Finding An Effective Style of Preaching for the Multicultural, Multigenerational Church in San Diego, California

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FINDING AN EFFECTIVE STYLE OF PREACHING FOR THE MULTICULTURAL, MULTIGENERATIONAL CHURCH IN SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

Written by

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requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

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upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

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FINDING AN EFFECTIVE STYLE OF PREACHING FOR THE MULTICULTURAL, MULTIGENERATIONAL CHURCH IN SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
DANNY MARTINEZ
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ABSTRACT

Finding an Effective Style of Preaching for the Multicultural, Multigenerational Church in San Diego, California

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2019

The purpose of this project is to explore homiletical approaches to establish a sermon style that speaks to everyone at Grace Covenant Church (GCC), a multicultural congregation in the San Diego area that houses a diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and language context. This endeavor seeks to allow the good news of Christ to be expressed in fresh ways for disciples who have been walking with the Lord for many years as well as for new believers with little knowledge of Scripture and those who are “unchurched,” in order to create a culture of learning foundational biblical knowledge. This project is divided into three sections.

Part One describes the Spring Valley community and GCC. It explores the historical background and sociodemographic and cultural contexts of both. The discussion pays special attention to the missional purpose of Grace Covenant Church and competing sociodemographic, cultural, and generational factors, with special emphasis on Latinos.

Part Two explores theological principles for preaching as well as experimental styles of expounding the Word in effective ways that lead people into active and ever deepening relationship with God. These have been selected for use during the three-month preaching period. They guide an overall examination of styles used in preaching.

Part Three presents academic and practical conclusions. Included are the sermon summaries and outlines, suggestions from the feedback team, and evaluations of specific homiletical styles. The project concludes with an assessment of what was learned and describes key findings, so other pastors in multicultural situations can benefit.

Content Reader: Juan Martinez, PhD
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

INTRODUCTION 1

PART ONE: THE TASK OF PREACHING IN GRACE COVENANT CHURCH

Chapter 1. THE COMMUNITY AND ITS NEEDS 7

Chapter 2. A DESCRIPTION OF GRACE COVENANT CHURCH 30

PART TWO: BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PREACHING THE WORD OF GOD TO UNIFY AN ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

Chapter 3. PREACHING AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PROCLAMATION 49

Chapter 4. EXPERIMENTAL STYLES OF PREACHING 82

PART THREE: SERMONS PREACHED AND THEIR ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Chapter 5. SERMONS PREACHED UTILIZING THE SERMON FORMS: INTERACTIONS WITH THE FEEDBACK TEAM 106

Chapter 6. THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS 136

Chapter 7. PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS 153

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION 161

APPENDIX 165

BIBLIOGRAPHY 178
INTRODUCTION

It is the hope that communication might be possible that sustains me as I make a phone call, preach a sermon, or write a book.

—Justo González, Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes

The premise of the above quote is simple yet profound: We view, read, and experience the Bible differently due to our own context and experiences. As we move more deeply, past the postmodern era into the millennial experience, the main influence seems to be on what people hear. In What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew, Mark Allan Powell puts it this way: “People hear our words correctly but take them in ways we do not intend.”¹ It is my hope that the weekly proclamation of the risen Christ clearly communicates the good news of the Gospel. As a pastor, my focus is on preaching to different cultures in such a way that people find the message easy to understand and to apply.

My interest in and experience with this topic comes mainly from preaching at Grace Covenant Church (GCC) in Spring Valley, California. GCC is a multicultural family of faith formed of various ethnicities—mainly African American, Latino, and Anglo. GCC leadership also is blessed to serve people from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands. This makes for an amazing church, but it also presents an incredible challenge for communicating the Word of God through proclamation. Vastly diverse backgrounds and cultural experiences make it difficult for people to navigate and hear the

truth of the Gospel mainly through Sunday sermons. While preaching to this eclectic
group of people is exciting, it can be difficult due to the different levels of education and
socioeconomic background. This is important because a sermon needs to be preached
effectively and provide a practical message for everyone who hears it. It has been
daunting to figure out how to do this complicated task. I do not pretend to have the
answers, but some suggestions can be derived from studying several approaches to
preaching and comparing them with one another. The focus of the study here is not only
on the way GCC receives the message but also in the way each congregant personally
responds to the message through action.

“Preaching the good news” is lingo that believers usually understand. It comes
from what the local church has learned in the translation of the word “Gospel,” which in
the Greek is εὐαγγέλιον. Essentially, this means that believing in God has impacted our
lives so much that we are willing to share our story with others. However, there is so much
diversity in the Kingdom of God that proclaiming the Gospel to such a diverse group
becomes less than ideal. We need to share the good news through preaching in a way that
is accessible to all who hear it, regardless of their education or theological training.

Grace Covenant has such a wide assortment of educational backgrounds that
sometimes I have found the task unsurmountable. GCC has high-school dropouts and
university professors. It has people who are new in the faith and people who were raised
in the Evangelical Covenant Church. In seeking to discover language that is appropriate
and effective for all, I have had to abandon many of my preconceptions. For example, I

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2 Evangelion means “good news” in Koine Greek according to the following commentary: William
started with the notion that if my preaching was too simple, people who knew the Bible—often better than I do—would be bored and unengaged. If my preaching became too academic, I feared I would isolate those who had not enjoyed the privilege of higher education. I was right . . . but not in the way that I imagined. While I assumed that preaching needed to be general to appeal to a heterogeneous audience and too basic a concept would sacrifice the depth of the academic concepts that invite strong application, I ended up realizing that Christian preaching is not limited to cognitive processes and complicated academic concepts but to living the Scriptures authentically in our place and time.

Consequently, this paper seeks to document the process of trying new sermon approaches in an effort to find a style that people of diverse ethnicities, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds can understand and apply—regardless of their culture, language, or level of education. This is not an effort to produce a “one size fits all” result, since this study was done in a very specific ministry context and with a limited number of ethnicities. I suspect that each preacher who wants to be effective in communicating the Gospel will have to go through his or her own journey of discovery. Once preachers decide that they desire to embark on a journey of discovering a sermon approach, my hope is that this document can help by serving as a flexible roadmap and provide at least one process of thought—although any process would need to be adjusted for context.

Of my pastoral responsibilities, the one I see as the highest priority is preaching. As previously described, Sunday morning preaching is the main event of the local church. In this way, it becomes the most strategic opportunity to engage new invitees and instruct members of the church to grow in knowledge and in deed. Since this is the most common
way of spreading the good news of the Gospel in our church, explaining God’s Word has become the most important part of pastoral duties. Orlando Costas agrees and writes the following in *Por medio de la predicación: Manual de homilética*: “El énfasis que se le dio a la predicación en la liturgia protestante a partir de la Reforma, hizo que esta se convirtiera en la tarea más importante del pastor.”

Not much has changed since the time of the Reformation regarding preaching on Sunday. Congregants generally still expect a sermon to be proclaimed. In essence, they expect good preaching, and many hope for something to apply to their current life situation. Costas comments: “De ahí que, en la mayoría de las Iglesias protestantes, la eficiencia de un pastor se mide por su éxito como predicador.” He argues that effectiveness in preaching defines a congregation’s perception of whether or not a pastor is successful. Ultimately, since most parishioners only come to church on Sunday, preaching must function by instructing people in the Christian walk of life.

Now, I define “good preaching” as a sermon that effectively communicates the good news of the Gospel and the love of God yet challenges listeners to practice what they hear. Therefore, my task has been to make sure that Grace Covenant hears the Word of God in a way that is easy to understand yet is deep in theological content and applicable to real life. The task of preaching is not limited to simply inspiring people to

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3 Orlando Costas, *Por medio de la predicación: Manual de homilética* (Orlando, FL: Grupo Nelson, 2005), 21. “The emphasis that was given to preaching in the Protestant liturgy after the Reformation made it become the pastor’s most important task [translation mine].”

4 Ibid. “Hence, in most Protestant churches, effectiveness of a pastor is measured by his success as a preacher [translation mine].”
read the Scriptures; it must inspire them to practice what they hear and read. In this way, preaching is a method of teaching.

The task is worthy yet not one that I thought possible for me to accomplish. I feel good about preaching effectively at least 50 percent of the time. As a preacher I enjoy and prefer a church that participates in the sermon by responding and testifying, for example by shouting back, “Amen!” or “Hallelujah!” However, GCC struggles with certain styles of proclamation, even if they provide great content. Whatever the style, Scripture is key. Part of my task in preaching is to connect the whole Sunday experience to the liturgy, which includes worship and music related to the scriptural theme, so people can walk away with clear guidance for the day.

For this reason, this ministry project focuses on identifying different styles of preaching. Part One discusses the town of Spring Valley. It examines the community and its needs and describes Grace Covenant Church as a center of proclamation. Part Two explores various styles of proclamation and theological principles for preaching. In particular, it highlights preaching as an instrument of proclamation. Part Three offers a practical application within the specific ministry context. It discusses the sermons that were preached and presents academic and practical conclusions regarding the sermon styles used. Throughout the experimental process of preaching, receiving concrete feedback, and forming both theoretical and practical conclusions, the hope has been to communicate the life of Jesus Christ through a narrative that moves people into active faith as the ultimate objective.
PART ONE

THE TASK OF PREACHING IN GRACE COVENANT CHURCH
CHAPTER 1

THE COMMUNITY AND ITS NEEDS

This chapter presents a socioeconomic and demographic profile of the Spring Valley community. It describes Spring Valley’s signs of life and progress as well as its current challenges and problems. The chapter also offers an assessment of how GCC can acknowledge and respond to the needs of the local community through proclamation of the Word.

A Profile of the Spring Valley Community

Spring Valley is a small Southern California town without a complicated story. As an unincorporated area of San Diego County, it encompasses nearly fourteen square miles and is located approximately ten miles east of downtown San Diego on Route 94. Its neighboring towns are El Cajon to the East, “La Mesa and El Cajon, to the North, Bonita and Chula Vista, to the South, and Paradise Hills and Lemon Grove to the West.”¹ Spring Valley’s central locality is close to much border activity that originates in Baja California,

México, mainly Tijuana and Mexicali. This is one of the most common entry points for those who cross the border without proper documents. The Latino residents of Spring Valley total 11,312 and 36.8 percent of the population, and most of these individuals descend from México. Despite its simple story, Spring Valley residents are impacted by powerful experiences—such as poverty, the effects of immigration, and the acculturation of thousands of Latin Americans.

There are many signs of life on the streets of Spring Valley. On weekday mornings, early-rising Latino parents drop their children at school and rush to work. After school, racially diverse children play basketball at the community center. On the weekends, it is not uncommon to see Latino families breaking *piñatas* as part of birthday celebrations in the local parks or young women in elaborate dresses celebrating *quinceañeras.* Other ethnic communities are present as well. For example, African Americans have restaurants that sell traditional soul food, such as The Soul Place. There are also Filipino Restaurants (the Filipino Star), Chinese Restaurants (Ling Lee’s), and the local flea market where there are stands of Greek food and Samoan cuisine.

There are signs of homelessness as well as some gentrification in the most popular areas that affect mainly those with low resources. Homelessness has a direct impact on the commercial aspect of business by making them less appealing, while some gentrification is making neighborhoods less affordable for low-income families. Gentrification often

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3 *Piñatas* are decorated items filled with candy treats for children. *Quinceañeras* are female coming-of-age celebrations.
displaces homes for working-class families in favor of high-end buildings, such as condos and other specialty living.

A Brief History and Profile of Spring Valley

The town of Spring Valley was originally home to the Kumeyaay, a Native American tribe, who called it Neti or Meti. When the conquistadores arrived to Southern California, this name was changed to San Jorge. The name was assigned by a Spanish priest in 1775 as homage. By the 1830s, the Kumeyaay people had been removed from the land, and it was turned into a place suitable for livestock and sheep to graze.4

In 1863, Judge Augusto Ensworth of San Diego was the person who had enough vision to request the land to be recognized as private property, about 160 acres, which included San Jorge, and this started the process of building what would become the city. After his death, his ranch was sold to Captain Rufus King Porter of San Pedro, California. Captain Porter and his family took up residence there in the summer of 1865. The Porters later changed the name to “Spring Valley,” since the spring had long served as a water source to many. The family also named the prominent mountain nearby “Mt. Helix,” because of the discovery of Helix aspersa (a garden snail) living on the hillside.

In 1885, Hubert Howe Bancroft wanted a peaceful area in which to retire, so he purchased the Porter residence and about five acres of neighboring lands and homes and named it “Helix Farm.” When Bancroft passed away in 1918, his family sold his property, and it was divided into what is now known as La Mesa County. In 1940, the

4 Spring Valley California, “History,” accessed August 18, 2018, http://springvalleyca.com/history.html. All historical information about Spring Valley is taken from this site, unless otherwise indicated.
Spring Valley Chamber of Commerce purchased the ranch along with a few acres and designated it as a historical site in 1958. In March of 1963, the site was established as a museum for all to enjoy.

The racial demographic of Spring Valley has changed greatly over the years. The Latino immigrant groups are mainly from Mexico and Central America. This is evident in the business presence in and around Spring Valley. There are carnicerías, such as Valley Farm Market, which serve Latino delicacies—for example, arracheras, champurrado, and chicharrones. This is an important sign of life for ministries that are interested in that community and are willing to reach this growing demographic.

As of the 2010 United States Census, Spring Valley had 28,205 residents living in 9,305 housing units. The racial composition was 59.5 percent White, 11.1 percent Black or African American, .84 percent American Indian and Alaska Native, 5.89 percent Asian, and .84 percent Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, with 15.36 percent listed as “Some Other Race” and 6.48 percent listed as “Two or More Races.” Of the reported population, 36.8 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino. Between 2000 and 2010, there was a 60 percent increase in the Latino population. This has created many opportunities for Latino outreach and multicultural ministries.

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6 Arracheras are skirt steaks, champurrado is a hot chocolate-based drink made from corn, and chicharrones traditionally refer to pork skins and deep-fried pork rinds.

It is possible that not all Latinos were counted in the census therefore making it difficult to gauge how large the population is. Many undocumented immigrants worry that census information will be used against them. They fear being reported to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). For this reason, it is estimated that more than 25 percent of the Latino population is not reported, though it is difficult to document. This is significant for local churches. This also means that those not counted by the census do not receive benefits such as “federal funds, grants and support to states, counties and communities [which] are based on population totals and breakdowns by sex, age, race and other factors.” Race categories reported by the United States Census do not necessarily reflect the language that may be used by the individuals. This is significant due to the growing need to serve Latinos in a context that does not always welcome their culture and often is not flexible to their language preference. For this reason, the Latino community is vulnerable financially and socially, when they do not have the proper documents to work and thrive. The church can seek to be a support to such families, which is an opportunity for growth in ministry.

The stability of a community is often related to its ability to afford housing, either by renting or buying. Real estate prices in 2008 were significantly higher than today, due

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to the housing crisis.\textsuperscript{11} The recession that hit in 2008 deeply affected Spring Valley. A large percentage of Spring Valley’s single-family homes were repossessed by banks,\textsuperscript{12} affecting many families who lost their homes and were not able to buy houses again.\textsuperscript{13} Real estate prices have risen considerably since 2008 but not without many financial casualties such as foreclosures, especially for people with fewer options.

Real estate prices are connected to vital business. Spring Valley is home to many commercial enterprises. The area offers a Sears, Vons, Albertsons, JPMorgan Chase, Big Lots, McDonalds, and Little Caesars. There are also many Latino businesses such as Carnicerías Jiménez, which is a regional grocery chain. Spring Valley has three mini malls. Although they cannot compare to those in San Diego, these three mini malls serve their community well. Still, the area has lost many small businesses that have been unable to compete with big corporations like Walmart and Costco, because they could not match the low prices of larger stores. A study from Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business offers some wisdom on what happens when a store like Walmart comes into a town like Spring Valley. Published in \textit{Inc. Magazine}, the study found in the wake of seven Wal-Mart openings a “40 percent sales drop at nearby mass merchandise chains and 17 percent sales


\textsuperscript{13} Fermin Damian, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2009; Eileen Zamora, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2008.
drop at supermarkets.” Similarly, in Spring Valley, local establishments struggle to compete with the nearby Walmart, Target, and Costco in the neighboring towns of El Cajon and National City.

Beyond a business presence, part of finding signs of life includes available educational opportunities. In Spring Valley, there are eighteen public schools. The ten elementary schools are Avondale, Casa de Oro, Kempton, Loma, Spring Valley Elementary, Bancroft, Highlands, La Presa Elementary, Rancho, and Sweetwater Springs. The four middle schools are Spring Valley, La Presa, Parkway, and La Mesa. Lastly, the four high schools are Monte Vista, Grossmont, Mount Miguel, and Steel Canyon. Unfortunately, a common denominator of these schools is their low overall grades. La Mesa/Spring Valley schools are remedial schools at best and ranked a “C” when compared with other schools in the San Diego area. Such public schools simply cannot compete with private schools and public schools in more affluent neighborhoods. Private schools are the ones that often produce good test scores. This demonstrates an imbalance of the social classes, because many of the working-class families cannot afford to pay for the benefits that come with a private school education.

There is only one college in the area. Cuyamaca College is located in the neighboring city of La Mesa, which services the entire Spring Valley area. As a community college, it offers associate degrees through a 2½-year program. Students who graduate then

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transfer to a university that offers four-year degree programs. The percentage of Latinos attending Cuyamaca is 17 percent. Unfortunately, only 3 percent of those who start community college graduate; and only 27 percent of the overall class goes on to university.\textsuperscript{16} This puts Spring Valley young people at a disadvantage. Education is one of the most solid ways of advancing from poverty, because many well-paying jobs require a diploma as part of the job application process. Consequently, graduates often have better opportunities for employment and advanced educational opportunities. Not having adequate schools or systems for a proper education produces graduates who are unprepared to function as stable citizens economically, which is detrimental to a community like Spring Valley.

The Spring Valley population averages $30,128, while the poverty rate is 14.2 percent. The median household income is $60,600. The local economy employs 30,146 people, with the largest industries being health care and social services.\textsuperscript{17} The working, uneducated class labors in unskilled jobs that do not require a degree (e.g., cleaning, housekeeping, babysitting, commercial maintenance, and the like). People who work in these unskilled jobs earn considerably less. Education or lack thereof is directly connected to the salaries and opportunities in Spring Valley.

Mount Miguel Retirement Village

Mount Miguel, or “the Village” as it is commonly called, is part of the Covenant Retirement Community network and provides different levels of housing and care options


for the elderly.\textsuperscript{18} In contrast to the rest of Spring Valley, most residents are not native to the area but rather people who have moved to live in the facility. Grace Covenant Church benefits greatly from these resident arrivals, as many have an Evangelical Covenant background, who find connection with GCC organic and simple.

The entrance fee to move in varies on the specific size of the apartment desired, but it starts in the six-figure range according to Debbie Witter, the sales director for Mount Miguel.\textsuperscript{19} Only people who have high equity in their homes can afford the enormous fee and monthly payments. This results in Mount Miguel primarily being an affluent retirement community. Due to the growing number of limitations that may come with old age, the living arrangements are all-inclusive. Mount Miguel offers medical care, daily meals, chapel, housecleaning services, and maintenance. Most of the population at the Village is Euro-American and has some connection to the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC).\textsuperscript{20} There are seven hundred residents at the Village,\textsuperscript{21} which has provided it with a financial stability that benefits the surrounding neighborhood. This has brought jobs to locals and expanded opportunities for Spring Valley residents, since they employ over a hundred workers. Being able to secure employment in the neighborhood enables many Latino families not to have to travel far to earn a living. This enables Latinos employed by Mount Miguel to be able to spend more time with their families on a daily basis.


\textsuperscript{19} Debbie Witter, phone interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, August 2018.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
Many residents of the Village attend Grace Covenant Church, as it is located just across the street. This adds to the blessings and challenges the church faces. I have named these members “the elders.” GCC decided to hire a Latino pastor to transition the congregation into being a multicultural church. At the time, the church only had 28 members who were all elders from the retirement community. These GCC members ranged in age from eighty-three to ninety-six.²² Despite their age, they did not want to be limited to the four walls of the church. Rather, they desired to reach out to the surrounding multicultural community of Spring Valley. Many of these elders previously served in professional ministerial roles—such as pastor, missionary, denominational leader, and the like. Seeing GCC as a small church that had not grown much in twenty years, they felt compelled to engage in some sort of evangelism.²³

These members from the Village provide a rich history and connection to GCC’s denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church.²⁴ Most of these amazing people come from ministry backgrounds and established churches with healthy dynamics and budgets. Their experiences have been primarily with mono-ethnic churches and, now in Spring Valley, they experience a multicultural context.

This GCC segment of the Village has a deep heart and missional desire to be true to their roots in evangelism and outreach, yet their aging bodies put physical limitations

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²² Grace Covenant Church residents of the Village, interviews by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2009. All information regarding this segment of GCC’s congregation comes from this source, unless otherwise indicated.

²³ Ibid.

on how they do this. Some, in particular, have a background as missionaries in Latin America and have a specific desire to reach Latinos in the Spring Valley community. While influencing their choice for the new pastor, the process has been difficult and long and messy. Such a decision has required them to depart from what they know as traditional church, which has a more defined and scheduled liturgy. While there is a great desire to reach Latinos in the community, they experience a greater challenge in embracing change and the new vision necessary for inclusion of all minorities, which ultimately has come with changes in worship styles and scheduled service times.

The Socioeconomic Reality Facing the Spring Valley Community

To enable an appropriate response to the community, GCC has taken a hard look at the problems that plague the immediate surrounding area. The Gospel is an integral part of ministry, and discovering the needs of the local area is necessary in order to formulate a suitable plan of outreach. This paves the way to understanding how to address issues that do not formally fit in an ecclesial setting. GCC must be able to know its community and to respond to people’s needs, if it is to be a trusted entity within its Spring Valley context.

The Missional Ground

A pressing issue for GCC is the holistic care of the people it serves. How congregants respond to local needs allows them to be seen as friends in Spring Valley, which is necessary to be effective in dwelling together as a community of faith. When

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25 Efrem Smith, *Jump* (Colorado Springs, CO: David Cook, 2010), 139.
there is an imbalance between proclamation and living together, the community often does not buy into the mission. The first part of this endeavor is to know the ministry context.

GCC has sought to be a parish for the one-mile radius of its immediate community, as a starting point. To be a parish, people need to know that there is a local church. Being a parish means focusing on a specific area, to provide care and other services—such as a food distribution program, childcare at low cost, after-school programs—but in order to do so, there must be a need so as to fill it. The challenge for GCC has been to find fresh and organic ways to be a part of the community with the hopes of reaching it for the Kingdom.

Grand Avenue is a short street that is four blocks away from the church. It is a throughway that traditionally has been a focus of crime, violence, and much police activity.26 This has increased since a marijuana dispensary opened its doors.27 There are several families supported by Section 8 housing, shelter assistance provided for those with a limited income. Walking through the neighborhood, GCC congregants have noticed that many of the children who attend the church’s preschool live in this area. This has provoked further thought about what the church can offer in order to engage this community. Due to proximity, reaching out to their families and friends has become possible. As with every marginalized community, there are challenges—in this case, drug use on the premises of GCC. With this community as a focus of ministry, the church has needed to be educated on how to respond missionally.

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This response has come hand in hand with the Village as a partner. One of the many ways in which the Village partners in mission is to intentionally employ locals. While Mount Miguel employs specialized workers such as doctors and nurses, they also need housekeepers, nurse assistants, orderlies, food preparation personnel, and maintenance workers. Although the Village employs over a hundred people, mostly from the Spring Valley area, and this is a benefit to the community, GCC has no set structure on how to connect those employees to the church. The Village is generous to its employees and collects a yearly bonus for all staff that is quite substantial. Consequently, the Village is loved by its employees—and as a result, by the community.

Acknowledging the dynamics at play in the area, GCC decided that to engage its surrounding community meant its mission would be to represent the community by becoming a diverse church: a multicultural family of faith for the community. This started as an ideal premise. It began to unfold and expanded opportunities for growth in the way church was done. GCC chose to allow the community to contribute to its mission and to shape it. This marked the beginning of many changes that have begun reshaping the culture and look of GCC for years to come.

The Religiosity of the People

The present-day Spring Valley community has religious roots. Through visitation of local homes in the one-mile area over the course of a year, Grace Covenant found that just over half of the residents have a religious affiliation. Most are Catholic at 45 percent;

28 Witter, phone interview.

29 Further detail regarding Grace Covenant Church and its ministry is offered in Chapter 2.
followed by 6.7 percent affiliating as “another Christian faith,” and less than 2 percent each as Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Presbyterian; finally, 2.4 percent identify as Mormon.\textsuperscript{30} Fewer than half of the residents do not attend church regularly but for special occasions.

Most Latinos visited in the area are nominally Catholic who practice their faith in other ways. GCC has observed how locals keep lit candles and other Catholic symbols in their homes, such as rosaries and images of Mary; but when prompted about attending church, they confirmed not attending one. Many residents are first-generation Latinos, with roots connected to the Catholic tradition. The connection is usually through being baptized into the church as a child, but these individuals do not seem to connect to a Catholic church in an interactive way. Attendance is not a big factor in being a faithful Catholic.

The process of becoming inclusive with respect to local residents is a hard process, due to some feeling disconnected from a church or a community of faith. More success is experienced in connecting people who have faith in God, regardless of faith background. These paradigms are consistent with certain cultural aspects in Latin American cultures that are seasonally Catholic. When visiting countries in Central America, such as Guatemala and Honduras, the religious sentiment is observable simply by the celebration of specific holidays, mainly Christmas and Easter. Robust parades and elaborate feasts are normal for these yearly celebrations, where spending large amounts of money is accepted as the norm. As in many of their Latin American countries of origin,

Spring Valley residents around GCC do not engage in weekly attendance or financial support as a part of that affection. Connection and relationships are important in forming a bond with the local church.

While visiting the community, African Americans, a tiny minority in Spring Valley, became a part of the growing scope of the neighborhood. Those who joined GCC testified that they follow certain patterns in which they confess faith in Christ and even claim membership at a church but did not frequent. These same residents have said that as GCC has changed to become more multicultural, they attend more often.\(^{31}\) It is typical to find in the feedback a suspicion of the established church as only being interested in financial gain from attendees, a perception formed and based on their previous experience.

In understanding the socioeconomic reality of Spring Valley, the interaction of church and neighborhood is enlightening. There exist many layers involved in this community, particularly with its mixed religious history. An approach that encompasses both the unchurched and the un-committed religious person needs to be drafted.

**The Disconnection between Mount Miguel Covenant Village and the Spring Valley Community**

Due to the general privilege of the average residents of Mount Miguel, there are enormous gaps between them and others in the community. These gaps are not limited to just wealth, age, generation, education, and religious background. These differences tend to separate people even in communities of faith. Mount Miguel residents must meet

\(^{31}\) William Bell, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, January 2017. Bell is an African-American resident of Spring Valley, who resides on Grand Street.
financial criteria in order to apply and be accepted at the Village. The difference in
generations tends to complicate relationships when dealing with a community that is not
only younger but unchurched. In comparing the homogenous Euro-American majority to
the multicultural nature of the general residential population, there are many differences.

A Socioeconomic and Generation Gap among Local Believers

In visiting Spring Valley families, GCC found locals to be younger, especially
among immigrants.32 While residents of the Village are in an older age bracket, they also
tend to come from more traditional homes. Since this facility is an Evangelical Covenant
Church Retirement Community, it is available to all Covenanters throughout the United
States and beyond, thus attracting people from other environments. The locals tend to see
the residents as rich and pampered, when compared to their local reality. This dynamic
leads to a gap that complicates the idea of community, when the differences are so visibly
apparent and yet ill-perceived.

Mount Miguel residents mainly are connected to the community in a professional
way, either receiving care or paying for goods. Since the Village is a compound on its
own that is self-sufficient—with pools, dining halls, entertainment, and a chapel readily
available for their use—it is easy for local Spring Valley residents to note this difference.
Consequently, Mount Miguel comes across as an elite community. Most residents are
well educated, many with a master’s degree in Divinity, since that is the standard degree

for Covenant ministers. This stands in contrast to only 27 percent of Cuyamaca students actually finishing just two years of community college.\textsuperscript{33}

There are other generational differences beyond the age span. There are liturgical differences as well. The average age at the Village is eighty years old, whereas 70 percent of Spring Valley residents are on average forty-four years of age.\textsuperscript{34} A quick glance at the faces on a Sunday morning at Grace Covenant reveals that the generational gap reflects the same. Finding common ecclesiastic ground proves difficult when generational values of those in the older age bracket are so conservative and traditional, both in religious and political arenas. Older Covenant liturgy that was a regular part of the service in the older generation is not being practiced as much as before, which has caused a feeling of loss for this generation.

The gap in socioeconomic realities leads to a constant misunderstanding of the possible ways of doing community. People who come from financial privilege have limitations when examining the local reality beyond the fence of their compound. Mount Miguel residents tend to be generous with their tips and wages, which is received well according to some employees who attend GCC; but since Mount Miguel residents do not have to go beyond the compound for anything other than church or some general shopping, they often are disconnected from the reality across the street on Grand Avenue.\textsuperscript{35} In contrast to the Village, Grand Avenue suffers from limited resources and an

\textsuperscript{33} College Tuition Compare. “Graduation Rate at Cuyamaca College.”

\textsuperscript{34} United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts: Spring Valley CDP, California.”

\textsuperscript{35} GCC congregants, interviews by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2018.
abundance of Section 8 residents. This makes their reality and taxes non-consequential to their community, as in a decent budget for public education. This disconnect is not something unique to Spring Valley and the Village, but only those who are intentional find out about those who are different culturally and socioeconomically.

Mount Miguel residents who attend Grace have deep convictions about going to church and supporting it financially. They are faithful givers who attend every week. This is a part of their culture and DNA, but many Spring Valley residents do not share this value due to their own lack of experience with a church. Locals who attend GCC do not commit right away and often take a few years before becoming regular Sunday attendees and supporting the church. GCC needs these elders for wisdom and financial support, but they often bring narrow-minded paradigms that limit inclusion of other cultures. Nevertheless, the elders have grown in their understanding that they need the younger members of the Spring Valley community. Some of the practical ways elders have been encouraged is by inviting them to disciple new believers as a way to leave a legacy and sow into the next generation of leaders, teachers, and pastors.

GCC has found that some Latinos in the area prefer to gather with other first-generation congregations who speak primarily Spanish.36 This has been an obstacle in GCC’s development as a multicultural church in the Spring Valley community. Those who joined in the first few years were young people, who were unable to contribute financially but willing contributed food and other things to share. Initially, it was a

36 Miriam Arellano, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, March 2015. Arellano is a local Latina leader at Grace Covenant Church.
challenge to retain middle-aged Latino families from the surrounding community, due to
the lack of a service in Spanish or meeting bilingual needs.

The multicultural dynamic is very fragile. GCC does not offer a “one size fits all”
worship experience. This is due to the diverse nature of the cultures, ethnicities, and
generations that are present in the pews every Sunday morning. Consequently, GCC
needs a diverse approach to preaching in order to best serve the church.

The intentionality of gathering retired believers with younger ones has not always
been successful. Elders are used to being treated with a high level of respect, which is
only enforced by living in a private, exclusive, and highly isolated community. Local
youth are not used to treating people with that kind of respect, as they value freedom in
their essential ways of expression. A quick example is that youth use the term “you guys”
when addressing the elders, who find such address offensive because those receiving the
address include not just men but women as well. The youth also have felt the disconnect,
since the elders often lack knowledge of pop culture or relevant current events. As a
result, both sides experience difficulty in building relationships and trust through
conversation. Nevertheless, both sides value intentionality in developing a rapport and a
relationship that allows for hope and work for the Kingdom in their ministry context.

A High Percentage of Divorced Households

Divorce has touched many families in the Spring Valley community. This can be
seen in the presence of ever-growing businesses, such as Divorce with Dignity and others
offering help in divorce proceedings. Almost 50 percent of Spring Valley couples end in
The business list for this kind of service is long, as reported by the Legal Information Institute. Divorce is a reality that is not isolated to any group, but the effects are felt when ministries are interested in the local community. GCC became aware of this the more local families began attending. Many of these were comprised of single mothers with children and divorced fathers. An appropriate approach and follow-up plan are needed to serve a community that has this kind of situation and the pressing needs that accompany such a family dynamic.

While walking the neighborhood and visiting with local residents, GCC met several single and divorced mothers. Some Latinas expressed concerns about attending church in a first-generation, Spanish-speaking context due to negative stereotypes of divorced and single women—especially the younger ones, who worried about being sought by males of the congregation. Since GCC’s goal is to become a multicultural church, the invitation was made, and fears were acknowledged. The church seeks to become a safe place for all people.

Some of these broken families overall are disadvantaged. Many parents are absent for long periods of time, due to working two or three jobs just to make ends meet. Sadly, their former country’s tradition to raise a family as a tribe is no longer viable in the United States, since trust often is limited to family. The family-as-tribe concept is that everyone supports one another in the rearing of children. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and

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cousins take care of one another, so no one is stuck alone and without community. Leaving children with neighbors is not viewed as wise or advisable, so many children spend a lot of time alone at home. Financial need and the desire to be financially stable drive many parents to leave their offspring to fend for themselves. Teens often have to grow up with friends and are surrounded by an abundance of drugs, gangs, and other unhealthy influences. This leads children and teens without needed support in excelling at school, complicating their future prospects of employment.

GCC sees this dynamic as an opportunity for local ministries to care in a very practical way for the children and youth of the area. There is opportunity for elders and other GCC members to provide mentorship, academic support, and other types of after-school programs. Children and teens need a safe place to receive support and have fun.

The socioeconomic reality of divorce in Spring Valley has been observed in those visited and interviewed. Some women attend church only with their children. This reflects how the traditional model of families is weakened from what once was a couple attending their children’s events and existing as a two-income family. Many children and teens grow up with a feeling of neglect, so the church must deal with deep emotional fallout as it seeks to walk with them. If left unprocessed, these feelings often become a liability, preventing the children from developing healthy relationships. When making some inquiries of GCC youth, a common trait among teens who end up in trouble with

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39 Chevra Dorsey, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2010. Dorsey is a new member of Grace Covenant Church and a single-mother divorcee.
the law is a lack of accountability to a parent and being left alone for an extended period of time without supervision.\textsuperscript{40}

Many local Spring Valley children who grow up without support suffer in their academic life due to a lack of homework help. Since some parents did not reach the same level of education as their children, they find themselves limited in the kind of assistance they can provide to their offspring. A single mother works one or two jobs in order to pay the bills but often cannot help beyond providing basic needs for the family.

The lack of a male figure in the home is a sad reality. When the local pastor is a man, he often assumes a role as father figure for the family. People from the community bring their children for counseling, leaning on their past experience that local pastors and/or priests can help advise and “set the kids straight.” As local pastors, we tackle the responsibility to walk with these teens and help them make better choices. However, pastors are not always equipped to deal with youth in a way that can heal them. Their contribution is limited to experience and resources; and more often than not, there are no specialty resources such as suicide prevention, drug rehabilitation, and extended counseling without the need to refer to outside help.

**Implications, Challenges, and Opportunities of Preaching to a Diverse Ecclesial Community**

As a result of the gaps in generation, education, and cultural realities, a single style of preaching cannot universally reach a diverse ecclesial community. Communicating the

\textsuperscript{40} Adam Moore, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2009. Moore serves as youth pastor for Grace Covenant Church.
good news is complicated in such an eclectic environment as Spring Valley. Such evangelism needs to be intentional and focused on paying attention to the signs of life and complications in order to be contextual in proclaiming Jesus Christ.

Preaching in this diverse community requires a specialized approach. Whatever the approach, it must be different than the normal, popular religious discourse that often occurs in homogenous, traditional, and liturgical settings. Learning about the community and its needs enables the church to walk with people and its imperative to serve them better through preaching. The expectation of what this will look like is exciting yet not clear. The hope is that the church can discern guidance from the Holy Spirit in which the community hears the Word of God and can be transformed into a community of faith not bound by differences. The proposed method should consider the multicultural and multigenerational aspects to reach people of diverse socioeconomic contexts.

GCC is a church that does not have vast finances to resource big programs. However, money does not always equal bigger impact. Preaching needs to reach people despite their socioeconomic, emotional, and spiritual context. This means prioritizing efforts, constantly seeking understanding, and never assuming it has the whole picture. It means maintaining a posture of humility, continuing in its pursuit to learn, and broadening its understanding of its community.

GCC believes that the town needs the church, but GCC cannot take that for granted. Therefore, as the plan to move forward continues, establishing vision, mission, and values with the feedback provided by visitation and interviews is ever more crucial. As the parish, the local church must care enough for its community to know what residents need and how it can provide guidance. These next steps are discussed in Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 2
A DESCRIPTION OF GRACE COVENANT CHURCH

This chapter provides a background of the history and missional purpose of Grace Covenant Church. It describes the congregation’s desire to be an agent of transformation in its neighborhood and to pursue reconciliation between ethnic groups. The chapter explores the way that Sunday services have become inclusive of various worship styles that are reflective of the local community. Finally, it examines how the use of new approaches to proclamation may help in bringing unity to the church community.

Brief Story of Ministry

Grace Covenant Church was founded in 1960\(^1\) as a church plant funded by The Evangelical Covenant Church,\(^2\) The Pacific Southwest Conference,\(^3\) and Clairemont

\(^1\) Carol Primer, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, Fall 2009.


Covenant Church in San Diego. This was a joint effort, typical of planting a new church. Within the ECC, a church plant is usually a collaborative financial endeavor by three entities. They share the financial responsibility evenly and therefore the care for the church plant is also a joint approach.

Grace Covenant has had several pastors over the years and primarily enjoyed a great time of growth and revival in the 1980s, reaching a membership of over 350. The church was poised for increase, as the community was growing and development of land was fast-tracked. Grace Covenant founded World of Wonder Christian (WOW) Preschool on its premises, in hopes of servicing the community. Harvest Festivals and other outreach events started a flow of new people into the church. These events continue in a spirit of service to the community, as the church seeks to engage local residents.

However, as GCC congregants became older, their energy and passion for the community could not be actively sustained by their current membership. GCC’s final attempt to change its decay in membership and budget was to hire a new pastor who would represent the church community to the broader community of Spring Valley. This is when I was called to be GCC’s lead pastor in December 2008.

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5 This includes coaching the church planter, providing training sessions for lay leadership, assessing a team’s skills and strengths, and offering overall accountability and any other assistance a church planter and team might need.

6 Marlan Enns, interviewed by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2009. Enns was president of the Pastoral Search Committee, when I was hired.

Despite aging physically, the church had many dreams and goals. Since the execution of those dreams and goals was problematic, in January 2010 we met as a congregation together with leadership to discern what kind of church we wanted to be. This resulted in establishing a specific vision, mission, and set of values.\textsuperscript{8} In essence, GCC strives to be a multicultural family of faith for the community, to offer a multicultural experience, and to be a Bible-based church of believers who love one another and their neighbors.\textsuperscript{9} This was a noble goal, yet change comes with a price. As soon as change started to develop, many of the elders became disoriented and upset at what they perceived as departing from beloved tradition. Mark Lau Branson offered a potential solution in \textit{Memories, Hopes and Conversations} called “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI).

AI guides participants to celebrate how the Holy Spirit has moved in the life of a congregation throughout its past and to see how God has shaped it over the years, a process which helps to open collective human minds for future change.\textsuperscript{10} Engaging in Appreciative Inquiry allowed GCC congregants to focus on the history of the church, to recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of the congregation since its inception, and to embrace future hope based on God’s past faithfulness. This caused much joy. GCC elders shared examples of how God led people to Christ to become faithful members, baptisms, festivities, funny stories, and an overall gratefulness for

\textsuperscript{8} GCC’s vision, mission, and values will be discussed at length later in this same chapter.


\textsuperscript{10} Mark Lau Branson, \textit{Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry, Missional Engagement and Congregational Change} (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 113. If I did not have this tool at the time, I am not sure what I would have done. I learned a lot by implementing the ideas in this book, since working with elderly brethren was not something I had experience in at the time.
much fruit in the life of the church. Branson affirms that some of the benefits of AI are discovering information on congregational history, values, current activities, along with a goldmine of resources for meaning and motivation.\textsuperscript{11}

Engaging in Appreciative Inquiry broadened my pastoral perspective and helped church members be more precise, as they struggled with embracing what was most important and valuable in the church’s tradition and identity. In the face of changing demographics in Spring Valley, they were forced to transform the way they did church or otherwise face extinction. Appreciative Inquiry paved the way for aging, predominantly white congregants to give up their reality of being a middle- to upper-class homogenous church—much like the example Branson shares regarding a Japanese-American congregation.\textsuperscript{12} It was difficult, but GCC elders were excited.

Little did they know that the approaching changes would be upsetting, with some realizing that it was more than they were willing to sacrifice. The biggest hurdle in the revamping of the church was the preparation of current members to receive the dissimilar people in the community. We decided to continue meeting with the whole congregation to return to some of the fruitful habits of the past—such as sitting with newcomers, offering Bibles to visitors, inviting friends, discerning how to approach them, and extending the time for “meet and greet” in the service. Extending this portion of the Sunday service was affirmed by all, in order to allow for more fellowship in the middle of the service. Some members felt uncomfortable and overwhelmed at the notion of the high investment

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4.
involved in being a welcoming church. This only showed that they were not ready to accept people of a different language, tradition, and culture and give them a voice to help create the story and narrative of the church.

When new people started arriving to Sunday services, it was a joyful experience initially. GCC was happy to welcome Spring Valley families and fresh faces to the church. Most of the new arrivals were not currently Christians or people raised in a church environment, who knew how to engage in congregational life. They did not dress up to attend church; they placed their feet on the pews, got up in the middle of the service during the sermon, and sometimes talked while the service was in motion. The discomfort grew too much for some more traditional congregants. GCC lost older members, as new ones were added. Some of the complaints received from members were that the new people were disruptive in the service or their children did not behave, as newcomers would interrupt the service and arrive late.

The Spring Valley community increasingly responded to GCC’s invitations. The church held several events that gathered a few hundred people from the community through GCC’s preschool,13 tutoring program, and other youth programs. GCC also started a music class that allowed congregants to invite parents to hear their children do a recital, which was strategically held on Sunday morning to connect parents in the worship service. The congregation grew from twenty-eight in 2008 to over ninety in 2010.14

13 Grace Covenant Church, “World of Wonder Christian Preschool.”

14 Kim Shell, Grace Covenant Church Attendance Records (Spring Valley, CA: Grace Covenant Church, 2008-2010).
This growth posed more challenges. One of them was the need to preach to unchurched people, who did not have any experience in an ecclesiastic body. The sermons had to have a healthy foundation to engage the elders from the Village, most of whom were experienced ministers, while keeping it relatable enough for new believers and those curious about Christianity to understand. Personally, this proved a difficult challenge. As a preacher, my experience primarily relied on expounding the Word to multicultural congregations much younger than GCC’s current elders. Consequently, this was also a time for growing as a preacher, since it offered an opportunity to experiment in new approaches in homiletics.

As new attendees continued to flow into GCC services, a sense of disconnection and lack of belonging came over the older generation, as they witnessed changes in the liturgy, worship, length of service, Word proclamation, and other aspects of a normally traditional service. The congregation wrestled for several years with singing hymns and contemporary music in the same service and how much to give each style. While two elders on the worship team led the initial hymns, one of the many problems was that both the church organist and accordionist were experiencing extreme hearing loss and were not able to keep the same beat together.

Another reason some of the elders started to struggle in perceived belonging was that familiar faces were disappearing, some due to death and the natural aging process and others due to a decision to congregate elsewhere on Sunday mornings. This was not only a sad fact but a worrisome one. The elders of Mount Miguel were the sole financial benefactors of the church. They knew it, and some did not leave due to that very fact. Financially, GCC could always count on their gifts to arrive at the church on the first
Sunday of the month or the first day of the month, whichever was closest. Church leaders knew by this first Sunday offering whether bills would be paid. Leadership struggled to trust God financially while welcoming the new, less financially secure community and keeping a sense of what the church historically had been throughout past decades.

The biggest problem the traditional church faced in the beginning of my tenure was that my marriage was in trouble and would succumb to divorce. This was a very difficult time for a church that was already going through many changes. I started with GCC’s ministry in December 2008, together with my whole family. In January 2010 I had to face the congregation with the news that my wife of twenty years had decided to leave the church and her family as she did not feel called to be a pastor, wife, or mother anymore. While this was a shock to the family, the church experienced a bigger shock. Particularly the older generation believed in the ministry for which the Martinez family stood, since we were musicians and church planters. We initially presented a united front with our children as musicians and my now ex-wife as a worship pastor. The elders had hired us, because we had modeled what they deemed as a “Christian family fit for ministry.”

Now these traditional members were faced with a new reality. Never in the history of the church had they experienced one of their pastors facing a divorce. A few elders, who also served as lay leaders on the governing board, talked to me about my situation. They suggested it was better for me to move on to another call, since I was clearly damaging the church and its legacy. Another board member visited to encourage me,

15 Russ Camp, interview by author, Spring Valley, CA, 2010. Camp, now deceased, was a Mount Miguel resident and president of the GCC leadership team.

because he felt I had no more choices going forward with ministry. “Who else would want you as a divorced pastor?” he asked.  

I submitted to the care process of The Evangelical Covenant Church for denominational assessment. I was under the care of the Board of Ministry, which is the body that walks with pastors in discipline and care cases, for over two years. This was an encouraging process. The denomination invested in counseling for my children and me. My ex-wife was offered the same help, but she declined. I was asked to surround myself with two mentors, solid men who would be willing to walk with me through these difficult times and were willing to speak the truth in love. I was fortunate enough to find five pastors to walk with me. This was an important asset to the congregation indirectly, since they were influencing my leadership skills and abilities as the congregation went forward with the church’s original desire to seek the community and become multicultural.

In a strange way, this tragedy brought some unexpected and helpful benefits. It equipped me to be a better pastor to a community that experiences much devastation from divorce. I suddenly found myself in a unique position to help others going through this experience, from filling out legal paperwork to specialized counseling to couples who were considering divorce as an option. Even in my public speaking life, I am asked to address crowds in many marriage conferences, which seek to enrich communication between partners. My family’s experience also was helpful to a congregation who had not experienced a minister in this situation. In the end, the same elders who asked me to leave

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17 Camp, interview.
actually became strong partners. The traditional segments of the GCC no longer assume that tragedy brings an end to ministry.

**Recent Ministry**

Due to the age and life stage of many of the congregants, recent ministry basically has involved offering comfort during funerals and burials, leasing space to young church plants, prayer ministry, and seeking to serve as a space and base for racial reconciliation and diverse cultures to come together as the Body of Christ. Newer parishioners are involved in discipleship classes that teach basic Christian doctrine but also practical formation opportunities for developing communal connections.

During the last five years of ministry, GCC has engaged in twenty funerals and burials. Most of the elders from across the street “graduated,” as Mount Miguel says when someone passes away. Of twenty-eight original members from the Village, only five now remained. GCC acquired more members from the Village, but some still chose to attend another Covenant church in the area. This was a difficult time of loss, financial uncertainty, and unique opportunities. If GCC was to continue, other sources of revenue needed to be found. This difficult circumstance also has given GCC the opportunity to move forward with a younger congregation who can reach the community at large, since they come from there. New people are not isolated like Mount Miguel’s tight-knit community.

As part of solving the financial conundrum, GCC explored the option of making the grounds and campus available to other congregations. A clear strategy was needed to go forward in light of GCC’s vision, mission, and values. The first congregation to become a renter was Our Father’s House (OFH), an Adventist church led by James
OFH is a multicultural church, predominantly African American and Pacific Islander. Since this congregation worships on Saturdays, there was no problem sharing the whole campus. The rent amount was relatively low but helpful to the GCC budget. The second church was a Samoan church plant called “Voice of God,” which continues to meet on Sundays at 1:00 p.m., after GCC’s meeting time of 10:30 a.m. Finally, Centro Cristiano Nueva Vision, a first-generation Mexican church plant joined the campus on Sundays at 4:00 p.m. All three churches contribute to the financial health and overall outreach efforts of GCC, as all four churches unite in events to reach the diverse community.

While sharing the facilities all congregations took advantage of the opportunities to mingle and become friends, embracing the multicultural vision of the church. The commitment to treat all tenants well, justly, with dignity, and as partners allowed for real friendships to grow and for trust to be established. The renters became partners in the mission and formed a unit that led to great partnerships for the congregations. This arrangement helped GCC survive some of the most difficult financial years, while growing in size and in discipleship of new people.

GCC has many victories, such as the alliance formed with the renting pastors and congregations. However, some of the challenges continue. Among those are that congregants were not really equipped to mobilize for ministry—such as outreach, discipleship of new people, counseling—as they were young in the faith. For five years, training and discipleship have continued with some academic and practical resources. Mondays are the day for study and training of lay leaders, a very important key in

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churches. This day serves to solidify basic knowledge of Scripture and setting basic rudimentary foundations for future leadership. These new worshippers are growing in the faith, but there is a lack of structure and understanding of how to live out that faith with the new knowledge. Since Sunday is the biggest gathering day, what is done during the main service has to engage congregants to take a practical step each week into helping both themselves and, consequently, the church to grow. For this reason, so much importance now has been placed on discerning the fruitfulness of different sermon styles and directing the premise of practical application in a multicultural environment. There is deep need among congregants to hear the Word of God, practice what they hear, and feel equipped in their God-given gifts.

**Connecting the Church to Its Community**

GCC is fairly good at reaching the community to come to its campus through events. Special events bring a life to the church that is not always present. Energy, action, and movement in the campus are a sharp contrast in the middle of the week. The whole church has to mobilize in order to receive hundreds of people at the same time. These range from a Harvest Festival, GCC’s alternative to Halloween, to summer events like the Vacation Bible School that welcomes children and youth for Bible lessons. The WOW Preschool holds joint events at graduation, Christmas, and Easter that are well attended as parents come to see their children perform. However, this interaction did not cause many people to join the church. There is a chasm between being appreciated for such efforts to host the community and a resident’s concrete choice to attend services to support the tangible church. Although a few congregants have been added through these ventures,
something is lacking in the church’s ability to connect more people into the Body of Christ and the Sunday worship experience.

An insignificant, yet perhaps important, detail of the church building is that it does not have a door facing the street. In order to enter the church, one must enter through the parking structure. Theories vary as far as why it was built this way. Some say that it was simply overlooked, while others thought campus security played a part on it. Whatever the reason, it seems to signify a lack of openness to the community. Several people are surprised when they visit that the church still exists, simply because they never see anyone walking into the sanctuary unless they also can see the parking structure. This is a problem to be addressed but would have to wait due to the financial uncertainty. Even the preschool, which is also on campus, seems to be hidden in the back area.

**Mission, Vision, and Values Established by the Congregation**

In order to establish a working document that GCC could reference as it moved forward, the congregation and leadership gathered to figure out the kind of church it could become. This was a time of inquiry and listening to the congregation’s dreams and hopes. The document included key pieces—specifically, statements of vision, mission, and values that could guide GCC as it moved forward into its preferred future.¹⁹

First, the congregation and leadership designed a vision statement. GCC is “to be a multicultural, multigenerational family of faith for the community; to be a great place to

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¹⁹ Danny Martinez, comp., *Vision, Mission, and Values* (Spring Valley, CA: Grace Covenant Church, 2009). The contents of this document were created as a result of AI and approved at a GCC congregational meeting. All details regarding GCC’s vision, mission, and values are taken from this document, unless otherwise noted.
GROW for all people.” This was an important distinction from what GCC has been yet now needed to be. Intentional multicultural outreach for the retention of a multicultural community is now seen as necessary. This is in the process of becoming a practical part of the ethos, as GCC seeks to live together among many cultures. This is a future view of the Kingdom of Heaven, as it shows all nations and tongues together praising God (Revelations 7:9).

GCC also designed a mission statement, which consists of a few moving parts. The first part is this: “To offer a great worship experience to all generations.” According to ECC church-planting training, the worship experience helps attract and retain new people to a church plant.20 The second part deals with Scripture. GCC is “to be instructed and challenged by the Word of God through the preaching and the study of the Bible.” Deep worship joined with solid preaching marks a significant introduction to the church for possible returns. As the third leg of mission, GCC seeks “to submit to one another in the love and discipline of Jesus Christ.” Knowing that the process of planting a multicultural church was not comfortable for everyone involved, “submitting to one another in love out of reverence for Christ” was a gentle reminder that love needed to trump all else as the mission went onward, because this was the apostle’s reminder in Scripture (Ephesians 5:21). The final part is “to disciple a new person each year.” This was a good goal to have in order to grow in the number of disciples. The liability became that people did not follow up on this particular part of the mission. The correlation was hard to establish with new people beyond the amicable, superficial connection. The hope

20 David Olson, interview by author, Sacramento, 2003. Olson is director of Church Planting for The Evangelical Covenant Church.
is for new approaches to preaching to encourage this praxis of the mission, by equipping and encouraging congregants to invite others to church as a discipline.

Additionally, GCC established a list of values as a congregation. These values communicate the church’s non-negotiable biblical concepts and communal desires, which stem from ECC values. GCC’s first key value is this: “Being a Bible based Church.” This is part of the ECC philosophy of affirming the centrality of the Word of God. This is especially important to the Covenanters who remain in the flock. GCC’s second value involves “being God’s Ambassador to our neighborhood.” This comes from the deep belief that the church is needed in the community, as much as the church needs the surrounding community. The third value is for GCC congregants “to be racially and generationally diverse.” Listing this helps in accountability of continuing the vision of being a multicultural church. GCC’s fifth value is “loving our neighbor as ourselves” and comes from the greatest commandment, as told by Jesus in Mark 12:30-31. GCC believes that a tangible way of loving Jesus is how one loves people. The final value involves “being generous with our resources by faithfully giving to our church and other needs.” This was meant to be a discipleship and stewardship tool. As GCC grows, more resources are needed to keep the doors open to the church. These values point the church in a biblically discerned direction. This list was published and listed in bulletins and promotional material for the church. This has been a tool continually shared at events and to all new visitors.

21 Grace Covenant Church, “What We Believe.”

GCC congregants have been on board with the discerned vision, mission, and values. They passionately invest themselves in the process. Without this kind of initial platform, moving forward in a single-minded manner would be difficult. For those who have called GCC their church family for many years, this was a huge investment as the vision, mission, and values were enhanced in a new and unfamiliar way. An emotional investment was also necessary to see ministry into implementation. This stance has taken the church into new territory that no one can guarantee, yet it dreams of a new congregation who represents the community.

The Ongoing Challenges of an Established Church Deciding to Become Diversified

When measuring the steps needed to help GCC become a more relevant church, the biggest setback has been timing. When bringing transformation forward and establishing structures for change, discerning the right timing is of essence. Change that happens too fast risks eliminating some. Change that moves too slowly seems too dense and lacks the synergy and momentum needed for additional modification.

The leadership has been careful not to hurry the process, in order to be inclusive of the elders. Some of the changes needed were in the area of music and revamping the worship service. Since there was no regular team for worship, new people were recruited and a system for training and developing worship team members was put in place. As slowly as things changed, years later many elders expressed loss and sadness over the new way of doing church. However, they committed themselves to continue out of love for God and the church.
Another disadvantage was the lack of budget to hire people for specialized ministry, such as youth, children, and worship ministries. Since visitors were attending, their families had needs during the service. This meant shifting the focus from elders to visitors. These situations were opportunities to learn new ways to minister in this context. Consequently, training has become a part of the greater narrative of work; since without having trained people in place, the work would become unsustainable.

A third challenge has been implementing a preaching experience applicable to the new congregation. This preaching needs to be a tool for learning about God, Scriptures, and community; yet it needs to be practical enough for diverse listeners to apply what is being learned. Preaching that is too academic can alienate new people with no church experience or knowledge of the Bible. Preaching that is too rudimentary might seem boring and redundant to the elders, who have been versed in biblical academic studies and in missionary ministry. For this reason, preaching became the focus of this paper.

**A Desire and Need to Start a Worship Service in Spanish**

As GCC continued to make changes to its worship and service, both leadership and members saw an increase in people visiting the church. Eventually, neighbors within walking distance started attending the service with their families. Preschool parents began joining the church as well as families whose children were served through various church programs. Some came simply because they saw a Latino last name on the marquee outside. Essentially, most who arrived were Latino and other minorities, such as Samoan and African American.
Many new Latino attendees who spoke only Spanish did not know what was going on during the service. They thought that the pastor would certainly speak Spanish, but this was a multicultural service where English was spoken. People were gracious but stopped coming regularly, due to their limited understanding. Initially, they stayed because their kids enjoyed church, but that was not enough to commit to weekly worship. GCC bought some headsets to accommodate them, but this solution felt awkward and pointed to their deficiency in the language. Translating the service from up front was not an option, since we did not have a good interpreter and this tended to lengthen service. These people were seeking a spiritual home, but they still felt like visitors.

Consequently, GCC started thinking seriously about starting a second service that would be in Spanish. I was not comfortable with the idea at first, since GCC’s multicultural service was not large enough to have people permanently leave for the other service. Also, the preparation would wear the staff thin in double work, since the message would need to be translated into Spanish as well as the overhead projections, the music, and all other elements of the service. So we waited until the multicultural service grew to a level that was comfortable to launch a counterpart service.

Then, in January 2015, the Spanish-speaking church meeting at the GCC facility lost its pastor. GCC met with the leaders and presented a plan to start a new church within the ECC. After many months of building relationships, they merged and went ahead with a preview service, which was a trial monthly service that the ECC uses to plant a new
church, to engage interest in the new service time and to gather people. There was a tremendous response, and it eventually became Iglesia del Pacto Nueva Visión (IPNV).23

GCC congregants were ecstatic that, despite all the extra work, there were two services that were growing. Part of the challenge became having appropriate cultural sermons, since the sermons were written in English for the multicultural church. This became part of what was needed to find in the mix of preaching well to diverse congregations. Humor often does not translate, so I had to find ways to communicate the same message with a new format. Finally, we had a Latino congregation that felt at home with their native tongue to worship and receive visitors. Surprisingly, some of the original Latino congregants went back to the multicultural service as the Spanish-speaking church began to grow.

GCC leadership began to question my loyalty to the multicultural church, since IPNV was experiencing fast growth. They started to question how much time and effort I was putting into the church plant and how the extra task might deter me from doing my job as senior pastor at Grace. This was not accurate, since most of my time was dedicated to GCC. Consequently, GCC became a hybrid: two congregations but one church.24 All of this led to the exploration of preaching as an instrument of proclamation through experimental styles of preaching, which is the focus of Part Two of this discussion.

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24 Grace Covenant Church, “Welcome.”
PART TWO

BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PREACHING THE WORD OF GOD TO UNIFY AN ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY
CHAPTER 3
PREACHING AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PROCLAMATION

This chapter explores some fundamental convictions that have led toward the development of a theology of preaching. It considers biblical perspectives on preaching as well as doctrinal issues relating to proclamation. It also recognizes the role of the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the good news of the Gospel.

God Meets People Where They Are

Scripture offers many examples of God’s willingness to reach out to people. Two of those examples are studied here to provide a basis for the interest of God in pursuing individuals. They show how people sought God but needed guidance and attention. In this way, God often uses His servants to proclaim His Word to people who may not be able to make sense of it—particularly due to differences in culture or religion.

The narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-39 offers a solid perspective on what drives such proclamation. Below is the passage depicting the Ethiopian’s
meeting with the evangelist/deacon Stephen. It narrates how this important Ethiopian man, an official of the Queen of Candace, was on his way home from worshipping:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way, he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

It is likely that the Ethiopian was there on official business or he was probably a Jewish proselyte, someone who is not a Jew but has converted to the God of the Jews. His name is not mentioned, but his title held importance and commanded attention.

There are several problems with his attendance in Jerusalem and the expectation of being able worship in the temple. His title or importance did not make a difference in being allowed to go into the temple. Several things stopped him from entering, mainly his race and his religion (since he was not a Jew) and the fact he was a eunuch, which also

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1 All Scripture is taken from The Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), unless otherwise noted.

exempted him from this privilege (Deuteronomy 23:1-3; Leviticus 21:18-20). On his way home the Ethiopian eunuch reads from the scroll of the Book of Isaiah but has questions about Isaiah 53:7-8:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearsers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.

This passage describes the Suffering Servant, which initially is attributed to Israel and then Jesus Christ, who embodied it in fulfillment of prophecy. The Ethiopian is reading this chapter either by happenstance or because it speaks to him somehow. There are themes of oppression, affliction, and lack of justice. Perhaps he reflects on his denial of entry to the temple and/or his life as a eunuch.

The other side of this Acts 8 narrative shows how God met the eunuch right where he was. Recently in a revival in Samaria, Philip the evangelist had been ousted from Jerusalem after the death of the deacon called Stephen (Acts 8:1-8). Now Philip is moved by the Spirit of God to go to the desert road leading to Gaza. There he sees the eunuch on his chariot, and he runs behind him close enough to hear him read from Isaiah the prophet. Philip asks if he understands, and the eunuch says, “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” Philip takes the very same passage of Scripture to show this man the good news of Jesus Christ. He baptizes him and the eunuch goes home, with a huge difference: he was rejoicing. Essentially, God interrupts Philip’s trajectory in order to minister to the eunuch. Philip is God’s agent of proclamation. God worked the circumstances for the needs of this African man to be met. Using Philip to bring the good
news with clarity, God intersected this man where he was in his journey. God met him through the Scriptures in his own suffering and through Philip on the road to Gaza.

This passage shows how God will go to extreme circumstances to meet people where they are. Philip was very useful in proclaiming the Gospel in Samaria, yet he chose to obey God in pursuing a man he did not know, in the middle of an unknown place. God made it possible to meet this Ethiopian in his time of need. Philip was placed at the right place, at the right time, and for the right purpose.

Another passage that shows God’s interest in pursuing people where they are is the story of Elijah the prophet in 1 Kings 18 and 19. Elijah faced the false prophets of Baal on Mount Sinai and God met him there, demonstrating His power by burning the sacrifice Elijah was offering. Elijah then was overcome with fear for his life, when the queen threatened him. Elijah fled and hid in Mount Horeb. God met him there as well.

The political climate of the time of Elijah was complicated. King Ahab and his wife did not do the right thing before the eyes of the Lord and wanted to kill all the prophets of God. Ahab, son of Omri, committed more evil acts in the eyes of the Lord than any regent before him (1 Kings 16:30). Elijah feared for his life, due to this persistent evil from royalty. Theologians Richard D. Patterson and Herman J. Austel agree that just when God needed him the most, the divinely trained prophet proved a notable failure. Elijah had seen the power of God and still feared a human queen who had the power to kill him. God met Elijah in public (1 Kings 18:16-38), in private (1 Kings 19:3-8), in his success (1 Kings 18:39-46), and in his failure (1 Kings 19:9-18). God met him to provide encouragement.

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and support but also to challenge him (1 Kings 19:9). God encountered Elijah through the elements, like an earthquake (1 Kings 19:11) and then a fire (1 Kings 19:12), but finally He spoke to him in the gentle wind (1 Kings 19:12-13). God meets people in challenging times and in time of personal affliction and pain. God remains faithful, for He cannot disown Himself (1 Timothy 2:13).

Just as God meets people individually, He also meets them in community. The preacher is used by God to meet people right where they are. Jesus desires a relationship with everyone, and faith starts by hearing the Word of God. Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Elijah eventually would come back to do God’s will but only after he had an encounter with the God he served. The people of God today need that same encounter in order to continue doing His will in their specific space and place where life meets them.

For proclamation to usher in God’s presence and meet people where they are, preachers need to rely on the power of God. God meets people in the sermon and in the community. Both benefit from the preparation and groundwork of the preacher, much in the same way the Ethiopian eunuch benefited from Philip’s preaching preparation and groundwork in Samaria. Justo González and Pablo Jiménez explain that God’s power turns the sermon into something meaningful for its hearers. They write: “[E]l sermón no es un texto sino más bien un acontecimiento.” Centering on the fact that God is interested in the individual and the whole church, preachers can focus on themes that are

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important within the limits of the thirty-minute Sunday sermon. They can expand on the
essentials of the faith and develop an important/relevant topic that affects the church
currently. However, the expectation is that God meets each person through the
proclamation of the Word. Those listening participate. González and Jiménez affirm, “La
congregación le está diciendo al predicador que reconoce o no, la Palabra de Dios en lo
que el predicador está diciendo.”

In this way, the sermon can provide a place where God meets people. In *View
from the Pew*, Lora-Ellen McKinney agrees and states: “Preaching is, in the Sunday
morning moment, the center of the worship service and as such, it is a powerful event.”
Preachers announce the God that has revealed Himself through His son, Jesus Christ, and
the Holy Scriptures, so they utilize the weekly Sunday event to proclaim this intention.
Proclamation without the presence of God does not fulfill the purpose of declaring who
Jesus Christ is. God meets people where they are, because He loves them. This is the
essence of Jesus’ incarnation on earth: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one
and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John
3:16).

The personification of God’s desire to be present in people’s lives is His love for
humanity through the person of Jesus Christ. God loves people so much that He gave His
only son, so they might believe. This is the epitome of His action towards a humanity that
appears to be lost and without purpose. The reason stated is so that no one will perish but

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5 Ibid., 82. “The congregation is communicating to the preacher with their attention, if they
acknowledge or not, the Word of God in what the preacher is preaching [translation mine].”

have everlasting life. The words that Jesus spoke in John 3:16 express the most important message of the Gospel (cf. Mark 3:6; Matthew 10:6; Luke 15:24), that salvation is a gift received only by believing God for it. Love is the force that prompted God to intervene in the world; therefore, it is the force behind proclamation.

Jesus’ entry into the world in human form and interacting with humanity speaks to God’s aspiration to meet people in their homes, places of worship, and in the streets. Jesus’ miracles (John 2:11; 4:46-54; Mark 1:28) and many acts of compassion (Matthew 8:14-15; 9:27-31; John 5:1-15) were signs of the Kingdom of God coming to earth with God’s love for everyone. The fulfilment of the Old Testament and the culmination of God’s concern in meeting people was through the sending of His son, the Messiah.

The Need for Proclamation

Proclamation has been the cornerstone of the Gospel since the Great Commission was given to the disciples by Jesus. Jesus charged the disciples with this important task. He said, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). To go and make disciples, to baptize them, and to teach them to obey were the tasks. However, before disciples can be made, followers baptized, and obedience taught, proclamation must first occur. People must hear the Gospel and various aspects of who Jesus is, in order for their lives to start to be shaped into His image.

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Sundays give a unique weekly opportunity to proclaim the Gospel and shape people into believers.

In Luke 4:18 Jesus walks into a synagogue and is handed a roll. He chooses to read from the Book of Isaiah to describe the beginning of His ministry. He chooses a passage that includes a verse that states that He is called to proclaim: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18). The word to “preach” or proclaim is significant in Luke. It has the connotation of carrying out this task to a specific group of people, such as those who did not have access to it. These words carry with them an intention to proclaim the message of good news to all.

Proclaiming the good news to the poor was an important factor in the ministry life of Jesus. He demonstrated this by healing blind people (John 9:1-41), lepers (Luke 17:11-19), and even the dead (Luke 7:11-17). Many of these people likely did not have access to health care. The need for proclamation goes beyond physical healing into emotional and spiritual restoration. According to Teresa L. Fry Brown, “the purpose of preaching is the proposition of the potentiality, and actualization of healing the inner hurts and pains, deliverance from trial and tribulations.” It is an all-inclusive reminder of the Jesus who saw His service as “healing, saving, preaching and teaching. . . . [and] sets the criterion for preaching about the

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critical concerns of the lives and lifestyles and all persons.”

Jesus cared about the health of the sick and the lonely. When proclamation is done properly, preachers honor the Christ who cares for people and their overall well-being. In this way, the need to proclaim the Gospel points to a holistic approach that may start during Sunday morning’s message but carries through into a person’s mid-week discipleship and challenges people to grow in all aspects of their being.

Preaching needs to happen within the context of congregational life. Proclamation is given to the people, and it addresses their reality in whatever socioeconomic context they reside and their own relationships. While preaching can happen outside the church, within the Body of Christ is where it is sought and wanted. In this same way, Jesus utilizes the opportunity given to Him by the synagogue to address those seeking God to read a passage and to preach the fulfillment of the prophecy of His arrival. His message is questioned and even rejected in Luke, but His resolve is to give the good news (Luke 4:28-30).

Leon Morris highlights the need for proclamation in his commentary on Luke and writes: “Jesus understood his role to bring good news for the world’s distressed.”

Jesus started a movement that would emulate His preaching and love for communities in the periphery, pursuing people not only to believe in Him but who would become better because of His message. Fry Brown agrees and addresses the “action potential” of proclamation. She asserts, “If preaching is good news, then people will find resources

10 Ibid., 51.
11 Ibid.
from the Bible to confront their pain and face their trials and tribulations.”

Proclamation has fruitful consequences when preachers in the Body of Christ follow this example. Jesus was certainly faithful to this calling. Reading through Scripture it is easy to find that Jesus healed physically; comforted those in pain, such as the widow who lost her son; and delivered people from demons and terminal disease (Matthew 14:34-36; Luke 4:31-44; 7:11-17). He was faithful in deed and in word, specifically by proclaiming the good news for people where they seemed to have none.

The need for proclamation is evident as Jesus set the pace for the disciples to preach the good news everywhere they went. Jesus was not just a public speaker but one who would spend time with the people teaching and living among them. He invited the Twelve into a life of discipleship, so their proclamation would have a very practical effect. Together they learned to share their testimony and had shared experiences of Jesus. Their proclamation took shape, as they witnessed with their own eyes what they saw happen when walking with Jesus. Proclamation became a part of their lives, since they proclaimed the good news just as Jesus did from town to town (Luke 4:43). Miracles also followed the disciples as signs of the Holy Spirit, but these never took center stage over the love of God and His sacrifice at the cross, which is the central message of the Gospel. They were there to set the foundation of faith needed in order to believe. Through their relevant and transformational wisdom, biblical preaching today renovates lives and paves the way for people to become whole just like in the time of Jesus.

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Preaching as a Bridge for Communication

Preaching is a necessary bridge for communicating the Gospel. Often, it is an act of communication utilized for a collective purpose, such as in a church setting. Jesus sought it as a transformational tool to launch people into discipleship. In the same way, His disciples would communicate the Gospel privately and in community (Luke 19:1-8; Matthew 10:5-14; Mark 6:7-13).

Preaching was used in the life of the Early Church to connect God, His Word, and His people (Acts 2:14-47; 3:11-26; 6:1-7; Colossians 1:23). In the Old Testament, prophets brought a word from the Lord to kings and queens in a special and direct way (Isaiah 37:10; 1 Samuel 13:13-14; 2 Samuel 12:7; 1 Kings 18:1-19). In the same vein, preaching today is an effective way to connect God’s Word to people’s lives.

Communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ is, by definition, sharing who Jesus is. This can be done by sharing what Jesus said, within the context that He said it, to a new context in the life of the local church. However, the church should not expect to be transformed completely, solely by hearing sermons. There must be additional ways of enforcing and supporting what is said in the pulpit.

In What Do They Hear? Powell states that communication can be difficult based on context, so simplicity and clarity are essential. People hear according to their own experiences and limited understanding. For this reason, sermons are going to mean different things to different people. The variety of people’s contexts adds to the

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15 Powell, What Do They Hear? 108.
preacher’s challenge of communicating the good news. The preacher must make sense of
the way the congregation might practice the Gospel. Still, sharing the life of Jesus and
His message of reconciliation remains the substance.

Jorge Maldonado, a former professor and president of Centro Hispano de Estudios
Teológicos, the Bible Institute for Covenant Latina Churches, likes to share an often
quoted common saying in the homiletical community, “Some people use a text out of
context as a pretext.”

If Christian leaders do not apply proper context to their preaching
and do not diligently study the essence of a scriptural text, they can make it say anything
they desire instead of using the Scripture for how it was originally intended.

As an instrumental bridge of communication, preaching has a special mission in
the growing vitality of a church. Preaching allows for people to open their minds to
different stories other than their own experiences. Hearing the Scripture and its
development invites listeners to compare their values with the values of the Bible. James
R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers agree. They write: “The substance of the sermon is
surely set in motion by the preacher, but whatever the meaning it may attain rests upon
the reception of the actual hearers.”

Whoever the hearers are must understand a common language that will connect
with the intended communication. This is difficult in any setting, yet multicultural
settings pose several challenges since preachers do not always understand how certain
passages work for particular cultures and people in their specific situations. In Santa

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16 Jorge Maldonado, “A403: El ciclo vital de la familia” (curso, Centro Hispano de Estudios
Teológicos, Bell Gardens, CA, 2010).

17 Nieman and Rogers, Preaching to Every Pew, 17.
Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes, González discusses how his preaching did not bring the “Scripture closer to the people but farther away.”¹⁸ He eventually concluded that this lack of bridging occurred, because the sermon was coming from a place of theology as opposed to practice. This experience served as the impetus to write his book. This was to show that people read the Scriptures within a context, whoever the person may be.

Even in the best communication, there will be obstacles to communicating clearly. Nevertheless, the values of the Gospel—namely, Jesus’s love for the poor, the marginalized, and all of humanity—can and should be the preacher’s anchors, despite culture or context. Clear communication is necessary to help people turn their minds from their thoughts to the thoughts of God. Transformation is the goal in sharing the good news of the Gospel.

The Word of God being proclaimed in the pews of the church is not simply a valued chore of the pastor for the weekly worship service. The Word of God brings healing to a broken world (Psalm 107:20) and a word in due season (Proverbs 15:23; Isaiah 50:4). People who have endured suffering as part of their upbringing or unusual pain and prejudice often seem to read that into the Scripture as opposed to someone who may have had a privileged life. However, preaching that engages both examples will communicate the good news of Jesus, although listeners’ personal application of the texts might differ. The suffering can be comforted by the fact that Jesus also suffered, while those who are not in distress may feel special and loved since Jesus died for them yet can

begin to see the plight of those who are in pain. The same proclamation of the Scriptures brings healing to one and teaches compassion to the other.

Philip, as an evangelist, was sent from the Lord for this very purpose: to understand the promises of God in what the Ethiopian was reading. He bridged the meaning of Isaiah 56, where God promises to redeem and give a place for His followers to call their own (Isaiah 56:3-5), to the Eunuch’s personal situation. In this way, proclamation was utilized by another human being to span the gap in understanding, from the Old Testament era into a first-century cultural context. Similarly, contemporary preaching helps bridge the gap in communication from first-century biblical times into today.

The promises of God provide hope and encouragement for people but not if they do not know or understand them. Preaching and proclaiming God’s promises are a practical way of placing the Word of God as a reassurance to people in their need and sickness. It bridges their present physical, emotional, and social context with the Kingdom of God. When Jesus sent the disciples out for the first time to preach in nearby towns, He said for them to heal those who were sick and to tell them that the Kingdom of God was at hand (Luke 10:9). Healing and the proclamation of the Kingdom are linked together. This ties both with the mission of the Twelve and with the ministry of Jesus.19

Just as people were healed supernaturally by Jesus and the disciples, God continues to heal today, although a church may experience it in different ways. The Body of Christ provides a place of healing and reconciliation through the works and words of the Messiah.

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The people of God do this by providing the core of Jesus’ heart through the Gospels, the New Testament, and personal experience. The Bible and particularly the life of Jesus serve as a practical reminder that God is with us always. Preachers have the important task of reminding parishioners to look to the Savior for the things that they need, and even the ones they do not think they need. This connects people to the practical truth that God loves them.

**Preaching as a Bridge for Communication: A Denominational Perspective**

Preaching is a value in proclaiming the Gospel in The Evangelical Covenant Church (Iglesia del Pacto Evangélico).\(^\text{20}\) While pastors are free to proclaim the good news according to their own personal style, the ECC places a high value on contextual and biblical preaching. In its church-planting model, ECC church plants are instructed to provide contextual preaching that is effective in attracting new people to the gatherings.

The Evangelical Covenant Church holds the standard that the Bible, “the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.”\(^\text{21}\) Therefore, when a church is adopted or one is planted, the ECC believes that for a start-up to be healthy teaching the Word of God through “great preaching” is fundamental.\(^\text{22}\) The denomination views great preaching as designed

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\(^\text{20}\) The Evangelical Covenant Church, “Church Planter’s Training” (Chicago: Department of Start and Strengthen Churches, June 2013), 7. This is an internal departmental document.


\(^\text{22}\) The Evangelical Covenant Church, “The Church Planting Model” (Chicago: Department of Start and Strengthen Churches, September 2018), 13. This is an internal departmental document.
to “communicate the Word of God in a fresh way that engages people and that teaches the
gospel of Jesus Christ.”

In the New Testament, preaching is a public testimony of Christianity to those
who do not know Christ. To keep faithful to the calling of preaching to those who are
not committed Christians, which is a primary purpose of church planting, the ECC
teaches that the good news is always about Jesus Christ (Acts 8:35).

Sociologically, there are many elements that newcomers to church are
considering. First, they wonder if the church they are visiting is a safe place for them.
Second, they often ponder it as a place for their children to participate and be a part of the
life of the church. Some parents are interested particularly in Christian formation for their
children. Third, they assess the church as a place to engage spiritually; through fruitful
proclamation, those who come to church are confronted with the Word of God in a way
that is relatable and in their context. Proclamation connects the newcomer to a larger
narrative where they can be a part of receiving encouragement and engage in learning and
understanding God’s will, much how Jesus Christ engaged people in both teaching and
preaching (Matthew 4:23). Finally, newcomers consider the worship style.

For church planters, preaching the Word of God in a way that is practical for
newcomers is an integral part of the first-step strategy of developing disciples. They are
taught the Scriptures in an enjoyable and non-traditional way. This often is done by

23 Ibid., 14.


26 Ibid., 17.
encouraging questions and people’s stories, which surface in the time of instruction. Preaching always is an event geared to call people into repentance and point listeners back to the Messiah, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). In this manner, the ECC adheres to biblical preaching that speaks to the local demographic. It views proclamation as an asset in communicating the good news of the Gospel.

**Preaching as a Tool for Teaching**

Preaching is a necessary instrument to teach the Body of Christ. For this reason, the Greek word *kērygma* is described as public proclamation (Matthew 12:41; Luke 11:32; Romans 16:25). As a highlighted element in Sunday worship, preaching has the responsibility to communicate the good news of Jesus and to instruct people in a way that shapes their understanding of biblical principles and helps them apply Scripture to daily life. Life-giving preaching has teaching elements that assist people in living their faith. It is not unusual to distinguish between preaching and teaching in the public ministry of Jesus.

Reviewing the Acts 8 situation of the Ethiopian eunuch once again reveals how hungry he was for instruction. He had questions that pertained to the context of Isaiah. He asked, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (Acts 8:34). When Philip started his proclamation in Acts 8:32, he began with the very same passage of Scripture the Ethiopian was reading and explained to him the good news about Jesus. This encouraged the eunuch’s question in Acts 8:34. Philip understood that by teaching the good news, the eunuch’s life would change. The first obvious sign was his willingness to be baptized (Acts 8:36-38). As it states in the Great Commission, Philip taught that trusting in the Gospel and being baptized was the next step after believing.
There was a teaching element that was put into practice as soon as the eunuch saw some water. The good news was taught and believed, and his response was the next natural step of discipleship: baptism. In this way, his desire to be baptized was a logical and organic way of expressing his faith. Jesus died for the eunuch’s sins; the eunuch had immediate access to the family of faith, as already stated in the Scripture that he was reading (Isaiah 56:3-50). Jesus received him, and the eunuch was immersed in water as a public sign of faith. This form of proclamation took shape as Philip went about teaching and walking alongside a new believer. In a similar way, it is essential for sermons to be such instruments of teaching. People have questions, and those who proclaim and teach do not always provide answers. Rather, they offer elementary truth that allows people to continue to learn, engage, and receive.

Teaching in the New Testament is a carryover from Old Testament teaching practices. Children were instructed in the ways of God both at home and in the synagogue. Teaching children was a basic function of the synagogue that adults hoped would shape good followers of God. Additionally, the priests and elders had the responsibility to teach as part of their service to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 17:10-11). In the New Testament, children were included in the life of the Church to teach them in the way of Jesus.

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The Apostle Paul offers an analogy about teaching infants instead of adults. He states: “I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it” (1 Corinthians 3:2). Here in this context Paul saw the different levels of need and recognized that some were not ready for a solid meal of deep theological teaching. This is because teaching and preaching need a background and framework that allow preachers to approach several people walking through different moments in their lives at distinct levels of maturity. The general premise should be to empower all people to learn and to encourage them to continue learning as they walk with God.

Teaching and preaching go hand in hand. They correlate in the same message of the Gospel. Preaching is a proclamation of God’s desire to have a relationship. This must be done with care and in a way that is easy to understand. Preaching is an invaluable tool that can be used to teach people about the Kingdom of God.

Preaching is also a tool for teaching the truth of Jesus Christ, which in turn helps believers discern truth from lies. Jesus declared that He was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The elementary reason for Jesus to teach His disciples was to instruct them in the way of the truth, because it would set them free (John 8:32). God is the God of truth (Psalm 31:5; 108:4; 146:6). Jesus told the disciples that Satan, the accuser, was the “father of lies” (John 8:44) and that those who lie belong to him. The way the disciples distinguished lies from the truth was by knowing the truth that Jesus taught them. The Master said on more than one occasion that the disciples were in danger of being misled by other people claiming to be Christ (Luke 21:8). It is important to know the truth to not be misinformed.
Preaching that does not provide truth or that lacks teaching the truth in a practical way does not help to renew people’s minds. Consequently, it is important for churches to examine not only the preaching that happens during the main service(s) but also their teaching in parishes and Sunday School classes to discern what the best approaches are for learning basic Christian concepts that will enable today’s disciples to go deeper into the Scriptures and set a standard for truth. In a time where an absolute truth is not believed, Jesus’ teachings continue to provide relevant information into the truth of the Kingdom. Jesus offers examples for Christian living and stories to draw practical conclusions. Since God cannot be deceived (Galatians 6:7), only He can provide the values and principles for people to develop their own understanding of how to distinguish between counterfeit theology from the words of Jesus himself.

People face a transformation of the whole self—mind, body, spirit, and soul—when they learn the heart of God. The truth that Jesus commands us to love God (Mark 12:30) and to love neighbors sets a foundation for godly living. This only can happen if people believe Jesus. Preaching can help teach them how to understand His words and life for the sake of imitating His example. To preach the Scriptures in a way that allows the listener not only to understand but to emulate the Master is a high goal.

Disciples who do not know the Master and His teachings will not be able to preach a transformative Gospel. The good news is only “good,” if it is true and believed. As the preacher guides people to know God and His will in their lives, their existence can be renewed.

Moreover, preaching is a tool for teaching because it guides people into a closer relationship with Jesus. This happens when they embrace the Holy Spirit as the ultimate
“paraclete”\textsuperscript{30} and life teacher. Paul highlights this in his own use of proclamation: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Jesus promised the disciples that He would not leave them alone and that He would send a counselor that would guide them into all truth (John 14:16-17). The Holy Spirit is the advocate who walks with disciples and new believers alike to show them the way to the Father. He is the teacher, the Spirit of truth that leads them into all that is true and helps them in their ability to remember the message of Jesus accurately (John 16:13). When Jesus came to show humanity that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand by His teachings, miracles, and wonders as fulfillment of the prophetic hope (Matthew 12:41-42; 13:16-17; Luke 17:20-21), He promised not to leave the disciples as orphans after His death.

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians to teach that the Holy Spirit is the one who reveals truth to those who follow Jesus. He claims that what they have received was not given by the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God (1 Corinthians 2: 10-13). In preaching some will not accept the message and might even make fun of it. Paul states that this is because the sermon only can be discerned through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). To fully grasp the secrets of the Kingdom, both preachers and hearers must have the Spirit of truth guiding them in all truth.

Embracing the Holy Spirit in proclamation is to guide oneself towards Jesus, His Word and His actions. The Holy Spirit points people towards a divine fellowship with the

Savior. Since His job is to reveal the truth, the preacher must depend on the Spirit to disclose the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness personally through the Scriptures as a true-life coach towards heaven.

**Effective Preaching and Defining Desired Results**

It is important to preach effectively and define the desired results of a sermon, before uttering a word in front of the congregation. The sermon and its preparation start long before the preacher steps behind the pulpit to give the homily. This section considers what it means to preach effectively to a church. Ultimately, it is important to note that a preacher must first strive to learn and grow before leading the church.

For a sermon to be effective, it must communicate the Gospel of Jesus. To do this, the preaching might focus on His life, death, teachings, resurrection, or His desire for the Church to proclaim Him. This involves proclaiming with conviction what the Bible says and preaching it with the goal to help people to remember God’s story. Fry Brown says it well, “Establishing continuity between text and the contemporary word is critical to listeners understanding. It is not enough to preach a great sermon, if this is not going to be remembered.”\(^{31}\) When pastors proclaim the good news from the pulpit, the goal should be the same: to bring repentance to those who need to repent, to provide next steps for people who would like to experience transformation in their lives, and to walk with listeners in their spiritual journey by leading them into belief of what the Scriptures say.

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Sermons accomplishing this teach would-be believers as well as staunch believers to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior.

Another mark of effective preaching is practicality. The ability of listeners to put into practice what was proclaimed is imperative to be efficacious. Sermons need to be actionable. Effective preaching engages people’s hearts and establishes godly habits, such as giving, visiting the sick, forgiving offenses, and participating in congregational life. Finding ways to help people remember the sermon and to apply it should be part of the structural component of the sermon. Fry Brown adds, “Applicable sermons are more likely to lead to spiritual transformation.”32 The ultimate result desired in preaching is for people to be transformed through the Holy Spirit to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

The application is a part of placing the Holy Spirit into people’s hearts for reflection. González states: “When we say that the Bible is good to us; it is not so much that we interpret the Bible as that the Bible interprets us in a radically new and ultimately affirming way!”33 This is an important part of the desired result of preaching. The key is both biblical understanding and allowing Scripture to define and mold us. Intentional preaching has the ability to lead people into opening themselves to be changed by deep-seated truth, exposed through passages of the Bible.

Effective preaching also has a prophetic element. Fry Brown states that from the time of the Old Testament, “prophetic preaching challenges the listener and self to

32 Ibid.

33 González, Santa Biblia, 118.
change. . . The preacher stands under God’s Word and transmits God’s message of transformation and living standards.”

Preaching the Word of God allows the preacher to share what God wants people to know. This can be read from the Scriptures without the need of a preacher, yet something divine happens during the sermon. God uses the preacher as a prophet to call out sin, to share His love for people, and to communicate that He expects better. God relishes an individual’s personal relationship with Him, and as a community people have the chance to wrestle with biblical passages that cause them to alter their ways.

In the Jewish religious tradition, the best shaping elements are attributed to the call and ministry of the prophet, to whom God gave His Word and who, in turn, gave it to His people. When Jesus resurrected the son of the widow, the witnesses cried out, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” (Luke 7:16; Mark 6:15; 8:28). They were not wrong to call him a prophet, as this was a visit from God. However, Jesus was not just an average prophet. His message was prophetic from the start, when He called people to repent (Mark 1:15) and to change their ways (Mark 1:15b). In His incarnation, Jesus brought about the fulfillment of the prophecies of God (Isaiah 7:13-14; 2 Samuel 7:13-14; Isaiah 9:5).

Today preaching embodies the prophetic spirit as people are entrusted with Scripture that is to be disseminated, and the mission remains the same: to obediently glorify God. Prophets are not foretellers but “tellers of what is to come,” essentially declaring the truth about God and letting people know what the Word says that God will

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do if they obey.\textsuperscript{36} Prophets were not always the carriers of good news to those who did evil in the eyes of the Lord (2 Chronicles 25:16). Similarly, preaching repentance through a sermon does not always sound like good news; but for those who follow it, they will be led into change and restoration. Consequently, an effective sermon must inspire obedience in the Christian walk.

In defining the results of effective preaching, it is important to distinguish between sermons and simply delivering speeches. A speech can be given on any topic to any audience and can bear no consequence or expectation. Godly, inspired preaching desires to bear fruit in the preacher’s life as well as in the lives of congregants. To speak the Word of God and not have any expectations does not help lead people towards their needed outcome. The prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh to proclaim repentance to the whole nation (Jonah 3). Although Jonah himself did not have any expectations from his proclamation, because he did not care for the people, he obeyed. The City of Nineveh responded to the call to repent with fasting and true repentance to the God of Israel. When God saw what they did, He relented the destruction He had promised. Jonah had to go through a transformation of his heart to find worth even in the life of his enemies, simply because God loved them. The desire of God was repentance and transformation; both Nineveh and Jonah experienced that. In the same way, expectation for God to work is a precursor prior to, during, and after the sermon has been delivered.

When preachers speak the Word of God, if this is to be believed, the preacher must expect movement from the Holy Spirit to convict the world of its sin (John 16:8).

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
The preacher must abide in the hope of Jesus Christ and how that hope is for everyone, regardless of their personal feelings toward people who sin differently than they do (John 3:17). This means understanding that results occur in different ways and time frames, because the Gospel will reap fruit in God’s time. The Apostle Paul explains:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building. (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

Having expectations is important to make the best effort in proclaiming the good news. The discipline to submit oneself to feedback after the sermon to gauge whether the congregation understood correctly is important. To be an effective preacher, the message and point must come across clearly, concisely, and coherently. Most pastors and teachers have been misheard in ways totally unintended from the original premise. For these reasons, consistent feedback on sermons by a trusted group of people is indispensable.

Ultimately, preaching is a combination of preparation that includes exegetical work (obtaining the meaning from the passage through tools that utilize language and nuance), spiritual preparation (such as prayer, fasting, and meditation), standardized expectations (such as teaching what the church needs and/or desires), and the movement of the Holy Spirit (the power to convict, convince, and transform). Anticipating results, there must exist hope for what needs to be accomplished in the life of the church. Listening to the congregation is important, particularly to discern if the intended message

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37 Powell, *What Do They Hear?* 2.
of scriptural truth has been sufficiently contextualized for them and has been clearly communicated in a coherent and actionable way.

**The Role of the Holy Spirit in Proclamation**

The Holy Spirit plays a key role in the process of issuing and receiving proclamation. Without the Spirit of truth, it is impossible for people to be impacted by the Word of God. The Spirit’s function is to reveal truth to readers, speakers, and hearers of the Word.

The Holy Spirit infuses preachers with the power to proclaim (Acts 1:8). The word “spirit” (Hebrew *ruah*, Greek *pneuma*)\(^38\) is the word used from ancient times to define and clarify the knowledge of divine influence working in people, which was understood by them as the power of the living God. The power to be witnesses was brought to the disciples by the Holy Spirit, as promised by Jesus Christ.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples for the last time on earth, He asked them to stay in Jerusalem to receive power so that they (the disciples) would be “witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). They obeyed and stayed, and Peter preached an incredible sermon that drew three thousand people the same day to increase the number of disciples. Then they went to Judea (Acts 8:1), which was a larger province, and then to Samaria (Acts 8:1b). According to John 4:9, they would not be welcomed here due to racial tensions between Jews and Samaritans. The Holy Spirit did astonishing works in all of these places through Philip (Acts 8) and then with Peter and John (Acts 8:14).

The disciples often in their proclamation were accompanied by miracles, supernatural events, and signs of wonder. Peter healed a blind man by the temple (Acts 3:1-9), people were filled with the Holy Spirit after praying to speak the Word of God (Acts 4:31), and Ananiah and his wife Sapphira died for lying to the apostles about the gift they were offering (Acts 5:1-10). Although the miracles were astonishing, the vehicle for these was the Word of God, which the apostles had committed to continue to preach (Acts 6:2). McKinney observes, “Though the Holy Spirit is ever-present, preaching invokes that presence aloud and welcomes it into the community of believers.”

Preaching is not possible unless God directly intervenes through His Spirit to lead the preacher, to help listeners open their hearts, to convince them of their ways, and to plant spiritual seeds for fertile fruit. Such is the job of the Holy Spirit within this whole concept of preparing, working in the text, and living the Word. The sermon simply brings it all to completion and elevates God the Father. His power moves by transforming lives and changing people who previously were hopeless.

The Holy Spirit’s power works to empower preachers to boldly perform their task: to declare the Gospel to parishioners and would-be parishioners (Acts 4:31). The Holy Spirit holds a fundamental place in the rhetoric of the Word of God. Whether the preacher is an introvert (shy, reticent) or an extrovert (outgoing, expressive), both personalities require a personal belief on behalf of preachers that they will not be alone in the task of proclamation or on such an incredible mission.

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39 McKinney, View from the Pew, 6.
Timothy Keller states that people hearing a sermon will respond to “your skills, preparation, character and conviction. . . . but for the act of preaching there is something even more central to persuasion: your listeners’ sense of the Holy Spirit working in and through you.”\(^{40}\) For the Apostle Paul, the Holy Spirit is only the start of an enduring process that does fully complete until the person’s whole being is brought under the direction of the Spirit (Romans 8:11, 23; 1 Corinthians 15:44-49; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 5:1-15).\(^{41}\)

Preachers can trust the Holy Spirit to guide them, as He has been charged for that very reason. The role of the Spirit is to align the preacher to the will of God, as revealed through the Scriptures, with the personal heart of goodness. The Apostle Paul was encouraged by the Spirit to continue being faithful (Acts 23:11) with the promise that he would testify in Jerusalem. Paul suffered through many difficulties, but his hope in the Lord and reliance on the Holy Spirit allowed his preaching ministry to continue. The Spirit gives boldness to proclaim the Gospel truth that Jesus transforms lives. Paul writes to Timothy in his second letter: “For this reason, I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:6-7).

The Holy Spirit also helps preachers, when they are subjected to trials and tribulations. There can be health issues and family problems. There may be a relationship that is deteriorating and low morale. Paul urges Timothy, a young preacher, to remember who he is and his purpose during these difficult times. Preachers receive their flame, the gift of God, the Holy Spirit, and that this fire of God gives power and boldness to state

\(^{40}\) Keller, *Preaching*, 192.

effectively the message God wants proclaimed. The desire, devotion, and talent come from God. Simply put, every good and perfect gift comes from Him (James 1:17).

The Holy Spirit’s role in proclamation is also to lead people to the truth. There will be people who question the truth of God. From the beginning, Jesus tells His disciples that the counselor would be their guide to truth (John 15:13) and their job would be to dwell in Him (John 15:4-11). The fact is that the story of the Gospel is so fantastic and surreal that it is difficult for people to believe without a special intervention of the Paraclete.

Jesus taught the disciples that the Spirit would have several purposes. Only through the revelation of the Holy Spirit can sermon listeners find their way to Jesus and therefore to the Father (2 Corinthians 2:10). As advocate and counselor (John 14:16), the Spirit of God intercedes for people even when they do not know what they want or need (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit gives wisdom to understand the Scriptures. He indwells believers (John 14:17), particularly preachers carrying out their task of proclamation, sanctifying all and preparing all for good works (Romans 15:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). Within the task of proclamation, the Spirit causes the preacher to testify about Jesus (John 15:26), so listeners can better know God and His teachings. The Spirit of truth takes what belongs to Jesus and reveals it to His followers (John 16:15), which is what preachers do when they place the Scriptures in front of people and present the argument of the Living God.

The Holy Spirit guides all to Jesus, because Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; and no one comes to the Father, if not by Him (John 14:6). Paul argued that he spoke the truth in Christ and that he was not lying; his conscience confirmed it through the Holy
Spirit (Romans 9:1). In the same way, holding on to the Spirit allows the preacher to discern the Scriptures and to preach knowing that the revelation of the passage will occur. The Holy Spirit works through a preacher’s disciplines learned in seminary, Bible software, commentaries, and many other tools for learning, so presentation of the Word can bring biblical understanding and the task of proclamation can be done confidently in truth for all to hear the good news.

The role of the Holy Spirit is providing conviction within the preacher and the congregation. In fact, Scripture says that the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts preacher and parish alike of their sin, God’s righteousness, and His judgment (John 16:8). Without the Third Person of the Trinity, the preacher speaks in vain. The Spirit also convicts for good works to be done in the name of Jesus (Colossians 3:17).

The Holy Spirit guides preachers to the matters of people, knowing that God loves them and wants the best for them. This frees the preacher to speak confidently in the name of the Lord. In the Ethiopian eunuch’s story (Acts 8:26-39), Philip was guided by the Holy Spirit to go to the desert road, the one that leads to Gaza, to an isolated place for a specific purpose. In my Pentecostal upbringing, it is often referred as to being led by the Spirit. It is not just a gut feeling but a gentle tug from our consejero divino, or divine counselor, that allows us to be led into different ways than those to which we might be more accustomed.

The preacher’s hope is that the Holy Spirit is not limited to speaking to the audience at hand but rather, before the preparation of the sermon, a relationship exists between the preacher and God that provides the call and conviction to follow the call to preaching. This is trust within preachers that the Holy Spirit will guide them into truth
and away from teaching heresy. The truth of Christ is revealed to unite the Body of Christ and to align them with the will of God, as expressed in the Gospels.

Another of the Spirit’s functions in the role of preaching is to stimulate faith in the heart of those who listen to the sermon (Romans 10:17). A preacher’s conviction comes from the Spirit giving witness to the reality of the Son of God in the hearts of people (1 John 5:6-11). Preachers have the unique opportunity to speak of the values that God has transmitted to His prophets and disciples in the Scriptures. The preacher can influence a church and make a call to repent from racial biases and prejudice. Preachers can raise awareness about local injustices or highlight opportunities to do good. This gives the church the opportunity to be convicted by the Spirit of God to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Even as the congregation learns or remembers the Lord’s prayer and engages to pray to ask God for His will to come, preaching brings a conviction to align human goals and values with those of the Father who is in heaven.

Ultimately, preaching as an instrument of proclamation is a collaboration. The work of the Holy Spirit is to help both preacher and sermon listeners to understand the Scripture and God’s will for their context. The work of the preacher is to present God’s Word clearly, concisely, and coherently. The job of the Spirit is intertwined with the preparation of the sermon, the spiritual life of the preacher, the delivery to the masses along with the profound and fruitful effect upon the fertile soil that listeners bring to the proclamation event.

Consequently, the role of preachers is to depend on the Holy Spirit for a deep conviction in life and the freshness of God through His holy Word. This means waiting for and trusting the Spirit to provide an anointing for truth, power, and application to a
congregation that desperately needs the touch of God. God cares for His Church through elaborate manifestations of His will through proclamation of the living Word.
CHAPTER 4
EXPERIMENTAL STYLES OF PREACHING

This chapter advocates for the preaching approaches being used in this project. The sermons seek to establish an element that is organic to the community of faith at Grace Covenant Church and normalize it for the rest of the community. The chapter explains why certain styles were selected and holds them to the test of the congregation’s feedback through the Core Group, regarding sermon preparation and weekly preaching. The premise was to find styles that would engage GCC’s diverse parish and serve as a structure for future multicultural and multigenerational preachers. Several approaches were selected as experiential opportunities to learn homiletically. All were taught to the Core Group of people who would serve as both filter and weekly evaluator of the effectiveness of each approach to a certain demographic within the church as well as the whole.1

Conversational Preaching: The Roundtable Approach

Conversational Preaching’s goal is to unite a group of selected individuals to read Scripture, ask questions, listen to what Scripture tells each person, and to discern

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1 How each sermon was prepped, delivered, and evaluated with feedback will be presented in Part Three of this project.
collectively what it means for the rest of the congregation after wrestling with its content.\textsuperscript{2} This method also is called “The Roundtable Pulpit” approach. In his book, \textit{The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet}, John McClure states in the preface that Conversational Preaching is an approach that involves a proactive method to sermon delivery and even involves some of the members and/or leaders of the congregation in sermon brainstorming.\textsuperscript{3} Conversational Preaching was chosen as one of the approaches for two main reasons: to learn to preach in a way that speaks to the congregation and to get future leaders and members involved in the process. This was also an effort to help empower lay leaders to share ownership in the proclamation process.

Conversational Preaching is a basic way to help the church become a discerning body for Scripture and fellowship. In this Roundtable approach, a core group of believers is selected to give feedback to the biblical passages chosen for the sermons. They (the team) are selected, because they represent the church and its demographics. This core group brings their thoughts, questions, and contributions to the weekly Saturday meeting where every member gets to share. The feedback can be used for the sermon to enhance the communal narrative or as new insights to the preacher. The preacher takes notes and injects any relevant, useful, and supportive material into the Sunday sermon. The Conversational approach contributes to the good communication of the Gospel in a church like Grace Covenant in that it has the potential to connect people to the passages

\textsuperscript{2} McClure, \textit{The Roundtable Pulpit}, 7.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
and one another, regardless of culture or background, because it encourages listening and mutual sharing around the message of Jesus Christ.4

McClure asserts that such “collaborative preaching empowers members of a congregation to claim as their own the ideas, forms of religious experience, and theological vision articulated from the pulpit.”5 McClure does not advocate a topical preaching series according to the needs of an actual segment of the congregation nor a limited expository method.6 This is because one generalizes the context, and the other avoids connecting the needs to the content. McClure writes: “The good news of the gospel emerges in the theological event of interpretation, not the critical practice of exegesis (the discipline that helps us find the meaning and interpretation of a text) . . . placing a high premium on the conversation between the biblical text, theology, and life of real people.”7 In essence, preachers emphasize a need to connect the Gospel with the public realm.8

A church cannot grow spiritually unless preachers venture onward into the public life of the people and face the unknown persons who live there.9 The process of this style of preaching helps pastors to discover what is going on in the church by having the Core Group share personal and general concerns through the Scripture reading. It encounters

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4 Further details for how this works in practice can be found in Part Three of this project.
5 McClure, The Roundtable Pulpit, 7.
6 Ibid., 9.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 13.
9 Ibid., 14.
the stories that pastors would never get to hear, since they do not counsel every single member. This brings a proximity to taking the temperature of the leadership, Core Group, volunteers, and some members. Conversational Preaching engages church people in a process where, no matter what their local socioeconomic context, participants can share their own concept and life experience to enhance the meaning and overall experience of the Gospel message. In this way, preachers can find how the Scriptures are speaking more broadly to all the people, since the Gospel is for all people.

This method allows people to become owners of the proclamation on Sundays. Their voices can be heard, their opinions empowered, and experiences validated. The proclamation then becomes a common word. This technique also allows the preacher to become the facilitator of the discerned reading and application of the text, instead of only functioning as a charismatic speaker to engage an audience without the discernment of fellow congregants.¹⁰

This approach does not absolve the preacher from preparing or formatting the sermon. However, it allows the preacher to listen for the collective wisdom and experiences of a diverse group of people. This is because members of the Body of Christ see God differently and experience Him in an assortment of ways, since there is no hermeneutical paradigm that fits all.¹¹

The goal of persuading change in the community starts with the communal group. Preachers can speak on how God gives a sense of His Word, how it becomes a communal

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¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹¹ González, Santa Biblia, 32.
response on the Scriptures, and how it may apply to the rest of the congregation. However, it is difficult to know congregational needs if one does not spend time with the people. The Roundtable approach provides an understanding of where people are, either theologically or emotionally, and how they view God. This helps the preacher know how they are receiving the Word of God in their own interpretation. Application is not always universal. Sermons can disenfranchise rather than gather the people of God for empowerment under the cross of Jesus. The Conversational Preaching approach bridges this gap of misunderstanding that can happen between preacher and congregation and allows representatives of the congregation to speak into the process for a more contextualized proclamation and application of the Word.

**Preaching as Celebration: An African-American Approach**

Preaching as Celebration is based on *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* by Henry Mitchell.\(^\text{12}\) This resource was written in the 1970s and offers a description and argument for Black culture and preaching that is vital for African-American churches. In writing his book, Mitchell hoped that the African-American Church would continue to learn about its heritage and Christian roots through new and upcoming preachers. This strategy was chosen as a resource to embrace the African-American constituency at Grace Covenant Church, as a third of its members are African American.

Preaching as Celebration was chosen for some very important reasons. Studying and practicing the values of this approach to preaching was an attempt to transcend

culture and to start forming a new multicultural one at Grace Covenant. This was also a practical way of honoring GCC’s parish diversity in the pews as well as the legacy of African-American Christians. This choice was an important contribution to good communication, by learning some of what makes their cultural style of preaching effective and unique. The premise of Preaching as Celebration is to remember the pain and suffering of the ancestors while keeping hope alive in difficult times. Collectively, the diverse cultures of GCC were in need of a unifying hope.  

According to Mitchell, the approach is defined as the key to understanding different styles of preaching in the culture, since it is composed of language, metaphors, style, and the cosmovision of a specific group of people. Multicultural settings, like Grace Covenant Church, offer the unique privilege both to approach and dwell with distinct people, different races, and diverse cultures. Not only is it appropriate to learn how their own traditions have fed them spiritually but it is an obligation for the preacher to be informed, as he or she speaks to everyone.

Language is key in communicating a message that is proclaimed orally, as it uses words, expressions, and sayings. Mitchell makes the argument of two churches, both Baptist—one White, one Black—that have a different emphasis of timing and rhythm. This is described as some clapping on the different upbeat of the song, as well as having movement while singing. Some differences would be how clapping is included in the

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13 Details regarding how this approach was practiced can be found in Part Three of this project.


15 Ibid., 12.
worship. Other aspects of language distinguish Black preaching. For example, there is extensive use of personal mannerisms, rich tone, melodic rhythm, and call and response employing repetition, storytelling, and even slow delivery.

Mitchell says, “Culture is the accumulation over time of all the wisdom and methods of a given cultural group for the purpose of ensuring its survival.” This rings true for many different traditions, mainly Latino churches that continue to preach and worship in Spanish, since language is a way of retaining an identity. Many African-American churches embrace the singing of Negro Spirituals that were sung back in the time of slavery to proclaim a time and space in history where they relied on God and faith in Him for survival of harsh and difficult circumstances. In the present day, many of the African-American Covenant churches retain this practice and music with a deep association with pain and trusting in God. Deliverance continues to be a major theme in the music and in worship.

Black culture and religion, mainly Christianity, hold on to the memory of the times when life was harsh. This was a time when a master/owner of slaves could change

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16 Ibid., 88.
17 Ibid., 89.
18 Ibid., 91.
19 Ibid., 92.
20 Ibid., 93.
21 Ibid., 96.
22 Ibid., 12.
the length of hoes used in the forced labor but not the slave’s faith or beliefs. The real message of this cultural approach is that the preacher affirms and works within the culture of the congregation. However, preachers must be careful not to suggest nor imply that culture is holy or something that should not be criticized nor challenged. It is important to appreciate culture but also to challenge the sinful parts of it that go against the Bible. Scripture also corroborates the traits of pain and tragedy in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul, who suffered much persecution in his lifetime, was quick to encourage fellow Christ-followers in their circumstances. He pointed them to the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 14:21-22), knowing that all had to go through testing circumstances.

There are many African-American preachers who have a high profile and are recognized by their own style. T. D. Jakes, the senior pastor of The Potter’s house, a non-denominational megachurch based in Dallas, can be seen on television and travels extensively promoting his books and videos. Other examples are the Reverend Cynthia L. Hale, pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Georgia; the Reverend Raphael G. Warnock, who pastors Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was pastored by the

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23 Ibid., 13.
24 Ibid., 14.
25 Ibid., 15.
Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Rev. King was also a preacher who led many to fight against institutional racism by doing peaceful marches in the capitol and other key places in the United States. Rev. King is mostly known for his famous preaching in the Lincoln Memorial called, “I Have a Dream,” which continues to be mentioned and eulogized still after fifty years.

This is because the holistic approach of Black preaching brings passion, encouragement, and intentional knowledge of a people with their contexts and pain. Black sermon delivery not only emboldens people but educates them through biblical principles and values. It is the essence that God continues to be with His people, just as He was with the people of Israel in the desert. Mitchell observes, “Black preaching is conditioned by sociology, economics, government, culture—the whole ethos of the Black community.”

The assumption of this style of preaching is emotive, very direct, and to the point. It is an invaluable tool for personal preaching. A whole new vocabulary enters one’s preaching lingo. Any congregation would benefit from a style that esteems members of color, while allowing for the learning of new methods of hearing the Word of God.

An interesting aspect of Black preaching is being able to identify with the text, making it one’s own personal story. One of these examples is the Hebrew slavery narrative as described in the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and

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30 Mitchell, _Black Preaching_, 123.

31 Ibid., 66-67.
Deuteronomy and comparing it to the toils of their own Black ancestry as the mutual experience of slaves in a foreign land. Being a person of color, I found it easy to relate to the struggle and pain of being marginalized, as this is part of my immigrant experience.

Many of the stories that come to life for African-American preachers are stories that deal with the toil of life as a Black person in their context, mainly issues of life and death, struggle, and frustration.\textsuperscript{32} So the preaching themes resemble whatever the congregation is facing at the time. An overarching theme is the wondering of how they will receive some relief from their toil and survive until the Lord intervenes.\textsuperscript{33}

The story from the Bible comes alive through the telling of their own story. People in the congregation feel that God is present in their own stories of pain. Stories that exemplify a path of constantly having to rely on God where there was no other hope is not exclusively a Black experience.\textsuperscript{34} What is unique is their ability to turn their sorrow into dancing and hope, when there is little to be had.

There is a message to the story: telling the truth, although harsh at the time, in a way that is experienced by everyone. Part of the intricacy of telling a good story is to tell it with passion, almost as if one has experienced it personally. Black preaching involves story that engages and reaffirms the message being preached. God cares about human stories. According to Mitchell, one of the great Black storytellers is John Jasper (1812-1901), founder of Sixth Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, who is remembered for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 67.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 69.
\end{itemize}
deeply touching the audience with riveting stories about heaven.\textsuperscript{35} These sermons offered hope.

Overall, even though Black preaching has qualitative characteristics, we must not reduce it to a list of rules that seek a desired effect. Black preaching has deeply rooted historical implications for its people. It has been steadily developed by a group of preachers, whether on the plantations, preaching against their master’s wishes, or at a local church where they can meet God and expect a word that will encourage or foster celebration despite circumstances. Faithful African-American brothers and sisters know and trust, for their own sakes, that God will have the last word about their perils.

\textbf{Preaching in Series: A Pragmatic Teaching Approach}

One of the outcomes of the Roundtable approach was to come up with a series that could help mobilize the church in mission and give it purpose for outreach and discipleship.\textsuperscript{36} The Core Group decided that the whole church would use the same sermon topics and Bible passages, since we had experienced the desired results from the previous teachings on the Gospel of Mark. These had provided consistent and persistent learning from the preaching on Sunday, while giving the whole church a much needed refresher through a unified learning theme for the week. So, in unison, in January 2015 we embarked on a discovery of Jesus through the Book of Nehemiah, the Old Testament prophet.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 70.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{36} Outcomes and conclusions regarding all experimentation with sermon styles are detailed in Chapter 5.}
This method had not been used before, since Grace Covenant followed a lectionary of a Covenant calendar of Scriptures. Preaching in Series was chosen as an alternative to the lectionary that was not benefiting the whole congregation. For this reason, a series of only three sermons was selected for experimentation. Due to the mix of people in age, religious background, and cultural context, this approach gave GCC an order to follow to study Scriptures ahead of time instead of using the lectionary. This was a good approach for the church, because it became a tool to engage people cross-culturally regardless of specific tradition around the message of Jesus Christ. It grounded congregants in the Word of God and allowed the church to create a new culture of bringing people’s different experiences into the studies. This approach also was chosen as it allowed GCC to introduce new themes in a way that would not be viewed as disorderedly or impulsive, which was initially a concern for our elders.37

Defining this approach through scholarly resources proved to be surprisingly burdensome. Although many books offer thematic plans, topics and texts, outlines for a specific sermon series, and even ready-to-go sermons in a series,38 no academic resources surfaced on the specific approach of preaching a series of sermons. Although there are no Scriptures to support this pragmatic approach, several pastors affirm it as a tool for education in a way that is organized and structured.39 The Reverend Heberto Ruano, the

37 Details regarding the practice of this approach can be found in Part Three of this project.


founder of Belen Covenant Church in Chicago, now retired in California, feels strongly about Preaching in Series. He says, “Predicar en serie siempre ha sido una manera específica de reiterar un tópico o una serie de tópicos que son importantes para la iglesia. Esto subraya el tema en diferentes maneras y encamina la iglesia hacia el fin que se le quiere recalcar.”

For Preaching in Series, one must first establish the overall focus and link it firmly within the church context. Then one sermon stands upon another, building a bigger case for the theme chosen. The sermon series selected for GCC was this: “You are at the right place, at the right time and for the right purpose.” This series was based on the Book of Nehemiah for the purpose of engaging the church to work through adversity.

After choosing a theme, the first consideration is that a series needs to have continuity, so a biblical book of proper size is necessary. Nehemiah was the right length. To tell the whole story is impossible in a single sermon, but the book lends itself to be able to share major highlights in a way that is easy to understand. For Preaching in Series, sermon continuity is important. The story continues with each progressive sermon and activates the congregation to read the whole book.

Another aspect of Preaching in Series is being able to set up next week’s sermon. Preaching on one Sunday leaves the congregation anticipating the next sermon for the following Sunday. During the week, congregants find themselves expecting to ingest the next episode in the biblical saga. They wonder and are hopeful to find out what happens.

40 Heberto Ruano, interview by author, Covina, CA, March 2017. “Preaching in series has always been a specific way to reiterate a theme or various themes in different ways, and it helps the church walk toward a specific goal [translation mine].”
next in the story. Consequently, Preaching in Series serves as a great motivation to read ahead into the next chapter. The infusion of such excitement within a congregation is encouraging to the preacher of a series.

**The Homiletical Plot: Traditional Methods**

Eugene Lowry, author of *The Homiletical Plot*, feels strongly about preaching. Lowry says that a proclamation always should have its roots in the truth of the Gospel. For this reason, his approach to preaching is methodical and intricate. He calls the creative process a “search for language beyond the reach of consciousness.”41 This method was chosen as a structural approach to preaching, because it was something that would be attractive to traditional or more established Christians.

This approach was suggested by Clay Schmidt, my former professor of Homiletics at Fuller Seminary. In his opinion, this showed a good approach to preaching for the elderly folks at GCC, since it utilizes an established method of thinking while providing a twist and newness to the Bible passages they knew well. Although it was unclear how this style of proclamation would contribute to good communication of the Gospel, it was worth risking the unknown because all of the diverse cultures within the congregation were united in the process of experimentation.42

The Homiletical Plot approach places a great deal of weight on structure. All steps of the sermon fit well with one another. The “homiletical plot” sermon involves

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42 Details regarding the practice of this approach can be found in Part Three of this project.
encouraging stories with purpose and a plot. This type of sermon is carefully drafted by the preacher and takes on the form of an intentional plan that will cause a rational dilemma.

There are several factors that are placed as a paradigm of thought for consideration in writing sermons for the congregation. An audience reacts to stories. They care about people through stories, and this makes the approach to preaching important as it influences the attention of a crowd into an important piece of a story that is not yet complete. Preachers of the homiletical plot do not know if listeners will care for the homiletical plot’s main characters—their pain or situation or the people in it. During sermon delivery, the congregation is driven by a good preacher to pay attention to every detail as if they might discover what the plot twist will be.⁴³

Lowry determines two initial phases in preparing such sermons. The first one is the state of “Wandering Thoughtfulness.”⁴⁴ This is a place where preachers write their thoughts, gather any notes they might have made during the week or month, read the lectionary for that day, and even check denominational calendars. This allows preachers to gather all ideas that they have been processing throughout the week and even longer.

The second phase is “Decision,” when preachers finalize the idea that will eventually become the sermon. This sets up the sermon content to be a work of possibility that becomes reality, from what can happen to what will happen.⁴⁵ This is the most

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⁴³ Lowry, The Homiletical Plot, 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid.
difficult stage, since coming up with inspiration can be the hardest thing. This is where intuition transforms into the sermon. A good preacher will do this intuitively, although it is difficult to articulate the process.\(^\text{46}\)

*The Homiletical Plot* describes the five stages of every sermon. The first one is “Upsetting the equilibrium,” as the title and even the introduction of the sermon have the potential to upset the balance and cause enough uncertainty to catch people’s attention. The risk is that it may cause confusion throughout the sermon and keep the congregation’s attention trying to understand it.\(^\text{47}\) The thesis of the sermon or the plot should be kept secret, to cause curiosity in the mind of the people.

The second stage is “Analyzing the discrepancy.” This step is the longest stage and the most significant.\(^\text{48}\) It attempts to answer the basic question of when people should listen or even care about this sermon. The preacher convinces the congregation of why everyone should listen to this discourse. This step should not be simply stated but rather identified within the context of the proclamation of congregational life.

The third stage is “Disclosing the clue to resolution.” Disclosing the clue to resolution allows preachers to follow up on the principle of asking the question, “Why?”\(^\text{49}\) Preachers establish the foundation in a structure that can explain the “why” in the sermon. During the homiletical plot sermon, the church wonders how the preacher will put everything together and make sense. Jesus was the master of setting up a

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 53.
narrative that ended in an unpredictable result. One example is the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-34), where the hero ended up to be the hated Samaritan, whom the people knew could not be the popular choice.

The fourth step is “Experiencing the gospel.” This is the step where people are ready to receive the good news, hence the name. Lowry writes: “Using the medical term for diagnosis, once the patient has been thoroughly analyzed, then the appropriate medicine can be prescribed to relieve their pain/discomfort.”\(^{50}\) It is the hope that the Gospel will be obvious and appropriate at this point, once preachers have traveled with the congregation for a period of time. While they proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and that includes a call to repentance, a call to follow the master, preachers must not condemn or vilify sinners. Rather, preachers aim to walk with them towards reconciliation with God. In preaching “our task is to bring judgment on evil and still love the sinner.”\(^{51}\)

The final step is “Anticipating the consequences.” For Lowry, the final step is the opportunity to provide the listeners with closure. This closure is a door that can open people into new breakthroughs and endeavors. Now preachers can ask the church, “What can be done now that we know this?” It is a conclusion that draws people into the possibilities that are available for application, now that congregants have this new information. The notion of the future is changed through an understanding of the Gospel.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 74.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 77.
story. This is what preachers leave the congregation with when they provide an entry into application.

**Story/Narrative Sermon: Possible Approaches to Latino Preaching**

For the purposes of this discussion, Latino Preaching is defined as preaching derived from Latin American pastors living in the United States who minister primarily to Latinos living in this same country. It is impossible to have an approach that speaks for all Latino communities. However, there is one common element: the presence of story and narration.

This approach was chosen because of the Latino constituency at GCC and as a way to communicate the Gospel in a way that honors their style of proclamation. Since all the diverse cultures within the congregation were united in embracing experimentation of how to deliver the message of Jesus Christ effectively, GCC was open to this approach and eager to see how it worked. This was expected to be a good style for the church, because members already had chosen and were accustomed to a Latino preaching every Sunday.53

González and Jiménez in their book, *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching*, make the case for having both a theoretical component and a practical approach to Latino Preaching.54 In their introduction, they say there is a population of about 40

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52 Ibid., 80.

53 Details regarding the practice of this approach can be found in Part Three of this project.

million Hispanics living in the United States, which would be more like 50 million according to the Census Bureau.  

This approach is based on the context of the U.S. Latino experience as immigrants and people of marginalization.

In *Santa Biblia*, González states that there are many Hispanics from all over Latin America who share different interpretations of the Bible. Due to their experience as people of limited resources, some interpret the Scriptures according to their struggles and hopes. González and Jiménez describe this approach as “an exploration of different metaphors used by Hispanic theologians . . . to summarize, communicate, and advance their hermeneutic approaches.” In this approach to proclaim the good news in a way that honors some of the Latin American populations in the United States, this section presents some basic distinctions that make Latinos such a special group for preaching and teaching.

The variety and diversity of Latinos (those from Latin American countries, not excluding Brazil) and Hispanics (Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain) is healthy. The population in the U.S. consists of a wide range of Hispanics. Some are mestizos (those of mixed Spaniard and indigenous backgrounds), Afro-Latinos (those mixed with native and African descent), and Euro-Latinos (those whose parents came from a different part of Europe and mixed with either indigenous or another race). With more than twenty Latin American countries, there is a vast distinction among them. There is also a variety

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57 González and Jiménez, *Púlpito*, 41.
of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, with many living below the poverty line.\textsuperscript{58} While there is no one approach to speak to all Latinos, nor does González insinuate to do so,\textsuperscript{59} it is possible to read the Bible through Hispanic eyes when it is identified with things that represent most of the demographic. However, González and Jiménez point out that those who achieve some success often feel tempted to differentiate from those who have not.\textsuperscript{60} To speak into the lives of people who need to be encouraged, the proper approach is needed.

Some of the things that Latinos share are marginalization, poverty, and being mestizos (being mixed races). “No matter what our background, most Latinos, when speaking of their own experience in this society and in the church within this society, identify with the image of marginality.”\textsuperscript{61} Therefore, when Latinos read the Scriptures and find stories of oppression or injustice, they can relate due to their own experiences in the United States as immigrants. Preaching on this subject can be passionate, since the preacher and the congregation often relate firsthand to what is being proclaimed. Hispanics stand in the middle of the larger culture and find themselves being marginalized due to race, appearance, language, or culture.

Latino preachers tend to lean towards being theatrical to appeal to the heart of the listener.\textsuperscript{62} Most Latino pastors are bi-vocational and, often due to less advanced

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 29.

\textsuperscript{59} González, Santa Biblia, 18.

\textsuperscript{60} González and Jiménez, Púlpito, 29.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 32.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 60.
education, find it hard to write their sermons down—yet preaching for over an hour is not unusual. All of these descriptions are important when considering Latino Preaching. However, they are not all binding as these kinds of preachers are fluid, often focus on being led by the Holy Spirit, and sacrificially care for their congregations. They understand that the men and women sitting in the pews need encouragement for the difficult week ahead of hard toil, perhaps limited employment, and frequent financial and familial uncertainty.

The continuing task is to provide inspiration and care in a world that usually does not understand the culture. Engaging by catering to the emotional wants and their need for renewing strength are elemental. In this vein, several of the Psalms are written as a plea to God for salvation from toil (Psalm 51:3), a complaint against injustice (Psalm 3) and asking God to intervene against enemies (Psalm 35). Part of the culture cries out to the God of justice to do His will.

Observationally, storytelling to Latinos became an art form that developed out of the need to teach younger generations. There is a great heritage of oral stories and experience to share with young ones. Many immigrants from Mexico and Latin America share their stories of pain, poverty, and limited opportunities. Some are limited by sixth-grade schooling, because they had to work the fields and did not pursue advanced education. Many miss the land, the actual soil, from their towns of origin and were raised in agricultural areas where there was no electricity. There was no entertainment on the Internet, no local theaters, and often no televisions. While many read at a basic and functional level, many towns were not fully resourced with expansive libraries, so oral storytelling became a way to share their heritage in a way that could entertain the youth.
Often the approach is not academic but rather down to earth, focusing on story essentials in perhaps a specific narrative event, and appealing to the core human condition. Story/Narrative Preaching in this style can speak something new even among the most traditional Hispanics.\(^6\) Some preachers find it hard to relate to the way seminary trains preachers, as it shows a theology that is foreign to them.\(^6\) This means that traditional theology comes across as mostly European. It is appropriate to say that Hispanic preachers tend to be pragmatic but not limited to contextual thinking. This teaches the greater Body of Christ to give people ways of applying their faith and seek solace in God before exhausting all possible help venues. A Latino preacher in proclamation often will preach from the perspective of the poor and will read Scripture from that perspective.\(^6\) Story/Narrative Preaching is used to relate to the Word of God in our toil for identity and assimilation.

Latinos tend to be master storytellers, as the broader culture itself uses this natural way of communicating. I remember family members trying to tell what seemed like such a simple story, but they evolved the tale into a multi-plot story where every detail was important and could not be emphasized enough. Many Latino church families are like this as well, especially while breaking bread together after a Sunday service. Consequently, Latino preachers tend to use story and narrative elements to convey the Gospel message. They set up the story, leave room for suspense, hint at a detail that might be important

\(^6\) Ibid., 19.
\(^6\) Ibid., 21.
\(^6\) Ibid., 31.
later, pause for effect so people have a chance to ponder events as the story progresses, and always end with a big finale. The story continues as part of a relationship that is being forged. Story/Narrative Preaching makes us all part of a bigger family that continues to understand and learn new things. That is the final purpose of the biblical story.

Latino Preaching often involves treating those in the pews as if they were part of a single family. Providing the congregation with a sense of family is particularly important, because many do not have any in the immediate area where they live. The church becomes the family of faith and the spiritual center where they can run, hide, and speak to God about their toils. Preaching a common message and a sermon that speaks to the Latino experience in the United States gives congregants a sense that we are all in the same lifeboat together. Having a place to call a “home” when immediate family is not around makes the Pueblo de Dios, the Latino Body of Christ, serving immigrants an incredible place to connect people on the same journey. Latino Preaching deals with the concept of identity, provides a place of safety, and even a place where they can serve and be useful, which also is key.

The Story/Narrative sermon as an approach to Latino Preaching, along with Preaching in Series, the Homiletical Plot, Preaching as Celebration, and the Conversational Preaching method using the Roundtable approach, immersed me in a discipline of sermon exploration. Part Three of this project discusses this journey of trying to understand how other cultures or societies proclaim the good news. It was both overwhelming and encouraging and led to some key theoretical and practical conclusions.
PART THREE

SERMONS PREACHED AND THEIR ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL ASSUMPTIONS
CHAPTER 5
SERMONS PREACHED UTILIZING THE SERMON FORMS:
INTERACTIONS WITH THE FEEDBACK TEAM

This chapter presents the first portion of Part Three of this project. It discusses the criteria for choosing the feedback team and describes the process that was used for receiving critiques from this important Core Group. The chapter also summarizes approximately twenty sermons preached during the six-month experimental period and discusses how the sermons were prepared and delivered. The rest of Part Three analyzes the outcomes, explores what was learned using each of the associated forms, and offers both theoretical and practical conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the sermons.

The Process of Forming the Feedback Team

In the practice of Conversational Preaching, a group of diverse congregants from Grace Covenant Church was gathered. This was done in September 2012, by inviting members of the Leadership Team and other mission groups who desired to participate. At the time, this did not seem like an exciting venture. It just appeared to be more work. The associate pastors were recruited as part of their training and with the promise of intentional discipleship through experimental studies of the Word.
The feedback team was officially named “Core Group” and comprised of men and women equally. It represented youth, young married couples, established married couples, singles, and retired congregants living across the street at the Covenant Retired Home. The Core Group was racially diverse. Present were African Americans, Latinos (second and third generation), and Caucasians. Their ecclesiastical backgrounds were distinct, too. Some were long-time Covenanters (Evangelical Covenant Church). O’chea Dorsey, one of the Core Group members, had come from New Seasons, a traditional African-American church in Spring Valley, California. Others were Neo-Pentecostal (Reformed Pentecostal) from Latin America and some independent churches in San Diego like Torre Fuerte of Chula Vista, California.

Accompanying Dorsey on the team were GCC members Nicole Soares, Adam Moore, Russ Camp, Jim Cline, David Ceja, and Joyce Navas. This group was chosen due to how they reflected the diversity of the church, the community, different socioeconomic levels, cultures, generations, and ethnicities. Saturday morning was identified as the best time to meet for a period of three hours. We gathered initially for just three months in December 2015. Afterwards, we continued gathering but invited additional people into the Core Group. This was because many more leaders wanted to have this kind of discipleship experience.

**Goals, Expectations, and Criteria for Analyzing the Sermons**

Since the Core Group was gathered during experimentation with Conversational Preaching, the initial goal was to receive enough feedback from the team to enhance the preaching with local stories, poignant analogies, and the most appropriate feedback. This
step was taken directly from The Roundtable Pulpit by McClure. The premise was to
interest the group and involve them in the content of the biblical text. As the facilitator
and preaching pastor, I sought to create a safe space to allow feedback suggestions and
general comments to flow without any judgment or criticism. This meant a safe place to
share and not be singled out in the group or during the Sunday sermon.

Another goal was to create an atmosphere of learning through community. Since
GCC was so diverse, people had very different levels of biblical knowledge. Some were
newer believers, while others had been lifelong students of the Scriptures. It seemed
messy gathering folks from these extremes to contribute to a process of preaching.
However, this messiness represented the complexity of preaching to a multicultural,
multigenerational congregation.

The expectations were simple: to be a place of fellowship around the topics and
themes selected. To begin, we started with the basic questions of who, what, when, where,
and how. People would read the Scripture, figure out the story, and imagine the characters
there. They highlighted anything that was not clear or they needed to figure out to
understand the story. This was very helpful for all, especially the newer members. Some of
the questions that surfaced for the Core Group are highlighted here in this discussion.

For example, Mark was not one of the disciples. People wanted to know more about
Mark and why he wrote the Gospel. John the Baptist sounded very weird to some members
of the Core Group. They asked, “Why did God choose him to introduce Jesus?” “Where
did JB learn the concept of repentance?” “What led him to dress the way he did?” “Did
John know that Jesus was his cousin.” “Why doesn’t Mark include more on the baptism
and temptation of Jesus?” It was determined that we would have to use another Gospel to make that a bit clearer for more people. So we used the longer narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. Here other questions surfaced: “Did Jesus have a specific thing in mind when he started calling people to be his disciples?” “Did he know Peter and John?” and “Was Jesus fulfilling a certain kind of prophecy of calling people from Galilee?”

The second step was to gather this information and connect it to the premise of the Gospel of Mark 1:1, the beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. The Core Group focused on how the passage corroborated the fact that Jesus is God. Connecting the premise to the individual passage and then the whole chapter was an incredible teaching experience, because people were learning how to exegete a passage without the academic lingo.

Many made connections to the thesis of Mark that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God and how John fulfilled the prophecy of the voice in the desert, preparing the way for God (Jesus). From this, various key questions surfaced: “Why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized if he never sinned?” “How does he identify with sinners?” “Was the desert a lonely place or an actual wilderness?” “Did Jesus not really eat for forty days?” and “Satan obviously recognized who Jesus was and he had the gall to tempt him, so was Jesus really tempted?” The question of “What do we learn from those lessons?” also came up, since power, money, and fame were huge issues for everyone. Some observed how the evil spirit was actually helping Jesus by proclaiming who Jesus was. Some even asked, “Why did Jesus stop him?” and “Was that an actual evil spirit or a mental illness?”
The third step encouraged people to state how this passage applied to their lives. They pondered whether or not the passage spoke to them somehow and what it possibly could be saying. They confronted these questions: “Did it soothe or convict?” “Did it encourage them or challenge them?” This was uniquely sensitive. There was a tenderness in which people described their own experiences and how God spoke to them in a specific way through that passage. Some said, “I can see Jesus honoring John the Baptist even though he was weird,” “Jesus loves us all no matter what,” and “I feel like I am weird and that gives me comfort that God can use me, too.”

The Core Group ended all meetings with prayer. We prayed for all the needs and difficulties expressed and offered up to God thanksgiving and hope. After the first session, people said they knew that this would be a wonderful experience. Actually, it was a transformative experience, as initially people feared the gatherings would be boring and just a review of Scriptures that they would hear on Sunday. There was an excitement to gather for learning in community and experience it as a safe place. After some gatherings, many members did not want to leave. Ultimately, the Core Group meetings became a space for reflection and a sanctuary for expression as preparation for the sermon, and some reflections made it into the Sunday morning homily.

**Use of Each Sermon Style at Grace Covenant Church**

There were a total of five experimental sermon styles employed during the course of this ministry project. At Grace Covenant Church, the Conversational Preaching style (the Roundtable approach) was used in January 2014. The experiment of Preaching as Celebration happened in February 2014. The experience of Preaching in Series followed in
March 2014. Then the Homiletical Plot was utilized in April 2014. Finally, the experiment with the Story/Narrative style of Latino Preaching happened in September 2014.

Conversational Preaching: The Roundtable Approach

The Conversational Preaching, or Roundtable style, was used to preach four back-to-back sermons. The first sermon focused on Matthew 1:1-8 and Mark 3:2 and dealt with John the Baptist’s ministry and proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. The second sermon followed up with Matthew 3:13-17 and Mark 1:9-11 and taught on Jesus’ baptism. The third sermon discussed how Jesus called his first disciples in Mark 1:16-20, and the fourth sermon centered on how he drove an evil spirit from a man in a Capernaum synagogue in Mark 1:21-28. The Conversational Preaching style was chosen for these passages because they seemed to concur in a way that was a good introduction to the many more styles to come. It was a low-key approach, and the team enjoyed the work it had developed for the congregation. Although the initial experience of the Conversational Preaching experiment already has been discussed, below is further observation and analysis of the experiment.

The use of this specific approach seemed intimidating. There were a couple of reasons for this. First, since sermon prep always has been a singularly personal endeavor for me as a pastor, it felt strange to welcome a team to speak into my sermon preparation. Throughout my pastoral career, I have not had much formal feedback on sermons, let alone comments on their preparation. Second, the Core Group and I did not know what surprises we would find through this process, such as lack of biblical knowledge or even doctrinal differences.
To begin, the role of the members of the Core Group needed to be communicated clearly and concisely. The Core Group needed to understand why a feedback team was being formed, and their purpose needed to be distinguished from the concept of “focus group,” although they mirrored some of the same functions—for example, they served as a guide for topics on future messages. The members were also responsible for sharing how the passages spoke to them and what they sought to grasp for the community. Each moment of feedback was important, necessary, and confidential. The official days to meet as a team were Saturdays at 9:00 a.m. at the church.

First, a base was needed to begin. The preparation, which was the setup of the Scripture, was reviewed. Hosting the experience also proved important. As the preacher, I became the facilitator to which the Core Group looked for leadership, and I also held the responsibility to properly welcome participants. I brought a few sources for us to choose from—such as the Gospel of Mark, Parables of Jesus, Pastoral Letters of Paul, and the Book of Acts. The Gospel of Mark was chosen for the purpose of teaching the congregation the life of Jesus with a shorter Gospel (only sixteen chapters) that would not seem overwhelming. We established the importance of beginning with a text that was not obscure to churchgoers and allowed them to be familiar with the stories.

Second, we chose to go pericope by pericope (preachable passage) to structure a few weeks of teaching in a way that would allow the congregation to study ahead of the pending sermon the next Sunday. We took passage by passage to read, pray over, tell in our own words, and relate to our personal story. Finally, we sought to apply each passage to the church or specific members of the church. We agreed that our conversations of
personal stories would be kept confidential among the group and in the preaching. Our theory was to involve the whole church in the expectation of the preaching on the Gospel of Mark.

Eventually, we arrived to the listening part where we listened for understanding the way our group understood the stories and text of the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. It was important to establish within the Core Group the importance of their contribution and the way they heard and practiced the Scriptures. In this, we found a lot of painful stories of group members and their past and how the Gospel of Mark began to speak to them. Some expressed a newfound knowledge of the passage and how that was important for their spiritual growth. In retrospect, I realized that if I had preached the same message on Sunday, without the Roundtable process, they would not have arrived at the same conclusion. However, since they were part of the process, each member of the Core Group felt invested in the pericopes we read, studied, and applied to our own lives.

Dialogical communication was employed, and it included various elements. Among those was the ability to be unstructured, flexible, and cheering the Core Group as they opened their hearts—even if they revealed more than intended.\(^1\) The time was not so framed that it lacked spontaneity. The discussion remained open-ended, so the community experience would be organic and allow whatever flowed to be revealed naturally and according to an individual’s experience of Scripture. As the preacher, my role was not to present the unfiltered thoughts that were collected but rather to retrace the

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\(^1\) McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 41.
inductive trip to see if participants would come to the same conclusion. Instead of being
the person who delivered the sermon solo, my job transformed into initial receiver and
then sharer of the authentic signals of life as the congregation knew it.²

Several important key themes and undercurrents were identified by the Core
Group and then proposed to be included in the sermons. Among them was the fact that
the Gospel of Mark did not have a Nativity narrative. This became a conundrum for the
group, since Christianity places such a high value on Christmas and celebrating Jesus’
birth. John the Baptist was offered as a solid beginning to the narrative, with the writer’s
thesis stated in Mark 1:1, which reads: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the
Messiah, the Son of God.” This plainly asserted that Jesus is the only way to find Old
Testament redemption, so it became the first sermon (Mark 1:1-8). John the Baptist’s
preaching focused on repentance, calling people to change their lives and their attitude
about sin, which is literally a change of mind.³

The sermon pericopes (preachable passages) and themes were chosen by the Core
Group. These included how Jesus’ preaching was similar to that of John (e.g., repentance),
which we thought was remarkable to start with as such a direct and powerful message.
Also included was how Jesus’ message changed according to John’s imprisonment (the
Kingdom of God is here) and the implications of the Kingdom arriving with Israel’s
expectation of the Messiah by asking people to believe in the good news. This became the
second sermon (Mark 1:9-11).

² Ibid.

Jesus then began to call disciples and formed the Twelve into fishers of men. Here questions were raised about the practicality of Jesus calling men He did not know to follow Him without having an obvious ministry yet. We established, by using the Gospel of John, that Jesus in fact had met and talked with some of the disciples on two occasions and therefore had the credibility to ask them to follow Him (John 1:35-42). This became the third sermon (Mark 1:16-20). Finally, another pericope and theme selected by the Core Group was how Jesus taught at the synagogue with authority, the reaction of the evil spirit before Him, and the reality of the kingdom of darkness as a total contrast to the Kingdom of Heaven. Here questions about the reality of spirits and power of darkness arose, so this was the fourth sermon (Mark 1: 21-28).

As the Core Group analyzed the impact of this approach, we ventured into the text and applied the findings to the preaching. The rest of the congregation became interested in the new method. After the first Sunday, twenty congregants approached the team after the Sunday sermon to ask questions and ultimately requested to join the group. Another thirty congregants trickled into the Core Group, as the experimentation with the various preaching styles progressed. They expressed that they could tell something was different in the preaching and became curious about the Core Group dynamic. Some of the feedback received was that the sermons had a different tone, were a little longer, and had more application than usual. The congregation could tell how there seemed to be more than one voice speaking. This may have been a natural byproduct of the sermon style or simply a psychological effect of knowing that Conversational Preaching was being
applied to the new sermons. Grace Covenant also liked the order of the passages in the Gospel of Mark.

Ultimately, there seem to be three important expectations for this preaching to work well: modeling cordial relationships, attempting to understand the role of the members of the community in decision making with planning, and persuasive change in the community. To involve the community, we had to empower them by spending time together to hear their voice and learn together. To know that the thoughts of the group would somehow be included in the sermon was an exciting notion. The Core Group was faithful in attendance and very committed to being present in the sermon, paying careful attention to how their experience enhanced the discourse.

Also, through this process, the Core Group discovered that people did not want to have two services. At the time, GCC had a traditional service at 8:30 a.m. that was attended by mostly residential senior citizens of the Covenant Retirement Community across the street. The elders felt isolated due to the lack of interaction with the younger generation in the 10:30 a.m. service, which was GCC’s contemporary worship celebration. Music had been a difficulty for the seniors, so by having a service that was appropriate in music and length of time, GCC leaders thought this would help. However, we were wrong. We only uncovered this congregational sentiment during the Core Group gatherings and safe-space discussion. I am grateful that this surfaced, since I had no idea and no one had told me.

\footnote{Ibid.}

116
The conclusion on the sermon approach is that this method challenged the status quo of the church. The ability to minister and comfort with preaching the way we practiced it was interrupted with a new way. The biggest surprise was the church getting involved in the weekly discussion on Saturday to voice their thoughts and experiences as well. The congregation heard from the Core Group that it was a healing experience to share and learn in an alternate place to Sunday morning.

The messages were well received, and there were many more inquiries about the actual sermon and points brought out in the preaching. Since the church knew of our team preparation and involvement, this led people to be better listeners for a period of time, wanting to recognize the various themes and point them out in the homilies. Part of the positive feedback was the abundance of questions after the service. There were so many follow-up inquiries that we decided to have “coffee time” for those who wanted to stay and ask questions.

The feedback of the Core Group was incredibly helpful in bringing practicality to a diverse congregation. The way the group saw themselves through Scripture and how they applied their own experiences in light of the texts and their faith in the God of the Gospel of Mark made an impact in my life and other leaders on the feedback team. This was so helpful that we continued to use this group for all future sermons, all based on the Gospel of Mark. Such collaborative preaching taught the church the premise that God can speak not only to individuals but also to a group of believers. This method of preaching,
quite inductive in nature, communicated that the preacher trusted the experience, abilities, and vision of those in the pews.  

During the process of experimentation, I preached all sermons. However, on eight separate Sundays a member of the Core Group joined me at the pulpit to share a testimony that specifically related to the content or the style of the sermon. This gave the sermon an additional layer of depth as those who testified corroborated the theme of the sermon.

Preaching as Celebration: An African-American Approach

Preaching as Celebration was used to deliver four back-to-back sermons. The first sermon focused on Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, as described in Acts 8:26-39. The second sermon centered on Mark 1:40-45 and taught on how Jesus healed a leper. The third sermon discussed the calling of Levi in Mark 2:13-17, and the fourth sermon dealt with how Jesus exorcised the demon-possessed man in Gerasenes, as portrayed in Mark 5:1-5. Preaching as Celebration was chosen for these biblical stories, because the style underlines pain and personal anguish and the interaction of God to bring hope to a relationship.

In preparing for the sermons, developing a structure in which the key traits of passionate discourse and a prophetic voice would be incorporated was fundamental. Choosing pericopes that met with criteria had to be considered. This approach turned out to be difficult for me to grasp, so I decided to visit some local African-American churches. I

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6 See the Appendix for a summary outline of each sermon that was delivered.
reached out to Bishop Sherwood Carthen, former pastor of Bay Side of South Sacramento (BOSS) and the Reverend Bryan Murphy from South Bay Community Church in Fremont, California. The guidance of these two brothers in Christ was key. They guided me in developing a dynamic in the sermon that would honor and reflect the African-American experience. I asked questions, worked on the style and asked for feedback. These pastors invited me to their churches and offered me their pulpits, so I could practice this Preaching as Celebration approach.

The purpose was not to appear to be an authentic African-American preacher but to have a sermon that would resonate with the African-American experience of pain and difficulty and also offer the promise of Jesus Christ as Savior. Some of the characteristics mentioned in Mitchell’s book were enthusiasm, passion, and emotion over proclamation and delivery. These were corroborated by Bishop Carthen and Rev. Murphy as a standard of communication that was meant to touch the soul of a congregant while instilling hope towards transformation.

Philip and the Ethiopian, based on Acts 8:26-39, was a great example of God’s intervention in the life of an important man of Ethiopia. He was a eunuch who had experienced difficulties as a servant of the Queen of Candace and had experienced frustration with being marginalized in Jerusalem. There was much underlying pain and

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9 Mitchell, Black Preaching, 32-33.
10 Bishop Sherwood Carthen, interview with author, Sacramento, CA, May 2014.
personal anguish inherent in the eunuch’s situation and much potential to bring hope through interaction with God, so this became the first sermon.

The second sermon, “Jesus Heals a Leper” (Mark 1: 40-45), describes how this man full of deep suffering asked Jesus to be healed. Jesus filled with compassion, healed him, and restored him into relationship with both God and his community. The premise was that Jesus cares for the pain of others and has compassion for those who seek Him. The leper was an outcast, isolated from family and community, yet Jesus gladly received him.

The third sermon, the calling of Levi (Mark 2:13-17), showed the mercy of God to an outcast in his community due to his job as a tax collector for the Roman Empire. Jesus offered him hope and all those who would come to know him. He cared for the outcast and restored him into relationship with both God and community.

Lastly, the healing of the demon-possessed man in Gerasenes (Mark 5:1-5) was chosen, because it was a different kind of miracle. This man was delivered from an evil spirit who was constantly hurting him physically, but Jesus also restored him back to his community. It is similar to Levi’s story but with different circumstances. Both were outcasts, and Jesus used His power to restore their lives that were broken and chained.

In analyzing the impact of this approach to the congregation, a main concern was raised to remain sensitive so as not to offend by mimicking or borrowing inappropriate items that were culturally reserved only for the African-American Church. Such aspects included the specific animated delivery, inflection in the voice, and enhancement of different parts of the sermon as emphasis. My goal was not an impersonation of an African-American preacher but rather learning the skillful art of the preacher who knows
how to pull the audience in as part of the tale being told, drawing them into a spiritual
space where they could respond with “Amen!” “Halleluiah!” “Praise the Lord,” “Preach
it,” and the like.\textsuperscript{11}

As I preached the first test sermon at South Bay Community Church, I became
frustrated at the immediate feedback received from the audience. Although enjoyable, it
interrupted my train of thought during the sermon. Later, after receiving constructive
feedback from Rev. Bryan, I learned to pause for effect. Stopping between certain
climatic sentences gives the congregation the opportunity to hear and respond but also to
let the preacher know how the sermon is being perceived. I was intentional to make
sorrow and pain highlights and to give comfort and peace in the hope of Jesus. Choosing
the right pericopes for that was key.

Personal mannerisms allow preachers to be themselves when delivering a sermon
to a congregation. It is not that a church expects the preacher to have certain mannerisms,
but congregants do expect preachers to be authentic through their own abilities and
personality. Consequently, the use of tone was important in determining continuity and
avoiding being monotone. There were many parts in the sermon when a change in tone
would give the congregation an opportunity to pay more attention or to understand that
certain parts are of importance to grasping the whole sermon. Putting that into practice
required much preparation and intentional effort.

\textsuperscript{11} These enthusiastic and spontaneous responses are drawn from my personal experience
preaching at African-American churches, specifically AME Zion Church in Los Angeles, South Bay
Community in Fremont, Bayside in South Sacramento, and Community Covenant in Chicago.
Rhythm was also important in establishing if what I was discussing seemed vital to congregants and was integrated into the premise. Rhythm provided a sense of the congregation being in step with the rhetoric of the preacher by keeping up and knowing when the sermon was ending. These things were not given as a rule but usually seemed a beneficial part of a sermon that was prepared and delivered for an African-American congregation. Pausing in certain places for effect and reading the congregation were helpful in preaching a sermon that was not manufactured but was genuine, even if the preacher was not African-American.

The use of call and response has been a part of Preaching as Celebration for a long time. For example, the “Whoop!”\(^\text{12}\) is a method of intonation along with musical notes that demand a response from the audience. It is a form of call and response and had the same purpose of giving the sermon a sense of congregational participation and contribution. Mitchell writes: “In truly Black preaching, repetition occurs not only in the call and response but also in the normal course of the sermon. Texts, aphorisms, and other significant statements are restated for emphasis, memory, impact and effect.”\(^\text{13}\) This is not done as mere style but rather as a teaching tool to get people invested in the text and in the repetition as a way of learning Scripture. Watching both Bishop Carthen and Rev. Murphy was a resounding lesson of charisma, technique, preparation, and performance.

After visiting and preaching at both South Bay and BOSS, it was time to preach the sermons at Grace Covenant. The sermons were more upbeat than usual and


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 93.
emphasized more the dire circumstances of the protagonists in the biblical stories. There were intentional pauses, giving the church an opportunity to respond. There was encouragement given for the congregation to orally respond and interact. People felt shy and very challenged in the beginning, so they did not participate. This was a very different sermon than that to which GCC was accustomed. Although the preaching is always energetic, asking for a response from the congregation is not a traditional part of it. However, in the third sermon, there was more oral response from the folks of color and a more responsive tone to the Preaching as Celebration approach.

During experimentation with Preaching as a Celebration, the Core Group discovered that the congregants of color felt uncomfortable expressing their natural response to GCC sermons. They feared being misunderstood. They did not want to disrupt others, who were not used to this kind of banter, and call attention to themselves. This kept them from feeling free to speak up and talk back to the preacher, as is normal in a traditional African-American congregation.

The African-American members responded well to this approach, as they recognized some of the dynamics in the sermon. The feedback provided to me afterwards indicated that it was easier for them to respond to the sermon, which some had stopped doing due to the lack of space provided in the sermon to do so. This kind of preaching requests and encourages the congregation to respond as to measure engagement and to keep their attention. People often miss this, if not given proper space to participate, and often feel cheated of the opportunity to give back.
The big lesson was that some GCC members have been hearing the preaching and have missed the time to give a response during the sermon. The lack of participation in the sermons from people of color was noticed earlier on but not really explained. It was assumed that they did not feel comfortable “talking back” to the preacher, since other members did not do that. Some of the negative feedback was that certain members felt obligated to respond when that was not their culture, preference, or custom.

Finally, to learn the approach and not just mimic this style in hopes of getting it right, two specific values come to mind that continue to transcend whatever audience is being preached. First, it is how the message of the Gospel brings hope. Mitchell says that the Gospel needs to be preached to oppressed people, so hope is a core component in Preaching as Celebration. The sermons of the Rev. King Jr. set the standard of African-American preaching as receiving help directly from God. Black preaching has been successful, because it has enabled African Americans to survive horrible injustices.

Celebrating is essential in accomplishing the goal of walking with the oppressed. This can and should be used for all preaching. Whether preaching at a middle-income, upper-class, or Anglo suburban church—or the local African-American congregation—all of God’s children need to celebrate His faithfulness despite differences in the way they might see it. A preaching style that can incorporate the contextual suffering of the congregation to give them hope through the light of the Scriptures is of much value when

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14 Ibid., 130.

15 Ibid.
proclaiming the good news in a marginalized community. The Scriptures give hope in the middle of darkness and suffering, when believers focus on God (Psalm 100:5; Jeremiah 29:11). These sermons were received well. The acknowledgment of pain and the hope for celebration was a refreshing experience.

Preaching in Series: A Pragmatic Teaching Approach

The pragmatic approach of Preaching in Series was used to preach three back-to-back sermons. They focused on the biblical story of the prophet Nehemiah and how he carefully planned the reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem, leading the people of Israel into working together for the greater good. The first sermon delved into Nehemiah 2:11-18 and focused on how God positions His people to be in the right place. The second sermon followed up with Nehemiah 4:1-18 and taught on how change does not happen without proper timing and execution. The third sermon centered on Nehemiah 12:27-30 and 12:44-46 and established how God positions His people in a particular place and time for a specific purpose. Ultimately, the series instructed on the premise of how Christ-followers must submit their goals, dreams, and desires to the work of building the Kingdom—which in turn will serve as a refuge and sanctuary for His people.

Preaching in Series was chosen for these passages in Nehemiah, because the prophet carefully placed priorities in their communal endeavor with emphasis on their collective goals through collective work.

Preaching in Series gave the congregation the opportunity to study ahead of time from sermon to sermon. In fact, GCC adopted the same passages and themes for Sunday School, so the church could participate in sharing stories and personal reactions to the
text. After doing so, they came to hear the sermon based on the same Scripture. This proved effective in mobilizing the whole church to be involved with the text, so the Sunday School teachers were gathered to review and learn the themes that were chosen. The congregation started to read the themes for the month, studied the passages at home, and then reviewed them in Sunday School. This approach lent itself to be pragmatic in a way that helped congregants think about the same Scriptures and feel part of a single collective movement.

The process of preparing the sermons was to work with the exegetical component of Nehemiah and to begin the process of preparation. The Old Testament Book of Nehemiah was read in full. Nehemiah, the protagonist, was a Jew living in a distant land and felt the call of God to do something for his people who were in dire straits. The biggest need was to rebuild the fragmented wall of Jerusalem, which had left the people open and vulnerable to neighboring attacks. The Jews lived in constant fear and danger that their lives could not continue with dignity (Nehemiah 5:1-19).

Infusing excitement into the congregation about what was coming next became very important to GCC. We saw a newfound commitment to showing up every Sunday to find out the rest of the story. Recapping the major plot highlights from the previous week linked the sermons efficiently. At GCC, sermons sometimes tend to be “stand alone” stories that do not have anything to do with one another from week to week. The series offered a needed connection that kept the church continually engaged in the direction of the teaching. The title gave the whole plot for the series: “You are in the right place, at the
right time, for the right purpose.” However, how the sermons would piece it together became the intriguing part.

The first sermon, “You Are in the Right Place,” based on Nehemiah 2:11-18, gave the context and set up congregational expectations that we can have balanced priorities in both our personal lives and in service of the church. This also helped to confirm for many congregants that God had called them to be present at Grace Covenant for this period of time in their lives. The sermon was essentially a call to arms for the new thing coming to GCC.

The second sermon, “You Are in the Right Time,” based on Nehemiah 4:1-18, contained the main premise of the sermon. The biblical content centered on how the time was “now” to rebuild the walls. The needs of GCC were many at that specific time, so this was a plea to react to the needs of the church. The goal of the church was to work and, as the text shows, others may not like it when Christ-followers decide to finally work on the things to which God is calling them. This sermon called the church to immediate action and to invest in rebuilding what needed building.

The third sermon, “For the Right Purpose,” based on Nehemiah 12:27-30 and 12:44-46, invited the congregation to think about the passage of dedicating the wall of Jerusalem after it was finished. This was a way for God’s people to draw near to Him. The right purpose allows us to get close to God and to serve Him. In GCC’s case, we were being called as a people, regardless of background, to unite as a community of faith that believed itself to be called for a specific purpose. GCC’s purpose was to call its surrounding community unto God.
Once these pericopes were established, the narrative was interconnected to create a pattern of learning for the congregation. Since preaching did not often make the connection from one passage to the other, this gave us the opportunity to know where we were going and where we were coming from. As we analyzed this style, we discovered that people started to read their Bibles more. This happened due to mere human curiosity but also to be good students. New Bibles were given to those who wanted one to keep continuity in the version being read (New International Version). With their new Bibles and themes, people responded well in pursuing God through the Scriptures, often attempting to figure out how those texts would be used for the preaching on Sunday. This proved to be quite effective, since those who were studying the themes in Sunday School came in with the essentials of the passage, ready for the Sunday sermon. This involvement was invaluable, especially for those who were newer to the church and in their relationship with Christ.

Having the themes in advance was helpful. Chosen by the Core Group through the Roundtable approach, they offered a practical way to engage the demographic utilizing more than one voice. The Sunday School teachers and lay leaders also were invited as a church-wide effort to continue utilizing the same theme for all the teaching. By giving the exegetical scheme of the passages, we could adopt lots of stories and the way people viewed these pericopes. This gave the method much weight when presented to the congregation, as it represented them and their views while still maintaining a coordinated approach within an orthodox structure.

Teaching became an important part of developing a curriculum for Sunday School, midweek services, and early morning Bible studies help at church for both
elderly and ladies’ groups. Younger children also were given an appropriate lesson plan for the month. This was significant, as such coordination had not been done before. Everyone in the church was studying the same stories with the appropriate application for their age and life stage. Children were taught at their level, with creative costumes and sets to give a visual of the time of Nehemiah and the wall that needed to be rebuilt. The youth were given additional resources in the form of videos of Ancient Jerusalem and the battles of that time. Adults had a more practical interest in being able to apply the values learned from Nehemiah about leadership in the church—and most importantly, for themselves personally and their family.

The desired congregational result had been growing interest in learning the Scriptures together as a communal event. This meant utilizing the sermon themes to provide a base for the whole community to engage in the weekly reading and discussion of the Scriptures. The church enjoyed the synergy created in such a powerful display of wanting to learn more of the Scriptures as a community. As a pastor, I felt it very important that the church have an interest in the Holy Bible, as we preached the God of the Scriptures and walked the congregation toward becoming doers of the Word.

The downside to this was the yearning of congregants for more series and not being initially excited about other styles of preaching. With passing time, the Core Group was left with little energy to continue organizing each Saturday session due to the emotional unpacking of what was shared with the group. Although the energy was low, they (Core Group) continued plowing through to the next approach.
The Homiletical Plot: Traditional and Popular Methods

The Homiletical Plot was used to preach four back-to-back sermons. The first one focused on John 3:14-21 and dealt with how God so loved the world that He gave Jesus as a redemptive light to the world. The second sermon followed up with Ephesians 2:1-5 and taught on how believers in Christ are dead to sin but alive in Christ. The third sermon discussed what it means to be a spiritual child of God, as seen in 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, and the fourth sermon centered on Advent as explored in Isaiah 11:1-9. The Homiletical style was chosen for these passages, because they seemed to be simple and easy to explain. Since this is a brand-new approach, simplicity was key.

Since diagnosis was central to analyzing the discrepancy in a sermon without a solid structure, it was easy to fall from the intentional road of teaching when it came to the Homiletical Plot. Although the preaching was methodical and well-founded, most of the sermons lacked a strong diagnosis, since often it was exchanged for illustration. Illustration was useful, but it could not replace analysis. All of this was done to proclaim the Gospel in a way that was more effective. It was challenging to remain on topic when there were many good stories that interact with the Scriptures being presented. However, this style did not offer those options. It kept to the topic at hand and in progressive motion towards the desired result.

As these sermons were preached and analyzed, the congregation had mixed feelings about them. Some thought that the structure was very important to communicating the message without many divergent trails. This had been part of the conversation with the Core Group in the first preaching style of the Roundtable approach.
People got lost when the preacher would insert stories within narratives and analogies. Although entertaining, it was not helpful to bring them to the fruition of the sermon. The conclusive point was muddled and hard to distinguish at times.

Some congregants thought that the sermon felt rigid and was not very expressive when following the Homiletical Plot format. Some of the defining words were confined and restricted. These folks had preferred the previous style, which included humor and many stories. In contrast, they found this present style void of flavor. Although they appreciated the context, they felt disconnected due to vast differences in style from previous sermons.

Those who felt good about the structure were mostly seniors from the congregation, who have had a hard time with the current style of preaching. Although they never complained, with the Homiletical Plot they found a style to receive the preaching in a way that was conducive to them. The order of each step and a strong application was appreciated. Additionally, there was a contradiction with the purpose of the author in that Lowry did not agree with having a sermon that was simple with a strong introduction, three points, and an application. He felt that was too limiting.16

The first sermon, “God So Loved the World,” gave the rudimentary foundation for the Gospel, which is God’s love. The sermon helped new people understand why we come to church and the reason we can feel loved by the Almighty God. The second sermon titled “The Living Dead/The Walking Dead?” stood on the main premise of the sermon that some believers do not walk into the life that God already has given us. This sermon ultimately called on the church to live their lives to the fullest while living for Jesus, since

believers are no longer dead in their sins. “The Spiritual Child,” as the third sermon, invited the congregation to think about growing spiritually by receiving good spiritual food. Essentially, they learned that we receive and then, in turn, give to others what we have learned from the Bible. Finally, “The Gift of Hope” was an Advent sermon calling the congregation to see the great gift we have that others desire as we are in expectation of the newly risen King. The sermons resonated well with those who knew the Gospel and had a solid knowledge of the Word of God. The new structure inspired confidence and the appearance of preparation. Some of these listeners expressed their enjoyment by offering compliments such as this: “It sure showed you prepared yourself this time.”

Ultimately, the Homiletical Plot taught us that it was not a good fit for GCC. The premise was complicated, and many in the congregation found the sermon difficult to follow. A sermon should not be merely constructed to fit a specific format; rather, it must be developed in a way that serves those who hear it. This is because proclamation needs to occur in a place in time using communication styles that speak directly to the congregation. The Homiletical Plot approach to preaching did not do that. Proclamation needs to be purposeful and enable every sermon to be an actual event.17

**Story/Narrative Sermon: Possible Approaches to Latino Preaching**

The Story/Narrative style was employed to preach four back-to-back sermons and was used to examine possible approaches to Latino Preaching. The first sermon focused on Mark 4:35-41 and discussed how Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. The

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17 Ibid.

132
second sermon followed up with Mark 9:33-37 and taught on how to find one’s place through an understanding of Jesus. The third sermon discussed how prophets are without honor, as presented in Mark 6:1-6, and the fourth sermon centered on the faith of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-30. The Story/Narrative style was to empower listeners, so these passages were selected for preaching because empathizing with the Latino experience is vital in Latino Preaching.

This approach came organically due to my Latino upbringing in the church. I have heard many people tell personal testimonies and stories of God’s intervention in their lives in a powerful way. This approach involved analyzing the elements of getting people interested in the subject with a personal interaction, using a softer voice where there needed to be more careful attention paid, and employing humor to preach harsh truth in a way that could be accepted.

In the analysis of this approach, an interesting contrast of Hispanic preaching versus mainstream Euro-Caucasian preaching came up during the Saturday sessions with the Core Group, and it was the theology of solidarity.\textsuperscript{18} This is a theology that combats the oft-individualistic approach to church. People frequently speak of salvation and divine relationship as something personal with Jesus as opposed to “our” salvation and “our” relationship with Jesus. In mainstream Euro-Caucasian preaching, community does not seem to be as important. Basically, this is an issue of emphasis on the individual rather than the communal. This stands in total contrast to what the Apostle Paul

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 24.
emphasizes when he discusses the family of God as being like the human body, which is comprised of many members for an overall healthy function of the whole (1 Corinthians 12:12). The emphasis on personal salvation can cause some bifurcation in the whole of the community. Unity is needed as believers are a type of people in exile, who live here in a broken world while being people with citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven (Philippians 3:20). There is a pull from both sides. Similarly, while wanting to be loyal to their country of origin, many Latinos tend to stick to their local culture as opposed to creating a new one.¹⁹

GCC was very receptive at hearing the pain and isolation that Latinos feel in the United States. Some Latinos rose from their seats and stood in front of the congregation and shared their stories of being undocumented and stories of pain in the Sunday morning service. Many non-Latino congregants also rose from their seats, gathered around those who were suffering, laid hands on them and prayed. Afterward, the church verbally expressed to the Core Group about it being a powerful time of the Spirit and how they had learned from the shared experience. They resonated with this suffering and difficulty, for many members remember being immigrants themselves. Some members were not impressed by that pain but rather viewed and shared a more political response to the suffering. This was regrettable but helpful in letting people know how an important part of the congregation felt. In the preaching, God softened hearts and allowed His Word to flow to heal our Latino brothers and sisters experiencing pain.

¹⁹ González and Jiménez, Púlpito, 28.
The hard thing to grasp was how to have hope and celebrate when things do not seem to be going well. Some of the GCC members who are of privilege—for example, they have benefited from solid education, financial security, and social status—were not able to relate to some of the stories of sorrow with which many Latinos live. Some Latinos feel an enormous sense of loss having left behind their families to search for a better future. They deeply mourn the loss of their extended community. In debriefing this style, which seemed more natural for me personally, the congregation could not help but to appreciate the similarities with the African-American approach for Preaching as Celebration. They both focus on families, relationships, and restoration.

In conclusion, to gauge Latino Preaching through the Story/Narrative style, there must be comfort in showing and portraying emotion through the Scriptures. The theology of solidarity in which Latinos are united in the Lord and in culture is common. The ultimate thrust of using the Story/Narrative style in Latino Preaching is to offer hope and courage that God will do His will in the lives of those who persevere, especially when they face difficult times. The theoretical and practical conclusions of the Story/Narrative style in Latino Preaching, along with the other experimental styles, are explored further in Chapters 6 and 7.
CHAPTER 6
THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

This chapter explores the theoretical conclusions of this project’s implementation. It evaluates the effectiveness of experimentation with each preaching style. This chapter also presents the specific feedback from the Core Group.

Effectiveness of Experimental Sermon Forms in Bringing Good News and Unity to Grace Covenant Church

This section examines whether or not the Sunday sermons accomplished the objective of proclaiming the Gospel, bringing good news to the hearer, and uniting GCC in a strategic and teachable way. It also explores the presuppositions of each preaching approach and verifies if each form achieved the desired results. The styles under examination are Conversational Preaching (Roundtable approach), Preaching as Celebration, Preaching in Series, the Homiletical Plot, and the Story/Narrative style as a possible approach to Latino Preaching.

The initial philosophy of Conversational Preaching through the Roundtable approach was that it would give congregants both voice and ownership in the sermon preparation. Through congregational participation, it was hoped that people would feel
represented in the Sunday sermon and benefit by sharing their experiences with others without placing themselves in the limelight or the actual pulpit. Ultimately, this theory proved to be true in revitalizing a whole new perspective in the way the church looked at studying the Scriptures.

Before this process, there was little excitement for Sunday School or regular Bible studies. The Conversational Preaching method through the Roundtable approach allowed the church to gather together in the task of learning the text for a particular week. The approach was helpful in encouraging people to talk about the weekly text and the sermon. The church was asked on Sunday morning regarding how many people had read the text for the week and out of 125 people, almost 100 did. The second question asked was how many had studied the passage, and more than half of the people raised their hand. As one of GCC’s associate pastors, Ceja counted the people on that Sunday for more accurate results. Those who did not raise their hand saw something happening that was exciting and enticing.

During the month of preaching, Core Group members were in attendance and more interactive with people than usual. The congregation saw this as a powerful movement of the Holy Spirit. Members of the Evangelical Covenant Church usually ask, “Where is it written?”¹ Their response to the Roundtable approach showed their interest in reading the Scriptures, which served as a complement to the ECC ethos of respect and love for the Bible. As a pastor, often limited by budgets and established church programs, I found it refreshing to see all members, both young and old, sharing their thoughts on the

¹ The Evangelical Covenant Church, *Covenant Affirmations*, 4.
selected text. This experimental way of preaching, preparing the Core Group and finally the congregation, did much for uniting GCC’s distinct generations and ethnicities. The good news became the focus of the studies—which were received, studied, and discovered to be deeply impactful.

For Preaching as Celebration, the initial model was to understand and then implement a style that would be inclusive and honoring of the African-American constituency at GCC. This responded to a primary concern that, as time went by, it seemed that the African-American brethren had stop participating aloud and had followed the more traditional stoic approach of the older folks in the congregation. It was hoped that experimenting with Preaching as Celebration would allow for expansion in the execution of the sermons while providing a safe place for oral feedback and participation from the whole church.

This theory was partially proven. The delicate balance of preaching in a way that was prophetic to people’s pain while providing hope without mimicking or imitating popular African-American preachers was difficult. Instead, the approach of asking people to say “Amen” or encouraging them to share something with their neighbor worked initially. Part of the congregation was deeply moved by the stories that were preached, mainly African Americans and other minorities. The pain became an initial topic for all the pericopes that were preached, and soon enough came the hope that God gives in being present. GCC’s older folks struggled with some of these issues, such as continually acknowledging pain that was received by circumstances or current events. The large disparity in social status became evident as the seniors live in the highly affluent,
residential Covenant Retirement Community of Mount Miguel Covenant Village. Although most of these members face personal struggles, they do not tend to dwell on this kind of pain. Seniors struggle with other core issues such as loneliness, health concerns, and fear of dying. These were not covered in the preaching. In retrospect, doing so would have included them more.

Although the sermons were preached to the whole congregation, some felt uncomfortable by the constant emphasis on pain. There seemed to be an annoyance in asking people to respond audibly to the sermon, which felt out of their comfort zone. In contrast, many of the people of color really blossomed in their response during these sermons. Although noticeably uncomfortable, the broader church understood a bit more about those who do not live in the Village and have faced institutionalized or socioeconomic struggles. This proved helpful in the process of becoming more unified, by creating space for compassion and understanding one another in our differences and struggles.

A solid conclusion is that it is possible to implement a model of learning for the whole church by utilizing a method of listening for understanding. This can be done by gathering and giving ownership to a select group of people representing the range of the current body of believers, as excitement can be generated through those sessions. However, there must be ownership by the core of the congregation regarding the new styles and specifically keeping in mind those who will benefit.

For Preaching in Series, the concept was a series that could help mobilize the church in mission and give it purpose for outreach and discipleship. This was a
continuation of the forum of preaching in the Roundtable approach, where the leadership team of Grace Covenant Church decided to maintain the dynamic of meeting together and continuing to hear how the texts moved them. This time the broader GCC leadership was invited to participate as well. Since the congregation had gone through this similar approach a month earlier, it was easier to implement and go back to the initial excitement of wanting to learn more by preparing and discussing the passages. There was intentionality in choosing Nehemiah, since it was an Old Testament book that could be summarized within a single month of preaching.

Through the overwhelming response from the congregation and the leadership team, the theory that the church could be mobilized in mission and given purpose in outreach and discipleship was confirmed to be true. There was buzz generated that a good method for learning had been found. The church began getting ready to invite the community into Sunday morning celebrations, as Lent was coming and Easter Sunday soon would arrive. The discipleship component was an additional surprise as the elders of the church, former missionaries, pastors, seminary teachers, became involved in conversations and visited with the newer believers to answer questions and listen to their stories. The Book of Nehemiah served as a great base to learn about leadership but also to place our hope in God. It reminded the older members that God had been with them the whole time, even through difficult ordeals just like the people of Israel, and God still had a purpose for them. It gave a reason for the newer folks to invest in “building a wall” that was not necessary for them but as collaboration for benefiting the church as a whole.
Here the conclusion is that Preaching in Series is a powerful tool for teaching and investing in the leadership of the church, while generating a whole new attitude towards learning in community. If GCC was going to grow, the need for neighbors to invest in one another was a necessity and not just a wish. Developing ways to connecting GCC elders with different generations was key and a powerfully verified component of generations helping and benefiting one another.

For the Homiletical Plot, the initial concept was to have a group of sermons that could engage traditional elders in the church and those who know the Scripture well by providing a plot twist to see the Gospel in a different perspective. It proved important to choose sermons that would seem easy to understand and that would provide depth in the formation of Christians, regardless of context. The initial thesis was that GCC’s elderly Anglo members from Mount Miguel Covenant Village as well as educated people wanted a fresh approach to classical biblical stories, in order to become more engaged in Scripture.

The theory proved to be lacking, as delivery seemed uncomfortable for both me as the preacher and to the broader congregation. Although the pericopes were proper, the part of providing a plot twist was not an organic factor in the accustomed way of preaching. In the first sermon of an easy and well-known passage of John 3:16, the sermon did not capitalize on the love of God and why it was so wonderful but rather was derailed somehow by placing Moses and the snake in the desert as examples. The hope was to give new life to the passage that the church knows so well. However, the sermon did not seem to achieve the goal of keeping the people glued to their seat to see how this
was going to end. As the second sermon, “The Living Dead/The Walking Dead?” experienced broader acceptance but the nuance of naming it after a well-known television show was lost on some of the older folks. These two were the least favored sermons of the series and perhaps the whole experiment. People were tolerant, but the Homiletical Plot did not stir the same reaction as the other styles of preaching. When asked for feedback, people would simply say that the sermons were “okay.” This was a sharp contrast to their abundant feedback before.

Consequently, it is difficult to draw concrete theoretical conclusions here, since my perspective on the Homiletical Plot is fragmented by the difficulties of execution. My approach felt inadequate and not fully committed to this style. The sermon was unable to connect to the congregation in a way that was obvious and logical. There was very little feedback for these sermons, and the Core Group confirmed that this style did not resonate well with the congregation. The overall consensus was that the Homiletical Plot felt stifled and non-energetic and was not a personal good fit for the larger church body of GCC.

For the Story/Narrative style as a possible approach to Latino Preaching, the initial thought was to tell biblical truth using story based on the scriptural text. The theory was that Latinos reacted well to narrative, which was based on my personal experience as a Latino pastor ministering over the course of decades. This style was meant to honor the Latin Americans in the congregation and present the power of storytelling, which was a format that Jesus used much during His ministry (e.g., Parable of the Talents, Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the like). The Narrative style invites people to become part of
the story and makes them protagonists alongside and together with the message of the Gospel. This approach allowed for humor and irony to be used as part of the storytelling (not by telling jokes), offering a different perspective that is inherent within the biblical story but that the text often explicitly omits, perhaps because it was so obvious to the original biblical audience.

The theory was proven to be effective. The challenge was to make it appeal to all congregants and not just Latinos, who in particular enjoy humor and the power of stories. It already had been proven in the Core Group that stories were powerful, especially from those who do not share often. Although challenging, the whole congregation for the most part entered a place of listening for specific nuances that made the text special and inviting. This was a large part of the communication received in the feedback and the after-sermon time of fellowship.

Experimenting with the Story/Narrative style proved to be an incredible experience of personal growth for me. As a preacher, learning to use humor and stories to tell the Gospel became imperative. The biggest lesson was this: if preachers can make people laugh, this will allow them to speak prophetically and listen to the corrective elements that are presented within the preaching. Humor and story establish a rapport and a relationship, so truth can be spoke in love. This specific method shaped the sermons going forward as they seemed natural, organic, and able to cross the multicultural congregational divides.

**Evaluation of Homiletical Styles and Their Implementation**

The criteria for evaluating the sermon was settled by three questions: “Was the sermon a representation of what was discussed in the Core Group?” “Was the sermon
geared to the whole church from the lessons learned?” and “How did God speak to you personally from the sermon given?” The purpose of evaluating the sermon was to garner a good picture of what was going on in the life of GCC. The evaluation determined if the desired results were being achieved and whether or not the preaching style and approach were effective.

For the Roundtable approach, it was easy to see a representation of the Core Group discussions. There were many items that, as the preacher, I would not have normally included—namely, other people’s stories. This gave the group a sense that their personal story could touch the congregation and affirm people dealing with the same difficulties as described in the biblical text. Since any preacher has a limited amount of personal experience, the Core Group added these valuable pieces of narrative for a more well-rounded sermon presentation and application.

The immediate purpose was to give the church some examples of things learned in the dialogue, and these were well received. Congregants placed a deep importance on hearing various experiences and how these could be applied to their own lives. A variety of personal stories concurring with the biblical story became part of proclamation and what God seemed to use for transformation. God spoke by validating the stories shared in the group and in the application of the texts. Most the church felt encouraged by this style of preaching.

In Preaching as Celebration, the purpose is to celebrate and there must be a reason why. The story of struggle and difficulty was front and center, and the toil was how to bring hope in the middle of it. An initial way is to proclaim that God will show up in the
middle of mayhem, but there are limited number of ways to share that. In examining this style, there was a disconnection on how to communicate with GCC’s African-American brothers and sisters in a way that was celebratory to their heritage when so much of it has been oppression. However, through the aid of other preachers like the Rev. Murphy and Bishop Carthen, the acknowledgment of strife and being alive was a basis to be grateful.

In retrospect, there was a lack of confidence in the preaching for several reasons. It was a new style for both me as the preacher and the broader congregation of GCC. Since it was uncomfortable, a level of caution had to accompany every word and movement. This got easier as the time went by, and it became normal and organic to be whooping (singing and asking for feedback) and asking for an “Amen!” God spoke personally first through the African-American preachers and then through the visible and vocal response of the African-American community in appreciation and surprise. This method of preaching was exhausting, as the level of care for every word had to be carefully weighed. For me personally, the tension of complimenting an ethnic approach while not impersonating was always there. Once I had more practice, utilizing the Preaching as Celebration style became easier and flowed more naturally. More than half of the congregation could relate to this style. All on its own, limiting the sermon to this approach would not do well in the long run. Whatever approach GCC preachers use must include the elders from the Village and all represented groups.

Preaching in Series seemed a welcome return to receiving the pericopes in advance for the church. Taking the series approach was an opportunity to present a teaching on leadership and engage the congregation to work. Every congregant was
encouraged to get connected. The intentionality of engaging the church through a series inspired the congregation to read a whole biblical book (Nehemiah) and to ask questions on leadership, which stimulated implementation. Therefore, by definition, this stylistic approach proved to be a success.

More importantly, God spoke to the Core Group in various ways. The first way was to corroborate the role of the Core Group in helping the church to love to study the Scriptures more. God challenged them to be more committed and to take their roles as leaders seriously. He also taught them to implement good values described in the passage—such as gathering people to do a task, giving vision to work toward fulfilling a need, and not letting distractions derail that which God was calling them to do.

As already discussed in Chapter 5, the Homiletical Plot was hard from the beginning. Finding a way to make the story be seen in a different light became an obstacle. The pericopes chosen were fine, but it would have helped to choose lesser known narratives to make a more convincing argument. The minimal lesson learned was that the Bible is read superficially; and sometimes in the reading, one can miss the richness of the details. With enough time and study, the text comes alive with many nuggets of wisdom within the context and cultural environment. This approach was transmitted to the congregation, yet it missed the usual confidence and comfort since I was neither sure nor fully comfortable in the method of the Homiletical Plot. There was a commitment to making it go well, since it was geared to the senior part of the congregation, but they did not grasp it either. This approach isolated the groups and did
not create ownership of the style to benefit a specific group of people as other approaches, like the Story/Narrative style or Preaching as Celebration.

In examining the Story/Narrative style as an approach to Latino Preaching, the stories that were told and shared had a deep impact in the Core Group and the greater church body. Being able to tell a Gospel story and interjecting personal stories was powerful. To use the stories, I asked permission and agreed not to use names. The lessons learned were applied to the whole church with humor and challenges.

By this time, the Core Group was used to receiving the challenges and sharing those with the congregation in their respective Sunday School classes and Bible studies. The group was heartened by the humor that was inserted. The preaching at GCC always has used some humor but as part of the narrative in calling items that did not make sense—like the Syrophoenician woman’s insistence, when Jesus essentially called her a puppy, was helpful. Particular questions were asked to help heighten the individual experience of the Story/Narrative style: “How would you react?” “Would you continue to ask the Master for a miracle?” Personally, it was reassuring to use a natural part of my personality as an intentional piece of the sermon, which helped soften the perceived blow of a prophetic voice. This also became an intentional tool in preaching using this style.

Feedback and Responses of the Core Group

The responses to the text were invaluable, as the goal was to envelop the congregation in a systematic way of reading and learning the Gospel. While some responses from the Core Group already have been shared in earlier chapters of this project, here are more responses to the individual text: “Mark was not one of the
disciples,” “People wanted to know more about Mark and why he wrote the Gospel,” “Why did God choose John the Baptist to introduce Jesus?” “Where did JB learn the concept of repentance?” “Why doesn’t Mark include more on the baptism and temptation of Jesus?” “Did Jesus have a specific thing in mind when He started calling people to be his disciples?” “Did he know Peter and John?” and “Was Jesus fulfilling a certain kind of prophecy of calling people from Galilee?” One theoretical conclusion that can be inferred from these responses is that deeply engaging with Scripture generates curiosity and questions within the human brain.

The feedback was gathered and connected to the premise of the Gospel of Mark 1:1, the beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. It became important to understand how this passage corroborated the fact that Jesus is God. Connecting the premise to the individual passage and then the whole chapter was an incredible teaching experience, where people were learning how to exegete a passage without formal seminary training.

There were some connections to the thesis of Mark that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. John fulfilled the prophecy of the voice in the dessert, preparing the way for God (Jesus). Some people asked, “Why was it necessary for Jesus to be baptized if He never sinned?” “How does He identify with sinners?” “Was the desert a lonely place or an actual wilderness?” “Did Jesus not really eat for forty days?” Others expressed shock or doubt: “Satan obviously recognized who Jesus was and he had the gall to tempt him,” and “Was Jesus really tempted?” Feedback also focused on what could be learned and how that learning could be applied to present-day life financially, spiritually, and
emotional: “What do we learn from those lessons? (Power, money, and fame are a huge issue for everyone),” “The evil spirit was helping Jesus by proclaiming who Jesus was,” “Why did Jesus stop him?” and “Was that an actual evil spirit or a mental illness?”

An intentional move was to encourage people to state how this passage applied to their lives. While the feedback focused on how the passage personally spoke to people, what it said, and how it challenged them to respond, the process was uniquely sensitive. A poignant example is this: “I can see Jesus honoring John the Baptist even though he was weird. Jesus loves us all no matter what and God was consistently there for Elijah, even when he had given up.” Overall, the feedback transformed from initial apprehension to embracing an excitement that came from learning in community, linking the Word to real life, and responding to Scripture in a safe place.

Another type of feedback was offered after the sermon was delivered. Here are a few of the comments made: “When I heard the sermon on Sunday, I was able to recognize lots of what was said on our gathering day,” “There were some well-thought out suggestions that were placed in the group and Pastor Danny expressed to the rest of the congregation,” “The sermon was amazing. I felt like I knew the subject being shared and finally could keep up with Pastor Danny,” “I was amazed at how much of our thoughts Pastor included in the preaching,” “It was surreal to hear what we had shared the time before. I love this!” and “I wasn’t sure how this was going to work on Sunday because we took three hours talking and deliberating what was good for the church. The sermon seemed more real because it included our thoughts and ideas.” Some post-delivery feedback still contained some confusion or disappointment: “I couldn’t follow
with all the hints of the sermon. It seemed a bit busy and scattered. There was a lack of structure that usually is there. The congregation seemed ok with it,” “I came out with things that were left out that I thought would be good to be included. I guess this did not happen because the sermon is getting longer,” “Perhaps in the future we can all go on stage and give our testimony during the sermon. This would give it more credibility,” and “The Pastor did not mention that the feedback came from the group gathered Saturday.”

Not all the feedback went into the sermon. Inserting some feedback gave the sermon another layer in bringing the story of the Bible to real life and to share the many ways people can react to it. However, including every single comment would have made aspects of the sermon redundant and therefore drag or become boring for Sunday listeners. Therefore, with strategic inclusions of feedback, the sermons felt more solid and more supported. The Core Group was attentive and generally encouraging during the sermon and became more proactive in inviting people to the Sunday service. This created a culture of ownership and gave us a glimpse of things to come.

After the initial month, the Core Group continued meeting to study the next series. Feedback continued to be requested after every sermon. However, now the follow-up questions were different: “Was the sermon effective for the whole church?” “Did anything catch your attention either good or not so good?” “What can be improved in the next sermon while doing the same approach?”

The feedback regarding whether or not the sermon was effective for the whole church often came back with a flat “yes,” but no more information was provided. This gave cause to believe that the question did not request enough information. Perhaps what
should have been included was a more in-depth inquiry about what specifically was “effective” and what it accomplished.

For the other questions, the feedback on the sermons was more concrete. What caught people’s attention varied. Some members in the Core Group said, “There was something about the sermon, it was well done and others that did not enter a deeper analysis,” “We had to go back and ask more clarifying questions,” “There was information being given that required more explanation. More like an inside joke or story. It was fun to be called into a new way of preaching and still feeling like it is our church,” and “There was no competition with the way the sermon came to be.” Some of the feedback focused on me as preacher: “Pastor Danny seemed nervous for the first time,” “He is usually very confident,” “All the different ways of preaching were good,” “The ones where pastor was more ‘in your face’ was my favorite.”

The final question asked about what could be done better using the same approach in the future. Here the responses were helpful. Some said, “The sermon could be shorter,” “The sermon could be longer,” “The reading of the Word should be done standing, not sitting,” “The call to be a closer community was good but there were no practical steps attached to it,” and “It encouraged us to think that there was a group giving feedback to the pastor and that he was humble enough to collect it and do something with it.”

There was not a significant amount of negative feedback. However, when a sermon did not do well, there was less feedback. Some people preferred to stay quiet and withhold their participation, so as to avoid appearing critical of a senior leader. In general, it was a bit difficult to take the temperature of a congregation that is so fluid in
style, culture, and academia. Written feedback did not work well despite many efforts to collect some, since many in the congregation are not used to journaling or putting their personal thoughts down on paper. For this reason, most feedback and information was given one on one to the preacher or as a participatory member of the Core Group.

It seems that the key change in the congregation had to do with having the Core Group and members of the congregation become part of the sermon preparation and analysis. Some sermon styles worked better than others, but the most important part of the process was how the people were able to verify and highlight what worked and what did not. Essentially, they were participating in the preparation and the analysis. That was crucial.
CHAPTER 7
PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents practical conclusions that can be implemented at Grace Covenant Church. Some of these practical conclusions include next steps utilizing new methods of proclamation. This chapter also offers some personal reflections on what I learned about my own preaching and suggests ways to share GCC’s findings with other pastors and congregations.

Implementation of New Methods of Proclamation

It was easy to implement the methods that seemed natural and flowing, such as Preaching in Series and the Story/Narrative style as an approach to Latino Preaching. However, there was more intentional work that needed to happen to shape a new style of preaching. The goal was to find a method that could speak to the whole congregation, yet there existed the fallacy behind this hypothesis that everyone would feel comfortable with a particular style of preaching. The hypothesis was found to be false, as someone was always uncomfortable with a specific approach, even with the premise of change and trying something new. This was discovered by the Core Group, who remained invested in trying the different approaches and continually urged the congregation to keep an open
mind. It seems that in multicultural preaching, various methods can be applied but in whatever approach a singular style cannot achieve a consensus in preference.

However, some of the intentional pieces actually did become part of the sermon preaching as a general practice. This included the regular use of the Core Group. The Roundtable approach became an incredible asset in the life of the preaching and Grace Covenant Church. This was a timely event as the right ingredients were available: a seasoned group of elders experienced in the Scriptures, brand new leaders willing to learn, a growing church that yearned to reach their community with practical tools, and a desire to be multicultural. This style of collaboration became a staple in the way the church did communal life and engaged in the Scriptures for years to come. This was significant and life-changing in congregants who seemed disconnected from one another yet tolerant of the preaching in general.

Part of the Preaching as Celebration style was well received but not instantly. This was a process in which people had to get used to a method that would speak prophetically of the experience of pain and bring it to the light of Christ for redemption. This had to be done in a thorough manner, as some members had expressed exhaustion at being prodded for a response. Some claimed that it simply was not their culture and became outspoken in communicating their discontent. As the other members became more involved, the congregation seemed happy to oblige a bit more.

Preaching in Series became a norm for Grace Covenant Church. Going back to the Gospel of Mark to continue the story paragraph by paragraph and through chapters was a positive result of this project. As important as preaching had been in the life of the
church, growing personally in faith and understanding the will of God had to go hand in hand. In praxis, studying the Word of God formed a discipline that became a part of the community. Although the extreme would have an unfavorable effect (not belonging because the new person did not understand the texts), people were inclined to study the Bible and the text for the following sermon. This was a best-case scenario and, although an initial expectation, it could not have been predicted to have such great results.

The Homiletical Plot did not fare well and—though the approach was attempted, albeit half-heartedly—it was found not to be very practical. Admittedly, if a preacher is not sold on a particular preaching style or approach, it is a difficult sale. Since all the groups did not respond well to it, it was discarded as a future preaching style.

The Story/Narrative style gave lots of life to the sermon and stood in stark contrast to the Homiletical Plot, in that it did not have to have a plot twist at the end. This approach could be executed in a way that was light-hearted, appealing to the joyful nature of God and using a sense of humor that engaged everyone. Humor can be cultural and not universal, as not everyone enjoys making light of the person of Jesus or His disciples. However, since the process of learning in community and relationship was evident, congregants were more apt to adapt to the flow as it was obvious that the whole church was going through a transition together in finding suitable ways of including the whole community in the preaching. Therefore, unity in community came to be an option that dissenter's from a particular preaching style embraced as a form of self-sacrifice, due to their desire to express love and acceptance to those brothers and sisters who had previously felt culturally marginalized on some level.
The next steps were to implement the Roundtable approach as a regular preaching practice. This meant gathering a Core Group of the congregation to offer life stories and reaction to the Scriptures. This has become a genuine way of executing a communal sense of the Scriptures and building community. A schedule of preaching was chosen for the following year that included time with the congregation to gather stories and to study the pericopes. Also, material for Sunday School and Bible studies was requested to support the continued learning of the church and as a way to connect all the ministries under the same themes.

**What I Have Learned as a Preacher Using New Sermon Forms**

Preaching is difficult. Preaching in a way that transcends culture, context, background, and socioeconomic diversity is burdensome. Having a personal discipline of studying the Scriptures is challenging but necessary to be up to par with the huge task to bring the good news on a consistent basis. It is easier to continue to communicate the message to the congregation without making it applicable personally or involving others in the process. To find a suitable method of communicating God’s Word is ideal, and the price to pay is to learn and submit to new disciplines and styles. This can be done with guidance from the Holy Spirit and through community.

During this process, several new experiences became game changers. The listening approach with the elders of the church, who had placed their faith in their new pastor to lead them towards a community-oriented church, was lifesaving. GCC had been a homogenous church for several decades, even after the demographics started to change. To listen to the needs of this segment and for them to have ownership in extending the
church into the community through new ways of preaching was reassuring. Their financial support was needed to continue and their incredible wisdom and experience were vital to the church, so preaching had to include their engagement and commitment. To change the culture of the church there needed to be a committed group of people willing to be honest with their feelings and to remain devoted to change for the betterment of the new community. More often than not, a church wants change but does not understand the price it will need to pay by sacrificing power to the community.

Preaching to honor certain ethnicities is a gamble. The risk of misunderstanding in using a style to engage a certain audience is high and often falls short of the intent. In the attempt to honor a certain demographic, it became obvious that every preacher has his or her own DNA and a way of being authentic. Ultimately, preaching must start to develop personally and then be communicated to the church. To incorporate disciplines that can enhance the effectiveness of the message is better than manufacturing an approach. It is better to have a style that honors all ethnicities by sharing a non-biased or non-political message. It is by no means an effort to distance oneself personally from race or culture but rather to create a culture that allows the Gospel to be communicated powerfully and prophetically. Although some models of preaching are attractive, not all of them can be replicated and communicated to the church. The lesson is to keep an open mind to the way other cultures preach and praise Jesus. There is a lot to learn, even if it cannot be replicated or implemented.

The ability to know one’s strengths as a preacher and to build on that with other approaches is recommended. It is useful to challenge oneself to learn more effective ways
of reaching the congregation. Understanding what works for the preacher and grasping how other approaches work, even if they seem strange or uncomfortable, is of great help. If the obvious strength is the use of Story/Narrative, then using it to preach is a given. However, expanding the knowledge of what comes naturally and utilizing it beyond the limited scope of experience will make a better communicator. If humor is not an asset, then staying away from it is advisable but understanding the way it works enhances a preacher’s perspective.

Practicing is beneficial for preaching well. No one knows how to preach in every style and to every audience. However, given the proper amount of time in practice, every preacher can and should get better. Whatever the style, knowing one’s preferences and one’s own personality will be useful in determining how the Gospel can be preached utilizing the instruments that God gave each individual to engage a particular audience in a particular time for a specific purpose.

This stage of learning was a structural asset for the vision of the church in preaching for at least a year of time. To have a sense and an understanding of the themes that will be tackled is invaluable. This would have felt unattractive in the past, since it would have seemed too rigid or too planned, but I have discovered the opposite to be true. The themes establish a teaching purpose and create congregational ownership, which is needed to entice all members of the Body of Christ to become better students of the Scriptures.

**Sharing with Other Pastors and Congregations**

The original intent was to share with pastors all the findings of this experiment. The desired result was to have a solid, tried, and true process to develop a style that
would be multicultural in nature. Now the dream is to inform the preacher on how to conduct a process for self-discovery and church enhancement.

As a pastor who now oversees other ministers and churches, there is a unique opportunity to share findings with a select group of people. Ministerios Hispanos de la Iglesia del Pacto Evangélico (MHIPE), with the Latina Covenant Church Association, serves over a hundred congregations in the United States and has different ministry liaisons with other Latin American National Covenant churches. Since Latin American churches are multicultural by nature, the process can help guide different styles for engagement. The plan is to share with this association in a one-day training event at the annual convention called “Midwinter,” to guide a process for their individual church. A copy of this project will be made available to them as a resource with the understanding that every church needs its own distinct process. More than ever, the assumption that one process can serve all churches is outdated. This writing only can guide a process that is submitted to the local context, vision, congregational makeup, and dynamics. Additionally, the bibliographic list at the end of this project also can be an asset to those who want to learn more specifics about each style.

In the meantime, here is a preliminary process that preachers and churches can begin to use to explore multicultural proclamation as a tool for compassionate unity and drawing one another more deeply into the Scriptures. First, it is important for leaders to listen deeply to congregants to know their church more intimately. This means being

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willing to celebrate the past, starting to dream, and setting a new vision. Second, leaders can gather with a Core Group, representative of the different factions of the congregation (e.g., generationally, culturally, racially), and together begin building a culture of learning to start getting buy-in from the committed members of their church and to foster an environment of anticipation and momentum. Third, the preacher and Core Group can experience different styles of preaching. I recommend the Roundtable approach, as this grounds the Core Group in the learning and feedback process; Preaching in Series, since this method is useful for collectively drawing in the congregation to study the Word together; and the Story/Narrative Style, as this approach lends itself well for preachers to use their own personality to communicate organically. There is no better promoter of learning than the congregation that is learning and excited to study God’s Word.

Fourth, preachers and their Core Group gather to discern together whether a preaching method works for their unique ministry context. This involves listening and taking seriously feedback from the Core Group and the congregation and utilizing some sort of preacher’s assessment. Finally, both preacher and church set new disciplines, implement what works, and together create a new preaching culture that has been engendered by collective ownership. In this way, the broader vision of the church can be solidified.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This project was an ambitious endeavor. It sought to explore homiletical approaches to establish a sermon style that could appeal to and engage a multicultural congregation housing a diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and language context to allow the good news of Christ to be expressed. The desire was to communicate the Gospel in fresh ways both for disciples who have been walking with the Lord for many years as well as for new believers with little knowledge of Scripture and those who are “unchurched,” to create a culture of learning foundational biblical knowledge.

From the onset, it became obvious that this would not be a traditional project. Preaching in a way that is applicable and relatable to such diverse groups of people is a challenge, as all have a different understanding of culture. Family and church do not mean the same to all congregations. Nevertheless, preaching the Gospel in a way that is relevant has been a task worthy of achieving.

Engaging in this project also led to my new mission and position as superintendent for the Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church in the Midwest. Instead of leading a single congregation, I now oversee churches in five states: Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Indiana, and Wisconsin. My new job is to supervise and walk alongside 111 churches. They are large in number and diverse. The group ranges from traditional congregations to new church plants; from those liturgically established in worship to those embracing a more contemporary expression; from those that are multicultural to those singularly focused on being Anglo, African American, Latin American, or Korean.
American. In the mix, there are some churches that are similar to Grace Covenant in that they are multicultural.

The main difference between my former congregation and the churches in my district is that Grace Covenant Church is mainly multicultural, while the majority of the conference churches are homogenous. The task to preach in a multicultural church is more difficult in my experience, because one has diverse groups with different needs while the homogenous church has a greater common expectation with respect to the worship time and preaching style. As I visit these churches in the district to get to know them, I am invited to bring the Word of God. I happily get to preach and use the same sermon for a few months, as I must convey certain things on behalf of the Conference—such as new initiatives for ministry during the year.

Preaching the same sermon is an advantage, as there is no need to prepare a weekly sermon. However, without knowing the congregations intimately, experiences vary from context to context. While the content remains the same, each sermon is distinct. It may have the same Scripture and the same PowerPoint slides, but the contextual application varies in each location. This has been an extraordinary venture as the Holy Spirit works and allows me to read the room and understand the need to communicate something specific to each congregation. There are seventy-eight different versions of the same sermon so far, and it keeps getting better. The process of experimenting with preaching styles has made my task easier and much more interesting.

The Central Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church in the Midwest is very diverse and in need of connection from the Conference office, so visitation is key in
providing leadership and casting a vision for future ministry. An outstanding opportunity to gauge is promoting diversity in ethnicities, sharing local cultures, and promoting geographical clusters. My experience at GCC has helped prepare me for this task as well. As GCC’s multicultural congregational preacher, I learned to adapt to unfamiliar waters that required important navigation. The ability to preach to churches that differ in their approach to congregational polity, worship styles, and preaching expectations now feels like a gift and privilege to me as a superintendent.

This investigation and project has allowed me to study the preaching styles of the major ethnic groups within the denomination and the conference. I am growing equipped to preach and communicate the good news using tools learned from my study and readings. The pleasure to preach at African-American churches as well as Anglo-suburban congregations, and Latino iglesias is a task that requires paying attention to the local leadership and considering each unique audience of hearers as I proclaim the Word of God.

There are some major implications for the Central Conference. The ability to visit and preach in every church allows me the opportunity to preach the Gospel and share the vision of the Conference. This is an obvious advantage, since most parishioners do not know me nor have they heard me preach. There is a sense of being welcomed into a church family when we worship together; and they hear a sermon that is poignant, challenging, and relevant in a style that is more culturally conducive for them to receive God’s message for their individual and communal lives.
In the denomination, this is a unique skill. Superintendents are not necessarily preaching in their conference churches in the same fashion. I believe this skill was one of the reasons why I was chosen to serve in this capacity. The Central Conference needed a pastor and bishop, someone willing to relationally invest in every church and build equity. Preaching in a way that is accessible to all major ethnicities in the Covenant is a gift that I am grateful to continue learning, as I am being shaped by this experience as well. Preaching in every congregation opens a relationship to build trust, which is of the utmost importance and precisely what the ECC was seeking in a superintendent.

Cultural and racial reconciliation are predominant themes in the preaching of the Gospel in these churches. This is the way the Spirit is moving towards reconciling people through this unique platform that is the pulpit. Coming face to face with a superintendent of Latino descent, the first one to be exact, is a pleasant and eye-opening surprise for many.

Lastly, part of my job is walking with pastors and influencing them in a way that is practical and helpful. Many have asked about using humor in preaching, since it allows for addressing difficult subjects and releases some of the tension of prophetic truth. To the pastors who have asked, I often point to the resources I have used in this project. Helping pastors and preachers find their voice and own their personal sense of style is becoming very rewarding.
Each sermon summary contains the passage used (in italics) followed by a brief outline of key points

**Conversational Preaching: The Roundtable Approach**

**First Sermon: John the Baptist’s Preaching**

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ” And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8) Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. (Matthew 3:2)

John the Baptist was a key player in the introduction and presentation of the Messiah. He was the voice that called from the desert (Mark 1:2) and helped pave the way for the Son of God. His call to be baptized in repentance was unimaginable for Jews, since only proselytes would submit themselves to that. The Jews were expecting the Messiah and now, this prophet sets up the narrative for Jesus to step into this role.

**Definition:** Define, describe, Support, Analyze

John was an odd man. His behavior was uncharacteristic of any previous prophets. His way of dressing and eating habits were not the traditional priestly garment nor was the Jordan River the desired place for doing ministry. This contrasted with the worship in the temple of Jerusalem, which was so revered but not full of life.

The first point is that John starts his ministry with the premise of repentance. His approach to prepare the way was one that would infuse an existing religion with a direct plea to believe the good news. This was revolutionary in an age where the limitations of temple worship and the given additional requirements by the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees were too much to bear. This left people desiring a new way to reach God.

The second point is proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is at hand. This became a main shift in the expectation of the upcoming chosen one of God to save the Jews and all humanity. What many people had been asking for, John claimed is at hand. The expectation of receiving that which they have been expecting for many centuries.

The third point is that John understands his role as the Voice that calls from the desert. He doesn’t claim to be the one the people are expecting but someone pointing them in Jesus’ direction. John merely points at the Lamb of God, who takes all sin away.

The conclusion is that Mark makes a strong point in verse one by stating the thesis of the book. The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. John the Baptist would preach this in a unique way that was countercultural but effective. As people of God, we must carry our lives interested and invested in proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Son of God. The implication is a personal life that is changed and constantly transformed by this knowledge. John was a great example of this. John knew that the Kingdom of God was at hand; therefore, he could not be silent.
Second Sermon: Jesus’ Baptism

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming out up of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:9-11) Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:13-17)

The central idea of this sermon is that Jesus approaches John the Baptist and chooses to baptize him. John did not understand why Jesus would submit to doing what others did out of repentance. John is obedient and sees confirmation that Jesus is in fact the Messiah by hearing the voice from heaven.

Jesus seeks to fulfill all righteousness. He seeks to be baptized by the messenger and preparer of the way. John claims that his baptism is lesser that Jesus, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:11). Jesus technically did not have to be baptized since he was the Son of God and did not need to repent of any sins. Yet, he submitted himself to identify with sinners.

The first point, John the Baptist recognizes Jesus and obeys, by consenting to baptize him. John expected to be baptized by Jesus, instead. This was revolutionary as people were being baptized by repenting of their sins.

The second point, John receives the privilege to witness and hear the voice from heaven that claims that Jesus is who he says he is. The long wait of the people was over. The Kingdom of God is at hand and in the form of Jesus. Often, confirmation is not provided. John obtains a precious moment in his ministry.

Finally, Jesus identifies with sinners in this action, though unnecessary in John’s eyes, necessary for the fulfillment of the Law and all righteousness. Jesus starts his ministry in a place of obedience and serving as an example for all.

In conclusion, baptism is an important facet in the life of a Christian. Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize followers in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As important as it is, it does not serve as a final indication of salvation in the individual. Baptism is a sign of obedience in a public setting. We tell the world that we believe Jesus is the Son of God. We encourage, therefore, those who have not been baptized to proclaim publicly their love for the Messiah.

Third Sermon: Jesus Calls His First Disciples

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)
Introduction: The central topic is that Jesus starts his ministry by calling the first of twelve disciples to simply “follow” him. This was a call that carried a promise: to make them fishers of men, better defined as humanity. He knows them and has decided to make them part of a group that would change the world.

Jewish Rabbis normally would call children to be life-long disciples to carry on the tradition. Jesus calling fishermen was out of the ordinary but a powerful statement that he would be for all people. Jesus had a purpose for these disciples which was to make them fishers of people. The first point was the question of defining the role of a disciple. Following the Master had consequences, since he was no ordinary Rabbi but the Son of God.

The second point is this was not the first interaction of the disciples with Jesus. John 1:35-42 gives a glimpse of the initial contact with Jesus and why this was a moment of divine intervention. The third point is the unexplained definition of what it means to fish for people. This was a new concept, and Jesus simply invites them to start a relationship with him by living with him and being influential in other people’s lives.

In conclusion, since the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, we must respond to the invitation of the Son of God to become his followers and to engage the world as a response to the Kingdom. Jesus came and gave an example to follow, starting with repentance and inviting people into a relationship that changes the individual.

Fourth Sermon: Jesus Drives out an Evil Spirit

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)

Introduction: Jesus has power over spirits and Satan. Since Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 1:1), he is powerful. He shows power over the elements, sickness, and even the spiritual realm.

Jesus starts teaching at the local synagogue. An evil spirit interrupts him and proclaims that he is the “Holy One of God.” Jesus rebukes him and heals the man from the unclean spirit. Satan is not to proclaim Jesus.

The first point: The Jews did not recognize Jesus, the Messiah. Even after this incredible show of power, they simply attributed him being a teacher with authority.

The second point: Jesus’ teaching had authority. The synagogue was not used to having the Scriptures come alive, especially after 400 years of silence from the Lord.

The third point: Knowing who Jesus is doesn’t make you saved. The demon knew who Jesus was and he was cast out. Christ is the only one who saves. Relationship with him is the driving force.

In conclusion, Jesus started his ministry with a harsh tone: “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand”. Being a part of this kingdom has consequences. His power would prove through his teaching; indeed, God had visited his people.
Preaching as Celebration: An African American Approach

First Sermon: Philip and the Ethiopian

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-39)

Introduction: Philip was a great man, an evangelist who despite being thrown out of Jerusalem continues to preach the good news wherever he goes. The Ethiopian Eunuch is looking for the God of the Jews but doesn’t find him at the temple. He is frustrated and not getting the book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The first point: Philip was enjoying a great revival in Samaria and is asked to go to the desert instead. God moves us out of our comfort zone for his service.

The second point: Philip meets a man who sees himself in the Scriptures when he reads about “The Suffering Servant.” Philip uses the same Scripture to give him the good news of Jesus.

The third point: The Eunuch gets baptized as obedience to his newfound faith, and Philip does not stop him. We walk with people in their faith, along the way.

Conclusion: God cares about people and he cares about their pain. He always provides venues in which we can get to know him. We share our faith with others and we get to hear their stories to sympathize with their pain. We bring them closer to Jesus.

Second Sermon: Jesus Heals a Leper

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (Mark 1:40-45)
Introduction: Leprosy was a horrible decease, and it destroyed the person who had contracted it. Without modern medicine, the only possible solution was isolation from others. Jesus came into the picture with willingness to help.

Jesus already had been healing people with various deceases. His Messianic ministry would bring good news to the poor and the disfranchised.

The first point: Leprosy, like sin, brings isolation from community and God. Sin has similarities to explore in the segregation of the practitioner.

The second point: Jesus is always willing to help, especially when others have given up on them. The leper said he could heal him if he wanted to. Jesus said yes. He is always interested in being with you.

The third point: Jesus touched him. This was unthinkable since the person who did would become unclean as well. Jesus was not any ordinary person. He is the Son of God. The one who brings good news.

Conclusion: The cleansing of the leper was a messianic sign that no one could deny (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22). God was visiting his people. The priests declared this man to be clean but were unable to accept the Messiah, the one who could clean them from their sin as well.

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**Third Sermon: The Calling of Levi**

*Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alpheus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the “sinners” and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”* (Mark 2:13-17)

Introduction: Jesus continues to call disciples. Peter and John were obvious choices but not this tax collector. Jesus had a knack for identifying with sinners, whether he ate with them or got baptized (since only sinners need repentance), and now he sought the truly hated: tax collectors.

Tax collectors were considered the worst of the worst. They were used by the Roman Empire to exploit the people from Palestine and in turn made themselves rich. Jesus called Matthew, a Chief Tax Collector to follow him and he does!

The first point: Jesus continues to find opportunities to seek the undesirable. The expectation is to find other Rabbis or holy people but He continues to be guilty by association.

The second point: Matthew leaves everything he considers his life and follows him. This will create problems with Simon the Zealot, one of the disciples, who hates the Romans, who would consider Matthew a traitor.

The third point: Matthew shares Jesus with his friends, other tax collectors. Jesus eats with sinners, a big “No!” for the sake of appearances. Jesus is critiqued for this but not dissuaded. Jesus welcomes all people unto him.

Conclusion: Jesus came for those who need him, not those who consider themselves healthy. We can rest assured that Jesus forgives our sins and changes our lives. Matthew became an apostle and wrote one of the Gospels, which carries his name. His life was never the same.
Fourth Sermon: The Healing of the Demon Possessed Man in Gerasenes

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

(Mark 5:1-5)

Introduction: There are many ways to be an outcast. Either because people hate you, you hate the people, or they fear you. This demon-possessed man was a nuisance that had been plaguing Gerasenes for a long time. This looked hopeless for the individual and the people. Until Jesus comes to shore.

There are many powers that can influence and shape a person. We will see three of them through this story. Jesus always has the ultimate power.

The first point: the devil’s power over those who allow him to enter is horrible. He destroys people and takes away their dignity. He tries to erase the *imago Dei* from the people he controls.

The second point: The people were powerless and had lost hope. They did what they could but couldn’t help the demon-oppressed man. They seized him and tried to bind him to no avail.

The third point: Jesus has power over the devil and his demons. Jesus encountered the man and healed him, by releasing him from his bind. Jesus transforms him into a new creation.

Conclusion: Jesus cares for those who are bound and isolated from community. He sought the undesirable to heal and transform, to return them to their community. The church must play a part in connecting people to Jesus, the only way to the inner healing that many desire.

Preaching in Series: A Pragmatic Teaching Approach

First Sermon: You Are in the Right Place

So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon’s Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burnt. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So they committed themselves to the common good. (Nehemiah 2:11-18)
Introduction: This sermon gives the context and sets up our expectations when we have good priorities in our personal lives as well as in the service of the church. This also assures the congregants that God has called them to be present at Grace Covenant for this period of time.

Change is hard. Analyzing our situation to propose change requires hard work, determination, and a love for what you are doing. Nehemiah is an incredible leader, and his task was to protect the people back home in Jerusalem.

Priorities are important. It reveals your level of maturity and love for the task at hand. Nehemiah had to start somewhere. He was a man of resources, but first he had to lay the groundwork for the work proposal.

The first point: You are in the right place to rebuild the wall. Whether you are new to the church or have been for many years, you are called to rebuild. This involves changes that will help us attract our community.

The second point: This is the right time to grow. When we build the wall, we will have opposition but we also will be leading the way for those on the periphery.

The third point: you are in the right place to work. We stand on the shoulders of many who have made GCC possible. There is lots to do, and you are an important part of it.

Conclusion: Being in the right place is a good thing. Realizing you are at the right place is better. You have been called to be more than an attender. You are a partner in ministry, getting this place ready for the community and bringing them to it.

Second Sermon: You Are in the Right Time

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?” Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!” Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders. So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.” Also our enemies said, “Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work.” Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they will attack us.” Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your
When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work. From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. (Nehemiah 4:1-18)

The main premise of the sermon is that this is the right time. Now it is the time for action to rebuild the walls. Time is an important commodity, and there is none to waste.

Introduction: Nehemiah organizes the people to work and is leading by example. He has asked people to be ready for battle just in case. He assigned people tasks and gave them priorities. People were in need of good leadership, one that casted a vision and would put them to work. This requires a methodical, intentional leader to mobilize people who have not for a long time.

The first point: Opposition grows when you’re doing the right thing or heading towards better things. Whether personal improvement or communal, there are some that don’t want you to succeed.

The second point: People don’t like change and they don’t like change in you, especially those who do not care about your well-being. We take precautions and work through them.

The third point: Threats and other things will bring discouragement to people. Remind them why this is important, as Nehemiah reminded his people that they were doing this for their families and future.

Conclusion: This is the right time. Change doesn’t happen without execution, and the time is now to rebuild the wall. The people are ready to build; they just need to be reminded that this is important and God is with us.

| Third Sermon: For the Right Purpose |

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites, from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall. At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, first fruits and tithes. From the fields around the towns they were to bring into the storerooms the portions required by the Law for the priests and the Levites, for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites. They performed the service of their God and the service of purification, as did also the musicians and gatekeepers, according to the commands of David and his son Solomon. For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. (Nehemiah 12:27-30; 44-46)

Introduction: This sermon invites the congregation to think about passage of dedicating the wall of Jerusalem after it was finished. The right purpose is always allowing us to get close to God and to serve him. In this case, we are being called as a people, regardless of background, to unite as a community of faith that believes itself called for a specific purpose. Grace’s purpose was to call the community unto God.
Nehemiah knew that the people of God would need a tangible reminder of him being present. The temple would be that and more. It also signified that they had accomplished what they had committed to do.

Nehemiah was not the only person who worked. Everyone was important in the endeavor, even their enemies. When the work was done, they celebrated by consecrating themselves and the music to the Lord to offer thanks.

The first point: God wants to have a relationship with us. He wishes to repair what others have destroyed. He cares about our welfare and community.

The second point: God wants to be your Lord and Savior. He desires to guide you towards a better future with him in his Kingdom. We always end in praise to the one who has provided.

The third point: God wants to use you for his glory. The temple represented God with his people. It would be a great remainder that he is present always.

Conclusion: Being in the right place, the right time, for the right purpose is submitting our goals, dreams, and desires to the work of building the Kingdom, which in turn will serve as a refuge and a sanctuary for his people and their families.

The Homiletical Plot: Traditional and Popular Methods

**First Sermon: For God So loved the World**

_Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God._ (John 3:14-21)

Introduction: Nicodemus was as religious leader who needed a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the teacher of Galilee. Jesus would change his life forever. The serpent in the desert story gives us an early prophecy of what Jesus would do for all of humanity.

The first point: We all sin. We have all been marked for death. No one of us is worthy of salvation, so we must seek the one who can give us eternal life.

The second point: We all need forgiveness. Our nature is one of sin and rebellion and therefore we need to be transformed into children of the light by the mercy of God himself.

The third point: God provides salvation through Jesus Christ, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert and those who saw it did not die, so with the Son of Man.

Conclusion: Nicodemus sought Jesus to understand what the new teaching was. He was challenged to be born again and change his attitude of tradition for one of receiving the love of God. Jesus showed him why he had come into the world.
Second Sermon: The Living Dead

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. (Ephesians 2:1-5)

Introduction: As people who walk with others, it is important to recognize when they fit into this category. We walk with people who do not know Christ yet. People are searching for life. Although they are alive, they are dead in their sins and disconnection with God and community.

The first point: we were dead in our transgressions. There is need for resurrection. People are being called out of the darkness into the light.

The second point: Describing being dead in the need to follow the cravings of our sinful nature. Those who are born of the Spirit are attracted to spiritual things.

The third point: The biggest miracle is the one of being transformed into a child of the light and receiving salvation through faith in our Lord.

Conclusion: His great love for us made us alive with Christ. As we walk with others, we realize that the journey does not stop there. Bringing people to Jesus is great, but it’s only the beginning.

Third Sermon: The Spiritual Child

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:10-12)

Introduction: The spiritual child is a stage in which love, care, and attention needs to be provided to grow into a deeper relationship with God. Children are a gift from God and we rejoice in this new life that is exploring the wonders of God, as they learn how to go from milk into solid food.

The first point: Children require lots a good nutrition, good teaching, and patience to grow strong and healthy.

The second point: Children also require correction and discipline. They need to learn godly habits and healthy patterns to grow closer to God.

The third point: Discipline and love go hand in hand when it comes to growing spiritually. God provides us with good guidance that we can follow.

Conclusion: God desires for us to grow in him. We walk with people in this stage to help them develop into a mature Christian.

Fourth Sermon: Hope – Preparing for Jesus – An Advent Sermon

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of
the fear of the Lord— and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy; with justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:1-9)

Introduction: Advent is a season when we prepare ourselves for the coming of the king. The church must intentionally open their hearts to receive the Kingdom of Heaven. Hope is a well-placed expectation that God will finish what he started two thousand years ago when he established the Kingdom with his presence.

The first point: The prophet Isaiah offers hope in the Messiah as he unpacks the Messianic passage.

The second point: This new king would be the desired anointed one of God to rule righteously with power, integrity, and care.

The third point: Our politicians could never live up to the Kingdom of God. Our hope should not be placed on earthly leaders for our salvation.

Conclusion: The Spirit of the Lord is upon the Messiah and therefore our hope is placed well. He will lead us well, because he is the Son of God and hope is an expectation of that Kingdom to come.

Story/Narrative Sermon: Possible Approaches to Latino Preaching

First Sermon: Jesus Calms the Storm

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:35-41)

Introduction: There will be storms that will come upon our lives when we least expect it. Knowing who Jesus is and believing in him are key to our lives as disciples. Jesus continues to show the disciples who he is. He has healed sick people and done miracles, yet they still don’t understand.
The first point: Jesus gives order to cross the sea. If Jesus said it, then it will happen. We must believe in his word.

The second point: Jesus takes a nap. Not only does that show good leadership (relying on the people he trained) but also that he is human and in need of rest.

The third point: Jesus shows his power by doing something supernatural: calming the storm by commanding it to stop. This horrified the disciples.

Conclusion: The disciples called him Rabbi (Teacher), but Jesus consistently had shown himself to them by mighty works. He is the Son of God. Only God can control nature.

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**Second Sermon: Where Do I fit In?**

_They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9:33-37)_

Introduction: Jesus has a different concept of greatness than the world does. Jesus uses an argument among the disciples to teach them an important lesson in leadership. Misunderstanding who Jesus is will cause us to lose our place in the mission of God.

The first point: The disciples argue about which one of them will be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Jesus does not intervene but allows it to develop on its own.

The second point: How does Jesus measure greatness? By serving others and imitating his example. Servant leadership is about Christ’s attitude in service of others, even those who do not seem significant.

The third point: Jesus uses a child as an example of service, both by accepting and also adopting their attitude of service.

Conclusion: Where do we fit in? We fit in the Kingdom of God, when we serve as Jesus came to serve humanity. We can be good leaders, members, and a part of society if we serve others as if we are serving our Master.

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**Third Sermon: A Prophet Without Honor**

_Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. (Mark 6:1-6)_

Introduction: Jesus accomplished many great things in the period since he had left Nazareth. Now he returns with his disciples, after building a reputation. Coming home is always an adventure. Not all families believe, and it can be challenging to not have support among loved ones.
The first point: Jesus comes home to a sour reception. Instead of getting the “we are proud of you” town, he gets people questioning his reputation.

The second point: The people of Nazareth cannot see beyond what they think they know of Jesus and try to reason why he has become so popular.

The third point: Jesus refuses to do many miracles there. He still healed some but did not stay long.

Conclusion: Jesus was disappointed at the lack of faith in the town he grew up in. Sometimes our families do not believe, but we must continue with the mission that God has placed in our hearts. A prophet sometimes is without honor, but the honor always belongs to God.

### Fourth Sermon: The Faith of the Syrophoenician Woman

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30)

Introduction: A foreign woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter who is demon-possessed. Jesus does not seem to care and offers a dog-related explanation on why he shouldn’t. This woman is relentless and determined to touch the heart of the Master, even though he seemed removed from the place.

The first point: Jesus goes outside the perimeters of Israel into a foreign land. He probably seeks solace away from the people who search for him, to continue training the disciples.

The second point: This woman asks for the healing of her daughter. Jesus say no, offering an explanation that should have repelled her.

The third point: The woman impresses Jesus with her huge faith and love for her daughter.

Conclusion: We can be very impatient when we pray, but we are called to pray without ceasing. Jesus loves us and does not always answer the way we would want him to. Jesus cares for the family.
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178


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