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RECLAIMING BIBLICAL RELEVANCE IN PREACHING.
THE NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS
OF BIBLICAL RELEVANCE IN PREACHING

A b s t r a c t . The desired outcome of biblical communication is application – the process of the listener relating his or her life to the truth of God's word. Consequently, the goal of biblical communication is relevance – the process of relating truth of God's word to the listener. At the heart of the biblical equation of communication stands the question of the necessary and sufficient conditions which must obtain for a sermon to count as being biblically relevant. The article analyzes the content and form of biblical communication seeking to determine its relationship to the consciousness of the listener (intellect, affection and will). The paper contends for an objective foundation of biblical relevance found in the biblical content always aiming at the will of the listener and the biblical form framing the content for the intellect of the hearer. The sermon is biblically relevant to the extent to which the above relationships obtain in the process of communication.

Key words: biblical relevance; preaching; content; form; intellect; will.

1. THE DILEMMA OF BIBLICAL RELEVANCE IN COMMUNICATION

Relevance is the heart of preaching. Relevance pumps the life-giving blood of God's word through the arteries of our souls. When the heart of relevance pulsates with life in the pulpit, our pews teem with life. When the heart of preaching

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loses its pulse, the life of the church flat-lines. Biblical relevance stands at the very core of biblical preaching.

The desired outcome of preaching is application. Application, in its broad sense, *is the process of relating life to truth.* In the context of homiletics, application is the process of the listener conforming his or her life to the truth of God's word. We preach to change lives. If the desired outcome of preaching is application then the goal of preaching is relevance. Relevance is the flip side of application. *It is the process of relating truth to life.* More precisely, relevance in preaching refers to the process of forming the truth of God's word to the lives of the listeners. Before people are able to apply their lives to the truth, the truth has to be properly related to their lives.

The field of homiletics sits on a fault line of relevance, where the plate of God's truth overlaps the plate of life. Preaching is taking God's truth spelled out in yesterday's book and applying it to the lives of today's audience. Timothy Warren points to the heart of the homiletic dilemma when he observes that "The challenge of Christian ministry is to proclaim changeless eternal truth while applying it to ever-changing temporal situation."[1] The preacher stands between two worlds: the world of the Bible and the world of today. Those once-intersecting worlds have drifted apart pushed by the winds of history. Time and change, accelerated by the rapid growth in technology, social transformation, political transition, and religious diversification eroded the initial splinter into a grand canyon. The demand for relevance in communicating God's word increases as the distance between the world of the Scriptures and the world of today expands. That distance is measured in terms that define culture in all its complexity. The process of relevance then is the process of trying to bridge the gap between the culture of the Bible and the culture of today.

Preaching "in the gap" has demanded that relevance build a bridge from the side of the Scriptures to the side of our contemporary culture. What the process required from a preacher was to transfer the message of the Bible to the other side of the canyon, with the hope of finding a solid ground. However, the endeavour of bridging the cultural chasm has been wrought with frustration and difficulty. The greatest challenge comes from our inability to build a bridge to an ever-moving mass of cultural landscape. Culture is in a constant state of flux. It changes perpetually, often without warnings or signs along the road. Consequently, any attempt to build a homiletic bridge is akin to shooting short of target. If one

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[1] Timothy WARREN, "A Paradigm for Preaching", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1991, October-December: 463.

generation builds a bridge of relevance that reaches across the span, the next generation finds that same bridge reaching only part way over the abyss. This frustrating task of pursuing culture has left us spent and dejected. In our repeated attempts to scratch the cultural itch we have found ourselves chasing our homiletic tails to exhaustion. In summary, "Unable, or perhaps unwilling, to understand and respond, preachers have failed the challenge, capitulating to culture and offering mere fragments of meaning, personhood, and fraternity."[2] One generation's bridge of relevance becomes the next generation's pier of irrelevance.

The growing futility of trying to build relevance from the bank of biblical revelation to the bank of contemporary culture has swung the homiletic pendulum to our side of the gulf. The dogma of relevance today has reversed its course by attempting to construct the bridge of relevance from the side of today's world over to the world of the Bible. The great reversal grows out of a new perspective in communication placing the domain of relevance under the listener's authority. In this view, since relevance is a conditional concept prompting a question, "relevant to whom?" The listeners determine the relevance of a sermon. Bibby puts his finger on this general trend by noting that, "Rather than saying to culture, "This is what religion is," [the churches] have been much more inclined to say to culture, "What do you want religion to be?".[3]

The project of trying to start with today's culture and end on the shore of God's word has been riddled with quandaries. Relevance erected on the quicksand of people's felt needs tends to drown the truth of God's word in a sea of subjectivities. The desire to speak to people's perceived needs results in the Word of God becoming a kind of a quick fix manual or a recipe book for all pallets and tastes. The chorus clamouring for the satisfaction of our insatiable appetites tends to turn the word of God into a mere echo of the culture's predominant voice. The Bible is made to speak to issues it often has no interest in addressing and to answer questions it deems irrelevant. Preaching becomes relevant only at the price of agreeing with the latest opinion poll.

What lies at the core of this growing hostility is the question of the nature of biblical relevance in preaching. Both sides view relevance as the goal of preaching. And yet they do not see eye to eye on what it means to create and to preach relevant sermons. The danger of the former view, where God's Word is declared inherently relevant, is that its preaching is nothing short of a dull recitation of

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Reginald BIBBY, *Fragmented Gods: The Property and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1987), 111.

clichés. This kind of preaching evokes "amens" from the crowd of the faithful few but it often goes only skin deep. Preaching is reduced to restating platitudes that fall on deaf ears, being unable to penetrate the soul. Preaching may engage the intellect but it leaves the heart cold. The hazard of the latter view of preaching, beginning with people's felt needs, is that it aims at evoking an emotional response often at the expense of truth. The felt needs are often met by making the Word of God echo the collective voice of the audience.

This impasse stands us before the question of what is the nature of biblical relevance in preaching. Stated more precisely, the question at the heart of this inquiry is "What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of biblical relevance?" The conditions in question refer to relations that hold between the Word of God and the listener. In causal relations, a necessary condition for the occurrence of an event is a state of affairs without which the event cannot happen. A sufficient condition is a state of affairs that guarantees that it will happen. What we are after is a determination of the essential elements that account for the relevance of God's word to a human audience.

It is important to distinguish the question guiding this inquiry from other relevance-related questions. The question before us is the question of the essential components of biblical relevance. Most works devoted to relevance in preaching skim over the foundational question, "What is biblical relevance in preaching?" in favour of the question, "How can we make the message more relevant to today's audience?" The question of relevance in the first instance deals with the conditions that hold true under any and all circumstances. The inquiry following the second question assumes the prior answer. It presupposes a "right" relationship of the message to the audience. It affirms that God's word is inherently relevant to people's deepest needs. It then moves to the subsequent inquiry of the contingent conditions of relevance.

Contingent conditions of biblical relevance depend for their validity on factors rooted in the variables of audience analysis. As a result, most treatments of relevance affirm the authority of Scripture as a given without prior analysis, leaping across the chasm to exegete the culture. The result is an exhaustive study of the nuances of today's culture without an adequate reflection on the conditions that must hold a priori for something to count as biblically relevant. In the majority of works on relevance, there is a glaring absence of genuine inquiry as to the conditions that guard the biblical concept of relevance. Relevance is affirmed but left unexplained. The majority of books and articles dealing with relevance in preaching focus on examining the contingent conditions of relevance rooted in culture.

The distinction between the necessary/sufficient conditions of biblical relevance and the contingent conditions can be framed in the context of the distinction between relevance and persuasion. Relevance is concerned with the adequate relationship of God's message to the listener. Persuasion focuses on the process of application, the relationship between the listener and his response to the message. In this sense, a sermon may be relevant without being persuasive and vice versa, a message may be persuasive without being relevant. The effectiveness of our preaching is dependent but not exhausted by the conditions of relevance. In order for our sermons to be effective we must augment our communication by engaging the listener's affection along with her cognition and will. However, what makes a sermon effective is a related but distinct question from the query of what makes a sermon biblically relevant. It is the second question that is the object of our inquiry.

The priority of the former question is evident in the gravity of the dilemma of relevance. Unless there are some objective grounds for our claim of biblical relevance, independent of the changing cultural milieu, we cannot claim the Bible's relevance for people either today or yesterday. Trying to bring God's word to today's audience in the absence of a tie that lies beyond time and change is futile. It is like trying to bring two magnets together by attempting to join the two negative or two positive poles. We can bring them quite close together. But essentially, it is impossible to join two identical polarities together. The same dilemma stands at the heart of the question of biblical relevance. Unless we can establish that relevance in preaching is not a sole function of cultural adaptation but is an innate function of God's communication with people, our attempts at being relevant may leave us with the illusion of making contact while all along remaining infinitely apart. Extracting the essence of biblical relevance requires the identification of its necessary and sufficient conditions. Finding these conditions for relevance will supply us with the sinews of a skeleton on which we can subsequently hang the flesh of trans-cultural communication.

The question of relevance in preaching then pertains to the domain of the preacher's responsibility in the process of God communicating with his creation. God is the author of this process in revelation recorded on the pages of his word. The audience is given the challenge of response to the Word. The preacher is caught in the middle, hearing from God and speaking to the people. The extent of the preacher's liability in preaching reaches from God's lips to the listener's ears. That distance, from the heart of God to the heart of people, is the canyon bridged by relevance.

2. THE EQUATION OF BIBLICAL RELEVANCE

"Relevance" is a conditional term. It derives from the Latin word, *relevare*, which means "to bear upon something." For something to count as relevant it must have a significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand. The term "relevance" is not only conditional but relational. It cannot stand on its own. In order to function according to its semantic design it must stand between other terms. In this sense, relevance is a glue that holds two sides of the equation of communication together.

When we talk about relevance in the context of biblical preaching, we are placing relevance as the two-sided tape holding God's word on the one side and the listening audience on the other. To claim that the Bible is relevant to today's audience is to assert that God's word has a bearing upon the lives of the listeners. When God speaks in his word, the words are meant to impact the listeners. The two components which relevance holds together are the word of God and the life of the listener. In order to understand the relationship between these two concepts, we must make some necessary distinctions by analyzing the term on each side of the equation.

It will be helpful for our discussion to recognize that any piece of written or verbal communication, intending to convey meaning, is made up of two essential elements: content and form. Content refers to that which is asserted. All intelligible communication is predicated on people asserting something about something else. Communication trades in concepts expressing ideas. The content of a concept can be determined by analysis of the two essential parts that make up an idea, namely the subject and the complement. The subject, in communication is the answer to the question, "What is the author talking about?" The complement completes the subject by answering the question, "What is the author saying about the subject?" Every complete idea is made up of these two elements. "In order to have a complete idea we must assert or predicate something about something else. As long as we have merely a "something" (a subject), we do not yet have an idea. It is only the assertion of "another thing" (a complement) about the subject that gives birth to a complete idea."[4] Content is made up of ideas comprised of subjects and complements.

Every idea comes wrapped in a certain form. Form pertains to how assertions are framed. Few ideas in communication ever come to us in a neatly distilled subject and complement framed into a single sentence or proposition. Instead,

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[4] Duane LITFIN, *Public Speaking*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 85.

ideas come in a variety of shapes, patterns and moods. The forms usually make up patterns that comprise literary genres. Each genre of literature has some distinguishable features intended to frame the ideas into a recognizable pattern. The genres serve the purpose of shaping our communication according to the design of the author. Understanding the distinguishing marks of each literary genus are indispensable to our understanding of the content. Understanding of both content and form is indispensable to the act of communication.

The Bible is God's communication with people. More concretely, when we speak of "God's word," we refer to God's communication with people enscriptured in the Bible. Since the Bible is God's communication with people it comprises of both content and form. The content of the Bible comes to us in ideas. The ideas express notions of sin, salvation, redemption, holiness and others. The ideas come wrapped in a variety of forms ranging from narrative, prophecy, wisdom literature, epistles, and apocalyptic among others. This vast diversity is often lost on us in referring to God's word by a singular word, "Bible." This singular was originally a plural Latin word, "*Biblia*" indicating a plurality of books that comprised it. The Scriptures come in books of various length that comprise what we traditionally come to call the Old and the New Testament. What is particularly remarkable about the Bible is that while it demonstrates a remarkable unity, it is made up of a myriad of forms encasing the message. There is prose and poetry. There is a narrative discourse and prophetic pronouncement. Parables intersect with sections of didactic teaching and deductive argumentation. God's communication comes wrapped in a diversity of literary forms.

The recognition of the diversity in form amidst the unity of the message is pertinent to the question of relevance. God's word does not come in "one size fits all." The diversity of genres poses a question as to the role of biblical forms in relation to biblical relevance. If the message can be extracted in an idea, why so many diverse forms framing those ideas? In short, what we need to evaluate in the context of biblical communication is what is the relationship between the word of God – content wrapped in form – and the intended audience.

The analysis of the term, "God's Word," at its core, yields two essential components, content and form. While God's word, made up of content and form, stands on one side of the equation of relevance, we must also define the notion of the "listener's life" standing opposite to it. "Life" is an all encompassing term that is just about as easy to grasp as is the breath from which life originated. It will serve us well to break "life" into its constituent parts – the most likely bearers of God's word in the equation of relevance. The notion of "life" can be sliced into innumerable parts. However, for our purpose "listener's life" can be divided into

parts defined by the ancient rhetoric. Aristotle's classic rhetorical can be of help to us at this juncture. Aristotle argued for a tripartite composition of every persuasive message: *logos, pathos and ethos*. *Logos* referred to the verbal content of the message. *Pathos* comprised the emotive features of the message including the passion, fervor, and feeling that the speaker arouses. *Ethos* related to the perceived character of the speaker determined by the concern expressed for the listener's welfare.

The analysis of the term "listener" or a "listener's life" unveiled a tripartite division of intellect, affection and volition. We must now return to our examination of "relevance." In the context of our analysis of "relevance" as a relationship where God's word is claimed to bear on the life of the listener, what we need to determine is the relationship between the content and form of God's word on the one side and the intellect, affection and will of the listener on the other side. If God's word has any bearing on the life of the listeners, we must first answer the question, "What is the relationship of the content of God's word to the life of the listener?" Then, we will follow that question with the subsequent inquiry, "What is the relationship between the form of God's word to the listener's makeup?" What we are trying to identify are the necessary and sufficient conditions that hold between the divine and the human side in the equation of biblical relevance.
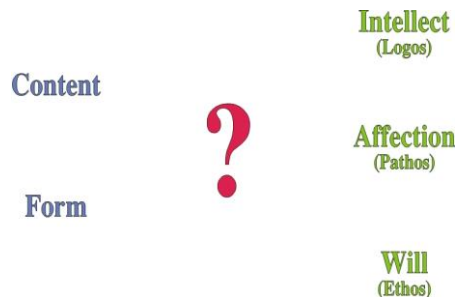
In order to determine the relationship between the biblical content on the scriptural side of the equation and the personal dimensions of intellect, emotions and will we will analyze sample texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the first part, we will focus on the relationship between the biblical content and the human constitution. In the second part, we will examine the relationship of the biblical form to the personal dimensions of being.

3. THE FUNCTION OF BIBLICAL CONTENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The first act of communication between God and man is recorded in Genesis 2:16-17. There God outlines the condition of his relationship with the man, "And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." After creating man in his own image, God placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and care for it (Gen. 2:15). The invitation to the garden came with a condition attached to it. Man was allowed to eat from any tree of the garden. However God commanded Adam not to eat "[…] from the tree of knowledge of good and evil." The consequence of human disobedience would be death. What is significant is that the command prohibiting man from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil come prior to the original act of disobedience. The image of God in man is still untarnished. God still holds the view that the creation was "very good," without any blemish of sin.

The main idea of God's prohibition is not difficult to determine. The subject can be framed in the question, "Why should man not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?" The complement supplies the answer: "Man must not eat from the tree because if he eats from it he will surely die." The idea expresses a prohibition, a moral imperative based on God's command. It is stated in a declarative sentence. The imperative of God's prohibition is established on the indicative of the grim reality of death. Instead of simply forbidding man to eat, God provides a rationale for the prohibition by appealing to the grim consequences of man's adverse choice. The consequence of a wrongful choice is the loss of life, loss marked by a separation from God.

With the content of God's idea in hand, we can now proceed to determine what is the aim of that idea on the other side of the equation of relevance. What becomes readily apparent is that the idea expressed in the imperative of prohibition bears on man's volition. The command is aimed at the human will. It can hardly be denied that the content of the prohibition must first be understood, filtered through the intellect. However, the intellect is not the final destination of the command. What God requires is not mere understanding but obedience. The "what" of what God says is related to the "how" of how people choose to live. The line of relevance originating in the content of God's prohibition leads directly to the will of the recipient.

The aim of God's word expressed in an idea and applied to the will is underscored by the paradox embedded in the command itself. An attempt at sidestep-

ping God's command would result in gaining knowledge of right and wrong only at the expense of first making a morally culpable decision. The moral input of God's communication is critical to our understanding of the grounds of our relationship with God. It is also decisive for our understanding of the overarching character of God's communication with people. Our relationship with God is only partly based on our knowledge of what God demands from us. Instead, it is made complete by our commitment to choose what he commands. Our relationship with God is always conditional upon our commitment to doing what God tells us to do. This commitment is evoked by our volitional response to God's word.

In the context of man's relationship with God, the idea of God's communication relates directly to the human will. The relational context of God's communication with people is paramount. God does not address people with a set of instructions or rules framed in abstraction. Instead, what God says is predicated on his desire to have a relationship with people who are made in his image. The prohibition points to a built-in dependence of people on their Creator. The knowledge of good and evil, prior to the first people's act of disobedience, lies exquisitely in God's realm of authority. People depend on God for that knowledge. Our dependence on God for our knowledge of good and evil is essentially the ground of our trust in God. Knowing what is right must be predicated on the willingness to do it. It is that willingness to trust God's judgment that underlies our relationship with him. The focus of God's relationship with us marks the boundary for the context of all of God's communication. In other words, God speaks to us out of his desire to have a relationship with us. All of God's word will be spoken in the context of the interpersonal relationship with his creation. All of God's communication with us functions primarily on the moral level predicated on our response to God's commands.

In the context of God's unmediated communication, the emerging pattern of relevance connects the truth of God's word with the human will. The content of God's truth addresses the human volition. God speaks with the explicit purpose of evoking our response in obedience to his word.

While the special limitations of this paper do not permit us to include a comprehensive survey of all literary genres of the Old Testament, the contention of this paper is that the above analysis is exemplary of all kinds of the Hebrew literature in the Bible. There a number of conclusions that could be drawn from the textual analysis.

First, it is evident that biblical content of the Old Testament expresses theological ideas. In both poetry and prose, we are able to extract the subject and

the predicate that jointly comprise a dominant idea intended by the biblical author. Biblical authors speak the truth in making claims about some subject or another. Each genre must be handled in a unique way. Some biblical literature lends itself more readily to the determination of what the author is talking about and what he is saying about it. However, the common thread of biblical communication is its ideational character. Biblical ideas, couched in biblical concepts are conveyed through complements impregnating subjects with meaning.

Second, the pattern of Old Testament exposition is that the content of biblical ideas is always aimed at the human will. The biblical ideas never convey sterile thoughts intended to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. Neither are they merely intended to evoke a feeling or stir an emotion. Instead, biblical ideas always speak ultimately to human volition. They aim at mastering people's hearts – engaging them on the level of the will. God's word addresses our need for a renewed relationship with God. It prods us to subjugate our wills to his will. The context of the biblical imperative is the context of our dependence on God. The need of our heart is the need of God, and that need is exposed throughout the biblical narrative in people's repeated rejection of God.

What is surprising about this inexorable connection between the biblical ideas and the human will is that the connection seems counterintuitive. Ideas, by their very nature, are the stock of the intellect. When we trade in ideas, we do it in a kind of an intellectual gambit, where truth claims are expected to be exchanged between people as the currency of the mind. Therefore, in opening the biblical text we expect from it, much like other pieces of literature, to relate predominantly to our minds, and stir our emotions. The revelation in the Old Testament comes with predominantly volitional thrust, expressing ideas whose content aims at changing not only our minds, but first and foremost, changing our attitudes and actions.

4. THE FUNCTION OF BIBLICAL CONTENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Since this pattern of relationship between the biblical content and human will is exemplified in the Old Testament, we must turn our attention to the New Testament with the hope of discovering an identical relationship between biblical ideas and human will. In the New Testament context, I would like to focus on Jesus' greatest sermon, the Sermon on the Mount.

The shock of the Good News derives from the claim that the "Word of God," in the vernacular of our day, "moved into our neighbourhood." The word acquired

hands and feet. It came with eyes, ears and tongue. The word became flesh in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews grasps the radical nature of God's final word embodied in Jesus when he summarizes, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son…" (Heb. 1:1-2a). Jesus is the living word of God. In this sense, Jesus' life speaks to us in his birth, his suffering on the cross, and his resurrection. In being "God-in-the-flesh" whatever Jesus says counts as God's direct address to us.

It is no accident then, that the Gospel of Matthew opens with Jesus caught in the act of preaching. Jesus' own conviction bears witness to his mission finding its essence in preaching (Mark 1:38). In what has become known as The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus engages in a form of direct divine communication with his disciples and the crowd of hearers. Stott claims that "The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed."[5] Whether there exists a causal connection between the sluggishness of our hearts and the laziness of our intellect implied by Stott must be left to further inquiry. One thing is certain that there has been no shortage of attempts to understand the meaning of the sermon. Historically, several major strands in the interpretation of the Sermon surfaced in the course of history grappling with the relationship of Jesus' words to each subsequent era. These can be conveniently divided into the pre-Reformation, the Reformation and the post-Reformation.

In the pre-Reformation period, the first extensive commentary on the Sermon on the Mount comes from the pen of Augustine (*The Sermone Domini in Monte*). In his view, the sermon is "the perfect measure of the Christian life," being filled with "all the precepts by which the Christian life is formed." The difference between the Law of Moses and the "Law of Jesus" is found in the latter consisting of "the greater precepts of righteousness." Since Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, the Old and the New are integrally related. Aquinas, in Summa (part 2.1, quest. 108, art. 4) distinguishes between "precepts" and "evangelical counsels." The former denote obligation, while the latter are optional to those who choose to follow it. The commands of the Sermon come as necessary conditions for the attainment of the "eternal bliss." The counsels give direction to a more "assured and expeditious" attainment of that goal.

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[5] John R.W. STOTT, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1978), 15.

The Reformation views were formed largely through the work of Luther, Calvin and the Anabaptists. Luther, in a series of sermons compiled into a commentary, departed from any notion that established the obedience to the sermon's commands as necessary for salvation. Luther recognized the necessity of making a distinction between "the kingdom of Christ" and "the kingdom of the world," where the "Sermon's demands are to be carried out continually within the Christian's heart even if the 'office' demands conduct to the contrary." "For him the Sermon did not instruct one on becoming a Christian through "works of righteousness" but on being a Christian whose life produced by God's grace the corresponding works and fruit."[6] Calvin's view emerges from his Institutes as well as his Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Mathew, Mark and Luke. Calvin's position is framed in reference to the question of the relationship between the Law of Moses and Christ. Calvin vindicates the view that the Sermon, in its entirety, applies to all believers. However, the Sermon must be understood within the larger context of Scriptures and judged by the rule of analogia fidei. What is needed for a correct understanding of the Sermon's demands is a prior understanding of the intent underlying the rules. Finally, the Anabaptists embraced the view that the Sermon must be followed rigorously and literally. This stance led to a withdrawal from the social and political aspects of life, and a separation of church and state.

Guelich summarizes the essence of the three interpretations emerging during the Reformation: "Thus we have three approaches to the Sermon, with their various theological implications, each seeking in a distinctive manner to apply the Sermon to life. For some, this meant perceiving life as being divided into two compartments, in only one of which could and must one carry out the Sermon's demands. This alternative runs the risk of "compartmentalization" and cultural compromise. For others, the secular and the sacred were continuous, and the Sermon's demands understood against the whole of Scripture applied to all believers and for all areas of life. This alternative runs the risk of casuistry and avoidance of the "impractical." For still others, the secular and the sacred were separate because of the radical nature of discipleship and the evil character of the world…This alternative runs the risk of "isolationism" and utopian irrelevancy."[7]

The post-Reformation trends in interpretation diverge into two extreme views. On the one extreme, the Sermon's radical demands have become a manifesto for

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[6] Robert A. GUELICH, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), 16.

[7] Ibid., 16-17.

revolutionary living best expressed in the convictions of Christian Marxists and elucidated by Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy held the conviction that "governments needed to submit to the guidance of Jesus. Courts should stop administering oaths to witnesses because of Christ's teaching about not swearing. Since a line in the sermon says that we are not to resist evil, Tolstoy wanted to do away with police forces and armies." The other extreme was expressed in the views of American Dispensationalism, opening a chasm between the present and the future much like Luther's dichotomy between the secular and the spiritual. Between the two extremes, "At various points of the spectrum fall the numerous other interpretations such as a "Gesinnungsethik, an interim ethic," and idealized ideal, a call to repentance, and the "cost of discipleship."[8]

This brief historical survey of interpretations of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount reveals some common threads. First, the ideas conveyed in the sermon are readily accessible. Stott divides the sermon into seven sections, each relating to a facet of the Christian life: character, influence, righteousness, piety, ambition, relationships and commitment. Each section deals with some aspect of a Christian relationship with God and people. The demands of the sermon are clearly spelled out. Beginning with a depiction of the spiritual stance before God, the sermon moves through our stance with relation to others. In conclusion, our response to Jesus' words bring us to a question of our relationship with him. Each chapter of the sermon identifies for us some new reality of the Christian life.

Secondly, the ideas expressed in Jesus' Sermon aim at the will of his audience. The demands are meant to infringe on the volition of the listeners. The sermon demands a change of lifestyle predicated on the change of attitude – an implosion of the heart that brings about a change from the inside-out. That the will is the object of Jesus' sermon is most evident from the closing words. What is particularly instructive about these words is not only their content but also their form. Jesus' challenge to his listeners is couched in Jesus' favourite form of address, a parable.

In the closing parable Jesus distinguishes between two possible responses to his Sermon. In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus concludes: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into

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[8] Ibid., 19.

practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Jesus insists that an intellectual knowledge of him can never be a substitute for obedience. The question that Jesus' preaching poses to us is not whether we have heard it, but rather, whether we will listen to it – do it. The only evidence of our hearing the message is in our willingness to incarnate it. The sermon presents us with a choice of whether we will shrug our shoulders and walk by the challenge of Jesus' sermon, or whether we will make a decision to stake our lives on Jesus' word. What ought to be evident in the context of Jesus' concluding challenge, is that truth aims primarily at the will of the listener.

In the context of the question of relevance, the ideas of God's word find their complete and final embodiment in God's Word-in-the-Flesh. Jesus is the revelation of God's will and the only means to a new relationship with God. In the context of the New Testament, the will is prompted to respond to Jesus. The Word of God demands that we submit our wills to his Living Word. The response of the will is measured by its willingness to acknowledge Jesus as both the Lord and the Messiah. It is this conviction that informs the theology of the New Testament church in its unequivocal assurance that, "It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:10-12).

Jesus, in a paraphrase of John's Gospel, becomes the Idea aimed at the volition of the human heart. What we discover about Jesus in the Gospels cannot be reduced to a mere biographical collection meant to satisfy our curiosity. Jesus' life is not intended for our intellectual or emotive sampling. Instead, Jesus' life become The Truth of God that demands our response. John echoes this conviction at the end of his Gospel when he discloses the purpose of giving us the story of Jesus' life. "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). The pattern of relevance remains consistent from the Old Testament through the preaching of Jesus. What changes in the New Testament is that now God's revelation, "the Word," finds its full embodiment in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

The purpose of our brief analysis of the New Testament of Jesus' preaching was to determine whether there is a necessary connection between the content of God's word and the will of the listeners. The essential connection between the truth of God's word and the human volition was the constant theme of the Old

Testament. That same pattern continues throughout the New Testament. Biblical ideas consistently aim at the response of the human will. However, the pattern under the new covenant is augmented by the word of God acquiring flesh and blood in Jesus. As a result, the Living Word becomes the focal point of the human response. Preaching is reshaped into the contours of the cross, and humanity is faced with the choice of what to do with the man on the cross of Calvary. However, the christological focus of preaching finding its focus in Jesus retains the original pattern of the content of preaching aiming at the will.

In our analysis, it becomes evident that the truth of God's Word is intended to address human volition. The primary target of biblical ideas is human will. This relationship emerges time and again in a variety of genres in the Old Testament and from the study of sermons in the New Testament. The pattern of ideas standing the will at the crossroads of choice can now be restated in the context of relevance. If relevance in preaching is the act of relating God's word to the lives of the listeners, the content of God's word must always primarily relate to the will of the receivers. A necessary condition of relevance is that the biblical content must relate to the human will. In the sphere of preaching, a sermon is relevant to the audience to the extent to which the biblical idea of the text aims at the response of the listener's will.
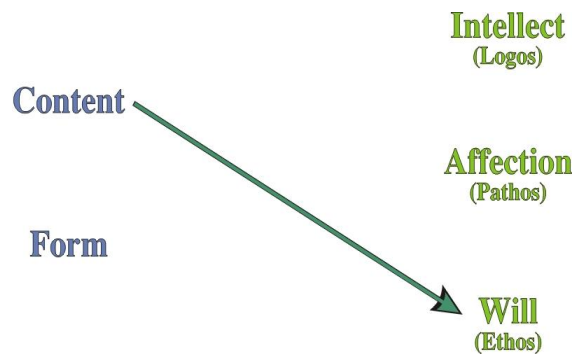
5. THE FUNCTION OF FORM IN THE BIBLE

In the following section, we will turn our attention to the analysis of the second element in our equation. We will endeavour to determine the nature of the relationship between the form of the biblical content and the listener. The process of analysis comprises two interrelated parts. In the first part, we must determine

whether the form of the biblical content, expressed in various genres, has some distinguishing common elements. There is an ambiguity in the use of "form" in the discussion of Scriptures. The Bible contains many literary "forms," (i.e. law, dream, parable, exhortation, report, etc). The way I intend to use "form" is to refer to an abstract entity, an all-encompassing category for any content-framing device. In other words, what we want to discover is whether there is a common denominator or are there any common elements that are essential to all biblical forms. To put it differently, is there a form of biblical forms? And if so, what are its essential features? Unless we can extract some universal features shared by all biblical forms, we may be unable to determine the relationship of the biblical form to the human side of our equation. In the second step, pending our success at mining the essential features of biblical form, we must determine the specific relationship between the form and either the intellect, emotion, or will.

The discussion of the previous section revealed a multiplicity of literary forms in the Bible. Besides the most general division of biblical text into prose and poetry, the word of God teems with literary types. The debate of literary genres and types is far from over. Collins provides a workable definition of literary genre defining it as "a group of written texts marked by distinctive recurring characteristics which constitute recognizable and coherent type of writing."[9] The difficulty with determining the exact category for each biblical text lies in the often blurred lines of delineation. However, there are several postulates that have been put forth by various scholars. Walter Kaiser in the context of his Old Testament studies proposes five basic literary forms employed by the biblical authors: a. prose, b. poetry, c. narrative, d. wisdom, and e. apocalyptic. "Each of these," according to Kaiser, "has a distinct shape and style."[10] Fee and Stuart, looking at the entire Bible, divide its literature into ten distinct units: "Epistles, Old Testament narratives, Acts, Gospels, Parables, Law(s), Prophets, Psalms, Wisdom, and Revelation.[11] The problem of biblical genres is the problem of how many ways can we slice the Bible.

A helpful way of viewing the biblical literature is to identify genres as "categories for classifying literary works as a whole," (i.e. narrative, wisdom, epistle), and forms as "relatively small, individual units of literary material,"[12] (i.e. lament, pronouncement, miracle). In this sense, a collection of smaller units of biblical

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[9] John J. KOLLINS, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre", *Semeia* 1979, 14: 1.

[10] Walter Jr. KAISER, *Toward An Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 91.

[11] Gordon FEE, Douglas STUART, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

[12] Sidney GREIDANUS, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 22.

forms will constitute a larger biblical genre. The biblical forms frame individual units of biblical text, expressing biblical ideas. What we seek to determine are the common elements in the biblical literary forms. These elements would become the defining features of the more abstract category of form as a general counterpart to the biblical content.

6. UNITY

What will be helpful to us at this juncture is to recall the argument of the previous section. In the context of the study of Old Testament literature, I tried to demonstrate that biblical content expressed biblical concepts. A similar strategy applied to the New Testament's sermons yielded similar results. The concepts were determined by identifying a subject and a complement. The conjunction of those two elements made up a biblical idea. Each biblical genre contained literary forms framing biblical content. The content was the bearer of ideas the biblical authors intended to convey.

Since biblical content conveys ideas, one of the framing functions of biblical forms is to impose unity on the thought of the author. Unity is the function of the Bible's ideational content. In order to convey an idea, an author must frame it in a way that will unify its development. Biblical communication, much like other common forms of communication, does not come in the form of sterile propositions listed on a page. Instead, biblical ideas come to us through stories and poems, parables and psalms. The ideas are build out of multiple blocks of supporting material and sub-ideas that shore up the main thought of the author. Ideas have to be extracted from stanzas and paragraphs of text where they lay buried beneath the layers of words, fragmented by commas and periods. The claim that the Bible conveys ideas presupposes a unifying framing device. In the absence of such a frame, we would be at a loss in our quest for biblical ideas. The characteristic of unity as an essential quality of the biblical form is a necessary feature of biblical communication.

The demand for unity is primarily the demand of our cognitive apparatus. "The human mind craves unity,"[13] argues Litfin. One of the most fascinating features of our mental make-up is our intolerance for chaos. "The human mind is constantly seeking to discover unity in the stimuli it receives, to separate those items that are related to one another."[14] We witness that in our explanations of life's events, as

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[13] D. LITFIN, *Public Speaking*, 80.
[14] Ibid., 81.

we try to either find a single cause or learn a lesson from the events of life swirl-ing all around us. The entire scientific enterprise is predicated on the conviction that the universe is guided by some grand, unified theory that eventually will enable us to tie all the loose strands together.

The question of the unity of biblical text then is a question that goes way be-yond the covers of the Bible, encompassing our view of the entire sphere of communication. Unless thoughts can be framed into units, we cannot communi-cate ideas successfully. We can express things in words by forming long strings of sentences, forming these into paragraphs. However, unless we can determine what the author is talking about and what he is saying about it, we cannot claim to understand the author's thought.

A helpful way to identify the unifying character of biblical forms is to recog-nize a distinction between how the idea is structured and how it is developed. The structure of an idea is always the same, consisting of a subject and complement. However, ideas are developed in four distinct ways. To be sure, "When we make a declarative statement, we can do only four things with it: we can restate it, explain it, prove it, or apply it."[15] The biblical forms, by the nature of their fram-ing, lend themselves to one or more ways in which the ideas are developed.

The biblical genres develop ideas in distinct ways. However, each one frames the idea toward a unity of thought designed for the listener's mind. Hebrew poetry conveys ideas in a way in which "the system of versification as a whole definitely encourages dynamic interplay between versets in which feelings get stronger, images sharper, actions more powerful or more extreme." The narrative discloses idea by framing it into a plot where actions, dialogue and narration allow us to see the idea as it emerges within the interaction of the characters. Epistles contain explanations, proofs and application of ideas depending on the intent of the author. Each one frames the idea in a different fashion. However, all of them synchronize the authors' thoughts by framing ideas toward unity. One of the essential elements of form is unity.

7. ORDER

The second function of biblical forms is to impose order on the biblical content. Order is the necessary prerequisite of unity. In order to discover unity it is necessary to discover not only how the parts relate to the whole, but also how

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[15] Haddon ROBINSON, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 75.

the parts relate to one another. "Thus, to grasp the unity of diverse parts, to dis-cover e pluribus unum (out of many, one), we must also discover the proper relationships or order among the many parts."[16] Unless we can determine the correct relationship between the various elements in the arrangement of the author's thought, we will not be able to arrive at the determination of the concept he intends to convey. There are three basic ways in which the biblical authors order their material: logical, temporal or causal.

Logic builds order by arranging elements according to the valid laws of reason, i.e. law of non-contradiction, laws of inference, etc. A logical develop-ment is often framed in an argument where premises infer a conclusion. Accept-ing the premises necessitates the acceptance of the conclusion. A good example of a logical ordering is Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8:1-7. Paul, in the context of answering the question about eating food sacrificed to idols writes, "So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this…"

The thrust of Paul's argument comes from the correct definition of "God." If "God" refers to an infinite and perfect being, then there can be only one such a be-ing. If we accept the definition of God, we must concede the argument, granting its conclusion asserting that there cannot be another god or other gods. If there were another God equally perfect, he would have to be identical with the God of the Bible. Paul's idea develops through logic.

A temporal development follows a time sequence. It develops the idea according to some chronology of events. Most of the biblical narrative develops in sequence with the passing of time. David's life story follows the story of Saul's rise and demise. The story of Solomon develops in a sequence that follows the story of David's life. The Bible as a whole could be viewed as a temporal se-quence of God's growing revelation, where at different stages of history God reveals more of himself to his people. That revelation culminates in the incarna-tion of Jesus Christ. A time sequence gives us a reference points along the line of the story or revelation.

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[16] D. LITFIN, *Public Speaking*, 81.

Closely related to that is the causal ordering of events. Temporal sequence is the skeleton for the ordering of causal relationships. The passing of time allows us to determine what comes first and what follows. As a result, the temporal framework aids us in determination of what are the causes and what are the results of events and actions. The biblical authors establish numerous causal relationships that frame their ideas. The Book of Kings, for instance, establishes a relationship of cause and effect between the sins of the Kings of Israel and Judah and the consequences of their sins for the nation of Israel. The prophets relish the disclosure of the causal relationship between the people's commitment to God and the quality of their lives. A causal sequence frames the relationship between causes and effects.

What ought to become evident is that the ordering of material is a function of our minds. Our minds tend toward unity. As a result, we arrange pieces of information in a way that establishes that unity. We arrange the elements either according to logic, time sequence or a relationship of cause and effect. Since this is the way our intellect functions, in communication we both frame and seek to discover one of those framing devices in our pursuit of the content's meaning. In the absence of order, we stand in danger of either imposing our own order or failing to grasp the unity of the author's idea.

8. PROGRESS

The third function of biblical forms is to impose progress on the biblical content. Progress presupposes both unity and order. What it adds to the other two dimensions are the elements of beginning and end. Ideas, in oral communication are developed and expressed in time. They are built on a continuum that has a starting point and a finish line. A failure of progress in developing an idea stands in danger of rendering only a part of the idea, or failing to render it altogether. A lack of progress is akin to a skipping record of a musical composition that prevents the listener from appreciating the entire masterpiece. As we try to sort out the pieces we are perceiving, to discover the relationships, we are looking for an order consisting largely of some progression, one thing following another in an appropriate chronological relationship.

The biblical authors do not always arrange their ideas in chronological order. However, they arrange the parts to give the whole a sense of theological progress. Changes in the expected progress of ideas is often a way of alerting the reader

about an important theological idea the author is trying to convey. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11: 3, Paul gives us a sequence that appears to be out of order from a hierarchical vantage point. In describing the distinctions in worship between men and women, Paul prefaces his argument with the description of the interrelationships between God, Jesus, men and a woman. He writes, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." Paul's starting point seems out of sequence in the view of importance. The sequence of hierarchy we would expect would begin with God – Jesus – Man – Woman. Paul's ordering, however, changes the sequence to Jesus – Man – Woman – God. The subtle change in order is meant to alert us to the fact that Paul is not building a sequence based on the progress of authority but rather progress of origin. Paul establishes relationships on the basis of cause and effect sequence in the chronology of creation.

All that is to say that progress allows the biblical authors to develop ideas from the beginning to the end, according to some desired sequence. The notion of progress in framing ideas derives from the structure of our minds. In order to apprehend ideas we must see their development in a sequence of progression that takes us from an introduction to a conclusion.

Progress in developing ideas is best captured by the inductive-deductive distinction. "Induction […] is a process of drawing inferences about the unknown from the known. In the case of induction, the known consists of a limited number of specifics, all of which share membership in some broader category."[17] The idea is developed inductively to the extent to which the reasoning progresses from the specific to the general. An inductive progress is marked by a progressive development where the statement of an idea comes at the conclusion.

Deduction is the inverse of induction. We also draw conclusions about what is unknown on the basis of what is known. "In deduction, however, what is known is some general observation, from which we draw hitherto unknown conclusions about specifics or particulars."[18] A deductive progress is defined by the complete statement of an idea at the outset. What follows is a development of that idea.

Progress can be marked by some combination of the inductive-deductive reasoning. In this development scheme, the idea emerges at some juncture between its building blocks. The statement of an idea shifts development from inductive to deductive.

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[17] Ibid., 162.
[18] Ibid., 164.

Finally, a scriptural passage can develop by stating the subject question at the beginning with the following ideas completing it.

Progress in framing an idea then is not simply a way of getting from the beginning to the end, from the start to the finish line. Progress takes a specific form. A correct identification of the pattern of progress in the development of an idea can be critical to our determination of that idea. A deductive progress will state the idea in the introduction, while the inductive progress will emerge the idea at end of the argument. The inductive-deductive progress serves the purpose of imposing a framework on biblical content in order to render it intelligible. The progress in the development of an idea alerts us to the rational steps in establishing the validity of an idea. The nature of progress allows us to frame both the order and unity into a coherent sequence.
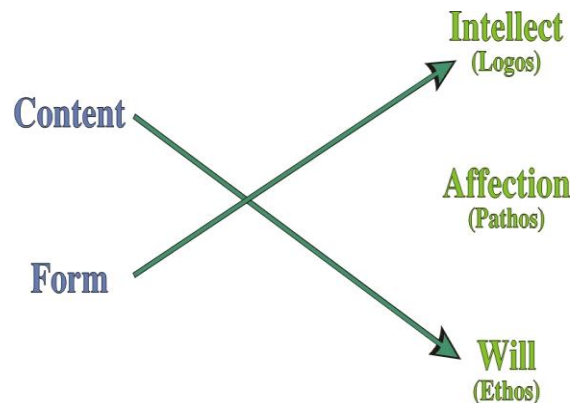
9. A CONCLUSION: THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS OF BIBLICAL RELEVANCE

Biblical forms frame biblical ideas. Content is inseparable from form, in that an idea always comes wrapped in a form. The Bible contains a multitude of forms that give shape to the biblical material. The framing is a combination of three essential and interdependent elements: unity, order and progress. The function of the elements derives primarily from the operations of our minds. For communication to succeed, our intellect must be able to process the data of communication to extract its main proposition from its parts in the course of the process that has a point of beginning and ending. Conversely, any communication lacking in these three

essential elements will be incoherent. In the absence of these elements the substance of communication will remain unintelligible to the receiver.

In a broad sense, abstracting from the multitude of biblical forms, we can draw an all-encompassing conclusion for our broader division of the biblical word, namely, its content and form. Since biblical forms share the three elements of unity, order and progress in common, these elements must be essential to the form of God's word. What follows is that the form framing biblical content functions primarily in the context of the intellect. The biblical form aims at the intellect in that it provides coherence for the biblical content.

It is also important to notice that while the two conditions are interrelated, there is a functional sequence in their relationship. The condition of the form appealing to the intellect precedes the conditions of the content relating to the will. In other words, before the listener can respond to the content of God's imperative, he or she must comprehend the command. It is impossible to get at the content of God's word, the idea in abstraction from the form. For that reason the analysis of form must precede the analysis of content.

Relevance in the Bible functions at the crossroads of form and content aimed at the distinct aspects of the human makeup. If relevance is defined as the process of relating God's Word to the life of the listener, we can now spell out the precise nature of that relationship. Relevance in Scripture consists of the interplay of the two necessary conditions. Jointly these conditions are both necessary and sufficient for the claim of relevance in biblical context. These conditions can now be spelled out more precisely. For God's word to count as relevant to the audience two necessary conditions must hold:

That the biblical content, expressing a biblical idea, asserts an imperative aimed at the will calling it to a response in the context of our relationship with God.

And

That the biblical form, framing the idea, gives it coherence aimed at the intellect with the goal of making the idea intelligible to the listener.

Biblical relevance functions at the crossroads of the idea aimed at the will and the form framing shaping the content for the intellect. The dogma of biblical relevance asserts that a sermon cannot be biblically relevant in the absence of one or both of these conditions.

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