TST Homiletics Seminar 2:1 (Winter, 2008)

"Incarnational Homiletics and the Courage to Preach"

Arthur Van Seters
Knox College, Toronto School of Theology

Theology, Courage and Homiletics

I have two starting points for this homiletical exploration: theology and the need for a theologically rooted courage to be faithful preachers and homileticians. Incarnational theology that stems from the Gospel is a construct that finally has so much edge and calls for such boldness that only Spirit-enabled courage is sufficient for its proclamation. Here an interpretive process centred on God becomes, in Paul Wilson's words, "an invitation to a life of risk." (Wilson, 55)

The recovery of the importance of theology for preaching is, in part, a reaction to an undue emphasis in homiletics to discover the ideal form of the sermon as though form is more important than substance. Such preference for form is certainly the case for many politicians and advertisers. In addition, the seductive influence of an entertainment culture may have shaped more of preaching than we might like to admit. Form is not unimportant homiletically but, as Richard Lischer has pointed out, it is much deeper when it arises from Scripture. (Lischer, 2005, 118) In this he is reflecting one of the central insights of the Academy of Homiletics in the 1980s when it developed the notion of discovering the creativity of the sermon in the biblical text. But when it comes to substance we are looking not only at what given texts say but also their larger theological ramifications.

Attention to deeper theological dimensions enables listeners to focus on God in Christ who must finally be, in Lischer's words, "subject, object and verb of all our sermons." (Lischer, 1981, 88) Time and again it is in reading theological works alongside of commentaries that I am forced to grapple much more extensively with what the sermon needs to say and what the congregation needs to hear. I have also found that when theologians such as Bonhoeffer, Hall, Moltmann, Tillich, and Volf (to name a few from the attached bibliography) delve into specific texts, biblical passages are illuminated for the benefit of the church in fresh and vigorous ways.

Along side of this theological agenda I want to raise a question about whether we have really struggled with the acute need for real courage in our preaching. What kind of leadership does preaching require?

Last spring political commentator, Elizabeth Drew, wrote, "The idea that legislators should get out ahead of public opinion, that they should try to shape that opinion...sometimes risking their political careers by doing so, is essentially passé in American politics. Self-preservation, the need for money, and the advice of political consultants all discourage the taking of risks." (Drew, 53) Closer to home for preachers, Ken Gallinger wrote an Ethics column in *The Toronto Star* this past summer in which he claimed, "As a group, clergy are among the most insecure people on the face of the planet."

That sent me back to re-read Will Willimon's article in the *Journal for Preachers* about "pastors who won't be preachers" because they prefer to be care-givers rather than spiritual leaders. (Willimon, 39) Our need to be needed and our desire to be affirmed by our listeners can be so insidiously pervasive that we tame the text (often by omitting its difficult aspects), diminish the sermon's theological reach and avoid relating its implications to anything that might make listeners feel uncomfortable. I recall that as a pastor in the early 1970s I always dreaded "Remembrance Day Sunday." The cultural affirmation of war was pervasive in the congregation I was serving. Although I had some sense that this was at odds with the nonviolent thrust of the Gospel, I simply lacked the courage to let the Gospel speak its own message. On one of those Sundays even introducing children to the peace symbol elicited several quite negative comments. Such experiences show how intimidated we can be as preachers.

Before looking specifically at the theology of incarnation let me interject a further word about "doing theology." In an autobiographical reflection on being a theologian, Douglas Hall writes about "theological courage." This means "daring to think that one has really heard and understood the Christian message" and has also dared to grasp "the character of one's...own historical moment." To become theology, he claims, "Christian thought must have been pierced to the heart by the pathos of the human condition here and now." So doing theology is "a form of spiritual suffering – hopefully, suffering 'with Christ.'" (Hall, 2005, 17, 22-23)

Incarnation as Homiletical Lens

In choosing to focus on the incarnation I do not want to diminish the importance of the doctrine of reconciliation so central in Lischer's treatment of homiletics in *The End of Words*. But when Paul speaks of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:19, he begins with the incarnation, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's approach to ethics uses Christology as an incarnational lens to understand the relation of God and the world. This is not so much about enfleshment, he writes, as it is about God creating a true humanity in Christ. By means of the incarnation the world and humanity are reconciled to God, human beings are transformed "into the form of Christ." Simply put, reconciliation is rooted "in the very act of God's becoming human." (Clifford Green in Bonhoeffer, 2005, 6-8)

What is essential here is to connect the incarnation to the cross and the resurrection (as Paul does in Philippians 2). The self-emptying of the divine Son reaches its apex in the crucifixion. Moltmann states this connection clearly. "God's being is in suffering and the suffering is in God's being itself, because God is love." Here God is "known as the human God in the crucified Son of Man." (Moltmann, 1974, 227) Drawing on Luther, he states that God's being can be seen and known directly only in the cross of Christ" and only that knowledge of God is "real and saving." (212)

Similarly, Miroslav Volf states that the incarnation is the coming of the Son of God as a human being and goes to sacrifice. (Volf, 1996B, 25) When Jesus speaks about the fact that the Son of Man (referring to himself) must suffer, he is saying, Hall says, that the *agape* of God necessitates the cross in order to change sinful human history from within. The "enfleshment and the cross-bearing of the divine Word" direct us "to the suffering of God in solidarity with us." (Hall, 1986, 109, 113)

Paul Tillich clarifies this further in his sermon, "He who is the Christ." He states that the divine-human mystery is most poignant in the crucifixion. This event was humanly unintelligible but divinely necessary because only through suffering love is God able to win human hearts. A Christ of glory cannot do this. It is the cross that reveals both the heart of God and the human heart. The crucified is the Christ. (Tillich, 1949, 148-50)

The incarnation of God in Jesus is revealed not only in the cross but more specifically and controversially in the profound abandonment represented in the cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The real scandal of the cross is to be found in this agony of abandonment. (Volf, 1996B 26-27) This is because abandonment is the ultimate experience of powerlessness.

Volf has noted that the question of power figures prominently in the Bible - but it is the power of the Crucified. "The nature of the Christian church and its proclamation...must correspond to the life of the one who is proclaimed." So it is "the word of the cross," that manifests the wisdom and power of God. (1Cor. 1-2) "Theology as reflection on the word of the cross must be embodied in the community of the cross *whose peculiar kind of weakness is a new kind of power inserted into the network of the powers of the world*." This new kind of power provides "a space within networks of power in which the truth of Christ...can be lived out." (Volf, 1996A, 109-10)

Incarnating Our Homiletics

From what we have been exploring, homiletics is incarnational because the incarnation of the crucified Christ is central to its message. A theologically oriented homiletics has to incorporate rigorous reflection on the incarnation. In the process of demonstrating this we have already anticipated another dimension of the theology of incarnation in relation to preaching, namely the enfleshment of the Crucified in the believing community and in those who proclaim the word of the cross.

Chuck Campbell writes about incarnating our homiletics when he says, "Faithful preachers embrace a strange kind of powerlessness, like the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross. They finally must rely on God to make effective not only individual sermons but the very practice of preaching itself. Like the Word made flesh, the preacher's words depend on God for their effectiveness." This is "an ethic of risk, rather than the ethic of control." (Campbell, 81)

Campbell understands the fragility and counter-culture nature of preaching. Who really takes preaching the cross seriously in a world which prefers (especially in its politics, but also in business, sports and entertainment) the way of domination, coercion and silencing opposition? We live in a culture of violence (so evident every night on television) that the cross becomes irrelevant even for many who openly declare themselves to be followers of Christ. More than this, the hegemony of the military industrial complex in our world (including in North America) needs pervasive support (or at least silent passivity) to endure and therefore it cannot tolerate another view of power shaped by the cross. This is what is so controversial about Christian proclamation.

Near the beginning of *The End of Words*, Lischer notes that the preacher's job is to "shape the language of the sermon to a living reality among the people of God – to make it conform to Jesus." He takes this a step further. "The sermon, in fact, *is* Jesus trying to speak once again in his own community." As a result the church is called to organize its life around the presence of Christ and the preacher "models for the community a distinctively Christlike way of speaking in an uncomprehending and often hostile world." He goes on to add (following Bonhoeffer) that preaching centred on the cross feels profoundly irrelevant because it relates to the world only through the cross, the paramount symbol of marginalization. (Lischer, 2005, 7-8)

Courage to Preach

Since the incarnation of Christ in the church requires deliberate leadership from those who are called to preach, we need to look again at the calling of preachers. Drawing on 1 Corinthians 9:16, Hall says that it is vocation that gives us the courage to be and do what we would not otherwise do just as Paul's encounter with the incarnate Christ necessitated that he preach the gospel of the cross. (Hall, 2005, 129).

Hall presses this incarnational understanding of vocation further. Implicit in this Pauline compulsion is the freedom to engage or confront reality. The power that calls also enables and sustains - including illuminating the dark places into which that calling inevitably leads. This moves one to speak and act without being concerned about popularity, effectiveness, success, praise, criticism or ridicule. (Hall, 2005, 130) Only those who have the courage to take the path of the Crucified, the path that is shadowed, dark, and often threatening, will test the freedom of Christ and come to appreciate its power to affirm life. This is possible because God has become incarnate in human flesh and faced the abyss with courage.

So we must not think of courage in this connection as a matter either of personal disposition or as an aspect of psychology. To be sure, some people are more inclined than others to take risks or to live with ambiguity. But incarnational courage is a gift that is available beyond human inclinations.

In *The Courage to Be*, Tillich explores what he understands to be the fundamental nature of courage. It is not the courage to be oneself (as in individualism), nor the courage to be oneself in the collective. It transcends and unites both of them. The courage of the sixteenth-century Reformers was a confidence "based on God, and solely on God, who is experienced in a unique and personal encounter." This courage "is threatened neither by the loss of oneself nor by the loss of one's world" because it is grounded in "the acceptance of the unacceptable sinner into judging and transforming communion with God." (Tillich, 1952, 159-61)

Tillich recognizes that Luther had attacks of despair when nothing was left of the courage to be and in those moments he moved beyond courage based on encounter with God. In the First Commandment Luther discovered that God is God, the unconditional element in human experience of which one can be aware even in the abyss of meaninglessness. It was this awareness that saved him. (165-66)

This brings us, says Tillich, to faith, “the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything.” This faith is the basis of the courage to be even in the face of radical doubt and meaninglessness. (168)

The church which places itself under the Crucified is the church that can receive the courage to be because at the cross the Crucified cried out to the God who had forsaken him. As a result, Christ was left in the darkness of doubt and meaninglessness to end the courage of confidence and accept the absolute being of the God beyond confidence. This he did through an absolute faith, the faith of still being grasped. Here Jesus is on the boundary of faith where both confidence and despair are transcended. In that moment on the cross Jesus exercises the courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness upon himself. The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt. (183)

The clearest example of raw Gospel courage that I have read or heard is one preached by Ralph Hawkins, “A psalm of praise and pleading on the eve of war or the last enemy is death.” It is unusual not only in its substance but also in its form. In a Forward to this sermon, Walter Brueggemann notes its post 9/11 timing and its connection to the invasion of Iraq. “On such an occasion, the preacher might well voice the bewilderment and anxiety, the anger and confusion, as well as the faith of the church.” He adds that Hawkins “has done just such a daring act to bring to speech the mix of faith and fear that characterizes the people of God.” (Hawkins, 52)

The sermon is not addressed to the congregation but to God. It is a poetic rendering, a psalm that cries out to God pleading,

> Do not hide your face from us
> in this day of distress.

It then names the violence of the world and its consequences in the midst of which God is affirmed as still enthroned. In true psalmic fashion God is reminded of his way of nonviolence. Toward the end of the sermon the congregation is invited to express their need for the Spirit.

> We are often too strong for faith
>   often too cynical for hope
>   often too preoccupied for love.
>   We are too wealthy for sacrificing our crosses;
>   we are too enlightened for resurrection hope.”

This leads to asking for the “Holy Presence of Christ” and later also for God’s Courage (capitalized).

This is a sermon threaded through and through with theology and that theology engages the rugged reality of the moment. Its candor is disarming and its faith seeks true courage from God in whose presence and actions hope is finally possible.

Encouraging an Incarnational Homiletic

Let me end with a few comments about teaching homiletics that seeks to take the incarnation of Christ seriously. An incarnational homiletic will include the following:

1. the deliberate practice of theological reflection - often as an extension of exegetical and hermeneutical exploration of particular biblical texts;
2. candid discussion on how a theology of the cross relates to concrete situations faced by the church and how such concreteness might be expressed in a sermon;
3. an examination of how homiletical form can more clearly exemplify the incarnation of the Crucified, particularly a rhetoric of powerlessness;
4. reflection on a theology of the call to preach because the spiritual discipline required to preach the word of the cross is an ongoing struggle to depend on the Spirit to empower our preaching;
5. opportunities to reflect on what intimidates students when they are preaching both within the life of the church and in their homiletics classes – the very structure of class preaching, therefore, needs to create an atmosphere of trust where this is more likely to happen;
6. sharing specific examples of sermons that incarnate the Gospel with courage; and
7. above all, a deliberate call to preach Christ as the liberating force that enables listeners to hear and respond to the Gospel rather than relying on their own efforts to make improvements – and to do so in our secular-minded context will demand increasing courage.

These are only preliminary suggestions of how an incarnational homiletic might take shape. In the end homiletics has to be shaped by our deepest theological convictions and these, in turned, are tested and redeveloped as our theology engages the concrete realities of our lives and our world. It is both a very personal spiritual struggle and also a struggle in community, especially the community of faith. In the final analysis such a homiletic has to be incarnated in the act of preaching itself as witness to the Christ of Golgotha and the empty tomb.

Selected Bibliography

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics* (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 6) Clifford J Green, ed. English edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press (originally 1955), 2005.
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Christology*. London: Collins, 1966
Brueggemann, Walter, "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching," *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*, Arthur Van Seters, ed., 127-65. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988.
Campbell, Charles L. *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
Drew, Elizabeth, "The war in Washington," *New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2007, 53-55.
Gallinger, Ken, "Ethics," *The Toronto Star*, 07/07/07.
Gerrish, Brian A. *The Pilgrim Road: Sermons on the Christian Life*, Mary T. Stimming, ed. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
Hall, Douglas John. *Bound and Free, A Theologian's Journey*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Hall, Douglas John. *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

Hawkins, Ralph W. "A Psalm of praise and pleading on the eve of war or the last

Lischer, Richard. *The End of Words*: *The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*. Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005.

Lischer, Richard. *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.

Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology.* New York: SCM Press, 1974

Moltmann, Jürgen. *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God.* San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985.

Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be*. London: Collins Press, 1952.

Tillich, Paul. "He who is the Christ," 143-50, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. London: Penguin Books, 1949.

Volf, Miroslav, "Theology, meaning, and power," *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honour of Jürgen Moltmann*, Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg and Thomas Kucharz, eds., 98-113. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Willimon, William H., "Pastors who won't be preachers: A polemic against Homiletic accommodation," *Journal for Preachers* 29/4, (Pentecost, 2006), 37-42.

Wilson, Paul Scott. *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.

TST Homiletics Seminar 2:1 (Winter, 2008)

"Preaching the 'New Paul'"

Terence L. Donaldson
Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology

Many preachers, it seems to me, shy away from preaching on Pauline texts. The reasons for this are not hard to identify; a number of things might induce preachers to look for greener homiletical pastures elsewhere in the canon. For one thing, Paul has left us with letters rather than narratives, and in his case letters that strike many in the pew as dense and difficult. Even if one recognizes that there are interesting and instructive stories behind and beneath the epistles, it usually requires so much work to bring them out into the open that preachers often opt for more accessible lectionary fare.

Further, many people find Paul to be off-putting. There is a lot of aversion to Paul out there, not only in the pews but also in the pulpit. Part of it is his personality; in his letters he is at times a prickly character, defensive over his own status and turf, and prone to feel threatened or slighted. Part of it is a sense that his letters have contributed to the subjugation and marginalization of women in church and Western society. Part of it is a sense that his sharp contrast between flesh and spirit has also contributed to the suspicion of sexuality and the devaluation of the material world that has been endemic in the church and in Christendom.

A lot of it, however, is a view of salvation that has been attributed to him. At the risk of caricature, I would summarize the main points briefly as follows:

- The basic human problem is fundamentally one of guilt. Humans are sinners and thus are guilty of breaking God's laws. God would like to forgive, but lawbreaking needs to be punished.
- Christ provides the solution to this problem in that in his death he endured the punishment for sin, acting as a substitute for the real sinners. Since the penalty has been paid, God can now forgive.
- Those who have been forgiven no longer carry the status of "guilty"; rather, now they are justified, which is like being acquitted on a technicality.
- The way to receive this new status is to have faith, which is defined as the opposite of "works" – i.e., the opposite of doing good things in order to earn God's approval.

This is an over-simplified and probably unsympathetic way of describing an understanding of Paul's basic message that has a long tradition in the church. The faith-works contrast and the penal substitutionary view of the atonement are linked with the Reformation, though other aspects of it go back through Anselm as far as Augustine. It may be that this depiction of Reformation theology is somewhat unfair or one-sided. It probably is, but I think it captures an impression of Paul that is fairly widespread —that in his view salvation is primarily a transaction carried out somewhere between a God who is a stickler for the rules and a saviour who finds a way around them; and that human beings get access to the benefits of the transaction by studiously disavowing any presumption that they might be able to earn them.

The past thirty years or so has seen the emergence of what has been called a "new perspective" on Paul. As the term implies, this approach consciously sets itself over against an "old perspective," which is essentially the interpretation of Paul that I have just summarized.

From my perspective, the “New Perspective” (in some of its manifestations) provides us with a view of Paul that is both closer to Paul himself and more fruitful for the preacher. Before looking at this approach to Paul, however, I need to expand a little on several aspects of the old that are particularly in view in this approach.

One is the assumption that justification by faith is a central concept for Paul, and that the key to understanding this concept is that it is the polar opposite to a religion based on “works.” The heart of Paul’s gospel, then, in older readings of Paul, is to be understood in terms of a contrast between a religion of meritorious achievement and a religion of grace. In the one, justification is (mistakenly) understood to be something that one earns on the basis of law observance; in the other justification is bestowed by God on the basis of divine grace to those who accept it as such in faith.

Another important aspect in the “old perspective” as viewed by the “new” is the place of Judaism. In this reading, Judaism is Paul’s prime example of a “works-religion.” Paul spends so much time contrasting the gospel with the law because Jewish law-religion was the most pertinent example of a religion based on meritorious achievement. I should mention in passing that this criticism of Judaism stands alongside another, namely, that sin makes it impossible for one to achieve righteousness through the law. It is not easy to see how the two critiques are to be correlated; it seems to suggest a situation that you are damned if you don’t keep the law (because you have sinned) and damned if you do (because you are trusting in works). But usually the two are correlated by means of the idea that Jews misunderstood the law as a system of works when in reality its purpose was something else.

Still another is the nature of Paul’s conversion, which is seen essentially as an abandonment of Judaism. In his conversion Paul left behind a “works-religion” that didn’t work—precisely because it was incapable of removing guilt and producing justification—and moved to a religion of grace and faith. There are several versions of this view of Paul’s conversion. Oftentimes it was believed that Paul’s conversion was preceded by an unhappy upbringing in Judaism. He had tried hard to win God’s approval by keeping the law in a zealous fashion, but found that no matter how hard he tried, he always fell short. In this reading, Paul’s conversion is seen as fundamentally the discovery that Christ provided a solution to an existential problem that he had already experienced in his life within Judaism. Other interpretations focus on the conversion experience itself. In this experience Paul recognized Judaism for what it was—a religion of legalism, a religion of works and merit; at the same time he recognized that Christ had made possible a new religion of grace and justification by faith; and thus he abandoned one religion for another.

Any discussion of the “New Perspective” needs to begin with the work of E. P. Sanders, though at the same time we need to recognize that there are significant precursors to his work, the term has come to refer to a variety of viewpoints (not all of which he would agree with), and the term is not his. Sanders’s pivotal book was *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) and in it he accomplishes two main things. First, on the basis of a thorough examination of the relevant literature, he fully established what Jewish critics of Paul had long maintained, namely, that Judaism was not a legalistic religion of works but was just as much a religion of grace as was Christianity. The Torah was given not as a set of “works” that had to be performed in order to earn a status of righteousness, but as a means of responding to God's elective grace and of shaping the life of the people of God. This pattern of religion Sanders called covenantal nomism.

Second, Sanders refuted what was commonly understood to be a necessary corollary of the first point, namely, that Paul therefore must have misunderstood Judaism. Building on the earlier work of Albert Schweitzer, he showed that justification by faith functioned in the letters not as a central and fundamental statement of Paul's gospel, but as a particular argument fashioned by Paul for a specific and limited purpose. That purpose had to do with Paul's response in situations where attempts were being made to impose circumcision and other Jewish identity markers (i.e., "works of the law") on his Gentile converts as conditions of membership in the church. Indeed, the only "works" about which Paul gets worked up are those that turn Gentiles into Jews. In such situations Paul uses justification-by-faith arguments for the specific purpose of defending the status of his Gentile converts as full and equal members of the people of God in Christ (i.e., as "righteous" or "justified"). Put differently, the question that drives Paul's justification-by-faith discourse is not "How can a sinful human being find acceptance with a righteous God?" but "How can Gentiles be included with Jews in the salvation accomplished by Israel's promised Messiah?"

Justification by faith, then, is an argument in defence of a more fundamental conviction concerning the means of salvation and membership in the people of God. Sanders describes this conviction in this way: that God had provided Christ as a means of salvation for all, Gentiles as well as Jews, and on equal terms.

In the latter part of his book, Sanders unpacks this fundamental conviction and the "pattern of religion" that it supports. Several aspects of this should be noted here, especially since some of them provide the point of departure for other approaches that belong to the "new perspective" but that differ somewhat from Sanders.

(1) Paul's pattern of religion is not covenantal nomism but participatory eschatology. Salvation involves a participation with Christ in his defeat of the powers of sin and death and his transition into the life of the age to come.

(2) Jew and Gentile share the same status as far as plight and salvation are concerned, and thus need to be treated on equal terms. Sometimes the "new perspective" is characterized as having to do primarily with the inclusion of the Gentiles. However, while the salvation of Gentiles looms large in Sanders' analysis, Sanders does not think that Paul makes any fundamental distinction between Jew and Gentile in either plight or salvation.

(3) Paul's critique of law religion is a necessary implication of his fundamental conviction rather than an independent perception of something wrong with law religion per se. His arguments for the inadequacy or ineffectiveness of law religion depend for their cogency on the prior conviction that salvation is available for all through Christ, rather than on anything inherent in the law itself. This leads to Sanders' well-known maxim that for Paul the solution precedes the problem; one might even say that it produces the problem: if Christ is necessary for salvation, there must be something deficient in law religion. To put it another way, Paul's arguments against the law are essentially tactical, in service of a more fundamental conviction.

To quote another maxim: “In short, this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity” (Sanders 1977: 552).

(4) “Faith” and “works,” then, function as Paul’s rhetorical shorthand for two different views about membership requirements for Gentiles. Paul’s rejection of “works” is a rejection of the position that the Torah-based boundary markers that identified members of Judaism (especially circumcision, but also food laws, sabbath observance, and so on) were to be imposed on Gentiles as a condition of membership in the church. Further, his emphasis on the equality of Jew and Gentile in Christ makes it clear that Paul was also rejecting the idea that these identity markers functioned as membership requirements for Jewish Christians as well.

While Sanders work is necessarily central to any discussion of the “new perspective,” it is also important to place his work in a larger temporal context. On one side of it, as I have mentioned, there were important precursors—especially William Wrede, Albert Schweitzer and, much later, Krister Stendahl; but we might also mention W. D. Davies and Johannes Munck on the Christian side, and Jewish scholars such as Claude Montefiore and Hans Joachim Schoeps.

On the other, his work has precipitated vigorous discussion and variant developments. The term “new perspective” refers to a variety of approaches to Paul, something that is not always recognized and needs to be kept in mind. Of course, there are commonalities. While “new perspective” means different things to different people, generally speaking those who can be classed within this approach tend to share his interpretation of Judaism and his belief that justification by faith has to do with the inclusion of Gentiles rather than with a fundamental polarity of faith vs. works. But as with any pioneering work or paradigm shift, his work has left questions to be addressed, refinements to be made, areas to be elaborated. Several aspects of this are worth mentioning here:

- One question has to do with the source of Paul’s convictions about the Gentiles. True, we can make sense of Paul in Sanders’ terms, but how do we account for the conviction that Christ’s saving significance pertains to Gentiles as well as Jews, and on equal terms?
- Another question has to do with precisely why Paul drew the corollary about the law. Why did his logic run: if Christ, then not Torah? If Judaism is a religion not of legalism but of covenantal nomism and if Paul has not misunderstood Judaism, how is it that his belief that the Messiah has come has led to an apparently fundamental break with Torah religion and descriptions of the law that no covenantal nomist would recognize?
- Both questions are to the fore in the work of James Dunn, who actually is responsible for the term “new perspective.” Dunn follows Sanders a considerable way but has problems with the apparent arbitrariness of Paul’s attitudes towards the law and Judaism as Sanders presents them. In order to save Paul from the charge of being arbitrary and idiosyncratic, Dunn tries to root Paul’s critique in some aspect of Jewish law religion per se. For Dunn (Tom Wright develops things in a somewhat similar way), Paul is critical of Jewish assumptions about covenantal privilege, of their undue pride in the things that differentiate them from Gentiles and exclude Gentiles from the community of salvation. The aspects of the law that serve as boundary markers between Jew and Gentile are what Paul is aiming at with the phrase “works of the law.”
- This way of putting it leads some people to describe the “new perspective” as a view in which the inclusion of the Gentiles is the heart and centre of Paul’s gospel. Stephen

Westerholm, who generally is one of the most insightful critics of the new perspective, nevertheless has a tendency to portray it in these terms; for example: "Paul did not go to Corinth to invite the local Gentiles to share in a salvation already enjoyed by their Jewish neighbours under the Jewish covenant" (Westerholm 2004: 366; also 374; 401).

- While this is not an accurate representation of most "new perspective" approaches, it nevertheless describes another approach that overlaps with "new perspective" readings somewhat—the two-covenant view espoused by Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, Stanley Stowers and others. In this view the Torah covenant continues to be valid and salvific for Jews; Paul proclaimed Christ as a parallel means of salvation for Gentiles.

My task here, however, is to say something about what implications all of this might have for the preacher. Before turning to some specific suggestions, let me sketch out in outline form my own "perspective on Paul." I will do this by picking up the same topics that appeared in the description of Paul with which I began:

- The problem posed by **sin** is not fundamentally one of guilt, though guilt arises as a secondary consequence. The problem, instead, is one of bondage, sin being a kind of power or force-field that holds human beings under its sway. "Now if I do what I do not want [to do], it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom 7:20). Of course, human beings commit actual sins as a result, and these bring guilt. We are complicit in our own bondage. But the fundamental problem is the coercive power of sin and the "principalities and powers" through which it works.
- **Christ's accomplishment** then needs to be seen more fundamentally in terms of a confrontation with sin, breaking its power, opening up a new sphere in which life can be lived, eventually winning a full victory over sin and death (the "last enemy to be destroyed"; 1 Cor 15:26).
- While Christ's death makes possible a new status (of which justification is one metaphor), this is not the **heart of salvation** for Paul; instead, salvation is a process of sharing with Christ in his victory over sin and his rising to the life of the age to come; in this process the believer is liberated from the sphere in which sin is the dominant power and transferred to a sphere where life is empowered by the Spirit. Justification by faith is not Paul's central theme. It describes a facet of Paul's thought, but looms large in some of his letters because it provides a useful tactical argument for defending the equality of Gentile Christians. As one of Paul's "change of status" metaphors, it has a more important part to play in Paul's thought than, say, Schweitzer would have us believe. Still, status is secondary to participatory experience in Paul; status is derived from participation in Christ rather than the other way around.
- While faith is important for Paul as **the means by which people** enter and continue with this process, its essence is to be understood with reference to Christ not in a contrast with works. In fact, I believe that in a number of key "justification by faith" passages, the faith in question is that of Christ and only secondarily that of the believer. "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed . . . the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (*dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou*) for all who believe" (Rom 3:21-22).
- Paul's fundamental **problem with Judaism** is not that it is a legalistic, "works" religion; this is a tactical argument used to defend his Gentile converts against claims that they need to become full Torah observers in order to be acceptable to God. Paul's problem with Judaism is a derivative of his new belief in Christ, rather than an independent one. While it

is not entirely clear why Paul concluded that, since Christ had come, the Torah (in some sense) had to go, it was not because he perceived that Judaism was a legalistic religion of works.

- The heart of Paul's **conversion** had to do with the acceptance of Christ rather than the abandonment of Judaism. His experience led him to believe that God had raised Jesus from death, which means that Israel's Messiah and saviour was a dying and rising figure. His Jewish pattern of belief was not abandoned, but rethought and reconfigured around this new belief. He didn't leave Judaism and his Jewish identity behind when he "converted." Rather, he came to a new understanding of Israel and its role, leading to his own self-understanding as a Jewish apostle to the Gentiles who had been entrusted with the task of announcing to the world what God has accomplished through Israel for the sake of the whole world.[1]

What implications might this have for preaching? Does the new perspective provide us with new opportunities for bringing Paul into the pulpit? This will depend on where you hang your theological hat, I suppose, but from my perspective I believe that it does.

First, at the risk of simply repeating things that I've already said, I think it points us in the direction of a more robust, well-rounded and accessible model of salvation. To summarize briefly:

- Through his obedient life, his death and his resurrection, Jesus has broken the power of sin and has blazed a trail for us into the life of the age to come. In this age he has opened up a space for us where the dominant power is not sin but the Holy Spirit; those who live in this liberated space are brought with him into the life of the age to come. He brings us forgiveness, but as part of a larger program of liberation.
- When we respond to the good news in faith, we are joined to Christ, we become part of his body, we are—to use Paul's favorite language—"in Christ." To be in Christ is to be in the domain of the Spirit, not the domain of sin, and to share with Christ in his death to this age and his rising to the life of the age to come.
- For Paul there are many aspects to this life of participation in Christ. Prominent among them are the sacraments. Baptism is a means of dying with Christ in expectation of our rising with him; the Eucharist is a *koinonia* in the body and blood of Christ, a way of participating in him until he comes.

Such a model of salvation, in my view, provides a number of opportunities for the preacher, a number of themes that can be readily developed in accessible ways. Let me mention three of them briefly.

---

[1] Paul shows no evidence of ever having been frustrated and in despair over his "former life in Judaism." Rather, whenever he looks back on it, he does so with a real measure of pride (Gal 1:13-15; Phil 3:4-6; cf. Rom 9:1-5; Rom 11:1), and no hint at all of despair or dissatisfaction. Note especially Phil 3:6—"as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Romans 7 is not to be taken as autobiographical. Rather, Paul's use of the first person "I" is a way of portraying Adam's solidarity as seen from the standpoint of one who has come to be "in Christ." Thus, Paul's conversion cannot be seen as the result of a long dissatisfaction with Judaism, Christ coming as the "solution" to an already-perceived "problem."

Salvation at its heart and starting point is a matter of participation rather than transaction. This presents several avenues for development. For one thing, the idea of participation provides a natural point of contact with the *realia* of people's lives; the locus of salvation in essential elements is in our day to day experience as Christians and not in a heavenly transaction to which we are simply interested third parties. For another, a participatory understanding of salvation is closely linked with the sacraments, which means that sermons based on Paul can serve to lead people to the eucharistic altar or Lord's table. At the same time, however, while salvation is participatory, the process in which we participate is one that has already been pioneered by Christ. Christ by his own faithfulness has accomplished something once and for all, in which we can participate by our own response of faith. While subjective experience is an essential element in a participatory view of salvation, there is an objective element as well.

Salvation is essentially corporate rather than individual (though individual experience is by no means disregarded). By participating in Christ's experience we are at the same time participating in a new corporate entity, a new humanity. Thus Paul provides us as preachers and as parishioners with an opportunity to see all that we do as a church, from the mundane to the mystical, as located at the heart of the gospel.

Salvation has to do with the redemption of the whole of creation. What we are participating in is even larger still; the new domain of the Spirit is the sign of the redemption of the cosmos. Salvation is a process that will culminate in the renewal of the whole created order, not the rescue of individual souls from it. Thus Paul's pattern of salvation has direct implications for politics, culture, ecology and the social order.

These homiletical opportunities arise from the participatory character of Paul's pattern of salvation. A second set of opportunities has to do with the juridical material and the conclusion that Paul uses the idea of justification by faith for the specific purpose of defending the salvation of the Gentiles and their equal status in Christ.

Paul's language of justification by faith provides us with a model of a Christ-centred concern for inclusion. Paul's concern was for the inclusion of Gentile believers, but as he himself implies in Gal 3:28, the model might be used for other areas of social distinction as well (in Christ there is "no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female"). Paul's concern is not a fuzzy-minded inclusivism—inclusion for inclusion's sake; being conformed to the image of Christ is what counts, not prior membership in some minority or marginalized group. Still, the way in which he rethought inherited social distinctions from the starting point of the gospel provides us with an instructive model.

More generally, Paul provides us with material for dealing with issues of diversity and unity in the church. There were significant differences between Paul and the Jerusalem church on the issue of the status of the Gentiles and the terms in which they were to be included in the church. While Paul defended his position vehemently, he did not try to disenfranchise those who differed with him. Indeed, he devoted a significant portion of his life to a collection project whose aim, in part, was to prevent any rupture between the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church. It was during the delivery of this money to Jerusalem that he was arrested by the Romans, which means that in a sense he gave his life for this project of church unity.

Finally, Paul provides us with resources for dealing with the dismal legacy of Christian anti-Judaism which we have been forced to confront in the decades since the Holocaust. Paul refused to go where the logic of his new Christian convictions might seem to lead. He rejected the idea that the church had taken over Israel's covenantal identity and blessings without remainder and that God had rejected the Jewish people in favour of the church. Instead, he held firm to the conviction that God's election of Israel was "irrevocable" (Rom 11:28-29), arguing that in the end "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). The logical tensions in the argument of Romans 9-11 is a measure of how firmly he held to this conviction. Paul seems to be prepared to leave it to God's "unsearchable judgments" to work out the seemingly intractable tensions between God's covenant with Israel and God's act of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In short, I believe that the "new Paul" presents the preacher with new opportunities, both to see the old gospel more clearly and to proclaim it in new ways in our own day.

Brief Bibliography

Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
________. *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.
Dunn, James D. G. "The New Perspective on Paul." *BJRL* 65 (1983): 95-122.
________. *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*. Tbingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005.
Donaldson, Terence L. *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.
________. "In Search of a Paul Neither Lutheran nor Idiosyncratic: James D. G. Dunn's *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*," *Critical Review of Books in Religion* (1998), 35-55.
Westerholm, Stephen. *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

"Preaching Suffering"

L. Ann Jervis
Professor of New Testament
Wycliffe and Trinity Colleges, Toronto School of Theology

This is an interesting time to be writing books about the Bible. The return of a lively public discussion about the existence of God, what some have termed a 'neo-Enlightenment', again brings the work of Biblical scholars out of the shadows. For the Bible's claims, and various interpretations of these claims, are necessarily features of the current discussion. It was not for this reason that I wrote *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message*.[2] I will get to that shortly. It has, however, struck me since writing the book that what initially were for me academic, humanitarian, and personal reasons for writing this book have turned out also to make some contribution to questions that are again being raised about religion's credibility and the existence of God.

Suffering, of course, is one of the reasons to doubt God's existence – at least the existence of a God most people find worth believing in – a God who is both in charge and benevolent, in ways those characteristics are commonly understood. The presumption is that if a good and all powerful God were real there would be no suffering.

Suffering is also at the heart of the criticism of religion. Even leaving aside the horrific misguided sufferings that religion has caused, the fact that religion has endorsed certain fitting sufferings (at least fitting to that religion's claims) can be seen to be deranged.

Christopher Hitchens is one of the more vocal voices in the current critique of belief in God and of religion. In his book, *God is Not Great. How Religion Poisons Everything,*[3] Hitchens gives the existence of suffering and the sufferings religions has endorsed as one of his chief reasons for doubting God's reality and for damning religion.

I expect that if Hitchens had turned his attention to the same Pauline texts as I have, he would find what Paul says about suffering to be the words of a deluded and dangerous fool. Here was someone who avoids the hard question and so has wrecked havoc on countless subsequent lives. Hitchens might point a finger at the apostle chained in a Philippian jail and accuse him of avoiding the obvious. Why, Hitchens might say, is Paul not asking how what he is proclaiming can be true? Hitchens might say, 'Here is someone who has every reason to ask the important questions: why would a good God who has demonstrated enough power to raise a dead man continue to allow bad things to happen? Or what good is belief in a God who raises his son but leaves his preacher in a fetid cell? Christopher Hitchens might say; there is no evidence that Paul faced reality head on. If he had, Paul would have seen that the fact that he was hungry, and cold and imprisoned is proof either that the God Paul proclaims is an incompetent or, more likely, a figment of his imagination.

---

[2] L. Ann Jervis, *At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

[3] Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religions Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Warner Books, Inc., 2007).

I find that I must go a certain distance in agreeing with Hitchens (or, with my hypothetical Hitchens). In the course of studying Paul's words on suffering in three of his letters (I Thessalonians, Philippians and Romans) I found that Paul in fact does not try to explain God's seeming absence or incompetence in the face of his own suffering. I found that Paul's experience of pain and loss did not lead him to question the reality of God in the light of his own troubles. Rather, Paul's questions in relation to his and others' sufferings were focused on how he, Paul, might share Christ's sufferings.

Of course, I draw different conclusions from this than Hitchens might have. I draw different conclusions because I happen to be in sympathy with Paul. I am a person who shares Paul's faith – a fact I take as a wonderful underserved blessing in my life. Consequently, on the basis of a sympathetic reading of Paul, I find his response to what has been known in the study of religion and philosophy as 'the problem of evil' more interesting than offensive.

When I first turned my attention to the matter of what Paul said about suffering I admit that I felt somewhat confounded. Being someone who is clearly sympathetic to belief in God, to religion and to Christianity in particular, I was not of course looking for a way to discredit either God or religion or Christianity. I was, however, expecting to find that Paul turned his attention to the problem of suffering in a way similar to how it has been construed in the western intellectual tradition. Instead I found something refreshingly strange.

Here is someone who has given it all up for the sake of his belief that, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has remedied the problem at the heart of existence. And yet, what Paul experienced as a believer in God's dramatic action in Christ was loss and the ongoing destruction of his physical and social powers. Here is someone whose faith does not lead him to expect to escape difficulties. Here is someone ready to accept his tribulations as part of the package of the gospel, who claims that he knows joy in the midst of them; here is someone who interprets his sufferings as a participation in the sufferings of Christ, seeking to know more of them. Someone who appears to believe that even after the resurrection, Christ's sufferings continue. Paul seems convinced that the cross remains vitally present and that he, Paul, must continue the sufferings of Christ in order to help bring an end to suffering.

At the same time as I found Paul's reflections on sufferings strange, I found them strangely illuminating: illuminating not only of who he was, but also of the experience of being a Christian.

Paul was convinced that God is present in suffering, that God reveals Godself in the context of suffering. For Paul, this truth is demonstrated by the cross. Consequently, Paul's struggle with suffering was not that it threatened to disprove God's existence or God's usefulness. Rather, Paul's struggle with his and others' suffering was to strive to conform them to Christ's sufferings which was, for Paul, how God would suffer. Paul responded to suffering by trying to describe and enact and encourage and enable himself and others to suffer as God would suffer.

One of the great contributions Paul made to the conversation about God and suffering is a paradoxical one. He is convinced that it is not God who causes suffering but that rather it is sin. Paul is sure that if there were no sin there would be no suffering. Sin for Paul is primarily a power that seeks to destroy and damage every manifestation of God's goodness. God's ways of creative life, of abundance and of love and well-being are the targets of sin. It is, then, not God but the power of sin that causes suffering. Paul's monumental statement in Romans that through one man sin came into the world and through sin death (5:12) indicates how sure Paul is that suffering's source is sin.

At the same time, Paul is convinced that those who believe in Christ must take on a burden of suffering. At first this seems paradoxical. If suffering's source is sin, then surely avoiding suffering should be high priority for believers in Christ. However, on the basis of Paul's understanding of the meaning of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul accepts that in the strange architecture of God's reality suffering is necessary in order to alleviate suffering. This is the meaning of the cross.

Thus the paradox, that though sin is the source of suffering, those who are 'in Christ' must be sufferers in order to participate in God's project of ridding the world of suffering.

One of Paul's more arresting convictions is that believers in Christ are required to share Christ's sufferings (Rom 8:17) and that the trajectory of life in Christ is to share in the 'koinonia' of Christ's suffering, taking on the shape of Christ's death (Phil 3:10-11). As far as Paul is concerned, any joy or hope of ultimate release from suffering is dependent on this – both for the individual believer and for the whole world. This I have termed suffering 'with Christ'.

We find in Paul the original description of Christian suffering that has become realized and expressed in the lives of other Christian saints. Most recently and famously perhaps in the life of Mother Teresa who could say, "I want to drink only from Christ's chalice of pain." Teresa, for all her flawed humanity and for all her spiritual trials (which, as we have found out from her recently published memoirs included the desolation of feeling abandoned by God), actualized to a large degree what may be described as suffering 'with Christ'. Her famous statement - "It is not enough for us to say, 'I love God, but I do not love my neighbour. Since dying on the cross God has made himself the hungry one – the naked one – the homeless one" – demonstrates her recognition that suffering along with and for the suffering of the world is suffering along with Christ. Teresa understood such suffering to be critical to God's project of ridding the world of pain. And here, in my view, she understood Paul well.

What I found through my study of the original first person reflection on suffering as a Christian – through my study of Paul – was a profound response to the ongoing pain of the world – a response that has fundamentally shaped the way others in the Christian religion have viewed and reacted to suffering.

I found Paul reflecting both on suffering because one is a believer in Christ – what I called 'with Christ' suffering; and reflecting on suffering as a believer. This latter mode of suffering I term 'in Christ' suffering. Paul thought that those who believe in Christ should not expect to be spared the trials of human existence. In Paul there is no evidence of a health and wealth gospel, no evidence of the prosperity gospel. Paul does not think that Christians are translated out of the human condition. Rather Paul thinks that believers in Christ may experience the losses and tragedies of human life in a unique environment – that of being 'in Christ'. And so, believers may know that suffering is not all there is and not all there will be. That suffering is bounded by joy, by light, by hope, and by love – by God's presence. The hallmark of this 'in Christ' suffering is that it expects deliverance from suffering. It is not a passive form of suffering but a suffering forward towards release. We see this in Paul's description of his being in chains in a Philippian jail as being 'in Christ' – the literal rendering of the Greek (Phil 1:13). Paul hopes for his liberation while he suffers 'in Christ'. This 'in Christ' suffering is available to all believers in Christ, but, given that Paul must encourage his readers to suffer this way, believers may easily miss what has been given to us in this regard. We are offered the possibility of experiencing the pains of the human lot 'in Christ'.

Conclusion

The texts on suffering in Paul are provocative – we are to boast in our suffering (Rom 5:3); and at times odd – reception of the good news is at once the acceptance of suffering (1 Thess 1:6). It is incumbent on the preacher not only to address these strange texts, but to do so with great sensitivity. For these passages can so easily be misheard, and then faithful Christians might feel constrained to accept precisely the kind of suffering from which they should be seeking deliverance, or to avoid taking on the suffering that is our vocation.

In the contemporary western context, where there is so much suspicion of Christianity and faith in God, the manner in which the church talks about and offers pastoral advice concerning suffering is critical. For, the way we understand and undergo suffering may be one of the most potent expressions of our faith. If we wish to communicate the convictions of Christianity, a deep understanding of Paul's view of suffering is essential.