

Theological Family in the Bible as a Context for Preaching

“Context” is a magic word in theological discussion today. However, when using the word, preachers need to be clear about which levels of context they have in mind since “context” can be used in reference to the interpretation of the Bible, to voices from the tradition after the Bible, to contemporary theology, to preaching, and to self-understanding. Indeed, when writing an exegesis paper, one of the first things a student is typically assigned is to describe her or his social context (location) and how that might play into the student’s interaction with the text.

One context I often find fruitful is one seldom discussed in preaching: the theological family of a text in the Bible. Placing a passage in the context of its larger theological family often helps specify possible meanings of the text. Looking at a text through the lens of its theological family can help the preacher determine what the text asks listeners to believe about God and the world and what to do in response.

The major theological families of the Bible are deuteronomism, priestly theology, wisdom, apocalyptic theology, and Hellenistic Judaism. The deuteronomistic viewpoint occurs most directly in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, the Samuels, and the Kings, as well in several of the prophets. The priestly perspective shapes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the Chronicles, much of Isaiah, and some other prophets. Wisdom includes Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Apocalypticism permeates Paul, the deuteropaulines, Mark, Matthew, Luke–Acts, James, the Peters, and others. Hellenistic Judaism shapes the Johannine corpus and Hebrews.

Each family puts forward distinctive nuances in what God offers, how people become aware of those things, and how to respond appropriately. I would not simply preach on David

in the Samuels but on the deuteronomic David, that is, on the narrative of David as an expression of the deuteronomic view of God and monarchy, and on how that narrative leads the reader to a negative evaluation David in specific and of monarchy in general.

The contextual web is more complicated: the preacher is typically a member of a historic Christian theological family as well as a contemporary one. The preacher interprets a text through these lenses.

My Thinking Theologically: The Preacher as Theologian (Fortress Press, 2007) describes the historic families as Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Anabaptist, Friends, Pentecostal, and other. Of course, some movements meld elements from different families. The major contemporary theological families are evangelical, neo-orthodox, postliberal, liberal, mutual correlation, process, liberation, and racial-ethnic, confessional, radical orthodoxy, and otherness. For example, I am a process theologian who moves in a Reformed stream (the Stone-Campbell movement).

When developing the sermon, the preacher should bring these families into conversation at the point of biblical text, a Christian doctrine, a practice, or a personal or social situation. From this conversation, the preacher hopes to develop a sermon that invites the congregation to believe something theologically adequate about God and the world, and to respond in ways that are appropriate to those beliefs.

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March 19, 2015