PREACHING EZRA–NEHEMIAH'S RELIGIOUS MINORITY-GROUP NARRATIVES FOR POST-CHRISTENDOM CONGREGATIONS

by

Stefan C. Matzal, BA, MDiv, ThM

A dissertation submitted to
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Practical Theology

McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
2024

DOCTOR OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Preaching Ezra–Nehemiah's Religious Minority-Group Narratives for Post-Christendom Congregations

AUTHOR: Stefan C. Matzal

SUPERVISORS: Dr. Mark J. Boda and Dr. Michael P. Knowles

NUMBER OF PAGES: xiii + 273

ABSTRACT

"Preaching Ezra–Nehemiah's Religious Minority-Group Narratives for Post-Christendom Congregations."

Stefan C. Matzal
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
Doctor of Practical Theology, 2024

As North America moves from Christendom to post-Christendom, the church needs resources that foster spiritual strength. Ezra–Nehemiah has a role to play here because the original audience was a religious minority-group, as is the evangelical church in North America. What exactly, however, are the challenges that Christians experience today in their interface with the non-Christian majority culture? This dissertation seeks to answer that question for the benefit of contemporary preachers of Ezra–Nehemiah.

This research project proceeded in three phases. First, literature-based research was used to prepare three sermons from Ezra–Nehemiah. Chapter 2 describes narrative analysis of Ezra 4–6; Neh 1–6; and Neh 9–10. For the sake of the development of *Christian* sermons, Chapter 3 draws links from these texts to the New Testament. Chapter 4 describes the process of developing sermons, one from each of the three passages.

In the second phase of this project, I preached these sermons at eight different churches across the Northeast US and Eastern Canada. The preached sermon then functioned as a springboard for discussion in a focus group interview, one per church, populated by people who had listened to the sermon. I asked congregants in what ways

they found their interface with the non-Christian world to be challenging. Chapter 5 presents my analysis of the focus group data.

In the third phase of the project, described in Chapters 6 and 7, I integrated the exegesis of Ezra–Nehemiah and the focus group analysis in order to derive recommendations for pastors regarding preaching biblical minority-group literature to Christians living in the post-Christendom West. One significant conclusion is a call for fearlessness and courage, derived from a robust personal relationship with the God who makes himself known in Christ and by the Spirit.

DEDICATION

To Sarah
אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת־יְהוָה הִיא תִתְהַלָּל

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the support of numerous individuals. It has been a tremendous blessing to have Mark Boda as my supervisor. Mark's guidance throughout this entire process—from early clarification of the topic to the oral defense—was a marvelous gift. His comments on drafts of the dissertation always challenged my thinking or pointed out needed improvements. Throughout my entire time in this program, Mark has ever and again pointed me to significant books and articles of which I would otherwise be unaware.

I am thankful for Michael Knowles' searching feedback on dissertation chapters. Additionally and importantly, a conversation with Michael during a DPT retreat caused me to stop thinking of this project as *my dissertation* and to replace that designation with *the dissertation to which the Lord has called me*. The conversation with Michael at the retreat led me to pray about this project on a daily basis. Michael, I have been helped by your insistence on the need to die to self and rely upon divine empowerment.

It is a privilege to be able to write and receive serious critique of that writing. Thank you, Mark and Michael, for the gift of your time and constructive criticism. I am likewise grateful to Scott M. Gibson for his feedback, questions, and encouragement in the context of the oral defense.

I am extremely thankful to the congregants of my church, Trinity Fellowship. They graciously gave their blessing when I told them I wanted to enter this program of study. Then they prayed me through it to the very end. I am grateful for all those who from time to time asked how my work was going or told me they were praying for me (I'd like to list all your names here, but it would be a long list, and I would unintentionally miss some names). To my colleague, Nathaniel Jackson, thank you so much for your prayer, your support, and your repeated offers to add to your busy workload so that I could have more time for writing. Thank you for your feedback on all three Ezra-Nehemiah sermons. Thank you covering extra responsibilities while I was preaching out of town last summer, and for picking up the slack in various areas at other times. I'm also grateful for the ongoing prayer and encouragement of Philip Irvine and Peter Pullen over the past five years.

My ministerial fellowship, the Iron Club, was a great encouragement throughout this process. They listened to various of my ideas in the early stages. Rick Chaffee gave me helpful feedback on the Ezra 4‑6 sermon. The group helped me edit some of the focus group recruiting material. They listened to me present a portion of Chapter 2 and an early version of Chapter 5. Their feedback on those two chapters was a great help to me.

There is another group of people whose aid was critical to the success of this project. These are the friends, pastors, and church leaders who helped me contact potential

research sites—Sam Benjamin, Gillian Jackson, Jerry McFarland, Joanna Moutoux, Paul Fuller, Jack Kroeze, Dave Hammer, Ife Ojetayo, Ryan Cogswell, David Hertweck, Matthew Crane, and Sara Mitchell. Your kindness opened doors for me, and even if your advocacy did not lead to a research site, I appreciate your efforts just the same. Next, of course, I am indebted beyond measure to the research sites. I am so grateful to the pastors and church leaders who welcomed me to their pulpits and who helped me arrange for the focus group discussions.

Thank you, thank you, thank you to the sixty focus group participants who shared their experiences and stories with me! Because there are so many of them, and because I promised them anonymity, I cannot mention them by name. But the Lord knows you each by name, dear ones. I am indebted to you all. I count it a privilege to have been entrusted with your stories. Without your participation, this project would have been impossible. Your willingness to participate will provide benefits to other members of Christ's church.

I thank my parents-in-law, Sandy and Peggy Rubel, for their support of this project. My neighbor, Professor Amanda Brown, was a practical help and an encouragement. Some of my travels were assisted by the gracious hospitality of Anna & Ralph Tillinghast and Rob & Carrie Mason.

No one has sacrificed more to see this project through to its completion than my wife, Sarah. Without her unceasing practical support, encouragement, and her prayers, I never would have reached this milestone. For one of my early focus groups, she asked the Lord for a specific number of participants—one more than had signed up (and I had reason to doubt if all who signed up would attend). The Lord granted her number. In four other cases, Sarah attended the focus group session, and we debriefed together afterwards. Throughout the project, Sarah has been a sounding board and conversation partner. I dedicate the project to her. Two are better than one, and in fact this was a joint project all along.

My constant prayer has been that our Father would bring genuine wisdom to his church through this project. If indeed this dissertation serves the body of Christ, it is my privilege to thus return my gifts to the Giver. The Lord is my creator and redeemer, and I thank him for calling me to this task. If I have lived worthy of my calling, I attribute that to the Spirit's enabling power all the way through. What do I have that I have not received? To God alone be the glory.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
Bib	*Biblica*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
Heb.	Hebrew. Where Hebrew versification differs from the English
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JHebS	*The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
OTL	The Old Testament Library
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary

SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
TJ	*Trinity Journal*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Christian preaching—alongside its other functions—equips congregations to navigate pressures they face from the non-Christian world around them. With that in mind, during the spring and summer of 2023, I preached sermons from Ezra–Nehemiah to eight congregations in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada. The sermons functioned as a springboard for focus group interviews that I then conducted, asking congregants about their real-life experiences of pressure from post-Christendom culture. Finally, through a process of theological reflection, I integrated the preaching of Ezra–Nehemiah with the experiences shared by the focus group participants. The present chapter introduces the dissertation project by discussing its research objectives, theological assumptions, research methodology and design, limitations, and, finally, a literature review.

Research Objectives

Introduction

In Brad East's typology, the church has "four primary modes of faithful engagement with culture."[1] These are *repentance*, *reception*, *reform*, and *resistance*.[2] Repentance means that the church should publicly admit her public sins. Reception means that the church should receive those divine gifts that by common grace exist in the world. East's

[1] East, "Once More, Church and Culture," para. 18.
[2] East, "Once More, Church and Culture," para. 19–22.

category, reform, encompasses the good news, the prophetic voice, and the good works by which the church makes a positive difference in the world. The present dissertation project concerns the fourth mode, resistance.[3] Resistance entails saying "No!" to a culture. Resistance is required whether the church is dominant in a culture, persecuted, or in circumstances between those extremes.[4] Under circumstances of marginalization, the church resists by means of persevering faithfulness in the face of the alternate idolatries of the dominant regime.[5] Pastors are called to the work of *resistance training*, equipping their congregations for faithfulness under pressure. In a time of transition from Christendom to post-Christendom, resistance training is critical because certain spiritual muscles tend to weaken under Christendom. Pastors do the work of resistance training through a variety of means, and preaching is one of them.

Defining Post-Christendom

In this dissertation, I use the terms, "minority-group," "marginalized," and "post-Christendom" in parallel fashion. The first two terms are broad enough to refer both to the original readers of Ezra–Nehemiah and to evangelical Christians in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada. The final term, post-Christendom, is narrower. It functions here as a way of encapsulating many of the experiences of contemporary Christians in the West. In Stuart Murray's definition, "post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian

[3] However, the dissertation's discussion of Ezra 6:21 will touch upon reform, and the discussion of Neh 5:9 will touch upon reception. Though not discussed in the dissertation, Ezra 5:12 provides an example of repentance in the presence of the world.

[4] East, "Once More, Church and Culture," para. 19.

[5] East, "Once More, Church and Culture," para. 19.

story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence."[6]

The term post-Christendom does not comprehensively identify all of the changes currently being experienced in the West.[7] Its heuristic value lies in the fact that many of those changes are related in some fashion to the declining influence of Christianity.[8] Radical individualism, relativism, secularism, consumerism, and the like, are bourgeoning idolatries that would supplant true Christianity. Christians in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada are not experiencing physical persecution, but, as the church now finds itself in contested space,[9] they are feeling pressure from such idolatries. Two final observations round out this discussion of post-Christendom. With respect to the question as to whether the loss of Christendom is a good or a bad thing, my conclusion is that a mixed assessment is appropriate. Power corrupts, and Christendom often offered a corrupted form of Christianity.[10] At the same time, the longstanding influence of Christianity in the West has had many good effects for human flourishing.[11] Finally, with Stuart, I do not see the shift from Christendom to post-Christendom as an on-off switch; we are in a transitional phase.[12] Degrees of marginalization vary widely from situation to situation today. Times of transition call for wisdom. The church must adjust to new circumstances while remaining faithful to Christ.

---

[6] Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 21. Paas ("Post-Christian, Post-Christendom," 14) prefers a narrower definition, focused on loss of political power.

[7] Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 4.

[8] On declining religious affiliation, see, for example, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity," October 17, 2019.

[9] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300–307.

[10] Paas, "Post-Christian, Post-Christendom," 13; Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 23.

[11] Holland, *Dominion*, 539–41.

[12] Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 3.

Research Problems

Two problems drive this dissertation project. The first problem is the shift in Western culture from Christendom to post-Christendom. This change require the ongoing development of resistance training resources for Christian preachers. The second problem to be addressed is the temptation that preachers sometimes experience to downplay the importance of their congregants' life experiences. To succumb to this temptation is a misstep. Pastors generally know the Bible better than their congregants do, but congregants often know the pressures of the world better than their pastors do.[13] Homileticians recommend that preachers use conversations, interviews, or listener diaries to deepen their understanding of the day-to-day experiences of congregants.[14] The use of such tools can aid in the development of resistance training tailored to the needs of a particular church or group of churches.

Research Questions and Purpose

To address these problems, this research project will answer the following three questions. First, what unique insights does the Old Testament book, Ezra–Nehemiah, provide for resistance training? Ezra–Nehemiah holds potential toward this end because there is an analogous relationship between the marginalized position of the original readers of Ezra–Nehemiah and the contested space occupied by the Christian church today in the post-Christendom West. Ezra–Nehemiah was written about "an embattled

---

[13] Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 192.

[14] Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 192; Quicke, *Short 360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word*, chapter 9, para. 27–33, 1914–37; Scharf, *Relational Preaching*, 171, 174–75; Van Harn, *Preacher, Can You Hear?*, chapter 12, para. 20–28, location 1437–63.

community,"[15] "a sacred reality within the secular world,"[16] indeed, "God's minority group in an alien world."[17] Preaching from Ezra–Nehemiah has potential to proclaim a timely message for congregations in our day.[18]

Second, what do lay Christians find challenging in their interactions with the non-Christian majority culture today? In order to answer this question, I conducted focus group interviews at eight churches in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada. Third, and finally, what wisdom is gained when, through a process of theological reflection, I integrate my analysis of (a) selected passages of Ezra–Nehemiah (the preaching selections), (b) my process of preparing and delivering sermons from those passages, and (c) the focus group data?

The unique contribution of this dissertation project is its analysis of Ezra–Nehemiah's minority-group teachings, integrated with (i) the preaching of Ezra–Nehemiah to Christians in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada and (ii) these Christians' responses in group discussion to the application sections of the sermons. This multifaceted approach allows me to integrate analysis of Ezra–Nehemiah's teaching about external pressure with analysis of contemporary Christians' real-life experiences of external pressure. This interaction generates insights for pastors in their calling to provide resistance training. These insights will benefit preachers who preach in order to strengthen congregations' identity and conduct in situations where they find their faith being opposed by the dominant culture. The purpose of this dissertation project, then, is

---

[15] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, li.

[16] Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 638.

[17] Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 26.

[18] I recognize that, following Wright (*Old Testament Ethics*, 245–47), a well-rounded understanding of how the church is to relate to the world, including how the church is to resist the world, will be informed by other biblical texts from other time periods as well.

to develop recommendations for pastors regarding preaching biblical minority-group literature to Christians living in the post-Christendom West. This approach is informed by integrated analysis of selections from Ezra–Nehemiah, by the preaching of these selections, and by street-level experiences of contemporary Christians.

Theological Assumptions

This dissertation project takes an evangelical theological approach. In Kidd's definition, "evangelicals are born-again Protestants who cherish the Bible as the Word of God and who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit."[19] Historically, the use of the term "evangelical" arose in the eighteenth century in a Christendom context: "Being born again in Christ and walking in the Spirit set them [evangelicals] apart from their nominal Christian neighbors."[20] Whereas in the American media today, evangelicals are often thought of as a voting bloc, the use of the term here follows its historical usage. In Western post-Christendom, the existence of a range of types of Christians still obtains. The evangelical emphasis on the experience of regeneration and ongoing sanctification is an important foundation for this dissertation.

With respect to regarding the Bible as the word of God, this research project follows Vanhoozer's *critical biblicism*.[21] Vanhoozer calls for biblicism—the Bible has final authority for belief and practice—but not naïve biblicism.[22] With his term *critical*, Vanhoozer means that submission to Scripture should take into account the guidance of

---

[19] Kidd, *Who is an Evangelical?*, 4. Kidd's historical definition is helpfully supplemented by Vanhoozer's (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 26) theocentric definition: "The core 'evangelical' conviction is that God has spoken and acted in Jesus Christ and that God speaks and acts in the canonical scriptures that testify to him."

[20] Kidd, *Who is an Evangelical?*, 20.

[21] Vanhoozer, "Beyond What Is Written," 791.

[22] Vanhoozer, "Beyond What Is Written," 762–65, 791.

the Holy Spirit,[23] the history of Christian doctrine, the teachers whom Christ has gifted to the church, and the use of our capacities in Christ for interpretation of, contextualization of, and obedience to Holy Scripture.[24]

According to Vanhoozer, the use of our interpretive capacities entails both interpretive judgments and interpretive virtues. Interpretive judgments begin with an appreciation for the diversity that comprises the single canon.[25] This diversity is necessary because the canon reflects the complexity of reality.[26] The canon is diverse in that it is history, literature, and theology.[27] The canon is diverse in that God speaks through many genres and voices, and with various intentions.[28] When the Christian asks what God is saying and doing in the Bible, the answer is multifaceted. In the Bible, God sets forth propositions; depicts models and examples; displays worlds;[29] presents competing or complementary points-of-view;[30] issues commands, promises, and warnings; sings songs, and much more.[31] This diverse library summons both "the intellect to accepts its propositions" and "the imagination to see, feel, and taste them."[32] To connect the canonical diversity to lived life, the interpreter must make "wise judgments about what is truly good and fitting in a given situation."[33] Such wise judgments are

---

[23] Discussing the Spirit's illumination and application of Scripture to the human heart, Vanhoozer ("Speech Acts to Scripture," 38) uses speech-act theory to provide a nuanced remark about Barth's doctrine of Scripture: "the Bible is the Word of God (in the sense of its illocutionary acts) and . . . the Bible becomes the Word of God (in the sense of achieving its perlocutionary effects)."

[24] Vanhoozer, "Beyond What Is Written," 762–92.

[25] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 272–76, 286–91.

[26] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 288–91.

[27] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 275.

[28] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 272–91.

[29] For example, ideal scenarios, present or future, that God's people are to inhabit.

[30] For example, compare the presentations of the delay in temple building found in Hag 1 and Ezra 4.

[31] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 278–91.

[32] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 291.

[33] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 335.

always made in light of the canon's unifying theme: "what God is doing in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world."[34]

With respect to interpretive virtues, Vanhoozer posits that to read with an ear that attends to authorial intent is an act of love.[35] This is because an author is an *Other* who deserves our respect.[36] The alternative to be avoided Vanhoozer terms *interpretive violence.*[37] He further calls for a middle way between interpretive arrogance and interpretive cynicism.[38] Christian conviction about the gospel does not balloon into arrogance when excesses are reined in by Christian humility.[39] Christian humility about fine grain doctrinal details does not deflate into cynicism when excesses are reigned in by Christian conviction.[40] An evangelical emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, on the divine inspiration of the Bible, and on interpretive responsibility informs the preaching of Ezra–Nehemiah that lies at the heart of this project.

Research Methodology and Design

Methodology[41]

This project uses a *practice-led research* methodology to generate six forms of research output. This multifaceted output is then integrated by means of a particular form of the

---

[34] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 287.
[35] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 373–407.
[36] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 187, 461–62.
[37] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 161–65.
[38] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 187, 462–67.
[39] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 187, 463–65.
[40] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, 187, 465–67.
[41] The methodology used in each discrete phase of the research is introduced at the beginning of the relevant chapter.

pastoral cycle called *the scriptural cycle*. This section introduces, in order, practice-led research and the scriptural cycle.

Practice-led Research

This project employs a practice-led research methodology. In this methodology, as Mottram and Rust describe it, practice plays an instrumental role in research.[42] "Practice may provide, for example, a location or focus upon which to direct questions, or it can also be a means of generating data, a site for testing propositions, for engaging individuals and communities, or for reflecting on theories and methods."[43] Certain phrases in this description identify the various facets of the present research project. In what follows, after a brief description of my current professional practice, I specify how my practice functioned as an instrument for inquiry throughout this project. I identify five elements of my professional practice, and for each, I indicate the way in which that element served as a location or means for research.

I have been one of the pastors in an evangelical congregationalist church since 2001. Located in a university town in the northeast US, my congregation is aware of the shifting religious landscape locally. In my regular preaching ministry, resistance training is one aspect of what I do. As our lectionary creates a rotation of different portions of Scripture for the sermon text week-by-week, resistance training does or does not come to the fore depending on that Sunday's assigned text. For the present research, I made use of five of my regular professional practices related to preaching.

---

[42] Mottram and Rust, "The Pedestal and the Pendulum," 135.
[43] Mottram and Rust, "The Pedestal and the Pendulum," 135.

First, as a part of my regular pastoral ministry, I study a discrete Bible passage from which to preach. In my church, we primarily use an expository approach to preaching, which means that the sermon is derived from a single pericope of Scripture. For this research project, I did exegetical work with three discrete texts from Ezra–Nehemiah.[44] The results in Chapter 2 may look like straightforward academic biblical studies. However, as I did this work, I had a forward-looking eye toward the eventual development of a sermon. Furthermore, I was especially asking the question, "What, in these texts, is God saying and doing that relates to resistance training?" In this case, my professional practice of exegesis served as *a focus upon which to direct inquiry*.

Second, when I preach from Old Testament texts, I make connections to the New Testament. I did the same in this project, working from the three Ezra–Nehemiah texts. As with the exegesis of the Old Testament texts, here too I had an eye for resistance training. Again, my professional practice of exegesis served as *a focus upon which to direct inquiry*.

Third, in my current ministry, I regularly develop sermons. I contemplate a sermon's focus and structure, planning out the specific means of presenting the biblical material to the congregation. For this research project I developed three sermons. Because I was doing this work over an extended period of time in an academic setting, my practice of sermon development served as *a site for me to reflect* on homiletical theories and methods in general (which in turn can be applied specifically to resistance training).

[44] In each case, a lengthier text than that typically called for by my church's lectionary.

Fourth, my professional practice includes delivering sermons on a regular basis. As a part of this project, I preached sermons in eight different churches. The preached sermon was my initial engagement with the focus group participants, and it functioned as the springboard for the focus group conversations. In this case, my practice of preaching served as *a site for engaging communities*. The combination of the preached sermon and the focus group discussion as a response drew the focus group participants into this dissertation's process of theological reflection.

Fifth, as a pastor, I regularly converse with my congregants at a variety of levels. One function of this conversation is that it deepens my understanding of those to whom I preach for the sake of developing sermons that are fitting to their situations. For this project, I conversed with members of eight different congregations in order to study their life experiences. Though rooted in the same function, these conversations were more academic than my professional practice, including the fact that I recorded and transcribed the conversations. In this case, my practice of listening was *a means of generating data*.

Before discussing how I integrate these five areas of research output, I add one additional area. Andrew McNamara recommends that practice-led researchers avoid excessive focus merely on their own subjective experiences.[45] He recommends that researchers place their own work in a context by *examining the practice of other practitioners*.[46] For this reason, I include with my integration of the aforementioned five areas of research output, a sixth, namely, consideration of Tim MacBride's resistance training monograph published in 2020.[47] MacBride's title, *To Aliens and Exiles:*

[45] McNamara, "Six Rules," 5–7.
[46] McNamara, "Six Rules," 5–6.
[47] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*.

Preaching the New Testament as Minority-Group Rhetoric in a Post-Christendom World, reveals similarities to the present project. MacBride's book includes a blend of theory and practice. He begins by making use of Social Identity Theory and Social Categorization Theory as lenses by which to view the first century church, as a minority group, with respect to its resistance to external pressures.[48] Working from that perspective, MacBride's book then reflects his own pastoral practice, in that it includes several sermons that he preached to his own congregation.[49] The similarities with the present project make MacBride's work a natural choice to provide context for my own work. Having identified six focal points of research, I now turn to their interaction and integration.

The Scriptural Cycle

This project's six forms of research output are: (a) the narrative analysis of selected passages from Ezra–Nehemiah; (b) the links made from Ezra–Nehemiah to the New Testament; (c) my reflections on homiletical theory and practice; (d) the focus group data analysis; (e) the focus group participants' initial contributions to theological reflection; and (f) comparisons to MacBride's book. These six research outputs will be integrated with each other through theological reflection. Theological reflection is that discipline which, for the sake of the life of the church, contemplates Christian practice through the lens of theology.[50] The specific method of theological reflection used here is the pastoral cycle. The pastoral cycle is a key tool in the field of practical theology.[51] A practical

[48] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 9–41
[49] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, vii, 45, 146.
[50] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 96.
[51] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 96.

theologian engages in a pastoral cycle by integrating theology and practice in a series of stages of reflection, normally depicted as a circle or spiral.[52] The specific form of the pastoral cycle used here is Helen Collins's scriptural cycle.[53]

The scriptural cycle correlates the Bible and human experience in an asymmetrical way, foregrounding Scripture as the authoritative Word of God that informs the interpretation of experiences.[54] Collins explains, "Our theological reflections go first to the Bible as our act of faith, looking for God to tell us who God is and who we are, so that we are able to see the world rightly and to live within it faithfully."[55] My exegetical study of the three Ezra–Nehemiah passages along with their relevant New Testament links will function as the Scriptures that inform the theological reflection of Chapter 6.

While pride of place goes to the Scripture, contemplation of human experiences remains important. Interpreted in light of Scripture, experiences can deepen our understanding of the Bible, renew our appreciation of the texts, and show us specific ways to live the Scripture out.[56] Furthermore, these experiences often represent the Holy Spirit's guidance such that correlation between the Scripture and the experience helps us discern the present work of Christ.[57] The focus group data and specific testimonies offered by focus group participants will fill the role of Christian experience in the reflection of Chapter 6.

---

[52] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 80–81; Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 31–34.

[53] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 52–56.

[54] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 58–59, 150.

[55] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 58–59.

[56] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 127–28, 151. Similarly, Volf (*Captive to the Word*, 55) writes, "Christian beliefs normatively shape Christian practices, and engaging in practices can lead to acceptance and deeper understanding of these beliefs."

[57] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 151.

The scriptural cycle creates space for other voices and perspectives to complexify the reflection.[58] It is at this complexifying or discernment stage that I will include MacBride's work. Ultimately, for Collins, the goal of the pastoral cycle is that its users will participate in Christ's present ministry as an act of worship and for his glory.[59] A more detailed description of the scriptural cycle's stages is laid out in the introduction to Chapter 6.

Design

The initial structure of this project derives organically from four stages of my professional practice. These are exegesis, linking from the Old Testament to the New Testament, sermon development, and sermon delivery. As discussed above these four stages function as locations for research.

A key design feature is the relationship between the preached sermons and the focus group interviews—the sermon-to-discussion move. The chosen design builds upon the fact that an interview always has a context.[60] The sermon provided an introductory touchpoint, a springboard, for the focus group discussions.[61] Outside of my control, other factors necessarily provided context for the interviews as well. However, no matter if participants had a headache or a fight with a spouse earlier the same day, at least they heard the sermon. Without that, other individual influences and social factors may have held more sway over the interviews. In this case, my intention was that the categories of

---

[58] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 130–39.
[59] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 152–53.
[60] Brinkmann and Kvale, *InterViews*, 64.
[61] It is important to note that the focus group discussions were not, by design, discussions of the sermons per se. Instead, they were discussions of the participants' own experiences in the world, experiences of the types of scenarios discussed in the application sections of the sermons.

thought in the focus group discussions should be influenced by biblical categories. I wanted the interviews to be framed by what God is saying and doing through the Ezra–Nehemiah texts.

Furthermore, by means of their responses to the sermon that they heard, the focus group participants began the process of theological reflection. They took the first step around the scriptural cycle, moving from Scripture to experience. In every case in Chapter 6, the linkage between biblical text and human experience is a linkage created by a focus group participant. I did not ask them to engage in theological reflection per se. I preached a sermon about external pressures, and in response they told me about their own experiences with external pressures. Not always, but often enough, focus group participants recounted their real-world experiences in terms of the categories of the sermon they heard.

More needs to be said here about my analysis of the focus group interviews. I recorded the audio of the focus group interviews, and had the recordings transcribed. Analysis of the transcripts provides an interpretation of the participants' stories. I used content analysis, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis for the sake of a well-rounded exploration of the interview data.

The final stages of the research design consolidate the research elements into recommendations for the sake of others who engage in resistance training. What the focus group participants began, I complete in Chapters 6 and 7. That is where I complete the process of theological reflection, leading finally to recommendations for pastors engaged in resistance training, that is, preaching biblical minority-group literature to Christians living in the post-Christendom West.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Not only is the study of Ezra–Nehemiah limited to three selections about resistance, about tense insider-outsider relationships (Ezra 4–6; Neh 1–6; Neh 8–10), but two other such passages are not considered here, namely, Ezra 9–10 and Neh 13. As the voluminous literature on Ezra 9–10 indicates, inclusion of that passage alone would crowd the limited space available for consideration of the first three passages.

Time and resource restrictions also meant that the field research was limited to eight churches at which a total of approximately sixty individuals participated in the focus group interviews. Furthermore, in these interviews, there were limits to what focus group participants shared. Participants reported their own experiences from their own limited perspectives. They tended to speak about concrete interpersonal or workplace interactions that they find challenging rather than the influence of subtle cultural pressures. Furthermore, participants were aware that their sharing in the focus group sessions was being recorded, and in some cases this caused them to restrict what they said. In order to maintain the privacy and anonymity of the participants, I am unable in this dissertation to indicate the names and addresses of the churches at which I conducted this research. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, my reporting of participant statements masks any details that could be used to identify any individual participant.

There are other limitations to this study that could be addressed in future research. A similar study could be conducted using different portions of Scripture. This research was conducted only in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada. Similar research could be conducted at different churches in the same region, or in different parts of North America

or the world. The eight research sites are all small evangelical Protestant churches. Similar research could broaden into different theological constellations or narrow to a single denomination or Christian tradition.

Religious Minority-Group Theology: A Literature Review

The biblical theme of exile or diaspora provides guidance for the contemporary church with regard to her relationship to culture. James speaks of his readers as being "in the diaspora" (ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ, Jas 1:1).[62] Peter refer to Christians as "exiles of the diaspora" (παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς, 1 Pet 1:1). In 1 Pet 1:17, Peter likewise uses the term "sojourn" (παροικίας).[63] Because Christians live by values that run counter to those of the surrounding culture, they are, metaphorically speaking, foreigners.[64] Three and a half centuries after James and Peter, Augustine, in *The City of God*, wrote similarly using especially the Latin term *peregrinatio* ("pilgrimage").[65] Augustine traces human history down the parallel and then intertwined lines of the city of man and the city of God. Citizens of the city of God are not at home in the city of man: "For the city of the saints is on high, even though it brings forth citizens here below, in whom it is on pilgrimage until the time of its kingdom arrives."[66]

While some authors use the term "diaspora" as roughly synonymous with "exile," Evans calls for a distinction. In the biblical literature, exile is more oriented to a return to

---

[62] Moo (*The Letter of James*, 23–25, 50) argues that this is a literal reference to Jewish Christians being dispersed because of persecution in Jerusalem.

[63] Jobes, *1 Peter*, 109. In 1 Pet 2:11, Peter repeats two of these terms: "sojourners and exiles" (ESV).

[64] Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 82–83. Jobes (*1 Peter*, 22–27, 66) posits that Peter's audience was a literal diaspora, and that Peter applies their experience to the church's figurative exile.

[65] E.g., Augustine, *City of God*, 15.1–6, 18.49–54, 19.17.

[66] Augustine, *City of God*, 15.1

the homeland than is a diaspora, and younger generations of Christians in the West are not longing for a return to Christendom.[67] Meanwhile, MacBride sees the church today as marginalized by the majority culture of the West, and in that light he uses the term "minority-group."[68] Regardless of whether the authors work under the banner of exile, diaspora, or minority-group, this literature review proceeds under four headings. First, I consider authors who work through various corpora of biblical literature. Second, I compare various schema by which authors discuss simultaneous avoidance of both assimilation to the majority culture's patterns and isolation from the majority culture. Third, I summarize three noteworthy books from the twentieth century, followed, fourth, by six authors writing in the twenty-first century.

Biblical Studies

One common approach among scholars is to work methodically through a particular corpus, distilling themes that can be applied to contemporary Christian resistance. Smith-Christopher surveys Ezekiel, Lamentations, the Deuteronomic History, Third Isaiah, Jonah, Ezra–Nehemiah, the Wisdom Literature, Tobit, and Daniel, all through the lens of contemporary social sciences.[69] On this basis he calls for Christian uprightness and acceptance of marginalization.[70] Boda uses categories from diasporic studies, including the significance of the progression of time, to compare Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Esther to each other.[71] In these texts, sometimes the majority culture represents danger,

[67] Evans, "Can't Go Home," 42–43.
[68] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, ix–xvi.
[69] Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 75–188.
[70] Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 189–98.
[71] Boda, "Identity in Diaspora," 6–22.

and sometimes opportunity, such that faithful interface with the world is variable and requires wisdom.[72] Beach finds creative theological reflection in Esther, Daniel, Jonah, Second Temple Judaism, the life of Christ, and the general epistles, especially 1 Peter.[73] This reflection indicates that the church today can recover its identity by means of the exilic themes of God's presence, and the church's holiness and sense of mission.[74] MacBride works through much of the New Testament, making use of the lens of social categorization theory.[75] Like Beach, MacBride gives emphasis to 1 Peter, "the most prototypical example of minority group rhetoric in the New Testament."[76]

Avoiding Both Assimilation and Isolation

A key calling for conversionist minority groups such as the Christian church is avoidance of the extremes of assimilation and isolation.[77] To identify the calling in this way is to name the extremes to be shunned. We might also identify by name the crucial middle space. Moving in from the one extreme of assimilation, we are to remain distinct from the world, faithfully Christian. Moving in from the other extreme of isolation, we are to engage with the world. Thus, in Jesus' terms, we are *in* but not *of* the world (John 17:11–26).

Christian authors frequently attempt to name this middle space with a succinct phrase. For each of the authors discussed below, the succinct phrase is not the sum of their argument. They each unpack the meaning of their phrase at length; nonetheless, the

---

[72] Boda, "Identity in Diaspora," 21–23.
[73] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 69–136.
[74] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 31–48, 53–64.
[75] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 12–13.
[76] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 45.
[77] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 9–10; Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 190; Kroeker, "Messianic Ethics and Diaspora Communities," 75–76.

phrase they choose reveals something of their unique emphasis. For Hauerwas and Willimon that phrase is "resident aliens."[78] "Resident," of course, refers to being in the world. Because the church has become too much like the world, Hauerwas and Willimon believe that "alien" is not too strong a word.[79] The church needs a strong word to be roused to her calling to be different from the world.

Whereas Hauerwas and Willimon's phrase emphasizes distinctiveness in the world, Stott's phrase emphasizes being able to relate to the world. His phrase is "contemporary Christian."[80] By "contemporary" he means that we are to understand our own age so that we can speak into it. We do so by the double refusal (neither escaping, nor conforming to the world) and by double listening (to the Word and to the world).[81]

Volf heads in a slightly different direction. His phrase is "soft difference."[82] "Difference" equates to the "alien" and the "Christian" of the preceding two phrases. The term "soft" is what stands out here. This is Volf's way of capturing the Petrine call to Christlike acceptance of suffering (1 Pet 2:18–23), to submission (2:13, 18; 3:1), to repaying evil with a blessing (3:9), and to gentleness (3:16).[83] Volf does not want to be misunderstood: this softness is neither weak nor fearful nor silent.[84] In fact, this softness is evangelistic as nonbelievers see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (2:12; see also 2:9 and 3:1).[85] Hauerwas and Willimon would not disagree with "soft."[86] "Soft"

---

[78] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.
[79] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12, 20–21.
[80] Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 29.
[81] Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 26–29; at the same location Stott clarifies that there is an asymmetrical pattern to the double listening, because only the Scripture has God's authority.
[82] Volf, "Soft Difference," 24.
[83] Volf, "Soft Difference," 21–24.
[84] Volf, "Soft Difference," 24–25.
[85] Volf, "Soft Difference," 26.
[86] See their discussion of a *confessing* church: Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 46–47.

correlates to Stott's approach in the following way: Stott emphasizes relating to the world, whereas "soft" emphasizes the *demeanor* with which the Christian does that relating.

Like Volf, MacBride also uses the word "difference." His phrase, however, is "attractive difference."[87] With "attractive," MacBride agrees with Volf but brings graciousness' evangelistic trajectory out into the open. MacBride describes "difference" as a boundary, and "attractiveness" as the permeability of that boundary.[88] Although the church is perceived by the world to be shameful, her distinctive and *attractive* values and behavior will persuade some outsiders to join in.[89]

Hunter's phrase is "faithful presence."[90] "Faithful" equates to the preceding epithets' terms, "alien," "Christian," and "difference." It is especially similar to Stott's "Christian." Indeed, for Hunter, being "faithful" requires Christian formation, catechesis, and spiritual disciplines—being built up in the faith.[91] Hunter's second term, "presence," equates to the preceding "resident," "contemporary," "soft," and "attractive." "Presence" derives from the Incarnation, provides an antidote to our fragmented culture, engages with the world actively, and entails faithfulness in our work in our local spheres of influence.[92]

Hunter describes faithful presence as "a theology of engagement."[93] Thus, what Hunter states implicitly with "presence," Beach makes explicit with the first term in his

---

[87] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 10.
[88] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 10.
[89] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 10.
[90] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 237.
[91] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 236–37.
[92] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 240–48.
[93] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 243.

phrase: "engaged nonconformity."[94] With respect to Beach's second term, the church's nonconformity derives ultimately from the holiness of God.[95]Although my analysis here has considered "in" and "not of," one at a time, Beach wants us to hold the engagement and the nonconformity tightly together. The nonconformity is essential to the church's witness because her nonconforming holiness properly critiques the world, while her holy love and holy grace invites the world in.[96] While all these pithy phrases have the practical benefit of helping us grasp and mentally retain the overall concept, no one phrase can do justice to the complexity of this matter. The ramifications of "in but not of the world" are far reaching. As we will discover later on, Ezra–Nehemiah also has something to contribute to this discussion.

Several authors consider the means by which a Christian enters the marginalized state. This discussion also provides insight into the middle space between isolation and assimilation. When we think of the literal exile of any migrating people group, two primary relevant forces are "push" and "pull" factors—unfavorable conditions in one's homeland and favorable conditions elsewhere.[97] Christians, however, enter their exilic state through supernatural divine intervention. For Hauerwas and Willimon, it is baptism that makes us dissidents, dissidents who remain in place even after baptism. "In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another, and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens."[98] Hauerwas and Willimon's wake-up call is addressed to a church that has inappropriately assimilated to the world and thus violated

---

[94] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 180–87.
[95] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 180.
[96] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 187–94, 200.
[97] Lee, "A Theory of Migration," 49–52; Santos, "Diaspora Missions," 194–95. Alternately, the Old Testament Babylonian dispersion was caused by divine judgment.
[98] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.

her baptismal vows.[99] Goppelt observes the divine election of 1 Pet 1:1 ("elect exiles of the dispersion") and makes a similar point. It is election that brings the church into exile, and it is that election that makes the church a stranger to the world.[100] Thus assimilation is forbidden for the deepest possible reason. Christians have values that conflict with worldly values not by some migration pattern explicable on a human level, but by divine calling.

Volf, however, develops this thought in a way that allows for more nuance. For Volf, it is the New Birth that causes Christians to be exiles.[101] They have not arrived on exilic shores from afar. They have been here all along. It is just that now their hearts have been transformed. "Christian difference is therefore not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but a bursting out of the new *precisely within the proper space of the old*."[102] This too has implications for isolation and assimilation. Because the church has been an insider all along, and because of common grace, there are some majority practices and values she may retain. Her new estrangement is not to every single aspect of the world. She now selectively retains, rejects, and/or transforms the various beliefs and practices of her social world.[103]

---

[99] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.
[100] Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, 66.
[101] Volf, "Soft Difference," 18.
[102] Volf, "Soft Difference," 19; emphasis in the original.
[103] Volf, "Soft Difference," 18–21.

Three Noteworthy Books from the Twentieth Century

Machen

J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) was an important salvo in the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy. The term "liberalism" in Machen's title denotes the various theological positions of his day that denied the supernatural intervention of God in the origin of Christianity.[104] Working through various doctrinal topics, one at a time, Machen argues that such liberalism is not compatible with Christianity. Liberalism rejects the Bible's teaching about the transcendence of God and about the sin that separates humanity from him.[105] Liberalism claims that it submits to Christ (rather than to the Bible), to which claim Machen raises evidence to the contrary.[106] Liberalism sees Jesus as merely an example and not as a supernatural person.[107] With respect to the doctrine of salvation, Machen responds to various objections to vicarious atonement and the necessity of being born again.[108] Finally, Machen laments the extent to which the church is populated by people who do not believe Christian doctrines; it would be more honest of them to join the Unitarian church.[109] Throughout, Machen emphasizes that Christ's true church must maintain doctrinal clarity and fidelity.[110]

Niebuhr

In *Christ and Culture* (1951), Richard Niebuhr presents a typology of five overlapping ways that Christian groups historically have conceived of the relationship between Christ

---

[104] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 2.
[105] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 62–67.
[106] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 76–78.
[107] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 80–116.
[108] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 117–56.
[109] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 165.
[110] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 17–47.

and the world. The first two of these, "Christ against culture," and "Christ of culture," correspond respectively to the two extremes discussed above, isolation and assimilation.[111] The remaining three views avoid the extremes by seeing simultaneous differentiation and unity between Christ and culture.[112] "Christ above culture" acknowledges Christ's transcendence, but also recognizes, for example, that Christians must submit to Caesar.[113] "Christ and culture in paradox" refers to a Christian loyalty to both kingdoms, a dualism held together in tension.[114] Finally, the view entitled "Christ the transformer of culture" looks for the present intervention of God for the sake of the renewal of the world.[115] Throughout, Niebuhr attaches figures from church history to each view, and he identifies strengths and weaknesses of each approach. However, he uniquely finds no weakness to identify in the "Christ the transformer" approach.

Hauerwas and Willimon

Hauerwas and Willimon, in *Resident Aliens* (1989), read Niebuhr as favoring the transformer approach.[116] They furthermore skeptically see all but his first category as being, in practice, too assimilationist.[117] Instead of Niebuhr's typology, Hauerwas and Willimon recommend that of Yoder.[118] Using Yoder's model, they call for neither an activist nor a conversionist church, but rather a confessing church: "Rejecting both the individualism of the conversionists and the secularism of the activist. . . the confessing

---

[111] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40–41, 91–94.
[112] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 41, 117–18.
[113] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 42, 122–23.
[114] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 42–43, 150–56.
[115] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 43, 193–95.
[116] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 40.
[117] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 40–42.
[118] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 44.

church finds its main political task to lie. . . in the congregation's determination to worship Christ in all things."[119] This is political because the confessing church's genuinely Christian way of life exemplifies for the world a countercultural social structure.[120]

Hauerwas and Willimon argue that the church today has assimilated to worldly values such as radical individualism and consumerism.[121] She will only be renewed by finding her identity in the story that God is unfolding,[122] by looking for the presence of the kingdom of God, and by returning to God's values.[123] The Sermon on the Mount demonstrates that Christian ethics are incompatible with the ways of this world.[124] The Christian community living out the Sermon demonstrates what God's future kingdom looks like.[125] In this light, the church must neither serve the state nor seek to commandeer the powers of this world for her own purposes, no matter how noble.[126] The first calling of the church is to her own spiritual and ethical formation. The Christian community teaches ethics through personal discipleship; we learn ethics by watching examples.[127] The pastor's job is to preach the Word, to tell the truth that will empower the church to be distinct in the world.[128] Ultimately, the pastor's job is to orient people to God.[129]

---

[119] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 45.
[120] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 46.
[121] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 19–21, 31–34.
[122] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 59.
[123] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 118–22.
[124] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 74.
[125] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 87.
[126] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 30–38.
[127] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 95–111.
[128] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 127–72.
[129] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 140.

Commentary

Before proceeding to the twenty-first century, a few comments are in order. Niebuhr's publication date, 1951, places his book in the time of the Cold War. This was a time of heightened Christendom culture as the US was at odds with atheistic communism. Niebuhr's bent toward the transformer approach reflects, in part, the sense at the time that the church was in an ascendent position. Meanwhile at the time of the publication of the first and third books, the distinctions between church and non-Christian culture were more obvious. Machen and Hauerwas and Willimon have a few things in common. Separated by 70 years, and arising out of different theological traditions, both books are severe criticisms of the Protestant church, decrying especially the level of the church's assimilation to worldly ways. Although Machen focuses on Christian doctrine and Hauerwas and Willimon on Christian behavior, both are concerned about both of these categories. Machen is interested in more than an intellectual Christianity. For example, he closes his book expressing a longing for a genuine Christianity where Christians unite in gratitude for God's grace that refreshes the soul.[130] Hauerwas and Willimon are interested in more than Christian behavior. For example, they assert early on that Christians must be taught so that they understand what prayer is and that we sin.[131] Whatever their differences, one thing observed in these two books—with respect to resistance training—is the prophetic voice that cries aloud for Christian belief and practice that is distinct from the temptations of the world.

---

[130] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 180.
[131] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 28.

Six Authors in the Early Twenty-First Century

Hunter

James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* (2010) argues that (especially American) evangelical intentions to change the culture through grass roots efforts underestimate the culture-making power of networks of elite institutions.[132] Furthermore, the politicization of so much of our world has tempted the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists to define their identity in terms of fear, resentment, victimhood, and the negation of the "other."[133] Two particularly challenging characteristics of our age are pluralism and skepticism, which lead in turn to nihilism and radical individualism.[134] In response, and instead of popular paradigms of cultural engagement ("defensive against," "relevance to," or "purity from") Hunter calls upon Christians (a) to build up their own faith through catechesis and the spiritual disciplines and (b) to love their neighbors in accord with common grace and in a way that provides a picture of God's *shalom*.[135]

Wells

Beginning in the late 1990s, David Wells wrote a four-volume contextual theology. His *The Courage to Be Protestant* summarizes the project, now updated with a second edition in 2017. The evangelical church today faces a twofold problem: its own internal weakness and an increasingly hostile culture.[136] The church's weakness derives from its downplaying of biblical doctrine, especially with respect to the transcendence of God,

---

[132] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 6–96.
[133] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 102–75.
[134] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 199–212.
[135] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 213–54.
[136] Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 12–21.

human sinfulness, and our need to rely on divine grace.[137] Also needed is a return to the marks of a true church: the ministry of the word of God, the sacraments, and church discipline, all this paired with confidence that it is God who builds his church.[138] Western radical individualism—the pursuit of the autonomous self—has had an especially corrosive influence on the church,[139] as have various contemporary spiritualities according to which a person can reach up to God on the basis of their own inner resources.[140]

Dreher

In *The Benedict Option* (2017), Rod Dreher argues that Christians should accept their powerlessness in the new social order.[141] Instead of trying to save Western culture, they should build strong families and communities that will remain faithful to Christ through the present and future time of testing.[142] Radical individualism has fragmented Western culture,[143] but by acting locally, caring about beauty, holding to high standards in the church, and following a thoughtful and intentional approach to sex and technology, the church can demonstrate to the world what true community looks like.[144]

---

[137] Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 14–16, 80–82, 136–47.
[138] Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 147–61.
[139] Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 85–90.
[140] Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 115–33.
[141] Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 88–90.
[142] Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 50–53.
[143] Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 40–44.
[144] Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 100–43, 195–236.

Commentary

Before proceeding, it is worth noting the similarity between the first and the last of these three. While Hunter's is an academic work and Dreher writes for a general audience, they raise the identical concern. Both authors criticize the approach that calls for the church to "take back" the culture. Accepting its lack of influence, the church needs to do two things: build up its own spiritual strength and testify to the world by modeling Christian living in local settings. Meanwhile, Wells' book is different in its interest in systematic theology. However, like the other two, Wells also decries the internal weakness of the church. All three inform resistance training with the point that to say "No!" to the world, the church needs to be saying "Yes!" to being built up internally in Christian doctrine and practice.

Trueman

Carl Trueman's 2020 book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, traces the trajectory of Western thought from Rousseau to Romanticism to Nietzsche to Freud (among others).[145] This trajectory explains contemporary culture's denial of the transcendent and its elevation of the desires of the individual.[146] Sexual desire in particular is understood today to be key for identity formation.[147] In response, the church should find her bearings by means of the core Christian doctrines, by strengthening her own internal community, and by teach a theology of the physical body.[148] In his 2022 follow-up, *Strange New World,* Trueman adds that the church should acknowledge her

[145] Trueman, *The Modern Self*, 105–97.
[146] Trueman, *The Modern Self*, 44–69, 92–93.
[147] Trueman, *The Modern Self*, 68–69.
[148] Trueman, *The Modern Self*, 383–407.

own worldliness.[149] She should furthermore engage the culture by being herself, a people devoted to rich Christian worship and productive citizenship.[150] Finally, she should be characterized by Christian hope.[151]

Wright

Christopher J. H. Wright begins *Here Are Your Gods* (2020) with a biblical theology of idolatry. To the detriment of humans and the diminishment of the glory of God, idolatry is ultimately an attack on the creator-creature distinction.[152] Examining the contemporary context through the lens of Old Testament idolatry, Wright condemns the Western idols of prosperity (consumerism, celebrity culture), nationalism (including gun violence), and self-exaltation (radical individualism, narcissism).[153] Renewed God-centeredness[154] will provoke us to a distinctive lifestyle as salt and light, as well as to prayer, praying both for and against societal leaders.[155]

Root

In 2021, Andrew Root completed a trilogy that brings Charles Taylor's insights about contemporary culture to bear on the church. Due to the influence of radical individualism and the consumer mentality,[156] the church has jettisoned the reality of transcendence and divine action.[157] To right their course, Christians should return to kenosis (emptying

---

[149] Trueman, *Strange New World*, 170–73.
[150] Trueman, *Strange New World*, 175–78, 180–82.
[151] Trueman, *Strange New World*, 185–86.
[152] Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 82.
[153] Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 113–22.
[154] Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 133–58.
[155] Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 160–73.
[156] Root, *Faith Formation*, 3–94.
[157] Root, *Faith Formation*, 109–16.

oneself), hypostasis (sharing in the personhood of Christ), and theosis (sharing in the ministry of God).[158] In the second book of the trilogy, Root expands on the latter point (theosis), specifically with respect to pastors. The key to pastoral ministry is divine action and thus the call to participate in the work of the living God. Pastors are to share in the life of God, helping congregants become more aware of their encounters with Jesus.[159]

Root's third book focuses on the busyness of contemporary life, busyness which is a substitute for communion with the sacred and eternal.[160] Under the secular and technological regime, we are alienated from God and each other.[161] Family and church have been replaced as society's glue by government and business.[162] Instead of busyness, we need resonance (connectedness).[163] The litmus test for our Christianity is how we treat children.[164] When we care for and serve the other, we connect with eternity—fullness of time.[165]

Commentary

These last three authors are distinct from each other on one level. Trueman's work is largely historical. Wright's is biblical-theological. Root writes from a mainline Lutheran perspective with a theological emphasis on the call to participate in divine action. On another level, all three emphasize the problem of Western culture's radical individualism, the idea that an individual creates their own meaning, that they discover their own

---

[158] Root, *Faith Formation*, 131–80.
[159] Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 173–281.
[160] Root, *Congregation in a Secular Age*, 3–55.
[161] Root, *Congregation in a Secular Age*, 131–32, 145–46.
[162] Root, *Congregation in a Secular Age*, 71–120.
[163] Root, *Congregation in a Secular Age*, 194–212.
[164] Root, *Congregation in a Secular Age*, 223–29.
[165] Root, *Congregation in a Secular Age*, 243–62.

identity by digging deeply into their own emotions and intuitions, that to be true to oneself is more important than submitting to traditional community values. Trueman and Root both acknowledge the philosopher Charles Taylor's cultural analysis that highlights the problem of this sort of individualism. Resistance trainers need to be aware of the contemporary tendency toward this form of self-centeredness.

Synthesis

We have observed Christian authors discussing the ways that contemporary Western culture presses in on the church. These authors have then proposed multiple forms of Christian resistance to the pressure. I identify here four forms of resistance that are prominent in this literature. First, church leaders need to prioritize Christian formation, the internal strengthening of the church.[166] This entails various forms of discipleship: teaching sound doctrine, catechesis, and instruction in the spiritual disciplines.[167] It also includes prayer, corporate worship, and the development of personal bonds within the local church.[168] Second, and overlapping with the first, Christians need to grow in their awareness of and confidence in the transcendence and presence of God.[169] At this level, all of these forms of Christian resistance are built upon Christian *being* more than Christian *doing*.[170] The church needs to find her identity in her Lord, in Christ by the Spirit. This entails trusting God because of his grace and his present action in the

---

[166] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 236–37; Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 95–111; Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 147–61; Hunter, *To Change the World*, 282–83.

[167] Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 50–53; Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 179–180.

[168] Trueman, *The Modern Self*, 404–5; Trueman, *Strange New World*, 180–82; Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 165–67.

[169] Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 77–82; Root, *Faith Formation*, 111–12.

[170] Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 136–38; Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 190; Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 83–86.

world.[171] One key is to remember that God has birthed his people into their marginalized state in the world.[172]

The third form of Christian resistance is being distinct in the world. In terms of a sense of identity, Christians need to grow in their level of internal comfort at being different.[173] This then translates to holiness of lifestyle.[174] Christians must flee the temptation to worldly behavior patterns such as radical individualism and consumerism.[175] In all of this, the exact form and degree of distinctiveness is not monolithic; wisdom is required.[176] Fourth, several writers see a tight relationship between "resist" and "reform."[177] The church's relationship with the outside world is to be characterized by love.[178] The church expresses God's ministry with words of truth and deeds of mercy that reach out to the world.[179] At the same time, the church also silently presents to the world an illustration of what it looks like when God reigns.[180] The church models God's kingdom in her upright living and productive citizenship.[181] The present dissertation project will build upon this literature.

---

[171] Root, *Pastor in a Secular Age*, 183–212; Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 81.

[172] Volf, "Soft Difference," 18–19.

[173] Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 199–200; Volf, "Soft Difference," 24–25; Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 126–27.

[174] Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 173–95; Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 160–73; Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, 154–57.

[175] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 19–21, 31–34; Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 149–51.

[176] Boda, "Identity in Diaspora," 23; Volf, "Soft Difference," 20–21.

[177] I make use here of East's ("Once More, Church and Culture," para. 19–22) typology; the writers do not.

[178] Volf, "Soft Difference," 21–24; Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 253–56.

[179] Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 200–2; Wright, *Here are Your Gods*, 160–65; Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 339–48.

[180] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 281; Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 117–19.

[181] Trueman, *Strange New World*, 176–78; Hunter, *To Change the World*, 265–69.

Dissertation Outline

In what follows, Chapter 2 uses narrative analysis to exegete three selections from Ezra–Nehemiah. Chapter 3 makes connections from those three selections to the New Testament. Chapter 4 describes my process of preparing sermons from those three selections. Chapter 5 describes the focus groups that I conducted with people who listened to me preach the sermons. Chapter 6 makes use of theological reflection in order to merge my exegetical work in Ezra–Nehemiah with the life experiences of the focus group participants. Chapter 7 summarizes the key findings of the project and provides recommendations for pastors engaged in resistance training.

CHAPTER TWO: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PASSAGES IN EZRA–NEHEMIAH

This chapter lays the exegetical foundations for the development of sermons from Ezra–Nehemiah. I have selected three passages from Ezra–Nehemiah on the basis of their relevance to the people of God in situations of social tension. The three passages are Ezra 4–6, Neh 1–6, and Neh 9–10. Each of these selections has something to say to God's people as a minority group, whether they face direct opposition or subtle pressure to assimilate to the beliefs and behavioral norms of a nonbelieving majority culture. For this reason, the sermons to be developed from these selections will serve the cause of resistance training.

Hermeneutical Methodology

To answer the question, "What is God saying and doing in these texts?" the hermeneutical tool employed here is narrative analysis. I take a synchronic approach to the texts, examining their narrative features.[1] Particular attention is given to plot and structure, and each analysis ends with a discussion of ideological point of view.

For its consideration of plot, structure, and ideological point of view, this chapter is dependent on the following theorists. Ska, summarizing the work of other scholars,

[1] In addition to the scholars listed in the next paragraph, I am particularly dependent on the poetics of Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*), Berlin (*Poetics and Interpretation*), Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*), and Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art in the Bible*).

provides robust definitions of the elements of plot in Old Testament narrative.[2] His work informs the discussions of plot in this chapter. Walsh's poetics regarding structure guides the strategies used here to examine that key narrative feature.[3] Finally, Ryken delineates narrative elements that reveal a narrator's ideological point of view, and his insights are employed here.[4] These tools help me take the stance of a learner, listening to the inspired text in order to be able to relay God's message to the congregation in sermonic form.

Ezra 4–6[5]

Ezra 4–6 describes the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in Yehud[6] after the Exile. At first, hostile neighbors obtain imperial authority to terminate the construction work. In the second half of the passage, however, God's intervention brings success. The following analysis focuses on the plot and structure of this passage.

Plot

Ezra 4:1 functions as the exposition,[7] summarizing the preceding chapter and introducing a new character, the adversaries. The inciting incident occurs when the adversaries express a desire to join the Jews' building project (Ezra 4:2).[8] Conflict then increases throughout the chapter. The adversaries are rebuffed by the Jews (4:3). In response they

---

[2] Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 17–30.

[3] Walsh, *Style and Structure*, 191–93.

[4] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 45–51, 81–89. See also Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 173–81.

[5] This section builds upon my earlier work: Matzal, "He Turned the Heart," 32–80.

[6] This is the Aramaic form of *Judah* and the name of that province in the Persian period.

[7] According to Ska's (*Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 21) definition, an exposition presents background information that is "necessary for the understanding of the narration."

[8] The adversaries' approach introduces conflict specifically because the narrator has just stated that those offering to help are in fact adversaries. On the "inciting moment" (or "occasioning incident") as an element of plot, see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 20, 25.

show their true colors, harassing the returned exiles' efforts to rebuild the temple (4:4–5). Drawing in correspondence from a later period, the author depicts ominous accusations against the Jews. The local adversaries report to the emperor that Jerusalem's existence is a threat to the interests of the empire (4:15–16). The emperor concurs (4:20), and the building project is forcibly brought to a halt (4:23–24). Stoppage functions as the high point of tension in the passage.[9]

The narrative situation changes dramatically in Ezra 5:1–5. A pair of new characters appear. Haggai and Zechariah prophesy "in the name of the God of Israel" (Ezra 5:1 ESV). This phrase, Fried explains, means that Yahweh has sent these prophets. "To speak in the name of someone is to speak the words that that person tells you to say."[10] Reengagement in temple construction entails risk in light of the opposition recounted in Ezra 4. But no matter. The divinely commissioned prophetic word launches a renewal of the building effort (5:2).

The approach of Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai seems threatening given the parallels to Ezra 4.[11] And what good could possibly come of their wanting to take down names (Ezra 5:3–4)? Nonetheless, this rise in tension is outstripped by a new reason for hope in verse 5. Divine prompting (i.e., the prophets) is complemented by divine protection. Suspense abates as the narrator indicates that God's eye is on the Jews (5:5).[12] Two instances of relational language in the text explain Yahweh's prompting and

---

[9] Given the eliding of the two time periods and the repetitive resumption of 4:24, there are two stoppages.

[10] Fried, *Ezra: A Commentary*, 233; see, for example, 1 Chr 21:18–19. Similarly, Steinmann (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 262) states that the import of Ezra 5:1b is that ". . . Israel's God was the ultimate mover behind this revival of temple construction."

[11] The authors of the main accusatory letter in Ezra 4 are similarly two men identified by proper names "and their associates" (וּכְנָוָתְהוֹן); Ezra 4:9, 17, 23; 5:3.

[12] Ezra 5:1–5 is the turning point of the narrative; Ska (*Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 27) defines the turning point of a plot is the moment that inaugurates the falling action.

protecting: the prophets prophesy in the name of "the God of Israel" (5:1) and the divine eye is the eye of "their God" (5:5).[13]

Despite the considerable changes effected by Ezra 5:1–5, conflict does not immediately vanish. At Ezra 5:17 the local governor requests two pieces of information from the Persian capital. His stance toward the returnees will be determined by information about Cyrus' decree and by Darius' pleasure in the matter. Cyrus' decree is eventually discovered; its contents favor the Jews (6:3–5). Darius accordingly adds his support (6:6–12). The local governor carries out the emperor's favorable decree, and the plot comes to resolution[14] with the completion of the temple (6:14–15).

The resolution attributes the completion of the temple to both prophets and decrees. For the second time now, the text highlights the role of the prophets. As for decrees, pride of place among the decree-issuing authorities goes to "the God of Israel" (Ezra 6:14). When, however, did the God of Israel issue a decree? No divine decree is explicitly mentioned earlier in the text of Ezra. Presumably Yahweh had decided in heaven to have the temple rebuilt. His heavenly decree was then actuated on earth through the words of the prophets (Ezra 1:1; 5:1–2) and the Persian imperial decrees (Ezra 1:2–4; 6:6–12).[15]

---

[13] Discussing a different passage but one that uses similar language (Neh 6:16), Shepherd and Wright (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 77) state that the phrase "our God" implies God's identification with his people.

[14] See Ska (*Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 27) for a definition of the resolution among the moments of a plot.

[15] Regarding the fact that three Persian emperors issue a single decree, Eskenazi (*In an Age of Prose*, 41) argues that their separate decrees are merely "variations of the same decree;" Steinmann (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 269–70) posits that the use of the singular here communicates that God was the unseen agent causing all the favorable Persian decrees. McConville (*Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 41) sees the anachronistic reference to Artaxerxes as a proleptic reference to Artaxerxes' subsequent favorable decree.

Following Ska's distinction between a resolution and a conclusion,[16] Ezra 6:16–22 functions as the conclusion. In this case, the conclusion consists of a report of the dedication of the temple (6:16–18), the observance of Passover (6:19–22a), and a closing commentary from the narrator (6:22b).

The symbolic use of numbers plays an important role in the conclusion. These numbers tell a story that override any discouragement based on the notion that the second temple was inferior to Solomon's temple (as indicated in Ezra 3:12). To be sure, the number of sacrificial animals was small (Ezra 6:17) as compared to the dedication described in 1 Kgs 8:5, 63. This can be said to reveal the economic weakness of the community.[17] Nonetheless, at the dedication, the people sacrifice a total of 700 animals (Ezra 6:17), a number that symbolizes completeness.[18] To be sure, the returnees consisted primarily of members of but three tribes—Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (Ezra 1:5; 2:36–40). However, they bring sin offerings on behalf of all twelve tribes (Ezra 6:17).[19] The nation is considered to be whole again. As compared to the trouble brought on by the division of the kingdom and the exile, the successful rebuilding of the temple represents Israel in her ideal state.[20]

The offering of sacrifices speaks to the meaning of the temple. This narrative is not merely about the construction of a physical building. The raison d'être of the temple

---

[16] Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 28.

[17] Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 94.

[18] Pope, "Seven, Seventh, Seventy," 4:295.

[19] Vogt (*Studie zur Nachexilischen Gemeinde*, 53, 55) argues that there is a link between the reference in Ezra 6:17 to the twelve tribes and the fact that the name "Israel" appears exactly twelve times in Ezra 4–6. Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 84) thinks that this twelvefold occurrence is coincidental, but Vogt's observation coheres with other evidences of the author's meticulous craftsmanship (see the discussion below of the parallel panels and inclusio).

[20] Vogt, *Studie zur Nachexilischen Gemeinde*, 54–55; Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 137–39.

is the relationship between God and his people; this is their meeting place. National wholeness and relational access to God leads to joy in his presence (Ezra 6:16, 22).

Structure

Parallel Panels

In addition to the plotline, Ezra 4–6 consists of two parallel panels.[21] Multiple details in Ezra 4 are matched by counterparts in Ezra 5–6. The overall structure may be summarized as follows. In both panels local authorities approach the Jewish builders and then ask the emperor to provide guidance by means of archived records. In each case the archives provide relevant material for an imperial decision. In the first case, that decision is to halt the temple building project; in the second case, it is to provide imperial support for the project. In this way, the second panel functions as a response to the accusations of the first panel, a dramatic act of divinely orchestrated reversal.

Inclusio

A second structural feature asks for attention. Ezra 4–6 is framed by an inclusio; the two framing units are Ezra 4:1–5 and 6:19–22.[22] Following Walsh, interpretation of literary structure such as this should compare the corresponding elements of the frames in their two settings to each other, and, furthermore, observe how these relate to the larger

[21] Various scholars have commented on the overall bipartite structure or on various individual verbal or conceptual parallels between the panels: McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 39, 41; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 120; Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 59; H-Mallau, "The Redaction of Ezra 4–6," 70–73; and Matzal, "The Structure of Ezra IV–VI," 566–69.

[22] Vogt, *Studie zur Nachexilischen Gemeinde*, 49–53; Matzal, "The Structure of Ezra IV–VI," 567–68.

narrative, the storyline of Ezra 4–6 in its entirety.[23] Two elements within the frames will be considered here: the Jews' relationship to outsiders and the weakening or strengthening of hands.[24]

The first element of the framing material concerns potential cooperation across religious boundaries. In the opening frame, neighbors ask to join the temple-building project, an offer which the returnees rebuff (Ezra 4:1–3). In the closing frame, the exact opposite obtains. The returnees welcome neighbors[25] to join the celebration of Passover (Ezra 6:21). Why the change? The repeated verb "to seek" (דרׁש) reveals the difference. In the opening unit, the neighbors' assertion that they are seekers (דרׁש) of Yahweh appears only on their own lips (Ezra 4:2). The reliable narrator[26] has already identified these "seekers" as adversaries (4:1).[27] In the closing unit, on the other hand, it is the narrator who states that the welcomed neighbors seek (דרׁש) Yahweh (Ezra 6:21). This seeking entails both leaving past practices and entering a new community. The converts are described as "all who separated themselves *from* the impurities of the nations of the land

[23] Walsh (*Style and Structure*, 59) instructs interpreters to examine the relationships between framing elements and between the frame and the overall narrative.

[24] Another repeated element is the phrase "the king of Assyria" (Ezra 4:2; 6:22). This repetition highlights connections to 2 Kgs 17, including the syncretism of the adversaries of Ezra 4:1–5, and the fact that the reversal accomplished in this passage addresses the judgment experienced by Israel ever since the Assyrian Age. See Lau, "Gentile Incorporation into Israel," 368–69 and Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 97.

[25] Positions vary as to the exact identity of these outsiders. Ben-Zvi ("Inclusion in and Exclusion from," 112) identifies them as Yehudites who remained in the land during the exile. Lau ("Gentile Incorporation into Israel," 364–65) and Japhet ("People and Land," 115) see them as Gentiles. Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 85) identifies them as "those from any other background without distinction." Whatever the case may have been, the text of Ezra 6:21 presents them as people who previously maintained, but now have abandoned, an attachment to the peoples of the lands.

[26] On the reliability of the narrator, see, e.g., Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 51; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 80.

[27] Phaipi ("The Golah and their Adversaries," 11–19) notes additional textual features that characterize the adversaries negatively: (a) the Jews' phrase, "our God," in Ezra 4:3 portrays the adversaries as outside of the covenant; (b) the adversaries have a comparatively brief history with Yahweh (Ezra 4:2); (c) and the textual appearance of the adversaries evokes Ezra 3:3 and the fear-inducing "peoples of the lands" in that verse.

to them" (כֹּל הַנִּבְדָּל מִטֻּמְאַת גּוֹיֵי־הָאָרֶץ אֲלֵהֶם, Ezra 6:21).[28] Ezra 6:21 provides a counterbalance to Ezra 4:3.[29] The reader should not suppose that Ezra 4:3 presents a universal principle. Isolationism is not a defining characteristic of the Golah[30] community.[31] In fact, one finds in Zech 2; 8; 14; Jonah; the Psalms; and Isa 56–66 evidence of a growing emphasis on outreach to Gentiles with the message of God.[32] According to an integrated reading of Ezra 4:3 and 6:21, the religious commitments of outsiders are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Insincere joiners are turned away, while the truly repentant[33] are welcomed in.

How does this pairing (rebuff versus welcome) connect to the overall plot of Ezra 4–6? The rebuff of outsiders is an integral element of the conflict in the early stages of the plot. Welcoming outsiders, however, does not appear at first to have an intrinsic connection to the overall plot. The key, however, is to remember that the plot is more than a progression from construction-work-shut-down to construction-work-completed. The building under construction is the temple, the central locus of the relationship between Yahweh and his people. Only upon the completion of the temple could the covenant people celebrate the most important remembrance of how Yahweh redeemed

---

[28] Author's translation, emphasis added. The phrase "to them" indicates that what is being described is the conversion of outsiders (Williamson, "Unity and Disunity," 335–36).

[29] Ulrich, *Now and Not Yet*, 72. Williamson's diachronic analysis sees Ezra 4:1–5 as written later than Ezra 6:21; it functions in part as an exclusivist community's negative response to the earlier text (Williamson, "Composition of Ezra 1–6," 26; Williamson, "The Concept of Israel," 158). The synchronic approach of the present dissertation sees the final editor(s) intentionally using inclusio to place these texts side-by-side so that they are read in an integrated way.

[30] Formed from the Hebrew word *golah* (exiles, exile), the phrase *Golah community* refers to the returned exiles.

[31] Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 68.

[32] Timmer, "Jonah and Mission," 161–71. See also the concern in Jer 29 to seek the welfare of Gentiles.

[33] Harrington ("Holiness and Purity," 106–11) argues that טֻמְאָה (uncleanness) at Ezra 6:21 refers primarily to the sinful practices of the Gentiles, but that ritual impurity is also involved. The only other occurrence of טֻמְאָה in Ezra-Nehemiah is at Ezra 9:11 where it is matched with the term "abominations." Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 97) and Klein ("Ezra and Nehemiah," 3:713) see טֻמְאָה at Ezra 6:21 primarily as a reference to the worship of foreign gods.

them—Passover. This was the occasion on which the redemption of newcomers was recognized. Lau argues on the basis of texts such as Exod 12:43–49; Num 9:14; Josh 5:10–12; and 2 Kgs 23:21–23 that one function of Passover was to identify who was and was not a member of the community of the redeemed, especially at critical moments in her history.[34] Passover is celebrated at the temple, the meeting place between the holy God and sinful humanity, and thus participation in temple rites requires redemption from impurity.[35] In light of these themes, Ezra 6:21 makes sense in its context: outsiders experience their own Exodus, leaving behind alternate religious commitments and practices to join the community of those who seek Yahweh at his holy Temple. This is what the adversaries of Ezra 4:1–5 had been unwilling to do.[36]

The second element of the framing material concerns the weakening or strengthening of hands (Ezra 4:4; 6:22). A hand represents power or capacity for action[37]—in this case the action of building the temple. In the opening unit, at Ezra 4:4, the adversaries "were weakening the hands of the people of Judah"[38] (מְרַפִּים יְדֵי עַם־יְהוּדָה). In the closing unit, at Ezra 6:22, Yahweh turns the heart of the king "to strengthen their [the Jews'] hands"[39] (לְחַזֵּק יְדֵיהֶם). This correspondence of language reveals that the initial discouragement is directly reversed.[40] The encouragement of the Jews surpasses their

---

[34] Lau, "Gentile Incorporation into Israel," 362–63. The identity and boundaries of the community of the people of God are key themes in Ezra 1–3; see, for example, the lengthy list that identifies the returnees by clan and/or hometown, and the various indicators of continuity between pre-exilic Israel and the returning community. These facets of Ezra 1–3 do not militate against the welcoming of converts at Ezra 6:21, but in their light, the requirement of separation from the impurities of outsiders makes perfect sense.

[35] Williamson ("Unity and Disunity," 334) notes the concentration of holiness language in Ezra 6:20–21.

[36] Petter and Petter, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 166.

[37] Ackroyd, "יָד *yāḏ*," 395, 413, 418–19.

[38] Author's translation.

[39] Author's translation.

[40] Klein, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 3:713; Petter and Petter, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 166.

discouragement chronologically (strengthening of hands comes *after* weakening of hands), but also in terms of levels of authority. The discouragement was perpetrated merely by the local authorities. By the end of the story not only has imperial authority reversed the situation, but the emperor is, in fact, acting as an instrument of Yahweh the God of heaven, the ultimate invigorator of his people.

How do these two phrases about hands function with respect to the overall storyline of Ezra 4–6? The opening act of discouragement (Ezra 4:4) is a significant element of the story's conflict. The closing description, however, appears after the resolution to the story (i.e., after Ezra 6:14–15). Ezra 6:22, then, is not part of the storyline proper, but rather part of a concluding recapitulation. It is technically redundant, and thus asks for special attention. The overturning of opposition in Ezra 6:3–12 is obvious enough in a linear reading of Ezra 4–6. However, the explicit correspondence between weakening hands and strengthening hands draws additional and summative attention to the reversal and to the Agent of that reversal.

Ideological Point of View

Ryken commends to the exegete two questions: "What is the story about?" and "What is the storyteller saying about that subject matter?"[41] Ezra 4–6 is about the temple, the place where Yahweh dwells in the midst of his people. In conjunction with the temple, Ezra 4–6 emphasizes the relationship between God and his people by means of repeated phrases such as "the God of Israel," and "their God." The temple is one of the key institutions for

[41] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 83–84.

maintaining that relationship.[42] As to Ryken's second question, what is particularly emphasized in this text is the initiative of Yahweh for the reconstruction of the temple. At both Ezra 6:14 and 6:22, explicit statements of ideological point of view appear.[43] These verses indicate that Yahweh commandeered the Persian emperors for the sake of the building of the temple. Here after the exile, Yahweh's desire to meet with his people, to dwell in their midst, drives this story.

Divine intentionality regarding the temple is also revealed by the plot function of Yahweh's prophets. They are the ones who initiate the story's falling action (Ezra 5:1). Two additional factors enhance the importance of this observation. First, reading from the beginning of the book, this is now the second prophetic initiative for the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1:1). Second, the author highlights the role of the prophets by referencing their ministry again at the resolution to the story (6:14). Writing about Ezra 1; 5–6 and Neh 1–2, Nykolaishen states that "it is YHWH who has brought about the progress toward restoration that has been attained, in fulfilment of the words spoken through his authorized spokesmen."[44]

Ryken asks the interpreter to attend to the storyteller's affective strategy.[45] This interpretive key highlights the theme of reversal. The opening phrase, "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" (Ezra 4:1), asks the reader to take sides. As the story proceeds,

---

[42] McKelvey, "Temple," 806; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 755–56; Boda, *1–2 Chronicles*, 274–75. The subject matter of Ezra 4–6 can be seen in short form in the closing words of Ezra 6: "the house of God, the God of Israel." Whose temple is it? Yahweh's. And which God is Yahweh? The one with whom Israel has a relationship.

[43] On such explicit statements, see Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 174; similarly, Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 84, and Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 105.

[44] Nykolaishen, "The Restoration of Israel," 198; see similarly Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 98.

[45] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 45–46, 86. See also the similar observations by Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 441–45.

readers recognize an archetypal comedic plot pattern.[46] Readers instinctively find themselves siding with the protagonists, the returnees, hoping for a happy ending.[47] The reader's experience of the shift from sadness to happiness is dramatically enhanced by the parallels between the two library searches.[48] How does it come about that a second occurrence of an identical series of events yields an opposite outcome? The unexpected second outcome intimates that a supernatural power at work. The intervention of Yahweh is indicated explicitly in the text, but the text's large-scale structural repetition supports that message affectively.

Two themes discussed thus far, divine intentionality for the temple and divinely accomplished reversal, appear together within Darius' decree: "May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 6:12 ESV). Considered narrowly, Darius' prayer is oriented merely to a hypothetical future event. However, this line coheres well with the entire narrative, a narrative about God overthrowing the characters in Ezra 4 who sought to obstruct the building of the house of God. In this light, this line communicates the narrator's perspective through a normative spokesperson.[49] Both this line and the overall story reflect Yahweh's opposition toward those would harm his temple.

---

[46] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 48–49. *Comedic* refers to a story that moves from tragedy to a happy ending.

[47] Ryken (*Words of Delight*, 46) encourages readers to observe their own intuitive responses to stories—to what characters or events do they respond favorably or unfavorable?

[48] Ryken (*Words of Delight*, 46–47) observes that textual structure communicates meaning. Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 479–50) likewise identifies analogical patterning as a means of literary persuasion.

[49] "Normative spokesperson" is Ryken's phrase: *Words of Delight*, 84–85; the same means of communicating the narrator's point of view is discussed at Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 175–77; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 105; and Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 476.

Ryken states that a story's resolution is an implied evaluation of the characters of the story.[50] The outcome at Ezra 6:14–15 vindicates the Jews' attentiveness to the prophets (5:1–2; 6:14). It vindicates the penitent piety of the Jews in their response to Tattenai (5:11–13). The outcome also vindicates the Jews' action of rebuffing their adversarial neighbors (4:3). Yahweh's people are in the right when they restrict participation in temple building. However, Ezra 6:21 intentionally provides a counterweight: outsiders are welcome if they will renounce the impure practices of the Gentiles. The integrity of the narrative becomes clear when we recognize that both the rebuffing and the welcoming are keys to honoring the meaning of the temple. Pretenders dishonor the temple while worshipful converts properly join the sacred band. The story's joyful conclusion encourages the reader to respond favorably to the commitment of Yahweh to his people and his temple, as well as the commitment of the people to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

As observed in Chapter 1, the church faithfully engages with the world in four modes: repentance, reception, reform, and resistance.[51] The fact that Ezra 4:3 and 6:21 are integral elements of the same narrative has implications for resistance training. While resistance can be the focus of an academic inquiry such as the present project, resistance cannot be the exclusive attitude of the church toward the world. Resistance training must be complemented by reform training (training for evangelism, good works, and a prophetic voice for the benefit of the world). The Golah community models for us this multi-modal outward-facing posture.

---

[50] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 83, 86. See similarly Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 314, 317; Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 29; and Walsh, *Style and Structure*, 192.

[51] East, "Once More, Church and Culture," para. 19–22.

Nehemiah 1–6

This section of the present chapter traces the theme of shame through Neh 1–6. The text itself commends this approach by means of its repetition of חֶרְפָּה (shame, reproach, taunt) along with the cognate verb חרף at regular intervals throughout these chapters. After addressing preliminary matters, this section consists primarily of a plot analysis of Neh 1–6, focusing on the theme of shame. I also make use of sociological analysis of the text's cultural background, specifically with respect to shame and honor. For this I am dependent upon the works of Laniak,[52] Jumper,[53] Wu,[54] and Bechtel,[55] and their surveys of the relevant sociological literature. This discussion of Neh 1–6 concludes with a consideration of the biblical author's ideological point of view.

Preliminary Matters

The Unity of Nehemiah 1–6

Nehemiah 1–6 consists of a series of narratives linked together by five story elements, the most dominant of these being the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem.[56] Comprised of shorter narratives, each with its own plot,[57] Neh 1–6 contains a larger story line that moves from "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down" (Neh 1:3 ESV) to "so the wall was finished" (Neh 6:15 ESV). Within this story, the character Nehemiah functions as a

[52] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 16–32.
[53] Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 16–41, 51–120.
[54] Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 4–57.
[55] Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction," 50–53.
[56] On the general topic of how literary features can tie a series of narratives together, see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 132–40.
[57] Additionally, there is one list: Neh 3.

second unifying element.[58] Nehemiah's leadership, his courage, his faith in God, and his prayers appear throughout. Nehemiah as protagonist is matched in these chapters by Sanballat as antagonist. Sanballat and opposition to wall-building thus provide the third unifying feature.[59] Fourth, a fundamentally important element is the place of God as the grantor of success.[60] Opposition and discouragement in Neh 1–6 are overcome only through the work of God. Finally, biblical authors can communicate meaning by repeating a key word throughout a series of texts.[61] The term חֶרְפָּה (shame, reproach, taunt) and the cognate verb חרף (*ḥrp* II) appear throughout these chapters.[62] The relationship between these five narrative elements may be described as follows. The essential activity is wall building. The key agents engaged in that activity are God and Nehemiah. Sanballat stands in opposition to the activity. One underlying meaning of the activity is revealed through the development of the concept of shame within these chapters.

Defining Shame

A preliminary issue to be considered is the meaning of shame. Shame is a social phenomenon. Discussing חֶרְפָּה, Kutsch distinguishes two senses: "*ḥerpâ* designates the

---

[58] Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art in the Bible*, 135) lists a shared principal character as one feature that can unite distinct narratives. Nehemiah is both a character and the first-person narrator throughout most of Neh 1–6 (the exception to first-person narration being chapter 3).

[59] Appearances of Sanballat are also integral as a structuring device in Neh 1–6. Throntveit (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 59–60) observes the sevenfold repeated formula, "when X heard," where X is always some appellation for the returnees' enemies: 2:10, 19; 4:1 [Heb 3:33]; 4:7, 15 [Heb 4:1, 9]; 6:1, 16. Similarly, Blenkinsopp ("Nehemiah Autobiographical Memoir," 204) sees a sevenfold repetition of a progress–opposition–reaction pattern as a structuring device in the Nehemiah Memoir.

[60] Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 375–80.

[61] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 212–15.

[62] The noun חֶרְפָּה appears exactly 4 times in the entirety of Ezra–Nehemiah, all of them in Neh 1–5 (1:3; 2:17; 4:4 [Heb. 3:36]; 5:9), and the cognate verb חרף appears exactly once in the entirety of Ezra–Nehemiah (at Neh 6:13). Throntveit (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 80) notes this repetition.

disgrace that one party can 'put' on another . . . [or] the reproach that rests on an individual [or] group."[63] Locating this disgrace or reproach within the broader category of shame, perspective is gained by recognizing that shame is one half of the honor and shame binary.[64] Honor relates to high status and shame to low status in social relationships.[65] Jumper observes that within biblical Israel "honor and shame inform every context of life: morality, political discourse, international relations, economic position, cultural esteem for character or deeds, military valor, and so on."[66] For this reason, the states of honor and shame are expressed in the Old Testament by means of a wide range of vocabulary.[67] While חֶרְפָּה provides an entry point, the following discussion will trace the theme of shame as it is presented through a variety of means in Neh 1–6. Of particular note will be descriptions of rising and falling: one rises to a place of honor or falls to a place of shame.[68]

Plot Analysis of Nehemiah 1–6

Exposition and Inciting Incident

Within the large-scale plot of Neh 1–6, Neh 1:1–3 functions as the exposition.[69] At first glance, the situation seems to be defined by Jerusalem's broken-down walls. The Jews' problem, however, lies deeper than that. The double reference to the exile (Neh 1:2, 3) and the triple reference to survivors of the exile (√שׁאר, Neh 1:2, 3, 3) demand attention.

---

[63] Kutsch, "חרף *ḥrp* II," 5:213.

[64] Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction," 54.

[65] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 16–17, 23, 53–56; Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 55–56, 61–63, 74–75, 119–20.

[66] Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 119.

[67] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 17–23, 167–68; Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 52–53.

[68] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 19, 80; Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 75–84; Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 67.

[69] See Ska's (*Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 21) definition of an exposition.

Furthermore, while broken-down city walls can readily be described as "great trouble" (רָעָה גְדֹלָה), Hanani adds the descriptor חֶרְפָּה (shame, reproach). Note then the following two points. The answer to the "Who?" question is not merely "Jews in Jerusalem," but also "survivors of the exile."[70] The answer to the "What?" question is not only "broken-down walls," but also "shame." These observations make sense when we recognize that the exile was a profound cause of shame for Israel.[71] The exile represented a monumental loss of status for the nation, both before God and before the neighboring peoples.

In Ska's analysis of plot, the inciting incident is often found within the exposition,[72] and that is the case here. The inciting incident is twofold: the razing of the city walls of Jerusalem (whenever and however many times that occurred)[73] and the deporting of the people to Babylon.[74] The shame associated with these events still obtains. It weighs heavily upon the Jews, and the exposition prompts the reader to hope for a removal of this disgrace. Two chapters earlier in Ezra–Nehemiah, at Ezra 9:6–15, a similar but even more poignant expression of the longing for release from shame appears.[75]

---

[70] According to Boda ("Confession as Theological Expression," 43–44), the theology of שאר indicates that people such as these have experienced both the discipline and the preservation of Yahweh.

[71] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 23, 173.

[72] Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 25.

[73] Many commentators suggest that the razing of the walls was a recent event, perhaps related to the opposition described in Ezra 4:7–23. Just the same, Neh 1's references to the exile draw the reader's mind back to 586. On this latter point, see Petter and Petter (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 256).

[74] On the violence and the pain associated with these events, see Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 51–104.

[75] Notice especially the use of shame terminology in Ezra 9:6–7.

Shame before God

After the exposition, narratival action commences with Nehemiah praying. Nehemiah confesses the sins of the people, and he implicitly requests[76] the removal of their shame—shame, that is, in the court of God's opinion. One may be tempted to think of shame only on the horizontal plane, but biblical literature gives significant space to shame in the sight of God.[77] Honor—the opposite of shame—is an essential quality that belongs to Yahweh, and true honor among humans is derived in relation to him.[78] Humans, in fact, acquire both honor and shame by means of how they respond to Yahweh. In short, Yahweh honors those who honor him, and he shames those who refuse to give him the honor that is his due.[79] Yahweh brought shame on the nation in the form of exile, and Nehemiah recognizes that Yahweh is the only one who can remove that shame.

Nehemiah approaches God with fitting reverence and humility. Taking the stance of a mourner (Neh 1:4), Nehemiah venerates Yahweh with several terms from the lexicon of honor: "the great and awesome God" (הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא) (Neh 1:5); "with your great power" (בְּכֹחֲךָ הַגָּדוֹל) (1:10); "to fear your name" (לְיִרְאָה אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ) (1:11).[80] He acknowledges the relational offense of his people's sins—they are an affront against Yahweh (1:6, 7). In Neh 1:8–9 he requests a change in status—from being *scattered* and *your outcasts* to being those whom Yahweh *gathers*. As Laniak states, "Scattered is the

---

[76] Penitential prayer typically expresses its request implicitly: Boda, "From Complaint to Contrition," 186n2.

[77] Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 10–11, 15–16, 59.

[78] This is Stiebert's summary (*The Construction of Shame*, 88) of the usage of כבד in Isaiah. Her point holds true elsewhere in the Old Testament: e.g., Ps 113.

[79] Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 71, 99; Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 72–73, 162.

[80] Jumper ("Honor and Shame," 52, 59–61, 85–92) includes גדל, ירא, and שֵׁם in his discussion of honor terminology.

shame state of defeated enemies."[81] Nehemiah is seeking relief for his people from shame before God.

Once Nehemiah has petitioned Yahweh regarding the people's sin and shame (Neh 1:4–10), he turns to the issue of the walls. As becomes clear in Neh 2, Nehemiah's petition to Yahweh for "mercy in the sight of this man" (Neh 1:11 ESV) functions as the groundwork for a request to the emperor for the rebuilding of the city walls. When the emperor responds positively to Nehemiah's request (2:6, 8), Nehemiah understands this to be an expression of favor from God (2:8, 18). Laniak notes how the biblical characters, Joseph, Daniel, and Esther all receive grace, both from Yahweh and from powerful rulers, and that such reception of grace is paired with a rise in these individuals' status.[82] So too here, we see the beginning of the lifting of shame from Nehemiah and the people he represents.

After arriving in Jerusalem and inspecting the walls, Nehemiah speaks to the Jewish community in Jerusalem. His threefold description of the situation repeats the terms from Neh 1:3: "trouble" (רָעָה), the ruined walls, and "disgrace" (חֶרְפָּה): "you see the trouble we are in . . . let us rebuild the wall . . . so that we may no longer suffer disgrace," (Neh 2:17 NRSV). Nehemiah is taking initiative to confront the narrative's opening conflict. Moreover, the emotional register in which these terms are used has moved now from lamentation (1:3) to hope—an expectation of relief from trouble and disgrace (2:17–18). This hope arises from the evidence of divine favor. The people use a spatial metaphor as they respond to Nehemiah's call to leave shame (חֶרְפָּה) behind (2:17): they will *rise* (קום) to build (2:18).

---

[81] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 86.
[82] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 63–65.

Despite the hopeful statements just noted, the text of Neh 2 never explicitly states that the Jews' shame before Yahweh is lifted. Nehemiah's call to action in Neh 2:17 ("let us build. . . that we may no longer suffer shame" (חֶרְפָּה)) suggests that until the wall is rebuilt, the Jews' restoration from exile remains incomplete.[83] Later in Neh 6, when the wall is completed, textual features beckon the reader into the second half the book of Nehemiah, where further resolution unfolds.[84] At no point in Neh 1–6 does the text explicitly indicate that Yahweh has gathered (קבץ) the people to Jerusalem as Neh 1:9 suggested he would. In this light, Neh 1–6 leaves room for additional consideration of the people's relationship with Yahweh, consideration that is taken up in the context of the great gatherings (assemblies) of Neh 7–13.[85]

Shame before People

At Neh 2:19, the narratival problem shifts. A new form of disgrace appears as adversaries attempt to shame the people (Neh 2:19). Thus, the large-scale plot of Neh 1–6 (which centers on wall-building) contains two sub-plots.[86] The tide is turning with respect to shame before God. The story line pivots to the threat of shame in the presence of

[83] Klein, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 753–54; Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 394.

[84] Janzen ("The Cries of Jerusalem," 131–32) notes that the problems of Tobiah's infiltration into the community (Neh 6:17–19) and Jerusalem's unpopulated status (Neh 7:4) both point toward further plot developments in the succeeding chapters.

[85] Boda ("Prayer as Rhetoric," 276–77, 280) notes three parallels between the opening of the first and the opening of the second half of the book of Nehemiah: (a) the presence of Hanani (Neh 1:2; 7:2); (b) God putting something on Nehemiah's heart (Neh 2:12; 7:5); and (c) the gathering (קבץ) of the people (Neh 1:9; 7:5).

[86] On plots with a double climax, see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 28.

people.[87] The aggression of Sanballat and Tobiah is expressed in shaming terms.[88] Sanballat and Tobiah jeer (לעג) and despise (בזה) the Jews. They are attempting to force upon the Jews a mindset of inferiority. Nehemiah responds differently to different types of shaming. There is a difference between being shamed for legitimate reasons and being shamed for illegitimate reasons.[89] Nehemiah saw the shame that came from God for the people's sins as legitimate, deserved. It needed to be addressed through penitence. The new reproach from enemies, however, is illegitimate. Nehemiah will not take onboard shame originating from Sanballat. He ignores the taunts as they are outweighed in his mind by the knowledge of God's favor: "God . . . will make us prosper" (Neh 2:20 ESV). Furthermore, he uses language that intimates the relationship between Yahweh and Israel: "we, his servants" (2:20). Finally, as the people had done moments before (2:18), Nehemiah uses a spatial metaphor. He ties his confidence to the God of *heaven*, and for that reason he and the people will *rise* (קום) (2:20).[90]

Two chapters later,[91] the building of the wall is proceeding. Sanballat and Tobiah again taunt the Jews (Neh 4:1–3 [Heb. 3:33–36]). The threat of shame in the presence of people continues to be the conflict that drives the plot. In cases of feuds and rivalries,

---

[87] In Wu's terms (*Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 10–11, 15–16), the problem of shame in the Divine Court of Reputation is now replaced by the problem of shame in the Public Court of Reputation. Following Laniak's typology (*Shame and Honor*, 8–13), a Guilt and Restoration plot is now replaced by a Challenge and Honor plot.

[88] Laniak (*Shame and Honor*, 19) distinguishes status as one facet of כבד; he lists חרף, לעג, and בזה as terms that can be used to express disrespect for status. חרף and לעג are paired in Ps 44:14; 79:4; Prov 17:5. חרף and בזה are paired in Ps 22:6. See also Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction," 72.

[89] Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 54.

[90] In the last line of Neh 2:20, Nehemiah indicates that the adversaries are outside of the covenant. Nehemiah's statement of resolve to build the walls is fulfilled in the immediately succeeding verse (Neh 3:1) with another occurrence of קום (the priests *rise* to build).

[91] Although Neh 3 does not receive attention in the present analysis, honor and shame concepts appear within the list of builders when the text notes that the Tekoite "nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors" (Neh 3:5b NIV). This foreshadows the tensions inside the community that appear in Neh 5.

honor is a limited commodity.[92] When the status of one party rises, that of the other party falls.[93] This sort of rivalry was on display when the narrative first introduced Sanballat and Tobiah: the good (טוב) of the Jews was displeasing (רעע) as a great evil (רָעָה) to Sanballat and Tobiah (Neh 2:10). Likewise, here at Neh 4:1–2 [Heb. 3:33–34] Sanballat responds to the success of the builders with strong displeasure.[94] The shaming terms "taunt" (חֶרְפָּה) (Neh 4:4 [Heb. 3:36]) and "jeer" (לעג) (Neh 4:1 [Heb. 3:33]) appear again. Direct speech of Sanballat and Tobiah (Neh 4:2–3 [Heb. 3:34–35]) concretizes the taunting. Sanballat and Tobiah seek to convince the builders that they, the builders, are weak and ineffective. Sanballat and Tobiah do not want the walls to be built, and they attempt to demoralize the Jews to the point where they will cease to work on the walls.

In this type of scenario in the Mediterranean world, the normal expectation is that someone in Nehemiah's shoes would retaliate against Sanballat in order to regain their own honor.[95] It is noteworthy then that Nehemiah responds by taking his case to God, not into his own hands.[96] As was his response to the situation of shame before Yahweh (Neh 1:4), so here in the face of shaming before people, Nehemiah avails himself of prayer. This time it is a strongly worded imprecation against the revilers (Neh 4:4–5 [Heb. 3:36–37]). In the opening line of the prayer, Nehemiah summarizes the taunts of the adversaries with a shame term not previously seen in this narrative: *we are despised*

---

[92] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 78–79.

[93] Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction," 64, 69–70.

[94] Laniak's observations (*Shame and Honor*, 56) about the relationship between shame and anger include the fact that status anxiety often produces extreme responses.

[95] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 80–83. Bechtel ("Shame as a Sanction," 50) observes that this is a typical *human* response. Alternatively, another possible response would be to feel shamed; Petter and Petter (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 323) observe that it is remarkable that the disparaging words don't cow Nehemiah.

[96] Kang, "Positive Role of Shame," 262; Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 217) finds this noteworthy in light of Nehemiah the character's tendencies toward action.

(בוז).[97] He furthermore requests that Yahweh would cause the taunt (חֶרְפָּה) inflicted by Sanballat and Tobiah to rebound upon their own heads.[98]

Becking observes the imprecation's chiastic structure.[99] The opening and closing lines identify the enemies' violations. In between, Neh 4:4b [Heb. 3:36b] requests judgment, and 4:5a [Heb. 3:37a] appeals for the withholding of forgiveness. Noteworthy here is the fact that the opening and closing lines' accusations both suggest that the enemies have attacked God himself. In the opening line, the appellation "our God" (Neh 4:4a [Heb. 3:36a]) appeals to Yahweh on the basis of his relationship with his people.[100] The repetition of the first-person plural makes the connection: if *we* are despised, then surely this will be significant to *our* God. Likewise, in the closing line Nehemiah equates taunting the Jews with an offense against Yahweh: the enemies "have provoked you to anger." (Neh 4:5b [Heb. 3:37b] ESV). Ridicule of the building project challenges Yahweh's honor.[101] The building project is a divine initiative, something that God put in Nehemiah's heart to do (Neh 2:12). What is more, this provocation of God was committed in the hearing of the workers, "in the presence of the builders" (Neh 4:5 [Heb. 3:37] ESV). Nehemiah is sure that Yahweh will not allow his own (Yahweh's) reputation to be diminished in the presence of those carrying out the essential vocation of the hour.

---

[97] Laniak (*Shame and Honor*, 21) includes בוז in a list of terms that communicate the loss of reputation, reputation being one facet of honor. Jumper ("Honor and Shame," 52) also includes בוז as a term from the vocabulary of shame. חרף and בוז are paired in Ps 119:22; Prov 18:3.

[98] Bechtel ("Shame as a Sanction," 71) notes that this type of prayer appears frequently in the psalms. Steinmann (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 444–45) notes two plays on words in the prayer of Neh 4:4–5 [Heb. 3:36–37], by which means Nehemiah is asking for punishment that fits the enemy's crimes (בִּזָּה, בוּזָה; כעס, כסה + עַל).

[99] Becking, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 208.

[100] Note also "our God" at Neh 4:9, 20 [Heb. 4:3, 14].

[101] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 217–18.

The union between God and his people fills Nehemiah with confidence that God himself will enact vengeance against the revilers.

Throughout the next verses, Neh 4:6–12 [Heb. 3:38—4:6], reader interest is stimulated by oscillation between reasons for hope and reasons for fear.[102] Conflict escalates. Shaming attempts intensify even to the threat of armed assault.[103] As previously observed, Sanballat and his associates do not want the city wall to be built. If shaming does not thwart the Jews, perhaps military force will.

The turning point[104] of the plot of Neh 1–6 occurs at Neh 4:13–15 [Heb. 4:7–9]. From this point forward tension slowly recedes. The military attack never materializes. Sanballat and Tobiah will still antagonize, but they will target Nehemiah alone (Neh 6), not the entire Golah community. At this critical juncture, we find the language of shame and honor again. The verb "to rise" (קום) appears (Neh 4:14 [Heb. 4:8]) for the first time since Neh 2:20; 3:1. Nehemiah rises. Once again, he will lead his people out of their shame state.[105] He points the people to the honor that belongs to Yahweh, the one who is "great and awesome" (הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא).[106] He readies them for the surprise attack. Then we read, "our enemies heard that it [their plot] was known to us and that God had frustrated their plan" (Neh 4:15 [Heb. 4:9] ESV). Although no specific shame terminology is used in verse 15, Jumper notes that defeat in battle is often associated with shame.[107] Furthermore, a key component of shame is the *recognition* of the status of oneself and

---

[102] On hope and fear as drivers of plot, see Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 264–65. Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 270) describes the plot movement of a similar narrative as "zigzagging."

[103] See the offensive threat at Neh 4:8, 11 [Heb. 4:2, 5], and the defensive military arrangements at 4:13–14, 16–23 [Heb. 4:7–8, 10–17].

[104] On turning points, see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 27.

[105] Note especially the demoralized state of the Jews at Neh 4:10, 12 [Heb. 4:4, 6].

[106] Jumper ("Honor and Shame," 52) lists גדל and ירא as honor terms.

[107] Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 53.

others.[108] Not only is the surprise attack thwarted by God, but the reader watches as the enemies are forced to acknowledge their own defeat.

Prospective Shame

When the reader arrives at chapter 5, the walls have not yet been completed and the hostility between the Jews and Sanballat hangs in an uncertain state of pause.[109] During this break in the action, a new and unexpected inciting incident appears. An outcry within the Jewish community reveals that poor Jews are being oppressed at the hand of wealthier fellow citizens. A link to the larger story line, however, is maintained by means of another appearance of the noun חֶרְפָּה (Neh 5:9), and with it the presentation of a new facet of shame.

Nehemiah confronts the oppressors and calls on them to treat their fellow Jews in accordance with the fear of God.[110] Reverence for the honor of God is necessary for harmony within the Jewish community.[111] Nehemiah warns that if Yahweh's community is publicly divided, neighboring enemies will taunt the Jews. This potentiality, "the reproach of the nations, our enemies" (Neh 5:9 NASB) (חֶרְפַּת הַגּוֹיִם אוֹיְבֵינוּ), is an example of prospective shame.[112] Shame is often contemplated in entirely negative terms, but the human ability to anticipate shame can serve a positive function. It is the opposite of

---

[108] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 22.

[109] Nehemiah 5 creates suspense, delaying the outcome of the question of the walls and the conflict with the neighboring enemies.

[110] Jumper ("Honor and Shame," 52) lists ירא as a term associated with honor.

[111] Shepherd and Wright (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 71–72) point to Nehemiah's words, "the fear of *our* God." Nehemiah is emphasizing that a harmonious Yahweh-Israel relationship leads to a harmonious relationship within the nation. The covenant between Yahweh and Israel binds Israel together; it also distinguishes Israel from the nations. Thus, the question Nehemiah raises in Neh 5:9 is whether the wealthy will acknowledge the high status of "our God" or cede high status to "our enemies."

[112] On prospective shame, see Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 53–54.

shamelessness. The desire to avoid potential shame can cause people to refrain from immoral acts.[113] Reading Neh 5 in its larger literary context, the effort Nehemiah has made heretofore to fight off shame (חֶרְפָּה) causes the reader to want the people to keep up the fight. And they do. The people respond positively to Nehemiah's reprimand (Neh 5:12–13). They end the internal financial oppression, thus restoring unity and fending off prospective shame.

In Neh 6, the overarching plot conflict—the problem of the city wall—reappears as Sanballat and his associates take a new approach to thwarting the project.[114] This chapter describes three distinct attempts to intimidate Nehemiah. Here too, the theme of shame emerges, first by means of the verb "to shame" (חרף) and a parallel phrase, "a bad name" (שֵׁם רָע, Neh 6:13). Hired by Sanballat and Tobiah, the false prophet Shemaiah warns Nehemiah about a threat on his life, suggesting he flee to the temple. It is a ruse. The goal is to lure Nehemiah into an embarrassing position "so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt (חרף) me" (Neh 6:13 ESV). A person's name is one facet of their shame or honor.[115] This is another case of prospective shame. Nehemiah resists Shemaiah's counsel because to do so would be an act of cowardice[116] and an act of sacrilege (a layperson entering the temple).[117] Nehemiah emphasizes that such a misstep

[113] Similarly, Smith-Christopher (*A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 120–23) observes that retrospective shame over wrongs committed is essential for moral transformation and turning toward a better way forward.

[114] That this is their goal is indicated at Neh 6:9.

[115] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 20–21; Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 52, 90–92.

[116] McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 109.

[117] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 259; Petter and Petter, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 345–46.

would lead to his own shame. This he successfully avoids by resisting the temptation to flee to the temple.[118]

Resolution

At the beginning of our analysis of Neh 1–6, we noted two points of conflict: broken-down walls and shame (Neh 1:3). The first problem comes to resolution[119] at Neh 6:15: "the wall was completed" (וַתִּשְׁלַם הַחוֹמָה). The second problem is addressed in this line as well, though less explicitly. Shame before Yahweh was lifting in Neh 2, and will be further addressed in the assemblies of Neh 8–10. Now, given the close tie between the destroyed walls and shame before the nations (e.g., Neh 2:17b), the completion of the city wall removes the Jews' shame before people. In fact, the use of the verb "to complete" (שׁלם) suggests as much. Laniak observes that that the use of this verb in the closing section of the book of Esther (Esth 9:30) reflects a "subtle association between honor and social order that many biblical writers maintain."[120] Likewise, Wu notes the association of peace (שָׁלוֹם) with honor (כָּבוֹד) in the restoration envisioned in the latter chapters of Ezekiel (e.g., Ezek 37:26).[121] Given these observations, Neh 6:15 provides all the resolution necessary for the story line of Neh 1–6; however, our author has more to say about shame.

The subjects of the next verse are "all our enemies" (כָּל־אֹיְבֵינוּ) and "all the nations around us" (כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתֵינוּ). The double use of "all" (כֹּל) adds to our sense

[118] In East's ("Once More, Church and Culture," para. 21) typology, prospective shame in the presence of outsiders is an example of *reception*. By common grace, the world has a moral perspective that helps the believer.

[119] On resolutions, see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 27.

[120] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 161.

[121] Wu, *Honor, Shame, and Guilt*, 87.

that we have arrived at the culmination of Neh 1–6.[122] Nehemiah 6:16 describes the reaction of the nations to the swift completion of the wall. Their response is communicated by means of three clauses, each governed by a *wayyiqtol* verb. The first and last clauses describe a natural reaction to the fact that the wall was completed in merely fifty-two days (Neh 6:15). According to the first clause, the nations are afraid,[123] presumably because they are impressed with the Jews' effectiveness in building, even in the face of opposition. According to the last clause, the nations recognize that rapid success such as this can only be attributed to divine intervention. This represents an honoring of the Jews and their God. The middle clause narrates a corresponding shaming of the enemies. At Neh 6:16, the text states: "they fell greatly in their own eyes"[124] (וַיִּפְּלוּ מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵיהֶם). In the Hebrew Bible, the verb "to fall" (נפל) sometimes communicates the downward motion of being shamed (e.g., Esth 6:13; Job 12:3).[125] The enemies are embarrassed specifically because they recognize that their taunts were ill-conceived. The phrase, "in the eyes of *x*," reflects the fact that shame and honor have to do with the estimation of an individual or group by themselves and others (e.g., 2 Sam 6:20, 22; Esth 7:3).[126] In this case, the shame cannot be shaken off; it is observed by the enemies themselves about themselves.[127] In sum, we find in Neh 6:16 two framing clauses

---

[122] Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 89.

[123] Laniak (*Shame and Honor*, 19–20) observes that fear is part of the vocabulary of shame and honor because divine glory and splendor evoke a response of fear. The reference to God in the third clause of Neh 6:16 indicates that the nations are experiencing this sort of fear.

[124] Author's translation. Myers (*Ezra Nehemiah*, 141) translates, "their self-esteem was decidedly diminished," and Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 248), "[they were] much deflated in their self-esteem." Fensham's translation (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 207) is "their high opinion of themselves received a serious setback." Petter and Petter (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 348) translate: "lost their self-confidence."

[125] Laniak (*Shame and Honor*, 125) discusses the creative use of נפל with respect to shame in Esther.

[126] Jumper, "Honor and Shame," 67.

[127] The narrative's conclusion was foreshadowed by the similar Neh 4:15 [Heb. 4:9].

describing the nations looking up to the Jews and the Jews' God,[128] and one central clause in which they look down upon themselves.[129]

Given the heights of Sanballat's haughtiness as described in Neh 2:19; 4:1–3 [Heb. 3:33–35]; and 4:7–8, 11 [Heb. 4:1–2, 5], this turn of events is astounding. One could imagine Sanballat and his associates dismissing the Jews' success as a fluke. Alternatively, why can the enemies not acknowledge the accomplishment without being personally deflated? Why is "We will defeat you next time," not an option? Only one explanation will do, and that is that Yahweh has returned the enemies' taunt (חֶרְפָּה) on their own heads (Neh 4:4 [Heb. 3:36]).[130] The shame of the nations at Neh 6:16 is a divinely wrought shame, an answer to Nehemiah's prayer. Not only has shame been lifted from the Jews, but furthermore, shame has been placed upon their enemies!

Ideological Point of View

Ryken states that repetition often reveals what the narrative is about.[131] In Neh 1–6, the author uses repetition to explore multiple facets of shame. What is the author saying about shame?[132] The way this story is told asks the reader to see Nehemiah the governor

---

[128] Laniak (*Shame and Honor*, 133) cites biblical examples in which the enemies' fear reflects their perception of the divine hand at work (Esth 8:16; Exod 15:16; Ps 105:38; Jer 33:9, etc.). Nehemiah 6:16 coheres with these examples when we read the first and third *wayyiqtol* clauses in tandem.

[129] This spatial arrangement between the parties is foreshadowed by means of Nehemiah's confident use of terms from the vocabulary of honor and shame in Neh 6:3. His project is גָּדוֹל, and in order to travel to his enemies he would need to go down (ירד, twice in the verse). Of course, he would need to literally "go down" to get to the plain of Ono, but Nehemiah's repetition of ירד suggests that the author has more in mind.

[130] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 225; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 207; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 81–81. At the same time, the book of Nehemiah never explicitly reveals if the final two lines of Nehemiah's imprecation (Neh 4:4c–5a [Heb. 3:36b–37a]) are granted by Yahweh.

[131] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 46–47, 83–84; Satterthwaite, "Narrative Criticism," 1:127.

[132] Ryken (*Words of Delight*, 46–47, 83–84) instructs interpreters to consider not only the topic of a narrative, but also what the story has to say about that topic.

as a positive role model.[133] Three examples in this regard are: (a) Nehemiah's interpretation of the returnees' situation by means of the Torah (Neh 1:8–9; Deut 12:5; 30:3–4); (b) the fact that Neh 6:16 reports Yahweh's granting the request that Nehemiah made at Neh 4:4 [Heb. 3:36]; and (c) Nehemiah's close association in this passage with the rebuilding of Jerusalem, an Old Testament priority. Nehemiah models for the reader the addressing of deserved shame in the sight of God by means of penitence. He also demonstrates that undeserved shame in the sight of people may be resisted. The taunts of adversaries are properly contested through faith in God. However, just because shame in the sight of others may be resisted, that does not mean that such shame is always unprofitable. In certain cases—such as those in Neh 5 and Neh 6—potential deserved public shame can motivate God's people to upright behavior. Nehemiah the governor addresses deserved shame both by explicit teaching (Neh 5:9) and example (Neh 6:11–13).

The affective strategy of Neh 1–6 leads the reader to side with the wall builders, hoping for their success.[134] On the one side of the conflict there is a man of humility and prayer, on whom the Lord's good hand rests (Neh 1:4—2:8). On the other side are adversaries who think that good is evil (2:10). The reader's instinctive desire for the success of the returned exiles lends special weight to the turning point (Neh 4:14–15 [Heb. 4:8–9]) and the resolution (Neh 6:15–16) of the story. These are emotional high points for the reader. It is noteworthy that at both high points the enemies are forced to

[133] On the protagonist as a potential model, see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 83.

[134] On the storyteller as one who fosters sympathy and aversion, see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 45–46, 86. See also the similar observations by Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 441–45.

recognize their own failure (Neh 4:15 [Heb. 4:9]; 6:16). This doublet of humiliation signifies the decisive downfall of those who would shame God's people.

The resolution of the plot of Neh 1–6 reveals the author's perspective as well.[135] The outcome at Neh 6:15–16 vindicates Nehemiah's prayerfulness, and his courage in the face of Sanballat and Tobiah. The resolution also highlights the relationship between God and his people, a theme emphasized throughout the passage. Shepherd and Wright note that the appellation "our God" (6:16) emphasizes Nehemiah's conviction that Yahweh identifies himself with his people, the Jewish community.[136] The same appellation also appears in the key verses Neh 4:4 [Heb. 3:36] and Neh 4:20 [Heb. 4:14]. Shame challenges a person's sense of identity,[137] but God's people properly fend off the threat of inappropriate shame by finding their identity in their relationship with Yahweh.

In addition to the plot resolution, a related textual feature also highlights the intervention of God as a key theme in this text.[138] Ryken asks the interpreter to identify a story's fundamental plot type.[139] Nehemiah 1–6 follows a crossing fates pattern.[140] The returned exiles rise, especially in their successful rebuilding of the walls. Meanwhile, their enemies fall. As noted above, not only do the enemies fail to thwart the building project, but they are also forced to acknowledge their own weakness before God and his

---

[135] On plot resolution as an indicator of ideological point of view, see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 83, 86; similarly Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 29.

[136] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 77. Similarly, McConville (*Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 109) notes that in this passage the Jews are shown to be strong, but only in the strength of the Lord.

[137] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 20–21, 25.

[138] According to Ryken (*Words of Delight*, 86–89), readers should look for multiple literary techniques that point in the same direction. See also Sternberg's (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 48–56) notion of foolproof composition.

[139] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 48–50.

[140] This pattern is considered at length by Fokkelman in his exegesis of 1–2 Samuel; see, for example, his discussion of the characters, Samuel and Eli (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Samuel, Vol 4*, 156–244).

people. This plot type reveals the intervention of God in dramatic fashion. One can imagine God blessing his people. One can imagine God judging his people's enemies. However, when God carries out both of these simultaneously, evidence of his governance over human affairs is unmistakable.

Nehemiah 1–6 emphasizes God's active engagement with his people's predicament, thwarting the enemy's schemes, and causing the wall to be built. In this light, Nehemiah and the people's prayers, courage, and action are all forms of cooperation with the work of God. The intervention of God is primary, for the people could only be properly fearless and could only properly fight if their heart was set on remembering "the Lord who is great and awesome" (Neh 4:14 [Heb. 4:8] ESV). Additionally, the passage shows that deserved shame before God is properly addressed through penitence, and deserved (prospective) shame before people should be avoided through upright behavior. Finally, the antidote to undeserved shame before people is faith in Yahweh, the God who is committed to his own people. Such faith awaits divine intervention that shames the shamers.

Nehemiah 9–10

Nehemiah 8–10 presents an account of covenant renewal. It includes a narration of the reading of the Law, a lengthy Levitical prayer of confession, followed by the people's covenant, in which they commit to obey the Torah. On the one hand, Neh 8–10 is a unified literary unit. On the other hand, this dissertation focuses on God's people in situations of social pressure. For this reason, this section of the current chapter concentrates on those sections of Neh 9–10 that concern the Jews' relations with

outsiders. The analysis here focuses on structure and plot. It concludes with a discussion of ideological point of view.

Structure

Nehemiah 8–10[141] narrates three assemblies, each account introduced by the verb "to gather" (אסף) (Neh 8:1, 13; 9:1).[142] The first two accounts focus on Ezra reading the Law. The third account, Neh 9–10, stands out as the climax of the overall presentation of covenant renewal.[143] Nehemiah 9–10 is structured as follows:[144]

1. (Neh 9:1–5) Narrative synopsis of the assembly's penitential rites (Present)
2. (Neh 9:6–31) Prayer rehearsing the people's history with Yahweh (Past)
3. (Neh 9:32–37) Petition for mercy, given sin and the distress of foreign rule (Present)
4. (Neh 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40]) Covenant renewal (Immediate Future)

The opening five verses provide a narrative introduction to this chapter's lengthy prayer. Nehemiah 9:1–5 narrates the assembling of the people. They formally express their penitence, after which the Levites lead the people in prayer.

The prayer (Neh 9:6–31), a historical rehearsal, works from Creation to the rebellions in the time of the monarchy. An opening segment—marked off by repetition of the pronoun "you" (אַתָּה)—praises Yahweh for Creation and the Abrahamic land promise (9:6–8). The same pronoun (at 9:31) also marks the end of the entire historical rehearsal,

---

[141] Duggan (*The Covenant Renewal*, 68–72) argues that this unit begins at Neh 7:72b and thus defines the unit as Neh 7:72b—10:40.

[142] See Duggan (*The Covenant Renewal*, 73–74) for additional parallels between the three subsections.

[143] Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 75–77; Boda ("Redaction in the Book," 36–37) observes several textual features which indicate that Neh 9–10 is a unity.

[144] Discussions of the structure of Neh 9–10 include: Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 75–79; Eskenazi, "Nehemiah 9-10," §2.11–19.

and the pronoun "we" (אֲנַחְנוּ, at 9:37) similarly marks off the end of the entire prayer.[145] Following the opening segment, the prayer moves chronologically through the Exodus, the Wilderness Wandering, the Conquest, and Life in the Land. This section (9:9–31) consists of two major subsections, the first covering the Exodus and Wilderness period, and the second, the Conquest and Life in the Land.[146] Each subsection moves from (a) salvation and harmony to (b) Yahweh's response to Israel's rebellion; each subsection also exhibits numerous parallels to the other.[147] The latter portion (9:26–31) of the Life in the Land section is organized according to the Deuteronomic cycle of disobedience, judgment, cry for help, and divine rescue, this repeated thrice.[148] The third cycle, however, lacks the cry for relief and any divine response. The closing note of the historical rehearsal acknowledges that the worst possible outcome, though deserved (it is implied), was averted by Yahweh's mercy: "you did not make an end of them or forsake them" (Neh 9:31 NRSV).[149]

The transition from the historical rehearsal to the petition (Neh 9:32–37) is signaled by "and now" (וְעַתָּה).[150] Given the incomplete third Deuteronomic cycle, the reader is to understand that the Levites anticipate that their present prayer continues that cycle.[151] Appealing to Yahweh's steadfast love, the essential request is that he would not overlook the hardship faced by the Jews (9:32). The petition contrasts Yahweh's

---

[145] Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 163–64; Klein, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 3:811.
[146] Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 164; Boda, "Torah and Spirit Traditions," 481.
[147] Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 164; Boda, "Torah and Spirit Traditions," 480–82.
[148] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 315.
[149] Using Boda's terminology (*Praying the Tradition*, 85–86), here the patience model of the Wilderness tradition is unexpectedly integrated into the discipline model that has governed the Life in the Land tradition.
[150] For a discussion of this transitional term, see Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 29–30.
[151] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 316–17; Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 81; Klein, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 3:810; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 166.

righteousness with the Jews' wickedness, and it emphasizes that Persian rule is preventing full enjoyment of the land.

The opening words of Neh 9:38 [Heb. 10:1] ("because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing" ESV) create a transition between the petition and the covenant of Neh 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40].[152] After the list of signatories and a preamble (Neh 10:1–29 [Heb. 10:2–30]), textual markers divide the provisions of the covenant into two subsections.[153] The conjunction "and that" (וַאֲשֶׁר) introduces a subsection (Neh 10:30–31 [Heb. 10:31–32]) consisting of three provisions. A longer introductory phrase, "we also lay on ourselves the obligation" (Neh 10:32 NRSV) introduces a subsection (Neh 10:32–38 [Heb. 10:33–39]) consisting of seven provisions.[154] The first subsection relates to intermarriage and sabbatical laws, and the second subsection to support of the temple and its functionaries. A statement of resolve rounds out the final seven provisions: "we will not neglect the house of our God" (Neh 10:39 ESV).[155]

Plot

What follows is a plot analysis of Neh 9–10. Because the prayer of Neh 9:6–37 consists of a historical rehearsal, Neh 9–10 includes one story inside another. I refer to the historical rehearsal as the *inner story*. The *framing story* then consists of the report of the people assembling, the introduction to the prayer, the prayer viewed as a whole, and the covenant that the people establish after praying.

---

[152] The relationship between the prayer of Neh 9:1–37 and the covenant of Neh 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40] is discussed more fully below.

[153] Glatt-Gilad, "Reflections on the Structure," 388–92.

[154] Glatt-Gilad ("Reflections on the Structure," 395) notes that these numbers (three, seven, and ten) "represent wholesomeness."

[155] Glatt-Gilad ("Reflections on the Structure," 392–93) argues that the stipulations are framed by pledges to Torah (Neh 10:29 [Heb. 10:30]) and Temple (10:39 [Heb. 10:40]).

The Framing Story

The framing story begins with an exposition[156] consisting of Neh 9:1. The first scene commences at 9:2 with the characters' active engagement in penitential rites. The shift from exposition to action[157] is subtle because verse 1's stative reference to fasting, sackcloth, and dirt is already a description of penitence. While action commences at 9:2, there is no inciting incident within 9:1–5. As we will see, the framing story's main conflict is introduced in the inner story. However, a subtle sense of conflict does exist in Neh 9:1–5. Reader interest is peaked by the fact that no explanation is provided for the penitence. The framing story's action continues into and past verse 6 because the lengthy prayer (historical rehearsal) is an element in the series of penitential acts that commenced in verse 2. Discussion of the framing story will continue further below.

The Inner Story

The inner story begins further back in time. It focuses on the gift of the land.[158] The inner story has its own exposition—Neh 9:6–8. These verses present the initial state of affairs, which is defined by Yahweh's identity as creator and his land promise to Abraham. The action of the inner story begins when Yahweh leads the Israelites out of Egypt (Neh 9:9–11) and thus toward the object of the promise. The inner story's inciting moment[159] consists of the refusal at Kadesh to enter the land (9:15b–17a). Remarkable divine grace (9:17b–18) overwhelms the tension of rebellion such that the earlier peaceful state returns

---

[156] See Ska's (*Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 21) definition of an exposition.
[157] On such shifts, see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 22–25.
[158] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 312, 319; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 168, 232.
[159] On the "inciting moment" (or "occasioning incident"), see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 20, 25.

(9:19–21; cf. Neh 9:12–15a). Progressing toward their goal, the Israelites take the Trans-Jordan (9:22) and finally enter the object of the promise (9:23–25). After describing the attainment of that goal, the prayer reaches a provisional resolution with its fond, drawn-out depiction of abundant life in the land (9:25).[160]

Immediately following this idyllic scene, conflict rears its head for a second time (Neh 9:26),[161] and the prayer enters the tense Deuteronomic cycles of sin and punishment. The third Deuteronomic cycle begin at 9:29. This cycle hints at the return from exile in a muted fashion (Neh 9:31).[162] This is intentional—emphasis on the exile would spotlight the existence of Israel outside of the land.[163] As noted above, the petition of Neh 9:32–37 functions as the third cycle's cry for deliverance. Once Israelite rebellion was introduced at Neh 9:16–17, any path to denouement will depend on divine mercy. The Levitical leaders recognize that relief requires crying out to Yahweh.

The direct cry to Yahweh begins with the phrase "and now" (וְעַתָּה) at the head of Neh 9:32. The tragedy of Israel's disobedience is that it took place in the divinely given "large and rich land" (Neh 9:35 NRSV). The implicit request in Neh 9:35–37 is for relief from the distress of taxation which robs the Yehudites of the promised land's rich yield. Verbal parallels tie the present request to the earlier idyllic scene.[164] Both the earlier scene and the present request highlight Yahweh's goodness: "in your great goodness"

---

[160] Shepherd and Wright (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 89) designate Neh 9:25 as a climax. These verses are also transitional: Boda (*Praying the Tradition*, 80) argues that Neh 9:24–25 describe "the initial blessing against which the people rebel in 9:26."

[161] On plots with a double climax, see Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 28.

[162] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 315–16.

[163] Shalom-Guy, "Undercurrents in Restoration," 51–52; Duggan (*The Covenant Renewal*, 232) makes a similar statement.

[164] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 317; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 196–97; Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 183.

(בְּטוּבְךָ הַגָּדוֹל, Neh 9:25); "in your abundant goodness" (בְּטוּבְךָ הָרָב, Neh 9:35).[165] In both settings the land is described as "rich" (שָׁמֵן, Neh 9:25, 35). Also, in Neh 9:25 the cognate verb (שׁמן) indicates that in the past the ancestors in the land "grew sleek."[166] In both settings a key activity is eating the produce of the land; the root אכל (to eat) appears twice in Neh 9:25 and once in Neh 9:36. These parallels intimate a current longing for the abundant life that was experienced when the promise was first fulfilled at the time of the Conquest.

The logic that expects Yahweh to overthrow the Persians and restore the gift of the land seems convincing. Given the petition's position in the third Deuteronomic cycle, we should expect a positive outcome.[167] More than that, even within the Deuteronomic discipline cycles (Neh 9:26–31) Yahweh showed undeserved mercy (Neh 9:30a, 31).[168] At Neh 9:37 the Levites indicate their anticipation of mercy by means of the term, "distress" (צָרָה);Yahweh's earlier rescue of his people from their suffering was described with a fourfold repetition of the similar "to suffer" (צרר, 9:27).[169] Likewise, the Persians' ability to dominate the Jews "according to their pleasure" (כִּרְצוֹנָם, 9:37) has inverted Yahweh's gift of the land at the Conquest, when Israel dealt with the Canaanites "according to their pleasure" (כִּרְצוֹנָם, 9:24).[170] Every reason is given to expect ongoing

---

[165] The noun טוּב is also used once each in the historical description and the supplication to describe the benefits of the land (Neh 9:25; 9:36).

[166] Blenkinsopp's translation (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 299); Shepherd and Wright state that the verb should not be understood as a criticism of Israel's enjoyment of the land (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 89n73). On the other hand, Boda (*Praying the Tradition*, 170) and Duggan (*The Covenant Renewal*, 216) note that in Deuteronomy this sort of abundance terminology is connected to warnings against apostacy.

[167] Not only had Yahweh heard his people's cry in the cycles in the book of Judges, but he had also heard their cry at the Red Sea (Neh 9:9); the point is: "Surely, he will hear our cry again!"

[168] Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 85–86.

[169] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 317.

[170] Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 185.

possession of the land and freedom from Persian domination. However, when we reach the end of the inner story at 9:37, no response has been received from Yahweh.

The Framing Plot Continued

Nehemiah 9:38 [Heb. 10:1] is transitional. What precedes and what follows this verse are both expressed in the first-person plural. However, the preceding verses are a direct address to Yahweh; the following verses are not. I thus identify Neh 9:38 [Neh 10:1] as the point of transition back to the framing story. The framing story's plot now includes conflict—disappointment at the lack of an ability to fully enjoy the gift of the land. The retrospective prayer as a whole functions as the framing story's inciting moment.

Nehemiah 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40] consists of the people's recommitment to obedience. Why do the people recommit to obedience? This is in part an effect of the prayer. Boda observes a crisis–prayer–action pattern repeated throughout Nehemiah.[171] Prayers sometimes function as rhetorical turning points,[172] which we may explain as follows. When a pray-er is reminded through prayer of who God is, and when they thus contemplate afresh the potential intervention of God in their crisis, they are thus energized for action such that they might participate in God's response. At Neh 9:38 [Heb. 10:1] the people refuse to allow the distress of Neh 9:37 to incapacitate them. While waiting for Yahweh's response to their prayer, they will move forward by committing to obey his commands. What is the plot function of Neh 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40]? As will become clear in the discussion of verbal repetition below, the covenant

[171] Boda, "Prayer as Rhetoric," 277, 282.
[172] Boda, "Prayer as Rhetoric," 278.

of Neh 10 functions as the framing story's search for plot resolution. I hold over discussion of the resolution of the plot until after this discussion of repetition.

Verbal Repetition

In this section, I examine verbal repetition between the prayer of Neh 9 and the covenant of Neh 10. We have seen that the inner plot is identical to the lengthy Levitical prayer. If we view that prayer—as an undifferentiated whole—as the inciting moment in the framing plot, then what remains in the framing plot is its search for resolution, which takes the form of the covenant of Neh 10. Now, analysis of four verbal links between Neh 9:6–37 and Neh 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40] provides insight into the interconnectedness of these two dominant features of Neh 9–10—the prayer and the covenant.

First, at the beginning of the covenant, the pronominal subject of Neh 9:38a [Heb. 10:1a], "we" (אֲנַחְנוּ), connects backwards to the prayer, especially to the closing petition (Neh 9:32–37).[173] First-person plural referents appear throughout the prayer, beginning at Neh 9:9 ("our fathers"). In the closing petition, "we" (אֲנַחְנוּ) appears four times, including as its final word. The covenanters are precisely the descendants of the Israelites who experienced God's grace and discipline in time past. Those who recommit themselves to Torah obedience are the very ones who have just petitioned Yahweh in Neh 9:32–37.

Immediately prior to "we" in Neh 9:38a [Heb. 10:1a] and thus tightly linked with it, the covenant opens with a prepositional phrase, "and in all this." This phrase refers back to the prayer,[174] though in this case not by means of verbal repetition. When we

[173] Technically, the אֲנַחְנוּ of the prayer refers to the Levites, and the אֲנַחְנוּ of the covenant refers to the entire community, but the proximity of the occurrences of אֲנַחְנוּ in Neh 9:37 and 9:38 [Heb. 10:1] elide the two; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 77n34.

[174] Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 76.

inquire as to the exact referent of "this," the modifier "all" asks us to think broadly. The people make the covenant in light of all of the content of Neh 9—their own sin, God's grace, and their current distress. Of these three, the connection to the first and third is particularly obvious. Considering their sin and the distress to which it has led, they now commit themselves to no longer sinning. Such repentance, however, would be futile were it not for the middle element—God's grace. Without that, they would be inextricably consigned to distress.

The second element of verbal repetition linking the prayer and the covenant is also located within Neh 9:38 [Heb. 10:1]. A pair of terms, "to cut" (כרת) and "covenant"[175] (אֲמָנָה), draw a line all the way back to the opening segment of the prayer. The returnees are cutting (כרת) a covenant, just as Yahweh had cut (כרת) a covenant with Abraham (Neh 9:8). Yahweh did so because Abraham had been found faithful (*ne'eman*, נֶאֱמָן). Now the penitent returnees identify their fresh commitment to Yahweh with a cognate term, covenant (*'amanah*, אֲמָנָה).[176] The returnees thus express their intention to exhibit the faithfulness of their father Abraham.[177] Their logic is that if Abraham's faithfulness was a reason that Yahweh promised the land to him, then surely the faithfulness of the present generation—expressed by keeping the stipulations of the covenant—would be a reason for Yahweh to renew that covenant and grant them an ability to enjoy the produce of the land.[178]

---

[175] Or *agreement*.

[176] Holmgren, "Faithful Abraham," 250; Eskenazi, "Nehemiah 9-10," §2.18. Throughout the rest of the dissertation, I refer to the covenant of Neh 10 as the *'amanah*.

[177] Holmgren, "Faithful Abraham," 253; Throntveit, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 108.

[178] Holmgren, "Faithful Abraham," 253.

Third, references in the *ʾamanah* to the Mosaic Law draw upon the prayer of Neh 9. In these references, the people appeal to the principle of retribution. They hope that renewed obedience will lead to deliverance from Persian oppression.[179] In Neh 10:29 [Heb. 10:30], the returned exiles describe the law (which they are committing to obey) with four terms, "law," "command," "judgment," and "statute." These same four terms appear at Neh 9:13.[180] In the earlier passage, these were described as right, true, and good. They took their place among all the gracious provisions with which Yahweh equipped his people as he set them on their way to the promised land (Neh 9:9–15). Among these is the sabbath law.[181] In the *ʾamanah*, the people recommit to Sabbath observance (10:31 [Heb. 10:32]), the logical response to their earlier observation that the Sabbath was among Yahweh's good Sinaitic gifts (9:13–14). The people are recognizing that their past disobedience to the Law was a personal affront to the Gift Giver, and thus the source of their distress.[182] Might not then rectifying past disobedience to the Law lead to renewed blessing? Explicit reference to the retribution principle appears in the prayer: "If a person does them [your rules], he shall live by them" (Neh 9:29 ESV). This line derives ultimately from Lev 18:5.[183] This promise, which motivates the people to repentance and obedience would have come to their attention through the reading of the Torah described in Neh 8.[184]

---

[179] Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 550.

[180] Boda, "Redaction in the Book," 37

[181] Boda ("Redaction in the Book," 37) notes references to the Sabbath as a link between Neh 9 and Neh 10.

[182] The connection between disobedience to the law and Yahweh's punishment is emphasized in Neh 9:26–30.

[183] See also Ezek 20:11, 13, 21; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 219; Boda, *Praying the Tradition*, 177.

[184] Perhaps they were also motivated by the promises of Lev 26:40–45; Deut 30:1–10.

As an aside, this is the place to note another reference to the principle of retribution. This is a case of verbal repetition *within* Neh 9. Because disobedience had previously yielded slavery, and since the Jews are still in slavery, the renewed obedience reflected in the *ʾamanah* might lead to release from slavery. Twice in Neh 9:36 the Levitical leaders lament the fact that they are slaves (עֲבָדִים). This draws a line back to the recounting of the Kadesh Barnea incident. On that occasion, as Neh 9:17 reports, the Israelites' perverse desire was to return to their slavery (לְעַבְדָתָם).[185] The reference to slavery at Neh 9:17 is deliberate, the term being this text's substitute for the phrase "to Egypt" in the otherwise parallel Num 14:4.[186] Rebellion against Yahweh is tantamount to wishing for enslavement (Neh 9:17), exactly the condition the postexilic community now wishes to escape (Neh 9:36).[187] Thus, enacting the opposite of rebellion holds the promise of freedom. None of these appeals to the Deuteronomic principle of retribution are expressed as demands or ultimatums. As befits penitent sinners, the logic built from the Pentateuchal blessings and curses is only expressed implicitly.[188]

The fourth and final example of verbal repetition between the prayer and the covenant concerns the use of the verb "to forsake" (עזב). In the prayer's historical rehearsal, thrice over the Levites observe that in his response to Israel's rebellion, Yahweh did not forsake (עזב) them (Neh 9:17, 19, 31).[189] In renewing their commitment to Yahweh, at the end of the *ʾamanah* they promise that they will not forsake (עזב) the

---

[185] Technically, this is verbal repetition within Neh 9. However, Neh 10 is the logical conclusion stemming from the desire to be released from deserved slavery for lawbreaking.

[186] Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use*, 673.

[187] Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use*, 674–75.

[188] Petter and Petter (*Ezra–Nehemiah*, 393) note that, as slaves (Neh 9:36), the community is "in no position to dictate terms." On requests in penitential prayer being expressed implicitly, see: Boda, "From Complaint to Contrition," 186n2.

[189] On the other hand, in the second Deuteronomic cycle, Yahweh did forsake (עזב) his people into the hand of their enemies (Neh 9:28).

temple (Neh 10:39 [Heb. 10:40]). Their promise is a response to Yahweh's action. Their commitment to not forsake Yahweh's temple is perfectly fitting in light of the fact that he did not forsake them.[190]

Conclusion

By this point in the process of reading Neh 9–10, one mystery is resolved. Reaching the end of the framing plot, we understand the previously unexplained penitence of Neh 9:1–5. It is of a piece with the retrospective prayer at one level, and the *ʾamanah* at another. The ceremony of Neh 9–10 includes both sorrow over past sins (Neh 9:1–5, 16–18, 26–31, 33–35) and commitment to avoid future sins (Neh 9:38—10:39 [Heb. 10:1–40]). There may be two plots within Neh 9–10, but there is only one conflict: the inability to enjoy the land, and this is the result of the people's sin. Both the prayer and the *ʾamanah* respond with expressions of penitence, penitence that appears as early as 9:1–5.

We are now in a position to conclude the discussion of the plots of the two stories within Neh 9–10. In the inner story, the praying Levites search for plot resolution through prayer. In the framing story, the community as a whole searches for plot resolution through a recommitment to obedience.[191] Yet for all this, there is no resolution to either plot. Divine intervention overthrowing the Persians such that the gift of the land can be enjoyed never appears. Even looking ahead to Neh 12, there we see the people rejoicing at divinely wrought success in reestablishing the holy city. There is, however, no

[190] Petter and Petter, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 418.

[191] Boda (*Praying the Tradition*, 36) states that the ceremony of Neh 9–10 is enacted on the basis of an expectation that it will bring relief from the covenantal curse that has fallen on the nation.

reference to any removal of the slavery, taxation, and distress lamented in Neh 9:35–37. This is of a piece with the theme of incompleteness that appears also in Neh 13.[192]

Ideological Point of View

Ryken states that one of the ways that a story communicates the author's point of view is through normative spokespersons.[193] That the praying Levites (Neh 9) and the covenanting people (Neh 10) function as such becomes clear when we observe that they are assembling (Neh 8:1, 13; 9:1). Nehemiah knew the promise that Yahweh would gather his people (Neh 1:9; Deut 30:3); God had put it on his heart to begin that process (Neh 7:5).[194] In this sense, the assembly of Neh 9–10 is a fulfilment of earlier Scriptures. Similarly, their confessions of sin and their commitments to obedience are full to the brim with allusions to earlier Scriptures.[195] The Levites and people are clearly exemplary in their humility over their own sin, and their sense of absolute dependence on the mercies of Yahweh.[196]

Ryken wants the interpreter to pay attention to how the story is designed to move a reader's sympathy or antipathy.[197] In this case, the reader identifies with the anguish of the supplicants. The supplication, ending as it does with "we are in great distress" (Neh

---

[192] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, li–lii.

[193] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 85.

[194] Boda ("Prayer as Rhetoric," 276–77, 280) notes three parallels between the opening of the first and the opening of the second half of the book of Nehemiah: (a) the presence of Hanani (Neh 1:2; 7:2); (b) God putting something on Nehemiah's heart (Neh 2:12; 7:5); and (c) the gathering (קבץ) of the people (Neh 1:9; 7:5).

[195] With respect to Neh 10, Schnittjer (*Old Testament Use*, 675–82) argues that the assembly's commitment exceeds Torah standards (at some points) out of devotion to Yahweh. Cf. Clines ("Nehemiah 10 as Example," 113–17) for the alternate position that the application of the Torah in Neh 10 is sometimes unsystematic and at other times excessively rigorous.

[196] On characters as exemplary, see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 83.

[197] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 45–46, 86. See also the similar observations by Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 441–45.

9:37 ESV), transmits to the engaged reader a longing for the emotional release of a happy ending. No happy ending, however, appears. The cause of distress is never removed in this narrative. There is no evidence that Yahweh grants the request for relief from the dominance of the Persians. In this light, there is a heroic quality to the returned exiles' willingness to press forward. Williamson terms it a "holding-in-tension of present faithful acceptance with future aspiration."[198] Rather than wallow in their suffering, they recommit to obeying Yahweh, trusting him for the unseen outcome. We have already noted that the commitment to obey provides a positive example for the reader; now our eyes are opened to the courage of a commitment made in the face of deep disappointment.

Just the same, the unresolved tension in this story is surprising, even disconcerting. Reader interest is held by the delay in the explanation of the penitence of Neh 9:1–5. When the reason for the penitence becomes clear—desire to enjoy the land again—the fact that Yahweh never grants that desire becomes perplexing. Given that the people appeal to Yahweh through both prayer and recommitment to obedience, the silence is deafening. Furthermore, the returnees deploy powerful arguments derived from Yahweh's own principles and past actions. Although the prayer completes a Deuteronomic cycle, although the covenant aims for the faithfulness of Abraham, although the people commit to obeying the rules by which one can live, Yahweh does not remove the Persian yoke. It is a tragedy most gripping.

In this way, Yahweh's right to do as he pleases is foregrounded by Neh 9–10. Because of their own sin, they are unable to presume upon God. And the indeterminate

---

[198] Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, lii.

conclusion of the passage subtly asks the reader to be at peace with the fact that whether Israel enjoys the fulness of the land lies in the hands of God. The question of Yahweh's wider purposes regarding the gift of the land remains for further discussion in the next chapter of this dissertation.

Conclusion

The original audience of Ezra 4–6, Neh 1–6, and Neh 8–10 experienced tension from external pressures in the Persian period. Narrative analysis of these three passages reveals elements of what God is saying and doing in these texts with respect to resistance training. Highlights can be summarized as follows. The paired library searches of Ezra 4–6 reveal God's determination to overthrow those who wish to obstruct his residence in the midst of his people. God's people participate in his temple building work by rebuffing infiltrators but welcoming repentant newcomers. The resolution of Neh 1–6 depicts God shaming those who wish to shame his people. Such divine judgment steers God's people away from internalizing undeserved shame, as does the example of Nehemiah's courage. The complex plot of Neh 9–10 becomes perplexing when we realize that it never comes to resolution. At the same time, the shift at Neh 9:37–38 [Heb. 9:37—10:1] from despair to determination provides a model for ethical behavior among God's people. Suffering at the hands of Gentile powers, they must keep separate from Gentile corruption and center themselves on the temple and their community while they wait for God to work out his hidden purposes. As part of the process of developing resistance training material, in the next dissertation chapter, I will trace connections from these themes into the New Testament.

CHAPTER THREE: MAKING LINKS FROM EZRA–NEHEMIAH TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Methodology

The previous chapter used narrative analysis to exegete three selections from Ezra–Nehemiah, selections chosen because of their usefulness for resistance training. The present chapter will make connections from the three selections to the New Testament. To do so, this chapter makes use of Christopher J. H. Wright's methodology for preaching Christian sermons from the Old Testament.[1] In Wright's approach, preachers honor two complementary principles. First, preachers should recognize that the overall narrative of the Old Testament leads to and reaches its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.[2] Second, while showing the congregation the overarching biblical narrative, preachers must not be so focused on preaching Christ from every Old Testament text that they give short shrift to the preaching text in front of them.[3] Upon the basis of these two principles, a sermon from the Old Testament should primarily focus on the Old Testament selection, and secondarily make connections to the larger storyline which leads to Christ's First and/or Second Advents.[4] When a preacher regularly makes these connections over time, a

[1] Wright, *How to Preach*.
[2] Wright, *How to Preach*, 27–31.
[3] Wright, *How to Preach*, 53–60.
[4] Wright, *How to Preach*, 63–64; regarding the fact that some sermons will properly move to Christ's *Second* Advent, see Wright, *How to Preach*, 46–51.

congregation will grow in seeing the Bible as a unity, and they will learn to make these connections themselves.[5]

Wright offers six ways to make links from Old Testament texts to Christ. These six paths are: redemptive-historical progression; promise-fulfilment; analogy (including typology); contrast/discontinuity; ethics/response-to-God; and law-gospel.[6] For each of the three selections from Ezra–Nehemiah, the discussion below will be governed by the previous dissertation chapter's discussion of ideological point of view. Working with the themes developed there, this chapter will indicate in each case which of Wright's paths I use to move from Ezra–Nehemiah to Christ.[7] The use of these links will yield sermons that help congregants see Ezra–Nehemiah in the light of the New Testament. Sometimes the link will lead to a fulfilment embodied in Jesus Christ himself. Other times the link will find the church in a position before God that is analogous to that of the Old Testament saints. Even in those cases, however, the church's position has been transformed by the First Advent of Christ and the New Covenant. Living on the other side of the Cross, Resurrection, and Pentecost, the church relates to God in union with Christ by the power of the indwelling Spirit.[8]

---

[5] Wright, *How to Preach*, 64.

[6] Wright, *How to Preach*, 64–84; I have identified Wright's six links by means of common theological nomenclature rather than Wright's non-technical language. Similar listings of paths from Old Testament to New Testament can be found in Bright, *The Authority*, 199, 210, 211–12; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 203–25; Keller, *Preaching*, 73–85; DeRouchie, *How To Understand*, 352–57, 430–31, 474–81; and Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*, 166–72.

[7] There are areas of overlap among these links. In each case below I will identify a link that clarifies the Old Testament to New Testament connection; my selection of a particular link does not mean that other links are not also simultaneously in play.

[8] Wright, *How to Preach*, 80–81; Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*, 173–77.

Making Links from Ezra 4–6 to the New Testament

Ezra 4–6 narrates Yahweh's work through the returned exiles, their prophets, and the Persian emperor to overcome opposition and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The preceding dissertation chapter highlighted three themes. First, Ezra 4–6 narrates a divinely accomplished reversal of fortune with respect to the building of the temple. The temple is built in accordance with Yahweh's intentionality. Second, the function of the temple is to facilitate the relationship between God and his people. Third, the inclusio around the passage juxtaposes the rebuffing and welcoming of outsiders. In what follows I use several of Wright's paths to make links from these themes to the New Testament.

Divine Upending of Opposition to Temple-Building

The Meaning of Temple

For the sake of developing a sermon about God's people under pressure, the following discussion will focus on the opposition to the building of the temple in Ezra 4–6. However, a preliminary task is to understand the meaning of the temple in the context of both the Old and New Testaments. The temple is the institution that mediates the relationship between Yahweh and his people. The narrative of Ezra 4–6 frequently uses relational phrases such as "our God," "their God," and "the God of Israel."[9] Ezra 4–6 also repeatedly identifies the temple as the house of God.[10] Here Yahweh dwells in the midst of his people.[11] This relational function of the temple is indicated concisely in the four

[9] Ezra 4:1, 2, 3, 3; 5:1, 5; 6:14, 21, 22. On "our God" as relational language, see Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 77.

[10] The term "house" (בַּיִת) appears at Ezra 4:3, 24; 5:2, 3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17; 6:3, 3, 5, 5, 7, 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 17, 22. The term is spelled the same way in both Hebrew and Aramaic.

[11] Exodus 25:8 provides a concentrated expression of the theology of the tabernacle/temple: "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (ESV).

closing words of Ezra 6, "the house of God, the God of Israel." Who dwells in this sacred house? Yahweh. And which God is Yahweh? The one with whom Israel has a relationship.

By means of Wright's analogy link,[12] we observe correspondence between the Old Testament tabernacle/temple and the New Testament development of the temple theme. As a critical foundation to all that follows, Jesus himself fulfills the temple theme. John's Gospel informs us that Jesus "tabernacled" among us (John 1:14). Furthermore, Jesus speaks of himself as the temple (John 2:18–22). Mark, in his Gospel, presents Jesus as the new temple, destroyed and raised again after three days, the Holy of Holies being revealed at Christ's death (Mark 15:21–39).[13] Christ is the new temple, but, united with him, so is Christ's Spirit-indwelt church. Both Paul and Peter use the metaphor of construction material to illustrate the connection between Christ-as-temple and church-as-temple. Christ is the cornerstone, or the original living stone, upon which the new structure, the church of living stones, is built (Eph 2:19–22; 1 Pet 2:4–6).[14] Temple terminology is used in the New Testament in other ways. The writer of Hebrews can term church's corporate worship as a sacrifice, a sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15).[15] Finally, as is common in the use of typology, the New Testament's presentation of the temple is

---

[12] As one component of Wright's (*How to Preach*, 68–73) analogy link, he includes typology. Typology is the more precise identification of the way the temple theme is developed in the New Testament.

[13] Bailey, "The Fall of Jerusalem," 102–5. Similarly, the Gospel of Matthew sees the Old Testament temple as being replaced by Christ (Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 176–92).

[14] Additionally, Jesus cites Ps 118, speaking of himself as the cornerstone (Mark 12:10; Matt 21:42; Luke 20:17). For Pauline presentations of the church as temple, in addition to Eph 2, see 1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:16.

[15] See also Paul's use of cultic terminology when describing Christian activities in Rom 12:1; 15:16; Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6.

characterized by escalation.[16] Jesus is greater than the temple (Matt 12:6),[17] with the rending of the veil of the temple, now all believers (not just priests) freely enter the house of God (Heb 10:19–22).

Divine Confrontation of Temple Opposition

In Ezra 4–6, Yahweh initiates the building of the temple. He does so by inspiring both emperors (Ezra 1:1; 6:14b) and prophets (Ezra 5:1–2; 6:14a). This is in keeping with the fact that in Scripture, temples are always gifts of divine grace.[18] What, however, happens when God's temple is threatened by outsiders? Not only is God the ultimate builder of the tabernacle/temple, but his commitment to establishing his holy presence on earth runs deep enough to overcome all opposition. This is an emphatic point in Ezra 4–6. Only the miraculous intervention of Yahweh can explain the dramatic turnabout from the authorities' obstruction (Ezra 4) to their munificence toward the project (Ezra 6:3–12). By means of Wright's analogy link, we see a similar divine confrontation, this time against insiders who oppose God's dwelling with his people: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple" (1 Cor 3:17 NIV).

---

[16] Greidanus (*Preaching Christ*, 216–19) observes that in the New Testament's use of typology, there is always something greater about the New Testament realities as compared to their Old Testament prefigurements.

[17] France (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 461) finds Jesus's superiority here (as compared to the Old Testament temple) to reside in his authority as the true mediator.

[18] McKelvey, "Temple," 806. Boda ("Legitimizing the Temple," 310–12) notes the Chronicler's emphasis on divine initiative with respect to the Second Temple.

The Prophetic Word

In Ezra 1–6 the returned exiles do not build the temple suddenly and with no antecedent word. The completion of the temple is a fulfilment of an earlier prophetic word (Ezra 1:1; 6:14), and the builders are spurred on and supported by the prophets (Ezra 5:1–2). Using Wright's analogy link we observe that Jesus-as-temple and church-as-temple do not appear unexpectedly either. The intentionality of God and his interpretive communication about his New Covenant temple initiatives are robust. First there are all the Old Testament prefigurements, including the narrative of Ezra 4–6. Then, secondly, there are the dominical and apostolic pronouncements mentioned in the discussion above about the meaning of temple. Together these various forms of prophecy herald and explain God's commitment to dwell among his people.

Concluding Perfection and Joy

Despite certain weaknesses on the ground, Ezra 4–6 closes with references to perfection and joy. By means of the symbolic numbers 700 and 12, the text sees through present limitations to a perfection that lies beyond the community's circumstances. Shepherd and Wright see the reference to the twelve tribes as pointing both forward and backward.[19] The remnant was continuous with the twelve tribes of pre-exilic Israel, but was also a harbinger of the New Jerusalem with gates bearing the names of the twelve tribes and foundations bearing the names of the twelve apostles. Thus, by means of Wright's redemptive-historical progression link, we see that the completion of the second temple points forward to the consummating day when "the home of God is among mortals. He

[19] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 137–41.

will dwell with them as their God" (Rev 21:3 NRSV). The joy of Ezra 6:16, 22 is a foreshadowing of that future perfect and never-ending joy (Rev 19:6–8; 21:4). It is true that the New Jerusalem does not have a temple (Rev 21:22). This is "because the whole city is filled with God's immediate presence. As a result, the city itself becomes a temple."[20] Most remarkable of all, when at last God and the Lamb are the temple, God's people will see his face (Rev 22:4).[21]

Relating to Outsiders

False Teachers and Syncretists

In Ezra 4:1–2, adversaries attempt to infiltrate the community of God's people. These enemies deceptively claim to be seekers of Yahweh.[22] If there is an element of truth to this claim, it is only because they are syncretists.[23] The adversaries' potentially persuasive claim of religious commonality is firmly rejected by the leaders of the Golah community. The leaders discern that such cooperation would have a corrupting influence upon the community.[24] By means of the example of these leaders, the text asks its readers to be vigilant against infiltrators and false teachers.

---

[20] Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 136.

[21] Bauckham (*Theology of Revelation*, 142), in his discussion of the immediate presence of God, states, "nothing expresses this immediacy more evocatively than [Rev 22:4]."

[22] The deviousness of false prophets is a major concern in the Old Testament. E.g., Deut 13; Jer 23:9–40.

[23] Note the allusion at Ezra 4:2 to 2 Kgs 17:24–41.

[24] Steinmann (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 222) observes that Zerubbabel's exclusivism (Ezra 4:3) arises from the Decalogue's foundational requirement of undivided commitment to Yahweh. This demand receives a finer point when the New Testament requires exclusive commitment to Jesus Christ as the way to the Father (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Wright's analogy link connects this Old Testament and New Testament exclusivism.

Wright's ethics/response-to-God link[25] points to similar warnings in the New Testament. Jesus warns of wolves who come in sheep's clothing (Matt 7:15–16). In 2 Corinthians, Paul identifies the intruding Judaizers[26] in Corinth as "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor 11:13 ESV). He goes on to say that they disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, derivative from the fact that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14–15). In all such cases, the church must be discerning lest she be led astray.[27] Paul's prohibition of the yoking of believers to unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14) functions as a New Testament parallel to the example provided by Zerubbabel's rebuff (Ezra 4:3). In both cases the holiness of the temple is at stake. "What portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor 6:15–16 ESV). Whether with respect to the literal constructing of the Temple in Zerubbabel's day or the building up of the New Testament church-temple, infiltrators into the holy temple courts must always be rebuffed.

The Juxtaposition of Rebuffing and Welcoming Outsiders

However, might not such an exclusive stance inappropriately bar the approach of newcomers to God?[28] As discussed in the preceding dissertation chapter, the relationship

---

[25] Wright (*How to Preach*, 80–81) reminds us to avoid mere moralism by seeing ethical commands as responses to God's grace. Israelite obedience as a response to the redemption from slavery in Egypt foreshadows Christian obedience as a response to the redemption we have in Christ.

[26] This is Harris' (*Second Corinthians*, 85–87) identification of the false apostles under discussion here.

[27] See also Matt 23:1–36; Gal 1:6–9; Col 2:8, 16–23; 1 Tim 6:3–21; 2 Tim 3:1–17; Titus 3:8–11; Jas 4:4; 2 Pet 2:1–22; 1 John 4:1–3; and Rev 2:2, 6, 14–15, 20, 24.

[28] MacBride (*To Aliens and Exiles*, 183–84) warns against the misappropriation of the New Testament's call for Christian distinctiveness; it must not be used in a triumphalist manner, nor to foster hatred toward a non-Christian majority culture.

between Ezra 4:3 and 6:21 indicates that God's people ought to rebuff those who refuse to be holy, while simultaneously welcoming repentant newcomers into God's holy presence.

This pairing of rebuff and welcome moves into the New Testament along two different paths. First, Wright's analogy link reveals the pairing as a matter of fact. God himself enacts a simultaneous rebuff and welcome. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' famously speaks of the church being in but not of the world (John 17:14–18). Not being *of* the world, the church is hated; it needs protection and sanctification (John 17:14–15, 17, 19). Being *in* the world, the church is available to welcome new converts (John 17:20, 23). Similarly, in Rev 21, God will rebuff and welcome. On the one hand, the kings of the earth will be received into the New Jerusalem: "its gates will never be shut" and "they will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations" (Rev 21:24–26 ESV). On the other hand, "nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false" (Rev 21:27 ESV).

Second, Wright's ethics/response-to-God link points us to New Testament passages in which the church is commanded to rebuff and welcome. The church is thus to conform to what God has done and is doing. A specific instantiation of the golden mean between assimilation and isolation can be found Acts 8. At the same moment that the gospel crosses a significant cultural barrier and welcomes previously hated Samaritans into the church, Peter severely rebukes one of them, Simon Magus, for his selfish grasping at the gift of the Spirit (Acts 8:4–25). Peter functions in this text as a moral exemplar, one who acts upon the fact that newcomers are welcome, but they must be transformed. Jude also presents this third way as he instructs his readers to "save others

by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh" (Jude 23 ESV).[29]

Rebuffing and welcoming are not at odds with each other. The unifying principle is holiness required of God's dwelling place. "I will make my dwelling among them. . . therefore, go out from their midst and be separate from them" (2 Cor 6:16–17 ESV). Adversaries are rebuffed because of their hostility to God and his ways. Outsiders must repent in order to join Christ's body. Summarizing the New Testament call to distinctiveness, MacBride argues that maintaining clear boundaries enables a minority group to make converts: "When the dominant culture notices the minority because of its differences, the minority has the opportunity to show just how attractive those differences are."[30]

Underneath this human juxtaposition lies a divine juxtaposition. As the Apostle Paul expresses it: "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Rom 11:22 KJV). The same holy presence of Yahweh that strikes down Uzzah also blesses Obed-Edom (2 Sam 6:1–11). In Isaiah's prophecy, Yahweh declares: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit" (Isa 57:15 ESV). God is both just and justifier (Rom 3:27). Jesus Christ is both a lion and a lamb (Rev 5:5–6). It is neither the case that God's holiness renders him absolutely unapproachable, nor that his mercy makes him altogether spineless. His kingdom expands to encompass new

[29] James 1:27 presents a similar but slightly different pairing: a call to both showing mercy and distancing oneself from the negative influences of the world.

[30] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 24; emphasis in original not maintained. Similarly, as a part of their discussion of Ezra 4:1–3 (and similar passages in Ezra–Nehemiah), Shepherd and Wright (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 144) argue that the point of Israelite distinctiveness is "to bear witness to the nations as to what it means to live under the nearness of God and in a society of justice and compassion. So then there was a missional dimension to the holiness of Israel."

people, but no one can enter without being changed. Thus, God's people are to both welcome newcomers and rebuff pretenders.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ in his First Advent begins to fulfill the Old Testament temple theme. With that foundation in mind, we have explored two details of the theology of Ezra 4–6. These chapters present both divine initiative and human response in the context of opposition to God's temple. The initiative and intervention of Yahweh brings the temple building program from a standstill to joyous completion. God's intentionality regarding the temple is seen in the sending of the Son to live among his people and the giving of the Spirit to indwell the church. Furthermore, and with respect to Christ's second coming, the joyous completion of the second temple points forward to the consummating establishment of the presence of God among his people forever. Second, the human response aspect of our passage's theology has a straightforward Old Testament to New Testament parallel.[31] As under the Old Covenant, so also under the New, God's people play their part in the building of God's temple-church by both rebuffing adversarial infiltrators and welcoming repentant newcomers.

Making Links from Nehemiah 1–6 to the New Testament

Nehemiah 1–6 narrates the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The theme of shame runs through the account. The preceding dissertation chapter highlighted four themes. First,

[31] One must keep in mind, however, the greater resources available to the New Testament believer due to the coming of Christ and giving of the Spirit: Wright, *How to Preach*, 80–81; Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*, 173–77.

Nehemiah's penitential prayer functions as a model for addressing shame before God. Second, Nehemiah functions as an exemplar for God's people when enemies attempt to shame them. Nehemiah's faith and courage encourage the reader to resist internalizing undeserved shame. Third, prospective shame can have a positive function. It can motivate God's people to upright behavior. Fourth, this narrative dramatizes God's justice as he brings shame on the heads of those who attempt to shame his people. This section considers these themes in light of the New Testament by making use of Wright's links to Christ.

Shame before God

Nehemiah 1–6 begins by narrating an experience of shame before Yahweh. The text indicates that the shame of the exile is ongoing as Nehemiah continues to think of the Jews as "scattered" and as "outcasts" in need of being "gathered" to the place God has chosen (Neh 1:8–9 ESV). The possibility of relief from such shame moves into the New Testament along two different paths. First, Wright's ethics/response-to-God link leads us to New Testament calls for penitence. Just as Nehemiah confessed the sins of the people (Neh 1:4–7), so Christians are called to confess their sins (e.g., 1 John 1:9).

Second, we move to the New Testament via Wright's redemptive-historical progression link. In Nehemiah there is an incompleteness to the story of relief from shame and ingathering to God after exile. Despite all the successes recounted in Neh 1–12, the book ends with a description of failure (Neh 13).[32] In this way, Nehemiah points to a larger storyline looking forward to a day when penitence yields a greater assurance

[32] Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, lii) highlights Neh 9:32–37 and Neh 13 as passages that communicate disappointment, failure, and a corresponding eye to the future.

of relief from shame before God. When the Messiah arrived, he proclaimed that climactic day: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15 ESV). With the coming of Christ, relief from shame before God and reconciliation between God and man take on a new concreteness and clarity. For example, Christ explicitly offers relief from shame to the church at Laodicea: "I counsel you to buy from me . . . white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen. (Rev 3:18 ESV).[33]

Moving along the trajectory of redemptive history, the New Testament gives significant attention to the possibility of shame in the presence of God at the Final Judgment.[34] Through faith in Christ and obedience to him, one can be spared this eschatological shame. The Apostle John exhorts his readers, "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming" (1 John 2:28 ESV). Peter uses a collocation of Isa 8:14 and 28:16 to teach that faith in Christ rescues one from ultimate shame. "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame" (1 Pet 2:6 ESV).[35] The book of Nehemiah presents God's people being restored to relationship with him (see especially Neh 8–10; 12). However, the book of Nehemiah does not picture the robust removal of shame before God in quite the way the

[33] In addition to the change from nakedness to being clothed in white, other metaphors are tangent to the removal of shame. The theme of the removal of uncleanness through Christ is prominent in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 15:9; Eph 5:26; Titus 2:14; Heb 9:14; 10:22; 1 John 1:7, 9). There is also the move from poverty to riches (2 Cor 8:9). On Christ being shamed, see Matt 26:67–68; 27:27–31, 39–44; Phil 2:7–8. On Jesus' shame being for our sanctification, see Heb 13:12–13; cf. Isa 52:13—53:12. On being gathered to God through Christ, see Luke 15:1–32; John 6:37; 2 Cor 5:14–21; Eph 2:13–17; Col 1:19–22; Mark 13:27.

[34] Two rare presentations of the shaming of the wicked in this life appear at Luke 13:17 and Titus 2:8.

[35] See the similar Rom 9:33.

New Testament does in its discussions of the First and Second Advents of Christ. Nehemiah 1–6 serves thus as one stepping stone in a larger narrative, pointing readers forward to the coming of Christ.

Shame before People

Nehemiah the governor stands out in Neh 1–6 in his unwillingness to accept shame. Wright's redemptive-historical progression link is a fitting way to connect Nehemiah's example to the New Testament. Nehemiah flatly refuses to internalize shame on the basis of his relationship with God. Nehemiah need not accept shame because God will cause his people to prosper (Neh 2:20) and because God is great and awesome (Neh 4:14 [Heb. 4:8]). The Lord, however, reveals himself more fully in both the First and Second Advents of Christ. The first coming of the Suffering Servant opens a new reason for God's people to accept shame. At his Second Coming, Christ the judge will bring his people's reward to them, and this changes how they perceive the taunts of enemies. We will consider each of these in turn.

Like Nehemiah, Christians ought not internalize undeserved shame, yet at another level they accept undeserved shame before people. They do so *in fellowship with Christ*: "Let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured" (Heb 13:13 ESV). Instead of flatly refusing to accept undeserved shame, Christians reframe it. They interpret mockery as an encouraging sign, evidence that they are united to Christ.[36] The author of Hebrews depicts this reframing by means of the example of Moses: "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt"

[36] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 22–23.

(Heb 11:26 NIV).[37] Where Christians are hated, it is because they are followers of the one whom the world hated (John 15:18–21).[38] Their sufferings are a sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3:10–11; 1 Pet 4:13). The contrast here is nuanced. It is not as if Nehemiah's faith in God counts for nothing. In fact, there is similarity[39] between Nehemiah and Christ, who, when reviled, entrusted himself to God (1 Pet 2:18–23). The point, however, is that something has changed with the First Advent. Shame takes on additional meaning because of the shaming of Christ.

Moving further along the trajectory of redemptive history, consideration of shame in the face of other people is informed by Christ's Second Coming. In comparison to a short-term focus on one's immediate experience of honor or shame, the New Testament presents an alternative approach.[40] Shame before people can be relativized when the recipient of undeserved shame focuses on the reward to be received upon Christ's return.[41] Paul presents himself to Timothy as an example of such far-sighted courage: "I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been committed to me" (2 Tim 1:8, 12 ESV).[42]

The author of Hebrews, likewise, implores his readers to focus on the vertical plane and to rely upon the promise of eschatological honor.[43] He reminds his readers of the earlier days of their faith. Previously they had responded with joy to when "publicly

---

[37] MacBride (*To Aliens and Exiles*, 71) emphasizes Moses' function in Heb 11:23–29 as the epitome of faith for a minority religious community. MacBride also notes that the anachronism in the verse (Moses lived long before Christ).

[38] See also Acts 5:41; Rom 8:17; 1 Thess 1:6–7.

[39] Wright's analogy link.

[40] Lau, *Defending Shame*, 131–32.

[41] Elliott, "Disgraced Yet Graced," 173.

[42] See similar calls to fearlessness and courage at Mark 8:38; Rom 1:16–17; Phil 1:27–30; 2 Thess 1:3–12; 1 Pet 3:14.

[43] deSilva, "Despising Shame," 440.

exposed to reproach and affliction," knowing that they had "a better possession and an abiding one" (Heb 10:33–34 ESV). They need to return to their former confidence. They should follow in the train of the patriarchs who, acknowledging "that they were strangers and exiles on the earth," remained untroubled because God "has prepared for them a city" (Heb 11:13, 16 ESV). Shame does not control those whose confidence lies in future glory.[44] The ultimate example of this long-term perspective is to be found in Jesus. Despite the shame associated with crucifixion, Jesus did not avoid the cross. According to Heb 12:2 he counted that shame as nothing,[45] specifically by taking a longer view. Anticipating eternal joy, he strode forth to the cross.[46] In all this he serves as an example for his followers. Believers under pressure bear reproach with Christ "outside the camp" because "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Heb 13:13–14 ESV).

Prospective Shame

The preceding dissertation chapter discussed two examples of prospective shame from Neh 5–6. Wishing to avoid being deservedly shamed, God's people are thusly motivated to upright behavior. Wright's ethics/response-to-God link brings us to New Testament texts where the identical imperative and motivation appear.[47] In Luke 14:8–9, Jesus warns that the person who selfishly seeks honor will be shamed in public. Not wanting thus to be disgraced, a wise disciple heeds and keeps to a low station. In Titus 2:1–10,

---

[44] For other articulations of this theme, see Heb 11:26; 1 Pet 1:4–6; 4:12–14; 5:9–10; 1 John 2:17.

[45] deSilva, "Despising Shame," 445–46.

[46] See also 1 Pet 1:11b. On Christ's bold approach to the cross, see John 19:17.

[47] Now, however, in the New Covenant context, we are responding to God's grace that has been more fully revealed to us in Christ and by the Spirit; Wright, *How to Preach*, 80–81; Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*, 173–77.

Paul uses prospective shame as a stimulus for righteousness. He calls for upright behavior on the part of different subgroups within the church. Upright behavior, he argues, prevents the church from being shamed (Titus 2:5, 8, 10). Peter, amid discussion of undeserved shaming, interjects, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler" (1 Pet 4:15 ESV).[48] Across the two testaments, prospective shame has a place among the various teachings that motivate God's people to live upright lives.

The Final Judgment

In Neh 6, Yahweh proves Sanballat's derisive words about the wall of Jerusalem to be wrong. Yahweh shames his people's enemies with the swift and surprising completion of the wall. He forces them to recognize the ineffectiveness of their hostility. Wright's analogy link carries this event into the New Testament. God's intervention in judgment is characteristic of him. The shaming of the Jews' enemies prefigures the shame of the Final Judgment after Christ's return.

Paul, in 1 Cor 1, emphasizes that God will shame his people's enemies. By building his church out of people with low social status, God shows that the power of the church is divine, not human. He also demonstrates the futility of worldly values. First Corinthians 1:27–28 and its reference to the shaming of the strong has an eschatological flavor; any shame that falls upon the world in this age is but a precursor of their final shaming.[49] In Col 2, Paul reveals that at the Crucifixion, God shamed the satanic powers by exposing their impotence: "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to

[48] See, similarly, 1 Pet 2:20.
[49] Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 86–87.

open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Col 2:15 ESV). Picking up on the image of a triumphal procession, Beale draws a line to the Final Judgment: "The consummation of this parade will be the consummate defeat (death) of these powers at the very end of time."[50] Paul, in Phil 3:19, speaks of enemies of the cross who "glory in their shame" (ESV). They boast about the very things that will bring them into eternal humiliation.[51] Peter promises that believers' good behavior will refute the accusations of slanderers, putting them to shame: "Do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (1 Pet 3:15–16 ESV). This shaming could conceivably happen in this life, but Michaels argues on the basis of parallels with 1 Pet 2:12 that Peter refers in 1 Pet 3 to shaming at the Final Judgment.[52] A few verses later Peter adds, "they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead" (1 Pet 4:4–5 ESV). The New Testament encourages God's people to persevere under persecution specifically through their knowledge of the sober reality of final judgment on their oppressors.[53]

Conclusion

The theology of Neh 1–6 expounds upon the theme of shame from a variety of angles. The New Testament perspective adds new layers of complexity. First, shame before God has been definitively resolved because Christ bore the shame of his people. God's

---

[50] Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 33.

[51] Silva, *Philippians*, 180–82.

[52] Michaels, *1 Peter*, 190–91. So also Schreiner, *1–2 Peter and Jude*, section 3.3.1, para. 17–18. Achtemeier (*1 Peter*, 236) finds that the parallel to 1 Pet 2:12 suggests that the shaming is eschatological; on the other hand, the context of an encounter in this life as described in 1 Pet 3:14–17 suggests that the shaming is immediate. He concludes that the intended time frame "is difficult to determine."

[53] MacBride (*To Aliens and Exiles*, 116) makes this point in his discussion of Rev 14–20.

forgiveness of penitent sinners is thus more clearly grounded. Second, with respect to undeserved shame before people, Christians accept shame in fellowship with Christ. Simultaneously, however, they relativize undeserved shame before people in light of the eschatological honor that God will bestow on those who are hidden in Christ. Third, prospective shame—a motivator toward upright conduct—carries over into the New Testament in a straightforward manner, albeit now with the Spirit's empowering of such uprightness. Fourth, with respect to the divine shaming of shamers, New Testament saints reframe their own affliction and their enemies' ascendancy because of perspective gained by the promise of the Final Judgment. The sting of hostile reproach is relativized in light of its ephemeral nature.

Making Links from Nehemiah 9–10 to the New Testament

Nehemiah 8–10 narrates an account of covenant renewal. The preceding dissertation chapter highlighted two themes. First, the prayer of Neh 9:32–37 laments Persian rule. Then in Neh 10, in hopes of a restoration to the full benefits of the land, the people commit to live a distinctive lifestyle in the context of the surrounding nations. Nehemiah 10 includes the specific stipulations to which the Jews promise renewed obedience. Second, we observed that the Levitical request for the full experience of the gift of the land is not granted. The Jews remain under Persian rule, and this raises questions about the purposes of God with respect to the Abrahamic land promise. In what follows I use Wright's methodology to make links from these themes to the New Testament.

Recommitting to Obedience

Nehemiah 10 presents the Yehudite community's recommitment to obedience. We will consider this in three parts: obedience as a response to God; obedience in the midst of suffering; and the specific stipulations of the *ʾamanah*. Using Wright's approach, I identify "echoes of those very same responses called for in the preaching of Jesus in the Gospels and in the rest of the New Testament. We can make those links and keep them anchored in Christ and motivated by the grace of the gospel itself."[54] Now in the gospel, the motivation for obedience and the Spirit's empowerment of holy living have been revealed more fully.[55]

The Jews' commitment to obedience in Neh 10 is a response to the grace and mercy of God, the divine attributes highlighted in Neh 9. Furthermore, the Jews' personal connection to God functions as the foundation of their renewed resolve; they are honoring the relationship they have with "Yahweh our Lord" (Neh 10:29 [Heb. 10:30]). Wright's ethics/response-to-God link connects this passage to similar statements of resolve in the New Testament.[56] The hinge verses of Paul's epistle to the Romans command service to God as a response to the mercies of God (Rom 12:1–2).[57] Similarly, conformity to Peter's virtue list (2 Pet 1:5–7) requires reliance upon divine grace. Those

---

[54] Wright, *How to Preach*, 81.

[55] Wright, *How to Preach*, 80–81; Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*, 173–77.

[56] For sake of space and focus, I am not taking Neh 13 into consideration here. However, if I did, Wright's law-gospel link would provide a connection to the New Testament. Nehemiah 13's description of the returnees' violations of the *ʾamanah* reveals their inability to keep the Law and thus points to the need for Christ and the Spirit. Discussing Neh 13, McConville (*Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 151) speaks of "the inability of the chosen people of the Old Testament to meet the terms of the covenant in any meaningful way." Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 402) comments similarly on Neh 13: "Clearly, external measures were inadequate, in the last resort, to control the perversities of the human heart."

[57] On these verses' role as a hinge in the epistle as a whole, see Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 748.

who do not heed this call to virtue are those who have forgotten that they have been forgiven (2 Pet 1:9).[58]

The *ʾamanah* is also a response to the judgment of God, the principle of retribution. God blesses those who obey him and curses those who disobey him. Wright's ethics/response-to-God link moves us to New Testament passages about judgment on the basis of works.[59] The Pauline emphasis on salvation by faith does not abrogate the retribution principle. First, the demand for righteousness is fulfilled in Christ (Rom 10:4). Second, New Covenant faith is a living faith: "faith cannot be separated from repentance and the transformation of one's life."[60] There is a shift when we come to the New Testament because of the atonement and the gift of the Spirit. And yet eschatological outcomes provide motivation for holy living. "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (Gal 6:7–8 NRSV).

In this text, there is a significant transition at Neh 9:38 [Heb. 10:1] from the distress of the prayer to the resolve of the *ʾamanah*. God's people here resolve to obey their Lord in hopes of his blessing, even though they do not yet see evidence of a change in his stance toward them. Wright's analogy link leads us to see this courageous commitment as a model for the church. In the New Testament we find similar commands to obey God even in the midst of suffering. For example, Peter calls upon his readers to

---

[58] The phrase, "call to virtue," is Davids' (*2 Peter and Jude*, 176) title for his discussion of this passage.

[59] E.g, John 5:27–29; Rom 2:6–8; Jas 2:14–26; Rev. 20:12–13.

[60] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 615.

accept persecution as an instrument of God's purifying judgment (1 Pet 4:16–18).[61] As they trust God for the outworking of his eschatological purposes, these suffering Christians are exhorted to do good (1 Pet 4:19). The same principle is expressed in Matthew's parables of the kingdom. When tribulation comes, some turn away from the faith (Matt 13:20–21). Stated there in negative terms, the point is the same: true followers of Christ persevere through persecution and bear fruit just the same.[62]

In addition to a global statement of recommitment to the entire Torah (Neh 10:28–29 [Heb. 10:29–30]), the *'amanah* consists of four stipulations developed from the Mosaic law.[63] These are: (a) the prohibition of intermarriage; (b) the prohibition of commerce with Gentiles on the Sabbath and holy days; (c) the requirement to honor the sabbatical year by letting the land lie fallow and releasing debts; and (d) the requirement of support for the temple, its rites, and its functionaries, this final requirement described in lengthy detail. These four are highlighted because of their role in maintaining the group solidarity of the Jewish community.[64] The communal identity fostered by these four stipulations was especially necessary for a religious minority facing hostile external forces.[65]

---

[61] Jobes, *1 Peter*, 288–93.

[62] One other theme could be pursued here: obedience motivated by divine retribution (the Jews of Neh 9–10 are hoping that their obedience will yield freedom from Persian control). By Wright's analogy link we see the parallel theme in New Testament passages such as John 5:28–29; Rom 2:6–11; and Gal 6:7–8.

[63] The general approach taken in this dissertation toward the Old Testament law is that it no longer has binding force as law upon the church (Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 672), and at the same time that it is profitable for the church (2 Tim 3:16–17).

[64] Bautch ("The Function of Covenant," 10–21) argues that the covenants of Ezra 9–10, Neh 5, and Neh 10 draw upon the notion of national fraternity as a response to the people's awareness of Gentile others. Regarding the four stipulations of Neh 10 (which he furthermore sees as fostering an incipient sectarianism), Bautch ("The Function of Covenant," 19) writes: "the particular *halakot* in 10.31–40 correspond to issues that marked the second governorship of Nehemiah."

[65] See the discussion below of the individual stipulations for the way that each relates to pressure from outsiders.

The following discussion considers the four stipulations in order. In each case Wright's ethics/response-to-God link is the operative connection. Stitched into Ezra–Nehemiah, the *ʾamanah* asked for a response from the original readers of the canonical text. The second and third stipulations draw upon Old Testament sabbatical regulations, but under the New Covenant, the sabbath laws are no longer binding on God's people.[66] In such cases, sound practice consists of bringing the Old Testament law into the New Covenant context by making use of the underlying theology of the stipulation.[67] That will be the approach taken below.

With respect to the prohibition of intermarriage, Paul expresses the same prohibition in 1 Cor 7:39b: a widow may remarry "only in the Lord." The underlying concern in the Old Testament is that intermarriage will lead to religious infidelity.[68] The second stipulation of the *ʾamanah*, the prohibition against commerce with Gentiles on a Sabbath or a holy day, functioned as a means of "maintaining the [Jewish] boundaries of identity and community."[69] This stipulation was necessary because "the community's boundaries were inevitably more visible and vulnerable" in the area of commerce.[70] The underlying meaning of both the intermarriage and the commerce-on-Sabbath prohibitions has to do with God's people maintaining a holy identity. This concern is reflected in the New Testament most notably at 2 Cor 6:14—7:1: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers . . . what fellowship has light with darkness? . . . be separate from them . . .

---

[66] Lincoln, "Sabbath to Lord's Day," 345–46, 394–95, 404–5.

[67] Bright, *The Authority*, 140–51.

[68] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92; Harrington, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 407. See Exod 34:11–16; Deut 7:1–4; Neh 13:25–27. Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 205) sees the intermarriage prohibition as an expression of the community's desire to preserve national identity.

[69] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92.

[70] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 95. Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 239) mentions how challenging this stipulation was for a "small religious community in a larger world of heathens."

let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of the Lord" (ESV). Under the New Covenant, separation from Gentiles becomes separation from non-believers.[71] Because God's people now live in the midst of every nation, this is not an absolute separation. Otherwise, they would have to leave the world (1 Cor 5:9–10). However, the New Testament repeatedly urges Christians to live an ethically distinctive life.[72]

The third stipulation of the *'amanah* required letting the land lie fallow and forgiving debts in the sabbatical year. As with the first and second stipulation, the sabbatical year stipulations also functioned as means of maintaining the Golah community's "boundaries of identity and community."[73] In the Torah, the Sabbath year stipulations were intended to benefit impoverished Israelites (Exod 23:10–11; Lev 25:6–7; Deut 15:4). The same concern for tangible expressions of love—now within the postexilic community—appears at Neh 5:1–13 and Neh 8:10, 12. Compassion within the community is intended to foster group solidarity in the face of outsiders.[74] Nehemiah demanded that wealthy Jews cease taking advantage of poor Jews, lest they be shamed by their Gentile neighbors (Neh 5:9). The two sabbatical year requirements similarly serve to foster Jewish unity in the face of pressure from without. Moving to the New Testament, in John's first epistle, we find a parallel challenge: "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet close his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1

---

[71] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 144.

[72] See for example 1 Cor 6:9–11; Phil 2:14–15; Eph 5:5–12; 1 Thess 4:4–5; 1 Pet 2:12; 4:3–5.

[73] Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92. Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 205), discussing both halves of Neh 10:31 [Heb. 10:32], refers to the Sabbath as "a natural way to promote the sense of national identity."

[74] Bautch, "The Function of Covenant," 16–17; Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92–93.

John 3:17–18). John warns his readership, a minority religious group, against making the wider culture their court of reputation.[75] He wants his community to evaluate itself according to the ideals given to them by Jesus. They do this by continuing to show "behavior that's prototypical for the group: namely, love for one another."[76] Throughout the New Testament writings, it is Christian community that will provide embattled Christians with the support that they need to survive.[77]

The final stipulation regards support of the temple system. This support was also a means of creating a unified Jewish community in the face of external pressures. This stipulation represents an important shift away from relying on Persian support for the cult.[78] In the absence of the Davidic monarchy, the temple (along with the Torah) provided the center of gravity for the post-exilic community. "The continual maintenance of the temple cult and personnel was a necessity as a binding factor uniting all the loose elements of Jewish families who had returned from exile. It bound them to the service of God, but also to one another. In every religious community this is one of the most important characteristics."[79] In the same way, Christians develop their sense of identity in the face of the world through their commitment to the New Testament fulfilments of the meaning of the temple, namely, Jesus Christ and his church. Peter emphasizes this point as he writes to persecuted Christians. In response to rejection experienced in the world, Peter encourages believers to see themselves as tied to Jesus who is precious to God, and to understand themselves to be an integral part of God's new spiritual temple (1 Pet 2:4–

[75] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 76–78.
[76] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 78.
[77] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 17–18, 63–64.
[78] Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 127; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 239.
[79] Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 241.

10).[80] The foundational point here is Christ himself as the fulfilment of the temple theme. Building upon that foundation, the church finds its identity and its calling in its role as the locus of the presence of God on earth.

God's Messianic Purposes with Respect to the Land

The Implicit Request of Neh 9:36–37

In Neh 9, the Levites lament the fact that they are being prevented from fully enjoying the land. Their harvests are going to the Persians: they are "slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us" (Neh 9:36–37 NRSV). This contrasts with their reminiscence of the days of Joshua, when their ancestors captured "a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness" (Neh 9:25 ESV).

Implicitly,[81] the returnees from exile are requesting the restoration of their ability to benefit from the produce of the land. Yahweh, however, never grants this request—neither as recorded anywhere in Ezra–Nehemiah, nor in the rest of the Old Testament. The Persians are replaced by the Macedonians, Ptolemies, and the Seleucids. Other than a brief period of independence under the Hasmonean dynasty, the Jews continue as a subject people into the Roman era. Given the Abrahamic covenant, one might suppose that Yahweh would be quick to grant a request for the renewed gift of the land. However,

---

[80] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 50–51.

[81] Penitential prayer typically expresses its request implicitly: Boda, "From Complaint to Contrition," 186n2.

Yahweh's post-exilic silence with respect to these matters suggests that something else is afoot. Yahweh has plans in mind that go beyond a return to days gone by. Here we see facets of Ezra–Nehemiah's theme of incompleteness.[82] For a more complete understanding of Yahweh's purposes, Wright's promise-fulfilment link connects us to New Testament teachings about the land promises. What we discover is that the post-exilic limitations on enjoyment of the land is consistent with the state of incompleteness that exists prior to the Second Coming of the Messiah. In the New Testament's inaugurated eschatology,[83] prior to the Second Advent the church will similarly not have its own land.

The Abrahamic Land Promise

Even in its original patriarchal context there was an eschatological facet to the Abrahamic land promise.[84] Given its integral connection to the promise of innumerable descendants, the geographical limits of Canaan were not, from the start, large enough for the land's stated purpose.[85] From the beginning, the promised land signified something larger than Canaan.[86] The New Testament fulfilment of the land promise plays out in accord with inaugurated eschatology.[87] Upon the First Advent of the Messiah, the people of God do

---

[82] Boda (*Return to Me*, 135) points out that even the penitence of Ezra–Nehemiah is incomplete, in that it never attains Yahweh's promise of transformation of the human heart (Deut 30:6; Jer 31:31; Ezek 36:26–27). On both Neh 9 and Ezra–Nehemiah as an entire book never reaching a complete resolution, see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, li–lii; Duggan, *The Covenant Renewal*, 230; Shepherd and Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 156–57.

[83] On inaugurated eschatology, see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 41–116.

[84] Martin (*Promised Land*, 17) reaches farther back, seeing the goal of the Abrahamic land promise as the restoration of Eden, and in that light locating the Abrahamic Covenant's ultimate fulfilment in the New Heavens and New Earth.

[85] Martin, *Promised Land*, 115.

[86] Echevarria (*The Future Inheritance*, 57–72) shows how this larger vision of the land appears in the Psalms and Prophets.

[87] On inaugurated eschatology, see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 41–116.

not gain a geographical territory to call their own. Instead, the promise of the land is fulfilled under the New Covenant in a person.[88] The New Testament inaugural fulfilment of the land promise is realized in Jesus under the themes of rest[89] and inheritance.[90] Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28 ESV). Paul tells the Galatians that in Christ they are the inheritors of the Abrahamic promise: "You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you" (Gal 3:29 NLT).[91] God's first priority is the creation of a new people, a people who find their rest and inheritance in Christ.[92] He will only subsequently bring them to their new home.

The consummated fulfilment of the land promise will appear when Christ returns. The New Testament speaks of the New Heavens and New Earth by means of the language of rest and inheritance as well. Jesus uses the language of inheritance as he renews the promise of Ps 37: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5 ESV).[93] Paul, picking up on the Old Testament's expanded notions of the land, speaks of Abraham as inheritor of the world (*kosmos*, κόσμος, Rom 4:13).[94] The author of Hebrews sees in the theme of rest, not only present rest in Christ, but also a future rest

---

[88] Martin, *Promised Land*, 127; Burge, *Jesus and the Land*, chapter 8, para. 63–66.

[89] For *rest* as an Old Testament term for the land promise, see Deut 12:9–10.

[90] For *inheritance* as an Old Testament term for the land promise, see Num 32:19; Deut 12:9; Ps 105:11.

[91] Moo (*Galatians*, 256) suggests that because the context (Gal 3:23—4:5) contrasts slavery with sonship, 3:29 is about present blessings in Christ, that is, about the inaugurated inheritance rather than the consummated inheritance. Echevarria (*The Future Inheritance*, 116–21), on the other hand, appealing to allusions in Gal 3 to Ps 2, identifies the inheritance of Gal 3:29 only with the New Heavens and New Earth (i.e., for Echevarria, the inheritance is "not yet," without any "already").

[92] Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 836.

[93] On the basis of the eschatological orientation of Ps 37 and the future tense verbs of Matt 5:4–9, Martin (*Promised Land*, 124–25) argues that Matt 5:5 refers to the New Heavens and New Earth; Burge (*Jesus and the Land*, chapter 3, para. 32) links the inheritance to the repeated term, "heaven" (Matt 5:3, 8, 10, 12).

[94] Martin (*Promised Land*, 134–37) and Echevarria (*The Future Inheritance*, 142–49) understand this to be a reference to the New Heavens and New Earth.

yet to be entered (Heb 3:7—4:13).[95] The inheritance of the patriarchs was ultimately a heavenly country (Heb 11:8–16). Similarly Peter speaks of "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (1 Pet 1:4 ESV). Schreiner comments on this text: "Peter. . . considers entrance into the land typologically so that it forecasts possession of the heavenly inheritance."[96] The final inheriting of the land promise is revealed at Rev 21:7: "the one who conquers will have this heritage" (ESV). Those who overcome inherit the blessings of the descended New Jerusalem, including its river of the water of life (Rev 21:6; 22:1). Revelation 21–22 present the ultimate vision of the meaning of the original land promise to Abraham.[97]

In between the inaugurated and consummated fulfilment of the land promise, Christians are to be content in this life with its suffering. Instead of being surprised by the lack of a settled prosperity here, they must come to terms with the fact that they are "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Heb 11:13 ESV). The author of Hebrews calls on God's people to go to Christ "outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Heb 13:13–14 ESV).[98] This earth will be shaken (Heb 12:25–29), so we ought not to expect to find ultimate security on it.[99] Our orientation is to be to the future: "People who say such things [as the Patriarchs] show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one" (Heb 11:14–16 NIV). MacBride

---

[95] See Martin's (*Promised Land*, 141–43) discussion of Heb 3:7–4:13.
[96] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 606.
[97] Martin, *Promised Land*, 153–57.
[98] See also Heb 11:10, 13–16.
[99] Martin, *Promised Land*, 147.

comments: “People who embrace their ‘outsider’ existence as aliens and exiles do so because they have the hope of a better place to call home.”[100] Just as Yahweh did not grant the praying Levites a return to the delightful scene described in Neh 9:24–25, so also the church is to long for what lies ahead. This vision has the power to shape the identity of God’s people, as they heed Peter’s challenge: “what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:11–13 ESV).[101] The church’s confident expectation of the age to come gives them courage to persevere through their present trials.[102]

Conclusion

One of the most striking features of Neh 9–10 is the silence of Yahweh in response to the request for a renewed ability to benefit from the bounty of the land. Despite the fact that the prayer of Neh 9 functioned as the next appropriate step in a Deuteronomic cycle, despite the fact that the people desired to act like faithful Abraham, and despite their commitment to obey the laws by which one can live, God did not restore the benefits of the land to the Jews. Instead, God’s metanarrative was moving forward to the first coming of Christ. The inaugural fulfilment of the land promise was realized in Jesus Christ, our rest and our inheritance. Furthermore, the church looks forward to the

---

[100] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 70.

[101] Commenting on this passage, Davids (*2 Peter and Jude*, 293) challenges his readers: “The problem contemporary followers of Jesus have is not that they are looking forward too much to the future world, but that they are not looking forward enough to it. We tend to conform our lifestyles to this present age, trying to live functionally with respect to it, which is short-sighted since this age is passing away.”

[102] None of this, of course, denies the value of also looking back to God’s faithfulness in the past. Despite their misplaced longing for the age of the Conquest, the praying Levites of Neh 9 do well to appreciate God’s mercy in time past. See, e.g., Ps 77:10–20; 1 Cor 15:24–25.

consummated fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant, to be realized at Christ's return. For these reasons, the church today has all the more reason to remain steadfast under trial and joyful in hope.

The Golah community recommitted to obedience despite their discouragement at being oppressed by their Persian overlords. They established the *ʾamanah* on the basis of the principle of retribution, but also out of confidence in the divine grace and mercy recounted in Neh 9. The church has received that same grace and mercy even more fully with the revelation of Jesus Christ. The four stipulations of the *ʾamanah* provided the communal identity necessary because of the Jews' status as a minority religious group. Carried over into the New Testament context, these stipulations continue to distinguish the church from the world and to build the church's corporate solidarity. The final stipulation forms solidarity around the temple. The temple is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the centering hub on which the church builds her solidarity today.

Conclusion

Chapters 2 and 3 have laid the groundwork for the development of three sermons, one each from Ezra 4–6, Neh 1–6, and Neh 8–10. The commonality between these texts is the presence of external forces placing pressure on the community of God's people. Using Wright's six types of links from Old Testament to New Testament, the present chapter has made connections from the three Ezra–Nehemiah texts to the New Testament. Ezra 4–6 recounts God's upending obstruction to the building of the temple. This was the fulfillment of the words of the prophets, as is also the church's role as the New Covenant temple. Nehemiah 1–6 describes Nehemiah's resistance to undeserved shame. While

accepting shame with Christ, the church today also resists undeserved shame in light of the Final Judgment, when God will dispense eternal shame and honor and thus set all things right. Nehemiah 8–10 recounts the renewed commitment to obedience that the Jews made while suffering at the hands of the Persians. Likewise, the church today perseveringly obeys while looking forward to the consummated fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise to be revealed at Christ's Second Advent. These New Testament texts augment Ezra–Nehemiah's resistance training material. In the next dissertation chapter, I will make use of the exegesis and New Testament connections discussed above in order to develop three sermons, one from each of these texts.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEVELOPING SERMONS FROM SELECTED PASSAGES IN EZRA–NEHEMIAH

For the sake of resistance training, Chapter 2 presents a narrative analysis of three selections from Ezra–Nehemiah. Chapter 3 makes connections from those selections to the New Testament. The present chapter describes the development of three sermons, one from each of the biblical selections. This chapter makes use of Timothy Keller's homiletical theory and methodology. The first portion of this chapter unpacks Keller's homiletics under three headings: expository preaching, preaching to the heart, and his specific steps for writing an expository sermon.[1] The second section of the chapter details my appropriation of Keller in the development of three sermons, one from each of the Ezra–Nehemiah selections. The final section of the chapter presents homiletical reflections based on my experiences while working on the present project.

Homiletical Theory and Methodology

Today's homiletical landscape consists of three basic camps—the traditional, the New Homiletic, and the radical postmodern.[2] Put simply, the traditional approach emphasizes the propositional, and the New Homiletic the poetic.[3] Keller's homiletics is grounded in

[1] Given its focus on resistance training, this dissertation does not work with Keller's emphasis on evangelistic preaching.

[2] Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 149.

[3] Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 59–72, 146–49; the radical postmodern includes approaches such as roundtable discussion, typically of ethical matters.

the traditional approach but has much in common with the New Homiletic.[4] We see this both in his approach to expository preaching and in his notion of preaching to the heart.

Expository Preaching

Keller defines expository preaching as preaching in which the sermon emerges from a single passage of Scripture and emphasizes the priorities that arise from that passage.[5] He contrasts this with topical preaching in which a sermon is developed from multiple texts.[6] He sees expository and topical preaching as two ends of a continuum.[7] Both have their place in a preacher's repertoire.[8] Keller commends expository preaching because of the way that it channels the dynamism of God's written communication to the hearers.[9] Keller defends this notion both from Scripture and his practical experience. As to the Scriptural evidence, the author of Hebrews observes that centuries after its original use, Ps 95 remained "living and active . . . able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12 NRSV).[10] Thus, humility is required, because rather than one's own opinions, the preacher is speaking "the very words of God" (1 Pet 4:11 NIV).[11] As to his own observations, Keller writes, "I have seen hundreds of specific cases in which the Bible itself contained a power to penetrate people's spiritual indifference and defenses in a way that went far beyond my powers of public speaking."[12] For Keller then, an

---

[4] See, for example, Keller's (*Preaching*, 41–42) critique of a rigidly propositional approach to exposition and his (*Preaching*, 307–8) explicit, even if selective, praise of elements of the New Homiletic.

[5] Keller, *Preaching*, 29–32.

[6] Keller, *Preaching*, 30–31.

[7] Keller, *Preaching*, 31–32.

[8] Keller, *Preaching*, 29–32.

[9] Keller, *Preaching*, 32–35, 45–46.

[10] Keller, *Preaching*, 35. In this context, Keller also cites Jer 23:29: "Is not my word like fire. . . and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (NRSV).

[11] Keller, *Preaching*, 20.

[12] Keller, *Preaching*, 35.

expository sermon is both a transmission of content and an event in which God addresses the human heart.

Preaching to the Heart

Keller insists that preachers should seek to address congregants' deepest desires and longings, as well as their imagination—in a word, the heart.[13] While some authors equate the heart with emotions and contrast it with the mind, Keller sees the heart as something deeper.[14] He defines the heart as "the seat of the mind, will, and emotions."[15] Contemplating Jesus' words, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21 NIV), Keller associates the heart with a person's values, loves, and commitments.[16] If an individual knows about a reality intellectually, but that reality has not subjectively captured their imagination, they do not yet truly know it.[17] In sum,

> Whatever captures the heart's trust and love also controls the feelings and behavior. What the heart most wants the mind finds reasonable, the emotions find valuable, and the will finds doable. It is all-important, then, that preaching move the heart to stop trusting and loving other things more than God. What makes people into what they are is the order of their loves—what they love most, more, less, and least. That is more fundamental to who you are than even the beliefs to which you mentally subscribe. Your loves show what you actually believe in, not what you say you do. People, therefore, change not by merely changing their thinking but by changing what they love most. Such a shift requires nothing *less* than changing your thinking, but it entails much more. So the goal of the sermon cannot be merely to make the truth clear and understandable to the mind, but must also be to make it gripping and real to the heart. Change happens not just by giving the mind new arguments but also by feeding the imagination new beauties.[18]

---

[13] Keller, *Preaching*, 158. Similarly, Vanhoozer (*Hearers and Doers*, 93–94, 103–13) calls on preachers to address congregants' desires, their existential bearings, that is, their imagination.

[14] Keller, *Preaching*, 157–59.

[15] Keller, *Preaching*, 158.

[16] Keller, *Preaching*, 159.

[17] Keller, *Preaching*, 163–64.

[18] Keller, *Preaching*, 159–60; emphasis in original.

Keller presents seven means of preaching to the heart. First, the preacher should preach affectionately.[19] This requires a genuine affection for both God and the congregation.[20] The preacher's own heart needs to be full of an authentic spirituality.[21] Keys here include praying, yielding to God's grace, and fleeing the temptation to be self-promoting and performance oriented.[22] Second, the preacher should preach imaginatively.[23] "The imagination is more affected by images than by propositions."[24] This means that sermon illustrations should link a cognitive proposition with a sensed experience.[25] "Because of our fallenness, spiritual realities are not as real to us as sense experiences."[26] A reminder of a sense experience can help the listener better understand the spiritual reality and incline their hearts to love it more.[27]

Third, the preacher should preach wondrously.[28] In other words, the sermon should evoke wonder. The Resurrection of Christ and the New Heavens and the New Earth, for example, are realities that resonate with profound human longings for justice, love, immortality, and timelessness, the sorts of human intuitions that fantasy stories approach.[29] Fourth, the preacher should preach memorably.[30] This requires insightful content and orality (which entails including less content than in written communication). Fifth, the preacher should preach Christocentrically. In this regard, Keller especially

---

[19] Keller, *Preaching*, 166.
[20] Keller, *Preaching*, 168.
[21] Keller, *Preaching*, 10–12, 166–69, 191–210.
[22] Keller, *Preaching*, 168–69, 200–5; see also Knowles, *We Preach Not Ourselves*, 259–61.
[23] Keller, *Preaching*, 169–75.
[24] Keller, *Preaching*, 169.
[25] Keller, *Preaching*, 169–71.
[26] Keller, *Preaching*, 169.
[27] Keller, *Preaching*, 173.
[28] Keller, *Preaching*, 175–77.
[29] Keller, *Preaching*, 175–77.
[30] Keller, *Preaching*, 177–78.

warns against sermons that are merely moralistic. At the same time, Keller, like Wright,[31] cautions against being so keen to get to Christ that the preacher may miss what the text is actually about.[32] Furthermore, Keller does have a place for the ethical in preaching.[33]

Sixth, the preacher should preach practically. In this regard, Keller warns against a tendency to specialize only in those modes of applications that fit the preacher's temperament. We should be open to using words of warning, encouragement, comfort, and exhortation.[34] At another place, Keller adds a seventh means of preaching to the heart. The preacher should preach narratively. By *narratively*, a term that Keller does not use,[35] I represent Keller's point that a sermon should have movement.[36] Movement means that the sermon begins with a problem[37] and that there is suspense that builds toward a climax.[38] Keller emphasizes that in the case of preaching from biblical narratives, the sermon must not convey less than the propositional import of the text, but that alone will not accurately represent the text; the drama of the story is part of its meaning and its effect.[39]

---

[31] Wright, *How to Preach*, 53–60.

[32] Keller, *Preaching*, 66–67.

[33] For example, at one point Keller (*Preaching*, 184) details how in one of his own sermons he exhorts toward telling the truth as opposed to lying.

[34] Keller, *Preaching*, 186.

[35] I use this term for the sake of parallelism with the six adverbs that Keller does use.

[36] Keller, *Preaching*, 228–35. Keller references Eugene Lowry in this regard; see for example, Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 124–25. Miller ("Narrative Preaching," 114–15) and Mathewson (Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching*, 148) recommend movement in sermons based on narrative texts.

[37] With respect to identifying a problem, in addition to Lowry, Keller mentions Chapell's "Fallen Condition Focus." See Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 28–33.

[38] Keller, *Preaching*, 307–8. The sermons I have developed as part of this dissertation move toward a climax. However, this is one area where my approach diverges from Keller. Keller's evangelistic preaching is known for the way he would make Jesus the climax of his sermons. He would address a cultural idol and then show how Jesus meets human longings better that that cultural idol can. Keller explains this approach at multiple points in his book on preaching (*Preaching*, 56–63, 93–120, 178–79, 184–85, 230–40). This approach fits Keller's call to be an evangelist in New York City. My circumstances are different and so my approach focuses more on the main points of the Old Testament text.

[39] Keller, *Preaching*, 305–8.

Does all this mean that there is a formula by which a preacher can guarantee congregational change? No. Effective preaching ultimately depends on "the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher."[40] At the same time, it is possible to explore the dynamics of what sermons do. In what follows, I apply Keller's "preaching to the heart" to resistance training. As an example, I consider a line from a classic resistance training text, Matt 10: "Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt 10:31 NRSV). At a basic level, this is a prohibition (something to do) and a statement of fact (something to know). In Keller's approach, a congregant's response to a prohibition and a statement will be dependent upon the condition of their heart, or in Vanhoozer's phrase, their *existential bearings*.[41] Because the heart is the seat of the will and the mind,[42] the prohibition and the statement can be preached to good effect only if the hearer is characterized by a fundamental wholehearted love for the Lord.[43] Logically prior to genuine reception of preached commands and propositions is the transformation of the heart that comes about by the ministry of the Gospel, the Spirit, and the Scriptures.[44]

To press further with this homiletical exploration, treasures remain to be unpacked from Matt 10:31. The verse is more than a mere prohibition and statement. Two observations are important here. First, the statement of fact uses a figure of speech.

---

[40] Keller, *Preaching*, 11.

[41] Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 104.

[42] Keller, *Preaching*, 158.

[43] Keller, *Preaching*, 235–240; Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 105–6. See also in this regard, Prov 4:23.

[44] The dynamics of existential Christian identity are complex. The relationship between (a) the preaching that calls for repentance and faith and (b) the gift of the New Birth is, of course, seen differently by Calvinists and Arminians. Nonetheless, both parties agree that a born-again Christian repeatedly needs to appropriate their New-Creation identity: "Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11 NRSV). To this, Vanhoozer (*Hearers and Doers*, 104–6) adds the problem of Christians whose imaginations have been taken captive by contemporary idols and ideologies.

Alternate perspectives on the value of sparrows (Matt 10:29) build toward a climactic statement about the value of God's people. The verse thus feeds the imagination with something to visualize and feel.[45] Preaching that reflects the poetic dimensions of the text is more likely to stir the heart than bare prohibitions and propositions alone. Second, the poetic statement of fact provides rationale for the prohibition. To the extent that the hearer grasps their value in the sight of God, he or she will reasonably renounce fear. "What danger can there be if God loves me?" This is a common dynamic in the Bible. Assuming the hearer's heart is in the right place, a cognitive element of the text motivates the hearer's behavior.[46] In the case of Matt 10:31, a poetic statement of fact grounds a prohibition. Logical and literary elements are both in play. Ultimately, the state of the human heart and the work of the Spirit are not under the control of the preacher. Thus, there are no guarantees. Nonetheless, the wise preacher makes use of a variety of forms of preaching to address the hearers' hearts, and upon that foundation to address their interrelating minds, wills, and emotions.

Keller's Three Steps for Writing an Expository Sermon

Keller lays out four steps for developing an expository sermon.[47] However, because his first step finds a counterpart in Chapter 2, the present chapter works only with Keller's final three steps. These are: choose a main sermon theme; develop a sermon outline; and flesh out the subpoints.[48] The following briefly unpacks Keller's three steps.

---

[45] Recalling Vanhoozer's (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 291) discussion of the diversity of what God is saying and doing in biblical texts.

[46] See Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 189.

[47] Keller, *Preaching*, 213–40.

[48] Keller, *Preaching*, 214. Keller's first step is to discern the goal of the text by means of a process of exegesis.

In Keller's model, the textual theme arising from exegesis need not become the homiletical theme in a strict one-to-one fashion. This is because the sermon will be pastoral, people-oriented.[49] To his paired concern for text and people, Keller adds the need to preach Christ and his salvation. This yields a series of three questions to be used in the development of a sermon theme. These three questions summon the preacher to identify: (a) the main idea of the text, (b) the pastoral aim of the sermon, and (c) the means by which the sermon will point to Christ.[50] On the basis of one's answers to these questions, the preacher then creates (d) a main theme for the sermon.[51] The use of a process such as this provides the preacher with a roadmap that helps prune out tangents and distractions for the sake of clarity in the sermon.[52] The description below of each of the three Ezra–Nehemiah sermons will answer these three questions and then present a main sermonic theme statement. The answer to the first question (text idea) and the third question (pointer to Christ) will draw upon dissertation chapters two and three, respectively.

Keller wants a sermon outline to have unity (everything supports a single theme), proportion (subunits have similar time and importance), order (each subsequent point builds on previous points), and movement (discussed above).[53] Attention to the development of the outline helps the preacher to remain true to the biblical text and to

---

[49] Keller, *Preaching*, 218–19.

[50] Keller, *Preaching*, 222–23. Keller divides the first of his three questions into two parts, drawing upon Haddon Robinson (*Biblical Preaching*, 21–22), namely, what is the text about, and what does the text say about what it is about? Meanwhile, the pairing of Keller's first and second questions approximates Thomas Long's focus and function statements, which Keller (*Preaching*, 298 n16) commends. In Long's (*The Witness of Preaching*, 127) terms, the focus is what the sermon is about, and the function names the hoped-for change created by the sermon in the lives of the hearers.

[51] Keller (*Preaching*, 223) recommends that this be a people-oriented, active, declarative sentence.

[52] Keller, *Preaching*, 42–44.

[53] Keller, *Preaching*, 224–25.

cull the peripheral.[54] Finally, Keller asks the preacher to flesh out the sermon subpoints. This involves adding "arguments, illustrations, examples, images, other supportive biblical texts, and other forms of practical application and rhetorical devices."[55] Having considered Keller's three steps for sermon development, in what follows I make use of them to develop three sermons from Ezra–Nehemiah.

Development of a Sermon from Ezra 4–6

Ezra 4–6 emphasizes the initiative of Yahweh in the overturning of opposition to temple-building. An inclusio framing the passage highlights the Jews' actions that cooperate with temple-building. Their twin actions of rebuffing adversarial neighbors (Ezra 4:3) and welcoming repentant newcomers (Ezra 6:21) maintain the holiness of the temple. The story's joyful conclusion asks the reader to esteem the initiative of Yahweh and the cooperation of his people.

Choose a Main Sermon Theme

(a) Main Idea of the Text: God is so committed to building his temple that he upends all opposition to it; God's people cooperate with what he is doing by rebuffing infiltrators and welcoming repentant sinners. (b) Pastoral Aim of the Sermon: This sermon aims to encourage believers with God's commitment to his temple-church; it will also challenge believers to cooperate with what God is doing by rebuffing and welcoming as appropriate. (c) Pointer to Christ: This sermon makes three links to the New Testament. First, I point out the typology by which the Old Testament temple points to Christ and his

[54] Keller, *Preaching*, 225.
[55] Keller, *Preaching*, 235.

church. Second, with respect to the prophetic word, I point out the apostolic word of Eph 2:20–22. Third, with respect to rebuffing and welcoming I mention John 17:14–23 and Rev 21:24–26. (d) Main Sermon Theme: Christians should be encouraged by the fact that God will build his temple-church, thus establishing his presence with them, even in the face of opposition.

Develop a Sermon Outline

To create movement within this sermon, I first identify a problem to be solved. The text readily admits three problems. First, there is the problem of the lack of God's presence. This is not emphasized in the text,[56] but it is the problem addressed by the construction of the temple and by the relational language (e.g., "their God," Ezra 5:5). Second, there is the problem of adversaries who wish to infiltrate the work on the temple (Ezra 4:1–2). Zerubbabel responds to the adversaries' overtures with a strong rebuff at Ezra 4:3. Third, there is an implicit temptation to isolationism; this is the problem addressed by means of the welcome mentioned at Ezra 6:21. The second problem listed above (infiltrators) is the one most explicitly stated in the text, and thus initially seems to be the best choice. However, the pairing of Ezra 4:3 and 6:21 suggests another possibility. Since both infiltration and isolationism have to do with external relations, a broader umbrella problem comes into view: the tension of life as a religious minority group inside a hostile cultural environment. I present this tension in the sermon introduction.

This sermon consists of five movements. The first three follow the plot line of the biblical story. The first movement, titled "Opposition," retells the events of Ezra 4. The

[56] It is present at Ezra 5:12.

second movement, titled, “Restart,” retells the events of Ezra 5:1—6:7. In these two sections of the sermon, there is significant movement from despair to hope. Resolution then appears in the third movement, “God’s Perspective.” This movement recounts Ezra 6:12 and 14. Tied as it is to the drama of the plot, this movement draws attention to God as the one who overthrows opposition to temple-building because of his purpose to dwell in the midst of his people.

The fourth movement of the sermon, titled “The Participation of God’s People,” breaks away from the main plot line to tease out the significance of the inclusio that surrounds the story, particularly the relationship between Ezra 4:3 and 6:21. It might seem that I have exhausted the drama of the text by the time I reach the end of the third movement, and in one sense that is true. However, I maintain tension as we enter the fourth movement by introducing a new problem, the temptation to isolationism. I then present the fourth movement’s imperatives as forms of cooperation with God’s temple-building work. Thus, the third movement highlights God, and the fourth movement asks for human cooperation with the divine purposes. This sermonic move from divine sovereignty to human responsibility creates unity in the sermon. The fifth movement, titled “Perfection and Joy,” reveals the final outcome that is attained when God’s purposes are accomplished and his people cooperate with those purposes.

Flesh Out the Subpoints

Application

Ezra 4–6 inspires today’s Christian with a vision of a God who is so committed to building his temple that he will overthrow infiltrators. This reality provides motivation

for the church to avoid the extremes of assimilation and isolation.[57] The church is to rebuff worldliness and to welcome repentant converts. I present application at the end of each sermon movement except the second. At the end of the third movement, I speak of God's intervention, the fact that he is building his church today (Matt 16:18). Furthermore, he will overturn enemies so that his presence can reside among his people. With respect to Keller's four modes of application, this is encouragement.

At the end of the fourth movement, I speak of the church's responsibility to rebuff and welcome. Christians might avoid isolation, for example, by means of hospitality. One way or another, we should welcome personal interactions with non-believers. In such settings, we avoid assimilation sometimes by speaking up about our faith. No matter the company we keep, our behavior should be a faithful expression of our loyalty to Christ. This application section follows Keller's exhortational mode of application.

Preaching to the Heart

The two highlights of this sermon are: (a) the strength of God's intentionality to build the temple, even in the face of opposition, and (b) the pairing of rebuffing and welcoming. With respect to God's intentionality, I seek to evoke a sense of wonder by emphasizing the remarkable similarities between the two exchanges of correspondence between Palestine and Persia, and yet their opposite effects. How could this happen but by divine intervention? I use an illustration about receiving a letter from a governmental taxation agency for the second time in a row. One would naturally assume the second letter to be

[57] Similarly, Beale (*New Testament Biblical Theology*, 644–47) argues that the church is the eschatological temple that God has been expanding, and that we are therefore to follow Christ's example and to continue to extend God's presence to others around us.

the same as the first. I also make use of the strength of the word "overthrow" (Ezra 6:12). With respect to the human responsibility, I seek to engage listeners' imaginations by means of an illustration relating to attending a sporting event to root for the away team. It takes courage to do this. One has to be willing to engage with people who have a different perspective, all while wearing the colors of the team to which one gives loyalty. This sermon asks listeners to renew a heart-level commitment to shunning the extremes of assimilation and isolation, that based on confidence in God's work of building his church.

Developing a Sermon from Nehemiah 1–6

Nehemiah 1–6 narrates the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Shame is a theme that runs throughout these chapters. The dominant problem in the passage is the shaming attempts brought about by Sanballat and Tobiah. The text emphasizes God's intervention, thwarting the enemies' plots and causing the wall to be built. Cooperating with what God is doing, his people properly fend off the threat of inappropriate shame by finding their sense of identity in their relationship with Yahweh. At the conclusion of the account, Yahweh brings shame on the heads of the Jews' enemies.

Choose a Main Sermon Theme

(a) Main Idea of the Text: God is committed to his people such that he intervenes in their distress by shaming those who shame them. (b) Pastoral Aim of the Sermon: This sermon aims to motivate God's people to not internalize the taunts of their enemies. God's people do this through prayerful, courageous faith in God, like that of Nehemiah. This sermon

includes two secondary points. First, the sermon instructs God's people to address shame before God through the confession of sin. Second, the sermon seeks to persuade God's people to live lives of integrity so as to avoid deserved shame. (c) Pointer to Christ: The primarily link to the New Testament made by this sermon regards the promise of Christ's return and the eschatological outcomes of honor for those who are united to Christ and shame for those who are not. Additionally, the sermon observes that Christians accept shame in fellowship with Christ, and that the New Testament also discusses prospective shame (1 Pet 4:15). (d) Main Sermon Theme: Christians should not internalize shame when they are derided for their faith in Christ. They properly avoid such shame by keeping their eyes fixed on God's commitment to his people and on his eschatological intervention.

Develop a Sermon Outline

Movement is created for this sermon by beginning with a problem to be solved. Nehemiah 1–6 presents three spiritual concerns: (a) deserved shame before God, (b) undeserved shame before people, and (c) deserved prospective shame before people. Because the text gives the most space to the second of these, that is the problem on which the sermon focuses. Because the conclusion of the sermon is dependent on spatial language for shame ("they fell greatly" Neh 6:16), I introduce spatial language early in the sermon, and point it out every time it shows up in the text. This adds to the poignancy of the conclusion.

The sermon consists of five movements. The first movement is slightly different from the others. It alone focuses on shame before God; in fact, I title it, "Shame before

God." This is treated as a preliminary matter—prior to addressing shame before people, one must have a harmonious relationship with God. The remaining four movements consider shame before people. The second movement, titled, "Shame before People," retells Neh 2:17–20. The third movement, titled, "Intensification," retells Neh 4. In this section, I emphasize two theocentric features of the text: Yahweh (not the apparently fearsome enemies) is "great and awesome" (Neh 4:14); and the relational emphasis communicated by the repeated phrase, "our God" (Neh 4:4, 9, 20). The fourth movement, based on Neh 5:1–13 and 6:10–14, is titled "Prospective Shame." This section introduces a secondary facet of shame and at the same time creates suspense by delaying the overall plot resolution. The fifth movement contains the overall resolution. It is titled, "Conclusion: God Shames the Shamers," and it retells Neh 6:15–16.

I use a vivid storytelling style especially for the retelling of Neh 4 and Neh 6:15–16. The sermon keeps the resolution concealed until the final movement. The retelling of Neh 6:16 within that closing movement functions as a dramatic high point of the sermon. That discussion emphasizes the intervention of God, a primary topic of the sermon.

Flesh Out the Subpoints

Application

This sermon's key point of application is that Christians ought not internalize undeserved shame. This will be developed at three different locations in the sermon, once each following the discussion of Neh 2, 4, and 6. Instead of internalizing shame, Christians should live openly and courageously as obedient servants and representatives of Christ. Two indicatives drive this imperative. First, we reframe mockery. If we are mocked, that

demonstrates that we are tied to Christ. Second, the reality of eschatological shame and honor inform us as to what sort of behavior is proper today.

This sermon also includes two secondary points of application. First, the sermonic discussion of Neh 1 calls upon God's people to address shame before God by means of the confession of sin. Second, the discussion of Neh 5:9 and 6:10–13 shows how prospective shame motivates us to live lives of integrity. With respect to Keller's modes of application, all of the topics above come across primarily as encouragement. However, I do move into an exhortational mode toward the end of the sermon, especially at the end of the sermon's fourth movement.

Preaching to the Heart

How does the preacher persuade the listener at a heart level to not succumb to internalizing undeserved shame? One means is to paint Nehemiah as a real human being whose courage comes across as admirable, even contagious and transferable. Another means is through tangible illustrations. I make use of several illustrations throughout this sermon. I compare the rubble in Jerusalem to an imaginary situation of Washington D.C. [or Ottawa] being reduced to rubble in our own day. I make use of a story about a struggling woman feeling prompted by the Holy Spirit to confront shame with the single word "no."[58] That simple word, "no" presents in as concise a form as possible how we should respond to the temptation to internalize undeserved shame.

To illustrate mockery today, I describe a situation close to me where a non-Christian described a Christian's beliefs as "your little book and your imaginary friend." I

[58] Liu, *Shame*, 59.

also use memorable language by repeating the taunt, “Oh, you’re one of them.” To create a sense of wonder with respect to the conclusion of the story, I make use of a foil. I raise the question of how it is that the hard-hearted Sanballat can be defeated so quickly. Why do the Jews’ enemies not mount a final attack on the builders? Why would they admit defeat instead of saying, “We’ll get you next time!”? In this light, the only reasonable explanation for the shaming of the shamers is divine intervention. Finally, I describe keeping one’s eyes on God’s eschatological intervention as “seeing what most people do not see” and provide an illustration regarding my nephew who understands used car values in a way that many others do not.

Developing a Sermon from Nehemiah 9–10

Nehemiah 9–10 presents the Golah community’s desire for the renewal of the gift of the land. The prayer of Neh 9 highlights the mercy of God and models confession of sin. The passage concludes without full resolution. Nonetheless, in Neh 10 the people recommit themselves to obedience to the Mosaic Law. To develop a single sermon about God’s people under external pressures,[59] this sermon focuses on the silence of God, the Jewish community’s recommitment to obedience despite their distress, and the specific legal stipulations to which they recommit themselves.

[59] The pressures faced by the church today are different from those faced by the returned exiles. The pressures that come from the post-Christendom West tend to be more variegated and more social, as compared to oppressive Persian taxation. At the same time, the pressures are analogous at three levels. Both are a form of suffering to some degree, suffering sourced externally. In both cases, God’s people are tempted to long for a scenario from the past (the Conquest, Christendom). In both cases, God’s people’s location within his redemptive plan requires that they look forward to the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.

Choose a Main Sermon Theme

(a) Main Idea of the Text: God has the right to do as he pleases with respect to the fulfilment of his promises to Abraham; while waiting for that fulfilment, God's people properly recommit themselves to holy living. (b) Pastoral Aim of the Sermon: This sermon challenges listeners to accept marginalization and to be a distinctly faithful people. (c) Pointer to Christ: This sermon makes two links to Christ. First, the church today awaits Christ's Second Coming and the consummated fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. Second, the sermon considers New Testament equivalents to the stipulations of the *ʾamanah*. (d) Main Sermon Theme: The church is to accept marginalization, confident that God is working out his purposes. In their marginalized state, the church should remain distinct in the world and prioritize their corporate commitment to Christ and his church.

Develop a Sermon Outline

This sermon consists of two main sections, titled "Frustration" and "Determination." This outline exploits the move in the text from Neh 9:37 to 9:38 [Heb. 10:1]. The first section develops the Jews' frustration (as slaves to Persia) and compares this to the contemporary church's potential frustration with post-Christendom culture. The second movement describes the Jews' recommitment to obedience and links that to the similar New Testament call to holy faithfulness on the part of the church.

The first half of the sermon presents the tragic story that moves from prosperity (Neh 9:24–25) to slavery (9:36-37). Frustrated with their subjugation to the Persians and their inability to fully enjoy the produce of the land, the Jews did not realize that they

lived inside a larger story. In analogous fashion, the church in the West today lives inside a story that is transitioning from Christendom to post-Christendom. We too need to recognize that we live inside a larger story. God is moving our story forward toward the Second Coming of Christ.

I transition to the second section of the sermon by asking, "What do you do when you are frustrated?" If, for example, we resort to some form of escapism, the text provides a better model. We should follow the example of the Jews' recommitment to obedience—their determination. The Mosaic stipulations of Neh 10:30–39 [Heb. 10:31–40] depict behavior appropriate for a minority group under pressure from external forces. Although the second half of the sermon is working with a list of legal stipulations, I explain the stipulations and their contemporary applications by means of stories and illustrations. I present the stipulations under three headings: (a) being a distinct people; (b) loving each other; and (c) being centered on the temple.

Flesh Out the Subpoints

Application

The application sections of this sermon fit under two broad umbrella headings. The first half of the sermon leads to the point that the church should accept marginalization because God is working out his larger story. I flesh out "accept marginalization" by saying that in its post-Christendom location, the church is not to be surprised, resentful, anxious, or in despair. Instead we are to live in confident hope. We are not to covet political clout, but rather to experience God's power in our weakness. The second half of the sermon presents a call to holiness. Building on the covenant commitments of Neh 10,

the church is to be a holy people. Working from Neh 10:30–31, the church's holiness is expressed by not assimilating to the world. Instead, the church is to be a people characterized by love (10:31b). Finally, working from Neh 10:32–39, God's people need to be centered on our New Covenant temple, Jesus Christ and his church. In this sermon, the indicative drives the imperative in the following way: the fact that God is sovereignly working out his purposes frees the church to obey him as they wait for the final fulfilment of those purposes. With respect to Keller's modes of application, the first half of the sermon warns against wrong responses to marginalization; the second half of the sermon encourages holy living.

Preaching to the Heart

The climactic moment of this sermon is the description of the move from frustration at 9:37 to commitment to obedience at 9:38 [10:1]. The sermon uses a foil to create a sense of wonder as the listener considers this shift. Our typical human patterns when we are frustrated help us recognize the heroic quality of the Jews' commitment to obedience in this context. Another significant point in the sermon is the fact that God is working out his purposes even when we can't see what they are. I present a tangible illustration (from the world of baseball) of the contrast between appearances and reality. For the sake of presenting memorable language, when discussing Neh 10:30–31, I appropriate the phrase, "Keep Austin Weird." The point is that the church should be distinct in the world. Finally, I close the sermon with an illustration about a commercial for an automobile. Advertising seeks to move us, to shape us. Because we could be tossed to and fro by the

forces of this world, we need to be grounded, to know who we are and what we are about. In these ways, the sermon seeks to address the hearts of the listeners.

Personal Homiletical Reflections

In the latter stages of this project, having delivered these sermons at the eight research sites, I took time to reflect on homiletical theories and methods. Contemplation of my research experiences yields seven observations. These observations function as a form of research output, to be integrated in Chapter 7 into the dissertation conclusions.

First, I observe the importance of the fact that God is a speaking God whose word issues forth into dynamic change. The prophetic word holds causative power in Ezra 4–6, and this reality has broader meaning for preaching in general. The turning point of Ezra 4–6—from one vantage point—comes at 6:6–7 when Darius instructs Tattenai to allow the work on the temple to proceed. I had been aware that Ezra 5:5 presents an earlier turning point; here the eye of God forestalls any injunction against building. In the course of the present study, however, I saw in a fresh light the importance of the word of God through Haggai and Zechariah (5:1). Their word yields the initial turning point in Ezra 4–6, a fresh iteration of the prophetic word that initiates the entire book (Ezra 1:1). Circumstances change when God speaks.

I have been a pastor and preacher at my own church for more than twenty years. Over that time, I have had the privilege of seeing congregants mature in Christ. I attribute that change to the work of God through various elements of our corporate life, including the way he speaks to the people through the ministry of preaching. Contrariwise, serving as a guest preacher in the course of this research project, I did not observe notable fruit

from my preaching. A guest preacher arrives and departs, properly risking the whole preaching venture on the unseen power of God's word. Such confidence, it seems to me, is actually required of all preachers and preaching. Whenever any preacher steps into any pulpit, a God-centered demeanor is required. Absolute confidence must be placed in the God who speaks. It is God's word of grace that "is able to build you up and give you the inheritance" (Acts 20:32 ESV). Because it is easy to give lip service to this notion, a reminder is ever necessary. I observe in myself the temptation to overemphasize human capacity. In the context of my preaching ministry, I need to be reminded again and again to depend solely upon God and the power of his word.[60]

Second, working with Ezra–Nehemiah has highlighted the importance of including both the dramatic/poetic and the logical in preaching. If sermons from Ezra–Nehemiah echo the text, they will incorporate both the narratival and the propositional. For example, Ezra 4–6 is a narrative, a captivating story. At the same time, the author presents universal principles in this text. One of these principles is the reality of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. To be sure, that relationship has narratival aspects to it. It was established over the course of time, and the meeting of its mutual relational responsibilities also plays out over time. Underneath those narratives, however, lies a fact that can be expressed as a proposition: Yahweh is the God of Israel (Ezra 4:1, 3; 5:1, 5; 6:14, 21, 22).

Similarly, Neh 1–6 is a narrative that includes general principles. The following discussion considers first narratival and then propositional facets of Neh 1–6. One of the

[60] Discussing the same topic, Stott ("Power Through Weakness," 135–38) relates an example from his own preaching (as a guest preacher) in which the power of God's word, working through the human weakness, accomplished change that was evident both in the immediate moment and in subsequent years.

functions of the narratival aspect of Neh 1–6 is that it represents to the congregation a world that they otherwise might not see. While listening to the audio recording of the Neh 1–6 sermon that I preached at one of the research sites, I asked myself what was going on in that preaching moment. The sermon was presenting to the congregation Nehemiah's unique ability to see that the enemies of God's people are not as strong as they appear. Sermons often do this: they provide an alternate lens through which to interpret the world. Sermons can thus confront the default vision of our secular age. The sermon paints a picture of a God who is actually present in a world such as ours.

In *The Screwtape Letters,* Lewis makes the same point from the back side. Screwtape, the demon, recounts a case in which he redirected the thoughts of a materialist whose reading caused him to contemplate the possibility of a spiritual world. In response, the demon suggested to the man that the ordinariness of everyday life is all there is to reality.

> I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an inalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" (by which he meant the bus and the newsboy) was enough to show him that all "that sort of thing" just couldn't be true.[61]

Congregants observe the contemporary equivalents of newsboys and buses all week long, but sermons open up a broader vista of the real—a view to what God is doing in the world.

Thus, the narratival is important. At the same time, as with Ezra 4–6, Neh 1–6 contains universal principles. At a key turning point, the ground of Nehemiah's summons to courage is the fact that Yahweh is "great and awesome" (Neh 4:14 [Heb. 4:8]).

---

[61] Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 13–14.

Fundamental realities such as the character of God lie underneath the Bible's stories. Without knowledge of such fundamental principles, on what basis will a congregant choose one narrative over another? Might not both narratives be reasonable options? Lewis' story about the temptation of the materialist addresses this point as well, highlighting the importance of the logical. The demon wants to bring mundane life to the fore in order to draw the materialist's attention away from logical argumentation. Screwtape warns that devils ought to avoid arousing humans' reason:

> By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient's reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favour, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experiences. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it "real life" and don't let him ask what he means by "real."[62]

When, diabolically, concerns regarding truth and falsity are set aside, our congregants can choose any narrative they prefer. Sermons present an alternate narrative, but they also point to universal principles by which one can recognize that the Bible's narrative is true, and the world's narratives are false. I see in Ezra 4–6 and Neh 1–6 a case for preaching the drama and poetry of the Bible as well as its logical propositions.

Third, one key issue in preaching from the Old Testament regards the level of importance given to the ethical and to the redemptive-historical. For example, Kuruvilla emphasizes divine demand, the call to upright behavior,[63] while Greidanus focuses on the flow of redemptive history that leads to the grace revealed in Christ.[64] My reflections upon Neh 9–10 indicate that both are necessary. If we were to view Neh 9–10 through a

---

[62] Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 12.
[63] Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!*, 151–209.
[64] Greidanus, *Preaching Christ*, 8–10, 230.

purely ethical lens, we would likely present Neh 9:32–37 as a model prayer: "Here is how we ought to pray in times of trouble." However, such an approach would ignore the fact that Yahweh does not grant this request. It is more in keeping with the whole of the canon to observe that this prayer request regards the land promise which will be fulfilled in stages with the Messiah's first and second Advents. Conversely, viewing Neh 9–10 through a purely redemptive-historical lens, a preacher might present the *ʾamanah* as an example of the law we cannot keep. In this presentation, however, the actual content of Neh 10 matters little.[65] Any law would serve as the high bar that points to Christ's fulfilment of the law and his substitutionary atonement on behalf of lawbreakers. My conclusion is that I best honor the content of the Bible if I have an eye for both the forest of the metanarrative and the trees of particular texts, including those which present moral demands.[66]

Fourth, this research project has encouraged me to consider my own strengths and weaknesses, and to seek to grow in areas where I am deficient. What follows is one example. My own tendency by temperament is to be somewhat cautious in preaching, and to lean on an explanatory mode—more teaching than preaching. However my study and reading regarding the requisite spirituality of the preacher and regarding the importance of preaching to the hearts of congregants had a subtle effect on me. My own preaching became slightly more affectionate. I began to feel more free to express in the pulpit my own affective response to the biblical text. This was not put on; it happened organically over time during the course of this program of study. I desire to continue to

[65] Granted, however, Neh 10 could also function in the redemptive model in accordance with the "second use" of the law, a standard of righteousness for believers who are growing in grace.

[66] See the similar conclusion of Price, "Comparing," 91–93; Boda (*Haggai, Zechariah*, 63–65) appeals to 2 Tim 3:15–17 to make the same case.

grow in the range of modes in which I can preach in order to increasingly reflect God and his word rather than merely my own temperament.[67]

Fifth, I found that Ricoeur's notion of *the world in front of the text*[68] is a valuable addition to the means of making application. Keller does not provide guidance for the specific means of working from the ancient biblical text to present day application. For years, I have made use of Chapell's *Fallen Condition Focus* for this task.[69] In the late stages of this project, however, prompted by advocacy from the writings of Vanhoozer[70] and Kuruvilla,[71] I experimented with Ricoeur's world in front of the text as a means of moving from then to now. What I found is that the two approaches complement each other. Put simply, Chapell's approach asks the question, "What is wrong with the world, such that this text needed to be written?" The move from then to now is made by means of discovered mutuality between the ancient wrongness and the present-day wrongness with the world. Ricoeur's approach asks, "What is right about the ideal world that this text is projecting?" The move from then to now is made by inhabiting that ideal world.[72]

An example will demonstrate how these two approaches can work as a pair. I begin with Nehemiah as a model of someone who trusts the Lord and therefore does not internalize undeserved shame. According to the fallen condition focus approach, Neh 1–6 was written because God's people are tempted to wrongly internalize shame (Christians today can experience this in mutuality with the original readers of Ezra–Nehemiah). Preachers taking this approach will have in mind a negative view of their congregants.

---

[67] Keller (*Preaching*, 186) makes a similar point with respect to modes of application.
[68] Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Humans Sciences*, 141–42.
[69] Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 30–36.
[70] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?," 104.
[71] Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!*, 39–43.
[72] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 331; Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 132–34.

Meanwhile, according to the world in front of the text approach, Nehemiah represents a world that Christians can enter into; they can live like Nehemiah. Preachers taking this approach will have in mind a positive view of their congregants. Neither the negative view nor the positive view is wrong in itself. The former is realistic given the sin nature, and the latter is realistic given the power of the Spirit. Using these two methods side by side can help the preacher—with respect to one's stance toward the congregation—avoid sliding too far in the direction of skepticism on the one hand or naïveté on the other.

Sixth, I received some helpful feedback regarding the sermons from focus group participants. In general, the focus group discussion centered on my question related to the participants' real lives. However, on a few occasions, participants said something that functioned as an observation about a sermon itself. At two different churches where I preached the Ezra 4–6 sermon, a focus group participant asked for my sermon manuscript.[73] I suspect that they found the sermon meaningful, but there was too much content to assimilate in one sitting. In retrospect, all three sermons attempted to cover too much textual ground. I wanted the dissertation to reflect something of Ezra–Nehemiah as a whole, which is why I avoided sermons based on a relatively brief text selection. Furthermore, my early exploration uncovered literary patterns encompassing large swaths of text. The down side of this, however, was that the sermons were content heavy. Another consequence was that space was tight to include Keller's means of preaching to the heart.

Regarding the Neh 1–6 sermon, I also had two focus group participants, one at each of two different churches, ask me after the sermon to clarify the definition of shame.

[73] These were the only two times that I received such a request.

I see two reasons for this request. First, as noted above, had I covered less content in the sermon, I would have had more time to explain and illustrate the meaning of shame. Second, such explanation is necessary because we live in an individualistic society, and thus shame is not recognized and discussed as much as in more collectivist societies.[74]

I received feedback from two focus group participants who heard the Neh 1–6 sermon the very first time I preached it. Both found the sermon structure to be confusing. They processed my first two headings (Shame before God, Shame before People) as propositional points, rather than descriptors of scenes in a narrative. That made the subsequent narratival headings seem out of place to them. In response, on the subsequent occasions that I preached from Neh 1–6, I presented the headings in such a ways as to highlight the narrative structure of the entire sermon. The problem the first time was that I was holding certain unspoken assumptions and thus failed to properly hear the sermon through the ears of a listener.

Seventh, to give a brief preview of Chapter 5, I discovered that interviewing congregants for the sake of relevant sermons is an invaluable process. My normal process of growth in understanding people is informal. I have been a pastor in the same church for more than twenty years, and I have been getting to know some of my congregants for that long. However, by formally interviewing sixty people, I learned new things. Two examples will suffice. These both are discrete experiences that at a surface level I knew occurred among evangelical Christians. However, hearing face to face about these scenarios made an impression on me. First, two public school staff members[75] described

[74] I preached the Neh 1–6 sermon at three research sites. The site at which no one asked me to clarify the definition of shame was the site at which the majority of the congregants are Asian.

[75] One at one research site, the other at another; one an administrator, the other a teacher.

interactions with colleagues or students who actively participate in and vocally promote occult or spiritualist practices. Second, two mothers[76] shared their own emotional strain brought about by the holidays in scenarios where there is some degree of tension or distance between them and their non-believing adult children. Out of these conversations, I have a sense of what these experiences are like that goes beyond mere theoretical cognizance. This sort of awareness will help my preaching over time.

Conclusion

The three sermons, summarized succinctly, concern God establishing his presence, his shaming of shamers, and his control over history. In each case, there is a fitting response from God's people: the rebuff and the welcome, not internalizing shame, and distinctive living. The three full sermon manuscripts may be found in the dissertation appendices. My personal homiletical reflections at the close of the present chapter are integrated into the entire project in Chapter 7.

[76] One at one research site, the other at another.

CHAPTER FIVE: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The field work component of this dissertation is driven by the requirement that preachers are to grow over time in their understanding of people.[1] The present dissertation chapter is motivated by Stott's articulation of this point:

> The best preachers are always diligent pastors, who know the people of their district and congregation, and understand the human scene in all its pain and pleasure, glory and tragedy. And the quickest way to gain such an understanding is to shut our mouth (a hard task for compulsive preachers) and open our eyes and ears. . . . We need, then, to ask people questions and get them talking. We ought to know more about the Bible than they do, but they are likely to know more about the real world than we do. So we should encourage them to tell us about their home and family life, their job, their expertise and their spare-time interests. We also need to penetrate beyond their doing to their thinking. What makes them tick? How does their Christian faith motivate them? What problems do they have which impede their believing or inhibit them from applying their faith to their life? The more diverse people's backgrounds, the more we have to learn. It is important for us to listen to representatives of different generations as well as of different cultures, especially of the younger generation. . . . Humble listening is indispensable to relevant preaching.[2]

This chapter presents the fruit of my efforts to ask questions of congregants and to humbly listen to their responses.

This dissertation project seeks to help pastors provide resistance training by preaching from biblical minority-group literature, specifically Ezra–Nehemiah. In order to listen to evangelical Christians who sit under sermons from such texts, during the summer of 2023 I conducted eight focus group sessions. These conversations probed the

[1] Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 216–17, 252; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 195–96; Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 48; Bettler, "Application," 347–48.

[2] Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 192.

participants' experiences as a religious minority group in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada.

I recruited eight local churches to serve as research sites. At each site, on a Sunday morning, I preached one of the three Ezra–Nehemiah sermons developed in the preceding dissertation chapters. Using the sermon as a springboard for discussion, I then conducted a focus group interview at each church.[3] I analyzed the transcripts of the audio recordings of the focus group interviews using a mixed methods approach to data analysis. This dissertation chapter describes the qualitative research methodology, my reflexivity, and the analysis of the focus group transcripts.

Methodology

Three methodological issues are discussed here: the means of recruiting research sites and participants, the nature of the questioning route used in the sessions, and the methodology for the qualitative data analysis.

Recruiting Research Sites and Focus Group Participants

The Eight Research Sites

Before considering the focus group participants themselves, we must consider the research sites where I interviewed the participants. During the spring and summer of 2023, I approached approximately 50 churches, asking if I could conduct research in their congregation. I limited myself to evangelical churches. Among evangelical churches, my

[3] The point of the focus group was not to ask for an evaluation of the sermon. Instead, the application sections of the sermons served as a jumping off point. The essence of my question to focus group participants was: "In the sermon I gave you some ideas based on my experience, but tell me now, what is your real-life experience of interacting with the non-Christian world?"

goal was to gain a breadth of sites, in terms of denomination, location, and, by extension of location, ethnicity. I approached churches from a range of denominations.[4] I approached only small to medium sized churches. In no case did I approach a church that I knew to have a regular Sunday attendance of more than 250 people or a large pastoral staff. My rationale was that a church with a large congregation and large staff would be less likely to need pulpit supply.

My recruiting process yielded eight research sites. The denominational affiliations of these[5] are as follows: The Evangelical Free Church of America (three sites); The Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (one site); The Presbyterian Church in America (one site); Plymouth Brethren (one site); Independent Baptist (one site); non-denominational (one site).[6]

The geographical locations of the research sites are as follows: one in New York City, one in Philadelphia, three sites in Upstate New York, and one each in New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Ontario. The population density of the communities in which the research sites are located is summarized in table 1.[7]

Table 1: Population Density	**Urban**	**Urban/Suburban**	**Suburban**	**Rural**
Number of Churches	2	3	2	1

[4] Not including the eight churches that became research sites (their affiliations are listed below), I approached one or more churches from each of the following denominations: American Baptist Churches USA, The Assemblies of God, Anglican Church in North America, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, The Southern Baptist Convention, Venture Church Network, independent Baptist, independent Congregationalist, and non-denominational churches.

[5] In the following discussion I do not identify the eight churches by name because I promised anonymity and privacy to the focus group participants.

[6] The non-denominational site is largely influenced by the Baptist and the Congregationalist traditions.

[7] The urban/suburban category consists of churches located in (a) a densely populated suburb immediately adjacent to Toronto, Ontario; (b) a town in New Jersey located in the most densely populated region of that state; and (c) a densely populated district of a small city in Upstate New York.

Each of the research sites is a small church. Although I only approached smaller churches, among the churches that I approached, the eventual research sites skewed toward the smaller sized churches among that set. The average attendance of the eight churches on the Sundays I preached was forty-five. The range was from eighty-five to ten worshippers.[8]

The Focus Group Participants

As part of their evaluation of the conclusions of this dissertation, readers will want to understand why certain congregants at each research site attended the focus group and others did not. The process of recruitment was overseen by one or more pastors or elders of each church. According to Morgan, "recruitment problems are the single most common source of failure in focus groups."[9] For that reason, I asked the leadership of each church to recruit participants in a way that they felt made most sense for their setting. The details of the process varied from church to church. At four research sites, an email or text message was sent to all members of the congregation. The attendees self-selected by responding to that invitation. In one of those four cases, the church leadership communicated a qualification: in order to attend the focus group, a congregant was required to hold a job in a secular workplace. At two research sites, the focus group discussion filled the slot of a sermon discussion or adult Sunday School class that was already part of that church's normal Sunday schedule. In these cases, a majority of those who heard the sermon also attended the focus group. At the other two research sites, the

[8] At least four of the eight churches were streaming their worship service live online (including the church with only ten in-person worshippers); in that sense attendance was slightly larger than what is indicated here.

[9] Morgan, *Focus Groups*, 54.

church leadership invited one small subset of the congregation to the focus group interview. In one of these two cases, the only people invited were members of a small discipleship group that already was meeting on a regular basis.

The size of each group was to some degree out of my control. Focus group literature recommends a group size of between approximately four and twelve people.[10] Krueger and Casey, for example, recommend a group size of six to eight participants.[11] The analysis of 77 focus groups by Nyumba et al. found a median of 10 participants per focus group.[12] In my project, there were a total of sixty-four focus group participants and an average group size of eight. The smallest focus group had three participants, and the largest twelve.[13]

At each focus group interview, I asked the participants to complete an anonymous demographic survey. The results of this survey provide a picture of the aggregate makeup of the interview participants by sex, age, and race/ethnicity. Of the sixty-four participants, thirty-eight participants were male (59%) and twenty-six were female (41%). The balance between male and female participants was approximately even at six of the research sites. The sex imbalance thus arises from two sites. At the first of the two anomalous sites, the ratio of men to women was five-to-one, and at the second it was three-to-one.

Table 2 shows the makeup of the group of participants by age.

Table 2: Age	**Number of Participants (total=64)**	**Percentage**
Age 13–17	2	3%
Age 18–29	18	28%
Age 30–39	15	23%
Age 40–49	8	13%

[10] Hopkins, "Thinking Critically," 529–31.
[11] Krueger and Casey, *Focus Groups*, 5, 10.
[12] Nyumba et al., "Use of Focus Group Discussion," 20, 27.
[13] These figures only include participants who spoke during the session.

Age 50–59	6	9%
Age 60–69	9	14%
Age 70+	6	9%

The data above shows that approximately one-half of the focus group participants were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-nine. This anomaly may be explained as follows. Of the thirty-three participants in that age range, twenty-five were at three research sites. In the first of these sites, the church is in a college town and has a robust ministry to students; in the second case, the church leadership invited to the focus group only a previously existing discipleship group consisting primarily of young adults; and in the third case, the overall makeup of the congregation at that research site skews young.

Table 3 shows the makeup of the group of participants by race/ethnicity.

Table 3: Race/Ethnicity	**Number of Participants (total=64)**	**Percentage**
White	22	34%
Black	17	27%
Asian (but not South Asian)	7	11%
South Asian	6	9%
Hispanic or Latino	10	16%
Multi-racial	2	3%

The data above indicates that I succeeded in my attempt to recruit several churches with a degree of ethnic diversity. As recommended by Stott in the quotation at the opening of this chapter, by means of the focus groups I was able to listen to people in the younger generations and people of cultures different from my own.

The Questioning Route in the Focus Group Sessions

I used a semi-structured interview route[14] to moderate the focus group sessions. I began with an open-ended question, which was typically some variation of the following: "In what types of situations do you find it challenging to interact with the non-Christian culture around you?"[15] In many cases, that single question generated a lengthy series of responses. From time to time, I would ask a clarifying question. I generally closed out the session by asking something to this effect: "Is there anyone who wants to say something who has not had a chance to speak, or is there someone who would like to come at this topic from a perspective we haven't heard yet?" When the sermon under discussion was the one from Neh 1–6, I asked, "Can anyone share an experience or scenario where you felt the temptation to be embarrassed about being a Christian?" Afterward, I moved to the question listed above about what they find to be challenging. The focus group sessions lasted fifty-five minutes on average. The range was between thirty and seventy minutes.

Data Analysis Methodology

In what follows, I use a mixed-methods approach to data analysis, considering the data through three different lenses.[16] I make use of content analysis, thematic analysis, and

---

[14] Robson & McCartan (*Real World Research*, 285–86) and Osmer (*Practical Theology*, 63) distinguish between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured approaches to interviewing.

[15] My questioning route was developed through what Morgan (*Focus Groups*, 45–46) calls an "emergent design." At the first two focus groups, I used a more structured questioning route, and I asked, "Where are you tempted to assimilate to culture?" I discovered that participants had a difficult time answering that question. Thus I shifted to asking a more broad question about what they find challenging in their interactions.

[16] Swinton and Mowat (*Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 48–49, 65–66) recommend triangulation—including the use of more than one analytic technique—as a means of establishing the validity of practical theological research. Another form of triangulation appears in this dissertation by means of the comparison in Chapter 6 to the work of MacBride. Brinkmann and Kvale (*InterViews*, 283) add that the moral integrity and practical wisdom of the researcher are also important keys to validity in qualitative research.

narrative analysis. These approaches are defined below. The analysis process begins, however, with coding.

Coding

The eight focus groups yielded approximately six and half hours of recorded audio, which I then transcribed. I used Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software[17] to assist the coding and the analysis of the transcripts. Coding is the process of assigning identifying labels to discrete portions of the transcripts.[18] My coding methodology included a mix of an inductive and a deductive approach.[19] I read through the transcripts multiple times, seeking to honor the perspectives of the speakers. At the same time, on the basis of prior reading, I had certain categories of North American cultural patterns in mind (individualism, relativism, consumerism, etc.), and these also informed my creation of codes.

Content Analysis

"Content analysis involves establishing categories and then counting the number of instances when those categories are used in a particular item of text."[20] This adds a quantitative facet to what is otherwise a qualitative study. In the analysis below, I use content analysis to reveal which topics were raised most often by the focus group participants. Those raised most often are then subjected to thematic analysis. I also use

---

[17] Typically identified by the acronym CAQDAS. I used NVivo 14.

[18] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 4.

[19] Or, using Brinkmann and Kvale's (*InterViews*, 227–28) terminology, a mix of data-driven and concept-driven coding.

[20] Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 120.

content analysis within the thematic analysis discussion in order to demonstrate the prevalence among participants of certain subthemes.

Thematic Analysis

When a researcher organizes, reorganizes, merges, and splits codes, a group of broader umbrella codes, called themes, emerges. Thematic analysis explores "within and across the themes."[21] This exploration includes identifying relationships between themes and patterns running throughout them. As recommended by Robson and McCartan, in my thematic analysis below I provide quotations from focus group participants to illustrate my findings.[22]

Narrative Analysis

In narrative analysis, the researcher examines a story told by a focus group participant. The researcher notes if the narrative follows an archetypal plot motif, such as a comedy or a tragedy.[23] Attention is given to the setting of the story.[24] The sequence of events is traced and the types of links between events are identified.[25] The researcher looks for conflict, a complicating moment, a climax, and other key turning points and conclusions.[26] Unexpected details in the way the story is told are worthy of note.[27] Does

---

[21] Robson, *Real World Research*, 476.

[22] Robson, *Real World Research*, 478

[23] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 158; Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 133–34, 140. "Comedy" in this context means a story with a happy ending; see Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 49.

[24] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 72.

[25] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 72.

[26] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 72–73; Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 156–58; Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 132–41.

[27] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 156.

the story contain a repeated motif?[28] Is it told from a unique point of view?[29] As recommended by Creswell and Poth, I close out each narrative below with a final interpretation of its meaning.[30]

Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research is intended to disclose ways that the researcher influenced the research. The following discussion presents two considerations in that regard. First, in the early stages of this project, I assumed that I would be able to locate focus group participants' experiences within set categories of non-Christian ideologies. Early on in the project, I created a list of attributes of contemporary Western culture. I did so on the basis of reading I was doing[31] and on the basis of my own experiences in our culture. The list included ideologies and influences such as: individualism, relativism, the temptation to make politics one's "religion," tribalism, hedonism, sexual immorality including LGBTQ ideology, the inordinately therapeutic and overprotective mindset that has arisen from Western prosperity, consumerism, scientific materialism, secularism, Christian nationalism, ethnocentrism, and cynicism (excessive distrust of institutions). I listened to focus group participants through the lens of this list. Halfway through my travels to different churches I came to recognize one limitation of this approach. Because I was tuning in for ideologies, I observed something in a couple of the focus groups that should have been fairly obvious, but instead came as a surprise to me. In both the third and fifth focus group interviews, the first person to speak described an intense form of

---

[28] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 157.
[29] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 158.
[30] Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 73.
[31] Some of this reading is reflected in the literature review.

tension with the non-Christian world. In both cases this tension was experienced in the context of a personal relationship with an individual in their immediate family. I saw in a new way that Christians don't feel pressure from ideologies; they feel pressure from persons. Those persons (spouses, children, bosses, peers, etc.) may *represent* ideologies. There can also be impersonal pressures (media influences, for example), but the focus group participants with whom I interacted indicated that the strongest forces that press in upon them are three-dimensional, flesh and blood people with whom they have relationships.

Second, during the process of the field research, at one point I changed something in my sermons, wondering if this change would have an influence on the focus groups. In all eight of the sermons I preached, in the application sections of the sermons, I addressed a variety of contemporary issues. In the first four sermons, one of the application issues I mentioned was LGBTQ ideology. I always mentioned this briefly. For example, at both the second and fourth research sites, I said something to this effect: "One marker of the move to post-Christendom was the 2015 Obergefell decision, a decision saying that the definition of marriage that we find in the Bible is not going to be the definition of marriage in our culture." In those two sermons I did not say anything else about sexuality or marriage. Upon completion of the fourth focus group interview, I recognized that LGBTQ ideology had been raised in all four focus group sessions to that point. No other single issue had been raised as often. This was the case, even though I had devoted more time in the application sections of the sermons to other topics. At that point I decided to make a change. At the final four research sites, I purposefully did not say anything at all about LGBTQ issues in the sermons. This, however, made no difference. LGBTQ issues

were raised to the same degree or even more so at the final four research sites. The data analysis bears that out, and it is to that analysis that this discussion now turns.

Data Analysis

Content Analysis

The analysis here considers two overarching categories: (a) Non-Christian ideologies and behaviors that provoke conflict with Christians, and (b) Christian responses to this conflict. The second category is further broken down into affective responses and behavioral responses. This yields a total of three categories. What follows is content analysis of the transcripts in these three areas. Table 4 presents the tally of the number of occurrences of non-Christian ideology or behavior patterns mentioned by focus group participants.

Table 4: Non-Christian Ideology or Behavior Pattern	**Number of sites at which this was mentioned (out of a possible 8)**	**Percentage of total participants who mentioned this (*N*=60)**
LGBTQ ideology, acceptance, and advocacy	8	52%
Secularism, Anti-Supernaturalism, Indifference to Religion	6	23%
Safetyism, Fragility	6	23%
Hedonism, Drunkenness, Hard Partying (not including illicit sex)	5	13%
Heterosexual Promiscuity, Lust, Pornography	3	13%
Christian misbehavior that places a bad name on other Christians	3	10%
Use of Profanity	3	8%
Relativism, Subjectivism	3	8%
Radical Individualism	2	5%
Therapeutic Mindset	2	5%

Both results columns above are important. If a topic is mentioned by multiple participants at a *single* site, that could indicate that an initial speaker prompted the rest of the group to discuss that topic. However, when a topic appears at a number of sites, it means that people across the geographic range of the study independently experience the same thing.

Table 5 presents the tally of the number of occurrences of Christian affective responses to external pressure as reported by focus group participants.

Table 5: Christian Affective Responses to Conflict	**Number of research sites at which this was mentioned (out of a possible 8)**	**Percentage of total participants who mentioned this (*N*=60)**
Faith in God	8	43%
Courage, Boldness	7	22%
Fear, Anxiety, Timidity	7	22%
Internal Tension	6	33%
Meditating on Scripture, or reminding themselves or others of biblical principles	6	32%
Concern for one's children	5	17%
Shame	3	12%
Humility	3	5%

Table 6 presents the tally of the number of occurrences of Christian behavioral responses to external pressure as reported by focus group participants.

Table 6: Christian Behavioral Responses to Tension	**Number of research sites at which this was mentioned (out of a possible 8)**	**Percentage of total participants who mentioned this (*N*=60)**
Speaking up versus silence	8	58%
Prayer	8	25%
Involvement in Christian community	8	23%
Holy behavior that is distinct from the world	6	27%
Love for neighbor	4	13%
Withdrawal	3	7%
Use societal structures to fight for what is good	2	7%

Thematic Analysis

Content analysis has identified the two most prominent themes in the data. Among the non-Christian ideologies or behaviors, "LGBTQ ideology, acceptance, and advocacy" is the most prominent. It is the only one of these themes to appear at all eight sites. Furthermore, by a noticeable margin, it is the only one of these themes to be mentioned by more than half of the participants. Among the Christian responses to external pressure, "speaking up versus remaining silent" is the most prominent theme. Although four Christian response themes appeared at all eight sites,[32] only speaking up and/or remaining silent was mentioned by more than half of the participants. These two most prominent themes are now subjected to thematic analysis. The following discussion will complexify these two themes. According to Swinton and Mowat's definition, "to complexify something is to take that which at first glance appears normal and uncomplicated and, through a process of critical reflection at various levels, reveal that it is in fact complex and polyvalent."[33] This discussion will consider themes and subthemes that lie alongside and within these two themes. It will consider relationships between these two themes and other prominent themes as identified by the content analysis.

LGBTQ Ideology, Acceptance, and Advocacy

At the outset of this discussion, it is important to observe the nuanced nature of the focus group participants' interactions with LGBTQ ideology. Participants noted variability with respect to these interactions and also variability within the LGBTQ community itself. With respect to workplace interactions, while many participants recounted situations of

[32] "Faith in God," "Prayer," and "Scripture" are the other three.
[33] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 13.

adverse pressure, others indicated that there is no LGBTQ pressure at all in their workplace. One participant related how the diversity, equity, and inclusion training in his workplace treated people in the LGBTQ community and evangelical Christians on par with each other as examples of communities that are sometimes mistreated. Another participant provided an example from his non-Christian workplace, an example in which LGBTQ advocacy was a minority opinion that was mocked on at least one occasion. With respect to variability within the LGBTQ community, several participants indicated that some members of that community are ideologues who aggressively push their viewpoint while others are not. Some participants expressed compassion for members of the LGBTQ community, noting that some people they know have entered that community in the context of confusion and suffering, and in the context of looking for personal affirmation and love. Four focus group participants at three research sites noted that, while they are committed to a Christian sexual ethic, there are many people in the LGBTQ community among their personal friends.

When asked what external encounters they found to be challenging, focus group participants reported feeling pressure from LGBTQ activists who demand overt affirmation of their position. When focus group conversations addressed conflict with LGBTQ ideology, participants sometimes identified the specific person or organization that was the source of tension. The most common sources of pressure in descending order were: an employer (or similar authority figure), a peer (or friend, co-worker), a subordinate (or student), and the government.[34] The two most common pressure-inducing actions were: (a) explicit invitations or implicit expectations to express affirmation of

[34] The latter category, government, was associated with the legal underpinnings of policies that affected focus group participants who work for a public school or the military.

LGBTQ ideology (or to participate in affirming activities); and (b) threats related to one's employment status if one did not cooperate.

As one might expect, no focus group participants indicated that they felt pressure to engage in same-sex sexual activity.[35] The pressure that comes from LGBTQ activism is for affirmation and advocacy. For example, transgender activists are not content to merely conceive of themselves according to their preferred gender. They demand that everyone else honor their conceptions. Nine participants at four research sites mentioned expectations regarding the use of preferred pronouns (either to use other people's preferred pronouns or to announce one's own pronouns as an ally). The uniqueness of the pressure that comes from LGBTQ ideology can also be seen when we compare it to the non-Christian ideology of hedonism and hedonism's behavioral patterns. Thirteen focus group participants at six sites described experiences where people around them prioritized pleasure to an inordinate degree. Pleasure-seeking activities mentioned were: sexual immorality,[36] going to strip clubs, the use of pornography, drunkenness, the use of illicit drugs, general laziness, excessive use of social media, and excessive video gaming. Participants said that the non-Christians in their lives rarely asked them to join them in these activities. No participant reported non-Christians asking them to advocate for hedonistic practices. The point here is that LGBTQ ideologues uniquely pressure others to be a vocal ally for their viewpoint.

Christians' interface with LGBTQ ideology becomes especially challenging given how much weight some in the LGBTQ community give to the two issues of identity and

---

[35] One participant struggled at one time with gender identity and resisted influences that proposed transitioning.

[36] This reference does not include same-sex sexual activity.

freedom. Regarding identity, one focus group participant observed, "Their worldview is . . . 'Your sexuality is fundamental to who you are.' " From this point of view, Christianity gets viewed as an existential threat to the LGBTQ agenda. Regarding freedom, the LGBTQ agenda is bolstered by today's radical individualism.[37] One participant connected LGBTQ pressures to everyone wanting "to have their own freedom of will." Individualism is an essential feature of Western civilization, but radical individualism elevates the freedom of the individual to the highest place. In this approach, personal choice is inviolable, and the best choices are made by being true to one's own inner feelings and intuitions.[38] External restraints upon the individual that come from the community or from religion are viewed negatively.[39] In this light, the Christian sexual ethic is sometimes perceived as standing in opposition to the West's highest values.

While LGBTQ activists conceive of their sexual ethic as essential to their identity and highest values, they sometimes fail to appreciate Christians' sense that their Christianity is their identity. One focus group participant stated that some people in her workplace think of Christian faith as merely a preference, "something that we can put on and take off." She went on to say, "Actually sexuality is a preference, but my faith, that's a lifestyle that's embedded within me." This observation reveals a significant facet of the tension between these two groups. Whereas Christians think of their Christianity as a deeply held conviction and sexual behavior as a choice, LGBTQ activists think in exactly

[37] Three participants in two research sites said that they observed radical individualism at play in their environments. None of them used the phrase, "radical individualism," but spoke instead of, for example, the mantra, "you have to be yourself."

[38] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 188–90, 473–86; Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 333–34.

[39] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 305, 475–81.

the opposite terms. Given the factors of identity and freedom, they see their own lifestyle as being in keeping with their own deeply held convictions, but Christianity as a mere choice.

At this point, a parallel theme that the content analysis highlighted can be drawn into the discussion. LGBTQ ideology's negative stance toward the Christian sexual ethic is amplified by the influence of safetyism and fragility. Safetyism is overprotectiveness.[40] It is an unreasonable overemphasis on the avoidance of stressors—unreasonable because stressors can be good for the development of resilience.[41] Safetyism is also related to a trend that began in the late twentieth century of applying language about severe physical danger to less severe forms of emotional discomfort.[42] When this perspective is enacted by parents and educators, it renders students more fragile, less able to cope with people who disagree with them.[43] Six focus group participants at three research sites spoke about safetyism or fragility in the context of interactions with LGBTQ ideology.[44] One participant reported how her administrator in a school setting demanded that she use students' preferred pronouns specifically so that students do not feel "uncomfortable" or experience "pain." Another participant in a school setting reported her school administration's position that the Christian sexual ethic is "hurtful to people that just want to live their lives." These words, "uncomfortable," "pain," and "hurtful" are all part of the language of safetyism.

---

[40] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling of the American Mind*, 12, 29–32.
[41] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling of the American Mind*, 22–25.
[42] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling of the American Mind*, 25–29.
[43] Lukianoff and Haidt, *Coddling of the American Mind*, 30–31
[44] They did not use the terms "safetyism" or "fragility."

Added to all the above is the phenomenon of tribalism. Some facets of Western culture today encourage an "us versus them" mindset.[45] Thirteen focus group participants at four research sites reported seeing this mindset in the LGBTQ community in their interactions with them. Three reported encounters in which elements of the LGBTQ community were asking people to choose sides. According to what focus group participants heard from the LGBTQ perspective, the contrast could not be starker: Christians are bigots, while to honor the Pride Flag, for example, is an expression of being kind. Aggressive LGBTQ ideology's enmeshment with individualism, safetyism, and tribalism yields extreme characterizations of Christians. Six participants from three research sites described the LGBTQ approach to Christianity as dismissive of Christians, characterizing them, for example, as homophobes. One statement by a participant brought together both sides of this tribalism, namely, the fact that ideologues within the LGBTQ community want affirmation, and that they also condemn those who don't provide it: "When not only do you have an LGBTQ life going on, the world going on, but you're a hater if you don't promote it and celebrate it, well, that's Babylon to me."

All of the above has led to a certain level of marginalization for Christians. This is the case in some workplace situations and in certain quarters of North American culture at large. Nine participants from seven research sites indicated that in some settings, Christianity is disadvantaged as compared to the LGBTQ agenda. They observed a double standard in situations where the LGBTQ ideology and Christianity rub shoulders. Six of these experiences had to do with the workplace. For example, one participant spoke about her workplace and the Christian sexual ethic: "everybody has a voice except

[45] Bishop and Cushing, *The Big Sort*, 19–40; Lukianoff and Haidt (*Coddling of the American Mind*, 53–77) discuss the recent fostering of tribalism in Western higher education.

for Christians." Another participant, reporting about the drive for LGBTQ inclusion in his workplace, spoke as follows: "My question always to everyone is that if we are talking about inclusion, then you can't exclude me out if I am sharing about my faith." He continued, saying that the approach of members of the LGBTQ movement is "to not consider themselves as a group that is outside the norm, rather put you as the person who's standing outside the norm." Another participant noted that his company decorates the workplace cafeteria for Pride Month; he is confident that if he proposed decorating the cafeteria for a month to honor the Christian sexual ethic, his proposal would not be accepted.

Finally, some participants expressed frustration in their attempts to engage in genuine dialogue with the LGBTQ community. Discussing exaggerated accusations against Christians, one participant who has several friends in the LGBTQ community stated, "It's very hard to combat . . . . That's where I find it very difficult at times to interact and try and love people well." A participant at a different research site stated that tribalism thwarts his attempts to be an evangelist to the LGBTQ community: "That's where I am hitting a wall constantly in a lot of the conversations we have." This frustration provides a segue to a consideration of speaking versus remaining silent, our next topic.

Speaking Up Versus Remaining Silent

Multiple focus group participants presented some facet or another of the following formula. When engaging with non-Christians and in situations where there is some level of disagreement or tension, the Christian is often tempted to be afraid and thus remain

silent. However, the appropriate response in such situations is to trust in God, and thus to be courageous. This often prompts the Christian to speak up. As we will see, many nuances complexify this formula. In what follows, I will first explore participants' experiences with respect to the affective side of the equation—fear, courage, and faith. Secondly, I will explore their experiences with respect to the behavioral side, the overall topic itself, namely, speaking up versus remaining silent.

We begin with fear. Eleven focus group participants at six research sites spoke about anxiety and the temptation to remain silent. While two spoke about the fear of losing their jobs, the majority of these spoke of worrying about what other people think. Three participants recounted an experience in which they felt a strong temptation to worry about how their interlocutor might evaluate them. Five participants made an explicit confession, describing an encounter or ongoing state of affairs that they now look back upon with regret. They described their own mindset in the moment or even their own long-standing personality with phrases such as "wanting to be liked," "fear of man," or "people pleasing."

On the other side of the coin, nine focus group participants at seven research sites shared stories of times that they had spoken up with boldness. The situation involved some form of risk, and yet they expressed their Christian convictions in the presence of the world. Most of these cases revolved around (a) evangelistic boldness, (b) speaking up for some aspect of Christian morality, or (c) expressing some form of resistance to non-Christian pressures in the workplace (for example, regarding the use of preferred pronouns). In the majority of these accounts of boldness, as they shared in the focus

group session, the participant referenced something about their faith in God or something about how God had provided for them in the situation. That introduces our next topic.

A godward orientation is a key heart-level theme underlying the issue of speech. Fifteen participants at seven research sites spoke of their relationship with God as a factor governing their speech. Their comments in this regard fell out into three main subthemes: faith in God, thinking or speaking biblically, and prayer. With respect to faith in God, the attributes of God mentioned most often were his grace, his protection, his sovereignty, and his transforming power. Two participants at two different sites said that their mentality is to plant the seed and trust God for the growth. With respect to the Bible, six participants either recounted how they spoke a biblical truth to a nonbeliever or how they spoke a biblical principle to themselves in the context of speaking up. Five participants spoke about praying in the context of speaking.

Speaking up, however, is generally not easy. Fourteen participants at seven sites spoke about internal tension they have felt regarding whether to speak up in certain situations. For some this was a logical question. For example, they were trying to determine if they had enough of a personal connection with their conversation partner to be able to speak about weighty matters. Alternatively, they wondered if any practical good would come of the conversation, or they wondered what exactly to say. For many, however, this was an emotional experience. Participants described their internal tension with phrases such as “maybe it’s because I’m trying to stay on the fence,” “the whole issue of feeling, like, caught in the middle,” “I just spiral in my head,” “I started sweating,” and “I get upset over and over at myself.” Participants also described asking themselves questions such as, “Why didn’t you say this?” and “Am I just being plain

weak?" Each of these statements was made in contexts where the topic at hand had to do with speaking up versus remaining silent.

Having considered the affective side of the coin, we come now to the behavior itself, speaking or remaining silent. Focus group participants' comments in this area broke down into five subcategories: speaking evangelistically, speaking confrontatively, speaking lovingly, speaking partially, and remaining silent. We will consider these one at a time.

This dissertation project concentrates on non-Christian initiative that causes pressure. However, at six research sites, participants brought up the topic of evangelism. Participants spoke of their own initiative to speak some aspect of the message of salvation to friends and co-workers. Two participants spoke of fruit they had recently seen from their evangelistic efforts. On the other hand, six participants at four sites, as part of their response to the question, "Where do you find your interactions with non-Christians to be difficult?" spoke about their own sadness or frustration with non-Christian blindness or unresponsiveness to the gospel.

Fifteen participants at eight sites discussed speaking up to contradict a non-Christian idea. Most of the examples that they provided took place at work or in conversations with friends. Workplace conversations typically involved a disagreement that was too intense to be avoided (e.g., a co-worker communicated their point of view directly in a one-on-one conversation, or a co-worker constantly used profanity over a long period of time). Conversations with friends typically were with someone with whom the Christian had a close relationship, the sort of relationship where it would be natural to talk about weighty matters. Four different focus group participants shared a story in

which their response to a co-worker or friend included asking a good question. These questions either asked the interlocutor to consider the issue on the table from a different perspective or they tactfully probed the non-Christian's underlying assumptions or motives. Several of the accounts of asking a question exhibited a mix of courage and wisdom.

Eleven group participants at six sites emphasized a desire to speak truth in a respectful manner. Participants spoke of their desire to avoid being demeaning or obnoxious. Others spoke of wanting to encourage or to show love in their speech. Two participants spoke about the importance of treating people as individuals. Another two participants described their close relationships with non-Christians. In these relationships, if they, the Christians, are willing to talk about some subjects but not others, their silence becomes obvious. One of these participants said that she overcomes such a potentially awkward moment by asking her non-Christian friend if she would like to hear her opinion. Finally, one participant, speaking about her desire to be non-offensive in conversations about LGBTQ issues resigned herself to the following conclusion: "no matter what you do, it's going to be offensive."

The next subtheme is "speaking partially," namely, restricting the degree to which one speaks out Christianly, but in hopes that this limited communication will lead to more robust conversations. The majority of those who advocated for this approach said that they have revealed to co-workers and friends that they are a Christian, but that they are cautious about how much they share. Five focus group participants said that they abide by their workplace regulations which require that they can only speak evangelistically if the other person initiates the conversation. Four of these are employees

of public school districts.[46] One of these described in some detail an incident in which she shared a biblical principle with a student in response to the student's question.[47] Among these four, two from two different sites stated that they hope that their distinct behavior (e.g., praying before lunch, or not participating in a school exercise rooted in Eastern religions) will lead others to ask questions and thus begin two-way conversations.[48] Another six participants spoke similarly of hoping that their own distinctively Christian lifestyle would prompt non-Christians to ask questions.[49] At one research site, one portion of the focus group discussion raised the concern that if Christians are outspoken as public school employees, they might lose their jobs, and thus Christian influence would be lost in that arena.

Finally, seventeen participants at eight sites spoke about remaining silent in situations where they could potentially speak up and offer a Christian perspective. Ten participants expressed regret over their own silence in past situations. Three of these remained silent because they anticipated being mocked if they spoke up. Seven participants from four sites specified that they have remained or do remain silent when the subject at hand is related to LGBTQ ideology. Of these, five indicated that keeping their job is at stake in this regard. Finally, three participants reported remaining silent in a scenario that at one level allowed for the interjection of a Christian perspective. However, in all three cases, the focus group participant's evaluation was that the subject matter was

---

[46] Conversely, one focus group participant, an employee of a public school district, described herself as evangelizing wherever she goes. On this account, she lost her job at one school.

[47] In response, the student withdrew from what had been a friendly relationship.

[48] One of these two, stated her position more strongly: "you cannot necessarily even [tell] someone a lot of really good truth if there's no relationship. Because they have to trust that what you're saying is legitimate because of the legitimacy of . . . the way you carry yourself when you're at work."

[49] These six were speaking about the testimony of Christian behavior in general, not with respect to workplace speech restrictions.

complex and the time available for the conversation would not allow for a suitable presentation of the Christian viewpoint.

The preceding discussion reveals a wide diversity of mindsets and experiences with respect to speaking up in the presence of the world. For many Christians the most challenging scenario concerns LGBTQ topics. Furthermore, whether that subject or another subject is the one on the table, we have observed that many Christians experience guilt, internal logical uncertainty, and internal emotional confusion with respect to speaking up. The solution to this problem is not in every instance faith-fueled courageous speaking out. However, certain participants' accounts of boldness do suggest one facet of the way forward. Faith in God, meditation on Scripture, and prayer bolster Christians' ability to navigate the varying scenarios that they encounter. Believers are also helped as they clarify their overall approach to workplace speech restrictions, along with their response to other conversational circumstances such as time availability and the nature of their relationship with their interlocutor.

Narrative Analysis

During the focus group sessions, participants shared their own experiences and discussed those of others. They did so in a variety of ways. Some of what was shared contained an obvious narrative arc. I have selected three such accounts for analysis here. These were shared by focus group participants who spoke at some length. Because they spoke at greater length than the average participant, their accounts provided me with more material to analyze. That is why I chose them. These three narratives come from three

different research sites. The geographic locations in which these experiences took place are spread out across the Northeast US and Eastern Canada.

Narrative One: John

The Narrative

John[50] is a performing artist in an urban setting. He enthusiastically reports that he became a Christian about three years ago. In the focus group session, he responds to the question, "Are there places where you find it hard to live as a Christian in a non-Christian culture?" As John responds, a repeated idea runs through the story that he tells. He repeatedly says that a person's artistic output organically reflects what is in their heart, and that the essential options are either promoting sin or glorifying God.[51] There are also two concurrent plot lines to John's story. His is both the story of a sudden conversion, and the story of gradual Christian growth. Prior to his conversion, John was "completely moving in the world." His creative production was "promoting sin" and "lustful," he says. Then about three years ago, "God came into my life." At that time, John said to God, "I'm going to submit to you completely." While some things changed dramatically, John describes a gradual change in his artistic output. In his immediate next phase after conversion, he produced pieces that, from his perspective today, did not promote sin, but are questionable to him. Also in this intermediate phase, he would try to sneak a Christian perspective into his artistry. By comparison, today his production is different. Now he focuses on two things. First, by means of his artistry and style, he connects with

[50] In the narrative analysis section of this chapter, the names presented are not the participants' real names.

[51] Additionally, at one point, John mentions current artistic output of his that is not explicitly glorifying God, but rather makes use of common human themes to indirectly point to God.

audiences, and second, having connected with them, he seeks to point them to Christ. Today he puts the gospel of Christ on the forefront, he says.

This two-layered change has been mirrored in John's personal life. On the one hand, at his conversion there was a strong sense of conviction of sin. On the other hand, there has been subsequent growth in conviction. John attributes this to "getting in Scripture" and "learning more about God." There were certain things that he did not realize were sinful at first, but upon learning about them, he now makes sure he walks the right way, he states.

At one point in the focus group discussion, another member of the group comments that what John is doing is unique. A more typical pattern would be to withdraw from the world. After his conversion, John continued in the same career and thus continues to spend a majority of his time with non-believers. This prompts John to tell the story of his relationship with an artistic collaborator with whom he had worked for approximately six years prior to his conversion. Upon his conversion, John told this business partner that he was going to change the nature of his material. There were certain forms of artistry in which he would no longer engage. This led to conflict and long-into-the-night arguments. During this uncertain period, John said to another friend that if he and his collaborator needed to part ways, the Lord would provide someone else to fill that role. Eventually the partner backed down, agreeing to John's cleaned up approach to artistic production. John attributes this change to two things: "the grace of God," and the artistic partner's recognition of a genuine change in John's way of life. So today, while the partner is not a Christian, the two of them continue to work together.

While telling his story, John repeatedly says that his life in the world is "difficult," "challenging," and even "extremely challenging." A few times he gives hints as to what he means by that. Once he refers to the environment in which he lives as being "counter-Christ." He notes that he has not pulled all his pre-conversion output off the market or from the Web. Three times he mentions temptations, including an experience of falling to temptation. Finally, he mentions certain practices of self-discipline that he has found to be essential. There are some activities that he does not consider to be sin, but he refrains from them because they lead to an area of struggle for him. There are limits he places on himself regarding his use of time and the places he goes, because otherwise, he says, "I'm done for."

Discussion

The basic plot type of John's story is comedic, moving toward a happy ending. Additionally, however, the conclusion of the story sounds a note of ongoing struggle. That ongoing struggle is, of course, part of every Christian's story. The turning points within John's story highlight two other Christian realities: the New Birth and Christian growth. John sees his conversion as a work of God: a being made "brand new in Christ," as he describes it. His lifestyle and his artistic production organically changed due to the gift of the Holy Spirit and the inner transformation that John experienced. John's emphasis on this point coheres with a point that another focus group participant at a different research site made. Discussing real temptations from the world that he faces, this participant spoke of a certain level of inoculation from the world: "At the same time, we are set apart . . . there are just certain things that you know you don't accept." The

experiences of both of these participants reveal the unique power of regeneration and conversion to free a person from slavery to worldly idolatries. This does not mean that all struggles disappear. However, there is a level of change such that, even when one does succumb to temptation, normally he or she recognizes with regret what has happened.

The second aspect of John's story that can be extrapolated for the benefit of others has to do with Christian growth. Four factors come to the fore here. First, there is ongoing transformation brought about by divine intervention. John speaks of different levels of growth: "now Christ is working on this . . . now Christ is working on that." The second factor is the role of Scripture in growth. John speaks of gradual growth in conviction and knowledge over time that came through reading the Bible. Thirdly, John's story emphasizes his own personal resolve to change and to be distinct from the world. At one point he talks about going "cold turkey." At another point, speaking about the conflict with his artistic partner, John explains how he clearly defined for his friend certain lines that he would no longer cross.

The fourth factor is John's active involvement in his local church. He is a member of the church's worship team. He participates in the weekly meetings of a discipleship group led by one of his church's pastors. This last fact points to a noteworthy aspect of John's church involvement. It turns out that the pastor who leads the group is also someone who maintains a significant degree of contact with the non-believing world. During the focus group interview I learned that this pastor is actively involved in the neighborhood in which he lives. Seen in that light, it appears that John's approach to being in but not of the world may be derived, at least in part, from the example of this mentor.

Narrative Two: Jane

The Narrative

Jane is an administrator in an urban public school. During the focus group session, she shares two stories, both with a confident demeanor. The first story took place a few years ago, before she was promoted to her current administrative position. Regarding its type of plot line, this story has a simple form of momentary conflict that is quickly resolved, leading to a happy ending. Jane had been a classroom teacher in a school that served early elementary special education students. One day, the school district sent rainbow pins to Jane's school. These were to be distributed to the children as a means of highlighting LGBTQ issues. Jane had a good relationship with the assistant principle to whom she reported. He knew in advance that she would not be in favor of this distribution. She knew in advance that while he was not a Christian, neither was he a passionate LGBTQ activist. In the focus group session she describes him as a man who is "confused about many things." She said to him that she would not be involved in distributing the pins. She asked him to let her know when he would do the distribution. Because she wanted no part in it, she told him that she would clock out early that day, prior to the time of the distribution. In the story's comedic conclusion, Jane was not required to take part in the distribution, nor, in fact, were the pins distributed after all.

In the second story that Jane shares she is now a school administrator. This narrative also has a happy outcome, but its plotline is more complicated than the first. A professional development session for teachers was held at Jane's school. This session had to do with teaching children about same-sex marriage and about families with two mothers or two fathers. Jane was not involved in developing this training session, nor did

she attend it. Shortly thereafter, however, one of the female teachers who reports to Jane comes into her office to state that she wanted to file a formal complaint against a colleague. Jane hears the woman out. The woman's complaint is against another teacher in the school, a teacher who is a Christian. At the end of the training session, this Christian teacher said aloud that she would be praying for a particular member of the LGBTQ community (who was not present at the time), and she said this in such a way as to indicate that she disagreed with the LGBTQ agenda. The complainant, who, in Jane's words, is someone who struggles with gender and sexuality issues, overheard this statement. Having heard the complainant out, Jane's next step was supposed to be to file the complaint. This is the high point of tension in this story. Jane notes to herself that this might be the moment at which she loses her job over her commitment to Christ. However, carefully reading through the relevant school district regulations, Jane determines that there are not enough grounds for a formal complaint. The Christian teacher said she would pray about someone who was not present at the time; she did not say this directly to the complainant, nor was she saying that she would pray about the complainant; and the regulations allow for a certain level of verbal expression of one's own thinking. Jane explains to the female teacher that she cannot file the complaint. At the same time, she asks the woman to keep an open line of communication with her about how things are going in her classroom. As conversations proceed, in the end Jane switches some teaching responsibilities around so that the complainant and the Christian no longer work in close proximity with each other.

Discussion

Jane's stories have a comedic plot type. When we inquire about what led to the favorable outcome in the first story, two factors come to the fore. The first is Jane's ability to read the situation. Based on her personal knowledge of her assistant principal, she anticipated that she would not be required to be involved in the distribution of the pins. The second is Jane's confidence. Someone with a different type of personality or level of faith might have attempted to silently evade the issue. Instead, Jane spoke forthrightly to the assistant principal. Her courage was likely a factor that influenced him to cancel the distribution altogether.

With regard to the second story, we can identify three keys that lead to the positive outcome. First and foremost is Jane's commitment to Christ. A critical factor in this story was Jane's unwillingness to unthinkingly file a complaint merely because someone else expects it of her. A second key was Jane's ability to parse the district regulations. The third key is Jane's ongoing kindness to the complainant. Once again, Jane demonstrated situational awareness. Unlike her earlier interaction with the confused vice principal, this time she was dealing with a subordinate who is willing to make formal complaints. Jane's job could have been in jeopardy if she crossed this woman unnecessarily.[52] Jane's courage and her wisdom helped her navigate difficult waters successfully.

[52] Nothing I say here should be construed to suggest that Jane was merely pretending to show kindness out of self-interest. At another point in the focus group session, Jane shared the challenge of dealing with other subordinates (not the complainant), including some who do not perform their duties faithfully. Jane described her desire to show Christian grace to such subordinates, while her job requires that at times she dispense consequences for poor job performance.

Narrative Three: Jill

The Narrative

As Jill speaks in the focus group session, her gentle disposition makes it hard not to picture her as an elementary school teacher. That, in fact, is her position in a local public school. What stands out as unique in Jill's story is its gradual buildup of tension. Reading over the transcript of what she shared in the focus group, I observe a series of five moments of increasing conflict. In recent years, for Pride Month, Jill's school has flown the Pride Flag during the month of June. Usually, not much fanfare accompanies the raising of the flag. This year, however, on the evening of May 31, Jill receives an email stating that she and her students should wear clothing of a designated color of the rainbow to school tomorrow. This email introduces the first moment of conflict. It raises tension in two ways. First, as a Christian, Jill believes that she should not participate, so she decides to wear a neutral color to school. She will not be cooperating with those who have workplace authority over her. Second, there is the surprising nature of the email. It enacts a change to an anticipated pattern (the raising of the Pride Flag as the only acknowledgment of Pride Month), and it does so with little advance notice. On the morning on June 1, the school administration sends another email to the staff. This represents the second moment of conflict. The email informs the staff that there will be a school assembly at which the classes will be arranged in the formation of the Pride Flag and a photo will be taken. Jill considers the new information, she pauses to pray, and then she sends an email in response. Her email is the third moment of conflict. She inquires as to what opt-out provision they might have, thus indicating her desire to not cooperate with her superiors.

The administration's response to Jill's inquiry initiates a fourth moment of conflict. They tell her to attend the event anyway, but she may stand off to the side while the photo is being taken. This raises the level of conflict in that now Jill will be made into a spectacle for the rest of the school to see.[53] The fifth moment of conflict appears in the form of a public address announcement made to the entire school just before the event. It offers everyone the option to stand off to the side while the photo is taken. The announcement also states that the event is not associated with Pride Month; it is merely an opportunity to stand in opposition to bullying. At one level, this appears to be the administration conceding to Jill. At another level, the newly expressed rationale for the event is clearly designed to pressure even the hesitant to participate. Jill will stand out all the more for not joining in. Finally, the climax of the narrative comes when Jill offers to her students that they may either join the photo or stand off to the side with her. From this point, the story moves quickly to its conclusion. We reach the resolution of the narrative when Jill's entire class[54] stands off to the side with her, and another teacher joins her, telling Jill how glad she is to be able to join her there.

This story, however, has a double plot as it continues the next day. The next day one of Jill's colleagues approaches her, telling Jill that she had felt bad for her, standing there off to the side. The colleague proceeds to say that she also she feels bad because Jill's thinking is so narrow. Jill responds with a question. She names a different flag, representing something with which she knows her colleague would disagree. "What if they wanted to make a formation of [that] flag, would you stand for it?" In the context of

---

[53] This is Jill's interpretation of the new directive.

[54] In the focus group, Jill does not indicate how many students are in her class, but she says that while she expected only three students to stand aside with her, instead twenty-seven do. She doesn't explicitly state that the *entire* class stayed with her, but I believe that was her meaning.

a lengthy conversation, Jill further asks, “You have your convictions. I do too. If you want me to give up mine for yours, how is that equality?” The colleague acknowledges Jill’s point. In the focus group session, Jill summarizes the entire experience this way: “It takes a lot of courage to speak up, but I just thank God that in the moment he gave me the grace to say the right things.”

Discussion

As with the preceding two stories, this moves to a happy ending. Inside the story, there are several key turning points. As she described to the focus group some of those turning points, Jill repeatedly recounted her own inner dialogue. Upon receiving the first school email, she said to herself, “I’m not going to do that.” Reading the second school email: “I can’t do that.” When informed that the opt-out provision was to attend but stand off to the side: “I got to do this.” These statements represent Jill’s internal tension in these critical moments. The fact that she reported her inner life to the group means that her decisions were not instinctive reactions. The internal tension, however, never lasted long. Jill acted with resolve in each case. Jill’s courage is a substantial component of meaning in this story. That courage likely prompted the opt-out offer that was extended to the entire school. It also had the effect of revealing the lack of integrity on the part of the school administration as seen in their duplicitous explanation for an event being held on the first day of Pride Month. This revelation, no doubt, confirmed to Jill that her stand was proper.

At a deeper level, Jill’s story highlights the intervention of God. Twice Jill stated that God extended his grace to her during this challenging period. She may not have

planned it this way, but Jill mentions God's grace once at the beginning of her report and once at the end. Jill understood that she not only received divine grace enabling her to speak, but even guiding her as to what to say. A key thing that she said was her appeal for an opt-out. As in the preceding story, one facet of God's grace was the granting of an ability to make use of pre-existing organizational practices for her own benefit. As Jane had made use of the school regulations, so also Jill appealed to the sometimes-used practice of providing opt-outs. Another part of Jill's appeal was to make use of her colleague's belief in equality. In that conversation, Jill asked her colleague to apply her own beliefs to Jill. What would it mean for Jill to be treated equally? Jill attributed her ability to ask this fitting question to divine grace.

Finally, we observe that the divine grace came in response to Jill's prayer. When Jill decided to wear a neutral color to school, it was a silent and passive act of resistance. In contrast, when she wrote to ask for an opt-out, that was a vocal and active step of resistance. The second act took a greater amount of courage. Jill told this story in an off-the-cuff manner during the focus group session. The telling of her story was not planned out in a careful way. And yet, at the moment of her crossing her Rubicon, that is the moment at which she recalled praying.

Conclusion

Stott summons David Read to provide a striking metaphor: the path from the pastor's study to the pulpit should not be a straight lifeless corridor but should instead run through the streets.[55]

[55] Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 190–91. Stott is citing Read, *Communication of the Gospel*, 62–63.

What did I learn as I "ran through the streets" of the Northeast US and Eastern Canada? I conducted eight focus group interviews in churches spread across this region. By means of a mixed-methods analysis of the transcripts of these interviews, I gained new insights into the ways in which evangelical Christians find their interface with the non-Christian world to be challenging. The following summary considers, first, the non-Christian ideology that causes pressure, and, second, Christian responses to that pressure.

Content analysis of the transcripts demonstrated that the most common pressure point that participants experienced comes from LGBTQ ideology. Thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed that this ideology is unique in its tendency to ask those outside its community to affirm its beliefs and practices. Moreover, synergy with other aspects of contemporary Western culture, such as radical individualism, safetyism, and hedonism, makes LGBTQ ideology feel like an intuitive belief to those who hold it. Focus group participants indicated that conversations with LGBTQ activists are among the most difficult conversations to navigate well.

Content analysis revealed that the most-discussed Christian response had to do with the decision to speak up or remain silent. Thematic analysis explored the complexity of this decision. Personal internal tension was especially highlighted. In the emotional space where one chooses between speaking and not speaking, this study observed a significant level of underconfidence regarding the living of the Christian life. Without suggesting that the following means of grace and spiritual disciplines are quick and easy fixes, the narrative analysis did provide examples of Christians successfully resisting. Whether the issue is speaking versus silence or other aspects of interface with a hostile world, God's initial and ongoing supernatural work of transforming the human heart is

critical. Many focus group participants testified with gratitude of God's guidance, provision, and protection in critical moments of conflict. In response to God's grace, these participants' faith, their courage, and their wisdom provided the way forward. Finally, the disciplines of meditating on Scripture, prayer, and involvement in the life of the local church were also part of God's people being built up so as to live a life of faith and to love their non-believing neighbors.

The most important point to emphasize here at the end of this discussion has to do with the diversity of experiences that the focus group participants recounted to me. The preceding paragraphs have identified merely some of the high points, the most common scenarios. In my own preaching, it is easiest to provide applications and illustrations that arise from those aspects of life of which I am aware. It was my privilege to converse with people who know more about the real world than I do, and an honor to listen to believers from a variety of ethnicities and generations as they shared their stories.

CHAPTER SIX: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

In order to provide recommendations for resistance trainers, the preceding chapters have described the development of three forms of research output. These are (a) the narrative analysis of selected passages from Ezra–Nehemiah, (b) the links made from Ezra–Nehemiah to the New Testament, and (c) the focus group data analysis. The present chapter integrates these with two additional outputs. These are (d) the focus group participants' initial contributions to theological reflection and (e) comparisons to MacBride's book, *To Aliens and Exiles*, which functions here as context provided by an outside practitioner.[1] I integrate these through a process of theological reflection. A sixth form of research output, (f) my reflections on homiletical theory and practice, will be integrated into the conclusions discussed in Chapter 7.

The specific form of theological reflection to be used is Collins's *scriptural cycle*. The scriptural cycle is a type of pastoral cycle, a series of stages of reflection. The scriptural cycle consists of five stages. These are: Scripture, Testimony, Discernment, Encounter, and Participation.[2] The Scripture stage entails reflection on a passage from the Bible.[3] As this passage is prayerfully considered, the practical theologian asks the Holy

[1] As recommended by McNamara, "Six Rules," 5–6.
[2] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 149.
[3] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 155–58.

Spirit to bring to mind a related life situation: this is the Testimony stage.[4] In the Discernment stage, the theologian reflects on how the Scripture illuminates the Testimony.[5] The theologian also reflects on how the Testimony might deepen our understanding of the Scripture and demonstrate specific ways to live it.[6] Additionally, consideration is given to possible ways of complexifying or diversifying the interpretations attained thus far. When the scriptural cycle is depicted visually, the other four stages encircle the central Encounter stage. Here the theologian articulates "what Christ is doing in and through the particular situation of the testimony, illuminated through the Scripture passage."[7] Finally, in the Participation stage, the theologian reflects on how God is asking Christians to participate in his work.[8]

In this chapter, I use the scriptural cycle six times. I commence each cycle by asking what God is saying and doing in the three Ezra–Nehemiah passages. I devote cycles to each of the three passages in order (Ezra 4–6; Neh 1–6; Neh 9–10). For each passage, the first biblical theme has to do with divine action and the second with human response. In this stage, I also consider a link that I previously made to the New Testament.

For the Testimony stage, in each of the six cycles, the Testimony comes from a focus group participant who heard the sermon based on the Ezra–Nehemiah passage that initiates that cycle. I have read through the focus group transcripts from the research sites at which each sermon under discussion was preached. I have chosen a story that has a

---

[4] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 158–60.
[5] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 160–63.
[6] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 127–28, 151.
[7] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 165.
[8] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 165–68.

close resonance with the Scripture. Although I am the one who made the final choice as to the pairing, a focus group participant was the person who first connected their story (the Testimony) to the Scripture. Also within this stage, I comment on a connection between the Testimony and the broader focus group data. In the Discernment stage, I ask how the Scripture illuminates the Testimony, and how the Testimony might deepen our understanding of the Scripture. It is also here that I include MacBride's work (at the end of this chapter I provide a summary comparison of MacBride's work to the present dissertation).

In the Encounter stage, based on the preceding three stages, I look for congruence between what God is saying and doing in the Scripture and what God is doing in the Testimony.[9] The ultimate purpose here is to indicate what God is doing that is relevant for resistance training. For the Participation stage, I address an intended audience of preachers. I respond to the following question: given the reflections of the Discernment and Encounter stage, how might preachers preach from Ezra–Nehemiah (and other biblical religious minority-group texts) in a way that participates in what God is doing in the world today?

Scriptural Cycle One: God Overturns Opposition

Scripture

In Ezra 4–6, the second of two parallel library searches yields an unexpected outcome. By means of this text God renders for us a dramatic example of divine intervention that undoes antagonistic obstructionism. In the text, Yahweh sends the prophets, and he

[9] Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection*, 164.

commandeers the Persian emperors, all for the sake of his intention to live in the midst of his people with whom he has a personal relationship. The theme of temple is continued in the New Testament with the coming of Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit in the church. Like the prophets, the apostles speak to the meaning of God's tabernacling among us.

Testimony

It was after hearing the Ezra 4–6 sermon that Jill, the elementary school teacher, shared her story, as reported in Chapter 5. Jill experienced the presence of God as she prayed, and as he guided her into what to say during her conflict with her employer. Jill's experience represents some of the most common reports in the focus group data, involving as it does both LGBTQ ideology and the question of if and how to speak up.

Discernment

The most significant overlap between the Scripture and the Testimony has to do with the presence of God. In answer to Jill's prayer, God gave her the grace to be able to speak courageously, clearly, and winsomely in a tense situation. When I ask how Ezra 4–6 informs my understanding of Jill's Testimony, I recognize that the guidance that the Lord provided to Jill is part of a long-standing pattern of his work with his people. He has been intentionally seeking to have an intimate relationship with his people since the days of Zerubbabel and long before. When I ask how the Testimony deepens my understanding of the Scripture, Jill's experience highlights the fact that God's presence (whether in the Old Testament temple or through the New Testament gift of the Spirit) is not a latent

presence, but instead, an active presence. God is present with his people in such a way as to provide for them, whether that provision be guidance, protection, or other specific actions and provisions.

MacBride's discussion of minority-group rhetoric does not emphasize the presence of God. Neither, however, is it ignored. The final section of MacBride's discussion of James' epistle discusses trust in God, which entails "prayer in each and every circumstance."[10] MacBride's discussion of the sealing of the saints (Rev 7:3) emphasizes that God's minority-group does not need to be anxious, given that God protects them.[11] Likewise, the Spirit will give persecuted believers the words to say when they are on trial (Matt 10:19–20).[12] These are various manifestations of the gift of God's presence.

Encounter

When Christians face pressure from the non-Christian world today, God is present with them. The exact details of how God manifests his presence in these encounters with the world will vary from believer to believer and situation to situation. However, in Christians' experience of pressure, God responds to his people's prayers. He by his Spirit protects his people and guides them into what to say and how to say it. He meets their needs, whatever they may be.

[10] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 98.
[11] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 107–8.
[12] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 172.

Participation

Resistance trainers participate in the work of God when they preach the presence of God. Not only is God present, but he also informs his people about the meaning of his presence. Analagous to the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah, preachers relay the Lord's promises about his presence.

Scriptural Cycle Two: The Rebuff and Welcome

Scripture

Through the framing verses, Ezra 4:3 and 6:21, God presents us with a model community that simultaneously rebuffs infiltrators and welcomes repentant sinners. And these two activities hold together because both work toward holiness within the covenant community. When the church acts in accord with such attractive difference, she anticipates the eschatological pairing of a welcome to and a restriction from the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:24–27).

Testimony

A focus group participant who heard the Ezra 4–6 sermon shared his unique way of combining a welcoming and rebuffing stance toward non-Christians. This young man described how he enthusiastically develops relationships with non-Christians. This reflects both his unique personality and his giftedness as an evangelist. He referred to the abbreviation, LGBTQ, noting that he has friends from college represented by each of those letters. These are friends with whom he has maintained relationships after graduation. Similarly, today in his workplace, he pursues colleagues in conversation,

asking a lot of questions, and being interested in their lives. In this context, he has learned something: "They can tell when I disagree with something they said. So they'll be telling me about their weekend. 'We went camping. And we did this, and we did that.' And then they get to talking about the drunken karaoke. And what do I say about that? If I only nod my head and say, 'um-hum,' they'll recognize, 'Oh, you don't approve of that.' " Out of this experience, rather than waiting for the awkward silence, he now takes the initiative, but in the form of a question. He might ask them if they have the time to talk further about the controversial topic. He might ask if they would be interested in hearing his perspective on it. What he has found is that if a Christian genuinely loves someone, and if the Christian works at having a personal relationship with that person, the two are often better able to engage productively over difficult topics.

While many focus group participants did not seem to me to be as extroverted and well-connected with non-Christians as this young man, his Testimony is not unique in two ways. First, two people mentioned in Chapter 5—John and his pastor[13]—both have notably high degrees of engagement with the world, one in his workplace and the other in his residential neighborhood. Second, the young man was one of five participants who spoke about their use of questions as part of how they engage with non-Christians. At one level, the young man has an unusual degree of engagement with non-Christians; at another level, he represents an approach to the world found among other participants as well.

[13] These two are at a different research site, not the same as the young man.

Discernment

What does Ezra 4:3; 6:21 have to say to this young man? "Keep up the good work." For Christians attempting to engage non-Christians robustly while standing up for Christian distinctives, the Scripture provides reassurance. Ezra 4–6 calls for the double avoidance of withdrawal and capitulation. Conversely, what the young man's Testimony provides is one example of how to flesh out the rebuffing and welcoming pair in personal relationships.

One of the questions that arises in the present discussion is how one avoids leaning too far in one direction or the other with respect to distinctiveness from the world and engagement with the world. If one were to criticize the approach of the young man for leaning too heavily on the welcome and being too slow to introduce the rebuff, I would demur. That critique may represent the expectations of Christendom scenarios. My sense is that the young man's careful navigation of conflict was not driven by fear, but rather by wisdom. None of this denies, of course, that different Christians have different gifts and callings. Some may have a calling akin to that of John the Baptist, and others to that of Barnabas.

The Ezra pairing of rebuff and welcome finds a counterpart in MacBride. The phrase *attractive difference* is a centerpiece of his book. MacBride emphasizes various means of being both different and attractive. These include single-minded devotion to Christ, upright behavior, gentleness of speech, Christian unity, and godly joy.[14] He addresses the issue of balance in an insightful way. He notes that the majority of the New Testament focuses first on difference (holiness) and second on attractiveness

[14] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 50–52, 95, 169, 177, 186, 196.

(evangelism).[15] Acts, however, reverses that with a unique emphasis on the permeability of the boundary between the church and the world.[16] There is no single formula for finding the proper balance between difference and attractiveness. God calls us to discernment as we steward of our gifts, callings, and circumstances. What is clear is that there are two extremes to avoid.

Encounter

Human fallibility leaves us with a tendency toward dichotomous thinking that lacks nuance. In that context, God keeps us on the path and out of the hedges. In passages such as Ezra 4–6, God provides us with models of how to navigate life in the non-Christian world. In Ezra 4–6 God gives us an example to follow: his people avoiding the extremes of assimilation and isolation.

Participation

Resistance trainers participate in the work of God when they preach Ezra 4–6's rebuff and welcome. The literature review in Chapter 1 has shown that this is a frequently discussed topic. However, the pairing of Ezra 4:3 and 6:21 is a previously overlooked resource in this regard.

---

[15] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 199.
[16] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 199–200.

Scriptural Cycle Three: God Shames the Shamers

Scripture

God gives us in Neh 1–6 a vivid example of adversarial tactics falling back upon the adversaries. A dramatic reversal occurs when, at Neh 6:16, arrogant enemies are forced to acknowledge their defeat before God. In light of the New Testament teaching about shame, this reversal in time foreshadows the eschatological reversal, when those who have refused Christ will be put to eternal shame.

Testimony

In one of the focus group sessions that followed upon the Neh 1–6 sermon, discussion lingered for a few moments on LGBTQ ideology. Given the prominent place that LGBTQ ideology held at all the research sites, this discussion carries meaning beyond its own local context. One participant observed that from the LGBTQ perspective, a person's sexuality is an essential part of their identity. A middle-aged man picked up on this, observing that television programming and movies tend to downplay shame. Rather than be ashamed of immoral behavior, people are encouraged to "be yourself." A young woman carried the conversation further: "It's like how God says, in the last days, that good will become bad, and bad will become good. So the things that are actually bad, they want you to be proud of them. Many things that are actually good, they want to give you shame in them. That's why they flip the script and do the opposite of what God wants." From there, the conversation moved in a different direction (another participant, picking up on the topic of shaming, referenced his recent trip to the Middle East. He

spoke about missionaries he met and their discussion of the threat of honor killings that some Muslim-background Christian converts face there).

Discernment

Bringing the Scripture and the Testimony into conversation with each other, I observe that the Testimony expresses a frustration, and the Scripture expresses God's solution to that frustration. The Testimony's expression of frustration did not proceed to contemplation of Christ's Second Coming. However, the natural corollary of the Testimony is that God will right the ship. If the current situation is "the opposite of what God wants," surely God will not allow such a situation to remain in place forever. The Scripture informs the Testimony by revealing that Christ's Second Coming and the Final Judgment will restore justice. Where people persist in being proud of what is shameful and encouraging shame for what is honorable, the Final Judgment will accomplish the ultimate reversal of fortune, the final crossing of fates.

The present-day frustration expressed in the focus group session makes sense when we recognize the New Testament's inaugurated eschatology, the already and the not yet. God's kingdom has arrived partially, not fully. Present-day frustration identifies with God's opposition to evil, and it is tempered by confidence in God's promises. This confidence helps the believer to accept the present situation and to persevere in doing good. In fact, this stance sees in God's delay an opportunity for all to repent.

The young woman moved the conversation beyond the middle-aged man's frustration related to the passive watching of media entertainment. She reported external pressure that asks Christians to actively participate in the honoring of what is immoral.

The young woman did not seem liable to succumb to this pressure, noting, as she did, that this would be the opposite of what God wants. Several focus group participants, however, reported experiences of pressure to be an explicit ally to LGBTQ ideology. One means of counteracting that pressure is confidence in God's promises of eschatological outcomes.

Working from New Testament texts, MacBride makes similar points. A primary lens through which MacBride views the entire New Testament is this: when pressure from the world tempts believers to compromise, they need to see that group membership—membership in the church—is important and relevant because of the Final Judgment.[17] The rhetoric of Matthew, 1 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation urges believers on the basis of the ultimate divine reversal to remain in the minority group and to not assimilate into the majority culture.[18] Finally, the book of Revelation helps Christians see that present-day suffering is part of a necessary process that will lead to final vindication.[19]

Encounter

God is guiding history in accordance with his purposes. His various promises and warnings related to eschatology and final outcomes are intended to motivate our attitudes and choices today. Our temptation in the moment may be toward compromise with the world, fear, frustration, or even despair. In that context, God's eschatological promises reorient us by showing us which values and behaviors will be eternally condemned and which will be vindicated in the end.

---

[17] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 39–41.
[18] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 51, 54, 64–65, 102–17, 143–45, 176–79.
[19] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 106, 112, 116.

Participation

Resistance trainers participate in the work of God when they preach the Final Judgment. They handle eschatology rightly when they recognize it as a resource that informs present-day living. While the church prays for the conversion of her adversaries, the promise of eschatological shaming of shamers relativizes today's undeserved shaming.

Scriptural Cycle Four: Not Internalizing Undeserved Shame

Scripture

God gives Nehemiah to the church as a model of someone who through faith in God is impervious to undeserved shaming attempts made by others. Nehemiah's appeal to the people to be fearless by remembering God who is great and awesome resonates down to our own day. And while shaming attempts should not affect the fundamental sense of identity of God's people, the New Testament indicates that at another level, Christians accept shame in union with Christ and his sufferings. They reframe taunts as evidence that they are faithful to Christ. Present shame is further relativized because of God's promise to his people of honor at the last day.

Testimony

In a focus group with participants who had heard the Neh 1–6 sermon, Jane, the school administrator, shared two stories, both relating to LGBTQ pressures in her workplace (reported in Chapter 5). At another point in the same focus group session, Jane spoke about shame:[20] "I cannot say that I am someone that is ashamed. People in my job know

[20] The following was not included in the narrative analysis section of Chapter 5.

that I'm a Christian. I express to people that I pray for them, especially when, let's say someone has a death in the family and they come into work. Everybody says, 'I'll keep you in my thoughts.' I say, 'I'll be praying for you.' " Jane commended her approach to others in the group. She mentioned that being openly Christian in the workplace sometimes connects you with other Christians there. She also suggested how to respond in the context of a school-sponsored ritual that comes from eastern religions. "If someone were to say to you, 'How come you are not chanting with us?,' or whatever they're doing in the morning. . . 'Oh, I don't do that because I'm a Christian, and what I do is that I pray.' " Jane's testimony here is important because it touches on the issue of speaking up or remaining silent, a common theme in the focus group data.

Discernment

In this cycle, we have a Scripture that provides reasons not to internalize undeserved shame, and the Testimony of a Christian who seems unlikely to internalize undeserved shame. The Testimony provides a living-color example of how one might be faithfully shameless about their Christian faith in a contemporary workplace. Resistance trainers can present Jane's statement, "I don't do that because I'm a Christian," to their congregations as a model.

Jane does not state all the reasons for her fearlessness. However, if anyone in her shoes needs more reasons, this cycle's Scripture provides them. MacBride finds many of the same reasons in various New Testament texts. In Peter's first epistle, Christians are instructed to reframe threats of shame by trusting Christ who was shamed (1 Pet 2:4,

23).[21] The epistle to the Hebrews instructs the readers to both resist undeserved shame and yet bear it with Christ (Heb 13:13–14).[22] They can disregard shame, relativizing it as the great heroes of faith did (Heb 11).[23] Paul tells the Philippians that today's temporary shame with Christ leads to eternal honor (Phil 3:19–21).[24] The gospel of Matthew asks its readers to reorient their perspective on shame by gaining affirmation from God and in Christ's new community, rather than from the world's values (Matt 5).[25]

MacBride has a final observation that brings this discussion back around to Jane. Jane's situational awareness navigating school administrators and district policies reminded me of Jesus' command: "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16 ESV). Commenting on this and similar passages in Matthew's gospel, MacBride observes that when facing opposition, Christians sometimes should make a strategic withdrawal, not out of fear, but rather shrewdness.[26] Sometimes trouble can be avoided, and, in fact, should be avoided. For example, in one of the scenarios reported in Chapter 5, Jane refused to file a complaint, not citing her Christian faith to her workplace subordinate, but on the basis of a careful parsing of district policy. The former rationale would have led to her being terminated from her job. In this she gives resistance trainers a living example of what faithful Christian shrewdness under pressure (with innocence) can look like today.

---

[21] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 50.
[22] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 59.
[23] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 68–75.
[24] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 124–25.
[25] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 162–67.
[26] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 172–75; see also Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 183–84.

Encounter

God is currently working in and through modern day Nehemiahs. God stations his courageous servants throughout the world, including in workplaces with various challenges and pitfalls. People like Jane, recognizing their calling, trust in the Lord who is great and awesome, and they reframe the world's shaming attempts as evidence that they are united to Christ.

Participation

Resistance trainers participate in the work of God when they preach fearlessness and godly shamelessness. Such preaching will be nuanced as it includes looking to the Lord, bearing shame for Christ's sake, and being shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.

Scriptural Cycle Five: God's Orchestration of History

Scripture

In Neh 9–10 the reader observes Yahweh's silence in the face of the prayers of his people and their recommitment to obedience. Whereas the people wish for a return to former days, God has plans for something new. The First Advent of Christ clarifies the newness. New Testament revelation points God's people forward. God calls his church to accept the trials of this life, living in expectation of the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Testimony

At one research site, preaching from Neh 9–10, I spoke of the possibility that God is pruning his people by means of the move from Christendom to post-Christendom. In the

subsequent focus group session, one participant, before explicitly mentioning my sermon, emphasized the importance of Christian community (including Sunday church attendance) as a safeguard against external temptations. At one point in the discussion, he described a challenge he experiences on Saturday nights. He faces expectations from non-Christian family members and neighborhood friends to engage in late-night social events. The people who want him to participate are important to him, and yet the events are detrimental to his ability to get to church on Sunday morning. At another point in the discussion, he described a different challenge he experiences on Sunday mornings. He has observed over the course of his life that American culture has diminished the extent to which Sunday mornings are honored. Today, the prevalence of youth athletic events on Sunday mornings has become a significant competitor to church attendance (another focus group participant—a father of school-age children—at another research site independently made the same observation). As he spoke of these Saturday night and Sunday morning scheduling conflicts, frustration was evident in his voice. Then, however, he shifted gears as he recalled my point about God pruning the church. He continued, "I was thinking about Heb 12 where it talks about that he shakes, so that the unshakeable things may remain. And so, is that process taking place? Hey, that's a good thing because God's about to unveil the unshakeable: the kingdom of heaven."[27] This participant reframed the current sidelining of the church in Western culture. Rather than see it only in a negative light, he chose to see it as a sign of Christ's coming kingdom.

[27] The focus group participant is referring to Heb 12:26–29. According to Lane (*Hebrews 9–13*, 491), the shaking of Hebrews refers to cataclysmic judgment at the end of the age. The focus group participant's point is seen in 1 Pet 4:16–18, where present-day suffering functions as a precursor to the Final Judgment.

Discernment

In this interaction at the research site, several Scripture passages worked in combination with each other: (a) the silence of Yahweh in response to the returned exiles' request for renewed ability to enjoy the land; (b) God pruning his church;[28] (c) the shaking of the earth so that the unshakeable may remain; and (d) Abraham looking forward to a heavenly city rather than backward to Ur.[29] The combined force of these words from the Lord enabled the focus group participant to reframe his cultural obstacles to church attendance.

Reflection on the Scripture and the Testimony reveals an important difference between the two. The characters inside Neh 9–10 respond to their frustration with a fresh commitment to obedience. Nothing inside the text indicates that they have any sense of God's intentions beyond retribution (sin yields punishment and righteousness yields blessing). The focus group participant also responds to his frustration with obedience.[30] However, as the beneficiary of New Testament revelation, he knows more about God's intentions. He has been granted a larger vision, seeing the First and Second Advents of Christ in a way that Old Testament saints could not.

The focus group participant provides an excellent model for those who experience the pressures of post-Christendom. He gives us a front row seat to observe what it might look like as a believer gains perspective from the wealth of divine revelation given to us. He not only listened to a sermon at his church, but he also paired that sermon with another Scripture with which he was already familiar (Heb 12). The focus group

---

[28] In the sermon, I alluded to but did not cite John 15:2.

[29] In the sermon, I cited Heb 11:15–16.

[30] My understanding from my interactions with him is that he is a regular church attender, despite the challenges he faces.

participant could have remained discouraged in his situation, but instead the Lord granted encouragement though the Scriptures.

Similarly, MacBride's study of New Testament texts finds a divine call to accept trials, such as those experienced in post-Christendom, in light of God's unfolding plan. As in the preceding discussion, so also MacBride finds this message especially in the epistle to the Hebrews. He summarizes the rhetoric of Hebrews as asking Christians "to embrace temporary disadvantage in the present in order to gain *eternal* advantage."[31] Variations on this theme appear in Matthew's gospel, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Peter, and Revelation as well.[32] Finally, one balancing corrective is needed. Referencing Phil 2:15, MacBride notes that *exclusive* focus on the hereafter is not good. In that case, "our heavenly citizenship turns our gaze inward, away from the world in which we're called to shine like stars."[33]

Encounter

God is delaying his ultimate intervention by which he will judge the world and fully establish his reign on earth. Delay, however, is not the same thing as inaction. While he does not reveal the day or hour of Christ's return, God promises us that Christ will return to set all things right. Christians encounter God when they take to heart the perspective revealed in Scripture about his overarching plan. This perspective counters our tendency toward myopia and encourages us in persevering obedience.

---

[31] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 58; emphasis in the original.
[32] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 48–49, 107, 141, 165–66.
[33] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 127.

Participation

Resistance trainers participate in the work of God as they present the historical markers that show their congregants where in time they are. These markers include the Old Testament promises, as well as the singular events associated with Christ's First and Second Advents.

Scriptural Cycle Six: From Frustration to Determination

Scripture

In Neh 9:38—10:39 God gives us a picture of his people recommitting to obedience and holiness. The people make this commitment in a context of suffering. They assume that their obedience will result in his blessing, even though they currently do not see signs of his blessing. The call to behavior that is distinct from the world finds an echo in New Testament passages such as 2 Cor 6:14—7:1.

Testimony

After hearing the Neh 9–10 sermon, John, the performing artist, shared his story. Despite the fact that he finds it challenging to be in the world and not of the world, he continually resolves to live a distinctively Christian lifestyle, setting for himself certain boundaries that he will not cross. This type of commitment represents a common pattern in the focus group data, with participants at six of the eight sites sharing something about their own commitment to holiness of life in contexts outside the church.

Discernment

When I bring the Scripture and the Testimony into conversation with each other, I find that the resolve expressed in the covenant of Neh 10 confirms that John's commitment to holiness is fitting. Conversely, John's experiences provide living examples of what the *ʾamanah* commitment might look like in our own day. One difference between the Old Testament story and John's experience is the transformation accomplished by the establishment of the New Covenant. John's new lifestyle is created by the gift of regeneration and empowered by ongoing sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

MacBride discusses the New Testament's emphasis on the call to distinctive Christian behavior. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians emphasizes the readers' need to unlearn the Greco-Roman values in which they were steeped.[34] His first epistle to the Thessalonians stresses distinctive behavior in the areas of love and sexual morality (1 Thess 3:12; 4:1–7, 9–10).[35] MacBride's comment on Paul's sexual ethics suggest that the sexual revolution of our age has brought us to a situation similar to that of the first century: "this was an area in which group norms would have stood in stark contrast to those of the dominant culture."[36] The epistles of James, 1 Peter, and 1 John also place significant emphasis on distinctive Christian good works.[37] Finally, the call to distinctive behavior stands out in Christ's letters to the seven churches of Asia (Rev 2–3). In these letters—similar to what we see in the relationship between Neh 9 and Neh 10—Jesus

[34] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 128–35.
[35] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 141–43.
[36] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 142.
[37] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 48–56, 80–81, 88–93.

uses the language of retribution to persuade the believers to do good and not compromise with the majority culture.[38]

Encounter

God is motivating his people toward a distinctively upright lifestyle. He does this by a variety of means. For example, he provides the example of those who originally committed to the *ʾamanah* of Neh 10. He encourages and warns us about the consequences of our choices. With the establishment of the New Covenant, he makes us a new creation by the Spirit who empowers us in an ongoing way for holy living.

Participation

Resistance trainers participate in God's work by preaching holiness of life. Toward this end, they use the diverse material found in the Scriptures. Here they find various motivations for and examples of distinctive behavior in the presence of the world.

Summary Comparison to MacBride

The present discussion compares the emphases of MacBride's book to those of this dissertation. MacBride's work highlights six lenses through which the New Testament addresses Christian minority-group status.[39] The first two lenses have to do with approval and disapproval, whether in the opinion of the majority culture, God, or the church. These two areas have a strong overlap with this dissertation's discussion of Neh 1–6 and

[38] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 100–103.
[39] MacBride, *To Aliens and Exiles*, 14–15, 225.

shame.[40] Skipping MacBride's third lens for a moment, his fourth lens has to do with distinctive behavior. This lens coheres strongly with this dissertation's discussion of the *ʾamanah* of Neh 10. MacBride's notion of attractive difference, which appears throughout his book, but is especially associated with the fourth lens, has a strong overlap with my discussion of the inclusio around Ezra 4–6. Skipping MacBride's fifth lens for a moment, his sixth lens has to do with "importance" or "relevance,"[41] including the fact that the Final Judgment makes Christian distinctiveness important. This coheres strongly with this dissertation's discussion of Neh 1–6 and God's ultimate act of shaming the shamers.

I return now to the two lenses that I skipped over. MacBride's third lens (titled "identity") and his fifth lens (titled "worldview") include the importance of the Christian minority group's understanding of time. The church has a home in God's overarching plan, which includes eschatological restoration. This resonates strongly with this dissertation's discussion of God's plan, seen in the New Testament's perspective on the Abrahamic land promise, prominent in Neh 9.

I am not able to identify any topic on which MacBride and I write in strong contrast to each other. There are places, however, where our points of emphasis vary from each other. MacBride's third lens and his sixth lens highlight in part the importance of community, the way the Christian minority group builds itself up in love in the face of the external majority. This issue is not emphasized in the dissertation. It does, however, arise in the dissertation's discussion of prospective shame in Neh 5 and of holiness drawn

[40] The issue of shame and honor is also prominent in MacBride's discussion of distinctive Christian practice. The New Testament authors sometimes use honor and shame to promote that distinctiveness.

[41] MacBride's (*To Aliens and Exiles*, 39) title for his discussion of the sixth lens is "salience."

from Neh 10:31b. MacBride's discussion of Christian worldview (his fifth lens) calls upon the minority group to rewrite and recast the majority's social conventions. There is no one-to-one counterpart in the dissertation, but MacBride's discussion here does point in part to the issue of shame and in part to the issue of eschatology, both of which have a place in the dissertation. As noted above, this dissertation's discussion of the temple in Ezra 4–6 gives emphasis to the presence of God. This is a topic that is important to MacBride, but not as pervasive in his work as the lenses listed above.

McNamara calls upon practice-led researchers to compare their own work with that of others.[42] Although I worked from three selections from Ezra–Nehemiah, while MacBride worked from select New Testament books that emphasize minority-group rhetoric, our summary lists of major themes overlap in a number of areas. Strong overlap can be seen with regard to: shame, distinctive behavior, attractive difference (an alternate way of naming the rebuff and welcome), God's overarching plan, and the Final Judgment.

Conclusion

This chapter uses Collins's scriptural cycle to integrate the Ezra–Nehemiah selections with the focus group data. New Testament passages have been considered as well, including MacBride's discussion of the preaching of New Testament minority-group rhetoric. This chapter's theological reflection is summarized succinctly as follows. Resistance trainers participate with what God is doing about worldly pressures by

[42] McNamara, "Six Rules," 5–7.

preaching the presence of God and the overarching plan of God. They furthermore ask for a response of courage and holiness, along with the pairing of rebuff and welcome.

This chapter has drawn together five forms of research output. These are (a) the exegesis from Ezra–Nehemiah, (b) the links to the New Testament, (c) the focus group data analysis, (d) the focus group participants' initial contributions to theological reflection, and (e) comparison to MacBride. Chapter 7 will add the final research output, (f) my reflections on homiletical theory and practice.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

This chapter responds to three questions. First, what challenges are lay Christians experiencing in their interactions with the non-Christian majority culture today? As discussed in Chapter 5, the focus group interviews explored this question with respect to Christians in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada. Second, what insights does Ezra–Nehemiah provide for resistance training? In this section, under four headings, I provide recommendations for pastors regarding preaching biblical minority-group literature to Christians living in the post-Christendom West. These recommendations are drawn from Chapter 6 where Ezra–Nehemiah and the focus group participants' experiences are integrated. Third, what did I learn over the course of this project about homiletical theory and practice that will be helpful for other preachers? Here I apply the homiletical reflections found at the end of Chapter 4 to the ministry of other resistance trainers.

Today's Challenges

Compared to the experiences of Christians in nations such as North Korea and northern Nigeria, the external pressure on Christians in North America is minimal. Compared to North America seventy-five years ago and compared to the Bible Belt, Christians in the Northeast US and Eastern Canada today face an increased level of pressure. One of the things resistance trainers can learn from Chapter 5 is how variegated that pressure is.

Within that overall diversity, the most contentious scenario—interactions with LGBTQ ideology—is highly variable as well. For some focus group participants, their interactions with members of the LGBTQ community are uneventful. For others, three challenges obtain. First, the most difficult scenarios reported by focus group participants were in the public education and military sectors. Here, several focus group participants stated that their employment status is under threat relative to demands that they openly signal their commitment to act as allies for LGBTQ ideology. Second, the focus group analysis of Chapter 5 showed that this ideology presents a singular challenge because of the way it is tightly enmeshed with Western givens, such as hyper-individualism, safetyism, and tribalism. Third, several focus group participants spoke of the uniquely high barrier to genuine dialogue between themselves and LGBTQ ideologues. One factor here is forceful accusations from LGBTQ ideologues that assert that the Christian sexual ethic is hateful, and that the LGBTQ stance holds the high moral ground.

To the challenges summarized in Chapter 5, I add one subjective observation. This regards those focus group participants who, in the course of conversation, expressed the greatest degree of anxiety, frustration, or sorrow, observed even, on one or two occasions, in their tears. In my observation, the three most intense external stressors for Christians are the LGBTQ pressures mentioned above, close personal and family relationships that have been strained or severed due to differences of faith and ethical commitments, and concerns about negative influences upon one's children, especially in the public education system.

Finally, there are numerous subtle cultural pressures that the focus group interviews did not draw out. An exception illustrates the point. One participant stated that

upon reading that cynicism is a characteristic of modern Western culture, he came to recognize a measure of cynicism within his own attitudes. The focus group questioning route tended not to elicit much of this sort of self-awareness. Though not emphasized in the current project, our society's implicit secularism, radical individualism, consumerism, and relativism, to name a few, function as the alternate idolatries of the dominant regime that make resistance necessary.

Insights from Ezra–Nehemiah

The Rebuff and Welcome

Resistance trainers preach to congregants who are sometimes tempted to assimilate to the world and at other times tempted to withdraw. Preachers may have called congregants away from those extremes by means of Jesus' statement about being in but not of the world (John 17:11–26). This dissertation offers to resistance trainers the bookends around Ezra 4–6 as a fresh way to express the same concept. The intentional pairing of Ezra 4:3 and 6:21 can be preached as a narrative example. A congregation can watch as Zerubbabel rebuffs, but then later as his community welcomes repentant newcomers into the Passover celebration. Both the rebuff and the welcome are fitting, given the holiness required by the fact that God is present among his people. Pastors can illustrate this pairing with contemporary examples. I benefited from listening to focus group participants who are highly engaged with non-Christians. As described in Chapters 5 and 6, several of these reach out winsomely while speaking up creatively.

Some focus group participants admitted to being too worried about people's perceptions of them. They confessed that sometimes in public settings they have been

embarrassed to openly express their Christian identity. The inclusio around Ezra 4–6 warns Christians away from this sort of withdrawal from the world—the failure to be openly Christian in public settings. Ezra 4–6 proclaims that *resistance* must be paired with *reform*.[1] Those who say "No!" to the world must not hide their faith. How will the world say "Yes!" to Christ if Christians hide their light under a basket?

Where in Time are we?

Resistance training should give congregants the perspective of God's metanarrative. The shift from Christendom to post-Christendom has taken some in the church by surprise. They need to be reminded that God has not been taken by surprise. The frustrations of post-Christendom life are sometimes anxious overreactions. Other times they are a response to genuine threats, for example, in some cases to one's livelihood. Either way—and this must not be stated glibly—pressures from the external world are relativized when considered in the light of God's overarching plan. Nehemiah 1–6 and its links to the New Testament reveal that those who mock God's people are not as intimidating as they may seem. Unless they repent, they traverse a road that leads to eternal shame. The silence of God in Neh 9–10 points us forward to the New Testament revelation that the Abrahamic land promise's rest and inheritance, partially received already in Christ, will be ours in full in the New Heavens and the New Earth. We accept our calling to be strangers and exiles as we take to heart God's promises about the age to come. Resistance trainers help their congregations to persevere when they highlight the great markers of

[1] Referencing again East's ("Once More, Church and Culture," para. 19–22) typology.

the story in which we live: Creation, Exodus, Exile, Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, the Second Coming, and the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Distinctive Disciples

Resistance training should equip congregants for a counter-cultural lifestyle. At its core, Neh 10:30–31 is a call to holiness in the face of the world. Five factors provide guidance for the issuing of this call in sermonic form. First, there would be no opportunity to recommit to holiness were it not for the persistent mercy of Yahweh (Neh 9). This remains true today. Second, given the emphasis in Neh 9–10 on divine retribution, it needs to be said that those who assimilate to the world will be swept away with it in the end. Third, the model of obedience in the face of God's silence (Neh 9–10) calls the church to commit to distinctive living without anxiety or resentment about changes in her social status. No matter the cultural currents, the church is to remain confident in God who is working out his plan. Fourth (appealing now to authors from the literature review), behavioral distinctiveness begins with the internal strengthening of the church—both as individuals and corporately—through the normal means of grace and spiritual disciplines. Fifth, focus group participants or other living examples known to the preacher can colorize contemporary distinctiveness. One example would be John from Chapter 5 who sets boundaries for himself. Another example is Jane from Chapter 6. Christians experiencing the temptation to compromise will do well to respond with her words, whether spoken to oneself or aloud: "I don't do that because I'm a Christian"—not with a holier-than-thou tone, but with confidence in our transcendent and immanent

Lord who grants the courage to live openly as a Christian in the face of a sometimes-hostile world.

To Speak or Not to Speak

Resistance trainers should assume that their congregations include people who struggle with the question of whether to speak up or remain silent about matters of Christian faith and practice in interactions with non-Christians. This struggle includes experiences of anxiety and retrospective feelings of guilt. Wise resistance trainers, therefore, do not begin to address this issue at the level of the tongue, but instead they focus on matters of the heart. Ezra–Nehemiah provides models of fearlessness and courage, especially in the persons of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, as well as the covenanters of Neh 10. The example of Nehemiah is particularly robust as it occurs in the context of Neh 1–6's wide-ranging exploration of shame, which is relevant to the matter of public speech.[2]

Seen through the lens of Ezra–Nehemiah, resistance training is a form of spiritual formation. Ezra–Nehemiah's public speech resources are theocentric. Ezra–Nehemiah says, "Take courage in the active and intervening presence of God in the midst of his people" (Ezra 4–6). This presence of God is not something to treat casually; God's intentionality to dwell in the midst of his people is robust, forceful to the point of overcoming opposition to it. Ezra–Nehemiah says, "Let the fear of God displace your

[2] *Public speech* is shorthand here for speech in interactions between Christians and non-Christians. I especially have in mind interactions in which there is the possibility of some measure of conflict or difference of opinion due to the faith commitment of the Christian. *Public speech*, in the sense it is used here, includes even a private conversation between a Christian and a non-Christian. It also includes interactions, whether verbal or in writing, that a Christian may have with their employer or other authority figures.

fear of people" (Neh 4:14). Nehemiah the governor provides a picture in living color of the courage that is fostered by that displacement.

The New Testament augments these realities in two ways. First, Christians accept shame in fellowship with Christ's sufferings. This helps take the sting out of shame. Shame becomes a badge of honor and a sign of faithfulness to our Lord. Second, Jesus' command to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matt 10:16) adds another nuance. Sometimes the correct option is to speak partially, in guarded fashion. However, that option, along with the option of silence, must never be founded on anxiety or fear.

Times of cultural change provoke anxiety. But the heart transformed by God assigns more weight to his constancy than to cultural change. Christians speak or remain silent on the basis of their sense of identity. Four features of this dissertation draw attention to the New Birth, the indwelling of the Spirit, and Union with Christ[3] as the keys to the question of identity and thus to public speech. First, in the literature review, we observed with Volf that Christians are in the world but not of it precisely because of the New Birth.[4] Second, the repeated relational language in Ezra–Nehemiah (e.g. "our God") highlights the importance of the connectedness between God and his people, now enhanced by the giving of the Spirit. That this matters in interface with outsiders can be seen, for example in Nehemiah's prayer of Neh 4:4: "Hear, O our God, for we are despised." Third, Keller's notion of preaching to the heart points in the same direction. Resistance trainers aim at congregants' hearts in order to shape proper public speech habits. Fourth, two focus group participants from two different research sites emphasized

[3] I see these three as tightly related spiritual realities.
[4] Volf, "Soft Difference," 18–21.

the personal relationship with Christ as the factor that to a significant degree inoculates the believer from the temptations of the world.[5]

In challenging interactions with non-Christians sometimes the best choice is silence. Other times a Christian will do well to probe a topic by means of questions. There are many scenarios in which one ought to speak openly as a Christian. This may include gently contradicting an expressed worldly perspective. A few are called to follow in the train of John the Baptist, raising a prophetic voice that publicly denounces wickedness and injustice. There is no simple formula because one's own unique gifts and calling matter. In every scenario, looking first to the Lord, the one thing we shun is the response driven by fear and anxiety.

Homiletical Reflections

I close with seven recommendations regarding *how* to preach the four themes above. Here I integrate the reflections found at the end of Chapter 4.

First, because we preachers are constantly tempted to subconsciously disbelieve it, it must be emphasized that the power of preaching resides in God and his word. Eskenazi has observed the prominence of documents throughout Ezra–Nehemiah. She writes of "the power or propriety of documents as causative principles and significant forces in human events. The ultimate power behind the documents . . . is God."[6] Likewise, the biblical documents from which we preach today hold an intrinsic dynamism due to their divinely breathed-out origin. Effective resistance training requires

[5] See the discussion at pages 172–73 above.
[6] Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 41.

prayerful expectation that when God speaks through his word, people begin to change, even when we cannot immediately see that change.

Second, resistance trainers should remember that the four themes discussed above must not be preached as bare themes. The preacher will want to preach from specific texts and release the literary qualities of those texts. Let each unique biblical pericope sing so that the listeners' imaginations can "see, feel, and taste them."[7] As their stories are retold in sermons, the fearlessness of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, for example, can be contagious. In Vanhoozer's vision, preachers will draw congregants into God's drama rather than present them with "ossified, formulaic knowledge."[8] At the same time, it must be added that in bringing out the literary qualities of Scripture, we must not let the pendulum swing so far that we leave no place for propositions, principles, or explanations.[9]

Third, resistance training should have room for both the redemptive-historical and the ethical. Preachers should avoid exclusive focus on only the overall flow of redemptive history or only the moral demands that God places on human beings. These two come together when we preach the New Covenant empowerment for obedience provided by the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, in Chapter 4 I discussed my own growth in the area of affectionate preaching. At the same time, I can imagine a different preacher, who by temperament freely expresses emotion. This preacher might make exactly the opposite change, reigning in emotion for the purpose of explicating textual details with care. The example

---

[7] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 291.

[8] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 88. MacBride (*To Aliens and Exiles*, 224–25) closes his book on a similar note.

[9] See further on this theme, Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 17–18.

from my own preaching paired with this imagined preacher makes the point that we should all seek to grow in awareness of our own unique assets and liabilities. Added to our own natural weaknesses is the call above to preach both poetically and propositionally, as well as both redemptive-historically and ethically. Who is capable of such things? This line of thinking leads to a further recommendation. I recommend to any solo preacher or senior pastor that they prayerfully develop additional preachers in their church. A team of preachers will naturally provide a more balanced diet of preaching demeanors and voices over time. To be sure, some preachers are quite gifted. But even these should be thinking about raising up the next generation (2 Tim 2:2).

Fifth, as discussed at the end of Chapter 4, I recommend the process of developing application by making use of both the fallen condition focus and the world in front of the text. This approach accounts for both sin and the Spirit. In this way the sermonic link from *then* to *now* considers both the fallenness of our present world and the possibilities of New Creation living. Pastors thus avoid both skepticism and naïveté, that is, extreme appraisals of their congregation.

Sixth, should any reader wish to use the appendices as an aid to the development of sermons, I recommend that they cover less textual material per sermon as compared to the manuscripts found there. For example, one might preach one sermon from Ezra 4–6 that focuses on the overall reversal in the story, and a second sermon that explores the inclusio. This will create more space to add Keller's homiletical devices for preaching to the heart. Similarly, the Neh 1–6 sermon discusses shame before God, shame before people, and prospective shame. That material would better lead to, for example, three sermons rather than one.

Seventh, preachers should resist the temptation to overlook the perspectives of congregants. For example, the first time I constructed the outline of the Neh 1–6 sermon, I did not have the perspective of a listener as fully in mind as I might have. My unstated assumptions led to some confusion on their part. Additionally, my experience with the focus groups commends the use of a formal means of learning more about one's congregation. The focus group report of Chapter 5 provides a thick description of real-life experiences similar to those in the congregations of other preachers. For the sake of resistance training, preachers could lead discussions in their own churches about the themes in Chapter 5. Resistance trainers could build upon what I learned in the focus group interviews, investigating the distinctive nuances of their own contexts.

Benediction

May every preacher who reads these words be blessed in their ministry of resistance training. Equipped by robust preaching, may your congregation rise to the challenges of the age. May you be an instrument by which God is pleased to speak to his people. Like Ezra before you, with the good hand of your God upon you, may you set your heart to study the Scriptures, and to do them, and to teach his statutes and rules in the church. Like Nehemiah before you, may you ever point the people to the Lord who is great and awesome. May God use the gifts he has given you for his glory, and in your weaknesses may his strength be all the more effectual. Amen.

APPENDIX A: BUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE IN POST-CHRISTENDOM
A SERMON FROM EZRA 4–6

Introduction

Please turn to Ezra chapter 4. We will work our way through chapters 4, 5, and 6 this morning. The events in Ezra 4–6 take place in the Middle East in the time of the Persian Empire, approximately 500 years before the time of Christ. If you look at this [projected] map, most of our story today takes place in Jerusalem. The Jews are under the authority of the Persian Empire. Persepolis, Susa, and Ecbatana are the Persians' three main capital cities. Ecbatana is mentioned in today's passage. These cities are in modern day Iran. Here is the Euphrates River. From the Persian perspective, Palestine is on the other side of the great river. So the province that includes Palestine is called "Beyond the River" or the Trans-Euphrates. In today's passage, we are going to observe letters going back and forth from Jerusalem to Babylonia. In Ezra 4, the Jews' neighbors write a letter to the Persian emperor. He considers the letter and sends a response back. And then the same thing happens a second time in Ezra 5–6. Before we go any farther, let's pray.

In the year 2020, the editor-in-chief of a leading evangelical magazine resigned. Afterwards, in a series of online posts, he revealed a bit of what went on behind the scenes. He said, "Our magazine often skewed in a certain direction. Our editorial staff, myself included, sometimes wrote in such a way as to try to gain the approval of certain constituencies." Ironically, a year later, in 2021, the editor-in-chief of a different leading

evangelical magazine also resigned. In this case, the editor resigned in protest. He said, in an online post afterwards, that the business managers of his magazine were too concerned to placate certain audiences that they wanted to reach and certain donors who contributed to the magazine. The business team was dictating how the editorial team covered certain stories. And the ironic thing is that in the second case, the pressure was coming from the opposite direction—theologically and politically—as compared to the first magazine.

I tell you that story for two reasons. First, if it can happen to Christian magazines, it can happen to Christians as individuals and to churches. If we get enamored with some sort of idol, if we try to make certain influencers happy, we essentially are welcoming infiltrators into our hearts. The other reason I mention this is that we can have our guard up against certain non-Christian ideologies and not realize that we may be threatened by others from other directions as well.

We're contemplating, this morning, pressures that the church faces in an increasingly post-Christendom society. And God has given us Ezra 4–6 so that we can learn from how the Jews in the Persian Empire navigated the pressures of life as a religious minority group. We will work our way through this story in five movements.

Movement One: Opposition

I'm entitling the first movement, "Opposition." Here we consider Ezra 4. As the story opens, the Jews who have returned home from exile are rebuilding the temple. Picture the leader of the Jews, Zerubbabel, sitting in the construction hut, poring over blueprints. A delegation from a neighboring people group stick their heads under the tent flaps, peeking in. "Hey, are you the leader of this operation?" "Yup, that's me." "Listen, we'd like to

help out. We're from just over yonder. We worship Jehovah, Yahweh, just like you do. We'd like to offer our services for your project."

We don't know how long Zerubbabel thought about this, or prayed about it, or consulted with other leaders. But in the end he gets back to these neighbors and says, "Thanks, but no thanks. We're going to do this on our own. You *say* your worship Yahweh, but actually you don't have anything in common with us." And people in our day today would say, "Why be so harsh? So provincial? Shouldn't we be building bridges. I mean, let's be coalition builders! They're offering help—don't turn down good help!"

But there's a clue in the passage that tell us that the Zerubbabel was correct to rebuff these neighbors. In verse one it says that these neighbors who were offering to help—what are they called in verse one? They are referred to as "enemies." They've got nice big smiles but a little bit of wool here and there. And some of those teeth seem a bit long.

The neighbors were pretending to be on the same team, but once rebuffed they begin to show their true colors. They begin to take the wool off. You see, they feel threatened by the re-establishment of the Jewish community. They don't want the temple to be rebuilt. And so they begin to intimidate the builders. They harass them. They do everything in their power to stop it.

Follow along as I read [read Ezra 4:1–5].

Now, if you dig into the details of this chapter, it turns out that everything in verses 6 through 23 comes from a different time period. However, the author places it here because it fits perfectly topically. It's another example of opposition. And this is the

first letter that I mentioned before. In Ezra 4:6–23, the neighboring officials write a letter to the Persian emperor. They say, “Dear honorable emperor, these nasty Jews here have a building project going on. We don’t think it’s a good idea. Could you look in your libraries? Could you search in the archives? We think you’ll find evidence from the past that this city Jerusalem is dangerous. These people do not honor the emperor. If you let them build this city, next thing you know, they’re going to take control over this whole Trans-Euphrates region. You’re going to lose tax revenue.” That of course gets his attention.

And so the emperor, back in Persia, commands his librarians to look for information about Jerusalem. Sure enough, they find in the archives evidence that Jerusalem had once been a very powerful city. It’s probably a reference back to the days of David and Solomon. So the emperor sends a letter back to the neighbors in Jerusalem and says, “Yeah, you’re right—make the work stop.”

When we get to Ezra 4:24, we are back to the main story line. The Jews’ enemies force them to stop building the temple for a total of 15 years. You can imagine Zerubbabel’s disappointment and frustration. Verse 24 reads, “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”

Our passage is about the attempt to build the temple, and when we move these principles into the New Testament, one of the things we are told is that the church is the temple of God. We see this in Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter 2. In the Old Testament, at the temple, God’s presence was there living in the midst of his people. Today God’s Holy Spirit lives in the midst of his people, the church. We, the church, are God’s temple.

Now here in North America, we don't have the government shutting down churches. This summer I heard a missionary to the country, Jordan, give a report. He works with Muslim background believers. There's a measure of religious freedom in Jordan, but not for converts from Islam. A group of Muslim background believers were meeting in secret, and while they were meeting, the secret police called one member of the group on his cell phone and said, "We know who you are and what you are doing." The leader was called into the police station, and the police had a list of the names of everyone who was present at the meeting. So somehow there had been an infiltrator.

For us here in North America today it's a little different. For us the problem is cultural infiltration. There are forces, such as radical individualism and materialism—and many others—that tempt us to weaken in faith. Tempt us to walk away from the Lord. The infiltrators in Ezra 4 were deceptive—they said, "Hey, we're on your side." So also in our own day, cultural infiltration can be deceptive, hard to spot. I mentioned pressures placed on Christian magazines. Where churches and believers face similar influences, we need to have the wisdom of Zerubbabel to say no. We need to pay attention to the temptations to false doctrine, to sinful behavior. We need to have our eyes open. We need to remain firm in the Scriptures and our commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and on that basis not let outside influences lead us astray, from whatever direction those influences may come.

Movement Two: The Restart

So that's "Opposition." Now we come to Ezra chapter 5. The second movement—I'll call it, "The Restart." When you get to Ezra 5:1, it's now fifteen years later, and God begins

to stir up the prophets, and the prophets encourage the people to start rebuilding. Haggai and Zechariah say, “Hey, let’s get going—the Lord want us to rebuild his temple!” Now the Persian prohibition against this building project was never rescinded. Zerubbabel’s heart skips a beat when the new local official pulls up in his chariot. His name is Tattenai, and he asks two questions: “Where’s your building permit? Let me see your building permit.” And secondly, “I want names. I’m taking down names.”

Tattenai is also going to write to the Persian emperor to ask what to about these Jews. This all sounds scary, but it turns out that there’s a generous side to Tattenai. He tells the Jews, “Until the emperor tells what to do, you can keep building. I might make you stop once Emperor Darius gets back to me, but for now, you can keep going with your project.” And the question is, Why? Why does Tattenai them keep building? It’s very generous as compared to what we saw in the previous chapter! Well, the answer is “God.” Look at Ezra 5:5. “But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped them until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received.” Look carefully at verse 5. This God who has his eye on the Jews—is this any old god? What does it say? How is God described? It’s the eye of *their* God. That’s relationship language. Same thing in verse one. “The God of Israel.” Are you familiar with the line that gets repeated throughout the Bible, “I will be your God, and you will be my people?” That’s what we are seeing here. This is why Tattenai is so generous. God is orchestrating this. He’s got his eye on his people. The skies are beginning to brighten a bit here, specifically because God is acting upon his commitment to his own people.

So Tattenai writes to Darius. The letter he sends over to Persia is also generous. He actually includes—very fairly—quotations of what the Jews said to him. The Jews explained to Tattenai how it came about that their temple was destroyed to begin with, and also how they got a building permit. "The reason our temple was destroyed," they say, "is actually on us." [Read Ezra 5:12]. That's the story of Israel's sin and God's judgment that we know from 2 Kings.

Then at verse 13 the Jews explain to Tattenai—who in turn reports to Darius—how they got their building permit. This goes back to the time when the Jews were living in exile. When Cyrus sent the Jews home, he made a decree that they were to rebuild the temple. Verse 13: "However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God." So in his letter to Darius, Tattenai says, "Dear Emperor, These Jews here are saying that if you do a library search, supposedly you'll find a decree that your predecessor Cyrus wrote, authorizing them to build their temple. They say they have a building permit from Cyrus the Great." So Darius commands his librarians to investigate. Lo and behold, they find in the archives a copy of Cyrus's decree. So Darius writes back and says, "Yeah, we got the proof. We have their building permit here. Let them build." We're into chapter six now. [Read Ezra 6:6–7]. And then—get this—look at the middle of verse 8: "their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury." What a turnabout!

Movement Three: God's Perspective

So that's our second movement. We've had "Opposition," "The Restart," and we come to—in the middle of chapter six—to our third movement in this story. I'm calling this,

"God's Perspective." What is God up to in all this? We've already seen that God's eye is on the Jews, but there's more to see. Much more.

Remarkably, Darius closes his letter with a prayer. He says, "May God *overthrow* anyone who tries to destroy this temple." Notice that word, "overthrow." [Read Ezra 6:12]. Overthrow. That's a strong word. Turn things up on their head. It's the perfect word, isn't it? It's a prayer for what God will do in the future, but it also captures what God has already done. The enemies had said, "There's archival material in Persia that will prove that the temple shouldn't be rebuilt." But God says, "You know what—I'm going to directly turn that on its head. Let's have another exchange of letters, another searching of the archives, and we'll undo the first one. I'll show you even *older* archived material that proves that the temple *should* be built!"

Imagine that you get an envelope in the mail from the IRS [CRA in Canada]. It's a thick official looking letter, and you have to sign for it. It looks intimidating, and sure enough, it says that you miscalculated your taxes, and now you owe a lot of money. You really do. Thousands and thousands of dollars. You pay it off over time. Very painful. Okay, now, fifteen years go by, and then one day you receive an identical envelope. "Oh no! Here we go again." Hands trembling, you open the envelope. Inside is a check, and the letter says the government made a mistake fifteen years ago. "We're giving you all your money back, plus fifteen years of interest that we owe you." And you say, "No, things like this never happen!" "How could this be?" And the only explanation is divine intervention.

Same thing here. In the first case the Persian emperor had said, "Stop the work," but now the Persian emperor says, "Don't let the work stop." What was the concern in the

first case that really got the emperor's attention? "You're gonna lose tax revenue, sir." What's said now in chapters five and six? "We the Persians will pay for the building of this temple and supplies." I ask you: How do we explain the way the opposition gets turned completely upside down? What can this be other than the intervention of God? And why is God intervening? What are God's purposes? "I want the temple rebuilt." "I want to live in the midst of my people," he says. "This is what matters to me."

[Read Ezra 6:13–14]. Notice here the mention again of the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. God doesn't just make things happen. He's a talking God. He explains himself all along the way. With respect to the church today as the dwelling place of God, he explains this through the apostles. For example, regarding the church, the household of God, Paul writes [Read Eph 2:20–22].

Notice in the middle of verse 14 that the temple was completed according to the decree of God. He is the one doing this. And he is referred to as "the God of Israel" again, just as at 5:1. It's relationship language. The temple is the specific location where that relationship actually happens. This is where God and his people meet.

For us today, infiltrators, cultural pressures, they're there, they're real. We have to deal with them. But in the big picture, they do not win the day. We understand God's perspective. He laid it out for us in advance through the prophets. God is committed to having his presence among his people. He'll even overturn enemies to accomplish that.

Movement Four: The Participation of God's People

So we've seen the Opposition, and the Restart. We've seen God's Perspective. And that brings us to our fourth movement, which I'm titling, "The Participation of God's People."

You see the question now is this. We see what God is doing, building his temple, the church. Might there be some way in which he wants us to participate in what he is doing?

Cultural infiltrators are knocking on our doors. These are people who seem to want to build the temple with us, but they're actually adversaries. We need the wisdom of Zerubbabel to rebuff infiltrators. We need to have our guard up. The problem is—how do you do this without becoming isolationist? How do you keep out false teachers without circling the wagons? We don't want to develop a hostile demeanor to everyone outside the church, do we? We can't let it come to this: "No one's getting in here—no one ever!" Ezra 4 through 6 addresses this issue specifically.

Are you familiar with this? Often when a speaker gives a speech, or a writer writes a piece, they'll begin with a story or they'll begin with a quotation and then when they get to the very end, they'll come back around to the exact same story or the exact same quotation. The happens in the Bible. For example, do you know how Psalm 8 begins? "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name." Do you know what the last verse of Psalm 8 says? "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic." Same thing.

Well it turns out that Ezra 4–6 has bookends just like that as well. There's a half a dozen different words or phrases or themes that show up in Ezra 4:1–5 and then again in 6:19–22. I'll show you a couple of them. You'll have to flip back and forth in your Bible between the beginning and the end of today's passage. Toward the end of 4:2, you have the phrase, "the king of the Assyria." The only other time that phrase occurs in Ezra is in the middle of 6:22. In the middle of 4:4 you see the word "discourage." Its opposite is found in the middle of 6:22 where you see the word, "assisted." That word discourage represents from the original language, "the enemies caused their hands to droop." So

then, if you were to read 6:22 in the King James Version, it reads that God "strengthened their hands." That's intentional. That's the "overthrow." Their hands were drooping at the beginning of the story, but God strengthened them by the end.

Now there's another one of these pairings that I want to develop. The rebuffing of infiltrators is presented at the beginning, but then there's a counterpoint to it at the end. Look at the middle of 4:2. The key word here is "seek." The neighbors they say, "Let us help you build, because, like you, we *seek* your God." Now we know that's a lie, because these are enemies who are not wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord. They worship other gods as well. Now flip to chapter six. Here we have the other side of the coin. At 6:19 they are celebrating the Passover. Ezra 6:20 begins to tell us who participates in Passover. The Passover is eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from the exile—and here's the point—and also by other people coming in to join Passover. Look at verse 21 and watch for our word, "seek:" And, by the way, these are the only two times the verb "seek" appears in Ezra 4–6. "So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of their Gentile neighbors in order to *seek* the Lord, the God of Israel." And this is not a lie, because this is the inspired author telling us that these are converts. These are neighbors who came, and they go through their own Passover. Figuratively, the cross the Red Sea, repenting of their old ways, to seek the Lord the God of Israel.

Now the point is, if the only thing you read was Ezra 4:1–5, you'd say, "Yeah, we the church—we've got to put up walls. Have to keep false teaching out of the church." But then you read Ezra 6:21, and you see the balancing point—we are also supposed to welcome newcomers. Now, the standards are high. Newcomers have to leave their

unclean practices; they have to repent. But when we are open to newcomers, that's how we participate with what God is doing in building His church. These two sides of the coin are not contradictory to each other. The common theme is the holiness of the presence of God in the midst of his people. We rebuff deceptive infiltrators to keep God's temple-church holy, and we welcome repentant sinners, those who are newly committed to that holiness.

What does that look like? It involves the practice of church discipline, when necessary. It means the leaders of the church protecting the church from false teachers. But never in such a way that the church's mentality is only antagonistic to the world. There must be engagement with and a welcome offered to the world.

There's an Australian theologian named Tim MacBride who summarizes this point in a single phrase. He says that the church is to be "attractively different." We're supposed to be different. We're not supposed to be like the world. If the church is just like the world, then what do we have to offer them? But we're supposed to be *attractively* different. We're supposed to let our light shine. We're supposed to be salt in this world. Some people will not find Christian living attractive, but some will, as God's Spirit opens their eyes, and we need to be available to them to be attractive. In a hostile environment, we need to maintain our identity. We have to hold firm to what is true and right, and not be infiltrated, but part of our identity is that we don't hoard salvation all for ourselves. We hold it out to others as well.

Imagine yourself going to watch your favorite team play a major stadium or arena. And you're going all decked out in your team's colors, wearing their jersey, your face painted, the works. Now here's the catch. You're going to the opponent's home

field. You're watching your favorite team compete as the *away* team. That takes a lot of courage, doesn't it? You're even going to attempt to persuade some of the home fans sitting near you as to what is so great about your team. You see what I'm saying? You aren't compromising your loyalty, but you also aren't staying away from the other side. That's the church—in the world, but not of it.

So what does it look like for you personally to avoid isolating yourself from the world? Maybe it's hospitality, maybe it's going out for coffee with a non-believing friend. And in those settings, when you are in the presence of non-Christians, what does it look like for you to remain faithful to the Lord? Don't hide your light under a bushel, neither by remaining silent about your faith, nor by just avoiding the world altogether. God is building his temple-church, and we participate with what he is doing by neither isolating ourselves, nor by assimilating to the patterns of this world.

Movement Five: Perfection and Joy

So we've seen the opposition, the restart, God's perspective, and our cooperation with what God is doing. Now the final movement is titled: "Perfection and Joy." Imagine the sweet joy the people experience as they work on the finishing touches of the construction of the temple. They hold an elaborate dedication ceremony. We can picture them praying, singing, listening to speeches. What the text emphasizes, however, is the sacrifices. In chapter 6, verse 17, if you add up how many sacrificial bulls, rams, and lambs they offer up, it adds up to 700. That number—seven times one hundred—is symbolic of perfection. In the same verse, they offer twelve goats as a sin offering, according to the number of

the tribes of Israel. This group of people is just a small remnant of Israel, and yet, brought by God into his presence at the temple, they count as the fullness of the nation.

At the end of the book of Revelation, we find another grand celebration. In Rev 19 we read about the marriage supper of the Lamb. In Rev 21, we are granted a vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth. Remarkably, here too we discover the pairing of a grand welcome and yet restriction on who may enter the camp. On the one hand, it will include people and offerings from every nation and language and ethnicity. On the other hand, nothing evil will ever enter that place. [Read Rev 21:26–27].

From beginning to end, God has been unswervingly committed to building his temple. The overthrowing of enemies in Ezra 4–6 was a foreshadowing of the climactic overthrow. It foreshadowed that climactic moment when darkness turned to light, when the stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone. That move from death to life is the defining moment for us. Today, here, right now, we are that temple built on Christ the cornerstone. We live in Christ's victory. And while we wait for the final populating of the New Jerusalem, Christ is protecting his church from enemies. He is adding to her number. He dwells by his Spirit in our midst. And where all this is leading is to a day of unimaginable fullness and joy.

Here in the middle, you and I participate in what God is doing by rebuffing infiltrators and welcoming repentant newcomers. We cooperate with what he is doing by being in the world, but not of it. In this world, we may experience trial and trouble. We may play a part in seeing new people coming to faith. Whatever our experiences, we rejoice in knowing that God is working out his purposes, building his church, and that he will in the end finally overthrow all opposition. Our confidence is built upon his

commitment to live in the midst of his temple-church, both now and into eternity. To him be the glory forever, Amen.

APPENDIX B: THE PROBLEM OF SHAME IN POST-CHRISTENDOM
A SERMON FROM NEHEMIAH 1–6

Introduction

We are going to take a tour through Nehemiah chapters one through six this morning. Before we get into the text, I want to tell you about the research of Thomas Sieberhagan. This Belgian scholar has studied how evangelical Christians are portrayed in American movies and television programming. There's a wide range of types of portrayals, but two stereotypes come up more than any other. The first stereotype is the evangelical Christian as a naïf—that is, a naïve or ignorant person. The other one is the evangelical as a hypocrite. For the quintessential example of the naïf, Sieberhagan points to the TV series, *The Big Bang Theory*. The mother of the main character—her name is Mary Cooper—she talks a lot in the show about her belief in the Bible.

In the episode in which she is introduced, she's serving a meal to a group of people, and one of the people at the meal is of South Asian descent. He's Indian, and she's serving chicken. And she says to the Indian man, "I hope that's not one of the animals that you people think is magic." She's mixed up in her mind between chicken and beef, and magic is not really the issue. In the show, the main character, Sheldon, is this super, hyper-intelligent guy. Sieberhagan says that what probably happened is this. "Who would be the perfect foil for Sheldon?" "Who would be the exact opposite of someone who is really smart?" "Oh, of course, an evangelical Christian!"

For a quintessential example of a hypocrite, Sieberhagan points to the show, *The Office*, and the character Angela. In one episode Angela is asked what books she would bring with her to a desert island. She says the Bible, and she says Pastor Rick Warren's *A Purpose Driven Life*. Sieberhagan says that the conniving Angela is arguably the most immoral main character in that show, and she's the professing Christian! Oh my!

Now I trust that people who know you as a Christian don't see you that way because they see the real you. But does it ever happen, as you get to know someone, if you say, "Well, here's what the Bible teaches about this subject," or, "Here's why belief in Jesus is important," that you are aware that you might be pigeon-holed? "Oh, you're one of them," they say looking down on you. What does Nehemiah have to teach us about navigating life in a society that is sometimes inclined to look down on you? Before we go any farther, let's pray.

This morning we're going to see that Nehemiah 1–6 has a lot to say about situations where we feel like we are being put down, especially as Christianity comes to have a diminishing level of influence in our culture. We'll walk through this story in five movements.

Movement One: Shame before God

This story is taking place about 450 years before the time of Christ. Many Israelites who had been in exile in Babylon have come back home to Palestine. But when the story opens, Nehemiah himself is still back in the Persian empire. He's the cupbearer to the emperor, and he's getting a report from Jerusalem. He hears how the city walls are

broken down. But listen for the additional problem of disgrace or shame as I read. [Read Neh 1:1–3].

Depending on your translation, you see in verse three the word *shame*, *disgrace*, or *reproach*. This is talking about that painful feeling you have when other people look down on you because of some fault in you, whether a real fault or a perceived fault. It's that strong emotion that you feel when you are being judged to be defective.

Now most of our focus will be on shame before people, but we begin with shame before God. In fact, that's my title for this first movement of the story, shame before God. Here we're considering especially chapter one. You see, Israel had sinned in previous generations so badly that eventually the threats that God had made in Leviticus and Deuteronomy came true. God had warned them that if they behaved as bad as their predecessors, the Canaanites, they would be vomited out of the land. Which is what happened. And now, even though they're back in the land, they still feel the shame of being cast out of God's presence. Look for concepts like being scattered or being outcasts as I read. [Read Neh 1:8–9]. In the Old Testament, the concept of shame is most commonly associated with the exile. The exiles are back in the land, but they are not feeling truly gathered back to the Lord yet. In this light, Neh 1:6–7 provide a wonderful example for us of the confession of sin before the Lord. [Read Neh 1:6–7].

Now as the story progresses, there are some wonderful signs that the shame before the Lord is lifting. For example, after Nehemiah asks the king for permission to go back to Jerusalem. The last line of 2:8, "And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me." And then 2:18, where Nehemiah is saying to the people, "Come on, let's rise and build," we read "I told them of the good hand of God

that had been on me for good." Our focus is going to be on shame before people, but before you deal with shame before people, you have to deal with shame before God. That's always the first thing.

Movement Two: Shame before People

We come then to the second movement, which I'm calling, shame before people. We're thinking here about our relationships with people outside of the church. Our focus is on Neh 2:17–20.

Can you imagine? What if Washington, DC [or Ottawa] was just a heap of rubble? Would that help us feel any sense of pride in our nation? And so also for them, their city walls are broken down, and that's part of their shame before neighboring nations. Nehemiah is saying, "Let's rebuild the walls."

But also in chapter two we're introduced to Sanballat and Tobiah, leaders of neighboring people groups. They feel threatened by Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls. They don't want the city of Jerusalem to rise from the rubble. And so they began to taunt and try to put shame on the Israelites. Both here in chapter two, also in chapter four, we'll see different words that relate to trying to shame other people. Words such as "jeer" and "despise."

You can feel ashamed because you've done something shameful, but you can also feel ashamed because other people are trying to force shame on you, even when you don't deserve it. That's what these two men are doing. They're putting the Jews down. "Hey, that's a really dumb idea to try to rebuild the city walls. You'll never be able to do

it. You're no good. You're nothing." Trying to force that sort of shame on them. [Read Neh 2:19].

Here's the critical question. Does Nehemiah internalize, does he accept what they're saying? And the answer is no, he doesn't. He basically says, "Look, I don't buy your system."

So notice in verse 20, the God of heaven, he says, will make us prosper, and we, his servants, will arise and build. So at one level, we're nothing but servants. But the key word is *his*. We're his servants. That's what makes us who we are. We belong to God. We don't have to feel shame because we belong to God. He doesn't say, "I'm not going to be intimidated by you guys because I'm so special, but rather because God, my God is so special."

Part of understanding shame is to recognize that it's part of a pair. Sometimes we use the phrase, "honor and shame." To be honored is to be given high social status. To be shamed is to be given low social status. In talking about honor and shame, the Bible often uses the language of rising and falling. You rise to a place of honor, or you fall to a place of shame.

Nehemiah's God in verse 20 is "the God of heaven." Can't get much more honorable than that. And in both verse 18 and verse 20, when they say they're going to build, they say, "Let us rise up" (ESV). We're going to rise and build. Even though they're being put down, well, the favor of the God of heaven is upon them. And so they can rise and build.

Let's just pause here for a moment and think about what this has to do with my life and your life, whether that's in a context of people trying to put you down, or even

perhaps in the turmoil of our own thoughts. Not that long ago, a Christian counselor named Esther Liu published a 31-day devotional on the topic of shame. And every now and then in this devotional, she tells a little bit of her own story. She doesn't share a lot about her background or why she experiences this, but she says, "At times I have these voices in my head saying, 'You're no good. No one loves you, you're just trash'." And she writes in one of these daily devotionals: "There was one night where these voices were very loud in my head, and the Holy Spirit gave me a one-word response. And the one-word response was, "No." "No, I'm not going to listen to these voices."

And that's what Nehemiah is saying. Sanballat and Tobiah are trying to put the people down. "No, I don't accept what you're saying about us." Specifically he's tying himself to the Lord, "We're the Lord's servants."

By God's wondrous grace, we have even more reason today to say "no" than Nehemiah did. We know that we're God's servants, in an even more rich and full way than Nehemiah did. That's because of the coming of the Messiah and the giving of the Holy Spirit. We know that Jesus bore our shame for us. [Read 1 Pet 2:4–5]. Jesus is the Living Stone, uppercase *L*, uppercase *S*. Jesus, the living stone was shamed. We are "living stones," lowercase *L*, lowercase *S*. Two verses later: [Read 1 Pet 2:6]. We are tied to the honorable Jesus. If you are hidden in Christ, you will not be put to shame at the Final Judgment. If you stand confidently in that ultimate truth, it will work its way backwards into how you think about who you are today.

Movement Three: Intensification

So shame before God, shame before people and Nehemiah saying "no." And now we come to the third movement of the story. This is also about shame before people, but I'm calling it "intensification." In Neh 4, the temptation to be ashamed before people intensifies.

One day, Sanballat, Tobiah, and a group of enemy soldiers visit the building project at Jerusalem. These enemies begin to talk to each other very loudly. What are they doing? Who is it that they want to overhear their conversation? Answer: The builders on the wall.

"What do these feeble Jews think they're doing? They think they can turn this rubble into a wall. What a joke! If a fox were to climb up on it, the whole thing would collapse." Nehemiah is watching. He recognizes their plan. In fact, he sees the builders on the wall. He sees their heads begin to droop. "If they lose heart, what next?" So Nehemiah prays. In the first half of Neh 4:4, a word for shame appears again. Nehemiah prays, "Oh God, the shame that they're trying to put us, would you make it fall on them instead? Turn back their taunts on their own heads."

The builders recover and build the wall to half its height. But the enthusiasm doesn't last. Eventually the barrage of shaming language takes its toll on the builders. They begin to wane in their efforts again. To make matters worse, Sanballat and Tobiah begin to make a plan to attack, not with words, but now with military might. They plan an ambush, a sneak attack. [Read Neh 4:10–11]. The Jews are giving up. The enemy is about to attack. All the momentum is on the side of Sanballat and Tobiah. You see what I mean by "intensification."

However, there is one man, one man who is unstoppable, indefatigable. In the movies—think *Braveheart*—a hero will suddenly rise up. Well, that's Nehemiah. And he points the people to the Lord. To the Jews' eyes, it looks like the enemy is great and awesome. But actually, it is the Lord who is great and awesome. [Read Neh 4:14b–15].

This is the point where the Jews grab hold of their relationship with the Lord. Their relationship with the Lord is the antidote to shame. Remember that phrase earlier, "*his* servants?" We have a very similar phrase in this chapter: "our God." Not any old God, but the God with whom we have a relationship, the Jews say. So for example, 4:4: "Here, oh our God." And 4:9: "We prayed to our God." And 4:20: "If the enemy comes, we'll rally to the trumpet. Our God will fight for us."

Today we can feel the temptation to be shamed. Recently where I live, a church that had been renting space in a local public school was forced out of the school. Now, I understand that social media is not the place to go if you're looking for civil discourse on a matter of public interest. But I was paying attention to the story, and this what someone wrote on Facebook. They were writing to Christians. "I don't care what you think your imaginary friend is telling you in your little book." So imaginary friends, sometimes children have imaginary friends, but in this case, this was a reference to Jesus. So, "I don't care," this person says, "what you think your imaginary friend..." So this is not civil discourse. This is a putdown. "Your imaginary friend." In other words, you Christians are like little children. "With your little book." It's condescending.

Think about your own interactions with non-Christians, especially in those cases where Christianity is now counter-cultural. For example, your friend says to you, "I think all religions are like different paths up the same mountain. They all get you the same

place." And you're thinking to yourself, "I am the way, the truth and the light. . . . There is no salvation in any other name." And you can anticipate that you to say something here, you might hear back, "Oh, you're one of them." And so you wrestle with that. "How do I navigate this conversation?" Maybe Christ as the only way to God is not the issue. There are other topics where what is said in everyday conversation stands in contrast to Christianity. Perhaps you feel the tension. "I want to live openly for God. But I don't want to be put down, either, if I can help it." And the thing to remember is in the moment, it's not about you, it's not about me, it's not about us. It's about the Lord. And it's not trying to prove that we are great and awesome. It's remembering in the moment that he is great and awesome.

In Nehemiah, we have these relational phrases, "his servants," "our God." In the New Testament, we are "Christ's servants," Christ is "our Lord." Or better yet, we are "in Christ," one of the most common ways that Paul speaks about that intimate relationship between us and the Lord. If our identity is in Christ, if we have been crucified with Christ, then "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Then we can say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." At the end of Acts chapter five, the believers rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer disgrace. The key to all of this is tying our identity to the Lord.

Movement Four: Potential Shame

So shame before God, shame before people. We've seen now the third movement, the shame before people intensifying. And now we come to our fourth movement. This comes from Neh 5 and a little bit of chapter six. This is also a form of shame before

people, but in a different sense. I title this fourth movement “potential shame.” I’ll explain what I mean by that in a moment.

When you get to Nehemiah five, at first, it seems like it’s an unrelated story. There’s a famine. There’s nothing in Neh 5 about building the wall. It turns out there are rich Jews and there are poor Jews, and the rich Jews are mistreating the poor Jews within the Jewish community. The rich Jews are lending money because of the famine to the poor Jews, and the poor Jews can’t keep up with the payments. And the rich Jews are then trying to take possession of the property of the poor Jews.

Although the setting is quite different, the theme of shame shows up here too. Nehemiah confronts the people, “Look, if we Jews are a divided people, then the neighbors are going to see that, and they’re going to look down upon us. And actually, you know what? We’re going to deserve to be looked down upon. Because our behavior is objectively shameful.” [Read Neh 5:9].

It is one thing to be shamed in public for your Christian beliefs, but it’s another thing to be shamed in public because you are sinning in God’s eyes, and even non-Christians notice it. They say, “Hey, that’s wrong.” In New Testament terms, we say that we don’t want our behavior to bring shame on the name of Christ. In Peter’s first epistle, after saying that we shouldn’t be surprised by persecution… [Read 1 Pet 4:15].

A similar thing happens in Neh 6, starting at verse 10. There’s a man named Shemaiah, and he says to Nehemiah, “Hey, Nehemiah, there’s a plot to kill you. Come, let’s run over to the temple. We’ll hide there.” But Nehemiah sees right through it. He recognizes this is a plot against him. He says, “Oh, this guy, Shemaiah, he’s a false prophet. He’s trying to intimidate me.” And if you know anything about Nehemiah, is

Nehemiah someone who's easily intimidated? So he's not going to run to the temple. Here again, the shame language shows up. [Read Neh 6:13]. Nehemiah is not going to be afraid. He's not going to go to the temple, and therefore he's not going to let this potential shame, which would be deserved shame, fall upon him.

So in the main, what I'm saying to you this morning is, be strong in Christ, and don't be ashamed of your Christian faith. But let's not take that to the extreme where we get to the place where we say, "Well, no matter what a Christian does, it's always correct. And no matter what a non-Christian does, it's always wrong." No, there are times where Christians sin, and non-Christians by common grace, by the influence of Christianity in our society, by their own conscience, sometimes will say, "Hey," to the Christian, "that's wrong!" And they might even try to put shame upon you for the sin that you've done. And in this case, you deserve it.

What I mean when I say potential shame is that at any time of day or night, you can think to yourself, and you can imagine, "Now I could, in the next two minutes or the next two days or the next two months, I could engage in this sinful practice." You feel a temptation to do this thing that's wrong in the sight of the Lord. However, you can also recognize in advance, "Wait a second. If I do that, I might be put to shame for it publicly, and so therefore I am not going to do it." We sometimes speak about shameless people. You see, there's a good aspect to shame. Shameless people don't feel shame when they ought to. People who are not shameless, can see shame coming in advance, and change their behavior so as to not do something that is shameful.

Now listen, if the world thinks that gospel-centered Christians are naïve and hypocritical, let them think that. However, let's not give them ammunition for such

accusations! And if we see Christian scandals in the news in other places, we might pray about those situations. We might be frustrated about those situations, but let's at least, as a local congregation, with respect to deserved shame because of our own sin in the sight of our neighbors, let's say, "No, not here. Not in our house! By the grace of God, we will live lives of integrity. We will not dishonor the name of Christ. We will take seriously in advance the potential consequences of our behavior."

When you think about it, there are so many reasons to do what is right. We want to respond to grace and the gift of the Spirit. We want to live worthy of our calling. We want to offer our lives as living sacrifices to God. There are many reasons to do what's right, but warding off potential shame is one of them.

Movement Five: The Shaming of the Shamers

So shame before God, shame before people. We've seen that shame intensifying. Now we've considered a different kind of shame before people. That is, potential shame. We come to the story's final movement. It is found at Neh 6:15–16. I'll give you a fuller title to this fifth movement in a moment, but for now, let's simply call it, "The conclusion." We arrive at the day when the building of the wall is completed. If you could imagine being there that day. "Oh, praise the Lord, we put the finishing touches on the walls to the city of Jerusalem. What a wonderful day." Now, zero in with me on verse 16 of chapter 6. The first line of verse 16 says that when the enemies heard that the wall was complete, that they were afraid. This is surprising because Sanballat and Tobiah have not ever seemed afraid of anything thus far.

Now, however the enemies have to say, “Boy, oh boy. We’d never expected them to build this wall. How did this happen so fast? It puts fear in our hearts.” Look at the last line of verse 16. “They perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.” So in the opening line of verse 16, and in the closing line of verse 16, we’re seeing the enemies look up with respect to the Jews who’ve built the wall and with respect to the Jews’ God.

And then look at the middle of verse 16. It reads, “They fell greatly in their own esteem” (ESV). This is the Jews’ enemies. In other words, when the wall is completed, Nehemiah does not have to search out for Sanballat and Tobiah and say, “You guys should be ashamed of yourselves for all the grief you gave us.” No, Sanballat and Tobiah are feeling that shame already all on their own. They fell greatly in their own esteem. How did that happen? Seriously, Sanballat and Tobiah have been such tough characters. If I were reading this story for the first time, and I heard that the wall was built, I would expect Sanballat and Tobiah to come around to the city gates and say, “Oh, yeah? Well, we’ll get you next time.” Or to bring an army or a battering ram or something. That’s the Sanballat and Tobiah I would expect. So how do you explain that they fell greatly in their own esteem?

Well, do you remember the prayer of 4:4? What did Nehemiah pray? “May their taunts fall on their own heads.” What you see in the middle of verse 16 is divine shaming, divine judgment. That’s the only way to explain it. And so I would call the fifth movement, it’s the conclusion, but I would call it “the shaming of the shamers.” God putting to shame those who were trying to shame his people.

Now, in our day, when people put you down for your faith, I cannot promise you that God will shame those people in this life. But I can promise you that there will be a day when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. And we pray for those who try to shame us that they might repent and that they might not be shamed at the last day.

Part of the key to Nehemiah in these chapters is that he can see what no one else can see. I have a nephew who sometimes sees things that other people don't see. My nephew is 18 years old, and he loves to spend time studying used car prices on Facebook Marketplace. And he's developed a talent for knowing what a car is worth. Not that long ago, he bought an old luxury car with high mileage for $500. It was advertised upfront that it always was overheating. For about $200 worth of repairs and the help of a mechanic friend, he sold it for $1,500. You've perhaps heard similar stories about a business person who just has an eye for what will be a successful business. Or perhaps a talent scout in athletics who can see things that other people don't see.

Nehemiah can see what we don't normally see with our physical eyes. When someone tries to put undeserved shame on you, even if it's just the silent treatment. . . what happens is our eyes get fixated on the question of what they think about us. But instead of being self-protective, the call here is: "No, can you see beyond that?" Can you see the Lord and how your identity is tied to him? You don't need to be ashamed because your identity is wrapped up in Jesus, who is precious in the Father's sight.

Jesus said, "I don't care about this world's notions of shame." What does it say in Hebrews? He disregarded the shame. Why? For the joy that was set before him. In the New Testament the event in the New Testament that has the most concentrated amount of

shame attached to it is the Final Judgment. And so we look at today's interactions, and we need to look at and say, "I can see something that many people don't see. I can see where this is headed. And if this friend who's trying to shame me doesn't turn to Christ, they'll be the ones shamed at the final day. And oh God, may that not be, but as for me, I entrust myself to the Lord. I might be shamed in this life, but that is nothing compared to the stakes at the final day. [Read 2 Tim 1:12b].

How do you navigate life in a society that's inclined to look down upon you for your beliefs? What do you do when you sense that they might be saying about you, "Oh, you're one of them"? Well, first of all, deal with any shame before God. Confess your sin, and come to rest in the forgiveness of Christ. Secondly, keep the eternal outcomes in mind. In a running race, your eyes are on the finish line. In the race of life, we gain perspective by looking to the final outcomes of eternal shame and eternal honor. That perspective gives you the navigation tools you need to see where you're at and where you're going, and how to interpret the scene of the life around you. Hidden in Christ, we can handle the shame of the moment in light of that day when God will set all things right.

APPENDIX C: COVENANT RENEWAL IN POST-CHRISTENDOM
A SERMON FROM NEHEMIAH 9–10

Introduction

Please turn to Nehemiah chapter nine. We're going to look at chapters nine and ten this morning. When people use the term *post-Christendom*, they are speaking of the shifts whereby Christianity is more and more being pushed off to the margins of society. In fact, the ebb and flow of Christian influence in America is complex. But allow me to describe one key marker in the decline of the influence of Christianity in America.

It was 60 years ago now that the Abington School District Supreme Court decision was handed down. The year before, the Supreme Court had said that prayer was not allowed in public schools. And then in this Abington School District decision, the court said that a public school teacher is not allowed to read the Bible in class, such as in devotional exercises at the beginning of the day, or even if it's reading the Bible without comment. And a teacher is not allowed to lead a recitation of the Lord's Prayer. Of course, there are pros and cons to Bible reading and school prayer in public schools. On the one hand, if you have a non-believing teacher leading a prayer, might not they be communicating the wrong idea about God to the children? On the other hand, might not the Lord use even that sort of exposure to the idea of God and to prayer and to Scripture for his own good purposes. These Supreme Court rulings didn't say, "Well, we'll just leave it up to each district what they want to do." Which is what small communities with

a majority Christian population would have preferred. But the Supreme Court said, no, all 50 states, all communities everywhere, this is forbidden. But then there's Justice Stewart's famous dissent. He said, "Look, we have military chaplains, we have prayers at the beginning of sessions of Congress. We have Christian influence all over the place in governmental settings. This is now a shift." He termed it "the establishment of a religion of secularism." In other words, you are never neutral on these matters.

The secularizing impulse in American history has been with us for some time. Even prior to 1963. Now, the connection I'm making is that the original readers of Ezra and Nehemiah, they saw themselves as a minority religious group facing hostility from the Persian Empire, facing hostility from characters such as Sanballat and Tobiah. And today in various quarters, the Christian church in America feels hostility from the culture around us.

We are going to consider Neh 9–10 under two headings. First of all, frustration, and secondly, determination. Before we go any farther, why don't we pray? [Prayer].

Section One: Frustration

We begin with frustration. When you look at Neh 9:8, you begin to see that one of the key themes in the prayer of Neh 9 is the promise of the land. God had promised to Abraham that the people of Israel would have the land Palestine in which to settle. And in the prayer, the Levites who are leading the prayer work through the history of gaining the land, and then ultimately what life is like in the land under the Persians. Nehemiah 9:8 is referring to Abraham. [Read Neh 9:8a]. As the story progresses in this prayer, we that God was leading the people into the land. But they often rebelled. The low point in that

rebellion was when they made the golden calf to worship. And yet the emphasis in the prayer is: Even though our ancestors sinned so often, O God, you were incredibly merciful and gracious to them. You, in fact, despite their rebellion, did bring them into the land.

That brings us to verses 24 and 25 where they celebrate how wonderful the land was when they entered. They're looking back upon the days of Joshua and they're saying that in those wonderful years, the crops were so bountiful. Imagine if you were a farmer in that time of plenty. You had to hire harvesters, and more and more harvesters to keep up with the growth. It was just wonderful. All the food that you, Lord, provided. Nehemiah 9:24–25 is referring to "their children," that is the next generation. [Read Neh 9:24–25]. It's a picture of the perfection of well-being in the land. So wonderful to revel in the God's gift of the land. Everything just the way it's supposed to be.

However, as the story continues, as they recount their history in prayer, what comes to the fore next is the people's rebellion against God. Again and again, cycles of rebellion, sin, God bringing judgment on them, them crying out. You remember the cycles from the book of Judges? They're here too.

And then notice, when you get down to verse 32, the opening words, "Now therefore" (ESV). This is where the story arrives at the present-day moment, when the prayer of Neh 9 is being prayed. "Now, therefore." Having recounted their history, this is the community referring to their own day, and saying, "God, here we are under Persian rule, and we're frustrated, we're frustrated."

If this was a movie, verses 32 through 37 would be the place where the soundtrack would be playing those ominous undertones. Things aren't going well. Oh,

there may be wonderful harvests still. In fact, a lot of the language of verses 36 and 37 is drawn from verses 24 and 25. Bountiful harvests, but what? The benefit of those harvests is lost to God's people because of the taxes and tribute to the Persians. [Read Neh 9:32–37].

So the question is, Where is the promise of the land? Yeah, we're in the land but we can't truly benefit from the land. There is intense frustration in verses 36 and 37. We are slaves. We are slaves in the land that you gave our ancestors. We can't enjoy our own abundant harvests. We are in great distress. The Jews are longing for the days of Joshua. We wish we could have that scenario again. There's an implicit prayer request here. We're in distress. God, please take us out of our distress.

And the question is, does God grant this request? Does God grant this request? Remarkably, the answer is no. What happens? Persian rule is replaced by the Macedonians, Alexander the Great. Oh, there's a short reprieve under the Maccabees. But that doesn't last long, and the Roman Empire takes over. Which brings us all the way down to the church age.

The people praying in Neh 9 are disappointed that they don't have the full use of the land. Here's the main point. What they don't understand is God has a plan that's moving forward to the Messiah. And when the Messiah comes, Messiah does not give his people a land, a territory. The Messiah is first of all going to create, through the Spirit, from the inside out, a renewed people.

Even today, does God give the church a specific geographic land? No, God was moving towards a situation which our citizenship is in heaven, and we're still looking forward to the complete fulfillment of all those promises at the Second Coming of Christ.

The people praying in Neh 9 were frustrated at their loss, not seeing that their story existed inside a bigger story that God was orchestrating.

So also for us here today in post-Christendom. Whatever the ebbs and flows of the church's place in society, we are part of the larger mosaic that God is weaving together. We follow Messiah no matter what the government is like in our day. Wherever we are in the globe, whatever age we live in, we obey Jesus, and we render to Caesar, whoever Caesar might be at the moment. The church over the last 2,000 years has sometimes lived under governments where the church has more favored status, sometimes lived under situations where the church has less favored status. We seem to be moving in our own culture from more favored to less favored. That's okay, because God is in charge.

A couple months ago I looked online to see the score of a baseball game. The online gamecast indicated that it was the bottom of the eighth inning. Two outs. My team was behind by a run. In the most recent play, my team's runner had gotten thrown out at the plate to make the third out. If you know anything about baseball, there's nothing more demoralizing than to make the last out of the inning by having a runner thrown out at home plate. I closed the laptop. My team had lost its previous four games in a row. If you look at baseball power rankings they're in the bottom quarter of the list. So I said, I know how this story ends. That evening before I went to bed, I checked the scores, and my team had won that game. How did this happen? And so I read a summary of the game, and it turned out that play that I had seen, the only play of the game that I had actually paid any attention to, went to video review. And upon review, they determined that the runner was safe at the plate, and my teams went on to score another run that inning and

they won the game. This happens a lot. We think we know how a story's going to end, when in fact, we don't.

We need to see the move in America from Christendom to post-Christendom as being part of God's larger story. In the big picture God is moving things forward towards the Second Coming of Christ. We don't know what God's purposes are. I believe that this is a time where God is pruning his church. When pressures come upon the church, those pressures can reveal whose commitment to Christ is genuine. God uses pressure for good purposes. Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying God can't bring revival in our day. I'm not saying that you aren't allowed to speak a Christian perspective into the public square today. Different ones of us have different gifts and different callings.

But here's what I am saying. When you look at cultural trends in our nation, never despair. Never be anxious about it. Never be resentful; never complain as if you're just a victim; never whine as if you are entitled. Don't be surprised by suffering. The New Testament tells us that again and again. Through all the ups and downs of the last 2000 years, God has never stopped calling Christians, wherever they are, to trust in his sovereign plan as he works out the story of human history, as he works out the story of our individual lives, as he works out the story of our local congregations. And when we're weak, when we don't have political clout, we will find, that we're strong because then we learn to trust in the Lord. We don't want the church to be strong in the sense of mere political influence. That can be more dangerous than helpful. We want to be strong in the Lord.

When we look back to the past, we shouldn't be thinking, "Oh, I wish we could go back to that Golden Age," whatever it was. We look to the past to say, The Lord was faithful then, he'll be faithful now. And in general, our mindset is to look forward. This is from Hebrews 11. The patriarchs, they didn't look back to the land they came from. [Read Heb 11:15–16]. We are called to confident hope. To be confident that our current situation is not the final stage of God's good plan.

Section Two: Determination

So that's frustration. What do you do when you're frustrated? End of a long work day, things aren't going your way. When frustrated, some of us head the wrong direction, don't we? Binge watch TV, eat a lot of candy, throw in the towel. I don't know what you do when you're frustrated, but think about the movies. Think about a movie where the main character's just about done in, at death's door. But then at the last minute this character begins to move, starts to breathe, then gets up and wins the day. It's a heroic moment.

When you watch the shift from Neh 9:37 to 9:38, there is something heroic about verse 38. At verse 37, the people are in great distress. You might expect: "Never mind, God. We'll just all assimilate into the Persian empire." But what you get instead is, In view of all this—in view of our trouble, in view of our sin, in view of God's great mercy—we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing. We recommit ourselves to obedience to you, O God. In a moment we'll look at some of the details of what they commit to. But the movement from the frustration of verse 37 to the determination of verse 38 is remarkable. It's meant to be a model for us. If confidence in

God means that we accept our frustrating situation, where do we go next? If we acquiesce to the reality that God is in control of our history, what does that mean for how we live our lives? What it means is that we don't give up in frustration. We set forth in a new step of determination. We move forward with obedience to God's commands. Another factor here is that the people have come to see that their disobedience is what got them into trouble. That's a major theme in chapter nine. "So while we wait to see what God will do next, we had better recommit to obeying the Torah." And so that's what they do.

The covenant is spelled out in detail in chapter 10. They commit to obeying the entirety of the Mosaic law. The covenant, however, highlights those specific stipulations that are particularly critical for life as a marginalized people, facing the pressures of the Persian empire. This means that the specific stipulations in chapter 10—when we translate them into a New Testament setting—they are important for us in post-Christendom America today as well.

The overarching theme is here is the people's determination to be a holy people. And it breaks down under three headings. Number one, the call to be a distinct people. Number two, the call to love each other in the believing community. Number three, the call to be centered on the temple. To be distinct, to love, and to be centered. And we'll talk about these in our New Testament context.

The first requirement to which the Jews recommit themselves is to being separate from the world. This is both with respect to intermarriage and with respect to not doing commerce on the Sabbath. [Read Neh 10:30–31a]. In the Old Testament context, the problem with intermarriage is that if you marry outside of the Israelite faith, your Gentile spouses are going to lead you to worship their gods. Think Solomon.

As to commerce on the Sabbath, picture this scene with me. Imagine a friend of ours, a Jewish man in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. He's relaxing somewhere around Jerusalem. Sitting in front of his house. He doesn't work on Saturdays, because that is an important identity marker for him and his people. It's a lovely Saturday afternoon, and a Gentile merchant comes along and says, "Hey, I've got grain for sale at a really good price." And our Jewish friend says, "We're in need of some grain, and that is a very good price." The merchant says, "I can't guarantee this price tomorrow. What's your worry? What's wrong with you people anyway?" Our friend looks around. Will any of my neighbors notice if I buy a little grain from this Gentile trader here on the Sabbath? And then he remembers, "No, wait, we put this in writing. We said we would not do this. Sorry, friend. I'll buy from you another day, but not today

Carry these two issues over into our own age. What do they say about remaining distinctively Christian in post-Christendom America? If you're a young person and if you're single, looking to get married, the New Testament is clear, you're to marry inside the Christian faith. On the other hand, if you're a Christian and you're already married to a non-believer, according to 1 Cor 7, you're to stay in that relationship. We're not talking about splitting up that relationship as long as your non-Christian spouse is willing to stay married to you. But let's broaden this to the bigger picture of being unequally yoked in all sorts of different settings. Are there friendships that you have with non-Christians where the direction of influence is such that you are being led away from commitment to Christ through your friendships? If so, that's a concern.

Let's apply the issue of doing business on the Sabbath broadly. Are there places where you're embarrassed to live a distinctly Christian lifestyle? We must not cut

ourselves off from the world, but what does it mean to avoid becoming like the world? And the classic New Testament passage on this theme is found in 2 Cor 6. [Read 2 Cor 6:14–15; 7:1].

The city of Austin, Texas has always had its own distinct character, in comparison with the rest of the state. Some 20 years ago, a businessman had the idea of a new marketing campaign for the City of Austin. He came up with a new slogan, "Keep Austin weird." It's migrated across the country. People in Louisville now say, "Keep Louisville weird." I'd like to borrow that for the church. "Keep Christianity weird." In the sense of, let's not be embarrassed to be countercultural. If immorality, lust, drunkenness, wild partying—if that's all normal, then let us be weird. And one key here is courage. Courage to be a Christian no matter what others think of us. That's being distinct.

The second requirement to which the Jews recommit themselves is love. This is drawn from the second half of Neh 10:31, about the sabbatical year. [Read Neh 10:31b]. Hard to imagine how in an agrarian society, every seventh year you don't plant crops. Now, what does this have to do with love? Well, you see, the original legislation back in Exod 23 said that during the sabbatical year, the poor of the land in Israel were allowed to go to anybody's fields, anybody's vineyards. This goes beyond gleaning. They could take whatever crops would grow naturally in that seventh year and take them for themselves. Part of the meaning of letting the land lie fallow, was caring for the poor. And, of course, the canceling of all debts in the seventh year is also a kindness to those in need. I'm reminded of 1 John 3:17. [Read 1 John 3:17].

It's always important to love each other in the body, but this stipulation is placed here because it's one of the ones that's critical when you're a minority religious group.

When the winds of culture blow against the church, even this local congregation, you need to band together. To leave no one behind. As our culture becomes more fragmented, you want your church to be a place where, in Christ and by the Spirit, there is real community. A deep love for one another that especially attends to the most vulnerable among us.

So being distinct, and being loving within the community. Then, the third requirement to which the Jews recommit themselves is being centered. You see, everything in Neh 10:32–39 is about being centered on the temple and supporting all of its activities. This section lists detailed prescriptions about providing wood for sacrifices, making sure you're supporting the Levites and the priests materially and so on. Notice very last line of chapter 10. We will not neglect the house of our God. Don't overlook that last phrase, "our God." It's not any old god; it's the God with whom we have a relationship. He has a house, the temple. This is where the presence of God is in the midst of his people. When you face a hostile culture, you need to be centered. For them that was being centered on the temple.

When we translate that into the New Testament, we come, for example to John 1:14. Jesus tabernacled among us. Jesus is the temple. Destroy this temple, and I'll rebuild it in three days. And not Jesus, but also, the individual Spirit-filled believer is the dwelling place of God, and furthermore the church. And so I want to translate that last line of chapter 10 into New Testament language by saying, "We will not neglect Jesus Christ." And furthermore, "We will not neglect the church of Christ." Make it even more specific, There's the church capital C, but then there's the local expression of the church. We will not neglect this local outpost of the church of Christ.

As you feel post-Christendom pressures against you, center yourselves on Christ, and for his sake, on this local assembly. This is our local congregation to which we've committed ourselves. This is where the Holy Spirit is residing. This is a dwelling place of God here in this local community. And so I don't know what that means for each of you individually. Whatever your role is, whether in a specific area where you're using your gifts, or where you're supporting those who use their gifts, live with determination. If you don't like the direction the world is headed, don't get frustrated above that, but rather be determined to live for Christ, centered on him and your congregation. Part of how you're a testimony to the world around you is by the community that you demonstrate to them by means of your life together.

Not that long ago I saw a television commercial. This is one of the means by which culture pushes on us. It was for a luxury car. "When you drive this car, you can let your emotions run free. When you're in this car, you can truly be who you are." Do you hear the message? That's the religion of secularism telling you to find ultimate meaning within yourself. And of course that is only one of many messages out there that want to shape you into their mold.

And so in that kind of world, we need to be grounded. We need to not live in frustration but rather live in determination. Bottom line, it's being centered on Jesus Christ. This world will pass away. Bottom line, our foundation is Jesus Christ, Him and Him alone.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Achtemeier, Paul J. *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*. Hermeneia. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1996.

Ackroyd, Peter R. "יָד *yāḏ*." In *TDOT*, 5:393–426.

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic, 2011.

Augustine. *The City of God (11–22)*. Translated by William Babcock. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2013.

Bailey, Kenneth E. "The Fall of Jerusalem and Mark's Account of the Cross." *ExpTim* 102 (1991) 102–5.

Bar-Efrat, Shimon. *Narrative Art in the Bible*. Sheffield: Almond, 1989.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Bautch, Richard J. "The Function of Covenant across Ezra–Nehemiah." In *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, 8–24. Hebrew Bible Monographs 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

Beach, Lee. *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope after Christendom*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015.

Beale, G. K. *Colossians and Philemon*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019.

———. *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011.

———. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. NSBT 17. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004.

Bechtel, Lyn M. "Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming." *JSOT* 16 (1991) 47–76.

Becking, Bob. *Ezra–Nehemiah*. Historical Commentary on the Old Testament. Leuven: Peeters, 2018.

Bellah, Robert N., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Ben Zvi, Ehud. "Inclusion in and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term 'Israel' in Post-Monarchic Biblical Texts." In *The Pitcher Is Broken:*

Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström, edited by Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy, 95–149. JSOTSup 190. Sheffield: Sheffield, 1995.

Berlin, Adele. *Poetics and Interpretation of Bible Narrative*. Bible and Literature Series 9. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983.

Bettler, John F. "Application." In *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Samuel T. Logan Jr., 331–49. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1986.

Bishop, Bill, and Robert G. Cushing. *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. 2nd ed. Boston: Mariner, 2009.

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *Ezra–Nehemiah: A Commentary*. OTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988.

———. "The Nehemiah Autobiographical Memoir." In *Language, Theology, and the Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr*, edited by Samuel E. Balentine and John Barton, 199–212. Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.

Boda, Mark J. *1–2 Chronicles*. Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 5a. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2010.

———. "Confession as Theological Expression: Ideological Origins of Penitential Prayer." In *Seeking the Favor of God: Volume 1, the Origins of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, edited by Mark J. Boda et al., 21–50. SBL Early Judaism and Its Literature 21. Atlanta: SBL, 2006.

———. "From Complaint to Contrition: Peering through the Liturgical Window of Jer 14,1—15,4." *ZAW* 113 (2001) 186–97.

———. *Haggai, Zechariah*. NIVAC. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

———. *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017.

———. "Identity in Diaspora: Reading Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Esther as Diasporic Narratives." In *Rejection: God's Refugees in Biblical and Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Stanley E. Porter, 1–26. McMaster New Testament Studies 4. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015.

———. "Legitimizing the Temple: The Chronicler's Temple Building Account." In *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient near East and Hebrew Bible*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Jamie Novotny, 303–18. Alter Orient Und Altes Testament 366. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010.

———. “Prayer as Rhetoric in the Book of Nehemiah.” In *New Perspectives on Ezra-Nehemiah: History and Historiography, Text, Literature, and Interpretation*, edited by Isaac Kalimi, 267–84. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012.

———. *Praying the Tradition: The Origin and Use of Tradition in Nehemiah 9*. BZAW 277. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999.

———. “Redaction in the Book of Nehemiah: A Fresh Proposal.” In *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, 25–54. Hebrew Bible Monographs 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

———. *‘Return to Me’: A Biblical Theology of Repentance*. NSBT 35. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015.

———. “The Torah and Spirit Traditions of Nehemiah 9 in Their Literary Setting.” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 4 (2015) 476–91.

Bright, John. *The Authority of the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1967.

Brinkmann, Svend, and Steinar Kvale. *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2015.

Burge, Gary M. *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010. Kindle edition.

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018.

Childs, Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979.

Clines, David J. A. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. The New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984.

———. “Nehemiah 10 as an Example of Early Jewish Biblical Exegesis.” *JSOT* 21 (1981) 111–17.

Collins, Helen. *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture*. London: SCM, 2020.

Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018.

Davids, Peter H. *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

DeRouchie, Jason S. *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017.

deSilva, David A. “Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews.” *JBL* 113 (1994) 439–61.

Dreher, Rod. *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Sentinel, 2017. Kindle edition.

Duggan, Michael W. *The Covenant Renewal in Ezra–Nehemiah (Neh 7:72b–10:40): An Exegetical, Literary and Theological Study*. SBL Dissertation Series 164. Atlanta: SBL, 2001.

East, Brad. “Once More, Church and Culture,” *Mere Orthodoxy*, April 18, 2023, https://mereorthodoxy.com/once-more-church-and-culture.

Echevarria, Miguel G., Jr. *The Future Inheritance of Land in the Pauline Epistles*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019.

Elliott, John H. “Disgraced yet Graced: The Gospel According to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame.” *BTB* 25 (1995) 166–78.

Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra–Nehemiah*. SBL Monograph Series 36. Atlanta: Scholars, 1988.

———. “Nehemiah 9–10: Structure and Significance.” *JHebS* 3 (2001).

Evans, Paul S. “Who Says ‘You Can’t Go Home’? Reconsidering the Models of Exile and Diaspora as Metaphors for the Church Today in Light of Recent Exilic Literature.” In *Rejection: God’s Refugees in Biblical and Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Stanley Porter, 27–47. McMaster New Testament Studies 4. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015.

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 2nd ed. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

Fensham, F. Charles. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. NICOT. Eerdmans, 1982.

Fokkelman, J. P. *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses. Vol IV, Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1–12)*. Studia Semitica Neerlandica 31. Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993.

France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Fried, Lisbeth S. *Ezra: A Commentary*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015.

Gentry, Peter J., and Stephen J. Wellum. *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

Glatt-Gilad, David A. “Reflections on the Structure and Significance of the *ʾᵃmānāh* (Neh 10,29–40).” *ZAW* 112 (2000) 386–95.

Goppelt, Leonard. *A Commentary on 1 Peter*. Translated by John E. Alsup. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

H-Mallau, Hans. “The Redaction of Ezra 4–6: A Plea for a Theology of Scribes.” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 15 (1988) 67–80.

Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.

———. “Holiness and Purity in Ezra–Nehemiah.” In *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, 98–116. Hebrew Bible Monographs 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

Harris, Murray J. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Hauerwas, Stanley, and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1989.

Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*. New York: Basic, 2019.

Holmgren, Fredrick C. “Faithful Abraham and the *ʾᵃmānâ* Covenant Nehemiah 9,6—10,1.” *ZAW* 104 (1992) 249–54.

Hopkins, Peter E. “Thinking Critically and Creatively About Focus Groups.” *Area* 39 (2007) 528–35.

Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

“In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/.

Janzen, David. “The Cries of Jerusalem: Ethnic, Cultic, Legal, and Geographic Boundaries in Ezra-Nehemiah.” In *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, 117–35. Hebrew Bible Monographs 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

Japhet, Sara. “People and Land in the Restoration Period.” In *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period*, 96–116. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006.

Jobes, Karen H. *1 Peter*. 2nd ed. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022.

Jumper, James Nicholas. “Honor and Shame in the Deuteronomic Covenant and the Deuteronomistic Presentation of the Davidic Covenant.” PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013.

Kang, Bin. “The Positive Role of Shame for Post-Exilic Returnees in Ezra/Nehemiah.” *OTE* 33 (2020) 250–65.

Keller, Timothy J. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Viking, 2015.

Kidd, Thomas S. *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

Kidner, Derek. *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979.

Klein, Ralph W. “The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” In *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, edited by Leander E. Keck, 3:661–851. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.

Knowles, Michael P. *We Preach Not Ourselves: Paul on Proclamation*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008.

Kroeker, P. Travis. “Messianic Ethics and Diaspora Communities: Upbuilding the Secular Theologically from Below.” In *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile*, 64–82. Theopolitical Visions 23. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017.

Krueger, Richard A., and Mary Anne Casey. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. 5th ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2015.

Kuruvilla, Abraham. *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching*. Chicago: Moody, 2013.

Kutsch, Ernst. “חרף *ḥrp* II.” In *TDOT*, 5:203–9.

Lane, William L. *Hebrews 9–13*. WBC 47b. Dallas, TX: Word, 1991.

Laniak, Timothy S. *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*. SBL Dissertation Series 165. Atlanta: Scholars, 1998.

Lau, Peter H. W. “Gentile Incorporation into Israel in Ezra–Nehemiah?” *Bib* 90 (2009) 356–73.

Lau, Te-Li. *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020.

Lee, Everett S. “A Theory of Migration.” *Demography* 3 (1966) 47–57.

Lewis, C. S. *The Screwtape Letters*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942.

Lincoln, Andrew T. “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective.” In *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, edited by D. A. Carson, 343–412. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

Liu, Esther. *Shame: Being Known and Loved*. 31-Day Devotionals for Life. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2022.

Long, Thomas G. *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

———. *The Witness of Preaching*. 3rd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016.

Lowry, Eugene L. *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001.

Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin, 2018.

MacBride, Tim. *To Aliens and Exiles: Preaching the New Testament as Minority-Group Rhetoric in a Post-Christendom World*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020.

Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism*. New York: Macmillan, 1923.

Martin, Oren R. *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God’s Redemptive Plan*. NSBT 34. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015.

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

Matzal, Stefan C. “He Turned the Heart of the King: An Exegetical Project in Ezra 4–6.” ThM thesis, Baptist Bible Seminary, 1999.

———. “The Structure of Ezra IV–VI.” *VT* 50 (2000) 566–69.

McConville, J. G. *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*. Daily Study Bible Series. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985.

McKelvey, Robert J. “Temple.” In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 806–11. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000.

McNamara, Andrew. “Six Rules for Practice-Led Research.” *Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* 14 (2012) 1–15.

Michaels, J. Ramsey. *1 Peter*. WBC 49. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988.

Miller, Calvin. “Narrative Preaching.” In *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, edited by Michael Duduit, 103–16. Nashville: Broadman, 1992.

Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

———. *Galatians*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013.

———. *The Letter of James*. PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Morgan, David L. *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2019.

Mottram, Judith, and Chris Rust. “The Pedestal and the Pendulum: Fine Art Practice, Research and Doctorates.” *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7 (2008) 133–51.

Murray, Stuart. *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*. 2nd ed. After Christendom. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018.

Myers, Jacob Martin. *Ezra Nehemiah*. Anchor Bible 14. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper, 1951.

Nykolaishen, Douglas J. E. “The Restoration of Israel by God’s Word in Three Episodes from Ezra-Nehemiah.” In *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, 176–99. Hebrew Bible Monographs 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

Nyumba, Tobias, et al. “The Use of Focus Group Discussion Methodology: Insights from Two Decades of Application in Conservation.” *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* 9 (2018) 20–32.

Osmer, Richard. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Paas, Stefan. “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences.” *Mission Studies* 28 (2011) 3–25.

Petter, Donna, and Thomas Petter. *Ezra–Nehemiah*. NIVAC. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021.

Phaipi, Chingboi Guite. “The First Encounter of the Golah and Their ‘Adversaries’ (Ezra 4:1–5): Who Are the Adversaries, and on What Is the Adversity Based?” *JHebS* 20 (2020) 1–26.

Pope, Marvin H. “Seven, Seventh, Seventy.” In *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by G. A. Buttrick, 4:294–95. New York: Abingdon, 1962.

Price, Eric S. “Comparing Sidney Greidanus and Abraham Kuruvilla on Preaching Christ from the Old Testament.” *TJ* 39 (2018) 69–93.

Quicke, Michael J. *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003. Kindle edition.

Read, David H. C. *The Communication of the Gospel: The Warrack Lectures for 1951*. London: SCM, 1952.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014.

Robson, Colin, and Kieran McCartan. *Real World Research: A Resource for Users of Social Research Methods in Applied Settings*. 4th ed. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

Root, Andrew. *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life*. Ministry in a Secular Age 3. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021.

———. *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church’s Obsession with Youthfulness*. Ministry in a Secular Age 1. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017.

———. *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*. Ministry in a Secular Age 2. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019.

Ryken, Leland. *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.

Saldaña, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2016.

Santos, Narry F. “‘Diaspora Missions’: Contemporary Missiological Significance of People on the Move.” In *Rejection: God’s Refugees in Biblical and Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Stanley E. Porter, 191–208. McMaster New Testament Studies 4. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015.

Satterthwaite, Philip E. “Narrative Criticism: The Theological Implications of Narrative Techniques.” In *NIDOTTE*, 1:125–33.

Scharf, Greg. *Relational Preaching: Knowing God, His Word, and Your Hearers*. 2nd ed. London: Langham Creative Projects, 2017.

Schnittjer, Gary Edward. *Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *1–2 Peter and Jude*. Christian Standard Commentary. Nashville: B&H, 2020 Kindle edition.

———. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.

Shalom-Guy, Hava. “Undercurrents in Restoration Literature: Abraham and the Promise of the Land in Nehemiah 9:6–37.” *CBQ* 84 (2022) 39–60.

Shepherd, David J., and Christopher J. H. Wright. *Ezra and Nehemiah*. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

Silva, Moisés. *Philippians*. 2nd ed. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.

Silverman, David. *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. 6th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2020.

Ska, Jean Louis. *“Our Fathers Have Told Us:” Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*. Subsidia Biblica 13. Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990.

Smith-Christopher, Daniel L. *A Biblical Theology of Exile*. Overtures to Biblical Theology. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002.

Steinmann, Andrew. *Ezra and Nehemiah*. Concordia Commentary. Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 2010.

Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Stiebert, Johanna. *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible: The Prophetic Contribution*. JSOTSup 346. London: Sheffield Academic, 2002.

Stott, John R. W. *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

———. *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World: With Study Guide*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992. Kindle edition.

———. “Power through Weakness (1 Cor 1:17—2:5).” In *The Folly of Preaching: Models and Methods*, edited by Michael P. Knowles, 127–39. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowat. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. London: SCM, 2016.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007.

Throntveit, Mark A. *Ezra–Nehemiah*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1992.

Timmer, Daniel C. “Jonah and Mission: Missiological Dichotomy, Biblical Theology, and the *Via Tertia*.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70 (2008) 159–75.

Trueman, Carl R. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.

———. *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022.

Ulrich, Dean R. *Now and Not Yet: Theology and Mission in Ezra–Nehemiah*. NSBT 57. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2021.

Van Harn, Roger E. *Preacher, Can You Hear Us Listening?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. Kindle edition.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

———. *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014.

———. “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant.” In *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew et al., 1–49. Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 2. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

———. *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019.

———. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

———. “Lost in Interpretation?: Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics.” *JETS* 48 (2005) 89–114.

———. “May We Go Beyond What Is Written after All? The Pattern of Theological Authority and the Problem of Doctrinal Development.” In *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, edited by D. A. Carson, 747–92. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. Kindle edition.

Vogt, Hubertus C. M. *Studie zur Nachexilischen Gemeinde in Esra–Nehemia*. Werl: Dietrich Coelde, 1966.

Volf, Miroslav. *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

———. “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation between Church and Culture in 1 Peter.” *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994) 15–30.

Walsh, Jerome T. *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001.

Ward, Pete. *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017.

Wells, David F. *The Courage to Be Protestant: Reformation Faith in Today’s World*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017. Kindle edition.

Williamson, H. G. M. “The Composition of Ezra 1–6.” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1983) 1–30.

———. “The Concept of Israel in Transition.” In *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological, and Political Perspectives: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study*, edited by R. E. Clements, 141–61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

———. *Ezra, Nehemiah*. WBC 16. Waco, TX: Word, 1985.

———. “More Unity Than Diversity.” In *Unity and Disunity in Ezra–Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, and Reader*, edited by Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, 329–43. Hebrew Bible Monographs 17. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008.

Wilson, Paul Scott. *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2004.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *“Here Are Your Gods”: Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020. Kindle edition.

———. *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.

———. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004.

Wu, Daniel Y. *Honor, Shame, and Guilt: Social-Scientific Approaches to the Book of Ezekiel*. Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements 14. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016.

Yamasaki, Gary. *Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis*. New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007.