

rending questions. She does not pretend that there are easy answers but at the same does not argue they disprove the existence or love of God. Rather Dillard quotes this Jewish blessing which once again challenges us to deal with both God and the reality of our fallen world.

While allowing for the possibility that the range and detail of the blessings make them susceptible to formalism, legalism and mechanical repetition, there is still great value in exploring them. Every single blessing focuses on God and his kingly rule. Christians who pray 'Thy kingdom come' can only be edified by familiarity with these. Here is a range of prayers, many of which are impossible to date and may well

pre-date the days of Jesus himself that will enrich and encourage us. They bring God into the world of everyday life and they face the dilemmas, discrepancies, hardships and paradoxes of that life with theo-centred hope. Their value does not depend on our memorizing every one of them but at least they serve to prompt us to respond no matter what the situation. When Paul called the saints to pray at all times he was not putting a three line whip on the mid-week prayer meeting. More likely he was reflecting that all embracing Hebraic approach to life which once embraced, allows us to pray at all times without going mad.

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Evangelical Preaching in Northern Ireland – a Brainstorming Response.

Drew Gibson

KEYWORDS: irrelevance, guilt, self-esteem, contextualisation, discernment, interactive teaching, dialogue, contemporary interpretation, listening discussion

These days I am more often listening to someone else preaching than doing the preaching myself and I have come to the conclusion that two of the clearest features of much contemporary Evangelical preaching in Northern Ireland are blandness and irrelevance. This is not to say that all evangelical preaching is of poor quality but far too often in my work as a theological teacher I chat with students of all ages who find themselves unable to relate to what they hear from the pulpit. This would not be a problem if these students were nineteen year old budding academic theologians whose new-found theological 'enlightenment' had made them impatient with the less 'sexy' theology of their pastor. But the students who complain to me are full time and part time; more and less intelligent; male and female; old and young. They cover the social, economic and denominational spectra but they are united in their complaint that what they hear from the pulpit is remarkable only for its irrelevance. Curiously, some will maintain that their pastor is a 'great teacher' but this often means no more than that he is hard to understand or that he rehearses the old truths faithfully.

How can it be that someone listening to a sermon can think that the sermon is both 'good teaching' and completely irrelevant? My guess is that it is because statements of accurate biblical facts and doctrines, even when accompanied with real spiritual passion, are just not enough. It is possible to be completely faithful to the truth contained in Scripture but to so present this truth that the presentation itself alienates the hearers from the truth. In other words, truth telling is not the same as preaching, either in form or in content.

Thielicke considers this practical irrelevance to be 'a Docetic view of human beings [in which] . . . the very hearers who are troubled by real situational problems feel that they have been bypassed'.¹ From a more down to earth perspective Banks quotes the comment of a middle-aged businessman to a preacher, 'But when you spoke, I didn't hear a sermon at all. Instead I heard someone talking about what was actually going on in my own life.'² The businessman's presupposition was that a sermon is, by definition, irrelevant to everyday life.

Evangelicals in Northern Ireland do guilt very well. We know how to bring people face to face with their sins and shortcomings; this is right and necessary. Alongside this we have a very correct desire to elevate the majesty of God, his purity and transcendence. But the way in which we combine these often has the effect of diminishing our self-esteem and lowering both our sense of worth and our ability to face the world head on. The practical effect on many Christians is to send them out with their shoulders drooping and their tails between their legs; they are cowed rather than empowered.

I offer this little piece of self-analysis on the basis that it is not only Northern Irish Evangelicals who must address this issue but many Evangelicals in other parts of the world also.

Hermeneutics and Homiletics

I have the feeling that this state of affairs is at least partly a result of our understanding of the nature of homiletics and hermeneutics. Putting this another way, the patterns of interpreting Scripture and proclaiming the results of this interpretation have been inherited from the past and in the past have been blessed by God but I wonder if the time has now come to question both, lest, in our desire to be faithful

to our heritage, we continue to cling to that which the Holy Spirit has left behind. Darrell Guder reminds us that

We participate in established and received practices, but we are continually called to reinterpret them in the light of God's call for our common life and shared ministry in our present situation. Missional communities are called to be both faithful and innovative as they contribute to and pass on the historical practices that shape the life and purpose of the Christian community.³

Is it possible that the practice of preaching as we experience it today has become so decontextualised that it is actually destructive to the process of God communicating with his people and through his people to a lost world?

Hermeneutics normally has a logical priority over homiletics but I wonder if, in Evangelical circles in Northern Ireland, the order is in fact reversed. Does our understanding of the nature of preaching dominate the way in which we interpret Scripture? If our understanding of preaching is something like 'the public declaration of biblical truth' then this will drive our hermeneutic and all subsequent exegesis. We will approach Scripture as a storehouse of true statements and preaching as the explanation of these in order that they might be understood by our hearers. The responsibility of the hearers is to listen attentively, apply their minds to understand and then to apply what they understand to their lives. Such an understanding elevates a historically conditioned homiletical practice to a divinely ordained status. This monological pattern of preaching is not the only pattern either in the history of the church or within the canon of Scripture.

Homiletics

Evangelicals have traditionally understood preaching as the contemporary expression of prophecy so that a sermon could almost open with the words, 'Thus says the LORD. . .'. There is merit in this because we affirm the Bible as the infallible message from God and if the preacher is communicating biblical truth to his hearers then his words will come with a real, delegated authority. However, such an understanding of preaching does an injustice to the nature of prophecy in both Old and New Testaments. In both parts of Scripture, the words of the prophet were not heard as unquestionable oracles. In the Old Testament there were guidelines for identifying the false prophet whose words were not to be trusted⁴ and in the New Testament the words of the prophet were to be weighed by the community or its leaders⁵. In both cases, the words of the prophet had authority only in context and the community had a role to play in determining the authority to be given to the prophet's words. Indeed, even for the genuine prophets in Israel we cannot imagine that the words recorded in the Old Testament are the only words that they wrote or spoke, so some filtering by the community must have taken place. Again, in the New Testament Paul seems to have written other letters⁶ and their exclusion from the New Testament along with much other material also shows the community of faith filtering that which claims to speak with divinely delegated authority. Obviously we cannot maintain that the receiving community will always make righteous decisions about what to accept as a genuine message from God, as the prophet Jeremiah knew only too well,

but to encourage the people of God to understand themselves as merely obedient recipients is surely inappropriate.

In most contemporary churches opportunities for the community to respond with authority to the preached word, as the primitive Christian community did to the words of those who claimed some sort of prophetic authority, are few and far between. Hearers of sermons are expected to respond with acceptance and then to apply what they hear to their lives. The possibility of hearing, considering and rejecting the content of a sermon is almost unknown and attempts to respond with questions are often seen as offering negative criticism of the preacher.

Theologically, this situation is very unhelpful. For example, such a monological approach denies the equal access of all believers to the mind of God through the Holy Spirit, it denies the nature of the Body of Christ as a mutually corrective and supportive organism, it denies the gifts of discernment, it greatly inhibits the development of the 'mind of Christ'. In practice preachers are elevated to a mediatorial position that is entirely foreign to the Evangelical tradition. They become the official interpreters of the Bible in a way that can only be described as 'magisterial'.

In practical terms there may be many problems also. Thoughtful Christians are inhibited from exploring the Bible on their own, lest they arrive at conclusions that differ from those of the preachers. The preachers' predilections, hobby horses, fears and blind spots can all direct their exposition so that, although sermons may come from diverse parts of Scripture, the same themes may recur with unscriptural regularity. Because preachers can apply Scripture only from within their own frame of reference they will be unable to apply it with authority to many situations. Thus, some hearers may either be regularly frustrated that their situation is never addressed while others are even more frustrated that their situation is addressed from a position of ignorance, which makes the application irrelevant or even harmful. Further, in many churches there are A level RE students, undergraduate theology students, well read and thoughtful Christians, experienced missionaries or young people who have spent gap years or vacations in mission situations whose level of theological understanding or experience of Christian mission goes beyond that of the rest of the congregation or even of the preacher. For such to be merely passive recipients is absurd. Again, the expectation of the people in the pews is that the sermon will speak to them as individuals, not least because Evangelicals always think in terms of a personal rather than a corporate encounter with God.

Even from the broader cultural perspective, today most learning is done interactively with learners and teachers in dialogue with each other and with their sources. Many people are not afraid to ask questions and express their own point of view (and of course such interactions were part and parcel of God's communication with his people throughout Scripture).⁷ In addition, contemporary society allows such a wide range of choices and such a degree of individualised options that young people in particular expect to engage with all aspects of life directly and personally. They expect their needs to be met individually but this desire produces its own frustration as they do not have the facility to apply anything that is presented in general terms to the specifics of their

own lives. As one twenty year old put it, 'All I want is reality. Show me God. Help me to understand why life is the way it is, and how I can experience it more fully and with greater joy. I don't want empty promises. I want the real thing. And I'll go wherever I find that truth system.'⁸ From the point of view of the preacher, the practicality of speaking directly to such a wide range of individuals and situations represented by an average congregation is almost unbearable. To speak directly to even a limited range of concrete situations would mean either being highly selective or painting with such broad brush strokes as to be unacceptably bland or being lost in a welter of qualifications or having sermons of uncontrollable length!

Another consideration is raised by a phrase of Gustavo Gutierrez when he describes Jesus as 'the word made gesture'.⁹ Can we take the incarnation as a model for a type of preaching that is intimately related to doctrine and life? When God the son came into the world it was not a move from word to gesture. It was the word in action, the two were permanently joined. Can we not apply this and make the preached word more intimately bound up with the life of the people? This can be done only if the people are integrated into the preaching process.

It is not difficult to see that a more dialogical approach to homiletics is an absolute necessity but how is it to be achieved? Following are a few suggestions: some are very familiar, some are not.

Dialogue before and during the sermon

Opportunities to have an input into the sermon as it is being prepared will be explored below as part of our consideration of the hermeneutical process.

Multi-media presentations of sermons are already becoming more common and these presentations allow for a much increased level of understanding, not least because the selection of graphics, video clips and the like forces preachers to earth their material in more than abstract concepts. A well chosen picture can instantly engage emotions and elicit responses that would require a couple of minutes to tease out using spoken words alone. The next step from multi-media is multi-sensory presentations. Using smell, touch and taste is probably not for every Sunday but meeting on a winter evening with no heat on might be a useful context for studying the second half of 2Cor.11 or smelling freshly baked bread just before lunch time on Sunday morning might draw out some extra nuances from John 15.

There is no reason why a sermon should always be delivered by one person. Multi-person presentation of sermons can range from well structured presentations in which three people deliver three logically connected points in turn or three people giving interpretations of a text from different perspectives to an informal discussion on which the congregation are 'eavesdroppers' or even an open, roving microphone discussion. Obviously the more open a discussion becomes, the more dangers are introduced. Frankly, this is unavoidable but even the dangers may have hidden benefits. For example, if someone takes the opportunity to vent his feelings on another member of the congregation (verbally of course!) this may provide an opportunity for the chair of

the discussion to provide an object lesson in conflict resolution, it may bring into the open things that have been festering in private and that need to be aired or it may demonstrate the lack of wisdom of a crackpot and thus destroy his credibility.

Dialogue during and after the sermon

Opportunities for immediate response during the sermon are Sunday morning parallels to the common educational experience of every child at school and most students in higher education. They also mirror the experience of many people at work who are expected to make their contributions at committee meetings or call to account salesmen making their pitch. Any decent teacher is at ease being challenged by his or her students and if we hope to have a teaching ministry in the church we should accept this here also. As we have noted above, opening a sermon to dialogue introduces dangers. Preachers may be asked questions that they cannot answer; they may be sidetracked into irrelevant areas or their train of thought may be lost. But these dangers are the common lot of any teacher and again any capable teacher should be well able to deal with them, indeed an inability to deal with genuine queries or interjections might even call into question an individual's claim to have a Spirit-given gift of teaching.

Opportunities for immediate response after the sermon already exist in many places, as a cup of coffee is often available for any who wish to stay after the end of a formal service of worship. This could easily be formalised into opportunities for various types of response. Some of the following might be appropriate titles for small groups that meet to discuss the sermon, 'Vicar, I disagree. . . ' 'Ask the Pastor.' 'What does this sermon mean for us housewives?' This last option leads to thinking about opportunities for like-minded response to a sermon by more homogeneous groups such as young people, tradesmen, elderly women, BB officers, bowling club members, families and many others. It is impossible, in the scope of one sermon to make applications that are relevant to all situations but it would be most useful for people to make their own applications as part of a small group of folk whose situations are similar. This would have the added benefit of facilitating mutual support among groups whose jobs or family circumstances bring special pressures that 'outsiders' cannot really understand. For example, if a sermon is preached on Gen.1:24-31, farmers and 'Greens' might debate what it means to rule over the earth; business people might discuss gender equality in the workplace, based on v.27; vegetarians might want to put their case forward, based on vv.29-30; people with disabilities, their families and carers might share their experiences of society's practical denials of v.26. Discussion of the sermon could become the springboard for a prayer group among people whose jobs involve selling or a programme of practical mutual encouragement for police officers or a more effective coordination of the church's support of its overseas missionaries.

Another aspect of dialogical preaching is to allow responses from the congregation to influence the next sermon. This may mean revisiting the same text or preaching on a related text in order to correct an unexpected misunderstanding or omission. This may play havoc with neat forward planning and printed

programmes but this is a small price to pay for increased engagement with the text of Scripture by more people, at a deeper level. Less radically, it may be that a response to a given sermon can be anticipated and a pair or series of sermons preached by people who take divergent views on a subject or text. For example Christians in any church in Northern Ireland may well disagree on the interpretation and application of Paul's teaching on submission to the governing authorities in Romans 11 and the opportunity to listen to each other and respond to what we hear would be invaluable.

Opportunities to search the Bible further individually and in groups really ought to be part and parcel of contemporary Evangelical preaching. Putting together a list of biblical references for further study and giving a bibliography are by no means difficult. Useful questions for discussion are straightforward to compose and imaginative 'homework' options can be found. Think, for example, of a sermon on Ephesians 6:1-4. Other biblical texts spring readily to mind, books on parenting and the traumas of family life are legion, questions for discussion are not hard to construct. A homework task might be to watch an episode of 'Rug Rats', 'Malcolm in the Middle' or 'My Parents are Aliens' and relate its portrayal of family life to the text or content of the sermon.

Opportunities to respond creatively, by improvising drama, by sketching or painting, or by writing poetry, songs or short stories could be most useful in engaging hidden talents or allowing people who find verbalising their opinions in public difficult. Such activities could bring sharply into focus aspects of spiritual truth that are best communicated visually, poetically or in narrative. A series of sermons on the life of David could be rounded off with an evening of poetry, song and short stories based on incidents from his life or an exhibition of artwork and flower arrangements based on some of the Davidic Psalms.

It stands to reason that if the weekly sermon is the main teaching method in the church then God must speak through it to the church about the church's ongoing life and development. Some conscious exploration of opportunities to respond to a sermon in the everyday life of the church should be sought regularly. 'What does this sermon mean for the life of our church?' should be regularly asked. It would probably be chaotic if each monthly leaders' meeting tried to instigate changes based on the last month's sermons but sermon driven change need not happen like this. If a weekly log is kept of the main themes of and responses to sermons then patterns might emerge that will guide the slower development of the life of the church. The everyday life of the church consists of worship, fellowship and mission so some people could be charged with the responsibility of keeping their ears and eyes open for what God might be saying about each of these areas and their reports at the end of every sermon series could form the basis for a broader discussion of church life.

Hermeneutics

We have already drifted into thinking about hermeneutical issues. In practice, in preparation for a sermon, an Evangelical hermeneutic operates something like this. Read the text carefully and prayerfully (preferably in the original language), paying attention to the original context especially what the

words would have meant to the original hearers. Allow other parts of Scripture to shed light on the specific passage being considered. Search the commentators for their insights and allow the insights of Evangelical commentators to have the greatest weight. On the basis of these considerations, decide on the meaning of the text and present it in three coherent points. This method has much to commend it and, in my opinion, is much preferable to some competing methods. However, this is not and cannot be the only hermeneutical method open to Evangelicals. The primary reason for this assertion is that this is not the only method used in Scripture as biblical writers seek to use the Scriptures available to them in their day. A secondary reason is that this has not been the most common method used in the history of the church. A third and most compelling reason is that other methods have obviously been blessed by God, even in contexts in which the standard Evangelical method is most at home. One example will make the point. Allegorising of the Scriptures has been roundly condemned by Evangelical scholars for generations as being a most dubious hermeneutical method, yet we can plainly see this method in use in Scripture itself;¹⁰ it has a long and honourable tradition in the church, especially in the early church and the allegorical preaching of some renowned evangelists has led many into the kingdom. Therefore it would seem that there are good grounds then for accepting this as an alternative method. To take a second example, in many cultures both in the developed and developing worlds, stories have a power to move and communicate in a way that careful presentation of accurate information can never do, hyperbole communicates well as does the painting of word pictures. Each of these represents an approach to Scripture that is both represented in Scripture itself and is part of the normal means of communication in many cultures. Surely this means that we have complete justification for using these methods in our preaching. Can we even go further and claim that to use the standard Evangelical hermeneutic and its accompanying homiletic is to use a method that is rare in Scripture and is actually a barrier to good communication in many cultures?

Bringing things right home, when we talk of cultures in this context, we are not talking of esoteric or exotic cultures in distant parts of the globe, we are talking about the culture of the bloke in the street, the culture of the average teenager, the culture of the housewife and the TV soap watcher. If we use the standard historical critical method as the only foundation of our preaching we are not enabling the ordinary Christian to access Scripture in terms that are faithful to Scripture and to his or her own way of thinking, we are not modelling what he or she should be doing or, to return to an earlier theme, we are in danger of setting ourselves up as intermediaries between God and his people. Perhaps (with less hyperbole!) we are encouraging ordinary Christians to use a method that they are largely incapable of using and keeping them from using methods that are natural to their way of thinking and that they could use with great profit. How much better it would be if we could help people to use natural hermeneutical methods in a disciplined and spiritual way by modelling these in our preaching.

What would we need to do this properly? We need proper guidelines for an appropriate allegorical method, well established boundaries for hyperbole, good parameters for

composing and telling stories and, most interesting of all, creative flair for painting word pictures. The drawing up of rules, development of guidelines and establishment of principles all demand hard headed thinking but creative flair is not something that can be organized by a committee. Perhaps it is this last element, the creative element that is most frightening to Evangelicals. We can cope with rigorous thinking and hard, disciplined work but we are not so good at allowing space for creativity. This is particularly threatening to those of us who are not particularly creative or who may have had our creative abilities beaten down by our theological education in which rehearsing the ancient truths in the ancient ways was held in highest esteem. But, think for a minute of the congregations to whom we preach. They are the very people whom we are hoping to engage with our sermons so why not use the creativity and the instinctive understanding that they possess in the preparation of our sermons? Why not allow them to help us prepare? Why must they always be hearers only? Why should they not be part of the hermeneutical and homiletical process? Surely Sedmak is correct when he claims that 'People want to be part of a sermon'.¹¹

A sermon by committee? Sounds dreadful but it might have a vitality and indeed a validity that monologues lack. After all, it seems more than likely that much of Scripture was produced by 'committees' so why should the interpretation of Scripture not be done by 'committees'? If the Psalms and Proverbs were compiled by editors and if the Gospels used earlier sources why should their interpretation into everyday life be done by a single person. There are many natural groups in most churches and a preacher could well take an hour of his time to sit down with a different group each week to mull over the meaning of his text for the following Sunday. An hour spent with half a dozen BB officers, bowlers, elderly women, Sunday school children or unemployed teenagers could be of more value than an hour with the Puritans or Louis Berkhof. The group could generate alternative interpretations, supply illustrative anecdotes, suggest relevant applications and so on. The group would then own the sermon and if every subgroup in the congregation were to be involved in this way ownership of the pulpit ministry would expand to fill the space available. If we genuinely believe in the priesthood of all believers, the presence of the Holy Spirit with equal intimacy in every believer, the full incorporation of every believer as an important member of the body of Christ and the fatherhood of God embracing every believer then, theologically, 'committee' sermons are not only acceptable, they are arguably mandatory.

We can go even further, why not make sermon preparation part of the evangelistic outreach of the church? Inviting various groups of non-Christians to help prepare sermons would lead them to interact with Scripture for themselves, they would be keen to hear the results of their contributions and would, no doubt want to make their comments on the sermon, how the preacher had misunderstood what they had said, how they still disagreed with his interpretation or application, how they wanted to have another go at the same passage or another passage. A few years ago I heard Walter Hollenweger tell of his church's imaginative evangelistic approach to Easter. Annually they performed the Passion story on Easter Sunday but all of the parts with the exception

of Jesus were played by non-Christians; all that was necessary to take part was an interest in amateur dramatics. It is easy to see how this would inevitably lead to all sorts of thoughtful discussion and a traditional sermon would be utterly unnecessary. The same could be done at any of the Christian festivals.

Might we even have here a line of thinking for pastoral visitation in which the minister says to the 'visitee', 'I'm preaching on this verse on Sunday, what do you think I should say?' Now, I recognize that it is unlikely to be put as bluntly as that but if the 'visitee' knows that her comments will be helping form the sermon on Sunday then not only might she be there to hear the sermon but she should find some real relevance in what is being preached for her situation.

But all of this 'preparatory interaction' might give rise to other problems. What if the 'consultative' groups conclude with interpretations with which the preacher is unhappy? The preacher has a choice to make. He can set two interpretations side by side, openly acknowledging that one is his and the other is that of, say, some of the women from the mothers and toddlers group. Alternatively, if the groups are confident, they could choose representatives and be allowed to give their interpretations alongside those of the preacher. The congregation would then have to decide which are the best interpretations and would be drawn into the engagement with Scripture that has already begun. Coffee should be on hand after the benediction because in many churches people will want to give their opinions and burnt Sunday lunches or late Sunday bed times might become common.

What then is the role of the preacher? Does he become merely a mouthpiece for each subgroup in turn? In this arrangement the preacher has the opportunity to use his gifts and training far more than is possible in traditional sermon preparation. He ought to be able to bring other passages of Scripture into the discussion. He may well have to answer questions about the cultural background to a passage and to know some subtleties of Hebrew vocabulary or Greek syntax. He will have to be able to compare the 'consultative' groups' interpretations with other interpretations from the past and other contemporary interpretations from other parts of the world. He should also ask questions of the groups, point out logical flaws and force them to think of the practical consequences of their interpretations.

All of this will make the task of the preachers very different from the traditional task. They will have to be on their mettle in those things for which Bible college, theological college or their own study have prepared them but they will be relieved of that task that dogs every preacher, making the sermon relevant to the congregation. They will also be sharing the responsibility that no person has the right to arrogate to himself, that is being the sole mouthpiece for God in the public arena of the church community. There will also be spin-off benefits. The church pastor becomes a real listener and an equal with those to whom he listens. He will embrace a certain vulnerability that can only be good for relationships and he will preach with an altogether different kind of authority while, in turn, the people will also understand the task of their pastor more fully than ever before.

Conclusion

Gibbs and Coffey are correct when they claim that 'the people's understanding of God in both the Old and New Testament, came as a result of encountering the presence of God in the midst of a great variety of situations. Propositions were not simply parachuted from heaven but were forged on the anvil of life's hard knocks.'¹² How much less appropriate are propositions parachuted from a pulpit. The intention of the suggestions above is ultimately that the people will own the interpretation and application of Scripture. It will be theology from below, a people's theology that resonates with their lives and speaks to their hearts.

Of course this smorgasbord of ideas is neither comprehensive nor definitive. It is given to show the range of ways in which people may be transformed from passive recipients into active participants in the process by which God regularly communicates with his people through 'rightly dividing the word of truth'. The ideas above may include some that are utterly impractical in some churches but some ideas at least could be put in place with minimum disruption (and no financial outlay!).

This 'people's hermeneutic' and interactive homiletic seem to be consonant with both the method of Scripture itself and with contemporary western culture. Rather than being the preaching fodder that they can be in Evangelical churches the people will have their place as honoured members of the community of Christ, taking responsibility for their own spiritual nourishment rather than being spoon fed, drip fed or even (perish the thought) force fed.

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Notes

- 1 Thielicke in Banks: 59
- 2 Banks: 58f
- 3 Guder:154
- 4 Deut.13:1-3; 18:21-22,
- 5 1Cor.14:29, 37; Acts 21:10-14
- 6 Col.4:16
- 7 The Lord discusses with Abraham, Moses and Job; Job discusses with his friends; Jeremiah debates with his opponents; Jesus has discussions with many people and the disciples work their way together through a number of issues in Acts.
- 8 Drane, 118
- 9 Gutierrez and Shaull, 90
- 10 Luke 8:5-15; Gal.4:21-31
- 11 Sedmak, 126
- 12 Gibbs and Coffey, 126

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