

HOMILETICA ET HOMILIAE
—THE HERITAGE OF REFORMED PREACHING—

REDEMPTIVE HISTORICAL PREACHING AND THE
DRAMA OF REDEMPTION:
A MARRIAGE IN THE MAKING?¹

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Introduction

PREACHING HAS ALWAYS BEEN CLOSE to the heart of the church, though in our post-modern age, preaching in many circles is undergoing something of an identity crisis. Struggles over preaching, however, are not new. In the years roughly surrounding the 1930's in the Netherlands, a particular debate ensued over questions of preaching that would have lasting effects not only upon many congregations in the Netherlands, but also upon congregations throughout the world. This dispute is often referred to as the "redemptive-historical" preaching debates.² It centered upon questions of how Christ ought to be preached, particularly from Old Testament narrative texts. In addition, it wrestled greatly over the question of "application" or more particularly "exemplaristic" application that reduced biblical characters to moral examples.³ Though both sides sought to be "biblical" in their approach to preaching, it would be an understatement to say that a consensus was *not* reached.⁴ In some areas, the

1. All Bible quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

2. This is the English translation of the Dutch *heilshistorische*.

3. B. Holwerda is credited with coining this term when he labeled a particularly moralistic strain of preaching "exemplaristic" (*exemplarische* in Dutch). B. Holwerda, "Hoe Lezen we de Heilige Geschiedenis?", *Gereformeerd Mannenblad* XVIII (1940): 27. See also his "De Heilshistorie in de prediking" in *Beggonen Hebbende Van Moses*, (D.H. Littoij: Terneuzen, 1953), available in English at <http://www.spindleworks.com/library/holwerda/holwerda.htm>. See also the discussion in Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970), 19-21.

4. This preaching debate was part of a significant struggle within the *Gereformeerde Kerken Nederlands*. The issues were significant enough that in 1944, another denomination was formed,

preaching debates that began in the 1930's would make progress and come to clearer expression within the following decades. Regrettably, however, there were other areas of the debate that never reached a mature conclusion.

In 1988, C. Trimp, former professor of Homiletics at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen in the Netherlands, made a sincere plea for further reflection and development on both the hermeneutical and homiletical side of the debate.⁵ It could be said that today, while the shadow of that debate rests upon many churches both inside and outside of the Netherlands, the church is still in need of further light, further reflection, further progress.⁶ But did Trimp's request go unanswered? In a variety of ways, his request for further discussion is being responded to, both inside and outside the Netherlands. Some of these suggested areas of progress lie outside the direct field of homiletics, yet certainly relate to homiletic concerns. One particular form of advancement may be seen in what we shall call the "drama of redemption" paradigm, as found in the writings of numerous authors, particularly those of Kevin Vanhoozer and Michael Horton.⁷ The purpose of this paper will be to suggest the way in which the *drama of redemption* paradigm may help to advance the *redemptive-historical* preaching debate beyond some of its earlier obstacles and subsequent caricatures; that it might serve as a more effective means of faithfully proclaiming the word of God in a post-modern age.

We shall do this by first surveying the recent revival of interest in *redemptive-historical* preaching. Second, we shall focus on some of the ways in which we might describe the redemptive-historical paradigm as in need of progress. Third, we shall look at the fruit of thinking within the *drama of redemption* paradigm as a suitable helpmate for redemptive-historical preaching. Fourth, we shall propose a couple of ways in which drama of redemption advocates would benefit from greater awareness of the redemptive-historical discussions. Finally, we shall propose that a union between redemptive-historical and drama of redemption insights might produce a homiletic methodology that is not only capable of ministering adequately to the church

the *Gereformeerde Kerken Nederlands (Vrijgemaakt)*. It would be far too simplistic, however, to reduce the reason for the new denomination to the preaching debate. It was much more comprehensive than that. For two accounts of this struggle in English, see A. Van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990), and D. Van Dijk, *My Path to Liberation: Reflections on My Life in the Ministry of the Word of God*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 2004). Both works are translations of Dutch volumes.

5. C. Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Prediking: Hervatting van een Onvoltooid Gesprek* (Kampen: Van Den Berg, 1988).

6. A point that is affirmed by two recent articles by Arie Baars, "Heilshistorische Prediking in Deze Tijd (1) & (2)," *Nader Bekeken* 18, no. 1 (2011): 10-15.

7. This term shall be used throughout the article, though it should be noted that it is a synthesis of terms drawn primarily from the works of Kevin Vanhoozer and Michael Horton. See below for further details.

(the baptized) but also those who are outside the church (the unbaptized post-moderns) of our day.⁸

I. Revival of Interest in Redemptive-Historical Preaching

It is a small irony that the current climate of interest in redemptive-historical preaching is likely stronger outside the Netherlands than within it.⁹ In North America, interest in Dutch-Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, and Geerhardus Vos have caused many pastors and theologians to reflect more on the theological developments in the Netherlands. From a homiletic point of view, it is perhaps the work of Geerhardus Vos that has had the greatest influence. Vos taught at Princeton for 39 years (from 1893-1932). He had many notable American Presbyterian pastors and theologians as students.¹⁰ Yet perhaps his real influence on the pulpit would be through homileticians such as Edmund Clowney and Dennis Johnson. Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology*¹¹ is heavily dependent upon Vos. Clowney's influence would perpetuate this family tree in numerous directions. Dennis Johnson's recent work on homiletics is a thorough attempt to embody an unambiguously redemptive-historical model with many "Vosian" insights.¹² Johnson has taken up Clowney's homiletic mantle in print, pulpit and classroom. Additionally, Clowney's influence on Timothy Keller is well known, and perhaps best embodied in the D.Min. course they did together on preaching at Westminster Theological Seminary.¹³ Bryan Chapell, likewise expresses dependence upon the Dutch-Reformed

8. We have in mind here the helpfully nuanced distinctions of preaching to the "baptized" and "unbaptized" made by William Willimon in *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

9. For suggestions as to why this appears to be the case in the Netherlands, see Baars. "Heilshistorische Prediking in Deze Tijd (2)," 14-15. Baars concludes his article by suggesting that there are still important aspects of redemptive-historical preaching that are worth considering.

10. J. Gresham Machen, John Murray, and Cornelius Van Til, were just a few. Vos had a hand in brining Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck to Princeton for their Stone Lectures. Vos' influence can also be seen on the work of Louis Berkhof and Herman Ridderbos. For more of these development, see James T. Dennison, Jr., *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 66, and idem, "Geerhardus Vos" in *Bible Interpreters of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Walter A. Elwell and J.D. Weaver (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 82-92. Dennison went on to start a seminary built around the distinctives of Vos' theological method, Northwest Theological Seminary, which closed in June 2018. See also Richard Barcellos, *The Family Tree of Reformed Biblical Theology* (Pelham: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010).

11. Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (1961; repr., Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002).

12. Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from all the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007).

13. Available online at <https://itunes.apple.com/nl/itunes-u/preaching-christ-in-postmodern/id378879885>. Keller also dedicates his book to Clowney; see Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008).

family tree of biblical theology in the development of his preaching paradigm.¹⁴ In Australia, the work of Graeme Goldsworthy has done much to vitalize interest in contemporary questions related to redemptive-historical preaching and hermeneutics. Goldsworthy's work has gained significant attention internationally.¹⁵ Finally, we would not fail to mention the important work of Sidney Greidanus. His 1970 Th.D. dissertation, *Sola Scriptura*,¹⁶ on the redemptive-historical preaching debates is greatly responsible for the broader awareness among English speakers of the redemptive-historical preaching debates that took place in the Netherlands. He has subsequently published numerous books on the topic of Christ-centered preaching.¹⁷ Though his writings have received much criticism from both Dutch and English speaking advocates of redemptive-historical preaching, his work still retains a significant place in the attempted advances in homiletic discussion.¹⁸

At a more popular level, leaders of *The Gospel Coalition* have recently devoted a significant amount of time and energy to the development of materials that bear the marks of redemptive-historical preaching and hermeneutics.¹⁹ This movement, while not academic in the strictest sense, certainly represents a broad spectrum of theological commitments (Baptist, Presbyterian, Reformed, broad evangelical, etc.). We should note that it is remarkable that so many Baptists and broad evangelicals are expressing interest in the idea of preaching Christ from all of Scripture, which would seem to evidence a genuine struggle with dispensational hermeneutics and moralistic preaching.²⁰ At the same time, apart from a select few, awareness of the redemptive-historical preaching debates in the Netherlands is conspicuously absent.

14. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

15. Among Goldsworthy's works, we would highlight the importance of his distinctive homiletic effort in *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). We would add to this the important works of Greg Beale, D.A. Carson and Richard Gaffin, all of whom reflect Geerhardus Vos' redemptive-historical influence.

16. See citation above in footnote 3.

17. We will list the two we think are most important: *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), and perhaps more importantly, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

18. See Charles G. Dennison, "Preaching and Application" a book review of Greidanus' *Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* in *Kerux* 4, no. 3 (1989): 44-52. See also idem, "Some Thoughts on Preaching" in *Kerux* 11, no. 3 (1996): 3-6. For several reviews in Dutch see H.G. Geertsema in *Mededelingen van de Vereniging Voor Calvinistische Wijsbegeerte* 4 (1971): 7-12 (Greidanus' response to this review is published in the same issue); W.D. Jonker in *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 25 (1969/1970): 350-351; and C. Trimp, "'Exemplarische' of 'Heilshistorische' Prediking," *De Reformatie* 45 (1969-1970): 337-339.

19. Note, for instance, that an entire conference was based on the theme of the 2011 national conference "They Testify about Me: Preaching Jesus and the Gospel from the Old Testament." See also the nearly endless list of resources at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/search/results/?q=redemptive-historical&p=1&f=->.

20. The issue of moralistic application is discussed by several Baptist authors in Scott M. Gibson, ed., *Preaching the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 62-65, 137-139; Steven Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 99-

II. Perceived Weaknesses in Redemptive-Historical Preaching Debate

It is generally agreed upon by that the two sides of the redemptive-historical debate were unable to agree upon a hermeneutical approach to the Bible (the Old Testament in particular). The redemptive-historical side believed that the New Testament pattern of interpretation, generally speaking, modeled a hermeneutical approach that not only kept Christ at the homiletic center, it also resisted reducing Old Testament “saints” to moral emblems, whether positive or negative. The language of “application” was often debated. To be fair, it was not so much that the redemptive-historical side did not believe in “application” but that they opposed what they perceived to be moralistic application, and the illegitimate dualism of “doctrine and application” sermons.²¹ In reaction to this paradigm, Klaas Schilder, often recognized as a father in this movement, summed it up well by saying, “The *whole* sermon is application, toward the conscientious works of God.”²² Formulations from the exemplaristic side have varied. While some seem to be content with what we could call “bare exemplarism,” others recognized the need to locate the use of examples within their context, including the broader context of covenant history. Thus, both sides appear to have a spectrum of thought, some being more consistent (or extreme) in their expressions. A popular concern expressed of redemptive-historical preaching, even among contemporary homileticians, is that it does not contain sufficient application, or that it fails to get beyond objective descriptions to the place of truly reaching people’s hearts.²³ The parallel criticism of exemplaristic preaching is that it is moralistic, reductionistic, atomistic, and as it relates particularly to the preaching of the Old Testament, is more fit for the synagogue than for the church, and leaves people effectively with all law and no gospel. Thus, we are left with a question: Is there a hermeneutical and homiletical paradigm that is capable of discerning a redemptive-historical metanarrative, while at the same time appropriately discerning the way in which the people of God are properly instructed in their own covenant privileges and obligations,

103; and Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 78-83.

21. This is perhaps best seen in the standard homiletic work of the era, T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde Homiletiek* (Wageningen: Zomer & Keuning’s, 1926).

22. “De hele preek is toepassing, een naar de consciëntie werken van God” (Klaas Schilder, *Americana* [unpublished manuscript, 1942], 32 [available online at http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/schi008amer01_01/schi008amer01_01_0003.php, accessed 6/13/13], translation and emphasis mine).

23. See Jay Adams who concluded that Geerhardus Vos’ sermons have “no application in them” (Jay Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1990], 20). For a lengthy critique of certain expressions of redemptive-historical preaching, see John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002) and Hendrik Krabbendam “Hermeneutics and Preaching,” in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1986), 212-245. And more recently, Anthony Selvaggio, “An Answer to the Challenge of Preaching the Old Testament: An Historical & Theological Examination of the Redemptive-Historical Approach,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 5 (2009): 170-184.

even from the various characters in the Bible? It is here that we turn to the drama of redemption paradigm as a possible way forward.

III. The Drama of Redemption Paradigm

The language employed in this article, “Drama of Redemption,” is a synthesis of vocabulary found in the works of numerous authors, but particularly Kevin Vanhoozer²⁴ and Michael Horton.²⁵ The former is of particular interest as it proposes a distinct, and suggestively new way of doing systematic theology. According to Vanhoozer, modern theology (both conservative and liberal) has been somewhat hindered by their own foundational approaches and formulaic expressions. He claims that, “Propositionalist theology, while claiming to be biblical, is actually modernist in its epistemology inasmuch as it buys into modernity’s reduction of knowledge to information and into modernity’s myth that rationality is universal.”²⁶ This leads to what he calls an “epic” approach to theology, which leaves the reader in the posture of being more of a spectator to the story than a participant within it.²⁷ Thus, the temptation to communicate theology as simply categorized statements of discerned facts, has left a dry taste in the mouth of the average Christian,²⁸ and exposed a giant soft spot to the arrows of post-modern skepticism.²⁹ Homiletically speaking, this schematic objectivism is *potentially* embodied in homiletic paradigms (like the “doctrine/application” sermons), and even at times (ironically) in redemptive-historical preaching. While this has worked for many, including the great homiletic works of the past and present era, it has also created certain struggles for those who wrestle with whether or not the Bible really intends, on its own hermeneutical terms, to be reduced to textbook-like theological affirmations or simplistic moral guidance. Is that the way the New Testament handles the Old Testament homiletically? We could

24. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). See also his *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

25. Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). See also idem, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrine for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

26. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 87.

27. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 86. We could think of a scientist studying his specimen and then categorizing his findings. Where theological inquiry has become cold, sterile, and scientific, we would suggest that it has possibly missed the biblical point, or is at least in need of reformation. This is true not just of theology in general, but of preaching in particular. The Bible’s theology was never meant to simply be “described,” it was meant to be lived. See Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 70.

28. “The pivotal point of turning in evangelical thinking which demands close attention is the change that has taken place from the protestant emphasis upon the objective facts of the gospel in history, to the medieval emphasis on the inner life” (Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* [Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2006], 152).

29. Hence the so-called “hermeneutical turn” of post-modernism.

even wonder from a practical standpoint, is that the most edifying homiletic approach?³⁰

The drama of redemption proposal is an attempt to read the Bible on its own terms, not as *epic* (emphasis on the objective) or *lyric* (emphasis on the subjective). Rather, the Bible is seen as a dramatic story of which the Triune God is not simply the author, but the main speaker and actor. He writes the script (inspiration) and he performs the script (incarnation). While God is the central actor in the story, he is not alone. He has written a cast of characters into the script (the people of the Old Testament, the church in the New Testament), and he has called his covenant people into a “fitting” performance of their own covenant roles within God’s dramatic story.³¹ It is important to note that the drama of redemption paradigm cannot be reduced to a *story* that is simply read (in that case, the reader is “outside the story”). Nor is it a play simply to be watched, studied, and remembered. Rather, it is a living, interactive drama, one whose script (the Bible) is viewed as the norm for performance. Yet at the same time, the story is still being written (the story of the church and the world until the end of the age).³² The church is called to find her part, directed by the Holy Spirit (He is the director),³³ knowing that they are not simply performing *before* God but *with* God.³⁴ As God is seen as still speaking to and acting before the world, so also is the church.³⁵ To quote Calvin’s famous line, “the world is the theater of God’s glory.”³⁶

At this point we should wrestle with whether or not the drama of redemption paradigm is viable from an exegetical point of view. In other words, is it just as much of an anachronistic and reductionistic imposition upon the Bible as some of the extra-biblical paradigms that Vanhoozer and others critique?

First of all, we would do well to step back and see the bigger picture or drama of the Bible. It begins with God speaking and acting in Genesis 1. God speaks, or as Michael Horton says, “God *preaches* the world into existence ... and continues to preach his kingdom into existence.”³⁷ From the beginning of the Bible to its end, God

30. In some of the older puritan-minded, Dutch churches, the preacher would give the “doctrine” side of the sermon; then stop for the congregation to stand and sing a hymn; then have them sit down again for the “application” part of the sermon. We should not doubt which part kept the congregants interest better!

31. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 22, 57, 247, 252-263. This is very important language in his canonical-linguistic approach.

32. Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 16; Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 93.

33. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 20, 102, and especially 243ff.

34. Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 14-15. See also Michael Williams, “Theology as Witness: Reading Scripture in a New Era of Evangelical Thought: Part II: Kevin Vanhoozer, the Drama of Doctrine,” *Presbyterion* 37, no. 1 (2011): 24.

35. To paraphrase Peter Brook, the church is “the real theater, ‘The theater of the Invisible made visible.’” See Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book about the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Avon/Discus, 1968), 38, cited in Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, *Studies in Literature and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 112.

36. John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6.2. Calvin uses this language in many places.

37. Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 346.

continues to speak his word and then personally performs it. Everything God creates serves as part of the dramatic stage upon which he will display his own glory. Rather than being viewed as different, competing stories,³⁸ the Bible comes to us as one unified story or drama, with a variety of successive acts, all moving toward the same consummate goal. It is a U-shaped comedic drama, to use nuanced, dramatic vocabulary.³⁹ It begins in the setting of a protological garden-temple with a tree of life in its midst, held out as a promise of communion with God; and it ends in an eschatological garden-city where the tree of life is accessible and communion with God has become a permanent reality beyond the pale of sin and death.⁴⁰ This is so only because, according to the Bible, God has come down from heaven, taken our story of broken-ness and made it his own, triumphing over sin and death through his death and resurrection, and written us into his story of hope and glory. This is what makes Christianity unique according to Dorothy Sayers. “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama ever staggered in the imagination of man—and the dogma *is* in the drama.”⁴¹ But it is also terrifying; it is “the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death.”⁴² The Bible is not simply a linear, epic tale of heroism, a lyric tale of poetic, subjective expression, nor a tragic tale of sacrifice; or even a comedy in which the ending is better than the beginning. It is *all* of these (and much more!) in one all-encompassing, literarily diverse drama.⁴³ The New Testament is itself “unique in ancient literature in interpreting the crucifixion in a positive way, as the greatest of God’s actions in history.”⁴⁴ Though the accomplishment of Christ’s *atonement* work is complete, he is still carrying out the *performance* of his word and work through his Spirit and the servants he has sent in his name.⁴⁵ This, then, is not just a story that is *being told*; it is a story that is *being lived* by God and man in communion with one another, and performed in the theater God has built for the display of his glory.

38. We have in mind here the great divide between Old and New Testament, Israel and the church, as is depicted in dispensationalism.

39. A comedy is a “U-shaped story that begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy, and rises again to end happily” (Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 82, cited in Steven Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 47).

40. This over-arching covenantal (RH) theme, including the movement from protology, is unquestionably the defining hallmark of the work of Geerhardus Vos. See idem, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), and idem, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr. P&R Publishing, 1994).

41. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 3.

42. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, 24.

43. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 93. See also pp.273-278 for a helpful discussion of the uses of various literary genres in Scripture.

44. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 163.

45. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 75.

In light of these things, we are confident in saying that the Bible has a dramatic, covenantal meta-narrative, and that this meta-narrative gives shape and meaning to every smaller story within it.⁴⁶ Thus, from the redemptive-historical point of view, the drama of redemption paradigm requires that every mini-drama in the Bible must be understood in light of how it “plays its own part” in the bigger drama of God’s meta-narrative. Everything said and done in the Bible is part of the one big drama. We would argue that this is quite harmonious with the way the New Testament views the Old Testament. Every preacher of the gospel ought to bear in mind that all the “gospel preaching” done in the New Testament was done *from* the Old Testament.⁴⁷ Thus (and ironically) if we really want to “imitate” the characters of the Bible, we ought to begin by “imitating” their hermeneutic. There is no such thing as the proper or “fitting” performance of a script that we have not first properly understood.⁴⁸

In addition to the dramatic-covenantal meta-narrative of the Bible, there is also an unambiguous way in which the Bible employs the language of the theater. The New Testaments use of θέατρον, μιμέομαι, and ὑποκριτής, have clear connections to theatrical contexts. Paul’s use of θέατρον in 1 Corinthians 4:9 is helpful: “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle (θέατρον) to the world, to angels, and to men.”⁴⁹ The apostles are viewed here as a “living theater,” on display before the world, angels,⁵⁰ and men. In Hebrews 10:32-33, the church as a whole is viewed in a similar light, as being on dramatic, theatrical display: “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed (θεατριζόμενοι) to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.”⁵¹ Likewise, the language of “imitation” (μιμέομαι) is a summons to act in a way that reflects the prior performance of another. In the theater, actors imitated previous actors, and thus gave a “fitting” performance of their part in the drama.⁵² Paul uses this language often as he commands the church to imitate himself (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1), imitate God himself (Eph. 5:1), be imitators of the apostles “and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6), and even of “the churches” (1 Thess. 6:12). It is actually

46. “Like a good play, Scripture possesses a single, unified meaning” (Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 171).

47. Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 70

48. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 22. Throughout his book he makes it very clear that the *telos* of his paradigm is the fitting performance of doctrine derived from the script of Scripture.

49. Referring to Hebrews 10:33 and 1 Corinthians 4:9. “In both of these passages the emphasis is on how the persecution of believers make them a show or a theater of faith, to the world and to angels” (Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III., eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998], 856-857).

50. On the idea of “angels as audience” see Hebrews 13:1 and 1 Peter 1:12.

51. Philo has a very interesting use of this vocabulary, using both “theatre” (θέατρον) and “mimicking” (μιμέομαι) to describe the way in which early Jewish martyrs joined the saints of old in a living theatre of martyrdom in Philo’s “Flaccus,” 72, in *The Works of Philo: Unabridged in One Volume*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 1995), 731. Philo’s language clearly echoes that of Hebrews 11.

52. Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 53; Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 252-263.

difficult to imagine that Paul would be unaware of the theater while using this language, or that he would not expect the church to connect this vocabulary with dramatic performance.⁵³ With this language, Paul appears to be summoning the church to remember the parts played by those who have gone before them as actors on stage in the living-theater of God's redemption, whether those actors are OT saints,⁵⁴ apostles, other Christians—but especially Jesus—and through faith and obedience to *imitate* them. In doing so, Paul does not abstract these “performers” from their redemptive-historical context, but locates them within it (the author of Hebrews does the same), as does the over-arching hermeneutic of the New Testament.

There is no question that the New Testament is not only familiar with the theater, but that it employs it both hermeneutically and pastorally.⁵⁵ The *imperatives* to “imitate” are done not in the form of atomistic, reductionistic exemplarism, but in a self-conscious awareness of the historical *indicatives* accomplished for the church in Christ.⁵⁶ What the church performs in history, on this side of the second-coming of Christ, is an imperfect, yet spirited “mimicking” of what Christ already performed when he entered the theater of God's glory, clothed with the frail mask of humanity.⁵⁷ It is a mimicking born out of their union with Christ. As Vanhoozer says, “Christian participation is rather pneumatic: those who participate in the theo-dramatic mission do so through union with Christ, a union that is wrought by the Spirit yet worked out in history by us.”⁵⁸ Thus, participation in the ongoing drama of redemption is that to which the church is called, not mere theological speculation about the Bible's content or reductionist exemplarism of its characters.

It is precisely at this point that we find the drama of redemption paradigm to be not simply compatible with redemptive-historical preaching, but suggestive of a possible way forward. The earlier preaching debates in the Netherlands seemed to get stuck on the question of “application” or “exemplarism” in preaching. Though those who favored redemptive-historical preaching opposed objectivism/subjectivism or doctrine/application dualism,⁵⁹ yet it is worth considering that they may have fallen

53. Paul evangelized inside the theater in Ephesus in Acts 19. Paul quotes from a Greek play, Meander's *Thais*, in 1 Corinthians 15:33. See Kittel, *TDNT* 3:42 for a helpful discussion of the correspondence between the NT use of θεάτρον and its cognates.

54. Cf. Hebrews 6:12, and especially Hebrews 11.

55. “De volkeren der wereld behoren in het leven der kerk aanschouwelijk onderwijs te krijgen van het goede, het verlorste, leven in de vreze Gods... Wij zien dagelijks voor ogen het theater der wereld” (H.J. Schilder, “De Kerk in het Wereldtheater,” *De Reformatie* 50, no. 6 [1974]: 44).

56. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 253ff.

57. The language here is intended to be provocative, but not to in any way imply a docetic view of Christ's humanity. Rather, we have the language of Philippians 2 in mind.

58. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 366. See also Stephen J. Nichols, *Welcome to the Story: Reading, Loving and Living God's Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 141.

59. A suspicion confirmed by C. Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Prediking*, 70-71, 109-111. On the contemporary nature of this dualism, see Henk Geertsema, *Om de Humaniteit: Christelijk Geloof in gesprek met de Modern Cultuur over Wetenschap en Filosofie* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 74.

into the ditch of over-objectivizing. In other words, the pendulum may have swung too far. Sadly, it is possible that some of the advocates of redemptive-historical preaching ended up treating the *drama* of redemption more like a story to be read and believed, than something to be fittingly performed. If this is an accurate assessment, we would like to suggest that the drama of redemption paradigm may help the church again find her covenantal place on the stage of history, with a refined love for her Script, and a genuine passion for the drama it is called to exhibit—and preach! Vanhoozer puts this well: “The drama of doctrine is about refining the dross of textual knowledge into the gold of Christian wisdom by putting one’s understanding of the Scriptures into practice.... The proper end of the drama of doctrine is wisdom: lived knowledge, a performance of the truth.”⁶⁰ We are not watching the drama; we are in it. We are not simply studying the script; we are performing it. To ignore either in a sermon would be a mistake. If we ignore the former, we rob God of his glory, and attempt to “up-stage” him with our own self-centered performances. If we ignore the latter, we leave the story one-dimensional, and fail to embrace the proper way in which this drama is not simply “for us” but also “about us.” It is the drama we are living, and called to live more fittingly each day until the curtain closes. Homiletics is servant to the drama, a genuine *means of grace* that not only shows the church the dramatic grace of God in the gospel, but also shows the church how she may *gracefully* perform her script before God and the world.

It may be helpful at this point to bring out a distinction between “performing” and “improvising.” Most of the authors advocating some form of dramatic-theological vocabulary discuss the church’s role as performing.⁶¹ But more than performance is needed. “The church is always having to improvise, and it does so not out of a desire to be original but out of a desire to minister the gospel in new contexts.”⁶² The idea of improvising is particularly helpful as it recognizes that not every stage (cultural setting, time, context) is identical.⁶³ While the church is called to perform the script of Scripture, and to “stick to the script,” there is also a significant way in which the church *must* creatively improvise as she does so. There is a fine line here that ought not to be crossed. We are not advocating a reader-response “what does it mean to you?” approach to the Bible, nor are we saying that the ethics of Scripture are subject

60. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 22.

61. See for example, Charles L. Bartow, *God’s Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 82. See also Hans Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 1:254-255, 298-302.

62. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 128. The idea of “improvising” is not unique to Vanhoozer. See also Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 63-66.

63. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 129. For further appreciation of “improvising,” see comments by Michael Jensen, review of *The Drama of Doctrine*, by Kevin Vanhoozer, *ANVIL* 24, no. 3 (2007): 227-228. For a recent discussion of this idea in Dutch, see C.J. de Ruijter, *Horen Naar de Stem van God* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2013), 77-80. For a critical assessment, see Sarah Heaner Lancaster, “Dramatic Enactment of Christian Faith: A Review Essay,” *The Asbury Journal* 62, no. 1 (2007): 119-126, esp. 125-126.

to cultural relativism.⁶⁴ But we are saying that the church must learn to say the “same old thing” in new, clearly communicated ways that reflects an awareness of and concern for those before whom she performs the drama of redemption. This is the burden of every sermon.

Not only must we learn to improvise our speech creatively, our actions ought to bear the marks of spirited creativity, freshness, and clarity. We quote Vanhoozer on this at length:

It is unfathomable, if not an unpardonable sin to drain the drama out of the biblical story of redemption. De-dramatization happens in one of two ways: either one dilutes the action to a moral or a message (by principalizing) or one fails to draw the audience into the action. To be sure, the material is pure gold; yet the church all too often manages to turn the drama of redemption into cultural dross. The church becomes “deadly theatre” when it loses its prophetic edge or when its members become passive spectators who feel no call to become participants. *The church must hallow, not hollow, God’s name.*⁶⁵

This last idea is quite important. If the church is to remain faithful and relevant in our post-modern age (and whatever comes after that!), it must continue to learn how to communicate the “faith once and for all delivered to the saints” in a “word and deed” language that people can understand. This is the dramatic imperative of Pentecost—one authoritative gospel truth preached in many languages. Just as not every actor performs the same role, or even does the act the same way everywhere, but rather improvises in a way that communicates the message with the most effective method, so the church needs to be encouraged to speak in a language that post-moderns can understand. This should be a challenging word to both liberal and conservative theological paradigms. If the former has been guilty of re-writing the Biblical script to accommodate the audience (the post-modern hermeneutical turn), the latter may be guilty at times of burying the dramatic script under the dust of archaic vocabulary and bland, half-hearted performances (including sermons). The offense of post-modernity may be that it has dramatically abandoned the truth. The offense of orthodoxy may be that it has nearly emptied the truth of its drama. Dorothy Sayers said it well, “Let us, in Heaven’s name, drag out the Divine drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction.”⁶⁶ Truth *is*; but it *is not* boring, monotone, or lifeless: “There is nothing more dramatic than coming to know God?”⁶⁷ Preaching should reflect this dramatic reality.

64. Vanhoozer’s interaction with Nicholas Wolterstorff on this is helpful (Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 165). Hans Boersma expresses some concerns that Vanhoozer may have left the door to theological relativism somewhat open. See Hans Boersma, “On Baking Pumpkin Pie: Kevin Vanhoozer and Yves Congar on Tradition,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 254.

65. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 403.

66. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, 24.

67. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 301.

IV. Potential Weaknesses in the Drama of Redemption Paradigm

We could also suggest some potential weaknesses in the drama of redemption paradigm that might be complimented by further interaction with the redemptive-historical paradigm. We have in mind particularly the work of Vanhoozer. While he has been the primary author upon whom much of this proposal has depended, we would also like to point out two potential weaknesses in his paradigm. The first is the danger of a triumphant metaphor. It is fair to say that Vanhoozer is aware of this danger,⁶⁸ but in our view it exists nonetheless. While the drama of redemption paradigms does indeed help us take a step forward in communicating “old truths in new ways,” it is worth remembering that the dramatic vocabulary of the Bible is but a small part of the Bible’s vocabulary. We would (ironically) remind advocates of the drama of redemption paradigm that to the extent that Christians, pastors and theologians ought to be familiar with a variety of hermeneutical tools, those who embrace the drama of redemption model ought to do the same. The Bible cannot be subsumed under, or fully articulated by a single metaphor.

Our second concern is an outworking of the first. We note the conspicuous absence of interaction with authors within the Dutch-Reformed (redemptive-historical) tradition in numerous books advocating the drama of redemption approach. *The Drama of Doctrine*, for instance, lacks any reference to Herman Bavinck or Geerhardus Vos.⁶⁹ The only reference to Herman Ridderbos is to *When the Time Had fully Come*. Each of these authors has contributed much to the development of a covenantal (redemptive-historical) approach to the Bible. It is odd to us that Vanhoozer does not engage them more. Furthermore, as it relates to preaching in particular, we could wish for a greater awareness in Vanhoozer, and other drama of redemption advocates, of the redemptive-historical preaching debates in the Netherlands. They are part of the package deal that includes Bavinck, Kuyper, Vos and Ridderbos. Many of the struggles, including the introduction of new terms to attempt to take a step forward in meeting the ecclesiastical needs of the day parallel one another. As it is often said, those who forget their history are often prone to repeat it. It is no wonder that many of those who advocate and appreciate redemptive-historical hermeneutics and preaching are expressing favorable interest in the drama of redemption paradigm.⁷⁰ But this should serve as a clear reminder that while the two paradigms are certainly not identical, they share much in common, and to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of the earlier redemptive-historical discussions would only enhance the drama of redemption discussions in the present.

Our last concern is probably the most significant. While the drama of redemption paradigm has the wonderful potential of speaking to post-moderns in an evangelistic, missional way, it also needs to be exercised cautiously so that it does not capitulate

68. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 243, 386ff.

69. Vos is mentioned by Vanhoozer in “A Drama of Redemption Model: Always Performing?” in *Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 157.

70. See Daniel Doriani “A Redemptive-Historical Model,” in *Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 205-209.

(ironically) to post-modernity. The strength of the drama of redemption paradigm, in our opinion, is its ability to express a healthy theology—indeed, reformed, covenant theology—in a way that will be winsome and effective to post-moderns. The danger is that it becomes so effective, it becomes *affected*. Here we find some sympathy with the concerns expressed by Hans Boersma, and to a similar extent, Walter Kaiser.⁷¹ But we would like to express this concern from a confessional point of view. To the extent that the drama of redemption paradigm requires both “sticking to the script” and “faithful, creative, fitting improvisation,” we cannot help but express concern as to what this shall mean for the church over time *confessionally*. We do not believe that Vanhoozer is advocating that the church become a theological jelly-fish.⁷² Nor is he advocating that the church simply echo theology in some of the archaic formulations of the past. But where does this leave the church in her relationship to her creeds and confessions? To put it a little differently: “Which doctrine should we perform?” Vanhoozer speaks repeatedly about the importance of “performing the script” and the way in which “doctrine” helps us to “fittingly perform.” But again, “which doctrine?” is a question that is not clearly answered. Doctrine is not an abstract idea; it is particular. It is confessional. So perhaps we could rephrase our question: “which confession(s) embody the *true* doctrine?” Here again we might learn a lesson from the redemptive-historical debates in the Netherlands. At the heart of that debate was not simply a question of hermeneutics, or even a preaching paradigm per se, but a quest to be part of the “true church.” This concern was not simply foundational to the redemptive-historical preaching debates, it is the very heart of the Protestant Reformation, and what it means for the church to be *semper-reformans*. Any new theological model ought to be treated with a bit of respectful suspicion (whether drama of redemption, redemptive-historical, or anything else), and tested for its faithfulness to Scripture and to the churches confessions. Still, expressing caution and concern is different than accusation and alarm. We intend the former, not the latter.

Conclusion: A Marriage with a Mission

I would like to conclude this paper by focusing on an idea that lies at the heart of the drama of redemption paradigm. It is the idea of *missions*. We could speculate at great length about why the earlier redemptive-historical preaching debates did not find better traction. It could be suggested that one of the reasons why it may have waned so quickly is that it was in certain respects, an inward-facing debate. In other words, it was a good and fruitful debate in many ways, but it failed to produce a homiletic method capable not only of focusing on the needs of the baptized, but also on the evangelistic needs of the unbaptized. It became a nuanced homiletic method, primarily for Christians; and while this is not bad, it almost guaranteed that the growth of the church (and love for redemptive-historical preaching) would have to come from within—or the church would not grow. It was in need not only of more of an outward

71. Boersma, “On Baking Pumpkin Pie,” 254ff. We would express the same concerns about the very influential piece by N.T. Wright “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?” *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32.

72. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 449.

focus, but perhaps additional conversation partners.⁷³ We might paraphrase here and say, “it was *not good* for redemptive-historical preaching to be alone!” It needed a partner that was like it, but capable of helping it mature and bear greater fruit.

In this author’s view, the drama of redemption paradigm is something along the lines of a revised version of redemptive-historical concerns with a stronger missionary emphasis, and an updated vocabulary.⁷⁴ It is burdened with a concern to reach the lost of this post-modern age; to call them out of their broken, self-absorbed stories⁷⁵ and hopeless dramas into the “greatest story ever told”⁷⁶ in which God himself enters the stage of history as the servant of sinners that he might be exalted as the Lord of glory, thus reversing the curse, re-writing our tattered scripts, and re-creating our sin-stained lives—all by his word and Spirit. If redemptive-historical preaching has a future (and this author strongly believes it does) it will be through reforming (without conforming) its homiletic tools and rhetoric. This must be done not only with an eye toward the church, but also with an eye toward the world stage upon which God is carrying out his drama of redemption in this final act of redemptive history. As the title of this paper proposes (pardon the pun), a marriage between drama of redemption and redemptive-historical is worth considering. The redemptive-historical preaching model, left to itself, is significantly lacking; but joined in a vital union with contemporary approaches to drama of redemption, it has inspiring potential. Here, we appreciate France Young’s advice that every pastor ought to be familiar with a variety of hermeneutical (we would add homiletical) tools—that includes advocates of redemptive-historical.⁷⁷ We would suggest that the drama of redemption paradigm should certainly be one of those tools. Its time for the two to meet—and to get serious about each other!

The curtain of this final act in the drama of redemption will soon close. Modernism is dead. Post-modernism is staggering in the dark, intoxicated by its own self-referential epistemology. It has neither a past to cherish nor a future for which to hope. As skeptic Mark Taylor puts it, “Post-modernism opens with the sense of irrevocable loss and incurable fault. This wound is inflicted by the overwhelming awareness of death—a death that begins with the death of God and ends with the death

73. Mees te Velde, “Vrijgemaakte Vreemdelingen Tussen Verleden en Toekomst: Een Nabeschouwing” in *Vrijgemaakte Vreemdelingen: Visies uit de Vroege Jaren van het gereformeerd-vrijgemaakt leven (1944-1950) op Kerk, Staat, maatschappij, Cultuur, Gezin* (Barnveld: De Vuurbaak, 2007), 176-177.

74. Evidence is seen not only in our primary authors (Vanhoozer and Horton), but also in authors such as Tim Keller, Christopher Wright, Craig Bartholomew, and Michael Goheen. While these authors should each receive received nuanced appreciation, their work bears recognizable similarity to the hermeneutical and homiletical concerns of redemptive-historical preaching.

75. “Ironically, the biblical drama confirms their [post-modern] counter-narrative as descriptive of human existence apart from God’s covenant blessing” (Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 275).

76. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, 21.

77. Frances Young, *Art of Performance*, 161-162.

of ourselves. We are in a time between times, and a place which is no place.”⁷⁸ Enter the church—stage left! Here is the God-directed cast of characters, improvising (without compromising) the inspired script for the world to see, eager to preach the words that only the church can truly say. Her life is in Christ. She dramatically displays in word and deed that for those who are lost, Jesus is *The Way*. For those who are confused, Jesus is *The Truth*. For those who are spiritually dead, Jesus is *The Life*. This is the drama of redemption, the drama of the church, and it is the heart of the drama of preaching!

78. Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.