Theologian Ed Farley has argued that preachers preach not so much Biblical texts as the gospel. As important as Biblical texts are, the object of proclamation is not the text itself, but the gospel. As part of our research, systematician Robert Kelly and I have sought to bring Farley’s important theological claim to bear on a specific, more occasional form of homiletical activity: the situational sermon. Although most Sundays preachers will do the work of gospel proclamation with a stipulated text in view, whether provided by the lectionary or chosen by some other means, on some occasions preachers are faced with situations that go far beyond what any pre-selected text can foresee. There are some moments for preaching—say, a congregational crisis, the Sunday after a natural disaster, or an important moment of public decision—when a Biblical text is no longer fore-grounded, but the situation itself is. In moments like these, I contend, the role of the preacher as exegete recedes yet further and the role of the preacher as a theologian of the gospel comes to the fore.

The Situational Sermon and the Problem of Topical Preaching

Of course, the idea of situational preaching brings with it certain problems. Toward the early part of the twentieth-century Harry Emerson Fosdick tried to make a case for a type of preaching he called the “project method.” For Fosdick, a too narrow vision of Biblical preaching had proved to be problematic for the early twentieth-century pulpit. “Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites,” Fosdick quipped. On the other hand, Fosdick also worried that some forms of topical preaching were simply too subjective. Instead, what Fosdick envisioned with his project method was a more relevant pulpit that took the problems of the world seriously and supplied gospel answers to them. Thus, if the problem people faced in life was, say, depression, then preaching should bring the gospel to bear on that problem. Indeed, for Fosdick, the success of such preaching on Sunday was often measured by the number of people who showed up for counseling at the pastor’s office on Monday: “This, I take it, is the final test of a

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4 Ibid., 30.
sermon’s worth: how many individuals wish to see the preacher alone?5 Such preaching was thus relevant preaching—relevant to the world as people experienced it.

Naturally, such a naively correlationist view of preaching proved problematic. As soon as the gospel is envisioned as the answer to all the questions we are asking, the scope of the gospel is truncated. What if, for example, the gospel does not merely answer our questions, but parabolically re-frames or even over-turns them? If our worldly perspectives always determine what is “relevant,” the movement from our question to gospel answer tends to become just a barely-baptized way of turning the gospel into culture religion. The good news of the gospel should, after all, be more than the problem/solution gambit of laundry detergent commercials and headache remedy ads. If the movement is always unidirectional between worldly problem and gospel solution, such “relevance” will probably lead to a cultural domestication of the gospel. Perhaps this is why, as David Buttrick has noted, the therapeutic gospel triumphed for so much of the twentieth century.6 In the name of being “relevant,” the gospel was reduced to one-to-one therapy. We also may be witnessing a new form in our day and age, when certain forms of preaching sound more like motivational speaking or a pep-talk from the ecclesiastical CEO. In this case, the gospel may end up being reduced to mere management. Either way, the gospel loses its theological content and scope.

**Situational Preaching as Proclaiming the Gospel in Light of a Situation**

The key for preacher, therefore, is to become more theologically focused on the gospel in light of the situation. Rather than viewing the gospel as an answer to a problem, we need to ask what the gospel looks like in light of it. Of course, such an approach brings with it some problems of its own.

On the one hand, the term “gospel” is one we sometimes bandy about without defining. It can easily become a kind of empty cipher. As a result, for our hearers too often the term is confused with the final lection that is read according to the ecumenical order of the lectionary (as in, “the Gospel According to Luke”). Yet the gospel is not simply reducible to the Bible that bears witness to it, let alone the four Gospels that bear the same generic name. Indeed, the gospel is something we should be able to talk about with our preaching, reflect on for our preaching, and develop in our preaching. It should help us focus our work theologically so we can know what to say in the pulpit when difficult situations emerge in parish life.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume that the gospel is merely a timeless essence standing apart from life as lived.7 The gospel is not like condensed soup, which needs only a can of local water to make reasonably palatable. No, when we talk about the gospel in light of situations, different aspects of it come to the fore and require our attention. Theologian Ed Farley puts it this way:

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5 Ibid., 40.


7 For a survey of 19th and 20th century thought on this issue, see Stephen Sykes excellent work, *The Identity of Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973). This is in part why Sykes abandons the language of the “Essence of Christianity” for the term “identity.”
Gospel is not a thing to be defined. It is not a doctrine, a delimited objective content. The summaries in Acts and in Paul of what is proclaimed, the formulas of the kerygma, attest to this. Phrases like “the kingdom of God,” “Jesus as Lord,” “Christ crucified” do have content, but that content is not simply a quantity of information. To proclaim means to bring to bear a certain past event on the present in such a way as to open the future. Since the present is always specific and situational, the way that the past, the event of Christ, is brought to bear so as to elicit hope will never be captured in some timeless phrase, some ideality of language. Preaching the good tidings is a new task whenever and wherever it takes place.8

As a practical matter, for example, the gospel as preached at a situation like a funeral should sound somewhat different from the gospel as preached at a wedding. So, though we will need to think clearly about our theology of the gospel, we will probably not always be talking about the same gospel “things” in every situation. Because the gospel is preached in light of a situation, we will need to pay attention to enduring features of our common life that color our perceptions, including how those features help us both to “hear” and “mis-hear” the gospel. We can call these features “context”. We will also need to understand the many variations of situations that will call forth some gospel Word. All this is to say that preaching the gospel contextually in situations is both an exciting and demanding theological task. As such, it will also be quite different from the unidirectional movement of the old correlational preaching of the project method.9

**Locci Communes: Gospel Commonplaces for the Situational Pulpit**

Consequently, our book intends to speak to situations by appealing not to a cut-and-paste gospel, but to a structure of gospel “commonplaces,” a series of theological “loci” or “topics” that preachers can draw on for developing and organizing what they want to say. The idea of “Locci Communes” or common topics is an old one. The term appeared first in rhetorical manuals in the ancient world. When a speaker wished to figure out what to say, he or she could use either “special topics” unique to the matter being discussed (i.e., an argument among those rhetorical Greeks about whether to go to war against Troy would presumably include matters such as numbers of ships to get there; the costs of large, empty wooden horses; what one hoped to gain by going to war; etc.). At other points, a speaker might also use “common topics” or commonplaces, that is, arguments that one could appeal to in different kinds of speeches (e.g., “from the lesser to the greater”: as in, “if our Greek troops could make short order of the mighty Minoans, how much more could they truly rout those pathetic Trojans!”). Here commonplaces refer to arguments that you could use in more than one kind of speech.10 Given the fact that the

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8Farley, Practicing Gospel, 80.

9Two homileticians have endeavored to develop a kind of critical-correlational model for preaching that moves in the same helpful direction: David Buttrick with his work on “preaching in the mode of praxis” (Homiletic, 405-445) and Ron Allen in his book, Preaching the Topical Sermon (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

10In rhetorical theory commonplaces can refer to common themes used across different kinds of speeches or, as with Aristotle, patterns of argumentation or inference. Rhetorician Stephen O’Leary offers a helpful summary of the
situations of ministry are so variegated, it might be helpful indeed to refer to a series of homiletical-theological “commonplaces” that one could use to put together what to say in such moments.

Yet in this book the idea of “commonplaces” is for us far more theological than rhetorical. In fact, for a long time the same Latin phrase, Loci Communes, was used to designate theological treatises. The title was a very common one, for example, in the Reformation. Theologians like the Reformer Melanchthon wrote his famous work, Loci Communes, to make a brief compendium of Reformation theology more accessible.11 In such a time of rapid change, books in the form of a Loci Communes helped give early shape to emerging Protestant perspectives. In these books the “commonplaces” were the loci of theology: God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, salvation, eschatology, etc. It treated theology as a series of “common topics” or commonplaces to reflect on the Christian faith.

Nonetheless, though we recognize that preaching the gospel in light of situations is a structured way of thinking theologically, there is a center to that structure. For us its core is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. In one sense, it is quite natural to be so particular. My co-author on this forthcoming book, Robert Kelly, is a Lutheran systematic theologian. As a United Methodist, I am also aware that Wesley’s own understanding of it was profoundly impacted by hearing Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans read at Aldersgate.12 Our theological dialogue about gospel and situation proceeds quite naturally out of a place where our traditions overlap. Nonetheless, pastors of other denominations need not fret that our starting point for thinking situationally about a theology of the gospel is utterly irrelevant to their realities. Protestants and Roman Catholics alike share a commitment to preaching the gospel.13 Even among Protestants the gospel of God’s free gift of grace is hardly under anyone’s copyright.14 Yet if some sort of adaptation is required of the reader because of the variety of issues as it pertains to contemporary topical theory as it relates to millennial preaching in his book, Arguing the Apocalypse (New York: Oxford, 1994) 21-25.

11 A wonderful translation of and introduction to Melanchthon’s important work can be found in Clyde Manschreck’s Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci communes, 1555 (New York: Oxford, 1965).

12 The relationship of Wesley’s understanding of justification by faith to Luther and the other Reformers’ is complex. For further information, see Colin W. Williams, John Wesley’s Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), 57-73, esp. 64ff.

13 The document of the US Catholic Conference of Bishops, Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly (Washington, DC: USCC, 1982) 1, makes this quite clear by quoting on its first page from Vatican II’s Decree on the Ministry and the Life of Priests #4, “The primary duty of priests is the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all”. More recently, the issue of the content of that gospel, especially as it relates to justification, has emerged in theological discussions between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” (http://www.lutheranworld.org/Special_Events/OfficialDocuments/jd97.EN.html).

14 New Testament scholar Stephen Westerholm traces a fascinating history of the Apostle Paul’s influence and understanding through Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley in his book, Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The Lutheran Paul and his Critics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 3-87. Although these Protestant theologians stand at the head of diverging theological traditions, they take with great seriousness a largely Pauline understanding of justification by grace through faith. Naturally such views of Paul have come under serious question of late, especially the degree to which one can relate to a kind of Lutheran reading of “law” through Paul: e.g., Krister Stendahl [Paul among Jews and Gentiles (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) and E. P. Sanders [Paul, the Law, and the
theological traditions today, such adaptation is certainly of a piece with this whole book. Our gospel commonplaces will be starting points for pastors and their situational preaching ministry. Though we will try to begin at a common starting point, every preacher will need to engage the issues in his or her own way and unique situation.

The goal of our research for this forthcoming book is to give preachers gospel commonplaces that will aid them in their work of articulating the gospel in different situations of ministry and church life in the world. Because situations are so diverse, preachers will probably need to add to or otherwise modify what we will offer concerning situations like funerals, weddings, public crises, etc. A book cannot anticipate the special topics or nuances of every situation in ministry! However, it can at least give preachers some topics, commonplaces, which will get them started toward articulating the gospel in light of them. We view this structured gospel task as homiletical theology.15

Does this sound heavy? It certainly does. But a pastor is a resident theologian in her/his congregation. There are probably other people, whether in a parish or outside, who can offer better therapy to clients than a preacher can. There are probably also other people who can manage a business better than a pastor can. There are in the average community, however, few people who can relate with insight the unique situation of the people a pastor knows and love to the theological riches of the gospel. We hope our gospel commonplaces will help pastors get started. When difficult or even recurring situations pop up, there will at least be some place, some commonplace, with which to begin.

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15 Following theologian Ed Farley, homiletician Teresa Lockhart Stricklen has tried to show how homiletical theology can be understood as a unique kind of theological method in “Analgesic Jesus and the Power of God for Salvation: The Importance of Theological Method for Preaching,” in Papers of the Annual Meeting (38th Meeting; Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, comp.; December 2003), 242-252. In our book, of course, the work is of a much more modest scope, chiefly because we are limiting ourselves to specific types of situations that show up occasionally in pastoral ministry. For another related way of thinking about homiletical theology, see David Buttrick’s Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletical Theology (Fortress Resources for Preaching; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).