

**A CRITICAL EXAMINATION  
OF BRUCE W. THIELEMANN'S NEED-CENTERED  
APPROACH TO PREACHING**

**A Thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

by

Thomas Vincent Haugen

Middlesex University

Supervised at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

and London School of Theology

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## Abstract

Thomas V. Haugen

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This thesis is a critical assessment of Bruce W. Thielemann’s need-centered approach to preaching. The thesis argues that a need-centered approach to preaching was the foundation upon which American homiletician and Presbyterian pastor, Bruce W. Thielemann (1933-1994) built his robust theoretical and practical approach to homiletics. The thesis begins with a biographical sketch to familiarize the reader with Thielemann’s life and ministry and reveals a man dedicated to preaching aimed at addressing the needs of his listeners. Chapter two explores Thielemann’s neo-orthodox theology of preaching, which was the foundation for his need-centered philosophy of homiletics and demonstrates how Thielemann’s presuppositions and theological influences such as Forsyth, Barth and Bonhoeffer fortified his need-centered homiletic. Chapter three probes Thielemann’s need-centered approach to preaching including theological, psychological and rhetorical influences, focusing on how Thielemann’s homiletic was influenced by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Chapter four analyzes Thielemann’s need-centered preaching methodology by examining his sermons and preaching lectures during his thirty-four years of pastoral ministry in various contexts. Chapter five chronicles and critiques how Thielemann’s need-centered approach to preaching shaped his interaction with some of the major historical issues during his ministry from the 1960’s through the early 1990’s as well as theologically significant movements within the Presbyterian church in the United States. While Thielemann’s theological inconsistencies, oversimplification of psychological theories and tendency to manipulate his listeners resulting from his need-centered homiletic warrant critique, Thielemann’s theology, lectures and preaching praxis demonstrate his loyalty to and effective implementation of his need-centered homiletic.

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Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,  
“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”  
And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

**Isaiah 6:8**

(Bruce W. Thielemann’s favorite Scripture verse)

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?  
And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?  
And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

**Romans 10:14**

(The verse Bruce W. Thielemann felt all  
preachers should have mounted on their study wall).

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## Introduction and Methodology

Week after week, Sunday after Sunday, men and women around the globe craft and deliver sermons to the men, women and children who comprise their congregations. To do this well is not an easy task. Those who preach are aware of the extreme joy preaching provides along with the challenges of effective preaching. To preach in a manner which connects God's Word to God's people on a regular basis takes time and intentional effort to perfect. There are many well written and thoughtful books readily available on the subject of preaching, and most seminaries and Bible colleges provide training in homiletics for their students. These are certainly valuable for training and equipping preachers for the inevitable weekly trip to the pulpit. Preaching resources are a great place to start thinking about homiletics, but preaching must move from the classroom to the church context, from the theoretical to the practical. During a lifetime of preaching, Bruce W. Thielemann mastered this movement from the lecture hall to the pulpit.

The objective of this thesis is to provide a theological biography of the life and preaching ministry of Bruce W. Thielemann in order to examine and critique his need-centered homiletic. To accomplish this objective this thesis will attempt to provide a critical examination of Thielemann's life, theology of preaching, methodology of preaching and his historical and theological contexts. Thielemann dedicated his life to the art and discipline of preaching biblical sermons directed at the needs of his listeners. Throughout his preaching ministry, Thielemann held and practiced his conviction that every "sermon should be directed at the meeting of some human need – at something which is wounding spirits and burdening consciences and distracting lives."<sup>1</sup> This unwavering commitment to connect with the needs of one's listeners steered Thielemann's theoretical and practical approach to preaching. It will be demonstrated that Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching was central to his life and ministry and is the foundation upon which he built his theoretical approach to homiletics and his pulpit ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975, 1.

The generative idea for writing this thesis was planted after listening to a recording of a Thielemann sermon as an assignment during a seminary preaching class. In my experience, Thielemann's preaching stood out for his ability to touch in equal measure both my head and my heart during the sermon. My theological training began at a reformed evangelical seminary in the United States, and it is in the reformed evangelical tradition that my theological beliefs remain. At seminary my homiletical training was grounded in Haddon Robinson's definition of expository preaching.<sup>2</sup> For me, Thielemann stood on the edge of traditional expository preaching in a way that was compelling. He did not rigidly move verse-by-verse through a Scripture text, yet he attempted to ground his preaching in the Biblical text. He was intentional and skilled in his use of language, illustrated from a wide variety of sources and used emotion with the goal of motivating his listener to actions. His booming voice, larger than life presence and preaching style drew me in and made me ask how Thielemann did what he did in the pulpit. Eleven years after graduating from seminary, Thielemann became the subject of the thesis which is now before you. Further influencing my interpretation of the research material and Thielemann's preaching is the fact that like Thielemann, I too served as the Chaplain of a Christian liberal arts college and Presbyterian pastor while working on this research project. And to date, no single academic historical biographical and theological study has been made of Thielemann's life, ministry and preaching. This thesis is an attempt to fill that gap.

Within the academic discipline of historiography, this thesis is framed as a theological biography. Milton Lomask's, *The Biographer's Craft*, provided a guide for organizing the research material into a coherent structure. Lomask's practical manual also assisted in framing this project, not as just the compilation of facts, but a means for placing Thielemann within his cultural and historical context.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the structure of theological biography, there are a number of theological biographies which have sought to place a pastor within his or her cultural and

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<sup>2</sup> "The communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers." Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2001), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Milton Lomask, *The Biographer's Craft*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

historical context in order to critically examine their life, ministry and preaching. For this thesis James Findlay's theological biography of D.L Moody, Scott Gibson's theological biography of A. J. Gordon and Russell St. John's thesis on Robert Lewis Dabney all utilize a chronological and thematic approach and served as helpful guides and examples of theological biographies.<sup>4</sup>

The methodology of this theological biography is in part, chronological, when dealing with various aspects of Thielemann's life and ministry contexts. In addition, thematic chapters are included to introduce and critically examine Thielemann's preaching theory and practice. In order to present a comprehensive academic examination of Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching I will utilize his personal sermon files, sermons, lecture notes, personal correspondence, published materials and personal interviews. These primary source materials, many of which have never been drawn on in an academic study of Thielemann's preaching, will support a critical analysis of Thielemann's life, ministry, teaching, theology, and preaching as they relate to his need-centered approach to preaching and will point to the centrality of Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching in both his homiletical theory and practice. All selected interview participants for this research project had a personal knowledge of and a relationship with Bruce Thielemann. Each participant willingly offered consent without remuneration, was presented the interview questions in advance and informed of their right to withdraw written consent at any time during or after the interview before the final completion of the project. To ensure that the research was conducted according to professional and ethical standards all interviews for this research project complied with the ethical standards laid out in the London School of Theology Research Student Handbook.<sup>5</sup> Submitting to these ethical standards of review helped ensure no harm was caused and demonstrated a commitment to professional responsibility, both to the university and to the interview participants.

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<sup>4</sup> James F. Findlay, *Dwight L. Moody: American Evangelist, 1837-1899*, (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1969), Scott M. Gibson, *A. J. Gordon: American Premillennialist*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001) and Russell St. John, *Empty Admiration: Robert Lewis Dabney's Expository Homiletic*, (Thesis (PhD) – Middlesex University, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix Three and Four for the Interview Questions and Interview Consent Form.

To gain access to a wide sampling of Thielemann's preaching it was necessary to collect his "Message for the Moment" sermon tapes from a variety of personal collections.<sup>6</sup> More than 600 sermon tapes were digitized to allow for longevity and ease of use. Each sermon was analyzed for biographical information, theological content, use of Scripture and consistency with the need-centered homiletic as espoused by Thielemann in his preaching lectures. Because only four of these sermons were video recordings of Thielemann's preaching, the sermon analysis was unable to account for some of the non-verbal elements which are an important part of sermon delivery and communication technique. Another limitation in this study lies in the fact these sermons were evaluated for this thesis outside the context of Thielemann's gathered community of Christians which comprised his ministry context and outside of the historical and cultural context to which they were originally addressed. Thielemann believed sermons are meant to be a part of the whole worship gathering to which they contribute an important role.<sup>7</sup> For Thielemann, the sermon is not the whole, but a part of the worship experience. When listening to a sermon isolated from the whole worship gathering there is no pre-worship fellowship, no prelude, no call to worship, no corporate singing of hymns or reading, no offertory and offering, no hymn of response, no benediction, no postlude and no post-worship gathering time to frame the sermon. Further, Thielemann believed effective preaching must be addressed to a specific context.<sup>8</sup> Sermons are not preached in a vacuum, yet out of necessity for this project, Thielemann's sermons were analyzed outside the context of the worship gathering as a whole and their original historical settings. Because of these limitations, there will always be a part of Thielemann's preaching which we will never fully comprehend or experience.

Thielemann did not publish widely, so along with a collection of his sermons, this thesis utilized one of Thielemann's preaching lectures delivered 1973 and a

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<sup>6</sup> Thielemann's "Message for the Moment" sermon tape ministry began in the early 1970's at Glendale Presbyterian Church and continued through his time at Grove City College and First Presbyterian Church into the early 1990's.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," Preaching Worship sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

series of four preaching lectures first delivered in 1975 and presented multiple times and in a variety of contexts until 1993.<sup>9</sup> These lectures were converted from cassette and reel to reel tape format to a digital format for this research project. This study also incorporates information gleaned from Thielemann's personal files which were given to one of Thielemann's former student for safe keeping. These files include sermon files, personal correspondence, teaching lecture notes and notes from his seminary training.

During his preaching ministry, Thielemann served as pastor of three different congregations in Pennsylvania and California. He also served for ten years as the Dean of the Chapel at Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania. Thielemann was well known as an effective communicator and for his ability to preach with power and creativity. Thielemann provides a viable study in the field of homiletics because along with his preaching ministry he also lectured extensively about sermon preparation. Thielemann's homiletical approach and pulpit ministry gives a complete picture of both theory and delivery in the homiletical process.

Chapter one lays the groundwork for the study of Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching through a biographical sketch of his life and ministry. This biographical sketch describes a man who dedicated his life and ministry to the art and craft of preaching. This chapter also provides an overview of his childhood, education and preparation for ministry along with a description of his four primary ministry contexts. The chapter concludes with Thielemann's brief retirement and tragic death at the age of sixty-one. Chapter one unfolds the life of a man dedicated to preaching aimed at addressing the needs of his listeners.

Chapter two explores Thielemann's theology of preaching which was the foundation for his need-centered philosophy of homiletics. This chapter introduces Thielemann's academic and pastoral qualifications and extensive preaching lectures in which he describes in detail his need-centered approach. This chapter also examines some of Thielemann's core theological presuppositions which informed his need-centered approach to preaching. Next, this chapter looks at three primary influencers on Thielemann's theology of preaching and concludes with a look at

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix One for a complete list of Bruce W. Thielemann's preaching lectures.

how Thielemann believed Scripture could be utilized in his need-centered approach to preaching most effectively.

Chapter three provides an in-depth study of Thielemann's need-centered approach. First, we will examine the primary theological influences which helped Thielemann formulate his need-centered approach. Second, we will look closely at the primary homiletical influences which shaped his need-centered philosophy of preaching. Third, we will consider the central influence psychologist Abraham Maslow contributed to Thielemann's need-centered approach. Finally, we will look at the main rhetorical influences Thielemann looked to in creating his need-centered homiletic. This chapter is particularly beneficial in that it illuminates the catalyst which helped Thielemann understand the significance of needs in the homiletical process as he formulated his need-centered approach.

In chapter four we will look at Thielemann's preaching methodology and the profound ways his need-centered approach influenced his understanding and practice of homiletics. This chapter begins with an examination of Thielemann's understanding of the primacy of preaching and the ways his need-centered approach infused his sermonic process. We will look at the central role preaching played in his ministry and how connecting with a specific need was a means of bringing people to a deeper understanding of God's Word. In this chapter we will analyze the forms Thielemann used in his preaching in an attempt to connect with the specific needs of his listeners. Finally, we will examine the critical role of the preacher in Thielemann's need-centered approach maintaining a double grip on the biblical text and the contemporary listener.

Chapter five examines how Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching shaped his interaction with some of the major historical issues during his ministry from the 1960's through the early 1990's as well as theologically significant movements within the Presbyterian church in the United States. We will use a chronological and thematic approach to evaluate the historical and theological context of Thielemann's ministry, moving from the broader context of some major historical events during Thielemann's ministry, to the more specific context of the theological issues within the Presbyterian Church of which Thielemann was a part of for thirty-four years. The goal of this chapter is to place Thielemann within the

broader social, cultural, historical and theological context in order to see his need-centered approach to preaching in practice and how some of these key historical and theological issues impacted Thielemann.

# Chapter One: Biographical Sketch of Bruce W. Thielemann's Life and Ministry

## Introduction

The pulpit at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a magnificent, elevated stone structure with a serpentine staircase wrapping its way around a massive stone column. Towering at ten feet high, the pulpit allows the preacher to look the people sitting in the balcony directly in the eye. The pulpit and the eight winding stairs leading up to it are impressive for both their architectural beauty and the legacy of men and women who have climbed those stairs to preach God's Word. One of the preachers who set his sights on this mighty pulpit at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh was a young seminary graduate named Bruce Thielemann.<sup>10</sup> Like the massive stone pulpit, Bruce Wheeler Thielemann was an impressive man. The journey he took to the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh is a remarkable story of a man who dedicated his life to preaching God's Word.

As a teenager Bruce Thielemann memorized Father Mapple's sermon from Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*.<sup>11</sup> A young Thielemann would recite verbatim this fiery sermon on the book of Jonah over and over in the privacy of his bedroom, little knowing that one day he would go on to preach his own epic sermons to thousands. Melville's description of the preacher and pulpit also impacted Thielemann's understanding of the preacher's role in the pulpit:

What could be more full of meaning? - For the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.<sup>12</sup>

Using similar imagery Thielemann writes, "The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors; and like the sea, it batters and bruises and does not rest...To

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "How to Think Your Way to Success" (sermon).

<sup>11</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, (Newton: First Presbyterian Church, 2002) 27.

<sup>12</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (New York: Library of America, 2010) 66.



preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and to know each time you do it that you must do it again.”<sup>13</sup> This statement describes well the sacrificial and irresistible call on a preacher to his or her task. Bruce W. Thielemann dedicated his life to standing in the prow.

At the age of nine Thielemann announced to his family while seated at the breakfast table that he was going to be a preacher.<sup>14</sup> Heeding the call of the pulpit, Thielemann gave himself completely to preaching God’s Word. During his thirty-four years of professional ministry Thielemann served twenty-four years pastoring local congregations and ten years as a college chaplain. In all of these positions, Thielemann remained faithful to his call to preach God’s Word. Due to his single-minded focus on preaching, Thielemann only published one short book and wrote a few articles during his career. His primary impact was made through preaching.

Thielemann dedicated his life to the art and craft of homiletics. His greatest passion in life was to preach God’s Word clearly, powerfully and in a way that connected to the needs of his congregation. Thielemann once proclaimed in the conclusion of a sermon, “And this is the gospel that I preach. And I love to preach it more than anything else in all the world.”<sup>15</sup> The following is a brief biographical sketch of a man who loved to preach. The focus of this chapter is an examination of the specific areas of Bruce Thielemann’s life and ministry that were influential in shaping his need-centered philosophy of preaching. One’s upbringing, education, professional experience, passions, mental and physical health, and relationships all play a vital role in shaping who we are, and for a preacher, these factors shape one’s approach to the preaching task. This was certainly the case for Thielemann.

### **Childhood Years**

Bruce Wheeler Thielemann entered the world on April 12, 1933. Bruce was the first born of Art and Alyce Thielemann who lived south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the town of Dormont. Art Thielemann was President of Pittsburgh’s North Side Rotary Club and loved performing magic tricks. He worked as the manager of a freight

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, *The Wittenburg Door*, “More on the Essence of Great Preaching”, no. 36 (April–May 1977) 25.

<sup>14</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, (Newton: First Presbyterian Church, 2002) 21.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann “Unashamed,” (sermon).

company in Pittsburgh, while Alyce stayed home to take care of their two boys. Shortly after the arrival of their first son, the Thielemann's moved a few miles away to Mt. Lebanon. It was here that Bruce and his younger brother by two years, Alan Cole Thielemann, would spend their formative years.<sup>16</sup>

In sermons Bruce spoke fondly of his childhood and the healthy relationship he enjoyed with both his mother and father throughout his life. In a sermon preached on May 19, 1991, Bruce used a personal story from his childhood to highlight the importance of a nurturing Christian mother. Thielemann recalls, "As I look back on the history of my days, my brother and I would come home from school for lunch. My mom would have lunch ready for us every day. If she ever had those moments of feeling bad about being 'just a mother' she never expressed it."<sup>17</sup> Thielemann's deep love, admiration and respect for his mother would be evident throughout his entire life. Once while explaining the importance of a consistent home life, and a traditional understanding of motherhood Thielemann said, "I grew up in a time when families stayed together. My mother saw herself in the noblest terms as a mother."<sup>18</sup> It is obvious Thielemann had a deep respect for his mother and fond memories of the role she played in his spiritual development as a man of God. Very candidly Thielemann shared, "As I walk through life, pretending I have always been an adult there is still that little boy inside of me who hurried home to be welcomed by his mother at lunch every day. And that memory means very much to me. And I feel sorry for those who have no such memory."<sup>19</sup> Alyce took the lead in providing a Christian home and education for her two boys. As evidence of his mother's profound and lasting influence in his life, Thielemann continued to value his mother's favorable approval even as an adult. In one sermon Thielemann says,

I am far from being the kind of man that I ought to be. There are things in my life I would do anything to change. There are things in my life, which I find contemptible in the lives of other people. And, yet every time I confront the moment of temptation, whether it is with an evil thought or an evil word, or an evil deed, I can always check the rightness or the wrongness of

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<sup>16</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 21-28.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Carry Him to His Mother," (sermon).

<sup>18</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Carry Him to His Mother," (sermon).

<sup>19</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Carry Him to His Mother," (sermon).

what I am going to do by asking myself, if my mother knew this would she be ashamed?<sup>20</sup>

This investment early on in her oldest son's life forged a healthy relationship that Alyce Thielemann would maintain with her son until his death on January 6, 1994.

While Alyce played an important role in his spiritual nurture, Thielemann gave credit to both his parents for sharing the truth of Christ with him as a child. In describing his relationship with Jesus Christ, he once said that the truth of his parent's words was indisputable.<sup>21</sup> Although Bruce's younger brother Cole once described their father as "being disinterested in 'church'", it is obvious Bruce saw both his mother and father playing a vital role in his Christian nurture as a child.<sup>22</sup> Art may not have been overly interested in church, but Alyce faithfully attended church throughout her entire life.<sup>23</sup> Regular church attendance was an important part of Bruce and Cole's upbringing. When Bruce was an infant the family attended a Methodist Church in Dormont, Pennsylvania. Sometime in the late 1930's they began attending the newly planted Sunset Hills Presbyterian Church, which began as a Sunday school outreach meeting in the Julia Ward Howe elementary school and eventually came under the pastoral leadership of the Rev. Dr. James H. Blackwood in 1945. A church building was constructed and dedicated on October 4, 1948. Bruce was fifteen at the time and already leading the junior high Sunday school program at the church.<sup>24</sup> In a sermon reflecting on his childhood he said, at home and in Sunday School he was taught about Jesus Christ: his coming, his dying, his rising, his present power, and he was confident it was all for him. He believed it and he accepted it.<sup>25</sup> As a child he remembers singing *Jesus Loves Me* at the "drop of a cookie."<sup>26</sup> In the same sermon Thielemann said that faith in Jesus Christ, "Was the cornerstone of my family. Something I never doubted."<sup>27</sup> It was from his

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Carry Him to His Mother," (sermon).

<sup>21</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Unashamed," (sermon).

<sup>22</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Unashamed," (sermon).

<sup>26</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Unashamed," (sermon).

<sup>27</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Unashamed," (sermon).

parents that Thielemann first heard the Good News of Jesus Christ, and it was this Good News that he dedicated his life to boldly proclaim.

Throughout his life and ministry, Thielemann also held a deep love and respect for his father, Art. When Art Thielemann died on December 10, 1975, Thielemann said goodbye, “at least temporarily”, to the man he loved most on the face of the earth.<sup>28</sup> The sting of losing his father was listed as one of the great discouragements Thielemann faced during his lifetime. The friendship he had with his father as a child and as an adult taught him lifelong lessons about confidence and strength. In an article about friendship Thielemann remembers an incident that occurred with his father when he was eight-years old:

My father and I went into the back yard to move a heavy rock. Filled with the pride of my eight-year-old manhood, I determined to lift it unaided. However, strain though I might, I couldn't budge it. “Have you done everything you can?”, my father asked. “Yes” – and to prove it, I turned to the task once more. As I stood puffing a moment later, my father asked me again, “Have you done everything you can?” “Yes.” “No, you haven't – you haven't asked me to help.” I was filled with happiness as I understood: my dad, my friend, would be there if I needed him. Together we lifted that rock easily. My father had put more into the job than just his muscle power – he had given me the strength and confidence that come from being accepted as a friend.<sup>29</sup>

Thielemann knew the value of friendship and often spoke about this in his teaching, sermons and personal correspondence. “A friend is someone who comes along and begins to know us, to lift the veil a little. He lifts a little more, and suddenly tells us we are beautiful...we begin to create a threefold cord, to love ourselves in such a way that we can better love our neighbors.”<sup>30</sup> His understanding about the importance of friendship and unconditional acceptance from his father would play a vital role in allowing Thielemann to lead churches, teach, mentor young men and preach God's Word faithfully and boldly. Thielemann believed and taught that children and “adults need the love of a friend.”<sup>31</sup> Without the deep and

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Dealing with Discouragement,” (sermon).

<sup>29</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Focus on Friendship,” (article from Bruce Thielemann's personal files), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Focus on Friendship,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Focus on Friendship,” 6.

accepting friendship of his father and others in his life, Thielemann would not have been able to serve the Lord as he did.

Thielemann had a Christian upbringing, good relationship with his family and for the most part a positive childhood; however, as with most teenagers, Thielemann had his struggles. First among these problems was a lifelong struggle with his weight. Thielemann once said, “I have always been fat, and with my weight has come awkwardness and a lack of coordination. And I remember as a boy when we many times would line up to play games, and I would be the last to be chosen – and sometimes not chosen at all.”<sup>32</sup> After sharing this, Thielemann continues to explain, “It is what God thinks of you that is of infinite value.”<sup>33</sup> While he may have known this truth as an adult, it is a difficult truth to grasp for a teenager struggling with a poor self-image. And, for Thielemann battling with his weight and the resulting struggle with a poor self-image would remain with him throughout his life. Along with the struggle over his weight, in his teenage years Thielemann also wrestled with his Christian faith. On the outside, Thielemann looked and acted the part of a Christian, but he reveals feelings of embarrassment in his Christian faith. “There came a time when I was ashamed of the gospel – I refer, now, to my teen years.”<sup>34</sup> He continues explaining, “I caught it when I was thirteen. I wanted to be ‘regular,’ and the gospel wasn’t and still isn’t, so I became ashamed of the gospel.”<sup>35</sup> Despite teaching Sunday school for three years Thielemann confessed that he never let any of his friends at school know about his faith. “Faith was one world – life was another. I was ashamed of the gospel.”<sup>36</sup> This struggle between two worlds continued for Thielemann until his freshman year at Westminster College, a liberal arts Christian college located in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. Over Christmas break in 1951, during his first year of college while training for full-time pastoral ministry, Thielemann describes becoming, “Ashamed that he was ashamed.”<sup>37</sup> A friend from high school, Jack Smith, rang the doorbell of his parent’s

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Letter to the Son of My Dreams,” (sermon).

<sup>33</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Letter to the Son of My Dreams,” (sermon).

<sup>34</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>35</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>36</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>37</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

home. Jack was now a student at Purdue University who had heard Thielemann was preparing to enter the full-time ministry. He shared with Thielemann that his mother was an alcoholic and that he was having some problems at home. Thielemann knew that what Jack needed most was Jesus Christ, but he was ashamed to mention Jesus to his hurting friend. Reflecting on the incident Thielemann candidly shared, “He suffered and was dying...I was avoiding snickers.”<sup>38</sup> He continued, “I learned more that afternoon than in first semester [sic]. I became ashamed of my shame.”<sup>39</sup> This was a life changing revelation for Thielemann. He said, “I went back to campus a different person.”<sup>40</sup> When Thielemann returned to Westminster he would boldly proclaim with the Apostle Paul, “I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”<sup>41</sup>

## **Education and Ministry Preparation**

### *Westminster College*

In the fall of 1951, Thielemann entered Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. He majored in history with a pre-ministry focus. His focus on ministry was not a surprise to anyone who knew Thielemann. Many people told him he should consider pastoral ministry, but it was his fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Colvin, who was the first person to vocalize this to Thielemann. In a 1992 interview Thielemann recalls that moment, “The first person who ever said to me, ‘You ought to be a minister,’ was my fourth-grade teacher. I remember thinking the idea was silly. Even in the fourth grade I thought that and perhaps it was silly. I don’t know. I won’t know until I retire, I suppose.”<sup>42</sup> Through the inspiration of men already in ministry and the leading of the Holy Spirit, Thielemann began his journey towards full-time ministry at the age of eighteen.<sup>43</sup>

Westminster College was located seventy miles northwest of Mt. Lebanon and was a part of the United Presbyterian denomination. Thielemann’s home

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<sup>38</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>39</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>40</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>41</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>42</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Interview with Lydia Talbot, (transcript available at [www.csec.org/csec/sermon/thielemann\\_3607.htm#sermon](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/thielemann_3607.htm#sermon)), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Interview with Lydia Talbot, 4.

church, Sunset Hills Presbyterian, and his future seminary, Pittsburgh-Xenia, were also affiliated with the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA or UP). Bruce Thielemann would remain connected with the United Presbyterian Church of North America, which became the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) after merging with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) in 1958. Then in 1983 the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) from the north would reunite with Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) from the south to become the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). Thielemann was ordained in the Presbyterian Church from 1959 until his retirement in 1993. While serving as the pastor of Glendale Presbyterian Church in Glendale, California, Thielemann humorously told his doctor that he “suspected his blood type must be U.P.”<sup>44</sup>

Later in life reflecting on his time of in college Thielemann said, “I was not an exceptional student. I was an academic grind [sic].”<sup>45</sup> What Thielemann lacked in raw academic talent he made up for with hard work, discipline, self-confidence and determination. Years after having Thielemann in his class, history professor Dr. Delber McKee recalled, “He was not an intellectual – not a scholar – but he was certainly a very sharp individual.”<sup>46</sup> McKee also remembers Thielemann as young man determined to master the art of preaching.<sup>47</sup>

As a pre-ministry major Thielemann was required to preach in school chapels. When he was not preaching in chapel, he could be seen sitting in the balcony taking notes on the sermons being preached. He also preached every Sunday for six months at the Vienna Presbyterian Church while they searched for a full-time pastor. During this time Thielemann began a relationship with the pastor, Rev. Dr. John Calvin Reid, in his hometown at Mt. Lebanon Presbyterian Church.<sup>48</sup> Thielemann wrote a sermon each week and then mail it to Reid for critique. Later in

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<sup>44</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Nor Things to Come,” (sermon).

<sup>46</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 34.

his ministry Thielemann would fondly remember Reid as, “one of my fathers in the faith.”<sup>49</sup>

The young, aspiring preacher was also actively involved in other extracurricular activities. As a freshman Thielemann joined the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity. Showing an aptitude for leadership, he was elected president during his junior year. Drama was another one of Thielemann’s favorite extra-curricular activities. During his sophomore year Thielemann played King Claudius in the school production of Hamlet. The play and Thielemann’s performance as the bearded king received rave reviews, and the school’s production of Hamlet broke attendance records.<sup>50</sup> Thielemann carried a love and appreciation for theater with him throughout his life. He also sharpened his public speaking abilities by entering a statewide oratory contest during his senior year. His topic was “Fear: Friend or Foe?” This talented public speaker took first prize in the competition. Thielemann’s time at Westminster College was a positive and formative experience socially and academically, but also spiritually.

It is important to note the contribution Westminster College made on Thielemann’s spiritual maturity, his call to seminary and eventually his commitment to ordained pastoral ministry. In 1978 while speaking at the New Wilmington Missionary Conference, an annual weeklong, multi-generational, Presbyterian Church (USA) missions conference held on the Westminster College campus since 1906, Thielemann shared the personal influence of that very same missionary conference during his college years. In a conversation with his friend Doug Etter, he described the intimate encounter he had with God at the conference during a night of prayer. He recounted the moment as a “dark night of the soul.”<sup>51</sup> That night of prayer made a profound impact on the young Bruce Thielemann as he made a commitment to serve the Lord with his whole life. He would later explain, “The most important thing about conference [sic] for me has been the promises I’ve made here – the promise that I’ve had the chance to make and then re-make. You

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<sup>49</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>50</sup> Paul Gamble, “Hamlet Scores Hit in Little Theatre,” (April 1953 *Blue and White*, Westminster College publication).

<sup>51</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, 37, and in a personal interview with Doug Etter.



see, it was at this conference that I got off the curb and into the parade.”<sup>52</sup>

Elsewhere, Thielemann also shared the details about that night recalling fondly the ministry of the speaker for the evening Dr. Frank Lawrence. Thielemann recalled, “I don’t remember the title of his sermon or the text or anything that he said in the course of it, but I know that that night, by the Spirits power moving through him, my life was claimed by Christ and turned around. And every time I walk into that chapel either to speak there or just to visit, I see it all again.”<sup>53</sup>

In 1988, Bruce Thielemann’s alma mater, Westminster College, awarded him an honorary doctorate. On that occasion he remarked, “I love this school with all my heart.”<sup>54</sup> It was at Westminster College that God began the process of taking a hammer and chisel to Thielemann’s soul and spirit in order to form a man of God who was not afraid to call himself a “fool for Christ’s sake, a lover, a clown.”<sup>55</sup> Thielemann’s seminary would pick up the hammer and chisel role for Thielemann, but it was his time at Westminster College where this process of equipping, shaping and molding a young pastor commenced.

#### *Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary*

Thielemann was twenty-two years old when he began his studies at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary in 1955. During his three years as a student the seminary provided an intimate family feel. When he graduated in 1959 there were only eight faculty and forty-one students. Pittsburgh-Xenia was the primary seminary for the United Presbyterian Church of North America and later merged with Western Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1959 to become Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The consolidation of these two seminaries was the result of the merging of these two Presbyterian denominations in 1958. Before the merger and during Thielemann’s time, Pittsburgh-Xenia was heavily influenced by the Old Princeton theological movement of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> Old Princeton theologians

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<sup>52</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Anyone for the Parade?” (sermon).

<sup>53</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Seeing Things Not There,” (sermon).

<sup>54</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Send in the Clowns,” (sermon).

<sup>55</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Send in the Clowns” (sermon).

<sup>56</sup> James A. Walther, *Ever a Frontier: The Bicentennial History of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 141.

considered themselves to be the descendants of Calvinism as delineated in the Westminster standards and the Swiss theologian Francois Turretin.<sup>57</sup> They held to a strict confessional stance, had a high view of Scripture, and maintained a vital piety.<sup>58</sup> Its leaders at Princeton seminary included Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield and lastly J. Gresham Machen. Theologian Richard Lints defines the Old Princeton theological movement as a group of theologians “seriously committed to scholarship in defense of Protestant orthodoxy.”<sup>59</sup> Further this group was “committed to an intellectual exposition and defense of conservative Presbyterianism.”<sup>60</sup> Based on an examination of Thielemann’s class notes during his time at Pittsburgh-Xenia it is evident that many of the faculty: President Dr. Addison Leitch, Church history professor Dr. John Gerstner, preaching professor Dr. H. Ray Shear and Old Testament professor Dr. James Leon Kelso were theologically in alignment with conservative Presbyterianism as defined above.<sup>61</sup>

Preaching was a significant part of Thielemann’s theological training at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary. During his first and second years he was required to write two homiletics notebooks. In these homiletics notebooks Thielemann answered questions about a variety of issues in the study of homiletics. The notebooks cover in detail the history, theology, methodology and mechanics of preparing and delivering biblical sermons.<sup>62</sup> Along with learning the theory and mechanics of homiletics in the classroom, Thielemann and other students were required to preach in Pittsburgh-Xenia’s campus-wide chapels. Two-times a year a text was assigned for a ten-minute sermon to be delivered without notes followed by a critique from a faculty member designated by the preaching professor.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> W. Andrew Hoffercker, ‘Princeton Theology’, D.G. Hart and Mark Noll eds, *Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 202.

<sup>58</sup> W. Andrew Hoffercker, *Piety and the Princeton Theologians* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1981).

<sup>59</sup> Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 44.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*. 44.

<sup>61</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, (Seminary Notebooks from Thielemann’s personal files).

<sup>62</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, (Homiletics Notebooks from Thielemann’s personal files).

<sup>63</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, 41.

During his time at Pittsburgh-Xenia Thielemann served as a pastoral intern at the Mt. Lebanon Presbyterian Church under the leadership of Rev. Dr. John Calvin Reid, the pastor whom Thielemann sent his sermons to for critique during his college years. Mt. Lebanon Presbyterian Church was a large congregation with over 2500 members. Reid supervised three full-time pastors and one or two seminary interns. Reid recognized Thielemann's ability to preach and allowed him to preach more regularly than the full-time assistant pastors on staff at the church.<sup>64</sup> Along with regular preaching opportunities at Mt. Lebanon Thielemann also started a ministry to athletes at his former high school, Mt. Lebanon High. The Trinity Club was a successful afterschool ministry aimed at the local Protestant student athletes.<sup>65</sup>

*St. Mary's College in Saint Andrews, Scotland*

During his time at seminary Thielemann was given a once in a lifetime opportunity, a Rotary International Graduate Fellowship to study abroad. Thielemann explained his interview to compete for the award:

A wonderful opportunity presented itself – a fellowship to study abroad. And on the morning, we were to make our final presentation, I awakened covered with measles. I called the doctor. He said, 'It's all right to go. When the measles are out you're no longer contagious.' So, I went. I had another fellow drive me, because my eyes felt terrible – like lead balls in my head. They only gave ninety-nine of these fellowships, and I wanted with all my heart to have one.<sup>66</sup>

Thielemann earned the coveted fellowship and spent a year studying at St. Mary's College in St. Andrews, Scotland. His year abroad was an enriching experience for Thielemann that he would reflect upon with joy later in life; however, while his time in Scotland was rich academically, valuable for broadening his view of the world, and instilling a lifelong love of travel; it was also a time of great loneliness for him. It was not easy for Thielemann to be so far away from his home, family and friends.<sup>67</sup> When Thielemann returned from Scotland he still had one year of seminary studies to complete, but his final year proved personally challenging.

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<sup>64</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Nor Things to Come," (sermon).

<sup>67</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Have You Mailed Your Cards, Yet?," (sermon).

Although Thielemann felt called to preach, a calling that began in boyhood and was confirmed through early adulthood, during his final year of seminary Thielemann doubted this call to the ministry. He remembers, “When I was in my last year at seminary, I decided that I was *not* called to the ministry, and that I would leave school.”<sup>68</sup> Fortunately, Thielemann shared his struggle with a friend who immediately told the news to James Leon Kelso, Thielemann’s professor of Old Testament. Kelso came to Thielemann’s dorm room to talk with him. Thielemann reflected on that monumental conversation:

He looked at me and said, ‘Thielemann, the trouble with you is, you think God called you to be successful. God didn’t call you to be successful; He calls you to be faithful.’ And then taking that as his text, he sat down on the edge of my bed and proceeded to counsel me for an additional fifty minutes. In that fifty minutes he turned my life around – and I shall be eternally grateful to him for that. For I have known great joy in my ministry.<sup>69</sup>

Kelso’s pastoral prodding succeeded in leading Thielemann out of his valley of doubt. In that act of courageous mentoring, Kelso saw more in Thielemann than Thielemann saw in himself. In an act of faithfulness to God’s call, Thielemann was ordained on June 11, 1959, at Mt. Lebanon Presbyterian Church.

## **Ministry**

### *First Presbyterian Church McKeesport*

At the time of Thielemann’s arrival to the city of McKeesport in 1959, Pennsylvania had already reached the peak of its economic prosperity. The city of McKeesport is situated at the junction of the Monongahela and Youghiogheny rivers southeast of Pittsburgh. With the decline of the steel industry in Pittsburgh the population of McKeesport dropped significantly. At the peak of prosperity in 1940 McKeesport boasted a population of 55,355, in 1959 when Thielemann arrived the population had already dropped to 45,489.<sup>70</sup>

While prosperity may have been in decline for the city of McKeesport, activity at First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport was still booming. When the church called Thielemann as their pastor there were over 800 people on the

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<sup>68</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, (Address given at Chautauqua Institute, August 30, 1981).

<sup>69</sup> Thielemann, (Address given at Chautauqua Institute, August 30, 1981).

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.us-city-home.com/pennsylvania/mckeesport/>

membership rolls. Fresh out of seminary and only twenty-six years old, Thielemann was taking on a large church. He was also following in the footsteps of Rev. Dr. Clark, the loved pastor who had served the congregation faithfully for twenty-one years.<sup>71</sup>

Pastoring the First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport was a challenge that Thielemann was well equipped for and capable of handling. Thielemann, who would remain single throughout his life, gave himself completely to his new congregation. His preaching was well known in the community, and by the time he was in his early thirties Thielemann was already in great demand as a guest preacher. His passion for youth ministry continued to grow as he invested in the church's youth ministry program and in the lives of the students under his pastoral care. During his time at McKeesport Thielemann's saw a side of life he had never experienced before. Sometime after he left McKeesport, in a sermon addressed to "The Daughter of My Dreams," Thielemann reflected back on his horizon being broadened in McKeesport:

I grew up in a rather sheltered environment in a town where almost everybody was Republican, and almost everybody was Presbyterian. Everybody combed their hair the same way. It was the kind of place where I never heard the other side in any labor-management squabble. Then I went to my first pastorate in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, and suddenly I heard the blue-collar side of things, and I wish I would have known some of those things earlier, so I would want my daughter to have economic perspective and social perspective and political perspective and racial perspective.<sup>72</sup>

When Thielemann first arrived in McKeesport he may not have known much about those "blue-collar" men and women in his congregation, but after nine and a half years of serving and pastoring these people he learned unforgettable life lessons that became the fodder for numerous sermon illustrations. In a sermon he remarked,

I think of my first pastorate in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. The great United States steel rolling mills were there. They made tube steel...Now I have talked many times with those who run those machines and they suggest without exception that the principal ingredient in the success of that

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<sup>71</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Letter to the Daughter of My Dreams," (sermon).

operation is the temperature of the metal. When it is molten, it can be molded into what they want it to be...<sup>73</sup>

Thielemann continued to explain that character is like that steel. There are certain moments when the temperature is right for God to shape and mold men and women, to be what he wants them to be.<sup>74</sup> For Thielemann his time pastoring at McKeesport was a molten moment in which God shaped him and prepared him for his next congregation and ministry challenge.

In February of 1968 First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport merged with the neighboring Walnut Presbyterian Church forming the Immanuel United Presbyterian Church.<sup>75</sup> Thielemann describes the situation like this, “In nine years, we had merged with another church, we had three buildings instead of one, we were the only integrated congregation in McKeesport, the budget had gone up from 28,000 to 111,000 a year. Even the Mayor of the city, whom we had been trying to oust from office, said we were the most influential church in the community.”<sup>76</sup> It is worth noting when Thielemann describes First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport as an “integrated congregation” he is referring to different socio-economic and racial groups being represented in the congregation which he described as having “the most significant interracial ministry in the city.”<sup>77</sup> At the conclusion of his time at McKeesport the church had five pastors on staff and “one of whom was black.”<sup>78</sup> In November of 1968, after nine and a half years serving as the Senior Pastor, Bruce Thielemann left McKeesport riding on a ministry high. On December 15, 1968, Thielemann moved to Glendale, California to begin his next season of ministry.

#### *Glendale Presbyterian Church*

The five and a half years Thielemann spent in California at Glendale Presbyterian Church were challenging and enriching. On a positive note, during his time at Glendale Thielemann forged some deep and lasting friendships and continued to

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<sup>73</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Tide Riding,” (sermon).

<sup>74</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Tide Riding,” (sermon).

<sup>75</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Be Careful Not to be Too Careful,” (sermon).

<sup>76</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Be Careful Not to be Too Careful,” (sermon).

<sup>77</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Be Careful Not to be Too Careful,” (sermon).

<sup>78</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Be Careful Not to be Too Careful,” (sermon).

gain a reputation as an effective communicator in the pulpit both locally and globally. Thielemann traveled extensively nationally and internationally lecturing and preaching. By the end of his career, he had preached in sixty-three countries and lectured at over 200 college and seminary campuses. Also, through his recorded sermon audiotape ministry, "Message for the Moment," which began at Glendale, he became widely known as a preacher in every state and over twenty-seven countries.<sup>79</sup> As evidence of his growing influence, Thielemann was awarded two honorary doctorates from Presbyterian Colleges: in 1972 from Grove City College in Grove City, Pennsylvania and in 1973 from Sterling College in Sterling, Kansas. Later in life Thielemann would be awarded honorary doctorates from his *alma mater*, Westminster College and Waynesburg College.<sup>80</sup>

On a personal level it was at Glendale where Thielemann realized he needed to deal with the deep pain of loneliness that had been with him since his time in Scotland as a seminary student. Thielemann longed to be married and have children but would remain a bachelor his entire life. In a sermon at Glendale, he told the congregation that he considered adopting a child. Thielemann shared that the state of California had no restrictions on a single man adopting a child, "But first I consulted with a dear friend of mine, Dr. James Polhemus. Polhemus said to me that I should not adopt a child."<sup>81</sup> His primary argument being that with his busy ministry schedule, Thielemann would not have enough time for a child. Polhemus also challenged him, "As a pastor, you are to look upon all the children of your congregation as your daughters and your sons."<sup>82</sup> Thielemann listened to his friend's advice but continued to long for a wife and children. In 1992, one year from retirement, Thielemann candidly shared his lifelong desire to be married in an interview when asked, "You are a single pastor in the pulpit of one of the country's major churches, the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. How

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<sup>79</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Anyone for the Parade," (sermon).

<sup>80</sup> Thielemann also received the "Distinguished Alumnus Award" from Westminster College in 1983 and from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1993. In 1986 he was awarded the "Man of the Year in Religion" from the city of Pittsburgh.

<sup>81</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Letter to the Daughter of My Dreams," (sermon).

<sup>82</sup> Thielemann, "A Letter to the Daughter of My Dreams," (sermon).

would it have been different for you had you chosen the more predictable, traditional pattern of marriage and children?"<sup>83</sup> Thielemann answered:

Well, let me just say that I tried to choose that way a great number of times. I have felt throughout the course of my entire ministry that I am incomplete. The Scriptures say that it is not good for man to dwell alone. I think that applies to women as well. I think there is a certain full-orbed experience, which comes in the intimate relationships on every level between a man and a woman. I have known that. I stand before you, or sit before you right now, in my sixties and I am still a virgin. I don't know what it would be like to lie next to a warm body and feel the intimacy of that. I cannot identify with people who talk about the wonder and the beauty and the fruitfulness of that. I felt it has crippled my ministry to people who are in marital difficulties. I don't have anyone that I can ask questions about what I am doing at the church and know absolutely that they will level with me and say, 'It's really poor, Buster. It's really poor.' Everybody kind of puts the minister on a platform or podium and they never really quite tell him what he most needs to hear. It would be my hope and my belief, speaking as an outsider once again, that my wife would be someone who would tell me the truth.<sup>84</sup>

At an informal lunch discussion following delivering a lecture on preaching in 1979, Thielemann identified not being married as the greatest burden of his life.

Thielemann admitted feeling incomplete not being married and did not recommend anyone entering ministry in a single state. Thielemann dated regularly in college but dedicated the majority of his time to his studies, his Rotary scholarship in St. Andrews, Scotland and fieldwork during seminary. After completing Seminary, Thielemann hoped to find a wife. However, the demands of full-time pastoral ministry and fear of dating anyone in his congregation kept him from finding a wife.<sup>85</sup> In order to compensate for his singleness and lack of experience in a marriage relationship in ministry Thielemann read voraciously in the field of counseling and marital counseling. His strategy seemed to be effective, because Thielemann shared that young women were very ready to come to him as an unmarried man for marital counseling. To further explain and make light of a difficult situation he shared, "I think that some women think that all married men

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<sup>83</sup> Interview of Bruce W. Thielemann by Lydia Talbot  
([www.csec.org/csec/sermon/thielemann\\_3607.htm#sermon](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/thielemann_3607.htm#sermon))

<sup>84</sup> Interview of Bruce W. Thielemann by Lydia Talbot.

<sup>85</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 1979, 11-12.



are in it together [marriage]. And that I have a certain objectivity not being a member of the team.”<sup>86</sup>

Although Thielemann never married he shared with families in the congregation about his struggle with singleness, loneliness and deep need for the love of family. In Thielemann’s experience, he found this honest strategy with the families in his congregation to be an effective way of having them welcome him into their family life.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps as a way to satisfy his loneliness, Thielemann adopted a dog, a giant Newfoundland named Rufus.<sup>88</sup>

In another attempt to assuage the pain of loneliness Thielemann made the monumental and risky decision to buy a house and invite four to six men training for the ministry to live with him. This decision was born out of the ashes of a difficult experience of alienation and loneliness that occurred during a weeklong trip to Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Center with some of the youth from Glendale. Thielemann explained how he came to this decision:

I need to be cared for, I need to be liked, and I need to be loved. So, I told them that. I said, ‘I am a grill’...I made my biggest step just recently. I bought a house...and I am going to have people living there, at least four who are preparing for the ministry or at least seriously thinking about it. Maybe six, I don’t know it’s a very scary thought to me. I’ve lived alone for fourteen years. But you see I feel crowded out. I feel it’s desperately important to have life going through me, instead of me just going through life. I don’t want to be a grill.<sup>89</sup>

The house was called “Three Rings” based on “the three rings of God’s love: God’s love for us, our love for one another, and God’s love for the world.”<sup>90</sup> After leaving Glendale, Thielemann continued this practice of communal mentoring by opening his home to several young men from Grove City College.

Bruce Thielemann loved pastoring the people of Glendale Presbyterian Church, and at first the people of Glendale loved their pastor. During his time at Glendale his ministry work led the *Los Angeles Times* to describe his congregation

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<sup>86</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 11.

<sup>88</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, 81.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “When Life Crowds You Out,” (sermon).

<sup>90</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, 80.

as “one of the alivest [sic] churches in the Southland.”<sup>91</sup> In a sermon preached on June 7, 1970, he told the congregation, “I enjoy visiting your homes. I rejoice when I can bring some comfort to hospital room [sic]. I am honored when included in a wedding...Oh, I’m glad I’m your pastor. Your friendly wave on the street means a lot.”<sup>92</sup> However, while things started out well at Glendale for Thielemann, towards the end of his five and a half years he began to experience some painful ministry challenges. In a sermon entitled “Dealing with Discouragement” preached years later at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Bruce Thielemann shared the six greatest discouragements in his life. A lot can be learned about Thielemann from his list:

I know what discouragement is. I know the discouragement of fighting my excess weight for 50 years. I know the discouragement of open-heart surgery that was not as successful, though every bit as painful as it was supposed to be. I stood beside my father’s casket and known the discouragement of saying goodbye for a while to the man I love most on the face of the earth. I’ve known the discouragement of being betrayed by a very close friend. I’ve known the discouragement of having a congregation to which I gave everything I had turn against me and reject my ministry. I’ve learned the discouragement, and know it still of loneliness, for I am a bachelor I have no wife, I have no children. Believe me I know what discouragement is.<sup>93</sup>

Although Thielemann does not give specific details about some of these discouraging moments in the sermon, he felt Glendale Presbyterian Church turned on him and rejected his ministry. In the summer of 1974, as the result of tensions and difficulties in his relationship with some of the ministry staff, elders and members of the congregation the executive committee voted to request Thielemann’s resignation while Thielemann was vacationing and attending a conference in Switzerland. This decision and vote were the direct result of the mounting unhappiness among some of the elders over Thielemann’s treatment of staff, leadership and members of the church.<sup>94</sup> Although the executive committee in the Presbyterian Church has no official authority to force a pastor to resign,

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<sup>91</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Take the Whee Out of Life,” (sermon).

<sup>92</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Unashamed,” (sermon).

<sup>93</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Dealing with Discouragement,” (sermon).

<sup>94</sup> Personal interview with Rev. Barry Moller and Thomas V. Haugen.

Thielemann agreed and graciously announced his resignation from the pulpit on the following Sunday.<sup>95</sup> Thielemann's final Sunday at Glendale was in October of 1974. His decision to leave quietly was difficult, but a quiet departure was the only way to keep unity at Glendale Presbyterian Church. The searing pain of having men and women whom he had poured his life into reject his ministry would plague Thielemann through the remainder of his life.

#### *Grove City College*

On the Sunday in August that Thielemann announced his resignation to Glendale Presbyterian Church he also made a phone call to Dr. Charles MacKenzie, the president of Grove City College.<sup>96</sup> During a summer conference in Switzerland, while Glendale Presbyterian Church's executive committee voted on Thielemann's future at Glendale Presbyterian, MacKenzie shared with Thielemann that Grove City was without a Chaplain and his personal desire to hire Thielemann for the job. At the time neither of these men knew the executive committee would ask Thielemann to tender his resignation upon his return from Switzerland.

Thielemann began his new role as Dean of the Chapel and Associate Professor of Religion at Grove City on October 1, 1974. In this position Thielemann would be able utilize and cultivate three of his strongest gifts: preaching, teaching, and pastoring. In a series of letters addressed to Jim Prothero, one of the teenagers from Glendale Presbyterian Church, Thielemann is upbeat and optimistic about his time at Grove City College. In one letter he remarks:

I have always thought that the ministry is the highest of all professions. I still believe this because the minister is able to tell others about Christ in a totally natural way. I would rank teaching as the second profession because in teaching you are allowed to be openly and aggressively influential with the young and with others. It seems to me that I have the best of all possible worlds in being able to pursue my life's work in both teaching and ministry.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 83-84.

<sup>96</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 83.

<sup>97</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Letter to Jim Prothero (from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Library collection), quoted here from John Zingaro, 96.

As Dean of the Chapel, Thielemann would continue a regular preaching ministry during his ten years at Grove City College. Thielemann preached every Sunday evening to a full house during all school chapel services.

As an Associate Professor, Thielemann taught philosophy, religion and communication courses. One of the courses Thielemann team-taught with seven other faculty members in 1984 was called, "The Religio-Philosophical Dimension of Life." The course description states, "This course will explore many of the important issues of human existence – the meaning of man, God, knowledge, the nature of the world and social relationships, including ethics – from a Biblical perspective."<sup>98</sup> The wide scope of this course represents Thielemann's breadth of knowledge in different disciplines.

Along with his preaching responsibilities as Dean of the Chapel, Thielemann was also responsible for pastoral care of the students at the college. His love for students and ministering to them continued to grow during his time there. As a fellow Professor, Andrew Hofferger remembered, "I think the main dimension that he brought was his ability to relate illustrations from real life...the primary way he reached people was through illustrations."<sup>99</sup> Thielemann spent time with students investing in their lives. His pastoral care for the students played an integral role in formulating Thielemann's approach to preaching and philosophy of homiletics. In preaching Thielemann's aim was to connect with people's needs. In a series of preaching lectures first taught to the San Fernando Presbytery in 1975 and then delivered twenty-nine times at different locations until 1993, Thielemann described his approach to preaching. "If God's acts are in response to the needs of men [sic], and preaching is to be an act of God, then preaching should be directed precisely at the needs of men [sic]. And to me this is so patently clear that the mere announcement should suffice."<sup>100</sup> In order to accomplish this goal Thielemann dedicated time getting to know the students to whom he was preaching. From 1974 until 1979 Thielemann lived on campus in Cunningham Hall, and in 1979 he purchased a house near campus. He continued the practice he started at Glendale

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<sup>98</sup> Class Syllabus, Keystone 162, Grove City College (from Thielemann's personal files).

<sup>99</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher's Preacher*, 103.

<sup>100</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

of housing students. Perhaps as a commentary on his experience at Glendale, he named his house, “The House of Nod” so named after Genesis 4:17 where after arriving in the “Land of Nod” Cain’s wife bore him a son, Enoch, after being punished by God. Thielemann maintained lifelong friendships with many of the young men who lived with him. And his influence and impact are felt today through ministry initiatives started by Thielemann during his tenure as Dean of the Chapel, including the Red Box Mission program which was started by Thielemann nearly forty years ago. This program encourages students to engage in hands on global missionary experience.<sup>101</sup>

Thielemann’s ten years at Grove City were not without their share of personal and professional challenges. On a personal level he experienced the pain and grief of his father’s death. Art Thielemann died on December 10, 1975, and Bruce said goodbye, for the moment, to the man he loved more than anyone on the face of the earth.<sup>102</sup> Also, Thielemann’s health began to deteriorate. In 1977 Thielemann had a major heart surgery, which was “not as successful, though every bit as painful as it was supposed to be.”<sup>103</sup> Along with his heart problems Thielemann continued to struggle with his weight. In 1979 his gall bladder was removed, and he was suffering from arteritis before the age of fifty. On a professional level, tension over ideological issues arose between Thielemann and some of the faculty and administration.<sup>104</sup> The situation erupted when President MacKenzie asked Thielemann to rescind a speaking invitation that was extended to holocaust survivor and author of *Night*, Elie Wiesel. Thielemann agreed to retract the invitation but told MacKenzie that his resignation as Dean of the Chapel would immediately follow.<sup>105</sup>

#### *First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh*

Bruce Thielemann was fifty-one years old when he left Grove City College to become the Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. Much to

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<sup>101</sup> *The Collegian: The Grove City College Newspaper*, “Red Box seeks Students,” Vol. 69, No. 6, October 3, 2008.

<sup>102</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Dealing with Discouragement,” (sermon).

<sup>103</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Dealing with Discouragement,” (sermon).

<sup>104</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, 122-123.

<sup>105</sup> Told to Thomas Haugen by Jack Stewart in phone conversation.

Thielemann's delight, he would finish his preaching ministry from the top of the massive ten-foot-high pulpit; the same pulpit he dreamed of preaching in during his seminary days. Thielemann would also complete his thirty-four years of ministry in Pittsburgh, the city he loved. In a letter dated October 6, 1986, addressed to his friend Jack McGregor, Thielemann wrote about his beloved city. "My work continues to go well here in Pittsburgh. I really enjoyed returning to the city after being away for 17 years. Pittsburgh has changed a great deal since my days before, and I look upon all of the changes but one being salutary. The one black smudge on the picture is the economic situation. It really is steadily worsening here."<sup>106</sup> His letter praised the good work being done by First Presbyterian Church in assisting the unemployed.

With twenty-five years of full-time ministry experience behind him Thielemann began working as the Senior Pastor of one of the largest churches in Pittsburgh. His primary responsibility and his greatest joy were preaching God's Word. In order to continue to do this successfully Thielemann stayed committed to life-long learning. In one sermon he remarked, "The minister who does not keep up to date, who does not progress with advancing knowledge, that minister to that degree will weaken himself [sic]."<sup>107</sup> Thielemann believed a minister who was ten, twenty or thirty years out of seminary and not staying current with studying theology, pastoral psychology, the arts, science and current events was "positively dangerous."<sup>108</sup> The minister committed to preaching God's Word and meeting the needs of the congregation with God's Word must keep his or her mind sharp. "Study, recreation, quiet, good music – all of these things must be a part of a minister's life – else he [sic] becomes like a goldfish in a bowl."<sup>109</sup> Reading was a large part of his commitment to lifelong learning. In a preaching lecture to a group of pastors Thielemann said, "I would like to suggest also that at the very least we should be finishing one or two books a week. I don't think to read less than a

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<sup>106</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, (letter to Mr. Jack McGregor dated October 6, 1986, from Bruce Thielemann's personal files).

<sup>107</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know....," (sermon).

<sup>108</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know....," (sermon).

<sup>109</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know....," (sermon).

hundred books a year is responsible for a minister.”<sup>110</sup> Throughout his entire ministry Thielemann was an avid reader. In 1975 he claimed to have spent about twelve hundred dollars each year on books.<sup>111</sup> This amount would have represented a rather large percentage of an average Presbyterian minister’s annual compensation in 1975.<sup>112</sup>

When First Presbyterian Church called Bruce Thielemann to its pulpit on February 26, 1984, the congregation believed it called, “...one of the most brilliant ministers in America.”<sup>113</sup> The pulpit committee wanted a gifted preacher and found such a man in Thielemann. “There is no doubt that Dr. Thielemann was one of the greatest preachers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”<sup>114</sup> Before becoming the Senior Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Thielemann was a regular guest preacher at the church. “He had often previously preached in First Church and it was noted that when he did so people were slow to leave the Sanctuary after the service, and there were always many young people present. Both are signs of gifted preaching.”<sup>115</sup>

During his tenure at First Presbyterian Church Thielemann remained single-mindedly committed to promoting the gospel through the preaching of God’s Word. In his ministry, “The preaching of the Word was paramount and everything else in the congregational program was subsidiary.”<sup>116</sup> As part of his commitment to preaching Thielemann devoted many of the churches resources towards building a strong media ministry with emphasis on television and radio broadcasts. Thielemann viewed these media ministries as the most effective way to fulfill the churches mission to tell the world the good news of Jesus Christ.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 8.

<sup>111</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 8.

<sup>112</sup> The average annual compensation of a United Presbyterian pastor in 1975 was \$12,365. David B. Chesebrough. *The Professional Self-Images of American Baptist and United Presbyterian Pastors*. Thesis (Masters of Arts), Loyola University, 1975, 17.

<sup>113</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again, A History of First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, 1773-1997*, 76.

<sup>114</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 76.

<sup>115</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 76.

<sup>116</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 77.

<sup>117</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 77.

The men and women of First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh welcomed Thielemann with open arms and appreciated his strength in the pulpit and thoughtful leadership of the church; however, Thielemann's strength of personality as demonstrated throughout his ministry was not always appreciated. "Dr. Thielemann was a man of very strong will and determination with a mind that always welcomed the large scenario, sometimes larger than most congregations could handle. Also, once he made up his mind on a course of action he considered right, he pursued it with relentless tenacity and determination. He was a perfectionist who found compromise difficult."<sup>118</sup> This strength of personality would eventually lead to conflict between Thielemann and the leadership of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. Sadly, the work Thielemann enjoyed in 1986, at the beginning of his time at First Presbyterian Church had become extremely difficult by 1992. In a personal letter to a friend he shared, "I think, when you get right down to it, that my basic problem is 'burnout.' This has been an extremely difficult church to serve, and it is simply that I have burned too much of my candle! I cannot wait to get out of here."<sup>119</sup> In another letter to a friend he remarks, "I said the other day that I will be delighted on my last day here, because at last I will have managed to have made everyone happy. One-third of the people were happy when I came and one-third of the people were happy during my ministry, and one-third will be happy when I leave! So, I will soon have them all happy and I will be happiest of all, because I will not have to be in this place any longer."<sup>120</sup>

The stress of pastoring First Presbyterian Church, his rigorous travel and public speaking schedule and his declining health were all weighing heavily on Thielemann. Along with his continued struggle with his weight Thielemann was suffering from mental and physical exhaustion, intense headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, cellulitis, urinary infection, pneumonia, early stages of diabetes, heart condition, and cirrhosis of the liver. During a nine-month period in 1990 Thielemann

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<sup>118</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 77.

<sup>119</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ayers, January 6, 1992.

<sup>120</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Richard Long, December 22, 1992.



was hospitalized four times.<sup>121</sup> In one letter to a physician Thielemann wrote, “It seems the accumulation of these incidents, together with the workload that I carry here, put me in a state of what is described as ‘acute monopolar depression.’”<sup>122</sup> In a letter to a member of his congregation he wrote, “Unfortunately, my health continues to be very bad...I wonder if I might be so bold as to ask you to remember me in your prayers. Especially pray that my physical and emotional strength might be returned.”<sup>123</sup> Sadly, for the man who loved to preach, his body was not allowing him to preach as often as he would like. His health problems severely limited his ability to travel for speaking engagements. This was not easy for a man with the tenacity and drive of Thielemann. He shared his frustrations in a letter to a close friend, “I occasionally get speaking engagements to other parts of the world, but my health limits me. I am so exhausted from the travel that I am unable to do a good job when I am on hand for speaking.”<sup>124</sup> Thielemann was emotionally and physically exhausted. With another friend he shared that the heavy toll his ministry was costing him reminded him of something James S. Stewart once said, “Every time you truly preach you die a little.” At first Thielemann thought this was a bit extreme, but he later said, “I am convinced that it is true. When the Spirit is channeled through one, there is a kind of spiritual exhaustion which I find it difficult to describe in words.”<sup>125</sup>

When Thielemann arrived at First Presbyterian Church he made a nine-year commitment to the church. In correspondence with friends, he often mentioned looking forward to retiring at the age of 60. Honoring a nine-year commitment to the church would take him to April 1, 1993. The church accepted Thielemann’s request for an honorable retirement in May of 1991, a full two years before his departure. Thielemann announcing his retirement two years in advance was seen by some at the church as, “a disaster for First Church.”<sup>126</sup> Unfortunately, what was meant to be a kind gesture from Thielemann caused a decline in church

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<sup>121</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to James A. Shaver, M.D., October 8, 1990.

<sup>122</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to James A. Shaver, M.D., October 8, 1990.

<sup>123</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Miss Dorothy J. Pollock, September 11, 1990.

<sup>124</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Dr. and Mrs. Donald Polhemus, December 22, 1992.

<sup>125</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Rev. Paul W. Armes, December 14, 1992.

<sup>126</sup> Ernst Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 84.

membership. The significant drop in membership numbers from 1991 to 1993 is attributed to people being concerned about finding a replacement for Thielemann when he left the church.<sup>127</sup> Due to a three month of vacation that Thielemann accumulated he retired on January 31, 1993. In the final sermon preached from the massive stone pulpit he loved so dearly Thielemann answered a question posed to him a few weeks earlier by a young woman in the congregation. She asked, “How would you like to be remembered thirty years from now?” After many days thinking about this question Thielemann answered,

He was *not* a great man, though he *did* know some great people he lived at a time when mighty movements were afloat; it was a mid-sea kind of time, when the old was passing away, and the sunrise of newness was on every hand. He told me many things, most of which I have forgotten. But that which he told me most often and which he said was the greatest lesson he’d ever learned in life was the same lesson that John learned when he leaned on the bosom of Jesus and heard the Master say, ‘The world passes away, and the likes thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abides forever.’ And with that I conclude my preaching ministry in this place.<sup>128</sup>

So, with these final words Thielemann retired from his position at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and began the season of retirement to which he had looked forward for so many years.

### **A Brief Retirement**

Just before retiring from his pastoral position at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh Bruce Thielemann moved into his mother’s house in Scott Township, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As he explained it, “I added a room onto my mother’s home and am quite comfortable there. Mom is 84 now and is still rolling right along. I recognize, however, that this will not go on forever; and since I am the only family member in or around Pittsburgh, I need to be on hand to be of assistance when needed. So, my living with her seems to answer a lot of problems.”<sup>129</sup> The room added to his mother’s house was his personal study where he kept his extensive collection of books, classical music and sermon illustration files. It was also the place where he planned to continue his study and work while

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<sup>127</sup> Ernest Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 84.

<sup>128</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Big 6-0,” (sermon).

<sup>129</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Dr. and Mrs. Donald Polhemus, December 22, 1992.

-serving the Lord in his retirement. His mother, Alyce Thielemann who died on January 9, 2001, would outlive her eldest son by seven years.

Now that Thielemann was free from the pressure of pastoring a congregation he had great plans for his retirement. He wanted to limit his preaching and lecturing to one major speaking engagement in the United States each month, write books and host a weekly radio show. In a letter dated June 4, 1992, seven months before his retirement he shared his retirement plans with a friend, "I am not sure exactly what I am going to be doing after my retirement, but I am going to be doing something. I am not ready to sit down yet, and so I am looking around for the right kind of opportunity, I do have two invitations to write books and another invitation to do a weekly radio show. There also are invitations for preaching and lecture series around the country."<sup>130</sup> The First Presbyterian Church newsletter in January 1993 said about Thielemann's retirement that, "He looks forward with a continued sense of purposefulness. Already his calendar is filled with engagements he has accepted in churches, colleges and conferences from Florida to Minnesota and West Virginia to California. Two publishers have invited him to write books." Unfortunately, few of these plans would ever come to fruition. News of Bruce W. Thielemann's sudden death was literally front-page news in the January 8, 1994, edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.<sup>131</sup> The men, women and children of Pittsburgh, the city Thielemann loved dearly, would wake to a picture of the larger-than-life retired pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and news of Thielemann's death. On January 6, 1994, Thielemann was scheduled to have his second heart by-pass surgery and a much more complicated liver transplant. The heart surgery was successfully completed, but in the midst of the liver transplant Thielemann went into cardiac arrest and would never regain consciousness. Bruce Wheeler Thielemann died on January 6, 1994. He was only sixty-one years old. The man who dedicated his life to preaching God's Word was now with the Lord he faithfully and effectively proclaimed. As Thielemann once said, "To preach, to really preach is to die naked a little at a time, and to know each time you do it you must

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<sup>130</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Personal Letter to Mr. and Mrs. John A. Hollingsworth, June 4, 1992.

<sup>131</sup> Ann Rodgers-Melnick, "Bruce Thielemann, Presbyterian Pastor, ex-college chaplain," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 8, 1994.

do it again. Only one certainty sustains the preacher, that God never denies a man peace except to give him glory.”<sup>132</sup> In a letter penned to his mother before the surgery to be read in case of his death he wrote, “Dear mother, By the time you read this, you know I am already gone. Freedom at last!”<sup>133</sup> During his life Thielemann traveled to over sixty countries and saw and heard a number of awe-inspiring sights and sounds, but nothing he experienced on earth would compare to what he believed was the true splendor and glory of heaven. In a sermon entitled, “Great Gates: The Gates of Pearl,” Thielemann gave his listeners a picture of his incomprehensible view of the glory of heaven. As he described it:

In my life I’ve been privileged to see some magnificent sights, and to hear some remarkable sounds. I’ve seen the rising sun coming up above the Bosphorus at the Golden Horn. I’ve seen the colors of evening stain the sides of Ayers Rock in central Australia. I’ve rode a boat under the isle of Capri and looked at the mysterious blue in its fabulous grotto. I’ve seen Mount Kilimanjaro, its snowy crown turned to pink by the twilight. I’ve heard the roar of an unseen leopard in the wilderness of Amboseli. I’ve heard the harmonies of a Thomas Tallis canon. I’ve seen and heard a great avalanche rolling down the side of Mount Blanc. But none of these things, none of these things that I have seen or heard or seen and heard. None of them can match the glory of heaven.<sup>134</sup>

Heaven was the place of freedom for Thielemann. A place more glorious than anything he had ever set his eyes or ears on during this time on earth.

## **Conclusion**

Thielemann would be remembered in his death through his need-centered sermons, writings and the numerous people he pastored, mentored and befriended. Thielemann once introduced a sermon with these words, “I believe that every human being who knows and loves Christ should be leading an exciting, challenging and wonderful life.”<sup>135</sup> He concluded the sermon by saying, “He is a big God, a rough God, a play-for-keeps kind of God and he will have all of you – or none of you.”<sup>136</sup> God had all of Bruce W. Thielemann, and because he had all of him he lived an exciting life that gave God glory.

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<sup>132</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, *The Wittenburg Door*, no. 36 (April–May 1977).

<sup>133</sup> John Zingaro, *Thielemann, The Preacher’s Preacher*, 158.

<sup>134</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Great Gates: The Gates of Pearl,” (sermon).

<sup>135</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Legions of the Unjazzed,” (sermon).

<sup>136</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Legions of the Unjazzed,” (sermon)

# Chapter Two: Bruce W. Thielemann's Theology of Preaching

## Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore Bruce W. Thielemann's theology of preaching as it led to the formulation of his need-centered approach to preaching. First, we will look at Thielemann's qualifications and preaching lectures, which made his theology of preaching accessible and a viable topic of study. Next, we will examine some of Thielemann's presuppositions, which shaped and influenced his theology of preaching. These presuppositions are: The challenge of preaching, the mystery of preaching, the inability to preach, that God exists and chooses to reveal himself, and that God's Word is act. Next, we will look at the influence of P. T. Forsyth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth on the formation of Thielemann's theology of preaching. Finally, we will explore the three steps in preaching that Thielemann prescribed to ensure God's Word becomes God's act: preach from the Bible, creativity in preaching and a proper view of self.

## Qualifications

Every week thousands of men and women engage in the formidable task of communicating God's Word from pulpits and platforms throughout the world. Out of the thousands of preachers around the globe some are more effective at communicating God's Word to their listeners than others. Out of those effective preachers a small percentage are thoughtful, disciplined and intentional about cultivating the art and craft of preaching. Then, emerging from out of those few appears the rare preacher who is able to articulate exactly why his or her preaching is effective. It is in this final category that Bruce W. Thielemann falls.

Communicating God's Word effectively is a gift, but an awareness of why one's preaching is effective and possessing the ability to articulate those reasons to others is a rare gift indeed. During his vocational ministry Thielemann served as a preacher, pastor and professor. It is a blending and complementing of these three roles that placed Thielemann in the rare position of being able to preach regularly,

to evaluate critically his preaching methodology and articulate to others his approach to the preaching task.

### *Preaching Lectures*

As we have seen, during his thirty-four years of full-time ordained ministry Thielemann served as Senior Pastor of three congregations and as Dean of the Chapel and Associate Professor of Religion at Grove City College, a small liberal arts Christian College located in Grove City, Pennsylvania. While engaged in these various ministry positions, Thielemann remained a lifelong student and practitioner of preaching. His complete collection of sermon files is meticulously organized and contains thousands of illustrations, notes, outlines and manuscripts of almost one thousand sermons.<sup>137</sup> Each sermon in those files represent hours of thoughtful preparation and many of those sermons were preached multiple times around the United States and in over sixty-three nations.<sup>138</sup> During his ministry Thielemann preached on a regular basis to his congregation while also maintaining a rigorous schedule of travel for guest preaching and lecturing opportunities. The most frequent of his lectures was on a topic of great interest to Thielemann, developing the art and craft of preaching.

In the fall of 1973, while serving as the Senior Pastor of Glendale Presbyterian Church in Glendale, California, Thielemann was invited to address the incoming students at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California on the topic of preaching. Thielemann's message was entitled, "The Primacy of Preaching". This was the first opportunity Thielemann had to evaluate and articulate his theology of preaching in a lecture format. By his own admission Thielemann accepted the invitation, "In order to have an opportunity and the occasion to rethink, under fire as it were, my own theology of preaching."<sup>139</sup> This opportunity to think about and articulate his theology of preaching became the foundation for the development of further lectures on his theology of preaching and other topics of study in the field of homiletics. Two years later in November of 1975, while serving

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<sup>137</sup> See Appendix One for a list of some of Bruce Thielemann's sermons.

<sup>138</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, Sermon Files and Curriculum Vita.

<sup>139</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," A message presented to the incoming students at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, October 8, 1973. 2.

as Dean of the Chapel at Grove City College, Thielemann delivered his fully developed four-part lecture series on preaching for the first time to the San Fernando, California Presbytery. The preaching workshop included four lectures: “The Theology of Preaching”, “The Planning of Preaching”, “The Art of Illustration”, and “The Art of Imagineering”.<sup>140</sup> Over a time span of eighteen years, from 1975 to 1993, Thielemann presented these preaching lectures twenty-nine times to preachers, seminary and college students and lay leaders around the world at denominational gatherings, seminaries and colleges.<sup>141</sup> Thielemann was convinced that most preachers were failing to give men and women in the pews what they desired, the Word from the Lord. He explained, “I would submit that people are desperately anxious to hear the Word preached. But they are often betrayed by preachers.”<sup>142</sup> Whether motivated by positive or negative reasons, it is evident from his preaching lectures that Thielemann was a thoughtful preacher who wanted to help preachers communicate more effectively. And in that spirit, the primary focus of his preaching lectures was encouraging preachers to preach sermons that connected with the needs of their listeners by giving them “the Word from the Lord that they’re seeking.”<sup>143</sup> It is also important to note that these lectures were more than a theoretical exercise for Thielemann, his thoughts were hammered on the anvil of a regular preaching ministry. At one point he addressed his acute awareness of the ramifications of lecturing about preaching while also preaching every week in a local church. He explained, “my position is unenviable because any Sunday morning you can come over to the Glendale Presbyterian Church, and you can readily determine how serious I am about the sentences that I am going to utter this morning.”<sup>144</sup> While Thielemann may have been concerned that his lectures on preaching far exceeded his own abilities in the pulpit, it is clear that he was qualified to teach others about preaching because he preached with

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<sup>140</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Preaching Lecture” file from Bruce W. Thielemann’s file collection.

<sup>141</sup> Bruce Thielemann kept meticulous records on the outside of his “Preaching Lecture” file of the location, date and title of the preaching lectures he delivered. Dr. Don Prothero, a friend of Bruce Thielemann’s and member of Glendale Presbyterian Church made an audio recording of all four lectures presented in November 1975 to the San Fernando Presbytery.

<sup>142</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>143</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>144</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 2.

intentionality, thought deeply about his theology of preaching and was mindful of how to preach sermons that connected with his listeners.

### **Thielemann's Presuppositions**

In order to understand Thielemann's theology of preaching it is first necessary to understand five core presuppositions he brought to the preaching task: The challenge of preaching, the mystery of preaching, the inability to preach, that God exists and chooses to reveal himself, and that God's Word is act.

#### *The Challenge of Preaching*

The first core presupposition of Thielemann's theology of preaching is the challenge of preaching. In line with the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians, Thielemann did not shy away from using contradictions as a pedagogical tool. Thielemann began a 1975 "Theology of Preaching" lecture by stating, "You're going to hear today many contradictions."<sup>145</sup> The first of these contradictions being, "There is no subject that I enjoy talking about less than preaching. And there is no subject that I enjoy talking about more than preaching."<sup>146</sup> Thielemann struggled with the inherent difficulties associated with the call to preach God's Word. Like many preachers, Thielemann experienced first-hand the difficulties of exposing oneself, week after week, to a congregation through the act of preaching. In 1975, after completing his time serving as Senior Pastor of McKeesport Presbyterian Church, and then Glendale Presbyterian Church, Thielemann acknowledged, "I've been knocked around for sixteen years and I've got the scars to prove it."<sup>147</sup> Two years earlier in a lecture on preaching presented to the incoming students at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, Thielemann articulated in a poetical description the difficult nature of the preacher's call, "The pulpit will call you like the sea calls sailors. It will hurt you and yet you won't be able to stay away from its bitter and incomparable society. You'll break your heart a hundred times and leave the pulpit crying. But you will keep on doing it, because you love it."<sup>148</sup> These words appear hyperbolic and will not

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<sup>145</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching", Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Grenada Hills, CA, November 1975, 2.

<sup>146</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 2.

<sup>147</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 3.

<sup>148</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 13.



resonate with the same veracity for all preachers, but for Thielemann this sentiment was forged in the fires of the daily difficulties associated with his preaching and pastoral ministry. The pulpit was a lonely place for Thielemann. At one point he confessed, “I have found that preaching has a tendency to isolate you. The study that is required. The hurt that is involved in loving men in the Mass,<sup>149</sup> so that it is harder for you to love them in person. The isolation, which so often accompanies the group.”<sup>150</sup> Thielemann struggled with the loneliness of his call to preach, but this was not his greatest pain surrounding his preaching call. According to Thielemann, “The greatest pain in preaching is, you are constantly revealing yourself to be so much less than what you preach. Preaching is public hypocrisy. It is the most conspicuous of all the ministries in its failure.”<sup>151</sup> The vulnerability and public exposure of the preaching call were difficult on Thielemann and shaped his theology of preaching. Thielemann viewed preaching as making oneself naked, allowing people to see that preachers are not what they are preaching about.<sup>152</sup> The pain, loneliness and vulnerability of preaching did not discourage Thielemann from preaching, on the contrary, the admission of the pain of preaching caused Thielemann to embrace what he called “godly sorrow,” the realization that a preacher is much less than they claim from the pulpit leading to a humble dependence on God in order to preach effectively.<sup>153</sup> Thielemann understood both the thrill and challenge of preaching God’s Word to men, women and children on a regular basis. It was Thielemann’s conviction and experience that, “Preaching is hard work.”<sup>154</sup> And, because preaching is hard work, Thielemann knew it demands the best of the men and women God has called to the preaching task. Thielemann’s best is precisely what he attempted to give to the pulpit and what he encouraged other preachers to give as well. The challenge of the preaching task was Thielemann’s first core presupposition regarding preaching.

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<sup>149</sup> It appears strange for Thielemann, a lifelong Presbyterian, to use “Mass” to describe a worship gathering. However, Thielemann enjoyed pushing the boundaries of his listeners through the use of variety in his vocabulary. Perhaps he was trying to capture the attention and shock his listeners who were mostly comprised of incoming seminary students.

<sup>150</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 8-9.

<sup>151</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>152</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>153</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>154</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12.

### *The Mystery of Preaching*

The second core presupposition for Thielemann regarding the preaching task was the mystery of preaching. Preaching according to Thielemann was a challenging endeavor that was fraught with mystery. Thielemann certainly treasured his call to preach, but he did not take delight in the mysterious nature of preaching. His primary angst with preaching was rooted in what he considered to be the incomprehensible nature of preaching.<sup>155</sup> Early in his seminary training Thielemann was introduced to the concept of the mystery of preaching in one of his required preaching texts fittingly entitled, *The Mystery of Preaching* by James Black. In his introduction Black explained, "I have called this book 'The Mystery of Preaching' because, in spite of all the advice I have tried to crush within these covers, great preaching will always remain a mystery, not least to the preacher himself."<sup>156</sup> Thielemann viewed preaching as a mystery, and by his own admission he was not a man given to mysteries. He said, "I prefer things that are more readily understandable."<sup>157</sup> The real mystery of preaching for Thielemann was in his conviction that one never knows if he or she has actually preached. He mused, if preaching is speaking the very words of God, then how could anyone presume to preach?<sup>158</sup> While Thielemann viewed the task of preaching as mysterious, he did not allow the mysterious nature of preaching to hinder his lifelong study of preaching, his teaching of preaching or his extensive preaching ministry. Thielemann readily admitted that the mysterious nature of preaching caused him to wrestle with thoughts of abandoning the task of preaching. However, it is also true that the mysterious nature of preaching fueled a desire within Thielemann that caused him to tackle all levels of the preaching task with even greater gusto. The mysterious nature of preaching comforted Thielemann. He reasoned that, "In light of the inexplicable mystery which preaching is, and our utter ignorance and unworthiness with regard to it, even when we are doing it, I think it is very comforting to know this, that in the end it all rests with God."<sup>159</sup> Arriving at the

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<sup>155</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 2 & 8.

<sup>156</sup> James Black, *The Mystery of Preaching* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1924), ix.

<sup>157</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 2.

<sup>158</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.

<sup>159</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

conclusion that preaching is mysterious and willingly succumbing to this fact seemed to steady Thielemann and fuel his lifelong quest to comprehend, master and teach others about the mysteries of preaching.

Throughout his life, Thielemann remained deeply committed to the preaching task. His lifelong commitment to preaching began at the age of nine.<sup>160</sup> From that moment until the day he died, Thielemann only questioned his clear call from God to preach once in his life as we have seen just before completing his seminary education. Like an addict who loves and hates his vice, at one-point Thielemann confessed of his experience with preaching, "I want to let go of it, but I am addicted to it."<sup>161</sup> Although he wrestled constantly with the challenges and hardships that are a real part of a preacher's experience, Thielemann always remained firmly convinced of his call to diligently study and practice the art of preaching. It was Thielemann's strong personality, perfectionism, drive and intellectual curiosity which made him uncomfortable with the mysterious nature of preaching that could not be easily understood.<sup>162</sup> Ironically, these same character traits also lured him to the unknown and mysterious dimensions of preaching. Although he dedicated his life to the study and practice of homiletics, he would never plumb the depths of the mysteries of the preaching task. So, without fear of contradiction, Thielemann affirmed the push and pull of his relationship with preaching. And, it is this mysterious nature of preaching, which held Bruce Thielemann's lifelong commitment to the arduous task of grappling with preaching.

#### *Inability to Preach*

The third presupposition Thielemann brought to the preaching task was his belief in the inability to preach. Ian Pitt-Watson, the Scottish preacher and professor of Practical Theology said, "I don't understand preaching, but I believe in it deeply..."<sup>163</sup> It is precisely because of the mystery and the challenge inherent in preaching that Thielemann viewed his lecture on the theology of preaching; as

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<sup>160</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Thanks for the Memory," "A Letter to the Daughter of My Dreams," "Give My Regards to Broadway: 'The Dining Room'," (sermons).

<sup>161</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Theology of Preaching," 3.

<sup>162</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Theology of Preaching," 3.

<sup>163</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Kind of Folly: Toward a Practical Theology of Preaching*, (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1976), 5

“another attempt to understand what I really believe can’t be understood.”<sup>164</sup> The influence of Karl Barth on Thielemann’s theology of preaching and his approach to teaching others about preaching is apparent. The paradoxical nature of preaching is a common theme in Barth’s writing on preaching. Barth believed that preachers should remain “*aware* of both the necessity and the impossibility of our task.”<sup>165</sup> Barth articulated that preachers must speak of God, but cannot do this because they are human.<sup>166</sup> In his book, *Homiletic* Barth wrestles with the question: “Can we humans trust ourselves, even indirectly, to know God’s Word directly, and ascribe to ourselves collegiality with the scriptural witness”<sup>167</sup> According to Barth, preachers must preach, but paradoxically cannot preach and by acknowledging this they give God glory. In the midst of one’s inability to preach one pushes forward and “direct[s] our vision fixedly and changelessly upon what is expected of us, even when we are left in the uncertain position that we now occupy.”<sup>168</sup> Barth suggests that preachers are compelled to continue preaching even in the midst of the uncertainties of the task.

After a willing admission of the mystery and challenge of a preacher’s task, Thielemann continued to expound on the gravity of the preaching task. Throughout Thielemann’s preaching lectures the influence of Karl Barth is evident through direct quotation of Barth’s teachings and a general admiration for Barth’s work and theology.<sup>169</sup> Like Barth, Thielemann believed the primary question for a preacher to ask is, “Not, How *does* one do it? But, How *can* one do it?”<sup>170</sup> More will be said of this later, but preaching, according to Barth, occurred when the very words of God were spoken. Barth’s two-part definition of preaching highlights the two aspects of preaching which are to be in dialectic relationship with one another. First, “Preaching is the Word of God which he himself speaks,” and second, preaching is, “Expounding a biblical text in human words and making it relevant to

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<sup>164</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>165</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935), 214.

<sup>166</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 198.

<sup>167</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletic* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 32.

<sup>168</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 214.

<sup>169</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching” and “A Theology of Preaching”.

<sup>170</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 103.

contemporaries in intimation of what they have to hear from God himself.”<sup>171</sup> This high view of preaching ultimately leaves a preacher struggling with whether or not he or she has spoken the Words of God or the words of humans. Thielemann shared Barth’s conviction that, “We are *worthy* of being believed only as we [sic] aware of our unworthiness.”<sup>172</sup> The presupposition that preachers are unable to preach and the constant struggle between the Word of God and the word of man shapes the foundation of Thielemann’s theology of preaching. Because of this struggle, Thielemann’s approach to preaching does not begin with mechanics, although Thielemann dedicated a large percentage of his preaching lectures to explaining the mechanics of preaching. The primary question underlying his theology of preaching is not, “How does one preach?” but, “How can one preach?” In this, Thielemann primarily wrestled with how a preacher moves from our words to the Word.<sup>173</sup>

#### *God Exists and God Reveals Himself*

The fourth core presupposition Thielemann brought to the preaching task was the firm conviction that God exists, and God reveals himself. In order to answer the question of how the preacher moves from his or her words to the Word, Thielemann began with an epistemological question: How do we know what we know? This was a logical starting point for Thielemann, who at the time of writing this lecture on this theology of preaching was also teaching philosophy at Grove City College. The epistemological question is also an appropriate starting point for Thielemann because of his strong conviction that one can only know that which has been revealed to humanity by God. Thielemann began his theology of preaching with what he deemed the fundamental presupposition of the Hebrew/Christian epistemology, “that God exists, and that God reveals himself.”<sup>174</sup> This fourth presupposition of Thielemann’s theology of preaching was not arrived at by way of human reason, personal experience, or the authority of the church. As Thielemann explained, human reason is not a valid approach to this fundamental

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<sup>171</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletic*, 44.

<sup>172</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 129.

<sup>173</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>174</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 3.

presupposition about God for three reasons. First, human reason is too often proven inaccurate. Second, Thielemann believed all men, women and children are fallen; therefore, as a result of our fallen nature our minds are darkened and “incapable of pure reason.”<sup>175</sup> Third, we cannot come to an understanding of the existence of a revealing God because; “we are dealing, when we deal with God, with a person.”<sup>176</sup> In order for a person to be known he or she must first choose to reveal themselves to another person.

For Thielemann human reason and personal experience were not valid means of concluding that a self-revealing God exists. He believed personal experience varies too widely from individual to individual and is therefore not a solid foundation for affirming the existence of God and his self-revealing nature. In Thielemann’s understanding personal experience is too easily altered by one’s emotions, physical and mental health or by the use of mind-altering substances. Because of the fickle nature of personal experience, it cannot be used as a valid means of proving the existence of a God who reveals himself. As Thielemann said, “There may be no relationship between what we are feeling and reality. God’s existence is not assured by how I feel about him, because we often have wrong feelings about people.”<sup>177</sup> According to Thielemann, one cannot come to knowledge about God by way of human experience.<sup>178</sup>

Reason, personal experience and finally church authority according to Thielemann cannot bring a person to the fundamental presupposition that God exists, and that God reveals himself. The real problem with church authority for Thielemann rested in his observation that, “Unanimity of opinion on theological questions have never been found in the church. The church itself is sinful. The church often reverses itself.”<sup>179</sup> Therefore, this inconsistency within the church precludes the authority of the church as a valid foundation for belief in a God who exists and reveals himself.

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<sup>175</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>176</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>177</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 3-4.

<sup>178</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>179</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.

Therefore, for Thielemann, one knows what he or she knows about God based on the presupposition that God exists, and God reveals himself. The existence of a revealing God cannot be proven by means of reason, experience or authority. The fact that this fundamental epistemological statement was, in his mind, a presupposition that cannot be proven did not thwart Thielemann. He confidently asserted to a room full of Christian preachers and professors, “We begin as the Greeks began, with presuppositions. They are un-provable, but they are basic to our theology and philosophy.”<sup>180</sup> And, one of the fundamental presuppositions for Thielemann’s theology of preaching is that God exists, and God reveals himself.

#### *God’s Word is Act*

The final presupposition of Thielemann regarding preaching is that God’s Word is act. While presuppositions may be unprovable, they are still central to Thielemann’s understanding of both philosophy and theology. The presupposition that God exists and that God reveals himself is the foundation of Thielemann’s theology of preaching and central to his belief that “God’s Word is act – is an event.”<sup>181</sup>

Thielemann asserted that at the center of the Christian faith is the “fundamental dogma” that, “God entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>182</sup>

Thielemann claimed, “God’s entering history through Jesus Christ was an event, a historical event, *the event*, God’s event.”<sup>183</sup> Further, the event must also happen in the life of an individual in order to be certain of the reality of the event. He believed, “when Jesus Christ invades us, he invaded the world. In other words, events by nature establish themselves by happening.”<sup>184</sup> Thielemann taught that, “the way in which the happening most significantly occurs, is through the preaching of the word, the telling of the event, the invitation to be a part of the event.”<sup>185</sup> For Thielemann Christianity is the announcing of “the event”, or God entering human history in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, he asserts his conviction that,

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<sup>180</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>181</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975.

<sup>182</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>183</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>184</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>185</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 6.

“Christianity is preaching.”<sup>186</sup> God has revealed himself through invading the world in the person of Jesus Christ; therefore, the preacher serves as the primary herald of this event. If, as Thielemann asserted, Christianity is a religion based on the self-revealing nature of God to his people then God must be actively revealing himself to his people. If God is not actively revealing himself, if God’s Word is not act, then one cannot know God or anything about God. More specifically, Thielemann believed God actively reveals himself through both general revelation and special revelation. He defined general revelation as: nature, history and mind, and special revelation as: Christ, the Scripture and miracle.<sup>187</sup> It is through God’s special and general revelation that God makes himself known to his creation and continues to reveal himself to his creation. Through God’s general revelation one can know of God and through special revelation one can know God intimately. The necessity of God revealing himself to humanity places the active nature of God’s Word in the center of Thielemann’s theology of preaching.

Thielemann’s belief that in the “event” of preaching the Bible is God’s Word was in line with the teachings of Karl Barth who wrote, “The Bible is God’s Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He Speaks through it.”<sup>188</sup> By stating that God’s Word is act Thielemann asserted that God has revealed and is actively revealing who he is, what he has done in the past and what he will do in the future. Because God reveals himself to his people Thielemann related,

Our understanding of God’s Word is therefore an active one. His Word is revelatory. It is in fact, the *deed* by which God reveals himself. God’s Word is not just vibrations which batter the tympanum of our ears so that we hear. His Word is *act*. It is something more than is said; it is something that is *done*.<sup>189</sup>

As scriptural backing for his belief in the active revelatory nature of God’s Word, Thielemann turned to the Bible itself, both the Old and New Testaments. First, to prove that God’s Word is act he pointed to Psalm 33. Specifically, Thielemann highlighted the Hebrew parallelism found in Psalm 33:4 which reads,

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<sup>186</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>187</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>188</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010). I.1, 109-110.

<sup>189</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.



“For the word of the LORD is upright, and all His work is done in faithfulness.”<sup>190</sup> Thielemann indicated that in this Psalm, “God’s work and word are parallel.”<sup>191</sup> Further in Psalm 33:6a, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,” Thielemann noticed, “The Word is that which makes. He spoke and it came to be. He commanded and the earth stood forth. In his Word there is action. He speaks it comes. He commands it is.”<sup>192</sup> To continue to prove his point of the active revelatory nature of God’s Word, Thielemann turned to the New Testament, John 1:3 says, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Thielemann argued that this verse is talking specifically about “The Word” which became flesh and made his dwelling among us.<sup>193</sup> In this Scripture verse “The Word” is the active agent in creating the universe. Here Thielemann emphasized that the Word of God is act; and more specifically, the Word of God is an event, which spoke the universe into existence. Finally, Thielemann turned to Hebrews 1:3. He explained, “Hebrews describes God’s word in active terms. In the old days it came by the prophets, in these last days by a Son, who, reflects God and upholds the universe, by what? By the word of his power.”<sup>194</sup> From this scriptural evidence Thielemann concluded, “God’s Word is his act.”<sup>195</sup> And from the conclusion that God’s Word is act, Thielemann asserted, “that by its very nature the Word of God demands preaching. Which is nothing other than reporting God’s acts. Or, if you wish, the recreating of God’s act.”<sup>196</sup> The act of preaching was serious business for Thielemann; so serious that in his mind the task of preaching or recreating God’s act was impossible for any preacher to accomplish. He asked, “If God’s Word is act, how can we speak a word? How can we do an act for the Lord? Well to advance that question seems to me, to be quite an impertinence. To speak words about God is presumptuous.”<sup>197</sup> The result of Thielemann’s understanding of the nature of God’s Word having, as Barth said, its “being in becoming”<sup>198</sup>, lead him

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<sup>190</sup> Taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>191</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>192</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>193</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>194</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>195</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>196</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>197</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>198</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 110.

to the conclusion that God's Word is act and caused him to wrestle with the question, "Have I ever preached?"<sup>199</sup> For different reasons this same question has tormented other preachers as well. Welsh pastor, Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, "Any man [sic] who has had some glimpse of what it is to preach will inevitably feel that he has never preached. But he [sic] will go on trying, hoping that by the grace of God one day he [sic] may truly preach."<sup>200</sup> Like Lloyd-Jones, Thielemann often asked himself, and encouraged all preachers to ask themselves and wrestle with the question, have I ever really preached?

Five core presuppositions, which define Thielemann's theology of preaching, have been examined in this section. Thielemann believed that preaching was a challenging endeavor, it was a mystery not easily solved, that no one has the ability to preach in his own strength, that God exists and choose to reveal himself and finally that God's Word is act. Now we will look at some of the key figures that have influenced Thielemann's theology of preaching.

### **Influences on Thielemann's Theology of Preaching**

Bruce Thielemann read widely, and his theology of preaching was influenced by a several pastors and theologians. However, upon closer examination of his theology of preaching the influence of one pastor and two theologians is evident. In this section we will look at the impact and influence of P. T. Forsyth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth on Thielemann's theology of preaching.

#### *P. T. Forsyth*

Thielemann's belief that God's Word is act had a profound influence on his understanding of preaching and Scripture. The catalyst of Thielemann's conviction that God's Word is act comes from the influence of P.T. Forsyth, a Scottish Congregational minister who also served as the principal of Hackney College in London. Thielemann attributes Forsyth for the concept that God's Word is act. He said, "P. T. Forsyth puts it this way, 'The gospel is God's act. Preaching is God's act. The sermon is to be God's act, a dynamic power filled event, God reproducing his act, God acting.'"<sup>201</sup> In 1907, Forsyth delivered the Lyman Beecher Lectures on

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<sup>199</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.

<sup>200</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 99.

<sup>201</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.

Preaching at Yale University. These lectures would later be published as *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, which was one of the required preaching textbooks for the homiletics course Thielemann attended with Dr. H. Ray Shear when a student at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary.<sup>202</sup> This exposure to the works of Forsyth during seminary appears to have had an ongoing influence on Thielemann's approach to preaching and the formation of his need-centered homiletic. In *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, Forsyth began with the assertion of his high view of preaching: "It is perhaps, an overbold beginning, but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls."<sup>203</sup> Preaching, asserts Forsyth:

Is quite different from oratory. The pulpit is another place, and another kind of place, from the platform...The Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator, but the Hebrew prophet. The orator comes with but an inspiration, the prophet comes with a revelation.<sup>204</sup>

Thielemann's understanding of the preacher speaking the very words of God when preaching resonates with Forsyth's description of preaching as communicating God's revelation. Preaching is God's Word, argued Thielemann.<sup>205</sup> He believed that the Christian faith has its core in the event of Jesus Christ coming to earth as a man. He emphasized, "Christianity is nothing other than the announcement of that event and therefore Christianity is preaching."<sup>206</sup> In the event of preaching, Thielemann believed that God has spoken and reveals himself through his Son, and because Christianity is grounded in God revealing himself to his people it stands to reason that preaching, when it is the announcement of this event, is central to the Christian faith.

Finally, from the writings of Forsyth, Thielemann concluded that if God's Word is act then only God can speak God's Word. The connecting of God's revealing, and God's action puts the power of preaching solely in God's hands and not in the rhetorical skills of men or women. Forsyth claimed that God acted in

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<sup>202</sup> Syllabus from Dr. H. Ray Shear's Pittsburgh-Xenia Preaching class (First term 1955 and Second Term 1955-1956) found in Bruce W. Thielemann's personal files.

<sup>203</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House 1980), vi.

<sup>204</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, 3.

<sup>205</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>206</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 6.

sending his Son to die on the cross before humans could preach about God's actions. As Forsyth explained:

[The Gospel] is an act and a power: it is God's *act* of redemption before it is man's message of it. It is an eternal, perennial act of God in Christ, repeating itself within each declaration of it. Only as a Gospel done by God is it a Gospel spoken by man. It is a revelation only because it was first of all a reconciliation...And it is this act that is prolonged in the word of the preacher, and not merely proclaimed.<sup>207</sup>

The teaching of Forsyth contributed to what Thielemann believed, that as the gospel is proclaimed in preaching, the Good News of Christ is relived through the act of preaching. Thielemann credited the writings of P. T. Forsyth, as the catalyst, which led him to affirm that, preaching is God's act and that only God can speak God's Word.<sup>208</sup> It was this conviction that would form a central part of the foundation of his need-centered approach to preaching.

#### *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth*

Along with the foundational idea that preaching is God's act as propounded by P. T. Forsyth, Thielemann also believed that "Preaching is the extension of the incarnation. It is to be the occasion when Jesus Christ the Word, confronts the hearer."<sup>209</sup> Thielemann looked to German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer to strengthen his argument that proclamation of the Word is an extension of the incarnation of Christ. While it is not clear exactly where Thielemann was exposed to the neo-orthodox theological influences of Barth and Bonhoeffer, by the time he delivered his first preaching lecture he quoted from Bonhoeffer and Barth extensively. Thielemann also claims to have been neo-orthodox theologically since 1956, which would place him in Scotland at Saint Andrews University, where he would more likely have been exposed to Barth and Bonhoeffer than he would have been at Pittsburgh-Xenia seminary.<sup>210</sup> In his lecture on the theology of preaching, Thielemann quotes from one of Bonhoeffer's unpublished lectures on preaching:

The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself. As little as the incarnation is the outward shape of God, just so little does the proclaimed word present the outward form of a reality; rather, it is the thing itself. The

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<sup>207</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, 6.

<sup>208</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.

<sup>209</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 7.

<sup>210</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One...Therefore the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.<sup>211</sup>

In Thielemann's theology of preaching it is clear that "The sermon is to be the incarnate Christ."<sup>212</sup> For Thielemann preaching was a sacred event because of the incarnational nature of preaching. To summarize his belief in the importance of incarnational preaching Thielemann returned to the concept of the preaching event in line with the teachings of Barth.<sup>213</sup> He claimed: "God's coming into the world is event, we are to make this event real to men [sic] through our preaching, preaching is the re-creation of the event, this event begets preaching events, Christ is met again in personal crisis and the preacher as much as the congregation is part of that crisis."<sup>214</sup> True preaching, notes Thielemann has Christ in the place of authority and the preacher sitting with the congregation as one who is in need of hearing what God has to say to him or her as well.<sup>215</sup> Preaching for Thielemann was making real the event of God coming into the world for men and women. And, as Thielemann viewed it this happens when preaching recreates the event of Christ entering the world. When this happens then "preaching recreates the event in personal crisis."<sup>216</sup> The preacher is part of the crisis, in need of Christ and therefore unable to preach, "without the anointing of God's Spirit."<sup>217</sup>

With the conviction that preaching is charged with the task of recreating the Christ event in the lives of his listeners Thielemann asserted:

The sermon is not an essay, your views on life, though they will be part of it, and it's not a theological lecture, though any good preaching will have in it significant theology, and it's not a recitation of your political or your social views, though that may, by the nature of the aspect of God being presented come into the consideration, and it is not a teaching of Christian morals, though all good preaching should of course support Christian morality. It is none of these things essentially. It is God saving activity, his redeeming event lived again for personal, present encounter. And you as the preacher

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<sup>211</sup> Clyde E. Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1975) 126.

<sup>212</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 7.

<sup>213</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 109.

<sup>214</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 7

<sup>215</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 8.

<sup>216</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Primacy of Preaching," 7.

<sup>217</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 8.

are in the very midst of the crisis. God in his saving person encountering the souls of unsaved men [sic], the reliving of the event becomes the new event.<sup>218</sup>

The overarching influence of Karl Barth, whom Thielemann viewed as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, ultimately shapes Thielemann's theology of preaching.<sup>219</sup> The strong influence of Barth's theology on Thielemann is evident in his belief, "that preaching is God's act. It is God's Word. His moving in the now."<sup>220</sup> In agreement with the Second Helvetic Confession of 1536, which stated, "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God", Barth believed, "Preaching is the Word of God."<sup>221</sup> More specifically Barth believed that preaching becomes the Word of God, not because of anything the preacher might do, but only because of God's presence and revelation. Barth asserted:

Real proclamation, then, means the Word of God preached and the Word of God preached means in this first and outermost circle man's [sic] talk about God on the basis of God's own direction, which fundamentally transcends all human causation, which cannot, then, be put on a human basis, but which simply takes place, and has to be acknowledged, as a fact.<sup>222</sup>

In order to understand Thielemann's view of the Word of God more clearly one must look at Barth's perspective of the Word of God. More will be said about this in a later chapter, but it is important to know that Barth held a three-fold understanding of the Word of God: the revealed Word of God, the written Word of God and the preached Word of God are three forms of the Word of God. Revelation, Scripture and preaching are all equally the Word of God. To explain his three-fold understanding of God's Word, Barth used the analogy of the Trinity, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all equal forms of one God.<sup>223</sup> As the Trinity is inseparable, so Barth believed in the inseparable nature of the three-fold Word of

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<sup>218</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Primacy of Preaching," 7.

<sup>219</sup> Thielemann called Karl Barth the greatest theologian of the twentieth century in many sermons. In a sermon preached by Bruce Thielemann at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh on June 23, 1991, entitled, "Great Twentieth Century Christians: Karl Barth," Thielemann answers the question, Who is the greatest theologian of the twentieth century with the statement, "There is only one possible answer, regardless of your theological opinions: Karl Barth."

<sup>220</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>221</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, 44. See also, See the *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter 1, Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 2, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 800.

<sup>222</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, 90.

<sup>223</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, 120-121.

God. The three-forms should never be looked as isolated from one another. The preached Word of God is dependent on the faithful recollection of the written Word of God and the written Word of God is dependent on God revealing himself through the written Word of God. All three forms, argues Barth are interdependent, interrelated and therefore equally the Word of God.<sup>224</sup> To clarify his understanding of the unity of the Word of God Barth claimed, "It is one and the same whether we understand it as revelation, Bible or proclamation. There is no distinction of degree or value between the three forms."<sup>225</sup> This understanding of the three-fold nature of God's Word led Barth to hold a high view of preaching. Thielemann's high view of preaching was influenced by Barth's conviction that, in order for the written Word to become the Word of God for the listener, it must be proclaimed in the Church.<sup>226</sup> Therefore, in Thielemann's theology preaching was the proclamation of the written Word of God, which becomes the revealed Word of God.

Under the influence of Karl Barth's neo-orthodox theology, Thielemann's understanding of the written Word of God becoming the revealed Word of God led to his conviction that a preacher is unable to preach on his or her own. He believed that in the preaching event, where God's Word becomes God's Word by the power of the Holy Spirit, the preacher has nothing to do with this process; it is all God's doing. Karl Barth similarly stated, "We cannot speak of God. For to speak of God seriously would mean to speak in the realm of revelation and faith. To speak of God would be to speak God's word, the word which can come only from him, the word that *God becomes man*."<sup>227</sup> Commenting on Barth's understanding of the nature of God's Word in preaching, William H. Willimon says, "We can only speak about God because God has broken the silence between us and turned to us."<sup>228</sup> It is God's revelation that makes preaching possible. Or to use the part of Thielemann's core presupposition, it is God's act of revealing himself to humanity, which allows for the preaching act.<sup>229</sup> For Barth, "The word of God on the lips of a man is an

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<sup>224</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, 121.

<sup>225</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 120

<sup>226</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, 121.

<sup>227</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 198-199.

<sup>228</sup> William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, 71.

<sup>229</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

impossibility; it does not happen: no one will ever accomplish it or see it accomplished. The event toward which the expectancy of heaven and of earth is directed is none the less *God's* act."<sup>230</sup> In agreement with Barth, Thielemann affirmed and based his theology of preaching on the concept of God's word as act, an event in which God reveals himself to humanity and humanity is required to respond actively.

Like Barth, Thielemann viewed preaching in a circular and dialectic manner. For Barth preachers must speak of God. However, preachers cannot speak of God because they are human. So, this apparent contradiction leads one to recognize that preachers must speak of God but cannot and in the recognizing of their inability to preach they give God the glory in their preaching.<sup>231</sup> For Barth the warning to preachers is to "be *aware* of both the necessity and the impossibility of our task."<sup>232</sup> It was Barth's influence, which led Thielemann to affirm, "No man [sic] can preach. No man [sic] can announce God's real Word, that is do God's act, only God can do God's act."<sup>233</sup>

However, Thielemann was too enamored with preaching to make the assertion of impossibility the end point for his theology of preaching. If no one can preach, then why would anyone ever attempt to preach? Similarly, with Barth, Thielemann believed that preachers are compelled to speak God's Word, but they are unable to speak God's Word because only God can speak God's Word and in recognizing this fact, they honor God and are brought to the starting point of all preaching. According to Thielemann, an acknowledgement of complete dependence upon God is a necessity if one is to preach. Also, like Barth, Thielemann viewed preaching as a constant balancing act of the necessity of preaching and awareness that one cannot preach. For both men this awareness served to highlight the fact that a preacher must preach, even if he believed preaching is an impossible task. Ironically, not knowing for certain if he had ever truly preached, or if God's Word had become God's Word in the lives of his listeners, seemed to comfort

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<sup>230</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 124-125.

<sup>231</sup> Karl Barth's circular argument is explained in chapter 6 of *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.

<sup>232</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 214.

<sup>233</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.



Thielemann. In his early days of preaching Thielemann confessed that he would spend hours painstakingly analyzing his sermons on Sunday afternoon. But now, fully aware of the impossibility of knowing if one has really preached Thielemann says, “I go home and go to bed. And I am convinced that is legitimate. I have sown to the best I know how. I can go home and go to bed because the thing is God’s doing.”<sup>234</sup> Thielemann was content and could rest easy in never knowing if the preacher’s “words have become God’s act in the heart of a particular hearer.”<sup>235</sup> However, the not knowing if one has truly preached also brought Thielemann to the realization that this “makes us all the more responsible to do to the full everything which will ready us to be a channel. Even though we don’t know when that moment of channeling will occur.”<sup>236</sup> Thielemann’s favorite way to describe the pulpit was as a “sacred desk.”<sup>237</sup> This was more than a poetical description, for Thielemann the pulpit was a revered and sacred place where God’s Word was spoken to God’s people through the preacher. The work was God’s, but the preacher must always be ready to accomplish God’s work. It is clear that Thielemann’s need-centered approach was influenced by P. T. Forsyth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth. Now we will look at the ways Thielemann ensured God’s Word would become God’s act through the preaching event.

### **Ensuring God’s Word Becomes God’s Act**

For Thielemann the essence of preaching was recreating God’s act. More specifically, preaching is God’s Word being lived out or moving in the present among his people. While preaching is to be God’s act, Thielemann believed there was no set formula to guarantee that God’s Word will become God’s act in the heart of those listening to the sermon.<sup>238</sup> However, pragmatically, he prescribed three steps to help create a more suitable environment and cultivate the best possible soil for God’s Word to become God’s act: First, preachers should preach from the Bible; second, preachers should be creative in their preaching and; third, preachers should have a proper view of themselves.

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<sup>234</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>235</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>236</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>237</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “How to Write a Sermon,” (sermon).

<sup>238</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

### *Preach from the Bible*

More will be said about these three questions and Thielemann's use of Scripture in preaching as we explore Thielemann's preaching methodology, but the subject will be introduced in this section. As we have seen, for Thielemann, the fundamental epistemological presupposition of the Christian faith is "that God exists, and that God reveals himself."<sup>239</sup> In order to know God then God must choose to reveal himself to creation through his general and special revelation. Thielemann notes, "Scripture is one of God's means of special revelation."<sup>240</sup> He also viewed Christ and miracles as two other means of special revelation.<sup>241</sup> Thielemann affirmed, "It is obvious to us that God reveals himself and acts through Scripture. Dependence upon the Scripture, therefore, seems obvious, if one yearns to have one's preaching be God's act."<sup>242</sup> If preaching is to be God's Word, that is God acting in the present, then the best way to ensure this outcome is to preach from God's primary means of revealing himself, the Bible. What seemed obvious to Thielemann in 1975 was not as clear twenty years earlier during his time at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary. In his seminary days, Thielemann was taught and agreed with the writings of John A. Broadus and Andrew Watterson Blackwood, on the advantages of preaching from a biblical text.<sup>243</sup> However, he also stated during his seminary days, "Let us remember; however, that it is not absolutely essential that a text be had for every sermon."<sup>244</sup> While Thielemann may not have believed that a biblical text was an essential ingredient in the sermon while he was a student at seminary, it seems twenty years of pastoral ministry, study and preaching altered his perspective. By the time Thielemann developed his theology of preaching, in both practice and belief, he was convinced of the importance of preaching from a biblical text in order to help ensure that God's Word becomes God's act in the heart and life of the

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<sup>239</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 3.

<sup>240</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>241</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 4.

<sup>242</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>243</sup> On page 8 of his seminary Homiletics Notebook Thielemann acknowledges his understanding of and agrees with the five advantages of having a biblical text as listed by John A. Broadus in Chapter 1 of his *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. He also references the more complete listing of the advantages to the preacher and the advantages to the people of having a biblical text given by Andrew Watterson Blackwood in his, *The Preparation of Sermons*.

<sup>244</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, *Homiletics Notebook*, First Term 1955 (Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary), 9.

listener.<sup>245</sup> In one lecture he stated, “Now God honors Scripture by making it the vehicle of his special revelation. Therefore, it seems to me that dependence upon Scripture is more likely to make our preaching the vehicle of his revelation.”<sup>246</sup>

In line with his presuppositional belief that preaching is an extension of the incarnation of Christ, Thielemann taught that the preacher’s task was “to be the bridge over which Christ walks into today.”<sup>247</sup> This statement was made seven years before the publication of John R. W. Stott’s *Between Two Worlds: The Challenges of Preaching Today*,<sup>248</sup> but not before Stott’s first use of the bridge-building metaphor to describe preaching in his 1961 book, *A Preacher’s Portrait*.<sup>249</sup> More will be said about this metaphor in the section on Thielemann’s preaching methodology, but it is important to note that Thielemann saw the value of the bridge-building metaphor in his need-centered homiletic for highlighting the importance of a sermon being grounded in both the biblical text and the contemporary world. Thielemann did not want preachers to commit the error of being either “socially irrelevant” or “biblically indifferent.”<sup>250</sup> Thielemann taught preachers to remain grounded firmly in both the biblical text and the contemporary world to ensure God’s Word becomes God’s act and in life of the listener. He also preached sermons, which modeled the type of “two-world” grounding he espoused.

Thielemann believed in the power of words to shape lives and in the power of God’s Word to transform lives. Therefore, he reasoned that preaching from the Scriptures was the most effective way to transform the preacher’s words in the preaching event into God’s Word. He claimed, “It’s when we let the words of the Bible begin to give articulacy to our hearts, when our feet start tapping to that music, then it seems to me it is more likely that our preaching will become the Word of God alive in this time.”<sup>251</sup> In another preaching lecture Thielemann said, “Preaching is God’s ‘I’ meeting us, ‘thou’, brought to bear to us on listeners.

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<sup>245</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9-11.

<sup>246</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 10.

<sup>247</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>248</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982).

<sup>249</sup> John Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1961).

<sup>250</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>251</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 10.

Through the Word comes the Word.”<sup>252</sup> Thielemann’s conviction that through the Word comes the Word is in line with the teachings of Karl Barth who said, “The Bible, then, becomes God’s Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God’s Word, the little word ‘is’ refers to its being in this becoming.”<sup>253</sup> More will be said about Thielemann’s agreement with Barth’s concept of God’s Word having its being in becoming. For now, it is sufficient to observe that for Thielemann the conviction that a preacher should preach from the Bible was more than theory, it was a central part of his preaching practice. In a sampling of over six hundred of his sermons the vast majority of sermons had a biblical text as its foundation.<sup>254</sup>

### *Creative Preaching*

Thielemann viewed preaching as a work of art.<sup>255</sup> In his mind the sermon was like a blank canvas to an artist or a blank music sheet to a composer. Thielemann taught, “Ought we not think more of preaching as a living experience, not a formula with an inevitable end, but a game, if you will allow me to use that word, without a high control factor. A game, which abandons itself to itself and to whatever the outcome is.”<sup>256</sup> He stated, “There is no rigid outline that will guarantee to you that the Holy Spirit will anoint that and make it come alive and be God’s act.”<sup>257</sup> He believed there are no preconceived rigid forms or patterns to follow in preaching; a preacher is free to experiment and is to only allow “language to lead us into new worlds.”<sup>258</sup> Thielemann viewed preaching God’s Word as God’s act, but it is only possible for preaching to become God’s act through the anointing touch of the Holy Spirit. Since Thielemann believed there were no prescribed or predetermined formula for sermon form that will guarantee the presence of the Holy Spirit in one’s preaching he reasoned preachers are free to and even compelled to experiment and exercise creativity in their preaching. This conviction allowed Thielemann to break free of the rigid three-points and a poem formula which he believed was falsely prescribed

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<sup>252</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>253</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, 110.

<sup>254</sup> See Appendix Two for a complete list of sermons in Thomas Haugen’s Bruce W. Thielemann Sermon Collection.

<sup>255</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>256</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12

<sup>257</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 11.

<sup>258</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 11.

by some conservative, orthodox theologians.<sup>259</sup> On this topic he warned: “We ought to not so focus on the details that we miss the whole gospel *gestalt*. And the gospel *gestalt* is that man [sic] is free, that he [sic] is not tied to any system. The Spirit is most present when the Spirit, who is free, moves freely through us when we are free.”<sup>260</sup>

To strengthen his argument for the necessity of both freedom and creativity with sermonic form, Thielemann returned to the importance of Christ’s presence in one’s preaching. He said, “Christ is indefinable, the self-emptied Christ more indefinable, not less so, he alludes every homiletical caliper that we might devise. So, what is called for is a spirit of freedom and constant inquiry.”<sup>261</sup> Ideal preaching for Thielemann was likened to playing a game of follow the leader with one that the preacher knows he or she will never catch, but whom they delight in chasing.<sup>262</sup>

Along with a departure from a specific fixed form in preaching, to spark creative preaching, Thielemann encouraged preachers to use language in a creative manner. Language should be a “vehicle for experimentation.”<sup>263</sup> The writings of German philosopher Martin Heidegger were instrumental in helping shape Thielemann’s understanding of language. In *On The Way To Language*, Heidegger proposes a move away from using language for utilitarian purposes and a move towards an experience with language.<sup>264</sup> Heidegger states, “When we talk of ‘undergoing’ an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is something itself that comes to pass, happens.”<sup>265</sup> In line with Heidegger’s understanding of language as an experience, Thielemann encouraged preachers to stop using language as a means of reaching their own pre-determined goals. Thielemann suggested, “that we ought to allow language to unfold for itself. We ought to let language lead us into new worlds.”<sup>266</sup> For

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<sup>259</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>260</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>261</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>262</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>263</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 11.

<sup>264</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On The Way To Language* (San Francisco: Harper, 1971), 57.

<sup>265</sup> Martin Heidegger, *On The Way To Language*, 57.

<sup>266</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 11.

Thielemann, too many sermons have the destination determined before they begin. He is critical of preachers who he claimed, “use the same phrases, the same clichés. They become like highways or interstates they aren’t pathways into the unknown.”<sup>267</sup> Thielemann believed a sermon should be a “living experience” and not a “formula with an inevitable end.”<sup>268</sup> Thielemann did not want the sermon to be an exercise in predictable religious platitudes; he wanted the sermon to be an organic experience or event which took both the listener and preacher on a journey of discovery with the Holy Spirit as guide. The concept of allowing a sermon to be a living experience without a pre-determined end has rumblings of the New Hermeneutic and New Homiletic where a sharp turn to the listener is evident in the preaching process. We will look at the similarities found in the New Homiletic and the preaching of Fred Craddock in another chapter. It is important to note that Fred Craddock’s inductive approach to preaching represents this turn to the importance of the experience of the listener as well. Foundational to Craddock’s approach to preaching is the conviction that in preaching “the authority lies not in the speaker or the listener but in the message; both speaker and listener bear responsibility during the preaching; if the speaker has had the privilege of arriving at the message, the listener should be granted the same.”<sup>269</sup> Like Thielemann, Craddock’s concern was primarily “not of understanding language, but of understanding through language...the Word of God is not interpreted; it interprets.”<sup>270</sup> It is important to note Thielemann differs from the New Homiletic in his emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the sermonic process and the sermons ultimate destination. In Thielemann’s understanding one way to allow the Spirit to guide the sermon process as a living experience and fight the tendency to preach sermons with a pre-determined end is to be more creative in preaching. With the conviction that freedom is the essence of the Spirit, Thielemann wanted to free sermons from the preacher’s biases and preconceived ideas through the effective use of creativity. Creativity within these bounds then becomes the means of allowing the Spirit to

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<sup>267</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 11.

<sup>268</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>269</sup> Fred. B. Craddock, “Inductive Preaching” a paper prepared for the Societas Homiletica meeting at Stetson University, August 20-23, 1990. 16.

<sup>270</sup> Fred. B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 35.

move where the Spirit wants to move without the hindrance of the preacher's own preconceived ideas, thus allowing God's Word to be God's Word in preaching and not the words of a man or a woman.

### *Proper View of Self*

If preaching is to be God's act, then according to Thielemann preachers should preach God's Word, exercise creativity in their preaching and have a proper view of self. More specifically Thielemann described a preacher's proper view of self as thinking nothing of oneself and completely of the Spirit.<sup>271</sup> This call for a proper view of self, probes deeper than the ancient Greek aphorism "know thyself."<sup>272</sup> The proper view of self that gives preaching the best opportunity of becoming God's act is reminiscent of the teachings of Phillips Brooks the nineteenth century pastor of Trinity Church in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1877, while delivering the Lyman Beecher Lectures on preaching at Yale University, Brooks famously said, "Truth through personality is our description of real preaching."<sup>273</sup> Brooks described real preaching as the presentation of God's truth through the entirety of the preachers being. While Thielemann never makes a direct reference to Brooks, his ideas are similar to Brooks. Thielemann was convinced that preaching "demands sensitivity and involvement and emotion and strength, everything you've got."<sup>274</sup> Thielemann viewed preaching as a dynamic and mysterious event, which leads him to the conclusion that a preacher must have a proper view of self. And, according to Thielemann, a proper view of self contains two dimensions, which are contradictory. First, "We need to think not at all of ourselves and all of the Spirit."<sup>275</sup> Second, "We have to recognize at the same time, in wrestling with the Spirit, you need to use all of yourself."<sup>276</sup> The belief that the act of preaching requires simultaneously both all and nothing of oneself is another of Thielemann's contradictions, with which he was comfortable, but requires further elucidation. How is this essential proper view of self, which thinks "not at all or ourselves" and

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<sup>271</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 12.

<sup>272</sup> The Greek inscription, γνῶθι σεαυτόν was found on the wall at the temple of Apollo in Delphi.

<sup>273</sup> Phillips Brooks *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989) 27.

<sup>274</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 13.

<sup>275</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 12.

<sup>276</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 12.

at the same time uses “all of ourselves” possible? For Thielemann the answer lies in the balancing of his conviction that preaching is hard work and in the strenuous act of the preaching the “total man [sic] is involved.”<sup>277</sup> However, in true dialectic manner, this does not negate Thielemann’s assertion that at the same time the preaching act belongs entirely to God. Thielemann held firmly to the conviction that, “For preaching to be God’s act, it has to be that, God’s act.”<sup>278</sup> Or said another way, “The act of preaching is strenuous and it involves all of you, even as it involves none of you.”<sup>279</sup> This contradictory idea is a return to the teachings of Karl Barth who comfortably holds in dialectic tension the impossibility of God’s Word coming from the lips of a human together with the necessity of the preaching act.<sup>280</sup>

For Thielemann, a proper view of self, created two important realizations. First, is the realization that preachers speak as men and women who are under God’s judgment.<sup>281</sup> Thielemann wanted preachers to possess an awareness of their place before God. This awareness of one’s proper place under God’s judgment will then impact how a preacher listens to God, acts in obedience to God and speaks about God. Second, is the realization that preachers “must speak out of their own needs, openly and honestly.”<sup>282</sup> Thielemann believed preachers should set an example for their listeners through living a life of submission to the authority of God. Preaching with a proper view of oneself according to Thielemann means understanding that preachers are humans under the authority of the Spirit of God as they preach God’s act. A proper view of self in preaching is an understanding of and yielding to the truth that, “We must give all, and understand that insofar as preaching is concerned, all is nothing at all. For God’s act can only be God’s act.”<sup>283</sup> In order for God’s Word to have the best possible soil for becoming God’s act Thielemann taught that a preacher should have a proper view of self. For Thielemann a preacher with a proper view of self understands that preaching involves both losing oneself and using oneself while communicating God’s Word. It

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<sup>277</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>278</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>279</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>280</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 124.

<sup>281</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>282</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>283</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.



is through this paradoxical loosing and using that God's Word has the best possible chance of becoming God's act among God's people. As John Stott said, "there is an indispensable link between the preacher and the act of preaching."<sup>284</sup> Thielemann understood that the self cannot be disengaged from the act of preaching, but he was committed to self being subservient to the Spirit of God.

## **Conclusion**

Bruce Thielemann dedicated his life to the art and craft of preaching. He thought deeply about what makes a sermon effective and taught other preachers the lessons he himself had learned. For Thielemann, preaching was a mystery and a challenge, which would batter and bruise those who attempted to navigate her rocky shoals, but God's call to sail those treacherous waters held Thielemann firmly at the helm.<sup>285</sup> Thielemann understood that preachers are the "jars of clay" who pour out the "treasure" of God's truth, but emphasized a humble view of self which was subservient to the Spirit of God in order "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."<sup>286</sup> For Thielemann God's Word is God's act and the essence of preaching is a recreation of God's act among God's people. God exists and God is actively revealing himself to his people through the sermon and through preachers. In this chapter we have explored Thielemann's theology of preaching through examining his qualifications, his theological presuppositions, the external influences which helped formulate his theology of preaching along with a closer look at his understanding of God's Word becoming God's act. It is this understanding of the Word of God coming to life in the hearts of the listeners which led Thielemann to his need-centered approach to preaching which we will explore in the next chapter.

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<sup>284</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 267.

<sup>285</sup> Nautical imagery was a favorite of Thielemann's when describing the task of preaching.

<sup>286</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:7, New International Version.

# Chapter Three: A Need-Centered Approach to Preaching

## Introduction

The importance of knowing one's listeners and making a tangible connection with them is not a new topic in the disciplines of rhetoric and homiletics. Much has been written on the subject of understanding one's listeners in both public speaking and preaching. For Bruce W. Thielemann understanding and making connections with his listeners took a place of central importance in his life, ministry, teaching and preaching. Every preacher has his or her own style and approach to the task of preparing and delivering sermons. Many preachers are taught a methodology or philosophy of preaching in their seminary or Bible school training that stays with them for the duration of their preaching ministry. For some preachers, this means an exclusive commitment to topical preaching, expository preaching, or a mixture of topical and expository preaching. However, Thielemann did not fit neatly into any of these traditional preaching models. His contribution to the homiletical landscape was a commitment to a need-centered approach to homiletics. According to Thielemann, need-centered preaching attempts to understand, anticipate and meet the specific needs of one's listeners while remaining dependent on the Holy Spirit and always grounded in the truth of God's Word. As far as Thielemann was concerned, need-centered preaching was the most effective way to preach a sermon. He believed preachers were a vessel used to communicate God's Word to God's people. Therefore, "every attempt to be the instrument of God's Word and act should be aimed at a need – should be problem solving in its orientation."<sup>287</sup>

Thielemann's need-centered approach to the homiletical task was not formed in a vacuum, there were many factors influencing how he arrived at his particular approach to preaching. In this chapter, we will explore some of the streams of thought that shaped Thielemann leading him to formulate and embrace

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<sup>287</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975, 2.

his need-centered approach to preaching. Specifically, we will examine the various theological, homiletical, psychological, and rhetorical influences upon his thinking about homiletics.

## **Theological Influences**

In the last chapter, we noted Thielemann's comfort with balancing the rhetorical dimension of preaching along with a dependence upon the Holy Spirit to allow God's Word the greatest possibility of becoming God acting through his Word in the lives of his people. This ability to balance the vertical and horizontal dimensions of sermon planning and delivery is a result of Thielemann's theology of God's Word.

### *God's Word is Act*

Thielemann believed that "God's Word is act – it is an event. Preaching is to be God's Word – that is, the event of God acting now."<sup>288</sup> For Thielemann, when God speaks, something happens as a result of God's speaking. He advocated, "If God's Word is act then that Word demands preaching, not only the repeating of the acts that have gone before, but also the repeating of the acts in the sense that they are done again."<sup>289</sup> According to Thielemann, preaching that allows God's Word to become God's Word lived out in the lives of God's people in the present moment is only accomplished through "God's sovereign act."<sup>290</sup> Or stated another way, "if the Word becomes the event, it is because of the Holy Spirit."<sup>291</sup> Further, he believed it was, "arrogant for any preacher to assume that he can will this of himself [sic]."<sup>292</sup> In their own strength preachers are unable to cause God's Word to become God's act or event. However, as was noted in the last chapter, Thielemann believed there were three factors, which may increase the likelihood of the preacher being used by God. First, preaching ought to be built on the Scriptures, which he believed was "a record of God's act."<sup>293</sup> Second, the preacher should be free to use a variety of

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<sup>288</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>289</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 1979, 1.

<sup>290</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>291</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 1.

<sup>292</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>293</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

forms<sup>294</sup> in preaching “because the Holy Spirit will not be inhibited and moves in freedom.”<sup>295</sup> Third, the preacher ought to invest him or herself completely in the process of preaching “so that preaching becomes crisis for *you* as well as for your people.”<sup>296</sup> These three factors were hallmarks of Thielemann’s preaching in both practice and theory.

Throughout Thielemann’s lectures on preaching, indebtedness to the twentieth century Swiss Theologian Karl Barth is evident. Thielemann identified himself as neo-orthodox theologically and Barth is referenced extensively throughout his lectures on preaching. Thielemann’s understanding of God’s Word as act and his belief in the necessity of God’s Word becoming the lived-out Word of God in the lives of one’s listeners suggest the influence of Karl Barth. Barth believed God’s Word has “its being in this becoming.”<sup>297</sup> For Barth, the Bible becomes the Word of God through the event of the sermon:

This is what we mean when we call the Bible God's Word...The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it...The Bible, then, becomes God's word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word 'is' refers to its being in this becoming.<sup>298</sup>

From the time he first entered full-time pastoral ministry, Thielemann identified himself as neo-orthodox theologically.<sup>299</sup> Because of the influence of neo-orthodoxy on Thielemann’s theology, and specifically his understanding of God’s Word, his need-centered approach to preaching was dedicated to allowing God’s Word every possible opportunity to become God’s Word lived out in the lives of God’s people. Foundational to Thielemann’s theology of preaching was the core belief that there

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<sup>294</sup> “That is since there is no set form which ensures the touch of the Holy Spirit. There is no rigid outline that will guarantee to you that the Holy Spirit will anoint that and make it come alive and be God’s act. Since that is not indicated, then it seems to me that all forms may be tried. And we are loosed and the road to experiment is wide open. We don’t think often enough of language as a vehicle for experimentation. Martin Heidegger in his *On The Way to Language* makes this point. Language is most exciting and inexplicable when it is not used as an instrument, when it is not used in a utilitarian way. See we most often use language to reach our pre-determined goals. What I am suggesting is that we ought to allow language to unfold for itself. We ought to let language lead us into new worlds.” “A Theology of Preaching,” 11.

<sup>295</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>296</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>297</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, 110.

<sup>298</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.1,109-110.

<sup>299</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

is always evident purpose in God's acts and that purpose is to meet the needs of his creation. Because God acts, God's people must act as well becoming the Word of God lived out in the present moment. Therefore, Thielemann grounds his need-centered approach to preaching in the purposefulness of God in dealing with his creation. If God is purposeful in interacting with his creation, then Thielemann insisted that it must carry over to the preaching of God's Word.<sup>300</sup> Thus, if the Word is to become the Word lived out in the present moment, then preachers must aim at connecting with that which has the greatest possibility of connecting with one's listener, moving one's listener and motivating them to action.

Thielemann was comfortable with the theological nuances of homiletics. However, Thielemann was also a practitioner of preaching who was comfortable making abstract theological concepts concrete in the pulpit. Because of this dual interest in theory and practice there is a link between the theoretical and practical elements in Thielemann's theology and preaching articulated through his need-centered approach to preaching. Although not a mainstream position, Thielemann asserted that a need-centered approach to preaching would create the best possible environment for God's Word to become God's Word in the preaching event.<sup>301</sup> In his understanding of homiletics, focusing a sermon on the meeting of a specific human need was the most effective way to ensure the connecting of God's Word with God's people so it would motivate them to action and therefore become an act of God.<sup>302</sup> Motivating people was the driving force behind much of Thielemann's theory and practice of preaching.<sup>303</sup> For Thielemann it was clear that a preacher must do everything he or she can to allow God's Word to have the opportunity to become the Word of God lived out in the present moment. For Thielemann that meant moving people and motivating people to action, and it was this conviction that was an influential factor in the formulation of his need-centered approach to the preaching task.

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<sup>300</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>301</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 13.

<sup>302</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 13.

<sup>303</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 5.

### *Purpose in God's Act*

Another important characteristic of Thielemann's theology, which undergirded and influenced his need-centered approach to preaching, was the conviction that there is always a definitive purpose in God's actions. In line with his theological training at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary and his career-long ordination in the United Presbyterian denomination, Thielemann held a high view of the sovereignty of God. He saw God's control as complete and believed there is always specific purpose in God's actions. When God speaks or acts it is always for a specific reason. According to Thielemann, "God's acts are not capricious."<sup>304</sup> All of God's actions have a purpose, and Thielemann was convinced, "that purpose is to meet the needs of his creation: to reconcile men to God, to reconcile men to other men, and to reconcile men to their place in time and space."<sup>305</sup> Drawing on his interest in philosophy, Thielemann contrasts Aristotle's understanding of God as the distant and disconnected "unmoved mover" with his own understanding of God who is "deliberately active and moving and involved in life with us."<sup>306</sup> In Thielemann's understanding God is nothing like Aristotle's "unmoved mover" who refuses to get involved in the affairs of men and women.<sup>307</sup> In contrast, Thielemann stated, "God, in other words is not the Greeks' unmoved mover - a high and lofty one who sits ensconced on a silver cloud somewhere, above and beyond the affairs of men [sic]."<sup>308</sup> Thielemann saw the whole of Scripture telling of a God who is actively involved in every aspect of people's lives. And, more specifically, he believed that God who is actively involved is also deeply concerned with meeting the needs of men and women. As Thielemann sees it, "God's involvement with men [sic] is in terms of meeting their needs."<sup>309</sup>

Thielemann's theological understanding of a God who is actively involved in the lives of his creation had a strong influence on the formulation of his need-centered approach to preaching. He states, "If God's acts are in response to the

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<sup>304</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>305</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>306</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>307</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>308</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>309</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 2.

needs of men, and preaching is to be an act of God, then preaching should be directed precisely at the needs of men [sic]."<sup>310</sup> The idea that preaching should be directed at the needs of one's listeners was so firmly rooted in Thielemann's mind that in one lecture he says, "This is so patently clear that the mere announcement should suffice. This will not, however be enough, at least it won't be enough if contemporary preaching is noted."<sup>311</sup> Much to his frustration, Thielemann did not see contemporary preaching as being directed at the needs of people. He identified two primary models of preaching which were popular during his ministry, expository and topical preaching. And, in his mind, neither model was effective at connecting God's Word with God's people because they were not specifically aimed at the needs of the men and women in the congregation.<sup>312</sup> More will be said about Thielemann's critique of topical and expository preaching in the homiletical influences section of this chapter.

In his lectures on preaching, we see that Thielemann viewed the planning and preparing of sermons as a two-part process. First, preachers plan sermons, which aim at meeting the specific needs of his or her listeners. Second, preachers plan sermons that do not come between the preacher and his or her listeners.<sup>313</sup> This two-part process of planning sermons to meet specific needs and build an intimate connection between the preacher and listener is important to Thielemann's preaching in both theory and practice. Thielemann's approach to preaching was clearly need-centered. The central thrust of his need-centered approach to preaching was a desire to make certain God's Word was spoken clearly and specifically into the lives of the men and women to whom he was preaching. Like Harry E. Fosdick, Thielemann stated, "Every sermon should be directed at the meeting of some human need – at something which is wounding spirits and burdening consciences and distracting lives."<sup>314</sup> He affirmed that, "Before a sermon is five minutes old, everyone ought to be aware of how that sermon is speaking to a

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<sup>310</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>311</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>312</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 3-4.

<sup>313</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>314</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

need that is in the center of them. Something is being dealt with which has immediate relevance to their lives.”<sup>315</sup>

Two of the theological convictions, which clearly influenced Thielemann’s formulation of a need-centered homiletic, were his understanding of God’s Word as act and his belief in a God who is actively involved in meeting the needs of his people.

### **Homiletical Influences**

While studying at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from 1955-1959, Thielemann admits, “Like most seminarians of my era, I was taught an essentially intellectual approach to preaching: analyze a passage and deliver the fruit of your study.”<sup>316</sup> Early in his seminary training under the teaching of Ray H. Shear, Thielemann was introduced to and eventually grasped the importance of the sermon connecting with the needs of his listeners. During the first term of his junior year at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, Thielemann was asked in his Homiletics Notebook, “What has the condition of the congregation to do with the minister’s choice of texts?” Thielemann answers clearly, “The minister must preach to his congregation’s need.”<sup>317</sup> This answer given by Thielemann, as a young seminarian may not have been fully developed or the implications for his future ministry fully understood at the time, but it set the trajectory for his entire preaching ministry and the formulation of his need-centered approach to preaching. This first encounter with the importance of understanding the needs of one’s listeners in the sermonic process appears to have come from exposure to Andrew W. Blackwood’s *The Preparation of Sermons*, one of the required textbooks from Thielemann’s seminary homiletics class.<sup>318</sup> Blackwood taught that while planning ones preaching, “the wise man [sic] begins with some human need, and meets that need with divine

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<sup>315</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1-2.

<sup>316</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Sermons for the Head and Heart: Effective Preaching Feeds Both the Mind and Emotions,” *Leadership Journal*, Vol. VIII. No. 2 (1987): 58.

<sup>317</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Homiletics Notebook” (Class Project, Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, 1955) 11.

<sup>318</sup> A complete list of recommended reading for Thielemann’s preaching classes at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary is located in Bruce W. Thielemann’s personal files. The file heading reads, “Class Material”.



truth.”<sup>319</sup> In addition to Blackwood, Harry Emerson Fosdick, who he was also introduced to at seminary, and Henry Babcock Adams also influenced Thielemann as he developed his need-centered approach to preaching. To these preachers we now turn.

### *Harry Emerson Fosdick*

The preacher who arguably had the most profound and obvious influence upon Thielemann’s commitment to need-centered preaching was Harry Emerson Fosdick, the venerable preacher at New York’s Riverside Church. Fosdick never wrote a book describing his approach to preaching. However, in 1928 Fosdick wrote an article entitled "What is the Matter with Preaching?" in which he detailed his approach to preaching.<sup>320</sup> Fosdick also addressed the connection between pastoral counseling and preaching in an article published in *Pastoral Psychology* in 1952.<sup>321</sup> In addition, Fosdick discussed his approach to preaching in his autobiography, *The Living of These Days*, where he dedicated a chapter to preaching.<sup>322</sup>

Based on the required reading material for Thielemann during his studies at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary we see he was already introduced to Fosdick.<sup>323</sup> Starting in 1925, Fosdick served for sixteen years as the preaching pastor of Riverside Church. Fosdick, who was well known for his public fight with the fundamentalist theologians of his day and his outspoken liberal theology, did not come from the same theological cloth as Thielemann.<sup>324</sup> During a discussion on preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in 1979, a student asked Thielemann, “Who are some of your favorite preachers?”<sup>325</sup> Among the list of five preachers he gave in

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<sup>319</sup> Andrew Watterson Blackwood, *The Preparation of Sermons* (Nashville: Stone and Pierce, 1948), 22.

<sup>320</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?* (New York: Harpers Magazine, July 1928), 133-141.

<sup>321</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Personal Counseling and Preaching.” *Pastoral Psychology* 3, 1952. 11-15.

<sup>322</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *The Living of These Days: An Autobiography*. New York: Harper, 1956. 83-112.

<sup>323</sup> See “Suggested List of Books on Preaching” from “Class Materials” in Thomas Haugen’s personal files.

<sup>324</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” *Christian Work* 102 (June 10, 1922): 716–722.

<sup>325</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching”, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1979, 7.

response was Harry Emerson Fosdick.<sup>326</sup> Regarding Fosdick, Thielemann said, “I consider him the greatest preacher of the century, in terms of homiletic skill.”<sup>327</sup> However, he was quick to qualify his choice by stating that this was based on homiletic style and not the content of the message. So, while he may have considered Fosdick an influential preacher he was also aware that his writing and preaching were as he saw it, “riddled full of theological baloney and it is very, very liberal in its orientation and he puts down what he calls the fundamentalists, which he, by fundamentalist simply means a conservative.”<sup>328</sup> Although Thielemann may not have agreed with every aspect of Fosdick’s theology, he respected Fosdick’s understanding of preaching, artistry in the pulpit, desire to preach sermons that matter, and respect for the role of the listeners in the preaching process. In spite of their theological differences, Thielemann was able to gain insight from Fosdick, which he readily applied, to both his teaching about preaching and his own preaching. We shall now explore four areas in which Fosdick influenced Thielemann in the development of his need-centered approach to preaching: addressing specific needs of the listener, preaching as a cooperative endeavor, preaching to move people and the quest for a better way to preach.

#### *Addressing Specific Needs of the Listener*

Fosdick believed that effective preaching should aim at solving a problem which men and women in the pews were facing in their daily lives. In his “What Is the Matter with Preaching?” 1928, published in the popular *Harper’s Magazine*, Fosdick discusses the current state of preaching with both preachers and listeners. Simply stated, Fosdick asserted that preaching was in trouble. For Fosdick, much of the preaching during his day was unsatisfactory because preachers were not crafting sermons, which connected with the “real interests of the congregation” and consequently, were irrelevant and “could as well be left unsaid.”<sup>329</sup> The solution Fosdick outlined was a move towards preaching sermons which were directly

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<sup>326</sup> Thielemann also listed Clarence Edward McCartney, Jonathan Edwards, David H. C. Read and Ernest Campbell as some of his favorite preachers.

<sup>327</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>328</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>329</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?* (New York: Harpers Magazine, July 1928). 134.

connected with and focused on the relevant concerns of the men and women in the congregation. Fosdick was convinced:

Every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem – a vital, important problem, puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives – and any sermon which thus does tackle a real problem, throw even a little light on it, and help some individuals practically to find their way through it cannot be altogether uninteresting.<sup>330</sup>

According to Fosdick, an effective sermon is crystal clear in the introduction as to which vital need of the listener the sermon was going to address specifically.<sup>331</sup> He stated, “Within a paragraph or two after a sermon has started, wide areas of any congregation ought to begin recognizing that the preacher is tackling something of vital concern to them.”<sup>332</sup> It was Fosdick’s aim to direct a sermon at “real problems, speaking directly to individual needs, and because of its transforming consequences could happen to some person then and there.”<sup>333</sup> As far as Fosdick was concerned, “Somewhere in this congregation is one person who desperately needs what I am going to say; O God, help me to get at him [sic]!”<sup>334</sup> Connecting to a vital concern or need facing the congregation and then shedding light on this concern characterized Fosdick’s approach to preaching and later Thielemann.

This same desire to connect with the vital concerns of the listener is also evident in Thielemann’s approach to preaching. He agreed with the concept of raising a need, which connects directly with one’s listeners, early in the sermon process and affirmed, almost mimicking Fosdick, “Before a sermon is five minutes old everyone in the congregation should be aware of the fact that it is germane to their needs.”<sup>335</sup> Thielemann restated Fosdick’s thoughts on the importance of the sermon connecting with a vital concern when he said, “Every sermon should be directed at the meeting of some human need – at something which is wounding spirits, burdening consciences and distracting lives.”<sup>336</sup> The word choice by Thielemann is so similar to Fosdick’s here that the influence of Fosdick over

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<sup>330</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>331</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>332</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>333</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Personal counseling and preaching.” *Pastoral Psychology* 3, 1952. 12.

<sup>334</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Personal counseling and preaching.” *Pastoral Psychology* 3, 1952. 12.

<sup>335</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 2.

<sup>336</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2.

Thielemann is evident and hard to miss. Both Fosdick and Thielemann were concerned with preaching sermons and teaching others to preach sermons that were immediately relevant to their listeners. Both preachers vocalized and held the firm conviction that a sermon should be organized around the meeting of some human need.

Both Fosdick and Thielemann lamented the fact that much contemporary preaching of their day did not speak to people's real issues and problems. Fosdick was a harsh and vocal critic of what he deemed, preaching that did not matter.<sup>337</sup> As far as Fosdick was concerned these sermons could have been left unsaid because they only produce emptiness and futility in the lives of those listening.<sup>338</sup> The problem according to Fosdick was preachers assumed their congregations were interested in the ancient world of the biblical text and failed to connect with the real interests of their congregation. He critically stated, "It is pathetic to observe the number of preachers who commonly on Sunday speak religious pieces in the pulpit, utterly failing to establish real contact with the thinking or practical interest of their auditors."<sup>339</sup> In response to this indictment on the state of preaching Fosdick does not blame the preachers themselves but blames their wrong training and faulty technique. As an alternative to what he viewed as the disconnected and empty preaching of his day Fosdick offered his "project method" of preaching.<sup>340</sup>

Thielemann also lamented what he saw as the poor state of preaching during his day. In one lecture he remarks, "Preaching is having a bad time right now."<sup>341</sup> Rejection of authority and lack of training in need-centered preaching by seminaries were the primary causes for what Thielemann saw as the poor state of preaching. In another lecture he pointed out that the primary problem with preaching during his day was that most contemporary preaching, as he experienced it, was not directed precisely enough at the needs of the men and women to whom they are preaching.<sup>342</sup> Forty-seven years after Fosdick's published indictment of the

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<sup>337</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>338</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>339</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>340</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 140.

<sup>341</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 8.

<sup>342</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

state of preaching Thielemann brought forth a similar critique.<sup>343</sup> Preaching was not connecting, it was too far removed from the lives of the people being preached to and as a result it was irrelevant. So, under the strong influence of the contributions of Fosdick on this subject, and as an alternative to what he felt was irrelevant preaching, Thielemann offered his “need-centered” approach to preaching, committed to addressing the specific needs of his listeners through preaching.<sup>344</sup> Not only this, but Thielemann was also influenced by Fosdick in the way he viewed preaching as a cooperative endeavor between preacher and listener.

#### *Preaching as a Cooperative Endeavor*

With this turn to the needs of the listener in sermon preparation and delivery, both Fosdick and Thielemann viewed preaching as a cooperative endeavor between preacher and listener. For Fosdick the preacher “is delivering the goods that the community has a right to expect from the pulpit as much as it has a right to expect shoes from a cobbler.”<sup>345</sup> Fosdick believed that the preacher’s job was to dispense a commodity; sermons that connect with and help solve the real problems the congregation was facing on a daily basis. By his standard, preaching sermons that connect to the real needs facing the congregation is the only way of ensuring that a preacher has functioned properly in the pulpit, even if it appears pragmatic to do so.<sup>346</sup> Thielemann also affirmed Fosdick’s clear emphasis on directing sermons to meet and address the needs of his or her listeners. In a similar way to Fosdick, Thielemann looked to the field of advertising to inform and defend his need-centered understanding of preaching. More will be said of this in the next section, but it is clear from his lectures on preaching that Thielemann understood that the advertiser begins a commercial, aimed specifically at selling a commodity, “with a statement of need.”<sup>347</sup> For Fosdick the members of his church were consumers who had a say in the goods being delivered to them on Sunday morning in the sermon. In a similar way, Thielemann believed that preachers should learn from the world of

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<sup>343</sup> See Bruce W. Thielemann’s “The Planning of Preaching”.

<sup>344</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>345</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>346</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

<sup>347</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2.

advertising when “selling their goods” to the congregation on Sunday morning.<sup>348</sup> As Fosdick puts it, “The advertisers of any goods, from a five-foot shelf of classic books to the latest life insurance policy, plunge as directly as possible after contemporary wants, felt needs, actual interests and concerns.”<sup>349</sup> It is in this context that Fosdick makes the sarcastic often-quoted observation that, “Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to hear what happened to the Jebusites.”<sup>350</sup> To make the same point, in an almost echoing manner, Thielemann similarly said, “Most people are not really fascinated with the Amalekites.”<sup>351</sup> According to Fosdick the primary determining characteristic of a mediocre, uninteresting sermon is that it does not matter because it establishes no connection with a listener’s real interests. Therefore, fundamental to Fosdick’s approach to preaching was the necessity of beginning with the listener and solving some problem they might have. Like Fosdick, Thielemann also placed great importance on preaching sermons that mattered or made a difference in the life of the listener. Thielemann believed a sermon that mattered began at the place where one’s listeners were. Specifically, this meant always directing his sermons at the meeting of some human need. Turning attention to the listeners made the sermon process a cooperative endeavor for both Thielemann and Fosdick. In describing this cooperative endeavor between pulpit and pew Fosdick said, “When a man takes hold of a real difficulty in the life and thought of his people and is trying to meet it, he finds himself not so much dogmatically thinking for them as co-operatively thinking with them.”<sup>352</sup> As far as Fosdick was concerned the listeners were vital in the sermonic process. It took more than a preacher standing in a pulpit to preach an effective sermon it took engaged listeners. His cry to other preachers was “to preach sermons that try to face people’s real problems with them, meet their difficulties, answer their questions, confirm their noblest faiths and interpret their experiences in

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<sup>348</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>349</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>350</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>351</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 3.

<sup>352</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 96.

sympathetic, wise and understanding co-operation.”<sup>353</sup> The intentional inclusion of the listeners in the sermon process and cooperation between preacher and listener was an important part of Fosdick’s approach to preaching.<sup>354</sup> Cooperation with the listener in the preaching process was also an important part of Thielemann’s approach to preaching. In order to ensure the sermon was a cooperative endeavor between listener and preacher Thielemann always had on his desk a three-by-five inch index card with the names of eight to ten people representing a cross section of the men, women and children to whom he would be preaching and “who have the particular need towards which I am trying to speak.”<sup>355</sup> Throughout the entire sermon preparation process those names would remain in the forefront of his thinking. Thielemann stated, “And I keep thinking to myself, will she understand that? Will he grasp what I am saying? Is this really speaking to where they are? Now in that sense I am sensitive to them.”<sup>356</sup> Fosdick underscored the importance of making the sermon a cooperative enterprise. And, from Fosdick it appears that Thielemann learned a great deal about preaching being a cooperative endeavor between preacher and listener.

#### *Preaching to Move People*

Like many preachers, in the early days of his preaching ministry Fosdick felt a heavy burden and was tormented by the constant pressure to “prepare sermons that would be worth preaching.”<sup>357</sup> In those first years of preparing sermons Fosdick described the preaching process as a struggle, which was at times exceedingly painful.<sup>358</sup> While the early days of preparing sermons was challenging for Fosdick he also recalls a glimmer of hope in the midst of the difficult process. It was in these early days that Fosdick remembers preaching a sermon that “caught fire” and he felt a “kindling response” from the congregation.<sup>359</sup> It was at this moment Fosdick “went home sure that preaching could mean that kind of moving and effective

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<sup>353</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 98.

<sup>354</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 97.

<sup>355</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching”, 4.

<sup>356</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>357</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 84.

<sup>358</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 98.

<sup>359</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 83-84.

communication of truth.”<sup>360</sup> For Fosdick the idea of moving the people to whom he was preaching took hold early on in his ministry and became a driving force for the duration of his preaching ministry. The sermon in his mind was much more than a discussion or a lecture. Fosdick notes:

The preacher’s main business is not merely to discuss repentance but to persuade people to repent; not merely to debate the meaning and possibility of Christian faith, but to produce Christian faith in the lives of his listeners; not merely to talk about the available power of God to bring victory over trouble and temptation, but to send people out from their worship on Sunday with victory in their possession. A preacher’s task is to create in his congregation the thing he is talking about.<sup>361</sup>

The litmus test for a genuine sermon was when the idea being talked about in the sermon came to life in the lives of the men, women and children hearing the sermon. Or said another way, a sermon must do something to someone. A sermon is an endeavor to move the listeners to action. If a preacher is speaking of caring for the poor, then the congregation should leave the sanctuary with the intention to care for the poor in a tangible way. Ultimately, to move one’s listeners Fosdick advocated that preachers must know their listeners. Fosdick would have preachers ask, what are their problems, concerns, passions, fears and failures? This then will produce preaching that moves people to action and connects with them intimately. Then, following the sermon, people will come to the preacher not “to offer some bland compliment, but to say, ‘How did you know I was facing that problem only this week?’ or ‘We were discussing that very matter at dinner last night,’ or, best of all, ‘I think you would understand my case – may I have a personal interview with you?’”<sup>362</sup> For Fosdick this was the final test of determining the effectiveness of a sermon, when the individual members of the congregation want an appointment with the preacher following the sermon.

Fosdick’s goal of moving listeners to action is reflected in Thielemann who held the same litmus test of an effective sermon. He stated, “The real goal in preaching is that moment when somebody comes up to you afterwards and says,

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<sup>360</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 84.

<sup>361</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 99.

<sup>362</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 141.



‘May I talk to you about this in your study.’<sup>363</sup> By this, like Fosdick, Thielemann meant that the purpose of preaching is to provoke enough interest in the listener and to connect with the listener so clearly, that they are moved to talk with the preacher individually following the sermon. Also similar to Fosdick, along with meeting individually with the pastor, Thielemann also wanted to move his listeners to tangible and specific action. According to Thielemann, the principal function of a sermon is not to teach, but to get the people listening to the sermon to do something.<sup>364</sup> The fruit of effective preaching that connects with the listener is:

The moment when someone says, ‘you spoke to me directly today’, which means Christ incarnate walking in the midst of His people tapped them on the shoulder. Or, ‘May I talk to you further about this?’ – which means Christ through the Holy Spirit is *still* speaking to them, and you [the preacher] are the medium of that exchange.<sup>365</sup>

Thielemann unashamedly admitted to working hard at trying to manipulate his listeners into doing something with his preaching. He asserted, “I want to manipulate you right into doing something.”<sup>366</sup> For Thielemann the greatest motivational tool in his communication arsenal was touching the emotions of his listeners through his illustrations. Thielemann believed the principal function of an illustration was not didactic, but motivational. His illustrations were aimed at moving people into action.<sup>367</sup> When questioned about the ethics of manipulating his listeners, Thielemann stated that he did not think it was unethical to aim for moving one’s listeners.<sup>368</sup> Whether or not Thielemann’s position of aiming to manipulate people to action in the sermon is correct, he believed that the expectation the men and women attending any church is to get something out of the experience. When listeners complained that they did not get anything out of a sermon, Thielemann understood this to mean they did not feel moved by the preaching.<sup>369</sup> Thielemann argued that people listening to any speech are aware of

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<sup>363</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 1979, 2.

<sup>364</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>365</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>366</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>367</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 10.

<sup>368</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 10.

<sup>369</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 10.

the fact the speaker is attempting to persuade or move their listeners. He said, “I think people know when they come in and sit down to listen to somebody give a speech...the person is not giving the speech for their own entertainment. They’re giving the speech because they have a definite goal in mind.”<sup>370</sup> It is clear that Thielemann viewed moving people as one of his primary tasks in preaching. As he saw it, “The foolishness of preaching is the attempt, to the application of God’s Word, through your words, which can be done only by him, to change lives, to motivate and change lives.”<sup>371</sup> Thielemann warned against being dishonest or disingenuous with the techniques preachers might employ to motivate and move their listeners, but, like Fosdick, he did not see anything wrong with aiming sermons at moving people to action. In his desire to address the specific needs of his listeners, make preaching a cooperative endeavor between preacher and listener and move people with their preaching, Thielemann drew from Fosdick to find a better way to communicate God’s truth to God’s people.

#### *The Quest for a Better Way to Preach*

As Fosdick searched for a better way to preach, he utilized lessons gleaned from expository and topical preaching which were popular during the time in which he was preaching. In a similar manner Thielemann was also on a quest to find a more effective way to preach than the topical and expository sermons popular during his ministry. Both Fosdick and Thielemann were practitioners of the homiletic art searching for an alternative to the topical and expository sermons. Fosdick witnessed and wrote about what he believed to be weaknesses in both the topical and expository preaching.<sup>372</sup> In Fosdick’s quest for an approach to preaching that, in his mind, made the sermon matter in the lives of the men, women and children to whom he was preaching he developed the “project method.”<sup>373</sup> He asserted, “This endeavor to help people to solve their spiritual problems is a sermon’s only justifiable aim.”<sup>374</sup> Fosdick was quick to point out that his “project method” of preaching is neither expository nor topical in orientation. Fosdick characterized

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<sup>370</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 10.

<sup>371</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 10.

<sup>372</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134-136.

<sup>373</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 140.

<sup>374</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134.

expository preaching as following a distinct three-part pattern, “First, elucidation of the scriptural text, in its historical occasion, its logical meaning in the context, its setting in the theology and ethic of the ancient writer; second, application to the auditors of the truth involved; third, exhortation to decide about the truth and act on it.”<sup>375</sup> While Fosdick might have been critical of expository preaching he was willing to concede that the type of expository preaching he described could be effective, however he did see some problems with this model of preaching. Moreover, his concern was what he perceived as the assumption made in expository preaching that the congregation comes to church concerned about the meaning of the ancient text.<sup>376</sup> Fosdick did not believe men and women came to church with any such concerns. It was Fosdick’s experience that people came to church concerned about their actual lives, not the ancient world.<sup>377</sup> While he did not affirm verbal inspiration, and appears to treat the Biblical text as an artifact of history, the Bible had value for Fosdick; in fact he sees it as a better source for preaching than the preacher’s own ideas.<sup>378</sup> The Scripture according to Fosdick “is an amazing compendium of experiments in human life under all sorts of conditions, from the desert to cosmopolitan Rome, and with all sorts of theories, from the skepticism of Ecclesiastes to the faith of John.”<sup>379</sup> The Scriptures may shed light on the issues men and women are facing today, but Fosdick warns preachers not to focus on the light, but to allow the light to shine forward. He believed, “The Bible is a searchlight, not so much intended to be looked at as to be thrown upon a shadowy spot.”<sup>380</sup> Most importantly in his critique of expository preaching, Fosdick saw it as starting at the wrong end. Expository preaching from his perspective begins with an explanation of a Biblical text and then provides practical application in the conclusion.<sup>381</sup> Instead of concluding with practical application, which aimed at connecting to the listeners’ needs, he urged preachers to begin with the practical application. As an alternative to the expository model, Fosdick encouraged

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<sup>375</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 92.

<sup>376</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Living of These Days*, 92.

<sup>377</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>378</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>379</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>380</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>381</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 134-135

preachers to, “not end but start with thinking of the auditors’ vital needs, and then let the whole sermon be organized around their constructive endeavor to meet those needs.”<sup>382</sup>

Thielemann held a similar critique of the shortcomings of expository preaching. He taught that, “Need-centered preaching is *not* what is called expository preaching.”<sup>383</sup> Similar to Fosdick, Thielemann parodies expository preaching as, “taking a passage of Scripture, assuming the attending congregation will be interested in it, expounding it historically, exegetically, etc., adding a paragraph or two of application now and then.”<sup>384</sup> The error here, according to Thielemann is the assumption, on the part of the preacher, that people come to church excited about the Bible. As he saw it, “They aren’t greatly excited about the Bible.”<sup>385</sup> People come to church excited about themselves, “we see things – we see ideas – as we are – in terms of our own needs.”<sup>386</sup> Like Fosdick, it was a grave communication error, in Thielemann’s view, for any preacher to begin with the ancient text instead of with people’s needs. Thielemann even contended that expository preaching, because it begins with the ancient text and assumes listeners are interested in the ancient world of the text “is a misuse of Scripture,” and therefore moves farther away from the biblical text.<sup>387</sup> Like Fosdick, Thielemann saw the Bible as, “the record of the acts of God in human life – under every conceivable circumstance: in the desert and in the big cities, amongst the skeptics and amongst the faithful.”<sup>388</sup> The Scripture was intended to shed light on all conceivable human experiences, so an approach to preaching that honors Scripture ought to do the same thing. Like Fosdick, Thielemann saw Scripture as a lamp with the purpose to shine light. He gave a strong warning against focusing too much on the lamp instead of allowing the lamp to be used as a tool to “illumine the shadowy places.”<sup>389</sup> Thielemann warned that in his experience, “expository preaching is

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<sup>382</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 135.

<sup>383</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>384</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>385</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>386</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>387</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>388</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3-4.

<sup>389</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

essentially aimed at the intellect, and that is the reason it is so *cold*.”<sup>390</sup> Interestingly, or even ironically, to bolster his argument against expository preaching Thielemann quoted evangelical expository preacher, D. Martin Lloyd-Jones to argue against preaching which is aimed solely at the intellect. Lloyd-Jones asserted, “if our preaching is always expository and for edification and teaching it will produce church members who are hard and cold, and often harsh and self-satisfied. I do not know of anything that is more likely to produce a congregation of Pharisees than just that.”<sup>391</sup> Then ironically he observed, “Most conservative, fundamentalist preaching today is expository; it is therefore cold and it produces Pharisees.”<sup>392</sup> Thielemann then intimately shared with his listeners he carries scars as a result of these Pharisees, which he believes expository preaching had created in the churches where he served.<sup>393</sup> Perhaps his hurt propelled him to levy the harsh critique of expositors as being rigid and in the dark.<sup>394</sup> Thielemann saw a place for expository preaching in the pulpit, but argued, that expository preaching to be effective should be directed towards people’s needs.<sup>395</sup> However, he judged the problem was, “most expository preaching, I think, gets lost in the exposition of that which really isn’t where the people are.”<sup>396</sup> At the center of the issue for Thielemann was a concern that expository preaching was disconnected from the people and therefore ran the risk of being irrelevant.

Along with expository preaching Fosdick was also critical of topical preaching. In defense of his own approach to preaching Fosdick stated that his project method of preaching was derived from the “project method” of pedagogy where one starts with the child rather than a subject.<sup>397</sup> The problem with topical preaching then for Fosdick was that it started with a subject, a relevant topic of the day, and proceeded to connect that topic to his people. Instead of starting with a

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<sup>390</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>391</sup> D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching in Preaching*, 152-153.

<sup>392</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>393</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4. Perhaps this is a reference to his experience at Glendale Presbyterian Church, Glendale, CA.

<sup>394</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>395</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 7.

<sup>396</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 7.

<sup>397</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 136.

subject, Fosdick urged preachers to begin with people first rather than a theme.<sup>398</sup> The problem is the preacher “is starting with a subject whereas he should start with an object.”<sup>399</sup> Fosdick was also concerned by what he saw as the weaknesses of a topical approach to preaching. First, he was concerned that, “week after week one sees these topical preachers who turn their pulpits into platforms and their sermons into lectures, straining after some new, intriguing subject.”<sup>400</sup> Secondly, he remarked, “no living man can weekly produce first-hand, independent, and valuable judgments on such an array of diverse themes.”<sup>401</sup> And finally, Fosdick is concerned that topical preaching begins at the wrong end. He remarks, “He is thinking first of his ideas, original or acquired, when he should think first of his people. He is organizing his sermon around the elucidation of his theme, whereas he should organize it around the endeavor to meet his people’s need.”<sup>402</sup> Fosdick believed any preacher utilizing the project method of preaching should start with an object and not a subject. Thielemann too was quick to point out that his need-centered preaching was not topical preaching for the same reason, a sermon must start with the people’s needs and not a subject to be taught. By topical preaching Fosdick was referring to a sermon, which takes a subject from contemporary life and then attempts to connect that subject to the Bible.

Influenced by Fosdick, Thielemann held the same definition of topical preaching. And further showing the influence of Fosdick upon his understanding of preaching, in bolstering his case for the weakness of topical preaching, Thielemann used the same arguments made by Fosdick in his 1928 article, “What is the Matter with Preaching.” Building on Fosdick’s work Thielemann listed three weaknesses of Topical preaching, “In the first place, it makes the pulpit into a platform. In the second place, I’ve never met anybody smart enough to do it very well. And in the third place it begins at the wrong end.”<sup>403</sup> While only making brief mention of Fosdick’s influence over his view of topical preaching it appears that each one of

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<sup>398</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 136.

<sup>399</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 136.

<sup>400</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 136.

<sup>401</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 136.

<sup>402</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?*, 136.

<sup>403</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

Thielemann's objections come directly from Fosdick.<sup>404</sup> According to Thielemann, any preaching employing a need-centered approach should also start with an object rather than a subject. Preaching that connects begins with a need and connects that need to a truth.<sup>405</sup>

Fosdick's influence on Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching is clear. From Fosdick, Thielemann developed his conviction that an effective sermon begins with the listener so that vital contact with them is firmly established in the preaching process. In both men's thinking contact with one's listeners cannot be established on a regular basis through expository preaching because it begins with a text, and it cannot be established by topical preaching because it begins with a subject. In their quest for a better way of preaching Fosdick developed the "project method" and Thielemann developed the need-centered approach to preaching. Both men were deeply committed to connecting God's Word to God's people by starting with the listener. However, Thielemann's overdependence upon Fosdick may reveal a deficit in his own critical thinking in his own approach to the preaching task.

Yet, in his quest to preach sermons that connected with and moved people to action Thielemann developed his own version of need-centered approach to preaching. We "plan sermons to meet specific needs," is the foundation of Thielemann's approach to the preaching task.<sup>406</sup> In addition, the desire to see God's Word become God's act by being lived out in the lives of his listeners drove Thielemann to work intentionally towards the goal of connecting with his listeners needs.<sup>407</sup> This desire was notably shaped, molded and influenced by the writings and sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick. The influence of Fosdick upon Thielemann is so profound and deep that in some ways it appears Thielemann's "The Planning of Preaching" lecture may be seen as a reworking of Fosdick's "What is the Matter with Preaching?" article from *Harper's Magazine* in 1928.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 3.

<sup>405</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 3.

<sup>406</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 3.

<sup>407</sup> See Bruce W. Thielemann's "The Planning of Preaching" Lecture.

<sup>408</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick. *What Is the Matter with Preaching?* (New York: Harpers Magazine, July 1928).

### *Henry Babcock Adams*

In addition to Fosdick, another conversation partner for Thielemann was Henry Babcock Adams. As Thielemann was teaching others how to preach he stated, “I urge every preacher to follow the scheme developed by Henry Babcock Adams.”<sup>409</sup> Before we look at the preaching scheme developed by Adams, we need to know a little about Adams. Less is known about Henry Babcock Adams than we know about Harry Emerson Fosdick, but this professor of Practical Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary had a profound influence on Thielemann’s need-centered approach to preaching.

Adams was born on July 1, 1916, in Taegu, Korea to James and Caroline Adams, who were serving as missionaries with the Presbyterian Church.<sup>410</sup> After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1939, Adams served as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, in Watkinsville, California. Along with his pastoral responsibilities Adams completed his Bachelor of Divinity Degree at San Francisco Theological Seminary and began a career in religious radio broadcasting with a series of radio programs.<sup>411</sup> In 1947 Adams resigned as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church and returned to San Francisco Theological Seminary where he worked as Professor of Practical Theology teaching speech, preaching and broadcasting. During his time as a professor Adams continued working in radio, began working on television broadcasting and produced program series for both local and national networks.<sup>412</sup> Along with his teaching and broadcasting activities, Adams conducted workshops in colleges, seminaries and radio stations where he taught preachers broadcasting skills for both television and radio.<sup>413</sup> During his time teaching at San Francisco Theological Seminary Adams also completed a Master of Theology (Th.M.) in preaching at San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1952, a Master in Public Speaking at Stanford University in Stanford, California in 1956 and

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<sup>409</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>410</sup> Henry Babcock Adam’s Obituary from *Chimes*, San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1994, 4.

<sup>411</sup> Henry Babcock Adams. *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Important to Pulpit Effectiveness*. Thesis (Th. D.), San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, iii.

<sup>412</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphasis in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, 1957, iii.

<sup>413</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphasis in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, iv.



a Doctor of Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1957.<sup>414</sup> Adams was a pioneer in the field of religious broadcasting and its potential influence upon preachers during an era when radio and television broadcasting were in their infancy. His writings and teaching were aimed at helping preachers glean lessons from the world of broadcasting in order to communicate God's Word more effectively in an age when radio and television were just beginning to strengthen in importance.

It is not clear how Thielemann became familiar with Adams' work in homiletics. However, both men were involved with the Presbyterian Church in California in the late 1960's and with Thielemann's interest in radio and television broadcasting it seems logical their paths may have crossed at some point. Adam's doctoral dissertation and specialty in the field of homiletics was aimed specifically at increasing pulpit effectiveness through helping preachers understand and master the disciplines of broadcasting. It is also worth noting that Adams was familiar with and influenced by the preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick. His Master of Art Thesis at Stanford University explored the preaching methods of Fulton J. Sheen and Harry Emerson Fosdick.<sup>415</sup> In his doctoral work Adams explored four areas of significance for pulpit effectiveness as it relates to broadcasting: Contemporary use of language, rapport with ones listeners, motivating listeners to response and clarity in communication.<sup>416</sup> In a similar manner to both Fosdick and Thielemann, Adams firmly emphasized the importance of a preacher understanding and motivating one's listeners to action through connecting with the needs of one's listeners in the sermon.

#### *Building Rapport with Listeners*

For Adams it was essential that the preacher have a relationship with his or her listener. In addressing the importance of building rapport with one's listeners Adams wrote, "A speaker may break many rules, but if he [sic] establishes that

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<sup>414</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphasis in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, v.

<sup>415</sup> Henry Babcock Adam's Stanford University Master's Thesis was entitled, *Selected Sermons of Fulton J. Sheen and Harry Emerson Fosdick*.

<sup>416</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957.

relation called 'rapport' between himself and his audience, he [sic] will have done much towards achieving the conditions for communication."<sup>417</sup> It seems Adams was stating, in a more sophisticated way, what Thielemann taught regarding rapport with ones listeners, "we believe people that we like the best."<sup>418</sup> Therefore, Thielemann encouraged others to "preach in order to be liked...you will be heard better if you are liked by your people."<sup>419</sup> Adams helped Thielemann understand that in order to be heard while preaching there must be a harmonious relationship between the preacher and congregation. Because of Adams, Thielemann taught that anything, which hinders a harmonious relationship between the preacher and listener, must be eliminated if God's Word is going to connect with God's people.<sup>420</sup>

#### *Moving Listeners to Action*

Along with encouraging preachers to connect with their listeners Adams also argued that a sermon ought to move listeners to a response. This was a core assumption of the broadcasting world he occupied along with the pulpit. As he saw it, "The truth of the gospel is proclaimed and expounded in order to win a response among men appropriate to the acceptance of that truth."<sup>421</sup> For Adams the primary aim of the sermon was "convincing or persuading."<sup>422</sup> Instruction and impartation of information certainly play an important role in preaching, but these are secondary aims.<sup>423</sup> To prove his point Adams turned to the world of broadcast advertising. Adams as did Thielemann stated, "Broadcasters are not content to convince people: merely convincing is an intellectual activity. Their business is sales and selling depends on arousing people to action; selling in a competitive market

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<sup>417</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 53.

<sup>418</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 6.

<sup>419</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 4.

<sup>420</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 6.

<sup>421</sup> Henry Babcock Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 104.

<sup>422</sup> Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 105.

<sup>423</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 105.

requires the utmost in motivation.”<sup>424</sup> In Adams, Thielemann found a voice for his belief that the primary function of a sermon is not didactic, but motivational. Thielemann echoes Adams when he wrote, “The principal function of the sermon is not to teach, though any good sermon will teach.”<sup>425</sup> He continued, “The great function of preaching is to move people, to motivate people, to get them to do something.”<sup>426</sup> Because of Adams, Thielemann argued that moving people and motivating them to action was to be the primary aim in preaching.<sup>427</sup>

### *Appealing to Emotions*

Adams was a proponent of and affirmed the value of appealing to emotion in preaching in order to move people to action. A section in Adams doctoral thesis is devoted to the importance of appealing to listener’s emotions in order to move them to action. He argued that “The broadcaster recognizes the power of emotions clustered around common experiences with which life is filled. These get action, making sales.”<sup>428</sup> In the same line of thinking as Adams, Thielemann also regarded the use of emotion with the goal of moving people to action as an important part of the communication process.<sup>429</sup> Thielemann admitted that he was often criticized during his ministry for the “great amount of emotion” in his preaching.<sup>430</sup> He does not deny the accuracy of this criticism, but rejected the idea that the use of emotion is not a valid tool in the preacher’s arsenal. If the primary function of a sermon is to motivate people to action, then “even a second-rate psychologist knows that you motivate more through emotions than you do through the mind.”<sup>431</sup> Likewise for Thielemann, it was an elementary principle that connecting with the emotions of one’s listeners would effectively get them to do something. Therefore, like Adams, he viewed the use of emotion by the preacher as an

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<sup>424</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 105.

<sup>425</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>426</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>427</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 2-5.

<sup>428</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – ThD) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 129.

<sup>429</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>430</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>431</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching,” 5.

effective tool to move one's listeners. This concept was so engrained in Thielemann's philosophy of preaching that he published an article entitled, "Sermons for Head and Heart" in *Leadership* in 1997 on the use of emotions in preaching. In the article Thielemann admits that both logic and emotion are necessary components in effective preaching and warns that the use of logic can be just as manipulative as emotion in preaching. However, he observed that most preachers neglect the use of emotion in the pulpit to his or her detriment.<sup>432</sup> As was stated earlier, Thielemann had no qualms about admitting his ultimate outcome for a sermon was to manipulate people into doing something.<sup>433</sup> As influenced by Adams, Thielemann viewed emotion in preaching as the most effective way to gain this outcome.

#### *Knowing the Listener*

Adams also advocated that in order to connect with emotions one has to know his or her listeners. Adams wrote, "How to win attention, how to arouse and hold interest, how to move people to action – these come from studying and knowing people."<sup>434</sup> For Thielemann knowing his listeners was also a vital part of his approach to the preaching task. At one point he admitted that if he did not have regular contact with his congregation through his office hours, he would not have anything to say on Sunday.<sup>435</sup> Thielemann understood that he would have nothing to say to his people unless he knew them intimately. His desire to know the people to whom he was preaching went beyond regular office hours for Thielemann. It meant sharing meals, traveling together and even inviting them to live in his home while serving at Glendale Presbyterian Church and Grove City College.<sup>436</sup>

Adams' influence upon Thielemann is evident in four areas, building rapport with one's listeners, moving listeners to action, appealing to emotions, and knowing one's listeners. Adams appears to build into many of the core values Thielemann

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<sup>432</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Sermons for Head and Heart," *Leadership Journal*, 1997, 59.

<sup>433</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 9.

<sup>434</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 133.

<sup>435</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 4.

<sup>436</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 8.

held in regard to the preaching task. Because of this, Thielemann was naturally drawn to Adam's "three sentences" approach to homiletics in delivering a sermon.

### *Three Sentences*

Thielemann attested that Scripture was the record of God's deeds, which should be used as a bridge allowing God to accomplish those deeds again in the midst of his people in the present moment.<sup>437</sup> Because of this conviction, Thielemann was on a quest for an approach to preaching which connected to the needs of his listeners, remained grounded in God's Word and provided a clear and concrete call for an opportunity to respond. In the Adams' work, Thielemann found the framework he had been searching for to hold his need-centered approach to preaching. This three-sentence structure is a key part of Thielemann's preaching methodology so more will be said about them in a later section. In this chapter it is important to see how this three-sentence structure presented by Adams informed Thielemann's need-centered homiletic. In his approach to preaching Adams teaches that all sermons should be reducible to three sentences. The first sentence is a question stating the need. The second sentence is an affirmation of the truth found in God's Word that answers the first question stating the need. The third sentence is a clear invitation to respond to the truth, which God's Word is affirming.<sup>438</sup> In his doctoral dissertation Adams turned to the world of radio broadcasting, of which he was familiar, to explain the impetus for his three-sentence approach to preaching.<sup>439</sup> In his book *Fundamentals of Writing for Radio*, Rome Cowgill described the spot announcement as the shortest and simplest self-contained unit of radio writing. Cowgill says, "the spot announcement is written to carry a single message forcefully and vigorously."<sup>440</sup> He continues to describe the three primary components of the spot announcement, "the appeal for attention, the information, and the call to action."<sup>441</sup> In Cowgill's description of the spot announcement Adams witnessed a

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<sup>437</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

<sup>438</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

<sup>439</sup> Henry B. Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 137-139.

<sup>440</sup> Rome Cowgill, *Fundamentals of Writing for Radio*. Rinehart, NY, 1949, 246.

<sup>441</sup> Rome Cowgill, *Fundamentals of Writing for Radio*. Rinehart, NY, 1949, 247.

similarity between the radio broadcaster's goal and the preachers goal.<sup>442</sup> Therefore, in homiletics, as in a spot announcement, the preacher must be able to reduce his or her sermon to three sentences, an appeal for attention, the information and a call to action.<sup>443</sup> Because of the brief nature of a spot announcement the three sentences may literally be three consecutive sentences, however, in preaching the three sentences are essential elements of the sermon. Adams transported the three sentences from the field of radio broadcasting to the field of homiletics. For Thielemann, this was the ideal formula for his need-centered preaching, "Relevance, truth, response. Need, Good News, opportunity."<sup>444</sup> The first sentence or element in Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching was always the stating of a need. The second sentence or element was the affirmation of a truth proclaimed and affirmed by Scripture. The third sentence or element was an invitation for the listeners to respond to the truth.<sup>445</sup> As Thielemann describes in one preaching lecture:

All sermons then can be summed in three sentences. Henry Adams wrote these sentences, they're not original with me. The first sentence should be a question, here we discover the need, the second sentence and affirmation, God's answer to that need, the third sentence an invitation, how the need is to be met, with a verb either in the imperative or the subjunctive mood, relevance, truth and response.<sup>446</sup>

As we see in the next chapter these three sentences are more than theoretical and are utilized in his preaching practice on a regular basis as he follows this three-sentence structure closely in his sermons. For now, it is evident that Adams' three-sentence approach to preaching influenced the way in which Thielemann taught preaching and approached the preaching task.

Other preachers also had an impact on Thielemann. He admired the ministry and preaching of Clarence Edward McCartney his predecessor and former pastor of

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<sup>442</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 139.

<sup>443</sup> Henry Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Vital to Pulpit Effectiveness*, (Thesis – Th.D.) San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 139.

<sup>444</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>445</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4-5.

<sup>446</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 3.

First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.<sup>447</sup> He read the sermons of Jonathan Edwards devotionally and appreciated that Edward's sermons had the ability to "search out the dark places" in his heart.<sup>448</sup> For his "marvelous exegetical mind" and "immediate relevance,"<sup>449</sup> Thielemann appreciated the preaching of David H. C. Read, who was pastor of the Madison Avenue Church in New York City from 1956-1989.<sup>450</sup> And finally, Thielemann appreciated the preaching of Ernest Campbell, who was the pastor of Riverside Church from 1968-1976, for what Thielemann believed was his sound theology, social relevance, good exegesis and brilliant use of illustrations.<sup>451</sup> In this section we have looked at Harry Emerson Fosdick and Henry Babcock Adams, the primary homiletical sources from which Thielemann developed and formulated his need-centered homiletic. Now we will explore some of the psychological influences which shaped Thielemann's homiletic.

### **Psychological Influence**

During his extensive preaching and teaching work Thielemann gleaned insights which informed his approach to preaching from a variety of disciplines outside the traditional Christian theological realm, and he encouraged the preachers he taught to do the same.<sup>452</sup> He believed that psychology "should be a major area of reading in any preaching pastors' regimen."<sup>453</sup> As we have seen Thielemann gleaned insights from theologians and homileticians, but he also gathered understanding from the world of modern psychology. In the conclusion of one preaching lecture Thielemann admits that his teaching is an attempt to marry his theology with his psychology. He states, "and I am free to do this for two reasons: My theology says that Christ does it all; if my psychology aids then mine is a good stewardship; if my psychology hinders, then Christ knows it is an error of my mind and not an error of my heart. My psychology will never deter his sovereignty."<sup>454</sup> The second reason

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<sup>447</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 7-8.

<sup>448</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 8.

<sup>449</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 8.

<sup>450</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 8.

<sup>451</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 8-9.

<sup>452</sup> In 1939 Andrew W. Blackwood wrote a chapter in *The Fine Art of Public Worship* on the practical bearing of psychology in pastoral ministry and preaching. Jay E. Adams, Rodney L. Cooper, Donald Capps, and John Ortberg have also integrated psychology with the discipline of homiletics.

<sup>453</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 4.

<sup>454</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 12.

Thielemann states for the necessity of gleaning wisdom from the discipline of psychology for the homiletical process is his conviction that his age was “a time for experimentation in preaching.”<sup>455</sup> In his estimation, it is important for preachers to be comfortable with experimentation because, “Homiletical tradition has become a mistress which has asked too much for herself. Experimentation is the order of the day.”<sup>456</sup> For Thielemann in order to ensure that contemporary preaching remains connected with its listeners it needed to connect with the needs of the listener. In his evaluation, most contemporary preaching was not directed at the needs of the listeners and was therefore he believed ineffective.<sup>457</sup> The lack he saw in contemporary preaching which was so obvious to Thielemann moved him in the direction of wrestling with the “psychology of our day” in order to preach sermons that connect with the needs of one’s listeners.<sup>458</sup>

#### *Influence of Abraham Maslow*

By Thielemann’s own admission, “the man who’s helped me to understand the significance of needs is the psychologist, Abraham Maslow.”<sup>459</sup> *Motivation and Personality* was first published in 1954 when Thielemann was an undergraduate at Westminster College. Maslow first proposed a hierarchal approach to human motivation in 1943 when he published “A Theory of Human Motivation” in *Psychological Review*.<sup>460</sup> Maslow’s pyramid gained popularity in both the psychological and secular world, but Thielemann appears to be one of the first to apply Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to the field and study of homiletics. In November of 1975, it is evident from Thielemann’s preaching lecture series that he uncritically embraced Maslow’s pyramid of needs as a means of understanding and determining the needs of one’s listeners in order to direct his preaching.<sup>461</sup>

Thielemann dedicated a great deal of time in his homiletic lectures to detail Maslow’s hierarchical pyramid of human needs because as he states, “it helps us to identify needs. And if preaching is to be needs-directed, then we need to know our

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<sup>455</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>456</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>457</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>458</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 1.

<sup>459</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>460</sup> Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation.” *Psychological Review*, 1943, 50, 370-396.

<sup>461</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.



people's needs. And if Maslow is correct - and I think he is – here is a graded analysis of the need levels and likelihoods of our congregation.”<sup>462</sup>

Thielemann encouraged preachers to use Maslow's pyramid as a means of determining listener's needs. More specifically, Thielemann taught preachers to aim at the middle three levels of Maslow's pyramid. In Thielemann's estimation the average Presbyterian congregation was not overly concerned about the physiological needs at the base of the pyramid. He believed “in the average Presbyterian group, you know that the basic needs are met.”<sup>463</sup> Maslow affirmed this observation when he states, “the healthy and fortunate adult in our culture is largely satisfied in his safety needs.”<sup>464</sup> Thielemann also believed it “would be equally silly in most instances to focus on their self-actualization needs – at the very top of the pyramid.”<sup>465</sup> This left the middle of Maslow's pyramid with security, belonging and esteem needs as the primary target for most of Thielemann's need-centered preaching. He admonished preachers, “When you sit down to plan your preaching, you ought to aim most frequently at security, belonging and esteem needs.”<sup>466</sup>

#### *Moving by Connecting with Needs*

The attraction of Maslow for Thielemann was not just in finding a list of human needs with which to aim his preaching. For Thielemann, Maslow provided a way to ensure that his preaching would move people by connecting the biblical text with a pressing need. In a day when Thielemann was concerned about the state of contemporary preaching's inability to craft a sermon that connected with or motivated listeners to action, Maslow gave him a concrete and tangible way to determine the needs of his listeners.

However, while Maslow was a helpful partner for Thielemann in creating and informing his needs-centered approach to preaching, there is concern about the uncritical nature of his acceptance of Maslow's theory of human motivation and the way in which he interpreted Maslow's pyramid of needs for the preaching

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<sup>462</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>463</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>464</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 41.

<sup>465</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>466</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

process. First, Thielemann seems to accept wholeheartedly the teachings of Maslow as a viable and proven way of helping preachers identify needs in their congregation. While it may be argued that Maslow's pyramid has had a profound influence in the field of psychology, it must be said that "many behavioral scientists view Maslow's pyramid as a quaint visual artifact without much contemporary theoretical importance."<sup>467</sup> The present-day critique of Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs cannot be fully addressed here, but suffice it to say, his methodology was biased and limited in scope. As Susan Mettes point out,

The hierarchy of needs theory is not so much scientific as speculative. Abraham Maslow first published his theory without empirical testing. He tweaked the theory throughout his career and kept things lively by publishing a list of people he thought had reached the pinnacle, self-actualization (many of whom he had never met, like George Washington). But he never did systematically compare the theory to real people's behavior.<sup>468</sup>

Along with concerns over the validity of Maslow's theory of needs, Mettes also argues the theory is problematic for Christians because it is unable to account for certain behaviors which place devotion to God as the highest good. Mettes explains, "But we live in a world where US slaves risked their lives to attend church and created beautiful spirituals that would enrich the world, when neither of the first two levels of their needs (physiological and safety) were met."<sup>469</sup> She also observed that, "Today, religion thrives in the poorest and most violent parts of the world."<sup>470</sup> As some modern critics point out, Maslow's theory also falls short of fully explaining human personality, especially from a Christian perspective.<sup>471</sup> Roger Hurdling, writing from a Christian perspective, critiques Maslow's theories for their focus on self-directedness, independence and individuality.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> D. Kenrick, V. Griskevicius, S. Neuberg, and M. Schaller, "Renovating the Pyramid of Needs: Contemporary Extensions Built Upon Ancient Foundations." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 2010, 5(3), 292.

<sup>468</sup> S. Mettes, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is Not a Ministry Guide," *Christianity Today*, June 2018, Vol. 62, No. 5, 38.

<sup>469</sup> S. Mettes, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is Not a Ministry Guide," *Christianity Today*, June 2018, Vol. 62, No. 5, 38.

<sup>470</sup> S. Mettes, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is Not a Ministry Guide," *Christianity Today*, June 2018, Vol. 62, No. 5, 38.

<sup>471</sup> Roger F. Hurdling, *Roots & Shoots: A Guide to Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1986), 148-149.

<sup>472</sup> Roger F. Hurdling, *Roots & Shoots: A Guide to Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 54-55.

Surprisingly, Thielemann failed to evaluate Maslow in light of a biblical framework. Alluding to Maslow, Anglican preacher and contemporary of Thielemann, John Stott warned, “In recent years several schools of psychology have developed that lay their emphasis on self-actualization. The word sounds promising in Christian ears until we remember that, according to Jesus, the only way to self-discovery is self-denial, and the only way to live is to die to our own self-centeredness.”<sup>473</sup> From a biblical perspective, one’s primary need is not physical or psychological, but spiritual, eroding the foundation of Maslow’s pyramid. Although Thielemann used Maslow’s hierarch of needs extensively in his preaching lectures, it appears he did not evaluate Maslow critically enough. Thielemann failed to understand that needs do not always follow a hierarchy, and he did not specifically address any of the possible pitfalls and shortcomings of Maslow’s research. While it is true Thielemann encouraged preachers to look beyond the Christian faith and Scripture to inform communication and ministry skills, it is important to remember it is also necessary to evaluate all sources critically. Perhaps what Thielemann found in Maslow’s hierarch of needs was not so much a graded analysis of the need levels and likelihoods of his congregation, but a broad set of culturally specific categories to guide and inform his pursuit of aiming his preaching at the needs of one’s listeners. Unfortunately, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs may be too simplistic therefore does not provide a broad enough analysis of the multiple cultures represented in most present-day congregations to help effectively identify specific needs.

#### *Maslow’s Pyramid of Needs*

Thielemann may have overstated the validity and viability of Maslow’s research even beyond what Maslow intended for his work on human motivation and needs. One such example comes when Thielemann states that people seek to meet needs from the bottom of Maslow’s pyramid to the top in a similar manner to someone climbing a flight of stairs. After giving a detailed explanation about the five need levels of Maslow’s pyramid Thielemann boldly asserts, “It is important to remember

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<sup>473</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Through the Bible Through the Year: Daily Reflections from Genesis to Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 211.

that we seek to meet these needs from the bottom up.”<sup>474</sup> In Thielemann’s estimation a person can only ascend to the next level of Maslow’s pyramid once he or she has adequately had the need of the lower level fulfilled. Even Maslow did not promote the concept that the pyramid of needs was meant to be traversed in a fixed order. He clearly says:

So far, our theoretical discussion may have given the impression that these five sets of needs are somehow in such terms as the following: If one need is satisfied, then another emerges. This statement might give the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100 percent before the next need emerges. In actual fact, most members of our society who are normal are partially satisfied in all their basic needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time. A more realistic description of the hierarchy would be in terms of decreasing percentages of satisfaction as we go up the hierarchy of prepotency.<sup>475</sup>

Maslow organized his pyramid of needs in a “hierarchy of prepotency,” meaning certain motivating needs have a higher power of influence. This means “the appearance of one need usually rests on prior satisfaction of another more pre-potent need.”<sup>476</sup> Maslow clearly emphasized “usually” when speaking about the order of needs being met. Thielemann seemed to ignore this nuance in Maslow’s work when he taught that needs must be met “from the bottom up.”<sup>477</sup> Maslow also spoke about exceptions to his needs hierarchy as he felt some people operate outside the normal progression of physiological needs as they progress towards self-actualization at the top of the needs pyramid. Maslow wrote, “We have spoken so far as if the needs hierarchy were a fixed order, but actually it is not nearly so rigid as we may have implied.”<sup>478</sup> To bolster his case Maslow provided examples of highly creative people who frequently placed creativity in a higher place of precedence than their pressing physiological needs. In 2011 researchers from the University of Illinois put Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to the test. Their study concluded that fulfilment of need had a strong correlation with happiness as they observed people from multiple cultures and countries reporting that self-

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<sup>474</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>475</sup> Abraham Maslow, A. H. *Motivation and Personality*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1970), 53-54.

<sup>476</sup> Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 371.

<sup>477</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>478</sup> Abraham Maslow, A. H. *Motivation and Personality*, 26.

actualization and social needs were still important, even before many of their basic needs were met. This study suggests that while needs may be a powerful motivator of human behavior, they do not follow a hierarchical pattern such as Maslow described.<sup>479</sup>

Further, Maslow understood that people exhibit multiple motivations for behavior. Maslow himself states, “As an illustration, I may point out that it would be possible (theoretically if not practically) to analyze a single act of an individual and see it in the expression of his physiological needs, his safety needs, his love needs, his esteem needs and self-actualization.”<sup>480</sup> When using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in communication to know listener’s needs this makes the target at which one might be aiming a bit too broad to be useful. If, as Thielemann espoused, preachers are to aim their sermon most frequently at security, belonging and esteem needs it becomes an almost insurmountable challenge to narrow this to a specific need.

Thielemann was consistent at wedding his theory with his practice in how he planned his preaching to address Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In one of his preaching lectures, Thielemann outlined one semester of his preaching at Grove City College to illustrate how Maslow was integrated into his preaching plan. His first sermon of the semester, “On Dealing with Doubts” was aimed at security, belonging and esteem needs. The second sermon, “Legions of the Unjazzed” dealt with belonging in the midst of difficult challenges. The third sermon, “The State of the Faith – Christianity on Six Continents” also aimed at belonging needs in the context of the global church. The fourth sermon, “A Fat Man looks at a Thin World” attempted to meet esteem and belonging needs. The next sermon, “Point of No Return” dealt with security, belonging and esteem needs in the context of doubts. “The Night I Wrestled with a Boa Constrictor” was a sermon aimed at belonging needs in the context of sharing one’s Christian faith. In the sermon, “Is Somebody Standing on Your Wings” he dealt with belonging in the context of frustrations we might encounter. The sermon for Thanksgiving Week, “Psalm for a Pickpocket”

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<sup>479</sup> L. Tay, E. Diener, “Needs and Subjective Well-Being Around the World,” *Journal of Social Psychology*, 2011;101(2), 354-365.

<sup>480</sup> Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 392.

addressed belonging needs in the context of gratitude. And to finish up the semester, “Bud of a Virgin Flower” also addressed belonging needs in the context of one’s doubts.<sup>481</sup> Maslow played an important role in shaping the overarching plan of his preaching along with the focus of his individual sermons. As he stated by sharing this list, “I am trying to show you that what I’m talking about here is not just theory to me. This is the way I try to operate.”<sup>482</sup> Clearly for Thielemann, incorporating Maslow was not just a theoretical exercise. He was intentional about connecting to one of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Thielemann believed it was a worthwhile endeavor to allow disciplines outside of biblical and theological fields of study to inform the homiletical process. It appears that as Thielemann turns to the study of psychology and specifically Maslow’s pyramid he is putting tangibly into practice what he taught so passionately about preachers being “gap men,” by which he meant preachers should not be reading popular works that reference the primary sources but should be going to the primary source material.<sup>483</sup> Thielemann humorously says, “I don’t think we’re supposed to be reading Keith Miller. We’re supposed to be giving our people Keith Miller, and we read Abraham Maslow, who gave Keith Miller every idea that Keith Miller has.”<sup>484</sup> Thielemann was making a joke about Keith Miller, a popular contemporary Christian author best known for his first book *The Taste of New Wine* published in 1965.<sup>485</sup> Miller’s work which Thielemann is most likely referring to in this specific reference is *The Becomers*, in which Miller uses Maslow, Freud and others from the discipline of psychological studies to make many of his points.<sup>486</sup> Finally, it is important to note that Thielemann’s use of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was informed by the work of Charles U. Larson, who we will look at closely in the next section. In his book *Persuasion, Reception and Responsibility*, a work that Thielemann was familiar with, Larson dedicates a section to utilizing Maslow’s pyramid in communication as an aid in persuasion. Larson writes, “A

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<sup>481</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 11-12.

<sup>482</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 12.

<sup>483</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 8.

<sup>484</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 8.

<sup>485</sup> Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine*, (Waco, Word Book Publishers, 1965),

<sup>486</sup> Keith Miller, *The Becomers*, (Waco, Word Book Publishers, 1973),

persuader may capitalize on the whole notion of human need levels; that is, he knows that the audience or persuadee [sic] has certain needs or drives that must be fulfilled. Relying on this process, the persuader shapes messages directed at particular needs.”<sup>487</sup> At one-point in his “The Planning of Preaching Lecture,” Thielemann used, without citation, an illustration from Larson about an ex-President of the United States to explain self-actualization.<sup>488</sup> With Larson’s work being published in 1973, two years before Thielemann’s lecture and Thielemann’s later admission of respect for Larson’s book makes it probable that Larson was the primary reason Thielemann utilized Maslow to formulate his needs-centered approach to preaching.

In this section we have examined the profound influence that Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of human needs had upon Thielemann in the formulation and his less than critical application of his need-centered approach to preaching. In the next section we will examine some influences from the fields of rhetoric and communication which shaped Thielemann’s need-centered homiletics.

### **Rhetorical and Communication Influences**

Because of this high view of preaching, Thielemann taught and was convinced that preaching demanded the best from those who prepare and deliver sermons week after week.<sup>489</sup> As we have seen the impetus fueling this conviction was his belief that the preacher’s role was none other than the weighty and, in his mind, impossible task of announcing God’s Word to a congregation.<sup>490</sup> This was no easy task, for as Thielemann saw it, preaching “tells people what God has done, and at the same time it is God doing it again.”<sup>491</sup> Preaching was not the mere giving of advice, but the very “announcement of the gospel. The announcement of the Good News, a happening.”<sup>492</sup> Thielemann stated that preaching “tells people what God

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<sup>487</sup> Charles U. Larson. *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1973), 83.

<sup>488</sup> See Larson *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility* page 82 and Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching page 3.

<sup>489</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, ““My Job and Why I Love It,” (sermon) and “The Primacy of Preaching,”.

<sup>490</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5-6.

<sup>491</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>492</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5.

has done and at the same time it is God doing it again.”<sup>493</sup> Or said another way, “God’s coming into the world is event, we are to make this event real to men [sic] through preaching, preaching is the recreation of the event.”<sup>494</sup> The goal of preaching, Thielemann taught was the monumental task of recreating God’s Word, the event, in the lives of one’s listeners each time someone attempted to preach. For Thielemann, “To speak words about God’s Word is presumptuous. It leads you to ask yourself, I think very seriously, have I ever preached.”<sup>495</sup>

It is worth noting that while Thielemann believed that preaching is primary and the preacher is charged with the task of recreating the very words of God in the act of preaching, he also firmly believed if preaching becomes event or becomes God’s Words, it is because of the Holy Spirit.<sup>496</sup> However, this conviction of dependence on the Holy Spirit did not deter Thielemann from suggesting that “we should desire to bring everything that we can” to the preaching task.<sup>497</sup> For Thielemann bringing everything meant preachers needed to work diligently at gleaning wisdom from “the most effective communication technique that we understand.”<sup>498</sup> Or said another way, “When the study is a lounge, the pulpit is an impertinence. And this day when the world’s communication is so slick and smooth and careful, we dare not offer less. We must be wiser than the children of the world.”<sup>499</sup> This is a charge from Thielemann for preachers to bring their very best to the planning, preparation, and delivery of his or her sermons. And for Thielemann a preacher’s best was informed by multiple academic disciplines, including rhetoric and communications.

With this in mind, Thielemann admonished preachers to take the necessary time required to study the most effective and sound communication insights of the day. Then, the best practices and theories from the fields of rhetoric and communication should be thoughtfully integrated into the planning, preparation and delivery of one’s sermons. Thielemann’s high view of the preaching task, plus a

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<sup>493</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 5.

<sup>494</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 7.

<sup>495</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>496</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 1.

<sup>497</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 1.

<sup>498</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 1.

<sup>499</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 8.



desire to recreate the very Words of God through the preaching event, and a commitment to move people with his preaching all contributed to his desire to learn from the secular fields of psychology, rhetoric and communication studies to help formulate his need-centered approach to preaching.<sup>500</sup> We will now look at the influence of Aristotle on Thielemann's need-centered approach.

### *Aristotle*

In an attempt to bring the most effective communication techniques to his understanding of homiletics, Thielemann studied both ancient and modern theories of rhetoric and communication and shows himself to be well versed in the teachings of Aristotle, Plato and Demosthenes in his preaching lectures.<sup>501</sup> At one point, Thielemann quoted at length from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, written in 350 B.C. to present and validate what he sees as the foundational principle of persuasion.<sup>502</sup> According to Thielemann's interpretation of Aristotle he stated, "let it be noted that a credible man is believed first. Thus, to the degree that you are creditable, open, honest, trusted by your people, to that degree, the Christ will be better able to use your preaching efforts."<sup>503</sup> He then distills this idea even further to its core when he humorously says, "Well the fact is, this won't sound very sophisticated, but I've never heard it said in a lecture on preaching before, so I am going to say it, we believe people we like the best. In the last analysis, stripped of all the sociological and psychological jargon, verbiage...We believe people we like."<sup>504</sup> Foundational to effective preaching, Thielemann advocated, in addition to connecting with the needs of one's listeners, preachers should aim to be liked by his or her listeners. Later in his preaching ministry he would write:

It's important to affirm people as we address their needs, to start with the positive side of a need before we move to the elements that require

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<sup>500</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration".

<sup>501</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 3 and 13.

<sup>502</sup> The quote taken from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is: "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible, and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*."

<sup>503</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 6.

<sup>504</sup> Bruce W Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 6.

repentance and change. This seems to unlock something, giving the sermon access to the emotions of our hearers. It's okay to be liked. I strive to be liked. There, I've said it, as heretical as it sounds. As pastors we often don't quite believe this radical idea: There's nothing wrong with wanting to be liked.<sup>505</sup>

It is worthwhile to note that Thielemann warned preachers of the ever-present temptation and danger of compromising the truth as one aspires to be liked by their listeners.<sup>506</sup> He admonished preachers, “you ought to strive to be liked, never prostituting the truth, of course. And this striving, it seems to me, should be part of your sermon planning.”<sup>507</sup> Yet, as has been demonstrated, Thielemann created opposition in his ministry.

### *Vulnerability in Preaching*

There were three primary ways Thielemann employed and taught Aristotle's admonition for preachers to be liked by their listeners. First, through loving the people to whom one preaches more than preaching itself. Second, by giving out genuine encouragement to one's listeners whenever one can. Finally, through being vulnerable and transparent in both the pulpit and in life with the congregation.<sup>508</sup> We will look specifically at vulnerability in the pulpit as Thielemann taught preachers to “speak out of our own needs, openly and honestly. Not making the pulpit into a platform for psychotherapy, as the relationalists [sic] would suggest, but to identify and to set the example of yielding to the authority of the Spirit.”<sup>509</sup>

Vulnerability in the pulpit appeared to serve another practical purpose in Thielemann's homiletical strategy. He was a staunch advocate for preachers displaying greater levels of transparency in the pulpit in order to help lessen the number of conflicts pastors often face in his or her ministry. He believed, “the best battles won are the battles avoided. And battles are best avoided when your people know where you are and fight them for you.”<sup>510</sup> Thielemann reasoned that if people know the pastor, there will be fewer conflicts caused by misunderstandings. In

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<sup>505</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Sermons for the Head and Heart: Effective Preaching Feeds Both the Mind and Emotions,” *Leadership Journal*, Vol. VIII, No. 2, Spring 1987, 58-63.

<sup>506</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 6-7.

<sup>507</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>508</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>509</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 13.

<sup>510</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 8.

essence, being liked by the congregation, required what Thielemann called “the dyadic effect in preaching.” He explained, “The dyadic effect is the two-faced effect. Not in the traditional sense of that phrase, but in the Greek sense. That is one face is revealed and then the other is revealed.”<sup>511</sup> The term “dyadic effect” was first introduced by Canadian psychologist Sidney Jourard through his writings and work on self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships.<sup>512</sup> Thielemann’s application of the dyadic effect advocated for give and take, the preacher revealing vulnerably and then the listener reciprocating by also revealing themselves vulnerably.<sup>513</sup> While Thielemann was aware of the possible dangers of too much vulnerability, he thought the benefits of transparency outweighed the possible risks even though he created conflict with his listeners.<sup>514</sup> Thielemann practiced what he felt was a biblical concept to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”<sup>515</sup> In order to bear burdens one must be willing to share openly, honestly and appropriately with a congregation in a reciprocal dialogue. Thielemann worked hard to bridge what he saw as the divide between the clergy and laity through self-disclosure and vulnerable illustrations from the pulpit and in the bestowing of deserved compliments to his listeners. With this goal in mind Thielemann suggested:

In your preaching throw every bouquet you can just like Paul did. Pass out a compliment every time a compliment is in order. Be attractive, be likeable, love people through your preaching and let it show. And this is best done through transparency. Open yourself, let vulnerability that is yours become theirs. Let them see the similarities between you and them. Indeed, if there are places, and there will be places where you radically differ from your people, they would be more willing to accept that difference because of the areas of similarity they have found than that difference if that is all they see in you.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>512</sup> Sydney M. Jourard, *The Transparent Self. Self-disclosure and Well-being*, (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company Inc., 1964).

<sup>513</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>514</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 4.

<sup>515</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on The Art of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>516</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 4.

In the pulpit, Thielemann shared openly about his struggles with obesity, overindulgence, anger, temptation with sexual sin, and most often his personal struggle with loneliness. He would also share openly about his insecurities as a preacher. In a message entitled, "Critics but No Rivals," Thielemann told the congregation he had recently received a letter from a family that was leaving Glendale Presbyterian to attend another church in town where they agreed with what was being preached. To this Thielemann said, "I am ashamed, I am conscience of the weakness of my pulpit and the poverty of my preaching more than any of you because I have to live with it all week long."<sup>517</sup> Thielemann believed "transparency can be revealed illustratively through a lot of different things besides personal experience."<sup>518</sup> He once shared with the students at Grove City College about life on campus during students' absence over summer or winter break. He spoke of sitting alone in the beautiful gothic chapel where the stone columns, the arches, the windows all become the various students he missed so deeply. In anthropomorphizing the chapel, Thielemann expressed his emotion without explicitly saying he was lonely. However, Thielemann warned that the pulpit was not "a therapist couch for the preacher" but a place that demands "the courage to be vulnerable."<sup>519</sup> However, Thielemann warned vulnerability in sermons was not a call to "belch the most personal dimensions of our lives to everyone we meet."<sup>520</sup> He did believe that every Christian should have at least one person "with whom we share absolutely everything...And it is out of that sharing that real bearing comes. The recognition of this has affected every dimension of my ministry. It's affected my preaching."<sup>521</sup> Interestingly, Thielemann's capacity for friendship was limited. In addition, his vulnerability did not extend to what he considered fundamental congregations. "Now by fundamental I am not referring to their theology, rather their attitude."<sup>522</sup> Thielemann continued to warn preachers that "congregations that are authoritarian in nature generally have the doctrine of the immaculately

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<sup>517</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Critics but No Rivals," (sermon).

<sup>518</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on The Art of Preaching," 2.

<sup>519</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on The Art of Preaching," 2.

<sup>520</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Comradeship Christ Commands," (sermon).

<sup>521</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Comradeship Christ Commands," (sermon).

<sup>522</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 4.

conceived preacher. When you take your clothes off in front of a bunch of Pharisees you are going to get hurt, you can anticipate it.”<sup>523</sup>

Thielemann thought an appeal for preachers to be vulnerable ran against a propensity of preachers towards self-protection, so he challenged this with a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne called *The Minister's Black Veil*. In Hawthorne's story the minister of a local congregation came to church one day wearing a black veil over his face. The minister then wore this black veil, without explanation, for the remainder of his ministry. On his deathbed the minister disclosed to his congregation that he was not the only one wearing a black veil. For as the minister looked through his veil, he saw a black veil on everyone in the congregation.<sup>524</sup> Hawthorne's story highlighted what Thielemann perceived to be a lack of vulnerability from the pulpit. According to Thielemann, “You don't point out other people's black veils by putting one on. You point them out by taking it off.”<sup>525</sup> Thielemann said, “There appears to be a law of reciprocity in self-disclosure. There is a definite connection between one's willingness to be vulnerable and the degree of vulnerability offered by another.”<sup>526</sup> Self-disclosure and vulnerability from the preacher during the sermon was one way to ensure the preacher stayed firmly connected to one's listeners. Rather than perpetuating the illusion that the preacher is somehow radically different than the congregation, Thielemann promoted that appropriate use of vulnerability through honest self-disclosure from the pulpit would build credibility and authority. He taught and practiced that “the more people believe you are open with them, the higher will be your credibility.”<sup>527</sup> According to Thielemann, “Distance does not give authority in preaching, closeness does.”<sup>528</sup> So, to help listeners trust and hear what is preached, it is vital for the preacher to be transparent and vulnerable in the preaching event.

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<sup>523</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 4.

<sup>524</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne and William C. Spengemann, *The Portable Hawthorne* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>525</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>526</sup> Robert A. Coughenour, ed., *For Me to Live: Essays in Honor of James Leon Kelso*, Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Comradeship He Commands: Comments on Inter-Personal Relationships and the Clergy,” (Cleveland: Dillon/Liederbach, 1972) 204.

<sup>527</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 8.

<sup>528</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 9.

As a preacher and pastor Thielemann aspired to be both vulnerable, integrous and to be liked because listeners connect with preachers they like.<sup>529</sup> Summarizing Aristotle from *Rhetoric*, Thielemann said, “Let it be noted, that a credible man [sic] is believed first. Thus, to the degree that you are credible, open, honest, trusted by your people to that degree the Christ will be better able to use your preaching effort. Yes, you are only the pipeline, but pipes work better when they’re not clogged.”<sup>530</sup> As we have seen Thielemann warned preachers of the ever-present temptation and danger of compromising the truth as one aspires to be liked by their listeners.<sup>531</sup> Ironically, when it came to sharing stories from the pulpit, Thielemann said, “Never hesitate to make the illustration personal. When you are talking about reading somebody else saying it, it puts the whole thing too far away. Let it seem as if you were in the experience.”<sup>532</sup> Thielemann may not have considered this lack of full disclosure in sermon illustrations to be “prostituting the truth,” but for some of Thielemann’s listeners it may have compromised his credibility and thwarted his desire to be liked.<sup>533</sup>

Thielemann understood the difficulties for many preachers of sharing openly and vulnerably in front of a group of people. However, Thielemann considered the benefits of vulnerability made the effort worthwhile. It was his understanding that if preachers continuously place themselves as the champion of every situation in their illustrations with the perfect response at the ready, they may not seem as approachable. Or, if the preacher never shares with others the victories they did not achieve, the struggles they contend with or the places they fail most often then they will miss out on an opportunity to connect with their listeners on a deeper level. Often, when a preacher considers sharing openly and honestly about his or her own struggles there is a fear of alienating themselves from their congregation and damaging their authority. Thielemann argued preachers should trust that an appropriate level of vulnerability with one’s congregation both from the pulpit and

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<sup>529</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 1979, 4.

<sup>530</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Lecture Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 1979, 4.

<sup>531</sup> Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 6-7.

<sup>532</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 9.

<sup>533</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 6.

in relationships is vital for effective preaching. Thielemann believed Scripture taught we should bear one another's burdens.<sup>534</sup> "Bearing implies sharing...and I really think it involves the courage to be vulnerable."<sup>535</sup> Or as he said another way, "You cannot bear another person's burdens if you are not aware of them. You cannot assist someone if you are not aware of the need for assistance in that life. Prior to bearing there has to come sharing."<sup>536</sup> In order to teach healthy boundaries Thielemann shared with a group of seminary students about a what he called "a very serious misjudgment" regarding an appropriate use of vulnerability in the pulpit during his tenure at Glendale Presbyterian Church.<sup>537</sup> During a sermon entitled "Shall We Dance," Thielemann confided with his listeners that as a single man he had "great sexual temptations."<sup>538</sup> After that sermon Thielemann realized his sexual temptation was a great shock to some of his congregation. As he explained, "I wish now I wouldn't have done it. It took me months to get past some of my people. They couldn't bear the fact that I was sexually tempted."<sup>539</sup> What Thielemann taught preachers was the importance of using vulnerability wisely and appropriately from the pulpit in order to move people toward transformation and facilitate deeper conversation after the sermon. This two-way reciprocal vulnerability between preacher and congregation which Thielemann taught and practiced is precisely what the "dyadic effect" facilitates. It was Thielemann's hope that more preachers would implement the "dyadic effect" by dropping their veils and intentionally being vulnerable with the congregation both in and out of the pulpit.

Because of the influence of Aristotle's teaching, Thielemann viewed reciprocal self-disclosure between the preacher and congregation as the vehicle by which close relationships could be forged. Striving to be liked through intentionally loving his listeners, bestowing encouragement and being vulnerable were an integral part of his preaching preparations on the same level in his mind as exegesis

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<sup>534</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 2.

<sup>535</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 2.

<sup>536</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Comradeship Christ Commands," (sermon).

<sup>537</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on The Art of Preaching," 3-4.

<sup>538</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Shall We Dance," (sermon).

<sup>539</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 4.

of the Bible and study of the world around us.<sup>540</sup> It is worth mentioning that at one stage in the preaching lecture, Thielemann appeared to match his teaching medium to his message through an open display of vulnerability. He disclosed that he felt his preaching often lacked the depth of compassion necessary for people to truly like him as a pastor and preacher. About his own perceived lack of compassion in his preaching Thielemann shared, “Now I will be very frank with you and say, that I am very sensitive on this matter. Because it is a personal inadequacy of my own.”<sup>541</sup> As we saw in the biographical section, Thielemann openly struggled with being compassionate towards the men and women he was pastoring which seemed to contradict his advocacy for being liked. It is also evident that he worked very hard at growing in compassion for people throughout his ministry in churches, on college campuses and traveling around the world and taught others to strive for the same. Thielemann would agree with Tessa Fry Brown’s assessment that, “Preaching is one of the most vulnerable occupations in which a person can engage.”<sup>542</sup>

Thielemann gleaned wisdom from Aristotle’s teaching in the fields of rhetoric and communication. These principles informed Thielemann’s need-centered homiletic and fueled his commitment to the hard work of being known and knowing the people to whom one preaches. This is what Thielemann referred to as “pastoral involvement” in the preaching process.<sup>543</sup> Preaching and pastoring stood on equal levels of importance in Thielemann’s mind.<sup>544</sup> It was Thielemann’s belief that, “it is not enough to be an expert, it is not enough to be intellectually accurate, it is not enough to be powerful in argument. There must be love.”<sup>545</sup> It appears that for the first seven or eight years of his preaching at First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport, Thielemann did not use personal illustrations because he was warned by a pastoral theology professor during his time at Pittsburg-Xenia Theological Seminary that self-disclosure in the pulpit could be emotionally manipulative and too preacher centric. He would later write, “I’d been warned that

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<sup>540</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 6.

<sup>541</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 7.

<sup>542</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Exegeting the Congregation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 101.

<sup>543</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 8.

<sup>544</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 8.

<sup>545</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 7.



appealing to emotions would lead to manipulative preaching.”<sup>546</sup> As Thielemann further developed his need-centered approach and because of the influence of Aristotle, he would come to see the vital importance of balancing both reason and emotion in his preaching in order to build rapport with one’s listeners. Thielemann believed, “both good logic and honest emotion are necessary for effective preaching,” in spite of his own weaknesses.<sup>547</sup>

*The Influence of Charles U. Larson and Ernest G. Bormann*

Thielemann believed in the power of words to move people. During his time serving as Senior Pastor of Glendale Presbyterian Church, Thielemann’s “Message for the Moment” sermon audiotape ministry would begin with classical piano music playing in the background while the theatrical voice of a narrator said, “Glendale Presbyterian Church, People Moving Power, brings you Dr. Bruce Thielemann with a message (insert sermon title).”<sup>548</sup> Thielemann employed illustrations as a primary means to connect with and move his listeners during the preaching event.

Thielemann stated “that the purpose of an illustration is not to illuminate or explain. The real purpose of an illustration should always be to motivate. It may also explain, but its first reason is to move.”<sup>549</sup> Making this point in a slightly different way Thielemann taught, “I believe you are all articulate enough to explain any concept...but moving people once they understand something is a different matter. It is, I believe a matter of the pictures you paint, and more than that, the heartstrings you touch.”<sup>550</sup> As we see from the title of his primary teaching about illustration, “The Art of Illustration,” Thielemann viewed illustration as an art. Something of beauty that touched people deeply and required careful crafting, thought and skill, but when yielded well could bring life to the act of preaching. Once he stated, “Now, illustration is the principal way, I believe, in which we can make our preaching live.”<sup>551</sup> In order to hone his skill in the art of illustration

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<sup>546</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Sermons for the Head and Heart: Effective Preaching Feeds Both the Mind and Emotions,” 58.

<sup>547</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Sermons for the Head and Heart: Effective Preaching Feeds Both the Mind and Emotions,” 60.

<sup>548</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann’s sermon tapes labeled “Message for the Moment, Glendale Presbyterian Church” with a yellow label used this formula consistently.

<sup>549</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 2.

<sup>550</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 1.

<sup>551</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 1.

Thielemann turned to the work of two secular university professors of Communication Studies, Charles U. Larson and Ernest G. Bormann. We will now look at some of the ways these two men influenced Thielemann's understanding of how to connect with listeners and effective use of illustrations in preaching.

#### *Charles U. Larson*

We have seen that Thielemann turned to the psychologist Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs in order to help preachers grapple with the challenge of identifying the needs of his or her listeners, he also turned to the study of communication and rhetoric and the work of professors, Charles U. Larson and Ernest G. Bormann to aid preachers in the art of crafting illustrations that motivate and move people to action. First, we will examine the influence of Larson on Thielemann's need-centered approach to homiletics. Larson was a communications professor at Northern Illinois University from 1968 to 2000. In 1973, Larson published *Persuasion, Reception and Responsibility* as a primer for students of persuasion at the undergraduate level. This book has been revised thirteen times with the final revision being released in 2013. There is no record of Larson and Thielemann ever meeting in person or corresponding, but Thielemann admiringly described Larson's book as "masterful" and Larson's communication theories had an obvious impact on Thielemann.<sup>552</sup> And given Thielemann's habit of reading widely, it is likely he was introduced to Larson through his study of current rhetoric and persuasion research.

#### *Assumption of Similitude*

Motivating his listeners to action was a central part of Thielemann's approach to preaching. Naturally, this caused Thielemann to gravitate towards Larson's motivational principle called the assumption of similitude. In many ways the assumption of similitude is an extension of Aristotle's basic principle of persuasion that one listens to the people they like. According to Larson effective persuasion occurs in both small and large groups, when the principle of the assumption of similitude is at play. As Larson explained, "human beings like to believe that they are not alone; that there are other human beings who are like themselves – who

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<sup>552</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 7.

think the way they do; who believe the things that they believe; and who value the same things they value.”<sup>553</sup> It reasons that if people listen to people they like, then they like the people who are similar to them. Therefore, in his striving to be liked by his listeners, Thielemann used illustrations strategically to show his listeners that he was like them. In one preaching lecture directed to a group of seminary students Thielemann suggested Larson’s principle of the assumption of similitude should be leveraged to help build connection with one’s listeners. “People don’t like to be alone; people like to be like other people,” Thielemann stated, calling these future preachers to utilize Larson’s principle of the assumption of similitude in their preaching preparation and delivery.<sup>554</sup> He urged these young men and women to, “Be attractive, be likeable, love people through your preaching and let it show. And this is best done through transparency. Open yourself. Let the vulnerability that is yours become theirs.”<sup>555</sup> Thielemann accepted uncritically that preachers would be accepted more readily by their congregation, even when there are points of disagreement as long as they see the larger places of similarity. And, unless a preacher is vulnerable and transparent in the pulpit the congregation will never know where they share common beliefs and practices. Through Larson’s principle of the assumption of similitude, Thielemann found further academic backing for his conviction, fueled by Aristotle, that people are moved by preachers they like.

### *Cultural Myths*

In a further attempt to help preachers craft illustrations that move and motivate people to action, Thielemann turned once again to the work of Charles Larson’s cultural myths of a society. As Larson explained:

Cultural values, images, myths, and manners of behavior are introduced, demonstrated, and valued by those around us, and as a result we adopt the values. They become rules for governing ourselves as we interact. Eventually (some psychologists estimate by age five) most of these patterns are so ingrained that we do not even notice that they are there; instead, we respond almost instinctively to them. Only when we deliberately examine them or when we are thrust into another new culture do we ever realize

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<sup>553</sup> Charles U. Larson, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, 77.

<sup>554</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 4.

<sup>555</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 4.

how many of our ways of believing and behaving are culturally determined.<sup>556</sup>

Larson theorized that each culture has an ingrained set of myths that are valued by that culture and serve as a potential source of persuasive power when leveraged in communication through discerning these myths and then appealing to them directly or indirectly.<sup>557</sup> Larson's five cultural myths, which Thielemann taught and utilized in his preaching, are: wisdom of the rustic, possibility of success, coming of the messiah, presences of conspiracy and value of change.<sup>558</sup> It is worth observing that Thielemann felt these five myths were important enough to dedicate a great deal of time to explaining each of them in detail during his preaching lectures. In selecting illustrative material Thielemann taught preachers to choose illustrations which are tied to the listeners cultural myth. To summarize this Thielemann said, "Illustrations will have motivating effect if the cultural roles will fit those myths."<sup>559</sup>

Practically for Thielemann this meant avoiding certain types of illustrations which he viewed as overused in much of contemporary preaching. Illustrations which quote the best and the brightest are not utilizing the wisdom of the rustic. A story about defeat will not tap into the possibility of success. Thielemann believed that preachers "need to keep this rubric in front of us when we're using our illustrations. I think it will lead us to make better and more motivating selections."<sup>560</sup>

In his preaching lectures, Thielemann utilized Larson's five cultural myths as a means of aiding preachers in crafting illustrations which are effective in motivating people to action.<sup>561</sup> As an example in his own preaching, Thielemann taps into "the wisdom of the rustic," and "the possibility of success" in one illustration as he described an elderly man named George Sneddon who arrived in the United States from Scotland as a young boy and started working in a steel mill in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. George was not formally educated but worked his way

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<sup>556</sup> Charles U. Larson, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, 140.

<sup>557</sup> Charles U. Larson, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*, 140.

<sup>558</sup> For a detailed explanation of Larson's five cultural images and myths he felt were underlying American culture please see chapter 6 of Larson's, *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*.

<sup>559</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann. "The Art of Illustration," 5.

<sup>560</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann. "The Art of Illustration," 6.

<sup>561</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 3-5.

to become an engineer in the steel factory by his hard work and honesty.<sup>562</sup>

Because of this connection to these cultural myths, Thielemann believed this illustration would connect more effectively with his Pittsburgh listeners.

In many ways Thielemann adopted Larson's five cultural myths uncritically and without revision. However, it is important to note that Thielemann cautioned preachers to be very careful when utilizing "the presence of a conspiracy."<sup>563</sup> Thielemann warned, "the point is, you see, that when you get focusing on this kind of a conspiracy, you'll be heard, but it is a very dangerous thing."<sup>564</sup> Also, to contextualize Larson for preaching a sermon, Thielemann clarified, "now I use the myth of the coming of the messiah with a small 'm.' I am not referring to Christ."<sup>565</sup> The five cultural myths, which Larson proposed as underlying American culture, were recommended by Thielemann as a means of ensuring illustrations would move listeners to action. This fit well with Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching and focus on motivation. As Thielemann saw it, if a sermon illustration connected with one of these five cultural myths, then it would be more likely to persuade and motivate the listener to action. It is evident Thielemann dedicated a great deal of time in his preaching and taught others to use and select sermon illustrations which carry maximum motivational punch. We will now look at the communication insights Thielemann gleaned from Ernest Bormann which also influenced his need-centered approach to preaching.

#### *Ernest G. Bormann*

Ernest G. Bormann served as a professor in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Minnesota from 1959 until his death in 2008. Thielemann cited that Bormann was engaged in some of the most cutting edge and exciting work in the field of rhetoric.<sup>566</sup> Thielemann accepted uncritically and made heavy use of Bormann's concept of rhetorical vision in helping preachers craft illustrations that move people. As Thielemann stated, "I think the most interesting work that is being done in the whole area of illustrative technique today is being

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<sup>562</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love it," (sermon).

<sup>563</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 3.

<sup>564</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 5.

<sup>565</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 4.

<sup>566</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann. "The Art of Illustration," 2.

done by Dr. Ernest Bormann of the University of Minnesota. He has developed a concept, which he calls rhetorical vision."<sup>567</sup> Because of the focus on connecting with the aim of motivating, Bormann's rhetorical vision was of great interest to Thielemann for the study and practice of preaching. Like Larson, there is no record of Thielemann and Bormann ever meeting in person. It is most likely he was exposed to Bormann's work as he studied modern communication theory while formulating his preaching lectures.

### *The Rhetorical Vision*

Bormann explained rhetorical vision in these terms, "A rhetorical community is a group of people who participate in a communication style and have common rhetorical visions. The members of the rhetorical community understand the common language usages and the usual rites and rituals surrounding communication contexts and episodes."<sup>568</sup> In the communication process a rhetorical vision is a common understanding of a shared fantasy by a group of people. This shared rhetorical vision excites the listeners and motivates them to action.<sup>569</sup> Translating the rhetorical vision to the context of preaching, Thielemann believed it was possible "to create that kind of rhetorical vision, to excite the culture that the congregation has as its common background to capture the group, to build on their sense of community, to move them to action."<sup>570</sup> And, this was accomplished by utilizing the cultural myths shared by Larson along with Bormann's rhetorical vision. It was Thielemann's conviction that:

Any illustration that supports the cultural drama, the rhetorical vision of which we are a part, will build our sense of community, will motivate us to action and will influence our social attitudes, since the play of which we are a part is what gives us our sense of community, is what, because we have a part in it, impels us to action and constrains that action to a certain degree, and because that drama to a very large degree influences our relationship to one another.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 1.

<sup>568</sup> Ernest, G. Bormann, *Communication Theory* (Salem: Sheffield Publishing Company) 1980, 76.

<sup>569</sup> For a more in-depth description of Bormann's concept of rhetorical vision refer to chapter 3 in Bormann's *Communication Theory*.

<sup>570</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Preaching," 2.

<sup>571</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Preaching," 3.

For Thielemann, Bormann's rhetorical vision served as an effective vehicle to help motivate listeners to action. When a preacher took time to understand the drama and culture which listeners are involved then they are able to select and craft illustrations that excite people and "they will be motivated by what you say. The persuader will be more effective if she relates her persuasion to the drama in which her people are engaged."<sup>572</sup> In his preaching lectures Thielemann utilized Bormann's communication theory to glean insight into how to effectively motivate one's listeners. Bormann's understanding of the "rhetorical vision" was formative in shaping Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching.<sup>573</sup> In his preaching Thielemann attempted to understand and connect with the "rhetorical vision" of which his listener's saw themselves as active participants.<sup>574</sup> He believed, "we have cultural dramas going on today. We have cultural perspectives of which our people are a part."<sup>575</sup> In chapter 5 we will look more specifically at some of the cultural drama Thielemann addressed in his preaching as we see practical examples of how Thielemann appropriated Bormann's concept of the rhetorical vision in addressing some of the significant historical events his listeners were experiencing in their cultural context. It is also important to note that although Thielemann taught preachers to appropriate Bormann's concept of rhetorical vision, and he utilized this concept in his own sermons, he was aware of danger and potential for misuse and abuse the utilization of Bormann's rhetorical vision held. At one point in his preaching lecture Thielemann cautioned his listeners by reminding them of how Adolph Hitler used methods similar to Bormann's rhetorical vision to manipulate, ignite hatred, incite violence and encourage the holocaust.<sup>576</sup> While Thielemann used and encouraged others to utilize modern rhetorical theories to aid in connecting with the listener's needs, he was also aware of the potential dangers of

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<sup>572</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 2.

<sup>573</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 2.

<sup>574</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 3.

<sup>575</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 3.

<sup>576</sup> Thielemann asked, "How did Hitler manipulate his peers as he did? He did it by portraying them. His speeches were their daydreams. Study those speeches, they are chaotic, they are contradictory, they are highly charged and emotionally they begin with pessimism, but they end in triumph. He follows, you see the logic of the unconscious. He articulated the inner feelings, the group fantasy of his people. He made use of the rhetorical vision. And he was, and I think this is beyond question, the most effective orator of our age." Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 2.

persuasion techniques. Although Thielemann did not provide a complete treatise on the dangers of these rhetorical theories in manipulating the listener, his mention of the manipulative potential of both Larson and Bormann proves he was aware of the dangers at some level.

Because Thielemann believed, the primary purpose of an illustration in preaching is to move people to action, grappling with communication and rhetoric theories and techniques was the logical place for Thielemann to grow as a communicator. It is evident from his use of Larson's assumption of similitude and cultural myths along with Bormann's rhetorical vision that Thielemann thought a great deal about how to incorporate what he felt were the best practices of modern communication theory into his preaching.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen that Bruce W. Thielemann was committed to a need-centered approach to preaching. Thielemann placed a strong emphasis in both his preaching and teaching of preaching on the importance of knowing one's listeners and making tangible connections with them throughout the preaching process. Because of Thielemann's commitment to reading broadly and deeply, and at times uncritically, in a variety of disciplines, we have seen that his need-centered homiletical approach was formed by specific theological, homiletical, psychological and rhetorical influences. Because Thielemann was both a practitioner and teacher of homiletics, one can clearly identify and analyze these varied influences in Thielemann's preaching and teaching ministries. In the next chapter we will explore Thielemann's preaching methodology which was born out of these influencers and helped form his core convictions about the importance of a need-centered homiletic.



# Chapter Four: Preaching Methodology of Bruce W. Thielemann

## Introduction

From expository preaching to topical preaching and everything in-between, there are as many methods of approaching the task of sermon preparation and delivery as there are preachers who are willing to mount the pulpit week after week. That is not to imply that all approaches to preaching are created equal or that there is a one size fits all approach to preaching which should be prescribed like a miracle cure to all preachers. However, anyone who desires to communicate the Word of God effectively to God's people would do well to learn from a wide range of preachers who have plowed the homiletic field before him or her. As Thielemann often reminded preachers he taught, "this is a time for experimentation in our preaching."<sup>577</sup> He continued, "much homiletic theory is being cast about. And it seems to me we ought to be willing to try it."<sup>578</sup> It was this willingness to experiment with the homiletic theories of his day that directed Thielemann to his need-centered homiletic. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the preaching methodology of Bruce W. Thielemann which developed as a result of his theology of preaching and his commitment to a need-centered approach to the homiletic endeavor. Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching runs through all that Thielemann believed and practiced in his preaching ministry and lies at the heart of his preaching methodology.

We have examined Thielemann's theology of preaching which led him to formulate his need-centered approach to preaching. By way of review, foundational to Thielemann's homiletic and theology, he believed that "God's Word is act – it is an event. Preaching is to be God's Word – that is, the event of God acting now."<sup>579</sup> Preaching is first and foremost "God's sovereign act."<sup>580</sup> Out of this foundational presupposition, Thielemann created and articulated a concise definition of

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<sup>577</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975, 12.

<sup>578</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 12.

<sup>579</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>580</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

preaching: “Preaching is God’s act. It is God’s Word. His moving in the now.”<sup>581</sup> Thielemann made the additional observation and qualification to nuance further and ground his definition in his presupposition about the role of the preacher and the common refrain about the mystery present in the preaching event by noting, “How this happens and when and where is a mystery beyond us. We can only lend ourselves to his use and perhaps never know when we are used. All is mystery.”<sup>582</sup> As previously stated, Thielemann was not given to mystery, but he felt this mystery was a necessary tension to manage in order to articulate his preaching method to others.<sup>583</sup> Thielemann believed one would never truly know when the words of the preacher would become God’s act in the life of one’s listeners; that was the mystery. It was clear to Thielemann that in his or her own strength preachers are not able to manufacture or coerce God’s Word to become an act or event.<sup>584</sup> According to Thielemann, it is arrogant for a preacher to assume this power.<sup>585</sup> While it is true that Thielemann taught others and believed himself that the preacher ought to lose themselves in the mystery of preaching, it is also true that he believed preaching was a task. And, in his understanding, all tasks have a methodology.<sup>586</sup> As we have seen, according to Thielemann, three factors increased the likelihood of the preacher being used by God as a “channel.”<sup>587</sup> First, preaching ought to be built on the Scriptures, “a record of God’s act.”<sup>588</sup> Second, the preacher should be free to use a variety of forms in preaching “because the Holy Spirit will not be inhibited and moves in freedom.”<sup>589</sup> Third, the preacher ought to invest him or herself completely in the process of preaching “so that preaching becomes crisis for *you* as well as for your people.”<sup>590</sup> With these three factors as the foundation of his systematic approach to the preaching task, Thielemann developed a method to

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<sup>581</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>582</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>583</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>584</sup> In Thielemann’s beliefs we see echoes of Karl Barth which will be addressed in greater detail in a later section of this chapter.

<sup>585</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>586</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 11.

<sup>587</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>588</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>589</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>590</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

increase the likelihood of effectively communicating God's truth to God's people from the pulpit week in and week out.

In this chapter, we will explore how these three factors influenced and shaped Thielemann's preaching methodology. First, we will examine why Thielemann believed in and defended the primacy of preaching as foundational to his preaching methodology. Next, we will look at the central role Scripture played in Thielemann's preaching methodology and explore Thielemann's variety of form through his use of a three-sentence method. Finally, we will examine the role of the preacher within his preaching methodology. Throughout this chapter, we will see Thielemann's commitment to a methodology which he believed would increase the likelihood of the preacher being used by God. Let us begin by exploring some of the contributing factors which formulated Thielemann's commitment to the primacy of preaching in ministry.

### **The Primacy of Preaching**

Thielemann once defined preaching as "God's saving activity, his redeeming event lived again for personal present encounter."<sup>591</sup> In this definition, we get a glimpse of the Christ-centered nature of Thielemann's theology of preaching along with the importance of connecting God's truth with one's listeners. While he lamented that preachers often ignore the rules of effective communication, his confidence in the power of God's Word preached never faltered.<sup>592</sup> In his first preaching lecture, "The Primacy of Preaching" delivered to the incoming first year seminary students at Fuller Theological Seminary on October 8, 1973, Thielemann made the claim, "So I build today on this thesis: That in ministry preaching is primary."<sup>593</sup> This thesis would profoundly shape Thielemann's life and need-centered approach to preaching during his thirty-four years of pastoral ministry.

#### *Thielemann the Preacher*

For Thielemann, the pulpit and the ministry of preaching took center stage in his life, relationships, and pastoral ministry. This dedication to preaching began during

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<sup>591</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," Preaching Workshop sponsored by Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, October 8, 1973, 7.

<sup>592</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 1.

<sup>593</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 4.

his time as an undergraduate student at Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. And it appears that the centrality of preaching in his ministry and a relentless pursuit of homiletic excellence were the driving forces in Thielemann's life.<sup>594</sup> This hyper-focus on preaching, which was not always healthy, becomes evident as we pull the veil back on Thielemann's life. Jack Stewart, a close friend and fraternity brother of Thielemann's since they attended Westminster College together, observed Thielemann's dedication to homiletics and its consuming place in his life. Stewart, a retired Presbyterian pastor and professor and one of only two people Thielemann asked to speak at his funeral, claimed, "Not a week went by that Bruce, and I didn't talk."<sup>595</sup> Stewart agreed that Thielemann's dedication to the study and practice of preaching began when Thielemann was an 18-year-old undergraduate at Westminster College. Stewart shared that Thielemann would stay in the dormitory on Friday evenings to write a sermon while most students were out socializing. The sermon was one he would not likely preach, but a sermon that could be evaluated for the honing of his own preaching skills. As we saw in the biographical chapter, the pursuit of effective preaching and his deep-rooted conviction in the primacy of preaching in ministry developed early and in earnest for Thielemann.

#### *Preacher not Pastor*

Thielemann knew he wanted to be a preacher when he was eighteen years old. Stewart recalled, "Bruce did not want to be a pastor or a professor, but a preacher."<sup>596</sup> While it is unclear from Thielemann's work that he made this same distinction between pastor and preacher highlighted by Stewart, Thielemann did elevate the role of the preacher. For Thielemann, this goal and desire to become a "preacher" meant making costly sacrifices which would have an ongoing impact on his life. These included choosing not to marry. As Thielemann once described to a group of seminary students, "The trouble is the church took so much of my time, I didn't know anybody outside the church."<sup>597</sup> While Thielemann affirmed that

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<sup>594</sup> Telephone interview with Dr. Jack W. Stewart on September 24, 2010, Grand Rapids, MI.

<sup>595</sup> Telephone interview with Dr. Jack W. Stewart.

<sup>596</sup> Telephone Interview with Dr. Jack W. Stewart.

<sup>597</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 1979, 12.

preaching is primary, it was also something he believed isolated and at times even harmed him. The time involved in study, the hurt involved in loving the people entrusted to his care and the isolation which followed him throughout his ministry were frequently mentioned by Thielemann as challenges he personally faced.<sup>598</sup> Even though Stewart and Thielemann were close friends, Stewart candidly shared that he was “happy to be away from Bruce when the trips were over.”<sup>599</sup> Stewart attributed the relational frustrations and challenges he experienced with Thielemann to what he observed as a lack of social skills in his friend. Stewart believed these less than cordial relational traits of Thielemann were the direct result of his overdeveloped preaching skills and underdeveloped social skills. In Stewart’s opinion, “Everything was focused on preaching for Thielemann.”<sup>600</sup> As far as Stewart was concerned Thielemann “was like a baseball player with an overdeveloped pitching arm and weaknesses in other muscles.”<sup>601</sup> One may surmise, Thielemann’s underdeveloped social skills were a contributing factor in the dramatic wake of relational conflict left behind most of his ministry positions, but for Thielemann, the personal and professional sacrifices were worth it. In a sermon preached towards the end of his ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh Thielemann said, “The greatest joy of my life is to stand in this pulpit and sing of the love of God. My certainty about it, my confidence in it, grows every day of my life. And if you ask me, why? I can only respond, because.”<sup>602</sup> Why did Thielemann dedicate his life to the task of preaching? Why did Thielemann believe in the primacy of preaching? Why did his love for and certainty in the importance of preaching continue to grow throughout his ministry? He would simply answer,

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<sup>598</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 8-9, Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 8, Bruce W. Thielemann, Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 1979, 4, Bruce W. Thielemann, Bruce W. Thielemann, *The Wittenburg Door*, “More on the Essence of Great Preaching”, no. 36 (April–May 1977) 25, Bruce W. Thielemann, “My Job and Why I Love It, (sermon).

<sup>599</sup> Telephone Interview with Dr. Jack W. Stewart.

<sup>600</sup> Telephone Interview with Dr. Jack W. Stewart.

<sup>601</sup> Telephone Interview with Dr. Jack W. Stewart.

<sup>602</sup> The word “because” for Thielemann was the word used to describe the love a wife possesses for her husband, and it was the word God used to describe the love he has for his people. This is a heart word for Thielemann and not just a head word. Bruce W. Thielemann, “Because,” (sermon).

“because.” But as we have seen, that “because” for Thielemann had weighty consequences.

### *The Great Need and The Great Lack*

By the time Thielemann wrote and delivered his first preaching lecture on October 8, 1973, he had developed his conviction in the primacy of preaching grounded on the need for people to hear the Word of God. At one point in the lecture, he asked the rhetorical question, “but do we ever ponder the fact that man [sic] comes to the house of God’s people on the Lord’s Day morning for no other purpose than to worship God and hear the Word of God?”<sup>603</sup> This affirmation of peoples’ felt need to hear the Word of God preached reflected Thielemann’s 1973 context in Glendale, California. In the twenty-first century, there is a diminished felt need for preaching evidenced by empty pews. Studies among what has been called the religious “nones” have shown a drop in church attendance across multiple demographic groups.<sup>604</sup> It is not within the scope of this thesis to explore the complexities of this trend, but it is important to note the different challenges preachers face because of their ministry context. Thielemann believed that in his ministry context “people are desperately anxious to hear the Word preached. But they are very often betrayed by preachers.”<sup>605</sup> Thielemann saw that there was a great need and desire for people to hear the Word of God, but he concluded there was a lack of effective preachers handling God’s Word. “If preaching is under attack today,” Thielemann lamented, “it is because of the men [sic] who are doing it.”<sup>606</sup> This harsh critique levied against those preaching grew out of Thielemann’s firm conviction in the primacy of preaching, the very Words of God lived out as a personal and present encounter with Jesus.<sup>607</sup>

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<sup>603</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>604</sup> “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America’s changing religious landscape” Pew Research, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

<sup>605</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>606</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>607</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” Preaching Workshop sponsored by Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, October 8, 1973, 7.

*Preaching from the Word of God is the Word of God*

One can trace the development of Thielemann's thoughts on the preaching process through comparing "The Primacy of Preaching," a lecture delivered in 1973 at Fuller Theological Seminary, to a sermon that Thielemann preached in 1984 at The First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh entitled, "My Job and Why I Love It." In both the lecture and the sermon, Thielemann argued that preaching was central to the Christian Faith. He explained:

Now preaching has always been central to our Christian faith. Jesus came preaching. His preaching is what made his greatest impact upon the society of which he was a part. Interestingly enough in the Gospel according to John, Jesus is referred to as the Word of God. Now the Greek word for "word" is *logos*. He is the *logos* of God. But when that is translated into Latin, as it came to us, the word which is used to translate *logos* is *sermo*. The root of our word sermon. In other words, John chapter one verse one would read, "In the beginning was the sermon and the sermon was with God and the sermon was God." In other words, Jesus is God's perfect sermon.<sup>608</sup>

Thielemann contended that preaching was always the primary task of Jesus and was central to his ministry during his time on earth. Jesus came to save men and women, and he came preaching. Therefore, preaching was primary because it was the means God used to bring men and women to salvation.<sup>609</sup> According to Thielemann, preaching was also central to the ministry of the early church beginning in Acts chapter one where "the disciples are told to be witnesses unto me."<sup>610</sup> Thielemann emphasized that preaching the Word was the first thing that happened after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In Acts 6 when there is a dispute about the division of labor in the early church, Thielemann underscored that the disciples, "Elected others to the task while they gave themselves continually, the Scripture says, to the ministry of the Word."<sup>611</sup> He also gave examples from church history to bolster his case for the centrality of preaching. As Thielemann saw it, every great movement of God throughout Church history had at

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<sup>608</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon) a similar statement is made in "The Primacy of Preaching," 5.

<sup>609</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 4.

<sup>610</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 5.

<sup>611</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 5.

its core the preaching of God's Word. "Luther, Calvin, Knox, Latimer, Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, all great preachers. In those eras when people were being won, the Word was being preached. I find no exception to this in the 2000-year history of the church."<sup>612</sup> Or, as he affirmed in a sermon, "No great movement has ever occurred in the history of the church without the stimulus of preaching."<sup>613</sup> Conversely, Thielemann also believed that in every period of abuse and decadence in the church there was a scarcity and deprivation found in the preaching of the Word.<sup>614</sup> This led Thielemann to assert that "the theology of our faith demands that preaching comes first."<sup>615</sup> In agreement with the Second Helvetic Confession and Karl Barth, for Thielemann, preaching from the Word of God is the Word of God, and therefore, the hearing of God's Word preached was central to the Christian faith.<sup>616</sup>

### *The Greatest Need*

At the center of Thielemann's Protestant Reformed Christian faith was the belief that "God entered human history as a person...This entrance was unique...It was final...It was adequate, sufficient for all men's [sic] salvation. And it was indispensable, there is no other way to the Father than by the Son."<sup>617</sup> Making the same point in a slightly different way eleven years later, Thielemann described his theological system as swinging on three pivots: "First man's need, his weakness and his wickedness, second God's love for man in spite of this and his giving Jesus Christ as the answer to man's problems and predicament and thirdly about the fact that the Holy Spirit of God is still active in the world bringing God's love into waiting hearts."<sup>618</sup> The essence of Christianity for Thielemann, which informed his affirmation of the primacy of preaching, was that Jesus Christ came to accomplish humanity's greatest need, the salvation of souls. With this conviction as a motivating force, Thielemann poetically affirmed, "And the way that he comes into

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<sup>612</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 5.

<sup>613</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>614</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>615</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 5.

<sup>616</sup> See the *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter 1, Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 67, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, part 2, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 800.

<sup>617</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 5.

<sup>618</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).



history today, the way he impinges on the hearts and minds of people is by preaching. Preaching is God's loving assault on all those who will listen. Preaching is God's ceaseless endeavors to reach those who will hear. A preacher is one who heralds the event over and over again of the coming God."<sup>619</sup> In both his lecture and his sermon, Thielemann described his efforts to make every sermon a "kind of Bethlehem" where the Holy Spirit gave the preacher the words which then become the Word of God incarnate born among the hearers of the sermon.<sup>620</sup> Thielemann was confident that "preaching is the extension of the incarnation. It is to be the occasion when Jesus Christ the Word confronts the hearer."<sup>621</sup> Thielemann described the process and focus of his energy in preaching to his own listeners:

And I promise you that I will labor to make every sermon a kind of Bethlehem with the star shining above it and the angels singing about it and I will try to be like some Virgin Mary over which the Holy Spirit might brood in the hopes that I might bring forth in these words, the Word of God. And if and when I do, I pray that you like the shepherds and the wisemen of long ago, will fall on your knees and adore him. Not me. And not the sermon, but to the Christ who is alive and with us again in the solemnity of the preaching moment.<sup>622</sup>

For Thielemann, this meant that when preaching "really occurs Jesus walks up and down the aisles of the place in which the message is being held up and taps people on their consciences, gaining their attention."<sup>623</sup> The concept that every sermon is a Bethlehem moment is summarized in his lecture on the theology of preaching where he stated, "Christ walks amongst his people, incarnate again."<sup>624</sup> Bringing to his hearers the Word of God, to have their greatest need met, is why Thielemann stressed the primacy of preaching in his own methodology, and also why he believed all preaching should be grounded in the Scriptures. And so, we turn now to Thielemann's understanding of the Bible in his need-centered approach to preaching.

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<sup>619</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>620</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon) and "The Primacy of Preaching," 13.

<sup>621</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 7.

<sup>622</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>623</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>624</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 6.

## Understanding of Scripture

### *Starting with a Need*

Thielemann began his sermon writing process with the needs of the congregation. He said, “Now the first thing you have to do is have a theme. Now some ministers select their themes from a lectionary. Some ministers select their themes on the basis of personal preference. I personally select my themes in accordance with needs and requests which are expressed to me by members of this congregation.”<sup>625</sup> As previously mentioned, in order to ensure his sermons were grounded in needs present among members of his congregation, Thielemann would always have on his desk a group of index cards with the names of eight to ten people who had the specific need to which he was trying to connect. Those men, women and children were a part of the sermon writing process and important to Thielemann’s preaching methodology.<sup>626</sup> This approach is similar to the way Haddon W. Robinson would approach his sermon preparation. While working on a sermon Robinson said, “I get in imaginary conversations with people I want the sermon to help.”<sup>627</sup> Fred B. Craddock urged preachers to “close your eyes and see the people in the pews. They can be seen clearly because they sit in the same places every week. Let the names of the listeners come to mind and be formed by the lips.”<sup>628</sup> For Thielemann, this process of the imaginary dialogue helped ensure his illustrations and preaching connected with the needs of his listeners. As far as Thielemann was concerned it was a self-evident principle that “every attempt to be the instrument of God’s word and act should be aimed at a need – should be problem solving in orientation.”<sup>629</sup> As we have seen, Thielemann turned to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs pyramid to provide a graded analysis of the needs within a congregation.<sup>630</sup> For Thielemann, Maslow’s pyramid helped identify and address those needs. He believed and practiced his conviction of making one’s

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<sup>625</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “How to Write A Sermon,” (sermon).

<sup>626</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>627</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Making a Difference in Preaching*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999) 102.

<sup>628</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 92.

<sup>629</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2.

<sup>630</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 2-3.

listeners aware of the need, which has concrete relevance to their lives within the first five minutes of the sermon.<sup>631</sup>

### *Use of Scripture*

After establishing a need within the congregation, next Thielemann selected “a passage of Scripture on which to base the sermon.”<sup>632</sup> Thielemann stated, “One thing for example seems to me as very obvious, we ought to preach from the Bible. Scripture is one of God’s means of special revelation. It is self-authenticating to the faithful. It is obvious to us that God reveals himself to us and acts through Scripture.”<sup>633</sup> Thielemann also confessed to his congregation that his use of Scripture in preaching was partially motivated by the warning of stricter judgement presented in James 3 for those who teach in the church. He said, “I know my feet are of clay. I know my weaknesses far better than any of you. And that is the reason when I preach, I must stick to his Word and not to my own. And help you hide that Word in your heart that you might not sin against him.”<sup>634</sup> However, as we have seen, Thielemann was not a verse-by-verse expositor in his preaching practice. He would often jettison the larger context of a pericope in order to focus on one specific part or one word in a verse. In his sermons where this occurs it is a challenge to know his chosen biblical text. For example, in his sermon, “The Night I Wrestled with A Boa Constrictor,” Thielemann read Acts 1:1-9 to begin his sermon on the importance of evangelism but focused on one specific phrase from Jesus in Acts 1:8, “You are to be my witnesses.” By the end of this thirty-three-minute sermon, it would be difficult for most listeners to recall the sermon’s biblical text. Also, Thielemann often picked a theme based on his love of theatre, music or even the circus as the main focus of his sermon which sometimes overpowered the biblical text. In “Legions of the Unjazzed” Thielemann began with the disciples in prison in Acts 5, but the highpoint of the sermon was a lengthy description of surfing in the ocean which was far more memorable than the connection to Acts

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<sup>631</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1-2.

<sup>632</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “How to Write A Sermon,” (sermon).

<sup>633</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975, 9.

<sup>634</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “My Job and Why I Love It,” (sermon).

5.<sup>635</sup> Despite these critiques, his conviction was that “God honors Scripture by making it the vehicle of his special revelation. Therefore, it seems to me that dependence upon Scripture is more likely to make our preaching the vehicle of his revelation.”<sup>636</sup> The majority of Thielemann’s sermons began with the reading of a biblical text prefaced by his signature line, “The Scripture reading for this morning is [insert Scripture reference]. I begin at the verse numbered [insert Scripture beginning verse number]. And may the same God who inspired these Words, incline our hearts to their understanding.” In his first preaching lecture “The Primacy of Preaching,” Thielemann highlighted the centrality of God’s Word in the preaching event. He stated that God’s Word should be central because people want to hear not a word from the preacher, but a word from the Lord.<sup>637</sup> He continued, “I would submit that people are desperately anxious to hear the Word preached.”<sup>638</sup> So, in our examination of Thielemann’s preaching methodology it is to that Word which we now turn.

### *Biblical Sermons*

To understand the homiletical landscape which Thielemann occupied, it is necessary to review some of the leading homiletics teachers and practitioners who were contemporaries of Thielemann. The late British pastor, John Stott who lectured and wrote extensively on preaching, affirmed the importance of a sermon’s dependence on biblical text; however, Stott did not limit sermons to a “verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture.”<sup>639</sup> According to Stott, the preacher is free to, and even encouraged to utilize a variety of styles in preaching. What is crucial according to Stott is that the “Biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.”<sup>640</sup> Stott’s principal conviction that a sermon must have a firm basis in biblical truth also carries with it a strong warning. The preacher must not be lulled into a false

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<sup>635</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Legions of the Unjazzed,” (sermon).

<sup>636</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>637</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>638</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>639</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1982) 125.

<sup>640</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 126.

sense of authority with one's listeners simply because his or her sermon possesses a biblical text.<sup>641</sup> It is possible for a sermon, even with a biblical text, to be far from scriptural.

In *Design for Preaching*, H. Grady Davis, Professor of Functional Theology at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, made an important distinction between a sermon which has a text merely attached to it and a sermon which has Scripture as its source and foundational basis. When a sermon has Scripture as its grounding source, "The sermon says what the Scripture says."<sup>642</sup> Davis further explained, "Many a sermon uses a text but is not derived from the text. The text in such a sermon is not its source; it is only a resource, a tool used in preaching a sermon – used for psychological or literary effect."<sup>643</sup> Davis sternly warned that a preacher should "Never use a false or arbitrary exegesis to make the text support his [sic] notion."<sup>644</sup> Because of his belief that a sermon ought to be grounded in the biblical text, Davis would rather see the preacher abandon the use of a biblical text altogether than impose his or her own thoughts onto the biblical text.

From a different theological perspective than the traditional evangelical leanings of John Stott, Fred Craddock, who was preaching professor at Chandler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia also argued for the importance of a sermon's message being grounded in the message of the biblical text. In his preaching book entitled *Preaching*, Craddock admonished preachers to ask the question:

Does the sermon say and do what the biblical text does? This question functions as the canon for ascertaining if a sermon brings the text forward as a living voice in the church much better than a number of texts cited or biblical words repeated. It is possible that a sermon that buries itself in the text, moves through it phrase by phrase, and never comes up for air may prove to be "unbiblical" in the sense that it fails to achieve what the text achieves.<sup>645</sup>

Craddock's criterion for a biblical sermon was that it should proclaim that which the Scripture proclaims. Craddock stated his case in these terms, "Sermons not

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<sup>641</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 126.

<sup>642</sup> H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958) 47.

<sup>643</sup> H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 47.

<sup>644</sup> H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 47.

<sup>645</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, 28.

informed and inspired by Scripture are objects dislodged, orphans in the world, without a mother or father.”<sup>646</sup>

Similar to Stott, Grady and Craddock, Thielemann agreed a sermon’s style might have a variety of different forms, as long as the sermon remained grounded in the biblical message. As we have seen, Thielemann defined expository preaching in an overly narrow way as “taking a passage of Scripture, assuming the attending congregation will be interested in it, expounding it historically, exegetically, etcetera, adding a paragraph or two of application now and then.”<sup>647</sup> While this faulty and narrow definition of expository preaching may have helped bolster Thielemann’s critique of expository preaching it is not a comprehensive representation of the breadth of expository preaching. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who Thielemann references in his “Planning of Preaching” lecture on the subject of expository preaching provides a more comprehensive definition of expository preaching. “A sermon should always be expository But, immediately, that leads me to say something which I regard as very important indeed in this whole matter. A sermon is not. A running commentary on, or a mere exposition of, the meaning of a verse or a passage or a paragraph.”<sup>648</sup> With Thielemann’s limited definition in place he continued to state that he was not a proponent of expository preaching for three specific reasons: first, because he felt it was a form of preaching which rarely appeared in the Bible. Second, this type of expository preaching in his estimation remained too far removed from the present day needs of one’s listeners to be relevant. And third, it was often aimed at the intellect rather than the meeting of a specific need and therefore he felt it was often “cold.”<sup>649</sup> In a humorous critique of the expository preaching Thielemann witnessed during his day he stated, “Expository preaching is twentieth century Gnosticism. It’s salvation by verses...how often is the charge made that a preacher must get back to the Bible? And by this it is almost invariably meant he [sic] ought to get back to expository preaching. That’s simply not true. The Bible is full of need-centered preaching.”<sup>650</sup> Further, to bolster

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<sup>646</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, 27.

<sup>647</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>648</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 82-84.

<sup>649</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3-4.

<sup>650</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

his argument against what he considered a monotonous verse-by-verse expository style, Thielemann shared with his congregation what he saw as a common misunderstanding in the pew. He explained, “There are a lot of people who think that a sermon is more biblical the more verses you quote in it. Now of course that is not true. Because if it were true then most of the sermons in the Bible would not be very biblical. Since most sermons in the Bible do not quote much of the rest of the Bible.”<sup>651</sup> While this argument could be disputed, in his understanding, “Going back to the Bible does not mean, I think expository preaching at least as it is usually defined. It rather means bringing the Bible into the application of the needs of men [sic].”<sup>652</sup> Thielemann conceded there was a place for expository preaching, yet he personally believed expository preaching was most effective when directly related to the needs of the people.<sup>653</sup> He saw “the Bible as the record of the acts of God in human life under every conceivable circumstance.”<sup>654</sup> Therefore, the writers of Scripture were interested in God moving in response to human need. He admonished preachers, “‘Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path’ does not mean you spend all your time staring at the lamp – pondering the light. You use the lamp to illumine the shadowed places.”<sup>655</sup> The preaching Thielemann espoused and practiced aimed at providing an opportunity for Scripture to move actively in and through the lives of his listeners. He never wavered from his conviction that sermons based in Scripture would have an increased likelihood of being used by God. “If God’s Word is act, then that Word demands preaching, not only the repeating of the acts that have gone before but also the repeating of the acts in the sense that they are done again.”<sup>656</sup> It was this conviction in God’s Word as act which kept Thielemann committed to a version of biblical preaching which was not a verse-by-verse expository style of preaching. In the rare instances when Thielemann would walk his listeners through a passage of Scripture, he did so with larger sections of biblical text rather than verse-by-verse. For example, while

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<sup>651</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “How to Write A Sermon,” (sermon).

<sup>652</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 3.

<sup>653</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Lunch 1 Discussion on The Art of Preaching,” 7.

<sup>654</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 3-4

<sup>655</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

<sup>656</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary,” 1979, 1.

preaching on the Jesus' parable of the talents found in Matthew 25:14-30, Thielemann began by reading the passage in its entirety and then referenced larger units of thought during the sermon delivery starting with Matthew 25:15-17, then skipping over Matthew 25:18-19 completely without any comment as he moved to Matthew 25:20-23 and then finally addressing Matthew 25:24-30 from a macro view.<sup>657</sup> Thielemann hoped his need-centered approach to preaching would honor Scripture in a way that verse-by-verse exposition in a sermon may not achieve.<sup>658</sup> In the sampling of hundreds of Thielemann's sermons, the vast majority began with the reading of a biblical text but none are a pure verse-by-verse exposition of the passage of scripture.<sup>659</sup> In most cases, Thielemann focused on one part of the larger unit of thought. Though a critic of expository preaching, Thielemann's preaching methodology did not diminish his commitment to sermons grounded in Scripture.

Thielemann admitted he might be overstating his case against verse-by-verse expository preaching, but it is worth noting that Thielemann's position on expository preaching was not too far afield from much of the homiletical teaching on expository preaching popular during his day.<sup>660</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson goes so far as to say, "We must preach biblically or not at all. If what I am saying is not rooted in Scripture, then, however interesting or edifying it may be, it is not preaching."<sup>661</sup> He claimed that "all authentic preaching is expository preaching because it derives its substance from Scripture and is an exposition of it."<sup>662</sup> It is important to note that the term expository sermon is used synonymously with biblical preaching by Pitt-Watson. He was not referring to a method or form of preaching verse-by-verse but rather a sermon that derives its content from out of Scripture.<sup>663</sup> As David Larsen stated, "Biblical preaching is proclaiming what the Bible teaches, rightly and reverently."<sup>664</sup> Larsen continued to identify some historical forms that sermons have taken: homily, topical, textual-topical, textual and expository. Any of these

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<sup>657</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "How to Write A Sermon," (sermon).

<sup>658</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

<sup>659</sup> See Appendix One for a complete list of the sermons utilized in this study.

<sup>660</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

<sup>661</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Backer House Books, 1986) 23.

<sup>662</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers*, 23.

<sup>663</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Primer for Preachers*, 23-24.

<sup>664</sup> David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989) 30.



types of sermons he contended may be either biblical or unbiblical.<sup>665</sup> That is, any one of these particular sermon forms may not proclaim the message that the Bible teaches. According to Larsen, it is crucial to remember that “whatever form preaching may or may not take, our charge and challenge is to preach biblically because of what we believe about the Bible.”<sup>666</sup> Haddon W. Robinson was convinced that the message of the sermon must come directly from and be grounded in the biblical text. However, having a Scripture text attached to a sermon Robinson realizes is no guarantee of a sermon communicating a biblical message. “When preachers announce the text, they sometimes practice sleight of mind – now you see it, now you don’t. The passage and the sermon may be nothing more than strangers passing in the pulpit.”<sup>667</sup> Robinson also admitted that “sound doctrine can be taught without referring to specific biblical passages but grounding one’s sermons in Scripture protects a preacher from error. More positively, through expository preaching a minister speaks with authority beyond his [sic] own and those who sit before him [sic] have a better chance of hearing God address them directly.”<sup>668</sup> Biblical or expository preaching according to Robinson was not a method of preaching but a philosophy. “It reflects a preacher’s honest effort to submit his thought to the Bible rather than to subject the Bible to his thought.”<sup>669</sup> Homileticians from similar theological backgrounds but with different approaches to the preaching task, agree that effective preaching ought to be biblical preaching. But it should not be assumed by the consensus of the preachers mentioned above that all Christian preachers affirm that a sermon should be derived from the biblical text. As we have seen, there are preachers, such as Harry Emerson Fosdick from the liberal protestant theological perspective who would not have endorsed this practice.<sup>670</sup> Not all preachers contend with the biblical text in the original language trying to get close to its original meaning through grammatical, literary and historical study. However, each one of the preachers referenced in this section

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<sup>665</sup> David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching*, 29-32.

<sup>666</sup> David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching*, 33.

<sup>667</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Making a Difference in Preaching*, 70.

<sup>668</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, Scott M. Gibson, ed. *Making a Difference in Preaching*, 70.

<sup>669</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, Scott M. Gibson, ed. *Making a Difference in Preaching*, 69.

<sup>670</sup> See Harry Emerson Fosdick’s “What’s the Matter with Preaching”.

approached the biblical text from varying perspectives, but they all agree the message that the sermon communicates should be derived from and not imposed upon the biblical text. This is a similar line of reasoning Thielemann promoted. He was critical of a verse-by-verse exposition in preaching, but like many homiletics of his day, Thielemann championed a sermon grounded in the biblical text.

#### *Evangelical Presuppositions*

As we discuss the use of Scripture in Thielemann's preaching methodology, it is necessary to address the presuppositions with which Thielemann approached the biblical text. In both his theology and hermeneutic, Thielemann landed between two theological poles: traditional evangelical views on one side and neo-orthodox views on the other side. In order to understand his paradoxical stance, it is helpful to compare Thielemann alongside John Stott's more traditional evangelical understanding of the hermeneutical task in approaching Scripture.

Traditional evangelical understanding of Scripture presupposes that the Bible is the revelation of God, inspired, authoritative, supreme, sufficient and inerrant in all that it affirms. This traditional evangelical view has been represented by Stott who believed that "Scripture is God's Word written."<sup>671</sup> This does not mean that Stott affirmed a literal dictation theory of revelation, rather he believed in a "double authorship" method of God's revelation, "The Bible is God's Word written through human hands."<sup>672</sup> God may still be known today because "he is accessible only through the Bible, as the Holy Spirit brings to life his own witness to him in its pages."<sup>673</sup> Stott was convinced that God has spoken "Once and for all and forever."<sup>674</sup> For Stott, Robinson, Lloyd-Jones and many traditional evangelicals, God's revelation is complete and sufficient. Therefore, Stott affirmed the preacher is responsible for communicating "with faithfulness to the twentieth century (and endorse from our own experience) the only authoritative witness there is, namely God's own witness to Christ through the first-century apostolic eyewitness."<sup>675</sup> That God has spoken led Stott to affirm that the preacher received his or her authority

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<sup>671</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 96.

<sup>672</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 97.

<sup>673</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 98.

<sup>674</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 100.

<sup>675</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 98.

not from within himself or herself, but from God's Word as revealed through the Scriptures. Stott said, "How dare we speak, if God has not spoken? By ourselves we have nothing to say. To address a congregation without any assurance that we are bearers of a divine message would be the height of arrogance and folly."<sup>676</sup> Moreover, Stott believed that "God still speaks through what he has spoken."<sup>677</sup> Stott affirmed God's Word is complete but held that God is still very much active. Stott stated, "Scripture is far more than a collection of ancient documents in which God's Word is exhibited behind glass like a relic or a fossil. On the contrary, it is a living word to living people from the living God, a contemporary message for the contemporary world."<sup>678</sup> However, for Stott this does not allow the preacher to preach a sermon which runs contrary to what has been revealed by God through Scripture. God will not speak a word today which has "little or nothing to do with Scripture."<sup>679</sup> As Stott affirmed, the two messages that God has spoken and that God still speaks must remain closely related to each other "Because it is *through* what he spoke that he speaks."<sup>680</sup> As a representative of the traditional evangelical presupposition on Scripture, Stott believed God's revelation in the Scripture was complete and yet alive and active, today.

To Stott's view, Thielemann would respond, "We ought to use Scripture as Scripture is to be used. Let the record of God's deeds be used as a bridge for God to do those deeds again in the midst of his people."<sup>681</sup> Additionally, Thielemann would argue that "God did not stop speaking when his book went to press" supporting his belief that God's Word is act.<sup>682</sup> In a sermon entitled "Letter to the Son of My Dreams," Thielemann creatively wrote a letter to his hypothetical son warning him of the "incipient anti-intellectualism abroad within the councils of the Church, and I urge you to avoid it at all costs."<sup>683</sup> He supported this warning with an example of

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<sup>676</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 96.

<sup>677</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 100.

<sup>678</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 100.

<sup>679</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 102.

<sup>680</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 102.

<sup>681</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

<sup>682</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 9.

<sup>683</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Letter to the Son of My Dreams," (sermon).

how Scripture was misused to foster a spirit of anti-intellectualism. As he told the son of his dreams:

Faith is a living thing. It wrestles with the issues of God. It is patient before that which is unresolved. My dear one, never make the mistake of believing that you can sharpen your mind by narrowing it. The Bible is not a hitching post; it is a signpost. And the rigid upholders of fundamentalism offer a present that only has a past. But the course of faith is always forward, into the future.<sup>684</sup>

Thielemann's son was hypothetical, but Thielemann's frustration with fundamentalism was not. He interpreted fundamentalists' views on scripture as a hitching post or fixed propositions and preconceived ideas instead of a living, active signpost pointing listeners forward in their faith. Thielemann encouraged preachers to come to Scripture and "study the passage and let it speak to us, bathed in prayer, to dig until you come up with what is for you at least the fruit. The Word starts with God, and not with you. We'll miss and miss often, but at least we've tried. And it is better to flub honestly than to be superficial."<sup>685</sup> To emphasize this point Thielemann found the image of a safecracker used by Fuller Seminary President and Old Testament Professor David A. Hubbard helpful in describing how this attitude works in practice:

Approaching the Scriptures like a safecracker, not with dynamite and a sledgehammer to blast it open, but with your fingertips filed and you play with the dials until the tumblers drop. You see, this isn't selecting a text to suit your purpose, but working with a passage until the passage suddenly opens and claims you. Till the music of it sets your feet tapping.<sup>686</sup>

Hubbard presented a picture of the preacher approaching the biblical text not with an idea or agenda to impose but with humility allowing Scripture to inform and shape minds and hearts. Hubbard taught, "Approaching the Bible is like safecracking. Not the kind where you go in with crowbars and dynamite, but the kind when, with filed fingers you feel the knob until the tumblers drop."<sup>687</sup>

Thielemann found in Hubbard's safecracker a helpful simile to ensure that Scripture

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<sup>684</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Letter to the Son of My Dreams," (sermon).

<sup>685</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 10.

<sup>686</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 10.

<sup>687</sup> David A. Hubbard, "Some Musings on the Preacher's Task," unpublished paper quoted in Michael P. Halcomb, "The Use of Metaphor in Preaching" (D.Min. Thesis presented to Bethel Theological Seminary, 1982) 119.

is not a hitching post for fixed propositions or preconceived ideas. It is true that Thielemann's method of preaching always began with a preconceived need and then found a text which spoke to that need, but this did not keep Thielemann from allowing Scripture to claim the preacher and then the listener. Thielemann rejected the utilitarian use of Scripture which looks for a passage to support one's ideas but rather practiced an approach which allowed the text to claim and communicate truth to the listener.<sup>688</sup>

Similar to Stott, Haddon Robinson's definition of expository preaching supports biblically grounded sermons. Robinson believed expository preaching was: "The communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers."<sup>689</sup> Although Robinson began the sermon writing process with a biblical text, Thielemann started with a need or theme and then found a Scripture to address that specific need or theme.<sup>690</sup> For example, in his sermon "Have You Mailed Your Cards, Yet?" based on 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:3, Thielemann raised the need of belonging.<sup>691</sup> His sermon opened with a personal story of a lonely train ride at Christmas time to Lucerne, Switzerland. Upon arriving at his hotel, Thielemann received a letter from his parents which transformed his loneliness into belonging. He said, "Mail is a wonderful tonic when you're on the road. It brings closeness across the miles."<sup>692</sup> If Thielemann was true to his methodology, one can assume he aimed directly at his listeners' need for belonging and then found the biblical text to speak to this need. While Thielemann and Robinson disagreed on the starting point of preaching, they both placed importance on preaching that connects with the listener and the biblical text. Thielemann parted company with Robinson in his emphasis on the listener's responsibility to create objective meaning out of the biblical text. It is this turn towards the preacher's responsibility to their listeners and the listener's responsibility to the

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<sup>688</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 10.

<sup>689</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 2001), 31.

<sup>690</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "How to Write a Sermon," (sermon).

<sup>691</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Have You Mailed Your Cards, Yet?," (sermon).

<sup>692</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Have You Mailed Your Cards, Yet?," (sermon).

text which is addressed in Thielemann's embrace of both neo-orthodoxy and the ideas of new homiletic.

### *The New Homiletic*

Thielemann's preaching methodology and use of Scripture aligned in some features with the New Homiletic. According to Scott M. Gibson, "David James Randolph coined the term *New Homiletic* and formalized the teachings of Ebeling and Fuchs in his 1969 landmark book *The Renewal of Preaching*."<sup>693</sup> Randolph defined the New Homiletic as follows: "Preaching is the event in which the biblical text is interpreted in order that its meaning will come to expression in the concrete situation of the hearers."<sup>694</sup> Fred. B. Craddock was an advocate and voice for the New Homiletic and espoused the tenants of this movement in both his teaching and preaching. Craddock understood Scripture as authoritative but not in the same manner as the traditional evangelical views of those described earlier. Craddock believed, "To say these texts are canon is to say they are the authoritative rule by which to measure belief and conduct; to say they are Scripture is to say they are living documents, addressing believers in every age and place with a word that is fresh and appropriate as well as authoritative."<sup>695</sup> In one of Craddock's works on homiletics, *As One Without Authority*, he said, "The Word of God is the address of God to the hearer who sits before the text open to its becoming Word of God. Most importantly, God's Word is *God's Word* to the reader/learner, not a word about God gleaned from the documents."<sup>696</sup> Craddock believed that the Word of God becomes the Word of God only when the listener has experienced the biblical text. In Craddock's understanding the authority of God's Word does not rest in a complete and closed revelation of God in Scripture but in the faith community's continued reinterpretation and experience of the Word of God. He stated, "For reasons historical, practical and theological the canon is closed and will not be opened. However, as long as interpretation continues, the canon remains

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<sup>693</sup> Scott M. Gibson, "Critique of the New Homiletic," *Preaching Today*, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/books/art-and-craft-of-biblical-preaching/style/critique-of-new-homiletic.html>.

<sup>694</sup> David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 17.

<sup>695</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, 128.

<sup>696</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Endi: Haymaker Press, 1971) 114.

theologically open because new hearings of the Word are possible. A closed canon does not mean a silent God if interpretation remains a vital enterprise of the church.”<sup>697</sup> Taking this a step further, theologian Rudolph Bultmann made the claim that the “understanding of the text is never a definitive one, but rather remains open because the meaning of the Scriptures discloses itself anew in every future.”<sup>698</sup> The New Homiletic view of God’s Word “becoming” was in contrast to the traditional evangelical view of Scripture but seemingly more in line with Thielemann’s understanding of God’s Word having its being in becoming. The listener’s openness to the word of God becoming the Word of God was important to Thielemann’s preaching methodology. This was why he placed importance on imaginative recreation of the story in the listener’s life experiences. For example, Thielemann took time to imagine what it would be like “to be a leper, to smell leprosy, to taste it, to think about the separation and the loneliness, and the final hopelessness; what it must have been like to believe that you would never be touched by anyone, again.”<sup>699</sup> In another example Thielemann said, “You can stand up and say to your people, ‘All men are mortal’- and they will nod. But if you stand up and say, ‘Philipp, Mr. Brown’s son, is dying’- the church becomes the church. It moves into the stream of your peoples’ experience.”<sup>700</sup> It was Thielemann’s conviction that the written words of Scripture were not objectively the Word of God; rather, the written words become the Word of God only when heard and acted upon.<sup>701</sup> This was why he placed importance on convicting and motivating his listeners.<sup>702</sup> For example, in his sermon “Anyone For the Parade?”, Thielemann called his listeners to costly discipleship with an illustration taken from the epitaph of two, young mountain climbers who died on the Matterhorn in 1934 which read, “They scorned the lesser peaks.” Thielemann said,

That’s my desire for you – that you scorn the lesser peaks – that you turn your backs on anything that will call you to less than your uttermost for Jesus Christ. I call you tonight in his name to scale the Matterhorn’s of the

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<sup>697</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching*, 128.

<sup>698</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed Schuberr M. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1961) 295.

<sup>699</sup> Bruce. W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 3.

<sup>700</sup> Bruce. W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 3.

<sup>701</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>702</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 5.

Spirit of God – to press on toward the high mark of the calling of God in Christ Jesus!<sup>703</sup>

Thielemann ended the majority of his sermons with a call to action, to live out the biblical text. While Thielemann never voiced alliance with the new homiletic, his preaching theology and methodology lean in that direction. However, he did identify with neo-orthodoxy which we will explore next.

### *Neo-Orthodoxy*

The neo-orthodox understanding that God's Word has its being in becoming through the actions of the listener runs counter to the traditional evangelical view of Scripture, yet Thielemann preferred to self-identify as theologically neo-orthodox. He told a story which highlights his alignment with neo-orthodoxy. Thielemann recounted sitting in a lecture with Karl Barth when a young fundamentalist student stood up holding a Bible in his hand and asked, "Sir, do you believe this is the Word of God?" to which Thielemann said Barth responded kindly, "Sir, that depends on whether you are holding the book, or the God who offered the book is holding you."<sup>704</sup> Like Barth, Thielemann believed God's Word was not a static book to be worshiped, but the record of God's acts which point people to Jesus Christ. He stated, "The Christ who makes the preaching event is *before* Scripture and he will be *after* Scripture. And it is this Christ meeting people with needs that is the essence of preaching. And this comes not from preaching through a book but preaching to a congregation."<sup>705</sup> Because of the influence Barth played in Thielemann's life, informing both his theology and preaching methodology, it would be helpful to briefly recap Barth's understanding of God's Word.

In response to the question is the Bible the Word of God, Barth would answer a resounding, "it depends."<sup>706</sup> As we have discussed in an earlier chapter, Barth did not assert that the Word of God was objectively the Word of God, but he did affirm, along with Thielemann, that the Bible becomes the Word of God when it

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<sup>703</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Anyone for The Parade," (sermon).

<sup>704</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Great Twentieth Century Christians – Karl Barth," (sermon). Thielemann also used a similar story replacing Karl Barth with Paul Tillich, in Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching" 9.

<sup>705</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

<sup>706</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Great Twentieth Century Christians – Karl Barth," (sermon).



is proclaimed by the living human voice of the preacher. It is through the preaching event that the Bible might rightly be called the Word of God. As Barth explained, "The Bible, then, becomes God's Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word 'is' refers to its being in this becoming. It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us."<sup>707</sup>

This led to Barth's description of what he called the threefold form of God's Word: God's Word revealed through Jesus, the written Word of God and the preached or proclaimed Word of God.<sup>708</sup> Like the doctrine of the Trinity, Barth was not implying that there are three different Words of God, but one Word in three forms. Barth's understanding of God's Word influenced Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching and his overarching preaching methodology. The driving question which Barth imparted on Thielemann was how does the preacher "get from our words to the Word? To the act of God?"<sup>709</sup> Thielemann believed God's Word to be revelatory and therefore his view of Scripture was an active one.<sup>710</sup> In two separate preaching lectures Thielemann referenced what he called Karl Barth's description of preaching as the "transubstantiation of the word."<sup>711</sup> Thielemann postulated that Barth believed the preaching event, was similar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation in the Eucharist where, as Thielemann described, "the accidents are still only words, but they are changed into their substance, in their substance into nothing other than the present Christ."<sup>712</sup> This use of the "transubstantiation of the word" appears to be an attempt by Thielemann to explain Barth's understanding that the Bible is only God's Word if God is present and speaking through it in order to allow for its being in this becoming.<sup>713</sup>

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<sup>707</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 110.

<sup>708</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 120-121.

<sup>709</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.

<sup>710</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 4.

<sup>711</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 7 and Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 7.

<sup>712</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 7.

<sup>713</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 110.

Barth played a major role in the formation of Thielemann's view of what he called the "Bethlehem effect," the attempt to relive the event of Christ's incarnation among his listeners through the sermon.<sup>714</sup> This cannot happen by the preacher's own strength but through the power of the Holy Spirit in the preaching event.<sup>715</sup> Thielemann proclaimed that because God's Word is act it "demands preaching which is nothing other than the reporting of God's acts. Or, if you wish, the recreating of God's act. Preaching is not the giving of advice...it is the announcement of the Good News, a happening."<sup>716</sup> So, Thielemann understood preaching as a re-happening of that event or to use Barth's language the Word becoming.<sup>717</sup> Preaching "tells people what God has done, and at the same time it is God doing it again."<sup>718</sup>

Although Thielemann self-identified as neo-orthodox, in many ways his interpretation of Barth was more in line with Emil Brunner who debated publicly with Karl Barth in the 1930's about the connection between homiletics and rhetoric. Thomas Long who recorded a description of this debate between Barth and Brunner asserted that Barth argued for preachers to allow the Word of God to do its work of transforming individuals' lives without the additional use of rhetoric. Alternatively, Brunner contended that rhetoric in preaching was necessary in order to ensure a point of contact somewhere between the Word of God and the human situation.<sup>719</sup> While Thielemann agreed with Barth's view on Scripture, he appears in practice to have relied on Brunner's employment of rhetoric with the goal of moving people to action and connecting with a tangible need.<sup>720</sup>

Therefore, Thielemann's methodology of preaching requires the preacher to study the text, do the exegesis in the original language, pray and rely on the Holy Spirit and do what Thielemann called "homiletic homework."<sup>721</sup> Scripture comes first to ensure that a preacher is used by God, but Scripture must be recreated by

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<sup>714</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>715</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 8.

<sup>716</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 5.

<sup>717</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 110.

<sup>718</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 5.

<sup>719</sup> Fred Craddock, Gail R. O'Day and Thomas G. Long, *Listening to the word: Studies in honor of Fred B. Craddock* (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1993) 174-176.

<sup>720</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 7-9.

<sup>721</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Imagineering," 8.

the preacher to “bring it to life in our own time for our people.”<sup>722</sup> This is where the need-centered homiletic and the use of illustrations take center stage. “Preaching, then, is the imaginative recreation of the story of Scripture, so that people say, ‘I never thought of it that way before’, or ‘So, you can play it this way also?’ or ‘If this is so, what does this mean?’”<sup>723</sup> Effective preaching for Thielemann required the preacher to imaginatively recreate the story to connect the ancient world with the contemporary world of one’s listeners. According to Thielemann, preaching demands a double responsibility on both preacher and listener. The preacher is dependent on the Holy Spirit to “bring sound communication insights into the preaching situation in order to capture and hold the attention of our listeners.”<sup>724</sup> To hold attention, Thielemann admonished preachers to be creative or “get more circus into your pulpit.”<sup>725</sup> For example, in a preaching lecture Thielemann told a story of a girl in a pageant spinning a baton in front of a packed auditorium. She throws the baton, but it gets stuck in the curtain and never comes back down. The girl has a choice. She could run off the stage or continue with her performance as if the baton still spun. She chose the latter and began to pantomime as if the baton was back in her hand. It was a magnificent performance. One viewer exclaimed that the spinning baton was so fast, he could not even see it. Thielemann then said, “So, my friends, if you want to catch your congregation, and you want to hold them and you want to thrill them, and you want to send them home with a memory, use your imagination, and if you want to write down one word to remind you of it all, here’s the word: baton.”<sup>726</sup> In Thielemann’s methodology of preaching there was no place for passive observers in the preaching event, but the preacher must strive to make non-involvement impossible. In comparing the sermon event to the experience of the theater Thielemann shared, “A noted playwright says, that anyone who buys a ticket to one of his plays bears some responsibility for what occurs in the theatre that night.”<sup>727</sup> If the listener engaged and if the preacher does his or her homiletic

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<sup>722</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 3.

<sup>723</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 3.

<sup>724</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975,” 1.

<sup>725</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 1.

<sup>726</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 10-11.

<sup>727</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 4.

homework well, the Bible will be “like a Steinway piano...ready to rumble and respond to our touch.”<sup>728</sup> Although Thielemann self-identifies as neo-orthodox theologically, his focus on relevancy, garnering effect, creating a point of contact with the listener and the use of rhetoric in preaching seems to run contrary to Barth’s neo-orthodox theology and understanding of homiletics.<sup>729</sup>

### *The Treasure of Scripture*

Thielemann honored the Bible as a “treasure” and implored the preacher to place primacy on preaching the Bible.<sup>730</sup> He did not believe that Scripture was infallible and did not build his life or preaching methodology on an infallible book, but rather he preferred to say he rested in the care of what he believed was an infallible God.<sup>731</sup> Thielemann never wavered in his commitment to preaching God’s Word and encouraging others to do the same. In a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, based on 2 Kings 22, Thielemann presented a passionate defense of his lifelong commitment to preaching God’s Word. The sermon began with a reading of 2 Kings 22. Thielemann set up the historical context of the passage and described the dramatic scene where a group of workmen discover the Book of the Law hidden in a wall while doing renovations on the Temple in Israel and began to read it. As Thielemann observed, “The reading of the Book changed things. The reading of the Book always changes things, and the reading of the Book can still change things today.”<sup>732</sup> Thielemann asserted the importance of the proclamation of Scripture in the local church. As we have seen he often lamented that while men and women were “desperately anxious to hear the Word preached...they are very often betrayed by preachers.”<sup>733</sup> For Thielemann the betrayal came in the form of God’s Word not being preached effectively and as a result he believed many people in the church were ignorant of God’s Word.<sup>734</sup> He expressed sadness over what he saw as a perceived lack of understanding of God’s Word among the laity.<sup>735</sup> He

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<sup>728</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 8.

<sup>729</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, 8-9.

<sup>730</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Waiting for One’s Luggage,” (sermon).

<sup>731</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>732</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Waiting for One’s Luggage,” (sermon).

<sup>733</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Primacy of Preaching,” 3.

<sup>734</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Waiting for One’s Luggage,” (sermon).

<sup>735</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Waiting for One’s Luggage,” (sermon).

directed his disappointment not at the men and women in the pews but rather at the preachers in the pulpits who failed to preach God's Word to God's people.

Thielemann asserted this ignorance of the Bible among the people fell squarely on the shoulders of preachers:

And I think it is largely the fault of the clergy. There are too many ministers you see that read books about the Bible instead of the Bible. There are too many ministers who believe that their congregations don't want to hear the Bible but want to hear other things. There are too many ministers who have broken the vows of their own ordinations in proclaiming the Word of God.<sup>736</sup>

Thielemann encouraged preachers to stop trying to "demythologize the Bible" and allow "God's Word to demythologize him [sic] and his people."<sup>737</sup> By "demythologizing" Thielemann is calling for preachers to sit under the authority of the Bible, to study the passage, pray and allow God's Word to speak into their lives first before preaching.<sup>738</sup> The most important source in preaching is to be the Word of God.<sup>739</sup> In Thielemann's estimation lack of time in the study was disrespectful to the responsibility and position a pastor held.<sup>740</sup> But Thielemann warned, out of all the reading which preachers should do as they prepare to craft effective sermons that are informed and connect with one's listeners, the "most important source is always to be the Word of God."<sup>741</sup>

Because of Thielemann's conviction that no sermon was worth anything unless the Holy Spirit touched "the word which is built upon his Word," Thielemann instructed preachers to read God's Word first and foremost while preparing sermons, and this was also part of Thielemann's personal habit.<sup>742</sup> Thielemann disclosed to his congregation that he personally read God's Word every day and in every season of life:

I read it in the sun, I read it in the light of my own heart, I read it in the dark nights of my own soul, I read it when I am believing and I read it when I am unbelieving, I read it when I am strong and I read it when I am weak, I read it when I am sensitive and I read it when I am insensitive. Have never been

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<sup>736</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

<sup>737</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

<sup>738</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 10.

<sup>739</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

<sup>740</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of illustration," 8.

<sup>741</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage." (sermon).

<sup>742</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

able to read it without finding something new. I am never able to plumb its depths; I am never able to scale its heights. When you lay me to rest put with me this book and when I rise again from the grave there's only one thing, I want to have with me and that is this book. And everything in life that I have ever done which is any good is because of my reading of this book.<sup>743</sup>

Thielemann encouraged his listeners to read the "treasure" that lies within God's Word. He believed that God's Word is a treasure, a dependable and ultimate standard and "in its symbols, and in its stories, in its characters and in its parables, in its history and in its poetry is to be found nothing less than the council and the power of God - what we need in our churches, what we need in our nation and what we need in our individual lives."<sup>744</sup> He taught that "disciplined and devoted use of the Scriptures is the greatest power a Christian can know aside from the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>745</sup> For Thielemann, the Word of God was an "anthology of preaching, an announcement of the acts of God, and if nothing else speaks to us of the importance of preaching well then this certainly ought to."<sup>746</sup> As we have stated, Thielemann built his preaching methodology on what he saw as the three factors increasing the likelihood of the preacher being used by God as a "channel."<sup>747</sup> The first of these factors was the core conviction that all effective preaching must be built upon the "treasure" of Scripture.<sup>748</sup>

### **Variety of Form**

Thielemann asserted, "Effective sermons are the offspring of study, discipline, of prayer and especially of the unction of the Holy Ghost. They should be seen to come from the heart and from the heart as filled with the love of Christ and the love of souls."<sup>749</sup> According to Thielemann, if God's Word is acted it must be lived out in the life of the preacher and the people to whom one is preaching. His core theological conviction fed, guided and informed Thielemann's need-centered methodology and praxis of homiletics. Thielemann believed preachers should

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<sup>743</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

<sup>744</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

<sup>745</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Waiting for One's Luggage," (sermon).

<sup>746</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 6.

<sup>747</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>748</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>749</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 14.

preach from the Bible, be creative in their preaching forms and structures, and have a proper view of themselves in the homiletic process in order to increase the likelihood of the preacher being used by God as an effective “channel.”<sup>750</sup> First, preaching ought to be built on the Scriptures, which he believed were “a record of God’s act” which we have addressed.<sup>751</sup> Second, Thielemann claimed the preacher should be free to use a variety of forms in preaching “because the Holy Spirit will not be inhibited and moves in freedom.”<sup>752</sup> Thielemann hoped to spark creativity in preaching aimed at meeting needs, grounded in God’s Word and moving people to action. Third, the preacher ought to invest him or herself completely in the process of preaching so preaching creates crisis for the preacher and listener.<sup>753</sup> As we consider Thielemann’s variety of form, we will examine the three-sentence formula Thielemann employed and taught to ensure the correct handling of God’s Word in preaching.

#### *The Three Sentences*

As we saw in chapter three, Thielemann utilized the three-sentence structure derived from the world of radio broadcast advertising and adapted to preaching by Henry Babcock Adams.<sup>754</sup> Adams studied the spot announcement, the shortest and simplest unit in radio broadcasting, to learn lessons for the field of homiletics. According to Adams, the spot announcement was often no more than fifteen seconds to two minutes in length, so to be effective it should contain three recognizable parts: “the appeal for attention (or lead in), the information, and the call to action.”<sup>755</sup> Adams contended that sermons, much like spot announcements, should be reducible to three sentences. Thielemann adapted the three sentences to his own preaching.<sup>756</sup> The first sentence is a question stating the need. The second sentence is an affirmation from Scripture addressing the need. The third sentence is

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<sup>750</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>751</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>752</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>753</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>754</sup> Henry Babcock Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit: An Examination of Certain Emphases in Broadcasting Important to Pulpit Effectiveness*. Thesis (Th. D.), San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1957, 137.

<sup>755</sup> Henry Babcock Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit*, 137.

<sup>756</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 4.

an invitation to respond to the biblical truth addressing the need.<sup>757</sup> In the third sentence, the invitation to action, both Thielemann and Adams recommended that a verb, in either the imperative or subjunctive tense, exhort or motivate one's listeners to do something with the truth presented.<sup>758</sup> For Thielemann, these three sentences ensured that a sermon addressed a need which was then met by God's Word and finally acted out in the world in a tangible way.<sup>759</sup>

### *Three Sentences in Practice*

Thielemann utilized the three-sentence scheme developed by Adams in a number of his sermons. For example, in the sermon entitled, "A Fat Man Looks at a Thin World" preached at Grove City College, Thielemann candidly stated that the Lord had been speaking to him about overindulgence both with his personal weight and in neglect to the problem of world hunger.<sup>760</sup> He also saw overindulgence as a pressing need among the students at Grove City College. He started the sermon with a question identifying the need: "How do you deal with the need of overindulgence?"<sup>761</sup> According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this question aimed at esteem and belonging needs among the students.<sup>762</sup> Next, Thielemann brought in relevant Scripture passages to speak to the need of overindulgence. Last, Thielemann convicted and motivated his listeners to action. Thielemann asked students to give money to the poor and hungry that they would have normally spent on parties, and he organized a campus wide offering to help feed the poor. Much like the effectiveness of a spot announcement, the three recognizable sentences gave Thielemann's sermons focus which directly raised the need, the Scripture meeting the need and the tangible call to action.

In a sermon delivered to First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh entitled "Because," based on Deuteronomy 7:6-11, Thielemann again used Adam's three-sentence structure. His first sentence stated the need, how can we know that God

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<sup>757</sup> Henry Babcock Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit*, 137.

<sup>758</sup> Henry Babcock Adams, *Broadcasting and the Protestant Pulpit*, 189, and Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>759</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4-5.

<sup>760</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Fat Man Looks at a Thin World," (sermon).

<sup>761</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Fat Man Looks at a Thin World," (sermon).

<sup>762</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 11.



loves us?<sup>763</sup> Again, Thielemann looked to Maslow's pyramid of needs to address the need for love and belonging in his listeners. The second sentence met the need with Scripture. He turned to Deuteronomy 7:7-8 where God reminds the Israelites that he did not choose them because they were more numerous than the other peoples, but because he loves them. And last, the final sermon sentence called his listeners to respond to God's unconditional love by showing love in action. In single words each sentence in this approach could be described as: "relevance, truth and response" or "need, Good News, opportunity."<sup>764</sup>

In another sermon preached at both Glendale Presbyterian Church and Grove City College entitled "Is Somebody Standing on our Wings?" based on Matthew 17:14-20 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, the first sentence presents the question, what do you do when you encounter difficult people who do not encourage you?<sup>765</sup> Thielemann stated this need in three different ways. First, "How do you deal with the person who stands upon your wings of faith? Second, "How do you deal with the person who plants himself right on your pinions of belief and makes it so difficult for you to rise up into the great adventure that faith is?" And third, "How do you deal with people whose faithlessness frustrates your faithfulness?"<sup>766</sup> Next, Thielemann explained 1 Corinthians 13 to address the identified need. And last, he invited his listeners to respond with forgiveness to difficult people while clinging to faith in Jesus Christ. Thielemann concluded, "So, if someone is standing on your wings, love them, bear them, hold onto your beliefs, hold onto your hopes, hold onto your enduring convictions."<sup>767</sup> Once again, the three sentence structure "relevance, truth and response" or "need, Good News, opportunity" directs Thielemann's sermon and strengthens its effectiveness.<sup>768</sup> Because of the emphasis on needs, Scripture and application Adam's three-sentence format suits Thielemann's methodology and need-centered approach to preaching.

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<sup>763</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Because," (sermon).

<sup>764</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>765</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Is Somebody Standing on Your Wings?," (sermon).

<sup>766</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Is Somebody Standing on Your Wings?," ("sermon).

<sup>767</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Is Somebody Standing on Your Wings?," (sermon).

<sup>768</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

Thielemann identified benefits of Adam's three-sentence scheme. For Thielemann, Adam's second sentence regarding the truth of Scripture comprised the bulk of the sermon. Thielemann said there are only three things you can do with Scripture, "You can either explain it, you can either convince people it is true, or you can try to persuade them to try it."<sup>769</sup> To know which angle to take with Scripture, one must know the needs of the people. Thielemann believed the problem with contemporary preaching of his day could be traced back to the sermon beginning either with a topic or a social problem or with the pure exposition of Scripture which may or may not have specific relevance to the listeners.<sup>770</sup> He believed, if a preacher begins with a need then one's listeners "will start to care about the social issues, then they will start to care about what the Scripture says – it will become relevant to them."<sup>771</sup> Thielemann summarized his own excitement over this three sentence structure when he said, "the utilization of this approach which I am suggesting of Henry Adams not only brings you back to your need; but it also brings you back to your people."<sup>772</sup> This method also provided clear sermon structure and outlines for Thielemann.<sup>773</sup> And, Adam's three-sentence structure for Thielemann had a specific focus. If a preacher communicates God's Word effectively the fruit should be the moment someone says to the preacher, "You spoke to me directly today" which for Thielemann was evidence that Christ was walking in the midst of his people, a recreation of the Bethlehem moment.<sup>774</sup> Or, if someone walks up to the preacher and asks, "May I talk with you further about this? – Which means Christ through the Holy Spirit is still speaking to them and you are the medium of that exchange."<sup>775</sup> For Thielemann, Adam's three-sentence approach fit his preaching methodology and kept the preacher close to the needs of the people, the truth of the biblical text and ensured application.<sup>776</sup> While Thielemann remained commitment to Adam's three-sentence structure in his preaching methodology, it is

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<sup>769</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>770</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>771</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>772</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>773</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>774</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>775</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

<sup>776</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 5.

not without its weaknesses for preachers. Primarily, the rigid three sentence structure could lead to a mechanical formulaic approach to preaching which is overly simplistic. Perhaps not every sermon is reducible to this three-sentence structure and the use of this approach might even squelch the variety of form in preaching which Thielemann advocated strongly. There is also the danger when starting with a need in one's preaching of manipulating your listeners to a specific response.

## **Role of Preacher**

### *The Double Responsibility*

As mentioned previously, Thielemann outlined several factors that contributed to a sermon being used by the Holy Spirit to move people: the sermon must be grounded in Scripture, the sermon structure should not come between God's Word and God's people and finally, the preacher ought to invest him or herself completely in the process of preaching.<sup>777</sup> In order for the biblical text to engage the preacher fully, Thielemann encouraged preachers to bring Scripture back to personal experience so it communicates to both the preacher and listener.<sup>778</sup> In a sermon on 1 Samuel 5, Thielemann described the time that the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and set it up in a temple dedicated to their god Dagon. The statue of Dagon repeatedly bows down to the Ark of the Covenant, so in frustration, the Philistines send the Ark of the Covenant back to the Israelites. After "wrestling with it for quite some time," Thielemann asked the question, why wouldn't the Philistines immediately turn to the God of the Israelites after such an obvious show of superior power?<sup>779</sup> Thielemann described the process of allowing Scripture's claim on himself by stating, "I have my idea, my idol of God. Then something comes along and challenges my concept of God. My immediate decision is that it has to go. Because my idea of God is not big enough to handle it you see."<sup>780</sup> For Thielemann, Scripture must first claim and impact the preacher before

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<sup>777</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>778</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

<sup>779</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 10.

<sup>780</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 10.

it can be communicated effectively to one's listeners. This was one of his core presuppositions and central to his preaching methodology.

As Thielemann walked his congregation through the process of writing a sermon, he pointed out how the biblical text confronts him personally during the process. He said, "Now, what might be happening to you at this moment is what happens to me every time I write a sermon. All of a sudden this passage of Scripture that I am working on to present to somebody else begins to eat away at me."<sup>781</sup> It is worth noting that this double-edged nature of preaching where the biblical text confronts both preacher and his or her listeners is also present in Haddon Robinson's definition of expository preaching.<sup>782</sup> And, it coincides with Philip Brooks' famous definition of preaching from his 1877 Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching as "bringing the truth through personality."<sup>783</sup> Thielemann's preaching methodology relied on this double responsibility.

#### *The Bridge-Builder*

This double responsibility was a logical result of the emphasis Thielemann placed on the preacher connecting God's Word with the listener in the preaching event. Thielemann understood the challenges of bridging the gap between the ancient world of the Bible and the current world of one's listeners and encouraged preachers to make the extra effort to bring the Bible into the present day in order to connect with one's listeners. The preacher's task was "to be the bridge over which Christ walks into today."<sup>784</sup> Thielemann contended:

It is a top task to try to bring the past into the present every Sunday – to bring biblical truth smack into the middle of the here and now. It is not enough to say to our people, 'Go back with me now to old Jerusalem', because after worship the front doors of the church will *not* open on old Jerusalem; they will open on Main Street, twentieth century.<sup>785</sup>

Thielemann argued that biblical hermeneutics and preaching should not remain in the long ago and far away ancient culture. He stated, "The fundamental problem in

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<sup>781</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "How to Write a Sermon," (sermon).

<sup>782</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 31.

<sup>783</sup> Philips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989) 26.

<sup>784</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>785</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Imagineering," Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Grenada Hills, CA, November 1975, 2.

bridge building is to get the thing anchored at both ends. So too much preaching today is either in the world and ignorant of Scripture or on the other hand so involved in Scripture that it never gets to the world.”<sup>786</sup> The bridge-building metaphor has been widely used to describe the importance of preaching which first connects God’s Word to the preacher, and then onto one’s listeners in a way that moves people to action and transforms lives. Most notably, John Stott first used the image of the preacher as a bridge builder in *A Preacher’s Portrait* published in 1961, a work Thielemann, given his commitment to reading and study, would likely have been familiar with as he formulated his preaching lecture series.<sup>787</sup>

The necessity and importance of the preacher spanning a yawning chasm between text and listener is not unique to Stott or Thielemann. Ian-Pitt Watson taught, “Every sermon is stretched like a bowstring between the text of the Bible on one hand and the problems of contemporary human life on the other. If the string is insecurely tethered to either end, the bow is useless.”<sup>788</sup> Paul Scott Wilson described the process as the “double hermeneutic.” And, this “double-hermeneutic” required that the preacher study adequately both the ancient text and the contemporary world, for one may not be properly interpreted without understanding the other.<sup>789</sup> David Larsen contended that “the preacher must be concerned to bridge the two worlds of the truth of God’s Word and the realities of people’s lives.”<sup>790</sup> It was Haddon Robinson’s understanding that “the preacher builds bridges that span the gulf between the written Word of God and the minds of men and women. He [sic] must interpret the Scripture so accurately and plainly and apply it so truthfully that the truth crosses the bridge.”<sup>791</sup> Fred Craddock described the primary “hermeneutical task” of the preacher as the negotiation of the gap between the ancient and modern worlds.<sup>792</sup> And from a more critical perspective, Michael Quicke advocated moving towards a way of visualizing

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<sup>786</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “A Theology of Preaching,” 9.

<sup>787</sup> John Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1961) 25.

<sup>788</sup> Ian Pitt-Watson, *A Kind of Folly: Toward a Practical Theology of Preaching*. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1976), 57.

<sup>789</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 160-161.

<sup>790</sup> Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching*, 95.

<sup>791</sup> Haddon W. Robinson and Scott M. Gibson, ed. *Making a Difference*, 83.

<sup>792</sup> Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 106.

preaching which moves beyond a static 180 degree arc with the Bible on one side and the contemporary world on the other side to a model of “360 degree preaching, which has God’s authoritative word connecting and transforming people so that they might be Bible shaped, returning their lives in confession to God.”<sup>793</sup> Quicke seemed to be calling for a more robust means of communicating the importance of preaching which connects God’s Word to the preacher and then to one’s listeners.<sup>794</sup> This brings us back to the importance of God’s Word first confronting the preacher before it can be effectively communicated. This dimension of allowing the text to challenge the preacher was important to Thielemann because it helped to bring the ancient biblical text to life in the modern-day listener.

### *The Double Grip*

For Thielemann and many preachers the bridge has been used as a metaphor to communicate the importance of a sermon creating a pathway between the ancient text and the modern listener. In Thielemann’s methodology of preaching, he expands this image of a pathway to highlight the vital and often painful role the preacher plays in this bridge building endeavor. In Thielemann’s methodology of preaching the sermon was not a “theological essay” or a “moral essay” or “a discussion of the social and political economic views of the preacher. It is not even a dissertation on Christian morality.”<sup>795</sup> For Thielemann, a sermon was “an attempt, on the part of the preacher to be the channel by which the Spirit of the Living God touches people at the very center of their lives today.”<sup>796</sup> To take the bridge-building analogy a bit further, the preacher was also the bridge in a double grip of the preacher holding onto God and God’s people. Thielemann told the true story of radio engineer Harold Vivian in his 1973 “The Primacy of Preaching” lecture and his 1984 sermon “My Job and Why I Love It” to illustrate the necessity of the double grip.<sup>797</sup> On January 21, 1930, a speech presented by King George V of England was

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<sup>793</sup> Michael Quicke, “Preaching for the Next Millennium” *The College of Preachers* 1997, 10.

<sup>794</sup> Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching, Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

<sup>795</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “My Job and Why I Love It,” (sermon).

<sup>796</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “My Job and Why I Love It,” (sermon).

<sup>797</sup> “Complete Circuit So Radio Audience May Hear King’s Speech,” *The New York Times*, 22 January 1930, 3.

scheduled to air live over the radio in the United States. Just minutes before the broadcast began a crucial wire to the power generator broke and a young radio engineer named Harold Vivian willingly grabbed the broken wire and restored the connection by allowing 250 volts of electricity to pass through his body for twenty painful minutes until the wire could be repaired. At times the pain convulsed Vivian, but the connection remained unbroken, and King George's speech was heard over the radio waves throughout the United States. As Thielemann described it, "Now that is what preaching is. It is the double grip of pain thereof. It is to be a middleman [sic] in the encounter. It is not the impartation of information; it is the bestowal of God! For in the speaking is the acting."<sup>798</sup>

Often at the cost of great pain for the preacher, preaching occurs when a preacher dares to place one hand in the hand of God, gripping God's Word firmly, and the other hand in the hands of the people to whom he or she preaches so that the people hear the King of Kings.<sup>799</sup> And for Thielemann, the great personal cost defined his preaching ministry. He often repeated, "It is my conviction that every time a man [sic] authentically preaches the Word of God he shortens his own life. I believe that with all my heart."<sup>800</sup> Thielemann described the pain of preaching that comes from making himself "naked so that everyone can see that you aren't what you are preaching about."<sup>801</sup> But his love for God, the pulpit and God's people kept Thielemann's double grip firm as he continued to bring God's Word to the needs of God's people throughout his thirty-four years of preaching ministry. In a sermon based on Jesus' Parable of The Friend in Need found in Luke 11:5-13 Thielemann shared with his congregation at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh that he lived out the double grip, daily. He says:

My principal gift is preaching. But there is not a morning that I do not get up and think to myself, in just a few days now there are going to be a lot of faces gathered before me and they're going to come knocking on the door looking for something that will feed them, something that will fill them up. And I know you see that I've got nothing in my cupboard. I know that I've got nothing in my larder to share. So, what do I do? The only thing I can do. I

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<sup>798</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 7.

<sup>799</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>800</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 10.

<sup>801</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Primacy of Preaching," 13.

go to God, and I beseech him to give me the bread I need to feed those who will come, and he does.<sup>802</sup>

This necessitated a double grip with one hand firmly gripping God's Word and the other hand firmly grasping one's listeners. Thielemann was convinced that every preacher should acknowledge what he called the five trinities:

There's the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit whose word is preached. There are the trinities of the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - Peter, James and John, the book that is preached. There's the trinity of those who gather about him [sic], his [sic] colleagues in ministry and the officers of his church. And the fifth trinity is the people, Tom, Dick, and Harriet. All together you see necessary to make the preaching.<sup>803</sup>

This double grip ensured Thielemann remained grounded in the Scripture and connected to God's people while being intimately connected to the preaching process. Thielemann's methodology of preaching necessitated that all preachers view themselves as the intermediary in the homiletic process. Thielemann presented the double grip without delving into possible critiques. Also, it could be observed that the double grip is not a new idea in the field of homiletics, and this understanding of the preacher's role could be considered overly simplistic.

It is evident from Thielemann's lectures on homiletics that he spent a great deal of time wrestling over the most effective way to ensure preaching connected with listeners. In order for this connection to occur Thielemann focused on bridge-building between the contemporary world and needs of his listeners and the ancient biblical text while keeping a double grip on Christ and the listener so that the preaching event becomes crisis for the preacher first and then for the congregation. Balancing these tensions is the primary role of the preacher.

## **Conclusion**

Thielemann entitled his first attempt to articulate his theology and methodology of preaching, "The Primacy of Preaching" to pass on to future generations the central place preaching occupied in a preacher's life and ministry. This chapter provided an overview of Thielemann's preaching methodology through an exploration of

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<sup>802</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Friend of a Friend of a Friend," (sermon).

<sup>803</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).



Thielemann's unwavering commitment to the primacy of preaching. We examined three factors to increase the likelihood of the preacher being used by God in the preaching event: grounding the sermon in Scripture, using a form to ensure the sermon connects with a genuine need addressed in Scripture and finally by providing a proper understanding of the preacher's role in the preaching event. Thielemann understood the challenge of writing and delivering sermons week after week which would connect with and meet the needs of the people to whom he was preaching and remain grounded in the Word of God. Yet even with these challenges, we see that during his thirty-four years of pulpit ministry he never wavered in his commitment to the central role of preaching in the Christian faith and his deep love of speaking to God's people from the "sacred desk" as he reverently and affectionately called the pulpit. Christianity is founded on the presupposition that God has revealed himself to fallen humanity. As theologian J. I. Packer states,

It is a religion that rests on revelation: nobody would know the truth about God or be able to relate to him in a personal way, had not God first acted to make himself known. But God has so acted, and the sixty-six books of the Bible, thirty-nine written before Christ came and twenty-seven after, are together the record, interpretation, expression, and embodiment of his self-disclosure. God and godliness are the Bible's uniting themes.<sup>804</sup>

Thielemann grounded his preaching methodology and formulated his practice on what he viewed as the conviction that the "fundamental presupposition of Hebrew/Christian epistemology is that God exists, and that God reveals himself."<sup>805</sup> Thielemann went so far as to say in a hyperbolic manner, "God exists, and God reveals himself. In the end that is all we can say."<sup>806</sup> Without God revealing himself one could not know him; therefore, the preacher's primary task is to preach in a way that continues revealing God to God's people. For this reason, Thielemann felt Paul's words from Romans 10:14 should be etched on every pastor's study wall.<sup>807</sup> "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they

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<sup>804</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1993) 145.

<sup>805</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching", Preaching Workshop sponsored by the San Fernando Presbytery in Granada Hills, CA, November 1975, 3.

<sup>806</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 4.

<sup>807</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" Thielemann wanted to make sure that God's Word becomes act, an event lived out in the lives of his people. He wanted to see Christ walk incarnate among the people as a second Bethlehem occurrence. To facilitate this, Thielemann started with a need, preached from a Scripture passage and was aware of the role of the preacher in the process. Thielemann's concern for eliciting a scripturally based response formed his approach to God's Word, the structure of the communication event and the role of the preacher in the process. In the next chapter we will examine the theological and historical context of Thielemann's preaching ministry.

# Chapter Five: Historical and Theological Analysis of Bruce W. Thielemann's Need-Centered Preaching

## Introduction

This thesis has presented a biographical sketch of Bruce W. Thielemann's life, an overview of his theology of preaching, an examination of his need-centered preaching, and an exploration of his preaching methodology. To fully understand Thielemann's approach to preaching, it is necessary to look at the historical and theological context into which he preached, taught and pastored. Thielemann was committed to a need-centered homiletic which informed and shaped, for better or worse, a great deal of his life, ministry and preaching. Thielemann asserted "that preaching is God's act. It is God's Word. His moving in the now."<sup>808</sup> While it is true, that some elements of a sermon transcend multiple cultures and contexts, in order for the preacher to, in Thielemann's description, "invest completely" in the preaching process, he advocated that sermons should be grounded in the specific context of both preacher and listener and actively engage with the contemporary issues facing one's listeners.<sup>809</sup> In this chapter we will examine how Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching shaped his interaction with some of the major historical issues during his ministry from the 1960's through the early 1990's as well as theologically significant movements within the Presbyterian church in the United States. We will use a chronological and thematic approach to evaluate the historical and theological context of Thielemann's ministry. We will move from the broader context of some major historical events during Thielemann's ministry to the more specific context of the theological issues within the Presbyterian Church of which Thielemann was a part for thirty-four years. The goal is to place Thielemann within the broader social, cultural, historical and theological context in order to see his need-centered approach to preaching in practice and how some of these key historical and theological issues impacted the man himself.

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<sup>808</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>809</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1.

### *Understanding the Needs of the Listener*

As previously stated, the work of psychologist, Maslow, shaped Thielemann's focused intent to connect with his listener's needs. Thielemann taught that five minutes into a sermon the men, woman and children in the congregation should know the specific need addressed and its immediate relevance to their lives.<sup>810</sup> Thielemann also adopted Henry Babcock Adam's three-sentences to raise a need, address the need with Scripture and provide an invitation to respond to biblical truth answering the need.<sup>811</sup> Thielemann's need-centered approach depended on the ability to identify relevant needs which he accomplished by establishing pastoral observation and relationships with his congregation. He relied on Maslow's hierarchical approach to human motivation.<sup>812</sup> As we have seen, Thielemann recommended that preachers aim their preaching most frequently at "security, belonging and esteem needs."<sup>813</sup> Thielemann also looked to Larson's five cultural myths along with Bormann's rhetorical vision as a means of connecting with his listener's cultural drama and motivating them to action.<sup>814</sup> Throughout this chapter we will see that Thielemann's need-centered preaching was dependent on maintaining relevance through understanding and intentionally connecting with the historical and theological context of his listeners.

### *Ministry Contexts*

During his time at Glendale Presbyterian Church Thielemann's desire to be both biblical and socially relevant informed his need-centered homiletic which would be fully refined later in his preaching lectures. In his final sermon preached at Glendale Presbyterian Church Thielemann shared some of his goals with the congregation, which in his estimation he had accomplished as their pastor. Two of these goals provide a glimpse into Thielemann's desire to preach and pastor with relevance. Thielemann wanted "to try to bring this great congregation to a place where it was socially relevant, in touch with the world, doing things and not just talking about

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<sup>810</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 1-2.

<sup>811</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4-5.

<sup>812</sup> Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review*, 1943, 50, 370-396.

<sup>813</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 3.

<sup>814</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 7 and Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Art of Illustration," 2-6.

them.”<sup>815</sup> He also hoped “to bring a biblical authenticity to the pulpit...Not the pious platitudes of an outworn nineteenth century fundamentalism but a proclamation of God’s Word...which spoke to today and to people who are living today.”<sup>816</sup>

Thielemann commented that these were, “Big goals for a punk preacher.”<sup>817</sup>

Thielemann realized this goal of social relevancy and biblical authenticity would be polarizing.<sup>818</sup> During his tenure at Glendale he received, by his own admission, fifty-six letters asking him to resign. One of those letters came within the first four weeks of his time as pastor. In those letters from various members of the Glendale congregation, Thielemann was “accused of being a communist, a liar, prejudice in favor of black people and part of the Symbionese Liberation Army.”<sup>819</sup> In spite of the polarizing effect of his personality and preaching style for some, Thielemann maintained relevancy was central to his need-centered approach to preaching. He did not believe preachers “were in the business of selling patent medicine - we write out prescriptions and that means personalized attention.”<sup>820</sup> Thielemann viewed sermons ineffective which could have been preached at any time in history, disconnected from their specific context.<sup>821</sup> In order to connect with the needs of one’s listener’s Thielemann taught and aspired for his own ministry and preaching to be socially relevant which he defined as being “in touch with the world.”<sup>822</sup>

Being “in touch with the world” is an appropriate summary of Thielemann’s preaching lectures formulated shortly after departing Glendale and during the time he was serving as Dean of the Chapel at Grove City College. From this context Thielemann faced opportunities and challenges which influenced his approach to the preaching process different from those in his previous contexts. At Grove City College, Thielemann’s congregation was comprised of young men and women who

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<sup>815</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Measure of a Man,” (sermon preached at Glendale Presbyterian Church on October 1, 1974).

<sup>816</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Measure of a Man,” (sermon).

<sup>817</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Measure of a Man,” (sermon).

<sup>818</sup> This self-deprecating comment is evidence of the discouragement Thielemann felt at the end of his time at Glendale, the awareness of his polarizing personality and perhaps a glimpse into some of his own insecurities. Bruce W. Thielemann, “Dealing with Discouragement,” (sermon).

<sup>819</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Measure of a Man,” (sermon preached as a guest at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh in 1975).

<sup>820</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Imagineering,” 8.

<sup>821</sup> Interview with Douglas Etter.

<sup>822</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Measure of a Man,” (sermon).

were required to attend chapel.<sup>823</sup> Mandatory chapel may seem like an ideal scenario for a preacher who appreciates filled pews. But Thielemann had to work hard to grab and hold attention, all the while motivating and shepherding eighteen to twenty-four-year-old young adults, which in turn galvanized the refining of his need-centered approach to preaching. While Thielemann did not contend with the present-day, ubiquitous element of technology-based distractions in the form of wireless internet connectivity and the smartphone, he did face the challenge of wandering minds, students distracted by homework and the myriad of other ways students disconnected during mandatory school chapel. It is within this context we see Thielemann integrate Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Larson's cultural myths and Bormann's rhetorical vision into his four main preaching lectures.<sup>824</sup>

### *Mighty Movements*

In his final sermon preached on January 24, 1993, at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Thielemann reflected upon how he would like to be remembered in thirty years.<sup>825</sup> In that reflection he described the historical and theological context he experienced during his thirty-four years of pastoral ministry from 1959-1993. As Thielemann described it, "he lived at a time when mighty movements were afloat."<sup>826</sup> Presbyterian Church historian Lefferts A. Loetscher, from Princeton Theological Seminary described the 1960's when Thielemann was beginning his pastoral ministry in the United States as, "A period of upheavals, deep self-searching, and creative change both in the American nation and in the churches. Most conspicuous among the forces producing change were the 'black revolt' and the Vietnam war."<sup>827</sup> While this statement is specifically referring to the 1960's in the United States of America, it may be argued that these change producing forces continued to reverberate throughout the duration of Thielemann's ministry into the 1990's. We will examine Thielemann's interaction from the pulpit with some of these "mighty movements" to better understand his need-centered approach to preaching.

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<sup>823</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Not What but Who You Know," (sermon).

<sup>824</sup> This is the primary topic of all of Bruce W. Thielemann's preaching lectures.

<sup>825</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Big 6-0," (sermon).

<sup>826</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Big 6-0," (sermon).

<sup>827</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 157.

Thielemann's pulpit ministry spanned a period of thirty-three years and seven months, beginning on July 1, 1959, and concluding on January 31, 1993. During this time the United States had eight Presidents in office, experienced great technological advances, endured two major wars and one Cold War, entered a global space race, engaged in the civil rights movement, and women's rights movement. During Thielemann's ministry, the Presbyterian church into which he was ordained experienced a peak in growth and then major decline, endured some theological shifts and controversies and saw new Presbyterian denominations formed by both unification and division.<sup>828</sup> We will limit the scope of our study to Thielemann's historical and theological contexts within the United States of America where he lived and within the Presbyterian Church where he taught, preached and pastored for the duration of his thirty-four year career.

During the start of his final year at Pittsburgh-Xenia, the "General Assemblies of the PCUSA and the UPCNA came together in Pittsburgh to celebrate the organization of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA)."<sup>829</sup> During Thielemann's tenure in the Presbyterian church the Presbyterian denomination faced a decline in membership of over 1.2 million from 1966-1987.<sup>830</sup> Thielemann and the Presbyterian Church where he was ordained would also navigate a host of larger societal challenges related to gender, race, economics and war.<sup>831</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to cover in depth the entirety of these issues, but we will focus on some of the significant events which Thielemann addressed most frequently from the pulpit during his preaching ministry: civil rights, the Vietnam conflict, and abortion.

## **Historical Context**

### *Civil Rights*

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional. In 1955, the year Thielemann

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<sup>828</sup> Bradley Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2013) Chapter 7.

<sup>829</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, (Louisville, Ky: Geneva Press) 1996, Chapter 11.

<sup>830</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists and Moderates*. (S.I.: Oxf. U.P., N.Y) 1994. 3.

<sup>831</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, Chapter 11.

started seminary, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white woman sparking the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott.<sup>832</sup> In early 1956 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as a civil rights leader “calling for an end to segregation in public facilities.”<sup>833</sup> At the end of World War II “the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. were still racially segregated in the South.”<sup>834</sup> At the height of the civil rights movement during the 1950’s and 1960’s, Presbyterians began addressing the racism still present following the Civil War.<sup>835</sup> There were also movements within the southern Presbyterian church opposing racial discrimination and eliminating the segregated synod even though presbyteries remained segregated.<sup>836</sup> According to historian Bradley J. Longfield, “Shortly after the ruling of the Supreme Court in 1954, though not solely in response to it, the General Assembly adopted two reports claiming, ‘enforced segregation...out of harmony with Christian theology and ethics.’”<sup>837</sup> On August 28, 1963, 250,000 people gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. for what became known as the March on Washington. It was in Washington D.C. on this August day where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his now famous speech, “I Have a Dream.” Thielemann, who was in attendance, called this history making moment one of the “greatest thrills of his life.”<sup>838</sup> Thielemann claimed to be only 100 feet away from Martin Luther King Jr. as King spoke to the crowd stretching from Lincoln Memorial all the way to Washington monument.<sup>839</sup> This experience made such an impression on Thielemann that addressing the modern civil rights movement and speaking out against racism became a hallmark of Thielemann’s preaching ministry.

As evidence of the importance Thielemann placed on civil rights and addressing racism a sermon Thielemann preached at First Presbyterian Church of

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<sup>832</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 157.

<sup>833</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *America’s Religious History, Faith, Politics and the Shaping of a Nation*, 229.

<sup>834</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 191.

<sup>835</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, Chapter 11.

<sup>836</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 192.

<sup>837</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 192.

<sup>838</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “What to Do When Your Spiritual Go Has Went,” (sermon).

<sup>839</sup> Thielemann taught “never hesitate to make the illustration personal” it is challenging to determine if Thielemann was present in some of the life situations he describes. Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Art of Illustration,” 9.



Pittsburgh towards the end of his ministry provides evidence of this commitment. In the sermon Thielemann reflected on the growth and successes during his first pastorate at the First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport from 1959-1968.

Thielemann explained,

And when I left that church at the end of nine and a half years the congregation was larger. Many people had come to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Instead of having one minister, we had five, and one of them was black. We had the most significant interracial ministry in the city. We were the only church asked to participate in the memorial services for Martin Luther King, and I myself was asked to preach the sermon.<sup>840</sup>

Based on what Thielemann viewed as his milestone accomplishments during his first pastorate, it is evident he placed a high value on ministry growth and his own personal involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1960's.

In another sermon Thielemann described a young white seminary student from Glendale Presbyterian church who took a year off from his studies to serve in the black community of Mendenhall, Mississippi. The student was forced to return home after being falsely arrested, having his head forcibly shaved, stripped naked, and brutally beaten by thirteen Mendenhall Police officers. Thielemann acknowledged, he did not tell this account to be critical of all law enforcement, but as an indictment against what he saw as the racist police force in Mendenhall, Mississippi.<sup>841</sup> Rather than deter the student from continuing with his ministry, Thielemann recounted the traumatic and violent event only served to fuel a desire for this seminary student to try and bring an end the overt racism in what Thielemann called "the most closed state on racial matters in the union."<sup>842</sup> The student who was falsely arrested and beaten returned with a new resolve saying, "with Jesus we're going to set them free."<sup>843</sup> Glendale Presbyterian church continued sending both people and financial resources to the predominately black community of Mendenhall, Mississippi to support that ministry.<sup>844</sup>

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<sup>840</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Be Careful Not to be Too Careful," (sermon).

<sup>841</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Christian! Hold Fast," (sermon).

<sup>842</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Christian! Hold Fast," (sermon).

<sup>843</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Christian! Hold Fast," (sermon).

<sup>844</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

Throughout the late 1960's and early 1970's at Glendale Thielemann continued to highlight from the pulpit the importance of racial equality and the civil rights movement as he tried to motivate his listeners to action. On one Sunday morning John Perkins, internationally known leader on issues of racial reconciliation and Christian community development and one of the predominant evangelical voices in the American civil rights movement, made a surprise visit to Glendale Presbyterian Church. The following Sunday, Thielemann told his congregation, "Last Sunday morning sitting right back there in the sanctuary, there was a man who, if I would have known he was here then, I would have had him up here. For what he would have said would have been so much more important than anything I could have offered."<sup>845</sup> Thielemann explained to his congregation the focus and purpose of Perkins ministry to "bring the word of Jesus Christ to his fellow black men and women."<sup>846</sup> However, this purpose did not come without a great cost to Perkins. Thielemann proceeded to provide a detailed description of the arrest, beating and torture Perkins endured at the hands of "a bunch of redneck policemen" in Mendenhall, Mississippi while serving the black community.<sup>847</sup> The Tuesday following Perkins unannounced visit to Glendale Presbyterian Church, Thielemann and Perkins shared a lunch together. As Thielemann described it in a sermon, "The thing that overwhelmed me as I talked to him on Tuesday was this, the man's constant, deep and abiding joy. Joy!"<sup>848</sup> Thielemann admired Perkins's work for racial equality and urged his congregation to clarify their own purpose to "stand in the flow of the power."<sup>849</sup> Finally, Thielemann concluded his sermon with a reminder to the Glendale congregation of their ongoing support of John Perkins' ministries in Mendenhall, Mississippi. The strong example of Perkins knowing his purpose before God served as a motivational tool as Thielemann reminded his listeners, "he knows what it is to stand in the flow of power, and you can too."<sup>850</sup>

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<sup>845</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

<sup>846</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

<sup>847</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

<sup>848</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

<sup>849</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

<sup>850</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Practicing Your Purpose," (sermon).

Through his preaching Thielemann endeavored to connect his listeners to the ongoing struggles facing black Americans during this tumultuous period.

As Thielemann's ministry transitioned into the 1980's and 1990's he would continue to communicate the importance of the civil rights movement and the problem of racial inequity facing society as a whole. In a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh in 1990, Thielemann criticized what he viewed as the city of Pittsburgh's biased racial policies and misdirected priorities. Thielemann stated,

We spend millions of dollars on Grant Street or to remodel Melon Square but not a dime to improve conditions in the Hill District where small Christian congregations, with very little money and practically no professional personnel, try to carry on a task with which the whole city should be concerned. Twenty-five percent of the young black men in America today between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven are either in jail or on parole. That's a greater percentage than those who are in college. And yet, we as a city are doing nothing to try to reach those young men in the name of Christ or on the basis of any other moral philosophy or ethic. It's taken us years to get a black on city council.<sup>851</sup>

Thielemann concluded his sermon with a scene from American abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe's book, a married slave couple was being forcibly separated by their owners. As the slave rode away from his family he was given hope and his "soul was stirred" by the thought of a greater eternal city of God. Finally, Thielemann concluded his sermon by quoting from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. Saying, "In the final day, we will sing the song that all the saints of God that have gone before us have sang, 'Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last.'"<sup>852</sup> Then after a long pause, Thielemann prayed for racial reconciliation in the city of Pittsburgh and all cities of the world.<sup>853</sup>

On June 16, 1991, while preaching at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Thielemann turned again to the problem of racial inequality within the church by preaching a sermon based on *Fences*, one of the plays by the African

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<sup>851</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Great Gates: Outside the Gates," (sermon).

<sup>852</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Great Gates: Outside the Gates," (sermon).

<sup>853</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Great Gates: Outside the Gates," (sermon).

American playwright from Pittsburgh, August Wilson. Wilson's series of five plays chronicled the lives of one black family in Pittsburgh over the course of fifty years. *Fences* would win Wilson the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for Best Play in 1987. Thielemann, who loved the theatre, used Wilson's play as a tool for communicating the plight of men and women "caught in the cycle of racism."<sup>854</sup> When Thielemann watched *Fences* he described the experience as "dragging him out of the darkness. It made me see people like Troy Maxson in a way I'd never seen them before. It let me for at least a little while to experience the agony of such ones."<sup>855</sup> For Thielemann *Fences* shed light on the existing "high and difficult racial barriers in our society."<sup>856</sup> To bolster his argument Thielemann referred to a recent survey where white participants felt significant progress had been made in race relations in the United States of America. The same group also stated, "they would not want a black living in their neighborhood."<sup>857</sup> Thielemann lamented,

The average lifespan of a black man is ten years shorter than a white man. Blacks are lower on the economic scale in 1990 than they were in 1980. And fifty seven percent of the young black men in this country are unemployed. There are more young black men in this country in jail than there are in all of our colleges and universities.<sup>858</sup>

Thielemann also observed "that prejudice, is interestingly enough, much higher amongst Evangelical Christians than it is amongst most groups."<sup>859</sup> Whether or not Thielemann was correct, he based his indictment on three postulations: evangelical Christians were primarily from the South, conservative theology is often a moral heresy not focusing enough on the love of God and evangelicals had not developed what Thielemann called a "poor-ology" or a focus on caring for the needs of the poor in society.<sup>860</sup> In Thielemann's assessment racism was still a problem in the United States and more specifically, in Christian churches, "equality is a dream differed, a promise unfulfilled. And many who are in the church and think they're in

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<sup>854</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

<sup>855</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

<sup>856</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

<sup>857</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

<sup>858</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

<sup>859</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

<sup>860</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Give My Regards to Broadway: *Fences*," (sermon).

the light are in the darkness because they hate their brothers.<sup>861</sup> Thielemann suggested the remedy for racism in the United States was “white repentance and a growing respect in the black community for its own capacity.”<sup>862</sup> Thielemann believed the elimination of racial barriers in the United States could only happen “as the result of a religious revival and social activism on the part of Christians.”<sup>863</sup> A conversion of the heart along with a commitment to service was required. Thielemann believed, “The darkness of prejudice cannot stand in the light of Christ.”<sup>864</sup> He urged his predominantly white middle-class congregation and all Christians to get involved in both legislative and political action and to support black Evangelical congregations to bring an end to racism in America. It was Thielemann’s conviction that “only the people of Christ, filled with the love of Christ can truly succeed” in bringing about change.<sup>865</sup> He challenged his listeners, “the only way the fences of racism will come down, is if people who are strong in Christ, fenced in by his love, will move out in the power of his Spirit, and set themselves in obedience to Christ to building the brotherhood of humankind, under the fatherhood of God. So may it be. So, O God may it be.”<sup>866</sup>

In another sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, near the end of his pastorate, Thielemann addressed what he saw as the ongoing and systemic problem of racism in Pittsburgh and in the United States of America. The sermon, based on Jesus’ interaction with the Canaanite woman as recorded in Matthew 15:21-28, lays out the problem of racism and describes Thielemann’s own personal hatred of racism.<sup>867</sup> From Thielemann’s prospective much of the “overt racism” of the past had departed. However, he warned of the present danger of “aversive racism,” which can be defined as bias without intention. He viewed aversive racism as dangerous as overt racism.<sup>868</sup> Thielemann provided some examples of aversive racism occurring within in his own congregation such as, a

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<sup>861</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences,” (sermon).

<sup>862</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences,” (sermon).

<sup>863</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences,” (sermon).

<sup>864</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences,” (sermon).

<sup>865</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences,” (sermon).

<sup>866</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences,” (sermon).

<sup>867</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>868</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

white woman clutching her purse tightly when a black male walked by, the assumption that a black male working in his yard was the gardener or a college student requiring a black student to take a class on how to get along with white students.<sup>869</sup> Thielemann argued that aversive racism was rampant in the city of Pittsburgh and needed to be addressed through Jesus breaking down the barriers of racial prejudice. Thielemann asserted, “Racial prejudice is evil. It is brutal. It is sensual. It is criminal. Whether it is subtle or overt, no matter what the place of high or low station where it occurs, it is a ruinous menace. Racial prejudice is contrary to the most elementary of Christian principles.”<sup>870</sup> Thielemann described racial prejudice as “ignorant, for both the Bible and biology teach us that God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth.”<sup>871</sup> In both overt and aversive forms, Thielemann taught that racism is either “inane or insane.”<sup>872</sup> In his estimation racism “denies God, it denies the unity of the human family, it denies the equality of all souls before God, and it denies the authority of Jesus Christ.”<sup>873</sup>

Thielemann concluded his sermon with a call for Christians to pray for the “controlled courage” and “patience” of the African American families attending First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. Thielemann strongly encouraged the congregation to “pray that those who are racist will be illuminated and saved, for surely they are rejecting salvation.”<sup>874</sup> Thielemann urged his congregation to open its doors to people of all races, listen to them and allow them to be leaders. He urged his members owning businesses to hire people who others will not employ because of their race. Thielemann encouraged his people to be agents of peace in all spheres of life. Finally, Thielemann asked the congregation to befriend at least one person from another race, to write letters to businesses with racist practices and to stand up for injustice as a community of faith.<sup>875</sup>

From the pulpit, Thielemann passionately addressed “breaking the barriers” caused by racism, and this passion for racial reconciliation continued throughout

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<sup>869</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>870</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>871</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>872</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>873</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>874</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

<sup>875</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “For One of the Women I Love,” (sermon).

the duration of his ministry.<sup>876</sup> Thielemann made a bold and intentional effort to address the very relevant issue of racial prejudice and civil rights from the pulpit as he attempted to connect God's Word with the specific cultural context and needs of his listeners. During the last two years of his ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Thielemann also created a "Building Missions Bridges Campaign for which the congregation raised \$50,000."<sup>877</sup> Half of those funds raised "provided an Afro-American evangelist to work among the Afro-American males in the Hill District."<sup>878</sup> In contrast to some preachers, Thielemann regularly used the pulpit to highlight the civil rights movement and move people to action. As one of Thielemann's contemporaries, John A. Huffman Jr. noted, "Some of my evangelical, independent church friends and denominations shy away from matters involving social action."<sup>879</sup> However, because of Thielemann's commitment to God's Word "moving in the now," shying away from matters involving social action was not an option.<sup>880</sup> We turn now to another major historical issue confronting Thielemann's listeners, the Vietnam war.

### *Vietnam*

In contrast to the fixed beginnings of World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, the Vietnam War had no fixed beginning. It is difficult to determine a clear date for the start of the Vietnam War. The United States of America gradually became involved in the Vietnam War between 1950 and 1965 during the Cold War in the effort to defeat the spread of Communism.<sup>881</sup> Presbyterian church historian Lefferts A. Loetscher observed that alongside the civil rights movement of the 1960's in America the Vietnam war was also a source of "upheaval and change."<sup>882</sup> As Loetscher described it, "Evening newscasts brought battle scenes into the living

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<sup>876</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "For One of the Women I Love," (sermon).

<sup>877</sup> Ernst Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 85.

<sup>878</sup> The other half of those funds were given to support the William and Mildred Orr Compassionate Care Center, which was "established to meet the needs of frail, elderly persons." Ernst Edward Logan, *The Church That Kept on Being Born Again*, 85.

<sup>879</sup> John A. Huffman Jr., *A Most Amazing Call: One Pastor's Reflection on a Ministry Full of Surprises*, (Place of publication not identified: Publisher not identified) n.d., 315.

<sup>880</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Theology of Preaching," 9.

<sup>881</sup> Michael F. Hopkins, and M. L. Dockrill. *The Cold War, 1945-1991* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 3.

<sup>882</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 159.

room, vividly portraying the wounded and the dying. Then there was the daily ‘body count’ of enemies slain, reported like basketball scores. Was this the American Dream or a ghastly nightmare?”<sup>883</sup> In the late 1950’s, as Thielemann was beginning his ministry in the Presbyterian church, the Cold War escalated as the threat of nuclear weapons became more prevalent.<sup>884</sup> Another Presbyterian church historian, James Smylie, viewed the Vietnam War era within the Presbyterian church as a time of division. Smylie writes, “Whereas Presbyterians accepted the Korean War as just and necessary, they were divided over the Vietnam War as it escalated under successive presidents.”<sup>885</sup> Within the Presbyterian church both clergy and laity opposed the policies set by the United States government to manage the Vietnam War. However, Smylie noted, “While starting out with the assumption that the war in Southeast Asia was a legitimate part of American’s containment policy, some Presbyterians in the UPCUSA and the PCUSA began to confess confusion over the purposes of the war.”<sup>886</sup> Presbyterians in the United States began questioning if “the war in Vietnam was just and necessary.”<sup>887</sup> The UPCUSA where Thielemann was ordained, expressed their objection to the Vietnam War through an official statement entitled *A Declaration of Conscience* presented at the 179<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1967. The declaration stated, “There is no moral issue more urgently confronting our church and nation than the war in Vietnam. The hour is late; the church dare not remain silent. We must declare our conscience.”<sup>888</sup> This declaration began the process for the Presbyterian church of exploring the theological implications surrounding the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam war. Ultimately this statement acknowledged that although de-escalation of the United States involvement in the Vietnam War involved risk, it was a risk worth taking. The declaration affirmed, “We recognize that if our military escalation is not reversed, the time may come when those who dissent because they seek peace will be placed under even greater pressure, and that the possibility of significant influence by the

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<sup>883</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 159.

<sup>884</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 123.

<sup>885</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 131.

<sup>886</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, (Louisville, Ky: Geneva Press, 1996), 131.

<sup>887</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 131.

<sup>888</sup> *A Declaration of Conscience*, UPCUSA, 1967. Accession number 82 0126, box 6.



church on public policy will have disappeared.”<sup>889</sup> In 1969, the UPCUSA assembly adopted the “War, Peace and Conscience” declaration in which it affirmed the right for a person to “reject, ignore or oppose the authority of the state” under certain conditions. In 1970, the United States military invasion of Cambodia spawned protests on college and seminary campuses around the country.<sup>890</sup> And, “The Assembly of 1970 angrily declared: we have called into question our national integrity at home and abroad.”<sup>891</sup> In 1971, the UPCUSA commissioners declared “the United States, having failed to pursue a just cause by just means of warfare should withdraw from Vietnam.”<sup>892</sup> And then, in 1972, the UPCUSA asserted, “There is no honor for America in continued deception about the origins and intent of the policy pursued by our government since 1954...We have subjected Vietnam to a terror seldom before known in warfare.”<sup>893</sup> Lefferts notes, “when the nation finally withdrew from the war with none of its objectives accomplished, disillusionment was deep and bitter.”<sup>894</sup> It is clear the United States involvement in Vietnam was on the forefront of society, the Presbyterian denominations and the people to whom Thielemann was preaching.

During his time pastoring at Glendale Presbyterian Church, Thielemann’s views on the Vietnam war followed the same trajectory as the UPCUSA denomination and many in the United States of America. At first there was support for the country’s involvement in Vietnam, but as the war continued and the death toll rose, that support waned. In a sermon preached in January of 1973 entitled *Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972*, Thielemann recounted his overall impressions of the significant events of the year and the spiritual implications. Thielemann’s tradition of evaluating significant yearly events from the pulpit, began in 1964 during his time at McKeesport Presbyterian Church, where on the first Sunday of the year he reflected on some of the highlights of the previous year. Thielemann admitted that he would receive criticism for these sermons, but at the

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<sup>889</sup> *A Declaration of Conscience*, UPCUSA, 1967. Accession number 82 0126, box 6.

<sup>890</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 160.

<sup>891</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 160.

<sup>892</sup> Rick Nutt, *Presbyterian Lessons from the Vietnam War*, The Presbyterian Outlook, August 22, 2014.

<sup>893</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 160.

<sup>894</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 160.

conclusion of 1972, he had preached these reflective sermons for nine years.<sup>895</sup> In spite of the criticism, Thielemann persisted because, as he described it, “I find it necessary to tell you where I am. To express to you as the one who is your pastor, and for this hour each week, your teacher, just the way world events are affecting me.”<sup>896</sup> At least in Thielemann’s mind in order to be effective in the pulpit by his own need-centered homiletic, he felt it to be necessary to address the relevant events of the day including the Vietnam War. At the onset of his sermon Thielemann stated, “I make no claims to special insight, or brilliance or revelation.”<sup>897</sup> Reflecting on 1972, Thielemann covered a wide range of current events such as popular Hollywood films, the conclusion of Nasa’s Apollo 17 moon landings, contested political elections and acts of terrorism both domestic and international. However, Thielemann dedicated sixteen minutes of this forty-six-minute sermon, or roughly thirty-five percent of this sermon to the United States involvement in Vietnam.<sup>898</sup> About the Vietnam War, Thielemann said, “It dominated the news again in 1972. Many of us tried to pretend it wasn’t there, but it is there. It’s still very much there and it demands our attention.”<sup>899</sup> Then Thielemann told his listeners, “I have never spoken of it [Vietnam] before from this pulpit, but I am going to speak of it now.”<sup>900</sup> He prefaced his comments with some points of clarification.

I want to say, first of all, that I am not blaming any political party, the Democrats or the Republican. I want to say I am not blaming any President of the United States. The man who is our president now or any president who has proceeded him. I want to say that I am not speaking as a pacifist. To me pacifism is not an intellectually responsible position. I am no more interested in the opinion of a pacifist on the Vietnam War than I am interested in the opinion of a vegetarian on the qualities of different kinds of meat. And I am not speaking as one of those who questioned whether we should have ever been in Vietnam. There’s a lot written about that. I’ve read much of it. I think it to be historically unimpressive and morally unsatisfying. It smells of an isolationism I had hoped was dead a long time ago. Now, I’ve arrived at the position which is now mine in just the last few weeks. And I

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<sup>895</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon). The only sermon from this series the author was able to locate was from 1972.

<sup>896</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

<sup>897</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

<sup>898</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

<sup>899</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

<sup>900</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

am speaking now as one who simply feels that the issues in Vietnam are different now and involve a different response from this country. I am one who thought it *was* the honorable thing for us to be there but feels now that the honorable thing would be for us to not be there.<sup>901</sup>

Based on the visceral reaction visible to Thielemann from some of his listeners, the content of Thielemann's sermon was difficult for some in the Glendale Presbyterian Church to hear.<sup>902</sup> Thielemann proceeded to voice his disapproval of the United States involvement in the Vietnam conflict and systematically present his argument for the United States removing itself from any military involvement in Vietnam. It was Thielemann's conviction that any further involvement of the United States in military action in the Vietnam War was a "misusing of our national honor."<sup>903</sup> More specifically, Thielemann questioned the United States involvement in the Vietnam War, which he stated, "most of the world now looks upon as being essentially racial."<sup>904</sup> He questioned the honor of the United States being involved in a war costing about twenty million dollars a day. But most poignantly, Thielemann questioned the honor of being involved in a war where over 50,000 American lives and more than 700,000 Vietnamese lives had been lost. In strong language, Thielemann stated his understanding of the United States government's position on the Vietnam War. He felt the government's "urge to win was more important than the peace and that troubled me."<sup>905</sup> It is worth noting that at this point in the sermon Thielemann acknowledged the upsetting nature of his comments through an unscripted, impromptu remark addressed to some in the congregation. Thielemann voiced, "I know what I am saying is troubling some of you. I see some of you shaking your heads and looking at me with great despair. I am sorry about that; I don't like you to ever have to feel that way about me."<sup>906</sup> Controversially, at this point in his ministry at Glendale, Thielemann admitted he could no longer pray for the United States to win the Vietnam War because he felt guilty. In an emotional plea, Thielemann concluded his sermon with a vivid description of a "little

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<sup>901</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972," (sermon).

<sup>902</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972," (sermon).

<sup>903</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972," (sermon).

<sup>904</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972," (sermon).

<sup>905</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972," (sermon).

<sup>906</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972," (sermon).

Vietnamese boy sitting in the midst of ruins, despair, dejection and confusion on his face. And as I looked at the picture, I wondered if peace at any price would not be worth more than what was happening to him.”<sup>907</sup> The United States would remain involved in the Vietnam War until April 30, 1975. Thielemann’s ministry at Glendale would end on October 1, 1974. There is no specific evidence pointing to Thielemann’s anti-Vietnam sentiments contributing to his departure. However, it is clear his anti-Vietnam War position was divisive and not embraced by the congregation with complete acceptance.<sup>908</sup>

In another sermon preached at Glendale Presbyterian Church, Thielemann encouraged his congregation to take more risks in serving the Lord. To illustrate this point, he recalled a time when a group of college students at Glendale Presbyterian Church made a request to organize an event in protest of the Vietnam War. There was some resistance to the idea of hosting a Vietnam protest at Glendale Presbyterian Church. As Thielemann described it, “And some people said, ‘We can’t have a program against the Vietnam War...there will be a lot of people who get up and walk out of this church on account of it.’ And there were some people who said, ‘we are free, and we must allow other people to be free.’ And so, we had the program.”<sup>909</sup> Glendale hosted the event and there was some disagreement, but according to Thielemann, “whether you agreed or disagreed with the program, it was a good program. And nobody got up and walked out. Or at least if they did, they were so unknown in the life of the church that their absence has, to this day, has not been noted.”<sup>910</sup> It appeared some of Glendale Presbyterian Church’s congregation supported the United States military action in Vietnam, while others upheld an anti-Vietnam War involvement stance.<sup>911</sup>

In another sermon preached at Glendale, Thielemann read an excerpt from the diary of a friend and Vietnam soldier, Bill Frey, written just forty-two days before he was scheduled to return home from a tour of active duty in Vietnam. In his diary, Frey shared his desire to be back at his home with his family. Sadly,

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<sup>907</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

<sup>908</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972,” (sermon).

<sup>909</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “On Dealing with People Who Take the Whee Out of Life,” (sermon).

<sup>910</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “On Dealing with People Who Take the Whee Out of Life,” (sermon).

<sup>911</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “On Dealing with People Who Take the Whee Out of Life,” (sermon).

Thielemann shared, Frey was killed in action in Vietnam days after writing in his diary and would never make it home. Thielemann read from Frey's diary, "Dear God, I need your help and protection for these final days. Help me to be a good soldier and a good man. Please let me make it home to my loved ones. My thoughts are all trained on that one thing, home." Thielemann interjected, "and he's underlined the word home." Frey continued to write, "Oh Lord, please, please God, let me go home alive." To which Thielemann added "and he's underlined the word alive."<sup>912</sup> After reading this excerpt from Frey's diary to the congregation, Thielemann explained it was given to him by this boy's father as they stood together by the flag draped casket of his son.<sup>913</sup> The United States' involvement in the Vietnam War was emotionally charged, but Thielemann was not afraid to discuss this controversial current event from the pulpit. Thielemann's emphasis on connecting with the pressing needs of his listeners created an environment where ignoring or not addressing a topic on the forefront of people's lives such as the Vietnam War would have hindered Thielemann's ability to connect with his listeners. As we have seen, Thielemann's need-centered homiletic drove his preaching content to remain engaged with the current events of the day.

After his bold declaration against the Vietnam War in his 1973 sermon, Thielemann continued making his thoughts on the Vietnam War known to his congregation in his preaching. In a sermon where he was critical of the world for not accepting responsibility for their actions, he made a reference to the Vietnam War. In a sarcastic manner he said, "After all, who was guilty in Vietnam? Not the United States, we're innocent. Not North Vietnam. If you ask the North Vietnamese, they'll tell you they're innocent. Go to any nation you want on earth and ask, 'who was guilty in Vietnam, and they will all take a side, and you will find that they are never on the side that is guilty.'<sup>914</sup> In another sermon preached during his time at Glendale, Thielemann included a potentially incendiary comment about the Vietnam War to illustrate the dangers of people holding what he saw as an unbiblical view of God. Thielemann said it was unhealthy "to suggest that our God

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<sup>912</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "What to do When God Says No," (sermon).

<sup>913</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "What to do When God Says No," (sermon).

<sup>914</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "What to do When There is Nothing Else to Do?," (sermon).

wraps himself in red and white and blue and smiles with glee at broken Vietcong bodes.”<sup>915</sup> In a similar tone, Thielemann confessed in another sermon at Glendale, “I get a little bit uptight inside at a country which gets disturbed when people burn paper draft cards but doesn’t seem to be deeply troubled when people burn other people’s flesh. Especially when that flesh is yellow, and it happens 5000 miles away.”<sup>916</sup> In a more patriotic twist, in a sermon at Glendale, Thielemann likened a Christian’s arrival to heaven to the joyous reunions he had personally witnessed at airports across the United States of servicemen returning home from Vietnam and being welcomed by family and friends as they exited the airplane.<sup>917</sup> In an attempt to connect with the rhetorical vision, the shared experience of the congregation, Thielemann made his thoughts about the United States involvement in Vietnam clear to his listeners.

Even after the United States was no longer engaged in the Vietnam War, the impact continued to linger in the lives of Thielemann’s listeners. So, Thielemann engaged with the aftermath of the Vietnam War in his preaching. In a sermon delivered while Thielemann was serving as Dean of the Chapel at Grove College in 1982, he described his visit to the newly dedicated Vietnam Memorial in Washington D. C. In the sermon, Thielemann confessed he would like to spend more time talking about what he called the “very controversial” memorial but did not have the time to do so. He went on to describe “the great slabs of granite, black granite. And the stone is very highly polished. So polished that you can see, almost as in a mirror, your reflection in it. Then, carved into the face of this granite are the names of the 55,000 men and women who lost their lives during the Vietnam Conflict.”<sup>918</sup> Thielemann was impressed with the intentional design of the memorial which caused one to first see his or her own reflection before seeing the names of the men and women who lost their lives.<sup>919</sup>

On April 1, 1984, in his first sermon preached as the newly installed pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Thielemann again reflected on the

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<sup>915</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Putting First Things First,” (sermon).

<sup>916</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Notable Excuses I Have Used,” (sermon).

<sup>917</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “What is Heaven Like?,” (sermon).

<sup>918</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “God of Great Surprises.” (sermon).

<sup>919</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “God of Great Surprises.” (sermon).

United States involvement in the Vietnam War and the work being done by Christians in that country following the war. Thielemann stated:

We've been out of Vietnam now for a good number of years now, and all the soldiers have been withdrawn and all the news people have gone away. But the church hasn't gone away. Eighty percent of the orphanages in Vietnam are run by Christian missionaries. Ninety percent of the leprosariums in Vietnam are run by Christian missionaries. There are 350 Christian charitable institutions in Vietnam. There are 1500 Christian schools in Vietnam ministering in a loving and caring way to people who still boast about defeating America on the field of combat. See what that is. You may not like them, and you may not feel in harmony with them, but you serve them. You act as Jesus would have you act with them.<sup>920</sup>

In 1984, almost ten years after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, Thielemann now viewed the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War as an to encourage his congregation to move forward in grace. He believed his congregation shared a passion about these pressing issues, as well.<sup>921</sup>

During his time at First Presbyterian, Thielemann shared his anti-war sentiments, once again. The United States was on the brink of the first Gulf War on December 23, 1990. So, Thielemann gave his congregation an indication of the heavy weight he felt during what he called "the darkest hour."<sup>922</sup> As Thielemann observed the current situation, "There are dark shadows on the planet, hunger, homeless, prejudice, irreligion everywhere, selfishness, disease we cannot cure, the globe is scared with ugliness, on the edge of economic convulsions, and the possibility of war is the darkest of all these things."<sup>923</sup> Then, on January 21, 1990, with tensions rising in the Middle East, Thielemann stated his thoughts on war to his congregation as he preached an anti-war sermon at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. In tears, Thielemann said:

If only Christians were willing to die loving more than they were willing to die killing. What a difference it might have made. My heart is very heavy today because I cannot see a way out of this thing, except for the divine intervention of God, which is always possible. When we see what he is doing in the Soviet Union and places like China, we must believe that. But I am afraid that many Christians are going to be being called upon to kill, and

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<sup>920</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Too Many Christians in Camelot." (sermon).

<sup>921</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Too Many Christians in Camelot," (sermon).

<sup>922</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Darkest Hour is Just Before the Dawn," (sermon).

<sup>923</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Darkest Hour is Just Before the Dawn," (sermon).

they're going to kill. And they're going to claim that Christ is on their side as they kill when all the while it will be Mars who is grinding into red and bloody pulp the bodies of those who will perish in that wide, wide hard and unrelenting desert. My only hope is that someday Christians will make a choice. They will decide that civilization is going to fall into its final coma and die. Or they will instead, understand that humanity under Christ can recognize the planetary peril which it confronts. And like a person who has swallowed some lethal poison can shake it off, can throw aside the deadly stupor, can vomit it up and out and stop. Stop excuses, stop denial, and begin practicing an authentic discipleship. Oh, would God that the people of Christ would rise up and by justice, reconciliation, security and the cross cleanse the earth of its deadliest peril of the foulest of all human deeds, war.<sup>924</sup>

From strong statements like these made from the pulpit Thielemann made his views on the United States involvement in any war clearly known.

In November of 1990, Thielemann returned to the Vietnam War as a means of communicating to his congregation what he viewed as the "insanity of war."<sup>925</sup> Thielemann explained, "Another example of the insanity of war is that it never turns out in the way that is expected... We fought the Vietnam War to stop the dominoes from falling, and we left 58,151 of our boys and girls dead in those jungles. And Vietnam is as red as red can be."<sup>926</sup> In order for Thielemann to connect effectively with the pressing needs of his listeners he addressed the important issue of war facing our country. This was true during the Vietnam War and continued through the United States involvement in the Middle East.

### *Abortion*

As we have seen, Thielemann's insistence on the importance of sermons connecting with the listener's needs necessitated engaging with current social and historical issues facing the congregation even when those issues were potential points of division. This was the case with how Thielemann chose to address the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and also abortion. Presbyterians were forced to face the issue of abortion in a tangible way after the Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* on January 22, 1973.<sup>927</sup> Throughout the history of the reformed tradition and

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<sup>924</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Mars or Master," (sermon).

<sup>925</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Field is the World," (sermon).

<sup>926</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Field is the World," (sermon).

<sup>927</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 129.



the Presbyterian Church, the sanctity of life was upheld and affirmed at all stages. In 1647 the *Westminster Catechism*, regarding the sixth commandment, stated that “all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others...and the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful or necessary means of preservation of life” is sinful and forbidden.<sup>928</sup> While not specifically naming the practice of abortion, the *Westminster Catechism* forbids the taking of innocent life while demanding the preservation of life from the moment of conception to the moment of a natural death.<sup>929</sup> Thielemann would witness the official United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America change its position on abortion during his ministry tenure. Shortly after Thielemann began his formal ministry, the United Presbyterian Church General Assembly published the following statement on abortion in 1962 and affirmed the statement in 1965. “The fetus is a human life to be protected by the criminal law from the moment when the ovum is fertilized.... As Christians, we believe that this should not be an individual decision on the part of the physician and couple. Their decision should be limited and restrained by the larger society.”<sup>930</sup> Just five years later, in 1970, three years prior to *Roe v. Wade* and the legalization of abortion in the United States, the United Presbyterian General Assembly released the following statement, which switched the denominational stance to a pro-abortion position. The statement read, “Women should have full freedom of personal choice concerning the completion or termination of their pregnancies.”<sup>931</sup> In 1992, near the conclusion of Thielemann’s ministry, the PCUSA General Assembly declared the following regarding the denominational stance on abortion: “Problem pregnancies are the result of, and influenced by, so many complicated and insolvable circumstances that we have neither the wisdom nor the authority to address or decide each situation.”<sup>932</sup> The UPCUSA church, under which Thielemann was ordained, had moved from a stance against abortion to a pro-abortion stance in the span of thirty years. It was this change, reflecting a similar

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<sup>928</sup> Westminster Catechism (1647), 7.245 and 7.246.

<sup>929</sup> Westminster Catechism (1647), 7.245 and 7.246.

<sup>930</sup> United Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly statement, (1965).

<sup>931</sup> United Presbyterian Church (USA), General Assembly statement, (1970).

<sup>932</sup> Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA). General Assembly Statement, (1992).

societal and legal shift in the United States, which Thielemann addressed directly from the pulpit.

From the selection of sermons sampled for this research project, there were no instances of Thielemann speaking about abortion from the pulpit during his time at Glendale Presbyterian Church. However, in a sermon preached while serving as Dean of the Chapel at Grove City College, Thielemann made clear that he was aware of the prevalence of the abortion debate, which was pressing on the students and society. He admitted to the student body, "The abortion controversy is much before us today."<sup>933</sup> Surprisingly, Thielemann did not dedicate any attention in this sermon to speaking for or against abortion. And in his ministry, he would not take sides in the abortion debate. Instead, the abortion question became a vehicle for Thielemann to examine the origin of man and woman and to address the needs for belonging of his listeners. As far as Thielemann was concerned, both pro-life and pro-choice proponents needed to answer the central question: When does a fetus become a person?<sup>934</sup> Thielemann admitted that determining the moment of personhood was an issue frequently debated by theologians, ethicists and medical professionals.<sup>935</sup> However, in Thielemann's estimation these debates missed a crucial point:

They determine whether a fetus is to be allowed to live on the basis of its development. If it is a person, it may live. And this implies that personhood is what gives value. Now this kind of thinking is valid if the measure of a man's worth is man. A humanist might argue like this quite consistently, but not the Christian. For the Christian the measure of a man [sic], his sanctity, rests not in himself, but in God. The dignity of man rests not in man [sic], but in his [sic] origin, the fact that he [sic] is God made. His [sic] essence is his [sic] existence before God, and to God, and from God.<sup>936</sup>

The abortion issue was at the forefront of society during the 1970's and 1980's.<sup>937</sup> As Thielemann addressed the abortion issue from the pulpit, he used the topic of abortion for illustrative material, but curiously attempted to maintain a neutral

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<sup>933</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Last Word," (sermon).

<sup>934</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Last Word," (sermon).

<sup>935</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Last Word," (sermon).

<sup>936</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Last Word," (sermon).

<sup>937</sup> Thomas S Kidd, *America's Religious History, Faith, Politics and the Shaping of a Nation*, 250.

position on this issue. As we will see, his refusal to take a side on the abortion question left listeners wondering exactly what he believed about abortion.<sup>938</sup>

Thielemann's attempts to maintain a neutral stance on abortion continued as his ministry moved from the Grove City College campus to the inner city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Thielemann addressed the importance of Christians cultivating critical thinking skills. As an example of what he viewed as non-discriminating thinking leading to believing the erroneous thoughts and false assumptions, Thielemann turned to the question of abortion. He began by stating, "Now you're not going to be able, from what I say, to know where I stand on abortion, and that's good. I don't want you to know where I stand on abortion right now. That's not what we're talking about."<sup>939</sup> Thielemann proceeded to list what he viewed as three false statements "casually" said by Christians who are against abortion.<sup>940</sup> First, Thielemann felt it was not accurate to stand against abortion based on the argument of the sanctity of human life because "the sanctity of human life is a humanistic secular idea."<sup>941</sup> According to Thielemann, if a Christian stood against abortion they should do so "because it is the will of God. It is the sanctity of God, and God says don't do it, not because of the worth of the human being, no matter what that worth might be."<sup>942</sup> Second, Thielemann rejected the notion that "God forbids the taking of innocent life."<sup>943</sup> In his opinion it was not possible to define accurately the concept of "life" and "no one pretends to know exactly when the life of the fetus begins."<sup>944</sup> Furthermore he questioned, "Doesn't our Christian faith teach us that all of us are stained with sin?"<sup>945</sup> Finally, Thielemann pointed out what he perceived was the most "blasphemous" statement of all by pro-life Christians as he reprimanded those who argued that abortion is "playing God."<sup>946</sup> Thielemann protested, "God doesn't go

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<sup>938</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle," (sermon).

<sup>939</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>940</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>941</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>942</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>943</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>944</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>945</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

<sup>946</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "On Knowing What You Believe and Why?," (sermon).

around zapping little babies in the womb!”<sup>947</sup> Thielemann concluded his comments on abortion with the strict warning, “How dare anyone say when someone commits an abortion that they are playing God.”<sup>948</sup>

Thielemann understood the potentially contentious and divisive nature of the abortion question among his congregation and within society. As church historian Thomas Kidd observed, “By 1980, abortion had emerged as perhaps the defining concern for conservative Protestant voters.”<sup>949</sup> In two separate sermons at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Thielemann admitted, “We live in very angry times. Most people seem to go about with their thermostats turned on high most of the time...Some people are so upset with abortion that they are ready to bomb abortion clinics.”<sup>950</sup> In a society and within the Presbyterian denomination divided by the issue of abortion, Thielemann continued to maintain his stance of neutrality on the abortion issue. This neutral stance is nowhere more evident than in a sermon Thielemann preached at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh entitled “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle.”<sup>951</sup> Even before preaching this sermon, Thielemann revealed he had already received critical letters from members of the congregation. Citing one example, Thielemann explained that a woman wrote him a letter the week before the sermon was preached in reaction to the title alone. She placed him in the category with those who are “stupid, ignorant, violent – with those who are the cohorts of sinners. She said she would never fraternize with murderers.”<sup>952</sup> However, Thielemann confessed he was compelled to address the controversial and divisive issue of abortion “because it is creating discord in the church, and no pastor who loves his people can sit by idly while people in his congregation refuse to speak to one

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<sup>947</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “On Knowing What You Believe and Why?,” (sermon).

<sup>948</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “On Knowing What You Believe and Why?,” (sermon).

<sup>949</sup> Thomas S Kidd, *America’s Religious History, Faith, Politics and the Shaping of a Nation*, 250.

<sup>950</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Gripes of Wrath,” and “How to Defeat Discouragement: Love Story IV,” (sermons).

<sup>951</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

<sup>952</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

another. And that is occurring within our own church.”<sup>953</sup> With this relevant and pressing issue his congregation faced, Thielemann attempted to address Christians on both the pro-life and the pro-choice sides of the abortion debate. In Thielemann’s view, “To brand all, then, on either side as non-Christian is simply not true.”<sup>954</sup> Then, Thielemann went back and forth between the pro-life and pro-choice sides, listing what he viewed the unfair and unbalanced ways both sides defended their position. Thielemann observed, “As I look at these two positions as a man in the middle, I see areas of weakness, or should I say areas in which there needs to be a lot more thinking on both sides of this question.”<sup>955</sup> Then, in an attempt to lay out what he felt was a balanced argument, Thielemann listed two questions for pro-life Christians to think about and two questions for pro-choice Christians to grapple with. On the pro-choice side, Thielemann challenged a deeper engagement with “the nature and vulnerability of a fetus” along with a need to “think more about the practical results of the position you’ve decided to take.”<sup>956</sup> To those who affirm a pro-life position, Thielemann challenged, “It seems to me you need to think a lot about the difference between the potential and the actual.” He continued, “I deeply and earnestly wish that you would reject the misuse of Scripture which is so often the case in your presentations.”<sup>957</sup> The abortion debate remained ongoing throughout Thielemann’s ministry.

As Smylie observed, “In general, Presbyterians discouraged abortions but judged them permissible under extraordinary circumstances, after the counsel of pastors and physicians. So, Presbyterians attempted to find their way through changes in gender and sexual behavior.”<sup>958</sup> Thielemann’s strategy for addressing abortion from the pulpit was a stance of neutrality. Thielemann’s goal in addressing

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<sup>953</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

<sup>954</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

<sup>955</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

<sup>956</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

<sup>957</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle,” (sermon).

<sup>958</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 129.

the abortion issue from the pulpit was to encourage conversation, not conflict.<sup>959</sup> However, the abortion question remained a challenging and polarizing subject for preachers and even friends to discuss in a productive manner. As Longfield observed in the 1990's, towards the conclusion of Thielemann's ministry, "there is, of course, the ongoing and highly charged question of whether Christians ought to condone abortions as congruent with the faith."<sup>960</sup> In Longfield's understanding, within Thielemann's denomination, the PCUSA, it was "the ordination of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals" along with its stance on abortion which contributed to an "unprecedented hemorrhage in membership – about 50 percent since 1965 – that has resulted in the closing of congregations and massive budget shortfalls and staffing cuts at the national level of the church."<sup>961</sup> More will be said about this in another section, but here it is important to acknowledge that Longfield is critical of the denomination addressing "difficult issues more as matters of polity than theology, doing little to help clarify the church's theological identity."<sup>962</sup> As we have seen, Thielemann's strategy of neutrality on the abortion question was his attempt to encourage his congregation to look at abortion from a theological and scriptural perspective, than as a simply a matter of Presbyterian polity. However, from the response of some in his congregation, Thielemann's stance of neutrality on abortion was not completely accepted.<sup>963</sup> Further, it is interesting to observe that Thielemann's position of neutrality on abortion stands in contrast to his clearly one-sided views on both Civil Rights and the Vietnam War.

Every generation faces "mighty movements" which require thoughtful engagement. For better or worse, Thielemann was not afraid to preach sermons focused on emotionally charged "mighty movements" facing his listeners. In addition to the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and abortion, Thielemann also addressed issues such as politics, environmental concerns, technology, popular-culture, current literature, psychology, women's rights, fundamentalism,

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<sup>959</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle," (sermon).

<sup>960</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 201.

<sup>961</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 201.

<sup>962</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 201.

<sup>963</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle," (sermon).

liberalism, the Jesus Movement, global missions, euthanasia, poverty, and a variety of other current topics from the pulpit. Because of his commitment to a need-centered homiletic, Thielemann confronted relevant social issues from the pulpit to connect with his listener's needs, motivate people to action and ultimately bring God's truth to light on the current situation.

## **Theological Context**

### *Background Information*

On July 1, 1959, after graduating from Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, Thielemann accepted the call to serve as the senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of McKeesport in Pennsylvania. In 1967, during his final year in McKeesport, Thielemann altered his preaching to be more intentionally connect with his listeners on both a head and heart level.<sup>964</sup> During the same year, within the Presbyterian church, the *Confession of 1967*, named after the year it was adopted, gave neo-orthodoxy confessional standing and preferred status within the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.<sup>965</sup> More will be said about the historical and theological significance of the *Confession of 1967* in a later section. Interestingly, during this same year, Thielemann unapologetically admitted to shifting his sermons to speak to emotions over intellect.<sup>966</sup> In 1973, while serving as the senior pastor of Glendale Presbyterian Church in California, Thielemann delivered his first lecture, "The Primacy of Preaching," to the incoming class of Fuller Theological Seminary where he expressed his commitment to engage the listener's head and heart. Then as we have already noted, in November of 1975, while serving as Dean of the Chapel at Grove City College, Thielemann fully articulated his "need-centered" homiletic in a four-part lecture series first delivered to a group of Presbyterian pastors at the San Fernando Presbytery meeting. Thielemann reflected, "Slowly, I began to see that honest emotion is part of life, that the most powerful sermons always give people both something to think about

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<sup>964</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Sermons for Head and Heart: Effective Preaching Feeds both the Mind and Emotions," *Leadership Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 2, Spring 1987, 58.

<sup>965</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

<sup>966</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching," 5.

and something to feel.”<sup>967</sup> This need-centered preaching philosophy defined the final twenty-six years of his preaching and pastoral ministry. Thielemann formed his need-centered approach to preaching out of a desire to make his neo-orthodox theological understanding of the preaching event come to life. For Thielemann, need-centered preaching was the union of God’s Word and the listener. It was his attempt to have the best possible chance of crafting sermons that effectively communicated God’s Word to God’s people and making “God’s Word act.”

#### *Neo-Orthodoxy Within the United Presbyterian Church*

To appreciate fully Thielemann’s need-centered homiletic, it is important to understand theological movements within the Presbyterian tradition in which Thielemann’s homiletic and pastoral ministry were formed, primarily neo-orthodox theology. Following World War II, some Presbyterians turned to “a fresh theological movement often referred to as neo-orthodoxy.”<sup>968</sup> This movement began in Germany out of the ashes and despair of World War I and was solidified during the post war economic depression and the ensuing struggle of the German church with Naziism, which produced the *Barmen Declaration*.<sup>969</sup> Theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were the most notable European leaders of the neo-orthodox movement while brothers Richard Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary and Reinhold Niebuhr at Yale Divinity School were leaders of the neo-orthodox movement in the United States of America.<sup>970</sup>

When many mainline Presbyterian seminaries were embracing neo-orthodox theology, Pittsburgh-Xenia was going in a different direction. One of Thielemann’s professors at Pittsburgh-Xenia seminary, John H. Gerstner, observed that the seminary avoided liberal and neo-orthodox theology in an era when these two theological viewpoints were dominant among professors in mainline Presbyterian seminaries.<sup>971</sup> Also, from 1955-1959, during Thielemann’s time at the United Presbyterian Church of North America’s Pittsburgh-Xenia seminary, Addison

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<sup>967</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Sermons for Head and Heart: Effective Preaching Feeds both the Mind and Emotions,” 58.

<sup>968</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 131-132.

<sup>969</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 118.

<sup>970</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 118.

<sup>971</sup> Milton J. Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis Weeks eds, *The Re-Forming Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).



Leitch served as the seminary's third and final president.<sup>972</sup> During Leitch's five-year presidency, "Pittsburgh-Xenia affirmed its commitment to be a theological school with one dominating purpose: to prepare students for the pulpit and the pastorate."<sup>973</sup> In 1966, Leitch wrote a critique of the neo-orthodox theology of Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr and Tillich entitled *Winds of Doctrine*. Regarding neo-orthodoxy, Leitch asserted "stringent criticisms are called for."<sup>974</sup> Leitch argued, "There is also need for some kind of evaluation of the orthodox counter-movement and some judgement of its strength."<sup>975</sup> While Leitch was encouraged by the neo-orthodox focus on the close study of Scripture and its Christocentric qualities, he was critical of what he viewed as "the disintegrating effect of the radical criticism of Scriptures."<sup>976</sup> More importantly for our study of Thielemann's need-centered homiletic, Leitch was also critical of what he saw as neo-orthodoxy's tendency the shift from "inspiration to revelation."<sup>977</sup> As Leitch explains,

In Barth, the revelatory word includes everything from that which is written to the resultant action, and inspiration does not lie in the creation of the Bible, but in the act of the Spirit on the Word of the Bible in the action of the believer. Authority shifts from the inception of the Word – 'it stands written' – to the action of the believer, and, however much we may want to encourage action, we must recognize that the Word of God stands secure, whether we ever act on it or not.<sup>978</sup>

As we have seen in a previous chapter, this critique of neo-orthodoxy's view of God's Word ran counter to Thielemann's neo-orthodox understanding of Scripture.<sup>979</sup> One of Thielemann's classmates at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, James

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<sup>972</sup> James A. Walther, *Ever a Frontier: The Bicentennial History of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*, (Grand Rapid: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 129.

<sup>973</sup> James A. Walther, *Ever a Frontier: The Bicentennial History of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*, 130.

<sup>974</sup> Addison H. Leitch, *Winds of Doctrine: The Theology of Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Tillich*, (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1966), 19.

<sup>975</sup> Addison H. Leitch, *Winds of Doctrine: The Theology of Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Tillich*, 19.

<sup>976</sup> Addison H. Leitch, *Winds of Doctrine: The Theology of Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Tillich*, 57.

<sup>977</sup> Addison H. Leitch, *Winds of Doctrine: The Theology of Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Tillich*, 58.

<sup>978</sup> Addison H. Leitch, *Winds of Doctrine: The Theology of Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Niebuhr, Tillich*, 58.

<sup>979</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 4.

Bigley, who also served as the pastor of Tower Presbyterian Church in Grove City, Pennsylvania while Thielemann was Dean of the Chapel on the nearby campus of Grove City College, described the theological stance of Pittsburgh-Xenia during the 1950's as "traditional, conservative and resistant to change."<sup>980</sup> It was Bigley's impression that the contemporary theological teachings of Barth, Brunner and Bultmann were only occasionally alluded to during his time at Pittsburgh-Xenia. Further, he felt "only those students prepared to 'come out of the closet' and reveal their neo-orthodox or liberal leanings spoke openly of 'the three B's.'"<sup>981</sup> By Thielemann's own admission, he understood that he was known as a conservative theologian. While he does not elaborate on the meaning of conservative, the statement is made in the context of describing the dangers of "conservative fundamental preaching." By fundamental Thielemann was referring not to theology, but to an attitude he described as ridged, narrow and "authoritarian in nature."<sup>982</sup> Thielemann once described fundamentalists as believing in the absolute infallibility of God's Word even down to the punctuation marks.<sup>983</sup> He preferred to view himself as a moderate theologian. While Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary may not have been teaching neo-orthodox theology in the classroom, Thielemann along with the United Presbyterian Church embraced neo-orthodoxy during the late 1950's and early 1960's. And for Thielemann, neo-orthodoxy would shape and inform his turn towards need-centered preaching. We will now look at the *Confession of 1967* and the ways it brought neo-orthodoxy into wider acceptance in the United Presbyterian Church of which Thielemann was connected.

#### *Confession of 1967*

In 1956, while Thielemann was completing his first year at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, the General Assembly United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) created a committee to consider revising the confessional position of the denomination.<sup>984</sup> Then in 1958, when the United Presbyterian

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<sup>980</sup> James D. Bigley, "Living Next to a Giant," article in *Thielemann The Preacher's Preacher* by John Zingaro, 297.

<sup>981</sup> James D. Bigley, "Living Next to a Giant," article in *Thielemann The Preacher's Preacher* by John Zingaro, 297.

<sup>982</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," 4.

<sup>983</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Flags of our Faith: Love Letter," (sermon).

<sup>984</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 162.

Church in the United States of America merged with the United Presbyterian Church of North America, a new General Assembly was given the task of framing a contemporary statement of faith.<sup>985</sup> A committee spent seven years working on this project before it was sent to the General Assembly of 1965, where it was approved and sent to the presbyteries for consideration.<sup>986</sup> Suggested changes and additions were given to a newly appointed committee charged with making the revisions. The *Confession of 1967* draws heavily on the idea of reconciliation as it aims to address the role of the church in the modern world. Specifically, it calls the Presbyterian Church to respond to a variety of pressing social issues facing the United States in the 1960's such as civil rights, women's rights, the sexual revolution, peacemaking and environmental concerns. The committee drafting the *Confession of 1967* during the peak of the turbulent 1960's was aware of the significant changes occurring in the United States and the implications for the future of the Christian church.<sup>987</sup> The *Confession of 1967* was viewed by some within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as on the same level as the Roman Catholic's Second Vatican Council as a means of reforming the Presbyterian Church.<sup>988</sup>

The final draft of the *Confession of 1967* was accepted by the General Assembly of 1966 and submitted to presbyteries, of which eighty two percent approved it.<sup>989</sup> Some viewed the adoption of this new *Confession of 1967* "as a confessional and confessing church, seeking thereby the peace, unity and purity of the church in a new period in its life."<sup>990</sup> And "the Confession of 1967 did not replace the *Westminster Confession* but joined it and several other confessions in the *Book of Confessions*.<sup>991</sup> However, there was resistance to the adoption of the *Confession of 1967*. That resistance is evident in a nearly full-page ad placed in the February 18, 1966, issue of *Christianity Today* by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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<sup>985</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

<sup>986</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

<sup>987</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 162.

<sup>988</sup> *Book of Confessions*, (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2007), 252.

<sup>989</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 133.

<sup>990</sup> James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 133.

<sup>991</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

The top of the ad asks in bold letters, “A new confession – or a new faith? The Presbyterian Predicament.”<sup>992</sup> According to the ad, “Presbyterians cannot have it both ways. Either the Westminster Confession is outdated, irrelevant and untrue and should be openly abandoned-or it is a faithful summary of the eternal truth of the written Word of God to be received as such.”<sup>993</sup> While some Presbyterians would affirm the importance of remaining culturally relevant and contemporary was a worthwhile goal, some thought the *Confession of 1967* went too far. In the critic’s estimation, it was not a contemporary restatement of the historic Christian faith, but something other than the Christian faith.<sup>994</sup> While the *Confession of 1967* was not meant to replace the *Westminster Confession*, if approved critics feared it would gain authority on the level of several other historic doctrinal confessions in the Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*.<sup>995</sup> Among the harshest critics of the *Confession of 1967* was theologian Cornelius Van Til, who in a rather dramatic fashion “viewed the *Confession of 1967* as proof of his thirty-year claim that Barth had infiltrated the UPCUSA as the new modernism.”<sup>996</sup>

With the official inclusion of the *Confession of 1967*, in the *Book of Confessions*, Thielemann’s neo-orthodox theological convictions, which were not taught or embraced at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary and may not have been at the forefront of his thoughts during his seminary education, now had confessional standing in the UPCUSA where he was ordained. It is clear that, “The confession affirmed God’s transcendence over creation, humanity’s fall into sin, and the call to faith as a response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”<sup>997</sup> It must also be noted that “The confession carefully described the Bible as the word of God in lower case, to subordinate it to the incarnate Word of God, to whom Scripture was a faithful

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<sup>992</sup> *Christianity Today*, February 18, 1966, Vol. 10, No. 10, 27.

<sup>993</sup> *Christianity Today*, February 18, 1966, Vol. 10, No. 10, 27.

<sup>994</sup> *Christianity Today*, February 18, 1966, Vol. 10, No. 10, 27.

<sup>995</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub, 2007), 217.

<sup>996</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 218.

<sup>997</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

witness.”<sup>998</sup> Some voiced concern that the *Confession of 1967* also uncritically endorsed modern biblical scholarship “and instructed Presbyterians to read the Bible historically and not literally, liberated from the doctrine of inerrancy.”<sup>999</sup> The theological perspective expounded in the *Confession of 1967* was in line with what Thielemann’s described as the “Presbyterian understanding of Scripture.”<sup>1000</sup> As Thielemann explained to his congregation, “We believe that when the Bible speaks to us of matters of faith and practice, we may believe it and trust it absolutely. But we do not acknowledge that the culture and the traditions recorded on the pages of Scripture is binding to us today.”<sup>1001</sup> The *Confession of 1967* self-defines its purpose “to call the church to unity in confession and mission which is required of discipleship today.”<sup>1002</sup> With that purpose the *Confession of 1967* was organized around the theme of reconciliation. “God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are the heart of the gospel in any age.”<sup>1003</sup> This focus on reconciliation complemented Thielemann’s description of what he described as God’s purpose “to meet the needs of his creation – to reconcile men [sic] to God, to reconcile men [sic] to other men[sic] and to reconcile men [sic] to their place in time and in space.”<sup>1004</sup> This three-fold focus on reconciliation was foundational in the formation and explanation of Thielemann’s need-centered homiletic.

From a more conservative theological perspective, church historians Hart and Muether described the *Confession of 1967*. In their understanding, “Specifically the confession called the church to this mission four ways: race relations, modern warfare, economic justice, and sexual relations.”<sup>1005</sup> In their estimation, the passing of the *Confession of 1967* within the UPCUSA, ushered in “the end of its period of

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<sup>998</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

<sup>999</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 217.

<sup>1000</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann “A Tale of Terror,” (sermon).

<sup>1001</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann “A Tale of Terror,” (sermon).

<sup>1002</sup> “The Confession of 1967,” 9.05.

<sup>1003</sup> “The Confession of 1967,” 9.06.

<sup>1004</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “The Planning of Preaching,” 1.

<sup>1005</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 219.

ecclesiastical peace and the rise of theological antagonism and denominational strife.”<sup>1006</sup> Perhaps it was this theological antagonism which raged during much of Thielemann’s ministry within the Presbyterian church that led him to share his frustration with theological arguments during the final sermon of his career.<sup>1007</sup>

While Thielemann may have grown weary of theological disputes within the Presbyterian church, they were still very much in the forefront of his mind and laid the foundation for his need-centered approach to preaching.

#### *Controversies Within the United Presbyterian Church*

In 1958 while Thielemann was studying at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the United Presbyterian Church of North America merged to create The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. As we have seen, this merger in 1958 was a significant moment within the Presbyterian church at the start of Thielemann’s ordained ministry. However, after this merger the matter of the ordination of women was still unsettled. This caused some to view the merger of 1958 as a compromise because it “permitted but did not require that ministers and congregations commit themselves to women in church office.”<sup>1008</sup> The merger of 1958 then set the stage for a controversy within the United Presbyterian Church to which we will now turn.

#### *The Kenyon Controversy*

In 1974, Walter Kenyon, a student at Thielemann’s alma matter, now renamed Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was examined for ordination within the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. During his ordination examination “he informed the Pittsburgh Presbytery that he could not participate in services of ordination for women, though he would neither impede their ordination nor refuse to work with women in ministry.”<sup>1009</sup> By a narrow margin the Pittsburgh Presbytery authorized Kenyon’s ordination which led to a formal complaint being brought before the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly in 1975. The commission

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<sup>1006</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 219.

<sup>1007</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Big 6-0,” (sermon).

<sup>1008</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 238-239.

<sup>1009</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 239.

overturned the decision of the Pittsburgh Presbytery to ordain Kenyon. The ruling stated, “it is the responsibility of our Church to deny ordination to one who has refused the ordination of women.”<sup>1010</sup> The ruling further clarified that “the General Assembly had no power to allow a presbytery to grant an exception to an explicit constitutional provision.”<sup>1011</sup> The compromise of the 1958 merger permitting but not requiring ordained clergy and congregations to completely support women in church office was now overturned. Further, in 1979, the General Assembly ruled that “all congregations must elect men and women to the office of ruling elder.”<sup>1012</sup> The Kenyon case created protest within the United Presbyterian Church. Over forty churches left the denomination by the end of the decade. Most notably, historic Tenth Presbyterian Church, under the leadership of pastor James M. Boice, left the United Presbyterian Church feeling that the Kenyon case “brought to an end its reform efforts from within.”<sup>1013</sup>

On December 15, 1968, Thielemann began serving as pastor of Glendale Presbyterian Church. In 1971, three years into his ministry, Thielemann shared with the congregation in a sermon that his views on women and their role in society and ministry had changed from when he was first called as their pastor. This change of his theological convictions may be attributed to Thielemann’s commitment to maintaining a relevant connection with his congregation and their cultural context. Thielemann stated, “as a result of the publicity that women’s lib movement has received, I have become quite intrigued with it.”<sup>1014</sup> Most notably Thielemann confessed that because of the “theological implications” of the women’s liberation movement active within society and in “every major denomination in America” he dedicated one year to “studying a reconsideration of the place of women in society.”<sup>1015</sup> Thielemann confessed, “My study in the last year, my reading, my

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<sup>1010</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 239.

<sup>1011</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 239.

<sup>1012</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 239.

<sup>1013</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 239.

<sup>1014</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Adam’s Fractured Rib,” (sermon).

<sup>1015</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Adam’s Fractured Rib,” (sermon).

prayer, my sensitivity to the movements of God's Spirit, my conversations with others, all of these things have contributed from my being changed from the misogynist bachelor I was three years ago to what I hope is a Bible-based women's liber today."<sup>1016</sup> In his sermon's conclusion, Thielemann provided a summary statement of his newfound beliefs on the status of women in society and the church. Thielemann believed, "She is liberated, she is equal, she is in no sense subordinate or inferior, and she is what she is by the blood of Jesus Christ."<sup>1017</sup> Throughout the remainder of his pastoral ministry Thielemann remained committed to upholding the United Presbyterian Church's theological stance on the affirmation of women in places of ordained leadership. In one sermon, addressed to a hypothetical daughter of his dreams, Thielemann said, "I would say to her that I hoped she wouldn't bind herself only to those roles traditionally given to women."<sup>1018</sup> While not an overt affirmation of women in positions of ordained leadership, it does give us a glimpse into Thielemann's perspective on gender roles. In another sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh in 1984, on "Seminary Sunday" and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of graduating from Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary, Thielemann openly shared his support of and prayers for "the young men and women who are in training there."<sup>1019</sup> Even with the controversy ignited by the Kenyon case within the United Presbyterian denomination, Thielemann would teach, affirm and uphold an egalitarian view of women in ministry roles and maintain good standing within his denomination.

#### *The Kaseman Controversy*

Another controversy which had an impact on the United Presbyterian Church during Thielemann's ministry involved the denial of the deity, sinless nature and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. In 1981 the National Capital Union Presbytery approved for ordination Mansfield Kaseman, who had been called to co-pastor a congregation in Rockville, Maryland. At the time the church was dually aligned with the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the United Presbyterian Church in the United

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<sup>1016</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Adam's Fractured Rib," (sermon).

<sup>1017</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Adam's Fractured Rib," (sermon).

<sup>1018</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "A Letter to the Daughter of My Dreams," (sermon).

<sup>1019</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Prophetic Essential," (sermon).



States of America (UPCUSA).<sup>1020</sup> During his ordination interview, Kaseman denied the deity of Christ, the sinless nature of Christ and the bodily resurrection of Christ. This controversial decision to ordain Kaseman was brought before the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission who affirmed "that Kaseman's beliefs were within the 'acceptable range of interpretation' of the church's confessions."<sup>1021</sup> Kaseman's ordination within the UPCUSA after failing to affirm these foundational doctrines caused yet another series of departures from the United Presbyterian Church. One of those who departed was Thielemann's professor from Pittsburgh-Xenia seminary, John Gerstner. As one church historian described the situation, "Gerstner, who struggled to stay in the church after the passage of the Confession of 1967, described the Kaseman decision as apostasy."<sup>1022</sup> Gerstner threatened, but did not follow through on a protest walkout from the 1981 General Assembly meeting in Houston. However, he did move his ordination to the Presbyterian Church in America which was formed in 1973."<sup>1023</sup> Further, the Kaseman decision in 1981 sparked the creation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church as seventy-five pastors representing twelve congregations left the UPCUSA. There is no record of Thielemann speaking in favor of or against the Kaseman decision, but he did continue to serve within the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the PCUSA throughout the duration of his ministry.

Shortly after the Kaseman decision on June 10, 1983, in Atlanta, Georgia, the northern based United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the southern based Presbyterian Church in the United States reunited after being separated for 122 years to create the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA).<sup>1024</sup> These Presbyterians had been divided since their split in 1861 during the United States Civil War. Of the merger one historian noted, "For mainline American Presbyterians,

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<sup>1020</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 240.

<sup>1021</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 240.

<sup>1022</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 240.

<sup>1023</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 240.

<sup>1024</sup> Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians*, 185.

the Civil War finally ended on June 10, 1983.”<sup>1025</sup> The merger was an attempt to end a severe decline in membership in the Presbyterian church. From 1967 until the merger in 1983, mainline Presbyterians dropped from 4.2 million members to 3.2 million members.<sup>1026</sup> At the time of the merger “Presbyterians were the fourth largest American denomination, behind Catholics, Southern Baptists and United Methodists. According to Presbyterian pollster George Gallup, they were geographically the most widely distributed denomination in the nation.”<sup>1027</sup>

The Kenyon and Kaseman controversies are representative of some of the issues facing the Presbyterian church which caused division during Thielemann’s ministry. While there is no evidence of Thielemann commenting specifically on the controversial Kenyon or Kaseman decisions in the sermons studied for this thesis, it is evident that by the end of his ministry Thielemann had grown tired of theological debates and the lack of cooperation among Christians. We turn again to Thielemann’s final sermon preached at the end of his nine years at the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and the end of his thirty-four years of ministry within the Presbyterian Church. Curiously, Thielemann reflected, “I’ve come to the place where I wonder if there is any theology which is not, in the end, a heresy. Every theology is incomplete and inadequate, and precisely to the degree that it is incomplete and inadequate, it is dangerous.”<sup>1028</sup> He was tired of the controversies which marked his time within the Presbyterian Church. Thielemann continued, “So, I don’t take theological disputes very seriously anymore. I’ve lived too long to be entertained by its glib and shallow exercises. I am bored to death with these tests of orthodoxy, which one person gives to another.”<sup>1029</sup> The controversial issues within the Presbyterian Church discussed here are representative of the disputes Presbyterians faced during Thielemann’s career. The theological landscape of Thielemann’s ministry led him to a place of searching. His search can be heard in

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<sup>1025</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 243.

<sup>1026</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 197.

<sup>1027</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 243.

<sup>1028</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Big 6-0,” (sermon).

<sup>1029</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, “Reflections on the Big 6-0,” (sermon).

Thielemann's closing prayer at the conclusion of this final sermon of his career.

Thielemann prayed:

Oh, God, I thank thee for the gift thou has given me across the years to occupy this sacred desk. I am mindful of its history. I am humbled by its responsibility. I am joyful that I have had the privilege. I am thankful that it has come to an end. I pray that thou will give me, in the years which are still to be mine, deeper certainty. Deliver us all from being caught in the thick and thin things. And instead help us to understand that in the end, nothing is important except abiding by thy Word. It is in Jesus' name that I pray this prayer. Amen.

Following Thielemann's death in 1994 the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America would continue to struggle with theological disputes and a decline in membership. This came to a boiling point moment in 2001 with the rise of the Confessing Church Movement within the PCUSA created in response to what the members viewed as a drift towards liberal theology. This movement quickly grew to over 1300 PCUSA congregations united over three affirmations:

1. That Jesus Christ alone is Lord of all and the way of salvation.
2. That holy Scripture is the Triune God's revealed Word, the Church's only infallible rule of faith and practice.
3. That God's people are called to holiness in all aspects of life. This includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, the only relationship within which sexual activity is appropriate.<sup>1030</sup>

Thielemann and the Presbyterian church in which he was ordained for the entirety of his career navigated several theological disagreements together. The above discussion provides a summary of the major challenges faced by the mainline Presbyterian Church over the past few decades. These challenges contributed to a decline in membership from which the PCUSA has not recovered. In 2020, membership in the PCUSA was 1,245,354. In 1993, when Thielemann retired, it was listed at 2,742,192.<sup>1031</sup> The greatest recent decline in PCUSA membership occurred after 2012 when 800 congregations in support of the Confessing Church Movement

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<sup>1030</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking A Better Country: 300 years of American Presbyterianism*, 252.

<sup>1031</sup> <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2021/4/21/pcusa-2020-statistics-show-no-change-decline-rate/>

and the three affirmations left the PCUSA and formed a new Presbyterian denomination named, A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO).<sup>1032</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have examined some of the significant historical and theological movements which influenced Bruce W. Thielemann's formulation and application of his need-centered approach to preaching. In order to place Thielemann's need-centered preaching in the historical context, we looked at how he addressed civil rights, the Vietnam War and abortion, three significant historical movements during his ministry. In order to place Thielemann within his theological context, we examined some of the theological issues which shaped his need-centered approach to preaching and those which impacted Thielemann's ministry. Specifically, we addressed the influence of neo-orthodoxy through the acceptance of the Confession of 1967 and the ways the Kenyon and Kaseman controversies impacted Thielemann's Presbyterian denomination where he served. As we have seen, the cornerstone of Thielemann's need-centered preaching, was the necessity of crafting sermons that connected with the present day needs of Thielemann's listeners. Thielemann remained connected historically and theologically with some of the mighty movements of his day in order to more effectively preach God's Word to God's people as he remained committed to his need-centered homiletic.

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<sup>1032</sup> Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture A History*, 201.

## Conclusion

Following Bruce W. Thielemann's death on January 6, 1994, the January 8, 1994, edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ran a picture of Thielemann next to Olympic ice-skater, Nancy Kerrigan, who was recovering from a brutal attack. The Pittsburgh paper reported about Thielemann, "He was a scholar, although he would never put that label on himself. He would say, 'I have one talent and one talent only – for preaching.' But to do that he had to have a fine mind and be able to glean ideas from many sources and to analyze and filter them before he would present them."<sup>1033</sup> Thielemann would often tell his congregation while preaching that God had given him the gift of prophecy or preaching.<sup>1034</sup> Preaching was a source of great joy for Thielemann. At the same time, he also confessed to his congregation that the pulpit and preaching were often the cause of his greatest pain.<sup>1035</sup> This juxtaposition of pain and joy accurately described the task of preaching for Thielemann. He dedicated his life to the art and discipline of the double grip in preaching, "when a servant of God seeks to put one hand into the hand of God and the other hand into the hand of his people, and sometimes even at the cost of great pain, make it possible for the people to hear the King."<sup>1036</sup>

The objective of this thesis was to provide a theological biography of the life and preaching ministry of Bruce W. Thielemann in order to examine and critique his need-centered homiletic. To accomplish this objective this thesis provided a critical examination of Thielemann's life, theology of preaching, methodology of preaching and his historical and theological contexts. It has been clearly demonstrated that Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching was central to his life and ministry.

### *Summary of Findings*

Chapter one set the groundwork for Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching with a biographical overview of Thielemann's life and ministry. His

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<sup>1033</sup> Ann Rodgers-Melnick, "Bruce Thielemann, Presbyterian Pastor, ex-college chaplain," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 8, 1994.

<sup>1034</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>1035</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

<sup>1036</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "My Job and Why I Love It," (sermon).

upbringing, education, and vocational ministry contexts all provided an opportunity to develop, refine and utilize his need-centered approach on a theoretical and practical level. It was this mix of praxis and theory which make Thielemann a viable subject of academic study. His self-awareness, intentionality and evaluation of the preaching task was evident throughout his life and ministry. Thielemann remained committed to a need-centered approach to preaching God's Word.

Chapter two explored Thielemann's theology of preaching which comprised the foundation for his need-centered approach to preaching. In this chapter we examined Thielemann's academic and pastoral qualifications along with his preaching lectures which set the groundwork for his need-centered approach. We looked at Thielemann's theological presuppositions which influenced his approach to the homiletical task. We also considered the important role P. T. Forsyth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth played in formulating Thielemann's brand of neo-orthodox, theological beliefs. Finally, we highlighted the profound influence Thielemann's conviction that God's Word is act played in shaping his homiletic aimed at meeting relevant needs in order to bring tangible application of God's Word to the lives of his listeners.

In chapter three we assessed the theological, homiletical, psychological and rhetorical influences that helped Thielemann formulate his need-centered approach to preaching. We noted the influence of contemporary secular and Christian sources on Thielemann's homiletic. In this chapter we see that Thielemann encouraged preachers to utilize the latest Christian and secular resources to refine and deepen one's homiletical skills. In order for Thielemann to connect with the needs of one's listeners he sought to remain a lifelong learner in a breadth of fields with an emphasis on digging deeply into the primary source material. This lifelong commitment to read deeply and widely was an important part of Thielemann's approach.

Chapter four focused on Thielemann's methodology of preaching which was need-centered, but also grounded in Scripture. In Thielemann's life and ministry we observed that preaching was primary and connected to a specific ministry context. We unpacked Thielemann's use of Scripture in preaching and the central role God's Word played in Thielemann's need-centered approach to the homiletical process.

We also explored Thielemann's use of the three-sentence structure in his preaching lectures and practice to ensure a need was identified, answered with a truth from Scripture and applied in a practical way to his listeners. Finally, in this chapter we examined the importance of the double responsibility of the preacher to maintain a firm grip on God's Word and one's listener. Thielemann described this as both the building of a bridge or the double grip. In both of these analogies, we recognized the importance Thielemann placed on his preaching methodology of connecting God's Word to God's people in a way that motivated the listener to an action grounded in the truth of Scripture.

In chapter five we examined how Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching shaped his interaction with some of the major historical issues during his ministry from the 1960's through the early 1990's as well as theologically significant movements within the Presbyterian church in the United States. We used a chronological and thematic approach to evaluate the historical and theological context of Thielemann's ministry, moving from the broader context of some major historical events during Thielemann's ministry, to the more specific context of the theological issues within the Presbyterian Church of which Thielemann was a part of for thirty-four years. The goal of this chapter was to place Thielemann within the broader social, cultural, historical and theological context in order to see his need-centered approach to preaching in practice and how some of these key historical and theological issues impacted Thielemann. For better or worse, this chapter proved that Thielemann was committed to a need-centered homiletic as he interacted with significant events both within and outside the church.

This thesis demonstrated the following from a robust and critical study of Bruce W. Thielemann's homiletic. First, Thielemann's practical and theoretical commitment to his need-centered homiletic as both preacher and teacher made him a viable subject of a critical academic study. Second, Thielemann's identification with neo-orthodox theology fueled the formation of his need-centered approach to preaching which motivated him to move people to action through the preaching event. Third, Thielemann's attentiveness to a wide range of academic disciplines, both Christian and secular, infused and honed his need-centered preaching. Fourth, Thielemann utilized a variety of methods from various

disciplines to demonstrate the crafting of sermons which he determined would support his homiletic enabling preachers to develop sermons that connect with the needs of listeners and motivate them to action. Fifth, Thielemann's commitment to need-centered preaching necessitated assiduous interaction with relevant cultural, social, historical and theological issues despite the tension and relational rifts created when addressing controversial topics from the pulpit. While this thesis demonstrated that Thielemann's theological inconsistencies, oversimplification of psychological theories and tendency to manipulate his listeners resulting from his need-centered homiletic warrant critique, Thielemann's theology, lectures and preaching praxis demonstrate his loyalty to and effective implementation of his need-centered homiletic. In spite of personal flaws and potential overreaches in his thinking on integrating various disciplines in his homiletic, Bruce W. Thielemann understood the rigorous and painstaking labor involved in crafting and delivering God's Word to God's people, yet his lifelong commitment to preaching demonstrates a willingness to endure the task no matter what the cost.

Bruce W. Thielemann concluded thirty-four years of pastoral ministry on January 31, 1993. On that Sunday morning, Thielemann preached his final sermon from the massive, elevated stone pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. As we look back on his life and influence on the field of homiletics, in a day and age when pastors were "taught an essentially intellectual approach to preaching: analyze a passage and deliver the fruit of your study," Thielemann attempted to craft sermons which fed "both the mind and the emotions."<sup>1037</sup> Thielemann's homiletical legacy asserted that all sermons "should be directed at the meeting of some human need – at something which is wounding spirits, burdening consciences and distracting lives."<sup>1038</sup> And while Thielemann's need-centered homiletic warrants critique, Thielemann's preaching lectures and praxis united to prove his loyalty to his need-centered homiletic, because as Thielemann asserted, "needs are the door through which the gospel usually enters a person's life."<sup>1039</sup>

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<sup>1037</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Sermons for Head and Heart," *Leadership Journal*, 1997, 58.

<sup>1038</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "Sermons for Head and Heart," *Leadership Journal*, 1997, 60.

<sup>1039</sup> Bruce W. Thielemann, "The Planning of Preaching," 2.



### *Areas for Further Research*

There are several areas beyond the scope of this study which warrant further research. First, considering the critique in modern psychology of Maslow's work, a reworking of Maslow's pyramid of needs within a Christian framework is a project for further study which could aid preachers in their quest to preach sermons which aim at both the head and heart in order to move people to action. Second, further research could explore the intersection between academic psychology and communication theory to assist preachers in moving people to action. Third, further research could critically examine sermons delivered by contemporaries of Thielemann in neo-orthodox and Presbyterian circles to see how they interacted with current events from the pulpit. Fourth, further research is needed on the potential ethical dilemmas created when homileticians use emotion and persuasion techniques in their preaching with the goal of motivating and moving people to action. Fifth, further research could be done on the pressure placed on preachers to maintain relevancy and address difficult issues from the pulpit all while maintaining pastoral relationships with his or her congregation. Sixth, greater depth of research could be done on the full breadth and expanse of historical and theological issues Thielemann faced during the 1960's through the 1990's. Finally, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to evaluate Thielemann's need-centered approach to preaching against the contemporary horizons of homiletics.

## Appendix One: Bruce W. Thielemann Preaching

### Lectures Inventory

<b>Fuller Theological Seminary 1973</b>
The Primacy of Preaching
<b>San Fernando Presbytery 1975</b>
The Theology of Preaching
The Planning of Preaching
The Art of Illustration
The Art of Imagineering
<b>Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary - Harold J. Ockenga Preaching Lectures 1979</b>
The Planning of Preaching Lecture
Lunch 1 Discussion on the Art of Preaching
The Art of Illustration Lecture
Lunch 2 Discussion on the Art of Preaching
We all Need to Belong
The Comradeship He Commands

## Appendix Two: Bruce W. Thielemann Sermon Inventory of Thomas V. Haugen's Collection

<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
Rags to Riches
Adam's Fractured Rib
The Church Confronts China
Love Story, II, On Dealing with Our Doubts
Love Story, IV, How to Defeat Discouragement
Love Story, VI, The Answer to Anger
The Apostles Creed, XI, On Being Captured by Glory
Notable Excuses I Have Used
The Story of Samson, I, A Conversation with an Angel
The Story of Samson, II, A Tale of Two Women
The Story of Samson, III, Samson and Delilah
The Thundering Dawn
Five Steps to a Fabulous Future, II, How to get Folks to Like You
Five Steps to a Fabulous Future, III, Pathway to Power
Five Steps to a Fabulous Future, IV, Are You Busy as the Devil
Tom Skinner
The Christmas Creed, I, God in Paperback
He Cared Enough to Send the Very Best
For Those Who Don't Get Ahead
The Christmas Creed, V, One is The Loneliest Number
Reflections on the Spiritual Implications of 1972
Astronauts of the Heart
On Learning to Mind Other People's Business
You Never Have to Go it Alone
Are Your Nerves Converted
We are the Easter People
Saul Series, I, Be Loyal to Royal in You
Saul Series, V, It is Always Too Soon to Quit
The Power of Negative Thinking
Can the Dead Speak to Us?
On Repairing the Crack in the Liberty Bell
Is Somebody Standing on your Wings?
End of Your Rope
Mary, The Virgin Mother, III, Mary Ponders: The Word of God - Glory to God in the Lowest
The Moral Implications of The Kohoutek Comet
On Living Without Loose Ends

On Practicing your Purpose
On Dealing with People Who Take the Whee Out of Life
Caravan from Cabul
Shall We Dance
The Measure of a Man
The Summons of the Savior (Way to Go Series II)
Resurrection Lecture 2
You Claim to Be God, Prove It (Deity of Christ) Lecture 1
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
Psalm for a Pickpocket
The Night I Wrestled with a Boa
Thanks for the Memory
Does Santa Believe in You?
The Fast That Frees
A Journey Through a White Man's Mind
The Yoda Factor
Once Upon a Romance
The Sacrament of Failure
Spring Thoughts
A Theology for Times of Trouble
Zunch
The Cain Syndrome
I Saw Three Ships
The Spirit of '76
The Last Word
The Trial of Judas Iscariot. I, The Prosecution
The Trial of Judas Iscariot, II, The Defense
The Trial of Judas Iscariot, III, The Verdict
The Eyes Have It
Catching the Whispers of God
Soliloquy O're the Graves of Princes
The Lost Christ
What God Wants for Christmas
The Fine Art of Using or Find Profit in your Problems
Dirge for a Delinquent
Going into Arabia
Anyone for a Parade
Star Wars
The Student Christian
The Man Who Came First
The Man Who Came and Went
Came, Went, and Came Again

The Man Who Came Last
The Peril of an Easy Tolerance
Lying!
Case of the Cadillac Casket
We All Need to Belong
On Being a Whole Person
Fringe Benefits
Once Upon a Lonely Christmas
Hope: Strength for the Discouraged Heart
<b>Sermons on Video</b>
Do You Have Your CH.D?
With Things as They Are, Why is God Silent?
Carry Him to His Mother
Three Cheers for the Attempt
<b>Christianity Today Preaching Series - preachingtoday.com</b>
Because
Christus Imperator
Comradeship Christ Commands
The Cry of Mystery
Mary, The Virgin Mother, III, Mary Ponders: The Word of God - Glory to God in the Lowest
Hark! The Herald Angels (Symphony of Our Salvation Series)
Legions of the Unjazzed
Telltale Tears
What to do When Life Crowds You Out
Dealing with Discouragement
<b>First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh 1984-1993</b>
Tide Riding
Life is Too Short to be Little
Mountains of Justice Ran Dry
Daughters of My Dreams
The Riches of the Short Changed
God's Forever Family (Flags of Our Faith Series)
Death Destroyed
Crossroads of the Centuries
The Seven Pillars of Wisdom
Barbershop Harmony
How to Write a Sermon
Once Upon a Lonely Christmas
On Dealing with our Doubts
Hunger for the Highest
Psalm for a Pickpocket

The Face of the Lattice
God in Paperback (Christmas in the Creed Series I)
He Cared Enough to Send the Very Best (Christmas in the Creed Series II)
For Those Who Can't Seem to Get Ahead (Christmas in the Creed Series III)
One is the Loneliest Number (Christmas in the Creed Series V)
Bud of a Virgin Flower (Christmas in the Creed Series VI)
We Are the Easter People
I Was There
How to be Ready for Anything
Fly United (Mary, Virgin Mother Series)
Mary, The Virgin Mother, III, Mary Ponders: The Word of God - Glory to God in the Lowest
Of Grapes, Giants and Grasshoppers
Double Talk
Three-Fold Cord
Four Steps to Friendship
Am I My Brother's Keeper?
What to do When Friendship Falters
The Point of No Return
The Porn War
How to Triumph Over Tension
The Mathematics of Morality
If I Could Paint Four Pictures
How to Keep Your New Year's Resolutions
Lust, The Wrong Side of Love
How to do it Right When Everything Goes Wrong
The Gripes of Wrath
The Loyalty of Love
Trail of the Blazing Heart
A Letter to the Daughter of My Dreams
Surprise
I Wonder How the Indians Feel About Thanksgiving?
Men at the Manger, I, Nabal: The Innkeeper/ What you do Know Can Hurt You
Men at the Manger, II, Jesse: The Shepherd/A Theology for Slippery Seasons
Men at the Manger, III, Balthazar: The King' Star Gazing
Men at the Manger, IV, Joseph: The Father/Angels at Midnight
Babe Ruth Struck Out 1330 Times
A Cadillac Church in a Volkswagen Age
Tinstaffel, Etc.
Reflections on Baseball's Opening Game
Fat Cats Don't Innovate
Three Most Difficult Words to Say

Easter: The Answer to Your Energy Crisis
The Spirit of '76
When a Smile Hides Sorrow
All Ye Who Labor
Why They Draw the Curtain Between First Class and Tourist
On Knowing What You Believe and Why
The Flags of Our Faith: Love Letters
The Flags of Our Faith: The Bible, The Swastika, The Red, White and Blue
Service in the Eight Degree
In Pleasant Places
The Lord's Word to the Loyal
Of Mourning and Morning
Semper Ecclesia Reformanda
Marching Off the Map
I.O.U.
What Do You Give Someone Who Has Everything? (Christmas Queries Series)
Do You Believe in Santa Claus? (Christmas Queries Series)
Are You Ready for Christmas? (Christmas Queries Series)
Three Certain Predictions About the Future
Bethlehem Supernova
You Never Have to go it Alone (The Kindness of Calvary Series)
Find Faith Enough to Face the Facts (The Kindness of Calvary Series)
On Hiding in the Deep, Deep Darkness with God (The Kindness of Calvary Series)
Be Careful Not to be Too Careful (The Kindness of Calvary Series)
When Mystery and Love Flow Mingled (Down the Kindness of Calvary Series)
The Unknown Who Came to Know (The Kindness of Calvary Series)
It's Never Too Late to Love (The Kindness of Calvary Series)
Three Cheers for Thomas
Behold the Hippopotamus
On Suffering from A Sunset
Speaking of Tongues
Can the Dead Speak to Us?
Five Spirit Strengthening Short Stories: The Case of the Frozen Face
Five Spirit Strengthening Short Stories: On Being Left Holding the Boat
Five Spirit Strengthening Short Stories: A Tale of Terror
Five Spirit Strengthening Short Stories: On Trying and Trying and Trying Again
Five Spirit Strengthening Short Stories: The Case of the Fatal Friendship
America: Love It and Leave It
Toward a Philosophy of Fun
Have We Nerve Enough for Nineveh?
The Riches of the Short Changed
The ABC of ESP

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall
A Letter to the Son of My Dreams
Primary Prayer Prerequisites
Twelve Gates to Glory
Let the Excitement Principle Work for You
On Being Intimate with the Invisible
Money Matters
Follow the Leader
What to do When Folks Laugh at You
Barber Shop Harmony
The Light of the World
The Path, The Presence, The Pleasure (The Joy Star Series I)
The Splendor in Service (The Joy Star Series II)
Not What but Who You Know (The Joy Star Series III)
Bringing in the Sheaves (The Joy Star Series IV)
Star Fire in the Midst of Storm (The Joy Star Series V)
Prayer: For Beginners and Those Who Have Forgotten How
Great Gates: Hey Buddy, How About A Lift?
Great Gates: The Gates of Hades
Great Gates: Iron Gate
Great Gates: The Narrow Gate
Tunes of Glory
Of Nature, Humankind and God
The Sacrament of Failure
How to be a Winning Witness
Once Upon a Romance
Five Finger Exercise
Gleaning the Gleaming
Wind Power
Send in the Clowns
Great Gates: Mary's Gate
The Peril of Second Thoughts
Three Prayer Problems
Great Gates: The Gate of Nain
Great Gates: Outside the Gates
On Dealing with Disagreement
The Trumpeter of God: John Knox
The Power in Prayer
Abortion: An Open Letter to Both Sides from a Man in the Middle
The Carpenter of Nazareth
Of Millstones and Milestones
Why Come Before Winter?



Great Gates: The Gates of Pearl
The Field is The World
The Sandals Symbol
Business is Business
Leftovers
On Painting Your Own Portrait
For Those Pursuing Peace of Mind
With Things as They Are, Why Is God Silent
How to Know Heaven on Earth
The Darkest Hour is Just Before the Dawn
Eyes Front
Mars or the Master?
Great 20th Century Christians Martin Luther King Jr.
Ad Astore Per Aspera
Give My Regards to Broadway The Elephant Man
The Trial of Judas Iscariot: The Prosecution
The Trial of Judas Iscariot: The Defense
The Trial of Judas Iscariot: The Verdict
The Trial of Judas Iscariot: The Epilogue
When a King Knelt Down to Cry
The Crown of Thorns
Loosed! Easter Sunday
Great 20th Century Christians Giovanni Roncalli
Give My Regards to Broadway: The Dining Room
Soliloquy O'er the Graves of Princes
Carry Him to His Mother
Thanks for the Memories
The Haunting
Spring Thoughts
Childlike or Childish?
Give My Regards to Broadway: Fences
Great 20th Century Christians: Karl Barth
The Strange Story of Mr. Bigger Barns
Sure Anchors in an Age of Storms
Be Loyal to the Royal in You (Saul Series I)
The Majority Rules (Saul Series II) You and God are Majority
Make Peace with Yourself (Saul Series III)
Are You Part or Your Problem or of its Answer? (Saul Series IV)
It Is Always Too Soon to Quit! (Saul Series V)
Good Old Vitamin P
Great 20th Century Christians: William Barclay
Give My Regards to Broadway: Les Misérables

Of Our Fathers and Mothers in the Faith
The Hi Cost of Lo Living
Of Bulls, Bears, Sheep, Wolves, Serpents, and Doves
The Most Remarkable Word in the Bible
Love's Loyalty
Upper Room Interrogatories
Great 20th Century Christians: William Graham
Once Upon a Lonely Christmas
The Fine Art of Using
On Letting God Grow Up
For One of the Women I Love
Tide Riding
Great 20th Century Christians: Albert Schweitzer
Three Cheers for the Attempt
On Raising the Roof
Meal of Many Memories
Give My Regards to Broadway: Into the Woods
The Attitudes We Should Be At, I, The Dependence Dynamic
The Attitudes We Should Be At, II, All Sunshine Makes a Desert
The Attitudes We Should Be At, III, The Song of the Strong
The Attitudes We Should Be At, IV, Go for The Gold!
The Attitudes We Should Be At, V, Grow with the Flow
The Attitudes We Should Be At, VI, Living Without Wax
The Attitudes We Should Be At, VII, The Power in Peace
The Attitudes We Should Be At, VIII, To Heaven on Horseback
Someone Has to Sell Big Bridges!
When All Else Fails, Try Following the Directions (Jonah Journals, Vol. 1)
The Most Cowardly Word in the Bible
Don't Stay Down, Surge for the Surface (Jonah Journals, Vol. 2)
Pittsburgh, Poverty and Presbyterians
Not Dreams but Drums
Do You Have Your Ch.D?
Where There is Hope, there is Life
On the Care and Keeping of Parents
Broadway Series #6 Macbeth
The Autobiography of a Book
Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets
The Leadership Style of Jesus
Methuselah!
A Theology for Times of Trouble
The Best Things in Life Are Free
Things That Haven't Been Done Before

The Fine Art of Fitting In
Is Being "Good" Good Enough?
The Dead Sea Souls
Fringe Benefits
Roses in December
The Greatest Gift
The Three Mysteries of Christmas
The Trouble with Christmas
Everything You Always Wanted to Know About the Minister but Were Afraid to Ask
Reflections on the Big Six "O"
<b>The Pastor's Pics</b>
On Dealing with Our Doubts (Love Story Series II)
How to Defeat Discouragement (Love Story Series IV)
What to do When Life Crowds You Out
What to Do When God Says "No!"
Does the World Really Need Another Person Like You?
The Cries of Christ, IV, The Cry of Mystery
<b>First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh 1984-1993</b>
A Faith for Tough Times: How to Keep Things Together
A Faith for Tough Times: How to be Better Than You Are
A Faith for Tough Times: How to be Safe, Not Sorry
A Faith for Tough Times: Building Christian Character
A Faith for Tough Times: How to Be Hope-Empowered
A Faith for Tough Times: How to Combat the Contemptible
A Faith for Tough Times: Knowing the Power of Prayer
A Faith for Tough Times: Victors in the Field
The Cries of Christ, I, The Cry of Forgiveness
The Cries of Christ, II, The Cry of Pardon and Promise
The Cries of Christ, III, The Cry of Love
The Cries of Christ, IV, The Cry of Mystery
The Cries of Christ, V, The Cry of Human Need
The Cries of Christ, VI, The Cry of Triumph
The Cries of Christ, VII, The Cry of Reunion
The Three Mysteries of Christmas – Christmas 1988
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
Twelve Gates to Glory
Twentieth Century Skeptic
Where Great Things Fashion Themselves
Jesus is Able
Fantastic Faith Formula
Concerto Bass Drum

Bud of a Virgin Flower
The Righteousness Rat Race
Find Faith Enough to Face the Facts (The Kindnesses of Calvary Series)
What to Do When There is Nothing Else to Do
On Hiding in Deep Deep Darkness of God (4 The Kindnesses of Calvary Series)
Be Careful Not to be Too Careful (5 The Kindnesses of Calvary Series)
It is Never Too Late to Love (Final, The Kindnesses of Calvary)
You and God Are a Majority (Saul Series)
Make Peace with Yourself (Saul Series III)
Problem or Answer
How to Become A Brand-New Person?
Epitaph for a Clown
Fly United
The Victory Song of the Human Spirit / Glory to God in the Lowest
How to Make Life Worth Living
The God Who Falls for Anyone
How to Say "No" Positively
The King Nobody Wanted
Critics but No Rivals
The Pearl of Parables
Know Heaven on Earth
Putting First Things First
Not Tragedy but Triumph
Days, Dough, and Dependence
The Prayer Some Dare Not Pray
Who Sends the Serpent?
Kingdom, Power, Glory
Legions of the Unjazzed
Case for the Phony Follower
What to Do When Your Spiritual Go Has Went
Discovering the Gift
Gold by Moonlight
Nabal, The Innkeeper
Telltale Tears
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
The Rainbow Connection
The Face at the Lattice
And the Angels Sobbed (1 Via Della Rosa Series)
When the Fountain of Justice Ran Dry (2 Via Della Rosa Series)
No Escape (3 Via Della Rosa Series)
The Lamb Faces the Fox (4 Via Della Rosa Series)
Blasphemy in a Barracks (5 Via Della Rosa Series)

The Place of the Skull (7 Via Della Rosa Series)
Crossroads (6 Via Della Rosa Series)
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
Of Glory in a Garden
When a Smile Hides a Sorrow
The Fine Art of Mountain Moving
Five Finger Exercise
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
The Wise and the Otherwise
Is Being "Good" Good Enough?
Leadership Style of Jesus
Myths About Missions
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
A Woman's Place in the Church
Strength to Conquer Suffering (Love Story Part 1)
The Way to Fight Your Fear (Love Story Part 3)
Death Destroyed (Love Story Part 5)
It Is Never Too Late (Five Steps to a Fabulous Future Part 1)
The Hi Cost of Lo Lying
Treasures of the Snow
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
The Sword of Solomon
From the Sand to the Summit
The Mind of the Master
Jubilee and the Life of Prayer
What to do When Folks Laugh at You
The Runner and the Race
Ad Astare Per Aspera
The Haunting
Money Matters
Three Mysteries of Christmas
Christians! Hold Fast
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
I Was There!
Does the World Really Need Another Person Like You?
Are You Coming to the Party?
How to be Ready for Anything
Glory to God in the Lowest
Of Nature, Man, and God
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
Balaam and His Talking Ass
Hunger for the Highest

Giants and Grasshoppers
The God of Great Surprises
The Big Five-0
Angels from the Realms of Glory
On Feeling you Swallowed a Sunset
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
Take the Whee Out of Life
Easter, and Your Energy Crisis
Is Marriage Outmoded?
Broken!
<b>First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh 1984-1993</b>
How to Write a Sermon?
Have You Found Jesus Yet?
A Shepherd Remembers
Soliloquy of An April Fool
The Last Psalm of David
The Cross, The Cross, The Cross
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
The Threefold Cord (1 Friendship Series)
When Friendship Falts (4 Friendship Series)
The Point of No Return
<b>First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh 1984-1993</b>
The Measure of a Man
On Seeing with Six Eyes
Mystery, Mystery, What is Your Name?
Song in Shadow
Life in "J" Major
Friendship With the Highest
Alexander Archipus, Men Merely Mentioned (Part 1)
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
The Greatest Gift
The Cardinal Commandment
The Tendency to Trivialize
The Lord's Day
Care and Keeping of Parents
Reverence for Man
The Steal Trap
The Capstone Commandment
Facing Other Faiths
Singing in The Strain
Is God Over Thirty?
Send in The Clowns

On Forgetting to Remember
The Trouble with Christmas
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
The Incendiary Christ
Lamplight
Possibly Please Everybody?
The Winner Who Lost
Christus Imperator
What is Heaven Like?
A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Heaven
How to Make a Great Comeback
<b>Grove City College 1974-1984</b>
The Case of The Fatal Friendship
Tide Riding
The Dead Sea Souls
Mirror, Mirror on The Wall
Do You Know What Are You Asking?
Eye's Front!
All One Body We
<b>First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh 1984-1993</b>
Nor Things to Come
Too Many Christians in Camelot
Have you Mailed your Cards Yet?
The World of Sport
A Friend of a Friend of a Friend
Seeing Things Not There
The Inevitable
Too Short to Be Little
Waiting for One's Luggage
God of the Hills and the Valleys
Something About That Name
Love Always Finds a Way
The Prophetic Essential
The Gospel According to Bill
Communion of the Saints
The God of Great Surprises
On Treating Two Imposters Just the Same
Lessons from an Old and Foolish King
The End of a Golden String
My Job and Why I Love It
The Man Who Could Not Come Down (Goodrich Orientation)
But Where is the Lamb?

Where Luther Stood, Stand We
Bartholomew - The Man Who Was Average
Onesimus - The Man Who Was A Boy
Ephaphras - The Man Who Would Not Forget
Demas - The Man Who Loved the World Too Much
19 Men and Ashel
Via Verita Vita
Christmas Comes to the Manger
The Last Supper
On Falling from Cloud 9 and Other High Places
Of Kingly Conduct
The Shepherd's Song
The Damascus Road (Ancient Roads for Modern Feet)
The Wilderness Road (Ancient Roads for Modern Feet)
The Gaza Road (Ancient Roads for Modern Feet)
The Jericho Road (Ancient Roads for Modern Feet)
The Spanish Road (Ancient Roads for Modern Feet)
The Jerusalem Road (Ancient Roads for Modern Feet)
Three Cheers for Upsetting the World
Heroes in Unexpected Places
Four Pittsburgh's
Moses and The Girls
When the Unstoppable Meets the Immovable
The Holy Catholic Church
More Power to You
Evidences of Spiritual Maturity
Simplicity of the Sacrament
Missions Thank Offering Missionary Meeting
Midnight Dance with A Great Gray Lady
Anyone for The Parade?
Breakthrough to the Already
Tenderly Speaking
Zunch
Till Noon of the Following Day
Because
On Dealing with Doubt (1 Victorious Life Series)
The Noble Order of Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus
Coping with Failure
About Dumb Things We Have Done (2 Victorious Life Series)
Lust, The Wrong Side of Love (3 Victorious Life Series)
How to Do Right When Everything Goes Wrong (4 Victorious Life Series)
The Gripes of Wrath (5 Victorious Life Series)



How to Defeat Discouragement (6 Victorious Life Series)
On Filling Up the Emptiness in You (7 Victorious Life Series)
The Strength That Conquers Suffering (8 Victorious Life Series)
Death Destroyed (9 Victorious Living Series)
Caravan from Cabul
Symbolism of Sacrament
The Little Sisters of Galilee
The Rainbow Connection
The Way to Praise God
On Looking for a Leaning Place
Nights of the Wild Beasts
Wind Songs
The Most Heartless Verse in The Bible
Starfire In the Midst of Storm
Unashamed
An Old-Fashioned Christmas
Learning to Be in Step
A Friend in Court
When Sovereigns Keep Silent
Anthem of the Ages
Thielemann: Clergy and Interpersonal Relationships
<b>Glendale Presbyterian Church 1968-1974</b>
The Miracle of Newness
Put A Tiger in Your Tank
Observations Concerning Cracked Pots
The Man Nobody Loved
<b>First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh 1984-1993</b>
Dr. Thielemann: How to Worship
Thirteen Words
The Greatest Story Never Told
Hope: Strength for The Discouraged Heart
Music: Wings for The Heavy Heart
Peace: Resting Place for The Weary Heart
Confession: Light for The Shadowed Heart
Friendship: Shelter for The Lonely Heart
Beauty: Answer for The Searching Heart
Joy: Healing for The Hurting Heart

## Appendix Three: Interview Questions

### Questions for Bruce W. Thielemann Personal Interviews:

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to know Bruce Thielemann?
2. How would you describe your relationship with Bruce?
3. What were your first impressions of Bruce?
4. After knowing Bruce for some years how did your initial impression of him change, if at all?
5. What were some of Bruce's strengths and weaknesses?
6. What were some of Bruce's passions? What energized him?
7. What was it like working with Bruce Thielemann in a volunteer capacity or as one of his staff?
8. How would you describe Bruce's preaching?
9. How did Bruce's pulpit presence compare to his everyday persona?
10. What, if anything set Bruce's preaching apart from other preachers you have sat under?
11. Can you identify some distinctive characteristics of Bruce's preaching?
12. Do you have a favorite Thielemann sermon that has stuck with you through the years?
13. Bruce believed that the goal of a sermon is getting people to meet with the pastor privately in the study following the sermon. Would you say he was effective at reaching this goal in his preaching? Why or why not?
14. What would you say were some of Bruce's major themes or favorite topics in his preaching ministry?
15. What were some of Bruce's strengths in his preaching? And what were some of his weaknesses?
16. Do you have a favorite memory of your time with Bruce?
17. Is there anything you would like to add, any final points or comments you would like to make?

## Appendix Four: Interview Consent Form

**CONSENT FORM** (Participant Copy)

**Participant identification code:**

**Title of Project:** “A Critical Examination of Bruce W. Thielemann’s Needs-Based Approach to Preaching”

**Name of Researcher:** Thomas V. Haugen

**Name of Supervisor:** Dr. Scott M. Gibson

**Please read and sign:**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to the research project being written up, without giving a reason.

I give my permission for my interview to be recorded and used for the research study.

I agree to take part in the study.

_____	_____	_____
<b>Name of participant</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>
_____	_____	_____
<b>Researcher</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>

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## **Interviews**

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Rev. Craig Hall, Assistant Pastor McKeesport, PA with Bruce W. Thielemann.

Dr. John Huffman, friend of Bruce W. Thielemann and served as Senior Pastor First Presbyterian Church Pittsburgh (1973-1978).

Ellen Little, Library Circulation Supervisor, Pittsburg Theological Seminary.

Rev. Barry Moller, Associate Pastor with Bruce W. Thielemann at Glendale Presbyterian Church.

Dr. Don Polhemus, Member of Glendale Presbyterian Church with Bruce W. Thielemann.

Jim Prothero, Member of Glendale Presbyterian Church with Bruce W. Thielemann.

John Prothero, Member of Glendale Presbyterian Church with Bruce W. Thielemann.

Gerry and Beach Rogers, Members of Glendale Presbyterian Church with Bruce W. Thielemann.

Dr. John William Stewart, PhD, Hon DD, *Ralph B. and Helen S. Ashenfelter Associate Professor of Ministry and Evangelism Emeritus*, Close Friend of Bruce W. Thielemann.

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