominant ideas.” Marx, moreover, understood well that in the end, the dominant class does not need to exercise force but holds sway by “hegemonic theatre.”

(8) We now know (or think we know) that human transformation (the way people change) does not happen through didacticism or through excessive certitude but through the playful entertainment of another scripting of reality that may subvert the old given text and its interpretation and lead to the embrace of an alternative text and its redescription of reality.

Very few people make important changes in their description of the world abruptly. Most of us linger in wistfulness, notice dissonance between our experience and the old text, and wonder if there is a dimension to it all that has been missed. Most of us will not quickly embrace an alternative that is given us in a coercive way. Such coercion more likely makes us defend the old and, in general, become defensive.

\[25^\text{In Darwin (New York: Warner, 1991), Adrian Desmond and James Moore make a compelling case that social Darwinism was not remote from the awareness of Darwin himself. He knew where he was located socially as he did his research.}
\[26^\text{See the discussion of David McLellan, The Thought of Karl Marx: An Introduction (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 41–51.}
\[27^\text{Concerning the role of “social theatre” in the establishment and maintenance of social relations, see E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common (New York: New Press, 1991), pp. 86–87 et passim.}
Victor Turner noted that there is an in-between time and place in social transformation and relocation, which he termed “liminality.” Liminality is a time when the old configurations of social reality are increasingly seen to be in jeopardy, but new alternatives are not yet in hand.

What we need for such liminality is a safe place in which to host such ambiguity, to notice the tension and unresolve without pressure but with freedom to see and test alternative textings of reality. It is my impression that very much preaching, which is excessively urgent and earnest, does not pay much attention to what we know about how we change or how anyone else may receive change when it is given. The text entrusted to the preachers of the church is all about human transformation, but the characteristic modes of presentation, in many quarters, contradict the claim of the text and are the enemies of transformation.

An inviting, effective alternative does not need to be toned down in its claim or made palatable. It does, however, need to be presented in a way that stops well short of coercion that is threatening and evokes resistance to hearing or appropriating the new text. Preaching is not only the announcement of the alternative but the practice of that very liminality that does not yet know too much.

(9) The biblical text, in all its odd disjunctions, is an offer of an alternative script, and preaching this text is the exploration of how the world is if it is imagined through this alternative script.

This thesis reminds us of two important recognitions. First, the biblical text is indeed a profound alternative to the text of the Enlightenment and therefore alternative to the dominant text with which most of us came to church. For a very long time we have assumed that the “American Dream,” which is our version of Enlightenment freedom and well-being, coheres with the claims of the gospel. It is the U.S. that is God’s agent in the world, God’s example, and God’s most blessed people. I imagine that even those of us who reject blatant forms of this claim have been schooled effectively in the notion in some lesser ways. Now we are coming to see, belatedly we are required to see, that the American Dream as it is now understood has long since parted company with the claims of the gospel. Whereas the dominant text finds human initiative at the core of reality, the gospel witnesses to holiness as the core, and whereas it is the self that arises out of the hegemonic text, in the gospel it is the neighbor. The preacher and the congregation will be much liberated for serious preaching if it is understood that all of us, liberal and conservative, are in fact conducting an adjudication between these two competing texts, between


30The basic study of this coherence is Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus*, 96 (Winter, 1967), pp. 1–21. See his larger discussion in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Crossroad, 1975). Part of the power of Martin Luther King, Jr. was that he was still able to appeal to this coherence.
which there is diminished overlap and between which we do not want to choose. The preacher must show how this counter-text of the gospel is a genuine alternative.

The second notion here is that the preacher, from this text, does not describe a gospel-governed world but helps the congregation imagine it. Every text that describes and redescribes presents something that is not in hand, until the text is appropriated and all reality is passed through the text. Something like this must be the intent of Wallace Stevens in his enigmatic statement:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame... But fictive things Wink as they will.

The preacher traffics in a fiction that makes true. But that is why preaching is so urgent and must be done with such art. This world of the gospel is not real, not available, until this credible utterance authorizes a departure from a failed text and appropriation of this text.

Such an imaginative act of making fiction real is expounded well by Garrett Green in his assertion that “as” is the “copula of imagination.” I take Green to mean that an event or object must be interpreted “as” something before it becomes available. First, such a notion means that there are no available uninterpreted events or objects. They are beyond reach until interpreted, and when interpreted, they are seen or taken according to that “as.” Second, there is no right answer in the back of the book. Thus, formally, any interpretive “as” has as much claim as any other. What the preacher is doing is proposing that the world and our lives be seen or taken as under the aegis of the gospel. Such an imaginative “as” means a break with the world and our lives taken as under the aegis of Enlightenment construal. It is, of course, our usual assumption that the Enlightenment descriptions of reality are given. They are not, according to Green, given but only a powerful, long-sustained “as,” which is now to be countered by this evangelical “as.”

(10) The proposal of this alternative script is not through large, comprehensive, universal claims, but through concrete, specific, local texts that, in small ways, provide alternative imagination.

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31In Texts Under Negotiation, pp. 2-25, I have suggested that the work of Scripture interpretation is to fund counter-imagination.


33Garrett Green, Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 73, 140, et passim.


I have no doubt that every preacher and every interpreter of biblical texts operates with something like a "systematic theology." Of course. But such systematic thinking, which is essential to some provisional coherence about reality, is not the primary mode of the biblical text. In fact, our macrovision in systematic theology is stitched together selectively from little texts that refuse long-term stabilization. Of course, there is deep disagreement about this proposition. "Canonical criticism," as proposed by Brevard Childs, assumes long-term stabilization of a larger reading. While there is some truth in that claim, it is equally (or more pertinently) true that continual study, reading, and reflection upon the text causes that stabilization to be constantly under review and change. Thus, the insistence upon concrete, specific, local presentation is parallel to the nature of the text itself, which is put together of small parts, the precise relation of which to each other is not self-evident. The interpretive act is itself a major set of decisions about how the parts relate to each other this time.

Thus, the preacher, if taking the text seriously, does not sound the whole of "biblical truth" in preaching but focuses on one detailed text to see what it yields of "as." It can be a great relief to the preacher not to have to utter a universal truth with each utterance, and it may be an assurance to the church that it is not given to pronounce universally on every issue that comes along. It is enough to work with the local detail in the interest of transformation.

As examples of such "local work," we may cite almost any part of the Bible. In the powerful memories of Genesis 12–50, the action is quite local around one family, the members of which are known by name and in considerable detail. Perhaps more poignantly, the parables of Jesus focus remarkably on detail of one time and place. Helpful dimensions of this accent on the concrete are offered by Sandra Schneiders in her programmatic use of the phrase "paschal imagination," in which she

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38 Toulmin, Cosmopolis, pp. 186–201, has nicely argued positively for a retreat from universal assertion.


40 John R. Donahue, The Gospel in Parable (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), has provided a rich study of the parables and fully understands the parabolic character of gospel truth. He observes the cruciality of such speech when living in a "desert of the imagination" (p. 212).
shows how the text moves beyond the subject/object split to world construal and construction. And Jacob Neusner shows how very small acts of piety and ritual are ways in which practitioners can "imagine themselves to be Jews." Such detail was perhaps not necessary when Christianity recently occupied a hegemonic position in our society, and one could deal in unnuanced summaries. Now, however, with the dehegemonization of Christianity, we are back to the little pieces that in various ways make a claim against the dominant text. The preacher can understand the act of a single sermon as providing yet another detail to the very odd and very different description of reality being enacted over time in the congregation.

(11) The work of preaching is an act of imagination, an offer of an image through which perception, experience, and finally faith can be reorganized in alternative ways.

The alternative voiced in textual preaching intends to show that this scripting of reality is in deep conflict with the dominant description of reality, so that the scripts are shown to be in deep tension with each other, if not in contradiction. If an alternative is not set forth with some clarity and vigor, then no choice is given, and no alternative choice is available. There is, of course, a long history of suspicion about imagination going back to Aristotle and suggesting that imagination is an inferior and unreliable source of knowledge. With the failure of Enlightenment notions of "objectivity," imagination has made an important comeback as a mode of knowledge. Gaston Bachelard has elaborated in powerful ways the creative function of imagination in the generation of knowledge. Of his work, Richard Kearney writes that, in contrast to Sartre,

Bachelard ... conceives of the imagination not as privation, but as audition—an acoustics of the other than self. His poetical model of imagination is two-dimensional: at once a giving and a taking, a projection and a discovery, a centrifugal exodus towards things and a centripetal return to the self. This notion of an "interlacing rhythm" which spans the breach between subjectivity and being epitomizes the Bachelardian theory of poetics.

According to Bachelard, it is imagination that "valorizes" an alternative, and that, of course, is what preaching intends to do. Such a mode of preaching requires a break with our more usual modes of didactic, doctrinal, or moralistic preaching.
More recently, John Thiel has argued that imagination is a reliable mode of theological knowledge. He, of course, knows that imagination is available for distortion but asserts that it is no more available for distortion or less reliable for knowing than is reason, a long-trusted practice in theological reflection.

It is thus my notion that the preacher and congregation can reconstrue the time and place of preaching as a time and place for the practice of imagination, that is, the reimagination of reality according to the evangelical script of the Bible. Such preaching does not aim at immediate outcomes but, over time, intends, detail by detail, to make available a different world in which different acts, attitudes, and policies are seen to be appropriate. To aim at this “underneath” dimension of faith is consistent with Ricoeur’s conclusion that the “symbol gives rise to thought.” I would paraphrase Ricoeur to say that “the image gives rise to a new world of possibility,” and the preaching for which I contend is aimed at the image-making out of the text that may give rise to a church of new obedience.

Because old modes of certitude are no longer trusted, the preaching of these texts is not an offer of metaphysics but the enactment of a drama in which the congregation is audience but may at any point become participant. In Texts Under Negotiation, I have already articulated what I think is at issue in the move from metaphysical to dramatic thinking. It is clear that dramatic modes of thought are more congenial to the way in which the Old Testament proceeds and in which the primal testimony of the New Testament is expressed. Characteristically, biblical faith may assume a metaphysic, but it is of little interest and of little value for the generation of faith. What counts, characteristically, is the dramatic turn of affairs to which the community bears witness and responds in praise, joy, and obedience. The result is that, in the text itself, God is a character at play and at risk; in the preaching moment, the congregation may see itself as among the characters in the drama.

This means that the preacher, in the drama of the sermon, must “undo” much of the metaphysical preoccupation of the church tradition, to see whether the world can be imagined in terms of God’s action in the ongoing account of the world, the nations, Israel, and the church. Such freedom and vitality as drama, which von Balthasar has shown to be definitive, is matched in yet another image offered by Frances Young. Young proposes that the Bible is a musical score and that, in each

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47 The statement is programmatic for Ricoeur. See, for example, Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 288.
49 Texts Under Negotiation, pp. 64–70.
interpretive act, the score must be "performed" with the freedom and discipline always required of good performance. Moreover, Young proposes that much interpretation is a "cadenza" in the score, which gives the interpreter (here preacher) a good bit of room for maneuverability and idiosyncrasy.

(13) *This dramatic rendering of imagination has narrative as its quintessential mode, the telling of a story, and the subsequent living of that story.*

The claim that narrative is a privileged mode in Christian preaching is, of course, not a new idea. After paying attention to the "testimony" of Israel and the early church, as in the earlier work of G. Ernest Wright, Reginald Fuller, and C. H. Dodd, more recent study has considered the epistemological assumptions in the use of the genre of narrative and has concluded that, in this mode, reality itself has something of a narrative quality, that reality is an ongoing theater that has a plot with a beginning, middle, and end and has characters who remain constant but also develop, change, and exercise great freedom. As Dale Patrick has shown, God in the Bible (like Jesus in the New Testament) is an ongoing character in a narrative who is endlessly re-rendered in the Bible and whom the preacher subsequently re-renders. The constancy of God is the constancy of a character in a narrative who must change in order to remain constant and who necessarily violates our conventional notions of immutable transcendence.

Moreover, it is clear that the living of human life is embedded in a narrative rendering. Thus Hayden White has argued, persuasively in my judgment, that history is essentially a rhetorical activity in which past memory is told and retold in alternative ways, ways that may be intentional but that also take into account the vested interests of the narrating

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"Characteristically, biblical faith may assume a metaphysic, but it is of little interest and of little value for the generation of faith."

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Ignatius, 1990); Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1993).


community. And Alasdair MacIntyre has shown decisively that alternative ethical systems cannot be understood or assessed apart from the narrative world in which they are told, received, and valued. Thus, narrative is not a secondary or auxiliary enterprise; it is an act whereby social reality is constituted. Amos Wilder has championed the view long held by serious rhetoricians that speech, and specifically narrative speech, is constitutive of reality, so that narrative is indeed "world-making."

To be sure, there are many texts in the "script" of the Bible available to the preacher that are not narrative. Given my presuppositions, these are the most difficult to preach. It is my impression, nonetheless, that every text in any genre has behind it something of a narrative that generates it and through which the texts in other genres are to be understood. Thus, for example, the Psalms are notoriously difficult preaching material. I suspect that the preacher characteristically either presents a narrative situation that is critically recoverable (as in Psalm 137) or imagines such a context that led this speaker to speak thusly. In the case of the Psalms, some of the superscriptions, even if not historically "reliable," provide a clue for such narrative construal. And in the letters of Paul, a critically recoverable or homilectically imagined narrative context serves the preaching of the letters.

Such a mode of preaching has the spin-off effect of a drama being enacted, a story being narrated, and a plot being worked out. Such a mode holds the potential of showing the congregants that their lives (and life together) also constitute a drama being enacted and a story being told, in which we are characters with work to do, options to exercise, and loyalties to sustain or alter. This mode of preaching not only reconstitutes the shape of the Bible but also reconstrues human life. It moves away from an essentialist focus to see that much of life is a rhetorical operation, and that we are indeed "speeched into newness."


The invitation of preaching (not unlike therapy) is to abandon the script in which one has had confidence and to enter a different script that imaginatively tells one's life differently.

The folk in the Bible are shown to be those who have often settled into a narrative that is deathly and destructive. Thus, the early Hebrews settled for a slave narrative as their proper self-presentation. That narrative is disrupted by another narrative that has Yahweh the liberator as the key and decisive agent. The decision about staying in Egypt or leaving for the promise is a decision about which narrative in which to participate, whether to understand the “plot of life” according to the character Pharaoh or according to a different plot featuring Yahweh. Likewise, the New Testament narratives portray many folk either in a narrative of hopelessness and despair or in one of self-righteousness and arrogance. In each case, they are invited into an alternative narrative, which is the narrative of the life-giving kingdom of God.

In Texts Under Negotiation, I have already suggested the analogue of psychotherapy. I have no wish to “psychologize” preaching but only to suggest an analogue. In such a parallel, I do not understand the conversation of psychotherapy as simply one of self-discovery, but I envision an active “therapist” who, together with the one in need, conducts a conversation in which an alternative account of his or her life may emerge. And if such an alternative narrative emerges, then the needful person in therapy has the opportunity and the task of adjudicating between the old narrative long since believed and the new narrative only now available. Such a person may eventually decide that the old narrative (from childhood) is not only destructive and paralyzing but false, and a new one may be chosen that renarrates life in health. Many alternatives of one’s life or the life of the world are made available in the process.

Mutatis mutandis, the task of the preacher is to exhibit this particular narrative script of the Bible and to show how and in what ways life will be reimagined, redescribed, and relived if this narrative is embraced. The old-fashioned word for this process is “conversion.” In my book Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism, I have shown in some detail what this might mean for the study and proclamation of the Bible. It is in this context that Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann understand the social construction of reality as a process of “switching worlds.” Nobody can switch worlds unless an alternative world is made richly available with great artistry, care, and boldness.

The offer of an alternative script (to which we testify and bear witness as true) invites the listener out of his or her assumed context into many

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59 See, for example, Num. 11:4–6; 14:1–4; Ex. 16:3.
60 Texts Under Negotiation, pp. 21–25.
alternative contexts where different scripts may have a ring of authenticity and credibility.

That is, the place wherein I know myself to be living is not the only place where I could live. That is why it is important to pay attention to the several contexts of Scripture texts that may be either critically recoverable or textually evoked. Thus, I know myself to be living in a crime-threatened suburb in which I hear of the poor but, on most days, do not see them. In the text of Deuteronomy (to take one easy example), however, I do not listen in a threatened suburb. My "place" is different. The claimed location of this text is the River Jordan whereby "we" are about to enter the land of promise, a land filled with threatening Canaanite social structures and seductive Canaanite religion. As I listen, I have important decisions to make, according to Deuteronomy, mostly concerning neighbors. Or alternatively, to take the critical judgment about Deuteronomy, I live in seventh-century Jerusalem under the danger and threat of Assyria where the temptation is strong to accommodate and compromise until one's identity is gone. In listening to this text, I can be at the Jordan or in Jerusalem only for a brief period, and then I return to the "reality" of suburbia. But being transported briefly by rhetoric invites me to re-see and redescribe my own setting, perchance to act differently. Thus, the hearing of a counter-script invites to a counter-context which, over time, may authorize and empower counter-life.

(16) Finally, I believe that the great pastoral fact among us that troubles everyone, liberal or conservative, is that the old givens of white, male, Western, colonial advantage no longer hold.

The trust in those old givens takes many forms. It takes the form of power whereby we have known who was in charge, whom to trust and obey. It takes the form of knowledge, for we could identify the knowing authorities who had a right to govern. It takes the form of certitude, because the world was reliably and stably ordered. And those in control or authority had great finesse in conducting the kind of "hegemonic theatre" that kept the world closely ordered and coherent.

No special argument needs to be made about the demise of that world, even though a lot of political and ecclesiastical mileage is available out of the claim that the old world can be sustained even longer. The demise of that hegemony touches us in many different ways, personal and public,

\[63\] For a standard summary of critical judgments about Deuteronomy, see Patrick D. Miller, Deuteronomy (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), pp. 2-17.

\[64\] See Thompson, Customs in Common.
but there is in any case a widely shared sense that things are out of control. That sense is widely shared not only by beneficiaries of the old patterns of certitude but also by many of its perceived victims. Nothing seems to be reliable as it used to be. And that sense of things being out of control invites all kinds of extreme notions of fear and anxiety that eventuate in acts and policies of brutality.

In that context, preachers are entrusted with a text, alternative to the failed text of white, male, Western hegemony, which mediates and valorizes a viable world outside that given, privileged advantage of certitude and domination. It turns out that the script we have trusted in the Enlightenment (and in the older Euro-American) tradition is an unreliable script, even though we have been massively committed to it. And now, we are wondering, is there a more adequate script out of which we may reimagine our lives? Although few would articulate their coming to worship on such grounds, I believe people are haunted by the question of whether there is a text (and an interpreter) that can say something that will make sense out of our pervasive nonsense. It is my conviction that neither old liberal ideologies nor old conservative certitudes nor critical claims made for the Bible will now do. Our circumstance permits and requires the preacher to do something we have not been permitted or required to do before. Ours is an awesome opportunity: to see whether this text, with all of our interpretive inclinations, can voice and offer reality in a redescribed way that is credible and evocative of a new humanness, rooted in holiness and practiced in neighborliness.

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