

New Directions in Homiletics

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For the last twenty years, homiletics has been in a state of transition. We are reopening old issues and we are facing new ones. This article briefly identifies some of the leading issues in contemporary homiletics and points to some questions and possibilities which they raise for the preacher.¹

I do not deal directly with the matter which has rightly preoccupied homiletics for the last twenty years: the form of the sermon. This is a perennial.

Postmodern Consciousness and Its Implications for Preaching

“Postmodernism” is a buzzword of recent theological discourse. It refers to a worldview which is supplanting the modern worldview (which resulted from the enlightenment).² The two worldviews are contrasted in Table One.

The shift from modern to postmodern perceptions of the world is particularly important with respect to authority.³ This shift underlies many of our current ecclesial paroxysms. For instance, the current impasse on whether homosexuality can be a Christian lifestyle is, in part, a function of the contrast between these worldviews. Many who reject the possibility that homosexuality can be a Christian lifestyle have a modern vision of truth as static. They reason that since authorities from Christian tradition (e.g., the Bible, most Christian leaders) have rejected the possibility of homosexuality as a Christian lifestyle, we cannot consider it so today. Many who accept homosexuality as a possible Christian lifestyle do so because their postmodern view of authority allows them to adapt their view of truth to new interpretations of reality.

The modern preacher could assume the congregation’s assent to traditional authorities. The postmodern preacher cannot assume that the congregation will automatically recognize the validity of her or his position, sources, and reasoning. Thus postmodern preachers must often demonstrate why congregations should take their claims seriously. This presents a particular challenge when some in the congregation are modern and others are postmodern.

Much recent homiletical theory partakes of the shift from modern to postmodern worldviews. Preachers might benefit from assessing the degree to which we (and our congregations) are modern or postmodern in our approach to the world and the degree to which our sermons reflect our actual commitments. Does the preacher need to shift emphasis either in preaching or in our worldview in order to bring them into harmony with one another?

Issues Related to Theological Method

In the last twenty years, theologians have increasingly reflected on theological method — the sources, norms, and procedures by which we come to theological conclusions. The field of homiletics has been slow to join this dialogue.

Homiletical literature currently does a good job of helping us discover points of live contact with biblical texts.⁴ But we provide less help in dealing with problematic aspects of the Bible and in recognizing and evaluating other sources of authority. And homiletical literature provides little help with issues on which tradition and contemporary sensibility are divided. Nonetheless, we preachers need to reflect on

the degree to which our theological methods, and the content of our sermons, are appropriate to the gospel, adequate to contemporary understanding of the world, and moral.⁵

Furthermore, we still need to sort out the effects of the collapse of the Biblical Theology Movement on preaching. Many aspects of the current wave of interest in “biblical preaching” flow from that movement.

Preaching is preeminently a theological act. Yet, there is a near lacuna in our literature: we give little attention to theological analysis of the preaching event. Recent works do point in promising directions. But we lack a major, contemporary work which gives a thorough theological account of the homiletical moment. These issues are of particular interest: (1) How is God present and active in the moment of preaching (as well as in the process of preparation and in the afterglow of the sermon)? What does God do in the sermon? (2) With what resources are listeners equipped which help them understand themselves and the gospel? What are the implications of this theological anthropology for the shaping of the sermon?⁶ In the middle years of this century, theologians and preachers seemed to be conscious of distinctions in the content and style of sermons which issued from different theological positions. For example, I still hear preachers who did their theological education in midcentury speak self-consciously as Barthian messengers. While the distinctions among positions were sometimes overplayed, giving attention to them did have the virtue of helping preachers clarify continuities between basic theological convictions and the task of preaching.

This is less common today. Today’s leading systematic theologians appear to be less interested in preaching *qua* preaching than the generation of Barth and Bultmann. Nonetheless, today’s major theological families manifest distinct emphases: the liberation theologies, the revisionist theologies, the postliberal theologies, the neoorthodox theologies, the evangelical theologies and the fundamental theologies. Preachers would be helped in sermon preparation by being aware of the homiletics characteristic of the sermon’s theological family of origin.

Issues Related to Language

Homiletical literature did not show great interest in language as such until the generation of the New Hermeneutic. Today, studies in the nature and function of language are one of the energy centers in homiletics. Our greatest gains are coming in connection with story, image, and metaphor. Imagination is our hot category.⁷ Other loci of interest include the following. (1) Language theory. Just as there are different schools of theology, so there are different schools of language theory which attempt to explain the origin, nature, and function of language in its expressive, formative, and evocative dimensions. Different theories lead to different ways of understanding the relationship of language and sermons.⁸ Which are the most adequate to explain the language phenomenon? (2) Language and individual consciousness and behavior. How does language contribute to the formation of self-identity and individual behavior?⁹ (3) Language and the social world. How does language create, legitimize, and revolutionize our social relationships and world?¹⁰ (4) Language and individual and social change. How does language contribute to individual and corporate change? How can the preacher best use language to lead to individual and social change? (5) Relationship of imaginative and discursive language. How do story, image, and metaphor relate to discursive, stenic, propositional language? Will anyone in homiletics say a few kind words for the latter?¹¹ (6)

Language and memory. Memory has reemerged as an important topic in theological circles. What kinds of language create and release memory?¹²

Studies in orality and aurality are another high intensity center among us.¹³ This movement is helping us make quantum leaps in understanding the sermon as an event of the mouth and the ear as well as in appreciating the oral qualities of the Bible (and the cultures which produced it) and in recovering biblical storytelling. But our forward movement in this arena has some difficulties. We sometimes caricature print culture and bash it unfairly. We sometimes speak of oral culture in such pristine terms that we idealize it. We need to explore more carefully the differences between orality in antiquity and today. We also need to explore more carefully the gains left to us by print culture and how print culture will continue to impact our study of the Bible and our work in preaching.

Until recently, our general mode of relationship with the electronic media has been one of critique and attack. But now some in the homiletics community are beginning a positive appropriation of selected characteristics of media communication.¹⁴ In what ways and to what degree can preachers appropriate aspects of communication in the electronic media?

The discipline of speech communication has developed modes of empirical research to try to determine what happens in the listener in the process of communication (Listener studies). Researchers claim that they can identify patterns which usually result in successful or unsuccessful communication transactions. With only a few exceptions, the homiletics society has not ventured far into this data.¹⁵ To determine what "works," authors in the field of homiletics typically rely on little more than our own uncritically tested observations. We would be well served to investigate the methods (and the conclusions) of speech communication research. Are these methods and conclusions convincing? What can we *really* know about what happens in the mind and heart of the listener?

Changing Emphases in Biblical Studies

Historical criticism was the reigning method of biblical interpretation through the middle of the 1970's. Since that time, various forms of literary and rhetorical criticism have moved more and more to center stage.

Literary criticism is especially welcome in homiletical circles where preachers and theoreticians alike often have an aesthetic intuition which fits us more naturally to a literary-historical approach to the Bible than to a strictly historical approach. Homiletics has already been enriched by significant appropriations of literary criticism (especially with respect to the genre and function of texts).¹⁶ However, we are still not altogether clear about the limitations of literary criticism. Further, while we rightly embrace literary criticism's stress on the multivalence of texts, many preachers are unsure about controls in interpretation which help keep interpretation continuous with the text itself. And we are still probing the nature of the relationship between historical criticism and literary criticism.

Three matters in connection with preaching and the Christian relationship with Judaism are resurfacing (or surfacing) in our time. (1) How do Christians preach from the Hebrew Bible?¹⁷ (2) What is the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the literature from the hand of the earliest church in preaching? (3) How do we handle polemics against Jewish people and culture which appear in early Christian literature?¹⁸

Social Context and Preaching

The sermon has four contexts. The preacher's awareness of each can significantly shape the sermon. (1) The larger social and cultural context. What are our culture's perceptions and expectations of the sermon? How do these enhance or frustrate the purposes of preaching? In addition to being a context, culture is also a subject matter of the sermon. Two matters are important here. (a) What, in our culture, needs to be critiqued from the standpoint of the Christian vision? (b) What, in our culture is a positive point of contact for theology? How can the sermon help the community name God's presence and activity which is already taking place in our midst but which we might not recognize?

(2) The congregational system. The fast developing discipline of congregational studies emphasizes the systemic nature of congregational life. How does the sermon participate in the relationships of the congregational system?¹⁹

(3) Worship. We give considerable attention to the relationship of preaching and worship. As the Lord's Supper increasingly becomes the axis around which liturgy revolves, we are more interested in how the sermon does its part in joining the movement of the service towards the Lord's Table.²⁰

(4) Individual. Most of our work focuses on the individual listener. Yet, there is seemingly no end to the enhancement of homiletics through the study of the self in its many dimensions.

Increasing awareness of the diversity of our social context is also enriching preaching. If my own experience is representative, most Euro-Americans are nascently aware of the characteristics of the preaching of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, native Americans. Euro-Americans from the so-called "liberal" camps are often uninformed about Euro-American evangelical and fundamentalist perspectives, and the reverse is also true. Our witness to the *Basileia* (NRSV: Kingdom) and our own homiletical repertoires will be strengthened as we become conversant with preaching traditions beyond our cultures.

We have only begun to examine issues related to gender in the preaching tendencies of women and men.²¹ It is widely believed that the preaching of women is more nurturing, sensitive to life experience, aesthetic, indicative, vulnerable, and prophetic than the preaching of men. If this is true, could male preachers profit from incorporating some of these qualities in their own preaching? And listener expectation plays an important role in the ways the sermon is received. Do listeners anticipate a sermon differently when the preacher is a woman? If so, what differences would this make in the way women and men think towards the sermon?

The denomination is yet another social context of preaching. The "recovery of denominational identity" is a pervasive ecclesial theme in our time. Our respective denominational forebears probably had a better sense of what they sought in the sermon as a result of their denominational affiliation than do most of today's preachers. To the degree that denominational identity is a valid contemporary concern, preachers might be helped in coming to clarity in regard to the work of the sermon if we had a better idea of the purpose, content, and form of the sermon in our own traditions.

Miscellanea

Hopes for the sermon. Not long ago, the preacher hoped that the congregation would remember the sermon. This expectation is shifting in two ways. (1) There is greater emphasis on the cumulative effect of preaching. We read less that

congregations need to remember individual sermons and more that individual sermons contribute cumulatively to the ever deepening reservoir of theological awareness out of which the congregation lives. (2) Some in homiletics are shifting away from the sermon as the communication of ideas to the sermon as an experiential event. This redresses an imbalance of some earlier approaches. But it risks an imbalance of its own. Ideas can be transformative. Can preachers move toward a creative synthesis of idea and experience in the sermon?

Continuing Education in Preaching. At best, M.Div. instruction in preaching gives students a basic orientation to get them going the first few years of ministry. During the early years of ministry, professors of preaching hope pastors will engage in self (and collegial) assessment to designate areas in which they need further work through continuing education.

Preaching and the Health of the Disestablished Churches. We are getting clear diagnoses of the problems of the disestablished churches. Should we be thinking about homiletical strategies which directly take these diagnoses into account?

There are so many new impulses in preaching, it may seem daunting to a preacher to think about incorporating them into her or his habits of preparation and delivery. A preacher may find it practical to concentrate on one new direction for a period of time, and then to consider another. For instance, a pastor might consider the degree to which one's preaching considers authority from a modern or postmodern perspective and then conscientiously adjust one's treatment of authority accordingly. The preacher might then work on incorporating denominational characteristics into one's preaching. In this patient way, a preacher could carefully take account of the new directions in preaching.

NOTES

¹For two other surveys of the homiletics terrain, see Arthur Van Seters, "The Problematic of Preaching in the Third Millennium," *Interpretation* 55 (1991), 267-280 and Edwina Hunter, "Preaching: An Examination of Contemporary Influences and Current Movements," *Prism* 3/2 (1988), 109-121.

²For concise summaries of this see Darrell Jodock, *The Church's Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), Huston Smith, *Beyond the Postmodern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) and the series edited by David Griffin, SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought.

³On the crisis of authority, note especially the writings of Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) and *Ecclesial Reflection* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

⁴For a list of such works, see David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 475-483.

⁵These criteria derive from the contemporary "revisionist" theological movement represented by David Tracy and Schubert Ogden. For discussion, see Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *A Credible and Timely Word*, (St. Louis: Chalice, 1991), 71-90. For a contrasting approach, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1984). For comparison and contrast, see William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

⁶Richard Lisher, *A Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981). Gerhard Forde, *Theology for Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), Bernard Brandon Scott, *The Word of God in Words* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) and Buttrick, *Homiletic*, passim.

⁷Note particularly Paul Scott Wilson, *The Imagination of the Heart* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) and Thomas Troeger, *Imagining the Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

⁸E.g., Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 2d ed., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1985).

⁹On this and the following point, note especially Buttrick, *Homiletic*.

¹⁰On this and the following, see *Preaching As a Social Act*, ed. Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

¹¹E.g., Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), Frank Burch Brown *Transfiguration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1983).

¹²Note especially the comments on the church as a community of memory in Robert Bellah et.al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

¹³E.g., Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), the many writings of Fred B. Craddock are permeated by this concern: note especially now Richard F. Ward, *Speaking From the Heart* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

¹⁴E.g., a critical appropriation of aspects of media culture, see Troeger, *Imagining the Sermon*.

¹⁵E.g., Buttrick's *Homiletic*.

¹⁶E.g., Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), John C. Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

¹⁷E.g., Elizabeth Achtemeier *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) and Holbert.

¹⁸E.g., Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen *Interpreting Difficult Texts* (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

¹⁹E.g., Don M. Wardlaw, "Preaching As the Interface of Two Social Worlds," in *Preaching As a Social Act*, 55-90.

²⁰E.g., Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

²¹E.g., Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989) and Carol M. Norén, *The Woman in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

TABLE ONE

<i>Category</i>	<i>Modern Worldview</i>	<i>Postmodern Worldview</i>
1. Route to truth	Reason is the most important right to truth.	Reason is complemented by feeling and intuition.
2. Criterion of truth	Objectivity, exemplified by science, is the criterion of truth.	Complete objectivity is almost impossible. All interpreters are biased and need to be critical of their biases.
3. Nature of truth	Truth is unchanging.	New perceptions may cause <i>the view of truth</i> to change from time to time. Postmoderns acknowledge at least a degree of relativity in our views of truth.
4. View of progress	Progress is technological expansion and is good. The world is getting better and better.	Uncritical technological expansion caused some of our present problems (e.g., ecocide). Real progress is enhancing cosmic community.
5. Relationships	The individual is supreme. The individual is valued over community.	Community is the context in which individuals achieve their maximum fulfillment.

6. Attitude toward the past	The past is of minimal importance. "History is bunk" (Henry Ford). The present is everything.	Tradition contains much wisdom which can help us know who we are and what we are to do.
7. Nature of cosmos	The cosmos is a machine.	The cosmos is a living partner.
8. Discourse	Abstract, discursive, scientific discourse is best. Myth is superstitious. Story is window decoration.	Mythic and poetic language express depths of reality far deeper than the discursive language of science. Story is fundamental to human expression and understanding.