

# **Preaching That Heals Our Divides: A Model for Addressing Ethnocentrism and Reconciliation from the Pulpit**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Tragically, ethnocentrism appears to be rising in the United States. Three examples illustrate this disturbing trend: recently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a warning about a possible surge in hate crimes against Asian-Americans, the Anti-Defamation League sounded the alarm regarding an increase in anti-Semitic incidents, and black people such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were shockingly murdered.

Given this challenge, how can the faithful homiletician wisely address the idol of ethnocentrism from the pulpit?

This paper endeavors to answer that question and make a unique contribution to the field of homiletics by offering a six-step paradigm. First, the homiletician examines ethnocentrism theologically by exploring the ways the Holy Scriptures depict sin fueling alienation and division. Second, the preacher attends to ethnocentrism contextually: in her milieu—both historically and the present reality. Third, the communicator engages ethnocentrism personally: facing his sin and admitting his prejudices. Fourth, the homiletician admits her limitations: she is a herald and not a heart-changer. Fifth, the preacher employs the “Big Idea” philosophy in studying and proclaiming the text. Lastly, the communicator will hone in on specific themes and particular passages that will most incisively expose ethnocentrism and promote reconciliation and unity among the body of Christ.

The model proposed in this paper may provide homileticians with a robust and practical way to confront this social scourge with the hope of the gospel.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a land brimming with idols, it appears 2020 is the year many white Americans are being awakened to the ugly reality that our country remains beset by the blight of ethnocentrism. For instance, in April 2020, Christopher Wray, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a warning regarding “a potential . . . spike in hate crimes” against Asian-Americans due to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>1</sup> A short while later, the Anti-Defamation League announced “Antisemitic Incidents Hit All-Time High in 2019.”<sup>2</sup> Then, on May 25, came the horrific video depicting the murder of George Floyd while in police custody, which catalyzed protests and demonstrations in cities across the globe.

Our present reality raises a crucial question: how can the faithful homiletician wisely address the idol of ethnocentrism? In other words, how can she preach the Holy Scriptures with clarity, conviction, and sensitivity in confronting this scourge while also promoting justice, healing, and reconciliation?

This paper endeavors to answer that question and make a unique contribution to the field of homiletics by offering a model that engages ethnocentrism theologically, contextually, personally, positionally, methodologically, and categorically. If the communicator will traverse through these six dimensions, they will guide him toward a robust analysis of the problem and a constructive, gospel-centered solution.

## DEFINING ETHNOCENTRISM

This paper joins other scholars in distinguishing “race” from “ethnicity.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the focus here is on the idol of ethnocentrism rather than racism, although Jemar Tisby’s definition of racism as “*prejudice plus power*”<sup>4</sup> is a good one that can also apply to ethnocentrism, particularly when an ethnic group holds a dominant or majoritarian position in a culture. With that in mind, an ethnic group is one that is “set apart from others because of their national origin or distinctive cultural patterns.”<sup>5</sup> I concur with

Matthew Kim’s definition of ethnocentrism as

the belief that one’s ethnicity is the center of the universe, the most important, and thus ethnocentrists believe that all other ethnic groups are inferior to their own ethnic group. When we are ethnocentric, we look down on others and expect them to become just like us (i.e., forced assimilation).<sup>6</sup>

Ethnocentrism then, is animated by pride and alienation, which directs our attention to the theological dimension.

## THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

To address ethnocentrism properly, the homiletician—as a theologian—will examine this idol through a theological lens. In particular, the Bible can be interpreted through a metanarrative composed of “five movements: Creator, first creation, alienation, reconciliation, and final creation.”<sup>7</sup> The eternal, triune God is fundamentally relational: one being with three persons living in perfect harmony. God crafts the first creation out of the overflow of His love and it is pristine—in fact, “very good” (Gen 1:31). God’s relationship with the created order is marked by joyful mutuality and flourishing. God made humans in His image for the purpose of communion: “for personal and interdependent community with God and his people.”<sup>8</sup>

However, Adam and Eve succumbed to pride, rebelled against God, and brought alienation into the world (Gen 3). The aftermath is catastrophic: “a passage from communion to a rupture”<sup>9</sup> and “the tragic fracturing of a relationship.”<sup>10</sup> Alienation brings comprehensive division and disintegration: “man was separated from God, separated from himself (psychological problems),

separated from his neighbor (social problems) and separated from nature (ecological problems).”<sup>11</sup> Ethnocentrism is a fruit of alienation that has its roots in the Fall.

In response, God sent His son, Jesus Christ, “to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20). Indeed, Jesus tore down “the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles to form “one new humanity” who is restored to a right relationship with God and one another (Eph 2:14-16). This new community is to proclaim and embody “the ministry and message of reconciliation” serving as “Christ’s ambassadors” (2 Cor 5:16-21). God’s story culminates in the final creation: at the consummation of all things we discover “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1-5). Communion is restored between God, His people, and creation.

Faithful preachers must help their listeners grasp this narrative arc. History does not conclude with ethnocentrism, hatred, violence, and division. Rather, God’s final plan and ultimate reality is of “a great multitude . . . from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). Our glorious destiny shapes our preaching in the here and now.

## THE CONTEXTUAL DIMENSION

John Stott famously conceived of preaching as building a bridge “between the biblical world and the modern world.”<sup>12</sup> More pointedly, the communicator declares the Holy Scriptures to a specific group of people in a particular place with distinct characteristics, including a unique history that shapes current reality.<sup>13</sup> Historical events are like a rock that strikes the surface of a calm pond: they cause undulating ripples moving outward (i.e., the present consequences caused by the precipitating event). Indeed, action (past) and reaction (present) are dynamically interlinked. A good homiletician then, understands that an effective sermon brings God’s ancient (and inspired) truths into dialogue with the socio-cultural and concrete lived reality of his listeners. This means the preacher will cultivate a strong historical intelligence—both nationally and locally—so when she enters the pulpit, she will be prepared to address the context and social location of her listeners.

For instance, when I preach on a topic relating to ethnocentrism, repentance, and reconciliation, I must comprehend the complex background of my milieu. Because I love my city of Newport, Rhode Island, and because I desire to be a faithful preacher, I have become aware of the chasm between its reputation and reality. Newport is known for its Gilded Age mansions, gorgeous beaches, award-winning cuisine, expensive yachts, music festivals, and acclaimed Naval War College, to name a few characteristics. As a result, Newport has developed a reputation as a playground for the rich and famous: billionaire businessman Larry Ellison and comedian Jay Leno both own mansions in Newport and Oscar-winning actress Jennifer Lawrence got married at Belcourt Mansion in October 2019.<sup>14</sup> However, the city “also endures high levels of poverty, unemployment, and drug and alcohol addiction, as well as a housing shortage for the impoverished and homeless.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Newport is finally starting to come to terms with the fact it played a significant role in the notorious triangle trade. Indeed, some are beginning to acknowledge that “Newport ships carried 106,000 enslaved Africans across the Atlantic.”<sup>16</sup> It

appears the city's wealth and fame are the fruit of acute injustice. Armed with this information, I am able to connect present to past and help my hearers gain a broader perspective of their home, and their role in forming it.

The skilled preacher then, does the hard work of exegeting *both* the text and the context—the history and current story. This process enables her to explain *why* ethnocentrism is so intractable *here* and *now* and why justice and reconciliation are so hard—but necessary—to achieve. In sum, the *kerux* agrees with Bishop Desmond Tutu that history and memory are indispensable to healing and forgiveness.<sup>17</sup>

## THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

A mature preacher cultivates an attitude of self-reflexivity, brutal honesty, repentance, and accountability. She acknowledges she is not hermetically sealed from her setting, but rather is embedded within it.

This dimension engages both *personal* and *communal* responsibility and repentance. The personal aspect involves admitting, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). It means examining one's heart and asking questions like “Do I harbor any ethnocentric attitudes? Did I laugh at that racist meme? Did I fail to rebuke a friend when he or she mocked another person? Am I doing *everything* I can to develop multi-ethnic relationships and promote a diversity of leaders in my church/organization? If not, why not?” When the Holy Spirit reveals any prejudice, he unconditionally repents—à la King David in Psalm 51—no excuses, justifications, or rationalizations. She also invites safe friends or accountability partners to check with her regularly and ask hard questions.

Furthermore, the vigorous homiletician moves beyond the personal to embrace corporate responsibility and penitence. Humans are interdependent creatures. That is, “[O]ne's identity—even one's very being—cannot be understood apart from others. Personhood is, in part, a socially constructed reality.”<sup>18</sup> To demean another person due to his ethnicity is to attack his personhood and the identity of the family, tribe or people group to which he belongs. Most tragically, to do so shows contempt for their Creator, who crafted them as His image-bearers.

In addition, corporate responsibility grasps the systemic nature of sin. Every person is corrupted by sin in some way, shape or form. For example, when evaluating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission following Apartheid in South Africa, Professors Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith assert that

the truth commission constructed “victim” and “perpetrator” as “binary identities” and failed to account for the position of the “beneficiary” – “those who benefited from the everyday policies and practices of the apartheid regime.” Beneficiaries were “neither identified [by the TRC] as complicit in perpetuating systemic violence nor called to account.”<sup>19</sup>

Complicity is a crucial concept. Leaders and communicators must acknowledge that regarding social sins, everyone is contaminated, even by the smallest trace. Every person has contributed

and/or benefited, directly or indirectly.<sup>20</sup> It appears James gestures at this when he states, “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them” (Jas 4:17). On the other hand, the mature preacher—as a theologian—grasps that our interconnectedness “also works to our benefit. In fact the gospel is predicated upon the interrelated notions of identification, vicarious substitution, and federal headship.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus enters our complicity, takes it upon Himself, and pays the price for it on Calvary.

Consequently, the homiletician will regularly practice communal repentance as a public event (activity) and a posture of ongoing identification and humility.<sup>22</sup> This includes the four-step process of “Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, and Renewing or Releasing the Relationship.”<sup>23</sup> For biblical examples, see Daniel 9:1–19, Ezra 9:1–37, and Nehemiah 1:1–7.<sup>24</sup> By taking these necessary steps, the communicator seeks to perpetually grow in holiness by unmasking ethnocentric blinders, which if left untreated, will diminish the preaching moment by making it hypocritical. Indeed, a self-reflexive and repentant attitude fosters authenticity and unction in one’s proclamations.

## THE POSITIONAL DIMENSION

The effective preacher understands and embraces the limitations surrounding her role: she is a herald and not a heart-changer. Nevertheless, preaching is a means of persuading an audience or congregation to change thought patterns and habits or to take a certain action. As such, the homiletician recognizes the power of words: “[T]he identities of both rhetor and audience are fashioned in and through the language we use. The language we use not only *references* but also *shapes* reality ... all language functions constitutively.”<sup>25</sup> Resultantly, the preacher acknowledges her responsibility to carefully steward her words.

However, the preacher cannot, in his own human volition and agency, transform a human heart. This power belongs to God, and in particular, to the Holy Spirit (cf. Titus 3:3–7). Thus, the herald accepts his role as a vessel or conduit that conveys God’s truth and so prioritizes the preparation of his heart through prayer, personal devotional, exegetical, and contextual study of the text, proper application, and sermon delivery. In short, the preacher cares more about obtaining unction than obsessing over the audience’s immediate, quantifiable response. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines *unction* as

the Holy Spirit falling upon the preacher in a special manner ... It is God giving power, and enabling, through the Spirit, to the preacher in order that he may do this work in a manner that lifts it up beyond the efforts and endeavors of man to a position in which the preacher is being used by the Spirit and becomes the channel through whom the Spirit works. This is seen very plainly and clearly in the Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

Only the Holy Spirit can bring deep conviction of the sin of ethnocentrism and supernatural repentance.

We find two instructive examples in the life of Peter. Peter displays unction in Acts 2:37, when the hearers of his sermon on Pentecost “were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Yet afterward, Peter resists accepting the Gentiles’ inclusion into the Kingdom of God, until the Holy Spirit brings him into relationship with

Cornelius (Acts 10—11). The Spirit catalyzes a seminal shift, one that Lesslie Newbigin asserts “is the story not only of the conversion of Cornelius but also of the conversion of Peter and of the church.”<sup>27</sup>

At this point it must be noted that many Christian traditions and denominations believe one cannot easily or readily divorce the preaching moment from a communal and embodied response, including forms of social justice and political action. Cases include the black church, some voices within Reformed theology, and Catholic Social Doctrine.<sup>28</sup> Along with listening to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the speaker must be sensitive to the diversity of perspectives within the people of God.

## THE METHODOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The fifth piece of the scheme offered here is the methodological, containing two thrusts. The first is the theoretical: this paper affirms Haddon Robinson’s “Big Idea” approach<sup>29</sup> along with “The Homiletical Template” of HABIT, BRIDGE, and DIALECT posed by Matthew Kim.<sup>30</sup> The model presented in this paper seeks to build on these reputable works by stressing the cruciality of choosing reconciliation vice discrimination during the exhortatory event. It is at this juncture that homiletics and a theology of reconciliation converge.<sup>31</sup> To wit, preaching on reconciliation is the invitational challenge given to the congregation to eschew ethnocentrism and incarnate and reflect the radical nature of the new creation in the *here* and *now*. The koine Greek verb for “reconcile” (*katallasso*), used in 2 Corinthians 5, means “to effect a thorough change” and was used in the ancient world to describe “the process of money-changing where one set of coins was exchanged for an equivalent set.”<sup>32</sup> In this scenario, the audience trades their clouded vision for God’s clear vision, their pride and prejudice for humility and peacemaking, degradation and separation for edification and koinonia.

However, the preacher must repeatedly remind her listeners that reconciliation is hard because it’s unique, countercultural, even other-worldly. In commenting on the concepts of the “ministry” and “message of reconciliation” laid out in 2 Corinthians 5, N.T. Wright asserts,

Something new *has* happened; something new *must now* happen. The world has never before seen a ministry of reconciliation; it has never before heard a message of reconciliation. No wonder the Corinthians found Paul’s work hard to fathom. It didn’t fit any preconceived ideas they may have had. He was behaving like someone . . . who lived in a whole new world.<sup>33</sup>

To this day, God’s reconciling work—in and through his people—remains a paradox: both grueling and glorious, liminal and lofty. Overcoming ethnocentrism is more open-ended journey than conclusive achievement.

That leads to the second methodological thrust: the applicational side of reconciliation. The astute preacher presses for a change in attitudes and behavior: that is, she seeks “to provide a balance of *being* versus *doing* applications.”<sup>34</sup> Effective gospel proclamation directs the hearer’s affections—both individually and collectively—toward Jesus Christ, the great Reconciler, who “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile “through the

cross” (Eph 2:14–16). When the congregation’s desires are fixed upon the reconciling work of Jesus, it inspires imitation leading to purification, which animates Christ-like character formation.

With that in mind, reconciling must be applied or enacted. It is a mode of being *and* a concrete practice or habit. Along this vein, the homiletician will demonstrate caution in order to avoid giving applications that are disjunctive from the authorial intent of the text.<sup>35</sup> This raises a question: how can the communicator help the listeners incorporate reconciling into their lived experience? Again, this takes unction, wisdom and skill on the part of the speaker. However, as it relates to preaching reconciliation, Jemar Tisby proposes the following mnemonic: “The ARC (Awareness, Relationships, Commitment) of racial justice helps distinguish different types of antiracist actions. They are not formulaic; they can happen nonsequentially and simultaneously.”<sup>36</sup> This paper contends that when a homiletician deftly combines a text calling for reconciliation (see examples in the Categorical Dimension below), an accounting of Robinson’s necessary, probable, and possible implications, and the ARC mnemonic, there is the potential for faithful and fruitful application. That is, after a preacher expounds a passage, she may urge the listener to repent and be conformed to the image of Christ by pursuing more education, interethnic friendships, or dedicated action.<sup>37</sup>

## THE CATEGORICAL DIMENSION

The sixth aspect of the model pertains to preaching themes and texts. Given our current climate, marked by ethnocentric tension, the pastor may choose to preach a sermon series defining and denouncing ethnocentrism and promoting the gospel of reconciliation. If so, although it could be argued every text in Scripture points to God’s redemptive, restorative, and reconciling work in Christ, there are certain topics and passages that might prove more salient than others. By way of illustration, some appropriate themes are these: the nature of the Trinity (the Godhead exemplifies unity and diversity), the first creation (God establishes and values diversity), the Fall (brings sin and alienation), the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, and the new creation (the Revelation 7:9 vision). Regarding texts, while the interpreter is careful to avoid eisegesis, the following is a sample list of recommendations: Matthew 5:9 (“Blessed are the peacemakers”), Romans 5:6–11 (“We were reconciled to him [God] through the death of his Son”), Ephesians 2:11–18 (“His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity”), Colossians 1:15–23 (God’s plan is “through him [Christ] to reconcile to himself all things”), and 2 Corinthians 5:16–21 (“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”). When preached correctly—and with unction and vigor—these topics and passages will cultivate an atmosphere of conviction, repentance, interdependence, sacrificial love, and unity within the body of Christ.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to (a) equip the homiletician to identify and condemn the persistent and pernicious idol of ethnocentrism and (b) promote effective and faithful communication of the gospel of reconciliation. Consequently, I have presented a thick framework composed of six

dimensions: the theological, contextual, personal, positional, methodological, and categorical. The point is to engage the preaching event in a fully orbited way: objectively (externally) through the story of the triune God and human history, subjectively (internally, the *kerux*'s soul) through reflexivity, repentance, and humility, theoretically by exploring divine and human agency and the nature of communication, and practically through concrete actions and habits. Put differently: without engaging the theological dimension, the preacher may produce heretical and shallow sermons. Without the contextual dimension, truth is divorced from the listener's rooted reality, making it irrelevant and thus raising the likelihood it may fall on deaf ears. Without the personal dimension, preaching is tainted and tends to become hypocritical. Without the positional dimension, the speaker is tempted to over-rely on her human efforts, leading to anemic preaching that lacks the Spirit's unction. Without the methodological dimension, the homiletician may indulge in eisegesis or give esoteric sermons. And finally, without the categorical dimension, preaching lacks the precision required to catalyze change in the congregation.

Nonetheless, the urgency of our age challenges preachers to commit to rising to a higher level of homiletical efficaciousness. As we highlight reconciliation, restoration, and unity in the gospel, it is our conviction God will honor these efforts for His kingdom glory.

## NOTES

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3. See Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 95–97; Gary L. McIntosh and Alan McMahan, *Being the Church in a Multi-Ethnic Community: Why It Matters and How It Works* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2012), 23–27.
4. Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 16.
5. Richard T. Shaefer, cited in Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 96.
6. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 97.
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8. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 42.
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  13. For more information on the concept of “place,” see Hoffman, “Your Place,” chap. 1 in *Reconciling Places*.
  14. Stacey Leasca, “Jennifer Lawrence Threw a Rager of a Wedding at This Historical Rhode Island Mansion – See Inside (Video),” *Travel and Leisure*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.travelandleisure.com/travel-tips/celebrity-travel/jennifer-lawrence-wedding-newport-rhode-island-mansion>.
  15. Hoffman, *Reconciling Places*, 12.
  16. Newport Middle Passage Project, <http://newportmiddlepassage.org>.
  17. Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999).
  18. James Beitler, citing the thought of Desmond Tutu, in James E. Beitler III, *Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 139.
  19. Cited in Beitler, *Seasoned Speech*, 146–147.
  20. Speaking to a predominantly black audience, Dr. King averred “we must learn that passively to accept an unjust system is to cooperate with that system, and thereby to become a participant in its evil.” Martin Luther King, Jr, *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 7.
  21. Hoffman, *Reconciling Places*, 121.
  22. For more information on this, see Beitler, *Seasoned Speech*, chap. 4, and the excellent book by Jennifer McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
  23. Desmond M. Tutu and Mpho A. Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 49.
  24. For contemporary examples, see Hoffman, *Reconciling Places*, 122–123.
  25. Beitler is drawing from the thought of philosopher Kenneth Burke; Beitler, *Seasoned Speech*, 136–137.
  26. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 40th Anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 322.
  27. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 59. Furthermore, Christopher Wright states, “The mere fact that Luke devotes two chapters to tell the story and then repeat it indicates how pivotal it was in his narrative.” Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 515.
  28. See Amy E. Black, ed., *Five Views on the Church and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).
  29. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).
  30. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*.
  31. For more on a theology of reconciliation, see Hoffman, *Reconciling Places*.
  32. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross. Third Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 215.
  33. N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 65. Emphasis original.
  34. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 27.

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35. This brings to mind Haddon Robinson's assertion that "Implications may be necessary, probable, possible, improbable, or impossible." Haddon W. Robinson, "The Heresy of Application: It's When We're Applying Scripture That Error Most Likely Creeps In," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 309.
36. Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, 262.
37. In addition to Tisby's mnemonic, I recommend the "Reconciliation Roadmap" in Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015).