PREACHING HISTORICAL TEXTS:

THE REDEMPTIVE-HISTORICAL HERMENEUTIC AND THE PULPIT

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The task of interpreting and applying the Word of God to both the church and the world at large is ongoing. Interpretative aids are legion. This is true not only on the technical level but also on the popular plateau. R. C. Sproul's *Knowing Scripture*[1] has probably enjoyed the most enduring popular success. Another book in that vein, more sophisticated than Sproul's but also receiving a warm welcome, is *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, written by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.[2] Both of these books provide the reader with a digest of interpretative rules to follow and principles to bear in mind. Proverb and parable, epistle and prophecy, each and all literary types which make up the Bible are surveyed--including the narrative materials of both Old and New Testaments. This latter fact is especially worthy of note, since the interpretation and application of the historical materials of Scripture represent a special challenge to the preacher. How, after all, do the historical materials apply to Christians today? What is their primary focus? Is there a Christological character, dimension, or content to all historical texts? If so, in what sense? What is moralism, and how can we avoid it?

These are important questions for every preacher of the Word who must interpret and proclaim historical texts. Some pastors are tempted to avoid historical texts altogether, staying instead with the Psalms, the epistles, and the parables of Jesus. Others plow ahead in spite of their doubts, completely blind to the difficulties and pitfalls. The former type unwittingly create a canon within the Canon, leaving us with half

a Bible; the latter sort, despite their courage or naivete--
which ever it might be--leave us with a misinterpreted and
therefore misapplied Bible, which isn't much better.

The issue before us here is in no way slight. Consider the
sheer bulk of historical texts. As Fee and Stuart remark:

> The Bible contains more of the type of literature called
> "narrative" than it does of any other literary type. For
> example, over forty percent of the Old Testament is
> narrative. Since the Old Testament itself constitutes
> three-quarters of the bulk of the Bible, it is not
> surprising that the single most common type of litera-
> ture in the entire Bible is narrative. The following Old
> Testament books are largely or entirely composed of
> narrative material: Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I
> and II Samuel, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles,
> Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai. More-
> over, Exodus, Numbers, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and
> Job also contain substantial narrative portions. In the
> New Testament, large portions of the four Gospels and
> almost all of the Acts are also narrative.[3]

If ministers of the gospel want to proclaim the full counsel
of God and administer the whole Bible (and I suspect they
do), then they ought to be concerned about the proper
hermeneutical-homiletical approach to the historical materi-
als of the Scripture.

Though important, the matter is not easy or simple; nor is
it without controversy. During the 1930s and early 1940s a
debate raged in the Netherlands among pastors and theologi-
ans of the Gereformeerde Kerken concerning the legitimacy
of drawing moral "examples" from biblical history rather
than making application in terms of "the history of salva-
tion." The two approaches, in time labeled respectively as
the exemplarist ("exemplarisch") approach and the
redemptive-historical ("heilshistorisch") approach, consti-
tute mutually exclusive methods of handling historical narra-
tive. The *exemplarisch* men were confident that in preach-
ing historical texts it was legitimate and, even more, benefi-
cial to depict persons mentioned in historical texts as models,

examples, illustrations of good and/or bad behavior to be either imitated or avoided. Another way of describing this approach is that it ". . .dissolves biblical history into a variety of independent histories which are examples for us."[4] On the other hand, the *heilshistorisch* or "Christocentric" method sought ". . .to understand all those [historical] accounts in their relation to each other, in their mutual inner unity, in their cohesion with the mid-point of redemptive-history: Jesus Christ."[5]

It is not our purpose here to detail the breadth and scope of this debate, especially since this has already been done superbly by Sidney Greidanus in his doctoral dissertation, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts.*[6] Instead we only want to lay out the "bare bones" of the issues involved and proceed with this skeleton to examine a sermon on Mark 5:1-20, concerning the Gerasene demoniac.

Our central focus here shall be upon an address given by an exponent of the redemptive-historical approach, Prof. B. Holwerda,[7] entitled "The History of Redemption in Preaching."[8]

I. *The Christocentric Character of Redemptive History*

In his debate with pastors and professors adhering to the "exemplarist" method Holwerda was most concerned to turn aside misunderstanding as much as possible. He explained that even the *exemplarisch* men wanted to acknowledge Christ as the center of revelation.[9] He also wrote, "Whoever interprets the historical elements [of Scripture] Christocentrically. . .*will not forget* that these things were written as examples for us, *but he will rather proceed precisely from that starting point and will demonstrate to us why* these things can be examples."[10]

The crucial word here is "why." Understanding this "why" is basic to all legitimate application. Holwerda sees the issue concentrated in the question whether we are dealing in Scripture with a compilation of "many independent histor*ies*" or with "*one* history of redemption."[11] How one conceives of biblical history largely answers this "why."

Holwerda argues for one history of salvation, with Jesus Christ at its center. This is not, however, to succumb to the danger of futilely trying to fit every historical passage into a Christological mold. Such attempts Holwerda terms "Jesu-centric," "staurocentric," or "soteriocentric," but they are not "Christocentric."[12] Scripture is unified and progressive, culminating in Jesus Christ. Christ at the core of salvation-history has everything to do with its proper interpretation and application. Holwerda appeals to F. W. Grosheide's con-tention that "history stands in a certain relationship to Christ also where--we might say, *precisely* where--He is its mid-point, but that is also why history retains its hortatory signi-ficance," adding: "Thus there is no hortatory significance *alongside of*, but *adhering to*, the 'Christocentric' character of redemptive-history."[13]

Consequently, redemptive-history may never be thought of merely as a source-book of illustrations. Treating histori-cal texts in such a way robs them of their *unique* character. One then loses sight of ". . .the difference between the his-tory of Ahab in Naboth's vineyard and the parable of the good Samaritan, even though definite points of contact between the two can be pointed out."[14] The historical materials of the Bible lay the foundation for the dogmatical and ethical sections. And that is precisely why historical texts cannot be merely illustrative.

> . . .the dogma-*foundational* function of redemptive-history excludes a dogma-*illustrative* function; for with the latter option doctrine and morals would be set forth merely as concrete illustrations and would thereby be presupposed in the historical materials.[15]

This claim is clarified when Holwerda explains that one who preaches a doctrinal text may rightly appeal to a specific account within redemptive-history; for example, when one preaches on the ninth commandment, he might select as an illustration Abram's emergency lie (Gen. 12). Yet, one might just as legitimately illustrate the text in question by turning to men and incidents from church history outside of the Bible.[16] "But," writes Holwerda, *"if one has chosen a his-torical text, then he must consider it according to its own*

nature, and no longer as illustrative. A sermon on Genesis 12 may not degenerate into a sermon on 'The Emergency Lie'."[17]

II. *The Shift from Historia Salutis to Ordo Salutis*

Therefore, the proponents of the redemptive-historical approach warn against dissolving history into all sorts of "pictures" or "stories" which merely serve as illustrations or examples for us; the warning is maintained lest we destroy both the unity and progress of biblical history.[18] And yet the exemplarist method is, on this score, guilty on all counts. It severs the historical bond between David and Abraham, for example, and ourselves. Consequently, if any application is to be made to believers today, some sort of connection must be constructed *extraneously*; most usually a psychological link is built.[19]

Holwerda calls this more precisely *"a shift from the historia salutis to the ordo salutis"* (the history of salvation to the order of salvation).[20] Philo reduced the principal lesson of history to moral instruction: "He read into each [biblical] story that which God did for each soul individually, and then drew a parallel with what he does for each of our souls."[21] He lost sight of redemptive-history, ignoring the unique time, place, and function of God's servants and God's actions. Instead, "he set forth the *ordo salutis*, which is one and the same for everybody."[22]

While proponents and defenders of the exemplarist approach differ with Philo in degree, they are nonetheless with him in kind. For they too chop the Bible up into fragments, treating history in the same atomistic way. They too step over from history to the *ordo salutis*. With this method,

> one no longer asks what meaning or function Abraham, Elijah, etc., had for God's one, ever forward-moving work in Christ, but the very opposite: what significance God in Christ has for these individuals. Indeed, the Christ*ian* stands in the center here, although that is not the intention.[23]

As a result, superficial parallels are drawn; even allegorical interpretation finds new life. For example, I Kings 19:7, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you," comes to function as a text for the Lord's Supper. Jesus' calming the storm (Matt. 8:23ff) often is applied to the "storms" in our own lives. And Jesus is then depicted as the calmer of psychological, financial and spiritual storms. Holwerda laments: "All of this to the complete neglect of the actual content of the text."[24] Practitioners of the exemplarist method inevitably mutilate the unity and advancement of salvation-history, though perhaps unintentionally and unwittingly.

III. *Synthetic Exegesis*

Over against this "atomistic" treatment of Scripture Holwerda wants to treat the Bible "synthetically."[25] Synthetic exegesis respects the unity and the progress within the history of salvation simultaneously. It seeks to protect the uniqueness of each text within its *context* in the corpus of written revelation.[26] In this way the Scripture remains fresh. The various elements of any given historical text must yield a very specific synthesis. Holwerda uses an analogy from chemistry:

> If I have some water (H_2O) and wish to describe its importance and its properties, I mustn't talk about the qualities of hydrogen (H), but of H as it is combined in that very particular relationship to O. And with sulfuric acid the same is true: I'm interested not simply in H, but in the completely different relationship, H_2SO_4.[27]

Clearly, then, we can speak of the uniqueness of any given text without inferring its independence. The atomistic exegesis of the exemplarist approach, conversely, flattens out the richness of Scripture, failing to discern the individual character of each passage. Thus, the doubt of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:1-8) and the doubt of Thomas (John 20:24-29) are both reduced to the message: "Jesus delivers from all doubt."[28] By contrast, the synthetic exegesis of the redemptive-historical approach Matthew 11 speaks of "the

crisis in the preaching of the gospel," and the John 20 passage "deals with the specific *Easter* confession: My Lord and My God."[29] In the case of Thomas the *exemplaristic* application becomes, "We also have our doubts: we too are delivered from them by Christ."[30] But the salvation-history application is much more specific and pointed, as Holwerda writes:

> By the redemptive-historical method things are put a bit differently and, I think, better. One then asks about the background of his [Thomas'] doubt. This is never capable of being explained psychologically. Was it melancholy or intellectualism, or does this proceed from his combative, valorous nature? The Bible itself does provide several indications: Thomas didn't believe the resurrection (John 11:16), and this was related to the fact that as yet they didn't know that Christ was the Son, God-revealed-in-the-flesh (cf. John 14:5ff). Now Christ brings Thomas to a certainty of the resurrection, and thus to the confession: "My Lord and My God!" But he does this for our sake, since the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles, including Thomas. Christ intends hereby to make room for our Easter confession, one just as strong and personal. Yet, he doesn't do this by means of an appearance, as with Thomas, but by apostolic preaching. Therefore it is written, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." Thomas is blessed: blessed are your eyes because you see. But more blessed are they who no longer need to see. This grows into an application about the richness of the current manner of the revelation of Christ--not through an Easter *appearance*, but through an Easter *sermon*. So that after the sermon everyone must say personally: My Lord and My God.[31]

When the unique character and purpose of every text is appreciated and respected, the power of God's Word is able to burst forth upon the lives of his people. But only the redemptive-historical approach unbars the way.

IV. *I Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 11*

One last question remains, however, and that concerns two New Testament passages which have strict bearing on this entire issue: I Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 11. Proponents of the exemplarist method appeal to these passages since they clearly speak of "examples."

But it must be kept in mind that the redemptive-historical approach is not opposed to examples. As Holwerda states, ". example, not at all, but *in what manner* may one do so."[32] Holwerda in no way denies that the New Testament speaks of examples, but he perceptively asks in what sense--in the *exemplarisch* sense? Or in the *heilshistorisch* sense? Clearly Paul exegetes synthetically in I Corinthians 10: "He is not concerned with the vice of grumbling in general, but with the murmuring against God's redemptive benefits."[33] Further, Paul recognizes the unity and progression in redemptive-history; he does not flatten out biblical history but says explicitly: "us upon whom the end of the ages has come." And the key term itself, found in verse 6, the Greek word *tupos*, "has in Paul a very definite historical tone."[34] As Leonhard Goppelt states, "a type is something that happens between God and man and that points to the salvation which has come in Christ. It is testified to by the Scripture and it prefigures a corresponding event in the last days."[35] Commenting on I Corinthians 10:6 and 10, Goppelt also writes:

> The apostle has the events and not just the O.T. texts in mind. God caused these events both to happen and to be recorded because of their essential similarity to his end-time acts. The likeness is not just external, nor does it rule out difference in view of the eschatological nature of God's present work. But Paul here stresses the basic likeness so as to relate baptism and the Lord's Supper, which the Corinthians misunderstand, to the saving acts of the God who personally met Israel in salvation and judgment. The word *tupoi* might, of course, mean "examples," but the context suggests that it has here the force of "advance presentations" intimating eschatological events. "Types," then, is the

best translation.[36]

Thus we are not dealing with a patterning example in some general sense, but with an advance presentation of what is to come—a prefiguration within redemptive-history.

In Hebrews 11 the key word is not *tupos*, but *pistis*. And this "faith" is illustrated from a variety of passages. "Yet," says Holwerda, "this proves nothing against the redemptive-historical method."[37] As noted earlier, when preaching on a doctrinal text, the preacher may legitimately use specific *accounts* within salvation history as *illustrative* materials. In this way the refrain of Hebrews 11, "through faith," is perfectly consistent with the redemptive-historical method.

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Thus far we have been talking about *theory*. To be sure, we have noted at certain junctures how Holwerda *applies* his method; nonetheless, it would be helpful to put the theory into practice by analyzing a sermon that self-consciously seeks to be redemptive-historical in content.

The following article contains a "sample sermon" on Mark 5:1-20, the familiar narrative about the Gerasene demoniac. We present the sermon first, in order thereafter to comment on it in light of our remarks on redemptive-historical exegesis.

NOTES

1. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

2. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

3. Fee, *How to Read the Bible*, 73.

4. B. Holwerda, "Omdat ze de bijbelsche geschiedenis oplost in allerlei zelfstandige geschiedenissen, die voor-beelden (exemplen) zijn voor ons. . ." "De Heilshistorie in de Prediking" in ". . .*Begonnen Hebbende Van*

Mozes. . ." (Terneuzen: D. H. Littooij, 1953) 82. (N.B.: all translations are mine, J.M.B.).

5. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 82: ". . . probeeren al die berichten te verstaan in hun verband met elkaar, in hun onderlinge innerlijke eenheid: in hun samenhang met het middelpunt der heilsgeschiedenis Jezus Christus."

6. Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970).

7. Holwerda served as a pastor in the Gereformeerde Kerken of the Netherlands from 1934-1945, and as a professor of Old Testament studies at the Theological College of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Kampen from 1946 until his early death at the age of forty-three in 1952; cf. *Handboek van de Gereformeerde Kerken*, ed. P. Deddens, (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1953) 147.

8. Cf. note 4 above.

9. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 82.

10. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 82: "wie de historische stoffen Christocentrisch interpreteert, *vergeet* niet, dat deze dingen beschreven zijn tot voorbeelden voor ons, *maar gaat juist van uit en toont ons, waarom* deze dingen voorbeelden kunnen zijn."

11. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 82.

12. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 84.

13. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 87: "De geschiedenis staat met Christus in verband, ook daar, ja *juist daar is Hij het middelpunt, naar daarom ook houdt ze haar vermanende beteekenis.*" And "Dus geen vermanende betekenis *naast* doch *om* het 'Christocentrisch' karakter der heilshistorie."

14. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 87: ". . .verschil tussen de geschiedenis van Achab in Naboth's wijngaard en de gelijkenis van de barmhartige Samaritaan, al zijn er

zeker aanrakingspunten tussen die twee aan te wijzen."

15. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 88: ". . .de dogma*funderende* functie der heilshistorie sluit een dogma*illustrerende* functie uit: immers bij de laatste zouden dogma en ethos slechts concreetaanschouwelijk worden voorgesteld, en daarmee bij de historische stoffen voorondersteld zijn."

16. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 88.

17. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 88: *"Maar heeft men een historische stof als tekst gekozen, dan moet men die nemen in haar eigen aard, en niet meer illustratief.* Een preek over Gen. 12 mag niet ontaarden in een preek over noodleugen. . . . "

18. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 89.

19. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 89.

20. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 89: ". . .*de verschuiving van de historia salutis naar de ordo salutis. . . .*"

21. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 89: "Hij las daarin, wat God aan elke ziel apart deed, en trok toen de parallel met wat Hij aan onze ziel doet."

22. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 89: ". . .stelde hij de ordo salutis, die voor allen eender is."

23. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 90: ". . .men vraagt niet meer welke betekenis, welke taak Abraham, Elia enz. hadden voor Gods ene, steeds verder voortschrijdende werk in Christus, maar omgekeerd welke betekenis God in Christus heeft voor hen. Inderdaad staat hier de Christen in het middelpunt, al bedoelt men het niet."

24. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 90: "Alles met volkomen verwaarlozing van de eigenlijke tekstinhoud."

25. Greidanus points out that Holwerda did not intend "synthetic" in the hermeneutic use of "deep sense" of Scripture, nor the homiletic sense of "analytic," nor as an antonym of "textual preaching" in a moralistic or "motto preaching" context (*Sola Scriptura*, 137).

26. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 92-93.

27. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 92: "Als ik water heb (H_2O) en over de betekenis en eigenschappen daarvan wil spreken, moet ik het niet hebben over de hoedanigheden van waterstof (H), maar over H zoals het die heel bepaalde verbinding aanging met O. En bij zwavelzuur weer niet over H, doch over die heel andere verbinding H_2SO_4."

28. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 92.

29. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 92.

30. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 111: "Wij hebben ook onze twijfel: wij ook worden door Jezus daarvan verlost."

31. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 111-112: "Maar heilshistorisch stelt men de dingen anders, en ik meen beter. Men vraagt dan naar de achtergrond van zijn twijfel. Dat is nooit psychologisch uit te maken. Is het zwaarmoedigheid geweest, of intellectualisme, of hangt het samen met zijn worstelende heldennatuur? Wel geeft de bijbel zelf enkele aanwijzingen: Thomas geloofde de opstanding niet (John 11:16), en dit hing daarmee samen, dat zij nog niet wisten, dat Christus was de zoon, God geopenbaard in het vlees (vgl. John 14:5vv.). Nu brengt Christus Thomas tot de zekerheid der opstanding, en zo tot de belijdenis 'Mijn Heer en mijn God!' Dit doet Hij evenwel om onzentwil: want de kerk wordt gebouwd op het fundament der apostelen, op het fundament van Thomas mee. Christus wil hierdoor dus ruimte maken voor onze paasbelijdenis, even sterk en persoonlijk. Toch doet Hij het niet door de verschijning, als bij Thomas, maar door de apostolische prediking. Daarom staat er: Zalig zijn die niet gezien hebben, en nochtans geloofde zullen hebben. Thomas is zalig: zalig zijn uw ogen, omdat ge ziet. Maar zaliger zijn zij, die het zien niet meer nodig hebben. Dat loopt dan dus uit op een toepassing over de rijkdom der openbaringswijze van Christus thans: niet door een paas*verschijning*, maar door een paas*preek*. En na de preek moet ieder personlijk dus zeggen: mijn Heer en mijn God."

32. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 94: ". . .de kwestie niet is, of men die geschiedenis ten voorbeeld mag stellen, ja dan neen: doch *op welke wijze* men dat mag doen."

33. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 94: "Hij heeft het niet over de ondeugd van mopperen in het algemeen, maar over het murmureren tegen Gods verlossingsweldaden."

34. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 94: "Want 'typos' ('voor-beeld') heeft bij Paulus een zeer bepaald historische kleur."

35. Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpre-tation of the Old Testament in the New*, translated by D. H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1982 [1939]) 220.

36. Leonhard Goppelt in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Abridged in One Volume by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1985) 1194; see also H. Muller in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3, Edited by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978 [1971]) 905-906; and M. B. Van't Veer, "Christologische Prediking over de Historische Stof van het Oude Testa-ment" in: *Van Den Dienst Des Woords* (Goes: Ooster-baan & Le Cointre, 1944) 162-166.

37. Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 95: "Toch bewijst dit nog niets tegen de heilshistorische methode."

PREACHING HISTORICAL TEXTS:
EPILOGUE

Note that the sermon respects the Christocentric character of the text. The focus is not upon the "miraculous exorcism of demons," but upon "the gospel proclaimed by Christ" as this is confirmed through the miraculous exorcism of demons. That is no small difference! The focus of action is not first of all upon who was healed and how, though this is significant, but upon him who came to "the other side" and upon his purpose. A superficial reading of the text turns the incident into a story about the power of Jesus over against the despair and weakness of human endeavor--for we read that the demoniac "had often been bound with shackles and chains." But no one could "tame him" (v. 4). Or even worse, one might note the *isolation* of this demon-possessed man, and conclude therefrom that Jesus liberates us from the demonic power of loneliness. Clearly, such approaches demolish the uniqueness and powerful thrust of the text. Although Christ *acts* within exemplaristic sermons, though he might even be the primary *Actor*, nonetheless the Christocentric, i.e., redemptive-historical thrust of the passage is lost. As a result, we are left with an interesting story detached from the whole scope of the history of salvation.

But this is precisely what our sample sermon avoids. The events recorded in Mark 5:1-20 are not independent stories coming together to comprise a bigger independent story. Mark 5:1-20 is salvation history. It is part of a larger whole and constitutes a unity with the whole. The *land* in which all these events occur is important. Significant too is the history of the past events within that land. Also important are the beasts that graze the land--pigs, and the (Old) Covenant dietary laws that govern the inhabitants of the land. For the land is *Promised Land*! And one other vitally important element of the text is found in the last verse: "And he departed

and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled." The name of the region is hellenistic--Decapolis. Paganism in God's land! Thus in order to really understand Mark 5:1-20 in its height and depth one must see it within the unity of redemptive-history at large; and one must see too the progress or advancement or flow of that history. Our sample sermon satisfies on all counts.

All of which is to appreciate what Holwerda calls synthetic exegesis. Because the sample sermon is synthetic rather than atomistic in approach, the applicatory thrust of the passage is immediate, natural, and specifically unique. Nothing extraneous is needed in order to establish a link between the text and the reader. The application is plainly *scriptural* in its truest sense, coming from the text of Scripture. And note too it is fully *ethical* in implication without moralizing.

The redemptive-historical method holds great promise for the pulpit today because it allows the historical materials of the Bible to speak in their unique, God-intended role. That's just to say: it allows *God to speak* to his church today.