

Part Seven:
Preaching

“These Things Happened as Examples for Us”

In 1986, C. Trimp published a book about redemptive-historical preaching with this subtitle: *Continuing an Unfinished Discussion*.¹ A conversation about redemptive-historical preaching is important not only for The Netherlands but for Korea as well. And the discussion of this subject is underway. The debate that occurred during the 1930s and 1940s in The Netherlands regarding redemptive-historical and exemplaristic preaching is well-known by way of the summary of that debate provided in the dissertation of S. Greijdanus.² At the invitation of the students in Pusan, Professor Ohmann gave an address on this subject at the academic conference held in May 1986. That address treated the subject from the point of view of the Old Testament.

Again this year another academic conference was held, this time devoted to questions about preaching method. When I was asked to provide a contribution in this context, it was unnecessary to repeat the work of Professor Ohmann. So I chose to speak on the related topic: “Do the historical narratives recorded in the Bible function as examples?” I trust this contribution will advance the conversation that Trimp has requested.

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¹ C. Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis en prediking. Hervatting van een onvoltooid gesprek* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1986). English translation: *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion* (trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman; Scarsdale, NY: Westminster Book Service, 1996).

² S. Greijdanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970).

Preaching Scripturally

Before discussing questions involving the “example” function of Scripture, we must first obtain clarity regarding our starting point. What should be preached? To find an answer to this question, we will briefly investigate the so-called pastoral epistles. These letters were written by Paul to two co-workers, Timothy and Titus. They were not apostles; their labor in Ephesus and Crete can best be compared to that of ministers today.

That they had to preach is clear from the admonition Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:13: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” The “public reading” refers to the public reading that occurs in worship. It appears from the New Testament that in Jewish worship the Old Testament was read publicly (Luke 4:16; 2 Cor. 3:14). The Christian church received the command to read the letters of Paul and Revelation publicly (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3). But the public reading of such writings was not the end, since Timothy was instructed also to explain what had been publicly read, thereby to encourage the church.³

This mandate to preach is merely one of a series of mandates instructing Timothy and Titus to be busy with teaching. Timothy was instructed to “*command* certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer” (1 Tim. 1:3; cf. v. 18). He must “*point out*...to the brothers” how created things may be used by believers (1 Tim. 4:6). He must “*command and teach* these things” (1 Tim. 4:11); he must keep a close watch on himself and on *his doctrine* and persist in these things (1 Tim. 4:16). He must *encourage* (1 Tim. 5:1), *teach* and *urge* (1 Tim. 6:2), *command* (1 Tim. 6:17), and *guard* what was entrusted to him (1 Tim. 6:20).

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warns him to “*keep reminding* them of these things” (2 Tim. 2:14). Timothy had to be busy “*correctly handling* the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). As a servant of Christ, he was called to “be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful, those who oppose him he must gently *instruct*” (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Paul placed him under oath: “*Preach* the word; be prepared in season and out of season; *correct, rebuke, and encourage*—with great patience and *careful instruction*” (2 Tim. 4:2).⁴

³ See for the exegesis of 1 Tim. 4:13, C. Bouma, *De brieven van den apostel Paulus aan Timotheüs en Titus* (Kommentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Amsterdam: Botenburch, 1942) 165; J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles I & II Timothy, Titus* (Black’s New Testament Commentaries; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1976) 105. Regarding the public reading of Scripture, see K. Deddens, “Lectori Salutem – Attende Lectioni,” *Clarion* 33 (1984) 391–396, 416–419.

⁴ For this use of the term “word,” see also Acts 6:3–4: “We...will turn this

Titus had to “*teach* what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1), and in this way *admonish* older men, older women, young men, and slaves (Titus 2:2–10). He was to “*declare* these things; *exhort* and *rebuke* with all authority (Titus 2:15), and to “*insist* on these things” (Titus 3:8).

What must these preachers teach? They must teach “the sound doctrine” in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the God of salvation, which had been entrusted to Paul (1 Tim. 1:11; cf. 4:6). That included the Old Testament, which Timothy had earlier learned from his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 3:14–16; cf. 1:5). In addition, it included the message of Jesus (1 Tim. 6:3; cf. 5:18), and the message of Paul (1 Tim. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:13; Titus 1:3). All of this makes up in substance what we have received as the Old and New Testaments.

The New Testament church recognizes preaching and instruction as continuing phenomena. The Lord Jesus taught. He gave his disciples the mandate to make disciples. The apostles had instructed Timothy and Titus to provide instruction. And what they had heard from the apostles they were to “entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2). This is how teaching has proceeded in the church, even today. That includes what must be preached, namely, the Word of God written in the Old and New Testaments. Preaching is exhorting with and instructing in the Word of God revealed in Scripture.

Placing this starting point clearly before us is quite relevant in a discussion of the use of example in preaching. Many exemplary people have lived, and it is certainly not uncommon that they get preached about. Several years ago I read in an American periodical, *Christianity Today*, an interview with a well-known American preacher. He had been a long-time member of the same church, and throughout that time the church grew quite large. His preaching was highly appreciated. When asked about his method of preaching, he mentioned among other things that he had preached a series of sermons on exemplary Christians. For example, he preached a series on the heroes of faith during the Reformation, one of whom was Prince William of Orange. It happened that Dutch immigrants were visiting his church on that Sunday, and on account of this sermon they promptly became members of his church.⁵ This minister was indis-

responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” See also the essay by J. van Bruggen, “Vaste grond onder de voeten. De formule *pistos ho logos*,” in *Bezielde verband. Opstellen aangeboden aan prof. J. Kamphuis* (ed. J. Douma et al.; Kampen: Van den Berg, 1984) 38–45, esp. 43.

⁵ This is certainly not an exceptional occurrence. According to S. Greijdanus,

putably a successful preacher. And God could even have used his preaching to work faith and conversion. But we must insist that the successful sermon on William of Orange was not a good sermon. Preaching about a famous human person falls short of preaching God's Word. Famous people, no matter how exemplary their lives, cannot serve as the subject of sermons. Preaching is the administration of God's Word.

B. Holwerda's View of Exemplaristic Preaching

It was the Dutch Reformed Old Testament professor B. Holwerda who forged the term "exemplaristic" to describe an unacceptable approach to historical portions of Scripture. He crystallized the contrast between the two approaches by using the terms "Christocentric" and "exemplaristic."⁶ The first of these terms was flexible, insofar as other terms were used as well, such as "Christological," "redemptive-historical," and "revelation historical." The phrase "redemptive-historical" eventually came to displace the others.⁷ But the term "exemplaristic" was the only term used to describe the other approach.

What did Holwerda mean with this second term? He called this approach "exemplaristic," in his words, "because this method approached the biblical history as various independent histories which served as examples

"Huysers says: 'De Goethe-, Schiller-, Wagner-, Shakespeare sermons that people have dared to preach abroad, we reject as homiletical *extravagance*.' *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 50 (1950) 217, with references." (*Sola Scriptura*, 69, n. 77). Some homileticians defend the use of extra-biblical persons as subjects for preaching (see *Sola Scriptura*, 59, n. 19; 217, n. 14).

⁶ This appeared in 1940, in the *Gereformeerd Mannenblad*; see B. Holwerda, "De heilshistorie in de prediking," in his "*Begonnen hebbende van Mozes*" (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1974) 82. English translation: "The History of Redemption in the Preaching of the Gospel" (trans. and ed. P. Y. De Jong; Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1984). [Translator's note: the Dutch word *exemplarisch* can be rendered as "exemplary" or "exemplaristic," or even "moralistic." Each rendering has advantages, but our choice for "exemplaristic" seeks to capture most of those advantages in the interests of understandability.]

⁷ Holwerda, "De heilshistorie in de prediking," 82. M. B. van 't Veer preferred the term "Christological"; see "Christologische prediking over de historische stof van het Oude Testament," *Van den dienst des Woords* (ed. R. Schippers; Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1944) 137. English translation: "Christological Preaching on Historical Materials of the Old Testament" (trans. P. Y. De Jong; Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1984).

(*exempla*) for us.”⁸ To this he added: “One interpreting historical materials Christocentrically does not forget that these things were described as examples for us, *but proceeds precisely from that realization to show us why these things can be examples.*”⁹

Thus, Holwerda did not oppose the notion of example as such. In so many words he acknowledged that what was described in Scripture is an example for us. Nevertheless, he was concerned with the issue of how these descriptions can serve as examples. And he objected to disconnecting events from the Bible’s unified history in order to make them serve as examples.¹⁰

To clarify this point, it would perhaps be helpful to provide some illustrations of an unacceptable use of examples:

- The friendship between David and Jonathan is an example of the kind of genuine friendship that ought to exist among Christians. Genuine friendship can be based only in Christ, and therefore only if we together are friends of Jesus.
- Hannah’s prayer for a child is an example for all of us so that with our pain we go to the foot of the cross. The fact that this prayer was heard is proof that prayer works.
- David strengthened himself in the Lord after the destruction of Ziklag. So when we face difficult days, we too must seek our strength in the Lord.¹¹

In this way, the exemplaristic method often leads to moralistic or psychological preaching.

Against this approach to the stories found in the Bible, Holwerda registered three objections. First, historical materials have a unique character. They are not parables, but historical facts.¹² It often happens that a minister

⁸ Holwerda, “De heilshistorie in de prediking,” 82.

⁹ Holwerda, “De heilshistorie in de prediking,” 82.

¹⁰ Consider as well the following comment of Holwerda: “The only question was this: *in which way* must these materials be applied? By taking such material *by itself*, by *taking it out* of its historical context, or rather by *taking into consideration* that context?”

¹¹ These examples are taken from Van ’t Veer, “Christologische prediking,” 140.

¹² Holwerda, “Heilshistorie,” 87–88, and the summary on 94: “Will a person permit salvation history to retain its function as a foundation for dogma, or treat it illustratively?” Each of Holwerda’s three objections is rather complex. Criticism of various components of his objections is surely legitimate. In this connection, Trimp criticizes Holwerda’s notion of “dogma” (*Preaching and the History of Saha-*

first explains the general principle that he wants to treat in his sermon. For example: we should always go to God with our problems. Then he searches for a text he can use to illustrate that principle: Hannah's prayer. But were the events given to us in Scripture given to serve as illustrations of a general truth?

Holwerda's second objection is that the context of the event in God's redemptive history gets neglected. In Holwerda's words: "Should one treat this history in its *organic connection*, or may he elucidate it *fragmentarily*? Not in its *development*, but *leveled out*?"¹³ For example, Hannah's prayer and God's listening to it are connected with Israel's history and with Samuel's task within that history as a judge. May a sermon dealing with Hannah's prayer ignore this history?

The third objection that Holwerda mentions is that elements of the text itself get ignored. A portion of the text is lifted out. For example, Matthew 11:1–6 involves the doubt of John the Baptist, and John 20:24–29 involves the doubt of Thomas. According to the exemplaristic approach, one could preach the same lesson from these texts: Jesus delivers us from all doubt. But when one reads the passages in their entirety, one will notice that doubt can vary, such that the resolution of doubt can differ as well.¹⁴

Holwerda was able to raise significant objections against the exemplaristic method of preaching. But the question remains to be answered why he entitled this method "exemplaristic," when he was unwilling to exclude the function of example altogether. Holwerda argued that the word "exemplum" lacked any historical tint. It means "one of many comparable things, an exemplar belonging to a collection of similar articles."¹⁵

In rejecting the exemplaristic method of preaching, Holwerda did not wish to deny the example-function itself. What concerned him was that the persons in the Bible may not be held up to the congregation today as examples that have been isolated from the history within which they lived, without consideration of the historical progress contained in the Bible.

C. Trimp's Criticism

From the book on redemptive-historical preaching that Trimp published in 1986, it is evident that he agrees with much that was said about

tion, 130–134). In the text above, I am recounting Holwerda's arguments in what I consider to be their strongest form.

¹³ Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 88–91, and the summary on 94.

¹⁴ Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 91ff.; the illustration is from Holwerda as well.

¹⁵ Holwerda, "Heilshistorie," 85.

this approach by its earliest defenders: K. Schilder, B. Holwerda, and M. B. van 't Veer.¹⁶ At the same time, he voiced a number of penetrating criticisms, especially regarding Holwerda's foundational essay about redemptive history in preaching. In that connection, Trimp's criticism of Holwerda's use of example is certainly of no little importance.

First, Trimp rejects the meaning of “exemplum” that Holwerda assigned to that term. According to Holwerda, an example is one in a series of similar objects. Trimp contests this, arguing that the meaning is broader. The word “exemplum” comes from the Latin verb *ex-imo* ‘to take out.’ An “exemplum” refers to an object that is “extracted” or taken from something, such as, for example, a quality-control engineer selects individual objects in order to determine the quality of the entire lot.¹⁷

I would like to illustrate this with something from my own experience. When we lived in Korea, our family in The Netherlands regularly sent us packages containing foodstuffs not easily obtainable in Korea. The customs officials often did not know what the packages contained, and they were unable to read the Dutch instructions on the packages. Moreover, it is possible that such wrapping might have been hiding drugs or other contraband. For these reasons, they often removed something from the package, opened it, and tested it. In this way, they could be reasonably certain that the contents of the package were legal and safe. What those customs officials took out of the package and inspected we can term a sample, an example.

Continuing with Trimp's argument, an “exemplum” is something that indicates the quality of the whole. So it might also acquire the significance of a cautionary example or an example for imitating. The Latin word “exemplum” can be rendered by the words “model, prototype, antecedent, pattern, imitation, copy, imprint, portrait, illustration. Whatever ‘exemplum’ may mean, it nowhere has the sense of a leveling factor.”¹⁸

Thus, one could even claim that history is exemplaristic. Here is meant that history is illustrative, or encouraging, or cautionary, or characteristically factual.¹⁹ The word “example” can even possess a substantially historical flavour.

¹⁶ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 72–74, 107 (ET: 93–96, 135).

¹⁷ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 75 (ET: 97).

¹⁸ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 75 (ET: 97). In my opinion, Trimp expresses the point too strongly. With the meaning of “illustration,” the specific historical place of an event is no longer important. Later Trimp himself used the term “illustration” with the connotation of “separated from history” (84, 90; ET: 107, 113–114).

¹⁹ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 76 (ET: 98).

Does this apply also to the histories described in the Bible? In connection with this question, people have often discussed the meaning of passages like 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 11. Holwerda thought that Hebrews 11 involved a doctrinal argument concerning “by faith.” For making that argument, the biblical writer selected illustrative material from history. Holwerda considered that legitimate, for the specific feature of what those earlier believers had done was being maintained, and no historical equal sign was being placed between then and now.²⁰

Trimp could not agree with using the word “illustration.” The stories from the Old Testament mentioned in Hebrews 11 are proofs, documentation material. These are characteristic examples. The historical distance was not ignored, but that does not yet remove their exemplaristic use.²¹

Just as Hebrews 11 supplies examples for imitation, so too cautionary examples are provided by Hebrews 3 and 4, together with 1 Corinthians 10. In this last-mentioned chapter as well, the historical differences are kept in view (see v. 11). But that does not weaken the example; on the contrary, it strengthens the example. “For the compelling power of baptism (v. 2) and the presence of Christ (v. 4) have, since earlier times, become only stronger!”²²

In this context, Trimp makes two important comments about preaching on narrative texts from the Old Testament. He argues that a sermon on the narrative itself will approach its material differently than would a sermon on the related material in Hebrews 11. But at the same time, Hebrews 11 shows us that *we too* may look at the Old Testament in the same way as Hebrews 11 does.²³

This explains why a sermon about Abram’s calling narrated in Genesis 12:4 will surely differ in content and arrangement than a sermon on Hebrews 12:8. But it is certainly permissible, when preaching on Genesis 12:4, to hold Abram up as an example of faith-obedience.

The Result of this Discussion

The difference between Holwerda and Trimp is limited. Each emphasizes the historical character of the events described in the Bible. The persons coming to the foreground in biblical history lived in a period different than ours. They had obtained a different office, and they had a different

²⁰ Holwerda, “Heilshistorie,” 95–96.

²¹ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 92 (ET: 116).

²² Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 93 (ET: 118).

²³ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 93 (ET: 117). The first observation had been made earlier by Holwerda as well (“Heilshistorie,” 88).

task to accomplish. It is also interesting that most of them lived in the period before Christ came to earth. Therefore it is impermissible to act as though we occupy the same position in God’s redemptive work as they did and to apply their deeds directly to ourselves.

At that point, Holwerda termed the preaching method that ignored the historical distance “the exemplaristic method.” Trimp claims that while it is incorrect simply to equate the biblical situation and our situation, it is just as mistaken to surrender the term “example,” and to disapprove of any and every example-use of the biblical histories.

We must say that much of Holwerda’s criticism of the method that he termed the exemplaristic method is relevant. A sermon on a Bible story may not use that event merely to illustrate a universal truth. Neglecting a story’s historical context leads to weakening or even twisting the meaning of the text. This will necessarily result in an application not entirely consistent with the text. Treating only a part of the text and ignoring the rest yields an arbitrary application.

At the same time, it must be said that Trimp correctly advocates a broader example function for biblical history. Holwerda indeed claimed that this history supplied examples, but he could hardly develop that in terms of his theory. This was because he permitted his theory to be governed too heavily by the notion of the progress of redemptive history. The intention of the Old Testament was supposedly to show the progress of God’s work leading to Christ. Along with that, the manner of God’s concourse with his people became problematic.²⁴

The inadequacies can be overcome by seeing that Scripture shows both how God leads his people en route to Christ, and how his people responded to that leading. The events narrated show us who God is, who people are, and how God wants people to behave. It is possible to use events and persons as examples without ignoring the historical contexts and the progress of the period in view. Scripture itself leads the way for us.

In what follows, then, the question that will occupy us is this: How can events and actions be used as examples? To answer that question we need to recall our starting point. A preacher has the calling to hold forth the Word of God. When the preacher speaks on a text from God’s Word and that text is a historical text, then he will have to preach according to the description of facts and persons supplied in the text. Stated differently, the way in which a fact in Scripture is presented determines the way in which

²⁴ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 96–100 (ET: 121–127).

the preacher uses and applies that fact in his sermon.

God's Example-Actions

When speaking about examples in the Bible, we generally think of people who were exemplary in their actions. But it is important to begin with God's actions. Scripture describes the story of how God works in his world and how he relates to his people. In this history, God always enjoys priority. That applies as well to the description of this history. In that description, the actions of God are always prominent, and the actions of people appear in the context of God's actions.

When we call God's actions exemplaristic, we do not mean that we must act like God. One could point to such realities as, for example, in 1 John 4:11. Earthly children must resemble their heavenly Father in certain respects. But our comments at this point do not have this in mind. Rather, we are referring to actions that God performs in order to instruct his people about himself. Such actions are exemplaristic in this sense—that they reveal something that is characteristic about God's thinking and working.

Such events are often described in the Bible. We want to look first at a number of events described in Leviticus 9 and 10. On the day when the tabernacle was finished and ready for use, God's glory appeared to the entire people after Moses and Aaron had performed their ministry unto God (9:23). Fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering (v. 24). These deeds of God can be termed exemplaristic. By this we do not mean that they were one of a series of similar events. After that first day, priests entered the tabernacle daily, and then they blessed the people—without God's glory appearing. Only on this first day did this marvelous revelation of God's glory occur. Thereby God publicly showed that he did indeed desire to dwell with his blessed presence in the tabernacle in the midst of his people. This is how God revealed his heart in this unique exemplaristic deed.

God's coming down from heaven in fire to consume the sacrifice did not occur again on the days following this first day of tabernacle use. Usually the priests had to keep the fire going. By means of the example of the burning of the sacrifice, God showed that he accepted the sacrifices of Israel which were brought in the tabernacle.

But on that same day, the fire of God came down a second time—this time, not to consume the sacrifice but to slay two priests. The reason for this was that these men were about to enter the tabernacle with strange fire, something God had forbidden (Lev. 10:1–2). Later it happened often that people wanted to enter God's tabernacle or temple in ways that violated God's regulations for the temple ministry. They were not restrained in the same way by

means of God’s lightning. God does not always act in the same way, but this first time he showed what he thinks about this kind of worship. From that point forward, the people could know how dangerous it was to approach God. A second lightning occurrence was not needed to make that clear.

Anyone preaching on Leviticus 9 and 10 will have to place these actions of God in the foreground. He must explain who God is, and how he wants to be served. From that must proceed the application for our own worship.

The events described in 2 Samuel 6 must be interpreted in the same way. King David wanted to establish worship in Jerusalem around the tabernacle. But when he had the ark of the covenant brought to Jerusalem, he did not do that according to the prescriptions of the law. When Uzzah touched the ark, God killed him on the spot (vv. 7–8). Earlier the ark had come in the same way from the land of the Philistines. We may assume that the Philistines had touched the ark, but they were not killed. In this case, when we speak of an exemplaristic action of God we are not referring to one in a series. The fact that precisely here God acted exemplaristically is related to David’s plan to establish Israel’s worship in Jerusalem. God made it unmistakably clear that this ministry must be implemented entirely according to the laws God had given. So a sermon about this event should not focus on Uzzah who was killed (and on what might have become of him) but must concentrate on the God who kills and what he is revealing about himself in doing so.

When David saw what had happened, he became afraid.²⁵ He decided not to bring the ark to Jerusalem, but had it stored in the house of a Philistine. Then God blessed the man and his house (vv. 10–11). Scripture tells us nothing in particular about this man. We do not even know if he served God. A sermon on this text should not proceed by speaking about the faith of Obed-Edom, followed by the blessing on Obed-Edom. The purpose of this Scripture passage is to emphasize God’s exemplary action. God demonstrated, especially to David, that his presence brings genuine blessing.

The contours become even more pronounced when we consider what had just happened. It is indeed dangerous to have dealings with God, but not because God is a fickle, unreliable God. The very presence of God constitutes blessing. When the service of God appears to be dangerous, that is due to human disobedience where people are not serving God according to his commands. Accordingly, that must be central in any sermon on this passage.

²⁵ On this, and on the entire chapter, see H. de Jong, “Beamend lezen,” *Rondom het Woord. Theologische etherleergang*, 23.2 (1981) 9ff., esp. 13–14.

We conclude with an example-action from the New Testament: Ananias and Sapphira, who were put to death because of their lie (Acts 5). An “exemplaristic” approach to this passage will yield a moralistic sermon. Being motivated by a desire for fame can easily lead a person into sin, to lie. And God’s punishment comes down on such sin, and a person could even die because of that. The problem with such an interpretation is that punishment does not always come down on such sin, and rarely in the form described here.

By contrast, a “redemptive-historical” approach understands the special place this event occupies in the progress of God’s work. Since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit dwells in Christ’s church. So when in the church, in the presence of the apostles, Ananias and Sapphira lie, they are tempting the Holy Spirit (v. 9). If you are looking for an example in this passage, you must find it first of all in the example of God’s action. Throughout history since that time, many church people have lied, but they were not killed. Nor was that necessary, for already in Acts 5 God had made it crystal clear that his Spirit is indeed present in the church, and that he notices sin.

The conclusion of this part of our discussion can be that God’s activity, as activity within history, is uniquely once for all, and that it simultaneously reveals God’s heart and, to that extent, is exemplaristic. The suggestion can easily take root that a sermon is relevant only when people are held forth as examples. We must resist such a suggestion. A sermon that holds forth God and his activity in an appropriate manner is directly relevant for living by faith. John Calvin commented magnificently about this when he wrote about our knowledge of God as Creator:

Rather, our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him, and, having received it, to credit it to his account. For how can the thought of God penetrate your mind without your realizing immediately that, since you are his handiwork, you have been made over and bound to his command by right of creation, that you owe your life to him?—that whatever you undertake, whatever you do, ought to be ascribed to him?²⁶

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 1.2.2.

The Example-Actions of People

As we turn now to consider human actions that can function as examples, we observe first that a human action cannot function as an example on its own. A human action can function as an example only when it occurs in the context of God’s Word or work.

We take as our starting point the story recorded in Genesis 15. Abram, who at this time was childless and old, received the promise of a son. To this God added a prophecy: he would make Abram’s posterity as innumerable as the stars in the sky. When Abram heard this word, he “believed the LORD and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). What does “believing” mean here? It means relying on God’s word and holding fast to the promise that a child would be born, even though humanly speaking that was impossible.

In Romans 4 this is used as an example of believing. But in what sense can it be an example for us? God has not promised us a son. What he has promised, however, is Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, who was handed over for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25). Anyone who believes this promise of God is truly a child of Abram (v. 11), and God counts such a person’s faith unto that person as righteousness (vv. 4, 24).

As far as our respective situations are concerned, there is no correspondence between Abram’s and ours. We live in a different time than Abram, we have a different position (we are not the ancestor of the nation of Israel from which the Messiah would come), and we have received a different promise.²⁷ Between Abram and us exists a structural correspondence. Like Abram, we must believe a promise that humanly speaking is impossible to fulfill. And to the person who accepts what he has promised God counts such faith as righteousness.

How, then, is human action (in this case, that of Abram) an example for us? Two features stand out. First, the correspondence is structural, not situational. Second, the basis undergirding the example function lies in God’s action. God’s response constitutes Abram’s faith to be an example for us.

One frequently discussed passage in which Old Testament history is used as an example is 1 Corinthians 10. This passage presents the cautionary example of Israel’s sins (vv. 6–11). Again we need to ask how this human ac-

²⁷ With this we are not denying, of course, that Abraham received the promise of justification in Christ. The point is that such is not the content of the promise found in Genesis 15.

tion is put forth as an example. It becomes clear immediately that this human action obtains its example function within the context of God's action. God had led his people Israel out of Egypt and had blessed them. What they were eating and drinking every day were spiritual blessings (vv. 1–4). But Israel served idols and rebelled against God. Therefore, despite all his blessings, God put these people to death in the wilderness and they did not obtain the fulfillment of the promise. Israel's example becomes a warning only in view of God's earlier blessing and on account of God's punishment.

Furthermore, the correspondence between the Old Testament situation and that of the church in Corinth is structural. The Corinthians were not in the wilderness, nor had they been involved in the liberation out of Egypt, nor had they eaten bread from heaven in the wilderness. But if these church members in their situation were serving other gods—and that was, in fact, the issue in verses 14–22—then they needed to know what they could expect from God: his anger (v. 22). They could have seen that already from Israel's example.

When we investigate Hebrews 11, there we see the same pattern. That the correspondence with regard to faith is structural appears simply from the fact that among the Old Testament believers faith came to expression time and again in various ways. How much greater is the difference between them and us! At the same time, with their concrete faith-obedience in their own time they were en route to the better, heavenly homeland (vv. 13–16) toward which the readers of Hebrews were also en route (10:36; 11:39–40). Here, too, we find the second feature: the human example is embedded within God's action. The words to which people respond in faith are God's words; and through his deeds, God himself provided a good testimony concerning their faith (vv. 4–6).

The phenomenon of example is present not only where the New Testament cites ancient history. The Old Testament itself occasionally presents something as a human example as well. The marriage of Adam and Eve is such an example. God himself instituted it (Gen. 2), and it is presented to us as a pattern (Gen. 2:24). Naturally, there exists an immense difference in situation. Consider merely the fact that Adam and Eve could not leave their fathers or mothers. Nevertheless, husbands and wives subsequently were called in their situations to follow the rule of Paradise and become one flesh. Consider one more New Testament example, namely, the faith of the centurion from Capernaum, which Christ identified as an example for the multitude (Luke 7:9). In such cases, when preaching these passages, the human example may certainly be the focus.

Christ's Example-Actions

On the basis of human examples we can acquire a useful starting point for discussing the example that Christ has given to us. When earlier we noticed that human examples involved a unique situation, how much more is this true of Christ's situation! Just as his person is unique, so too is his work. He is the Son of God who became man. He is without sin. We cannot perform his work. We cannot heal the sick like he did, we cannot teach as he did, and the suffering he underwent we need not bear.

Nevertheless, Scripture does present him as an example. According to Philippians 2:5, “your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” When we investigate the kind of deeds in which that attitude was manifested, they appear to be the unique deeds that he performed as the Son of God and as Saviour. So when we nonetheless speak of Christ as example, the difference between Christ and us must not be ignored; rather, it must be clearly recognized. We must imitate his attitude on our level, in our situation. We are not called to do what he did, but to do as he did.

The same pattern we find in a saying of the Lord Jesus himself. Christ provides an example of serving (Mark 10:45, and especially Matt. 20:28 [“as”!]). When Christ refers here to his own work as being called “to give his life as a ransom for many,” then it becomes clear immediately that the content of Christ's work is not the same as ours. At the same time, this work of Christ in all of its uniqueness is an example. As Christ served, so we must be his disciples. In the church, greatness is not the greatness associated with the exercise of power, but with the demonstration of service. Again in this instance the example resides not in the content of Christ's work, but in the manner in which he performed his work. The correspondence is structural; we must follow Christ's example in our situation.

The emphasis within the sermon will depend, I think, on the text that has been selected. A sermon on Mark 10:45 will emphasize Christ's unique redemptive work. But a sermon on Mark 10:41–45 will deal with the position and task of office-bearers and church members, and in that connection, the preacher will appeal to Christ in terms of his example of serving.

If we were to take a similar approach to yet another work of Christ, namely, Christ's fasting and temptation in the wilderness, then we realize that we are not called to imitate his part of his redemptive work, but that work does nonetheless possess exemplary elements. We are not mandated to fast for forty days, so we should not imitate that feature. Who would attempt, having been weakened by fasting, to endure the attacks of Satan? Here we encounter the unique work of our Savior, who, though exhausted, nonetheless must endure the struggle against Satan.

At the same time, it is a fact that in this temptation, Christ remained completely obedient to God. And that may be held before us today as an example of obedience. In our own lives, we are called to strive against the devil and against temptation, if necessary, even unto death. In this context, we may also look to the example of Christ who defeated Satan with the weapon of God's Word.

A sermon on Christ's temptation in the wilderness, then, must accent the redeeming work of our Mediator. But this sermon can also employ Christ's perseverance and his use of Scripture in order to stimulate the hearers in their situations to persevere and to know and use God's Word.

In order to identify both correspondence and divergence, Dutch theologian K. Schilder once used the image of a general and a soldier, an image we might use to conclude this section: "One cannot copy Christ without misunderstanding him. The genus of soldier contains thousands, but the genus of the highest ranking general contains but one. To *imitate* the latter will paralyze the army. The highest ranking general is related to every soldier, and provides the model for every soldier, but he himself is 'beyond modeling.'"²⁸

Illustrations

The term "example" can also be used with the meaning of "illustration." An illustration possesses no determining, validating significance, but merely shows how things can go in life.

Even in the Bible we find the illustrative use of biblical narratives. In Nehemiah 13, Nehemiah was confronted with the problem that the Jews permitted their children to marry pagans. He responded to that first by giving a command: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves" (v. 25; a citation from Deut. 7:3). Subsequently he illustrated the truth of Deuteronomy 7:4 with Solomon (v. 26). Even a wise king like Solomon was seduced by his pagan wives to participate in the worship of idols. This example does not prove that such a marriage may never occur—nor was that necessary, since that had already been proved from Deuteronomy 7:3. The illustration of Solomon's marriages was intended to show how dangerous such a marriage is.

²⁸ K. Schilder, *Christus en cultuur* (5th ed.; annotated by J. Douma; Franeker: Wever, 1978) 43; although an English translation of this work and this citation exists (*Christ and Culture* [trans. G. van Rongen and W. Helder; Winnipeg: Premier, 1977] 28), the above translation is this translator's own rendering.

We can find many such illustrations in the history described in the Bible. When Noah had drunk too much wine, he became drunk and took off his clothes (Gen. 9:21).²⁹ When you read the entire story in Genesis 9:20–27, you see that the passage offers no evaluation, let alone any condemnation, of Noah’s behavior. The passage tells us about Ham’s sin and punishment, and of the actions of Shem and Japheth, and the blessing they received. In this context Noah’s sin was mentioned only as the occasion for these other events.

A sermon on this passage may not simply identify the dangers of drinking wine. But the fact remains that Noah became drunk, and this fact can be used. Even though Noah’s conduct may not be the subject of the sermon on this passage, the preacher can still use that fact in the course of his sermon as a cautionary example.

We might refer as well to Genesis 12:10–20, where we learn of Abram’s lie about Sarai in Egypt. At no point does the passage say that Abram’s lie was mistaken. We know that it was, but only in light of the Ten Commandments. Rather, the passage emphasizes not that Abram sinned, but that despite Abram’s sin God remained faithful to his promise to give Abram children. A sermon on this passage needs to focus not on Abram’s sin, but on God’s faithfulness. Naturally, it is indeed true that even the friend of God, who in obedience had left his fatherland, was driven by fear to tell a lie. That may also be mentioned in the sermon.

Dutch Reformed Old Testament scholar H. J. Schilder provided a couple of important indicators in connection with a passage that he called an “example,” namely, Ruth 2:4. Boaz greeted the reapers. That indicates that a healthy relationship existed between the farmer and his laborers. In a sermon on this passage, the preachers may observe that the relationship between employers and employees should be like that. But this, according to H. J. Schilder, is not the intention of the passage. “To the extent that such a relationship between farmer and labourers appears to be healthy, it appears to be such only when you test that relationship by the requirements of God’s law for every one of us. Then you will be able to say that we can see that reality *here* as well.”³⁰ Schilder used the law as the validation, and Ruth 2:4 as illustration.

In the same context, Schilder made yet another important comment. “Of course Christ provided examples as he performed his work. He con-

²⁹ This example is borrowed from C. Trimp, *De preek: Een praktisch verhaal over het maken en houden van preken* (3rd ed.; Kampen: Van den Berg, 1986) 60.

³⁰ H. J. Schilder, *Richteren en Ruth. Een vacature vervuld* (Kampen: Kok, 1982) 69.

tinues to do that every day, not only in the Bible, but also in your home, at your elders' meeting, in your Bible study group. You should not suppose that you have received the Bible primarily for that purpose."³¹ So illustrations need not be confined to biblical illustrations. They may come from everyday life. A truth in the Bible can be illustrated by referring to the facts in the Bible, but also by referring to other people and events outside the Bible. As long as they arise from genuine history, the source of the illustrative material makes little difference.

The fact that Christ continually supplies us with examples appears in yet another way. Paul encourages Timothy and Titus to be examples: "But set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12; cf. Titus 2:7). With their lives Timothy and Titus could not validate what a good Christian life is. But they were mandated to show in their lives what a good Christian is. They were called to live in such a way that they would be examples worthy of imitating.

We may close this section by concluding that a fact that is mentioned in Scripture may be used as an illustration. But if Scripture merely mentions that fact, and if it is nothing more than an element in the story rather than its thread, such a fact cannot be the subject of a sermon on the passage mentioning that fact.

The way in which facts and actions are presented in Scripture determines how they should be used in the sermon.

The Example-Actions of the Holy Spirit

We saw in a previous citation from H. J. Schilder that Christ provides examples. In the context of the discussion surrounding redemptive-historical and exemplaristic preaching, Dutch theologian W. H. Velema refers explicitly to the work of the Holy Spirit. In a sermon outline on Romans 15:4 we read: "So what is involved in this text is not human spiritual accomplishments or experiences that would supposedly function normatively for us. Rather, what is involved is what the Holy Spirit did back then, and what he still does now by means of the perseverance and encouragement of the Scriptures."³²

By contrast, Trimp would argue for placing the emphasis on the progress of God's work leading up to Christ, an emphasis belonging to the

³¹ Schilder, *Richteren en Ruth*, 69.

³² W. H. Velema, *Tussen tekst en preek. Meditatieve schetsen voor de verkondiging* (Kampen: Kok, 1976) 110.

redemptive-historical method, namely, that in Scripture God’s concurrence with his people is being described. In that connection he points to both Christ and the Holy Spirit. “This concurrence is made possible daily by the Spirit of this Christ. God seeks his people in Christ and seeks Christ in his people.”³³ Later he mentions as the heart of his criticism of the pioneers of the redemptive-historical method that the work of the Holy Spirit in the history of God’s redemption was ignored.³⁴ Insight into this feature could have led to a clearer focus on the example function: “Had these writers devoted as much attention to the *process* (concurrence) as they devoted to the *progress* of history, then without a doubt more refined definitions would have been crafted to distinguish between the illegitimate ‘example’ and the scriptural ‘example’ that comes down to us through history.”³⁵

In this essay, we have sought to reflect further along this line. The question now remaining is this: from where do we obtain the proper angle on the example function of the historical events described in the Bible? It is tempting to tie this back to God’s concurrence with his people through his Spirit. Indeed, this work of the Holy Spirit does lie behind a large number of examples in the Bible. But further insight discloses that this angle does not provide a wide enough view of the entire example character of biblical history. For in the Bible we read not only about deeds of faith and conversion, but also about deeds of sin, hardening, and punishment. When the sins of Israel are cited in 1 Corinthians 10:6–11 as a cautionary example, one could indeed refer to God’s concurrence with his people. The Holy Spirit could be mentioned in this context as well, in the sense of Isaiah 63:10, where we read that the Spirit became an enemy of God’s people. But the fact remains that it is not the work of the Spirit taken all by itself, but within the context of the work of the Spirit, it is human sin that functions as a cautionary example.

This can be clarified in connection with other passages as well. H. J. Schilder wrote that the people of Bethlehem were not such noble folk. “Consider the fact that Boaz had to instruct his workers explicitly not to molest Ruth.”³⁶ Even as Schilder on the very same page had cited Boaz as a good example, we might use Boaz’s servants as examples of our sinful nature. Schilder can claim that Christ provides examples in the first sense, but

³³ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 100 (ET: 126); on pages 96ff. (ET: 124ff.) he discusses Christ and the Spirit in this connection.

³⁴ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 108 (ET: 136).

³⁵ Trimp, *Heilsgeschiedenis*, 109 (ET: 137–138).

³⁶ Schilder, *Richteren en Ruth*, 69.

not in the second.

Perhaps we could state the matter this way: the fact that biblical events can be used exemplaristically arises not from the work of the Spirit in con-course with God's people, but from the work of the Spirit in describing those events.