

Coming to Terms with Barth's "Third Thing": Hans Frei, Paul Ricoeur, and the Possibility of Postliberal Homiletics¹

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Abstract: *In the wake of modernity and all across the theological spectrum, preaching has proven adept at evading or enlisting the Bible, but resistant to taking it seriously on its own terms. Karl Barth's theology is an important resource for moving beyond this impasse, but does not offer a compelling account of how biblical language and sermonic language properly conformed to it participate in God's free act of self-communication. The narrative hermeneutics of Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur point the way toward such a critically informed postliberal homiletic. In particular, Ricoeur's notion of threefold mimesis is appropriated to propose criteria for evaluating sermons in terms of their ability to pay against three debts: a debt to the actual (mimesis₁), a debt to the real (mimesis₂), and a debt to the possible (mimesis₃).*

Although it is common to label contemporary preaching as either liberal or conservative, most of the hermeneutical moves made in North American pulpits on any given Sunday are better understood simply as modern. The distinction between "left" and "right" may serve well in identifying clusters of ethical priorities and socio-political commitments, but it does not, as some suppose, correspond to a great difference in approaches to scripture.² The modern bid to manage and explain the Bible rather than listen to it may manifest as "liberal" embarrassment at the Bible's cultural infelicities and skepticism at its audacious claim to name God's agency in the midst of human contingency; it may also manifest as a settled "conservative" certitude that refuses to risk encounter with an untamable Other, and so reduces mystery to a system of propositions, or worse, tips for living. All across the theological spectrum, autonomous modern selves have proven remarkably adept at evading or enlisting the Bible, but highly resistant to taking it seriously on its own terms.

For those seeking theological resources for moving beyond this impasse, Karl Barth is a key figure. Barth's context placed him at odds with theological liberalism, but only those who fail to read him carefully can easily dismiss him as conservative. Rather, Barth insisted that the real issue for preachers—liberal, conservative, or otherwise—is the deep and often hidden question on the hearts of those who find their way to church on Sunday: "Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God, who is more than one of the friendly idols whose rise is so easy to account for, and whose dominion is so brief?"³ This question may be buried; its askers may have half-forgotten it. The danger is that they may be all too willing to be put off the question, at least for a while, by preaching that soothes them in their bourgeois complacency, or scatters their deep wonderings before a hail of relentlessly practical bullet points. When preaching is reducible

¹ The ideas and much of the language presented in this article are part of a larger project, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013).

² For the claim that conservative interpreters who profess a "high" view of scripture should be characterized as modern (albeit *early-modern*) in their hermeneutical disposition, see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 117.

³ Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 108.

without remainder to the saying of the best things we humans can think of to say to one another, it makes a mockery of the deep theological question the hearer brings to the preaching moment. Barth's charge is that people really have been put off by such preaching, and that the modern decline of the church is an indication of how "unspeakably disappointed" people have become with an institution that has refused to understand, to take seriously, and to respond courageously to their ultimate need.

Barth insists that the very possibility of a preached word that speaks to, and not merely out of, this situation rests with the question of the Bible. The great need to know the truth about God is met in the promise of *biblical* preaching. This is the place where the notion of Christian preaching as a conventionally plausible human word offered earnestly and with great good will meets its crisis; such preaching always pretends to be biblical, yet one can scarcely imagine a less likely resource for this kind of well-intentioned human talk than the Bible. The Bible is poorly suited to such efforts not only in the case of the occasional "text of terror"—not only where its cultural remoteness is most acutely felt—but in its entirety. For when it is taken seriously, the Bible opens onto a vista that is bewildering to human eyes in every age, a "strange new world" that claims to be nothing less than "the world of God."⁴ Indeed, so strange and awful is the promise of the Bible for Christian preaching that it will speak to the people's question by first exacerbating it; it will probe the need and recast the question until it is truly a need for and a question about the God who speaks through scripture.

It is in light of this exegesis of the extraordinary practical situation presupposed in the preaching moment that Barth proffers his theology of preaching as a word (1) spoken to the human situation from beyond the human situation, and (2) mediated by the Bible. These two aspects of Barth's theology of preaching are present in his definition of preaching⁵ and become explicit in his discussion of that definition: "First, God is the one who works, and second, we humans must try to point to what is said in scripture. There is no third thing."⁶

The "Third Thing"

But there is a "third thing," and it is precisely the thing that is missing from Barth's own attempt at building a homiletic from this foundation. Based on lectures given at Bonn in 1933, Barth's *Homiletics* is a polemical work shaped by extraordinary circumstances. Barth was convinced that preaching in Germany had lost its grounding in the authority of scripture and so had nothing to say to a culture moving rapidly to the brink of ethical catastrophe. With Nazis beginning to surveil his lectures and the undistinguished and aging homiletics instructor at Bonn already firmly in the camp of the German Christians, he announced that he would be giving a series of lectures on homiletics. Not surprisingly these lectures, published from the notes of an admiring student some thirty years later, are monomaniacal in their focus on exegesis and without nuance in their critique of rhetorical considerations that Barth associated with preaching's ineffectual and accommodationist past.⁷ As a result, *Homiletics* is forceful and clear in what it rejects, but less helpful in advancing a constructive proposal. Calling simply, perhaps simplistically, for the preacher to conform the sermon to the "distinctive movement of thought in

⁴ Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 33.

⁵ "Preaching is the Word of God which he himself speaks, claiming for the purpose the exposition of a biblical text in free human words." Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 44.

⁶ Barth, *Homiletics*, 45.

⁷ See William H. Willimon, *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 160.

the text,”⁸ Barth launches an eloquent assault on rhetoric arguing against sermon introductions and conclusions, against contextual relevance, and against imaginative aesthetic evocation. The resulting homiletic is inspiring in its clarion call for preaching that leverages the otherness of the text in order to have something to say to the context; but it is also, ultimately, unworkable. Missing is an account of what is actually involved in identifying and then sermonically re-presenting the “distinctive movement of thought” in a biblical text.

Barth was suspicious of hermeneutical theory, which he understood as a misguided attempt to solve an illusory problem: the supposed gulf between the ancient text and the contemporary context. For Barth, elaborate second-order accounts of how texts should be interpreted tend to recast the meaning taken from the biblical text as a human achievement, and ultimately represent yet another form of evasiveness before the God that addresses us in scripture. Following Kierkegaard, Barth insists that the gulf at issue in the preaching situation is of the infinite and qualitative variety—a distance and difference beyond the powers of any hermeneut, and so traversable only from the other side by a miracle.

But even if we—preachers who want to have something to say in response to the profound theological question presupposed in the preaching moment—agree with Barth that scripture is best approached as a word addressed to the present by a living God, the fact remains that such an address is mediated by language that must be appropriated. One need not question God’s sovereign freedom to meet (or refuse to meet) us in the text in order to note that such encounters are borne by carefully chosen language through which something is both said and done. In other words, the mandate for clear thinking about hermeneutics, rhetoric, and poetics is not primarily a concession to the cultural distance at issue in Bible reading, but rather a consequence of the nature of language itself, especially written language. Interpretation theory cannot truly be avoided in theology; when ignored it simply goes uncriticized.

Of course Barth could not really shun such considerations, even if he refused to integrate them explicitly into his homiletic. I am certainly not the first to note a discrepancy between Barth’s invective against rhetoric and his own practice as both a preacher and prose author.⁹ On some level Barth understood that there must be a “third thing,” but he failed to appreciate its true significance for theology and preaching. In brief, the “third thing” means thinking more about how scriptural language and sermon language participate in God’s free act of self-communication. Such thinking is indispensable for those who want to understand Christian preaching more deeply and teach it more effectively; and it is the central concern of this project.

So while Barth’s theology supplies a solid framework for thinking about the challenges preaching faces in the wake of modernity, the task of expounding a workable homiletic consistent with his vision remains and depends upon the intermediate work of explicitly wrestling with issues of hermeneutics and poetics implicit in his practice, but absent from his homiletical theory. More specifically, the task is to venture an account of how the language of scripture (and in turn the language of the sermon properly conformed to scripture) does what Barth claims that it does: mediate a word from beyond the human situation to the human situation.

⁸ Barth, *Homiletics*, 49.

⁹ For examples of rhetorical sophistication in his preaching, see Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper, 1961). With respect to his prose, Stephen H. Webb has shown that Barth’s peculiar brand of theological poetics was structured around a rhetorical one-two punch of first exacerbating the crisis of doubt (hyperbole), before twisting conventional assumptions in a surprising reversal (irony). Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth*, SUNY Series in Rhetoric and Theology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur: Toward a Postliberal Homiletic

In 1982 Haverford College hosted a Symposium on Narrative Theology at which the two most prominent scholars in the field at that time, professors Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur, were invited to present papers and respond to one another's work. To this day, these two figures make exceptionally generative conversation partners for anyone interested in exploring the "third thing." But in many ways, it is surprising that Frei and Ricoeur would even be mentioned in the same breath. In fact, the symposium was, so far as is known, their only meeting, and one can scarcely imagine more divergent paths to a shared destination.

While Frei wrote slowly and published little, virtually all of it in the highly circumscribed field of biblical hermeneutics, Ricoeur enjoyed a long, prolific, and very public career, with a record of scholarly production legendary for its quality, scope, and volume. His published intellectual odyssey is staggering, engaging every major figure in the philosophical tradition and including "detours" of remarkable depth and insight into fields as diverse as psychoanalysis, general and biblical hermeneutics, philosophy of language, historiography, and narrative theory. Frei called himself a theologian and a historian, but had little regard for philosophy; Ricoeur described himself precisely as a philosopher, albeit one who was also "a listener to Christian preaching."¹⁰ Frei understood himself as a Christian whose life's work was to give an account of how Christians have read and should read the Bible; Ricoeur's work in biblical hermeneutics is just one exercise among many in service of the his larger project of exploring what it means to be human. Although he has been highly influential in biblical studies, a few years ago when Ricoeur passed away, many of the public eulogies celebrating his intellectual accomplishments and praising his irenic spirit showed no interest in or even awareness of his contributions to Christian theology and biblical hermeneutics. By contrast, though Frei's work commanded significant and growing interest among specialists in biblical studies and theology, his untimely death in 1988 went largely unnoticed in the wider academic world. So despite their shared passion for exploring the meaning of biblical narrative, Ricoeur and Frei come to the conversation from very different intellectual backgrounds.

Yet despite their contrasting intellectual contexts and styles, in the field they share, the interpretation of biblical narrative, the similarity of their approaches is striking. Though they come at the problem of the "third thing" from very different perspectives, any differences between Frei and Ricoeur are best understood against the backdrop of their shared convictions—a common ground that makes the tensions between their approaches all the more salient and generative.

Three features common to their approaches to biblical interpretation merit consideration. First, both agree that modernity's search for the meaning of the Bible (and so the essence of Christianity) "behind," "above," or otherwise apart from the biblical text is misguided. Ricoeur's work presumes that religious language is meaningful in its own right, and he privileges its ancient forms, speaking of the need to "get as close as possible to the most *originary* expressions of a community of faith."¹¹ When Ricoeur thinks of getting to the heart of the matter, he thinks not of the history or experience concealed behind the text, or abstract religious truths floating above the text, but of a return to the language of the text itself.

This turn to language means that Ricoeur, like Frei, vigorously rejects the assumption that the genre of narrative—the form of the biblical witness—is a dispensable vehicle for the

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," in Wallace, Mark I., ed., *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress: 1995), 217.

¹¹ Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," in Wallace, 37 (emphasis in original).

transport of some abstractable religious freight that can and should now be borne with greater precision by categories less taxing to the credibility structure of the modern sensibility. They agree, in other words, that narrative is integral to the Christian understanding of God, and it is *in* and *in terms of* the biblical stories themselves that such understanding is properly sought.

Second, and following closely from this shared interest in paying close attention to the language of the biblical witness, is their agreement that the language of the text signifies by making available an alternative “world.” Both of these theorists want to speak of a textual world in order to communicate how immersive, immediate, and pervasive for the reader are the new options that open through an encounter with the language of the text. For both thinkers, to speak of a textual world is an attempt to name the way a text mediates access to “something more” than one is able to achieve independently through reflection on experience. The textual world is not primarily a window into other times, places, and events, but a present alternative to the reader’s prior settled construal of life and its possibilities.

Ricoeur is more explicit and precise than Frei in elaborating this notion of a textual world; and for Ricoeur this is not a special feature of biblical discourse, but a general hermeneutical claim about written discourse. Furthermore, for Ricoeur the world of the text is a site of interaction with, not domination of, the reader’s pre-self-understanding. Frei makes no general claims about the world-making power of texts, but asserts that the church, through long practice, has come to understand the function of this particular collection of “realistic narratives” as establishing the world in terms of which the ecclesial reader comes to understand her life. Frei emphasizes that for most of its history, the Christian church understood the Bible to offer a seamless account of “the one and only real world”¹² from its created beginning to its anticipated consummation—a depiction that functions to incorporate and provide the context for making sense of the reader’s present everydayness. It was Frei’s Yale colleague and close ally George Lindbeck who put the matter most memorably: “It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”¹³ In a post-critical context, this claim must exchange descriptive for prescriptive force: now that even the ecclesial reader is aware of other compelling ways of construing the world, the Bible’s proffer of an inhabitable world of meaning that may transform human subjectivity depends upon the reader’s cooperation.

This leads to a third feature of biblical hermeneutics broadly shared by these theorists: the conviction that full access to the world of meaning made available by the biblical text is necessarily a function of one’s cooperative disposition toward the text. Again, for Ricoeur this is a general hermeneutical principle applicable to all texts. And Ricoeur maintains that this sympathy with the textual itinerary of meaning is always held in tension with the need for critical distance. The move toward appropriation can be described as reading under a “vow of obedience,” which is in turn balanced by distancing under a “vow of rigor.”¹⁴ Ricoeur employs a number of metaphors for this disposition of cooperation with the textual agenda, ranging from the more passive notion of allowing oneself to be drawn into the “aura” of the text,¹⁵ to a more

¹² Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3.

¹³ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 118.

¹⁴ “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.” Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 27.

¹⁵ “But then I must quit the position, or better, the exile, of the remote and disinterested spectator.... No interpreter in fact will ever come close to what his text says if he does not live in the aura of the meaning that is sought.” Paul

determined and intentional willingness to “follow the arrow of the sense.”¹⁶ Ricoeur understands that the biblical text in particular makes exceptional demands upon the disposition of the reader that correspond to the extraordinary nature of its subject matter and its claim to “name God,” but the idea that textual meaning is a function of cooperative reading is universal for Ricoeur. For Frei on the other hand, the disposition of the believer toward the Bible is not a regional instance of a general hermeneutical principle. Rather, this particular text has a special relationship with ecclesial readers. It is only within the church with its distinctive practices and commitments that the text can be properly followed. Christian community is the concrete situation, the particular form of life, from within which the unique and unsubstitutable identity disclosed in the New Testament can be recognized and embraced as the risen Lord. As is so often the case, Ricoeur and Frei follow very different routes to similar judgments.

A Ricoeurian Proposal: Preaching as Threefold *Mimesis*

While I have emphasized the features common to their hermeneutical projects, there are important differences between Frei and Ricoeur. Frei was not engaged in an attempt to show how the Bible is true according to some external canon of truth. As a believer, Frei was surely committed to the truth of the biblical story, but as a thoroughgoing nonfoundationalist, he saw no advantage to arguing the case publicly. Shunning talk of truth and reference, Frei was satisfied with the more modest project of explaining how the Bible is meaningful for its ecclesial readers. Furthermore, his eventual focus on the idealized ecclesial community of interpretation as the guarantor of textual meaning bypasses the important issues of context and poetics that complicate the text-to-sermon move. For all its strengths, Frei’s account does not offer what homiletics requires, namely, guidance about how to shape sermonic language that is at once creative in its fidelity to the text, and faithful its engagement with a novel context. The modesty of Frei’s project limits its capacity to fund a robust and pedagogically useful account of the text-to-sermon process.¹⁷

Ricoeur’s project was more ambitious. As a Christian, Ricoeur shared key features of Frei’s basic orientation toward biblical narrative; but as a philosopher, he wanted to make claims about the truth of the Bible that could be argued publicly. Doing so involved him in the complicated philosophical project of challenging the modern epistemological assumption that all real knowledge is verifiable knowledge about objects that is available to an autonomous and objective knower. For Ricoeur, the Bible does make (potentially falsifiable) claims about what is the case, but it makes them in a domain more akin to poetic than scientific or descriptive discourse. Frei and Ricoeur would agree that close attention to the form of biblical narrative supports the conclusion that what we have in scripture is not accurate report, but rather adequate testimony. But it was Ricoeur who accepted the challenge of thinking more about the truth-bearing capacity of such testimony, and about how the truth claims mediated by poetic testimony

Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 294.

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 94.

¹⁷ In his carefully argued book *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Charles Campbell has worked out the homiletical implications of Frei’s work in detail. For a discussion of Frei’s project, and a critical engagement with Campbell’s homiletical appropriation, see Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say*, 17-48.

are appropriated contextually by cooperative readers. As a result, Ricoeur's hermeneutics are a rich resource for homiletics.¹⁸

For those who think about preaching, one of Ricoeur's most generative proposals is his account of narrative hermeneutics as threefold *mimesis*. Appropriated for homiletics, Ricoeur's narrative theory offers a glimpse at the inner workings of the text-to-sermon move, a way to think with some precision about how the Bible's poetic testimony does its work on the preacher who reads on behalf of a community. Ricoeur's account of the narrative function builds upon the Aristotelian notion of *mimesis*, which is best understood not as slavish "imitation," but rather as the representation of human action in time through emplotment. In order to develop and extend this notion, Ricoeur divides mimetic activity into three parts, or moments, which he designates *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂, and *mimesis*₃.

*Mimesis*₁ points to the way all narrative is built upon pervasive assumptions that make narration possible—shared conceptual strategies for imagining human action (e.g., agent, motive, goal). In other words, *mimesis*₁ names a basic assumed competence in the categories of practice, an ability to recognize and navigate the practical field, which can be imagined as a network of interrelated answers to questions of "what," "why," "who," "how," "with whom," "against whom," and so on.¹⁹ This is the conceptual apparatus that permits us to distinguish human action from mere movement. The poetic representation of human action begins with, works within, and builds upon such given cultural codes for recognizing, organizing, and evaluating human action. *Mimesis*₁ is Ricoeur's acknowledgement that every experience worthy of the designation "human" has already been *prefigured* within a framework that renders it patient of narration.²⁰ *Mimesis*₁ means that we come to every narrative text with a readiness to see our own lives as a story, indeed with some vague sense of our lives as already an inchoate narrative.²¹ We are searching for the plot.

*Mimesis*₂ is the domain of the poetic work proper; it designates the characteristics of a narrative text as a composition. Ricoeur emphasizes that *mimesis*₂ is explicitly an operation through which brute temporal experience is augmented and rendered intelligible.²² It is not

¹⁸ Although Ricoeur's work is widely recognized as homiletically suggestive, detailed appropriation of his work for preaching is surprisingly rare. Though not developed extensively, two exceptions with respect to the application of Ricoeur's narrative theory to homiletics are Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 45-53, and Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 93-99. For a discussion of Ricoeur's general interpretation theory in relation to homiletics, see Nancy Lammers Gross, *If You Cannot Preach Like Paul...* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 92-105. For an extended discussion of Ricoeur's philosophy of language, theory of metaphor, phenomenology of reading, hermeneutics of testimony, and narrative theory applied to the question of biblical discourse and preaching properly conformed to it, see Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say*, 49-146.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 55.

²⁰ This is close to what Stephen Crites has called "the narrative quality of experience." Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 65.

²¹ Homiletician Thomas Long elaborates this Ricoeurian notion, describing our sense of our everyday lives as fragmented but suggestive almost stories: "But even though life at the level of *mimesis*₁ is a cluster of shards and fragments, nevertheless all of the ingredients for a narrative are in place.... There are actors, there is action, and there are motives, partial and fragmented though they may be. This is *mimesis*₁—a narrative lurking beneath the rippled surface, a narrative ready to happen." Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, 46.

²² "[L]iterary works depict reality by *augmenting* it with meanings that themselves depend upon the virtues of abbreviation, saturation, and culmination, so strikingly illustrated by emplotment." Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 80 (emphasis in original).

simply the mimicking of human action, but the creative reworking of incidents into a whole in accordance with the logic of a rule-governed imagination. The “one thing after another” of a raw episodic sequence is *configured* as a plot through a number of devices including (1) the selection of events, (2) their arrangement and discursive expansion so as to achieve the more or less subtle attribution of cause and effect relationships, and especially (3) the demarcation of a beginning, middle, and ending, thereby supplying the governing framework within which all of the plot’s incidents must be appreciated as belonging to an intelligible whole.

Finally, *mimesis*₃ refers to the dimension of mimetic activity related to reading and appropriation. In the case of narrative discourse, appropriation means that the reader’s own temporality is *reconfigured* in light of the configuration (*mimesis*₂) encountered in the text. Because they are normally told in the past tense, narratives create the surface impression of “referring back” to something behind them, but they actually “refer forward” in the sense that only through the act of reading is a narrative’s world unfolded and its discursive destiny fulfilled. *Mimesis*₃ points to that site “between” the text and the reader where the world projected by the text intersects with the world of the reader and, through what Gadamer has called a “fusion of horizons,” engenders new possibilities for being in time. In other words, *mimesis*₃ names the way the reader’s own life narrative interacts with and is transformed by the encounter with the narrative text: “I shall say that *mimesis*₃ marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality.”²³ To appropriate a narrative is not just to understand it at arm’s length, but to understand oneself and one’s relation to reality anew before it, and thus to put it to work in the world of action.

The essential point for successfully appropriating Ricoeur’s narrative theory for homiletics is that just as the preacher’s engagement with the biblical text during sermon preparation can be grasped in three mimetic moments, so also the preached sermon in the hearing of the church will be marked by each of these three mimetic moments.²⁴ Formally, the sermon is an instance of *mimesis*₂. But because the sermon is a performed interpretation explicitly tied to the preacher’s prior hermeneutical encounter with the biblical text on behalf of the church, it is a special form of *mimesis*₂ activity that will itself more or less adequately reflect each of the three mimetic moments of the preacher’s engagement with the text. By analyzing a sermon through the lens of threefold *mimesis*, prescriptive criteria emerge for evaluating its capacity to navigate the demand for a discourse that is creative in its fidelity, and faithful in its novelty. The sermon can be judged according to its ability to discern and represent the congregation’s narrative prefiguration (*mimesis*₁), its willingness to engage and display the narrative world configured by this particular biblical text (*mimesis*₂), and its capacity to render seriously imaginable the refigured way of being made available through an encounter with this textual world (*mimesis*₃).

Understood through the categories of threefold *mimesis*, the preacher’s task in the sermon can be evaluated in terms of its success in paying against three debts. *Mimesis*₁ shows us that in order to read well on behalf of others the preacher must appreciate the narrative self-understandings that have shaped them. But the relevance of *mimesis*₁ to homiletics goes beyond the preacher’s conscious attempt read so as to mediate a hermeneutical encounter that will

²³ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 71.

²⁴ In *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, homiletician Thomas G. Long briefly explores the implications of Ricoeur’s threefold *mimesis* for preaching (45-53). In what follows, and especially in the lengthier treatment in *The Scandal of Having Something to Say* (121-146), I attempt to build upon Long’s insight of relating Ricoeur’s narrative theory to homiletics.

recognizably belong to the congregation. There is also a sense in which the sermon—though itself a mimesis₂ discourse—will have more or less explicit features traceable to this mimesis₁ aspect of the preacher’s surrogate hermeneutical engagement during the sermon preparation process. Because the sermon is a performed interpretation that recapitulates the preacher’s engagement with the biblical text on behalf of the congregation, specific features of the congregation’s prefigured narrative self-understanding will manifest in the sermon in a variety of ways. In other words, the sermon must pay against a *debt to the actual* circumstances and prefigured temporality of the congregation.

Mimesis₂ draws attention to the obligation of sermonic discourse to be conformed to—both funded and constrained by—the biblical text. If mimesis₁ calls for the preacher to go to the text on behalf of this particular ecclesial community, mimesis₂ reminds us that it is this particular text to which she is sent on the church’s behalf. The second mimetic moment directs the preacher’s attention in minute detail to the language of this biblical text and the world it displays. More profoundly, mimesis₂ points to the way the preacher’s task in preaching is conducted under a *debt to the real*—namely, the reality of God that is the issue of the biblical text. God is not an object that can be referenced directly by descriptive discourse. But biblical faith confesses that God has given signs of God’s self in history, and thus biblical poetics is a bid to bear witness to the reality that lingers beyond the horizon of all our significations in stories that give language to the mysterious reality of God’s presence amid the contingencies of human history. These stories show the reader a world organized around the reality of God and invite her to explore the possibility of her own world transformed by that reality. Understood in this way, mimesis₂ suggests that preaching is biblical only to the extent that it wrestles with the reality of God named in scripture.

Finally, the third mimetic moment emerges as a synergistic interaction between the first and the second. Mimesis₃ is the site of a meaning event in which something new is generated that did not already exist in either the reading community or the inscribed text alone. The given prefigured temporality of the community meets the configured temporality of the plot to generate a third thing: the congregation’s self-understanding reconfigured through an encounter in the world projected in front of this biblical text.

During sermon preparation, the preacher’s surrogate reading is the locus of the original sighting of this new world of possibilities. She has consciously taken up the prefigured temporality of the church as her own and approached the biblical text’s configured plot on their behalf. As she reads there is an expectation that something will be seen—something new and previously unavailable that will emerge from this particular reading, for this particular people, at this particular moment. We can speak of “going into” the world in front of the text to see this new possibility, but it is just as true that mimesis₃ marks the site of reentry into the domain of practice, for the adventure in the world in front of the text is at once a departure from the given, and a confrontation with new possibilities that are practicable in the everyday world of human affairs. The eventfulness of the third mimetic moment has the quality of a discovery for the reader/preacher. She knows when something has happened, when the spark of imagination leaps between the prefigured situation and the configuring plot, showing by its quick light the new thing that is possible. Just as the first two mimetic moments, mimesis₃ will also be reflected in the preaching event itself. The sermon will give voice to this new thing that the preacher has experienced in the world in front of the text. As performed interpretation and model reading, the sermon will facilitate the community’s appropriation of the biblical text by pointing toward the new way of being it makes available. If mimesis₁ entails a “debt to the actual” prefigured

situation of the church, and mimesis₂ insists that the preacher work under a “debt to the real” referenced by the biblical text, mimesis₃ places the preacher under an obligation of equal seriousness, namely, a *debt to the possible*. In other words, just as the preacher is liable for interpreting on behalf of this particular community, just as she is responsible for ensuring that it is this particular biblical text that receives her obedient attention, it is equally true that she must preach under an obligation to a new thing that for now only she has seen. Understood in terms of mimesis₃, to preach is to keep faith with a hard-won vision of what is possible now for this church in light of its encounter with this text. The preacher must strive to find language adequate to the new thing she has seen.

Conclusion

In this brief introduction to my larger project, I have tried to suggest how both Frei and Ricoeur make exceptionally demanding and rewarding conversation partners for anyone wishing to explore the possibility of a critically engaged postliberal homiletic. I have also made a proposal about the way Ricoeur’s narrative theory in particular helps us understand the workings of biblical narrative in relation to preaching. Of course, the theological claim that God speaks does not depend upon any theoretical demonstration that this is possible. God does not speak at the pleasure of the preacher, much less the homiletician. But preaching does seek to join itself at God’s pleasure to the word of God, which is not merely possible, but which is always and already articulate in the church and in the world. Then in turn, it is the homiletician’s desire and duty to think and say more about how preaching participates in God’s living and active Word. Such are the theological understandings and commitments that motivate this project, and situate its appeal to the best theoretical resources available under the logical priority of the conviction that God speaks, and therefore we have something to say.