

Disruption, Initiation, and Staging: The Theological Challenge of Christian Preaching¹

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Abstract: *Is today's Christian preaching really perceived as the living word of God ("viva vox evangelii") or as boredom, irrelevance and the mere repetition of conventional formula well-known in and outside the Christian community? One hundred years ago Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen struggled to find new words for their sermons in order to come closer to what Luther once called the "nova sprach de resurrectione mortuorum." A century later their question will be asked again against the background of new philosophical insights ("disruption"), liturgical observations ("initiation"), and aesthetic/hermeneutic reflections ("staging/presentation"). A theological description of preaching in the eschatological context of expectation, longing, and astonishment will be suggested.*

1. The new windows in Reims and the most protracted recital in the world — or: A break in perception

Reims in France is the town of the legendary baptism of Clovis I, the King of the Franks, by St. Remigius and his anointing with oil that came down from heaven. The mighty gothic cathedral has stood here since the 13th century — 140 metres long, between 32 and 55 metres wide and almost 40 metres high: the perfection of Gothic architecture! The French kings were crowned here. And here in 1974 Marc Chagall installed three windows in the eastern apse. In Chagall's work, too, there is perfect harmony — a merging and co-ordination of Old and New Testament, of Jewish and Christian, against a deep blue background.

For some months now the harmony of the cathedral has been broken. Responsible for this is Beuys' pupil Imi Knoebel, born in Dessau in 1940. For the 800th birthday of the cathedral Knoebel was commissioned to create three further windows to the right of Chagall's. Of all people a professed atheist has designed windows in a world-famous cathedral. The result (hardly surprisingly!) is by no means uncontroversial. Fragments of four different colours (blue, red, yellow, and white) characterize the windows. If one has gazed at Chagall's soothing patches of colour for long enough and grown accustomed to the mystic semi-darkness of the medieval cathedral, Knoebel's colours appear almost garish, disturbing, or even fairly "banal" — the colours of Lego pieces in comparison with the window-glass of classic church architecture. In the works of the abstract artist Knoebel, representations of figures are missing anyway. There is also restlessness in the Knoebel windows. Nothing remains fixed, unlike in Chagall, where the figure of Christ, dominating the central window, draws attention to itself. The impression of soaring space is broken.

The productions are called "Windows of Reconciliation." And it is not a coincidence that a German artist was given the contract. In 1914 German soldiers destroyed large parts of the cathedral of Reims. Not until 1938 the cathedral could be used again. Knoebel stages this "disruption" too.

¹ Lecture in Copenhagen, October 5th 2011, slightly revised.



The Chagall- and Knoebel-windows in the cathedral of Reims

A change of scene: from Reims to Halberstadt in Saxony-Anhalt. Something strange has been happening there since 5th September 2001. An organ-recital is being performed which will also be heard for years to come — more precisely: for 639 years! In Halberstadt, the longest and slowest recital in the world is taking place! The location, in which this is on offer, is no less strange: the Church of St. Burchard, almost a thousand years old, secularized at the time of Napoleon and used as a pig-pen after the Second World War. The musician John Cage once composed an organ concerto and added the instruction: “As slow as possible!” (Organ² ASLSP). Someone in Halberstadt had the idea of giving this recital really “slowly” and performing it in the half-ruined St. Burchard Church. Since then St. Burchard’s has been a magnet for tourists. People come from all over the world travel to the eastern German province, including people who have not been inside any church for years. Four films have already been shot on the subject of this recital, and the weekly newspaper “Die ZEIT” reported in its issue of 28th July 2011 on the project under the beautiful title “The Humming of God” (Das Summen Gottes).

What do the new windows in Reims and the slow notes in Halberstadt have in common? They interrupt. Both phenomena break customary perceptions: the windows at Reims a spatial impression of harmony and unity, the notes of Halberstadt a rhythm of life of the accelerating world with its imperatives of functionality and expediency (what can be rational in a recital which lasts 639 years?). In this way the two phenomena lead me to the *theological challenge of Christian preaching*. For this is my thesis: Christian preaching, i.e. a sermon which proclaims the foolish and distracting message of the Gospel (1Cor 1.18–31), disrupts connections and structures, disrupts — theologically speaking — the circles which the self-imprisoned subject has drawn around himself. And with that I propose a further excursion, this time leading to Switzerland.

2. “Not how one does it, but how can one ...” or: a homiletic re-reading of the dialectical breakthrough

The First World War breaks out on 1st August 1914. Karl Barth is working as pastor in Safenwil and is shocked — particularly because the German intelligentsia, among them even most of his theological teachers, join in the enthusiasm for war, reinforce it theologically, and exaggerate it. The date, 1st August 1914, becomes a day of transition for Barth. He writes: “For with this date there appeared — for me almost worse than the infringement of Belgian neutrality — the dreadful manifesto of the 93 German intellectuals who identified themselves openly before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and his Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg. And among those who signed it I had to discover with dismay the names of almost all my German teachers” “I experienced a twilight of

the gods when I read how religion and science ‘were transformed completely into spiritual 42 cm cannon’.”²

At this period Barth sought new orientation and found it in the radical return to the Bible. He wanted to begin again from the beginning. Consequently he read the Letter to the Romans and writes: “I began to read it as if I had never read it before.”³ And in another place he confesses:

“Paul — what a man he must have been and what kind of men were those for whom he could casually throw out and hint at these lapidary matters in a few confused fragments! . . . And then *behind* Paul: What realities must those be which could so move the man. What derivative nonsense we scribble together about what he says, of which perhaps 99% of the real content eludes us.”⁴

Barth wished to be more critical than the historically critical, more precise, he wanted to enquire more deeply — and he discovered a dynamism in Paul’s words. He discovered a Paul who wrestled with what he had suffered and experienced. One who came up against the boundary of language — and in his speech attempted to speak what could not be spoken.⁵

It is only consistent that Barth also raised the question of preaching and its possibility in quite a new way. The correspondence between Barth and Thurneysen in those years provides evidence of the significance of the work of preaching for the two Reformed theologians. In this correspondence one can read about preparation of the sermon and of reactions from the congregation; about sermons being exchanged, read, and commented on; about sermons by others from an earlier or more recent period being studied and criticized. And there, above all, is talk of the problem of preaching, of the intense rejecting and drafting up to the last minute: “I undertook the 5th and final onslaught on the whole at 6 o’clock on Sunday morning,” wrote Karl Barth.⁶ And later he writes: “Nice text for next Sunday: Isaiah 62.6–7; but how will the sermon turn out in this increasing recognition of the *a priori* impossibility of our preaching!?”⁷

The sermon is, above all, the theological point where the existentially crushing question of God finds its expression and understanding — or does not find it. On 19 September 1915 Barth writes: “I preached today with the distinct impression: this *cannot* come through yet . . .”⁸ And Thurneysen on 28 October 1917: “we are not really happy that we must in the meantime preach in this way, and the people, too, are not . . . But we must get through; other tones will come sometime, they are already discernible here and there.”⁹ In this way the struggle for the new language of theology was primarily an existential and also a biographically recognizable struggle for the language of the sermon.

Barth took his congregation into this battle, into this search, through his sermons. In a sermon from 1916 we hear: “What a helpless sighing and stammering this all is when we attempt to say something about it!”¹⁰ It is a matter of pressing through our stammering “to the

² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (Gütersloh: TVZ, 1993), 93.

³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴ Quoted according to Busch (n. 2), 111.

⁵ Cf. Christian Lehnert, “Meine Freude an Paulusbriefen,” *GPM* 64 (2009/2010): 134–42.

⁶ Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel vol. 1: 1913–1921, Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe V/3* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁰ Quoted according to Axel Denecke, *Gotteswort als Menschenwort. Karl Barths Predigtpraxis – Quelle seiner Theologie* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1989), 125.

living God” (125); you dare not rest “until you can say ‘Du’ to him.” What remains is, according to Barth: to wait for God, to remain on the way, to remain seekers, “enquirers, hopers, strugglers, discoverers of the living God. O would that we remain so. Would that we were so . . .” (126). We must all, according to Barth in this sermon, first become listeners: “O hear! Hear! . . . Hear that there is only *one affliction* in the whole of our lives: the painful struggle for life which involves the whole world. . . . Hear that there is only *one help* Hear: It is only *one truth*, life is right Hear all this. . . . But then let no one think: he *has* heard it already! O that dreadful ‘I know already!’ . . . No, we have not heard it all yet. . . . With all this it has not yet been said that you have already *heard*, you have already taken the word of God from *life*” (126).

In his expressionist form of speech Barth drives his congregation to that point where theology became new for himself: Those who know should become listeners! Barth wanted to take his colleagues in the ministry with him in this movement. Consequently in 1922–1924, Barth, in the meantime advanced to a chair in Göttingen, delivered his three famous homiletic lectures. Here the central question was: “Not how one does it, but how can one?”¹¹ If in preaching it should be a matter of speaking about God, if it is a fact, as Bullinger formulated it in the 16th century: “Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei”, then as a human being I must humbly and simply confess: I cannot do it! In his lecture “The Affliction and Promise of Christian Proclamation” in 1922 Barth asks:

“What are you doing, you human person, with God’s word on your lips? How do you come to this role of mediator between heaven and earth? Who authorized you to put yourself there and generate a religious mood? . . . Where can the talk of the wrath of God be more serious as about us ministers? . . . Moses and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jonah were truly aware of why they did *not* want to put themselves in the situation of preacher. Church is really an impossibility. One can in fact not be a preacher.”¹²

This must first be said again to a church which has become used to proclaiming the Gospel by transmitting or conveying it (or, as we would say today: breaking down [“herunterbrechen”]). According to Barth the risk of this would be simply telling people what they want to hear. With an *either-or*, typical of early dialectical theology, Barth brings the problem of preaching before us. In his lecture “The Word of God as Task of Theology” Barth says: The preacher is a rambler on a “narrow ridge,” so narrow that you can only walk on it but not stand still — “or you would fall down.” On the one side lies the way of dogmatics—for Barth the way of a naïve, uncritical supernaturalism. On the other lies the critical way upon which we would only speak about God in constant negations (the *via negationis*) or simply say nothing. Not the one and not the other, but also not the one without the other — and that is precisely what Barth calls the *dialectical way*.

“The true dialectician knows that this medium is incomprehensible and unclear, hence he will seldom allow himself to be carried away to making direct statements . . . knowing that all direct statements *about* . . . are *not* statements *about* but are always *either dogmatics or critique*. You can only walk on this narrow ridge, not stand still, otherwise you would fall down. . . . So there remains only one fearsome drama for all who suffer from vertigo; to relate both, position and negation, *reciprocally to each other*.”¹³

¹¹ Cf. Barth, *Not und Verheißung*, quoted according to Denecke (n. 10), 103.

¹² Ibid., *Not und Verheißung*, quoted according to Denecke (n. 10), 118f.

¹³ Ibid., *Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe*, quoted according to Denecke (n. 10), 171f.

Preaching is not for those who cannot stand heights! So Barth calls out to his colleagues in the ministry! And I believe that about ninety years later it is necessary to hear this call again. We still need to hear this objection, for it urges us to attend to the task of the theology of preaching as a fundamental *question* and salutary destructive *questioning* in contrast to every form of preaching enterprise as boring routine. Admittedly, we have to reformulate this question *aesthetically* — for it cannot simply be a matter of cutting out the question of *form*, as Barth and Thurneysen all too quickly intended. Hence in what follows I shall take a twofold aesthetic-theological step, but first I shall attempt — ninety years on from Barth — to grasp the basic problem of today’s preaching.

3. “Nova sprach”? — or: The Problem of Convention

If I were to name the greatest problem in preaching in the present day (at least in my German context) I would bring it down to one term: *conventionality*. I could also call it boredom or far too great predictability. Frank Michael Lütze describes the phenomenon expressively, which is why I shall give my colleague at Leipzig University a chance to speak in greater detail. Lütze reflects that in listening to a sermon a strange feeling could creep up on a person:

“You are already aware of that somehow. The intonation. The structure. The pulpit-jargon. The appellative undertone. The dramatic tension between text and reality which is guaranteed to be resolved immediately. And that mixture of a slightly bad conscience — whatever for is usually forgotten again by the end of the sermon — and a vague edification left behind by the sermon. . . . If this sense of déjà-vu was restricted to the sermons of one pastor one could put it down to his distinctive individual style or his simplicity, and the case would be closed. What is enigmatic, however, is the continuity which goes beyond person and place of certain characteristic features of preaching. Some motifs are encountered only sporadically, others appear to be related to particular styles of piety, others again are so widespread that without them a sermon hardly sounds like a sermon. What is the cause of this impression which is often described in homiletics but is only occasionally investigated? . . . There is much to be said . . . for the assumption that numerous tacitly codified rules and restrictions exist which direct the writing and delivery of sermons as well as their hearing and reading.”¹⁴

According to Lütze there is a convention for preaching (deliberately taken over or unconsciously integrated), which leads to an “It preaches” rather than an “I” preach. This convention is just the opposite of what should be heard — according to Martin Luther — in view of the novelty of the Gospel.

Luther was an enthusiastic preacher, because he had recognized how the “external word” works and so can reach, change, and liberate people. For Luther the *verbum externum* becomes individual experience and a theologically qualified event and remains that word which I myself cannot say, but for which means — preaching and the Sacraments — are employed (Confessio Augustana 5). For Luther, the dogmatic search for the *verbum externum* was homiletically bound to the search for the “nova sprach,”¹⁵ the “new language” in view of Christ’s Resurrection and the good news of justification — a “new language” which can break through the “language games” (Wittgenstein) of this world and which Luther brought

¹⁴ Frank Michael Lütze, “Die forma formans der Predigt. Zur vernachlässigten Rolle der Predigttradition,” in *Bibelwort und Kanzelsprache. Homiletik und Hermeneutik im Dialog*, ed. Alexander Deeg and Martin Nicol (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 115–36, 115f.

¹⁵ WA 36, 644, cf. Dörte Gebhard, *Glauben kommt vom Hörensagen. Studien zu den Renaissance von Mission und Apologetik*, APTLH 64 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 109.

into play against a Humanism à la Erasmus on the one hand, and a Roman Church, bound by tradition, on the other. This language makes children of God out of those who were far from God, and does not simply talk *about* Christian freedom but leads *into* Christian freedom. Of course it is the Holy Spirit, who changes our attempts to speak — no matter how imperfect — into *God's* speech. This certainty, however, cannot minimize the task of preaching nor reduce the challenge of preaching. It dare not lead to the result that sermons are simply “made” and that the risk of preaching is taken into account as little as its beauty and potential.

There is, in my opinion, a negative circle of decreasing pastoral motivation that can be observed in many preachers at the present time: the sermon does not produce anything — this is the experience of some pastors. And because it produces so little but makes so much work, less effort is put into the sermon. The Internet offers one or another. And a little bit of convention can also be added. Preachers who are so little motivated ascend the pulpit and are surprised that there is even less response, etc.

In my opinion an escape from this negative circle only seems possible if the question of the *theology of the sermon* again comes into the focus of attention. Here there are three aspects which should be taken into consideration for preaching — I call them *disruption*, *initiation*, and *staging* and combine with them reflections on the content and form of a sermon which hopes that in, with and under the words of the sermon the word of the living God will occur anew and liberating.

4. Disruption or: *Xenology* and the *verbum externum*

The disruption succeeds for Knoebel in Reims and Cage in Halberstadt. Modes of seeing and hearing are challenged. The circle of the constantly renewed confirmation of what is already known and understood is broken — and people react in different ways: enthusiastic or enraged, delighted or appalled. Sermons are scarcely heard as such disruptions. They are, as I said above, too much convention. Perhaps here and there they offer a little counselling or one or other interesting piece of information or at least agreeable entertainment. All of these are, on the whole, not bad (and I am neither opposed to counselling nor to information and certainly not to entertainment or humour!). But the theological challenge of the sermon is not even in sight here. I see this as the promise and obligation to bring the disrupting *verbum externum* into view — I could also say: the word which in the contexts of our world remains *alien* and is yet *close* to us. With the key word *alien*, a cultural-philosophical discourse has been called upon, which appears to me to be significant for homiletics.

I will only take up one trail here and bring to mind Bernhard Waldenfels (born in 1934), who in the German-speaking regions has perhaps most intensively looked critically at the “Sting of the Other/theAlien” [“Stachel des Fremden”] and so developed xenology further.¹⁶ The leading question of the Bochum philosopher is: “How can we enter into something which is alien without neutralizing or denying its challenges and demands by the way we deal with its effects?”¹⁷ Here it is taken for granted that there is something alien, not just something not yet understood but, as Waldenfels formulates it, “something radically alien . . . that does not arise from any simple deficiency of comprehension and understanding but belongs in its inaccessibility to the subject and consequently also to the discourse itself.”¹⁸

Waldenfels differentiates three ways in which the “alien” can be talked about and introduces for their differentiation Latin concepts which in German can all be translated by “fremd” but stand for different things: what is alien can be understood as “externum,” “as

¹⁶ Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990); cf. also Waldenfels, *The Question of the Other* (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 2007).

¹⁷ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Grundmotive einer Phänomenologie des Fremden* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 9.

¹⁸ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 4* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), 9.

something external which stands over against something *internal*.”¹⁹ A second understanding sees alien as “alienum,” as something that belongs to others. A third possibility of understanding alien comes from the term “insolitum,” which describes “something which is of a different kind, which is exotic, sinister, and strange.”²⁰

In this classification Waldenfels connects the *radically alien* with the *externum*. This is not only *different* but abidingly alien.²¹ “The radicalism of what is alien does not imply that the alien is totally different from what is one’s own and familiar, but it certainly implies that it is neither derived from what is particularly one’s own nor can it be subsumed under the general.”²² [„Radikalität des Fremden besagt nicht, daß Fremdes ganz anders ist als das Eigene und Vertraute, es besagt aber sehr wohl, daß es weder aus Eigenem hergeleitet noch ins Allgemeine aufgehoben werden kann.“]

I pause here because Waldenfels’ considerations are on the one hand complex, but on the other directly suggest the transition to the theology of the sermon. The *verbum externum* could be classified precisely in this category of the *radically alien*. It is in principle in no way totally different from “what is one’s own and familiar” (how could it be, for the *verbum externum* remains for the time being *verbum*, a word which does not elude the connection to language). But in spite of this proximity it can “neither be derived from what is particularly one’s own nor can it be subsumed under the general.” Perhaps both — homiletically interpreted — are the great dangers in homiletic dealings with the external word. It can appear either as a function of what is one’s own, as an utterance of the pulpit-ego, as an expression of a strong subject in faith, as a personal idea — instead of the preacher referring to that word which even a theologically-trained pulpit-ego cannot utter from itself. Or — and this is the other danger — it dissolves into the general, homiletically most likely into the thin air of a correct theological conceptuality.

For Waldenfels the radically alien is primarily *topographically* determined and describes a specific heterotopy (Foucault), which could be called u-topian rather than a-topian. “Alien,” Waldenfels writes, “is a place where I am not and cannot be and where, however, I am in the form of this impossibility.”²³ What is alien leads to an “other side beyond *this* world.”²⁴ “Something alien which, being exceptional, goes beyond the scope of possibility of one order can be to that extent described as im-possible, and that not, for example, in the sense of an ontological, epistemic, practical or logical but in the sense of an experienced im-possibility. In both cases the hyphen points out that that which goes beyond the orders does not lead into a world beyond this world but to another side of this world.”²⁵

With the category of the radically alien the philosopher marks a moment of the transcending of this world and its perceived orders and structures. Precisely this is the disruption that in my view is what we must seek in homiletics. Not just any disruption, which brightens up the perhaps boring everyday life with something humorous from the pulpit or soothes the hectic daily life with meditative words from the pulpit, but a disruption which leads to a specific other side and so opens up new possibilities in this world. As problematic ways of dealing with what is alien Waldenfels shows us two extremes: the extreme of “*a functionalistic underestimation*” on the one hand and the extreme of a “*fundamentalist transfiguration*” on the other.²⁶ The alien may neither be merely functionalized nor simply

¹⁹ Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 111.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 112.

²² Ibid., 57.

²³ Ibid., 114.

²⁴ Ibid., 31.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 33.

transfigured — and so kept at a distance from the world. Waldenfels is searching to describe a different, dialogical dealing with the phenomenon of the alien. How is such possible?

For Waldenfels what is first of all decisive is the relativization of a subjectivity strongly marked by modernity. It is modern for a strong subject to subordinate its objects. What counts here is to relativize this strong subject. And this occurs in the confrontation with the alien. The “sting of the alien” according to Waldenfels “penetrates its own flesh.”²⁷ The subject is constituted in the encounter with the alien but is thereby simultaneously restricted in its own high-handedness and power of definition. Waldenfels describes this encounter as “interplay of demand and answer”: It is “based on reception and oriented on response.”²⁸ There are “experiential demands” which *create*, provoke answers.”²⁹ The subject-object relationship is replaced by a “patient”-“respondent” relationship, i.e.: In my dealings with what is alien I am initially a sufferer and only then and only as such the one who answers,³⁰ whereby suffering and answers intertwine with one another.

Based on reception and oriented on response — the homiletic treatment of the *verbum externum* could also be described in this way, if a strong subject does not think it can subjugate this word but also, vice versa, not that a merely externally alien word is venerated and admired.

Waldenfels also poses the difficult question of how we can speak of what is alien. For as soon as I find my own words, what is alien is in danger of becoming the object of my appropriation. Without uttering a single word about the theological and homiletic challenge Waldenfels hints to something like a doctrine of the language of faith. He asks:

Does a person who speaks about an alien which cannot be made one’s own not act like one “familiar with the alien” who “understands the incomprehensible”? Would he not do better “to worship in silence what he does not understand”?³¹

With a simple “Yes” to this question Waldenfels’ reflections on language in relation to what is alien would have been ended — and so would the homiletic task. Mystic silence would be the only possible reaction. This, however, would also lead to a further problematic appropriation of the alien, because the impact of the alien would become “dependent on our good will, our humble adoration or simply our curiosity.”³² Instead Waldenfels turns our attention to the way of “indirect” speech,³³ which does not “take care of” what is alien by a linguistic assault but keeps it alive in its own speech. With Mikhail Bakhtin he encounters heterophonies — and above all the *quotation* as a speech-form of this indirectness.³⁴

A person who quotes a speech is not repeating something which was said, *he is repeating the alien statement . . .* The reduplication and multiplication of something said includes the fact that alien voices sound along with one’s own voice . . . One who quotes is not per se the lord or lady of what is said or written. The speech within the speech is at one and the same time *a speech derived from another speech*.³⁵

²⁷ Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* (n. 16), 8; cf. Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 7.

²⁸ Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 34.

²⁹ Waldenfels, *Der Stachel des Fremden* (n. 16), 7.

³⁰ Cf. Waldenfels, *Grundmotive* (n. 17), 45; cf. also the whole passage 34–55 [Zwischen Pathos und Response].

³¹ Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede* (n. 18), 10.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Cf. Kierkegaard’s notion of „indirekte Mitteilung“, below 7.

³⁴ Cf. Waldenfels, *Vielstimmigkeit der Rede* (n. 18), 159.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

The quotation sits “on the *threshold between what is one’s own and what is alien*.”³⁶ With a twinkle one could note: Too bad that Waldenfels does not realize that with his “phenomenology of what is alien” he is also simultaneously formulating a theology of preaching: A theology which is just as aware of the disruption through what is alien as of the restrained subject and the limits of direct speech. In this way Waldenfels clearly leads farther forward beyond the simple disruption.

5. Initiation — or: The divine-human verbal exchange and the sermon

Waldenfels sees the quotation as an infiltration of alien speech, the opening of the monologue for dialogue. Homiletically this dialogue is embedded in the liturgical event, in the service of worship, which Luther described as a verbal exchange between God and man. When in 1544 he consecrated the castle chapel in Torgau and preached there, he spoke words that had an astonishing effect. Since the 19th century sentences from Luther’s sermon have been called the “Torgau Formula” and been made fundamental liturgical axioms (prominent, though not explicitly marked, even in the first Declaration of the Second Vatican council on the Holy Liturgy!). Luther believed that in this house nothing else should happen than “our dear Lord speaking to us through his holy word and we for our part speaking to him in prayer and hymns of praise.”³⁷

We have become accustomed to this definition of worship. At the same time, the statement found in it is tremendous: We, as human beings, enter into a (joyful) verbal exchange with the living God. This promise, this expectation lies over what happens in the service of worship as a whole. It also characterizes the sermon, which is not simply a dialogue exchange of a preacher with the congregation but only succeeds if in, with and under this horizontal another dimension breaks into the sermon and God himself speaks his word. How? Contrary to all enthusiastic directness Luther was certain: not without the word of the Bible! Hence the theology of the sermon coincides with homiletical hermeneutics.

For Luther the reading of the Bible — if it succeeds in the theological sense — means its being changed into the justifying word and so the new establishment of human existence in the external word of Scripture. Luther already stresses this in his first lectures on the Letter to the Romans in 1515/16 on Rom 3:4 along with the quotation from Ps 51:6 included in it: “Vincit [i.e. God; AD] enim in verbo suo, dum nos tales facit, quale est verbum suum, hoc est iustum, verum, Sapiens etc. Et ita nos in verbum suum, non autem verbum suum in nos mutuat.”³⁸

The central position of the sermon follows this hermeneutic-soteriological foundation; more precisely: a sermon that leads into the movement of the justifying word. Consequently Luther concludes the first section of his *Kirchenpostille*, a collection of “sermon meditations,” with the urgent call:

Therefore enter in, enter in, dear Christians, and let my interpretation and those of other teachers be only a scaffold for the true building, so that we ourselves can grasp the simple, pure, word of God, tasting it and abiding in it. For there resides God alone in Zion. AMEN.³⁹

The sermon — like every interpretation of Scripture — does not put itself in the place of Scripture but sees itself as a scaffold, with the help of which the long-completed (!)

³⁶ Ibid., 167.

³⁷ WA 49, 588.

³⁸ WA 56, 227, 2–5.

³⁹ WA 10, 1, 1, 728, 18–22.

building of Scripture can be used and inhabited in the expectation of meeting in this building the God who has made his dwelling there.

En passant, this fundamental orientation provided by Luther is taken up in Rudolf Bohren's teaching on preaching when he writes: "The preacher who *stays on the way to his text* and consequently is amazed at the infinity of the word of God and at the patchwork character of what he says will never be afraid of being bored."⁴⁰ Karl Barth, too, in his homiletic seminar described the "entry into the movement of the word"⁴¹ as the fundamental condition for the "biblicity of the sermon."⁴²

Consequently I describe a sermon as an *introduction* to the biblical word — and consider this term hermeneutically far more appropriate than if we were to talk of the sermon as an *interpretation* of the word. I encountered such a way of introduction in Rabbinic Judaism. There (in the first centuries CE) a form of sermon appears to have existed where the preachers held their sermon (*d'rasha*) *before* the reading of the section of the Torah intended for the Sabbath. It culminated and came to an end in the first verse of the reading of the Torah, which then followed. Thus the human word of the sermon leads into the word of the Torah, which can be heard as God's word to the congregation. The sermon opens up Scripture — and in this way, both in content and in form — points to the lasting externality without which it could not exist.⁴³

6. Staging — or: Intertextuality instead of Metascripturality

In course of this essay the main question is to be pondered more and more practically, and thus the question of homiletic hermeneutics gives rise to one of homiletic practice. How does the introduction into the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible succeed? Already several years ago Henning Luther, the practical theologian in Marburg, described the sermon as "staging." He, too, initially is led by a hermeneutic observation. He writes: "Understanding preaching as a 'staging' of a biblical text means taking leave of an understanding of *interpretation* according to the *representation model of meaning*."⁴⁴ The meaning does not lie *in* the text like biscuits in a biscuit-packet.

Meaning is . . . not something which is hidden behind (or deep within) the sentences of the language but something which takes place when different sentences/texts collide, texts come into context and *in this way* first produce meaning.⁴⁵

Consequently biblical texts must be staged, i.e. set in scenes, brought into relationship to scenes of our lives and experience. It is a matter of staging the biblical texts in the hope that truth can occur in the "constellation of different texts, of the biblical text in scenes of our world."⁴⁶

I myself proceed from a similar fundamental hermeneutic differentiation and have suggested the two concepts of scripturality and metascripturality as a heuristic hermeneutic framework.⁴⁷ Metascripturality signifies the (problematic) way of interpretation, which

⁴⁰ Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 384.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Homiletik. Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1986), 62.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, 58–64.

⁴³ Cf. Alexander Deeg, *Predigt und Derascha, Homiletische Textlektüre im Dialog mit dem Judentum*, APTLH 48 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), esp. 475–528.

⁴⁴ Henning Luther, *Frech achtet die Liebe das Kleine. Biblische Texte in Szene setzen. Spätmoderne Predigten* (Stuttgart: Radius, 1991), 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁷ Cf. Alexander Deeg, „Skripturalität und Metaskripturalität. Über Heilige Schrift, Leselust und Kanzelrede,“ *EvTh* 67 (2007), 5–15.

extracts from Scripture sentences of harmonious truths and (once these have been recognized!) in fact no longer has need of the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible. In the homiletic execution the biblical word has then done its duty at a particular point in the preparation of the sermon and can be dismissed; in another metaphor: the Bible is simply the springboard from which the preachers come upon their ideas. It is different in the *scriptural* paradigm. Here “meaning” does not appear to be that which is mediated beyond the concrete linguistic structures of a text and then can be “taken” and distributed, but as the occurrence which, in the interplay *with* the biblical text and one’s own words, happens ever (and diversely) new.

Hence the motto for a successful sermon is: Intertextuality instead of metascripturality! Homiletically it is a matter of staging an interplay of the text and contexts in the expectation that meanings are thus set free for the listeners and that the living God himself intervenes in the interplay and speaks *the* word.

This conception is significant for those preaching and those listening: In this model I as preacher have a role that is both modest and expectant. I dissociate myself from desiring to know precisely what “my” audience needs today and what I can dispense to them from the rich treasury of my knowledge or experience. I dissociate myself from distributing the “message of the Gospel” (which I apparently “have”!), passing it on or breaking it down as fittingly as possible. In other words I put an end to that well-used form of massively treating our audiences as children which is the result of a downward slope between me and them. I remain modest and settle with the hearers in the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, take with us our world and what we meet in it, raise questions, make observations. And then let myself be surprised by what the listeners (after the sermon) tell me they have experienced.

At the same time I speak as one who is present, but am always aware that my presence dare not be “total.” My own homiletic presence,⁴⁸ if things go well, at one and the same time opens a wide space for the listeners and their direction on the one side and on the other for God’s intervention.

At this point at least a glance at a concrete sermon is requisite. According to the pericope-selections of the Lutheran Church in Germany, on Trinity Sunday quite a difficult Old Testament text is set for the sermon: Isa 6:1–13 — the account of Isaiah’s vision and vocation and his instructions to harden the hearts of the people. Michael Ebener has put a sermon on this on the page of the “Göttingen Sermons in the Internet.” Dresden, the city of the rebuilt Frauenkirche, is drawn into the vocation of Isaiah, in this cryptic text that speaks of God’s holiness as well as of the destruction of the people. The sermon time after time interweaves words of the biblical text with pictures and stories from the history of Dresden.

After the reading of the text it begins as follows:

“Should I speak now about prophets?

Of the holiness of God and this impossible demand?

Should I talk of Aramaeans and Assyrians in the 8th century before Christ and changing political coalitions?

Should I assess the manoeuvring of the King of Israel and the half-heartedness of the people who put their trust in horses and chariots rather than in the word of God?

Should I surrender myself to such a God who makes the *heart* unrepentant, the *ears* deaf and the *eyes* blind so that his people *do not repent and recover* but run unchecked into disaster?

I shall do so, but differently ...

⁴⁸ Cf. Alexander Deeg, Michael Meyer-Blanck and Christian Stäblein, *Präsent predigen. Eine Streitschrift wider die Ideologisierung der ‚freien‘ Kanzelrede* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

I imagine this:

In the year in which so many people died, and even the ‘greatest commander of all time’ [Hitler] met his end, initially much is as usual.

The high dome stands in heaven and rises over the city as it has done for years. The river flows peacefully under bridges made by rulers, past the Florentine backdrop: palaces, once for kings, now for art, the vault of the Treasury built of green stone. On the terraces theatre and opera, finely traced by pruned saplings.

Amidst all these stands the *Temple* — the building with the high dome!

Stands there, a little in love with itself, as always.

It is the church in which the town comes together, even *in this year*.

And inside there is light and peace, and a high sound. And an *altar*, so *high*, so sky-blue and golden, so *exalted* like a *throne*, worthy of heavenly hosts.

But no *seraphim* have ever flown through this room, not with two and not with six *wings*. Not through the arches and over the galleries. Not along the rows of seats in the round vault. The angels here are plaster and stucco — the Protestant soul is not allowed anything more.

But when one’s eyes travel upwards one senses the heaven where God dwells: *Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory* sings the building in playful innocence.

And the people sing upwards with them — sing until those days *in the year*: 13th and 14th February 1945!

Then *the thresholds* shake and *the house was full of smoke*.

And the thresholds of all the other houses in that city, poor or magnificent, shake — all full of smoke. And cave in upon their occupants who seek protection from this violent shaking in cellars and projections, behind doors and bathtubs.

The building with the high dome also crashes to the ground. In the morning of 15th February, after it has been consumed from the inside outwards by blazing hot fire, the sandstone bursts with the heat and can no longer hold the dome. It falls with all its gold and heavenly blue!

Now only pieces of architecture rise on a waste of rubble like the cramped hand of a buried giant, stretched towards heaven.

But in heaven there is no longer a sun, simply the buzzing of aircraft motors. Not angels but English bombers resound. And there is no light, simply will-o’-the-wisp tracers of the anti-aircraft guns. The bombs fall out of the tailboards like *burning coals*. They fall on Dresden.

The city on the Elbe with its Florentine backdrop.

The city and its dome-high Frauenkirche.

And those whose *lips* are not yet burned cry: *Woe is me! For I am lost!*

On the streets the firestorm rages.

But the suffering does not make atonement — no guilt is taken away, no *impurity* wiped out, the lips not purified by an angel’s gift from the altar fire.

They also do not see God, the LORD, who weeps behind the clouds. They are not overcome by holiness because they no longer see a heaven. They die in glowing burning brightness.

And they do not understand, never understand — the horror, the night and the hell.”

Then at the end of the sermon — after having talked about the rebuilding of the Dresden Frauenkirche in 2005 — we read:

“If this church has risen again from the rubble, this does not repeat the miracle of the very first day of Creation, but it reflects the creative potential which God, the Father, has drawn upon all his human children: *Holy*.

If this church has risen again from the rubble, this is not Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, but it is evidence of the strongest hope to which our faith is capable — namely that nothing is so dead and lost that it cannot be brought back to life with the help of God: *Holy*.

If this church has risen again from the rubble, it is not Whitsun [Pentecost], the pouring out of God’s Spirit upon disheartened little people, but rather a reference to the unbridled vitality and power to console in the dullest people in our world, under the rubble of so many lives, which continues to hold a sacred seed from which everything will become new: *Holy*.

If this church stands again, everything that is in us and our world which still lies *utterly desolate* can rise again.

Again and again.

The dark stones alongside the light preach this to us — the whole of the high vaulted building sings with all the seraphim:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts,

The whole earth is full of his glory.

AMEN.”

Certainly — there is still much left for discussion on this sermon with its many allusions and its Trinitarian ending. Nonetheless in my opinion this is a fine example of how a sermon can appear which puts a text in a new setting without explaining it first and then applying it. A sermon which does not proceed in the two hermeneutic steps of *explicatio* and *applicatio* — and in so doing all too easily tends to leave the text lying somewhere in the past — but lets it become new today amid our texts and pictures without abandoning it metascripturally and without treating the audience like children with an all too simple “message.”

7. On towards astonishment — or: Fra Angelico and the white in the picture⁴⁹

As a conclusion to me it seems to be suitable to undertake a final excursion in the context of this short homiletic journey through Europe, this time leading to Italy. Fra Giovanni, born 1395, died 1455, was a Dominican monk and one of the most significant artists of the 15th century. Soon after his death he was called the angelic one, “Il beato Angelico” or Fra Angelico. His most important works are without question the frescos which he created for the monastery of San Marco in Florence, among them the picture which has become famous under the title of “the Virgin of the Shadows.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Cf. Alexander Deeg, “‘Erkennbar besser’? Zur Diskussion um Qualität in Gottesdienst und Predigt,” *PTh* 99 (2010), 435–448.

⁵⁰ Fra Angelico, *Sacra Conversazione* (Madonna dell ombre), between 1438 and 1450, Fresco and Tempera, San Marco, Florence; cf. John T. Spike, *Fra Angelico. Leben und Werk* (München: Hirmer, 1997), 142f.



The Parisian philosopher and aesthete, Georges Didi-Huberman, was also inspired by the artistic monk and his works. He visited the monastery of San Marco in Florence — and stood astonished in front of the fresco of the “Virgin of the Shadows.” He knew it from many reproductions — and the details had always fascinated him. But what amazed him was something quite different. The picture in the corridor of the dormitory actually consists in the original of two parts.⁵¹



Almost all the art-historical books on Fra Angelico’s depiction ignore this. Under the well-known picture there are also four quite conspicuous coloured areas. On viewing this one might perhaps think: simply imitation marble in a stylized frame. *Marmi finti*, as art history calls it. “Decoration” according to Gabriele Bartz in her book on Fra Angelico.⁵² Not exciting for art historians. But for Didi-Huberman very much so.⁵³ He is amazed that one can so easily ignore something which is directly visible at eye-level. He looks further at the work of the Italian master and establishes: Areas of colour — similar to those under the “Virgin of the Shadows” — appear frequently in Fra Angelico’s paintings. Mostly in pictures of Mary, very frequently in representations of the Annunciation.

⁵¹ Cf. for the picture Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Unähnlichkeit und Figuration* (München: Fink, 1995).

⁵² Gabriele Bartz, *Guido di Piero, genannt Fra Angelico, um 1395–1455* (Königswinter: Ullmann Publishing, 2007), 80.

⁵³ Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico* (n. 51); cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Der Mensch, der in der Farbe ging* (Zürich et al.: Diaphanes, 2009), esp. 22–25.

Didi-Huberman concludes: A considerable aspect of the artist's mastery lies precisely in that which the world interested in art ignores.⁵⁴ For Fra Angelico was aware of the limits of the representation of figures. He desired to show more than simply figures. He wanted to point to the mystery, the mystery of the Incarnation. God becomes man — and Mary represents this completely incomprehensible combination of the divine and the human. The meeting of heaven and earth cannot be pictured in detail — and Fra Angelico has found a representation which corresponds to this.

This thesis can certainly be debated in the history of art, but it appears interesting hermeneutically. In an analogy to preaching and the service of worship one can ask: Are not exactly these things decisive in worship and preaching, which are not easy to express, and which cannot be transmitted directly? Are here, too, — metaphorically speaking — the areas of colour not at least as important as the painted figures? This elegant sentence stems from Søren Kierkegaard:

It is not knowledge which is lacking in a Christian country but something other, and one person cannot directly communicate this other to another person.⁵⁵

That is why Kierkegaard sees proclamation as *indirect communication*.⁵⁶ In the meantime our more or less Christian societies may be lacking of knowledge; but what is decisive in preaching lies as before in what is not “simple”, what cannot be transmitted “directly.” What matters is the disruption which teaches a new way of perceiving, the introduction which leads us into the words, metaphors and stories of the Bible, and the staging of that intertextuality which transcends and changes our world — and which altogether make the expectation great that our verbal attempts, our stammering and stuttering, lead us to that word which God himself speaks to us — terrifying or liberating.

⁵⁴ Cf. also Mark Rothko's paintings which were to a large extent influenced by Fra Angelico; cf. Diane Cole Ahl, *Fra Angelico* (Berlin: Phaidon, 2008), 224.

⁵⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Abschließende unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift zu den Philosophischen Brocken*, 2. Teil, in: *idem, Gesammelte Werke*, 16. Abteilung, vol. 2, (Düsseldorf et al.: Diederichs, 1958), 328.

⁵⁶ Cf. also Alexander Deeg, „Predigt oder ‘Sonntags-Geklapper’? Homiletische Fragen im Anschluss an Albrecht Haizmanns Darstellung der Predigtlehre Kierkegaards,“ *PTh* 96 (2007), 431–442.