

More Than Abstraction: Integrating Biblical and Systematic Theology in Preaching the Big Idea of Old Testament Narrative

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Introduction

This paper grows out of a concern formed in two settings at once: my weekly work as a preaching pastor wrestling with Old Testament narrative texts and my daily work as a preaching professor trying to show beginning students how to do it. From both angles I feel the same gap. Evangelical preachers hold two deep commitments, one to sermon unity (a single governing sentence) and one to theological unity (the coherence of biblical and systematic theology across the canon), yet the tools most commonly taught for building a sermon fail to bring these commitments together in any practical and repeatable way. The standard two-statement approach, which runs from an exegetical idea to a homiletical idea, looks back at the world of the text and forward to the world of today but typically fails to travel along the canon in between. An upgraded three-statement approach improves on this by adding a theological idea as bridge, but as this paper will show in Warren, Willhite, and especially Steven Mathewson (whose work on Old Testament narrative is the modern standard), that this added statement tends to collapse biblical and systematic theology into a single timeless principle, an abstraction generalized from one passage by changing the tense and removing the historical particulars. Biblical theology, where it appears at all, runs in the background as a check on the generalization rather than as the source of it.

In response, this paper proposes a six-statement integrated model for preaching Old Testament narrative: a textual summary (what happened), an exegetical idea (the author's intent within the literary unit), a biblical-theological idea (the text's placement along the redemptive-historical storyline that climaxes in Christ), a systematic-theological idea (the doctrine to which the text contributes, indexed to the passages that establish it), a rhetorical aim (what the author, and then the preacher, intends the message to accomplish), and a homiletical idea (the grounded exhortation that carries the text forward to today). Two moves are central. First, the theological idea is subdivided into a distinct biblical-theological statement and a distinct systematic-theological statement, stated explicitly and in the proper order, so that the theology of the passage is carried forward along redemptive history before it is ever generalized or systematized. Second, following Bullmore, the sermon's governing focus is treated as an argument rather than a bare idea, one that holds together both the text's truth claim (what is true = content) and its

rhetorical aim (what is required = intent). The result is a deliberate, teachable sequence. I am not aware of an existing model that integrates all of these disciplines into a single, explicit, and repeatable model for preaching Old Testament narrative, and so what follows is frontier work. It is exploratory and provisional, a first attempt rather than a finished system, and I fully expect it will develop through an iterative, experimental, process of testing and refinement, measured against two standards: whether it is *accurate* (true to the exegetical, theological, and rhetorical disciplines), and whether it is *helpful* (able to get beginning preachers off the ground and keep them tracking straight from text to sermon). I offer it as a pedagogical template, a way of making explicit for beginning preachers the interpretive and theological judgments that seasoned expositors often make intuitively, so that in time these become second-nature habits of moving from text, through theology, to a faithful and compelling word for today.

Two Great Commitments

Evangelical preachers hold two great commitments. One is that a sermon must be governed by a single sentence or have a singular focus (sermon unity within rhetorical diversity). The other commitment is to biblical theology (theological unity within canonical diversity).

Our Commitment to Sermon Unity

Bullet, Not a Buckshot

Haddon Robinson, “the father of the big idea”¹ famously wrote, “A sermon should be a bullet, not a buckshot.”² Robinson described this bullet as a big idea, comprised of a *subject* (what am I talking about?) and a *complement* (what am I saying about what I am talking about?).

Today there is near-universal agreement that the sermon needs a central, unifying sentence, even among those who do not represent or label it as Robinson did.³ As Keith Willhite puts it in his defense of the big idea, a preacher who does “analysis at the expense of synthesis” is left with “a long list of lexical, grammatical, syntactical, or biblical-theological data and the burning, unanswered question, ‘What’s the point?’”⁴ In addition, from a rhetorical standpoint, the human mind “craves unity, order, and progress,” so that “trying to have more than one point (buckshot) [is] like having no point at all.”⁵

¹ Bruce L. Shelley, “The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme,” in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 96.

² Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 35.

³ This single governing focus of the sermon is variously labeled in the homiletical literature as *the homiletical idea*, *the proposition*, *the big idea*, *the main point of the sermon*, *the preaching point*, *the preaching argument*; others are a bit more creative, like “the sticky statement.”

⁴ Keith Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot: What Makes the Big Idea Work?” in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 19.

⁵ Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot,” 21.

The Standard Two-Statement Approach

The standard textbooks on preaching tend to teach two “big idea” statements: the *exegetical idea* (the author’s meaning *then*) and the *homiletical idea* (the meaning stated for hearers *now*).⁶ These two statements are designed to facilitate the move from text to today.⁷ The exegetical idea captures what a specific biblical passage meant to its original audience in its literary and historical context; it is focused on the author’s intent. In contrast, the homiletical idea translates the exegetical idea into contemporary language, bringing out its relevance and significance for today’s audience.⁸

Our Commitment to Theological Unity

Not only are evangelicals committed to unity in our sermons, we are, in different ways, committed to unity in our theology.⁹ There are five primary branches of theology: exegetical, biblical, systematic, historical, and practical.¹⁰ Theological preaching involves all five branches

⁶ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 101–6; Wayne McDill, *The 12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 65; Dennis M. Cahill, *The Shape of Preaching: Theory and Practice in Sermon Design* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 95–100; Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 129–34; Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2007), 65–83.

⁷ For more on the move from text to today, see David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15–38; on page 16, Helm details the movement and describes a number of bad moves under the label “blind adherence problem”: impressionistic, inebriated, and inspired preaching.

⁸ For more detail on defining and differentiating the exegetical and homiletical ideas, see Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 66–72, 101–6.

⁹ For an overview of the differences among evangelicals on the issue of continuity and discontinuity, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020). For standard or revised dispensationalism, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007); see also Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2008). For progressive dispensationalism, see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993); as well as Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Current Debate over the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). For progressive covenantalism, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018). For covenant theology, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980); and Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006).

Even dispensationalists affirm forms of continuity, though the nature and extent of this continuity has evolved significantly within the tradition. See, for example, John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel according to the Apostles: The Role of Works in the Life of Faith* (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 2000), appendix 2, Logos Bible Software, where he writes, “Many dispensationalists, myself included, agree that there is some continuity between the Old and New Testament people of God in that we share a common salvation purchased by Jesus Christ and appropriated by grace through faith. But dispensationalists do not accept covenant theology’s teaching that the church is spiritual Israel.”

¹⁰ See John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 81. He calls these five “traditional. Theological programs.”

and factors into both preparation and proclamation.¹¹ Both biblical theology and systematic theology are predicated on unity—the unity of the Bible storyline or the unity of biblical truth across the canon.¹²

Biblical Theology

This paper is focused on the intersection of biblical theology and expository preaching, although it will necessarily engage with the other four branches of theology, especially systematic theology. Though there are different representations of biblical theology,¹³ I am taking as my definition the one proposed by Andrew Naselli, that biblical theology is the discipline that “studies how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ. It makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ.”¹⁴ It traces the arc of the canon’s storyline and reads each text in light of its place on that arc.

Problems with the Two-Statement Approach

Problem 1: The Inability of “Idea” to Capture Content and Intent

In his recently-released book on preaching, pastor and homiletics professor, Mike Bullmore, writes, “in our preaching we are seeking to persuade, to move people in their minds and hearts to a greater understanding and existential embrace of God’s word.”¹⁵ Therefore, he argues, “To be persuasive, a sermon needs an argument. We aren’t just offering a collection of observations. We

¹¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues in *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) that “preaching must always be theological, always based on a theological foundation.” 75-76. He further warns that to preach “isolated texts” without relating each to “the whole truth” is to risk saying, in one sermon, “something that contradicts what we have said” in another, 76. For a look at the role of historical theology in preaching, see Kyle P. Grant, “Historical Homiletics: The Integration of Church History into Sermon-Making and the Preaching Moment as an Answer to Declining Credal Cognizance” (D.Min. major project, Knox Theological Seminary, 2026).

¹² Canonical biblical theology does aim to display the unity of the biblical texts taken together, but it does so specifically through the narrative arc of Scripture. Its concern is the storyline of the Bible, understood as the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan in history, and it traces how themes develop across that historical progression; see Thomas R. Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 22; see also Thomas Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology 101 (PBT-101),” *9Marks Journal* 3, no. 9 (2006): 16–17. Systematic theology pursues a different kind of unity. Whereas biblical theology proceeds by historical construction, systematic theology gathers these themes and sets out their logical connections, organizing doctrinal truth across the whole canon. See Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 29.

¹³ Tremper Longman III, “Biblical Theology,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns, and Mark Strauss (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 224. Longman gives fifteen categories of biblical theological methods: “Classifications of the various methods for biblical theology (with some overlap between the categories) include (1) systematic, (2) diachronic, (3) central theme, (4) confessional, (5) descriptive, (6) tradition-history, (7) salvation-historical, (8) christological, (9) promise-fulfillment, (10) allegorical, (11) typological, (12) canonical, (13) literary, (14) cultural-linguistic, and (15) sociological.”

¹⁴ Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 5.

¹⁵ Mike Bullmore, *The Heart of Preaching: The Functional Centrality of the Gospel in the Life and Work of the Preacher* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2026), 94.

are ordering our understanding of the content and intent of the passage we are preaching into a coherent and unified argument. A sermon is not a bowl of pearls. It is a string of pearls linked together in an orderly way to make something both beautiful and compelling.”¹⁶ Notice the words “content and intent.” If the preacher’s focus is merely on getting an “idea” across, the rhetorical impact of that idea can easily get lost. The expositor’s work goes beyond conveying information (an idea). It aims at transformation (the consequence of that idea).¹⁷ This paper will argue that the sermon’s central focus should include both the foundational truth *claims* of the text along with the rhetorical *aims* of the author/preacher. Bullmore’s use of the word “argument” is to be preferred over Robinson’s “idea” language. And that argument should be comprised of answers to two questions: what is true (the text’s claim) and what is required (the text’s aim)?¹⁸

Problem 2: The Inability of the Two-Statement Approach to Bring These Two Commitments Together

Even if a preacher is committed to rhetorical and theological unity, and even if he adopts the language of argument over idea, the standard two-sentence approach is insufficient to bridge the gap between the text and today. The *exegetical idea* looks back at the world of the text (exegetical theology) and the *homiletical idea* looks at the world of today (practical theology), but neither looks along the canon. That is the role of biblical and systematic theology, and that is why homileticians like Wayne McDill acknowledge that “biblical interpretation is ultimately theological” and that “the bridge between the text and the sermon is the theological task.”¹⁹ And yet, when it comes to the primary, governing sentences McDill includes in his sermon preparation process, there are only two: a text idea and a sermon idea.²⁰ The “theological task” is identified as the bridge, but there is no sentence or statement helping the preacher get across.

Here is the problem: preachers will do some kind of theology as they cross the bridge, but if that theology is unstated, the behind-the-scenes assumptions cannot be articulated or evaluated. The theological reflection, therefore, may be poor or inadequate. Unfortunately those unexpressed theological assumptions or omissions tend to show up in application, especially by way of

¹⁶ Mike Bullmore, *The Heart of Preaching*, 94.

¹⁷ Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 82; he writes, “Transformation, rather than information, must be the end point of preaching.”

¹⁸ This is based to a large extent on the indicative-imperative nature of the epistles. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 159. “The indicatives (who we are) established by the grace of God generate the will and ability to follow biblical imperatives (what he requires).”

¹⁹ McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 70. This essential bridge of theological reflection is pictured in David Helm’s representation of the pathway from text to today; see David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 88. Helm is building on the earlier work of Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 110.

²⁰ See McDill, *12 Essential Skills*, 65, where he defines the two ideas as follows.

The Text Idea: The core idea of the text stated as a complete, past-tense sentence. It contains reference to certain historical elements associated with the text—writer or speaker, secondary persons or readers, the tone or purpose of the passage, circumstances of the writing, and special literary features. The Sermon Idea: The same core concept as the text idea, worded as a present-tense, universal statement, without the historical elements of the text idea.

moralism.²¹ What results is a failure to cut with the grain of the text and text writer. Hence, Robinson's quip: "More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis"²² Wesley Allen, writing outside of evangelicalism, sees the problem clearly as well: the failure of preachers to include a theological interpretation component is like taking out "the meat of the sandwich . . . and hearers are left with only two pieces of bread."²³

The Rise of the Three-Statement Approach

Its Advocates

Timothy Warren

A number of sources have responded to these concerns of the missing bridge by introducing a formal third statement, a theological idea that exists between the exegetical idea and the homiletical idea.

Timothy Warren is among the earliest and most influential advocates of a three-statement approach to sermon preparation.²⁴ In his 1991 *Bibliotheca Sacra* article, "A Paradigm for Preaching," Warren argues that authoritative and relevant preaching requires the preacher to move through "separate but related steps": exegesis followed by theology, followed by homiletics.²⁵ Against a homiletical tradition that treated the move from text to today as a kind of magic that happens when the preacher "blinks his eyes," Warren delineates a full preaching process consisting of four distinct sections connecting four separate points: an exegetical product, a theological product, a homiletical product, and finally a revelational or

²¹ Dennis E. Johnson defines moralism this way:

Moralism has been defined in various ways. Occasionally, any summons to concrete behavioral change in a sermon has been dismissed and condemned as "moralism," even though the New Testament epistles and the teaching of Jesus are full of such ethical instructions. More credible is the definition of moralism as the homiletic practice of issuing ethical demands without grounding them in the gospel or showing how they are integral to a grateful response to the redemptive work of God in Christ. The result of such moralistic preaching is that hearers come away with the impression that God's favor towards them rests to some degree on their (always imperfect) performance of obedience and love, rather than wholly on the perfect obedience and vicarious suffering of Jesus Christ. (*Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*, ed. John J. Hughes [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007], 233)

²² Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application: An Interview with Haddon Robinson," interview by Ed Rowell, *Theology of Work*, originally published in *Leadership Journal* (1997), <https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/the-heresy-of-application/>. In the interview, Robinson expands: "Preachers want to be faithful to the Scriptures, and going through seminary, they have learned exegesis. But they may not have learned how to *make the journey from the biblical text to the modern world*" (emphasis added).

²³ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Determining the Form: Structures for Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 34.

²⁴ Warren's paradigm technically has four movements, but only three of them are *propositions* or *statements*. The fourth (the revelational/transformational stage) is an outcome in the hearers rather than a written statement.

²⁵ Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148, no. 592 (October–December 1991): 469.

transformational outcome in the changed lives of the hearers.²⁶ What made Warren's proposal significant for later writers was his insistence that each section be "distinguished and correctly valued," with "no merging of sections and no eliminating of sections."²⁷ For Warren the theological stage was not optional. It is, in Montgomery's words, the "hermeneutical arch that reaches from the text to the contemporary sermon."²⁸ To ignore it "risks applying a temporal or limited principle."²⁹

Warren's paradigm produced three successive propositions. The exegetical process produces an exegetical proposition stated in the specific, time-bound language of the text; the theological process produces a theological proposition that expresses "the *timeless* theological truth that the passage teaches";³⁰ and the homiletical process produces the sermon with its own purpose, proposition, and structure aimed at a particular audience. Warren later expanded the middle term of this sequence in a 1999 *Bibliotheca Sacra* article, "The Theological Process in Sermon Preparation," where he traced the movement from the exegetical to the theological proposition through three modifying stages of stylizing, theologizing, and organizing.³¹

Keith Willhite

Warren's framework was taken up by others in the big idea tradition. Keith Willhite, drawing directly on Warren, reproduces this threefold pattern of an exegetical proposition, a theological proposition, and a homiletical proposition.³² At each stage the preacher interrogates the material with Haddon Robinson's two diagnostic questions that make up an "idea": "What am I talking about?" (the subject), and second, "What am I saying about what I am talking about?" (the complement). Willhite has the preacher press this same subject-and-complement question at each phase of the process, but with a widening frame of reference. In the exegetical phase the questions are answered strictly within the world of the text, so the resulting exegetical proposition still carries the specific language of the passage.³³ In the theological phase the same questions are asked again, but the answer is now cast in timeless language, yielding a theological proposition stated as a universal principle applicable to God's people in any age. In the homiletical phase the exegetical and theological propositions guide the preacher,³⁴ who now

²⁶ Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," 473.

²⁷ Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," 473.

²⁸ John Warwick Montgomery, "The Theologian's Craft: A Discussion of Theory Formation and Theory Testing in Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (1991): 79, quoted in Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," 478.

²⁹ Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," 474.

³⁰ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 45, quoted in Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," 477, emphasis original.

³¹ Timothy S. Warren explains the transition between disciplines:

The theological process advances the exegetical conclusions (interpretive outline and proposition) through three modifying stages toward the homiletical process. Those stages are stylizing (moving from technical, exegetical language to general, theological language), theologizing (moving from specific, time-bound statements to universal, timeless truth), and organizing (moving from textual structure to logical, psychological flow). ("The Theological Process in Sermon Preparation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156: 337–338)

³² Willhite, "A Bullet versus Buckshot," 18–19.

³³ Willhite, "A Bullet versus Buckshot," 18.

³⁴ Willhite does not, however, explain how the exegetical and theological propositions actually guide the homiletical one. He states that "the exegetical proposition and theological proposition guide the way, yet the preacher gives attention to the contemporary time and audience," and that the proposition "gains the sense

attends to the contemporary listeners, and the proposition takes on an imperative force, the sense of a “thou shalt.” The result is a message that is both “text-centered,” because it never loses allegiance to the author’s original intent, and “audience-focused,” because its language speaks directly to the preacher’s present hearers.³⁵

Willhite never names biblical or systematic theology as distinct operations.³⁶ He refers only to theology and the theological phase, which is a movement toward “timeless language” and a “timeless principle.”³⁷

Bruce Shelley

Bruce Shelley, in his chapter contribution to *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching* entitled “The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme” asks, “Is there a big idea in the Bible itself?” If so, then “shouldn’t this big idea or grand theme color every homiletical idea we preach?”³⁸ In fact, he correctly asserts, “Our most direct step toward a significant big idea from a given passage of Scripture is to search for the passage’s link with the grand theme.”³⁹ However, in a chapter that gives hope to the reader that a biblical theological bridge will be constructed, Shelley doesn’t go on to show how a preacher gets to the grand theme from a particular passage or what a third “theological statement” might look like.

Its Weaknesses

The question is this: Does a third statement or theological proposition as it is proposed by Warren, Willhite, and Mathewson actually integrate biblical and systematic theology?

The theological proposition should be subdivided into separate biblical and systematic theological statements.

Warren’s theological emphasis is commendable; there is much to appreciate about his additional theological proposition and his articulation of the role of biblical and systematic theology in moving from text to today. For Warren biblical theology identifies what the author “regarded as truth from his particular historical/theological perspective”⁴⁰ And systematic theology correlates that truth “with the Bible as a whole” and accounts for it “in light of the progress of revelation”⁴¹ The distinction he draws between the descriptive work of biblical theology and the synthetic work of systematic theology is helpful. However, for all his excellent insistence on the theological step and his differentiation of the theological disciplines, in the end Warren’s method diverges in several ways from what this paper is proposing.

of an imperative” so that it preaches with “the meaning intended in the exegetical proposition”; Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot,” 18.

³⁵ Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot,” 18.

³⁶ Willhite’s one use of the term “biblical-theological” seems incidental; he lists it among the kinds of exegetical data the preacher must synthesize, not as a stage in the process. Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot,” 19.

³⁷ Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot,” 18.

³⁸ Bruce L. Shelley, “The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme,” in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 97.

³⁹ Shelley, “The Big Idea,” 101.

⁴⁰ Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching,” 476.

⁴¹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 38, quoted in Warren, “A Paradigm for Preaching,” 477.

First, although he names and distinguishes between biblical, canonical,⁴² and systematic theology, the product of each one is not captured in a distinct statement. They function as sequential movements and tests that converge on a single theological proposition, so that systematic theology becomes a lens through which the preacher runs his biblical-theological conclusions rather than the source of its own articulated claim.⁴³ This paper, by contrast, will recommend separating what Warren has collapsed into one: a separate biblical-theological statement and a separate systematic-theological statement.

The theological proposition is not systematic theology.

Second, and more fundamentally, Warren's theological propositions for certain Old Testament texts lie outside of biblical and systematic theology altogether. His theologizing stage is expressly the move "from specific, time-bound statements to universal, timeless truth," and the resulting theological idea is a "universal theological principle" distilled from the passage. For Genesis 50:15-21 he offers the following theological proposition: "Faith in God's sovereign working motivates forgiveness." For Psalm 32:1-2 he moves from "The Lord's forgiveness of David's sins of adultery, murder, and deception blessed the repentant king" to "God blesses the repentant sinner with forgiveness."⁴⁴ The theological moment, on Warren's model, is thus a theological principle lifted out of one text rather than the text's own theological message carried forward, and it is precisely this limitation that the paper seeks to move beyond.

Someone may object saying that arriving at and stating the timeless truth is doing systematic theology. When writers describe the theological proposition in terms of a timeless truth, what kind of theology is reflected in that generalization? When Warren counsels the preacher to move "from specific, time-bound statements to universal, timeless truth,"⁴⁵ and when Willhite's theological proposition consists of a principle "that is timeless and applicable to God's people at any time,"⁴⁶ the universal nature of those statements can make it look like the work of systematic theology. Both are cast in an atemporal, propositional form.⁴⁷ However, they should not be conflated.

Systematic theology is a whole-canon, topical synthesis. It "summarize[s] in an orderly and comprehensive manner what the whole Bible has to say about any given topic," attending to "the bottom line" rather than "the storyline,"⁴⁸ and it organizes those topics "logically, so that an entire system of thought is established."⁴⁹ Its categories are supplied not by any single passage but by the interpreter's coordination of the entire canon, so that "other factors often set the

⁴² Warren, "The Theological Process," 340–341. "Though this theological discipline [canonical theology] is often considered a part of biblical theology, it may be helpful to distinguish between the historical, though still authoritative, expression of the timeless truth in a particular text and the progressive and final development of that truth in all of Scripture. Canonical theology seeks to discover the connections between earlier expressions of biblical theology and their counterparts in the progress of biblical revelation."

⁴³ Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," 477; Warren, "The Theological Process," 342.

⁴⁴ Warren, "The Theological Process," 349.

⁴⁵ Warren, "The Theological Process," 338.

⁴⁶ Willhite, "The Big Idea," 18.

⁴⁷ As Naselli observes, systematic theology is, relative to biblical theology, "deductive, ahistorical, and universal." Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 7.

⁴⁸ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 89.

⁴⁹ Lawrence, "Biblical Theology," 90.

agenda, such as a philosophical question.”⁵⁰ It is, in Carson's terms, “a culminating discipline,” standing downstream of exegesis and biblical theology rather than serving as the bridge between them.⁵¹

Can the aforementioned theological principles be categorized in this kind of systematic theological way? Perhaps. But in many cases, the kind of theological principle discussed and modeled in these works does not represent whole-Bible synthesis. Rather, they are generalizations of one specific text, and at best, within its immediate literary context. In that sense, they do not represent the work of systematic theology?

For example, a better and more “systematic” kind of proposition for Psalm 32:1-2 might be

Forgiveness is God's gracious judicial act whereby he remits the guilt and penalty of sin, no longer counting it against those who are united to Christ by faith. (Ps. 32:1–2; Isa. 43:25; Rom. 4:5–8; 5:1; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:19–21; Col. 2:13–14; Heb. 8:12; 10:17)

To get a truly systematic theological proposition the expositor must ask, “What doctrine does this text contribute to?” not just “What doctrinal truth does this text teach?” For a proposition to be systematic, it must be doctrinal rather than narrational, canonical rather than text-specific, precise in its theological categories (grace, judicial act, imputation, atonement, reconciliation), and grounded in the whole of Scripture rather than in a single passage.

The theological proposition is not biblical theology.

The focus of this paper, however, is on biblical theology; and most of the proposed theological propositions coming out of the three-statement camp fail to capture the text's placement along the canonical storyline.⁵² It becomes clear that adding a sentence and calling it the “theological idea” is not the same thing as integrating a specific theological discipline, like biblical theology. The added label is just that—a label for an abstraction that the two-idea model already produced.⁵³ The nature of Scripture itself poses a problem for the abstraction model. The Bible comes to us as “coherent, progressive, historical and theological revelation,”⁵⁴ not as a collection of timeless truths. The three-statement approach often works against this nature, taking progressive, historical revelation and converting it into the form of a timeless truth.

⁵⁰ Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 7.

⁵¹ Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 8.

⁵² There are exceptions, of course. Warren's examples from Psalm 2 and Numbers 21 move closest to this paper's goal of incorporating biblical theology into the homiletical idea. For Psalm 2, his theological proposition is: “Exchanging rebellion for reverence for Jesus Christ releases God's blessing.” His homiletical idea for this example is: “To unbelievers: (To reverence God's Son Jesus) turn from your rebellion. Or to believers: (To enjoy God's continued blessing) express your submission to Christ Jesus.” And for Numbers 21:4–9, his theological proposition is: “Faith in God's provision for sin in Christ results in salvation.” His homiletical idea for this example is: “Trust Jesus as your Savior from sin.” Warren, “The Theological Process,” 355.

⁵³ To its credit the three-statement approach at least tends to have a greater “theological” orientation, if by “theology” we mean a focus on God instead of man. The two-sentence approach with Old Testament narrative is much more susceptible to moralism.

⁵⁴ Peter Adam, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 107.

A Critique of Steven Mathewson's Framework for Old Testament Narrative

Since the focus of this paper is on Old Testament narrative, the aforementioned critiques of the three-statement approach to the theological proposition will be applied to a work which specializes in that genre—Steven Mathewson's *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*.

Mathewson's work, now in its second edition, is rightly considered the modern-day gold standard for preaching and teaching from Old Testament narratives.⁵⁵ There is likely no other work available today exclusively devoted to this type of literature that moves the reader over the bridge between the ancient Hebrew text and the people of today in as much detail as Mathewson does. His 10-step process walks the reader all the way from text selection to pulpit delivery. And, for the purposes of this paper, Mathewson's journey involves a robust theological bridge to extract the God-focused meaning of the text.

The Quest for the Big Idea

Mathewson, along with Warren and Willhite, is an advocate of the three-statement approach to the big idea. He argues that “we are on a quest for the text's big idea—that is, a one-sentence summary of the theological message it communicates.”⁵⁶ This is in contrast to “comb[ing] Old Testament stories for lists of moral principles” to preach.⁵⁷ The preacher is “on a quest to find the overarching idea that subsumes all the others. This quest, when done properly, is clarifying rather than reductionistic.”⁵⁸

The Exegetical and Homiletical Ideas

Mathewson defines the exegetical idea as “a biblical concept [stated] in such a way that it accurately reflects what the author intends.”⁵⁹ It “is a one-sentence statement of the author's

⁵⁵ For other key homiletical works focusing on Old Testament historical narrative and literature, see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Benjamin H. Walton, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2016); Joe Linares, *Proclaiming God's Stories: How to Preach Old Testament Historical Narrative* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2009); Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Flesh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2006); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999); and Christopher J. H. Wright, *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016).

⁵⁶ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 36.

⁵⁷ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 36.

⁵⁸ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 37. For an interesting interchange between Mathewson and Abraham Kuruvilla on this very topic, see Abraham Kuruvilla, “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 4 (December 2018): 825–46. See also the response by Steven D. Mathewson, “Let the Big Idea Live! A Response to Abraham Kuruvilla,” *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 19, no. 1 (March 2019): 33–41.

⁵⁹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 93.

intended meaning that reflects the time and culture of the original audience. It uses the language of the text, including the names of characters in the story.” The “homiletical idea is stating a biblical concept in such a way that it accurately reflects the Bible and meaningfully relates to the congregation.”⁶⁰ It is “more personal, [and] contemporary.”⁶¹

The Theological Idea

These two ideas, he says, are borrowed from Robinson’s *Biblical Preaching*. But then he goes on to say that “some of Robinson’s followers have added a third expression by subdividing the exegetical idea stage into *exegetical* idea and *theological* idea. . . . While I prefer to keep things as simple as possible, I see the value of this extra stage when working in Old Testament narrative literature.”⁶² Mathewson defines the theological idea as “the big idea in timeless language that applies to God’s people living in any stage of salvation history.”⁶³ Mathewson, like Robinson, argues that an idea is made up of a subject and complement. He also acknowledges that “determining the big idea of Old Testament narrative poses a steeper challenge than other literary genres. Stories work through indirection, conveying their ideas in a more subtle way than other kinds of biblical literature.”⁶⁴

Interestingly, in determining the author’s intended meaning (the exegetical idea), Mathewson follows Robinson’s lead and turns for help⁶⁵ to systematic theology first, particularly theology proper and anthropology. He looks to “a passage’s vision of God” and its “depravity factor,” or “what in humanity rebels against the text’s vision of God? What sin keeps God’s people from responding properly to a particular aspect of his character.”⁶⁶ The “depravity factor” is akin to Bryan Chapell’s Fallen Condition Focus (FCF).⁶⁷ Mathewson, then, uses systematic theological categories and reasoning to arrive at (confirm?) his exegetical idea. His movement can be represented thus: Exegetical → ST → Exegetical Idea.

Examples of Moving from Exegetical to Theological

Mathewson gives four examples of “how to move from the exegetical idea to the theological idea”: 2 Samuel 11-12, Genesis 13, Judges 17-18, and 1 Samuel 17. A look at the first two will be sufficient to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of Mathewson’s approach.

⁶⁰ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 93.

⁶¹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 94.

⁶² Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 93 (emphasis original).

⁶³ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 94.

⁶⁴ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 95.

⁶⁵ Mathewson indicates why a preacher might need help: “Determining the big idea resembles splitting wood: sometimes you get stuck in a knot. The way to get out of the knot is to identify the story’s vision of God and the depravity factor that works against this vision. These clues will get you back on target.” Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 96.

⁶⁶ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 95-96.

⁶⁷ Bryan Chapell defines the concept this way:

The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary persons share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him. (Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018], 30, emphasis original)

In 2 Samuel 11-12 King David commits adultery with Bathsheba, arranges the death of her husband Uriah to hide the pregnancy, and is subsequently confronted and judged by the prophet Nathan. For this narrative Mathewson borrows an exegetical idea from Paul Borden: “David learned to accept what the grace of God had given him and what the grace of God had not.”⁶⁸

Then he proposes the following theological idea: “Believers must learn to accept what the grace of God has given them and what the grace of God has not.”⁶⁹ In this case the theological idea became the theological idea by a process of abstraction (moving from particular to more timeless and universal) and a change in verb tense. “David” became “believers,” and the past tense “learned” became “must learn.” Mathewson even acknowledges that “the theological expression of the big idea *assumes* that what is true for David in this case is true for believers in any age.”⁷⁰

But on what basis can that assumption be made? Is that not a biblical-theological conclusion? He acknowledges that the reason he does not use “people” instead of “believers” is this: “God’s dealing with David is based on the covenant relationship between them, so the timeless element is ‘believers.’”⁷¹ But that is a biblical-theological conclusion. So even though biblical theology is running in the background as an assumption, it is not brought to the surface and named here.⁷² Instead the explanation for the movement from exegetical to theological is stated as such: “Expositors . . . must search for a *timeless* element that is neither too specific nor too broad.”⁷³ And then later: “The theological idea moves away from an event-specific description to a *timeless* description.”⁷⁴ What distinguishes the theological idea from the exegetical idea is the removal of historical particulars, not the addition of canonical location. The canon is where the preacher checks the result, not where he gets it.

One more example should suffice. Mathewson gives the following *exegetical* idea for Genesis 13: “Abram preserved God’s blessing when he faced conflict by taking the initiative to resolve it.”⁷⁵ His *theological* idea is this: “God’s people preserve God’s blessing when they face conflict by taking the initiative to resolve it.”⁷⁶ Once again, the process is one of abstraction and tense change: moving from “Abram” to “God’s people” and from “preserved” (past) to “preserve” (present).

Mathewson and Biblical Theology

In the next chapter when Mathewson proceeds to describe the movement from concept to sermon, he advises that preachers take the exegetical and/or theological idea and subject it to four questions, the first of which is a biblical-theological question: “How does this theological message connect to the Bible’s storyline?”⁷⁷ He rightly contends that “every Old Testament narrative we preach belongs to a larger storyline (metanarrative) that finds its center in Jesus the

⁶⁸ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98.

⁶⁹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98.

⁷⁰ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98, emphasis mine.

⁷¹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98.

⁷² As mentioned earlier in the paper, theology that is assumed and unstated cannot be brought out into the light and evaluated as to whether or not it is a legitimate assumption or correct theological conclusion.

⁷³ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98, emphasis mine.

⁷⁴ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 99, emphasis mine.

⁷⁵ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 100.

⁷⁶ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 100.

⁷⁷ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 108.

Messiah.”⁷⁸ For Mathewson the storyline of the Bible can be summarized in terms of the goal of redemption: “The Bible is the story of God reestablishing the gift of his presence.”⁷⁹

He then discusses how to make the connection between one’s exegetical/theological idea⁸⁰ and the Bible storyline. Here are two connections for every sermon from an OT narrative: “First, preachers need to remind listeners that they can only respond to a narrative’s prophetic message or ethical thrust in the grace provided by Jesus Christ and the gospel. Second, listeners need to understand any lines of continuity or discontinuity between the theological message of an Old Testament narrative and the new covenant.”⁸¹ Beyond these two critical connectors, Mathewson gives two more connections that may or may not be part of a sermon. “Preachers can note any major biblical-theological themes in their narrative and reveal how they culminate in the person of Christ.”⁸² In addition, “preachers can note any ways that a text prefigures or anticipates Christ.”⁸³

All of these are good recommendations for ways to integrate biblical theology. The problem is the fact that though Mathewson commends and utilizes biblical theology in arriving at his theological idea, for him biblical theology effectively serves the final product, which is the theological message, a statement of abstraction. In the first instance, biblical theology informs how we respond to the theological message, and in the second instance, biblical theology determines what of the theological message carries forward from old covenant to new covenant (continuity) and what does not (discontinuity). In both cases, biblical theology *follows* the formulation of the theological idea but is not explicit in the idea.⁸⁴

What primarily distinguishes the theological idea from the exegetical idea (arrived at by applying a systematic theological framework—vision of God and depravity factor) is a change of tense and the removal of historical particulars (judged appropriate by the application of biblical theology), not its placement along and within the canon.

Mathewson makes this clear when he discusses how he arrived at the preaching idea for Genesis 13. He explains, “When we run the exegetical idea of Genesis 13 . . . through the lens of Jesus’ teaching and the entire New Testament, it is apparent that what was true for Abraham is true for the people of God today as well. The theological idea . . . reflects this [abstraction].”⁸⁵ The New Testament is consulted, and what it yields is a confirmation that the generalization holds. The theological idea then records the generalization; the placement that legitimized it is left behind in terms of how the statement is worded. He finishes with his preaching idea, “stating it [the theological idea] in a condensed, memorable way”: “God’s people guard God’s blessing by operating on a ‘no conflict’ basis.”⁸⁶ In what way does the biblical theological work show up in this statement? A text about the God who bound himself by covenant to Abram has become a

⁷⁸ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 108.

⁷⁹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 109.

⁸⁰ It is actually not clear which he is referring to in this section—this paper assumes both.

⁸¹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 110.

⁸² Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 110.

⁸³ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 110.

⁸⁴ It could be argued that biblical theology is reflected in the theological idea in the sense that Mathewson moved from “Abraham” to “God’s people.”

⁸⁵ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 123.

⁸⁶ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 123.

policy of conflict avoidance, hard to distinguish from prudent advice. In what way is this distinctively Christian?⁸⁷

Critique of Mathewson's Model

The difficulty with Mathewson's model, then, is not in any single step but in what the model lacks. His theological idea is not subdivided into biblical and systematic theology; it is one statement, produced by generalizing a single pericope into a timeless principle. There is no distinct biblical-theological statement at which the passage's theme is traced through redemptive history to its fulfillment in Christ, and no distinct systematic statement coordinating it with the whole of biblical teaching. To the extent that the canon enters at all, it enters late and as a control, a way of testing whether the generalized principle holds across salvation history, rather than as the source from which the theology of the text is drawn. This paper argues instead for a prior and explicit statement of biblical theology in the process, so that the theology of the passage is carried forward along redemptive history before it is generalized or systematized, rather than collapsed at the outset into a single timeless principle.⁸⁸

Correction: A Six-Statement Integrated Exegetical-Theological-Rhetorical Model

Both the two-statement model and the three-statement model are trying to accomplish too much too quickly⁸⁹ and in some cases in the wrong order. Most preachers would benefit from slowing down to make sure they can trace (and re-trace) the line from text to today. Though some preachers may go through the process that follows intuitively in their head, it is helpful (even more so for beginning preachers) to write it down step by step, especially when working with Old Testament narrative.

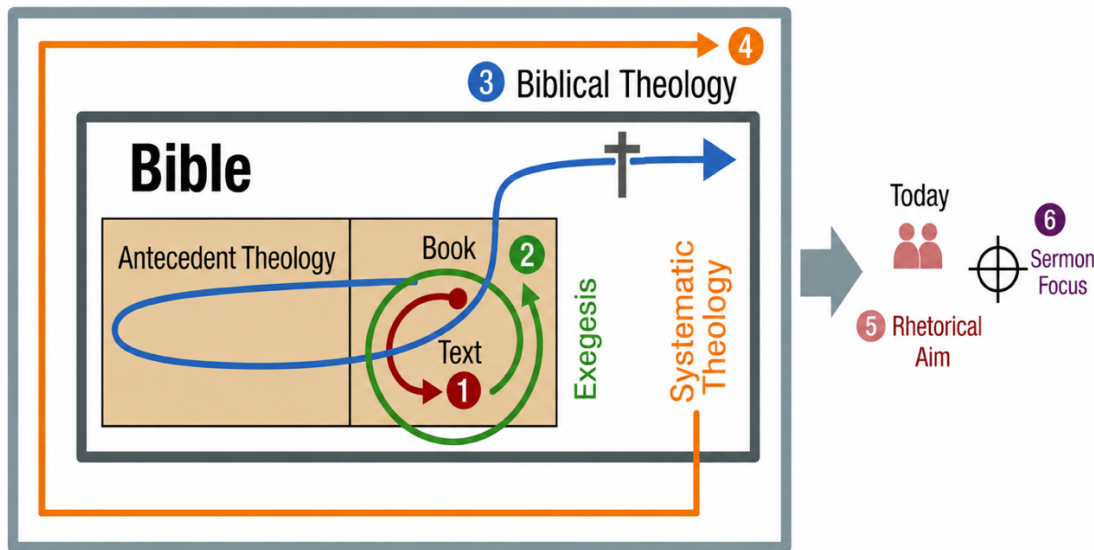
⁸⁷ Jay E. Adams explains the necessity of Christ-centered preaching:

If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member of a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when truly Christian, is distinctive. And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus Christ must be at the heart of every sermon you preach. That is just as true of edificational preaching as it is of evangelistic preaching. (*Preaching with Purpose: The Mechanics of Apostolic Preaching* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1982], 147)

⁸⁸ This ordering follows the sequence of the theological disciplines as D. A. Carson describes it. The line of final control runs "from exegesis right through biblical and historical theology to systematic theology," with Scripture as the final authority throughout. D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 92.

⁸⁹ The movement is too quick in the sense that too much is being packed into each statement and there are unstated and unevaluated assumptions at work.

The Homiletical Idea: An Exegetical-Theological-Rhetorical Model



WHAT IS TRUE AND WHAT IS REQUIRED

Here is another look at 2 Samuel 11-12 following this paper's proposed six-statement, integrated framework.

Statement ①: The textual summary (TS)

The textual summary is a simple, historical, observational, paraphrastic statement in answer to the question, "What happened?"

After David attempted to conceal his adultery and murder, the Lord exposed his sin through Nathan, leading David to repentance, forgiving his guilt, and preserving his covenant purposes while still disciplining him according to his righteous justice.

Statement ②: The exegetical idea (EI)

Having established what happened, the expositor must move on to why the author included this story, and here, in light of the larger literary unit?

The Lord does not overlook the sin of his anointed king but faithfully upholds both his covenant mercy and his covenant justice by exposing sin, forgiving the repentant, and judging covenant unfaithfulness.

One of the most helpful tools for determining the exegetical idea of a story is to do a plot analysis and pay careful attention to the intersection of the crisis/climax and resolution.⁹⁰

At the level of book context, the statement intersects with several central threads running through 1-2 Samuel related to Israel's understanding of leadership, divine sovereignty and authority, and

⁹⁰ "When you find the crisis and resolution of a drama, you usually find the main point, too." Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, Revised and Expanded (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 70.

messianic hope. Compare the exegetical idea here with Borden's earlier rendition: "David learned to accept what the grace of God had given him and what the grace of God had not."⁹¹

Statement ③: The biblical-theological idea (BTI)

The expositor now looks back and places his text in its context within the arc of God's progressive self-revelation throughout the Bible storyline. In other words, how does this story relate to "how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ"?⁹² The place to begin is with any antecedent theology⁹³ and then move forward along the unfolding revelation.

The antecedent theology of 2 Samuel 11-12 might be stated along these lines: 2 Samuel 11-12 centers on the catastrophic breakdown of human kingship, where David, much like Adam, fails in his God-given dominion, succumbs to visual temptation and desire, and seizes forbidden fruit; the result being his sphere of rule experienced death, curse, and exile.

David's failure follows the tragic pattern in the early chapters of Genesis, demonstrating that even God's covenant king could not overcome the temptation and effects of sin and bring in the righteous and lasting kingdom God promised; in doing so David exposes the failure of human kingship and intensifies Israel's hope for a greater, perfectly obedient Son of David who will reverse the curse and establish an everlasting kingdom.

Not All BT Connections are Created Equal: A Graded Scale for Assessing the Biblical-Theological Idea

Not every canonical connection is equally solid. When you trace a text along the redemptive-historical arc toward Christ, the preachers needs to grade the connection by how the canon itself warrants it:

- **Grade A (Explicit canonical warrant):** later Scripture, especially the New Testament, directly cites, quotes, or applies this text or its theme to Christ or the new covenant. The connection is made by Scripture itself, so it is the firmest ground.
- **Grade B (Trajectory or typological warrant):** the connection follows a legitimate, textually grounded trajectory even where this specific text is not cited in the New Testament. It rests on antecedent theology, established covenant structures, or a recognized type that the canon develops toward Christ (for example, the Davidic king, the sacrificial system, the exodus pattern).

⁹¹ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98.

⁹² Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, 5.

⁹³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981). Kaiser, an able advocate for the principlizing method, insists that the theological principle be reached inductively from the text: "In no way may a theological grid be arbitrarily dropped over the text as a substitute for a diligent search for a unifying theological principle through the process of induction," and to impose such a grid "must be condemned as the mark of a foolish and lazy exegete"; 134. He rejects the proof-text method in the same breath, requiring that theological exegesis be "carefully controlled diachronically," with constant awareness of "the various time periods in the sequence of the progress of revelation"; 134, 136. This includes and begins with the text's antecedent theology: terms that have acquired technical status in the history of salvation ("seed," "servant," "rest," "inheritance"), direct or indirect allusion to previous events in the progress of revelation, appropriated citations, and references to the covenants with their accumulating promises; 137. In other words, what Kaiser asks for is "nothing less than a full involvement of Biblical theology as a part of our exegesis"; 137.

- **Grade C (Thematic or analogical warrant):** a broader motif or conceptual parallel that is consistent with the storyline but is not anchored in a citation or an established type. This is the weakest link and should illustrate a connection rather than carry it.

As a governing rule, preachers should anchor the biblical-theological idea in Grade A connections where they exist; where the New Testament is silent, preachers may build on Grade B connections grounded in antecedent theology and legitimate typology; preachers should treat Grade C connections as suggestive or illustrative but not definitive. Grading biblical-theological connections in this way guards against two opposite errors: moralism that makes no Christ connection at all, and an arbitrary Christocentrism that imposes a connection the text and canon do not warrant.

Statement ④: The systematic-theological idea (STI)

To get a truly systematic theological proposition the expositor must ask, “What doctrine does this text contribute to?” not just “What doctrinal truth does this text teach?”

God's dealings with his covenant people are governed by his immutable holiness, justice, grace, and faithfulness, whereby he judges sin, grants forgiveness to the repentant, and administers fatherly discipline without nullifying his covenant promises (Exod. 34:6–7; 2 Sam. 12:1–14; Ps. 32:1–5; Ps. 51:1–17; Prov. 3:11–12; Jer. 31:31–34; Rom. 3:21–26; Heb. 12:5–11; 1 John 1:9). Again, compare this statement with Borden’s version of the theological idea referenced above: “Believers must learn to accept what the grace of God has given them and what the grace of God has not.”⁹⁴

Statement ⑤: The rhetorical aim (RA)

At this point the expositor needs to consider the rhetorical aim or goal of the biblical a/Authors and his purpose for his audience.

The author wants his readers to fear the LORD's holy judgment against sin, repent of covenant unfaithfulness, trust in the LORD's steadfast covenant faithfulness, and place their ultimate confidence in Yahweh rather than in the faithfulness of any human king.

Then, the focus needs to shift to the preacher’s audience and his rhetorical objectives for them.

By the end of this message, I want my audience to forsake hidden sin through genuine repentance, rest confidently in God's forgiving and disciplining grace, and place their ultimate confidence in Christ rather than in themselves or any human leader.

Statement ⑥: The homiletical idea (HI)

What does God now call believers to believe and do in light of the text understood in light of Christ and the whole canon? It should include both “what is true” and “what is required.”

Your hidden sin is never beyond God's sight or God's grace; bring it into the light and trust the only King who can truly forgive and restore you.

⁹⁴ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 98.

Statement	Summary
① Textual summary (TS)	Historical narrative ("What happened?")
② Exegetical idea (EI)	Authorial intent ("Why did the author include/say this, here, to his audience?")
③ Biblical-theological idea (BTI)	Redemptive-historical ("How does this relate to the Story?")
④ Systematic-theological idea (STI)	Doctrinal proposition ("What doctrine does this text contribute to?")
⑤ Rhetorical Aim (RA)	Purpose statement ("The author/preacher wants his readers/audience to...")
⑥ Homiletical Idea (HI)	EI/BTI/STI-grounded exhortation ("Because... therefore...")

The process, then, that this paper is proposing goes beyond merely extracting a timeless principle from the text. It begins with a *textual summary* (TS) designed to answer the question "What happened?" The point of the summary is to keep the preacher grounded in the historical realities of the text before taking off into the realm of the abstract.

From there, the preacher identifies the *exegetical idea* (EI) by asking why the biblical writer included this account within its immediate literary context and what message he intended to communicate to his original audience. This idea moves from what happened to why it matters.

The text and its idea are then situated or placed within the Bible's unfolding story of redemption and described in terms of how it relates to or advances God's saving purposes that culminate in Christ.⁹⁵ This is the *biblical theological idea* (BTI). The expositor then wrestles with how the text coheres with the rest of the Bible by writing out its enduring doctrinal truth. The *systematic theological idea* (STI) is the fruit of this step.

Next, the preacher gives careful thought to the rhetorical dimension and articulate the biblical writer's *rhetorical aim* (RA) as well as his own. The concern here is to articulate what the author intended to accomplish with reference to the recipients and how he desired his audience to respond to the message of the text.⁹⁶ Finally, the homiletical idea (HI) carries the message of the text (both at the exegetical and theological levels) and its rhetorical purpose forward to today. In expresses the how the exegetical idea understood⁹⁷ in light of the canonical context connects

⁹⁵ When it comes to biblical theological frameworks there are multiple ways to represent the storyline of the Bible. This model is not dependent on seeing the Bible as a story of redemption. The point is that the preacher is plugging the text into the larger, overarching metanarrative of the Bible, whether redemption, or kingdom, or God's glory, or some other biblical-theological scheme/methodology.

⁹⁶ Depending on one's view of *sensus plenior*, it may be wise to engage in rhetorical analysis both after the exegetical idea is established (author with a lowercase "a") and after the theological ideas are established (author with a capital "A").

⁹⁷ This is an important distinction—there is a process of understanding and there is a process of communicating that understanding. The preacher does not necessarily need to communicate all that is understood. For example, it's important for the preacher to examine his text in light of biblical theology and that perspective will/should shape the formulation of his homiletical idea, but that doesn't necessarily mean

with today's listener. Specifically, it targets how that listener should respond to the truth. This process (albeit linear and oversimplified) allows exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, and the biblical writer's rhetorical purpose to work together so that the homiletical idea is textual grounded but theologically and rhetorically processed.

Objections

One legitimate objection to this model is its apparent complexity and time-consuming nature. Busy pastors already face the weekly demands of sermon preparation, shepherding, administration, and counseling. Is it realistic to expect them to work through each of these stages just to arrive at the homiletical idea?

It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of the model is to make explicit the interpretive work and theological judgments that faithful expositors are already making, whether consciously or intuitively. It simply orders the right questions in the best way, making sure that each theological discipline is included and contributing to the sermon's big idea in appropriate ways. What begins as a deliberate, conscious analytical process will gradually become an internalized habit of thinking from sermon to sermon.

With this in mind, the framework may be most helpful as a pedagogical tool for beginning preachers or those who need to build the discipline reflected here. Experienced preachers may not move mechanically from one step to the next, because years of study and theological reflection have shaped their interpretive instincts. But for those without these instincts, the model is designed to train preachers to think historically, theologically, and rhetorically until these habits become second nature. The ultimate goal is to form up preachers who move thoughtfully from exegesis to theological reflection to application without sacrificing the integrity of any stage along the way.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that neither the two-statement nor the three-statement approach to the sermon's big idea adequately bridges the distance from an Old Testament narrative to the people of God today, because both move too quickly and, in some cases, in the wrong order, packing too much into too few statements and leaving the decisive theological work either unstated or reduced to a timeless abstraction. In place of a single theological idea generalized from one passage, this paper has proposed a six-statement integrated exegetical-theological-rhetorical model: textual summary, exegetical idea, biblical-theological idea, systematic-theological idea, rhetorical aim, and homiletical idea. Its two chief contributions are to give biblical theology and systematic theology each its own explicit statement, in an order that lets the text's theology be traced along the canonical storyline to its fulfillment in Christ before it is expressed in timeless doctrine terms, and to frame the sermon's governing focus as an argument that unites what is true with what is required rather than as a bare idea.

that that biblical theological material should take up 30 percent of the message. However, if the preacher is not planning to accent that in his sermon, he may not give sufficient attention to it in his study. This is especially important for those who are not as convinced that biblical theology should be an accent in the sermon itself.

I offer this model as a preacher and teacher of preaching. As a preacher I know the pressure to arrive quickly at something to say, and as a professor I watch beginning preachers jump over critical theological steps and scratch their heads over how to actually integrate biblical and systematic theology into their sermons. The framework is admittedly linear and may be, from the perspective of an experienced preacher, overly formal and restrictive. But that is precisely its pedagogical value. It orders the right questions in the right sequence so that no theological discipline is skipped and no assumption goes unexamined, and it keeps at this until the sequence is internalized and the preacher can trace, and re-trace, the line from text to today without shortcutting any stage (see Appendix B). My hope is not that preachers will carry six sentences into the pulpit, but that, having learned to write them, they will preach Old Testament narrative in a way that is textually anchored, theologically rich, and rhetorically aimed at the transformation of God's people in Christ.

Appendix A: A Multi-faceted, Integrated Statement

One additional step that might be helpful in synthesis is to pull all these pieces together into one integrated statement that becomes the basis for the homiletical idea.

The Sentence Frame

The sentence this paper proposes has four distinct, but interrelated parts. This integrated approach ensures the text is being viewed from multiple dimensions in a particular order. It also seeks to remedy the standard approach to the “theological idea” that reduces the text to a mere abstraction. This model requires factoring in the text’s placement within the canon at the right point.

The Four Components

The first component is the exegetical one and is labeled “Anchor.” The second one captures the work of systematic theology is labeled “Doctrine.” The third component incorporates the work of biblical theology and is labeled “Story.” And the final component is the rhetorical aspect labeled “Aim.”

Anchor	Textual Summary (TS) and Exegetical Idea (EI)	Historical
Doctrine ⁹⁸	Systematic Theological Idea (STI)	Timeless
Story	Biblical Theological Idea (BTI)	Historical
Aim	Rhetorical Aim (RA)	Contemporary

The Formula Applied to Various Narrative Text Types

Type	Frame	Use	Example
Continuity	The God who [ANCHOR], still [DOCTRINE], [STORY], so that [AIM].	Texts that reveal actions that God still performs (provision, rescue, keeping covenant)	Exodus 14: The God who brought Israel through the sea still rescues people who cannot rescue themselves, a deliverance that reaches its climax at the cross and empty tomb, so that they trust him

⁹⁸ The order here intentionally reverses the study sequence. In deriving the statements, the biblical-theological idea (Story) precedes the systematic-theological idea (Doctrine), since the text must be traced along redemptive history before it is distilled into doctrine. When crafting the homiletical idea, however, the concern shifts from understanding to communication, and the order shifts with it. Doctrine leads because it is already timeless and universal and therefore speaks most directly to a modern audience, making it the natural headline. Story then follows so that it can perform its distinct role of grounding that timeless truth in Christ and supplying the motivation to respond, which is what keeps the statement from collapsing into a mere moral lesson or a gospel-less maxim.

			when they face their own impassable places.
Identity	The God who [ANCHOR] is still the God who [DOCTRINE]; [STORY]; so that [AIM].	Texts that reveal attributes of God (faithful, just, merciful)	Daniel 6: The God who shut the lions' mouths for Daniel is still the God who is faithful to those who serve him, a faithfulness demonstrated in Christ whom the grave could not hold, so that we trust him even when obedience is costly.
Warning	The God who [ANCHOR] still [DOCTRINE], [STORY], so that [AIM]	Texts that consist of failure and judgment.	2 Samuel 6: The God who struck down Uzzah still will not be handled on human terms, a holiness in judgment the cross both upholds and absorbs, so that his people draw near with reverence and not presumption.
Example	In [the human act], we see [the truth it embodies]; the God who [ANCHOR] still [DOCTRINE], [STORY], so that [AIM].	Texts that foreground the human character (Ruth, Joseph, Esther, Daniel)	Genesis 50: In Joseph's refusal to repay his brothers' evil, we see a trust that sees God's hand behind the human jealousy; the God who used their betrayal to save many still turns evil toward life, as he did supremely at the cross where the worst evil bought redemption, so that we might forgive and entrust the wrongs of others to him.
Promise	The God who [ANCHOR] still [DOCTRINE], and has done so decisively in Christ [STORY], so that [AIM].	Texts that are promissory in character.	2 Samuel 7: The God who swore David an everlasting throne still keeps every oath he makes, and has kept this one in the risen son of David who reigns forever, so that we might stake our hope on his word.

Examples from Ruth

Ruth 1:1-22	[ANCHOR] The God who brought Naomi home empty, lacking husband and sons yet clung to by a Moabite daughter-in-law, [DOCTRINE] still works unseen in the bitter losses of his people, [STORY] having displayed his providence in the bitter emptying of his Son in order to fill the empty, [AIM] so that we may cling to him even when he seems to have dealt bitterly with us.
Ruth 2:1-23	[ANCHOR] The God who guided Ruth "by chance" to the one field where she would experience the law's provision for gleanings and the kindness of a relative named Boaz

	[DOCTRINE] still provides for the vulnerable through the ordinary obedience and generosity of his people, [STORY] a refuge that finds its ultimate fulfillment in God's <i>hesed</i> through Christ, [AIM] so that we can take shelter under his wings and become a shelter for others.
Ruth 3:1-18	[ANCHOR] The God who, through Ruth's bold request at the threshing floor, answered Boaz's prayer for Ruth to find shelter in him, [DOCTRINE] still grants a shelter his people seek and provides it through a redeemer, [STORY] a pattern that reaches its end in Christ who is himself the refuge he offers, [AIM] so that we may boldly seek shelter in the Redeemer.
Ruth 4:1-12	[ANCHOR] The God who worked at the city gate, where Boaz took up the cost of redemption after the nearer kinsman declined, [DOCTRINE] still secures a future for the destitute through a redeemer willing to pay what others will not, [STORY] a costly redemption that finds its ultimate expression in Christ who redeemed us at the price of his own blood, [AIM] so that we can entrust our restoration and inheritance to the Redeemer and imitate his self-giving kindness and generosity.
Ruth 4:13-22	[ANCHOR] The God who gave conception to Ruth, filled Naomi's empty arms with Obed, and extended the line out to king David, [DOCTRINE] still turns emptiness to fullness and accomplishes his grand purposes through ordinary, everyday acts of <i>hesed</i> , [STORY] purposes that move beyond David to his son, Jesus Christ, in whom the outsider is welcomed into the lineage of God's family, [AIM] so that we learn to trust him to weave our story of ordinary, everyday faithfulness into his larger purposes and to praise him as the God who fills the empty.

The Homiletical Idea

The four-part sentence is too unwieldy to serve as the sermon's big idea. It is designed primarily for gaining clarity in thinking about the exegetical, theological, and rhetorical relationships. But it can be an extremely helpful tool when crafting the homiletical idea. It essentially serves as a controlling statement that is critical for making sure the sermon stays tethered to text (Anchor) as understood in relationship to the entire canon (Doctrine and Story) and targeted toward application and response (Aim). The homiletical idea then is crafted with this integrated sentence in view, but with a desire to say it in a more concise, catchy, and compelling way.

Here are some examples of homiletical ideas from the book of Ruth that are tethered to the integrated sentences above but communicated as a message to people living today. There is a fuller version and a more condensed version for comparison.

Text	Homiletical Idea	Homiletical Idea (Condensed/Tag)
Ruth 1:1-22	When life empties you out and God himself seems to be the one who did it, hold on: the God who appears to be at work against us is at work for us to fill us through his self-emptying Son.	Cling to God in your emptiness and bitterness, because he is already at work in ways you can't see.
Ruth 2:1-23	In his providence God provides for those in need through the ordinary, deliberate	God's kindness in Christ came <i>to</i> us so that it could flow <i>through</i> us.

	kindness of his people, a kindness poured out in Christ and extended through us.	
Ruth 3:1-18	The refuge we need and pray for is the refuge God provides in our appointed Redeemer, Jesus, who provides shelter for sinners.	God answers your bold request for refuge by providing a Redeemer.
Ruth 4:1-12	Your future inheritance hangs on a generous Redeemer who paid for it in full at his own expense; trust your future to him and spend yourself in costly ways now for others.	We are redeemed by Christ at great cost so we can in confidence be spent for others.
Ruth 4:13-22	God still brings fullness out of emptiness, and in Christ he welcomes the outsider into his family and works out his great purposes in the world through our ordinary, everyday acts of kindness.	God weaves together your everyday faithfulness to accomplish his purposes. (See fn 101.)

The Process

How does the preacher move from the four-part integrated statement to the sermon's big idea? Though there is no one-size-fits-all approach, in general, (1) bring the Doctrine component to the surface as the headline, since that part is already timeless and speaks to a modern audience.⁹⁹

(2) After promoting the Doctrine part, the preacher should demote the Anchor part. The Anchor moves from being the historical report and becomes the felt human situation the hearer identifies with (emptiness, need, refuge-seeking, etc.). The preacher will need to find the contemporary analogue of the text's circumstances so the listener can see himself in need of the Doctrine. Now it becomes clear that the sermon is not just about Naomi; it's about the guy sitting in the fourth row back on the right.

(3) The Story component moves from simply locating the text within the storyline of the Bible to providing a distinctively Christian basis or motivation for believing or acting in a certain way. Even a highly compressed version along the way, like "a Son emptied on a cross," can distinguish the idea from a mere moral lesson.

(4) Next, convert the Aim component to a direct, personal address of your audience. This makes sure that the big idea is not just an idea. It not only includes what is true, but what is required in light of what is true.

(5) The hard work of wordsmithing comes next. The preacher must now retain the core components (need, truth, gospel, and application) and compress them into one singable sentence. Stylistic choices like reversal, parallelism, and alliteration can serve to help the statement stick.

⁹⁹ This is critical to highlight because, it is always possible that the canonical context can swallow up and overshadow the exegetical idea and the immediate literary context of the text. The anchor must really be the anchor, not a peripheral piece. What are the proportions or ratios? 70/30, 60/40, 50/50? It might even help to establish the homiletical idea bit by bit in the sermon. For example, preach through the story and establish the anchor. Then go out to the canonical context and establish the Story and Doctrine components. Then add the Aim at/near the end.

(6) Though it is not ideal to have multiple competing ideas in the sermon, it can be helpful to further reduce this initial statement into a smaller “tag” that is even more portable and memorable. However, in an effort to make the idea portable the preacher may find himself left with nothing more than the distillate, the very kind of abstraction this paper has been arguing against. Unfortunately, the first component to go will likely be the Story component, and so the kernel that is left is nothing more than a gospel-less maxim. So, if at all possible, the preacher needs to make sure the tag contains the Story. The short form should only be retained if the full theology is still latent in it.

An Example

Consider the homiletical idea from Ruth 4:1-12 as an example: ***Your future inheritance hangs on a generous Redeemer who paid for it in full at his own expense; trust your future to him and spend yourself now in costly ways for others.***

First, notice how the Doctrine is brought to the surface. In the four-part statement, the truth was that God secures a future for the destitute through a redeemer willing to pay what others will not. Now in sermon’s big idea, that truth is the headline: *Your future inheritance hangs on a generous Redeemer who paid for it in full at his own expense.*

Second, the Anchor now serves the felt situation. The original Anchor had to do with a legal transaction at the city gate, a nearer kinsman declining and Boaz stepping in. However, none of that historical particularity finds its way into the homiletical idea. But what does survive is the anxiety and insecurity surrounding one’s future inheritance. This anxiety and uncertainty, both at the material and spiritual level, is what resonates with a modern-day hearer. Is my future secure? Who will pay for it? This is especially heightened if the listener has any sense that they are a destitute outcast.

Third, notice how the Story or Gospel component works here. It serves both as basis and motivation. It is the *basis* or guarantee for a secure inheritance. Therefore, we can trust our future to God. And it is the *motivation* for spending ourselves in costly ways for others. What if we removed the Story component? *Your inheritance is paid for; trust your future to God and spend yourself now in costly ways for others.* Taking it out leaves us with an encouraging word about our finances and stewarding our resources for others. What remains has no gospel basis and no gospel motivation.¹⁰⁰

Fourth, the idea is directed personally to the listener. Here’s the applicational (Aim) end of the four-part statement for Ruth 4:1-12—*so that we can entrust our restoration and inheritance to the Redeemer and imitate his self-giving kindness and generosity.* But now in the homiletical idea, the style is direct and hortatory: *trust your future to him and spend yourself now in costly ways for others.* The what is true (you have a Redeemer who paid) is now connected to what is required (trust and spend). Belief and behavior are brought together.

Fifth, the need, truth, gospel, and application are now synthesized into a sentence that sings and sticks. You have on one side *he paid for it in full at his own expense* and on the other side *spend yourself in costly ways.* It is this kind of parallelism that holds the idea together and makes it

¹⁰⁰ I realize someone could object that the gospel component will be included in the sermon. If so, why does it need to be included in the homiletical idea statement? Again, experienced preachers may know exactly what they are doing here, but for a beginner, it is dangerous to assume the gospel and hope it finds its way in.

stick. Also, the redemption and payment imagery comes through all the economic terminology: *paid*, *expense*, *spend*, and *costly*. The more concrete imagery in the big idea the better, especially when you are conveying otherwise abstract concepts.

Sixth, in this case there is a related shorter “tag” to go along with the homiletical idea. ***We are redeemed by Christ at great cost so we can in confidence be spent for others.*** Here the Story stays in the spotlight; we’re not just looking at the moral distillate (something akin to “Give sacrificially, because you have been given much.”)¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ This is exactly the problem with the “tag” idea version for Ruth 4:13-22—“God weaves together your everyday faithfulness to accomplish his purposes.” The Story is lost. A change as simple as “God weaves together your everyday faithfulness to accomplish his purposes in Christ” at least makes the sentence distinctively Christian. The first version could be affirmed by a Jew or Muslim.

Appendix B: Worksheet for the Six-Statement Integrated Model

Preaching Text: _____

Work through the six statements in order. Do not skip ahead. Each step feeds the next, and the goal is to keep you grounded in the text and moving along the canon before you craft your homiletical idea. Write a complete sentence at each step.

Step ❶ Textual Summary (TS): “What happened?”

This is a simple, historical, observational, paraphrastic statement. It keeps you anchored in the historical realities of the text before you take off into the abstract.

Ask yourself:

- Who are the characters, and what is the setting?
- What is the sequence of events (what happens first, next, last)?
- What does God do in the account?

Keep it past tense and descriptive. Do not interpret yet.

Write your Textual Summary: _____

Step ❷ Exegetical Idea (EI): “Why did the author include this, here, for his audience?”

Move from what happened to why it matters. State the author's intended meaning within the immediate literary unit and book context.

Ask yourself:

- Where is the crisis/climax, and where is the resolution? (This usually points to the main idea.)
- What is the true (what is his message) and what is required (what is his purpose)?
- How does this account intersect with the structure, themes, and purpose of the entire book?

Keep the historical particulars: names, time, culture.

Write your Exegetical Idea: _____

Step ❸ Biblical-Theological Idea (BTI): “How does this relate to the Story?”

Place the text on the arc of God's progressive self-revelation, moving toward its climax in Christ.

Ask yourself:

- What is the antecedent theology? (Prior revelation, covenants, and technical terms carried forward by the storyline)

- Where does this text fall on the redemptive-historical storyline, and how does its theme develop forward from here?
- Does it anticipate, prefigure, or climax in Christ? If so, how?
- What lines of continuity or discontinuity run from this text to the new covenant?

Write a sentence that traces the text along the canon toward Christ.

Write your Biblical-Theological Idea: _____

Step ④ Systematic-Theological Idea (STI): “What doctrine does this text contribute to?”

Ask what doctrine the text contributes to, not merely what doctrinal truth it teaches. The statement should be doctrinal rather than narrational, canonical rather than text-specific, and precise in its theological categories.

Ask yourself:

- Which doctrine(s) does this passage feed into?
- What are the precise theological categories at work?
- Which other passages across the canon establish and confirm this truth?

State it as a timeless doctrinal proposition, and index the Scriptures that warrant it.

Write your Systematic-Theological Idea: _____

Scripture index: _____

Step ⑤ Rhetorical Aim (RA): “What does the author, and then you as the preacher, want to accomplish?”

Two parts. First the biblical author's aim for his original readers, then your aim for your hearers.

Ask yourself:

- What did the author want his readers to feel (head), believe (heart), or do (hands)?
- By the end of my message, what do I want my audience to feel, believe, or do?

Write the Author's Aim: “The author wants his readers to _____”

Write Your Aim: “By the end of this message, I want my audience to _____”

(Optional) Synthesis — The Four-Part Controlling Statement

Before drafting the homiletical idea, it can help to pull the pieces into one controlling sentence. Fill the four slots, then use it to inform the statement of your homiletical idea.

- Anchor (from EI, the historical situation): _____
- Doctrine (from STI, the timeless truth): _____
- Story (from BTI, the gospel grounding in Christ): _____

- Aim (from RA, the intended response): _____

Controlling sentence: "The God who [ANCHOR] still [DOCTRINE], [STORY], so that [AIM]."

Step ⑥ Homiletical Idea (HI): the grounded exhortation for today

Now craft the sentence you will actually preach. It must carry both what is true (the text's claim) and what is required (the text's aim). Build it in this order:

1. Headline the Doctrine. Bring the Doctrine component to the surface first, since it is already timeless and speaks directly to a modern hearer.
2. Demote the Anchor. Turn the historical situation into the felt human situation your listener identifies with. Find the contemporary analogue.
3. Keep the Story. Retain the gospel grounding in Christ as both basis and motivation, so the idea is distinctively Christian and not a moral lesson.
4. Direct the Aim. Address the hearer personally, joining what is true to what is required.
5. Wordsmith. Compress into one memorable sentence. Use concrete imagery, parallelism, and alliteration so it sticks.

Write your Homiletical Idea: _____

Check: Does it contain need, truth, gospel, and application? Yes / No

The Tag (condensed form)

Reduce the homiletical idea to a shorter, portable, memorable line. Warning: the first thing to disappear is usually the Story, which leaves a gospel-less maxim. Only keep the tag if the full theology is still latent in it. If the Story falls out, put it back (even a compressed "in Christ" will do).

Write your Tag: _____

Check: Is the Story (the gospel) still present in the tag? Yes / No

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