If You Can’t Spiritualize, Allegorize, or Moralize, What’s a Preacher to Do?
Preaching Christ From Gospel Narratives

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Abstract

Of all the genres, preaching Christ should be the easiest in the Gospels. Unlike Old Testament narratives where Jesus is hard to find, the Gospels are sermonic history writing whose main character is Jesus.¹ The Gospel records are intended to make theological statements about Jesus, yet many sermons from the Gospels revolve around non-Christ-centered themes. What is a preacher to do?

Introduction

A sampling of written and spoken sermons shows how prevalent it is for preachers to spiritualize, allegorize, and moralize (SAM) a Gospel preaching portion. The result is a failure to preach the Christ-centered message the author intended. In an effort to challenge this approach, we want to take a fresh look at Gospel literature and offer guidelines for preaching Christ from the Gospels. This fresh look attempts to go beyond genre-studies at the level of hermeneutics and enter the realm of “practical interpretation”² for the purpose of creating Christ-centered themes for biblical sermons.

The Importance of Genre Studies

Over the past fifteen to twenty years we have been told again and again that an understanding of genre is crucial to
understanding the meaning of the biblical text. The following authors state their case: “genre provides a set of rules and allow[s] the interpreter greater precision in uncovering the author’s intended meaning;” Chisholm notes that “Without knowing how these genres ‘work’ the interpreter can easily miss the message;” Greidanus speaks of preachers committing a “genre mistake” which drastically affects interpretation; Ryken suggests that, “sometimes the correct interpretation of a unit depends on identifying the precise genre of the passage.”

No doubt, genre impacts meaning. The question for the expositor is, How? How does genre provide the set of rules from which accurate meaning is extracted? For the most part, basic exegetical tools and practices (e.g. word studies, grammar, syntax) remain the same across the genre spectrum. There is even some overlap among the literary features and devices of the various genres. But at times the distinct literary features and devices of a particular genre warrant careful study. The reason genre plays a huge role has to do almost exclusively with the structure of the particular book, segment, and preaching portion.

We all can readily see the difference between the structure of a letter versus the structure of a poem versus the structure of a story. Structure is important to the biblical preacher because the structure of a particular book determines how much context must be consulted in order to interpret correctly a preaching portion of Scripture (the amount of biblical Text chosen to preach). One thing we learned from Alter, for instance, was that the structure of Old Testament narrative requires the student to pay attention to a large segment of context if subtleties of meaning are to be discovered. Genre affects structure and structure affects context which determines meaning.

As we talk about genre leading to the discovery of meaning, we are referring to the discovery of the meaning of an entire preaching portion — the sermon’s theme or big idea. While it is
true that the features and devices of a genre may affect meaning at the level of exegetical fragments — words, phrases, clauses, and isolated sentences — they also affect meaning and discovery of the theme of a preaching portion. This is vital for the preacher who is forced each week to move beyond genre-studies at the level of hermeneutics and enter the realm of “practical interpretation” to which Estes referred.9

A pastor armed with a working knowledge of the literary features and devices of the biblical genre increases his ability to identify the theme conveyed by the biblical author.10 What follows is an attempt to translate a theoretical “model” for understanding Gospel genre into practical interpretation of the theme of a Gospel preaching portion that will preserve its Christ-centered purpose.

The Uniqueness of Gospel Literature

Gospel genre poses a unique challenge for the preacher. Fee and Stuart suggest, “The four Gospels form a unique literary genre, for which there are few real analogies.”11 Gundry12 provides an interesting analysis of the reason for the uniqueness of the Gospels, so unique that he suggests that scholars avoid speaking of a “genre called ‘gospel’” which “implies a literary tradition of that kind prior to our gospels.”13 Classify them as you will, but Gundry’s analysis opens the door for the need to analyze this unparalleled genre so that pastors can readily discover Christ-centered themes from Gospel preaching portions. The following is a list of some of the more important characteristics of Gospel genre that affect the discovery and development of Christ-centered sermon themes:

The interaction or interplay between various genres and sub-genres

Ryken says “A literary approach begins with the conviction that
the Gospels are first of all stories.”14 Certainly the Gospels have a narrative flavor, but to see them as only classic, historical narrative is misleading. Ryken does affirm, “If we come to the Gospels with the usual narrative expectations of cause-effect plot construction, a strict beginning-middle-end framework, and the principle of single action, we will be continuously frustrated. The Gospels are too episodic and fragmented, too self-contained in their individual parts, and too thoroughly a hybrid form with interspersed non-narrative elements to constitute this type of unified story. The Gospels are an encyclopedic or mixed form.”15

Within the Gospels preachers find didactic, narrative, parabolic, apocalyptic, and other types of literature employed to communicate the author’s message.16 Understanding how the author uses these genres together is a key step for the expositor. At times accurate themes for biblical sermons will only be discovered by observing the interplay of two or more genres within a preaching portion.

The occasional nature of the Gospels

In comparison to the Epistles, the occasional nature of the Gospels is arguably less apparent and, therefore, often neglected. “Evangelical hermeneutics has somehow stressed the author’s intention for every book of the Bible except the narrative portions. We forgot that each Gospel is developed differently and must be studied by itself as a single whole in order to understand its inspired message.”17 The structure of narrative portions causes their occasional nature to be overlooked.

Knowledge of the occasion for a particular Gospel is essential to appreciate the direction of the author’s storyline. We know, for instance, that it is the different intentions, purposes, or occasions of the human authors which give rise to the need for writing
harmonies of the Gospels. Osborne speaks of Gospel plots at the “macro level.”18 The occasion or purpose or intention of the author at the macro level then provides the parameters for understanding the theme of individual preaching portions.

We acknowledge that the theme of a preaching portion must be consistent with the macro plot of the entire Gospel and, as a result, contribute to the author’s reason for writing. Some suggest that the Gospel of John is unique because of its evangelistic thrust. If the other three Gospels are written primarily for Christians, then this will radically affect the interpretation of virtually each preaching portion.19

The main character is Jesus20

You are all thinking it, so you might as well say it, “Well, duh! Of course the main character in the Gospels is Jesus.” If that is so, then all other characters are minor characters. By definition, minor characters rarely, if ever, find themselves figuring prominently into the development of biblical themes for a preaching portion.

Remember that Jesus is not only the main character of the Gospels, but He is also their purpose for existence. The Gospels present theological statements about Jesus through the records of His works and words. The Christ-centered nature of the Gospels means that Jesus Christ and allegiance to Him will be the focus of our preaching even if another strong character is present in the account.

There is a third aspect about Jesus being the main character of the Gospels which helps preachers discover Christ-centered themes for biblical sermons. Except for the birth records in the Gospels and those verses which discuss the life of Christ before He speaks, all other preaching portions highlighting His works yield meanings in connection with Jesus’ teaching. A careful
reading of pre-Christ-speaking sections reveals that their themes are guided by Old Testament didactic elements—the fulfillment of previously recorded prophecies. A helpful example of this principle is seen in Scott’s chiastic structure of the Gospel of Mark cited by Greidanus\(^{21}\) which places the center of the chiasm at God’s command to listen to His Son.

**Reasons for Spiritualizing, Allegorizing, and Moralizing the Gospels (SAM)**

Greidanus provides concise definitions and examples of committing SAM, so we will limit this section to exploring possible reasons for these practices.\(^{22}\)

**Philosophical Reasons**—There has been and continues to be a tendency to think that since God wrote the Scriptures every piece of minutia should yield timeless, relevant truth. This approach leads some preachers to develop an obsession to “find a sermon” in the incidental details of the Gospel narrative. This mindset may stem from an exaggerated view of inspiration, but it is like saying we have to see a house in every finish nail. While certainly being inspired and contributing to the theological idea, the story fragments do not contain by themselves the inspired idea.

Greidanus showed how Origen demonstrated this mindset to an extreme: “Origen was convinced that...every word had to have profound meaning—or rather, a meaning that would profit the reader and the hearer.”\(^{23}\) A conversation I had with an area colleague, Pastor Mike Horsman, reminded me how prevalent this philosophy still is. He stated that his belief in the doctrine of inspiration implied the automatic relevance of every segment of the Bible. But by using the term “segment” we must not be talking about *incidental details* within the segment. Many North American pulpits may be filled by preachers who confuse the two.
Practical Reasons—Preachers past and present have wrestled with the tension between accuracy and relevance. Greidanus points out that “another shortcoming in Calvin’s sermons [in relation to preaching Christ from the Old Testament] is occasioned by a combination of his pastoral concern for relevance and his employment of the homily style.” The seeker-sensitive model of pulpit ministry utilized in many churches today may be encouraging preachers to guarantee relevancy through identification with story fragments. Willimon suggests that “perhaps the most frequent modern pitfall is moralizing....The pastor, in an attempt to be relevant..., turns every text into some simplistic, moralistic program.”

It sounds odd, but the search for relevance according to today’s definition will most likely lead the preacher away from a Christ-centered theme from a Christ-centered Gospel. Unintentionally, the frantic search for relevance competes with the preacher’s obligation to discover the Christ-centered theme. In a phone conversation with Elliot Johnson, professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, he said that he has witnessed this approach in the preaching of some of their own graduates. The desire to connect an ancient passage with modern parishioners makes fertile ground for committing SAM.

Another practical reason that SAM is committed so widely is that it may still be the most recognized model of preaching certain segments of the Gospels. Greidanus has cited actual sermons that illustrate the point. Most of us have heard them and, perhaps, have preached them. Up to this point on the homiletical front, there has not been sufficient teaching within our training institutions to inject enough preachers into the scene to help offset the SAM model which has often set the standard for years.

Hermeneutical/Theological Reasons—At the heart of committing SAM is a failure to think in terms of the whole
versus parts. The preacher wrongly assumes that meaning for an isolated Gospel preaching portion can be discovered apart from the broader context. Osborne suggests that “Narrative studies recognize that meaning is found in a text as a whole rather than in isolated segments.”

Remember that one aspect of the structure of the Gospels which makes this difficult is that so many of the stories seem self-contained. At first glance one should be able to interpret the story on its own merit. Working in the Gospels may require even a seemingly isolated, free-standing story, to be interpreted in light of the surrounding framework of the preceding and following narrative or other genres/sub-genres.

**Working Towards A Solution**

**Remember the Purpose of the Book**

The first way to avoid SAM is to pay attention to the Gospel writer’s purpose and audience. Fee and Stuart write:

> different Christian communities each had need for a book about Jesus…. So one was written first (Mark, in the most common view), and that Gospel was ‘rewritten’ twice (Matthew and Luke) for considerably different reasons, to meet considerably different needs. Independently of them (again, in the most common view), John wrote a Gospel of a different kind for still another set of reasons.

The key statement from Fee and Stuart had to do with their identification of the original readers being “different Christian communities.” While the Gospel of John may be expressly evangelistic in nature (cf. John 20:31), the other three Gospels, despite their evangelistic look, are designed for a saved audience. This, in itself, affects interpretation and application of
preaching portions from the Synoptic Gospels. Preachers are often prone to give evangelistic twists to sections not designed for that purpose.

The opposite problem can occur when preaching from John’s Gospel. It is tempting in John 20 to moralize from the negative example of Thomas about the consequences of not being with the believers. To place undue stress there would be to miss the purpose of John’s Gospel which uses this preaching portion to call people to believe in the resurrected Christ without seeing the evidence for themselves (v. 29).

Another example can be seen from John 4 which records Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Often this narrative is used to teach methods of personal evangelism. Again, to place undue stress there and moralize the methodology of Jesus is to miss the evangelistic thrust of the story from John’s perspective—calling people to receive the living water.

**Pay Attention to the Larger Context**

Another way to avoid SAM is to remember that meaning for an individual preaching portion at times is derived from a larger context. At the very least, meaning must always be *consistent* with the larger context. Like we discovered from studying Old Testament narrative, Gospel genre at times requires that we take into account a much larger section of text than we might be comfortable with. Oftentimes in the Gospels, several scenes, acts, and stories are woven together to make a theological statement. 29

Robert Alter argues that Old Testament exegetes must assume “that the text is an intricately interconnected unity” rather than assuming that “it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents.”30 Old Testament narrative requires the student to
be “attuned to small verbal signals of continuity and to significant lexical nuances.”31 We pose that the same is true for the Gospels. The Jewish flavor of Matthew’s Gospel in particular displays the same connectedness and “verbal signals of continuity” (cf. the occurrence of “offend” or “offences” from 13:54-19:2). In the case of Matthew 17:24-27 (Jesus paying the temple tax), relevance to the original readers and to us is displayed in the surrounding context—Jesus’ humility and the humility needed for His disciples. Meaning is affected by genre because genre affects structure and structure affects context which determines meaning.

An extreme implication of this is that there may be individual preaching portions which may not contain a theme of their own. For example, Gospel writers will use narratives as illustrations of their intended theological point. Fee and Stuart note that, “stories...are placed in a context of teaching, where the story itself serves as an illustration of what is being taught.”32 To preach that story would be to only preach an illustration, not the actual truth being presented.

Consider Mark 8:1-38. Vv. 22-26 record the story of the healing of the blind man in Bethsaida. This narrative preaching portion is illustrative of the condition of the disciples who failed to see the significance of the feeding of the four thousand. This healing miracle narrative is wedged between the disciples seeing the miracle of the loaves but not really seeing what it says about Jesus and the account of Peter’s confession of who Jesus really is and yet not seeing his mission. The gradual clearing of the man’s vision is a picture of the gradual clearing of Jesus’ followers’ understanding of Jesus and the nature of His kingdom.

The pastor who is preaching through the Gospel of Mark and lands on the story of Jesus healing the blind man for his Sunday sermon is going to end up preaching an illustration. The
theological concept which might be extracted from the story will not be in line with the theme determined by the context. That preacher will deduce a sermon idea which was not intended by Mark and, in doing so, will no doubt resort to some form of SAM. What is misleading is that the narrative has a beginning, middle, and end and possesses its own plot and characters—all the makings of a story. But the story is incomplete theologically and is only a contributor to a theme that communicates the author’s intention. In this case the miracle story has meaning only as it is connected to the didactic portions of the larger context.

The opposite extreme of a preaching portion containing no theological theme is one that seems to have too many. Paying attention to the larger context is helpful at times in narrowing the pastor’s options to the one theme the author intended. Buttrick\(^3\) writes: “One of the problems with Luke 17:11-19 is that the passage seems to suggest too many motifs....What are we to make of such a mishmash of theamatics? The passage is intentionally designed, but we seem to have more intentions than we can handle.” The story of the ten lepers is best zeroed in on by paying attention to the previous context which teaches the need for faith and the reality of a servant’s obedience to his master. The parable ends with the statement of v. 10: “we have done that which was our duty to do.” The following example of the ten lepers shows them responding to Jesus’ command to go and show themselves to the priests—they did their duty to fulfill the law of the commandment. Only one person mixed obedience with a faith that worshiped God through His Son. The balance of obedience and worship that Buttrick is looking for in Luke 17:11-19 is found through a careful analysis of the previous context.

Grant Osborne cites Berlin to discuss the problem of seemingly multiple meanings within a preaching portion: “as Berlin points out, a story usually has multiple perspectives as the biblical
narrator like a movie camera zeros in on one aspect then another in the developing plot, thereby guiding the reader in several meaning directions at the same time.”34 We are suggesting that the larger context will help the pastor narrow these options so that the intended message is identified. The nature of communication means that God did not mean to guide the reader in several meaning directions at the same time without making it clear how those multiple meanings combine through subordination to create a dominant theological concept.

**Beware of Searching for Relevance in Exegetical Fragments**

The most fatal mistake resulting in SAM occurs within the preaching portion itself. Many pastors fail to think in terms of the whole versus parts.35 An important question to answer when studying the Gospel literature is, How many details in Gospel narratives are designed to teach timeless truth? At what point is it hermeneutically sound to move from the incidental details of the story to timeless principles? Osborne teaches that “As the story is retold, application...will suggest itself in natural ways within the story.”36 We suggest that those “natural ways” of discovering application will many times result in some form of SAM.

In his study of the kingdom parables of Jesus, Mark Bailey writes: “Ramm speaks of the presence of ‘accessories.’ These details ‘are necessary for the drapery of the parable, but are not part of the meaning.’”37 The same can be said of narratives. The stories found in the Gospels are replete with incidental details which are important for retelling the historical event, but which do not contribute directly to the formation of the biblical Christ-centered theme. SAM occurs when pastors “draw...moral inferences from isolated elements.”38

It is best to find timeless, preachable truths from the whole preaching portion rather than its minutia. As a safeguard against
SAM we contend that the whole be understood at three levels: the occasion and purpose of the whole Gospel; the whole section comprised of multiple preaching portions, including various genres and subgenres that jointly contribute to the theme of the Gospel; and finally the whole preaching portion.

Concerning the approach which resulted in Midrash, Alter writes: “the Midrash provides exegesis of specific phrases or narrated actions but not continuous readings of the biblical narratives: small pieces of the text become the foundations of elaborate homiletical structures that have only an intermittent relation to the integral story told by the text.” A perusal of the earlier-mentioned examples of SAM provided by Greidanus shows what can happen when pastors draw application from incidental details lifted from the whole story.

From step 6 in his method of getting from exegesis to exposition, Robert Chisholm writes:

Summarize the main literary/theological theme(s) and lesson(s) of the story. This will often entail an analysis of characterization. Who are the most significant characters, what role do they play, and how should they be evaluated from a moral perspective?

The pastor has to be careful about evaluating the individual character from a moral perspective because to do so is to immediately run the risk of committing SAM by drawing timeless principles from details lifted from the whole story.

Timothy Peck argues for the theological validity of preaching about Old Testament biblical characters:

rather than choosing between a false disjunction of either preaching God-centered or human-centered
sermons, the nature of the Bible itself suggests that we preach of God’s relation to humanity. Approached from this perspective, the Old Testament stories become paradigmatic for how God deals with humanity."

Certainly the same can be said about the New Testament Gospel stories. However, the sermon theme, which is devoted to the human side of the God-dealing-with-humanity drama, will commit some form of SAM. Not only will the pastor pay no attention to the intention of the original author, but he will also hunt for relevance in the fragments of the character’s attitudes and actions rather than in the whole narrative.

The Didactic Portions Control the Direction and Theme of Narrative Portions

When a pastor discovers that a mixture of genres (e.g., narrative and parable) is combining to make a theological statement about Jesus Christ, he should keep in mind that the didactic or teaching elements within that section will help interpret the rest of the section. Over and over again, we discovered that all other genres bow in submission to any teaching sections within their domain. Fee and Stuart state that at times, “stories...are placed in a context of teaching, where the story itself serves as an illustration of what is being taught.” Pastors will discover that many of the miracle stories are affected by this principle.

We have already referred to Mark 8 and the story of Jesus healing the blind man of Bethsaida. That narrative is controlled entirely by the previous didactic section of Jesus explaining the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Consider also the narrative sections which follow Christ’s teaching in Luke 18:9-14 (addressing those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous). Vv. 15-17 is the story of people bringing infants to Jesus. Vv. 18-27 is the story of Jesus’ encounter with “a certain ruler” who asked what he could do to inherit eternal life. The
two stories provide a positive and negative example of the earlier teaching about who receives justification from God. A sermon from Matthew 11:1-6, for example, makes theological sense only as a pastor allows the teaching of Jesus in v. 6 to control the narrative of John’s question posed to Jesus from prison.

Be Careful About Moralizing the Methodology of Jesus

Whereas the words of Jesus provide some controls over the narrative portions of the Gospels, the *works* of Jesus do not contribute in the same way. When Jesus teaches either in true didactic fashion, through parables, or in dialogue with a minor character, His recorded speech contains a theological idea that is preachable. Forms of SAM are rarely, if ever, committed in didactic material (we know the parables have been allegorized to death), but it is very tempting for a pastor to moralize the *methodology* of Jesus. While pastors will urge their parishioners to emulate the lifestyle of Jesus and follow His teaching, their focus should not be on His methodology. One prevalent form of SAM is moralizing the methodology of Jesus. Since the Gospels are filled with so many of the things that Jesus did, it is tempting for a pastor to preach a sermon which encourages the people to do exactly what Jesus did. How can it be wrong to ask people to do what Jesus did, especially when Christian book stores are selling WWJD bracelets?

We are suggesting that there are two reasons why moralizing the methodology of Jesus is not wise. One reason is because there are so many facets of His work that Christians—even Spirit-controlled Christians—cannot imitate. For instance, Christians not armed with omniscience cannot enter into evangelistic encounters with the same skillful comments as Jesus (cf. the many evangelistic encounters of Jesus in the Gospels such as John 4). While it is correct to follow His example and evangelize the non-Christian, it is impossible to follow His
exact method of personal evangelism. Osborne writes, “The modern reader will not seek to duplicate the miracles so much as to relive the faith-commitment of these stories.”

The second reason is that to focus on the methodology of Jesus diverts the pastor from the author’s intention for recording the event (cf. Matthew 4 in appendix; in the John 4 example, paying attention to Jesus’ recorded speech leads to the intended meaning of the story). The question for the modern reader is not, What would Jesus do?, but instead, What does Jesus want us to do? (we know…it doesn’t make for as good a bracelet—WDJWUTD?!).

Allow the rest of the New Testament to Guide Theme and Application

The discussion and analysis of the Old Testament Scriptures being characterized as sub-Christian, non-Christian, or pre-Christian showed the difficulty scholars have in interpreting certain sections of the Old Testament. These same categories are also pertinent to the discussion of preaching from the Gospels. That study led Greidanus to conclude that the Old Testament must be interpreted from the perspective of the New Testament. We suggest that the unique nature of the Gospels (recording events which preceded pre-resurrection Christianity and the teachings of Jesus which were packed with the already-not yet tension of His kingdom) require that they be interpreted from the perspective of the rest of the New Testament.

We believe Alter’s analysis is pertinent to the Gospels. He sees the Old Testament as “a real narrative continuum, as a coherent unfolding story in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or enriched by the addition of subsequent data.” We see the New Testament display some of those same characteristics. One reason for that is the unique purpose of sermonic history writing. The tension
within the Gospels is for the writer to remain true to the historical events while still teaching theology to the original, post-resurrection readers.\(^8\) At times within the Gospels, it is helpful to refer to any post-Gospels New Testament literature which cites an event in the life of Christ. Not necessarily for interpretation, but certainly to show relevance.

While the pastor’s interpretation can be derived from the wording of the Gospel narrative itself, application, so often the point at which SAM occurs, may be guided by later New Testament allusions to the Gospel event. For example, observe how the writer of Hebrews applies the event of the temptation of Jesus in 2:17-18 and 4:15. Rather than moralizing the methodology of Jesus (fighting temptation through quoting Bible verses), the writer shows that our Savior can be trusted with confidence to deliver us when we are going through temptation. The meaning of the enigmatic discussion Jesus had with Peter over paying the temple tax in Matthew 17:24-27 is cleared up only as 1 Corinthians 9:18-23 (Paul limiting his freedom for the sake of giving the Gospel a better hearing).

**Understand the Rhetorical Nature of Many of Jesus’ Parables**

Earlier we made reference to Bailey’s work on the kingdom parables. The preface of “The kingdom of heaven is like...” clearly shows the purpose of those analogies. The other uses of parables within the Gospels may require the pastor to remember that, at times, two or more genres/sub-genres are working together to create theme. It is helpful to note that the parables are technically not a literary genre since they are recorded by, not made up by, the human author. These parables are a rhetorical device of Jesus. Jesus uses parables to teach truth. The Gospel writer, then, must weave these parables into the macro-plot so that he is true to Jesus’ intention.

What this means practically is that parables rarely are used by
themselves. Parables most often help communicate a truth already referred to in the narrative. The parables of Luke 15 (lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son) not only show how a few seemingly separate parabolic stories contribute to one parable (15:3 “...he spoke this parable...”), but also show how the parable teaches a theological concept previously referred to in the narrative (15:1-2 and the murmuring of the religious leaders about Jesus’ friendliness towards sinners). It may not fit here exactly, but it is troublesome that more preachers have encouraged the “lost sons” of the congregation to come home than have encouraged the resident “pharisees and scribes” to change their way of thinking about sinners!

Matthew 18:23-35 (the king who reviews his servants’ accounts) is another example of a parable being used in connection with a narrative (Peter asking Jesus how often they had to forgive others). You can see what happens to a pastor who preaches the parable by itself. Is it possible for him to preach a true message? Yes. But the message will not be as complete as it would be in connection with Peter’s question and Jesus’ reply.

**Don’t Allow a Minor Character to Play a Major Role**

The very nature of the Gospel stories will make it tempting for a pastor to allow minor characters to dominate a sermon idea. By definition a minor character in the Gospels is any other character than Jesus. Peck’s analysis of the nature and structure of Old Testament narratives holds true for the Gospels. Rather than saying that these narratives demand biographical preaching, we would say that they strongly entice biographical preaching. We have already spoken of at least two dangers of preaching sermons that focus on a minor character: (1) the unity of the story—macro and micro-plot—is destroyed, leaving the pastor to find relevance in the fragments; (2) the intention of the author is destroyed leaving the pastor to find relevance divorced from the original principle which was relevant to the first
Christian community. Greidanus suggests helpful guidelines for preaching minor characters.\textsuperscript{50} Busenitz’s very brief treatment of biographical preaching is helpful in stressing the need to focus on the sovereign workings of God in the life of a minor character.\textsuperscript{51}

**Conclusion**

Greidanus reminds us pastors that the problems of SAM become evident at the level of application.\textsuperscript{52} According to Robinson application is the preacher’s question.\textsuperscript{53} Our job description means that every Sunday we look the same folks in the eyes and attempt to show them how God’s Word relates to their lives. It is while attempting to bridge the gap between the modern listener and the ancient text that we are most prone to commit some form of SAM. What is a preacher to do?

Actually, application is not the source of the trouble. Greidanus set the record straight when he suggested that, while the problems of SAM become evident at the level of application, they are actually caused by a deeper hermeneutical problem.\textsuperscript{54} We have attempted to present an initial look at the unique genre of the Gospels with a view towards practical interpretation — analysis which may help guide pastors to Christ-centered sermon themes/ideas that correctly interpret and apply.

Is this study important? We strongly believe that to commit some form of SAM is to warrant the harsh criticism of Robinson who lamented, “The awful thing was I said in the name of God what God was not saying.”\textsuperscript{55}

**Appendix: The Temptation of Christ — A Tale of Two Sermons**

Matthew 4:1-11 records Jesus overcoming the temptation of the devil. Although there may be other approaches to sermon development, the following is an attempt to contrast two possible alternatives:
Option #1

Broad Subject: Jesus successfully defeating the temptation of the devil
Narrow Subject: What is the result of Jesus successfully defeating the temptation of the devil?

Complement: Jesus is proven to be the true Son of God and experiences the full pull of temptation.

Exegetical Big Idea: The result of Jesus successfully defeating the temptation of the devil is that He is proven to be the Son of God while experiencing the full pull of temptation.

Homiletical Big Idea: When the people of PC/TCC are tempted to sin against God, they should not yield, but rather trust the Son of God who successfully defeated the temptation of the devil while experiencing the full pull of temptation.

Sermon Purpose: To challenge the people of PC/TCC to run with full confidence to the Son of God for help when they are tempted to sin against God.

Option #2 (a form of SAM)

Broad Subject: Jesus successfully defeating the temptation of the devil

Narrow Subject: How did Jesus successfully defeat the temptation of the devil?

Complement: by quoting the word of God

Exegetical Big Idea: Jesus successfully defeated the temptation of the devil by quoting the word of God.

Homiletical Big Idea: When the people of PC/TCC are tempted they need to defeat temptation by quoting the word of God.
Sermon Purpose: To challenge the people of PC/TCC to quote the word of God in order to defeat temptation.

In order to arrive at option #1 we had to pay attention to the following factors: the purpose of Matthew; the larger context; how the event of the temptation of Jesus is portrayed in Hebrews 2 and 4; what Jesus Himself taught His disciples about praying for protection in Matt. 6:13; also James’ teaching in 1:13; 4:7 and Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 10:13; not moralizing Jesus’ methodology of handling temptation.

Notes
9. Estes, 430
11. Fee & Stuart, 103; also Greidanus *Modern Preacher*, 266.
15. Ryken, 132.
16. For a helpful look at the genres and sub-genres within the Gospels, see Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 137.
17. Osborne, 154.
18. Osborne, 159.
27. Osborne, 153.
28. Fee and Stuart, 105.
30. Alter, 11.
32. Fee and Stuart, 118.
34. Osborne, 156.
35. Osborne, 153.
36. Osborne, 173.
41. Chisholm, 190.
44. Fee & Stuart, 118.
45. Osborne, 163.
47. Alter, 11.
49. Peck, 30.
55. Robinson, 25.