PREACHING AS CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP: THE STORY, THE SERMON, AND THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

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Abstract

The article suggests that the preacher may function as leader by creating images of an alternative future. Building on the insights from "the narrative turn" in the social sciences, it argues that leadership may be understood from a communication perspective, primarily through the stories leaders communicate and embody. Further, preaching is an act of proclaiming and establishing an integrating narrative. Linking Walter Brueggemann's notion of prophetic imagination with contemporary leadership theories indicates that preaching contributes to Christian leadership when it expresses a coherent story of the biblical witness, an orientation toward the future, and the use of imaginative language.

Introduction

The use of story has entered the mainstream corporate world, a trend witnessed by the growing numbers of books on storytelling in secular leadership.[1] Simultaneously, homiletics over the last decades has highlighted the use of stories and narrative structures in sermons.[2] Although both leadership and homiletics

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[1] See John Seely Brown, et al., *Storytelling in Organizations: Why Storytelling Is Transforming 21ˢᵗ Century Organizations and Management* (Burlington, Mass.: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004); Stephen Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership: How Leaders Inspire Action through Narrative* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

[2] See Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer, ed., *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?: Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008).

embrace stories and narratives as means of creating meaning and engaging people, there is little analysis about the telling of God's story through preaching as an act of leadership. This article explores ways in which the preacher may function as leader through the means of creating images of an alternative future. Storytelling in the narrow sense, then, understood as a technique to engage listeners, is not the locus of interest in this study. Rather, it seeks to go beyond the use of stories to see preaching as an act of proclaiming an integrating narrative by which the people of God may find meaning and direction to lead in the world. Because leaders lead through the stories they tell and embody, "the narrative turn" in humanities and the social sciences is a good starting point for such an endeavor.[3]

Narrative and Identity

In the last decades of the twentieth century, narratives entered the wider discourse of human identity and creation of meaning.[4] This narrative turn happened as the debates among literary critics of the preceding decades found their way into the social sciences, making the focus on language an important trend and starting point in disciplines related to organizational research.[5] The central concern, then, shifted from how a narrative text is constructed to how it operates in the mind's construction of reality.[6] Stories came to be related to the

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[3] The term *narrative turn* refers to the increased interest in texts and narratives as a mode of knowing and a basic form of social life. Having its starting point in various streams of literary criticism and hermeneutics in the first part of the twentieth century, it later spread beyond literary theory to the humanities and the social sciences. For a brief overview of its history, see Barbara Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2004), chap. 1.

[4] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989).

[5] E.g. Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman, "Taking the Linguistic Turn in Organizational Research: Challenges, Responses, Consequences," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 36(2) (2000): 136–158.

[6] See Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18(1) (1991).

creation of meaning, suggesting that identity-building in late modernity can be likened to writing one's own biography.[7] Although not shared by all, a widely held notion across the spectrum of the social sciences is that human beings live or experience their lives in the form of a story.[8] Some even claim that human lives are cultural texts that can be interpreted as narratives because people create stories in order to make sense of their lives.[9] These stories together reassemble people's narrative identity and provide meaning, direction, and purpose, defining their lives in time and context through the connection of past episodes with future plans. In Polkinghorne's words, "narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events identifying them as a part of a plot."[10] Fisher describes people as *homo narrans*, placing the symbolic action of narration at the center stage of human existence.[11] As the current argument proceeds, I set out to demonstrate that this emphasis on narratives has implications for leadership in general and for preaching as leadership in particular.

Leadership as Communication

The present study proposes that leadership in a profound way relates to communication as narrative. Not only is the precise use of language one of the most effective ways for leaders to get others to see things the

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[7] Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 71(3) (Fall 2004); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1991), 54.

[8] See Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17(4) (2004): x.

[9] Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2006), 76. See also Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2006); Ann Cunliffe and Chris Coupland, "From Hero to Villain to Hero: Making Experience Sensible through Embodied Narrative Sensemaking," *Human Relations* 65(1) (2012).

[10] Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," *Journal of Narrative & Life History* 1(2–3) (1991): 136.

[11] Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 51(1) (1984): 1.

way they see them,[12] communication constitutes the *esse* of leadership. Hackman and Johnson suggest that leadership is closely connected to communication through the uniquely human capacity to create and manipulate symbols.[13] This ability allows for the creation of reality, which in turn may be shared with others through communication. Hence, leadership is primarily a symbolic activity through which the words and deeds of the leader greatly influence those who follow. Leadership is by nature, then, a special form of human communication, defined as "human (symbolic) communication, which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs."[14]

Having established this communication-centered definition of leadership, we may now explore the role narratives play in leadership. A fruitful starting point for this endeavor is Howard Gardner's assertion that the articulation and performance of narratives that provide meaning and identity play an essential part in the leader's vocation.[15] Based on case studies of several prominent leaders (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher), Gardner contends that leaders achieve their effectiveness primarily through the stories they tell and embody. This effectiveness is due to the cognitive nature of leadership; something happens in the minds of the followers when they hear particular kinds of stories. By focusing on stories rather than slogans, snapshots, or headlines, Gardner emphasizes how leaders orchestrate a drama that unfolds over time in which they, the leaders and the followers, are the main characters. The leader's story, however, to be successfully influential, must compete with other existing narratives so that the

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[12] Gail T. Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr, *The Power of Framing: Creating the Language of Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 2–9.
[13] Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson, *Leadership: A Communication Perspective*, 4th ed. (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, Inc., 2003), 11–14.
[14] Hackman and Johnson, 12.
[15] See Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

new story needs to suppress or complement earlier stories as well as competing counter-stories. Effectiveness thus involves a fit between current realities, past experiences, and future goals, with the leader's story constructing the unifying element that holds them all together. In short, Gardner proposes a process view of leadership as something that happens in the minds of individuals who live in a culture, "a process that entails the capacities to create stories, to understand and evaluate these stories, and to appreciate the struggle among stories."[16] The provision of stories of identity—that is, narratives that help people think about who they are, where they come from, and where they are going—is thus one of the most effective tools in the leader's toolbox.

The ability to lead through language and narratives is especially important in times of turmoil and change. Denning contends that narratives are essential for transformational innovation that will help organizations push beyond the status quo and move into the future.[17] In order to lead in disruptive and chaotic times, the leader must be capable of articulating a compelling vision that provides the organization with current meaning and future hope: "It is by narrative that leaders persuade others to believe in, and act on, a vision."[18] Dunford and Jones hold that language in the form of narratives is heavily implicated in the process of constituting a new reality in the minds of organizational members amid strategic change.[19] From such a perspective, change is more dependent upon an engaging and compelling account that encourages the actions intended by the narrators than on tools such as strategic planning and

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[16] Gardner, 21.

[17] See Stephen Denning, "Transformational Innovation: A Journey by Narrative," *Strategy & Leadership* 33(3) (2005).

[18] Denning, 12.

[19] See Richard Dunford and Deborah Jones, "Narrative in Strategic Change," *Human Relations* 53(9) (2000).

environmental analysis.[20] By interpreting and providing meaning to events, leaders play the role of sense-givers.[21]

Given this close connection between communication, meaning, and leadership, one would expect that the vast body of homiletic literature would address the relationship between preaching and leadership at length. This is not the case, however, and the potential for leading through the arguably most important ecclesial speech act of all, the sermon, is to a great extent unexplored territory. The following sections will thus address this pertinent subject by elaborating on the link between leading and preaching.

Leadership and Homiletics

To be fair, storytelling and narratives have received vast interest from the homiletic community in recent years.[22] The argument for use of storytelling in preaching typically points out how factors such as the Gutenberg press and Enlightenment rationality gave rise to "the age of exposition" with a focus on literacy at the expense of oral utterance, thus downplaying the importance of narratives.[23] The developments in technology and culture over the last decades, however, have resulted in a secondary orality with a corresponding reemergence of the story, a trend that has implications for preaching.[24]

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[20] David Barry and Michael Elmes, "Strategy Retold: Toward a Narrative View of Strategic Discourse," *Academy of Management Review* 22(2) (1997): 433.
[21] See Andrew D. Brown, Patrick Stacey, and Joe Nandhakumar, "Making Sense of Sensemaking Narratives," *Human Relations* 61(8) (2008).
[22] Graves and Schlafer, *Shape of Narrative Preaching*; Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).
[23] David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Academic, 2000), 14.
[24] Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-Literate Age* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 1993); Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-FirstCentury Listeners* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2001); Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 64–85; Olav Skjevesland, *Det skapende ordet: En prekenlære* (Oslo: Universitetsforl.,

Some authors have also discussed preaching in relation to leadership,[25] yet little has been done to provide a theoretical and scriptural framework for the integration of leadership and homiletics.[26] I suggest that such an integration is possible if one follows the argument developed thus far, namely that the leader influences followers primarily by means of communication, in which narratives play a prominent role. As I extend this reasoning to show how preaching may function as Christian leadership, I will draw on insights from Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, who has developed fruitful perspectives on proclamation and change from the vantage point of biblical studies.

Brueggemann: Preaching as Prophetic Imagination

Over several decades, Brueggemann has highlighted the importance of perceiving and receiving the biblical witness in terms of "prophetic imagination."[27] Because much of Western society is immersed in stories and ideologies unfamiliar with and foreign to the biblical account of YHWH as acting in history, people are neither able nor willing to hear and embrace the newness of God. The task of prophetic ministry is thus "to nurture, nourish, and evolve a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[28] *Prophetic* in this sense of

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1995), 226–233; Thomas H. Troeger, *Ten Strategies for Preaching in a Multi Media Culture* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996).

[25] John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[26] One notable exception is Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Leadership: Preaching to Transform Congregations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2006). The author's emphasis on one particular change model, however, makes it unsuitable for the approach being proposed in the current article. Also, William E. Hull, *Strategic Preaching: The Role of the Pulpit in Pastoral Leadership* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006) proposes strategic preaching as an aspect of pastoral leadership, yet from a slightly different perspective than the one central to the argument of this study.

[27] See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

[28] Brueggemann, 3.

the word does not primarily refer to the popular notion of future-telling, but involves the capacity to discern, and see beyond, current realities in order to name the pains of the world and the plans of God. *Imagination*, one of Brueggemann's focus words,[29] refers to "the capacity to generate and enunciate images of reality that are not rooted in the world in front of us."[30] For Brueggemann, the ancient prophets as well as the preachers following in their footsteps are imaginers, people able to anticipate an alternative future and to summon an alternative community. It follows that the first question to be answered is not if something new is possible, but if there is enough freedom among us to imagine it: "The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The *imagination* must come before the *implementation*."[31] Imagination, however, does not entail turning a blind eye to the harsh realities of life. On the contrary, prophetic imagination includes naming and grieving loss and despair, including judgment, as the deeds and policies of our societies evoke devastating consequences. Neither is it a denial of what is real for the benefit of wishful thinking. Rather, it is a clash between competing narratives and worldviews.

Drawing on Ricoeur,[32] Brueggemann posits that reality is shaped and authorized by "texts."[33] Regardless of whether these texts are religious traditions, philosophical classics, or tribal convictions, they provide an account of reality that a group of people takes for granted and rarely examines. Only by the introduction of

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[29] Izaak J de Hulster, "Imagination: A Hermeneutical Tool for the Study of the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 18(2) (2010): 123.

[30] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 25.

[31] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 40. Author's emphasis.

[32] Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

[33] Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching as Reimagination," *Theology Today* 52(3) (1995): 316; see also Walter Brueggemann, "A Text that Redescribes," *Theology Today* 58(4) (2002).

a new text is there a chance to re-describe reality. This happens through prophetic proclamation, that is, the "attempt to imagine the world as though YHWH … were a real character and an effective agent in the world."[34] Such proclamation claims that God's account of reality is more reliable and adequate than the dominant narrative provided and approved by our culture and society, and must go beyond merely naming specific evils and concrete issues. According to Brueggemann, the notion of prophetic proclamation demands a deliberate epistemological act in which the prophet confronts the conventional narrative on the level of elemental imagination.[35]

In a time and place where people find meaning and plausibility in structures and narratives with no real reference to a biblical description of God, it is the task of the prophet to re-utter YHWH as a living and active agent in the world. The prophet sees and boldly proclaims that the world of the Empire, with its certified and officially approved versions of reality, is a fraud. A new world is possible, and a community is called upon to imagine and embody it. The utterance of this either/or, of an alternative narrative by which the people of God are to live, is for Brueggemann essential to the faith of Israel.[36] Because such proclamation is not self-evident in the nature of things, it hinges entirely on the obedience and courage of the witness who voices choices and calls for decisions. What is not uttered is simply not available. The proclamation of a counter-narrative is, in turn, essential for the formation of the people of God, a counter-community with a counter-consciousness.[37] Also, as the dominant texts shatter in the wider culture as well, it is the task of the preacher to offer alternative texts and

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[34] Brueggemann, *The Practice,* 2.

[35] Walter Brueggemann, "Prophetic Leadership: Engagement in Counter-Imagination," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(1) (2011): 5–6.

[36] See Walter Brueggemann, "An Imaginative 'Or'", *Journal for Preachers* 23(3) (2000).

[37] Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching a Sub-Version," *Theology Today* 55(2) (1998): 204.

stories of fidelity, generosity, and neighborliness to society at large.[38] In short, the preacher as prophet criticizes and exposes the dominant narrative while at the same time proposes an alternative narrative where God is the key character. To preach is thus to engage in counter-imagination. Given the important role narratives play in the human construction of reality as well as in leadership, the communication of a counter-narrative in which God is active in the world may very well be described as an act of leadership,[39] the content and tenets of which will be explored in the next section.

Preaching as Leadership

Summarizing the argument thus far, the preacher acts as leader when confronting the existing narratives in the minds of the listeners, inviting and compelling them to see the world and themselves from the vantage point of another narrative in which God is active. As discussed above, the naïve notion that language is nothing but a container of meaning should be replaced with a more complex understanding of texts and narratives as "a carrier of power through its ability to order and constitute the social world."[40] The man or woman in the pew or elsewhere is no *tabula rasa* on which the preacher may write the words of a new story with no friction or resistance. Quite the opposite; the leader's story (and in the preacher's case, God's story) must replace, suppress, or link with the counter-stories it encounters in the mind of the follower because it takes a radical change in a person's story to transform that person's consciousness.[41]

It follows that not all preaching deserves to be called leadership. The kind of sermon that merely orbits around the needs and sentiments of the individual is not Christian leadership in the sense advocated in this article,

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[38] Brueggemann, "A Text that Redescribes," 539.
[39] See Brueggemann, *Prophetic Leadership*.
[40] Alvesson and Kärreman, "Taking the Linguistic Turn," 144.
[41] Stephen D. Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39(3) (1971): 307.

since leadership involves modification of attitudes and behaviors in order to meet shared and common goals and needs.[42] Preaching as leadership stands and falls upon the preacher's willingness and ability to present an integrating narrative in which individuals and communities may find new meaning and build identity. The final part of the present article provides some suggestions for how preaching as leadership can be conducted effectively by addressing the need for (1) a coherent story of the biblical witness, (2) an orientation toward the future, and (3) the use of imaginative language.

A Coherent Story

It should be clear from the argument above that language shapes narrative structures through which people process their experiences and make sense of their lives. It follows that the preacher should actively engage in the creation of such narrative structures by providing an all-encompassing framework that makes it possible for the people of God to think and reflect upon their daily lives in light of the history of Jesus Christ. When such an integrating story of God's dealing with the world is absent, sermons may end up depicting the Christian life as a disconnected series of topics and events, hence confirming rather than confronting the fragmented nature of modern life. Rather than merely providing bits and nuggets of scattered truths from Scripture, then, the preacher as leader should aim at presenting a coherent story of what goes on in the world from the vantage point of the Christian faith and invite people to take part in that story. Without downplaying the different voices and tensions within the biblical canon, the preacher must show how the variety of genres and small stories together makes a unified story of God's actions in history as purpose for all of creation. In a time when many people don't have a grasp of the grand story of the Bible, the

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[42] Hackman and Johnson, *Leadership*, 12. This communal aspect of leadership is stressed by Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 5–6.

overarching narrative has to be stated, not simply assumed.[43]

As pointed out by Brueggemann, the preacher meets the ideology of the dominant culture head-on by proclaiming an alternative narrative where God is the key character. This may be described as leadership because it involves influencing people to change by challenging the story they see themselves living.[44] The goal of preaching is thus not simply to add the biblical narrative as an elective in the library of possible life strategies; the preacher as leader aims to present the Theo-drama in a way that calls out for listeners to make the story of the Bible their story rather than the reverse: finding support for their story in the Bible. This approach aligns with the perspective of Newbigin, who claims that the important thing in the use of the Bible is not primarily to understand the text but to understand the world through the text.[45] It follows that one of the responsibilities of the preacher is to help the congregation understand the biblical narrative, how it relates to our present time, and how they can take part in this story.

What I have advocated thus far may be described as the propagation of a biblical metanarrative. This is, of course, a controversial move to make, given the "incredulity toward metanarratives"[46] among the host of postmodern philosophers and proponents. I side with Robert W. Jenson, however, who argues that the Bible indeed constitutes a metanarrative, an overarching and universal story, and should be presented as such.[47] Jenson acknowledges that the postmodern condition has changed the context of the gospel proclamation, yet he does not agree with the notion that the church should

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[43] Craddock, "Story, Narrative, and Metanarrative," 95.

[44] This is a point made by Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership*, 105.

[45] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 98.

[46] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

[47] Robert W. Jenson, "Can We Have a Story?" *First Things* (101) (2000): 16–17.

downplay the all-embracing nature of its story in this cultural climate.[48] On the contrary, the challenge of pluralism and the critique of metanarratives underscore the universality of the Christian metanarrative[49] because the biblical story ultimately is God's story and not ours.[50] Precisely because the contemporary world has lost its metanarrative, the church has to save its converts by offering itself as a narratable world within which life can be lived with dramatic coherence.[51] This happens primarily through the church's liturgy,[52] of which the sermon is a component. In a profound way, then, to become a Christian is to become part of a story that has God as its source and God's purpose for creation as its plotline. Put metaphorically, it may be likened to jumping on a moving train, taking part in a journey that started before we got here and will continue after we have gone.[53] Elaborating on this metaphor, preaching as Christian leadership involves pointing out to people that there indeed is a train going somewhere, and then inviting them to join the ride. As has been discussed in this section, this invitation happens through the telling of a coherent biblical narrative. For preaching to become leadership, however, it is not enough to state that there is a train going somewhere; it must also address precisely where it is headed. This involves the proclamation of the Christian hope, to which the study now turns.

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[48] Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* (36) (1993): 22–24.

[49] See Kristin Graff-Kallevåg, "Én gud - én fortelling?", in *En bok om Gud: Gudstanken i brytningen mellom det moderne og det postmoderne*, ed. Svein Rise and Knut-Willy Sæther (Trondheim, Norway: Tapir akademisk forl., 2011).

[50] Jenson, "World Lost Its Story," 17.

[51] Jenson, 22.

[52] See James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013).

[53] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1989), 52.

An Orientation Toward the Future

Contemporary leadership constructs such as charismatic and transformational leadership emphasize the symbolic aspects of leadership and the centrality of presenting a desirable picture of the future, primarily through the articulation and communication of a compelling vision.[54] As important as this visioning might be, I contend that Christian leadership must extend its horizon beyond timely organizational affairs and have as its point of reference God's purpose for all of creation. Such a stance implies grounding the church's current engagement in the world in the Christian hope, hence restoring eschatology at the center of Christian doctrine and living.[55] As a result, the preacher as leader must cultivate an awareness among the people of God of how things to come shape the present. Such a disposition was essential to the language of the New Testament[56] and a characteristic that set first-century disciples apart from their twenty-first century siblings.[57] In the same sense, Hull remarks that the New Testament church was transformed by living out God's future in a way that impacted present realities, and suggests that strategic preaching has the potential of replicating that life-changing orientation even today.[58] He further holds that hope resists the tyranny of the *status quo* due to its openness to transcendence, thus bridging the temporal chasm between promise and fulfillment, between "not yet" and "no longer."

In contrast to the moralistic sermon that centers on the need for improvement and betterment of current

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[54] Gary A. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, Global Edition (Boston: Pearson Education, 2013), 300–301, 323. See also Sooksan Kantabutra, "What Do We Know about Vision?," in *Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era*, ed. Gill R. Hickman, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009).

[55] Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

[56] Richard Lischer, "The Interrupted Sermon," *Interpretation* 50(2) (1996): 179.

[57] Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1996), 49.

[58] Hull, *Strategic Preaching,* 23.

affairs, the eschatological word puts pressure on the present by proclaiming that what we see is not all there is. As long as the biblical witness is reduced to one among many voices making up the polyphony of contemporary improvement manuals, it may easily fit into the wisdom of this age, thereby reinforcing rather than questioning the hyper-individualism of late modernity. When the preacher comes as a messenger of the coming age, however, momentary categories are shattered and the fresh air of the future is able to once again blow among the people of God. To take such a stance opens up the temporary to the eternal, the current to the end, and provides meaning and direction to contemporary realities by giving it teleological significance.

The church is not only the community gathered in remembrance of Christ, but also the people among whom God is present to bring about changes in the world. For preaching to serve such a community, it must become *proleptic*, meaning that is must disclose in advance what is yet to come: "The sermon is where the future is first put into words so that it can then be put into deeds. Such preaching is catalytic, precipitating a congregational response to *become* more fully what, in Christ, it already *is*."[59] The stress on relevance, on understanding the times and relating to the questions people ask, is thus only partially right. The preacher as leader also needs to tell rumors of another world, to paint pictures of how life could and should be lived in light of what is to come. Such an orientation toward the future, however, does not involve the kind of end time hype prevalent in some circles. On the contrary, vibrant preaching insists that "the full disclosure of God is not fully contained in the present tense"[60] while at the same time avoiding literalism. As leadership involves giving direction, preaching the last word first is thus essential to preaching as Christian leadership.

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[59] Hull, 28.

[60] Thomas Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 122.

The Use of Imaginative Language

For preaching to be Christian leadership, the preacher should also come as a prophet and poet, proclaiming that a new creation not only is possible but necessary. One important way to do so is to use language creatively in order to produce images in the mind of the listener. According to Guite, poetic and imaginative language holds the potential of not only mirroring human realities so that people see themselves more clearly, but also of opening a window into the mysteries beyond nature so that they are transformed by a more-than-earthly light.[61] Imagination thus has the capacity to move between the immanent and transcendent aspects of the Christian faith, giving expressions to eternal truth that cannot be sufficiently described in propositional language. Avis suggests that human imagination is one of the closest analogies to the being of God because God delights in revealing Self through the forms of imagination, that is, in the poetic and the symbolic. This revelation has implications for preaching: "Because God is a poet, as Augustine suggests, and communicates with us in the imaginative mode, our most appropriate response is also in that mode."[62] Brueggemann argues along the same lines and contends that preaching has the possibility of opening up the good news through "speech that is dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join in other conversations."[63] Brueggemann's concern is that preaching too often is reduced to the prose of this world by presenting closed, managed, and useful truths, thereby reducing and trivializing the gospel so that it no longer has the power to evoke new life. In contrast, the biblical language is prophetic, or poetic, meaning that it

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[61] Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Burlington, Ver.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 16.

[62] Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol, and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 5.

[63] Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 3.

summons and anticipates realities that are beyond the conventions of the present take-for-granted world.

The argument proposed here rests on the premise that there indeed is an authoritative text the preacher is to embody and proclaim. This claim is obviously not undisputed as post-structuralists and postmodernists have exposed the inherent problem of language to mirror a reality independent of the producer and interpreter of a text.[64] Without ignoring the insights of the postmodern prophets, the present paper agrees with Vanhoozer, who holds that the reader has adequate and sufficient knowledge to give a faithful interpretation of the ancient text.[65] Christian imagination should thus not be confused with the postmodern fixation on the arbitrary and fractional nature of reality, namely symbols and images. Neither does the use of imaginative language in theology and homiletics imply that Christianity is an imaginary faith. Modernism stressed the Enlightenment idea of a dichotomous relationship between rational and imaginary thinking, the former being praised as a vehicle of knowledge and the latter treated with great suspicion. This valuation is reversed in postmodernism in the sense that image is privileged over discourse.[66] The postmodern emphasis on symbol and image has not, however, resulted in any renaissance of imaginary knowing due to the inbuilt skepticism against the existence of any truth.[67] In contrast, Avis suggests that the use of metaphors and images in Scripture is a way of communicating meaning because the greatest truths can only be expressed in imaginative forms.[68]

The use of imaginative language is necessary, holds Brueggemann, because a fresh hearing of the good news can happen only when the old text is preached in artistic

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[64] Alvesson and Kärreman, "Taking the Linguistic Turn," 141–142.

[65] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 139–140.

[66] Avis, *Creative Imagination*, 20–21.

[67] Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, 9. Author's emphasis.

[68] Avis, *Creative Imagination*, 6–7.

forms. Preaching is thus best described as "a poetic construal of an alternative world."[69] This is arguably the crux in Brueggemann's decades of writing about prophetic imagination and its relevance for preaching, as technological reason and everyday prose has flattened the Gospel so that it neatly fits into the categories of dominant ideology and is stripped of its power to evoke new life.[70] This is not to say that the preacher is to preach a new text; Hauerwas and Willimon remind us that faith begins in remembrance, not discovery.[71] What is needed, however, is for the preacher to disclose the opportunities of new worlds inherent in the Scripture. For Brueggemann, that can happen only through poetic speech.

Hence, the biblical counter-narrative differs from the wider cultural discourse not only in content, but also in form. What the Bible has to say can never be reduced to prose alone, but depends on the power of poetic speech to shatter conventional wisdom and create images of a different future in the minds of the listener. Such a view corresponds with the concept of leadership described in this article, emphasizing the symbolic nature of human communication.[72] It is hence not surprising that aesthetics, imagination, and creativity are highlighted in relation to leadership.[73] Duke even describes leadership as artistry, pointing out that a critical concern for the leader is to get the attention of others, to capture their imagination, primarily through the employment of dramatics, design, and orchestration.[74] Consequently, preaching as leadership includes the

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[69] Brueggemann, *Finally*, 6.

[70] Brueggemann, 1–11.

[71] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 52.

[72] Hackman and Johnson, *Leadership*, 11–14.

[73] E.g., Hans Hansen, Arja Ropo, and Erika Sauer, "Aesthetic Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 18(6) (2007): 544–560; Michelle Vondey, "A Biblical-Theological Aesthetic of Imagination and Creativity and Its Application for Leaders," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 3(1) (2010): 3–12.

[74] D. L. Duke, "The Aesthetics of Leadership," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 22(1) (1986): 20–23.

construal of an alternative world through artistic and imaginative language.

Summary

The thesis proposed in this article builds on the assertion that to be human means to take part in and enact a story. Change, then, must involve an alteration of that story. This premise aligns with MacIntyre's claim that one can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if one can answer the prior question: "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"[75] It is with such a backdrop that Brueggemann frequently underscores the important task of the preacher to proclaim the biblical narrative as the script for Christian living in the world. In short, the argument of the current study postulates that such preaching deserves to be called leadership because the communication of narratives that provide meaning and identity is essential to what it means to be a leader.

For leadership to be worth its salt, the leader must define reality.[76] As the Bible depicts God as alive and active in the world, the proclamation of the biblical narrative in a culture that has subdued its claims involves redefining reality; such work is the work of leadership. Although other aspects certainly may be added, this article suggests that preaching is leadership when it tells a coherent story, orients toward the future, and uses imaginative language to do so. The daunting task of the Christian preacher is thus to proclaim the epic story of God amidst and against the small stories of secularity and individualism; to utter words about the end to people who feast on beginnings; to speak imaginative words to a culture numbed by communicative anesthetics. When this happens, Elvis has left the building and the leader has arrived at the pulpit.

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[75] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 2007), 216.

[76] Max DePree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 5.