Preaching In Times Of Crisis
Towards A New Methodology

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PREACHING IN TIMES OF CRISIS:
TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY

by

Robert L. Beamish

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of
the Degree of Doctor of Theology And Ministry

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Department of Theology and Religious Studies
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. I cannot express enough thanks to my wife Louise, who has supported this project through feast and famine. Her commitment to her faith and family shows me each day what it is to live and live well. Her understanding throughout this season has been a blessing I will never forget, and I could not have done this without her. My children are my absolute delight and their prayers that this course would finally be finished have now been answered! They have been a huge encouragement and I hope one day they will benefit from what is written here, being able to know for themselves what it is to meet God in times of sorrow as well as joy. Finally, to my parents who both died during the time I have been preparing for and on this course, with thanks beyond words for their support and all the opportunities they worked so hard to give me.
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This work is my own, but I am grateful for all the comments and assistance I have received in this process. The copyright of this thesis rests with myself as the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.
Abstract

I claim that preaching in times of crisis is vulnerable to the tendency of therapeutic and other pastoral forms of preaching to put human solutions in the centre, moving God to the margins. I argue that crisis preaching must be balanced, being theocentric, and therapeutic if it is to be effective. I make the further claim that speaking of God at such times is undermined by theological confusion of how God is involved with his creation; a crisis of understanding driven by the question, ‘Where is God when I suffer?’ The proposal of Neil Pembroke (2013), that sermons are therapeutic when they point to the divine therapeia, the healing love of God, is argued to fail if there is no confidence in the involvement of God. In order to find the means of bringing the required balance I examine crisis sermons, and models of preaching, interrogating them with the term involvement. Finding it necessary to take these models further in the image of the God invoked, I consider the viability of applying apophatic method to crisis preaching in light of Michael Sells’ (1994) definition of apophatic discourse. Such a foundation provides the platform to consider what it is to gain confidence in God’s involvement by an appeal to the doctrine of impassibility in dialogue with the thought of Herbert McCabe (2005) and Katherine Sonderegger (2015). Finally, I evaluate the potential of applying such an approach, followed by bringing the apophatic method into dialogue with the radical deconstructive homiletic of Jacob Myers (2017).
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There are moments, simply said, when we probably ought not to speak. But of course, we must speak.¹

There is an inherent tension present in moments of pain and grief as observed by the theologian David Hart who, reflecting upon the 2004 Asian tsunami, drew attention to the relationship at such times between silence and speech. At the heart of this tension is our dependence on language moving us to speech at times when it can seem impossible to say anything appropriate:

Considering the scope of the catastrophe, and of the agonies and sorrows it had visited on so many, we should probably have all remained silent for a while. The claim to discern some greater meaning - or for that matter, meaninglessness - behind the contingencies of history and nature is both cruel and presumptuous at such times. Pious platitudes and words of comfort seem not only futile and banal, but almost blasphemous; metaphysical disputes come perilously close to mocking the dead.²

His threefold critique here is a telling one: firstly, of that desire to explain in either positive or negative terms what has taken place, secondly of the often-trite expressions of sorrow, and thirdly of the reasoned metaphysical and theological arguments which seek to fit the event into some kind of system. This critique serves as a direct statement of the difficulties of speaking appropriately in such moments, a warning of the problems which can arise if we speak without care and reflection. The central challenge will always be knowing what to say, since

violence has a way of making a mockery of words. After Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, all the words sound hollow. What does one say after a televised beheading? The proclamation of God’s justice or God’s love meets a wall of resistance first in the throat of the proclaimer, then in the ears of the hearer.³

This felt failure of language, I assert, can lead to a failure of preaching, since in a crisis the preacher must be able to find their voice, but we are often left asking ‘what language shall I borrow?’ with homiletics often looking outside of historic faith and practice for its orientation:

² Ibid.
Over the years, preachers have not been satisfied to speak from the embedded position. They have not been content with the starkness of the New Testament's theology of the word. They have sought other languages with which to communicate the gospel. When I was a seminarian, we all preached “existentially” after the manner of Bultmann, in the confidence that the existentialist analysis of the human predicament was pretty much the same as Paul’s. When we weren’t preaching existentially, we donned our white coats, lit our pipes, and preached therapeutically, in the equally misplaced confidence that psychologist Carl Roger’s view of the person was not all that different from Jesus’.

This tendency of homiletics to adopt other languages with which to ‘communicate the gospel’ is one which must be addressed. This practice is particularly problematic for crisis moments since there is already a great deal of disorientation and disruption through which the preacher must navigate, and that journey is made more difficult if there is a lack of confidence in the purpose of the sermon and how it should be shaped. It is my contention that many of the problems which arise when preparing a sermon for a crisis situation stem from confusion about how to understand the involvement of God at such times. This confusion is not simply on the side of the preacher, but also the congregation, since it is inevitable that we ask, ‘where is God when we suffer?’

Great trials challenge how we understand the character and activity of God, exposing our images of God to examination by the fire of experience. This examination will reveal how God is conceived, and it may be realised that these images are either unhelpful or indeed theologically faulty. These moments, when the ideas held of God do not match up with the present experience can be uncomfortable at best, and unbearably distressing at worst, causing the foundations of personal and community faith to be rocked to their core. This is the theological landscape in which the preacher finds themselves, potentially with their own doubts and questions, looking for a means to address such concerns with theological and homiletical integrity. The purpose of this study is to find a means, one which gives the preacher confidence to speak of God at such times. The study is informed by the hypothesis that crisis preaching is increasingly driven by the desire to bring comfort to the hearer as opposed to beginning with the doctrine of God and the out-workings of that. With this in mind, the central thesis is that a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this. Inherent here is the interrelationship between the theocentric and the

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4 Ibid., 12.
therapeutic echoing that between the doctrinal and the pastoral. Fundamentally the thesis contends that the therapeutic finds resolution in the theocentric. This conviction is evident in the structure of this study and is given justification in the first instance in the work of Neil Pembroke who argues that it is only when sermons are theocentric that they can be truly and effectively therapeutic.⁵

What follows in this first chapter is an unpacking of the rationale behind the thesis and an explanation of how it will be explored. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that addressing a crisis will never be easy, and Carol Norén remarks that ‘it is easier in many respects to strategise for services pertaining to death than those pertaining to crisis. There is little debate in local congregations about what constitutes death, but there may be different opinions about what constitutes a crisis.’⁶ Discerning whether to address a crisis is one of the first decisions a preacher must take, and if they do decide to focus on the crisis then they must decide on the approach of the sermon. This study concentrates on the latter decision because the discernment process is more concerned with liturgical practices and preferences which are not the focus here. It must be noted at this point that every crisis is different, and therefore it is not possible to prescribe a singular form, this then is why I write in terms of developing an approach based on a suggested method, rather than a form or explicit model. This study is concerned with the preacher and the approach of the sermon. The reception of the sermon, and whether in fact any approach is effective in practice is beyond the scope of this work but could form the basis for further study.

The thesis statement claims that there must be a right balance between the theocentric, that is the focus on God, and the therapeutic, that is the desire to meet people’s felt needs. This study understands the sermon to be a ‘liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ.’⁷ With this definition in mind, it is not possible to conceive of preaching as anything but theocentric in its nature. There are of course other definitions of preaching, but I employ this one in the study. The emphasis in this definition on the grace of God in Christ is what enables a sermon to

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be therapeutic, that is pastoral, primarily meeting spiritual needs through an encounter with God. Therefore, the right balance in a sermon is that it is theocentric, with the focus on God, which then enables it to be therapeutic. The reason for the need for such a balance is that there are approaches to preaching labelled under the banner therapeutic which often result in God being moved to the margins. These approaches are influential and can shape crisis preaching, since crisis moments raise a whole raft of pastoral concerns. Whilst there is not one clear definition, this form of preaching is usually where ‘the gospel is psychologised [and] common forms of human suffering […] are addressed from the pulpit and mini-doses of therapy are administered to ease the pain.’

The main complaint is that the sermon simply dispenses psychotherapy, rather than being a ‘liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ.’ The outcome is that the redemptive narrative of God is lost as ‘human solutions get shifted to centre stage’, and ‘God makes an appearance from time to time, but God’s role is little more than a cameo.’ It is argued that this happens as the preacher seeks to make the sermon ‘newsworthy’ by turning the attention away from what is already familiar, and then to a fresh source of insight, in this case psychology.

The deficiencies of the therapeutic form have been identified in the wider literature. The theologian Neil Pembroke addresses the central issues and proposes that a sermon can be both theocentric and therapeutic by pointing to the divine therapeia understood as ‘God’s healing love expressed through compassion, acceptance, help, and forgiveness, but also through confrontation and challenge.’ Significant here is the dual nature of this divine therapy – God is a source of comfort as well as challenge, a clear picture of the biblical God who is with the people, but will not let them remain in sin, apart from him. Conceiving of therapeutic preaching this way, as pointing to the divine therapeia, ensures it is robustly theocentric, and thus provides the balance required by the thesis. His proposal does provide a simple way for sermons to be both theocentric and therapeutic, however, I contend that it is not fully satisfactory when applied to crisis preaching, and this study must go further in exploring a means of finding the necessary balance. As I see it the principal problem relates to how the

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., viii.
12 Ibid.
involvement of God is understood at such times when the question ‘where is God in our suffering?’ is asked. To point to God as a source of comfort and challenge may be possible if you can remain confident that God is involved and present. However, as previously stated crisis moments challenge how the involvement of God is conceived, serving to expose false conceptions. These false conceptions of God’s involvement must be challenged if the preacher is to reach a point where they can appeal to the divine therapy, as defined by Pembroke. The concept of God’s involvement functions as a term of interrogation in the search for finding a means to achieve the balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic in crisis preaching, and this study will complicate this term in seeking a way forward. In seeing involvement as a term of interrogation in this exploration, I believe it is significant that the existing homiletical proposals for crisis preaching do not go far enough in defining the nature of the God they want to point to in the crisis moment. As with Pembroke, they often recognise the importance of God as the source of therapy in the moment, but they do not adequately address the understanding of the God they point to. It is my claim that they cannot adequately follow through on their crisis models without the involvement of God being properly interrogated. In its purpose, and with the specific claims of the thesis at its heart, this then is where this study is seeking to make a unique contribution to the knowledge base.

In making this contribution, and in seeking a way forward for crisis preaching, the thesis proposes apophatic theology as a means of complicating the concept of involvement and providing a way of finding a balance in approach between the therapeutic and the theocentric. Apophatic, or negative theology, approaches God by means of negation, committed to speaking only in terms of what may not be said, thus enabling the preacher to confront how God is being understood. When applied to our images of God it commits to a cycle of negation, challenging each image and exposing those faulty or idolatrous conceptions. The claim of the thesis is that such an approach, when applied to crisis preaching, will serve as a means of confronting those images of God which are causing disruption to the ability of individuals, and the community to have confidence in the involvement of God in the crisis moment. The interplay in this study of homiletics and theology is central as for Henrich Ott, a student of both Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, ‘theology is by its very nature the constant effort to eliminate empty talk from preaching, the incessant attempt to keep open or find ever
new access to the subject matter via authentic understanding.'

If there was ever a time when preaching must avoid ‘empty talk’ then it is during a crisis, and it is only by engaging theologically with the questions raised of God’s involvement at such times, that a sermon can have the necessary homiletical integrity. It is the central claim of the thesis that the negating approach which arises from applying an apophatic method is indispensable to crisis preaching, and therefore, is required to form the foundation of any approach, albeit applied in appropriate ways. The potential in such an approach is evident from the work of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in the *Divine Names* as stated by Denys Turner:

> The point of the serial negations [...] is not to demonstrate that negative language is somehow superior to affirmative in the mind’s ascent to God; rather it is to demonstrate that our language leads us to the reality of God when, by a process simultaneously of affirming and denying all things of God, by, as it were in one breath, both affirming what God is and denying, as he puts it, “that there is any kind of thing that God is”, we step off the very boundary of language itself, beyond every assertion and every denial, into the “negation of the negation” and the “brilliant darkness” of God.

I contend that this approach when applied to crisis preaching does not resist the vulnerabilities of the moment but dives deeper into them, embracing the uncertainty, shunning easy resolution, and reaching for an encounter with an involved God that is itself located in the tension identified between silence and speech with which this chapter began.

This study will explore the claims of this thesis in the following ways. The second chapter lays out the challenges of crisis preaching by establishing crisis preaching as a distinct genre which requires a tailored approach. This sets the background for evaluating two influential homiletical approaches, the therapeutic and the narrative, reflecting on whether they foster a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. The question of the involvement of God is used as a means of interrogation; so prior to the examples, I highlight the main issues concerning this conception at such times, firstly drawing attention to the claim that traditional approaches to theodicy fail pastorally in crisis moments. Secondly, I outline the move

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away from conceiving of God as impassible, one who does not suffer or feel emotion, to that of a passible God who is capable of suffering and feeling emotion. This foreshadows the fifth chapter which considers this debate in more depth, proposing that the apophatic method creates the space in which the doctrine of God’s impassibility can be recovered; being one which serves as the foundation for finding the balance between the theocentric and therapeutic by addressing the question of the involvement of God. In evaluating the presented homiletics, it is shown that whilst they could have the means to foster a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, their fundamental methodology renders it quite common for the balance to be lost, leaving God on the margins. This tendency has been identified in the literature itself, but I argue that the critiques, which put an emphasis on the metanarrative, the story of God, do not go far enough in exploring how God is to be understood. I contend that for a crisis situation this exploration should focus on the involvement of God, rooted in the discipline of challenging the images of God held by the preacher and congregation.

The third chapter continues the exploration of the balance of the theocentric and the therapeutic in the homiletical literature with a focus on the specific literature of crisis preaching. I begin with the proposals for approaches to crisis preaching, observing that in general there is a theocentric emphasis with an implicit pointing to the divine therapy. However, I argue that for there to be a consistent balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, how these methods address the way God is being understood needs to be taken further. Building on this assessment, I reflect for illustration on a sample set of sermons preached after the 9/11 terror attacks, looking again for whether a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic can be seen. It is evident, from this sample, that sermons can appear theocentric but are simply applying God as a balm to the situation, which does not in fact lead to the required balance claimed as necessary by my thesis. It is also the case that even where the sermons do exhibit such a balance, there is a need to explore further how God is understood since the sermons themselves compound faulty images of God.

Having demonstrated that in the two selected pastorally focused homiletics and in the crisis literature that the balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic is not consistent, I propose in the fourth chapter that apophatic theology provides a means
of providing this balance by complicating the idea of the involvement of God which has
been used here as a means of interrogation. I propose that crisis preaching can be
considered as a form of apophatic discourse by first outlining the method, and then
demonstrating the positive effect of applying it to the crisis sermon by considering the
claim that God is silent or absent in the crisis moment. This application leads to a
process of negation which continually debunks the understanding of God, seeking a
point of encounter with the God who is God.

The fifth chapter looks to build on this foundational approach and appeals to the
doctrine of God’s impassibility, arguing that when located as an apophatic quantifier,
it becomes a theological means to bring the balance between the theocentric and the
therapeutic since God is found to be present and involved yet still God. I conclude that
this appeal to impassibility brings the required confidence for the preacher to speak of
God in the crisis moment and point to the Divine Therapeia. The final chapter draws
together the study, evaluates the thesis and proposes possible next steps for future
research. The proposed methodology is then brought into dialogue with the radical
homiletic of Jacob Myers to demonstrate its further potential.15

It is my conviction that this study, as outlined above, makes a necessary contribution
to what remains an under-developed field. What is significant is that within the
extensive homiletical literature there is little that deals explicitly with preaching in times
of crisis.16 General theories of preaching do of course establish methodologies which
can be applied such as David Buttrick’s seminal volume *Homiletic*, and Ronald Allen’s
*Preaching the Topical Sermon*.17 The related area of social crisis preaching, with a
focus on long term social justice issues, has had some treatment in Kelly Smith’s 1983

15 Jacob D. Myers, *Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,
2017). This work is a response to the developments of what is known as homiletical theology. This has
been championed in a recent four volume project by David Schnasa Jacobsen. See, David Schnasa
Jacobsen, *Homiletical Theology Preaching as Doing Theology*, The Promise of Homiletical Theology
(Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015); *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological
Task of Preaching*, The Promise of Homiletical Theology (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015);
Theology (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2017); *Toward a Homiletical Theology of Promise*, The
16 For example see David Day, Jeff Astley, and Leslie J. Francis, *A Reader on Preaching: Making
Social Crisis Preaching, followed by Samuel Proctor in 1988 with Preaching about Crisis in the Community. In terms of crisis as defined in this study it is only in the 1998 Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public by American homiletician Joseph Jeter that crisis in general begins to receive more substantive treatment. This, however, did not open the proverbial floodgates, and it was over a decade later when Audrey Borschel published her Preaching When the News Disturbs stressing the importance of media literacy in the pulpit and the role of the preacher as mediator, which was followed by Bryan Chappell’s collection of illustrative sermons The Hardest Sermons You’ll Ever Have to Preach. Significantly a search conducted in the ProQuest dissertations and theses database using multiple search terms, including preaching in times of crisis and crisis preaching, only revealed two related results. The first thesis concerned social crisis preaching, and the second the relationship between preaching and lay pastoral care with a focus on personal crisis. Both these studies were conducted over twenty years ago, and do not overlap in significant ways with this study. This lack of focus on crisis preaching is also seen in the limited number of published collections of crisis sermons themselves. These event-based collections have a dominant North American focus addressing the assassination of President Kennedy, the Los Angeles riots, the Oklahoma bombing and more recently the 9/11 attacks. There are also individual sermons available linked to specific churches, preachers and events through the proliferation of content on the internet. However, these are difficult to locate unless there is specific knowledge of the individual church

20 Audrey Borschel, Preaching Prophetically When the News Disturbs: Interpreting the Media (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2009); Bryan Chapell, The Hardest Sermons You’ll Ever Have to Preach: Help from Trusted Preachers for Tragic Times (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011).
or preacher. The obvious lack of general treatment, and any specific recent focus on homiletical theory for crisis makes this a timely study.\textsuperscript{24}

In form this is a theoretical study conducted in the mode of practical theology, which as an approach is self-consciously contextual and interdisciplinary in nature. I do utilise some empirical research methods to illustrate what is being argued for. This is appropriate since preaching itself is contextual and can never be entirely theoretical, being fundamentally an event, an act of proclamation. However, the constraints of this study lead it to be a theoretical one with empirical illustration demonstrating the possibilities for both further theoretical and empirical research which will be outlined in the concluding chapter. The presumption made here that homiletics and practical theology are compatible disciplines is given some validation by the fact of the Boston School of Theology offering a PhD course in practical theology with a homiletics concentration.\textsuperscript{25} The work of Stephen Wright in his practical theology of preaching makes the link explicit.\textsuperscript{26} There are a number of ways of defining what is meant by practical theology, but I take as the reference point for this study the following definition:

\begin{quote}
Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in and for the world.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

The focus in practical theology on God’s redemptive practice is resonant with the study’s definition of preaching as the liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ. This has import since the task of developing an approach for times of crisis cannot be allowed to retreat into theological or homiletical abstraction and must remain true to the need for the sermon narrative to connect with the external narrative. Whilst my research design is not specifically empirical in nature the decision to include analysis of a sample set of sermons roots the study in the event of preaching. Adopting

\textsuperscript{24} See my recent published work giving an overview of the topic, the publication of which illustrates the potential for renewed interest in the field, Robert Beamish, \textit{Preaching in Times of Crisis}, vol. P154, Grove Pastoral (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2018).

\textsuperscript{25} Boston School of Theology, www.bu.edu/sth/academics/degrees/track3/phd-homiletics/.

\textsuperscript{26} Stephen I. Wright, \textit{Alive to the Word: A Practical Theology of Preaching for the Whole Church} (London: SCM Press, 2010).

a broadly non-empirical approach has continuity with much of the existing theoretical literature. However, even within such a standard theoretical form there can be a credibility distinction between theory proposed at a distance by a non-practitioner, and that proposed by a practitioner, giving the work more credence. At this stage, with that in mind, I identify myself as a preaching practitioner of over twenty-years-experience. This study is limited by the rubric of the course of study of which it is a part, with my progression through this course detailed in the appendix. Of note is the impact of changes to the course provision and supervision during my period of enrolment. These changes have affected the approach of this study, which has developed substantially over time, and have been a factor in it being broadly non-empirical, rather than empirical in method as first considered.

In summary, this chapter has introduced the central thesis of this study that a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this. I have presented a rationale for why this thesis is necessary and outlined how the rest of the study will explore it. This study has been positioned as seeking to revitalise an under developed and overlooked field, and as making a unique contribution to the knowledge base. Simply put, the approach suggested here builds on the work already conducted and takes it further, using it as a base to develop a theological foundation for a methodology for crisis preaching.
CHAPTER TWO: THE CHALLENGES OF CRISIS PREACHING

The central governing thesis of this study is that a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this. The previous chapter outlined the rationale for this thesis, and in this chapter I begin the process of exploring its claims. This chapter begins with the necessary task of establishing crisis preaching as a genre of preaching requiring specific treatment, meaning that general models cannot simply be applied wholesale. To illustrate this, I evaluate two examples of general models which have a pastoral emphasis, the therapeutic and the narrative, considering whether they are successful in finding a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. These models have an influence either intentionally or latently in modern approaches to crisis situations, and as such require consideration. This evaluation is carried out by drawing on the conception of the involvement of God as a means of interrogation, since I contend that how we understand the presence of God in the crisis moment is fundamental to then being able to point to God’s healing love. This being the case, prior to the actual evaluation, I outline the main issues around the conception of God’s involvement and highlight how misunderstanding this can lead to an imbalance between the theocentric and the therapeutic poles. Moving on to the models themselves, they are outlined and evaluated in turn. The models have been chosen as they explicitly seek to connect the message of the gospel with the needs of the people. The central question is whether they achieve the required balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic? The literature that relates specifically to crisis preaching, including specific models and sermons themselves, will be evaluated in the next chapter.

2.1 Crisis Preaching as a Distinct Form

I begin the exploration of the thesis statement by arguing for crisis preaching as a stand-alone genre of preaching which as such should be given more credence by the preacher and the congregation. This is an important foundational step to take because it recognises that there are core aspects which the preacher must be aware of when preparing a crisis sermon. I first define how crisis is being understood in this study, before reflecting on the nature of the sermon and its function in times of crisis.
To define what is meant by crisis it must be understood that what is often named as crisis is rooted in disturbance and disorientation, moments when ‘our world constructs are blown open.’\textsuperscript{28} The established everyday patterns of our lives and our expectations of how things should normally be are disrupted by a single event or a series of events which brings a change in how we view the world and how we interact with it. The theologian Carol Norén defines crisis as ‘an unstable or crucial time in a state of affairs, a decisive moment that may come unexpectedly and is usually unwelcome and unwanted.’\textsuperscript{29} The assumption here is threefold, that crisis brings instability, demands response and is unwanted. The expectations she believes of crisis sermons are clear as ‘there is the assumption that a crisis-related sermon and service will do something: strengthen faith, lead to action, and/or create and reinforce a sense of communitas.’\textsuperscript{30} So here the expectations are not so much of the form the sermon will take, but what the sermon will do. It is as Norén puts it a ‘decisive’ moment and one which must not be avoided or neglected.\textsuperscript{31} It is also possible to talk in terms of social crisis in relation to often long-term justice and societal issues. However the focus of this study is the response to those ‘decisive’ moments as defined here by Norén.

How a crisis sermon approaches this ‘decisive’ moment will depend on the type of crisis being faced. For Joseph Jeter, the author of one of the few books focussed on crisis preaching, the crisis may be public, congregational and or personal; often a combination of all three.\textsuperscript{32} He divides public crises into two broad areas, political crisis and disasters. Political crises includes war, assassination, riots and civic upheaval. Disasters is a catch all category of flood, storm, fire, famine, accidents and the like. Congregations are of course affected by those public crises, but there are distinct crises he highlights that ‘affect, infect or afflict the congregations we serve.’\textsuperscript{33} For Jeter these include accidents, shock occurrences like a death during worship, and those more general such as financial crises, scandals, crises of dissension and even of

\textsuperscript{28}Buttrick, Homiletic: Moves and Structures, 409.
\textsuperscript{29} Carol M. Norén, "Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship," Liturgy 27, no. 1 (2012).
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} The term crisis is used to describe a wide range of experiences and events, with the root of the word coming from the Greek ‘Krisis’ meaning decision and ‘krinein’ meaning decide. That the place of ‘decision’ is implicit in the moment of crisis is significant since there will inevitably be sermons preached in response to such a time, seeking to address theologically what has taken place. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary Vol. 2, 3rd Ed. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).
\textsuperscript{32} Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 13-14.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 14.
direction. He centres personal crisis on the preacher themselves, seeing these as the crises which strike the preacher directly and personally, acknowledging that ‘so many times we step into the pulpit out of the wreckage of our own lives.’ The crisis events cause the preacher to ask, what do I say? There is opportunity in such moments, but also for Jeter pitfalls, since ‘such times have been the occasion for some of the best and worst sermons ever preached.’ The next chapter will evaluate a sample set of sermons.

Of fundamental importance for Jeter is that the crisis being faced is understood by the preacher, since they must be able to define the type of crisis, assess its affects for the congregation and plan an appropriate approach. Jeter defines crisis further using established psychological frameworks, including Howard Stone’s Crisis Counselling, which proposes that the basic types of crises are developmental and situational. Developmental crises are expected, significant life moments such as learning to walk or getting married, and situational crises are ‘exceptional and unpredictable upheavals resulting from unusual circumstances’ which resonates with Norén’s description of what a crisis is. Jeter cites Andrew Lester, who further sub divides situational crises into interruptive and eruptive categories, explaining that ‘interruptive crises have an external origin. They come upon people unbidden and unexpected. They can be public, congregational, or personal. Interruptive crises like a hurricane, are very traumatic and have long-term consequences.’ The opposite is the eruptive crisis which comes from within and the cause may not be known or be particularly obvious as ‘they may not understand why they feel the way that they do. It may be unresolved grief, shame, or guilt about acts and deeds done or undone, or something altogether unknown.’ This kind of crisis is more likely to be addressed through pastoral encounter, and smaller group settings, but remains particularly prevalent and challenging since it is often more difficult to pinpoint the source than the more public interruptive event. This study recognises that crises come in different forms but, along with Jeter, asserts that it is the situational interruptive crisis which is most likely to be addressed in the pulpit since this category of crisis affects the congregation and

34 Ibid., 14-15.
35 Ibid., 15.
37 Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 18.
38 Ibid.
community. It will often be the external type events, such as the natural disaster or terrorist incident which unsettle a group to the point where it must be addressed. Related to this are those moments which perhaps do not strike a chord with all, but do resonate with concerns for justice and mercy, and therefore are of benefit to broach. It is important to acknowledge at this point that crisis events can have long term effects and there is a developing field of trauma studies which is relevant here. Trauma studies conducts research into the psychological consequences of mass trauma and considers effective treatment for survivors. Theological reflection on trauma is evident in the work of Shelley Rambo, and Joni Sancken has written on what it is to preach the gospel to trauma survivors. Addressing the longer term effects of the trauma is not the focus of this study but it is a related matter to crisis preaching, building on what is spoken in the initial sermon response.

Alongside the psychological effects of the crisis are the theological questions which are raised. Ronald Allen identifies two forms of theological crisis apparent at such a time, ‘crises of theology proper (understanding) and ethics (decision).’ The former is about the why and the latter about the response. For some the challenge is to God’s actual existence, since it could be thought that a powerful God would not have let such an event happen, and for others it is to his character, because God cannot be seen as compassionate if he fails to intervene. The crisis of theological understanding is the main focus of this study and I contend must be addressed by the crisis sermon for it to have the right balance. The theological question in particular focus for this study will be that of the involvement of God.

Having defined crisis and identified the type of crisis event most likely to be addressed in the pulpit, I now turn to the relationship between crisis moments and the sermon itself. Much has been written as to the function and form of function of the sermon and

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41 Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 25.
the literature is voluminous and continues to expand. Sermons are generally preached as part of the regular act of worship of a gathered church congregation, but alongside the worship services there are also other less regular occasions where a sermon is delivered, including baptisms, weddings and funerals, events that bring their own expectations as to what the shape of the sermon should be and what it should accomplish. I contend that times of crisis impose another set of expectations on the sermon, formed by the hope that the sermon would connect with the disorientation of the moment both therapeutically, that is pastorally, bringing comfort, and theologically, speaking about God as an act of meaning-making in the chaos. This resonates with the definition of preaching adopted here, that preaching is the liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ. Here we can see that the sermon will continue to have an important role in addressing the crisis, despite the questions that continue to be asked regarding its viability. Debate concerning the viability of preaching will...

42 Sermons themselves are increasingly seen as a literary genre: “The emergence of a discrete field of Sermon Studies has occurred over the last two decades. That is not to say that there were not distinguished studies of sermons and preaching before this, but a new interdisciplinary endeavour of historians, literary and linguistic scholars, theologians and rhetoricians has developed in response to recognition of the importance of religion in this period.” From the preface to Keith A. Francis and William Gibson, *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also the companion volume Peter E. McCullough, Hugh Adlington, and Emma Rhatigan, *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).


45 It was Donald Macleod in 1972 who remarked, “The average homiletics class is not bursting to learn to preach; most of them have to be convinced of the viability of the preaching office today.” Quoted in,
doubtless continue, but studies such as this one aim to invigorate the discussion proposing new ways to consider how preaching can connect God with the reality of people’s lives without losing God in the process.

Reflecting on the occurrence of crisis sermons, Carol Norén proposes that there are four occasions when what could be called a crisis sermon might be preached: the Sunday after the event, at an ecumenical service in response, a community inter-faith service and some form of anniversary service. Whilst each of these events have their value, the concern of this study is chiefly with the weekly context of the regular worship service. This is the service that most preachers will be involved in and is a regular gathering laden with expectations and assumptions which must be considered when facing crisis. For example, a sermon may have already been prepared and the preacher must decide whether to simply adapt what they already have or prepare something different, which will depend on how the crisis is being understood by the preacher, congregation and the community at large. For this study, the sermon is understood to be an integral part of the whole service, and not a separate element since liturgical unity comes through all the parts of the service with elements such as the prayers and the readings having the possibility of being part of the crisis response. There are specific resources which address this wider function, but a detailed study of these and further proposals is not within the focus or scope of this work.

In asserting that the sermon has a central role in addressing a crisis and that crisis preaching should be considered its own form, it must be acknowledged that there are those who see an inherent risk in addressing contemporary events in the sermon, precisely because God can be moved to the margins as human needs become preeminent. For example, William Wand, a former bishop of London, was concerned that ‘becoming so engrossed in the temporal context of the occasion’ in preaching can leave the people bereft of hearing from the Lord; that the sermons cease to be God

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centred. He recounts attending a church parade held in the allied lines during the first world war, where he believed the young chaplain missed the opportunity before him:

His theme was the current struggle, and as far as I could judge his main point was that the enemy soldiers were devils. It turned out to be his only point and I was not surprised that his own soldiers, who formed the congregation, became decidedly restless. They had not come to hear a discourse on the character of the enemy, and in any case, they knew more about that than the preacher did. As always, so especially in the occasional sermon, one must remember that the purpose of all preaching is the proclamation of Christ. If we have not used the golden opportunity offered by increased awareness to present that plea, then we have failed indeed.\textsuperscript{48}

This frustration that the redemptive work of Christ can be moved to the margins by a lack of discipline in integrating the bad news of the event and the good news of the gospel, is also seen in the reflections of Karl Barth on his own preaching during the first world war:

In 1914, when the outbreak of war left the whole world breathless, I felt obliged to let this war rage on in all my sermons until finally a woman came up to me and begged me for once to talk about something else and not constantly about this terrible conflict. She was right! I had disgracefully forgotten the importance of submission to the text. It may come to the point that a member of the congregation must call the pastor to order and counsel reconsideration. All honour to relevance, but pastors should be good marksmen who aim their guns beyond the hill of relevance.\textsuperscript{49}

Whilst Barth concluded that his focus should only be on the text,\textsuperscript{50} this was not the case across the board and the temptation to focus simply on events was clear.\textsuperscript{51} It is not however that the crisis event and the text should be seen as mutually exclusive. I

\textsuperscript{48}J. W. C. Wand, \textit{Letters on Preaching} ([S.l.]: Hodder, 1974), 63.
\textsuperscript{50}For preaching understood as an encounter with God see, Paul Scott Wilson, \textit{Preaching and Homiletical Theory}, Preaching and Its Partners (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004). See Chapter 4. Wilson highlights that this historic concept is developed by Barth underpinned by the “event of the word of God itself, in which the human dimension of language is elevated.” Barth understood the word of God as a threefold form: 1. The written word of God, 2. The preached word of God, 3. The revealed word of God. Karl Barth, G. W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, \textit{Church Dogmatics. Volume I, the Doctrine of the Word of God}, Study ed. (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 98-135.
\textsuperscript{51}It was clear at the time that others did not have the same concerns as Barth and Angela Dienhart Hancock in her study of the account of Barth’s 1930’s homiletic seminar observes that in preaching in Germany at that time ‘the subject matter of the sermon no longer rises from the text.’ Angela Dienhart Hancock, \textit{Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich} (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 159. John Swinton tells of attending a church service where a major local terror attack was not referenced at all and of the pain that was left by only focusing on praise rather than the hard questions, Swinton 92
suggest here that if the preacher takes seriously the responsibility of the sermon to reframe the crisis moment with the gospel, then the text and therefore the redemptive work of God in Christ remains central. Conceiving of the crisis sermon as an act of reframing the crisis moment, is a means of avoiding the potential of the event dominating the sermon and pushing God to the margins. The concept of there being a frame of reference is familiar in homiletics with three major competing frames of reference being identified in the literature: rhetoric, poetics and theology. These frames dictate the approach and form of the sermon, but in a crisis moment the agenda, frame of reference, is being imposed from outside and the crisis sermon must acknowledge this and choose to resist it. The danger, I contend, will always come when something other than the gospel sets the overall agenda for preaching. However, David Buttrick is also right to argue that ‘true Christian preaching is not only a hermeneutic of texts, but a hermeneutic of human situations.’ His principal critique is of preaching which would distance itself from the presenting situations, and in crisis he claims there is an urgency and ‘instead of asking, ‘what is life all about?’ we ask in crisis ‘what is life all about now?’ and refer to our cultural moment.’ This addressing of the now is met in times of crisis by acknowledging the sermon as having a role in reframing the moment within a new distinctly Christian frame, because reframing changes both the situation and the responses to that situation. Reframing renders the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Sometimes, when we reframe something, our original understanding is radically and unalterably changed.

This act of reframing in fact should be seen as nothing new, particularly when reflecting on the definition of preaching employed by this study, as a liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ. Rowan Williams, in a short treatment of tragedy in literature, sees the importance of our stories as a way of making sense of and narrating our own tragedies since ‘we are not simply passive in the face of terror and suffering, because we can imagine it, narrate it, make pictures of it that make it an agenda for others and

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52 The notion of having a frame of reference comes from physics in the late nineteenth century as a way to render accounts of celestial mechanics as in the debate there was a need to adopt a point of view, ‘an inertial or originating frame of reference’ which then could be used to calculate all motion in relation to it. See Kay, Preaching and Theology, 1-5.
53 Ibid., 3.
54 Buttrick, Homiletic: Moves and Structures, 405.
55 Ibid., 407.
56 Swinton, Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil, 16.
for ourselves. Applying this idea to the biblical material, preaching also has a role in telling a story, a narrative which names the crisis within a wider gospel context. The role of the sermon in the crisis moment should never be underestimated, since the sermon itself has a power which can be lost in the midst of homiletical argument and the discussion of forms. In a recent work, Jacob Myers, who is committed to postmodern homiletical method, captures something of the potential power and reach of the sermon as a deconstructive tool, which resonates with how I understand the role of the crisis sermon:

Preaching is not dogma. It is not pop-wisdom. It is not teaching. Nor is it seven-steps-to-a-happy-marriage. It’s not a hallmark card, spouting sappy, pre-packaged sentiments! Preaching is a kamikaze discourse. Preaching digs along the fault lines of our theological, ethical, cultural, political, economic and ecclesiological infrastructures until the whole damn thing implodes. Preaching is a screwworm fly that burrows deep into our theological brain matter and lays eggs that drive us mad for justice. Preaching is a wormhole that utterly reorients our relation to time and matter, to eternity and all that matters.

This idea of the sermon as a form of reorientation and reframing gives a vibrancy to it, functioning as an act of resistance in the crisis moment. However for this act of resistance to have power, it will not come from the proclamation of human therapy, but only from the divine. It is essential that this divine therapy, found in the gospel hope, reframes the moment. The divine therapy understood here, being defined by Neil Pembroke, as ‘God’s healing love expressed through compassion, acceptance, help, and forgiveness, but also through confrontation and challenge.’ The application of this understanding of God to the crisis moment is therefore helpful, but still begs the question of how God is being understood in the moment, the question of the involvement of God. It is to this theological question I now turn since it has an interrogative role in this study due to its importance as a foundational question in the crisis moment.

2.2 The Involvement of God

I argued in the introduction that poorly conceived ideas of God’s involvement are problematic in a crisis moment and must be addressed if there is to be a balance

58 Myers, Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology, 187.
59 Pembroke, Divine Therapeia and the Sermon: Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching, viii.
between the theocentric and the therapeutic in the crisis sermon. With a right conception of God’s involvement the balance arises naturally, since there is confidence found to speak of God, and, following Pembroke, to then point to the divine therapy of God’s healing love. In this chapter the involvement of God is considered and will be used as a means of interrogating two homiletics which seek to connect the gospel to the needs of the moment. In preparation for this process, I draw attention here to two aspects of the involvement of God, firstly that of theodicy, the process of vindicating God’s activity, in view of the existence of evil, and secondly God’s relationship to suffering and pain, namely the doctrine of impassibility.

I begin with the issue of how to reconcile the image of a good God with the reality of evil in the world. When we experience moments of great pain or witness great horror, it is inevitable that questions arise and particularly those of God’s involvement, his activity or perceived non-activity. In the introduction I made the observation that people can lose faith because God is seen as powerless in the face of evil or become indifferent to God, due to a perceived lack of mercy and compassion on his part. The attempt to justify the character and action of God in the face of evil and suffering is known as theodicy. The intellectual necessity of the attempts to reconcile our faith to our reality is obvious, but the real problem comes from the proposed solutions.60 This problem is illustrated by responses to the horror of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Voltaire in his classic poem challenged the pastoral bankruptcy of the attempts to theologically explain the event:

Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well,"
And contemplate this ruin of a world. [...]  
To those expiring murmurs of distress,
To that appalling spectacle of woe,
Will ye reply: "You do but illustrate
The iron laws that chain the will of God"?
Say ye, o'er that yet quivering mass of flesh:
"God is avenged: the wage of sin is death"?
What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?61

60 Swinton, Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil, 12.
There is nothing new in concluding that certain tragic events are the result of the judgement of God, but such claims can be argued to misrepresent God, and to be pastorally inappropriate.\textsuperscript{62} Having an intellectually satisfying solution is not the same as offering pastoral support, which underpins the claim of John Swinton, who in developing a pastoral response to the problem of evil, argues that the theodicy project falls short of providing any real help pastorally. Considering traditional approaches, he concludes that ‘the traditional enterprise of theodicy is meaningless’, and that ‘practicing traditional theodicy does not bring healing and a deeper love for God but is, in fact, a potential source of evil in and of itself.’\textsuperscript{63}

It is this second point which resonates with the comments of David Hart, with which I began the first chapter, that one’s attempts to discern meaning or not-meaning can cause more damage. The difficulties that arise from traditional theodicy are for Eleonore Stump framed by the context and reality of suffering as ‘what is in need of justification is God’s allowing suffering.’\textsuperscript{64} We may propose solutions to the problem of evil, but that does not change the reality of the suffering we are experiencing.\textsuperscript{65} This is where our carefully crafted responses fail and the claim that ‘preaching begins where eloquence ends’ has real resonance here.\textsuperscript{66} Traditional theodicy is then a problem for crisis preaching, since such sermons are fundamentally a form of pastoral response to the moment.\textsuperscript{67} Swinton believes that in such a context traditional theodicies can ‘justify and rationalise evil; silence the voice of the sufferer’ and ‘become evil in themselves.’\textsuperscript{68}

The warning here, particularly of the possibility of silencing the sufferer, must be heeded as our attempts to provide meaning in the sermon may in fact silence further

\textsuperscript{62} David Hart, in reflecting on the 2004 Asian tsunami, that the starting point must always be that the world is not how it was meant to be, so therefore such events are not part of God’s plan. See, Hart, \textit{The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?}
\textsuperscript{63} Swinton, \textit{Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil}, 13.
\textsuperscript{65} See Chapter 1 ‘Suffering, theodicy, defense.’ ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Kay, \textit{Preaching and Theology}, 10.
\textsuperscript{67} The homiletician Thomas Long claims that the metaphors that seek to define the preacher’s role can be clustered around three master metaphors that of the herald, the pastor and the storyteller/poet. See, Thomas G. Long, \textit{The Witness of Preaching}, Third Edition. ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 19.
\textsuperscript{68} Swinton, \textit{Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil}, 17.
those needing help. To avoid this, we must accept that crisis preaching is not an act of theodicy in the traditional sense and seek to develop, in response, ways to address the questions in a theologically coherent and pastorally sensitive way. This is where the thesis statement has resonance in its claim that a right balance can be found, and that there are theological means available to accomplish this.

One suggestion of how to form a pastorally acceptable theodicy comes from John Swint on himself, developing a pastoral theodicy consisting of four core practices: lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness and hospitality. 69 These four practices are located in the community, which he conceives as a means of resistance to the evil and suffering being experienced. He draws on the work of notable ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who in considering medical ethics, points to the way the early church responded to evil and suffering:

For the early Christians, suffering and evil [...] did not have to be “explained”. Rather, what was required was the means to go on even if the evil could not be “explained”. Indeed, it was crucial that such suffering or evil not be “explained” – that is, it was important not to provide a theoretical account of why such evil needed to be in order that certain good results occur, since such an explanation would undercut the necessity of the community capable of absorbing the suffering. 70

This approach is counter to our contemporary desire for explanation since ‘suffering was not a metaphysical problem needing a solution but a practical challenge requiring a response.’ 71 This resonates with David Hart’s critique of much that is said in response to a crisis, making it ironic if the Christian community forgot its historic approach to crisis, when others do not seem so bound up in seeking explanations. Hauerwas continues stating that

historically speaking, Christians have not had a “solution” to the problem of evil. Rather, they have had a community of care that has made it possible for them to absorb the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations. 72

69 Ibid., 88.
70 Ibid., 35.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
Significant here is the reframing which is taking place as the chaos and the reality of the suffering and evil is being absorbed within the community narrative. This is a faithful act as their response to the problem of evil and the existence of suffering was not to question God’s goodness, love and power, but rather to develop faithful forms of community within which the impact of evil and suffering could be absorbed, resisted and transformed as they waited for God’s return.\textsuperscript{73}

The encouragement here is that the crisis sermon has a role in finding ways to develop and nurture these faithful communities. There is resonance here with the thesis of this study with the necessity placed on balance, that the sermon can point to a God who can enable the community to move through the ‘impact of evil and suffering’ they are experiencing.

Having considered whether we can rationalise the relationship of God to the event of evil itself, the second aspect of the involvement of God I want to consider at this stage is God’s relationship to suffering. It is no surprise that the horror of much of the twentieth century has led to revision of how we understand God’s relationship to suffering. It is this shift which arguably has contributed to the confusion over how the involvement of God should be conceived in the crisis moment, since today there is an almost universal acceptance of God’s passibility rather than his impassibility - that is the assertion that God is affected by his interaction with his creation.

This development is seen in a comprehensive review of the arguments for divine passibility by Thomas Weinandy, who notes that Andrew Fairbairn stated in 1893 that ‘theology has no falser idea than that of the impassibility of God’\textsuperscript{74}, and Marcel Sarot that during the twentieth century ‘the idea that God is immutable and impassible has slowly but surely given way to the idea that God is sensitive, emotional and passionate.’\textsuperscript{75} This move leads Jürgen Moltmann, a significant advocate of passibility, to claim that ‘the doctrine of the essential impassibility of the divine nature now seems

\textsuperscript{73} Ib\textsuperscript{id}\textsuperscript{b}.


finally to be disappearing from the Christian doctrine of God. A significant driving force in the last century was the reality of Auschwitz becoming the ‘interpretative experience that advanced the phenomenal growth in and acceptance of the tenet that God is passible. No other event has so impacted the contemporary conception of God, especially concerning his passibility. There is a story told by Ellie Wiesel which is commonly used in the literature:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice in myself answer: “Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.”

Moltmann wrote in response of the necessity of such a claim:

Any other answer would be blasphemy. There cannot be any other Christian answer to the question of this torment. To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness. To speak here of an indifferent God would condemn men to indifference.

There are echoes here of Hart’s claim that attempts to do theology in the midst of great suffering are often ‘banal and futile’ if not ‘blasphemous.’ Of Moltmann’s emotive language in his response that it is the claim of God’s indifference which best sums up the motivation for the move away from divine impassibility – that an indifferent God is no God at all and no use to us. Moltmann went as far as to say that ‘there can be no theology after Auschwitz, which does not take up the theology in Auschwitz, i.e. the prayers and cries of the victims.’ The clear assumption being that divine impassibility is not compatible with such ‘prayers and cries’. However, those who affirm the passibilist position, ignore that for Wiesel the event that day, rather than affirming that God was present with his people, had in fact ‘murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust,’ leaving one to conclude that ‘for him God was truly hung – that is dead, not involved in the world any longer.’

76 These quotations are found in the comprehensive review of the passibilist position by Thomas Weinandy in the first chapter of his book on the suffering of God, Does God Suffer?
77 Ibid., 3.
79 Ibid., 274.
80 History and the Triune God: Contributions to Trinitarian Theology (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 29.
from this story illustrate that such events do not lead to succinct theological answers, and must not be presumed to do so.

The driving question in this discussion is ‘how can an all-powerful and invulnerable creator and ruler of the world be justified in the face of an enormity of human suffering?’

Reflecting on this question, the image of Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35) is evocative since it suggests one who is with us in our pain. It is indeed the biblical presentation of God which can be the most convincing in accepting a position of divine passibility, as we encounter a God who is intimately involved with his people and appears to be affected by that relationship. Thomas Weinandy, a notable voice in this debate, sums up the contemporary understanding of passibility as follows:

For God to be “passible” then means that he is capable of being acted upon from without and that such actions bring about emotional changes of state within him. Moreover, for God to be passible means that he is capable of freely changing his inner emotional state in response to and interaction with the changing human condition and world order. Last, passibility implies that God’s changing emotional states involve “feelings” that are analogous to human feelings. Thus, one can speak, for example, of God’s inner emotional state as changing from joy to sorrow, or from delight to suffering.

It can be conceived how such a position would provide comfort in a time of crisis, but it does not fully take into account of the kind of God we are left with and whether that God can assist us in navigating the crisis moment. The theologian Frances Young confronts this as she responds to the passibilist position of Paul Fiddes, when reflecting upon the life of her disabled son and her need for a God who is indeed transcendent:

From that experience, I found myself reclaiming the insight that God is ‘beyond suffering’ in the sense that he is not emotionally involved in a self-concerned

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83 We find the working out of this image in the response to the Manchester bombing of May 2017 of Irish worship band ‘Rend Collective’ who published a song ‘Weep with me.’ Chris Llewellyn of the band states that, ‘it can sometimes be tempting for us to dial back our worship, or become less honest, or more divorced from what’s going on in the world.’ The song they see as a refusal ‘to provide cheap, shallow answers […] hopefully this song can give us some vocabulary to bring our raw, open wounds before the wounded healer, who weeps with us in our distress.’ The song, in the form of a lament asks of God for his presence, ‘weep with me, Lord will you weep with me,’ and is clear ‘I don’t need answers, all I need is to know that you care for me.’ - ‘Rend Collective Shares New Song ‘Weep with Me’”, thechristianbeat, (2017) <http://www.thechristianbeat.org/index.php/news/3592-rend-collective-shares-new-song-weep-with-me> [accessed 01/12/17]
way - rather he is that ocean of love that can absorb all the suffering of the world and purge it without being polluted or changed by it. And yet at the same time in Christ he subjected himself to personal involvement in pain and anguish, so that in some sense he genuinely knows what it feels like to be victim and shares in our experience of suffering. The two ideas somehow belong together, and (despite the conclusions of Fiddes) our knowledge of God is impoverished if we cannot stretch our minds and imaginations to encompass both.84

Significant here is that Young writes of ‘reclaiming the insight’ that God is both beyond suffering, and also in Christ intimately involved in pain and anguish, so that he shares our experiences; this is about God’s capacity to engage with our suffering rather than experiencing it exactly as we are. First, in the claims of Moltmann and now of Young, we see the clear battle lines in the debate, which can leave the preacher easily confused as to how to speak of the involvement of God. Whilst the majority viewpoint could be argued to be the passibilist position, there are those who continue to contend for the traditional view of God’s impassibility. Thomas Weinandy has produced one of the most significant defences of recent years. He takes as his definition of impassibility that of The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church:

There are three respects in which orthodox theology has traditionally denied God’s subjection to ‘passibility’, namely (1) external passibility or the capacity to be acted upon from without, (2) internal passibility or the capacity for changing the emotions from within, and (3) sensational passibility or the liability to feelings of pleasure and pain caused by the action of another being.85

It is this definition that he defends in his work and he goes on to state that ‘God is impassible in the sense that he cannot experience emotional changes of state due to his relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order. This understanding of impassibility does not imply […] that God is not utterly passionate in his love, mercy and compassion.’86 In holding to this position he is rejecting the notion of passibility that ‘God experiences inner emotional changes of state, either of comfort

84 Frances M. Young, Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 237.
or discomfort, whether freely from within or by being acted upon from without.' This study employs the definition of Weinandy, and it is this conception of God which forms the basis of my understanding of the involvement of God. Important here is the assertion that just because God cannot be affected by his ‘relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order’ that he is not without passions. I assert this as an essential foundational concept when conceiving of God’s involvement in the crisis moment. This question of God’s impassibility will be explored and applied in greater depth in chapter 5, where I argue that impassibility creates the foundation for crisis preaching drawing on the conception of crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse.

I have drawn attention in this chapter to two of the core issues which arise in reflecting on the nature and form of God’s involvement with his creation. From this brief treatment, it can be seen how easy it could be to wrongly conceive of how God is involved with human beings and the created order at any time, not least a moment of crisis. I consider that how we understand God’s involvement is an essential element of crisis preaching. These two highlighted areas will form part of the framework for using the question of God’s involvement to interrogate the example homiletical models which now follow.

2.3 Seeking Balance
I present here two homiletical models, the explicitly therapeutic and the narrative, as examples of approaches which are looking to connect the gospel with the hearer, and to do so in resonant ways. This serves the exploration of the thesis, by considering to what extent they foster a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. Whether they are deemed successful in finding that balance will be seen after evaluating how they address God’s involvement in terms of his activity and character. The understanding of God’s involvement as a means of interrogation grounds the focus here in the application in the crisis moment, rather than simply in more general terms.

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87 Ibid., 39.
These two models reflect the development in twentieth-century homiletics known as the New Homiletic and its wide-reaching influence. This term encapsulated the move towards the listener, to inductive approaches which were concerned with the reception of the message and the experience of it. Principally it is a move away from what was known as the old homiletic, a traditional form based on rhetoric, with a deductive more propositional emphasis where the sermon begins with a thesis and works through it. Sermons in this style tend to have points which are used to structure the sermon and put the required information across. The New Homiletic, in contrast, sees the sermon as a transformative event where reasoning rather than a thesis guides the preacher and the hearer to a new understanding together. This school has an inductive focus where observations lead to theory, as opposed to the old homiletic which is more deductive beginning with the theory or knowledge to be communicated. Whilst the New Homiletic as a school cannot be reduced to a singular form the two models evaluated here reflect that move towards the listener and would be seen as identifying broadly with the priorities of this school. Is should be no surprise that the ideas of the New Homiletic are influential in crisis preaching due to the inherent concern with the needs of the listener in times of crisis and the desire to connect with them.

The first approach to be presented is that of the therapeutic form of preaching, which was introduced in the first chapter as being a means which is particularly influential when pastoral needs are at the forefront, such as in crisis moments. I stated that whilst there is not one clear definition, this form of preaching is usually where ‘the gospel is psychologised [and] common forms of human suffering […] are addressed from the pulpit and mini-doses of therapy are administered to ease the pain.’88 The emphasis here is on the application of psychological theory in the sermon as a means to address the felt needs of the individuals in the congregation. Such psychological models have a focus on the individuals needs and that is where many therapeutic sermons begin. It can be easily conceived how this is an attractive approach when faced with great human need in a crisis moment. This approach has developed against the backdrop of the development and burgeoning influence of what can be described as a therapeutic culture in society, where psychology has become the default lens for many through which life is interpreted and negotiated.

This backdrop of a developing therapeutic culture has, without a doubt, had an influence on how we approach moments of trauma. Frank Furedi, a sociologist, in a comprehensive study of the powerful influence of the therapeutic imperative in Anglo-American societies, questions robustly whether the therapeutic shift is an enlightened one, putting us in touch with our emotions, or in fact has made us more vulnerable. His direct assessment is that ‘therapeutic culture has helped construct a diminished sense of self that characteristically suffers from an emotional deficit and possesses a permanent consciousness of vulnerability. Its main legacy so far is the cultivation of a unique sense of vulnerability.’

To illustrate this he contrasts the initial response to the 1966 Aberfan disaster where a village school in Wales was engulfed by a coal-tip slide, with how it would be dealt with now. At the time, the self-reliance of the community in the face of unimaginable trauma was seen as a positive, now the response to the crisis would be perceived as inadequate and would be met with ‘clearly focussed therapeutic policies.’ It would be thought now that the trauma has remained suppressed rather than having been dealt with at the time as ‘instead of exploring the resilience of this Welsh mining community, commentators are far more likely to treat the survivors as hidden victims whose emotional needs were ignored by a callous officialdom.’ What is apparent is that where society would have seen resilience it now sees vulnerability:

One of the contributions of therapeutic culture is to encourage individuals to make sense of dramatic episodes through mental health terms. The influence of this approach may dispose people to react to major events, like 9/11, as potential trauma victims rather than as concerned citizens.

This is a telling observation for reflection particularly as Carol Norén sees the crisis sermon as a place to, ‘create and reinforce a sense of communitas,’ which is the opposite to focussing on the individual as victim. This focus on the individual in therapeutic method is inevitable as this is the emphasis of much psychology, but when applied in preaching it runs counter to the biblical picture of God’s covenant relationship with a people. The individualistic slant of therapeutic preaching is one of the principle difficulties in crisis moments when whole communities have often been

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90 Ibid., 19.
91 Ibid., 20.
92 Ibid., 16.
93 Norén, "Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship."
94 Pembroke, *Divine Therapeia and the Sermon: Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching*, x.
affected and are coming together searching for meaning. Significant is that the central complaint of the model is that God is moved to the margins since the sermon is seen to simply dispense psychotherapy, rather than in the understanding of the sermon employed by this study, being a ‘liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ’. It was noted in the introduction that homiletics has struggled to find an authentic voice since ‘preachers have not been satisfied to speak from the embedded position. They have not been content with the starkness of the New Testament’s theology of the word. They have sought other languages with which to communicate the gospel.’ The therapeutic form could be seen as an example of this, since it can appear that an outcome of the model is that the redemptive narrative of God is lost as ‘human solutions get shifted to centre stage’, and ‘God makes an appearance from time to time, but God’s role is little more than a cameo.’ It is argued by Neil Pembroke that this happens as the preacher seeks to make the sermon ‘newsworthy’ by turning the attention away from what is already familiar, and then to a fresh source of insight, in this case psychology.

However, if the notion of being a victim is operative in societies’ response to trauma are there ways a crisis sermon can address this apparently inevitable sense of victimhood? There is a possible means which can be adapted from the school of other centred homiletics as described by John McClure who sees this particular homiletic located on the margins, focussed on the previously not-included, described as the other. He identifies a sub-set of other centred homiletics known as victim centred homiletics which through a theology of victimisation can preach to the victims as ‘Jesus’ death on a cross is God’s breaking the grip of scapegoating by stepping into the place of a victim and by being a victim whose victimisation cannot be hidden.’ There is potential in this idea as it resonates with the description of preaching operating here that the sermon proclaims the grace of God through Christ. This grace meets the person in their actual or perceived status as victim and provides a means to reframe their experience with the gospel hope. However, the question remains of what image of God is being used to reframe the moment?

95 Ibid., vii.
96 Lischer, The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence, 12.
98 Ibid., viii.
This is an important question, as simply naming God and claiming that hope is found in him is not always the same as those claims actually having theological weight. Reflecting further on the problems with therapeutic approaches in preaching I turn to William Willimon who, reflecting upon his experience editing a collection of sermons by campus ministers following the events of September 11th, 2001, noted his struggle with the lack of theological and biblical depth in what was preached as ‘most of those sermons, including my own, were reflections on that event; most were therapeutic attempts to console people who were in grief.’ These sermons will be considered in the next chapter, but at this point it is enough to note Willimon’s conviction that the sermons were biased towards the therapeutic and not balanced. Willimon’s observation is echoed by David Buttrick who gives a damming assessment of what he sees as the bankruptcy of therapeutic method:

Once […] people were informed by a pilgrim model of selfhood. They traced their pilgrimage not only from birth until death, but from sin to salvation through stages of sanctification. They were able to describe their progress, their pitfalls, their bright expectations, all within a structure of narrative meaning. […] People do sense that they live in a struggle of soul that is much more than a bumping along through stages in developmental psychology. We are a people given to self-diagnosis. […] While psychological wisdoms can paste on labels, or provide useful therapies, what we demand is some soul-sized scheme of meaning for our lives – meaning that used to be wrapped up in big words like ‘redemption’ or ‘sanctification.’ The therapeutic model has been undeniably efficacious, but even extended, it does not provide profound enough meaning for the living of our human lives.

The central dynamic for Buttrick is that the method of meaning making has shifted from the language of faith to the language of psychology. He sees that it can be positive, but that in the end it does not provide ‘profound enough meaning’ for us to make sense of our lives. He argues that it must be found once again in the language of faith. However, it must be noted that simply applying God to a situation does not mean that the sermon is balanced or in fact theocentric at all as God can be applied simply as a balm which has little substance. It has been seen that religious practice and language can provide the means for avoiding the necessary work required to move on. This possibility is summed up in the concept of ‘spiritual bypassing’ which

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100 Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching*, 72.
was coined by John Welwood to describe avoidance, or bypassing, of psychological work by focussing solely on the spiritual.\textsuperscript{102} It is also referred to as premature transcendence ‘as it represents an attempt to rise above the complex and often messy nature of being human.’ In a recent article, Michael Sheridan describes eight faces of spiritual bypassing. The second face, which is of most interest here, is the, ‘avoidance or repression of difficult or unwanted thoughts and emotions.’ These emotions are denied when they don’t fit with the ‘spiritual persona being cultivated.’ Good emotions can include compassion, forgiveness and generosity, but bad emotions such as anger, jealously and fear are denied.\textsuperscript{103} The warning must be heard, and the sermon must not simply seek to be balm, and in effect bypass, what must be addressed. Religious ritual could be used to suppress those unwanted emotions, serving as a bypass for the reality of what needs to be faced in crisis. A robust crisis homiletic must avoid any tendency to bypass the real issues evident in the crisis, and those issues must be confronted, I am arguing, with the reality of an involved God.

The emphasis on the individual in the secular therapeutic method can be seen in recent attempts to find ways to connect the sermon with the listener. The difficulty, as I see it, is that such approaches have continued to put the focus in the message in the wrong place. One such approach, I contend, is the master metaphor of the preacher as pastor. Thomas Long identifies three master metaphors which gather up the vast majority of these images: Herald; Pastor; Storyteller/Poet. To these Long himself adds that of ‘witness’ and it has also been proposed that ‘shared story’ is an appropriate category.\textsuperscript{104} Here I address the metaphor of the preacher as pastor which places the focus on the ‘listener, on the impact of the sermon on the hearer.’\textsuperscript{105} It is centred on being engaged with people’s concerns rather than the pastor as herald which is focussed on being faithful to and declaring God’s message. Long cites other terms used to describe this pastoral approach such as: dialogical, therapeutic, educational and conversational. He states that


\textsuperscript{104} Long, \textit{The Witness of Preaching}, 19.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 30.
in all these terms, the underlying assumption about the purpose of preaching remains the same: preaching should intentionally seek a beneficial change in the hearers, should help people make sense of their lives, and should strive to be a catalyst for more responsible, and ethical living on the part of those who hear. In short, the pastor aims the sermon toward the listener, expressly shaping the sermon so that something good will happen to and for the hearers.\(^{106}\)

Any approach which seeks ‘a beneficial change in the hearers’ is to be commended, but the focus in this approach is firmly on the individual and their needs begin to drive the focus of the sermon. However, the desire for approaches which resonate with the hearers is understandable since it is simply the question of where is God in the midst of it. It was Harry Fosdick who popularised this approach in North American homiletics and birthed the psychologically based therapeutic form. Fosdick claimed in his 1928 Harper’s magazine article *What is the Matter with Preaching?* that ‘only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.’\(^{107}\) He believed that people needed to hear preaching which spoke to their issues and needs, so he proposed his *Project Method* which was later designated the *Counselling Sermon* by Edmund Linn as the method for preaching seeing it ‘as counselling on a group scale.’\(^{108}\) Fosdick is to be commended in his conviction that preaching at that time was not connecting. He critiques expository preachers and even topical preachers who he sees ‘turning their pulpits into platforms, and their sermons into lectures, straining after some new intriguing subject.’\(^{109}\) However, in proposing his project method as the only approach to take he moved the locus of the sermon to the individual and away from the community, and ultimately any conception of the authority of the text.

Donald Capps in his *Pastoral Counselling & Preaching* notes that Fosdick felt that expository sermons gave an ‘unwarranted importance to some passage in the Bible instead of to the business of living.’\(^{110}\) He also felt that whilst the topical sermon was more relevant than exposition, the weakness is that it requires the minister ‘to be an authority in every field of human knowledge. The opinions of a preacher whose

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 30-31.


\(^{109}\) Fosdick, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?.”

information is necessarily limited are little respected.'\textsuperscript{111} The intention of Fosdick’s counselling sermon was to avoid both pitfalls. He stated that ‘we need more sermons that try to face people’s real problems with them, meet their difficulties, answer their questions, confirm their noblest faiths and interpret their experiences in sympathetic, wise and understanding cooperation.'\textsuperscript{112} The emphasis in the counselling sermon is not on the preacher being an expert socially and politically, but being sensitive to the problems of the congregation and the pressures of modern life. The key here is that ‘this knowledge comes from familiarity with parishioners’ daily struggles.'\textsuperscript{113} Edmund Linn who developed Fosdick’s approach lists key characteristics of the counselling sermon, which on review are focussed primarily on the individual’s needs. They include ‘speaking as to a single person; relating to people where they are; [and] apply the gospel to persons.'\textsuperscript{114} Clear here is a lack of balance in terms of the theocentric and the therapeutic, since the focus is on applying the gospel to the individual’s needs.

Donald Capps observes the problems in the approach, raising two objections to how this model handles the relationship of preaching and pastoral counselling. Firstly, relating to preaching, ‘one can question the view that counselling is preeminent over proclamation, extortion, teaching, prophetic witness, and other important aspects of preaching.'\textsuperscript{115} The claim that the counselling sermon is the preeminent approach is indeed a bold one, and Capps is correct when he states that ‘the claim that preaching is fundamentally proclamation has a certain face validity that this claim lacks.'\textsuperscript{116} The second objection relates to the understanding of counselling in the method, and despite the valid claim that such approaches were not fully developed in the 1930’s, the reality was that the approach remained vague and orientated around what Fosdick saw as ‘clairvoyance,’ his ability to inherently understand the situation, which is not the case for every preacher. As previously stated one of the main critiques of this approach in preaching is that ‘psychology rather than the redeeming action of God in Christ is given centre stage,’ with the problem being that, ‘God is seen largely as a spiritual resource that is available to us in our quest for personal wholeness and

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 15-17.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
integration.' Approaches which use God simply as a spiritual power to support psychological self-help, appear in the end, to lack the power of those approaches which have a traditional understanding of the redemptive work of God in Christ.

Thomas Long adds his own critique and sees the key differences between the herald and the pastoral approaches as the ‘herald starts with the Bible as source; the pastor starts with the human dilemma as experienced by the hearer and turns to the Bible as resource.’ In the pastoral approach the question is not ‘what shall I say?’ but ‘what do I want to happen?’ Despite the obvious critique, there is much to commend this approach with its commitment to relevance and connection. But there is a risk that if in crisis a preacher is only asking ‘what do I want to happen?’ then they will fall into the trap of simply problem solving. I believe that the crisis sermon will fail if the emphasis is on resolving a situation, which due to its sheer nature, cannot easily be resolved or fixed. Long also observes that the pastoral preacher’s query ‘how can I help people with the problems of this day?’ is a powerful one, but maybe simply too small. He puts it this way:

> Whenever preaching spends all of its time solving problems, the inevitable conclusion is that the Christian faith is a completed set of answers to life’s dilemmas. All that is left to do is to apply it to our lives. The truth, however, is that the Christian faith is not yet finished, and the promised victory of God is not yet fully present or realised. Some tragic human suffering is for the time being unintelligible and meaningless to us.

Long’s critique demonstrates the weakness of this approach for crisis situations when there are not the easy answers which we crave. The preacher and congregation may want to find resolution, but it will not come through clever communication or force of personality:

> The faithful preacher cannot always speak a pastoral word that makes life healthier and more manageable but may only declare the trustworthiness of Christ, celebrate the signs and wonders in the present, and point to the future, which belongs to God.

There is resonance with Neil Pembroke’s proposal that the sermon is theocentric and therapeutic when it points to God’s healing love, the divine therapy. What is clear from

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119 Ibid., 36.
120 Ibid.
this discussion of the key ideas is that the critique comes easily due to the focus on the individual’s needs being shifted to the centre of the model. With such an approach it is inevitable that God is moved to the margins as being no longer the focus. As Long has demonstrated, an appeal to the story of God in the Bible will provide a necessary anchor for the approach to prevent it from sliding further into psychological method, but this appeal still begs the question of what conception of God is being pointed to. Long writes that the preacher must ‘declare the trustworthiness of Christ,’ but I assert again that in a crisis moment it is this claim of trustworthiness which is in fact in doubt. Looking through the lens of the involvement of God we see little treatment of the activity and character of God. The primary focus on the therapeutic form of the individual at the expense of reflecting theologically on God, makes this lack of focus on the involvement of God inevitable. However, I contend that it is only by considering how we speak of the involvement of God, that crisis sermons can have the required balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic.

Having reflected on the therapeutic method I now turn to the second example of an influential homiletic, what is known as narrative preaching. This descriptor refers to the style of the sermon rather than its content, and whilst some approaches focus on story that is not the case for all. However, the priorities of narrative preaching with the focus on narrative resonates with the stories we tell in crisis and of our responses.¹²¹ This is no surprise as stories are fundamental to what it means for us to be human:

> Storytelling is a universal and indispensable human means of symbolic communication. Humanity lives by narrative; hearing and telling stories we organise and give meaning to our experience. Our ancestors gathered by the fire to remember and create stories as a way of giving means to the present and moving purposefully towards the future.¹²²

The story functions as a way of meaning making for the present and the future. Narrative preaching as a school has come to a number of different conclusions as to what a narrative approach looks like for the sermon, but it does not have to be the

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¹²¹ The story of the south African truth and reconciliation commission is told by the archbishop at its head and illustrates the power of telling stories even when they contain great horror. The telling of stories became a vehicle for moving on. See, Desmond Tutu, No Future without Forgiveness, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

case that the idea of a meta-narrative is rejected. This conviction is by no means universal but serves as an example that there are those who are seeking to be traditionally theocentric.

Ronald Allen identifies four different ways that preachers and homilectians use the term ‘narrative preaching.’ Firstly, it can refer to ‘sermons that are actual stories containing little if any explanatory material. From start to finish, the preacher employs setting, plot, and characters to tell a story. This telling, without commentary, is how the sermon communicates its message.’ Secondly, ‘narrative preaching can signal the conviction that a sermon as whole should move in a way that is similar to a story, though the content of the sermon is not a single, extended narrative.’ The most notable proponent of this approach was Eugene Lowry, who in developing his idea of the homiletical plot, argued that tension was a necessary component of a sermon. Lowry’s approach is not a propositional model, for Lowry the sermon will move ‘primarily by logic movement, or by the shifting impact of image or images, or by the process of a story line.’ This outright rejection of the propositional is a hallmark of the narrative movement. He had noted how novelists, playwrights and writers in general sought to gain the reader or observers attention as they created tension in the plot of their story. He observes that

they make the assumption that the readers and observers are in neutral mentally as the experience begins. The truth is, different people will be in different forms of readiness. Some are eager to be engaged, others reluctant.

The preacher though, as a result, must not presume that all are in the same place of readiness, so it is necessary that ‘the first step in the sermon as preached is to upset the equilibrium of the listeners in such a way as to engage them in the sermon

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123 See Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, Chapter 7
124 Mike Graves, David J. Schlafer, and Eugene L. Lowry, *What’s the Shape of Narrative Preaching?: Essays in Honour of Eugene L. Lowry* (Saint Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2008), 27. A recent example of this approach is seen in the collected sermons with commentary of Jon Russell. The sermons exist as narrative with little or no application or explanation within them. See, Jon Russell, *A Preacher’s Tale: Explorations in Narrative Preaching* (SCM Press, 2018).
128 *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, 28.
This movement at the start of the sermon is intended to create an ambiguity that the sermon seeks to resolve. The hope is that in doing so the sermon demonstrates a vitality which captures the listener’s attention whether they have a high view of preaching or not. This creation of an ambiguity is central to Lowry’s project here. He writes of ambiguity as inherently theological:

Reinhold Niebuhr speaks of the anxiety consequent of our being both finite and self-transcendent. Ambiguity is thereby felt as foe to be vanquished. The need to resolve ambiguity is theological in nature— that’s why it can be used as a literary device. In mild doses, it is a motivator both to attention and to action. One cannot breathe easily until some solution occurs. And when resolution comes, the result is both a knowing and a feeling.

It is here that we see the resonance with crisis preaching, since a crisis by its sheer nature brings tension and ambiguity. I noted that the crisis sermon is expected to do something, and Lowry’s contribution here is to place ambiguity at the centre of the sermon:

The homiletical view expressed in this writing assumes that ambiguity and its resolution is the basic form-ingredient to any sermon, whether life-situational, expository, doctrinal etc. in content. There is always one major discrepancy, bind, or problem which is the issue. The central task of any sermon, therefore, is the resolution of that particular central ambiguity. This is not to say that the sermon closes down all of life’s ambiguities any more than the closing of a good play presumes to finish the lives of the central characters. Rather it is that now the anticipated future is made new by the resolution of one central issue or problem.

His idea is an intriguing one for crisis preaching, but it only goes so far because there are two main points of divergence from what is happening in a time of crisis. The first being the origin of the tension, and Carol Norén observes that ‘a key difference between Lowry’s method and preaching in crisis is that in a crisis, upsetting the equilibrium occurs outside the world of the text, and may be experienced by preacher and congregation prior to any consideration of the text or liturgical season.’ Lowry’s principle concerns were to engage the listener and to create an ambiguity. The reality

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129 Ibid.
130 Lowry explains it this way, “So potent is our need to resolve ambiguity—to be at peace—that ambiguity has power even when experienced in pseudo-form. This is one of the reasons children love to hear a nursery rhyme over and over again. Although they know how it will conclude, it is pleasurable to relive the painful suspense of it so that once again the suspense can be removed.” Ibid., 29.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 31.
133 Norén, “Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship.”
is that crises generate a body of people who are ready to hear ‘a word from the Lord,’ making what is said so crucial as there is a corporate attentiveness that may not be there at other times. The need to create an ambiguity leads to the second divergence. For Lowry, the ambiguity comes from within the text and is a device to draw the people in, but in crisis the ambiguity comes from outside, and may in fact be complex and problematic to resolve.

Returning to Allen’s categories of narrative preaching, we see thirdly the practice of doing theology by telling stories and reflecting upon them. This has parallels with Thomas Long’s master metaphor of ‘storyteller/poet’ as it can also be known as ‘story theology’.134 Fourthly is the notion of ‘narrative theology,’ a theological approach ‘associated with the contemporary movement of post-liberalism, the central conviction of which is that the work of the theologian and the preacher is to retell the biblical story(ies) so as to clarify their claim upon the contemporary world.’135 Fundamental is that the Bible is considered on its own terms and ‘the narrative preacher […] seeks not to interpret, but to narrate the congregation into the larger and ongoing biblical story.’136

For Allen, of these differing approaches, it is the idea of ‘the narrative quality of experience’ which is significant. The idea that life consists of story and narrative is not new but key is the idea that ‘narratives not only express experience but also can form experience in those who receive the story.’137 The function here of narrative forming experience is central to the idea of reframing and resonates with the concept of the crisis sermon forming a theodic community.

As a school of thought the New Homiletic has strengths and weaknesses, and for Paul Wilson, a significant accomplishment of the school was to retain the grounding of

137 Allen draws here on the well-known essay ‘The narrative quality of experience’ by Stephen Crites. Ibid., 30.
sermons in the Bible, but ‘it is clear now that having the Bible as a foundation is not necessarily the same thing as having God.’\textsuperscript{138} Significant for this study is the claim that ‘the New Homiletic has not been specifically focussed on the gospel.’\textsuperscript{139} It is sufficient to note here that the New Homiletic reached consensus on approach, but not really on theology, ‘the need for the sermon to focus on God and the gospel.’\textsuperscript{140} Wilson goes on to state that,

as the New Homiletic developed, it became apparent that God was more the assumed focus of its sermons than the actual, and what God says and does was not the intentional thrust of much homiletical instruction. Rather, what the biblical text says and does became the guiding principle, and if a text did not get to God, nothing ensured that the sermon got there.\textsuperscript{141}

Evident here is a move away from theocentric preaching in the traditional sense with many seeing the potential problems, including Richard Lischer. He felt that we would all become tired of narrative in the end, and John McClure also saw the potential for the preacher to abuse their power by shaping God in their own mould stating that ‘God should not become too accessible, too easily located, too easily associated with symbols elevated to kerygmatic status within the tradition.’\textsuperscript{142} It appears that much preaching in this tradition is judged to be no more than ‘sage advice,’\textsuperscript{143} and Frederick Buechner observed that God in much preaching, ‘is the most missing of all missing persons.’\textsuperscript{144} Thomas Long states the need for further revision of narrative preaching, as it has ‘too often devolved into a hodgepodge of sentimental pseudoart, confused rhetorical strategies, and competing theological epistemologies.’\textsuperscript{145} Conservative evangelical critics from the theological right would agree here, but Long reminds us that ‘in the linguistic repertoire of the gospel, narrative is not just one arrow in the quiver but is in a sense the quiver that holds all the arrows.’ He goes on to state that ‘always to tell stories means failure at the doctrinal, ethical and practical tasks. Always to cut to the chase by preaching dogmatic instruction, exhortations, and church building wisdom is to tear the gospel from its roots.’\textsuperscript{146} There is then an

\textsuperscript{138} Wilson, \textit{Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon}, 3.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 241.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 13.
acknowledgment that narrative preaching, due to the significance of the story, needs dynamic revision and we can see that a move to more theologically astute forms is taking place.\textsuperscript{147} The movement desired to see biblical preaching becoming more dynamic, but for Long, it seemed any style was allowed except a ‘thesis in three points.’\textsuperscript{148} A positive is that the movement has raised the profile of narrative, and brought form and content together. Ironically though the approach may have become as dogmatic as the one that was left behind, but whatever the case may be, any suspicion that God has been lost on the journey must be taken seriously and addressed. What is clear is that sermons can have aims they do not meet since ‘one can preach the Bible and not arrive at God’s word, one can preach God’s word and not arrive at the gospel, and one might even teach the gospel and still not proclaim it.’\textsuperscript{149}

A pioneer in the New Homiletic movement, Fred Craddock, insists that at its heart it is not about swapping stories, but about narrative. Craddock was committed to the inductive method and understood narrative in the sermon to be not simply a component but the whole, and is informed by the meta-narrative. The idea of there being a master narrative is often rejected and Craddock sees some benefits in the pulpit for its rejection. That rejection firstly locates us in the moment, secondly we would need to look for God’s activity in the now rather than depending on past experience, thirdly it is a triumph of reason, that the claims of modernism can be rightly rejected and fourthly that mystery can now be embraced.\textsuperscript{150} However, Craddock asserts that there must be a meta-narrative for effective preaching:

For the gospel to be the gospel, there must be a master narrative, a frame of reference in which life, relationships, Jesus, church and history are set. Imagine presenting Jesus, or trying to be the church, or interpreting events, or engaging the issues in one’s world without a context, a larger picture within which to set these activities. To believe in God is immediately to raise questions of whence, \textsuperscript{147} This need for revision is acknowledged by a range of the significant contributors to the movement in, Graves, Schlafer, and Lowry, \textit{What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?: Essays in Honour of Eugene L. Lowry}. Thomas G. Long makes his own proposal for revision in, Long, \textit{Preaching from Memory to Hope}. Interesting is the development by Lance B. Pape of Ricouer and his understanding of Mimesis. Pape proposes a method of seeing preaching as threefold Mimesis. This proposal hopes to rescue narrative methodology and places the Gospel back at the heart of the story. See, Pape, \textit{The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching}, 121-46.
\textsuperscript{148} Long, \textit{The Witness of Preaching}, 118.
\textsuperscript{149} Wilson, \textit{Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon}, 3.
\textsuperscript{150} Graves, Schlafer, and Lowry, \textit{What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?: Essays in Honour of Eugene L. Lowry}, 92-94.
whither, and why; to begin to think of God’s relation to the world in terms of origin, purpose, and end. If there is no overarching narrative into which personal stories and the human story are set, then, why even speak of a God who does not make a difference anyway? It could be argued that many of the listeners came before the pulpit hoping for a master narrative within which to reflect on the disconnects and contradictions of their lives. But whatever the appetites among the listeners, a metanarrative is good news.\textsuperscript{151}

I follow this position in this study as without a metanarrative it would be impossible to reframe the crisis moment effectively. We see the importance of the bigger story even within the narrative of the Bible itself. The theologian Oliver O’Donovan, in a sermon \textit{Horror}, takes the text Daniel 10:9, ‘I hear the sounds of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell on my face in a deep sleep.’ He observes that ‘confronted by humanity in all its chaos, the will and power to live goes out of us.’\textsuperscript{152} O’Donovan identifies rightly the sense of inertia that comes from a place of fear and indecision when faced with the chaos, that place of not knowing what to do and whether resolution of any kind can ever come. So how then does resolution come? Well, for Daniel the angel tells stories of hope fulfilled in God that he needs to hear. For O’Donovan this is central since ‘the important thing for those who experience such events is simply that they are made narratable. The chaos becomes history. The human mind can now engage with it, and that for Daniel and his despondent contemporaries, means that they can learn to live within it.’\textsuperscript{153} This surely then is part of the function of crisis preaching, to provide narration in a time of uncertainty, a narration which looks to strengthen faith through the story of a God who was present and is present. David Buttrick begins his major work with the theme of naming and narration, seeing human beings as \textit{storied} from birth, using language to name our world and stories to confer identity. He puts it this way:

Preaching can rename the world “God’s World” with metaphorical power and can change identity by incorporating all our stories into “God’s story.” Preaching constructs in consciousness a “faith-world” related to God.”\textsuperscript{154}

This is fundamentally about locating our story in a bigger story, and that act bringing change to how we view our story. Buttrick is right when he states that ‘Christian

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{154} Buttrick, \textit{Homiletic: Moves and Structures}, 11.
preaching can transform narrative identity. By locating our storied lives within a framework of beginning and end, Christian preaching poses the possibility of faith.¹⁵⁵ Let us not forget that the preacher has a responsibility to, ‘manifest the love of God, our “vital resource,” during calamity.’¹⁵⁶

In evaluating this influential school, as with the therapeutic form, it is important to note that the critique has come freely and the weaknesses of the approach in terms of any theocentric focus are clear. Again there is a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic in some areas, but generally the desire is to connect therapeutically. This is inherent within the inductive approach which starts from observation and experience. Ironically this method should be well suited to the crisis moment being an approach accustomed to beginning outside of the text, but it is how God is handled which makes it problematic. There is a repeat of the lack of interest in the character and activity of God which is addressed by an appeal to the bigger picture, in this case Fred Craddock pointing to the need for a metanarrative, a governing story to root the approach. This is much the same as the corrective applied by Thomas Long to the therapeutic form, but they both, when applied to crisis preaching, have the same problem that without proper consideration of the involvement of God, proper balance cannot be found.

2.4 Summary
The focus of this chapter was to begin to consider the central claim of the thesis statement, that crisis sermons are required to have a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic elements. I began by positioning crisis preaching as a stand-alone genre, one which has specific requirements of its own. This was a necessary step since it would be understandable to presume that other approaches could simply be applied. However, the fact that it is an external event which to some extent sets the agenda, means that the preacher must be aware that the sermon has an important function as a means of reframing the crisis moment with the gospel. This requirement is of course not only found in crisis preaching, the same could be said of any moment where the sermon is required to address an event or external theme. But whatever the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.
case, the peculiar demands must be taken seriously. I defined the crisis focus for this study as those events considered to be situational and interruptive, declaring that these are the most likely to need to be addressed from a pulpit. There are crisis events which could be dealt with in other liturgical ways, but there is something about a natural disaster or a terrorist attack that asks certain theological and pastoral questions that cannot be left. It is the fact that significant theological questions are raised in moments of crisis that makes it a compelling genre to consider.

The theological crisis of understanding is a significant part of the fallout from a crisis moment, and this study has put the emphasis on the question of the involvement of God, ‘Where is God in our suffering?’ I explored two aspects of the extent to which God is involved and affected by the creation, firstly the question of theodicy and secondly the question of the way that God suffers with his creation. Through the work of John Swinton, I argued that traditional approaches to theodicy do not always apply pastorally, and that there is benefit in conceiving of the sermon as a means for the community to be nurtured into a posture of resistance to the evil it is experiencing. The issue then is the extent to which God identifies with what we are going through, is God comfortably numb to our pain, or simply dazed and confused, feeling exactly as the creation does? I made clear that the doctrine of God’s passibility, that God is affected by his relationship with the creation, has become the modern-day default position, but that the doctrine of impassibility continues to have value for a study such as this. I asserted through Thomas Weinandy that such a position does not mean that God is without passion, a possibility which will be explored in the fifth chapter.

Having outlined the main concerns from the question of God’s involvement for this study I explored two models of homiletics which are influential in crisis moments. In contending that a balance is required I explored whether that balance is evident in those models. It was clear that both models can move God to the side-lines either through a psychological focus on the individual or by the more inductive model of beginning outside of the text. Despite the fact that both models have received critique from within the literature, it remains true that when interrogated by the question of God’s involvement, there is still a lack of treatment of the conception of the God. This lack is not simply a subjective judgement, but an indication that the doctrine of God is not a chief concern. The upshot is that these models do not meet the claim of the
thesis statement, and the models must be pushed further in how God is presented and understood. The reality is that invoking God in the sermon is not the same as moving to a balance of the theocentric and therapeutic. The central issue here is how God is being understood, and the related question of what theological means might be available to ensure the required balance of the theocentric and the therapeutic in the sermon. So far the approaches considered, whilst influential, were not specifically focussed on crisis moments. With that being the case I now turn to specific models for crisis and sample sermons seeking, as in this chapter, evidence of the required balance in the literature.
CHAPTER THREE: CRISIS MODELS AND SERMONS

This chapter approaches the specific literature of crisis preaching with the same search for evidence of a balance between the theocentric and therapeutic, as applied to the literature in the previous chapter. In establishing the significance of this study in the first chapter, I made explicit that the specific literature base for the genre of crisis preaching is fairly small compared to other genres. This fact gives an urgency to this study, coupled with a need to expand the field, but it also means that any judgements arise from a small literature base. However, this base is complemented by the two schools considered in the previous chapter which remain influential across the breadth of preaching. Having seen that those models fail to achieve the required balance of the theocentric and the therapeutic, I contend that a means must be found to push them further in giving more substance to the treatment of God, particularly God's involvement. It is here, that I now turn to the crisis literature itself looking for evidence of balance in line with the proposal that a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this. The central claim that a balance is needed between the theocentric and the therapeutic will be explored as before, with the reference to the role or not of the conception of involvement of God illustrated in the material.

This chapter begins with the specific treatments of crisis preaching with a focus on the forms of sermons proposed. I have selected three approaches from the available material, having only excluded two others as they deal primarily with social crisis preaching which has a different focus than the situational interruptive crisis that forms the basis of this study.\(^{157}\) Taking each approach in turn and then evaluating them as a whole, it is clear that whilst there is an explicit theocentric focus in all three, this appeal to the narrative of the gospel may bring the possibility of balance, but is underdeveloped and needs to be taken further. The lack of focus on the involvement of God in the form of God’s activity and character is apparent begging the question as to what conception of God is being appealed to.

\(^{157}\) Proctor, *Preaching About Crises in the Community*; Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching*. 
Following this section, I consider a sample set of published crisis sermons by firstly setting out the reasons for their selection, followed secondly, by explaining the method applied to their analysis. The selection of sermons from the 9/11 terror attacks reflect a fairly recent, and hugely significant event which had wide reaching effects. The sermons preached in college contexts were to a generation who would have to make sense of the events moving forward, making it important that these sermons connected in some way the story of God with the story of the event. The interpretation conducted through In-Vivo coding revealed a mixed collection of approaches, with some sermons more balanced than others in terms of the theocentric and the therapeutic, but only a limited number making any attempt to consider in any depth the involvement of God. In those attempts it remained clear that an approach is needed to enable the preacher to meet the claims of the thesis.

3.1 Crisis Models
The approaches of three advocates for crisis preaching are here outlined and then evaluated as a whole. They are presented with the most therapeutic approach placed first, followed by the remaining two which are more theocentric in focus.

3.1.1 Audrey Borschel
I begin with Audrey Borschel, whose approach is primarily pastoral centering on the role of the preacher as the mediator between the news and the gospel. In her study, *Preaching Prophetically When the News Disturbs: Interpreting the Media*, she takes as her focus the news generating media, seeking to give the preacher tools to interpret this media. She contends that the preacher has a double task as a mediator, firstly to mediate the news for the congregation and secondly to mediate the good news of the gospel. There is a deliberate contrast here between the news which disturbs and the news which gives hope. Whilst the term crisis is not used explicitly as the general designator, her understanding of disturbing news corresponds with the definition in this study of situational interruptive crises. She speaks firstly of the negative news which disturbs us ‘depending on our experiences, interests and familiarity with the issues.’ She argues that people are disturbed or at least should be when the details conflict ‘with the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus.’ She then defines disturbing

news ‘as those events and issues that are violent, unjust, destabilising, inhumane, uncharitable, and all policies and actions that will harm the environment.’\textsuperscript{159} Here she also includes what she names as acute crises such as natural disasters and accidents as well as ‘chronic worldwide social and political challenges for which solutions are few, slow and inadequate.’\textsuperscript{160} She acknowledges that we can be disturbed by news whether local or global, and claims that we may be disturbed more by news affecting us personally, but that the national or global news has a particular power to move us and call us to ‘take action.’ This call to action resonates with that of Carol Norén, and the expectation that the handling of a crisis in a service and sermon would call us to some kind of action, some kind of response. Reflecting on what is behind the disturbing news, Borschel appeals to liberation theology stating that ‘much of our world’s disturbing news is rooted in unresolved centuries-old freedom struggles.’\textsuperscript{161} She identifies here the historical power of the study of scripture to strengthen the resolve of those oppressed to seek a move towards freedom. Again, the idea of the scriptures reframing the chaos with the story of God to bring hope is active here.

Secondly, for Borschel there is the call for the preacher as mediator to engage with the media since

\begin{quote}
by engaging with the disturbing news through a wide range of print and electronic media, preachers can become a sacramental voice of compassion in a challenging world. As mediators of the news and the Good News, preachers have the opportunity and authority to lead listeners toward living God’s Word through love and grace.\textsuperscript{162}
\end{quote}

The image here of the preacher as a ‘sacramental voice of compassion’ is a powerful one, which shows the potential of the motif of mediator as a form of balance between the theocentric and therapeutic elements of the sermon. However, this image is not taken much further, with the bulk of her study being given over to developing a media literacy toolbox. The intention of this approach is to enable the preacher to engage appropriately with the news they are given, and then as mediator to enable the congregation to handle it appropriately. She addresses this concern comprehensively,

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 101.
seeking to encourage preachers to tackle that which they may have previously avoided.

Whilst her focus is undeniably on the pastoral, adopting some of the traits of the therapeutic preaching form, she does look to address the need to know God’s presence at such times. Borschel acknowledges that in the midst of crisis ‘listeners will need to be reminded of the power of God’s grace that inspires us to continue on even under the most difficult of circumstances’, since ‘all of us want to hear that God loves us and is with us on every step of the journey.’\(^{163}\) It is in the declaring of God’s grace that preachers point to a God who is in some way present with them. This contributes to her overarching project since ‘ideally the preacher who speaks during crises will prepare messages that are prayerful, healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling, messages that contribute to good pastoral care.’\(^{164}\) She draws on the work of Ronald Sider and Michael King with their suggestion of three dimensions of grace; the savage, the empowering and the comforting.\(^{165}\) Of these it is the idea of empowering grace which has the most direct focus on knowing the presence of God. To preach empowering grace is ‘to share the good news that, in the midst of the painful changes God calls us to consider, God’s enabling presence throbs. It means for the preacher and the congregation to realise that the more they follow Jesus, the more they will understand what it means to follow Jesus.’\(^{166}\) The presence of God is conceived to be known by his grace, but whilst to some extent this is true, it does not seem robust enough a treatment when considering the involvement of God. The same lack of depth of theological argument is evident in Borschel’s treatment of theodicy in the sermon. She states that evil, sin and suffering are ever present in the disturbing news, but that it is ‘the preacher’s own theology of morality and ethics as applied to these issues [that] determines whether and how these concepts will be presented to the listeners.’\(^{167}\) She is right to then state that evil, sin and suffering are not seen by each preacher in the same way, but she does not go on to give this area any substantial treatment.

\(^{163}\) Ibid., 96.
\(^{164}\) Ibid.
\(^{166}\) Ibid., 114. Cited in, Borschel, *Preaching Prophetically When the News Disturbs: Interpreting the Media*, 96.
\(^{167}\) *Preaching Prophetically When the News Disturbs: Interpreting the Media*, 90.
Rather than presenting an explicit method for preaching, Borschel makes general suggestions for preaching and congregational care in times of crisis. Quite telling is her assertion that the sermon is a ‘place for group pastoral care and group spiritual direction rather than as a time for theological discourse during a time of crisis.’\textsuperscript{168} It appears that she is keen to avoid the banal and sometimes offensive theological rationales that David Hart referenced in relation to the Asian tsunami, however this is a rather blanket dismissal of what I consider an important element of the crisis sermon if it is to have balance. The issue, as ever, is how the discourse is done, not whether it should take place. In the end, her approach is one with an emphasis on the pastoral connection with the hearer and wider congregation, rather than addressing in-depth theological concerns. However, her central theme of the preacher as mediator, who connects the good news with the bad news, does imply a need to understand the nature of the good news. That she does not go to any lengths to consider what the good news means in relation to the nature of God, gives justification to my contention that models such as this one can be taken further. The general approach of Borschel with its more pastoral focus is a marked difference from the more theocentric models of Carol Norén and Joseph Jeter which follow.

\textbf{3.1.2 Carol Norén}

Turning now to the proposal of Carol Norén, there is a clear focus on the gospel narrative being applied to the crisis situation, the emphasis being on the preacher as a narrator of the crisis moment, rather than a simple mediator. She begins by locating the crisis sermon within the liturgical context in which preaching usually occurs, and her article “Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship” has a commitment to ritual at its heart.\textsuperscript{169} In defining the role of the preacher, she draws on Joseph Jeter’s assertion that the preacher must ‘set before [the] people the great eternal truths of the faith, the truths that have led us safe this far, and will, by the grace of God, lead us home.’\textsuperscript{170} For Norén, the crisis may cause the activities and agendas of the church to be put to one side, but this must not be the case in worship where the tendency to return in crisis to the familiar and the favourite is indicative of the desire for the crisis to be reframed by what we know of God. This concept is present in Oliver O’Donovan’s

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{169} Norén, “Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship.”
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 47.
sermon *Horror*, previously mentioned, and is also seen by Norén as the requirement to declare the ‘ground of our hope.’

Her definition of crisis ‘as an unstable or crucial time in a state of affairs, a decisive moment that may come unexpectedly and is usually unwelcome and unwanted’ encapsulates the way crisis breaks in and disrupts. This then for Norén is when the ground needs to be firm, and the question in Jeremiah 37:17, ‘is there any word from the Lord?’, determines her approach to crisis. She states that there is an assumption that the crisis sermon and service will do something, listed as strengthening faith, leading to action, and/or creating and reinforcing a sense of communitas. She draws on William Willimon to reinforce the point that the purpose of the service and the sermon is to narrate the crisis from a position of what we know. This narration, she asserts, is not to be left to chance, which demands that the clergy take a significant role at a time when others might want to contribute. It is, as if ‘they assume that the ground of our hope will find expression if everyone and anyone has equal chance to speak or act in the service. The result is often syncretism or outright heresy being proclaimed.’\(^{171}\) There is a critical edge here which reflects her emphasis on the role of gospel narration and the responsibility of the clergy in this. Such an approach does not chime well with those who prefer or advocate for round table or interactive approaches in a service/sermon. However, such a method does ensure a consistency between one week and the next, but again assumes a confident understanding of the God and gospel being proclaimed.

As with Borschel, Norén does not prescribe a sermon structure in her work but outlines three crisis related tasks which should be attended to if the service and sermon are to be prepared well. These are: presence, communication and maintenance of the familiar.\(^{172}\) It is this first task which is key for her, since the ‘preacher has greater credibility when he or she goes through the crisis with the congregation, rather than appearing as a guest speaker who drops in to make pronouncements about the situation.’ This suggestion is located within the framework of a regular preacher as

\(^{171}\) Ibid.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 49.
pastor, and preaching as a form of pastoral care. Her examples of crisis preaching in her article reinforce this point along with the importance of presence as that which gives space for lament. She contrasts two sermons both preached after the Los Angeles race riots of 1992. The first sermon preached by a pastor in his own church is shown to demonstrate the power of identification with the congregation, whereas the second by a denominational leader denounces rather than laments what has happened. What is seen here is that one sermon is preached from within and one from without. For Norén the power comes from within; the preacher is journeying with the people. Her second task, communication, is where both facts and what is not known are acknowledged at the same time. Her third task, maintenance of the familiar, reinforces the location of the sermon within the liturgical practice of the community, and puts the emphasis on the power of familiar ritual to provide that awareness of the ‘ground of our hope.’

Her whole approach is founded on how she understands the governing characteristics of Christian worship which she adopts from Geoffrey Wainwright’s *Preaching as Worship*. Wainwright himself drew from the thought of John Chrysostom, stating that Christian preaching and worship are primarily:

- Doxological: Giving glory to God
- Anamnetic: Re-presents salvation history expounding the scriptures in their witness to Christ.
- Epicletic: The Holy Spirit is invoked upon the preacher, the sermon and the congregation.
- Eschatological: Looking forward to God’s future, proclaiming divine promises and announcing the present and coming kingdom of God.

The significant characteristic here is the anamnetic which is the basis of her focus on narrative. The chief concern is the story being told, which is highlighted by her observations from the second Los Angeles sermon. She observes that the ‘anamnesis in the sermon is a recitation of injustices in the nation’s history, rather than a recollection of salvation history’ meaning that ‘it is a stirring motivational speech, but it

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174 Castuera, *Dreams on Fire, Embers of Hope*.
176 Adapted from, Norén, “Crisis Preaching and Corporate Worship,” 47.
does not meet Jeter’s or Wainwright’s criteria for a Christian crisis sermon." What is at stake is the theocentric and therefore Christian nature of the sermon. The concern here is the same as that of the thesis, that there is right balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. Her approach resonates with that of Neil Pembroke, with the pointing to salvation history equating to the divine therapeia which he asserts as central. However, as she herself illustrated, there must be a clear understanding of what needs to be articulated and where to begin. It is very possible that the preacher of the sermon she critiques felt that in some way they were telling the story of God by applying it to their current situation. Fundamentally her approach with a focus on narrating the salvation story does seek a right balance. However the question of whether this approach goes far enough in how it presents God remains.

3.1.3 Joseph Jeter

The approach of Joseph Jeter has particular resonance with Carol Norén in his theocentric focus, which presents the possibility of balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic in the sermon since God is seen as the source of meaning making. Central for Jeter is what a crisis does to our hopes for the future, citing Andrew Lester, that in ‘crisis situations our future stories, including our visions of God’s future and our part in it, take a big and painful hit.’ This is the root of the crisis of understanding that brings people to worship, because they hope or believe that there is a ‘word from God for their anger, confusion, grief, fear and guilt.’ This makes crises for Jeter a theological concern, and he is conscious of the need to move away from how things are said in preaching, and back to what is being said. This is the opposite of the approach Borschel takes, and the theological emphasis appears a creative one, in terms of seeking to comprehend what God may be saying in such a situation.

In addressing the crisis of understanding Jeter proposes three theological affirmations: remembrance, presence and promise. The first of these, developing Dietrich Ritschl, is seen as a form of hoping backwards, when ‘our present and immediate

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177 Ibid., 52.
178 Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 19.
179 Ibid., 20.
180 Ibid., 28-38.
future lie in shambles’ we can hope backward, finding ‘our hope, our anchor, in what God has done in the past, and we can then remember those mighty acts of God forward into our present future.’ Reflecting on presence and promise, Jeter sees the importance in crisis of being assured of God’s presence, which then gives justification to the promise that everything is going to be alright. This promise, Jeter claims, can be a bit hard to swallow amid crisis if we are not already assured of God’s presence with us. It is here that the work of Jeter resonates with my central thesis and conviction, that understanding how God is present in the crisis moment is key. In addressing this, Jeter verges on an apophatic approach by appealing to Samuel Terrien’s The Elusive Presence. Significant in Terrien is the claim that the presence is elusive and fragile, and even when experienced as a surging it then dissipates leaving ‘in its disappearance an absence that has been overcome.’ This then is seen as the link with the notion of promise as

when God no longer overwhelmed the sense of perception and concealed himself behind the adversity of historical existence, those who accept the promise were still aware of God’s nearness in the very veil of his seeming absence. For them, the centre of life was a Deus absconditus atque praesens.

Here then, even in the mystery of God’s elusive nature, ‘God remains near to accept this promise.’ The grounding of God’s presence comes from the knowledge of the salvation story, which is seen as a guarantee of God fulfilling his promise even if in the moment he appears absent. This is significant for my thesis demonstrating the potential of such an appeal to the mystery of God in crisis.

A central task for the preacher proposed by Jeter, is the need to ‘name the monster’, a process of searching for the truth of the situation. There is a resonance here with Christine Smith, who framed an approach to preaching as ‘weeping, confession and resistance’ once she gave herself permission to name the injustice in the world. Part of this was to recognise that the end events we see and experience, are often part of

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182 Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 29.
184 Ibid., 476. Cited in Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 33.
something much bigger. We must first speak the truth that is in the room, but 'we must go further to speak the truth that is in the book.'¹¹⁸⁷ Simply naming the truth will not go far enough if resolution is not sought or given in some way.¹¹⁸⁸ This resonates with recent work from Walter Brueggemann, who is clear that many have failed to tell the truth about God, principally since the 'gospel truth about God is revolutionary, subversive and disruptive.'¹¹⁸⁹

In terms of a structure for a crisis sermon, he insists, in line with the other literature, that there is no particular form or structure. This reinforces the notion that context is central here, with each situation being treated on its own merits. Jeter adopts the inductive approach from the New Homiletic, but also looks back to Frederick Robertson who proposed the two-point or bipolar sermon. This method ‘searched for truth in the dialectic or polar structures of the text and situation’, saying that ‘the truth is made up of two opposite propositions, and not found in a via media between the two.’¹¹⁹⁰ With echoes of Borschel’s mediation approach, Jeter sees the two opposite propositions as ‘the bad news of the situation and the good news of the gospel.’¹¹⁹¹ He goes on to state that neither can be ignored. Nor are we looking for a via media. We are searching in the tension between the two for a glimpse of God’s promised outcome and the way for us to get there. Take life and death. Neither can exist without the other. But there is a real tension between the two, a tension we are not trying to cope with or finesse or smooth over. That would result in a living death. We are in quest of the promise that death shall be swallowed up in victory.¹¹⁹²

In seeking a more complete approach Jeter lays the truth of the sermon over the truth of the situation, and by doing so claims that ‘some stabilising support is offered, the tension in the situation is engaged, and the gospel is proclaimed.’¹¹⁹³ It begins with the particulars of experience in such a way as to provide a ‘landscape’ which does not stop the pain, but may contain it. The move in the sermon is to engage the tension

¹¹⁸⁷ Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public, 37.
¹¹⁸⁸ Samuel Wells explores what it is to speak the truth from the pulpit particularly when the congregation don’t want to hear it. See, Samuel Wells, Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).
¹¹⁹⁰ Jeter, Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public.
¹¹⁹¹ Ibid., 102.
¹¹⁹² Ibid., 103.
¹¹⁹³ Ibid.
between situation and gospel, leading to an ‘affirmation of the good news in the midst of the crisis.’\textsuperscript{194} He sums the movement up as ‘their particular concerns are acknowledged, the tension between situation and gospel is engaged, and a direction is suggested.’\textsuperscript{195} He believes this has traction as ‘no single form is normative’ and this suggestion provides a ‘broad enough base to help support the people in their unsettling experience.’\textsuperscript{196} He anticipates the critique that his approach is too broad. That if one was to attempt to preach to all the normal crisis responses at once, such as ‘confusion, guilt, fear,’ then the sermon cannot be successful, as you cannot ‘suggest enough gospel trajectories to meet every need.’\textsuperscript{197} He sees the importance of acknowledging the crisis responses rather than seeking to deal with each one, and calls the preacher to have ‘courage and imagination.’ He concludes by reasserting that ‘no single form is the best for all situations,’ but continues to ‘affirm that a sermon which begins by acknowledging the crisis and then moves to God’s hopeful word for us has a better chance of being heard and being helpful.’\textsuperscript{198} This model puts the emphasis on knowing the truth of the situation, so that the truth of the sermon can then be applied. What is the truth of the sermon? The truth for Jeter is the truth in the book, the Bible, and resonates in approach with that of Norén and the importance of narrating and reframing the moment with the gospel story. Again the model does not address directly the question of God’s relationship to the suffering, but does insist that salvation history points to a God who is present.

3.1.4 Evaluation

My central thesis is that \textit{a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this}. This thesis claims a need for a balance that is evident to a degree in the models outlined here, but not fully demonstrated. There is much to commend in the work presented, not least the commitment in both Norén and Jeter to narrating the crisis moment with the story of God, and the focus of Borschel on crisis sermons dealing with that which disturbs and is easy to avoid or gloss over. However, despite the encouragement to point to the divine therapy in all three of these approaches, it

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 103-04.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
remains apparent that they simply do not go far enough in wrestling with the question of God’s involvement. This is not to say that they do not in different ways seek to address the issue or related ones, but that the treatment is insufficient to act as a necessary control for crisis preaching. There is an attempt in the appeal of Jeter to Terrien’s idea of the fragility of the presence of God, but this feels cursory rather than foundational. It remains my contention that only when a robust exploration of our images of God forms the basis of the crisis sermon that the necessary and effective balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic will be found.

It is helpful to draw attention in this evaluation to the problems that are found in general homiletics, when it comes to naming God. A reluctance to name God, to explore God’s involvement is found in two of the most influential approaches to preaching, the expositional and the thematic. The biblical approach, known to some as the expository method, is where the preacher would exegete the text, teach it and then apply it. The topical approach, on the other hand, picks a theme and then seeks to relate that theme to God’s character and activity in the world. We have seen that Fosdick was critical of both, and that that critique led to his abandoning of both in favour of his project method, later known as the counselling sermon. David Buttrick is also critical, arguing that ‘the topical preaching tends to name God in the world, but has neglected narrative. The biblical preaching tradition can tell a biblical story, but often fails to name God-with-us in the world. Both traditions seem to have fallen victim to a cultural subjective/objective split.’

Buttrick sees the ‘genius’ of topical preaching, as the courage to rename the world and God in it, but the tragedy being that, ‘particularly in the liberal tradition [...] it fell victim to cultural romanticism and ended up misnaming God in the world.’ He claims a reason for this misnaming is that topical preaching ‘has tended to name God almost exclusively into religious affections.’ Here, God was primarily ‘a felt flutter in the heart, a still, small, and decidedly inward voice.’ Part of that tragedy, Buttrick claims, is that if the tradition had ‘brooded’ over scripture it might have ‘bumped into a God

200 Ibid.
201 Ibid.
202 Ibid.
named in connection with all sorts of human moments. Buttrick sees God present in all aspects of life, and states incisively that if the scripture were asked ‘where is your God?’, the reply would never be ‘here in our hearts!’ This he claims is the result of neglecting the narrative, the story that led to the tradition, causing us to misname God into ‘human subjectivity.’

Buttrick also sees the failure of biblical preaching to name God in the world. He wonders whether this is due to ‘Barthian fears of cultural accommodation,’ but for whatever reason, he sees a failure to permit God to step out of the biblical world into human history. The God of biblical preaching has been a past-tense God of past-tense God events whose past-tense truth (original meaning) may be applied to the world while God remains hidden in a gilt-edged book.

He concludes that ‘Biblical preaching that will not name God out of narrative and into the world is simply un-biblical.’ Behind this is his conviction that preaching must conjoin ‘narrative and naming.’ That in doing so it ‘must dare to name God in conjunction with the world of lived experience.’ There are echoes here of a Barthian conception of preaching as event, a place of encounter with God. What Buttrick is critiquing is the same deficiency as Fosdick noted, but rather than seeking a different path in a correlational methodology, Buttrick sees using naming and narrative as a positive way ahead. He calls for a confident naming of God which must happen in the light of the story, as ‘the biblical narrative of God-with-us is normative for preaching.’ This spotting of God’s presence is on the ‘basis of precedent – previous disclosures of God that establish God’s style and trace God’s purpose.’ He goes on to argue that if we read of God as liberating his people again and again, then we can see God in movements of liberation today.

In the light of this conviction, Buttrick sees the only way to connect the people with God, as ‘preaching that dares to name God in connection with a wide range of human

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203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid., 18.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid., 19.
experience will shape in congregational consciousness a live hermeneutic for scripture. When we name God in the world then biblical stories become meaningful.\textsuperscript{210} He affirms ‘God naming’ as a risky business, and that is particularly true in a time of crisis as God’s presence and compassion are often questioned. However, even with an awareness of the risks of misnaming God Buttrick claims that the risk of silence is an even greater problem as ‘failure to name God with the world can only certify God’s absence. Pulpits will gain usefulness as preachers venture to name unseen patterns of grace in a fully human world.’\textsuperscript{211} This resonates with an apparent reluctance to speak of God in crisis lest we speak out of turn, yet there must be courage to look for the grace of God’s presence. The focus here on the interplay of the Gospel and human experience is a creative one, and is matched by Ronald Allen as he seeks to apply more directly Buttrick’s whole scheme to topical preaching.

Allen shares with Buttrick a critique of previous methods of topical preaching and proposes an expanded model building on Buttrick and particularly his later appeal to preaching in the mode of praxis. That appeal was concerned with taking situations into a ‘Christian consciousness of the gospel.’\textsuperscript{212} Allen aligns with Buttrick and sees the topical sermon as a way for a congregation to interpret life and situations in the light of the gospel. There is not a prescribed form for the sermon, but three stages in the preparation of the message. The first is awareness of a topic suitable for ‘conversation with the congregation.’ Secondly, the topic is analysed with a ‘credible theological method.’ Thirdly, the preacher then puts the sermon together to give the ‘maximum help to the congregation.’ Fundamentally,

the centre of the topical sermon is the interpretation of the topic in the light of the gospel. The gospel is the dipolar news that God unconditionally loves each and every created entity and that God unceasingly wills justice for each and every created entity. The gospel offers a vision of what the world is (loved unconditionally) and what it can become (a place of justice). A key question is, “How does the gospel lead us to understand the topic?”\textsuperscript{213}

Allen, as with Buttrick, equates the potential risk in topical preaching with the lack of a textual anchor grounding the message. The purpose of the sermon for Allen is

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 434.
\textsuperscript{213} Allen, \textit{Preaching the Topical Sermon}, 5.
fundamentally to help ‘the congregation to name the world specifically in terms of the gospel,’ and in doing so ‘models theological method for the listeners.’ This means then that sermons must have the confidence to name God, which resonates with the definition of preaching used by this study, that preaching is a liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ. This is a significant area for discussion, one which is relevant to this study but cannot be fully explored here beyond acknowledging that the function of the biblical text in the crisis sermon is a central issue.

The reticence highlighted here to name God in the world, must be left behind if crisis preaching is going to be rightly theological as well as therapeutic. I find a resonance with Buttrick that naming God is a ‘risky-business’ but is one which must be the task of the preacher. Simply put, to name God is to allow God to be God, and that is the central thrust of the thesis. The question of to what extent actual crisis sermons find a balance of the theocentric and therapeutic, will be seen in the next section.

3.2 Crisis Sermons

In the introduction, I made reference to the available published collections of crisis sermons, as well as noting the possibility of locating sources from elsewhere. At this point, I must acknowledge the limits inherent in the available sources and of a study such as this. The published collections reflect single events bounded by their geographical, social and temporal context meaning that any conclusions may not be as generally applicable as they might at first seem. However, this is the reality of reflecting on responses to events which are by their nature rooted in their contexts.

3.2.1 Methodology

In this section, I outline my approach to the sources in terms of the selection and then the evaluation. In selecting primary sources for reflection there are a number of factors to consider. Firstly, whether they focus on a single event or a spread of events. Secondly, whether they are from multiple preachers or an individual, and thirdly, whether they consist of published or unpublished material. For this study given its scope and constraints, I have chosen to focus on a single event with a variety of

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214 Ibid., 7.
215 Ibid., 10.
contributors from a published collection. The decision to focus on a single event as opposed to selecting sermons from different events, gives a natural continuity to the reflection, and choosing a published collection which consists of different voices, gives a wider validation and variation to the material.

The published collections were identified by reference to the bibliographies of the core texts, such as Joseph Jeter, and by library and internet searches around key events which met the criteria of being classed as situational interruptive crises. The main available collections relate to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Los Angeles race riots, the Oklahoma bombing and the terror attacks of 9/11. Worth noting, is that there are a limited number of collections, and more recent events are not represented which may reflect the move away from published sermons due to increased online access to material. My criteria of considering sermons from the same event meant that looking to locate sermons outside the collections was problematic. It quickly became clear that finding a large enough sample would be difficult. I briefly considered locating the sermons within a particular church or institution, but found that national institutions such as the major cathedrals do not keep sufficient records of sermons preached.

From the available collections, I have selected a North American volume related to the 9/11 terror attacks for a variety of reasons. Firstly the collection is the most recent of those available, reflecting an event which had both a local and international scope. Secondly, the collection contains twenty-seven sermons drawn from university pulpits across North America giving a broad but manageable sample. Thirdly, the collection features an introduction by the editor and preacher William Willimon and an afterword from Stanley Hauerwas, which provides valuable commentary to interact with. Fourthly, Willimon commented in a later work that he felt the majority of the sermons in the collection, including his own, were overly therapeutic in tone which resonates with the reason for the thesis of this study. He observed that the biblical text was a clear focus, but that God remained on the margins. This, and the other reasons, render the collection a valid sample for this study. The collection was presented by Willimon as an example of the preaching after the event; preaching which reflected the breadth of perspectives and approaches. The nature of the introduction and afterword which

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216 Willimon, The Sunday after Tuesday: College Pulpits Respond to 9/11.
engages critique of the collection, encourages others to do the same, not treating the sermons as sacred texts, but documents to be considered and explored.

Having identified a sample, the choice of analytical approach was made simpler by the clear emphasis of the thesis in terms of its claim that crisis sermons require a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. The question of God’s involvement as a means of achieving this balance, provides a lens through which to see what these sermons say about the activity and character of God. Much of the focus in qualitative research methods is on identifying theory from the data, but with the sermon text the focus was on what was being said about God. Since this question demands that the text speak for itself, I decided to apply a simple first-cycle coding approach known as In-Vivo coding. Coding as an approach is described as not ‘a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act.”217 A code in qualitative enquiry ‘is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data.”218 The potential in coding is that large sections of data can be assessed and key themes identified making it suitable for a study with large samples of text.219 The In-Vivo first cycle method assigns as the code the ‘actual language found in the qualitative data record.”220

Applying this approach with the selected sermons meant identifying those portions of text that related to the question of the depiction of God, and selecting codes and offering them up for evaluation.221 Applying In-Vivo method is appropriate for studies such as this ‘that prioritise and honour the participant’s voice.”222 The code is the first action, which is then located in an analytic memo which forms the basis of the interpretation of the data and the resulting comments. As is usual in this approach, the reflection which follows does not concentrate on the codes themselves but on the interpretation arising from them. The code itself is part of the interpretative process and not the end result. From the process of making general observations of the whole

218 Ibid., 4.
219 See for a summary of first-cycle methods, ibid., 67-206.
220 Ibid., 105.
221 See for a summary of second-cycle methods, ibid., 233-72.
222 Ibid., 106.
collection, I identified two sermons to reflect on in more detail, both of which resonate with the thesis and begin to demonstrate the value of such a claim for crisis preaching.

3.2.2 The Sermons of 9/11

In this section I consider a set of crisis sermon preached after the 9/11 terror attacks, which were without a doubt a defining moment in recent international history. This was an event which unsettled people and nations on a scale not known in recent history, demanding a pulpit response since the scale of the attacks gave rise to many questions of the involvement of God.223

I applied the In-Vivo coding method to the sermons, asking what do these texts say about God? As previously stated, such an approach is not a precise science, particularly given a large sample of text, but being rather more an interpretative tool. An initial study of the texts related to what was said about God or related themes, highlighted a number of significant codes in the form of terms and phrases. I list a selected number here as examples: ‘while human effort can rebuild cities, only God can heal a broken spirit’; ‘Jesus knows what it is to weep’; ‘Jesus alone is worthy of our trust’; ‘we have been grasping – grasping to understand’; ‘we live out our lives in the presence of mystery’; ‘Jesus knew well this word why. It was his word amid the darkness and anguish of Calvary’; ‘let us allow the God of truth and wisdom to speak’; ‘we must trust that God stands beside us’; ‘today is the day to set aside your idols’; ‘God will be the first to weep’; ‘why, God? Where are you?’; ‘May God cleanse the temples of our souls’; ‘we have a God who suffers with us’; ‘I am convinced that God is present’; ‘God’s love is greater than our reasoning’; ‘God is where God always is and has always been; it is we who have to account for our absence’; ‘our vulnerability makes us tender’; ‘Jesus Christ stands at the vortex of evil’; ‘Our God protects us in suffering’; ‘God did not cause the tragedy’; ‘God is our haven, our secure place’; ‘Grieve as God does’; ‘God cannot be the scapegoat’; and ‘because of his, our tears

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223 Rowan Williams writes of meeting a Christian in New York with such questions the day after 9/11: ‘He wanted to know what the hell God was doing when the planes hit the towers. What do you say? The usual fumbling about how God doesn’t intervene, which sounds like a lame apology for some kind of ‘policy’ on God’s part, a policy exposed as heartless in the face of such suffering? Something about how God is there in the sacrificial work of the rescuers, in the risks they take? I tried saying bits of this, but there was no clearer answer than there ever is.’ Rowan Williams, Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11th September and Its Aftermath (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 7.
are made the very form of faith."\textsuperscript{224} Such a list is a subjective snap-shot of that which speaks of God in the texts. However, what is immediately evident is the focus on God as a source of comfort, who is invoked as one with the people. This was not always explicit, but there was a clear sense that God was seen as being involved in some way, even if the means were not articulated. There are also elements of the mystery of God on display, which begin to demonstrate the appeal of the apophatic which will be explored in the next chapter.

It is important to note, as per Willimon’s observation, how therapeutic the texts are in tone despite the clear biblical focus of many. This leads to an important observation regarding the appeal to God as a therapeutic agency. It was clear that despite the Bible being a reference point for a majority of sermons, God served more often than not as therapeutic balm, rather than being seen as the source of divine therapy. To continue with this language applied by Pembroke, God was invoked to give justification to human therapy rather than point to the divine. I have already drawn attention to the comment in a later book made by William Willimon, the editor of the collection, that he felt that the sermons were mainly therapeutic in focus including his own.\textsuperscript{225} This comment however, appears to be at odds with his own claim in the introduction to the collection, that the sermons were preached in a therapeutic mode, but that this was justified as they were preached ‘just five days after the tragedy [and] people were still in acute pain and shock. It did not seem a time for prophetic judgement, but a time for pastoral reassurance.’\textsuperscript{226} The contrast between these two comments illustrates how difficult it can be to comprehend how the therapeutic should function in the sermon context, and yet still remain biblical and theocentric. This can be illustrated by reference to two sermons both of which sought to address the pastoral concerns, one without directly appealing to God and one which did, but still contrive to leave God on the side-lines. The first sermon, whilst referencing the salvation story, spends the majority of its time recounting two stories of those who have followed God’s call, and then tells a final story in a similar vein where a telephone operator was able to bring comfort to one of the victims calling from a hijacked plane. The stories are uplifting but

\textsuperscript{224} Willimon, \textit{The Sunday after Tuesday: College Pulpits Respond to 9/11}.
\textsuperscript{226} Willimon, \textit{The Sunday after Tuesday: College Pulpits Respond to 9/11}, 21.
their use does little to address the concerns of the crisis moment. The preacher concludes as follows:

All of us, wherever we are, however we spend the hours of the day – whether leading a research pharmaceutical company, or a world bank, or working as a telephone operator, or a student, or a faculty member at a university – are called to the same vocation to care for God’s creation on earth.  

This sermon makes an attempt to make sense of the moment pastorally but without explicit appeal to the nature of God, it appears out of step with the context. The second sermon states that ‘in times of crisis we must trust that God stands beside us, in this time of crisis we must seek the face of God.’ This appears to be a positive theocentric statement particularly when taken with the sentence that follows, where the preacher asserts that ‘when I see the frailty of life, when I see the futility of my idols, all that is left is God.’ However the sermon does not seek to populate that conception of God, leaving it to the listener to apply their own understanding which does little to reframe the moment in any way. This serves to illustrate that simply appealing to God is not the same as being thoroughly theocentric.

Stanley Hauerwas, writing an afterword to the collection, also observed in the sermons that many simply offered ‘humanistic advice aimed at taking away or at least assuaging the pain.’ He observes that ‘some of these sermons try to “get God off the hook” or, failing that, to show that even though we cannot understand how God could allow this to happen to people like us, believing in God remains important if we are not to be crushed by the terror.’ Hauerwas is correct in the observation that the therapeutic approach fails when it is not ‘appropriately disciplined by the gospel.’ Potentially challenging is his resulting claim that the question so prevalent at such a time, ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’, is not a question Christians should ask. Hauerwas would have the listener reminded that God does not promise freedom from suffering, but that he has not left us. It would be easy to misunderstand Hauerwas here as the focus on individual well-being has overtaken a biblical perspective that freedom from suffering is not promised.

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228 Darrell Brazell, “In This Time of Crisis,” ibid., 42.
229 Willimon, The Sunday after Tuesday: College Pulpits Respond to 9/11, 195.
230 Ibid.
231 Ibid., 196.
This leads to the theological questions raised by the texts alongside the therapeutic focus. A fundamental question is that of God’s presence, as it claims that ‘whenever there is suffering, whenever there is tragedy, the human tendency is to question the presence of God. “Where is God when I suffer?”’232 This question gets to the heart of the wider question of the involvement of God. One sermon addresses this stating that ‘God certainly cares about our hurts, pains and struggles,’233 assuring the listener that, God is not silent. God is not absent. Even though God does not always prevent us from having to experience difficult circumstances, God has not left us alone, and will see us through if we would turn to God.234

This confidence in the presence of God in the crisis, is seen as giving strength to move forward:

I am convinced that God is present; as God can make a way out of no way. People of faith are finding the strength and courage to rise above it all. They are finding the power to rise again.235

This is an example of applying an aspect of the divine therapeia to the wider issues, but once there is assurance of the presence of God then there must be consideration of what that means. A majority of the sermons make an appeal to the incarnation of Christ as the major factor in having hope in the crisis. The incarnation is presented as that which assures us of God’s presence through Jesus in our pain, as one who has been through what we have been through and more:

Are you weeping? Jesus knows what it’s like to weep; he wept while in spiritual agony before he was crucified. He wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He wept for his people and their indifference to God. [...] He knows our situation because he’s been in our situation. More than that, he offers to guide us from despair to hope; from sorrow to joy; uncertainty to victory; from death to life.236

The fact of the incarnation allows for the declaration of confidence in the future hope that is promised through the gospel. This future hope found in the gospel promise, is seen in a number of the texts as a means of counteracting the nationalist fervour which was a notable feature of the general response, and is apparent in some of the sermons in this collection. Reflecting on this Willimon, locates the inability of the preachers to

232 Brazell, “In This Time of Crisis,” 41.
233 S. Renee Franklin, “Power to Rise Again,” ibid., 78.
234 Ibid.
235 Ibid., 79.
236 Jr. Luther C. Alexander, “Been There; Done That,” ibid., 27.
resist that societal pressure in ‘congregations that lacked substantive liturgical habits’, which meant that they ‘lacked the theological means to resist the pressures of the moment.’ This resonates with the comments of Hauerwas and Norén, that the preacher and the congregation must remain disciplined by the gospel. One preacher conceives of the nationalist fervour as a form of idolatry, and declares that ‘today is the day to set aside your idols’ asserting that here can be an exchange. ‘Today is the day to exchange the uncertainty of this life for the certainty of eternal life that comes only through Jesus Christ.’ This hope in the future is seen by another preacher as secured by the nature of God, since ‘God creates the future. The Lord of the universe calls us into it and accompanies us there.’ Such a future hope appears in the texts as a common sign of God’s faithfulness. For example ‘God is calling us into the future, beckoning us toward him. Somehow goodness always wins. Evil never triumphs.’

Another recurrent theme in the texts is the question of whether the crisis event is God’s will. In seeking to address this, one preacher appeals to the mystery of God and the incarnation:

God did not cause this tragedy, in spite of what you might hear from well-meaning friends and from pulpits across this city and this country. I don’t pretend to understand God, but since “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” I know that if I want to know what God is like I can look to Jesus.

As stated, this appeal to the incarnation is a common one with Jesus being seen as pointing the hearer to the divine. There is also evidence of the free will defence in some sermons, for example:

God cannot be the scapegoat and held responsible for the actions of the terrorists on Tuesday. We have free will to inflict harm or show love toward other people. There needs to be global discussion on what motivates us to do evil and what is needed to diminish it as attractive and preferential.

This emphasis on free will as the source of the evil is also made in another sermon which does so with a rhetorical flourish:

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238 Brazell, "In This Time of Crisis," 39.
239 Nancy A. De Vries, "Yor Glory, O Israel, Lies Slain on the High Places," ibid., 73.
240 William McDonald, "As It Was in the Beginning," ibid., 138.
It’s not God’s will at all. If it’s God’s will, one thing we’re relieved of is trying to find Osama bin Laden, unless we want to find him so that we can throw a ticker tape parade for him and say, “Thank you so much for doing God’s will.” This is contrary in the worse possible way to God’s will. Everyone recognises that.  

Whether one agrees with such an approach, what is clear is the emphasis on God’s involvement through Christ rather than any responsibility for the event itself. That theological questions are addressed in sermons is significant, and demonstrates that they are an important part of the response of the crisis sermon. The next part of this section reflects in more depth on two sermons which appear to demonstrate a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. It is also apparent that they achieve this by considering the question of the involvement of God. They will be evaluated as to whether this is the case and how successfully it is done. In terms of the sermons themselves, it was not a deliberate choice to select two sermons that both adapt, rather than replace the prescribed texts for that day, but it does illustrate that it is not always necessary to abandon some of what has already been prepared prior to the crisis moment. The focus of the analysis, as with the general observations of the whole sample, is to ask what they say about God particularly related to pastoral and theological concerns. These sermons have been selected, as I believe they show that it is possible to be theocentric and therapeutic and do so in contrasting ways.

The first sermon selected, *Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time* preached by the Roman Catholic priest Thomas Gaughan retained the lectionary texts, but clearly focussed on the crisis event.  

Speaking at a conference about his approach to the sermon, he registered his surprise that a survey taken after the event implied that eighty per cent of respondents did not address the crisis at all that day, he comments, ‘how can we preach an authentic word if we are not truly engaged with the reality of the life all around us?’ His comment demonstrates a desire to balance the theocentric and the therapeutic in addressing the event with the word of God.

In summary, the sermon which occupies three pages of the volume consists of an introduction focussed on the emotional response to the event, a body which draws on the three parables in Luke 15, emphasising the love of God, and a conclusion which

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244 Thomas E. Gaughan, "Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time," ibid.
245 https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=l3I3pP9kRFK. Accessed 28/08/18
calls the people to pray for themselves and the nation, pledging to pursue justice to seek peace. The introduction repeats the notion that the community, of which the preacher is a part, is engaged in a ‘struggle’ on different levels. There is an emphasis on the ‘we’: ‘we struggle to make sense of it all’, ‘we struggle to articulate our feelings and sentiments,’ and ‘we struggle to discern paths to follow.’ This though is a struggle where the people must remember that ‘we do not walk through life alone.’ He assures them that they have the ‘brilliance of grace shining through God’s Word to be our comfort and direction.’ The sermon is grounded from the start by its pastoral and theological convictions, stating clearly that there is a struggle, but God is with the community in it. This declaration of confidence in God’s presence is further reinforced by the declaration that ‘death has no victory. Death does not have the final word’ because of God’s love. The parables are exegeted as illustrating a ‘love that defies all reasoning.’ The love of God is presented as a mystery since we cannot understand it as God is not like us. The parables are seen to ‘demonstrate a love beyond our capacity to reason; far higher than our sense of justice; deeper and more embracing than we could ever hope for; with its capacity to heal, reconcile and forgive.’ This love is not simply about comfort for the people it demands action that ‘we must not […] succumb to the temptation to allow revenge to rule us’ and that ‘we must not let the veins of such evil penetrate our hearts.’

The repetition of ‘we must not’ gives an urgency to the statement, which is matched by what then is required with the assertion that ‘we must accept the deeper challenge of the gospel.’ This gospel is ‘God’s transformative life-giving love’ which ‘rendered powerless the powers of evil demonstrated in the crucifixion.’ This love even though revealed in Christ, is still beyond us, as the hearers ‘must allow this unfathomable love of God to so permeate our being that our response to these attacks becomes not only compassion for our own, but prayers of forgiveness for our enemies.’ Gaughan, in his emphasis on love and the repetition of ‘must’, reframes the crisis moment with the gospel hope and calls the community to be a place of resistance. This resistance can take place because God is not distant but is present in Christ, and has been in this place before. He concludes with an appeal for the ‘ongoing conversion of our hearts,’ that the people be set free by the love of God.
The strength of the sermon is its inherent simplicity, and a clear intention to address the ‘struggle’ but to do so theologically. Gaughan appears to take seriously the responsibility to engage with the pertinent issues as a community. The focus here is not on the individual, but on those together who seek to process what has taken place. The appeal is to a God who has in the crucifixion, journeyed the path of pain:

We know and believe to be true that the powerful embrace of God’s transformative, life-giving love rendered powerless the powers of evil demonstrated in the crucifixion. We live a real faith and we know that death has no power to quench life’s spirit; sin has no power to weaken love.

The image here is of the embrace of God’s love, which implies a God who is present and involved. However, this appeal whilst theocentric is still mainly therapeutic in tone as the involvement of God here is not fully explored. Whilst the sermon is successful in moving beyond the individual, and making the locus the community, the God who is invoked is not fully realised in a way which could be said to provide an adequate balance of the theocentric and the therapeutic. This is not unexpected, as it fits the general trend that this study is seeking to reverse, but remains disappointing as on the surface the sermon appears to have a balance. This in itself is significant because it illustrates how subtle such discernment needs to be, and that the purpose of the thesis statement is to move beyond simple claims of God’s presence, to an approach which articulates what that actually means for the crisis moment. Gaughan’s sermon may challenge the focus on the individual, but it does not challenge any faulty images of God that may be present.

The second sermon selected for closer focus, Whose Agenda Matters?, was preached by the theologian and pastor Mark Labberton and reflects his theological literacy and convictions. The sermon was part of a series on the Heidelberg Catechism with the text that morning being the response to the question, ‘What is your only comfort, in life and death?’ The central focus for the sermon was the part of the response which

246 “Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time.”
248 The full text from the Heidelberg catechism used that day: Q: What is your only comfort, in life and in death? A: That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful saviour, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now to live for him. See ibid., 110.
concludes, ‘that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.’ In summary the sermon occupies twelve pages of the volume and consists of an introduction which addresses the key text, flagging up the intention to consider the problem of evil placing the 9/11 event within the context of wider atrocities such as the Rwandan genocide. The body of the sermon presents the tension arising from the world of suffering in which we live, and the scriptural promise that God will protect us. The tension is addressed by an appeal to the incarnation and the cross, concluding with a call to Christian maturity to be those who identify with the one who understands the reality of suffering and who offers the protection of salvation.

This sermon covers similar ground to the first but does so in considerably more theological depth. The pastoral needs of the moment are radically reshaped in the sermon by a deliberate reframing of the crisis response with the call to Christian maturity. Labberton’s principal aim is to explode the notion that ‘God wouldn’t want us to suffer.’ His approach is the opposite to that of Gaughan who puts himself with the people in the struggle, assuring them of God’s presence which comforts and calls to action. Labberton is more direct, seeking to unpick their conceptions of what it is to know and follow God. He challenges their ideas, ‘there is no evidence in the Bible that God wants us to be happy,’ but gives the alternative,

Joy? Now that’s something God wants us to know. Hope? That’s something God cares about deeply. Happiness? Happiness in the sense of carefree delight, no problems, easy, no sense of conscience, no particular sense of worry or burden – that’s not in the Bible.”

The main thrust here is to ‘identify with the God of the Bible’, which is to ‘identify with someone who identifies with those who suffer.’ He seizes on the opportunity to challenge their idolatry in their conception of God:

The God of the Bible is a God who knows, shares and suffers with the world. There is a caricature alive in society and even in the church, with at best a two-dimensional, maybe even only one-dimensional vision of God that many try to preserve. But evil helpfully exposes and destroys such an idol.”

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249 Ibid.
250 Ibid.
The depiction of God in this sermon is governed by the repeated use of ‘suffer’ or ‘suffering.’ For Labberton, ‘if we think of God, as scripture instructs us, we now think of God suffering, of the suffering God, of a God who stands in and amidst and with and for a world that suffers.’ This picture of God is that of ‘Jesus Christ [who] comes to stand at the vortex of evil, to bear in his own life and death the consequences of what evil and suffering are about.’ This call to identify with the God of the Bible, is to be ‘willing to suffer both for the sake of identifying with those in need and for the sake of doing and entering into the work of love, which is the suffering work to which the church of Jesus Christ has been called.’ Labberton’s is an uncompromising message, but one marked by the declaration of the love and presence of God as revealed in Christ. Here he reframes the crisis moment with the gospel, and in doing so as with Gaughan, creates a community of resistance to the evil of the moment. He declares that ‘what we are called to is a maturity of faith in which we realise that our salvation is not only for our sake but also for the sake […] of enacting what it means to live a safe life.’ The God preached here is the ‘one who sends us into suffering and not away from it,’ however he is there with his people. The sermon unpacks what it is to know the protection of the love of God in the midst of suffering, and respond not simply as individuals, but as a community. A key strategy here for Labberton is the challenging of the communities idea of God, and the replacing of those ideas with a biblical vision of God.

Of all the sermons in the collection, this sermon is the one that comes closest to meeting the claims of the thesis statement. The sermon appears to strike a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, by appealing to a God who is present in the suffering of the people. The general approach also demonstrates an element of the apophatic method as images of God are challenged, which is illustrated by the quote given earlier where Labberton names a two-dimensional conception of God, which is then challenged by the evil of the crisis event. There is also what appears to be a careful approach to describing how God suffers, with Labberton locating God’s experience of suffering as being in Christ through the incarnation. He states that:

If we think of God, as Scripture instructs us, we now think of God suffering, of the suffering God, of a God who stands in and amidst and with and for a world that suffers. And it was Jesus’ understanding that he had come to suffer,
only that he was called to suffer but also is calling a people to follow him who, like him, will suffer.²⁵¹

His depiction of the involvement of God appears careful, however, with later statements such as ‘we know a God who suffers’ there is the risk of mis-interpretation. It is possible that a listener may hear a different version of God than the one the preacher is seeking to put across. This is a significant problem with the sermon that in its density and wide range of themes the description of God’s involvement becomes lost and confused for the hearer. My central critique is that the presentation of the involvement of God needs to be more explicit and deliberate so as to avoid any conception of a passible God. My reflection would be that his sermon would benefit from a more deliberate application of the apophatic method because where it does negate certain images of God the results are powerful. The sermon shows the potential for a more consistent application of the apophatic method and one which uses that as a foundation to consider the involvement of God.

3.2.3 Evaluation
The sermon collection was selected for a number of reasons. One of those was that the editor, William Willimon, had critiqued the collection as being overly therapeutic. This might seem unfair, particularly as his initial assessment was that a therapeutic perspective was only to be expected given the proximity of the sermons to the actual event itself. However, this observation provides an interesting insight into the collection, and also the pressures on crisis preaching in general. The reality of the proximity of the sermons to the crisis is a significant factor in how they should be shaped because they form a response to a moment which is raw and vulnerable. The reality of the therapeutic requirement is a key factor in the need for there to be balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, otherwise, as has been seen in more person-centred models such as the therapeutic and the narrative, the sermon can quickly lose any theocentric focus or shape.

I return to the conviction that the means to address the crisis moment comes from God and that the preacher must address the reality of the situation clearly. The set of sermons presented here has illustrated the simple fact that sermons can name God

²⁵¹ Ibid.
in the service of being therapeutic and also theocentric, yet actually be doing no such thing. The sermons illustrated how easy it is to declare what could be named the divine therapy, following Pembroke, and still result in God simply being applied as a balm, a totem, which gives a false sense that the situation is being addressed. I am arguing that what is important is how this God who is being invoked, is understood. This also applies in the context of a sermon such as Mark Labberton’s, where God is invoked to address the theological concerns, but it remains fairly easy to present the image of a God who may be mis-interpreted. This in itself is the failure of speech, of talking about God, the quest for a means to talk about God that has integrity and brings balance which is at the root of this study.

Whilst theodicy is not the direct focus of this study, it is a part of the question of the involvement of God as set out in the second chapter. Significant is that more than one sermon, in discussing whether the crisis event was the will of God, distances God from such a claim. This study is not explicitly focussed on the question of theodicy, but has already acknowledged the pastoral failure of much traditional theodicy. The difficulty is that rational theoretical arguments are often not heard in the midst of the emotion of the moment, and do little to address those emotions. There is however, a liberating effect in being able to distance God from the cause and present him as one who is alongside. This is seen in the theodicy of David Hart as he reflects on the 2004 tsunami taking great pains to assert that God is not the cause.\(^{252}\) This is a significant point, as much justification for the presence of God in a tragedy is sought along the lines of his involvement in cause and effect, rather than in the more general application of the divine therapy.

It is also important to note that a majority of the sermons were based in some way on a biblical text, but that this in itself does not bring balance. This goes to the original point that the desire to bring comfort in moments of great pain, can lead to sermons moving away from the one who can actually bring the comfort. The two selected sermons were chosen as they both in some way showed balance and were seeking to address the question of the involvement of God. However, even then it was seen that there is a need for an approach that can develop sermons which are more

consistent in approach, and are deliberate in presenting God. The sermons considered did not appeal explicitly to the impassibility of God, and on reflection it can be seen that such an appeal could provide a platform for a more consistent approach. This possibility will be considered in the next chapters.

3.3 Summary
This chapter has applied the central claim of the thesis, the need for balance between the therapeutic and the theocentric, to preaching models for times of crisis and to a sample set of crisis sermons themselves. The question of God’s involvement with his creation has been used throughout as a means to interrogate the sources, based on the conviction that such a theological question provides a way to achieve the balance required. What has been clear in this chapter, is that the models and sermons can provide a semblance of balance, but that the doctrine of God requires further treatment. The reality was that God can be invoked, but without appropriate exploration of that image then the act can be one of pouring balm rather than pointing to the mystery of the divine. The concern here are the images of God held by the preacher and the congregation. It is possible for these to be faulty in some way, and without those images being challenged there are no guarantees that the same image of God is being invoked by either the preacher or the hearer. This study is being conducted from the perspective of the preacher, but the images of God held by the hearer are operative here and require challenging. The next chapter will explore the secondary claim of the thesis that applying apophatic theology is the means necessary to achieve the required balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. The hope is that such a method will be found to be viable in achieving the required balance, and it is to that possibility that I now turn.
The introduction to this study established the central thesis, that a *right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this*. The second and third chapters have argued, by demonstrating that existing homiletics do not go far enough in their articulation of the nature of the God they invoke, for the claim that a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic is essential in crisis preaching. These next two chapters explore more directly the subsequent claim that applying the apophatic method can bring this balance. What must be noted at this stage is that I am proposing a way, not *the* way, to bring the required balance to crisis preaching.

This chapter begins by outlining the apophatic method, and then argues for crisis preaching being conceived of as a form of apophatic discourse. I argue that conceiving of crisis preaching this way provides a means to challenge our conceptions of God, which is necessary if God is to be allowed to be God in the crisis moment. The establishing work done in this chapter creates the platform to then directly consider the specific question of the involvement of God. It is in this particular question, often operative in crisis moments, that the method of apophatic discourse brings clarity and provides a foundation for the crisis sermon. In this chapter, I begin by setting out the foundations for an apophatic homiletic before giving an example of its application.

### 4.1 Saying & Unsaying: Apophatic Discourse for Crisis

Apophatic theology is a significant and influential method, being one which has garnered more interest in recent years. Within the constraints of this project I will outline the key principles in relation to homiletics, before considering what benefit it brings to crisis preaching specifically. The apophatic method approaches God by means of negation, committed to speaking only in terms of what may not be said. Its potential in relation to homiletics is in functioning as a means of cleansing the hearer of their faulty images of God. In considering how it might function in this way for preaching we can look to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who, writing at the end of the fifth century, developed spiritual exercises which embraced an apophatic method.

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He drew on neo-platonic philosophy, conceiving of a God who in creation was both immanent and transcendent. He saw that God was eternally ‘enticed away from his transcendent dwelling-place and comes to abide within all things’, and yet had the ‘capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself.’ The fact that this appears irreconcilable and contradictory was the point of the exercise for Pseudo-Dionysius to teach his students the failure of language. Karen Armstrong, writing a survey of Christian thought, highlights the tension between silence and speech here, as ‘religious people are always talking about God and it is important that they do so. But they also need to fall silent.’ This resonates with the tension evident in the claim of David Hart that in times of crisis we must speak, but that we should also be silent. This recourse to silence was at the heart of Pseudo-Dionysius’ project, as when we speak of God we are ‘to listen critically to ourselves, realise that we are babbling incoherently and fall into an embarrassed silence.’ Here, as an example, is a summary of Pseudo-Dionysius’ spiritual exercises which embrace this tension:

First we must affirm what God is: God is a rock; God is one; God is good; God exists. But when we listen carefully to ourselves we fall silent, felled by the weight of the absurdity in such God-talk. In the second phase, we deny each one of these attributes. But the ‘way of denial’ is just as inaccurate as the ‘way of affirmation’. Because we do not know what God is, we cannot know what God is not, so we then must deny the denials: God is therefore not placeless, mindless, lifeless or non-existent. In the course of this exercise, we learn that God transcends the capability of human speech and ‘is beyond every assertion’ and ‘beyond every denial.’

Applying this method leads to what is known as apophasis, ‘the breakdown of speech, which cracks and disintegrates before the absolute unknowability of what we call God.’ However for Pseudo-Dionysius this is not the end, but the beginning of a new way of seeing and of approaching God. This ‘breakdown of speech’ is the crux of the crisis of understanding, which is that point where our ideas of God no longer function faced with the reality of the crisis. Janet Williams, in her recent introduction to apophatic spirituality, also identifies this point as the beginning of the negative way, asking

255 Ibid., 124.
256 Ibid., 125.
257 Ibid., 126.
258 Ibid.
what if it was exactly at the point at which we consent to set aside what we’ve heard about God that we are best equipped to see clearly the character of the God we encounter? What if the setting-aside turned out to be not a pious footnote but the single most important thing we need to do?²⁵⁹

For Williams, the central issue is how to do God-talk after we have realised that language fails us. She cites Denys Turner, a significant voice in this field, who conceives of theology as ‘discourse about God’ which renders apophatic theology as ‘that speech about God which is the failure of speech.’²⁶⁰ Williams sums up the necessary outworking of this reality:

Apophatic theologians quite often talk about “negation of negation” for this reason, or “radical negation”: they mean that positive words and negative words both fail God; that “God is” and “God is not” both set their sights too low. […] Apophasis is the effort of moving away from both positive/affirmative and negative speech about God. The opposite of apophasis is kataphasis, a movement towards speech, deeper into it. Most Christian life is lived kataphatically. There’s something intrinsically kataphatic about a faith that begins with God creating a cosmos by speaking and identifies a particular human life as the pure speech of God translated into flesh and blood (John 1.14). To treasure apophasis is not thereby to devalue kataphasis […] But that we might find ourselves moving away from speech into encounter, and thereafter be a little more able to speak of God as God is.²⁶¹

Significant here in this summing up, is the relationship of the apophatic to the cataphatic, leading to a ‘moving away from speech into encounter’, and that through that encounter we are ‘more able to speak of God.’ The potential in this process for crisis preaching is clear, since it creates an environment where limits of knowledge can be named and new ways to speak of God can be found to help us make sense of the world we are in.²⁶² As a result, this searching for a way to speak of God must begin in the crisis moment with examining our own images of God.

²⁶² Karen Armstrong in considering the impact of the rise of religious atheism sees the possibility of the apophatic in crafting a new approach. Will the growing appreciation of the limitations of human knowledge – which is just as much part of the contemporary intellectual scene as atheistic certainty – give rise to a new kind of apophatic theology? And how best can we move beyond pre-modern theism into a perception of God that truly speaks to all the complex realities and needs of our time? Armstrong, The Case for God, 303.
Apophatic theology does not have a single conception, being thought of in different ways. Bruce Milem identifies four central theories of negative theology:

The first theory, which I call the metaphysical theory, grounds negative theology in God’s role as the cause of it all. The second theory interprets negative theology as an expression of desire for something unknown. The third theory justifies negative theology on the basis of an extraordinary or mystical experience. The fourth theory explains negative theology as an act of renunciation motivated by concern about self-interest in one’s devotion to God.  

As outlined by Milem, there are similarities and differences between these theories. The metaphysical theory conceives of negative theology ‘as the consequence of an objective, rational consideration of the natural world’, and the others appeal to ‘subjective factors.’ Significant is that the first three theories rely on positive assertions about God, and since these assertions ‘cannot be negated, they set a limit for negation in theology.’ However, the final theory does not rely on positive assertions about God and therefore has no limits on the process of negation.

Since the crisis moment must challenge our understanding of the character of God, I first consider the metaphysical theory, before moving on to the renunciation theory which has potential to inform the homiletical practice. In his outlining of the metaphysical theory, Milem draws on the work of Denys Turner. Turner begins with Aquinas’ ‘five ways’ of demonstrating the existence of God. He sees these ‘ways’ as variants on the question: ‘why is there something than nothing?’ These five ways see the world as contingent, which presumes that there is something which explains its existence, and this something is what we call God. Turner sees two consequences then for our use of language about God. Firstly, if God is the cause of everything, we can apply the language we use for that around us to God also. He draws on the neoplatonic understanding of causality of Pseudo-Dionysius where ‘effects more or less resemble their causes.’ With God then as the cause of everything and effects resembling their causes, we can say that God exists. Also, as we speak of God as the creator, and if everything owes its reality to God, we can say that our ordinary qualities

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264 Ibid.
can also be ascribed to God. So ‘identifying God as the creator legitimates describing God in terms of every created thing.’ Milet does critique this argument however, as he sees it as overly dependent on conceiving of God as the first cause, and the neoplatonic view of causation.

Following on from this, if God is the creator of all and we can legitimately ascribe to God the perfections or qualities of ordinary things, we risk speaking of God in contradictory ways as different things have different perfections. This is important as a ‘truly cataphatic language, one that enthusiastically describes God in the language of creatures will inevitably break down and show how inadequate all language about God is.’ The main issue is that objects can only possess the perfections which relate to them, a flower is not the same kind of thing as a bear etc. It is that ‘God possesses all perfections, which is possible only if God is not any particular kind of thing.’

Making this point Turner paraphrases Pseudo-Dionysius ‘God is not any kind of thing, and there is no kind of thing God is not.’ Milet sums it up stating that ‘the linguistic problem of talking about God arises from the fact that God is too real or determinate for us to understand’, so

although it is possible to fix the reference of God as the source and creator of all, and although this identification permits using the qualities of creatures to describe God, in the end such positive theology must admit that it does not understand what it is talking about.

Turner also reasons this by another route, since we are created and God is not, as stated in the five ways. Aquinas sees that ‘creatures are a compound of essence and existence, while God’s essence and existence are identical. Creatures are composite, while God is simple. Creatures are a combination of act and potency, while God is pure act.’ We and other creatures have different ways of being, but God’s way of being is different to each one. This then causes a problem when we claim that God exists, as we do not really know what ‘exists’ means. This apophaticism can also be applied to our understanding of what it means to say that God created the world, as

268 Milet, "Four Theories of Negative Theology," 189.
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid.
we cannot conceive of creation *ex nihilo*, creation from nothing, in any satisfactory way. So for Turner, the fact that when dealing with two major theistic beliefs, God’s existence and God as creator, we have to recognise we do not really know what those beliefs mean. This demonstrates the balance of the apophatic and the cataphatic in theology ‘which both formulates true statements about God and demonstrates their incomprehensibility.’ For Turner, this balance means that apophatic theology is not a style ‘but rather a necessary condition for doing theology at all.’ Here then, the apophatic is conceived as a necessary control on theological discourse. Understanding this balance is deemed as necessary for the theological task and its consequences:

> While the cataphatic declarations help orient the mind toward the mysterious source of all, the apophatic negations guard against taking those declarations too narrowly or literally. […] It guards against the mistake of constructing too narrow a concept of God, a mistake otherwise known as idolatry. This happens whenever God is straightforwardly identified with some idea derived from our experience of the world. It is idolatry to say that God literally is fire or a mountain. Modern believers who think of God as a person who micromanages the universe commit idolatry by applying ideas of personhood and rulership to God without also reflecting on how they fail to apply.

This form of idolatry stated above, is one of those which is challenged by the crisis moment, and it must always be a function of the sermon to facilitate this process of challenge. Conceiving of the apophatic as a control on theological discourse makes a positive claim for it fulfilling this function within a crisis homiletic.

The proposal to apply apophatic method to the crisis sermon finds resonance with the final theory identified by Milem, that of renunciation. This theory ‘interprets negative theology as obeying an ethical imperative to give up positive concepts of God. Negative theology is taken as a form of renunciation, one that does away with concepts of God in the name of rooting out self-interested desires.’ Milem explains this theory with reference to sermon two from Meister Eckhart which develops the concept of spiritual virginity; where one seeks to be such a virgin in order to be united with Christ and be free of all ‘alien images.’ Eckhart sees the spiritual virgin as the opposite to the ‘businessman’, who sees the act of devotion as a form of exchange.

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273 Ibid., 190.
274 Ibid.
275 Ibid., 197.
where one does something to receive something else. So, this emptiness or freedom to be pursued is about giving up self-interest. However, Milem raises a fundamental question, ‘Can one maintain a selfless devotion to God while possessing some concept of God? Or does any concept of God effectively introduce self-interest into one’s devotion?’ The difficulty here is that ‘any concept of God provides an opportunity for the self’s egotism to assert itself by offering information about what God is that may be useful in guiding one’s actions and advancing one’s interests.’ This means that if you are pursuing this selfless path then it appears that concepts of God are ‘incompatible with genuine devotion.’ For Milem, this process applies to the one who already has a religious devotion which they want to cleanse from self-interest. The main difficulty is that as this is primarily an ethical rationale, ‘rooted in an individual rather than in God understood in some way’ there are no limits to the negations. This theory is informative, illustrating the danger of doing ‘away with the descriptions of God that anchor and orient religious observance and daily life.’ The principle of the process of renunciation is useful as it cleanses us of our self-interested desires, but the fact that there are no limits to the potential negations is problematic. This is a problem which will be addressed later in this chapter when it is shown that the limit comes from outside the negation process in the form of encounter with God, secured by the fact of God’s own self-revelation. In summary, the primary contribution of the metaphysical approach to a crisis homiletic is the means to confront idolatry in our ideas of God, with the renunciation theory serving as a reminder that when we bring our own self-interest to our engagement with God, we are at risk of shaping that process to our own ends. I am thus proposing, on the evidence here, that apophatic theology can be a form of discourse applied to crisis preaching, and it is to exploring that possibility further I now turn.

In applying apophatic method to crisis preaching, we must note that at its heart is the relationship to cataphasis and the idea of saying and unsaying. This process of saying and unsaying is simply as stated, a process. Michael Sells makes a useful distinction between what he calls apophatic theory and apophatic discourse, with the former

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276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 Ibid., 198.
279 Ibid., 199.
being assertive and the latter performative. He begins with the unresolvable dilemma of transcendence, the aporia. It is conceived that the transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. However, to claim this the transcendent is named and ‘any statement of ineffability, “X is beyond names,” generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names.’

He sees three possible responses: Firstly silence, ‘one can literally abandon language, admit the utter futility of speaking about God, and say nothing more about God.’ Secondly, the decision to ‘distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names and ways in which it is not’, and thirdly a ‘refusal to solve the dilemma posed by the attempt to refer to the transcendent through a distinction between two kinds of name.’ To adopt this third approach then, the acceptance of an unresolvable dilemma, leads to negative theology which is that process of saying and unsaying – the relationship here between cataphasis and apophasis. A commitment to this process means that every saying demands a ‘correcting proposition’, the unsaying, but then that in itself is a saying which then demands an unsaying, and the process continues. Sells then makes his useful distinction between what he calls apophatic theory and apophatic discourse:

> Apophatic theory affirms the ultimate ineffability of the transcendent; but as opposed to apophatic discourse, it affirms ineffability without turning back upon the naming used in its own affirmation of ineffability. In [discourse] the effort to affirm transcendence leads to a continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false, or even as meaningful.

This inherent process in discourse, is further defined by Bruce Milem as a kind of speech which ‘strongly asserts the ineffability of God,’ and where discourse becomes apophatic when it turns back on every statement it makes about God and corrects in it what is ideally an unending process of revision. According to the point of view motivating apophatic discourse, conclusive statements about God are either false or meaningless, since they attempt to pin down or define what transcends all human definitions and distinctions. Apophatic discourse aims to show the total disparity between God and what humans say

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283 Ibid., 3.
about God. It challenges the accuracy of every theological perspective, including its own.\textsuperscript{284}

Fundamental then, is that discourse is performed and challenges ‘every theological perspective.’ The question of whether this potentially endless cycle of negation can function homiletically will be addressed later, but for now it is important to recognise that this process makes us vulnerable. This vulnerability comes at a time when we are already vulnerable, but is a necessary part of the process if we are to engage with it. A commitment to preaching here in the mode of apophatic discourse forces us to confront our own images of God which have been challenged. This is of course not an easy process since

its achievement is unstable and fleeting. It demands a rigorous and sustained effort both to use and free oneself from normal habits of thought and expression. It demands a willingness to let go, at a particular moment, of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession. It demands a moment of vulnerability.\textsuperscript{285}

The central irony here is that the process of moving through the vulnerability of the crisis moment demands that we embrace vulnerability, going deeper into it. Embracing a commitment to apophatic discourse enables us to confront our vulnerability as we begin to have our idolatry challenged. The next section considers what benefit in conceiving of crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse will have for the actual sermon.

\textbf{4.2 Applying the Approach}

So far in this chapter I have described the apophatic method and sought to demonstrate what the benefit might be in its application to homiletics. The primary function is the challenge to our speech about God, leading in the sermon to a debunking method which constantly challenges how God is conceived. The section finished with the warning that this approach demands vulnerability at an already vulnerable time, since the way in which God is understood is being challenged. However, the benefit of the process is such that the working through the vulnerability leads to a fruitful place. In this section I seek to show something of that fruit, by demonstrating how in applying the apophatic method, this can address the claim that

\textsuperscript{284} Milem, \textit{The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart's German Sermons}, 172.  
\textsuperscript{285} Sells, \textit{Mystical Languages of Unsaying}, 217.
God is silent in the crisis moment which may imply absence. This discussion acts as an extended example, not simply of the process of negation, but the application of the broader principles of the apophatic method.

The first task is to be clear that silence is not necessarily the same as absence, even though it can feel that way. This was definitely the case for C.S Lewis following the death of his wife:

> When you are happy, so happy you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.\(^{286}\)

The silence here for Lewis is experienced as indifference, but it is not the same as making an assertion of God’s total absence, which in fact is not coherent when faced with the Biblical material in which God is shown to be present with his people.\(^{287}\) Rachel Muers in her study, *Keeping God’s Silences*, proposes a theological ethics of communication, beginning with the observation that silence is not the same as absence. In reflecting upon the idea of silence, she remarks that

> to say that silence is “not absence” is to recall, not only the possibility of future speech from the one who is silent, but the fact that the “silenced” have their own history – and possibly their own speech, which is currently unheard. Defining silence as “absence” is part of the pretence by which silencing is maintained – the pretence that there is nothing there to be heard. The silencing of potential speakers perpetuates a lie.\(^{288}\)

Implicit here is the need to separate the notion of silence, from that of absence. Muers appeals, as an example, to the silencing of the marginalised by the enforcing of their sense of absence from any dialogue. Silence in that case does not mean that they are absent, simply that they have been presumed to be.\(^{289}\) This can be applied in the first

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\(^{287}\) See for example Exodus 3:2, 16:10, 19:18, 25:8, 33:14; Jeremiah 29:13; Job 38:1; Psalm 139:18; Acts 17:28


\(^{289}\) See also this recent work which argues for the need to find ways to enable the silent to find their voices, Walter Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2018).
instance to God, since the one affected by the crisis, who believes that God is silent, is not then to automatically presume that God is absent simply due to a lack of speech. Once it has been grasped that silence is not the same as absence, it is then necessary to understand silence in relationship to God. Underpinning this discussion is firstly the matter of how to understand God and think of him and his capacities. How we talk and think about God is the concern of Eberhard Jüngel’s masterly God as the Mystery of the World. 290 His central concern is how God is spoken of in relationship to atheism, seeing his work as necessary lest ‘our talk about God does not end up silencing him.’ 291 He sees a real possibility that ‘God will be talked to death’, being silenced in the end ‘by the very words that seek to talk about him.’ 292 Jüngel refers to the ‘dumb and the garrulous silencing of God’ which is the result of the ‘fact that we no longer dare to think God.’ 293 He lays the first, the dumb silencing, at the door of the atheist, where God is excluded from the discourse, and the garrulous silencing is attributed to the theological conviction that we cannot ‘think’ of God. This charge has the apophatic approach firmly in mind, which Jüngel counters with the foundational claim that God is a God who speaks, since ‘God is the one who speaks out of himself’, and that ‘to be addressed by God can therefore only and always be an event.’ 294 Jüngel unpacks the implications of this in his chapter On the Speakability of God which is complex and wide ranging, but the challenge to the apophatic is clear. 295 He sees the apophatic conviction that ‘every spoken designation of God says too little about God’ effectively silencing our ability to talk about God, and in the end silencing God. 296 For him this is fundamentally about the ability of God to speak for Godself. However, Muers critiques Jüngel’s position in her work, appealing to the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius, John of Damascus and the monastic tradition. She states that

for these thinkers to recognise God as “beyond” all finite words and concepts is precisely to guard against the kind of hubris of discourse of which Jüngel accuses certain traditions. Apophasis is what allows speech – about God or about the world – to be recalled to its source and limit in God. The incomprehensibility of God is a characteristic of God’s essence and not of human thought or speech. Gods “silence” is how God determines Godself to

290 Eberhard Jüngel, God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983).
291 Ibid., vii.
292 Ibid.
293 Ibid.
294 Ibid., 248.
295 Ibid., 226-98.
296 Ibid., 256.
be; it is not just what any human discourse attempts to impose on God, nor just the mark of a deficiency or lack in God.\textsuperscript{297}

The principle assertion here is that the apophatic process actually facilitates speech ‘to be recalled to its source and limit in God.’ The achievement is to allow God to speak as God wishes to and provides ‘God’s freedom from determination by the limits of discourse.’\textsuperscript{298} The result here, for crisis preaching as apophatic discourse, is that God can never be seen to be truly silent in any real sense, because the process continues to reach for God, allowing God to be God. It is argued then that God is not absent, and the apophatic does not silence God but, this begs the question of where can God be found?

The question of where God is to be found is a significant one in addressing this claim of silence and absence in the crisis moment. Paul Fiddes explores this area of the potential hiddenness of God by reflecting on the question found in Job 28, ‘But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?’ (Job 28:12) The answer that ‘mortals do not know the way to it (v.13)’ appears to suggest that this is a place we do not have access to, and thereby confirms our ideas of the remoteness of God. The absolute transcendence of God excludes us from ‘the dwelling-place of God’s wisdom, which is nothing less than a dimension of the divine personality.’\textsuperscript{299} We read later that only ‘God understands the way to it’ (v.23). Fiddes explores this ‘riddle’ and concludes that the answer is more positive than it first appears pointing us to a ‘place which is not literally a place at all.’ He see this quest for a ‘not-a-place’ as a clue ‘to the nature of the presence of a God who is hidden, but not absent and inaccessible.’\textsuperscript{300}

This question of ‘where shall wisdom be found?’ is for Fiddes, one which resonates with postmodern society, and expresses ‘a sense of elusiveness about naming the world, about the self as subject over against the world, and about God as the

\textsuperscript{297} Muers, \textit{Keeping God’s Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication}, 31.  
\textsuperscript{298} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{300} Ibid., 35-36.
foundation for this sapiental activity.'\textsuperscript{301} He points out that wisdom here stood for the divine wisdom of God, which created the world, and the human wisdom which enables the created beings to explore that world. Fiddes can then conclude that the interplay here, as understood in Job 28, means that wisdom is both transcendent and immanent. However, in postmodern deconstruction there is the idea of a ‘flickering presence’ which is both present and absent and resides in a nameless ‘place.’ For Fiddes this is a place which is ‘not-a-place’, and is often named the ‘khora’, and represents an “otherness” that disturbs all attempts to establish either full presence or full absence; it is a critique of immanence as well as transcendence, constantly breaking open boundaries and upsetting rigid ideas as to what is “inside” or “outside” the reality established by language.\textsuperscript{302}

This place is seen as both absent and present, and Jacques Derrida resists giving it a theological description, wanting to avoid the risk of a ‘totalitarian presence’. Fiddes reflects on whether it is possible to keep the disturbing effect of this non-theological khora when applying it in theological form. His task as he sees it, is to find whether ‘we can speak of a presence of God which is not oppressive, and which does not foster the split between subject (the thinking mind) and object (the world)?’\textsuperscript{303} He argues that the ‘no-place’ of Job 28 is a similar symbol of transcendence as the khora, but is different, as wisdom here is seen as accessible – the ‘hiddenness and silence is accompanied by real presence, expressed finally in the theophany of chapter 38:1, when God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind.’\textsuperscript{304} His response to the challenge of the khora is to ‘abandon talk of a dialectic of ‘absence’ and ‘presence’. The task is to clarify the nature of a ‘hidden presence.’\textsuperscript{305} Significantly for Fiddes, ‘to speak of hiddenness is to indicate presence and not absence.’ The metaphor of a ‘place’ which is not a place is conceived as that which allows speech of the hidden presence of a God. Fiddes states that ‘these pictures of a “place” are not literally locations in which God is hidden, but which accord (like Job 28) with a sense of the hiddenness of God. They express a transcendence, breaking open the circle of human immanence, but a transcendence which is not absolute but an accessible otherness.’\textsuperscript{306}

\textsuperscript{301} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{302} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{303} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid., 43.
Fiddes identifies four ways that this place which is not a place can be understood: ‘a place in God; a place in the self which is inseparable from (but not identical with) the being of God; a place between persons; and a place concurrent with many objects in the world which mediate the immediacy of God.’ Of these four ways it is the first, the concept of a place in God which resonates with this study and the function of the apophatic method in crisis preaching. The central claim is that in creation God has opened up a space within his own being, for his created beings to dwell; Fiddes names this ‘making room’ and sets it within the fellowship (perichoresis) of the trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What this means is that ‘through creation we participate in the relationships of ecstatic love, of mutual giving and receiving, within God.’ This is a proposal which Fiddes explores in more detail in another work, which I will address in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to acknowledge the potential of this for an apophatic homiletic, opening up for the hearer that open space within God. The logic is that ‘this image of dwelling in God is that God in turn dwells in the space opened up for created reality unless God is to be excluded from a space within God’s own life.’

Significant is that God remains God, and the invitation to encounter him, comes from him and not our own conceptions of what he is like. This is a theocentric process which begins with God, leading to the potential for encounter where God can be found.

The potential here for encounter is confirmed by the fact of God’s own self-disclosure, he can be known because he has revealed himself to his creation and can therefore be named. This is argued for by Janet Soskice, whose work is motivated by the fact that there has been much suspicion of the God of the attributes, the God of ‘omnipotence, eternity, wisdom, immutability and unity’ who has been seen as ‘remote and unfeeling.’ She reflects narratively on the encounter that Moses has with the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15) where it is God who calls Moses by name and then volunteers his name first as ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ then as the ‘I am who I am.’ This third name functions as a promise of the effective presence of God. This God of presence, is then evident, she believes, in Christian negative theology where ‘with its meditations on God’s eternity, impassibility and unity, since in

307 Ibid., 48.
308 Ibid., 59.
the hands of great theologians like Gregory of Nyssa, or Dionysius, this unknowable God who dwells in “brilliant darkness” and hidden silence is also and always the God of intimate presence." She sees in Augustine’s confessions the God of the attributes, who is simply evident as such as in Augustine’s experience. However, Soskice observes in the opening sentence of the confessions, ‘How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord?’, this question of how can he or we name God without misnaming God. Importantly it must be remembered that ‘this is not just an epistemological and metaphysical question – it is a spiritual and doxological one - for to name God is to risk making God into an object or idol.’ Augustine’s conclusion is that he cannot speak of God if God does not first call. He goes on then to ask God to speak to him so that he would be allowed to speak. For Soskice this is not about a proposition but about a practice, that for Augustine ‘you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known.’ What matters here is that ‘God has given himself to be named’ at the request of Moses. We can speak of God only because ‘God has first spoken to us.’

Lest it be concluded that this method comes about because it is not known how to describe God, Soskice finds an ally in Jacques Derrida, who acknowledged that negative theology can be mimicked as a technique for ‘those who have nothing to say.’ However, he rejects that theological apophaticism can be trapped in endless negation as he sees that it begins with prayer. The ‘power of speaking and of speaking well comes from God’ and he argues ‘this is why apophatic discourse must also open with a prayer that recognises, assigns or ensures its destination: the Other as Referent of a legein which is none other than its cause.’ This means then that ‘only the language of true theology, language whose destination is assured not by verbal domination but by grace, is truly language at all.’ Soskice contends that ‘to be a theologian […] is always to stand under the primacy of the signified over the signifier […] but at the same time to know the signified can only be named through gift.’ What this then means for the crisis sermon wrestling with the question of God’s silence or absence, is that being able to name God is only possible because at its foundation is the gift of God’s self-

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310 Ibid., 72.
311 Ibid., 73.
312 Ibid., 74.
314 Soskice 75
disclosure. Soskice concludes that there is application here for preachers since ‘this speaking of God, made possible because God first speaks to us, opens for us not only the possibility of praise but of our true sociality, our true and truthful use of the shared possession that is speech.’\(^{315}\) It is then, in this process of saying and unsaying that is apophatic discourse, that we can begin to find a God who can be known in the crisis moment. Rather than being silent or absent we encounter a God who can be found as we challenge our conceptions of him, demonstrating the potential of the apophatic method for crisis preaching.

In summary then, this discussion as an example of applying the apophatic method, has sought to illustrate how it can address the key issues of God’s perceived absence or silence in the crisis moment. The following chapter will consider in more depth the question of God’s involvement, but at this point the potential of the method is clear.

4.3 Evaluation
This chapter has argued for crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse, an approach requiring the preacher to commit to the process of negation. This in itself is a vulnerable activity, but one which if embraced, provides a platform for a crisis sermon which can confront the confusion and chaos of the crisis moment. The claim of the thesis is that there is a need for a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the application of apophatic method can achieve this. I am confident that the previous discussion shows that this is possible, due to the method acting as a control on the discourse both theologically and therapeutically. It being the case that the therapy should come from God for it to be effective, the apophatic method demands a right balance since it is a continual process. This is a real strength, as a crisis and our response to it cannot be considered a static thing, so the approach cannot be a static one in and of itself. The claim that God is absent or silent in a time of crisis has been shown to be negated by the process of negation, which enables our speech to return to its ‘limit in God’ as one who can be found. This will be explored in more depth in the next chapter as the involvement of God is complicated by the apophatic method. Fundamentally, it is God’s own self-disclosure, principally here in the incarnation, that

\(^{315}\) Soskice, “The Gift of the Name: Moses and the Burning Bush,” 75.
acts as a form of limit to the process of negation since God has made himself known. I explore this further as a form of conclusion to this short evaluation.

To conclude this evaluation I note that the apophatic method when applied to preaching can be problematic if the cycle of negation is allowed to continue without proper limit. This is a problem made apparent in the preaching of Meister Eckhart who was well known for his apophatic approach, and his commitment to the ineffability of God. His commitment to God’s ineffability was such that Bruce Milem has to ask whether Eckhart’s sermons were about God at all. Milem contends on this issue that there are three positions one can take, firstly that ‘Eckhart’s views, for instance, on the dialectical relationship between God and creatures, are accurately representative.[…] It is really true that God is both distinct and indistinct from the soul, even if this truth is difficult or impossible to understand’; secondly that ‘Eckhart’s sermons are about God and God’s relationship to creatures, but the dialectical and paradoxical character of those sermons have more to do with the limited nature of human thinking’; and thirdly that ‘Eckhart’s sermons are not about God at all. Instead they use the language of God rhetorically and metaphorically in hopes of having effects on their interpreters through appealing to the emotional connotations that such language has.’

For Milem, the apophatic emphasis in the sermons seems to imply the third position as Eckhart had, it is claimed, a clear aim ‘to help his listeners realise the extent of their own freedom to act in the world and choose to live for themselves.’ So, God becomes one who must be ‘obeyed and appeased’ as the people drive themselves on. The reality though is that faith no longer becomes a central concern, and Milem cites Emil Cioran who asked, ‘what advantage would having faith be to me, since I understand Meister Eckhart just as well without it?’ However even though it might appear that Eckhart was simply using God as a means to articulate his own vision, Milem contends that it is faith in God’s self-revelation for Eckhart that distinguishes his preaching as apophatic discourse away from simple silence about God. I have already argued that being able to name God in the sermon is possible, because of God’s self-revelation, and Milem argues that apophatic discourse limited by this enables us to move forward:

This faith allows someone practicing such discourse […] to hope and believe that his speech is about God, even if he fails to see how it can be. At the same

316 Milem, The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart’s German Sermons, 174-75.
time it tests the limits of human thought and language, for it tries to think and speak the mystery of God’s revelation even though such attempts end in the apparent failure signalled by paradox, contradiction and incomprehensibility. Such failure is essential to the project of negative theology and apophatic discourse. In showing that God’s revelation transcends the capacities of human language and thought, apophatic discourse indicates once more the poverty of creatures in comparison to the infinite. It demonstrates to theologians their inability to proceed in these matters without God’s self-revelation and their dependence on the divine and everything else.317

The importance of God’s self-revelation for apophatic discourse cannot then be understated, as it provides the necessary limit for a process which could have no end. This limit is fundamentally then, the promise of encounter with God that is found in the process of negation, when the distinction between the creator and the created is made clear. The cycle of negation strips away those faulty images of God, exposing step by step the reality of God framed by the mystery of the creator created distinction. This being the case, our attention must now turn to the question of God’s involvement with his creation in those crisis moments. The apophatic method will form the basis for this enquiry.

4.4 Summary
The central claim of the thesis statement is that applying apophatic method to crisis preaching can ensure a right balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic. This chapter has proposed that conceiving of crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse is the foundation for meeting that claim. Such an approach commits to the cycle of negation of the images held of God, thus confronting any idols and misconceptions. This was applied in the chapter to the issue of the perceived silence or even absence of God in crisis moments, and the potential of the approach was shown, as God was seen to be able to be found through a renewed emphasis on the distinction between the creator and the created. This process however, does take the preacher and congregation to a vulnerable place as those images, which perhaps provided security, albeit false security, are stripped away and replaced. However, this process can be seen as mimicking the actual effects of the crisis itself, and therefore provides a means of moving through it in a positive way. There is a resonance here with the claim of John Swinton, that traditional theodicy fails pastorally as it seeks justification

317 Ibid., 179.
where no theory can adequately meet the pain of the moment. Here in apophatic discourse there is a means to encounter the mystery of God, who is the one to be sought in those crisis moments. This is the reason why the apophatic method provides the means for the balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic in the crisis moment.

The following chapter takes the conviction that applying the apophatic method to crisis preaching can bring the required balance and explores further what this means for the question of the involvement of God, which has been operating as a term of interrogation for this study. The apophatic method will be used to complicate this term and argue for it being the basis of the conception of God in the crisis sermon. It is hoped that such a conception will take the argument full circle, via an appeal to the impassibility of God, providing a means to speak of God as the one who is indeed healing love in the crisis.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE INVOLVEMENT OF GOD

The focus of the previous chapter was in exploring the potential of conceiving of crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse. The application of apophatic method to crisis preaching is at the heart of this study’s central thesis, that a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this. The apophatic method is being proposed as a way, but not the only way, to achieve a balance between the theocentric and therapeutic in crisis sermons. This matters as sermons which either focus solely on theological concerns, or are simply therapeutic, in my estimation fail to appropriately address the needs of the crisis moment. The question of the involvement of God was proposed as essential to achieving this balance, since I contend that confusion over the action of God in such moments can lead to a failure to speak of God.

The principle claim of the previous chapter is that conceiving of crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse, creates a debunking form of homiletic which can challenge faulty images of God. By engaging in this process of negation, the preacher is able to expose the listeners’ understanding of God, as well as their own, to a performative discourse which begins to act as a form of cleansing. The problem is that such a process can continue indefinitely unless there is some way to limit it. The necessary limit in this case, was shown to be God’s own self-disclosure leading to the hope that God can be encountered. As an example of applying the approach, I discussed the issue of the perceived absence and silence of God in the crisis moment. It was concluded, through appeal to the work of Fiddes and Soskice, that God is a God of self-disclosure who opens up in himself a place where he can be found through his relationship with his creation. This then presents the possibility that God can be proclaimed in the crisis sermon as being involved in the crisis moment. This chapter will explore further the basis for that claim, with an appeal to the doctrine of God’s impassibility. It is my contention that this doctrine with its apophatic nature, provides the grounding for a balanced crisis homiletic.

Revisiting the doctrine of impassibility for a crisis homiletic is necessary, since to ask the question ‘where is God when I suffer?’, is to raise the notion that God is indifferent
to the suffering of his people, keeping himself at a safe distance so as to not be polluted by it. The desire to jettison this picture of an indifferent God is why an understanding of God as passible has replaced the doctrine of his impassibility. I highlighted the reasons for this shift in the second chapter, when I addressed how some of the theological questions generated by crisis moments are approached in the wider literature. The horrors of the twentieth century, particularly that of Auschwitz, have shaped the landscape for the debate and made it very difficult to present a counter view. However, it is my contention that recovering confidence in the doctrine of impassibility is a necessary task in developing a foundation for crisis preaching and it is precisely because it is apophatic in nature. What is significant is that the doctrine renders visible the clear divide between the creator and the creation acknowledging the limits on the created not the creator. This is important, as a commitment to passibility is not necessarily a comfort according to Karl Rahner, since to put it crudely, it does not help me to escape from my mess and mix-up and despair if God is in the same predicament. [...] What use would that be to me as consolation in the true sense of the word?

What is at stake is this very idea of consolation, and where it can be found. My governing thesis is rooted in the conviction that true lasting consolation only comes from God and nowhere else, but if God is perceived as indifferent and distant then this consolation will not be found.

5.1 Impassibility as an Apophatic Qualifier of God

In beginning to unpack what it means to appeal to the doctrine of impassibility, I first place it into its apophatic context. In defining impassibility as an apophatic qualifier of

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319 Thomas Weinandy in the preface of his seminal work Does God Suffer? writes of the fear felt in attempting such a study but locates this fear not in addressing the material but in the effect of contemporary events. ‘What I feared most was Auschwitz – with all of its contemporary iconic meaning and pathos. With the Holocaust and similar events of horrendous human suffering as the existential backdrop, how could I write a book in which I would argue that God is impassible and so does not suffer? Does God Suffer?, vii.

God, Paul Gavrilyuk surveys the patristic sources, and notes that ‘divine transcendence was expressed in patristic thought by the distinction between created and uncreated.’

Fundamentally, ‘creatures are finite, visible, and passible; God, in contrast is infinite, invisible and impassible. […] God is unlike everything else, and therefore he acts and suffers action in a manner different from everything else.’ The emphasis here on the distinction between the creator and the created, is an important one for framing how we understand God’s involvement in the crisis moments, particularly his relationship to our suffering. Gavrilyuk contends that we should not treat impassibility as an isolated concept but hold it together with the other predicates of ‘immutability, invisibility, incorporeality, indivisibility, incorruptibility, incomprehensibility, and the like.’ The apophatic qualifiers simply indicate creaturely limitations, and Gavrilyuk states that,

the adjectives invisible, incomprehensible and inexpressible qualify our ability to see, comprehend and describe God. These qualifiers do not function in such a way as to rule out God’s ability to disclose himself to humans. They rather serve as indicators of the divine transcendence and creaturely limitations.

The clear distinction between the creator and created is primarily then from the perspective of the created. The limits on knowledge are not felt by God and there is a confidence that God is with his people, precisely because he is impassible as ‘unlike that of humans who are unreliable and swayed by passions, God’s love is enduring and devoid of all those weaknesses with which human love is tainted.’ The emphasis on the transcendence of God does not therefore mean a lack of immanence, since the apophatic focus on human limits of knowledge allows God to be God.

In considering the involvement of God as the key aspect of seeking a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, I propose that recovering a commitment to the doctrine of God’s impassibility is a foundational step. Fundamental is the claim that holding such a doctrine does not render God inert to the suffering of his people but, when approached apophatically, allows God to be both transcendent and immanent. In demonstrating the possibility, I appeal to the proposal of Herbert McCabe which I

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322 Ibid., 61.
323 Ibid.
324 Ibid., 62.
present as an elegant and simple resolution to what is often a complicated and contentious debate. McCabe sets out his argument by beginning with the position of Aquinas, that ‘concerning God we cannot know what he is but only what he is not.’

It then follows that ‘God cannot be whatever it is that makes us ask the question in the first place,’ the question being ‘why the world, instead of nothing at all?’ Behind this question is a conviction of the creator and created divide, so that whatever motivates us to ask the questions cannot be the end point, God is simply beyond. This is significant for addressing God’s involvement in the crisis moment as it implies that suffering amongst other things is excluded from God since he is beyond us. For McCabe, the essential claim is that the God of tradition is the God of the Bible ‘the God who is not a god, not a powerful inhabitant of the universe, but the creator, the answer to the question ‘what does it all mean?’”

This is a thoroughly apophatic conviction, and McCabe does not see how the biblical God is anything like the god of those who claim that he experiences as we do. Underpinning the possibilist position, as understood here, is the claim that if God cannot experience suffering then he is indifferent, which is central to the isolation that can be felt in a crisis moment, but McCabe sees this claim as misunderstanding what it means for God to be creator:

Our only way of being present to another’s suffering is by being affected by it because we are outside the other person. We speak of “sympathy” or “compassion”, just because we want to say that it is almost as though we were not outside the other, but living her or his life, experiencing her or his suffering. A component of pity is frustration at having, in the end, to remain outside.

This is a telling observation for understanding how the idea of the indifference of God can operate in the crisis moment. Primarily, it is that we want God to feel our pain, to share the experience as we do, believing that is the way for empathy to be demonstrated. However, God as creator is not like us, but that does not mean, for McCabe, that God is distanced from us:

If the creator is the reason for everything that is, there can be no actual being which does not have the creator as its centre holding it in being. In our compassion we, in our feeble way, are seeking to be what God is all the time: united with and within the life of our friend. We can say in the psalm ‘The Lord is compassion’ but a sign that this is metaphorical language is that we can also say that the Lord has no need of compassion; he has something more

325 Herbert McCabe, God Matters, Continuum Icons (London ; New York: Continuum, 2005), 40.
326 Ibid., 42.
327 Ibid., 43.
328 Ibid., 44.
wonderful, he has his creative act in which he is ‘closer to the sufferer than she is to herself.’

Here is a picture of the involvement of God which resonates with the thesis providing a theological underpinning. The conviction that God as creator shapes how he relates to his creation is significant, since the claim is that God can therefore never be other to us, that he is never absent in the way he might be perceived in crisis moments to be. This picture of God united with his creation negates then the necessity to argue for other ways to conceive of God as intimate with us. This is the limit, that God is with his people as creator.

However, the passibilist would argue that God as creator remains remote to us. One example of this, is that it can be argued that a traditional view of God means that he cannot learn, he cannot change or develop. McCabe counters this claim by asserting this being essential to the nature of God as creator, that he ‘cannot be […] an experiencer confronted by what he experiences.’ To put it another way ‘being creator adds nothing to God, all the difference it makes is all the difference to the creature.’

What is essential here is the apophatic conviction that God cannot be known apart from his own act, which in this case is the act of creation. McCabe follows the observation made by Augustine and Aquinas that God ‘precisely by being wholly transcendent […] is more intimately involved with each creature than any other creature could be. God could not be other to creatures in the way that they must be to each other.’ This position is a direct counter to the claim of God’s indifference, as God being God cannot be anything other than intimately involved with us.

Central to the claim of God’s involvement with his creation as creator, is the incarnation. McCabe, in developing his position on impassibility, appeals to the incarnation, arguing that the modern interest in the passibilist tradition is because of a weakening hold on the doctrine of the incarnation. His proposal is an elegant one, and confronts what Paul Gavrilyuk sees as the inherent tension that arises when the incarnation is a part of the impassibility debate:

329 Ibid., 44-45.
330 Ibid., 45.
331 Ibid., 45-46.
In the incarnation the impassible God is no longer like a man, but he literally assumes human nature, is born a virgin, and suffers on the cross. Divine incarnation is a peculiar case where the tension between divine transcendence, expressed in terms of divine impassibility, and divine participation in the human condition, expressed in terms of pathos, is particularly acute and cannot be dissolved.332

McCabe’s proposal makes the observation above irrelevant, beginning to demonstrate why a traditional conception of impassibility is such a good foundation point for a crisis homiletic. For McCabe, it is quite simply a matter of holding on to the doctrine of Chalcedon, that Jesus is both truly human and truly divine. What this means, is that if we consider the function of subject and predicate in a sentence, we know the subject as that being referred to, and the predicate being what we want to say about it. McCabe then reiterates that, if Jesus is both human and divine, then there is a whole range of predicates we can attach to him as human, and another range of predicates as divine. He sums it up, stating that ‘the traditional doctrine of the incarnation is simply that both ranges of predicates apply to the same person referred to by the subject term “Jesus.”’333 McCabe acknowledges that while elegant, this remains ‘profoundly mysterious’, but is not inherently contradictory, since the separation between creator and created is such that we do not inhabit the same universe as ‘the divine does not occupy any universe.’ What this essentially means is that it allows ‘us to say that God suffered and suffered quite literally (and not even analogically) as we do.’334 In the suffering of Jesus we encounter God who knows our human suffering, but this is not the same as saying that God is changed by the suffering.335 The doctrine of God’s impassibility when applied to crisis preaching gives the preacher confidence in a God who is God; a God who is not numb to the pain of his creation. The fact of the incarnation and the event of the cross enables the preacher to speak of God’s capacity to journey with his people through the pain of the moment. This appeal to the incarnation cannot leave any doubt that God is involved with his creation.

The result of appealing to the impassibility of God via the apophatic method is that it becomes about the promise of encounter with God. This is the direct opposite of the

333 McCabe, God Matters, 47.
334 Ibid., 48.
335 For a thorough and insightful exploration of this Thomas Weinandydevotes three chapters in his defence of impassibility to working through the main issues, Weinandy, Does God Suffer?, 172-286.
conception that God is far removed and indifferent to the travails of his creation. At this point I draw again on Paul Fiddes and expand further his proposal, highlighted in the previous chapter, that the Trinity can be conceived as an event of relationships. In the previous chapter I pointed to the argument of Fiddes that God creates, by the means of the creation, a place in himself where he can be found. For Fiddes, the ultimate expression of this is the incarnation. He conceives of the Trinity defined by relationship, and through the incarnation, as pointing to ‘a person who is the tent and temple of divine wisdom, Christ is the place which is not-a-place which draws us into the place opened up for us within God.’\textsuperscript{336} The tension between the hidden and revealed God is shown in John 1:1-18, and Fiddes argues that ‘the word does not cancel the silence. For the incarnation of the Word does not invite us to observe God, but to enter the tent of meeting and participate in relationships which are there ahead of us.’\textsuperscript{337} For Fiddes, the incarnation invites us into encounter with God not as observers but as participants. This is an encounter with the silent God beyond speech which is framed as drawing the individual into the unity of God. An apophatic conception of God, grounded here in the revelation afforded by the incarnation, presents God as transcendent and immanent.

What is interesting, considering the convictions of this study, is that this view for Fiddes forms part of his passibilist position. In commenting on the turn towards the passibilist position Fiddes states, ‘I believe that this revolution has been right and necessary.’\textsuperscript{338} His conviction that the Trinity can be conceived differently, is employed along with his passible conviction to present a God who is vulnerable in his relationship to his creation. Fiddes, applies this position to the question of theodicy and presents an argument that the traditional kinds of theodicy are strengthened by a belief in the suffering of God.\textsuperscript{339} Though this is part of his application of his Trinitarian convictions, I believe there is value in appropriating part of the foundational theory here. The valuable contribution for my argument is his claim that we can encounter God not simply as observers, but as participants. He proposes that conceiving of the Trinity as

\textsuperscript{336} Fiddes, "The Quest for a Place Which Is 'Not-a-Place': The Hidderness of God and the Presence of God," 59.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{338} Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity, 154. See also, The Creative Suffering of God.
\textsuperscript{339} Fiddes applies the idea of the suffering God to four kinds of theodicy: The theodicy of consolation or practical theodicy; the theodicy of story; the theodicy of protest; and the free-will defense. See, Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity, 156-70.
a relationship of persons does not do appropriate justice to the actual dynamic, and he instead suggests the idea of an ‘event of relationships’ which can be described as ‘movements of relationship’, or ‘three movements of relationship subsisting in one event.’ This idea is apophatic at its core since it resists attempts to define God:

Of course, it is not possible to visualise, paint, or etch in stone or glass three interweaving relationships, or three movements of being characterised by their relations, without subjects exercising them. But then this ought to be a positive advantage in thinking about God, who cannot be objectified like other objects in the world; the triune God must not [...] be visualised as three individual subjects who have relationships.\(^{340}\)

What is important to understand, is this means for Fiddes that, ‘talk about God as an event of relationships is not therefore the language of a spectator, but the language of a participant. It only makes sense in terms of our involvement in the network of relationships in which God happens.’\(^{341}\) This can then be applied to the crisis moment, with the sufferer pictured being in participation with God, which corresponds to the lack of otherness noted before of God conceived as creator. Here then the question of the involvement of God is subverted since God has invited all to participate through the means of the incarnation. This is a significant proposal for a crisis homiletic, if one is content to move away from the language of person for the Trinity. Conceiving of God this way resonates with McCabe in terms of a God who is present with us as creator, and who can never be apart from us. The fact that the language of participation can be used, is fundamental for a crisis homiletic which looks for assurance that God is involved in the reality of the crisis situation.

In unpacking further this idea of participation in the event of divine relationships, Fiddes refers to the activity of prayer, citing the New Testament emphasis on prayer as being to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. He develops an analogy with the relationship of a father to a son, named as response, who also sends the son out, named as mission. He argues that to pray is not to pray simply to an aspect of knowledge, but in an event that reflects the movement of relationships, rendering us not simple observers, but participants. Fiddes states:

To pray “in the event of Golgotha” means that these movements of response and mission are undergirded by movements of suffering, like the painful longing

\(^{340}\) Ibid., 36-37.
\(^{341}\) Ibid., 37.
of a forsaken son towards a father and of a desolate father towards a lost son. Simultaneously, these two directions of movement are interwoven by a third, as we find they are continually being opened up to new depths of relationship and to new possibilities of the future by a movement that we can only call “Spirit”.

In this idea of participating in God we have a means to comprehend what it means to be able to speak of God involved in the crisis moment. The impact of the cross on the relationships of the Trinity is continual, and it is that which we are invited to participate in. Therefore, the God who opens up that space in Godself does so through the incarnation giving the preacher confidence to declare a God who in involved with us; a God who knows what it is to suffer.

However, such an argument for the impassible God will not satisfy all. One reason is that the conception of an impassible God appears to imply that God is without passion, without emotion. If the recovery of this doctrine is to form the basis for a new apophatic approach to crisis preaching there must be found a way to speak of a God who is both impassible and impassioned. I return here to the definition of impassibility of Weinandy that ‘God is impassible in the sense that he cannot experience emotional changes of state due to his relationship to, and interaction with, human beings and the created order. This understanding of impassibility does not imply [...] that God is not utterly passionate in his love, mercy and compassion.’ Such a definition gives hope that this position is tenable, and it is to exploring that hope I now turn.

5.2 The Passionate Presence of God

Exploring the question of the involvement of God is necessary for crisis preaching, as it counters the belief that God is indifferent to the suffering of the moment. Principally, through Herbert McCabe, I have argued for a way to conceive of God as impassible, but it can still beg the question as to what extent God feels the pain of his people even though he is not changed by it. Thomas Weinandy’s definition of impassibility asserts that God remains passionate. The discussion of the emotional life of God, whether God feels at all, can complicate how we conceive of him, but is important to this study. The apophatic focus on the creator created divide appears to be challenged when we

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342 Ibid., 36.
read in the Bible God being described in analogous language along emotional lines as feeling such affections as love\textsuperscript{344} and hate\textsuperscript{345}, joy\textsuperscript{346} and grief\textsuperscript{347}, pleasure\textsuperscript{348} and anger\textsuperscript{349}, and peace.\textsuperscript{350} We of course identify with these descriptions as we have experienced them, but a God who is emotionally vulnerable would conflict with the idea of his impassibility, and this is precisely the tension which drives the discussion.

Emotions are an important part of what it is to be human, and they are not primitive impulses to be controlled or ignored, but cognitive judgements and construal’s that tell us about ourselves and our world. In this understanding, destructive emotions can be changed, beneficial emotions can be cultivated, and emotions are a crucial part of morality.\textsuperscript{351}

Emotions are an important part of how we connect to the world around us and that is why they are so powerful when applied to God, implying a very real connection and identification with us. Significantly, Paul Gavrilyuk, amongst others, asserts that to claim that God is impassible does not prevent any discourse about divine emotions.

There are a number of approaches that can be taken in this discussion. Here I present two recent possibilities, the first I do not follow, and the second which I do. The first is a more philosophical defence from Robert Lister, who defines the central terms in relation to one another as follows:

God is impassible in the sense that he cannot be manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised into an emotional interaction that he does not desire to have or allow to happen. But this is not at all the same thing as saying that God is devoid of emotion, nor is it the equivalent of saying that he is not affected by his creatures. To the contrary, God is impassioned (i.e., perfectly vibrant in his affections), and he may be affected by his creatures, but as God, he is so in ways that accord rather than conflict with his will to be so affected by those whom, in love, he has made.\textsuperscript{352}

\textsuperscript{344} Deut. 7:13, 10:15; Ps. 18:19; Prov. 11:1, 12:22, 15:8; Isa. 42:1, 61:8; Jer. 9:24; John 17:24
\textsuperscript{345} Pss. 5:5, 11:5; Prov. 6:16; Isa. 1:14, 61:8
\textsuperscript{346} Deut. 28:63, 30:9; Jdg. 9:13; Neh 8:10; Pss. 16:11, 60:6, 104:31; Isa. 62:5, 65:19; Jer. 32:41; Zeph. 3:17; Luke 15:7, 10; John 15:11, 17:13
\textsuperscript{347} Gen 6:6; Jdg. 10:16; Pss. 78:40, 95:10; Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30; Heb. 3:10, 17
\textsuperscript{348} Num. 23:27, 24:1; 1 Kings 3:10; Pss. 69:3, 149:4; Prov. 16:7; Eccl. 7:26; Ezra 10:11; Rom. 8:8; Phil. 4:18; Col. 3:20; 1 Thess. 4:1; Heb.11:5, 6; 13:16,21
\textsuperscript{349} Num. 11:10, 22:22; Deut. 4:25, 6:15, 7:4, 9:18,19, 13:17, 29:20; Josh. 7:1; Jdg. 2:12, 14, 20, 3:8, 10:7; Pss. 2:12, 7:11, 78:49, 85:3, 90:11, 103:8, 145:8; Jer. 4:8; Rom. 1:18, 2:5, 9, 9:22, 12:19; Eph. 2:3, 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 1:10, 2:16, 5:9; Heb. 3:11; Rev. 6:16, 17, 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7, 16:1, 19; 19:15, 350 Pss.23:4; John 14:27; Rom. 15:33; Phil. 4:7, 9; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 3:16; Heb.13:20.
\textsuperscript{351} Rob Lister, \textit{God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion} (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013), 36.
Lister rejects an overly anthropomorphic position, that ascribing these human emotions to God means he must feel them as we do, and instead retains the creator created divide, with God being affected as God, but not like us. The question though, is how God can remain transcendent yet also have emotional integrity? The debate, as showcased in Lister, can be conducted along philosophical lines and can also touch upon the recent position of open theism which questions God’s foreknowledge. Among the key recent contributors to this form of discussion of divine emotion are Bruce Ware, John Frame and Scott Oliphint.353

Lister seeks resolution of this problem of divine emotion by appealing to the patristic view, affirming that God is impassible, in that ‘he cannot be manipulated, overwhelmed, or surprised into an emotional interaction that he does not desire to have or allow to happen.’354 He believes that this is not the same as saying God is devoid of emotions or that he is not affected by his creation. Lister claims that ‘God is impassioned (i.e. perfectly vibrant in his affections), and he may be affected by his creatures, but as God, he is so in ways that accord rather than conflict with his will to be so affected by those whom, in love, he has made.’355 Lister particularly explores God’s emotions relative to the doctrine of divine eternity.356 A key question for Lister is, if God experiences no succession of moments, how can God have time for emotions? Lister’s solution is that we see God as both above time (timeless) and also in time (omnitemporal):

With respect to God’s own experience of emotion, this model of God’s relationship to time in himself and in creation means that God has eternally known and ordained not only his creature’s actions, but also his responses to those actions. But foreordination or foreknowledge of a relational response is not the same thing as the experience of said relational response, even though it is the ground of it. In this way, we should not think of God as eternally wrathful and eternally merciful toward any given individual, any more than we would say that he eternally condemns and eternally forgives that same person. We must allow, in our understanding, for the temporal outworking and redemptive-

354 Lister, God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion.
355 Ibid.
historical progression of God’s eternal plan. Though his knowledge of that plan is eternal, his unfolding experience of it occurs in the temporarily progressive covenantal context, even while he stands as Lord over that very covenantal context.\textsuperscript{357}

Lister’s position, which develops from this understanding of God’s relationship to time, is summed up succinctly here:

Thus, I believe that atemporality is one way in which God is ontologically other than us. And yet, I also maintain that God’s temporal participation with us, following creation, is reflective of his voluntary and gracious immanence. This finding, in turn, portrays an instructive symmetrical duality between God’s in se atemporality and his in re omnitemporality, and what we might call his in se impassibility and his in re impassionedness, on the other.\textsuperscript{358}

The theologian Paul Helm critiques Lister’s position and raises the question of whether Lister holds to a sequential duality, God ceasing to be eternal upon creating a universe, or a simultaneous duality, God remaining eternal when he creates, and being in time in the creation. He concludes that it is probably the latter which Lister holds, but Helm himself sees it unnecessary when compared with a classical view which he claims sees

the eternal God able to create, sustain and govern, all creatures and their actions […] by his will, and communicates grace and glory through his activities as a communicative agent, through his communicable character or attributes. In carrying out his external actions God remains as he is eternally, distinct from the creation which depends upon him.\textsuperscript{359}

A key problem for Lister’s view is that if God is eternal he has no memory per se, he sees time eternally before his mind. But God in time has a memory, as Helm puts it, ‘God, the one God, both does not have a memory and has a memory, depending on which mode of the duality one is referring to. Is that not serious?’ It appears though, that Lister would see God as having two faces, rather than two natures, but Helm still sees this rendering God incoherent, stating that it ‘imperils the integrity of the divine unity.’\textsuperscript{360} Lister proposes this divine duality as he wants to avoid a classical view of divine accommodation that has God changing, while being eternally changeless.\textsuperscript{361} Helm argues that this is to misunderstand the classical position, which he sees as

\textsuperscript{358} Ibid., 229, 26-27.
\textsuperscript{359} Paul Helm to paulhelmsdeep, 1st August, 2013, www.paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com.
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid.
holding to God’s conversations recorded in scripture as being primarily pedagogic. What he means by this, is that the dialogue that God has for example with Moses in the wilderness or Hezekiah, is for a purpose such as testing and developing faith as dialogue partners, not equals:

In such ways as this God accommodates himself to his creation. That is, he comes down in grace and judgment, according to his purpose. This coming down is not a case of God re-locating (downsizing!), nor is it a case of acting as-if. It is not make-believe. God really talks to his people; he acts as their gracious friend and disciplinarian. It is simply that God does not change in doing so. But in order for God to achieve his goals he has typically to communicate with his people bit-by-bit. In a system of testing by examination, the learning takes place, then the examination, and then the result of the examination. It could not be any other way. The process is spaced out in time, first one stage, and then the other stage. If the eternal God is the one setting the test, the spacings-out have still to be observed. The creature changes, but not the creator. 362

This divine pedagogic emphasis raises issues when facing suffering as to the source of the suffering, and whether it in fact has a wider purpose. Such a position is problematic and could imply a God who causes his people to suffer. Helm, however, sees the point that God ‘by his eternal decree reveals himself in his creation little by little,’ so we see ‘his glorious goodness […] refracted in time according to his purposes for his people and with respect to others.’ It seems that even in the incarnation, God is choosing to allow his ‘power and grace to reach each corner of the creation’ as he wills it ‘little by little through time.’ He concludes that,

God is able to represent himself as angry, or compassionate, or faithful, because in his glorious essence he is not impassive or indifferent in character, but eternally impassioned, and so never overcome with passion […] With these resources God is able to express first this passionate state and then that passionate state as part of this process of teaching and disciplining his people, drawing out their faith in his promises and strengthening them in doing so. 363

Helm then believes he is able to hold onto God as impassible and impassioned, but not needing to refer to any kind of duality since God is conceived to be, ‘eternally in himself, both impassible, not being subject to moods or swings or surges of any kind, and impassioned, fully caring and concerned, and capable of expressing such ‘impassions’ in time.’ 364

362 Helm Impassible and Impassioned.
363 Ibid.
364 Ibid.
In summary, I reject the conclusions of Lister since I do not believe that it is desirable or necessary to divide God into having two faces, particularly since it could easily be conceived to be, in fact, two natures. Whilst he argues his point well, his fundamental model does not resonate with the approach of McCabe and the broader question of impassibility, which I highlighted in the previous section. McCabe’s assertion that God as creator is intimately involved with his creation renders unnecessary attempts to reconcile God’s impassibility and his passionate nature. It will be demonstrated, by an appeal to the work of Katherine Sonderegger, that the unity of God as creator can be retained with no need to separate the faces or even the nature of God. There is more resonance with the convictions of this study in the proposals of Paul Helm, but his pedagogic solution also appears to imply that God is not being fully present with his creation. It can be seen how such an approach resolves many of the potentially problematic passages in scripture, but in my opinion the image of God working pedagogically seems too far removed from the God of Neil Pembroke’s Divine Therapeia. There is also the potential for the justification of suffering coming from God in such a model, and that is a potential that I believe should be avoided. Having made that assertion, I turn to an approach I believe resonates with McCabe and dispenses of the need for the proposals of both Lister and Helm.

Having presented as illustration a position which I believe is not tenable or even in fact necessary, I draw now on the work of Katherine Sonderegger whose doctrine of God is founded on the unicity of God, from where she demonstrates a commitment to the classical attributes of God founded in the Greek metaphysical tradition. This commitment is founded on the idea of a God who cannot be comprehended fully by the created. Significant for my argument is that in her final section of the first part of her systematics she affirms the emotional life of God:

The overwhelming impression left upon the plain reader of Holy Scripture is that Israel has to do with a passionate God, with a Living One, encountered in Wrath and fierce Anger, in Jealously and Mercy, in Tenderness and holy Love. God is recognisable as One who burns with emotion, who lives in perfectly realised intensity.

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366 Ibid., 492.
So vivid is this picture, she must ask whether that in accepting a God of passionate love do we commit ourselves to a passible God? The dangers she believes are obvious and have been spotted long ago, that a passible approach leaves us with,

a God emeshed in our world, filled with passions and tempests, overfilled and overcome, prone to the ills of time and fortune, ready to abandon old ways, fresh for the new, suffering always, inevitably, with the unnumbered victims of our earth, suffering with rage and sorrow at our cruelties and cold hearts: Is this, in the end, the God of Love?\(^\text{367}\)

Sonderegger must then ask as to whether God can be passionate and impassible, to which the answer for her is a simple, yes. She affirms that ‘the impassible God of tradition is the passionate God of scripture,’ and that this ‘must be our fundamental conviction.’\(^\text{368}\) Significantly, she states that there is no means to explain this as in fact she claims we cannot:

> To lay out with confidence the Divine Nature and Person in such a manner that His fiery Life can remain transcendent, free from suffering, yet wholly near His creature – to do this at the level of explanation would show comprehension of the Divine Reality, impossible for us creatures.\(^\text{369}\)

This apophatic commitment is then given a limit, the perfection of divine love, which revealed in scripture gives ‘rise to the impassible One of tradition.’\(^\text{370}\) She dismisses what she sees as the modern conception, that to love is to be vulnerable and presents the God of scripture, where she sees God as ‘victorious love, the fullness of Passion and completion, the burning Heat, constantly aflame.’\(^\text{371}\) Reflecting on the depiction of love in 1 Corinthians 13, she sees a love which has no object, nor speaks of passibility, love here is ‘supremely invulnerable, impervious to another […] Perfect love is invincibly objectless, immutual, perdurant. It never ends – it alone is eternal against all the gifts of the Spirit, prophecy and tongues and knowledge. It isadamantine.’\(^\text{372}\) Such a depiction of love, she argues, can only mean that this perfect love ‘is simply another name for God.’ In her passionate prose, Sonderegger seeks to communicate the passion of God which is part of the unicity, there is no hint of separation or division for her. The promise of divine love for Sonderegger, is that which holds all doctrine together, this ‘Divine love waits on no one, needs nothing, bends to no condition or

\(^{367}\) Ibid., 493.
\(^{368}\) Ibid.
\(^{369}\) Ibid., 493-94.
\(^{370}\) Ibid., 494.
\(^{371}\) Ibid., 495.
\(^{372}\) Ibid.
limit. Love that is God scorches through infinite spheres, boundless, eternal Holiness. Love crowns the Divine Perfections; it abounds. Holding to this understanding of divine love leaves no room for any doubt that God is both impassible and impassioned, reinforcing the conviction that God is joined with his creation:

Love, we might say, is a ligature, the proper and God-given tie between living things. To say that God loves, in this view, is to affirm, quietly and directly, that God communicates, gives, and is joined – if only by Will – to the creature.

The approach here whilst not seemingly technical in the way of Lister or even Helm, is one which can be applied in the service of crisis homiletics. By declaring the love of God, the preacher draws the hearer in to the possibility of encounter with a God who is both impassible and impassioned, both transcendent, yet not other to his creation. Applying the doctrine of an impassible and passionate God is essential for conceiving of crisis preaching as a form of apophatic discourse, since it prevents us from concluding that God cannot be known.

My central thesis claims that there must be a balance between the theocentric and the apophatic in crisis preaching, and that applying apophatic method is a way to achieve this. The problem with the apophatic process of negation is how to limit it. I have argued that the limit is in the self-disclosure of God himself. The question though is what does that actually mean, and what does it look like in crisis preaching? This is the point that this study has been building to since in effect it grounds the whole approach. Fundamentally, the principle apophatic claim is that God is mystery. The controlling notion is that there is a distinction between the creator and the created, and that all our attempts to bridge that gap fall short. The ultimate question for Sonderegger is whether ‘can Being itself receive predicates?’ It is not simply that predicates attached to God can lead to a form of idolatry, but that it might be that because ‘Being might not receive predicates at all,’ that it is not possible. Does this mean then that God is in fact ‘beyond all being, beyond Being itself, God is the Dark Ground, the utter Abyss beneath all things and all thought.’ We use the term being as a universal category, and it makes sense to recognise that this is problematic when applied to

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373 Ibid., 496.
374 Ibid., 475.
375 Ibid., 446.
376 Ibid., 447.
God. However, Sonderegger claims that it is this very problem which is key, ‘for it is in feeling the force of this problem that we come to see how God is the radical End to all thought.’\textsuperscript{377} She acknowledges that to speak of God and his attributes is to ‘court idolatry’, since it is in the describing that we begin to conceive of God as a Being, who we ‘join to our world of property and quality and place.’\textsuperscript{378} Her important point is that this conceptual idolatry cannot be solved simply by applying transcendence framed by distance. That God is far away, lifted out of ‘heavy materiality.’ The problem, which many accuse impassibility of perpetuating, is that in trying to solve this difficulty we isolate God from ourselves:

In this way we hope to present a God who through the active working of the levers of negation can be Other, Wholly Other. We apply predicates, that is, but only under the stern eye of negation and transcendence, so that- we hope- this deity can be defined and shielded through icy remoteness from the threat of predication itself, the threat of idolatry.\textsuperscript{379}

The issue, as she sees it, is that we ultimately want a God who is known to us and is also transcendent. She argues that ‘in truth negation and distance cannot solve these crises in the doctrine of God; they were not designed for such work.’\textsuperscript{380} There is, she contends, a base reality that we must acknowledge, ‘God is present in the cosmos. He does not simply sustain the world - to be sure He does this - but He inhabits, indwells, and irradiates the world with His light.’\textsuperscript{381} This, then, must form the foundation for any conception of God:

If we are to speak of God as One who can be named, who can receive predicates and Perfections, we must do so as He is near, the very Present One. God’s Transcendence and Nearness must be compatible, that is; or perhaps better, they are irreducible. God’s very Reality as Being, His spiritual Nature, must be utter Mystery in His immanence, His Intimacy to the world. If His Being can receive predicates, it must be as One who dwells here and everywhere, the Omnipresent One. The Indirect One, that is, must be present as the One mixed into our world. He does not abhor this world; He is not too proud and too clean to enter deep into this mud-stained earth. The Lord is not “world denying,” not over against it, not the Negation of all things frail and mortal, not the ascent out beyond the cosmos, pure and utterly still. No! This True God, the One Living Lord, is content to be ingredient in this lowly world of ours, to be its Light, and to be present as admixture in this unholy place. And we discover Him here.\textsuperscript{382}

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\item \textsuperscript{377} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{378} Ibid., 448.
\item \textsuperscript{379} Ibid., 449.
\item \textsuperscript{380} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{381} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{382} Ibid., 449-50.
\end{itemize}
Sonderegger goes on to argue that God’s relationship to the world is not paradoxical. This is for her, the limit on the role of negation, since God revealed in the scriptures is not ‘alien’ to the creatures, because ‘when we speak of God as Beyond, as Mystery, and as incomunicable Light, we do not mean that in Virtue of these Perfections, God cannot be ingredient in our world.’\(^3\) She illustrates this with an appeal to the picture of the God who walks in the garden with Adam and Eve, there is, she observes, a ‘readiness, eternal readiness, for incarnation’, that fundamentally God is one who ‘eats and mingle[s] with sinners.’\(^4\) However, what must be affirmed is that this bringing together, the admixture, of divine and earthly spirit does not mean that God should be conceived as possible,

rather we must say, most especially here in the Perfection of Eternal Spirit, just how it might be that God can be present, ingredient and lavishly poured into our world, without the world being ingredient, mixed, and worse, essential to the very luminous Reality of God.\(^5\)

The central conceit here is resonant with that of McCabe, that God as creator is apart from us, that he ultimately cannot be apart, yet he is not adversely affected by the created. As the preacher wrestles with the questions of the involvement of God, it is this conception of a God who is both impassible and impassioned to which they must appeal, the creator God, one who has continually revealed himself and is epitomised by ‘eternal readiness.’

### 5.3 Summary

The task of this chapter has been to explore the question of the involvement of God whilst complicating it with the apophatic method. My central thesis statement has a primary and a secondary claim. The first claim is that there is a requirement in crisis preaching for a right balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and the second is that applying the apophatic method is a means to achieving this. The previous chapter began to explore the potential of an apophatic approach applied to crisis preaching. Principally such an approach creates a debunking form which challenges conceptions of God. A central conviction of this study is that the question of God’s involvement is a key question in a crisis moment, and that exploring this

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\(^3\) Ibid., 450.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid., 451.
question is a necessity for a crisis homiletic. The evaluation of the literature served to illustrate that whilst balance of the theocentric and the therapeutic can be found, it is not often consistent, and even when it is found, the picture of the God invoked is not developed sufficiently.

This chapter appealed to the doctrine of impassibility as an apophatic means to explore the question of the involvement of God. This question matters, as I have argued, as confidence in speaking of God can be undermined by confusion as to what may be said about God’s relationship to the crisis moment. It was shown that such a doctrine points us to God’s transcendence and serves as a reminder of the limits of human knowledge, a reminder of the creator created divide. The literature of this discussion is voluminous and often complex, but in drawing on the proposal of Herbert McCabe I sought to show that as the creator God is closer to us than we know, and that in the incarnation God experienced suffering in Christ, thus having the capacity to identify with our pain. I appealed to Paul Fiddes’ conception that the Trinity is an event of relationships which human beings participate in rather than simply being observers. The dynamic nature of the relationships as conceived create that space which complements McCabe and his conviction that God is not other. I argued that whilst the doctrine of impassibility can be applied, a key question is that of God’s involvement.

In addressing the question of God’s involvement, which is a sub-set of impassibility, I presented two positions. The first, that of Rob Lister, reconciled the impassible and impassioned natures of God by proposing two faces of God, one in time and one out of it. Such a proposal, despite the variation proposed by Paul Helm, was shown not to satisfy when compared to the approach of Katherine Sonderegger. Her approach has as its foundation, a commitment to the passionate nature of God as shown in scripture, which cannot be divorced from God. Whilst he is impassible, he cannot then be without passion. Sonderegger developed this further by raising the question of whether predicates can be attached to God. The risk was seen as that of idolatry, yet in our desire to know God as transcendent and near, Sonderegger claims that the nature of God is to be involved yet not affected by the created. This took the discussion full circle back to McCabe, and the God who is God but not apart from the creation.
The understanding of God as impassible and also impassioned, provides the limit on the process of apophatic discourse, as the limit is God’s own self-disclosure, embodied in the incarnation and enacted on the cross. Applying this to crisis preaching enables the preacher to declare a God who is God, and also one who is close to the creation and knows suffering. This then acts as a form of control to ensure the right balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic; the sermon cannot help but start with God, and in God are the promises of one who minsters to our pain.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “violence!” and you will not save? (Habakkuk 1:2)

This study began by acknowledging the difficulties of speaking in moments of great pain and grief. I stated that whilst it can be claimed that preaching at such times should point to the divine therapy of God, confusion over how to speak of the involvement of God in such moments undermines the confidence of the preacher. The purpose of this study was to find a means to help the preacher navigate the uncertain landscape of crisis events, with the sermon being understood here as the liturgical announcement of the grace of God in Christ. In this conclusion, I first offer an overview of the way the preceding chapters addressed the central thesis, that a right balance needs to be sought in crisis preaching between the theocentric and the therapeutic, and that the apophatic method is a good way of achieving this. I shall evaluate the outcomes from the discussion, and reflect critically on what this means in reality for application to crisis preaching. Following on from this, I will bring the proposed apophatic based method into dialogue with the radical deconstructive homiletic of Jacob Myers, drawing out what this might mean for the future of crisis preaching and the implications for homiletics in general.

In offering this overview of the preceding chapters and an evaluation of the proposal, the oracle of the prophet Habakkuk serves to illustrate the journey, providing a framework. This oracle begins, as seen in the quote above, with the prophet crying out in agony to God. His complaint mirrors that of a number of the sermons evaluated in the third chapter: ‘where is God when we suffer?’ There is pain in such statements, echoing the words of Habakkuk, which resists easy resolution. The thesis statement claims that effective crisis sermons require a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic if they are to begin to address such pain. The possibility of this is rooted in the proposal of Neil Pembroke, who argued that sermons can be balanced by pointing to the Divine Therapeia, therapy, of God. However, this therapy described as

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For example, “‘Why, God? Where are you? Why did you allow such evil to destroy such innocence?’ This cry has echoed our own dismay, reverberating over and over again through our souls.’ Tim Dearborn, "Will Life Ever Be the Same Again? Reflections on John 2," in The Sunday after Tuesday, ed. William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).
God’s healing love, implies the involvement of God, a problematic question in crisis moments when God might be seen to be silent or even absent, as implied here by Habakkuk. Such a question, the result of the challenge to our images of God, must be addressed if the divine is to be invoked as a source of healing and hope. The suspicion that God is indifferent to the suffering of the people has the potential to undermine our attempts to speak of God. Whilst there is crossover with other homiletical forms that have a pastoral focus, the crisis sermon is required to clearly address both theological and pastoral concerns. As a result, it is necessary to find a means to achieve this required balance between focussing on God and meeting pastoral needs.

The study explored the thesis statement in the following ways. The first chapter established the project, laying out the justification for the thesis statement, grounded in the need to find a means to bring a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic in crisis preaching, therefore giving the preacher confidence to speak of God’s involvement. The second chapter proposed that crisis preaching should be considered its own genre, thus requiring specific treatment due to the type of questions being asked, and the tension in the sermon arising from the outside. The question of the involvement of God was shown to include the subject of theodicy as well as the question of whether God suffers with his creation. It was claimed, through John Swinton, that traditional theodicy fails pastorally, and that God is generally seen as possible, one who is affected by the creation. Two major schools of homiletics were evaluated for signs of the required balance, and despite recognition within their own fields of a lack of balance, it was apparent that further work is needed on the application of the doctrine of God. Significant is the observation that simply invoking God is not the same as being theocentric, trusting in God as that source of divine therapy. This observation was also found in the evaluation of the crisis specific sources in the third chapter. Both the models and the sample set of sermons demonstrated that God can be called upon, but without adequate reflection on the character of God, this is sometimes a theologically empty gesture.

The observation that existing approaches fail to adequately address the character of the God they are invoking, chimed with the thesis statement that a new approach is required to bring the required balance in crisis preaching. The fourth chapter proposed that a foundation for a fresh approach can be found in conceiving of crisis preaching
as a form of apophatic discourse. The dynamic potential of such discourse, using the definition of Michael Sells, fosters a debunking form which challenges the faulty and ill-conceived images held of God. The potential was shown by applying the approach to the claim that God is silent or absent in times of crisis. Through the thought of Muers, Jüngel, Fiddes and Soskice, it was demonstrated that such an approach does not yield simple resolution, but the hope of encounter with God. The fifth chapter, addressing the core question of the involvement of God, built on this approach by appealing to the doctrine of impassibility and the related claim that God remains passionate. Through McCabe and Sonderegger the potential of this appeal was demonstrated, leading to the claim that crisis sermons should apply this doctrine in forming a base from which to speak of God and address the crisis.

Having outlined the preceding chapters, I move on to an evaluation of the methodology presented here. I begin with the research journey before making specific comments. This research sits as part of a wider course of learning, being in part-fulfilment, alongside other assignments (See Appendix). One essay considered the passibilist convictions of Paul Fiddes, who is an interlocutor in this work. In the course of the essay it was apparent to me that the question of God’s involvement with creation was an important one for homiletics due to the complexity of the debates and the confusion that can be generated. What was intriguing was that the majority shift from impassibility to passibility was informed by a claim of God’s indifference. In exploring this further, I found in the work of Rob Lister and Thomas Weinandy the claim, albeit with different reasoning, that God can be both impassible and impassioned.387 Related to the claim of indifference, was the influence of the therapeutic method in society and in homiletics. Drawing this all together, I began to consider a research design to look for signs of the shift to passibility in sermons preached over a sizeable time period. Attempts to locate suitable sermons and reduce the project to a manageable size came to no avail, and I began to focus more on the place of God in crisis preaching. This interest in itself has gone through a process of refining where the focus should be. This particular project grew from the desire to develop a methodology based on

387Lister, God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion; Weinandy, Does God Suffer?
the law and gospel homiletic championed in recent years by Paul Wilson.\textsuperscript{388} In the midst of that research, I began to explore the possibility of crisis preaching as apophatic discourse, where it became apparent that this was an applicable approach in its own right, leading to the proposal of this project.

Turning now to that proposal, I consider its viability for application in crisis preaching. The chief claim in this study is that existing models for preaching which can be applied to crisis situations, do not go far enough in articulating how God should be conceived. Fundamental was the observation from both chapters two and three that simply pointing to God is not enough. It was seen that the specific crisis models of Norén and Jeter take great pains to ensure that they remain theocentric. Jeter’s main proposal is that the truth of the gospel must be laid over the truth of the situation. Norén insists on the anamnestic function of the sermon with an emphasis on telling the salvation story, which reframes the crisis moment with the promises of God. I could not agree more with these suggestions, but I do contend that they must be taken further in presenting the doctrine of the God they point to. Underpinning this study is the conviction that faulty or ill-conceived images of God are a source of much of the discomfort and pain found in the crisis moments. Our images of God may bring contentment when all is well, but in times of trial they can be found wanting. This is of course a theological issue and the crisis sermon must find ways to resolve this. Also important to note is that one sermon cannot hope to change someone’s complete theological system, but there must be an acknowledgment of the benefit of attempting in a targeted way to address relevant issues. In such moments God may be seen as absent, silent, the cause, at fault or any combination of those, and more.\textsuperscript{389} Having idols, either conceptual or physical, is nothing new as is evident in Habakkuk’s oracle:

What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake: to a silent stone, Arise! Can


\textsuperscript{389} David Hart addresses the question of whether God causes those events we often name as crisis in his treatment of the 2004 tsunami. He argues that natural disasters are not caused by God but are the result of the world no longer being the way it is meant to be, a consequence of sin. He writes, ‘the world remains divided between two kingdoms, where light and darkness, life and death grow up together and await the harvest. In such a world, our portion is charity, and our sustenance is faith, and so it will be until the end of day. As for comfort […] I can imagine none greater than the happy knowledge that when I see the death of child, I do not see the face of God but the face of his enemy.’ Hart, \textit{The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?}, 104.
Whilst the emphasis here is on physical idols, the result is the same. In confronting idolatry it must be noted that there is not one doctrine of God that all will agree with, and many of the questions that come in a crisis moment do not have easy answers or indeed any answers at all. However, this does not mean that idolatry should not be challenged and that is why a dynamic approach is needed which ultimately seeks to point to God. The apophatic method with its commitment to finding a way to speak of God, is such an approach and with its history has a theological and homiletical viability.

Central to the proposal is the claim that a balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic is required. This study developed out of the hypothesis that crisis preaching is increasingly driven by the desire to bring comfort to the hearer, as opposed to beginning with the doctrine of God and the out-workings of that. The evaluation of the sample set of sermons from the 9/11 attacks, demonstrated the propensity to focus on the need for reassurance in the midst of the emotional and spiritual response. This led the editor of the collection, William Willimon, to critique his own collection as being overly therapeutic in focus. My reflection however, is that a therapeutic focus is not in itself bad in such moments when the pain is overwhelming, what is the concern is the understanding of the God who is being pointed to. This is why the balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic is required. The proximity of the preaching of the sermon to the actual crisis event will be a factor here, since the more-raw the emotion, the more it will be required to address that first. However, this does not mean that God should be on the margins or that the focus be solely therapeutic. This is where a means to address such moments must keep the promise of the divine therapy at the fore, having confidence in the power of the presence of God to enact it. As was seen in the second chapter, the narrative school of preaching has a focus on story but was critiqued for leaving behind any conviction that there is a meta-narrative. This is where the anamnetic conviction of Norén becomes important, in giving confidence that God is at work. This is apparent in Habakkuk:

O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy. (Habakkuk 3:2)
However, it must be asked again, what is this God like, is he involved with his creation? There is an innate vulnerability in applying an apophatic method to preaching, particularly a crisis moment, when all is already raw. But that is where the courage is needed to confront our idolatry despite how it might make us feel:

I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. (Habakkuk 3:16)

This journey into and through the idolatry is limited by the self-disclosure of God, the Godself who reveals Godself to the world. The promise in that is one of encounter, even as images of God are negated, God is being sought and has made himself known. This is the mystery of God and of faith which we see expressed at the conclusion of Habakkuk’s oracle:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

As the mystery of God is encountered in this statement of faith, God is a source of strength. This is where crisis preaching as apophatic discourse enables the preacher to find confidence in speaking of God, since God can be seen apophatically as being involved. Impassibility as an apophatic description of God presents a God who is God, but one who suffers in Christ and is passionate. The arguments of both McCabe and Sonderegger point to a God who cannot be other to his creation. This is the mystery that is appealed to in the crisis moment, a far cry from the resolution seeking homiletics, and a turn back to something much more scriptural; that hope is found in God alone.

However, in applying the method I assert the necessity of the appeal to impassibility. This conviction is integral to the apophatic approach, that a God who is transcendent and immanent, revealed in the incarnation as one who suffers, is proclaimed. This of course will be problematic for those who are drawn to the debunking form, but cannot commit to impassibility. But I contend that it is this very appeal to an impassible and impassioned God, which creates the necessary space in the crisis sermon to point to the divine therapy. This is possible because the required balance between the
theocentric and the therapeutic is achieved with pastoral needs addressed, but without God left on the margins: "‘Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.’" (John 6:68-69) In the mystery of God we are not observers, but participants through the one who knows our suffering and our pain.

Having argued for the potential of this approach for crisis preaching, I consider here future avenues for research, both empirical and theoretical. These suggestions continue to reflect the mode of practical theology which underpins this study, with its commitment to ‘critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world.’\(^{390}\) In terms of empirical research these would centre on studies which test the proposal. I suggest four potential research designs which with suitable ethical approval would interrogate the suggested approach in different ways.\(^{391}\) The first study: a group of volunteers would be trained in the approach. They would be asked to apply the approach in whatever they considered to be an appropriate crisis situation. Once a large enough sample had been collected, those sermons could be assessed against the approach to ascertain its implementation in practice. Feedback on the approach could be collected through the use of questionnaires, interviews and group interviews where appropriate. The second study: having asserted that applying the apophatic method to achieve the required balance between the theocentric and the therapeutic is a means to get that balance a group of preachers could be instructed in the need for balance, but not presented with the proposed apophatic method. The expectation would be that the preachers would preach with the intention of achieving the required balance. Sermons would be collected in a similar way to the first study, and then evaluated for the means they used to achieve the balance. Methods would be put in place to assess the success or otherwise of those approaches. Again, further information would be gathered from the participants as above. The third study: a broader empirical study on crisis preaching could collect sermons arising from an identified national event and evaluate them as in the third chapter of this study. This would give a more contemporary British sample to bring into comparison with the older, North American sample that was available for

\(^{390}\) Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*, 7.

\(^{391}\) Ethical approval is a necessary requirement of the empirical research process intended to enable the research to result in benefit and minimise the risk of harm to those involved.
this study. The fourth study: the focus of this research has been on the preacher and not the congregation. As in the first suggestion, a group of preachers could be instructed in the approach and then after sermons preached using the method, the congregation could be surveyed for its effectiveness through questionnaires and interviews. There is much work conducted theoretically on preaching models but judging the effectiveness of those models is more difficult.

The suggestions here for empirical research would interrogate the model and also widen the research base for what is currently a limited field. In terms of theoretical avenues for further research the choices are broad, but here I name a few key opportunities in line with central themes of the approach. The first study: much has been made in this study of the move towards more therapeutic models of preaching. The proposal of Neil Pembroke, that crisis preaching can be theocentric and therapeutic, has been foundational for this study. Whilst I agree with his proposals, it was necessary to take a step back and consider what would be required for the first part of his proposal to work in a crisis context. The second study: a further study could go the other way and explore his work more fully and its insistence on the possibility of applying counselling theory through correlation. It might be possible that his theory could be taken full circle for crisis moments, now that there is an apophatic basis in place. Secondly, an apophatic method has been applied to crisis preaching, but apart from the work on Eckhart's sermons, there is not a great deal which considers the apophatic in preaching in an intentional manner. Further exploration of the potential for the apophatic in wider homiletics could well be fruitful. The third study: the appeal to the doctrine of impassibility has showcased briefly what is a significant field of study. There is still scope to consider the role of impassibility in wider preaching as well as its impact on related areas to crisis preaching. A significant discipline in a crisis moment which has not been a focus here is that of lament. Kathleen Billman and Daniel Migliore explore the question of lament and place it in opposition to

392 Milem, The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart’s German Sermons.
393 See as an example, Gabriel Rochelle, "Apophatic Preaching and the Postmodern Mind," St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly 50, no. 5 (2006).
394 The unpublished thesis of Sally Nelson considers the relationship of the sufferer to suffering. As part of the foundation she rejects the doctrine of impassibility and embraces the process thought of Whitehead and the related research of Paul Fiddes amongst others. This demonstrates that the tendency to reject impassibility as a matter of course when reaching for an engaged God continues in fairly recent research. See, Sally Nelson, “Confronting ‘Meaningless’ Suffering: From Suffering-as-Insult to Suffering-as-Ontological-Impertinence” (The University of Manchester, 2011).
impassibility. They appear to embrace the mystery of God when they identify as a strength of lament that this God, who is often felt to be hidden, absent or silent, is ‘not experienced as familiar, predictable, or comforting but as shatteringly different and “other”’. They see that the prayer of lament ‘gives voice to those struggling to find God in the darkness.’ However, they embrace the passibilist error that only a possible God can be conceived of being engaged with our pain:

If the prayer of lament enables us to give honest expression to the experience of the hiddenness of God, it is also paradoxically a form of resistance to all ideas about God as immutable and unaffected by what happens in the world. Nothing is more destructive of the spiritual life and the discipline of prayer than the fear that God does not care, is indifferent, is not deeply affected by what happens to God’s creatures.

They argue further, that ascribing these apophatic attributes to God of impassibility and immutability as rendering ‘prayer useless and meaningless.’ This would be an argument and a relationship that would reward further exploration.

It is clearly evident that the approach for crisis preaching proposed in this research project opens up avenues for further study. The unique contribution to knowledge made here is the proposed new methodology arising from the demonstration that the existing models need to be taken further in their understanding of God. In concluding this project, I want to bring my proposal into dialogue with the radical deconstructive homiletic of Jacob Myers. I want to contend that, whilst deconstruction and apophasis are not the same conceptually, there is an interesting resonance between this study and the work of Myers, pushing my proposal further. I am drawing on Myers because this study has shown for me the problematic nature of those models which would leave God on the margins, either due to a person-centred approach or God being used as a form of balm to resolve felt tensions and solve problems. Myers also identifies problems within the homiletical agenda which gives credence to what I have been seeking to do in this study.

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396 Ibid.
397 Ibid., 12.
Myers argues for a radical homiletic drawing on the philosophy of deconstruction, claiming that preaching and the related homiletics must die to itself. He is suspicious of the methodological and theological control asserted by modern homiletics and contends that ‘the central features of preaching are philosophical before they are baptised as theology.’

What this means for him is that we must ask ‘what our respective philosophies commit us to homiletically?’ Arising from this comes a further question, ‘does such an economy lead us toward God, or does it inadvertently frustrate the possibility of encountering God in and through preaching?’ This question drives his central thesis that ‘preaching is born to meet its maker.’

This thesis resonates with mine in this project that crisis preaching in particular through being conceived as apophatic discourse can lead the hearer to an encounter with God. I contend that the creative benefit of the apophatic discourse in crisis preaching is the space it creates to meet with God. However, Myers sees the apophatic method as too prescriptive in its intent and argues for the ‘aporetic way, a way that is no-way.’ The aporetic, coming from *aporia*, is a way of doubt, rooted within the deconstructivist approach.

It is important to make clear that the relationship of apophaticism to deconstruction has been the source of much discussion. This is a debate that Mary-Jane Rubenstein tackles to a depth which cannot be replicated here. The basic similarity is that ‘both negative theology and deconstruction witness – and, in fact, catalyse – the failure of language to circumscribe an alterity that enables and exceeds linguistic determinations.’ The reluctance to state that they are more similar than that comes from Derrida himself. He rejects the limits placed on the apophatic negation by the reality of God:

If Derrida is hesitant to equate the two, it is not because he fails to recognise their similarities, but because he does not believe negative theology to be sufficiently negative; unlike *denégation*, apophaticism eventually negates negation, emerging with as strong an affirmation as positive theology. Moreover, he argues, negative theology has a locatable *arche* and *telos*, the

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399 Ibid.
400 Ibid., 2-3.
401 Ibid., 187.
402 Ibid., 166.
404 Ibid.
alpha and the omega. *Différance*, by contrast, has no investment in the ultimacy of the positive (or, for that matter, in ultimacy at all); it is without history or teleology, going nowhere in particular, but continually on the go. Because he holds that negative theology – whatever parameters one might assign to it – reserves a self-identical “presence” beyond presence and absence, a “being beyond Being”, Derrida argues that negative theology is corrective of, but ultimately reducible to, positive theology.\(^{405}\)

I claim here, against Myers, that the strength of the apophatic for preaching is its relationship to the cataphatic. Myers sees in deconstruction, not a method to apply, but that act which is already taking place. He sees it serving preaching in that it ‘exposes us to our (often) unexamined presuppositions, prejudices, and elisions that we employ to construct frameworks for meaning-making.’\(^{406}\) His argument is concerned with the structures of homiletics, and the potential contribution of deconstruction is clear. However, I contend that the apophatic method is preferable precisely because of the fact that it seeks to move towards God and that in doing so the wider structures are also brought into a right perspective.

I commend Myers in his desire for preaching to be about encounter with the mystery of God, and that mystery setting the agenda. His chief proposal is a radical homiletic that he names ‘hauntology’, which nurtures a ‘g/hostly perspective, playing host to the ghost that haunts our preaching.’\(^{407}\) What is troubling is not that he implies a commitment to the mystery of God, but that there is no limit to the process of deconstruction. A core foundation of his argument is the charge to modern homiletics of creating bastions to preserve its life. He names these as dogma, biblical exposition and practical wisdom.\(^{408}\) His critique of practical wisdom resonates with my own reservations with much of the therapeutic preaching which was presented in the second chapter. He also critiques the proposals of Fosdick and observes that such preaching ‘merely capitulates to capitalist ideals, neoliberal ideologies, and late modern values.’\(^{409}\) The problem as he sees it, is that such an approach focusses on the ‘use-value of the gospel and appears more concerned with empire building than in participating in the queendom of God.’\(^{410}\) This is very much in line with the reasoning

\(^{405}\) Ibid.
\(^{406}\) Myers, *Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology*, 190.
\(^{407}\) Ibid., 167.
\(^{408}\) Ibid., 7-11.
\(^{409}\) Ibid., 11.
\(^{410}\) Ibid., 12.
of this project since the ‘use-value’ approach of much homiletics is problematic when brought into conversation with a doctrine of God. This is a reason why I have contended that it is necessary for a crisis homiletic to start with God, and it could be argued that this should be the case for all methods. In terms of the radical homiletic of Myers it appears that in its search for God he makes God very difficult to find, becoming lost in ineffability. My observation of his homiletic is that the appropriation of deconstruction, whilst full of potential for some areas, is perhaps stretched too far in being applied here to the encounter with God. To return to Rubenstein, the fact that apophasis has a ‘locatable arché and telos’ is the strength of the approach, that in the end it reaches for something:

As distinct from both the motionless confidence ontotheology and the aimlessness of différance, apophatic desire is neither resolved nor ateleological. The apophatic self, marked by an endless desire to represent that which she cannot represent, is thus marked by a certain absence – but also by an excess of presence, which constantly unspeaks her speech and speaks through her silence. Always interrupted and undone, “mystical speech” has no proper subject or object, and can only emerge through abandonment of the speaking self and spoken God.411

There remains a mystery in what it is to speak of God and to encounter him. Myers does not reject the place of mystery and cites William Turner Jr. who states that preachers need to encounter the mystery of God, a mystery which is ‘given in self-disclosure in moments that are inherent to that mystery.’412 He also refers to the claim of Herbert McCabe that through our words about God we do not access the Word per se but access ‘a mystery beyond our understanding which we do not create, but which rather creates us and our understanding and our whole world.’413 From here he develops his ‘hauntology’ homiletic, but I do not believe it is necessary. This research has uncovered for me the potential of the apophatic and what it is to speak of the impassible God. This in itself is a radical homiletic which dispenses with philosophical deconstruction and grounds the sermon and also homiletics in the search to speak of God. I return to a definition of preaching from Myers that I referred to in an earlier chapter. It concludes with the claim that ‘preaching is a wormhole that utterly reorients

411 Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology.”
412 Myers, Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology, 165.
413 Herbert McCabe and Brian Davies, God Still Matters, Continuum Icons (London; New York: Continuum, 2005), 28. Cited in Myers, Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology, 174.
our relation to time and matter, to eternity and all that matters.\textsuperscript{414} I contend that the proposed methodology of this study resonates with such a definition and does not need to resort to post-modern deconstruction to achieve it, but simply to the apophatic challenge of how we speak of God, so that in the end we can speak of him.

\textsuperscript{414} Preaching Must Die! Troubling Homiletical Theology, 187.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bishop, Marsha Brock, and David Patrick Polk. *And the Angels Wept: From the Pulpits of Oklahoma City after the Bombing*. St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1995.


APPENDIX
Pathway through the Course 2012-2018

Yrs. 1 & 2: 2012-2014
Six Module assignments - 5,000 words maximum per assignment

Yr. 3: 2014-2015
Ministerial Focussed Study – 15,000 words maximum

The module topics were compulsory, but the assignment focus within that topic was a free choice by the candidate subject to approval. My choice varied for each module, but I invariably either focused on a scholar in that field or on a subject related to homiletics where possible.

Year 1

Practical Theology
January 2013 – Word Count 5010

Give a critical account of the contribution to practical theology made by Don S Browning.

In this essay I considered Don Browning’s fundamental practical theology and contended that he showed an over reliance on practical reason at the expense of necessary deductive approaches to the Biblical revelation. I agreed with his core proposal but demonstrated the fragility of his approach when he does not modify it to allow for revelation. In conclusion I dialogued with Leslie Newbigin and suggested that there is, in that interaction, scope for further research.

Liturgical Theology
May 2013 – Word Count 4936

Assess the contribution of Stanley Hauerwas to the debate about how ethics and liturgy are related.

In this essay I demonstrated the important place of liturgical theology in Hauerwas’s work. In his searching for a locus for his ethics he locates his project within the church
as an ethical entity. I outline the strengths and weaknesses of his approach suggesting further avenues for research.

**Spirituality**  
**September 2013 – Word Count 4953**

*Do Meister Eckhart's sermons ‘work’ for us today, and if so, how?*

I proposed that Eckhart's sermons do work for us today, as there is a climate of spiritual confusion that is fertile ground for Eckhart's key tenets. I focused on the concept of *Detachment* as to why & how the sermons work but questioned whether this is simply an ideal and contradicts Biblical orthodoxy despite its challenge. I saw parallels in the work of two French sociologists including Henri Lefebvre and his idea of the *Total Man*, which proposes a secular concept of detachment. I concluded that further research would be merited into how to apply the idea of detachment in the church, and whether there is any relationship here with the concept of *acedia*: spiritual torpor.

**Year 2**  
**Systematics**  
**January 2014 – Word count 4992**

*The Creative Suffering of God: Paul Fiddes desires to speak of a 'God who suffers eminently and yet is still God, and a God who suffers universally and yet is still present uniquely and decisively in the suffering of Christ.' Is this double task possible?*

Central here is the concept of the divine attributes as defined by classical theism. The doctrine of *immutability*, that God cannot change and the doctrine of *impassibility*, that God cannot suffer, have increasingly been seen to be problematic, perceived to lean too heavily on a Greek world view and leaving the believer with a dilemma, ‘God is sovereign over suffering and yet, in teaching unique to the Christian faith among the major religions, God also made himself vulnerable and subject to suffering.’\(^{415}\) This then necessitates some way of reconciling a sovereign God with one who suffers in

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Jesus. Modern reflection on this issue has increasingly seen immutability and impassibility as doctrinal impositions upon the idea of God which force the theologian to come to conclusions which would not be reached if we began today with the Biblical text and experience of faith. As a result of this we now seem to speak not simply of a God who can suffer, but a God who must suffer. This essay simply asked, ‘Why then has this shift taken place?’

**Moral Theology**

**May 2014 – Word Count 4997**

*Whom shall a Christian Marry?*

This assignment began by considering Rowan Williams and his well-known essay on moral decision making. The discussion of the possibility of universal ethics was applied to this complex but often marginalised aspect of marriage. I argued for marriage as a vocation and an act of ‘heroic’ resistance whilst highlighting changing attitudes and practices within faith communities. Fundamental was the question of whether a faith leader can or should instruct people on whom they should marry.

**Empirical Research Methods**

**Sept 2014 – Word Count 4907**

*A proposal for an Empirical Research Project: What do preachers think about the podcasting of sermons?*

This assignment was fundamentally developmental in nature. Here I outlined my proposal for my third-year project and contended for the importance of a focus on digital religion and its relationship to homiletics. The practice of podcasting was introduced, and I proposed a survey with a large sample group to discover attitudes to both preaching and podcasting.
A Critical Study of the Perceptions of Podcasting Sermons Amongst Preachers. [This assignment was required to be empirical in nature to demonstrate an understanding of the basic skills. The DthMin course was established with empirical research in mind.]

The creation narrative in Genesis begins with God speaking. Christianity has always had proclamation at its core with the sermon occupying a central place in the gathered worship of the faithful. Technological innovations and the decline in church attendance have caused many to rethink what it is to proclaim the tenets of faith in a rapidly changing world. Sermons have long been recorded using the media of the day and the practice of podcasting sermons online has become increasingly common. This practice raises questions of the understanding of the form and function of the sermon today, and the effects of adopting this very modern media. Despite the fact that the practice is widespread, there has been little academic consideration, and this study asks whether this lack of theological reflection is also evident amongst preachers. This research uses questionnaires and interviews to explore three interrelated questions with the ministers of the North Western Baptist Association:

1. How does the preacher understand the purpose of the sermon?

2. How does the preacher understand the purpose of the podcasting of sermons?

3. Is there a conflict for the preacher between their understanding of the purpose of the sermon and their understanding of the purpose of preaching?

The research demonstrated that podcasting practice is not always influenced by the preachers understanding of the form and function of the sermon, with those who do podcast often doing so without theological reflection and consideration of the effects of the practice. It is seen as just another distributing media to use. A foundation here is laid for further research, which is particularly pertinent as preachers were shown to be lacking in confidence and conviction as to the form and function of the sermon in this liquid age.