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The Promise of Promise: Retrospect and Prospect of a Homiletical Theology

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Abstract: *North American homiletical theology has been increasingly retrieving and revising a theology of promise for preaching. This article offers a Forschungsbericht concerning the use of promise in homiletical theology. It does so initially by retracing traditions of promise with respect to multiple theological concerns: the dialectic of promise and law in the gospel, the role of promise in eschatology, Word and Sacrament, and in theologies of the scriptures with respect to Old and New Testaments. The essay next considers the place of promise in contemporary homiletics. It discusses treatments of promise in the work of North American homileticians James Kay, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, David Lose, Olin Moyd, Christine Smith, David Schnasa Jacobsen, Richard Lischer, and Paul Wilson as well as briefly treating promise in light of the broader concerns of Eunjoo Mary Kim, Kenyatta Gilbert, Dale Andrews, and Ronald Allen and Joey Jeter. The article suggests future promising areas of research and lays a groundwork for future scholarly contributions.*

North American homiletical theology has been increasingly retrieving and even revising a theology of “promise” for preaching today. Homileticians like James Kay, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, David Lose, Olin Moyd, Christine Smith, Richard Lischer, and Paul Wilson have developed a theology of promise as a prominent theme in some of their work. Meanwhile, homileticians such as Eunjoo Mary Kim, Kenyatta Gilbert, Dale Andrews, as well as Ronald Allen and Joey Jeter have touched on promise in connection with other important theological commitments. The essay that follows is a preliminary *Forschungsbericht*, a research report of how a theology of promise has shaped various aspects of a homiletical theology in the past and might influence its prospects going forward. Its goal is to reinvigorate a discussion of promise as part of the ongoing, unfinished constructive task of homiletical theology.¹

Most recently, a homiletical theology of promise has re-emerged with the publication of *Kairos Preaching* in 2009.² In their book, David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly broached the problem of a homiletical theology of promise through a critical retrieval of a theology of the gospel. Their discussion centered on what the gospel is and how the gospel relates to both context and the kinds of situations that call forth gospel speech. As a central part of their work

¹ I view homiletical theology as type of constructive theology. It does its work in light of practices of preaching, its cultural context, and the theories that animate the homiletician’s work. As David Buttrick notes, it might be better to turn Barth’s notion that all theology is sermon preparation on its head. Rather all sermon preparation is theology (“Foreword.” *Homiletics*. Trans. G. Bromiley and D. Davis. Louisville: WJKP, 1991, 8). A homiletical theology, furthermore, is not merely another word for a theology of preaching. In practice, it can entail dealing with theologies of the gospel, Word and Sacrament, the use of theology in the sermon, as well as preaching itself as theology (i.e., theological method). The article that follows demonstrates that a homiletical theology of promise is far more than a theology of preaching, but touches in a homiletical mode on a variety of theological loci relevant to the constructive-theological task: e.g., scripture, eschatology, the means of grace, etc. For a vision of constructive theology related to such theological loci, see *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classic Themes: A Project of The Workgroup On Constructive Christian Theology*. Eds. Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005. For more on homiletical theology, see the new research project web site: www.bu.edu/homiletical-theology-project. Accessed November 24, 2012.

² David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelley, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1–41.

into the character of the gospel, they retrieved the Reformation notion of the gospel as radical promise. This insight leads to a potentially more integrated way of thinking about gospel: not only what gospel says (its starting point + unfolding theological reflection on the gospel through commonplaces), but what the gospel *does as promise*.

Viewed historically, however, a full retrieval of promise includes ranges of meanings and spheres of interest that go far beyond a theology of the gospel. Already in some early literature, the notion of promise was tied to other theological loci: eschatology and the purposes of God, theologies of Word and Sacrament, and the relationship between the testaments that make up the scriptures. Thus the potential value of promise goes far beyond the traditional Reformation concern to anchor preaching in a theo-centric vision of God's grace in the gospel. This means we now have an opportunity to re-envision the place of promise in our late-modern context with respect to a broader array of homiletical-theological issues, many of which we have been struggling with for some time in other terms. This essay, therefore, begins with a review of what "promise" has been, turns to the way promise has been treated in 20th and 21st CE homiletical theology and theory, and along the way identifies new resources beyond theology that may challenge us to take up and re-envision for ourselves a place for promise in our own homiletical theologies going forward.

Promise in Retrospect: Homiletical Theologies from Augustine to Wesley

The history of the role of promise in thinking theologically about the preaching task is a surprisingly diverse one. When we hear the word promise, we might at first be inclined to focus solely on the distinction between "promise and law," a dialectic that runs from an Augustinian³ reading of Paul through Luther, Calvin, Melancthon and beyond. While this focus on grace is indeed an important part of the tradition, the treatment of promise actually encompasses several other issues of concern to homiletical theology. In this retrospect, therefore, we want to survey the historical picture in all its fullness.

1. Promise and Law: Dialectical Diversity

The clearest line on the topic of promise runs from Augustine's reading of Paul through Luther, Calvin, Melancthon and down into Wesley. In Augustine's important homiletic work, *On Christian Doctrine*, we see him translate in Book III Tyconius' wrestling with promises and the law into his hard-won anti-Pelagian position spelled out in "Spirit and the Letter." This notion of promise was taken up in the work of the Reformers. For the early Luther in particular, the dialectic of gospel and law is understood chiefly as a relationship of *promise* and law. The law drives us to the promise in this sense: that is, what God commands drives us to petition God to be true to God's promise. For Luther, interestingly and uniquely, the promise is an external

³ Augustine in Book III.33 summarizes Tyconius' third rule, "the promises and the law," and assimilates it to his own theology of "spirit and letter" or "grace and law," a view developed in response to the Pelagian controversy, *On Christian Doctrine* (D. Robertson, trans.; New York: Macmillan, 1958), 107–08. Tyconius' own view of promise is actually a bit broader, as is evidenced by his continued heavy use of the term promise (*promissio*) well into his fourth rule, on genus and species, which Augustine understands in purely rhetorical terms (*OCD* Book III.34), but Tyconius understands eschatologically and with special ecclesial contextual significance for his North African Donatist church. For a translation of this 4th CE North African text and its discussion of Rules 3 and 4, see *Tyconius: The Book of Rules* (W. Babcock, trans.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 20–88. For an attempt at understanding how this struggle in North African hermeneutics has impacted homiletics' unfolding understanding of a theology of promise, see David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Augustine's Use of Tyconius' *Book of Rules* in *On Christian Doctrine*: Promise and the Unfinished Task of Homiletical Theology," *Collected Papers of the 47th Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (2012), 215–24. Perhaps this historical struggle over the nature of promise represents part of our unfinished theological task as a discipline.

reality to which the believer holds. The contrast comes to this view already in Calvin. For Calvin, the dialectic of promise and law is also important. Calvin writes:

We make the foundation of faith the gratuitous promise, because in it faith properly consists... [Faith] begins with the promise, stands upon it, and ends in it. For it seeks life in God, which is not found in the commands nor in the edicts of punishment but in the promise of mercy, and that only which is gratuitous, for a conditional promise, which sends us back to our works, promises life insofar as we find it in ourselves... Wherefore the Apostle bears witness to this testimony to the gospel, that it is the word of faith, which he denies to both the precepts and promises of the Law, since there is nothing which can establish faith except that free embassy by which God reconciles the world to himself.⁴

Where Calvin differs from Luther in his understanding of the promise is in its internalization. With the doctrine of assurance, Calvin actually internalizes the notion of promise to include its appropriation by the believer as a sign of election. The distinction about promise here, between external and internal promise, is actually an important one for understanding this classic, dialectical view of promise and law. Philosopher Phillip Cary argues that Luther's external vs. Calvin's internal view of promise has an important impact on what he calls the standard Protestant syllogism:

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.

Minor Premise: I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: I am saved.⁵

From this classic, Protestant view Luther's syllogism considers the promise external, an utterance in context, and understood sacramentally:

Major premise: Christ told me, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth.

Conclusion: I am baptized (that is, I have new life in Christ).⁶

For Calvin, however, the internalized notion of promise connected to a doctrine of assurance *changes* the way promise is understood:

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.

Minor Premise: I know that I believe in Christ.

Conclusion: I am saved.

Here, Cary points out, the unique Calvinist understanding of election, perseverance, assurance, and a growing focus on a once-and-for-all conversion work together to view promise not as an external reality, but an internal one.⁷ For Calvin, faith in the promise is an internal, reflective

⁴ *Institutes* III.2.xxix.

⁵ P. Cary, "Sola Fide: Luther and Calvin," in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71:3/4 (July/October, 2007), 266.

⁶ *Idem.* 267.

⁷ *Idem.* 269–76.

faith; for Luther faith is trusting the Word of God, uttered sacramentally, an external promise to which one holds in *Anfechtung*. A historical distinction about promise is not just of antiquarian interest. The way in which we conceive promise and its relation to faith conditions the way in which we understand promise functioning in our own homiletical theology today. We will see some similar differences emerge when we turn to the matter of promise in recent homiletics later.

We finish this survey of the promise/law dialectic by connecting it also to Melancthon and the Wesleyan tradition. For Melancthon, the distinction between promise and law is important for establishing the correlative relationship of promise and faith.⁸ The reason for this is Melancthon's connection of promise to the doctrine of justification and its relation to the last judgment. For Wesley, the clear distinction between promise and law becomes a bit more complicated. As an explanation for the workings of promise in light of the high demands of the Sermon on the Mount, Wesley conceives of the category of "covered promises." For Wesley, law and promise refer to the same thing, but in different form:

We may yet farther observe, that every command in holy writ is only a covered promise. For by that solemn declaration, "This is the covenant I will make after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws in your minds, and write them in your hearts," God hath engaged to give whatsoever he commands. Does he command us then to "pray without ceasing?" To "rejoice evermore?" "To be holy as He is holy?" It is enough. He will work in us this very thing. It shall be unto us according to his word.⁹

Thus, while the promise/law dialectic is a significant part of the tradition of a homiletical theology of promise, there is much diversity within that tradition. Promise is indeed distinguished from law, but not always the same way. In fact, sometimes promise is viewed as an external utterance; at other times it is seen as a matter of internal assurance about election. Sometimes promise and law are clearly distinguished; other times the distinction seems to be less clearly maintained.

2. *Promise and Eschatology*

I noted above that the hermeneutical differences between Augustine and Tyconius, when Augustine summarizes the latter's work in Book III of *On Christian Doctrine*, led to Augustine emptying Tyconius' more eschatological view of "promise."¹⁰ This struggle over promise may just be a very important one for us to re-visit today. There are today echoes of this concern for the relationship of God's promise to eschatology in contemporary theology, especially in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, to whom I will refer more explicitly later in this essay. It is also true that the eschatological approach to a homiletical theology of promise is alive and well in African-American theologies of preaching as well as theological approaches to prophetic preaching.¹¹ Certainly, the rediscovery of eschatology in early Christian literature since Johannes

⁸ Phillip Melancthon, *Melancthon on Christian doctrine: Loci communes, 1555* (C. Manschreck, ed. and trans.; New York: Oxford, 1965), 158.

⁹ Wesley, Sermon 25.

¹⁰ See footnote 3 above.

¹¹ For the former see Olin Moyn's treatment of promise in relation to redemption, eschatology, and the whole counsel of God in *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1995), 13–65. For the latter, see Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm's essay "God's Word in the World: Prophetic Preaching and the Gospel of Jesus Christ" in *Anabaptist Preaching* (Ed. D. Greiser and M. King. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2003), 76–93. For an intriguing use of promise in connection with an approach to liberation preaching see Christine Smith, *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001) as well as brief mentions in her chapter, "A Lesbian Perspective: Moving Toward a Promised Place," in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural*

Weiss and Albert Schweitzer has caused a general reassessment of its place in theology over the last century. The linking of those concerns to promise would seem to be a natural place to invite further homiletical-theological reflection for us today.

3. *Promise and the Relationship of the Testaments in the Scriptures*

Another key place for thinking about promise for homiletical theology is in the relationship between the two testaments. As James Preus points out, the line of promise that runs from Augustine to Luther is not merely concerned with a theological dialectic, but seeks to grasp how Christians are to understand and interpret the Hebrew Bible for proclamation.¹² In his brilliant work, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*, Preus begins with Augustine's continuous view of Old Testament and New Testament promises which in varying ways contribute to a "normative literal sense," which contributes to "faith, hope, and love."¹³ This means that some temporal promises of the Old Testament are interpreted figuratively for Christians. Augustine's distinction, of course, shifts gradually through a long line of interpreters over the whole medieval period in Preus' book: namely, Hugh of St. Victor, Nicholas of Lyra, Peter Lombard, Bonaventura, Thomas Aquinas, and nominalist theologians, among others. A full description of this process of dealing with promise in the relationship between the testaments goes far beyond the bounds of this article. At the same time, the shifts become clear. More and more of the temporal promises get interpreted figuratively, and precisely in Christ. Preus describes the Medieval interpretive tradition that Luther receives this way: "the Old Testament promised only *temporalia*, the New promises *eternalia*...The hermeneutical expression of this religious situation is to refer to the Old Testament as 'umbra,' 'figura,' and 'signum,' which imply that its sole theological relevance is in its New Testament antitypes."¹⁴ The temptation over time is to shift away from promise to shadow, mere figure. While Preus writes to show how Luther's own reading of the Old Testament makes sense not just against the medieval tradition, but within it, its chief value for us to see how a homiletical theology of promise also opens up important questions of the relationship of traditions in our canon. Given Christians' long struggle with anti-Judaism and later anti-Semitism, this merits ongoing solid homiletical-theological reflection as well.

4. *Promise and Theologies of Word and Sacrament*

Clearly promise has had an impact on the development of theologies of Word and Sacrament. The language of promise shapes not only how we think about a theology of the Word, but how that theology connects as well to conceptions of sacrament and the relationship of preaching to worship. As with the previous sections above, the arc moves from Augustine to the Reformers: Augustine links word and sign in order to describe sacraments as "visible words,"¹⁵ while Luther and the Reformers carry forward analogous sacramental concerns by naming that Word's

Perspectives (Cleveland: United Church, 1998), 134–58. In both cases Smith briefly links promise to a kind of liberative, critical eschatology.

¹² I am aware of the problematic language I am employing, but am trying to make historical sense of an important hermeneutical tradition. I am inclined to use the term Hebrew Bible to describe the Old Testament to honor the uniqueness of what Ron Allen has called the First Testament. I am aware how inaccurate and problematic these different terms are. At the same time, it is important to understand this hermeneutical tradition in its own terms. In their own way, they struggle to reconcile the whole of the scriptures and refuse to go the Marcionite route. At the same time, the clear trend is toward a subsidiary view of the Hebrew Bible that I view as ethically problematic.

¹³ James Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1969), 9–23.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 156.

¹⁵ Augustine, Tractate 80 (John 15:1-3).

character as promise and connecting it to sacramental elements in their theologies.¹⁶ Here, again, the Reformers play an important role. Their insistence on the importance of “testament” or promise as the key for viewing sacramental theology marked a major shift in thinking about the relationship of Word and Sacrament. In recent times, a renewed interest in the eschatological dimensions of Eucharist point also to new possibilities for homiletical theologians interested in promise. Perhaps a homiletical-theology of promise might open doors for us to see the relationship of Word and Sacrament more deeply.

The Role of Promise in Recent Homiletical Theology and Prospects for the Future

The homiletical literature of the last sixty years has certainly been aware of the importance of “promise” for thinking about preaching the gospel. At the same time, it has not remained a central, consistent concern over that period. This may be in part because of its early twentieth century association with the work of the neo-Orthodox theologians Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann. Barth’s view of promise is encapsulated nicely in his *Homiletics*. Here Barth equates promise with “announcement.” He wishes solely to distinguish gospel from any human decision—it has for him the quality of miracle and thus maintains his decidedly theocentric vision.¹⁷ For Bultmann, promise is part of the salvation event itself, which resides in preaching. This promise is an eschatological moment being made real in the present, confronting the hearer of that promise with an existential decision.¹⁸ Both of these approaches, despite the different role they ascribe to decision, limit the way they think about promise to purely dialectical terms for the individual hearer. They tend to bracket other aspects of promise, especially the more cosmic, eschatological view in favor of a breaking into the present of a kind of divine “eternality.”

Naturally, Bultmann’s language of a “salvation event” paves the way for the post-Bultmannians’ new hermeneutic and the rise the so-called “new homiletic” in the 70s and 80s.¹⁹ Bultmann’s event language does of course shape event terminology about preaching in the work of Ebeling’s *Wortgeschehen* or Fuchs’ *Sprachereignis*. This, of course, drew many leading homileticians of the last generation to focus on the shape and/or function of language and the Word to help us think about the preaching task. Yet, if one digs into the work of Fuchs and Ebeling, one discovers that their event-in-language ideas are never fully disconnected from promise. In *The Nature of Faith*, Ebeling devotes the better part of a chapter to the gospel as promise:

Only the Word by which God comes to man, and promises himself, is able to do this. That this word has happened, and can therefore be spoken again and again, that a man can therefore promise God to another as the One who promises himself—this is the certainty of Christian faith. And this is the true and fulfilled event of the

¹⁶ Luther uses this language with respect to the Eucharist as testament in the sense of a kind of promise of inheritance in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*; Calvin in *Institutes* IV.xiv.3 argues that sacraments are “never without a preceding promise,” and in *Institutes* IV.xiv.5–6 points out that sacraments are God-provided seals of those very promises.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (G. Bromiley and D. Daniels, trans.; Louisville: WJK, 1991), 45–46, 72, 125.

¹⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* I (Trans. K. Grobel; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951–1955). 302.

¹⁹ David Lose, “Whither Hence the New Homiletic,” in *The Academy of Homiletics Papers of the Annual Meeting*, November 30–December 2 (2000), 255–66. Of course, what was left out of many of these discussions that have preoccupied our histories of scholarship, is whether the new homiletic was really new! For a succinct, alternative view see Dale P. Andrews, “New to Whom?” *Homiletix E-Forum: An Electronic Journal of the Academy of Homiletics*, Fall, 2006. Accessed September 14, 2006.

Word, when space is made among men for this promise, the Word of God. When God speaks, the whole of reality as it concerns us enters language anew.²⁰

Fuchs likewise understands his view of *Sprachereignis* way beyond anything like a mere language concept, but connects it specifically to Jesus' making a promise.²¹ I cite these references for two reasons, both of which impact the way in which many have assessed the so-called new homiletic as theologically deficient. First, apart from a clear theological understanding of the gospel, the language of an event in experience, which supposedly characterized the new homiletic, leaves far too many questions open. Critics as early as the 1990s pointed out, on the one hand, that an experience implied at least "an experience of *something*." Indeed a general appeal to experience without some connection to theological understanding left the field wide open to later postliberal and neo-Barthian critiques. On the other hand, the language of an event in experience also left open the question of *whose* experience.²² Here a profound ethical and representational issue came to the surface that revealed, to my mind, some inadequacies of the new homiletic in both theological *and* contextual terms. Research into the notion of promise in the new hermeneutic has prompted me to wonder whether there is still something retrievable in the new hermeneutic's theological focus on promise as characterizing this Word- or Language Event. Despite the new hermeneutic's many other shortcomings (for me, its intimate tie to existentialism), I suspect this consideration might offer a way forward in our theological assessments of its value. Perhaps what the new hermeneutic offers, when seen as a whole, is more than just "word magic," as Anthony Thiselton contends.²³ Indeed, with a focus on promise, we might well reassess the value of the new homiletic as offering an event of promise given in context. The language of promise was key to Reformation sacramental theologies and opened the door to the disenchantment of the world after the medieval Catholic synthesis. Perhaps a renewed emphasis on promise will disenchant homiletics from its "word magic." This strikes me as a possible theological way forward and a homiletical *desideratum* for future research.

Promise in Neo-Barthian Homiletical Theologies

In contemporary homiletical theology promise has continued to play a role. This was aided in part by the shift to theological and theo-ethical concerns as the new homiletic's influence began to wane in the early 1990s. One theological trend was led by postliberal and neo-Barthian homileticians.

Paul Scott Wilson

In this group, the language of promise tended to surface in replicating in particular the more dialectical side of promise language in what Paul Wilson calls the deep grammar or

²⁰ Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (trans. by R. Smith; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 190.

²¹ Ernst Fuchs, *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1961), 94–95.

²² Here I am thinking not only of John McClure's discerning reading of the limits of the new homiletic's somewhat reified view of experience in *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 47–66, but also the successive ways of increasingly perspectival approaches to preaching represented in moves toward personal wagers, testimony, and confession with colleagues like Lucy Rose, Anna Carter Florence, and David Lose respectively.

²³ Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 337.

structure of trouble/grace.²⁴ In the tradition of a discussion that runs back in our literature as far back as Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (Book III.33), the point is the clear distinction of promise from law as a means of articulating gospel.

Richard Lischer

A particularly interesting development among the postliberal and neo-Barthian homiletics is found in Richard Lischer's article, "Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise" (1988). Here Lischer holds to a classic, dialectical view of promise in terms of gospel and law, yet also engages the interest in form by the then regnant new homiletics.²⁵ He argues in part that the (then) predominant interest in form should at least be informed itself by a theology and rhetoric of the gospel as promise. What makes the article exciting is that he pushes beyond the purely dialectical understanding of promise (recall also the critique of the truncated view of promise in Barth and Bultmann) to a view that takes the relation of promise to future hope seriously. Here, from the postliberal/neo-Barthian side we see the beginnings of an unexpected opening to the world and its own desire for hope in the midst of suffering and oppression.

James Kay

In a more recent development in homiletical theology, James Kay takes up the issue of promise in his book *Preaching and Theology*.²⁶ In part his book is a reclamation of the notion of the gospel, which he links explicitly to the good news of Jesus' cross and resurrection, in connection to an enactment of the gospel in the conveying of promise—that is the joining of the *fides quae* (the content of faith) with the *fides qua* (the trusting relationship by which we have faith). Thus Kay connects his interest in classic understandings of the kerygma with the role of promise as a kind of speech act. Here, Kay is drawing from recent developments in theology and philosophy. One important influence is Christopher Morse's interpretation of Moltmann's notion of promise in his *Theology of Hope* around the question: What linguistically constitutes a "promise"? In the background, therefore, also lie philosophical partners in analytical philosophy and speech-act theory.²⁷ Other theological partners for Kay's work include Ronald Thiemann, who following Morse's reading of Moltmann, argues for a cultural-linguistic understanding of "promissory narration."²⁸ This is to say for Kay that promise stands in a central theological role in rendering the narrative of scripture—it is then both telling and "address," through which, in the form of promise, God becomes the subject of preaching.

Possible Sources for Future Neo-Barthian Homiletical Theologies of Promise

Further work in the field of linguistic philosophy may aid the development of postliberal and neo-Barthian understandings of promise.²⁹ Along similar lines, a German Lutheran evangelical-catholic theologian, likewise drawing on Austin and Searle's speech-act theory, has

²⁴ An excellent summary of this and its connection to various figures in homiletics is found in Paul Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching: Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 160–83.

²⁵ Richard Lischer, "Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise," *Word and World* 8:1 (1988), 66–79.

²⁶ James Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007).

²⁷ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962) and John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

²⁸ R. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985).

²⁹ One example is Donald Evans' *The Logic of Self-involvement; a philosophical study of everyday language with special reference to the Christian use of language about God as Creator* (London: SCM, 1963). He explores not just what language says but does with respect to divine self-involvement in illocutionary speech like promises.

placed a theology of promise at the center of his work: Oswald Bayer.³⁰ At the same time, there may be broader implications of these theological and philosophical developments. Here the language of promise opens connections, through speech-act theory and views of promises as “self-involving” illocutionary speech, to a deeper sense of promise as God’s commissive speech—a form of speech not bound to ordinary senses of reference and correspondence, but referring back to the divine speaker of that promise and the new situation that arises from that speech act. Here I also sense possible echoes with Paul Wilson’s *Setting Words on Fire*. It occurred to me as I read the section on proclamatory statements in section V that this kind of reflection on promise could aid in describing this very type of proclamation that Wilson identifies so convincingly in his research.

Promise in Postmodern Homiletical Theologies

Another great turn in our field since the new homiletic has been represented by those who relate homiletical theology to constructive or deconstructive forms of postmodernism. Here the language of promise has played a less significant role. At the same time, the openness to dialogue with various philosophical sources makes this an area of great potential for promise.

David Lose

In the literature, the chief representative of this view has been David Lose. For Lose, promise plays an important role in developing a postmodern way of talking about the importance of the Biblical canon in line with Lose’s vision of preaching as confession. As he develops this approach, Lose talks about the idea of the gospel as promise by drawing connections to the philosophical literature cited above: speech-act theory, promise language as commissive and self-involving, etc.³¹ While most scholars use this language as a means of doing linguistic analysis, discovering the “use” of such language as promise, Lose brings these theories to bear on a broader theological issue: an exploration of how the Bible as a whole can function as Word of God in a postmodern context.³² The idea for Lose is that we respond differently to the illocutionary force of a text (say, a promise) when we sense that it is asserting some sort of truth claim. His postmodern view of the Bible as Word of God hinges ultimately on the perspectival nature of confession and the assertive nature of discourse. The language of promise in part allows him to pursue a way of thinking about the language of scripture that embraces perspective while holding to an assertive sense about divine truth that goes beyond mere solipsism. It embodies in a sense how the scriptures can be understood as functioning as God’s Word of promise consistent with his critical-fidestic postmodern vision. In Lose’s work, there is a desire to draw on theologians and philosophers for whom promise and its illocutionary force are important for developing a thoroughgoing postmodern perspective: Austin, Searle, Evans, and Thiemann are central; but others, like Gerhard Foerde and Nicholas Wolterstorff, also aid him in his work.

³⁰ O. Bayer tends to pursue his questions as a Luther scholar within a liturgical evangelical-catholic perspective, see *Theology the Lutheran Way* (J. G. Silcock and M. C. Mattes, Ed. And Trans.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 125ff. See also his treatment of *promissio* in great detail in his *Habilitationsschrift* of the same name, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971). A forthcoming doctoral thesis by Allan Rudy-Froese, whose engaging work under Paul Wilson on Bayer’s understanding of promise is key, deals with historic Mennonite concerns for ethics and Lutheran concerns for grace in preaching. Similar theological interests in promise that dovetail conversationally with this school include Robert Jenson’s *Story and Promise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

³¹ D. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 156–67.

³² Idem., 160ff.

Possibilities for Future Postmodern Homiletical Theologies of Promise

Perhaps the next stage here in exploring promise in a pluralistic postmodern context would be to draw on other philosophers who have stretched our understandings of promise. Two figures leap to mind. Hannah Arendt, for example, pushes the concept of promise into the area of public speech and pluralistic human agency. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt talks about how promise offers an island of security in the face of a future that is unpredictable and uncertain. Arendt writes, “without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart...--a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfills, can dispel.”³³ While Arendt's views of promise are anthropological in nature, they do help us to think about promise with respect to the presence of others in public space. As for the postmodern concern about modern foundationalisms and the language of presence, philosopher Richard Kearney explores the concept of promise with respect to the struggle between purely ontological, foundationalist views of God and the purely eschatological views of postmodernism which endlessly defer the presence of God. Kearney argues for an “onto-eschatological” view in his book *The God Who May Be*.³⁴ Using the language of epiphany from the burning bush narrative of Exodus, he argues that ontological views translate God's puzzling response, ‘ehyeh ‘asher ‘ehyeh, as “I am who I am,” a purely ontological God of the foundations. From the standpoint of the endless eschatological deferral of postmodernism, the translation runs “I will be who I will be,” a kind of apophatic view that is ultimately absence. In light of his onto-eschatological view, Kearney himself renders the phrase “I am who I will be.” The shift then talks about God not as simple presence or absence, but as traversing, eschatological presence. It furthermore places that emphasis not on God's actuality, but God's *possibility*. Clearly Kearney's work could be, well, promising for a postmodern homiletical theology of promise.

Correlational, Contextual, and Liberation Homiletical Theologies of Promise

Finally, I wish here to discuss a broad array of theological literature in our field that makes only interspersed reference to promise per se, but has a deep if perhaps more potential connection to the second sense of promise as hope: the role of eschatology in preaching and its connection to correlational, contextual, practical and liberative theologies of preaching. The rise of these varied approaches to homiletical theology has yielded an interest in making the preaching task more explicitly contextual-theological as it remains open to culture and world.

David Schnasa Jacobsen

In *Kairos Preaching* David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly go to great lengths to talk about the gospel theologically as promise while seeing it in deep relation to context and the situations which prompt gospel speech. In doing so, they see themselves following in the footsteps of Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, whose work is centered in part around the idea that a clear, non-triumphalist understanding of the gospel is intimately linked to its contextualizing for the disestablished, North American churches. In light of this, they view any and all of their reflections on a gospel of promise within the orbit of those theologians who want

³³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 237.

³⁴ R. Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2001), 20–38.

to see the preaching task in a contextual-theological frame and relate it to matters eschatological.³⁵

Much of the interest in eschatology in other contextual-theological approaches to preaching offers interesting potential points of contact for exploring aspects of a homiletical theology of “promise.” Here one thinks in particular about the work of Eunjoo Mary Kim, Kenyatta Gilbert, and Dale Andrews, all of whom relate an interest in eschatology to their contextual-theological work as homileticians.³⁶

Eunjoo Mary Kim

Kim, for example, places eschatology at the center of her project of a contextual theology of preaching that takes seriously Asian spirituality’s concern for critical transcendence. She writes: “The struggle between the powers of good and evil, the universal reign of the one true God, and the message of comfort with hope and promise for the future to the faithful in their times of most bitter suffering are its major concerns.... The expectation of the future is now grounded in the promise of God, the second coming of Christ.”³⁷

Kenyatta Gilbert

Kenyatta Gilbert, in his practical-theological agenda for trivocal African-American preaching touches on the importance of promise for his own homiletical-theological vision: “A good sermon is a theological conversation about what it means to speak of a promise-bearing God who addresses the real needs of real people.”³⁸

Dale P. Andrews

Dale Andrews aims to reconcile Black liberationist and survivalist/refuge approaches to suffering and oppression. He writes: “Survival may in fact be part of humanity’s proactive participation in the redemptive activity of God. It is, rather, God’s promise in Jesus Christ to work redemptively even in suffering.”³⁹ As he seeks to place eschatology at the center of his ecclesial vision as a way of reconciling this-worldly and other-worldly perspectives, Andrews notes: “The culmination of salvation history in the Kingdom of Heaven ultimately fulfills the gospel promise of complete freedom for the African slaves and early free blacks. Eschatology is the theological vision of that hope...; otherworldly promise translates into this-worldly hope and ways of being.”⁴⁰

Ron Allen and Joey Jeter

One other pair of homileticians whose work sees preaching as just such a theological task, but also do connect briefly their understanding of the gospel to promise are Ron Allen and Joey Jeter in *One Gospel, Many Ears*. Here they articulate the gospel in connection with diverse congregational conversation, yet in this formulation accenting the language of “the promise of

³⁵ In their book, Jacobsen and Kelley acknowledge that they do not always agree, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 12–13, 32–35! The ways they relate gospel as promise to context and situation are sketched out in chapters 1–3. The connection of the same to eschatology is covered on pp. 18–19.

³⁶ Dale Andrews argues eschatology is one of the four key elements for preaching within a Black ecclesiology of refuge in “Ecclesiology, Preaching and Pastoral Care in the African American Church Tradition,” in *Collected Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (1997), 12–21.

³⁷ Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999), 60.

³⁸ Kenyatta Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 80.

³⁹ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches* (Louisville: WJK, 2002), 46.

⁴⁰ Idem., 47.

the unconditional love of God for each and all, and the command of God for justice for each and all.”⁴¹

Christine Smith

In her development of a liberative homiletical theology, Christine Smith invokes the language of promise to talk about a powerfully eschatological sense of promise joined to life lived now. In her edited volume, *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (1998), Smith uses the language of Ezekiel 34 to envision and create a “promised place” for marginalized gay and lesbian persons.⁴² In the deconstructive and constructive work of such a liberative homiletical theology, Smith says, “...we may just find God’s incarnation power in ways we have never been able to imagine. In this world, where gender ceases to rule and heterosexism ceases to control, God’s promise...might well become a promise for us all.” Smith continues this emphasis in her work, *Risking the Terror*, where she links it with a liberation perspective on the resurrection. In part building on the radical critique of the web of oppression in *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance*, Smith returns to the prophetic task of justice preaching with a desire to name God more fully by means of resurrection’s promise: “...I found myself urgently turning to the possibility of resurrection as that promise in the Christian faith that is strong enough to counteract and transform death itself.... As a practical theologian and preacher, I needed new language, new images, and new understandings that would enable me to be a more faithful proclaimer of God’s resurrection life.”⁴³ Smith’s vision of promise in the resurrection blurs the line between divine and human agency by locating it incarnationally in the people of God now: “As eschatological vision, the people of God seek to articulate, proclaim, and embody the hope of shalom, the promise of healing and restoration, the transforming reality of God’s saving justice and love.”⁴⁴ And yet the promise is itself rooted in the resurrected Jesus that offer the promise that helps us claim the power of the resurrection among us.⁴⁵ Of course, it is not about Jesus alone; the reign of God is an “overarching vision” that expresses what God “desires and promises” and to such a degree that it gives us a glimpse of God’s “ultimate promise.”⁴⁶

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm

Wilhelm places promise at the center of her homiletical theology of prophetic preaching.⁴⁷ Whereas so much prophetic preaching runs the risk of forgetting divine agency, Wilhelm seeks to locate human and ecclesial engagement within the purposes of a sovereign God. Drawing in part on Walter Brueggemann’s understanding of the prophetic imagination and its connection to a community with an alternative consciousness, Wilhelm places the issue of prophetic preaching within the countercultural witness of Anabaptist communities as part of an overarching vision of God’s passion and God’s promises which *ground* our possibilities for prophetic engagement. Prophetic preaching’s proclamation of the promises of God functions for Wilhelm in two key ways. First, doing so recalls the One who promises. This recalls all God’s people to their identity in God.⁴⁸ God is the source of justice, love, and the very reign to which

⁴¹ Ron Allen and Joey Jeter, *One Gospel, Many Ears* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 10.

⁴² Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 144.

⁴³ Smith, *Risking the Terror*, 1.

⁴⁴ Idem., 10.

⁴⁵ Idem., 67.

⁴⁶ Idem., 73.

⁴⁷ Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, “God’s Word in the World,” 76–93.

⁴⁸ Idem., 87.

the promise points. Second, in speaking of the promises of God we invoke the futurity of God's realm. Wilhelm notes, "...the prophetic preacher who is passionate about God's Word in the world is not simply concerned with renunciation of evil but listens for God's promises echoing in every generation and relates instances of faith, hope, and love as they are found in the church and world. As surely as sin is at work among us, so are the promises of God and the prophetic preacher is responsible for identifying and naming the ways in which God's intended future is realized in the present."⁴⁹ In this way, the promises already begin to invoke the future of God.

Olin Moyd

Moyd's practical-theological vision of a theology of preaching in *The Sacred Art* also appeals to promise. Moyd wishes to make clear that there is a deep connection in the African American tradition between salvation from sin *and* the "hope for freedom, justice, and redemption," a connection which embodies this tradition's commitment to the "whole counsel of God."⁵⁰ Moyd continues: "Preaching the whole counsel included the telling and retelling of biblical incidents of God's self-revelation in human history and God's promise and plan for continued involvement in the redemption of his people."⁵¹ The role of promise, says Moyd, extends to the core of the gospel itself: "The mission of the preacher is to be the bearer of the gospel—the Good News of redemption.... [P]reaching always included a message of exhortation and promise—guidance and hope."⁵² Moyd continues this line of thought as he thinks about eschatology, God's redemptive and liberative purposes, God's activity and our participation. Exhortation and promise belong together: "Exhortation was the calling upon the people and the nation to adjust and to readjust their lives spiritually and socially in order to achieve a just society. And promise meant preaching hope for the inbreaking of a just society—the coming into genuine confederation and community of the people of God."⁵³ It is this, says Moyd, that gives preaching its capacity for empowerment and motivation.

It is important to note that a theology of promise here is only sometimes at the center of these disparate correlational, liberation, contextual- or practical-theological projects. What one does see in this literature, however, is a way of embracing the language of promise that draws deeply from its historically neglected eschatological sense. In some cases, it does so by drawing deeply as well on the connection of promise to the presence of the One who promises, too—a key notion shared by the older dialectical tradition.

Conclusion

This essay as *Forschungsbericht* has ranged widely through the literature of contemporary homiletics. It has sought to set out the many different ways that homiletical theologians connect promise to their work. My hope is that such an exploration of the many aspects of a homiletical theology of promise might bear fruit in new research problems and trajectories. Clearly many colleagues have already begun to develop new ways of thinking about how promise can give theological specificity and depth to the task of reflecting on the language of preaching, the scriptures, the relationship of future and present, the importance of grace and

⁴⁹ Idem., 88. Despite the reliance on Brueggemann's countercultural categories, I have placed Wilhelm's work on promise here rather than among the post-liberals in the neo-Barthian camp above. Her view of promise is open to its "echoes" as well as evocations and naming both in the church and world, and thus breaks open the exclusively ecclesial orientation of the postliberal options.

⁵⁰ Moyd, *The Sacred Art*, 53.

⁵¹ Idem., 55.

⁵² Idem., 57.

⁵³ Idem., 121–22.

divine presence, and the relationship of homiletical-theological work to sacramental theology. My intention is to focus new research in this direction, with a view to taking up its unfinished theological task. The hope is that this research report provokes renewed conversation and thoughts around prospects for a more integrative homiletical theology that is open even now to redeeming the promise of promise.

Dying to Be Creative: Playing In/With the Homiletical Hiatus¹

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Abstract: *Harbored within the preaching event is an innate and necessary spacing wherein the creativity of God—the Creative—works in and upon sermonic discourse. Against the grain of homiletical assumptions, governed as they are by Western philosophical assumptions, this essay points to the originary spacing structured by the Creative and offers an orientation to sermon development and delivery that attempts to engage the Creative for preaching.*

Creativity can save the Church in this era of ecclesial decline. I believe this applies to every area of the Church's ministry and mission in the world; but, it holds most prominently in the act of Gospel proclamation: preaching. In short, creativity can save preaching.

Herein lies a theological sketch for creativity in preaching. Note that I am not writing about *creative preaching*. That would indicate a methodological project: how to preach more creatively. Instead, I wish to reflect upon the creative element *within* preaching, an element seldom mentioned in homiletics texts, which tend to focus on the preacher's creativity, offering techniques to fan the flames of imagination, to fuel the preacher's creative furnace.²

Homiletics, following the tracks laid by theology and philosophy, is dominated by what Jacques Derrida labels a "metaphysics of presence," or, borrowing Heidegger's rebarbative neologism, "onto-theology." It is oriented to what is.³ I am not denying the importance of that which is given (*es gibt, il y a*) before consciousness; rather, I am posing questions to this governing principle. What if there is a more originary—sub-ontological, proto-phenomenological—creativity always already at work within our preaching that homiletics has failed to notice? What if our very efforts to be creative in our preaching frustrates that originary creativity from shedding its linguistic cocoon?⁴ How might we who preach have been seduced by a metaphysics of presence?

I believe we preachers must die to be creative. Following a certain death—a certain martyrdom of the preacher—we may catch a glimmer of the Creative always already at work within (and often in spite of) our homiletical imaginations. I am searching for a "crevice through which the unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed," to borrow a line from

¹ I am indebted to the participants of the Theology of Preaching section of the Academy of Homiletics (Chicago, 2012) for their helpful feedback and constructive criticism. Lingering errors and oversights are, of course, my own.

² NB: I am in no way arguing against such an approach. Rather, my intention is to supplement such helpful contributions by pointing to signs of the Creative within the very structure of preaching.

³ Thomas H. Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 15: "The primary principle from which all others are derived is that we are attentive to what is." Consider also Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 9: "... imagination is not culling something from nothing but rather is discovering what is given" and Barbara Brown Taylor, "Bothering God," in *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*, Jana Childers, ed. (St Louis: Chalice, 2001), 158. This is also the case for Mary Katherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York & London: Continuum, 1997).

⁴ N.b. we are restricted in English to describe the temporality of the Creative. "Originary" designates a time preceding origin, or any originating moment *in time*, that is irreducible to temporality. I am writing of a moment anterior to any *numen praesens*, or experience of the numinous *as present*. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, John W. Harvey, trans. (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1923), 11.

Derrida.⁵ The “closure” is onto-theological, and thus Derrida is a welcome conversation partner. The preacher as self-same subject must die in order for us to glimpse the Creative. The preacher’s death opens a necessary space—a fissure in the logocentric foundation—whereby *God* creates.⁶ Genuine creativity emerges from the Creator. God has elected human language—and preaching most of all—to manifest God’s creative energies in the world. God’s creation through the preacher’s words I am calling the Creative and I believe that such a manifestation worthy of the name *Creative* is necessarily prior to the work of the preacher and arises out of a certain dislocation of the preacher’s status vis-à-vis the sermon. The Creative arises out of the provenance of the Spirit, of whom Wendy Farley writes, “She is outrageous because of the kind of power that seems to spin off of Her. She is a troublemaker, always stirring things up in crazy directions, and blowing wherever the hell She wants to.”⁷ And just as it is with the Spirit, no preacher can summon the Creative to do his or her bidding; the best we can do is nurture a space for the work of the Creative to move where it wills.

This essay moves in search of a different notion of creativity than one typically finds in homiletics literature. Notwithstanding the helpful insights and strategies for harnessing the preacher’s creative energies offered by a number of astute homileticians, I am inquiring about a kind of creativity that participates in a certain death. Such a death, I believe, is necessary to experience the Creative. This is not a literal death—no homiletical hemlock is required. Rather, what I have in mind is akin to a kenotic self-emptying or what Paul Ricoeur will identify (following Jean Nabert) as *dépouillement*.⁸

Paul Scott Wilson gets it right when he avers, “Preaching and creativity belong together, and preaching is only authentically creative when illumined by the Spirit.”⁹ What remains to be seen, and what I hope to show in this paper, is what such agency on the part of God via the Spirit might look like for preaching, what God is doing before we even begin to conceive a sermon.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 14.

⁶ See Karl Barth, “The Need of Christian Preaching,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, trans. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 131: “Under no circumstances and in no sense ought we to desire to be *creatores Creatoris*. Ours is not to give *birth* to God but to give *testimony* of him.” Such a notion is not alien to the thought of a frequent homiletical conversation partner, Paul Ricoeur, who confesses a “permanent mistrust of the pretensions of the subject in posing itself as the foundation of its own meaning. The reflective philosophy to which I appeal is at the outset opposed to any philosophy of the Cartesian type based on the transparency of the ego to itself, and to all philosophy of the Fichtean type based on the self-positing of that ego. Today this mistrust is reinforced by the conviction that the understanding of the self is always indirect and proceeds from the interpretation of signs given outside me in culture and history and from the appropriation of the meaning of these signs. I would now dare to say that, in the coming to understanding of signs inscribed in texts, the meaning rules and gives me a self. In short, the self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation from the meaning inscribed in the text.” Paul Ricoeur, “Foreword,” in Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), xv.

⁷ Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 97.

⁸ See Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Lewis S. Mudge, ed., David Stewart and Charles E. Reagan, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1980), 119–54. N.b., Kenosis is troubled by feminist scholarship and the recent contributions by scholars like Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), draw our attention to the power arising from such acts as a power “that leans toward others and offers itself to them” (7). Such “power for” the other can actually lead to human flourishing rather than further subjugating and silencing already marginalized bodies/voices.

⁹ Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 2.

Creativity can save the Church and we preachers must die to be creative, which is, after all, consistent with our task to take up our cross and follow Christ (Mt. 16:24).¹⁰

Creativity in Preaching

Wilson writes, “Today there is more emphasis on creativity in preaching than ever before.”¹¹ Most of such emphasis is on the preacher’s creativity. However, as one commentator puts it, “Preaching is not running truth through a pipe to a tank; it is filtering truth through a person to a person.”¹² To borrow this metaphor, the number of joints one employs and the span between them structure preaching’s conditions of possibility for creativity. By this understanding, the preacher is fully in control of the flow of information, or “truth,” a homiletical plumber, so to speak. But what if things aren’t so simple? What if our solder joints are never quite as secure as we think? What if our attempts to “filter” the content of our sermons never quite removes the impurities we think it does?

Creativity in Language

Preaching is impossible without language. Language is not all that preaching is, but it is nevertheless a necessary condition for preaching’s possibility. By scrutinizing the way language operates we may thereby gain greater insight into how creativity might be a function of language even as it is a result of a certain use of language.

Language in general is *sign language*. In other words, the general structure of language is structured by an arbitrary and differential system of signification in which sounds, gestures, inscriptions, etc. affix to acoustic images that cohere in the minds of its users. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure taught us this.¹³ Derrida is the one who drew our attention to a fundamental creativity at work within language, a creativity that Saussure attempted to control through a theoretical violence that cast writing outside of the pure inside of language as speech.¹⁴ Derrida writes, “. . . the immanence of language is essentially exposed to the intervention of forces that are apparently alien to its system.”¹⁵ The “usurpation” has always already begun.

As a conventional system of signification, language is structured according to the interplay of signifiers and signifieds, which are arbitrary and differential. Signifiers and their accompanying signifieds are inseparable for Saussure, like two sides of a sheet of paper.¹⁶

¹⁰ I am indebted to David Schnasa Jacobsen for drawing this point to my attention.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Howard, 16.

¹³ See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, ed., Roy Harris trans. (Chicago & La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1983). For a particularly incisive reading of Saussure’s *Course* see Paul J. Thibault, *Re-Reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁴ This creativity will take multiple names in Derrida’s texts: spacing, arche-writing, *différance*, etc. We must be careful to distinguish between creativity, which is a feature of language in general from the Creative, which is radically distinct from the linguistic economy and signifies something like a gift, or the impossible in Derrida’s later writings. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, David Willis, trans. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Peggy Kamuf, trans. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992); and Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 43.

¹⁶ Saussure, *Course*, 65–70.

Derrida recognizes, however, that even if a signifier is inseparable from its signified concept there is a necessary space, or hiatus, between them. This space is necessary for the system to function, like a certain give between gears that enable them to turn. Thus, all of language is structured by an “arche-writing,” which conditions the possibility of language as such.¹⁷

Far from the “monstrousness” that Saussure observed in writing and condemned to a sort of “intralinguistic leper colony,” the fact that language in general is always already structured by a certain playful creativity is something that should be celebrated in homiletics.¹⁸ It is as if God has crafted a Divine loophole (an “enigmatic relationship of the living to its other”) in our tight linguistic fabric so that, in spite of our best efforts to control our words, God might speak. This feature of language will take on different names in Derrida’s writings—space, give, *différance*, trace, supplement, play, hiatus etc. But, whatever we call it, we may see this hiatus that is a necessary feature of language as a source of *theo-logy*, as a space where God-speaks.¹⁹

Might we not think of the hiatus, the possibility of creativity, in language as a gift from God? Derrida writes, “One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence.”²⁰ In other words, we may consider the nature of human language as working against our proclivity to secure God in the simple presence of living speech. Always already at work, before the preacher ever puts pen to paper, God is at work in the fabric of language to save us from idolatry, from inscribing God in our language as a fixed ideology or concept.²¹ A feature at work *within* language—arche-writing, hiatus, etc.—opens our preaching to a void, to absence, to death. Derrida observes, “Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a *presence*. It marks *the dead time* within the presence of the living present, within the general form of all presence. The dead time is at work.”²²

At all times, and against its every intention, language participates in an “*economy of death*.”²³ Death is the homiletical “hinge” (*brissure*) that simultaneously fractures or fragments (*brissure*) the preacher as a conscious subject, as *cogito*, and conjoins or folds (*brissure*) the preacher’s language into the creative energy at work within language. Such a concept has not

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70: “Arche-writing, at first the possibility of the spoken word, then of the ‘graphie’ in the narrow sense, the birthplace of ‘usurpation,’ denounced from Plato to Saussure, this trace is the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing.”

¹⁸ Saussure, *Course*, 31 writes of “a genuine graphic monstrosity.” See also Derrida, 42. A similar Saussurian impulse runs through many homiletics texts. There is an obvious worry that creativity will get the best of the preacher and that which is external to the Gospel will somehow usurp the inside of the sermon. See Wilson, *Broken Words*, 21–5.

¹⁹ Without getting in the middle of the Derrida-Ricoeur debate concerning the transcendental capacity of language, I see this necessary spacing as a generative speech (whether it manifests on the level of language, sense, or reference). See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. R. Czerny et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 257–313. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–72 and *idem*, “The *Retrait* of Metaphor,” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. I, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 48–90, esp. 53–60.

²⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 51.

²¹ See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, Thomas A. Carlson, trans. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 37: “To reach a nonidolatrous thought of God, which alone releases “God” from his (*sic*) quotation marks by disengaging his apprehension from the conditions posed by onto-theo-logy, one would have to manage to think God outside of metaphysics . . .”

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

gone unnoticed in homiletics. Richard Lischer, for instance, recognizes that death is necessary for preaching: “For the very language that informs [the preacher’s] message is undergoing a kind of death and refiguration. Every week the preacher must begin from the end of words.”²⁴ This is not, I would argue, just a result of the inundation of words from Madison Avenue, Washington, and Hollywood. The preacher’s message undergoes a kind of death when she submits her sermonic language to the fallenness of language in general, a fallenness that simultaneously structures the end of her words and the (possible) beginning of the Creative: a kind of “bursting.”²⁵

We can therefore conclude that creativity is not just something that we might do to language—as a conscious decision on the part of the preacher—but it is always already at work within language as its most intimate possibility. Apart from the arbitrary and differential structure of language there is not enough give in the system to allow for signification in general. To get around this we would require a sort of Divine dictionary, an *a priori* rubric external to the system of signification—outside of language in general—that mandated a motivated (i.e., non-arbitrary) connection between signifiers and signifieds.

We have no such dictionary. Our dictionaries are *a posteriori* linguistic rubrics. They contain no non-arbitrary signifieds. They are endless circulations of signifiers pointing to other signifiers; they bolster the claim that there is no outside of language, no outside-language.²⁶ But the absence of a Divine dictionary is the very condition that makes creativity possible *in* language. We are not linguistic automatons, but free to play in and with words; we are free to play in and with the homiletical hiatus. Creativity is the necessary condition for the possibility of language and homiletics has only scratched the surface of this reality inasmuch as it has concentrated its attention on the preacher’s creativity.²⁷

Creativity in Speech

Preaching is impossible without speech, or at least without something that approximates speech.²⁸ As with language, there is more to preaching than speech, but there is no disputing the privileged status the spoken word has held in the history of preaching. Much has been written on creativity in speech; matters of tone, inflection, pacing, and projection are staple topics in our

²⁴ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005), 19.

²⁵ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *The Disaster of Writing*, new ed., trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 124. What Blanchot says in reference to the book we might also think in reference to the sermon, which “is not the laborious assemblage of a totality finally obtained, but has for its being the noisy, silent bursting which without the book would not take place But it also means that since the book itself belongs to burst being—to being violently exceeded and thrust out of itself—the book gives no sign of itself save its own explosive violence, the force with which it expels itself, the thunderous refusal of the plausible: the outside in its becoming, which is that of bursting.”

²⁶ For this oft-quoted sentiment see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158: “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (“there is nothing outside the text/no outside text”).

²⁷ A noted exception to this is John S. McClure in his book *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 5: “. . . language exists just beyond the threshold of the language user’s experience of the disastrous inadequacy of language and the complicity of language in potentially violent, oppressive, and self-perpetuating binary operations. It could be that preachers need to retreat into this second, passive, and non-binary language in order to discern and preserve the heart of preaching.”

²⁸ I am thinking of the animating movement of bodily gesture at work in sign-language, for instance. See Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

introductory homiletics courses.²⁹ That speech is the vehicle par excellence of preaching goes without saying, which is part of the problem. Even those thinkers who challenge the structure of preaching as speech-making do not challenge the privileged status of the spoken word, merely the authoritarian posturing they detect therein.³⁰

Speech is the privileged medium for Christian proclamation for (at least) two reasons.³¹ First, the spatio-temporal qualities of the sonic substance correlate with the event-like quality of God's revelation in preaching. Many take seriously the dictum from the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1562) that "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." Thus some, like Charles Bartow, understand the "performance" of a sermon to be a re-animation of the living Word of God held in abeyance in the biblical witness. Through the preacher's speech, the Spirit of God is loosed upon the congregation, *hic et nunc*, as presence, reconfiguring both the preacher and the congregation in the process. Bartow writes, "We are speaking of the infinite in finite terms, of *actio divina* in the discourse of *homo performans*. We are using vocal and physical gesture to sound forth and body forth (enact) human experience of the divine."³² In short, the voice renders God present to human experience in the act of preaching.

The second reason why the human voice is the favored medium of Christian proclamation is that it seems to be the most effective vehicle to release the inner life of the preacher's mind (with its accompanying intention) outside of the preacher into the minds and hearts of congregants. The act of speech entails (for most) hearing oneself speak. The immediate feedback one receives from his voice as he speaks re-inscribes the communication process like no other medium of signification. Derrida calls this experience "auto-affection." When I speak I hear myself speaking, and unlike few other activities in the world, the connection between one's internal thought world—consciousness—and the outside world appears diaphanous. As Derrida notes,

The system of "hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak" through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the

²⁹ Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, 67 notes that "we too often think only in terms of language when we want to revitalize our religious imagination for the pulpit. This strategy often fails because without fresh sources of experience, we fall back into our old ways of thinking and expressing ourselves."

³⁰ See John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) and Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). For a far less rigorous attack on speech-making ("speaching") see Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) and *Preaching in the Inventive Age* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2011), 41 ff.

³¹ The status of speech in preaching is rightly challenged on two fronts in homiletics. On the one side, are homiletics that have challenged the "silencing" or "oppression" of the voices of those marginalized by ecclesial structures. Here Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989); Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved From Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999); and Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) are must-reads. On the other side, are homiletics that have drawn our attention to the ableism that can be embedded in the privileging of the vocal apparatus in preaching. See Black, *A Healing Homiletic* and Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 15–37.

³² Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 60.

idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between worldly and non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.³³

Another way of putting this is that in the moment of hearing myself speak I convince myself that I am fully present: alive to a world that is outside of my inner thought-world. Edmund Husserl took great pains to articulate this movement from inside oneself to an outside world as a necessary component for his phenomenology.

For Derrida, Husserl's descriptions imply that within the living present of articulated speech, it must be the case that there is a minuscule hiatus differentiating me into the speaker and into the hearer. This hiatus is spatial as well as temporal, and this barely discernible gap makes speech possible. The infinitesimal distance (between my larynx and my tympanic membrane) produces a second (internal) hiatus that differentiates me from myself, a hiatus or gap without which I would not be a hearer *as well as* a speaker. This hiatus also defines the trace, a minimal repeatability,³⁴ and this hiatus, this fold of repetition that simultaneously ruptures and enables speech, is found in the very moment of hearing-myself-speak.

Derrida emphasizes the fact that “moment” or “instant” translates the German *Augenblick*, which literally means “blink of the eye.” When Derrida stresses the literal meaning of *Augenblick*, he is in effect deconstructing auditory auto-affection into visual auto-affection. When I look in the mirror, for example, it is necessary that I am “distanced” or “spaced” from the mirror.³⁵ I must be distanced from myself so that I am able to be *both* seer *and* seen. The *space* between, however, remains obstinately invisible. Remaining invisible, the space gouges out the eye, blinds it. I see myself over there in the mirror and yet, that self over there is other than me; so, I am not able to see myself as such. What Derrida is trying to demonstrate here is that this “spacing” (*espacement*) or blindness is essentially necessary for all forms of auto-affection, even tactile auto-affection which seems to be immediate. There is a “difference within auto-affection,” within the “sameness” of the *Augenblick*.³⁶

This is the key to understanding Derrida's treatment of auto-affection and representation in Husserl: “What constitutes the originality of speech, what distinguishes it from every other element of signification, is that its substance seems to be purely temporal.”³⁷ Unlike writing which need not be synchronous—the writer need not even be alive—in order to signify, speech necessitates spatio-temporal proximity.³⁸ Derrida sums up his observations nicely in the following quotation:

³³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7–8.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, David B. Allison, trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 85: “But this pure difference, which constitutes the self-presence of the living present, introduces into self-presence from the beginning all the impurity putatively excluded from it. The living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace. It is always already a trace.”

³⁵ Cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141: “The specular dispossession which at the same time institutes and deconstitutes me is also a law of language. It operates as the power of death in the heart of living speech: a power all the more redoubtable because it opens as much as it threatens the possibility of the spoken word.”

³⁶ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ Of course we could discuss electronic modes of preserving and re-transmitting the phonic substance over space and time, but that would take us far afield from Derrida's conversation as well as the scope of this paper.

When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I *hear myself at the same time* that I speak. The signifier, animated by my breath and by the meaning-intention (in Husserl's language, the expression animated by the *Bedeutungsintention*), is in absolute proximity to me. The living act, the life-giving act, the *Lebendigkeit*, which animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into a meaningful expression, the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its own self-presence. *It does not risk death in the body of a signifier* that is given over to the world and the visibility of space. It can *show* the ideal object or ideal *Bedeutung* connected to it without venturing outside ideality, outside the interiority of self-present life. The system of *Zeigen*, the finger and eye movements . . . Are not absent here; but they are interiorized.³⁹

Nevertheless, because speech is always and already exposed to the structure of signification in language, as arche-writing, living speech is forever exposed to its other: death. Derrida writes, "The autonomy of meaning with regard to intuitive cognition, what Husserl established and we earlier called the freedom or 'candor' of language, has its norm in writing and in the relationship with death."⁴⁰

As we think about these words for preaching, we may uncover an aspect of creativity in speech that has been overlooked in even the best treatments of the performance of preaching. Always already at work within living speech is a certain death; the experience of presence in speech is conditioned, at base, by a non-presence. We need to think more deeply about how an experience of something like death in our preaching—in the very articulation of *homo performans*—might give way, or expose, a "supplement at the origin" of preaching: *Actio Divina*, the Creative. John McClure offers an insightful take on the "sonic personality" of preaching in his *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention*. He rightly urges preachers to consider not only the linguistic value of our words, but also the "voluptuousness of sounds and signifiers—which amounts to capturing the *desire* that resonates beneath those sounds and signifiers."⁴¹ McClure's work moves us in the right direction by adding a level of philosophical sophistication to our understanding of speech, even if such practice has long been at work in the best of our preaching, particularly in the African American preaching tradition.⁴²

Derrida concludes, "It remains, then, for us to *speak*, to make our voices *resonate* throughout the corridors in order to make up for [*suppléer*] the breakup of presence. The phoneme, the *akoumenon*, is the *phenomenon of the labyrinth*. This is the *case* with the *phônè*."

³⁹ Ibid., 77–8. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁴¹ John S. McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 116. McClure's helpful discussion on "the grain of the voice" borrows from the work of Roland Barthes. See Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 179–89.

⁴² For instance, Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 80 argues that the tone and tenor of black preaching is essential to "deep communication" in the African American Church tradition. Aspects of delivery rate, sentence structure, and tonal inflection are crucial for Black Preaching. Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 10 writes that the creative use of speech allows "the presence of God through the power of language to lift the sermon to higher heights." He continues, "To this end, the employment of literary devices such as antiphonality, repetition, alliteration, syncopation, oral formulas, thematic imagery, voice merging, and sacred time continues to be a compelling concern of the African American preacher."

Rising toward the sun of presence, it is the way of Icarus.”⁴³ Even as we, with LaRue, seek to “lift the sermon to higher heights,” we must divest ourselves (*se dépouiller*) of the hopes of mastering our speech. Rather, by living into a certain death that is always already at work within the phonic substance, according to a necessary hiatus that structures the possibility of speech, we may encounter that which must give itself outside of the economy of speech.⁴⁴

Creativity in Sermons

Preaching is impossible without the Word of God. This is the most salient point of differentiation from a sermon and a speech. In keeping with the focus of this paper, I wonder whether we might be missing something *in* sermons that bespeaks an originary creativity that always already precedes the preacher’s creative impulse. Preaching is “peculiar speech”⁴⁵ as well as a peculiar use of language. There are many aspects that lend themselves to such peculiarity, but I will focus my remarks on the strange relationship between the Word of God proclaimed (sermon) and the Word of God written (the Bible).

James F. Kay, in his helpful volume, *Preaching and Theology*, insists, “Preaching is the Word of God if, and only if, it preaches the Word of God, that is, the scriptures as witnesses to the will and way of God.”⁴⁶ Kay goes on to argue convincingly that preaching must arise out of the biblical witness “[b]ecause God wills to address us, *here and now*, in our time and in our place . . . If God’s Word is to continue as *an event in the present*, then there must be interpretation of the holy scriptures as they themselves indicate.”⁴⁷ In other words, if Kay is right, preaching is necessarily scripture-dependent in order to “accommodate” God’s “present speaking” to contemporary persons.

I do not wish to counter this claim, especially inasmuch as it structures my own preaching. Yet, when we read such words in conversation with Derrida, we may gain a deeper appreciation for the kind of presence at work in and by means of the Word of God, and the creativity always already arising therefrom. Derrida writes, “In the spoken address, presence is at once promised and refused. . . . We are dispossessed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it.”⁴⁸ In other words, on account of the general structure of iterability that makes our preaching possible, full-presence is never quite accessible. Whether we preach from the scriptures or not, we are incapable of ever fully “accommodating” God’s “present speaking,” at least not a present speaking that might ever arise as a plentitude, as “full-speech.”⁴⁹ This point arises clearly out of Derrida’s “reading” of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁵⁰

⁴³ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 104.

⁴⁴ Marion, 105: “*Ged gives*. The giving, in allowing to be devined how ‘it gives,’ a giving, offers the only accessible trace of He who gives.”

⁴⁵ See William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁴⁶ James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2007), 18. He goes on to argue that, while both “equally instruments of the Divine Speaker,” there is an instrumental though not normative equality between Scripture and preaching: “The scriptural Word of God must govern our preaching if that preaching is to be received as ‘Word of God.’” With regard to the instrumentality of Scripture, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: III/1 The Doctrine of Creation*, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, ed., J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight, trans. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 93 regards the Scriptures as a “very inadequate medium” and they only ever approximate the Word of God “by the self-witness of the Holy Spirit to whom alone they owe their origin and power.”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 141.

⁴⁹ Though never quite achieving a religious status, this notion of an anticipated though never fully arriving presence will continue in Derrida’s later mention of “messianicity,” which signifies a posture of openness to the future

To put it as clearly as possible: a sermon is an especially peculiar form of speech inasmuch as it incorporates, openly and without remorse, the spoken and written modes of language. There is no attempt to conceal the fact that the preacher has tethered her speaking to the written Word. Herein we find a great power at work within preaching, one that “dislocates the subject that it constructs.” It prevents us from ever “being present” to the signs we employ. This power “torments” our language as the work of *différance*. Derrida writes,

Différance does not *resist* appropriation, it does not impose an exterior limit upon it. Différance began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation *breached*. Until death. Death is the movement of différance to the extent that movement is necessarily finite. This means that différance makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of différance, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Différance produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible.⁵¹

As we think about this claim in relation to that “peculiar speech” that arises from our sermons, we may observe that *différance*—the structure of difference and deferral that governs language, and thus, preaching—simultaneously denies and “accommodates” God’s presence in sermons.⁵² God’s presence is not “constituted” by this *différance*, for that would merely make God a function, albeit an originary function, of language. *Différance* “is” the structure that makes it possible for us to think the difference between presence and absence in the first place.

We would do well to think theologically alongside Derrida, for the Word to which preachers bear witness in the event of preaching is even more originary to preaching than the anarchic linguistic structure highlighted by *différance*. As Jean-Luc Marion writes, “Before our words, the Word lets people talk, thus manifesting that he cannot be spoken in them, but that, by the lordly freedom of this redoubled incarnation, he (*sic*) gives himself in them to be spoken. What is unheard of in the Word stems from the fact that he only says [himself] unspeakably (gap Word/words), but that in the very unspeakableness he is said nevertheless perfectly.”⁵³

beyond (religious) expectation. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 33 and John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 22–5.

⁵⁰ Derrida locates a tension at work in Rousseau. On the one hand, Rousseau castigates writing as a destruction of presence and as a disease of speech. On the other hand, Rousseau rehabilitates writing to the extent that it promises the reappropriation of that which writing initially robbed from speech: presence, life. Rousseau confesses that, as an introvert, he feels that he can communicate himself more fully through writing than were he present to another in direct discourse: “If I were present, one would never know what I was worth” (*Confessions*, cited in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 142). This is the tension that divides Jean-Jacques (the author of *Emile* and *Confessions*) from Rousseau (the author of *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and *The Essay on the Origin of Language*). The irony, of course, is that Jean-Jacques and Rousseau are one and the same person. We see this same tension at work in preaching in the use of sermon manuscripts. There is an unexamined belief that by drafting our thoughts apart from the congregation beforehand we can better communicate our intentions (and God’s presence) than were we to preach extemporaneously.

⁵¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.

⁵² See Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 11: “*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences.”

⁵³ Marion, *God Without Being*, 141.

When we think about a certain creativity that might emerge in the hiatus between text and sermon, between the Word of God written and the Word of God spoken, we see that the Creative emerges as much through the structure of *différance* as it does from the preacher's imagination. God's Word is possible "in the present" only as it participates in a certain death, in writing. And yet, as Rousseau observed such "death is not the simple outside of life. Death by writing also inaugurates life."⁵⁴ It inaugurates life by inviting the preacher to experience death in the written Word of God. We may speak of creativity *in* sermons by experiencing the homiletical hiatus, between text and sermon, that "accommodates" God's presence by manifesting God's absence.

The homiletical hiatus between the Word written (in Scripture) and the Word spoken (in sermons) invites a certain playfulness in interpretation. Paul Ricoeur observes, "If interpretation is possible, it is because it is always possible, by means of this gap, to mediate the relation of meaning and event by another meaning which plays the role of interpretation with regard to their very relation."⁵⁵ The homiletical hiatus that is necessary for the proclamation of God's Word invites a shift, as McClure has noted, from a hermeneutical posture to an "intertextual posture."⁵⁶ By entering creatively into this intertextual space, through a kind of divestment, through a kind of death, the preacher encounters the Creative always already at work in preaching.

Toward a Theology of the Creative for Preaching

Theology has tended to curb creativity in favor of conformity. This is a lamentable part of our history and it is necessary that we recognize this fact prior to any theology of the Creative. We cannot fault Derrida for the following observation: "That the logos is first imprinted and that that imprint is the writing-resource of language, signifies, to be sure, that *the logos is not a creative activity*, the continuous full element of the divine word, etc."⁵⁷ This illustrates that the history of the Church bears so little semblance to the Creative One that those outside of our flock cannot detect any resemblance between the Word we proclaim and the Creative.

So where does this put us on the path toward a theology of the Creative for preaching? The Church is present—we might say, the Church is alive to its presence in its non-presence in the power of the Spirit—through the Creative.⁵⁸ What marks our present age of ecclesial retreat from the spotlight into the shadows, as Craddock put it, is an enervation of the Creative in the Word ("*the logos is not a creative activity*").⁵⁹ But the obverse side of this declaration is just as damaging: some preacher's selfhood is stolen a priori because it is tethered to certain aspects of

⁵⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, 145.

⁵⁶ McClure, *Mashup Religion*, 86.

⁵⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 68. Italics added. As Amos Wilder observes in his *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, "When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic. It is at the level of the imagination that any full engagement with life takes place." *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 2, cited in Troeger, "A Positive Theology of Imagination," in the Papers of the Academy of Homiletics Annual Meeting (2006):138.

⁵⁸ William H. Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 15. Willimon avers, "If God should stop talking, if God should withdraw, even for a moment, into apophatic, empty silence, then the mountains would fall, chaos would overwhelm, the light would become darkness, and death would have the last word. Yet God's creative, life-giving, people-forming, intrusive Word keeps creating, keeps being made flesh, keeps pushing in, keeps having the last say."

⁵⁹ Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 68–9: there is a "general unwillingness to lose oneself in the task of communicating."

the preacher's self (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race). Part of the argument I am making for the Creative works against such marginalization. With Farley I believe that such an abdication of the self "does not leave us impotent; it fills us with power. . . . We should understand that we are leaning into *power*, not impotence, passivity, neurotic patience, self-sacrifice, or the evacuation of personhood."⁶⁰ The Creative is the power of preaching par excellence.

First, we require a homiletical medium appropriate to the Creative that is always already at work *in* preaching. I believe we need an invigorated appreciation for the power of language, as a "medium of the Holy," as Thomas G. Long puts it.⁶¹ Such a medium is suggested in the notion of preacher as witness, albeit a radical witness (*martyr*) who has experienced the divestment (*dépouillement*) by the Creative *in* preaching.⁶² For, as Marion reminds us, "The other appears only if I gratuitously give him the space in which to appear; and I have at my disposal no other space than my own; I must, then, 'take what is mine' (John 16:15), take from myself, in order to open the space where the other may appear. It is up to me to set the stage for the other . . ."⁶³ Only when the preacher lives into his own divestment before the Creative, as a kind of martyr, as a witness hovering between activity and passivity, does the preacher sacrifice the space necessary for the Creative to manifest itself in the event of preaching.⁶⁴

Second, as we move toward a theology of the Creative in preaching we need a renewed sense of the subject matter of our preaching: the Word. As Willimon puts it, "Creativity is a word-derived phenomenon."⁶⁵ What Derrida has helped us to see is that anything that might be

⁶⁰ Farley, 148.

⁶¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 42. We also need a wariness of language as a medium for silencing the Holy. See Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, esp. her focus on language as a political activity that is oppressive for women.

⁶² See Ricoeur, 120 and his discussion of how the divestment of the witness allows the other "to appear of itself." See also Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). 45–51 and Karl Barth, "The Task of Ministry," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 216: ". . . our task [is] to believe in their witness to the promise, and so to be witnesses of their witness, ministers of the *Scripture*."

⁶³ Marion, "What Love Knows," in *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 166–7. Feminist scholarship has taught us the dangers of such a perspective, and the same thought moves against the traditional, (phal)logocentrism at work in homiletics. Marion accepts as given the spacing for the other, a culturally dominant and powerful assumption, to be sure. But the history of patriarchal readings of a certain *kenosis* need not render *eros* unjust. See Mercedes, *Power For*, esp. her emphasis on "*for*ness" vis-à-vis Christ's *kenosis* and crucifixion (p. 151 ff.).

⁶⁴ Such divestment will not look the same for all. While space will not allow for a thorough treatment of this point, let me point to the troubled constitution of the preacher's subjectivity. A "dying to self" might signify an abdication of the privileged position of the preacher as self-same subject, say, for white, heterosexual male preachers. For LGBTQ, women and racial minorities—those whose subjectivities have been formed out of the fold/speculum/alterity of the normative white, straight, male preacher before the patriarchal structures of the church—*dépouillement* might take the form of "stripping off" the hegemonic labels borne by the preacher. See Susannah Cornwall, "The Kenosis of Unambiguous Sex in the Body of Christ: Intersex, Theology and Existing 'for the Other,'" *Theology and Sexuality* 14, no. 3 (January 2008): 181–199; Catherine Keller, "Scoop up the Water and the Moon Is in Your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic of Self-Emptying," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, reprint, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr., Christopher Ives (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005); Jeremy Ayers, "Towards a Eucharistic Politics of the Black Body: Black Sexuality in the Horizons of Christian Theology," *Theology and Sexuality* 10, no. 2 (March 2004): 99–113; and the classic essay in this regard from a feminist theological perspective: Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed., Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).

⁶⁵ Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 12.

appropriate to the Word, anything worthy of the name Creative as an expression of the Word, can never be experienced as a full-presence in language. To preach is to be radically Word-dependent, open to that which exceeds language. Where the Church forgets this fact, where it seeks to ground itself in its own identity apart from God's Word, where it suppresses *différance* by inscribing a hermeneutically closed totality, the Word of God is there to name a certain spacing always already at work within our preaching.⁶⁶ We need to think more about the Word as the agent and agency of the Creative in preaching.

Third, the manner, or approach, toward the Word encountered by the preacher as witness must be reconsidered in route to a theology of the Creative in preaching. Such an approach is found in the erotic mode of encounter. Jean-Luc Marion writes that "[l]ove is defined by its ignorance of the other" and "[o]nly love opens up knowledge of the other as such."⁶⁷ The erotic offers itself as an epistemology for preaching the Creative. Moreover, such a way of knowing (God) is appropriate to preaching the Word as witness because only love can open a path toward the death of the preacher: "The more it loses (dispersed, gives, and thus loves), the more it gains (because it still loves). In the erotic reduction, the lover who loses himself gains himself all the more as lover."⁶⁸

In conclusion, the *homo performans*, the activity to which human preachers ought to strive, is their own martyrdom, a kind of death made possible by loving the Word which first loved us. Only when we experience the death always already at work in our language, our speech, and our sermons can we proceed to bear witness (*martyrion*) to the *actio divina* promised by God in Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ We who preach are dying to be creative, to present that new insight or image that facilitates a deeper encounter with God. But this will require the supreme sacrifice. In a completely different sense, we must die to be creative; we must die so that the Creative may live in our human all too human language, speech, sermons. We must die (in order) to be creative.

⁶⁶ This is not a blind spacing that could signify anything just as easily as it signifies nothing. Thus it is not quite as radical as, say, John D. Caputo's "radical hermeneutics," but is closer to an approach proffered by Richard Kearney, which he labels, "diacritical hermeneutics." Diacritical hermeneutics sees a middle ground between a "fusion of horizons," or "romantic" hermeneutic and an apocalyptic rupture arising from the other (*à la* Levinas and Derrida). See Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 18 and Idem., "What is Diacritical Hermeneutics?" *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1–14.

⁶⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, "What Love Knows," 157, 160.

⁶⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Stephen E. Lewis, trans. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 73. This is not just apropos for philosophy. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., Edwyn C. Hoskyns, trans. (London, Oxford, & New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 158: "[People] can never wrest love unto themselves, and make it their possession. They can only continually receive it afresh as something *shed abroad* from above. Such love, which is God's work, is possible only because He first loved us (v. 8). This insight into the invisible, which is ours because it is not 'ours', is the anchor of our hope." See also Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), esp. her chapter 3 on Eros and the Other.

⁶⁹ Thomas A. Carlson, "Apophatic Analogy: On the Language of Mystical Unknowing and Being-Toward-Death," in *Rhetorical Invention & Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, ed. Walter Jost & Wendy Olmsted (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), describes a certain "theo-thanato-logy" along these lines. He writes, ". . . the one who exists thoughtfully in language, or the one who exists understandingly through interpretation, always stands in relation to a term that ultimately eludes thought and language, a term that escapes understanding interpretation—a term that marks, in short, a certain figure of the 'impossible.'" (209).

A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching

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Abstract: *The preaching literature overflows with normative definitions of preaching – preachers ought to do this, because this is what Paul, or Jesus did. The listener has been understood as a constant, whom the preacher sought to educate and persuade. Against this backdrop an interest developed in what listeners “do” with sermons. A new vein of homiletical research followed – namely the phenomenological study of what listeners “do” when hearing sermons. Within this vein is the Dutch/German practical theological research, highlighting how sermon themes, life situation, the preacher’s connectedness to the congregation, or how listeners’ personality type affect engagement with the sermon. Conversely there arose American liberal arts driven homiletics, utilizing communication or rhetorical frameworks to understand what listeners are doing. This paper reviews all the phenomenological research from both fronts, and attempts to summarize, highlight the recurring themes, and clarify the points of tension and difference therein.*

Introduction

Ronald J. Allen entitles his review of a recent trend of preaching as “The Turn to the Listener.”¹ In this article he tracks a widespread if not universal theoretical shift towards acknowledging the authority and reality of the listener as co-creator of meaning in preaching theory. This being the case, we might anticipate a groundswell of empirical studies into what listeners actually hear in sermons. Regrettably this is only true in an embryonic sense. This paper will review what empirical studies there have been, bringing together both the North American, often seminary-centered vein, and the continental European vein, where the study of the phenomenon of preaching in congregations and its effects is more widespread.²

Having surveyed the research, this paper will also identify the similarities – the recurring themes; as well as the differences – the points of tension. Finally, this paper suggests areas for further empirical study that might advance the discipline of homiletics, with particular reference to the insights gained from listeners.

Before commencing, one “thorny” matter requires our attention; namely the place of David Buttrick. We have not included the work of Buttrick in our review. Buttrick’s approach is often described as phenomenological, and though he distances himself from this term,³ it is an appropriate descriptor of his method. Buttrick asks what people hear and understand in the preaching event. Furthermore, he regularly makes claims about preaching based on researching listeners. For example: “Research indicates that in a reasonably good sermon, only about 35 percent of the language will be functional.... As far as we have been able to determine, any ‘this’ sentence [i.e. any sentence beginning with ‘This’] will *instantly* delete from consciousness.”⁴ This (pardon the pun) prescriptiveness, founded upon research, troubles fellow homileticians. Buttrick indicates that “though the technical information I offer does rest on some years of research, at the risk of dogmatism I neither describe nor document studies.”⁵ Others counter that

¹ Ronald J. Allen, “The Turn to the Listener,” *Encounter* 64.2, 2003.

² Otis C. Edwards Jr., “What Makes Preaching Effective,” *Anglican Theological Review* LXIX: 2, 1987, 181.

³ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1987), xii.

⁴ Buttrick, 211, emphasis his.

⁵ Buttrick, xi.

given Buttrick's reliance on empirical studies, the lack of documentation and verification weakens his thesis. Further they observe that there are "successful" sermons that fall outside of Buttrick's tenets and question whether consciousness is more pluralistic than Buttrick permits.⁶

Given Buttrick's lack of empirical and methodological documentation, his intermittent over-reaching conclusions, and his controversial status as a researcher, we have not included his work in our survey. In any case, the phenomenological research of listeners of sermons, we suggest, began in Europe and not in North America.

Phenomenological studies of listeners

Sterk (1975), Preek en toehoorders [Sermons and Hearers]

In 1975 Sterk undertook a sociological study that explored connections between listeners' demographics and expectations, and their evaluation and recollection. He interviewed 1231 German Catholics. He found that a positive evaluation of the sermon correlated positively with higher levels of church involvement, and being more advanced in years.⁷ Listeners appreciated sermons that were captivating, pleasant, credible, clear, and biblical in character.⁸ He also found that a positive attitude towards the preacher correlated with a positive reception, whereas familiarity with the preacher did not affect levels of appreciation.⁹ Finally he reports two thirds of listeners could not recall the essence of the sermon, even if asked soon after its completion.¹⁰

Daiber et al. (1980, 1983) Predigt und Hören: [Preaching and Hearing]

Also in the 1970s in Germany, Daiber et al. conducted a large study of 6000 listeners and 200 preachers in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. The intent of the research was to test the effectiveness of two types of sermons, namely a personal-dialogical and a dogmatic-proclamation sermon. Listeners reported no single preference, appreciating the relevancy to life of the former, and the instructive and directional elements of the latter.¹¹

What listeners most valued was the sermon as a source of comfort, as providing direction, and a means through which to interpret life experiences.¹² Hearers viewed sermons more positively when the sermon was delivered well and with conviction when the content connected with the listener's life experience and when listeners could find and explore identify within the message.¹³ They also found younger listeners to be more negative, and more educated listeners to be more critical.¹⁴

Van der Geest (1978), Du hast mich angesprochen: Die Wirkung von Gottesdienst und Predigt [Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching]

⁶ Thomas G. Long, "The Significance of David Buttrick's Homiletic," *Homiletic* 12 No 2, 1987, 1–5; Allen, 182.

⁷ Johannes G.M. Sterk, *Preek en toehoorders: sociologische exploratie onder katholieke kerkgangers in di Bondsrepubliek Duitsland* (Nijmegen: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociologie. 1975), 89–90, 218–19.

⁸ Sterk, 99, 218–223.

⁹ Sterk, 209.

¹⁰ Sterk, 187–90.

¹¹ Karl F. Daiber et al. *Predigt und Horen: Ergebnisse einer Gottesdienstbefragung. Band II: Predigten, Ananlsen und Grundausswertung* (München: Kaiser, 1983), 184, 303–11.

¹² Karl F. Daiber et al. *Predigt und Horen: Ergebnisse einer Gottesdienstbefragung. Band II: Predigten, Ananlsen und Grundausswertung* (München: Kaiser, 1980), 29.

¹³ Daiber et al. 1983, 182, 359.

¹⁴ Daiber et al., 1980, 43; 1983, 357.

Hans Van der Geest, a Dutch pastor, supervised other clergy undertaking Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in a Swiss Hospital. His methodology was simple, if not rigorous. Clergy would preach in the hospital chapel, and the congregation of other CPE clergy and laity would, after the service, provide feedback. Van der Geest recorded 200 such instances. His findings are not presented as conclusions drawn from research data, rather as reflections from the overall experience. He distils the following elements in what makes for effective preaching.

Sermons must be personal. Whatever else may follow, a sense of personal security in God's love is foundational. They must address the congregant as an individual, through the use of pronouns, content and body language. Van der Geest warns against the overuse of "we." Identification and empathy are achieved through "I" and "me" being like "you." This sense of relationship is more fundamental than content.¹⁵

Second, preaching must communicate hope. The preacher must take what is relevant from the text, and find balance between the "law" – means and hope for personal improvement; and "grace" – hope of fulfilment. This is achieved through what transactional analysis would frame as adult – adult communication, as opposed to parent – child.¹⁶

Third, a sermon must engage with people's thought, doubts, questions and insecurities. A preacher task is to bring understanding to these concerns. But it is an understanding borne out of lived faith. While questions may not be neatly answered, they are explained in terms of living with the consequences in light of God's sovereignty. A combination of image and metaphor, as well as content is required to communicate such truths.¹⁷

One can imagine how the themes of security, hope, and understanding in the face of doubt would be almost universal themes in a hospital setting. How universal are such themes in a congregational setting is not known. However, the observation that communicating security requires an interpersonal connection; and that preaching requires image and metaphor as well conceptual content correlates, as we shall see, with the findings of others.

Pieterse (1991) *Gemeente en prediking* [Congregation and preaching]

Researching in South Africa, nonetheless influenced by the continental Reformed Protestant Europe, Pieterse undertook a qualitative study exploring connections between congregation type and what he termed the "homecoming" of sermons. Listeners were identified as residing in one of three types of congregations: a shepherd-flock hierarchical church, a body-of-Christ diverse egalitarian church, or a hybrid of the above. Listeners from each congregation type reported regular encounter with Christ experiences through preaching that entailed thoughts, feelings, and motivation to act dimensions.¹⁸

What did vary by congregation type was the propensity to discuss the sermon afterwards. In shepherd-flock type church it was not customary to discuss sermons post event, whereas in body-of-Christ type churches sermons were commonly discussed. Further, when a more collective understanding of the sermon emerged as a result of discussion, corporate meaning-making correlated to more broad and long-term applications by the listener. Individual meaning-making as experienced by shepherd-flock listeners resulted in narrower band of personal applications.¹⁹ In other words, the context of hearing impacted the scope of meaning-making.

¹⁵ Hans Van der Geest, *The Impact of Personality in Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 31–49.

¹⁶ Van der Geest, 90–103.

¹⁷ Van der Geest, 116–30.

¹⁸ Hendrik J.C. Pieterse, *Gemeente en prediking* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1991), 20–34.

¹⁹ Pieterse, 30–34.

Carrell (2000), The Great American Church Survey

Lori Carrell, who holds a Ph.D. in speech communication, published *The Great American Church Survey*. Her assumptions are stated as follows: “The communication perspective asserts that listeners and preachers are partners in interaction, mutually responsible for the co-creation of meaning during the sermon...”²⁰ Her stated aim was to “compare and contrast preacher and listener perceptions of ... the ‘sermon.’”²¹

In terms of methodology, Carrell conducted in-depth interview with seventeen preachers and thirty listeners. From this ground work, Carrell settled on twenty-two open questions that she asked of 102 preachers, and eleven questions she asked of 479 of their listeners.

In broad terms Carrell reported the following: 31% have a generally negative reaction sermons, whereas 69% have a positive reaction; few listeners ever talk to the preacher about the message; a good sermon is described as relevant, organized, with content of substance; whereas a bad sermon is disorganized, has futile content and is poorly delivered; people tended view the sermon as having more spiritual impact than any other component of a service; listeners want their preachers to be God centred and biblical, relational, a model of spiritual vitality, and organized.²²

Regarding our thesis, Carrell reports that listeners regularly talk about their sermons, with family and friends ... but not with the preacher. Listener perceive “sermons” to be monologues. Feedback to the preacher is rare. “Preachers are attempting to affect listeners, yet they are frequently protected from knowing many of the meanings their listeners have made from their sermons.”²³

In terms of expectations Carrell identifies several similarities and differences between preachers and listeners. There is consensus regarding the length of delivery, preparation, the importance of preaching, and the lack of conversation that occurs before and after. There is discrepancy in that most preachers aim to change their listeners in some way (54%), whereas most listeners desire inspiration (35%). Most preachers desire to teach biblical knowledge so that listeners will become more personally responsible for their own spiritual lives, whereas listeners expect their Scripture for the week. Most preachers sense their listeners want to be entertained, whereas listeners seek relevance and inspiration.²⁴

Carrell’s research leads her to conclude that sermons are not as effective or as dialogical as they could be. Her supposition is that with more dialogue greater effectiveness would be achieved.²⁵ Carrell offers very practical suggestions as to “how-to-do-this, before, during, and after the sermon.”²⁶ These conclusions, however, sit in tension with her findings that neither preachers nor listeners believe the sermon to be dialogical at present, and both appear to accept that as the status quo. Admittedly the most common reason given why listeners do not choose to converse with the preacher is that they believe the preacher is too busy or does not want our feedback (64%). Nonetheless the sermon-as-monologue expectation is shared and entrenched.²⁷

²⁰ Lori Carrell, *The Great American Church Survey* (Wheaton: Mainstay, 2000), 6.

²¹ Carrell, 6.

²² Carrell, 81–104.

²³ Carrell, 82.

²⁴ Carrell, 145–58.

²⁵ Carrell, 198–99.

²⁶ Carrell, 213–17.

²⁷ Carrell, 141.

Carrell, like McClure and Rose, is also an advocate for preachers actively pursuing the perspectives of listeners and then incorporating them into their message.²⁸ Yet this too sits in tension with her finding that many congregants agree that preachers do have biblical expertise, and that they ought to spend hours in preparation, both private and relational, prior to delivery.²⁹

In short Carrell's research and reflections upon her findings highlight an unresolved tension in contemporary preaching. There is a move in the literature towards framing the sermon as dialogue, towards underpinning it with a transactional model of communication, and towards regarding the congregants as an equal co-creator of meaning in preaching, both in preparation and in interpretation. It is argued this will make preaching more effective. Yet in practice this appears to be neither the expectation nor the experience of listeners not to mention preachers.

Allen, McClure et al. (2000), *Listening to Listeners*

Listening to Listeners is a collaborative North American study, overseen by homiletician Ronald J. Allen. In 2000, 263 lay people and their preachers, from 28 congregations in the Midwest USA were interviewed. From this research, four books and several journal articles have flowed.³⁰

The questions were arranged using the Aristotelian categories of *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, and a grouping they termed "embodiment." Listeners were asked questions regarding their response to sermons in terms of: their perceptions of and relationships to the preacher, the content of the sermon and its reasoning, the feelings and affect of the sermon, and how the preacher embodied the message in his delivery and the impact thereof.³¹

The research validated Aristotle's categories as "central to understanding what happens in the hearts, minds, and wills of listener's when they hear sermons."³² Most listeners hear the sermon through one of these settings.³³ That is to say, some listen because of a relational connection with the preacher (*ethos*), some listen because of an engagement with the content and a desire to understand the point, and for others listening centers around an emotional engagement with feelings elicited by the sermons.³⁴ This affirmation is qualified by the observation that the dynamic between these three elements is more complex than Aristotle suggested and not simply cumulative.³⁵ Further, there is also a corporate dimension to the reception of sermons.³⁶ Nonetheless these findings bolster the renewed emphasis on rhetoric of Buttrick and Long contra Barth.³⁷

Herein, however, lies the central limitation to this research. Given that the Aristotelian categories were adopted prior to empirical interviews, the study has an implied verification methodology. The researches have subsequently become aware of this, and acknowledge this limitation.³⁸ Given this methodological orientation, Pleitzier stereotypes this study as asking "how the rhetorical qualities of the sermon work for the listener."³⁹ Allen's response would be

²⁸ Carrell, 210; Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 89–118, John S. McClure. *The Roundtable Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 48–58.

²⁹ Carrell, 135–40.

³⁰ Ronald J. Allen, "Listening to Listeners: The Board Reflects Critically on the Study," *Encounter*, 68.3, 2007, 71.

³¹ John S. McClure et al., *Listening to Listeners*, St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 181–82; Allen 2007, 70.

³² McClure, 138.

³³ Allen, 2007, 78.

³⁴ Ronald J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 7.

³⁵ McClure, 138.

³⁶ McClure, 9–10.

³⁷ McClure, 138.

³⁸ Allen, 2007, 75, 77.

³⁹ Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010). 14.

two pronged. First, the Aristotelian categories have been affirmed, enhanced, and theologically reframed. Likewise the recent focus on the rhetorical nature of preaching, and the “turn to the listener” evident in homiletical theory have been verified. Further, some theological dimensions of listening have been articulated. With Calvin, listeners must use their own reasoning to assess the sermonic content as to revelatory value.⁴⁰ Again, with the Reformers, Aristotle’s notion of *pathos*, like Burke’s notion of identification is akin to Calvin’s notion of identification: we all (preacher and listeners) stand equal, fallen before God.⁴¹ In part this research affirms that listeners identify with the preacher (*pathos*), allowing the preacher to reason with biblical content (*logos*), then apply the scriptures so as to allow the congregational reframe their life choices (*ethos*).⁴²

Second, Allen points to the third and fourth volumes capacity to “identify broader trends in hearing perception with little explicit reference to the Aristotelian categories.”⁴³ We shall note only six of the ten findings, being those pertinent to our study.

In this study, when listeners are asked what the purpose of preaching is, two thirds respond it is to teach or instruct. Less common but nonetheless prevalent answers include: applying teaching, to deepen listener’s relationship with God, to inspire, and to unify God’s people. Respondents value listening to sermons, and they expect to be taught and to grow.⁴⁴ As regards what the researchers termed “embodiment,” listeners notice non-verbal cues and value features such as eye-contact, voice, dress, and gestures as points of connection. Greater connection facilitates greater engagement on the part of the listener.⁴⁵ Beyond the delivery, listener’s value content that places the preacher as “one of us.” Such a connection can be facilitated by disclosure from the pulpit, or experiences with preacher in and beyond other parts of church life.⁴⁶

Mulligan et al. note a threefold variegated response in listener’s attitudes as to how being in a congregation shapes listening. Less than one third understand preaching as speaking to individual faith listeners, others perceive an aggregate of individual listeners, and yet others sense a communal identity. Those who hear the sermon as speaking to “me,” struggled to answer questions about how preaching shapes a community. Those who hear sermons as speaking to an aggregate of individuals, talk about the sermons as moving individuals in a similar direction. Finally those who sense a communal hearing, also sense a communal responding, facilitated by the work of God’s Spirit.⁴⁷ How being in congregation affects listening is an emergently salient yet imprecise theme.

Likewise, in sensing God’s participation in the preaching event, respondents were divided between those who perceived God to be active, while others believe God is passive. On the active side, listeners may identify God as providing the theme or passage, inspiring the preparation, assisting listeners, or moving somehow among the people. On the passive side God is seen as present, or as listening, but not overruling the natural processes of communication.⁴⁸

Finally, in terms of outcomes, listeners respond that the outcome of preaching is a deepening of faith, or thought, feeling, and or a call to action. These answers are responses to

⁴⁰ McClure, 36.

⁴¹ McClure, 83.

⁴² McClure, 84–85.

⁴³ Allen, 2007, 76.

⁴⁴ Mary A. Mulligan et al., *Believing in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 7–14.

⁴⁵ Mulligan, 46–61.

⁴⁶ Mulligan, 68.

⁴⁷ Mulligan, 127–45.

⁴⁸ Mulligan, 152–58.

any one sermon, whereas others highlight a cumulative effect to hearing regular preaching as a more apt description of their response to preaching. Disturbingly, Mulligan notes that at times listeners respond negatively to sermons, believing them to be untrue, misapplied, or disingenuous on the part of the preacher.⁴⁹

In sum, this research suggests that *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*, embodiment and congregational culture are the five key elements to listening.⁵⁰ None of these themes are, however, new to homiletics. Beyond that, this research gives one the impression that within the preaching event there are any number of other variables (in *Believing in Preaching* they list ten), within which the listener can make any one of several responses. These variables are the product of recorded observations, grouped together (or codified), then commented upon. What the research fails to do is to reveal correlations or dynamic interactions between variables and responses. Beyond the Aristotelian categories, no theory of preaching or listening to preaching is offered.

McKinney (2004), View from the Pew

McKinney, daughter of a third generation preacher, writes from within the African-American Baptist tradition in the USA. Despite being a researcher with a doctorate in psychology, she fails to explicitly reveal any methodology. Instead, among other matters, we read that “*View from the Pew* is my thoughts and prayers for the preachers...”⁵¹ No doubt McKinney interviewed listeners, and at times she informs preachers what listeners want or need. At other times she shares from her own experiences, or draws on popular preaching literature, or scripture, or folklore, or even hymn lyrics in order to substantiate her point.

Given the above, it is difficult to prioritize themes in McKinney’s “research.” We propose that the following concepts are the most repeated and fundamental themes: preach the word,⁵² connect the head and heart,⁵³ pastorally connect with the congregation,⁵⁴ have organized material,⁵⁵ but preach to inspire.⁵⁶

Stark (2005), Proeven van de Preek [Samples of Preaching]

Stark undertakes to explore the sermon as the Word of God and its development within Protestant theology. As such much of his dissertation falls outside the interest of this study. He identifies sermons as containing six dimensions, namely the sermon, the listener, the (biblical) text, the preacher, the liturgical context, the ecclesial sociological context, and work of the Holy Spirit. Further, he offers a taxonomy of preaching based on two sets of variables. On the one hand preaching can be text driven, or application driven. On the other hand sermons can have a kerygmatic, a didactic, or a paracletic mode.⁵⁷

In his thirteenth chapter however, he presents the findings of his 246 surveyed listeners and their preachers. He reports the following. Most churchgoers enjoy church attendance and the sermon in particular. They do so, primarily desiring an “encounter with God”; believing God speaks to them through the sermon. That is, they understand the sermon to be the word of God.

⁴⁹ Mulligan, 169–89.

⁵⁰ Allen, 2004, 78.

⁵¹ Lora-Ellen McKinney, *View from the Pew* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson, 2004), xxviii.

⁵² McKinney, 7, 11, 17, 32–38.

⁵³ McKinney, 5, 9, 18, 27, 77–82.

⁵⁴ McKinney, 27, 44–45, 62–74.

⁵⁵ McKinney, 12–16, 36–37, 55.

⁵⁶ McKinney, 12–16, 36–37, 55.

⁵⁷ Franciska Stark, *Proeven van de Preek: Een praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de preek als Woord van God* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2005), 470.

All sermon types may facilitate this, and Stark does not identify any one sermon type as more effective to this end. Having said that, preachers are focused towards the exposition of a text, listeners are focused towards the relevance of the text for everyday life.⁵⁸ One of the themes Stark identifies as warranting further research is the tension that exists between meaning being found in the text versus in the act of appropriation.

Schaap-Jonker (2008), *before the face of God*

This very question is explored by another Dutch researcher, Schaap-Jonker, from a psychological perspective. She grounds her methodology within the epistemology of British psychoanalyst Winnicott, and his object relations theory. For Winnicott, objects are both “created” in the individual’s intrapsychic world, and “found” in the “external” world. The subjective and the objective come together in a transitional experience. Meaning is discovered and constructed by a knower in the very process of knowing. Yet the “other” that they come to know is a real object. The process of knowing involves an interaction between the subject and a real other.⁵⁹

Consistently, Schaap-Jonker contends that meaning is both created and found by listeners in sermons. Several variables influence the process of listening and meaning making. First, sermonic language is not merely referential; rather it is often transcendent and metaphoric. Second, the situational context: preaching occurs as part of a liturgy – call and response. Ritual creates a context in which we not only hear from God’s word, but become God aware. Third, preaching is an exercise in transformation, in exploring who we are at present and imagining what we might be. The subjective appropriation of the objective is sharpened in listening to sermons, because of the ethereal nature and themes of preaching.⁶⁰

Like Rose and McClure, all of this leads Schaap-Jonker to an interactional model of communication. Within the preaching event itself are three variables: the preacher, the content, and the congregation. These variables dynamically interact with each other. As a listener, the individual may appropriate the sermon as a whole (i.e. preacher, content and congregation dynamic), or any combination of these three factors. Further, the preaching event itself takes place in both a localized religious context, and a broader socio-cultural context, both of which affect the interpretation. Somehow, in all of this, the listener encounters God, hears from him, and finds personal comfort, support, transformation and or growth.⁶¹

Beyond a model of communication, Schaap-Jonker offers a five part model of listening. Listening involves: the *reception* of sensory impressions, the extent to which the listener pays *attention*, hearing *meaning* as evoked by the message and discovered within the hearer’s framework of reference, *reacting* to the sermon with agreement or disagreement, and *remembering* the sermons cognitive content and one’s emotional response to it.⁶² The concern of Schaap-Jonker’s research is how listener’s frameworks of reference affect attention, meaning, reaction and remembering.

In order to clarify a listener’s framework of reference, Schaap-Jonker draws upon Rizzuto’s theory of God image. Rizzuto, another psychiatrist seeking to build on Winnicott, draws a distinction between “God concept” and “God image.” A God concept is founded upon knowledge about God, is rational in nature, and can be comprehended without stirring the soul.

⁵⁸ Stark, 245–56, 471–74.

⁵⁹ Hanneke Schaap-Jonker, *Before the face of God* (Zurich: Lit Verlaag, 2008), 47–48.

⁶⁰ Schaap-Jonker, 72–81.

⁶¹ Schaap-Jonker, 81–92.

⁶² Schaap-Jonker, 92–98.

A God image is the experience one has of God, resulting from one's emotional responses, images, and memories of God. While neither Rizzuto nor Schaap Jonker seek to drive a wedge between these two, for both the notion of "God image" is primary and highlights the personalized and constructed nature of understanding God.⁶³

Schaap-Jonker research is both quantitative and qualitative. In the former she used questionnaires with 460 participants from three Dutch Protestant congregations. One questionnaire regarded the sermon/service, another regarded God image, another was a personality type test (NEO-FFI), another measured the affect (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule), and two other surveys.⁶⁴

Respondents found a sermon to be most meaningful when it was relational. By relational Schaap-Jonker means listeners attained a sense of encounter or connection with God, hearing from God, or sensing prospects beyond the limits of life. Those with a God as support image heard the sermon as more encouraging; whereas those with anxiety towards God were left feeling more guilt, shame, and anxiety.⁶⁵

Regarding the content, a similar pattern to finding the sermon as meaningful emerged. Those with a positive God image heard positive content, and those with anxiety about God heard more negative content. Positive and negative God images were found not just to be individual constructs, but part of localised congregational theology.⁶⁶

The second highest correlate to finding meaning was listener attention. Attention capacity, however, did not correlate to personality type.⁶⁷ The single most effective predictor of attention is attitude towards the preacher.⁶⁸

In the second part of her study, Schaap-Jonker switched to a qualitative methodology, interviewing seven respondents, in order to better understand the process of individual meaning construction. From this research, Schaap-Jonker identifies three stages of meaning making. First there is *focusing* – where listeners concentrate on the content. Second, there is *dialogizing* – where listeners reflect on the sermon in relation to their own situation. Third, there is *actualizing* – where listener's make the message concrete in their own context.⁶⁹

Of the seven respondents, two people heard the same sermon, another two a second sermon, and yet another pair a third sermon. When asked to recall sermonic themes, the persons who heard the same sermon gave different answers. For Schaap-Jonker:

This implies that the sermon does not automatically lead to an unequivocal meaning on the level of content; although what people hear is based on the words spoken by the preacher, results show that hearing is in fact a selective process in which hearers make meaning of specific words or fragments of the sermon while leaving aside other parts.⁷⁰

However when meaning is correlated with personality type, strong links emerge.

Persons who have similar personality structures report comparable themes, even though the sermons they heard were different, delivered by different preachers, concerned

⁶³ Schaap-Jonker, 107–09.

⁶⁴ Schaap-Jonker, 132–41.

⁶⁵ Schaap-Jonker, 204–09, 222.

⁶⁶ Schaap-Jonker, 210–14.

⁶⁷ Schaap-Jonker, 223.

⁶⁸ Schaap-Jonker, 210.

⁶⁹ Schaap-Jonker, 240–48.

⁷⁰ Schaap-Jonker, 264.

different Scriptural passages, and sometimes during different times in the ecclesiastical year.⁷¹

While Schaap-Jonker frames her research within the subjective-objective tension in Winnicott's theory, her methodology and results highlight the ways in which listener's construe messages, and not the reverse.

Pleizier (2010), Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons

Also writing in Holland, and asking the question "what do listeners do with sermons?"⁷² is Theo Pleizier. Consistent with his grounded theory methodological approach, Pleitzier commences with a descriptive (as opposed to normative) definition of preaching as "an instance of both religious and human communication."⁷³ That is, preaching combines a human-human(s) and a divine-human dynamic.

As regards the human-human(s) encounter, preaching is a social act, which contains three dimensions. First, despite being delivered as a monologue, it is pseudo-discourse. The listener is a silent but necessary partner. Second, it has shared intentionality. Both listener and preacher are there for like reasons: to rehearse the historical Christ event, to participate in a common faith sharing moment, and to be called to live a particular life. Third, this involves activity on the part of the listener. Listeners are not isolated individuals as receptacles of truth. Rather they are active participants who listen in community as part of a preaching event.⁷⁴

As regards the divine-human encounter, Pleizier notes that neither preacher intentionality nor listener consciousness sufficiently describes the preaching event. Preaching exists in three temporal modes. The past Christ-event entails a kerygmatic dynamic that must be pronounced, the exploration of the consequences of this in the light of present context requires an interpretative dynamic, and the eschatological dynamic must anticipate the future and implications for current trajectories.⁷⁵

These three dynamics find expression in a preaching event that is, to use Pleizier's descriptor, "religious": that is, preacher and listener suppose God is present and active. Thus the preacher is more than communicator; functioning as prophet or performer. The preacher's words carry more than concepts, they have illocutionary function (c.f. Searle) and force beyond the preachers authority as a human communicator.

Pleizier, flowing from his research, generates a theory of listening to preaching as involving three stages. The first is "opening up to listening." The listener's involvement in the preaching event begins even before the sermon does. The listener needs to be ready to listen, to receive.⁷⁶

Three factors will contribute to this readiness. The flow of the service, or the liturgy, will help position the congregant as being ready to listen. Different local churches will possess differing traditions and cues. The liturgy, outside the control of the individual, gives cues to the listener to put other things aside and prepare to pay attention. Second, the "situated receptivity" or expectations, fears, concerns, or distractions that flow from everyday life will position the listener as attentive to certain themes, and less receptive to others. When external concerns are

⁷¹ Schaap-Jonker, 265.

⁷² Pleizier, 12.

⁷³ Pleizier, 31.

⁷⁴ Pleizier, 39–56.

⁷⁵ Pleizier, 58–59.

⁷⁶ Pleizier, 157–60.

more trivial, the listener is more open to the preacher raised themes. When external concerns are substantial and do not correlate to the sermon, the listener may be distracted. Third, the extent to which an individual listener affiliates with the congregation within which they are seated also determines receptivity. This affiliation may be both relational and confessional. Higher affiliation correlates with greater receptivity. Liturgy, life situation, and congregational affiliation all combine to determine the listeners' receptivity to the impending message.⁷⁷

The second phase of listening in Pleizier's theory is called "dwelling in the sermon." Preaching events are more than just listening to lectures. According to Pleizier's research, listeners describe preaching events as being related to God; as providing a divine perspective on human existence.

To achieve this, a sermon must perform several functions. It must provide a meditative environment in which a listener can sit and explore. A sermon ought to be a pleasurable experience. Apart from any future functionality, preaching is an event in and of itself, in which a listener sits, within a community of faith, and takes pleasure in the hearing. Listening is thus communal religious enactment where the beliefs of this local community are rehearsed. Listening is also influenced by possible outcomes. Listener's expect practical instruction and to reframe life as a result of the message.⁷⁸

Dwelling in a sermon will produce two outcomes. Listeners will arrive at religious perceptions as a result of the sermons "aboutness." Their attention is focused so that they become aware of something, something they sense God has said or might be saying to them. Second, listeners will identify with the sermon. They will have a sense of – "Yes, that is what I believe." There is an affiliation with the content: with words, images, illustrations. A relational affiliation is also possible: "Yes, this is what we corporately believe, and they (the preacher) are one of us."⁷⁹

The third stage of the hearing sermons Pleizier labels as "actualizing faith." "[L]isteners are very much interested in the preacher's opinion, listening foremost entails how they view themselves, their situation, even the world, in terms of God, the Christian tradition, and the Scriptures."⁸⁰ Faith is actualized in both punctiliar illuminative moments of insight, and through long-term regular exposure to gospel themes. The content of the insight may have to do with the present, or the eschatological. Finally the insight may be affirmative and encouraging, or critical causing reappraisal.⁸¹

Pleizier has provided a fresh, research driven, ground up theory of the listener's function in the preaching event. Listeners are necessarily "religiously" involved in a preacher-listener-divine encounter, and Pleizier provides an account of how so. His research affirms and gives further insight into how preaching is conversational (pseudo-discourse) and communal (c.f. Rose and McClure). His reaffirmation of the sermon as aesthetic as well as functional, and the sermon as an exploration of past, present and future is timely. His metaphor of preaching as a temporary house for kingdom citizens is powerful to say the least.

Lorensen and Gaarden (2013): Listeners as Authors in Preaching

Gaarden and Lorensen are the most recent to engage in phenomenological research of listeners. Studying the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, also using a grounded theory

⁷⁷ Pleizier, 160–84.

⁷⁸ Pleizier, 185–207.

⁷⁹ Pleizier, 208–51.

⁸⁰ Pleizier, 253.

⁸¹ Pleizier, 253–70.

methodology, they are concerned to understand how listeners appropriate sermons. What does it mean, as Paul writes, that “faith comes from hearing” (Rom 10:17)? As opposed to Pleizier, Gaarden and Lorensen explicitly reject the assumption of a religious dimension to listening to sermons. Their stated concern is to understand the listening event as a phenomenon, which occurs within certain theological convictions.⁸²

Gaarden and Lorensen describe listeners as creators of meaning in dialogue with the sermon. Listener’s interact with their impressions of the preacher as a person, the content of the sermon, and interpret both within the framework of their own thoughts and experiences. This listener’s role is so significant that Gaarden and Lorensen report: “What remained in the memory of churchgoers was not what had actually been said from the pulpit, but their personal meaning production, activated by dialogical interaction involving the listener’s own life situation and existential reflections.... *churchgoers are to be understood as the primary authors of preaching and that preachers have the role as co-authors.*”⁸³

At this point Gaarden and Lorensen frame their findings within the epistemological theorizing of Mikhael Bakhtin, an early-to-mid-twentieth century Russian philosopher. Bakhtin proposes that “understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other.”⁸⁴

Returning to their empirical findings, Gaarden and Lorensen detail three modes in which listeners engage in sermon engagement and meaning construction. The first and most frequent is “associative interaction.” In this mode, the sermon kindles a train in the listener’s mind. The listener then makes associations of like content from within their own frameworks and experiences. By way of example, one listener, after hearing a sermon on justification, began thinking about the Islamic concept of justification. Though not mentioned by the preacher, the listener reported this thought as part of their account of the sermon. Such activity on the part of listener was “common.”⁸⁵

Gaarden and Lorensen conclude that “the empirical findings do not support an existentialistic tradition of interpretation deriving from Rudolph Bultmann or Søren Kierkegaard, which emphasises the encounter with the Gospel as a moment of personal decision making. Instead, the encounter activated a series of associations in a search for personal meaning.”⁸⁶ Though not mentioned, we take it that Gaarden and Lorensen would be even less inclined to accept a Barthian account of encounter with Christ, or a positivist account of an encounter with truth as revealed in God’s Word as fitting their data.

The second mode of listening identified by Gaarden and Lorensen, they entitled “critical interaction.” In this mode, listeners engage a critical voice in response to the sermon. From within their own preconceptions and experiences, listeners chose to disagree with the preacher’s interpretation of the biblical text. Listener’s tended to hold a belief that the Bible was true; their disagreement was with the preacher’s interpretation of the Bible.⁸⁷

The last mode of listening Gaarden and Lorensen term as “contemplative interaction.” Contemplation is described as “a state of being without words”; instead of... having a dialogue

⁸² Marianne Gaarden, & Marlene R. Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives, *Homiletic* 38.1, 2013, 28–45.

⁸³ Gaarden and Lorensen, 31; emphasis theirs.

⁸⁴ As cited by Gaarden and Lorensen, 32.

⁸⁵ Gaarden and Lorensen, 34.

⁸⁶ Gaarden and Lorensen, 35.

⁸⁷ Gaarden and Lorensen, 36–37.

with God... she can be said to dwell in God.”⁸⁸ As Gaarden and Lorensen acknowledge, the listener can be said at this point to have moved beyond dialogue with the sermon, to creating new, transcendent meanings, stimulated in the first instance by the sermon. (2013, 41–42)

By way of a final metaphor, Gaarden and Lorensen conclude that listener’s are the authors and creators of meaning, whereas preachers are the “interrupters” of human consciousness, initiating new lines of thought, to be constructed in the mind of the listener.⁸⁹ Given that congregation members have divergent frameworks of reference, the interpretation of preaching is best understood as a polyphonic event.⁹⁰

Given that the stated aim of this research is to understand “How do churchgoers listen to sermons when they participate *in services*,”⁹¹ it is disconcerting to discover that “eight of the 29 interviews were informants listening to a radio-transmitted worship.”⁹² Given their engagement and critique of Pleizier’s research,⁹³ Gaarden and Lorensen methodology demonstrates a lack of appreciation of how sensing being part of a congregation influences listeners.

Whereas some research highlights the effect of sermons, Gaarden and Lorensen’s research underscores what listeners do with sermons – how sermons provide fuel which stimulates dialogue. They helpfully identify three common means by which listener’s construct meaning: by association, by critical interaction, and by contemplation. We await Gaarden’s forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation for a theological reflection on the role of the Spirit of God in preaching and listening to preaching.

Distilling themes in the research

Effect versus audience research

Pleizier, in his brief summary of the literature, offers something of a taxonomy. Research can be divided into effect research, which asks “what do (properties of) sermons do to listeners,” and audience research, which asks “what do listeners do to sermons?”⁹⁴ This is framework with deep roots in philosophy, such as subject-object discussions of Kant and Hegel, and more recently in hermeneutical consensus around the two horizons of coming to knowledge, following Gadamer and Thiselton. Though Pleizier references neither of these traditions, he does acknowledge that neither effect nor audience research is unaware of the other, and the complexity of communication. Rather, both are vying for what is termed to “locus of control” of meaning.⁹⁵

Pleizier identifies among the effect type researchers: Sterk – for whom involvement in church life correlates to sermon appreciation (behaviourism); Daiber et al. – for whom sermon appreciation correlates to relevancy and practical application (communication); and Allen et al. – for whom the rhetorical nature of the sermon influences the listener. Conversely, Pleizier identifies others as having audience research partiality: Stark – in that listeners identify the

⁸⁸ Gaarden and Lorensen, 41.

⁸⁹ Gaarden and Lorensen reference Barth as proposing this notion of preacher as interrupter, 45. It must be said that they develop this theme in directions antithetical to Barth.

⁹⁰ Gaarden and Lorensen, 44–45.

⁹¹ Gaarden and Lorensen, 28; 45, emphasis mine.

⁹² Gaarden and Lorensen, 37 footnote 31.

⁹³ Gaarden and Lorensen, 29.

⁹⁴ Pleizier, 12.

⁹⁵ Pleizier, 13.

sermon as the word of God,⁹⁶ Schaap-Jonker – for whom listeners create meaning as a function of personality type, and Allen et al. – whom in their third volume acknowledge that different listeners respond in diverse ways to certain dimensions of the preaching event.⁹⁷

We suggest that the distinction between effect and audience research is of use, but that its use is limited and too forced. All researchers acknowledge both elements. While some may be characterised as locating the locus of control to one side (Schaap-Jonker, Gaarden and Lorensen); other research would point to both without reference to weight (e.g. Pleizier).

Recurring themes

Several categorical groupings emerge from the research as surveyed. Most researchers report that listeners take pleasure in hearing sermons (Sterk, Diaber et al., Carrell, and Stark), and reflect a sense of having engaged with God (Stark, Schaap-Jonker, Pleizier). When researchers sought to contrast the capacity of sermon type to elicit a sense of connection with God (Stark, Diaber et al.), they found no evidence of any one type as more effective than another. When researchers aim to identify what listeners rated as agreeable content, the themes of being relevant (Sterk, Vander Geest, Diaber, Carrell, Allen et al. and Stark), providing comfort, encouragement, or inspiration (Diaber et al., Vander Geest, Schaap-Jonker, McKinney, Allen et al.), organized (Sterk, Carrell, McKinney), personal (Diaber, Vander Geest), finding balance between logos, ethos, and pathos (Allen, McKinney), and biblical (Sterk, Carrell, Stark, McKinney) were common. Inability to recall content is not synonymous with a devalued sermon (Sterk, Pleizier).

Several studies touched upon the role of the preacher. Partiality to the preacher correlates with attention (Schaap-Jonker), engagement (Gaarden and Lorensen) and sermon enjoyment (Sterk). The role of the preacher is critical in creating a sense of conviction and embodiment (Diaber et al., Allen et al.), connection (Allen et al.), and allowing listeners to explore profound questions such as identity and doubt (Diaber et al., Vander Geest). Listeners at times identify the preacher as “one of us,” increasing sermon receptivity (Allen et al., Pleizier). However, a lack of personal knowledge of the preaching is not an impediment to listening (Sterk). Furthermore, disagreement with the preacher over textual interpretation can even aid listener engagement (Gaarden and Lorensen).

Only two studies sought to identify stages and or processes of listening, namely Schaap-Jonker and Pleizier. Both arrived at analogous conclusions. Both offer three phases of sermon engagement, including focusing or opening up, followed by dialoguing or dwelling in the sermon, and finally actualizing the sermon.

Several studies sought to understand the variable of context. Pieterse found that congregation type shapes post-sermon conversation, which expands the range of perceived sermon application. Mulligan found that one-third of listeners perceive the sermon as being addressed to an aggregate of individuals, and another one third to a communal identity. Schaap-Jonker found that salient themes may be the result of localised theology as well as individual personal traits. Pleizier found that listeners with higher levels of congregational affiliation are

⁹⁶ One suspects Stark would reject this representation of his research. As a Reformed Protestant, he believes the listeners hear the sermon as the word of God because it is the word of God as preached (or modernized would be his term), flowing from the word of God as recorded in Scripture, 470. Having said that Stark does acknowledge that it is “*the listener* who attaches the predicate “Word of God” to the sermon”, 471. The predicament arises, not so much as a consequence of reading or misreading Stark, but because of the dichotomization between effect and audience research.

⁹⁷ Pleizier, 12.

more receptive. Both Schaap-Jonker and Pleizier found that personal life context situated listeners to be either attentive, selective or distracted.

Differences, tensions, and gaps in the research

While there is some convergence apparent in the literature, several core elements of listening to sermons remain unclear. Foremost is the question: How dialogical is the sermon? Carrell sets the parameters for this discussion. On the one hand she is ideologically committed, as a communication theorist, to “listeners and preachers [as] partners in interaction, mutually responsible for the co-creation of meaning during the sermon.”⁹⁸ She concludes that preaching is not as effective as it could be, and affirms her assumption that greater interaction is the solution.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, she concedes that sermon as monologue is shared entrenched supposition of preacher and listener alike.¹⁰⁰

Schaap-Jonker’s research positions listeners as selectors and constructors of meaning, rather than co-creators. The preacher delivers a message, containing a raft of themes. The listener retains salient themes and disregards others, depending on their personality, God image, and affective state. The relationship is more sequential than dialogical.

Pleizier also proposes a modified form of dialogue, which he labels as “religious involvement” and “pseudo-conversational discourse.” By religious involvement he means that the listener picks up on the topic or “aboutness” of the sermon, identifies with the concepts and or the preacher, listens to preacher’s opinion, and somehow in all of this attributes illuminative moments as God having spoken. By “pseudo-conversational discourse” Pleizier recognises that sermons are not conversation proper, where there must at least two complete turns.¹⁰¹ But nor are they monologue. Sermons assume a present and ongoing involvement on the part of listener, they assume a shared purpose, they assume a listening community with the capacity for ongoing conversation, and they assume the capacity for divine-human encounter.¹⁰²

Gaarden and Lorensen take an alternate view from Pleizier. They understand *a priori* theological convictions of God as active in the communication event are contrary to grounded theory methodology.¹⁰³ They bracket the role of God. Instead they encounter listeners who hear, engage, interpret, disagree, and add - in effect constructing idiosyncratic versions of the sermon. As with Schaap-Jonker, sermons are more so sequential than dialogue.

If there was perceived merit in increasing the sense of sermon as dialogue, one avenue for possible further research could be the roundtable preaching as proposed by Rose and McClure. One can see how, just as personality type affects listener selectivity, so the personality type of the preacher could limit preaching themes. Roundtables are thus tools to help preachers hear more biblical themes than the limited ones that may flow from their own God image, personality or affective state. Does roundtable sermon preparation lead to more effective sermons because it includes conversational turns in the groundwork? Will helpful associations and possible objections be identified in the preparation, and incorporated accordingly? Does roundtable preaching ensure that the theologizing and application of sermons is appropriately localised? Do listeners find roundtable generated sermons more engaging, relevant, and practical?

⁹⁸ Carrell, 6.

⁹⁹ Carrell, 210.

¹⁰⁰ Carrell, 141.

¹⁰¹ That is, the preacher talks, and the congregation speaks back. See Pleizier, 46–47, for greater analysis of the communication theory and terminology.

¹⁰² Pleizier, 44–45.

¹⁰³ Gaarden and Lorensen, 29 footnote 8.

A second and related point of tension regards meaning construction. Gaarden and Lorensen advocate for sermons as polyphonic events. Schaap-Jonker suggests meaning construction is a function of preconceptions. Conversely, Pleizier proposes that, as both preacher and listener have a shared intentionality, namely to rehearse the Christ event and explore its implications, that will facilitate some convergence of meaning. Put another way, there is an “aboutness” of the text that both preacher and listener are seeking to understand.

This tension highlights a gap in the research. Pleizier suggests that what listeners hear could be assessed against the intentions of the preacher, or the text.¹⁰⁴ While it may not be possible to validate all readings of the text or the sermon, we would certainly wish to falsify some. Do listeners hear what the preacher is trying to say? Do they hear what the preacher is trying to say about the biblical text? Or do listeners use the sermon as a departure point from which to construct idiosyncratic readings? Are divergent contemplations listening? Can we, at times, pronounce a listening as incorrect? And if so, what factors correlate with any given listener, sermon, or congregation and incorrect hearings of the message.

Deep theological and hermeneutical convictions undergird these questions. Rather than avoidance, phenomenological research coupled with practical theology provides a grounded alternate path into exploring such matters.

A third point of tension in the research is the apparent non-correlation of sermon reception with sermon structure. Stark and Daiber et al. claim that, when they contrasted differing sermon types, they found no evidence of different outcomes. Yet the most recurrent theme among the researchers was strong evidence for relevant sermons as being more meaningful. This raises questions about types of sermons.

Pleizier asserts on logical and theological (and not on empirical) grounds that sermons exist in one of three temporal modes. Either they can be set in past, that is the kerygmatic cross event; in the present exploration of the consequences of the cross; or in the future eschatological dimension of anticipation and its relation to the present trajectory. More to the point, for Pleizier all preaching ought to cover all three modes, and preaching in the present mode requires interpretation on the part of the preaching. The preaching event is not merely a rehearsal of sin and the cross, but an interpretation of the gospel and its implications for today, both for preachers and faithful hearers.¹⁰⁵

Stark proposes six types of preaching. All of them, however, speak to the present, to use Pleizier’s modes. Likewise, Daiber et al. contrasted personal-dialogical with dogmatic-proclamation sermons. Both also have an element of present mode. It is possible then, that if relevancy correlates with finding meaning, that past focused sermons without relevant present application are less well received. This matter could be an avenue for further research.¹⁰⁶

A fourth avenue for research, related to the above, could be the exploration of congregation types. Pieterse found evidence that congregation type had no influence on the listener’s sense of being close to God. It did, however, affect and the breadth of perceived

¹⁰⁴ Pleizier, 289.

¹⁰⁵ Pleizier, 58–61.

¹⁰⁶ It is also possible that preaching that is not encouraging, given that encouraging correlates to finding meaning, might be less effective. However Schaap-Jonkers research highlights that both God as support and anxiety about God images can resonate with different listeners, 210–14. Pleizier takes an alternate path. He suggests that sermons that are too encouraging are more like self help than preaching, and sermons that are too confronting become legalistic. He advocates for balance, 283. One could thus also test the sermon receptivity of self help preaching, and hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching. Clearly there are precedents of both. As a first step though, it would be valuable to establish if any one sermon types or structure does limit receptivity. This finding would sit in contrast to both Stark and Daiber et al.

application. Mulligan et al. reports three levels of awareness of being part of a congregation, and connects this awareness to a breadth of application. Those with a greater sense of congregation as one entity, of which they are a part, hear communal application and perceive communal response; whereas those who perceive the congregation as a conglomerate of individuals perceive more individual engagement. Pleizier reports that at each of his three stages of listening, listeners sense they part of a congregation.

The above findings suggest that being-part-of-a-congregation awareness is a factor in listening. At the very least it affects the capacity to perceive communal applications and responses. But it is unclear how else congregation awareness affects listening, and why people have differing levels of awareness? Is the awareness a product of individual perception, or is congregation type also a factor? Using the categories generated by recent empirical research into congregation types, as opposed to the categories suggested by Pieterse, may bring greater clarity to this question. If there is such a phenomenon as congregation type, it is conceivable that a correlation between sermon themes and congregation type will increase listener receptivity.

A fifth discrepancy in the research regards the place of feelings. For Schaap-Jonker the affective dimension of God image is critical to understanding what listeners do with sermons. Likewise, the North American study by Allen et al., finds pathos to be a critical variable. Vander Geest concludes an effective sermon engages a person's thoughts, doubts, questions and insecurities. Yet Pleizier, whose grounded methodology ought to detect key elements to sermon receptivity, identifies no codes with high levels of emotional content (except when related to worship).¹⁰⁷ Both Schaap-Jonker and Pleizier interview similar congregations – Reformed Protestant Churches in Holland. So why this discrepancy in what would appear to be a fundamental concern? What is the place of emotions in listening to sermons? Further research could bring greater clarity.

A possible explanation is that the categories of logos, ethos and pathos, are not explicit categories that exist in the consciousness of listeners. So when Pleizier, utilizing a grounded theory approach, asks listeners open ended questions, listener's responses do not reveal recollections of sermons as being so catalogued. Having said, when researchers, such as Allen et al., inquire after reflections within logos, ethos and pathos categories, listeners oblige and report accordingly. Expressed another way, it is possible that listeners are conscious of being either engaged, or not engaged, and do not, in the first instance, differentiate between modes of engagement. When asked, listeners readily use the traditional rhetorical categories. When left implicit, such rhetorical categories are not self evident to listeners.

Understanding the phenomena of listening to sermons is an emerging discipline. While significant insights have been gained, any of the above suggestions would advance our homiletical understanding of what transpires when listening to sermons.

¹⁰⁷ Pleizier, 301–03.

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Frank J. Matera. *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013. 121 pages. \$11.66.

Frank Matera's *The Sermon on the Mount* summons the reader to a "single-minded devotion to God" (ix). He views chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel as a "call to discipleship" (x). *The Sermon on the Mount* is the culmination of Matera's thirty years of teaching on the Synoptic Gospels and originates from his initial encounter with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reading of the Sermon on the Mount. Matera's intended audience is not primarily those within academia; rather, he desires to reach "all who seek to live a Christian life" (x).

Matera introduces his work with a simple claim: "[T]he Sermon on the Mount is a call to Christian perfection intended for every believer to be lived in every sphere of life, the public as well as the private" (2). He debunks the normative view of perfection as mistake free and employs the idea of perfection as "completely devoted to God" (64). Matera notes that Jesus' sermon had a singular theme of righteousness that was primarily aimed at the disciples. He defines righteousness as behavior in harmony with God's will (13). Thus, the Sermon on the Mount, for Matera, is an "ethic of discipleship" (12).

This loving walk through Jesus' sermon begins with an analysis of the Beatitudes and the nature of discipleship. Matera states that the characteristics named in the Beatitudes—poor in spirit, mourning, meekness, etc.—are dimensions of discipleship. The blessedness attached to each characteristic "is not so much the result of [one's] own effort as it is the result of the gift of final salvation that God brings with the kingdom" (31). Matera posits the argument that the last beatitude must be the ethical hermeneutic for the previous eight. He highlights the difference of the ninth beatitude as the use of second person plural ("blessed are you"). Matera believes this change in language signifies that Jesus was directing the last beatitude—and consequently all the beatitudes—at the disciples. As insightful and helpful as this point is, Matera may lack foundation for this claim. He does not explain how that one turn of phrase for the ninth beatitude turns the other eight from general maxims to specific directives.

In chapter 2, Matera explores how "Jesus adopts a maximalist rather than a minimalist approach to the Law" (49). Jesus provides deeper meaning of the Law instead of destroying it through revised interpretations and new insights. Jesus warns against lust in addition to adultery since lust leads to adultery. While much of what Matera puts forth is clear and beneficial, his writing becomes ambiguous around certain sayings of Jesus. For example, Matera does not give a practical interpretation of Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek. Matera raises the question of practical implementation but does not answer. Nonetheless, Matera makes clear that Jesus' fulfillment of the Law directs disciples beyond the Law into loving relationships with all persons.

Matera delves into Jesus' views on piety in chapter 3. Jesus sees those practicing piety for others' approval as hypocrites and admonishes the disciples to practice piety privately. Matera points out the seeming contradiction this statement presents when juxtaposed to Jesus' statement about letting one's light shine. Matera says each has a different objective. Letting one's light shine through good works places emphasis on God. Practicing piety for public approval only glorifies the individual. This hypocrite is not completely focused on God. Jesus wants the disciples "to practice a greater righteousness that expresses its piety in a hidden way that only God can see" (85).

In the final two chapters, Matera investigates the themes of single-minded devotion to God and the need to do Jesus' words respectively. A person with a single-minded devotion to God "lives in wholehearted service to God" (105) without worry and judgment, only focused on spiritual treasures, confident prayer, and serving God alone (105). Matera realizes that people die

daily from lack of material needs and worry; yet, he declares, “For every argument against the practicality of what Jesus teaches, there is the witness of those who have confirmed his teaching by their lives” (97). Thus, Jesus’ sermon is not a set of laws, but it is “the path to life” (107). For disciples to travel that path, they must be “doers of the Word” (113).

Matera achieves his goal. He shows Jesus’ sermon as a call to Christian perfection and an ethic of discipleship. This work reminds lay, clergy, and scholar alike of the need continually to follow the words of Jesus. It is a tremendous resource: a great supplement for laypersons studying the Synoptic Gospels and a helpful approach for scholars—particularly those in homiletics, biblical studies, and Christian ethics—looking to bridge the gap between the academy and the church.

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Brent A. Strawn. *The Bible and the Pursuit of Happiness: What the Old and New Testaments Teach Us about the Good Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 430 pages. \$35.

The *Pursuit of Happiness* is a collection of essays written for a conference held at Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion in Atlanta, GA, in 2009. The thirteen essays in the collection attempt to discern what the bible communicates about happiness in conversation with the positive psychology movement. The essayists define happiness with the aid of Aristotle in two different ways: *hedonic* happiness is achieved when one attains wealth and material goods; *eudaimonic* happiness is realized when one has a good reputation and honor along with such things as numerous friendships, worthy friendships, good children, numerous children and good old age (13-15). Part one contains five essays about the Hebrew Bible including Genesis and creation, the Torah, Isaiah, Psalms, and Wisdom literature. In part two, the essays cover the Kingdom of God, Luke-Acts, the apostle Paul, and Apocalyptic literature. In part three, essayists from systematic theology, practical theology, counseling psychology and biblical theology respond to the essays of the biblical scholars.

As it relates to the Hebrew Bible, Terence Fretheim posits that happiness is a characteristic of the divine life and is evidenced in God's own happiness. Indeed God bears evidence of God's happiness when God is "pleased, delighted, and joyful" (34). Biblical texts such as Psalm 35:27, 44:3, and 51:8 demonstrate divine affectability or the ability of God to be moved by human actions. The church has tended to focus on God's anger. Fretheim challenges readers to imagine the impact on the lives of Christians if we emphasized divine joy rather than divine anger.

Nathan McDonald asserts that in the Torah, happiness for one person or community often came at the expense of another. Abraham became wealthy at Pharaoh's expense. Leah's happiness came at Rachel's expense. Jacob found happiness at Laban's expense. Happiness for the Israelites came at the expense of the Canaanites.

According to Joel Green, those who lived according to Jesus' teachings, which were in opposition to existing customs and practices, found happiness in Luke's gospel. For example, reciprocity was the expectation of all of those who extended hospitality to others. However, Jesus taught the people to extend hospitality with no expectation of reciprocity; thereby, he enabled, and indeed expected, people to extend hospitality to the poor, the crippled, and the lame who could never return their gifts of hospitality.

The manner in which Paul found happiness also denied the conventions of his day, according to Colleen Shantz. Culturally speaking, happiness was usually found in personal honor in Paul's day. Before meeting Christ, Paul found his honor in his ethnicity as an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin and in being a Pharisee. He found honor in living a life of righteousness in the eyes of God. However, once he met Christ, he found honor in circumstances that would be considered humiliating in the dominant culture. Though he was imprisoned, beaten, and persecuted for Christ, Paul found happiness, or at least contentment, in the knowledge that by sharing in Christ's sufferings he was advancing the kingdom of God. By accepting his fate, he accepted the inevitability of physical death and no longer feared it. He instead looked forward to life after death with Christ.

In her response to the Hebrew Bible and New Testament essays on behalf of systematic theology, Ellen Charry spends time recounting the evolution of the doctrine of divine passibility (God's ability to experience emotion). Thomas Aquinas believed that God could not experience emotion because divine emotion breached the rule of divine immutability (God's inability to change). However, impassibility ignores the biblical depictions of God who is emotionally moved by the predicaments of human existence. Though Karl Barth wrote of a God who was self

moved, it was Jurgen Moltmann who contended that Christ's sufferings were God's own. Charry contends that theologians fail to understand that if God experiences human sufferings, God can also experience human joy and happiness. It would be difficult for humans to trust God if God could not celebrate a flourishing creation.

One criticism of this work is about the Eurocentric orientation of it. It appeals to Greek philosophy for a definition of happiness. Many of the scholars rely heavily on Eurocentric scholarship as their conversation partners. For example, Carl Holiday, in his essay "Happiness and the Kingdom of God" chose to end his essay by engaging the writings of the "church fathers" on the beatitudes rather than taking the opportunity to engage a number of liberation, womanist and feminist theologians who have written about the kingdom of God in particular and eschatology in general. Out of thirteen essays, only one is written by a scholar of color.

The strengths of this work are many. The writings of biblical scholars challenge readers to re-read biblical texts and perhaps to see God differently than they ever have. In addition to seeing God differently, this book causes readers to understand that if God is happy and desires for all of creation to be happy, people of God must not only seek their own happiness, but must diligently work for the happiness of others as well. The responses of scholars of other disciplines broadens the conversation to demonstrate ways that conceiving of God and the bible with happiness in mind has far reaching implications for fields such as systematic theology, practical theology, and counseling psychology. This book is a must read for all of those who preach and teach the bible.

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Michael Walzer. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 256 pages. \$28.

What veritable provision for human agency is there for a nation living under the protections of an omnipotent God? Is there anything that remotely resembles a working democracy in Israel? In this volume, American political philosopher Michael Walzer argues that the biblical writers, though engaged in politics, were little interested in politics. In the shadow of an omnipotent God, Israel could, at best, consider itself an “almost-democracy” (200). As Walzer expresses it, *vox populi, vox dei*, is unknown to the biblical writers. As trusted sage, he takes sophisticated readers of sacred literature, world politics, and religious history by the hand, navigating them through the complex terrain of unconsidered details of Jewish religion’s most sacred text. Consciously avoiding “the homiletic style,” to use his words, and refusing to cloak the ideas and intents of the biblical writers in postmodern dress, he organizes his book around an examination of the core creeds, communal traditions, and biblical figures that have shaped and defined Israelite religion. While qualifications to his arguments seem to meet the reader with regularity, he leaves few stones unturned.

This book’s well-reasoned arguments bring two religious doctrines into sharp focus—the doctrine of election and the doctrine of covenant. Israel is depicted as a twice-born chosen people unified by their adherent consent to two covenantal traditions, each covenant carrying its own set of distinctions about what governs and constitutes Israel’s group identity. Walzer outlines the political implications and importance of holding to both birth theories—one based on kinship exclusivity *a la* the patriarch Abraham, with the other based in more open-access and traceable to the legacy of the mixed-multitude who followed the prophet Moses out of Egypt. Holding both as valid, he claims, is essential to obtaining a holistic understanding of Israel’s relationship with God. Guided by these two aspects of covenant, the book’s chapters unfold chronologically.

In God’s Shadow examines Israel’s journey from no nationhood status as freed vassals from Egypt to their loose tribal confederation period under charismatic judges and then to their sense of national independence under the rule of a long succession of good and bad kings. Walzer also examines how Israel’s divine connection is kept vital through the workings of God-appointed prophets, priests, and sages. From a fallen nation landing in exile to their eventual return to vassalhood under foreign rule—a kind of Egypt all over again—we get a remarkably comprehensive picture of Israel’s saga.

Chapters 5 – 6, the heart of Walzer’s exposition, present a particularly insightful portrait of the complex identity of the Hebrew prophet. Through eloquence, prophets were “anti-political” social critics who mediated God’s judgments to local, national, and international audiences in public spaces. Prophets spoke in public with seeming considerable freedom in what they could say on God’s behalf. The freedom to speak in public spaces, as one might expect, is an important identifier of the democratic ideal, he claims (201). All other covenant community members are examined and judged based on their association with the prophets. Also intriguing is his discussion of the inescapable tension between prophecy and kingship.

Chapter 7 depicts Babylonian exile as the decisive period when Israel’s collective identity finds preservation. According to Walzer, Israel’s long interlude in exile inspired a desire to canonize their sacred text, as many of the exiles perhaps perceived their status as a sign of divine abandonment. Out of Babylon emerged near-final editorial revisions to the Pentateuchal narratives, oracles, poems, and chronicles of Israel (122). The process of canonization gave rise to new leadership models in Israel. Scribes, priests, and “wisdom teachers” came to the fore to help Israel negotiate a politics of existence, specifically, concerning how they would live in light of lost national identity and as a community forced into sociopolitical passivity and

accommodation under foreign rule (124). Messianic redemption, he writes, “escapes the historicity and conditionality” of earlier rescues because “it doesn’t occur within a conventional historical narrative.” Rather, redemption will be enacted by God alone as divine gift, without the help of human hands (172, 176). The democracy that Israel did have was a democracy under God.

In the final analysis, this book’s primary drawback is that assumes a high level of biblical and historical literacy from its reader. This expectation perhaps is not a drawback at all, but an opportunity for all Bible readers, especially preachers, to engage more critically the biblical text. Christian preachers will find this a useful book for developing a more robust envisioning of what it means to proclaim words of promise and fulfillment, justice and hope informed by the rich religious and historical canon of Jewish faith—The Hebrew Bible.

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Michael J. Bauer. *Arts Ministry: Nurturing the Creative Life of God's People*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013. 328 pages. \$20.87.

The book *Arts Ministry: Nurturing the Creative Life of God's People* is an intriguing look at both the nature of art in the life of communities of faith and an opportunity to learn from eighteen enlightening case studies of arts ministries that are occurring all over the country. The intent of the book is to provide those interested in the important discussions around “bringing full color worship into their midst” (Intro). With its historical foundations related to arts ministry and its helpful case studies from congregational experiences, any church could gain insights about the prospect of creating this type of ministry in their own community from this book.

Arts Ministry is laid out in an easy to follow format. Bauer starts with an excellent introductory chapter about arts ministry, laying the foundation for readers to see the width and breadth of possibilities for arts ministry in their own communities of faith. For some congregations, the varied and intriguing possibilities will be new and exciting. For others already engaged in some types of arts ministry, there are still new insights and strategies to glean from this book.

The author then uses the historical presence of arts in the church, the arguments against those ministries historically, and provides a framework for advocacy related to arts ministry today. It is an interesting way to approach the advocacy idea, which is quite effective. Learning how to counter arguments against arts ministry, including idolatry, stewardship, morality, and distraction, is a helpful resource for anyone exploring this type of ministry (43-64). For a church already struggling with the inclusion of arts, this book lays out a framework for planning and implementing arts ministry in a way that would generate options for any size congregation.

Chapter three delves into the relationship between the arts and God. The gift of creativity and arts ministry is from God and of God. This chapter is a helpful look at the theological frameworks around the arts in which we participate and God's presence in our midst as a creative and creating God. Bauer looks at the holistic role the arts play in human formation and development. In turn, chapter four is an insightful look into the interplay between human identity and human formation (98-101).

Next, in chapters five and six, Bauer explores the widening circle of arts' encounters—from the individual to the wider world, the role of imagination, and a foray into a theology of creativity. The exploration of how arts ministry can engage the world outside of the four walls of the church, especially in evangelism and community outreach was helpful and even raised some cautions in this regard (123-138).

Chapter seven delves into the practical connections between arts ministry and worship itself. The connections between worship and the arts has a long tradition, however, this chapter explores the ways that art has and can be used in ritual moments, drama, poetry, dance, music, art and architecture, and how to utilize these artistic options as liturgical habits in the life of the church (188-206). One of the great gifts of this book is that Bauer explores such a wide array of arts options. Chapter eight begins to work toward a provisional theology for arts ministry. The language, character, and meaning of art as symbolic theology are important in developing a theology of arts ministry (227-242). This text helps congregations with that conversation in a very helpful manner.

The final chapter helps communities of faith answer the questions that might arise around the development of an arts ministry in their church. Providing a model for the creation of an arts ministry allows the reader to find their way into the discussion in the areas of basic principles, potential pitfalls, keys to consider, and practical considerations for their arts ministry's creation.

Bauer creates a very usable text with his straightforward approach to the subject. The historical foundation he lays out alongside contextual examples and potential pitfalls/issues is both informative and insightful. What Bauer has created is one of the few practical, foundational, historical, and useful resources for arts ministry in the church today. This book is about turning on the senses of the community by utilizing the full range of arts ministry “to experience the power of sight, taste, touch, gesture, line, color, sound, texture, rhythm, and metaphor” (3). For these gifts the church should give thanks.

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Robert K. Johnston. *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006. 352 pages. \$17.33.

Robert Johnston's *Reel Spirituality* encourages Christians to embrace film as a theological conversation partner. The second edition has less of an apologetic tone than the first since "the question today for most Christians is not *whether* the church should engage Hollywood, but *how* the engagement should be done" (14). Even so, much of the book focuses on the *why* as it attempts (likely successfully!) to convince the church to embrace a kind of "ethical patience" as it allows films to stand on their own merit before judging them; judgment here is referred to as "Judeo-Christian heavy-handedness" (263). Chapter four explores six theological reasons why Christians should enter into dialogue with film in this way.

Even though the subtext of the book is the author's stance as a church person telling fellow church people *why* they should embrace the relationship between "real" and "reel," the book helpfully moves toward outlining *how* the church might move from the approaches that "begin theologically and judge movies from a predetermined norm [avoidance and caution] to those critical perspectives that first view a movie on its own terms [dialogue, appropriation and divine encounter]" (65). Three chapters in particular give readers ample tools for putting faith and film into conversation. The first is chapter 8 ("Becoming a Film Critic"). In addition to exploring the narrative shape of film, Johnston summarizes four aspects of film criticism: genre criticism, auteur criticism, thematic criticism, and cultural criticism. Johnston affirms the church's longstanding experience with a similar multi-level method of interpretation. Since the church has had far less experience with incorporating into its analysis the effects that music and image have on one's experience, Johnston adds such elements to this second edition. This chapter is valuable not only for Christian moviegoers as they seek to assess movies on their own terms, but indirectly for preachers and worship leaders as they seek to craft and assess the experience of worshippers.

In this second edition, Johnston also responds to the first edition's critics with a full chapter on "Responding to Film Ethically" (ch. 9). The critics are right that a conversation about movies that "invite, demand even, our response" (23) might very well be the "ticket" to help Christian moviegoers "enter into theological conversation with film." While this chapter has potential to move to the *how*, and Johnston is to be commended on the addition, it primarily adopts an apologetic tone. The brief section on "developing skills for moral discourse" and the helpful examples at the end of the chapter are the exceptions.

Johnston postpones "Responding to Movies Theologically" (ch. 10) until the end since, according to the author, the "penultimate" [film] "demands our initial attention" (239). In this chapter, Johnston fully embraces the growing trend "to see the human and aesthetic dimensions of film, that is, to seek an encounter with cinema" (242). In so doing, one might have an encounter with the divine. It is here that the "'real' and the 'reel' come together in the experience of the viewer" (267). Johnston places himself squarely in the divine encounter category on his continuum.

In addition to the more skills-oriented substance in the "Responding to Film Ethically" chapter, another helpful addition to the book would be a clarification of the balance between leaving theological convictions aside in order to assess/experience a film on its own terms and the author's attempt to acknowledge at various points that viewers' social situations or competencies influence their experience of a movie" (213) just as "movies reflect the social and personal histories of their makers" (196). While the author states explicitly that "we do not leave our experiences and reflections at the door" (228) and that "we cannot escape responding to film

from our own perspective, our own center of power and meaning” (240), he still insists that viewers must, for a time (how long?), set aside their theological convictions.

Perhaps the most beneficial element of this book for church leaders, teachers, and all Christian moviegoers, in fact, is the impressive engagement with the exploding number of resources available on theology and film and the broad range of films engaged explicitly and deeply. The final chapter provides an “exercise in dialogue” that incorporates the wisdom of the previous chapters and is the book’s finest section.

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Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts. *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012. 256 pages. \$22.99.

When practical theologians talk about “engaging popular culture,” they may think of combing through the available stockpile of cultural artifacts in search of a movie scene or song lyric that resonates conceptually with something in the Christian tradition. In the classroom, the practice that grows out of such engagement may take the form of a professional hermeneutical performance aimed at demonstrating that, in the right hands, culture and theology make interesting and generative conversation partners. In *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls*, Clive Marsh and Vaughan Roberts have a different kind of engagement in mind. Rather than “treating pop culture as a set of ‘texts’ waiting to be read, like minor bibles awaiting postmodern interpreters” (Tom Beaudoin’s “Foreword,” x), Marsh and Roberts are interested in what ordinary people actually *do* with popular music. In other words, instead of offering professional theological reflection on the words of a U2 song, they want to explore the theological implications of what is happening when some persons painstakingly craft playlists that will serve as their soundtracks for the next few weeks of their lives, or finds themselves immersed in a profound sense of solidarity and wellbeing at a concert.

This focus on the practice of listening to music leads Marsh and Roberts into dialogue with a broad array of interlocutors. In its descriptive moment, their analysis includes generous engagement with disciplines as diverse as anthropology, sociology, psychology, media studies, and musicology. The goal of this ambitious project is to map the contours of what they call the “affective space” in which listeners experience popular music. “By this term we mean any practice or activity that entails significant emotional engagement, through which a person can be shown to be doing more than just enjoying the moment” (16). In the course of exploring this “space,” the authors are able to supply a nuanced account of the many overlapping influences and contexts that shape the ways people listen to and make meaning out of popular music. While resisting the temptation to make sweeping claims about music fandom as an unacknowledged religion, the authors do want to claim that some forms of deep and sustained engagement with popular music can be helpfully understood as “spiritual disciplines” that shape identity in a “religion-like way” (163).

The theological return on all this descriptive work comes in the final chapter. The authors discuss three traditional systematic loci in relation to popular music listening practices. The interchange is facilitated such that illumination and critique flow in both directions. For example, the rhythms and sounds of music are appreciated bodily, and many of the uses to which people put popular music call attention to the human body as the site of pleasure and fulfillment. While admitting that the Christian tradition has a complicated relationship to human physicality, the authors are able to show how the doctrine of the incarnation both informs the theological sense we make of embodied secular listening practices, and is in turn itself criticized by such practices. Or concerning ecclesiology, music fans may experience a sense of deep friendship and belonging that grows out of a shared search for truth and justice mediated by the music they love. Such community-forming practices call for critical reflection on the goals of Christian community, and lead the authors to a helpful discussion about the relationship between God’s boundless kingdom of love and justice, and the boundaries of the institutional church. Or again, reflection on the ritual-like dimension of certain listening practices leads to new appreciation for the way not only conceptual meaning, but holistic transformation is mediated by the Christian sacraments. At the same time, the Christian practice of the Eucharist, with its imperative to gather in harmony, gratitude, and hope those of many and diverse backgrounds, may grant perspective on the limitations of the more homogenous communities that tend to form around popular music. The

authors also gesture toward other theological topics that may speak to and be informed by their thick description of popular music listening practices.

This book strives for rigor and methodological precision; it is not for those seeking an accessible and emotionally satisfying defense of the spiritual value of popular music. More than one review on Amazon.com reflects the disappointment of a religiously inclined music-lover who felt tricked by the title. Indeed, even an academic theologian well-acquainted with the genre may wonder at times when or whether the methodological throat-clearing and the summaries of the arguments of interdisciplinary conversation partners will give way to something recognizable as theology. The payoff comes late, but is worth the wait.

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Hans Austnaberg. *Improving Preaching by Listening to Listeners: Sunday Service Preaching in the Malagasy Lutheran Church*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012. 238 pages. \$71.

The lively evolution of preaching across the continent of Africa is highly significant for the global church. Yet, many of us who seek to understand its preaching can be overwhelmed by the continent's sheer size and the range of content and style its preaching displays. So Austnaberg, a seasoned missionary to Madagascar currently teaching Pastoral Theology in Norway, has done both African pastors and global partners a service by slicing deeply into one region and its aspects in his fine book. He has limited his scope to preaching in the island nation of Madagascar (whose 22-million inhabitants are called Malagasy), and more specifically the preaching of the Malagasy Lutheran Church, one of the largest and most vital Lutheran bodies in the world. With roughly three million members, packed Sunday services, and a healthy upward growth trend, this church is well worth studying and emulating.

In a bold move, Austnaberg trained his sights not primarily on preachers or their sermons, but on the impact of preaching on listeners. Those who have followed various strands of the *Listening to Listeners* project¹ over the years will be heartened to see its lines of inquiry applied to the highlands of Madagascar. The author sought insights into what sermons do to listeners and, "what listeners do to sermons" (26). He interviewed extensively twenty listeners to three sermons, preached in a city, a town, and a rural setting. Using an organizational framework of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in his own analysis of the three sermons and then the listeners' responses to them, the author portrays a faithful church straining to listen well to the preached Word. He sought to discern what listeners retained, how the sermons impacted them emotionally and volitionally, and how they shaped their convictions. His questions were developed with deep sensitivity to the unique context and worldview of the Malagasy people, and yielded results that may surprise Western readers.

Madagascar boasts a unique and rich rhetorical tradition. *Kabary* is a cherished form of public speaking in which hired, highly trained speakers address audiences at important occasions. It is marked by wit and eloquence, and overtly aimed at persuasion. *Kabary* is so enjoyed and revered in Madagascar that the author had expected more listeners to connect its classic forms and strengths with those of a well-crafted sermon. In fact, many listeners were astonished at the proposal of any overlap, seeing *kabary* as dealing in deception and "decorated words" (131).

Listeners were more pleased when their preachers employed a few of the thousands of proverbs that store and transmit communal wisdom. Proverbs flourish in part because they conveying truth indirectly, avoiding a direct confrontation that would, "close the hearts of the "hearers," as one listener put it (27). Another reflected that she could "see the truth" (127) when proverbs were used. Yet some proverbs advocate practices incompatible with Christian teaching, and listeners wanted their pastor to show discernment. Another listener offered the interesting concern that proverbs may, "enter *too* deeply into your mind" (128) and distract from the core of the message.

A challenge of Austnaberg's project, which causes it to differ markedly from *Listening to Listeners* projects undertaken in low-power-distance cultures, is that Malagasy listeners were highly reticent to criticize their pastors or offer suggestions for improvement. This caused some amusing exchanges as the author pressed in vain for critique, and it may have limited the rigor of the feedback. It may also cause some gripe-weary Western preachers to catch the next flight to

¹ For an overview, see Allen, Ronald J., "The Turn to the Listener: A Selective Overview of a Recent Trend in Preaching," *Encounter* 64 (2): 167-196.

Madagascar. In general, the eagerness of listeners to change and grow in response to sermons was quite moving.

This reader was disappointed that all references to preachers used the masculine gender. Granted, all Malagasy Lutheran pastors are male (and in fact listeners expressed a rather distressing desire that their preacher be tall and have a booming voice!), but it would have been astute to acknowledge the leadership of women in the church or of female Malagasy preachers in other traditions. It also was unfortunate that the feedback from listeners was evidently not relayed to the preachers, and so did not help them in the process to improve as preachers, given the implied goal in the title of the book. Austnaberg refers to further projects to close that loop, and given his thought-provoking reflections here, I will be intrigued to see where his research takes him next.

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Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*. Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012. 322 pages. \$25.94.

In her book, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline*, Bonnie Miller-McLemore presents a helpful and compelling case for a more inclusive theology that draws explicitly from the disciplines of practical theology in general and pastoral theology in particular. Accomplished in both pastoral theology and practical theology more broadly, Miller-McLemore draws on her decades of scholarship to articulate the growing import of these fields upon the theological academy. She argues that scholars writing in these arenas have “disrupted conventional theological boundaries” (1) and that such a disruption has opened up the guilds to attend more closely to the lived reality of human persons. A central component of her book maps such a disruption; but her book is prescriptive as well. Miller-McLemore avers, “We need to move away from hierarchical interpretations, where one of the three forms of theology triumphs over the other as crown or roots, and move instead toward a more organic, ecological reading of the tree as an instance of circular and mutually interdependent movement” (3). These twin moves toward description and prescription converge upon a central preoccupation: to articulate the multivalence of theology across the theological and disciplinary spectrum.

Christian Theology in Practice is written for students and professors working in seminaries and undergraduate departments of religious studies, as well as doctoral students and future teachers in religious practices and practical theology. Her declared intention in writing to this particular set of readers is to curb a long-standing bias in religious and theological studies to write for an elite network of relatively isolated academic readers. As a pastoral/practical theologian, Miller-McLemore holds academic theology in close correspondence to the myriad faith practices arising therefrom; thus, she writes for academics in the hope that by disrupting our discipline of specific conversations we will in turn broaden our conversations to include a much wider range of people.

In her move to articulate the multivalent nature of practical theology, Miller-McLemore challenges the widely held notion that practical theology is merely a *field*, understood as an arena marked by common activities and interests. Practical theology is certainly a field within the theological academy, but Miller-McLemore suggests that it is also something more. Practical theology is a *discipline*, which entails a particular mode of vision and a way of being in the world. Thus her subtitle—*Discovering a Discipline*—marks an important orientation at work in the book, namely, to share a compelling vision for how theology is practiced in the academy.

The book is comprised of a range of essays that Miller-McLemore wrote over a twenty-year period, which mark the evolution of practical theology as a field of knowledge as well as a discipline at work throughout the guilds. The essays are organized into three sections: pastoral/practical theology as a complex “web” of interrelated concerns; pastoral/practical theology as an epistemological mode of engagement with the world; and a helpful presentation of gender as a category of analysis/disruption in pastoral and practical theology. Each of these sections is strong, and her chapters quickly but concretely introduce the major concerns that each essay addresses and situate those concerns within a wider framework of pastoral and practical theology.

One of the features of Miller-McLemore’s book that I most appreciated was the abiding commitment to liberation and justice that emerges even when these are not central to her argument. For instance, in chapter six she discusses the commonalities between pastoral theology and liberation theology—a new point of connection for me. Moreover, Miller-McLemore calls for such a passion for justice to transcend the *field* of pastoral theology, showing that pastoral

theology can serve as a harbinger for such an inclusive framework oriented to the lived realities of the marginalized and oppressed.

Scholars of preaching will find her essays on practical theology particularly illuminating—she literally wrote the definition of practical theology (see Chapter 4)—and her essay challenging the bifurcation between academic and clerical paradigms is instructive. She argues instead for a “multiplicity of ways of knowing” (162) that resists such unhelpful binaries. Homileticians will also find much of value by tracing the development of feminist theory within pastoral theology, which both overlaps and diverges from such developments in homiletics.

At day’s end, *Christian Theology in Practice* practices what it preaches. Miller-McLemore exhibits a graciousness to her various interlocutors and a critical assessment of her own work, all while making a strong case for a reorientation of academic theology. Such humility and reflexivity embody the best of what she has contributed to pastoral and practical theology and it does much to engendering support for her continued work in these arenas.

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Richard H. Cox. *Rewiring Your Preaching: How the Brain Processes Sermons*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012. 182 pages. \$12.80.

In his book, *Rewiring Your Preaching: How the Brain Processes Sermons*, Richard Cox brings the world of neuroscience to bear on the contemporary task of preaching. Cox argues persuasively that it is imperative for preachers to familiarize themselves with the insights that science is revealing about the human brain. “Intentional, purposeful preaching can actually cause new neural pathways that cause the brain to change the way it thinks and how its owner acts. . . . Knowledge of how the brain works will enable preachers to be more effective” (19).

Cox offers insights into how neuroscience studies can be applied to preaching. One is a concept that he calls *religare*. This concept says the brain only retains any new stimulus if it connects with something already stored in the mind. Defining human learning as “listening, memory, and integration”(25), he asserts that, “Preaching must build on past knowledge by bringing that knowledge into the present, coupling it with new information and making it meaningful for our future need before we need it” (25).

He also emphasizes engaging multiple senses or “brain gates” in order to maximize the brain’s retention of sermons. Cox says, “The more sensory modalities are engaged in preaching the more likely it is the brain will remember” (37). Applications of this include using object lessons and integrating preaching with other elements of worship including: music, incense, sacraments, and the aesthetics of the worship space.

Cox also highlights the relationship between preaching and healing. This is one of the key convictions of his book and many pages are devoted to its explication. Healing the brain, the body, the soul, and the community are all connected, says Cox. Preaching has tremendous potential to heal at all of these levels because it is the point of contact between the brain and the Gospel. “The brain is accustomed to looking for hope. Hope and healing are inseparable. . . . The basic premise of the entire Bible is healing” (61).

With these insights, *Rewiring Your Preaching* whetted my appetite for a rich treatment of preaching and neuroscience. However, as a preacher and preaching instructor, I found myself wanting a greater amount of specific advice about the processes of sermon preparation, delivery and gauging effectiveness in light of neuroscience. Cox passionately argues for the integration of preaching and neuroscience, but leaves largely unexplored the details of what that integration might look like.

The most helpful practical wisdom is found in the simple one-page appendix. Here Cox lays out seven questions a preacher should ask when preparing a sermon that will help her engage the brains of her congregants:

Does this sermon:

- Excite me and propel me in a specific direction?
- Change, affirm or reaffirm my beliefs?
- Provide foundation material for all listeners to tie back to?
- Offer multiple brain gates for those of all ages and educational backgrounds to understand?
- Lay the foundation for subsequent pastoral care?
- Provide a peak experience for the worship service?
- Prepare the way for the next sermon? (175).

These are excellent questions, and well worth careful reflection.

This book raised some additional questions for me; one is this: How might this book have functioned if Cox’s seven questions in the appendix were the outline of the book, with each

question the focus of a chapter? It would be fascinating to read the neuro-scientific explanation of each question's importance and then concrete examples of how to apply it in various contexts. Also, what are the implications of mental and emotional illness for preaching? Furthermore, what would Cox suggest for how preachers can craft sermons that heal individuals and communities who have undergone trauma? Additionally, how might ministers coordinate preaching so that it compliments other healing ministries in the church (for example, counseling ministries or recovery groups)?

With *Rewiring Your Preaching* Richard Cox has thrown the door wide open to a very important conversation. I am in complete agreement with Cox when he writes: "Not knowing how the learning process of humans operates is no longer excusable. . . . Ministers who do not consider this knowledge may be less informed of their primary task than their parishioners are" (95). I am grateful for Cox's work here, and it is my sincere hope that he and others will continue to offer more of their psychological and neurobiological knowledge for the benefit of preachers and the church.

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Walter R. Dickhaut. *Building a Community of Interpreters: Readers and Hearers as Interpreters*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013. 146 pages. \$18.

Biblical interpretation is more than “The Bible says so.” Walter Dickhaut, retired Fogg Professor of Sacred Rhetoric and Oratory at Bangor Theological Seminary, writes, “Everything that is said about what the Bible says is *interpretation*” (8). Interpretation depends on interpreters’ identities, filters, lenses, and points of view. Addressing “those who listen to preaching” and “those who read and those who hear others read or speak” (xvii), Dickhaut defines interpretation as “an imaginative move (assignment of meaning) that reaches for what is not apparent” (113). When readers assign meaning, they create new stories beyond the writers’ stories. Writing, reading, speaking, and hearing are creative acts, creations of new worlds that arise from “between the lines” and surpass the worlds of the texts’ creators. Since interpreters vary, so do their interpretations.

Dickhaut divides his book into two parts. The first, consisting of six chapters, presents interpretation in terms of story creation and explores a few dynamics of this process of seeking and finding, a process shaped by filters and lenses. “A filter . . . sets aside or removes what the reader prefers not to engage, often without our awareness. . . . Lenses, on the other hand . . . focus the interpreter’s attention on specific interests and features that aim to discover something new” (21-22). Lenses empower interpreters to discover “mystery, surprise, and expectation” in biblical texts (34). Angles of vision also shape interpretation, as the changing of locations on a beach adjusts the view. In this exploration of filters, lenses, and points of view, Dickhaut reflects on the hermeneutical circle that he learned in seminary and proposes that biblical interpretation is more like a spiral than a circle.

The second part, chapters seven through fourteen, presents more fully the lenses of mystery, surprise, and expectation, including three sermons, and concluding with three implications. The author desires to experience wonder when listening to a sermon but more frequently receives explanation. Preaching has largely lost the mystery of God, and Dickhaut speculates that this trend will increase as “our religious institutions continue to suffer loss of size, power, and identity” (49). Embracing mystery, however, can move us beyond rationalization and explanation. In addition to mystery, interpreters can find surprise in the Bible. “Surprise has an eschatological dimension; it is an interruption of our mundane routines by the intrusion of another reality” (63). Surprise can be difficult to perceive in texts when “institutional interests have neutered them” (65). The third lens is expectation, “an orientation, not to some other world outside this one, but to a new world within the one we presently inhabit” (89).

The book’s most obvious strength is the creative writing that infuses the pages with life. Dickhaut sprinkles throughout the book inspiring words, both from himself and from other sources, and incorporates colorful images, such as a map overlay, a lighthouse, music, child development, herons, and storm waves.

Although the book is titled *Building a Community of Interpreters*, it reflects primarily on what interpretation is and how it functions and contains little about community building. It leaves me wanting more exploration of the communal dynamics of biblical interpretation and of the process of nurturing interpretive communities.

Homileticians and preachers can find inspiring reflections in this book, and it can teach other readers about the process of biblical interpretation. Lenses of mystery, surprise, and expectation can enable us to expand conversations instead of stopping them and to explore instead of settling issues (26).

Steven Tramel Gaines, Harding School of Theology, Memphis, TN

John C. Holbert. *Telling the Whole Story: Reading and Preaching the Old Testament Stories*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013. 206 pages. \$21.60.

In line with the excellent contributions John Holbert has made in the past which include *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation & Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (1991) and *Holy Root, Holy Branches* (along with Ronald Allen, 1995), Holbert continues that tradition with this most recent volume. Holbert's purpose is to promote responsible story preaching. He believes such preaching, though not the only way to preach, brings about transformation in personal lives as well as in the world around us (viii-ix). The problem is that much story preaching is performed poorly. In addition, over the past several decades homileticsians have identified major flaws with story sermons, which Holbert defines as a subgenre of the larger category of narrative preaching. So how can preachers capitalize on the power of biblical stories without falling victim to many of the ways story sermons are abused? Answering this question becomes one of his central purposes. Another purpose he maintains is "to deepen the insights that the Bible can yield to preachers in order that their preaching may take on the qualities of that deepened insight" (171). This book serves as a type of sequel to his 1991 book (x) but adds components that the publishers edited out in the earlier edition. He chose the texts he did in this volume because they are ones seldom heard (x).

In chapter one, Holbert traces the history of story preaching from the Bible through the post-reformation to the twentieth century, while giving attention to the disillusionments that many homileticsians hold toward narrative sermons today. He maintains that the major criticisms leveled against story preaching are most persuasively and effectively argued in Richard Lischer's 1984 essay "The Limits of Story." Holbert uses this essay as a litmus test for crafting homiletically responsible story sermons.

Lischer identifies four substantive problems. First, is an aesthetic problem in which telling isolated stories often leads to moralizing sermons along the lines of Aesop's fables. The second problem is ontological. Too often the stories told are neat and organized and lead to nice well-rounded resolutions. In reality many people's lives do not identify with that scenario. The third is related to the story's theological dimension. It is difficult for a story to stand on its own without interpretation. In his sermons, Holbert shows how one can tell stories in a way that will enable them to be interpreted. He does this by subtly setting the interpretation within the story itself. The final issue Lischer raises with story is related to the socio-political realm. Stories often lack a prophetic voice. Holbert argues that Lischer's critique of story comes down to the misuse of story. When story is proclaimed responsibly it will avoid all these shortcomings. Holbert uses Lischer's four criticisms as a means of producing effective story sermons.

In chapter two, Holbert describes the tools necessary to produce story sermons. One is the ability and skill to read biblical narratives. The other is the ability to effectively tell a story. He concludes, "a story well read then leads to a story well told" (25). One must be trained in both skills. It is in describing how effectively to tell a story that he describes five types of story sermons (41-45).

Chapters three through six unpack four specific narrative stories in the Old Testament. These include Genesis 2:4b-3:24; the book of Jonah; 1 Samuel 15; and Judges 4. The sequence Holbert follows in each of these chapters is first to translate the text from Hebrew to English. Following the translating task he engages in a careful and detailed analysis of the story in the text, which he refers to as a narrative reading. This reading leads him to craft a plotted sermon story that includes explanatory notes along the way (no explanatory notes, however, are included with his sermon on Judges 4). At the end of each sermon, Holbert critiques it in light of the four problems Lischer identified with the story sermon. Each time Holbert concludes that this

particular sermon has avoided these pitfalls and thus the sermon represents a good story sermon. For example, Holbert believes his Jonah sermon passes Lischer's test. It avoids moralizing and is rooted in the story of God. The story is not "neat or closed" (130). Who really is the outsider is reversed. In the end it is Jonah. He is the only unrepentant one. This story is not a meaningless repetition of general theological truths.

Among the impressive qualities of this volume are the insights Holbert discovers as he engages in his careful narrative reading of the text. These insights alone are worth the read. He is not primarily interested in probing the historical background, but with the received text.

In turn, it would have been beneficial for Holbert to invite another reader who takes issue with story sermons, like Lischer, to also critique his sermons. In addition, I found it interesting that the title of chapter two is "Reading and Preaching the Old Testament Stories," which is also the subtitle of the book, when he argues elsewhere that his preferred title is the Hebrew Bible. But the title may simply be out of deference or an accommodation to popular understanding. He does default back to referring to it as the Hebrew Bible in the text of the volume.

One other minor observation is that the footnotes are placed at the bottom of each page, which I find most helpful. They are, however, in abbreviated form and the reader still needs to turn to the end of the book to find the full citations given in the bibliography.

Holbert combines the best of his areas of expertise in this volume, relying on both his training in Old Testament scholarship and in the discipline of homiletics. Hence, this book makes an important contribution for preachers and teachers of homiletics alike.

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Duncan MacPherson. *The Splendour of the Preachers: New Approaches to Liturgical Preaching*. London: St. Paul's Publishing, 2011. 141 pages. \$14.50.

British homiletician Duncan MacPherson offers ordained ministers a useful preacher's manual for developing catechetical and kerygmatic homilies and biblical sermons for ecclesial contexts. Perhaps the most notable feature of this work is its practical examples for preparing exegetically sound, contextually-fitting pulpit discourse. This book honors the liturgical Sunday calendar, but could also be useful for a range of other special occasions of worship, namely those associated with ceremonial rites within the Roman Catholic tradition. While MacPherson's theological perspective is patently Roman Catholic, this manual, from start to finish, resounds intriguingly with ecumenical sensitivity, to the extent that Protestants could welcome, embrace, and appropriate a significant share of its practical insights. Beyond this accessibility, MacPherson, lends his reflections on matters related to church renewal, with particular concern about declining memberships and the challenge of religious pluralism.

The central thread that runs throughout this work is MacPherson's insistence that homilies and sermons are distinguishable by virtue of their liturgical purpose. As he expresses it, homilies, properly understood, are never abstractions but messages preached that directly flow from the liturgical action of which it is a part. Differently, the sermon, as a service of the Word, is not only a lengthier discourse than the homily, but in many causes it might be considered "free-standing" discourse. This trait is why, according to him, sermons are not necessarily attached to assigned lectionary readings, especially those preached in certain Protestant settings (43). When liturgical homilies are delivered at the Sunday Eucharist service their purpose is to relate "the proclamation of the word of God to the sacramental celebration and *the life of the community*," to the end of nourishing the Church and furthering its mission in the world (32).

The Splendour of the Preachers is divided into three sections. Much of the book's content is reprinted from previously published articles. Each section offers the reader its own unifying theme and practical strategies relative to matters of sermonic form and content, specific congregational needs, or some liturgically significant special occasion. The first section, *Proclaiming the Word on Sundays*, examines the person of the preacher, role of the hearer, and interpretation of texts. Chapter 1 is the most illuminating. MacPherson takes his cue from post-Vatican II implemented reforms concerned with theologically reshaping the preacher's social identity and function within specific religious communities, and informed by conference proceedings at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops held in 1982. He maintains that whether the preacher assumes the role of herald or teacher in proclaiming Christ, competence in biblical scholarship, rootedness in Church tradition—nourished by profound meditation upon the Holy Scriptures and filtered through "the exegesis of the fathers, conciliar documents and the teachings of the Magisterium"—is indispensable to a preacher's homiletic arsenal (19).

The second section of MacPherson's preaching manual is devoted to preaching independent of the Sunday Liturgy. This section, *Preaching at the Margins*, provides homiletical hints for preaching at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Particularly useful are his heuristic suggestions about how to be faithful to the gospel while anticipating that many of the hearers at these services will have marginal or no commitment to Christianity and its associated practices. For example, Chapter 5 provides the reader a step-by-step full text of a baptismal homily for an infant, which, in support of his claims about the discontinuities between homilies and sermons, demonstrates how a homily directly flows from the liturgical action of which it is a part. This example of preaching focused on the rite of baptism also demonstrates that liturgical preaching, in this case, "mystagogical preaching," carries with it a specific theological agenda. Part of the task of preaching for the celebration of baptism, writes MacPherson, is to remind the

congregation as a whole that infant baptism is more than a “naming ceremony”; rather, at such a baptismal service, one might consider using a distinct liturgical preaching genre altogether. The truth is, as he explains, the nature and fundamental purpose of “mystagogical preaching” is to usher newly initiated Christians into a deeper understanding of the faith and their sacramental experience (65-70).

Finally, *Preaching Across the Divide*, the shortest section of the book, shifts readers attention to a discussion of new approaches for liturgical preaching in the spirit of Christian ecumenism and interfaith cooperation, where he clearly anticipates questions around the profound realities of globalization (106). This final chapter discusses how preaching in the context of historic Holy Land sites might be done, in a context where centuries old conflicts and rivalry for privileged status to the land continues. Here the reader finds a hopeful charge that should spur on any serious preacher to see that it is only through God’s revelation and salvific actions that liturgical preaching has any power to transform church and society.

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Kate Bowler. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 352 pages. \$34.95.

Kate Bowler, assistant professor of the history of Christianity in the United States at Duke Divinity School, has produced a remarkable book not only for the field of North American religious history, but also for concerned homileticians today. She has four definite writing aims. First, she wishes to introduce readers to a fast-growing 20th century movement that has so far been only vaguely defined and researched. It is known by various names including “Health and Wealth,” “Name It and Claim It,” “Faith or Word of Faith,” or most commonly “Prosperity Gospel.” Second, as a hard-working, critical researcher, she traces the origin and development of the prosperity gospel, starting with the late 19th century roots of the movement, through its flourishing during the Pentecostal revivals of the World War II period, to the final stage of its recent maturity after the 1960’s. Third, to aid the first purpose and using the methods of the second one, Bowler suggests her own definition of the prosperity gospel. She sums up this definition with four key themes—faith, wealth, health, and victory. Fourth, as the ultimate concern of the book, she wants to see how the prosperity gospel movement has been (re-)shaping North American religiosity. As Bowler argues, “[T]he prosperity gospel is a decisive theological, economic, and social force shaping American religion” (9).

With the four purposes above, Bowler constructs the main body of the book with five chapters. Chapter one (*Gospels*) is a historical note on the early 20th development of the prosperity gospel, which took various forms and different names like “mind cure, success literature, positive thinking, self-help, and prosperity theology” (11). She suggests three distinct yet interrelated religious or religio-ideological streams as the foundational sources of the prosperity gospel: 1) Pentecostalism, 2) New Thought (an amalgam of metaphysics and Protestantism), and 3) an American gospel of pragmatism, individualism, and upward mobility. In chapter two (*Faith*), Bowler finds that since the late 1940s, the “faith” talk started widely spreading throughout the nation with the symbolic faith motto, “God has greater things in store.” Proponents of the movement then boldly started preaching faith that heals, delivers, and prospers. Chapter three (*Wealth*) explains how the 20th century’s prosperity gospel “successfully” interpreted and transformed invisible faith into material wealth. What is particularly interesting in this chapter is her distinction between hard prosperity gospel (immediate causality between faith and financial reality) and soft prosperity (psychotherapeutic enhancement of one’s spirit). In chapter four (*Health*), in the prosperity gospel circle, Bowler recognizes physical health or healing as an essential demonstration of faith. In the last chapter, she articulates how *Jehovah Nissi* (translated as “my victory”) as another fundamental force of the prosperity gospel has been applied to individual success and national blessings.

At the close of the book, Bowler seems to have achieved most of the goals set in the beginning. We might, however, wonder if for her fourth goal she has really succeeded in arguing that the prosperity gospel is a decisive theological and social force (re-)shaping American religion. Undoubtedly, we see plenty facets of evidence in the book that show the evading presence and growth of the prosperity gospel on American religious soil. But, the book does not discuss exactly how the faith or theology of the prosperity gospel has changed or transformed existing or previous (mainline) American faith or theologies, which otherwise still hold their privileged positions as religious forces. Another common curiosity we might share at the end is about how much or to what extent the prosperity gospel movement is rooted in biblical foundations.

This book, obviously, is a priceless resource for today’s homileticians who cannot ignore the prosperity gospel preachers anymore as degraded preaching clowns spreading distorted

Christian messages. If Bowler is right, those once ignored “clowns” are fast becoming “crowned” forceful propagators of a uniquely American religion. Informative charts and photos at various points in the book, as well as two ample appendixes at the end, prove the growing religio-social force of the prosperity gospel movement.

The book does its job extremely well in including, with significant weight, the same movement unfolding in the African American church communities and among numerous women groups in the nation, not to mention women prosperity gospel preachers. If the author wants to expand the volume in the future, further research might be lent to the adoption of the prosperity gospel movement by Asian American and Hispanic American populations, who are the fastest growing Christians in number now in the U.S. This latter research will aid Bowler in arguing more convincingly for the sweeping influence of the prosperity gospel on North American religiosity in a broader sense.

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Angela Dienhart Hancock. *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich*. Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013. 372 pages. \$30.24.

Angela Dienhart Hancock, a graduate of the Princeton Theological Seminary, currently serves as assistant professor of homiletics and worship at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This notable volume is her first publication of a vast investigation on Karl Barth's theology, particularly his homiletic. In the introduction, she queries, "What does a theologian [Barth] say to young preachers [in the class] on the dawn of the Third Reich?" (xv). In this respect, she intends to explore Barth's emergency homiletic by primarily researching his unpublished lecture notes, *Übungen in der Predigtvorbereitung* (Exercises in Sermon Preparation) of 1932-1933. For appropriate interpretation of Barth's homiletic, she attempts an intricate description of the multilayered socio-political context of the theologian.

With a rich understanding of Barth's lectures of 1932-1933 on the subject of "sermon exercises," the first and second chapters trace his theological development and examine the way in which he theologically reaffirmed the Goodness of God and God's eschatological power in Germany's historical crisis. The same chapters show Barth's attention to the church's proclamation as a way to resist nationalism as well as how he decided on adding practical theology, namely preaching, in his classes of 1932-1933. Chapters three and four offer some suggested reasons why Barth rejected the German homiletic tradition as practiced by his contemporaries. The author points out that the church's language about God itself was being infiltrated by the propaganda rhetoric and ideological pathos of national politics (118). This went against Barth's theology since he believed that the church must only preach the Word of God freed from national pathos. Chapters five and six chronologically present Barth's *Predigtvorbereitung*. These two chapters distinctly focus on Barth's lectures on preaching; his emphasis on biblical homiletics, the preacher as the servant of the Word of God, preaching as witness, Jesus Christ as Christian hope, faithful obedience to the witness of the Bible, and the virtues of a preacher. The two chapters show that contrary to the common understanding of Barth, he was in actuality greatly concerned with the local congregation and their serious political situation in preaching. In this volume, thus, Hancock subverts the common notion that Barth's theology was so abstract and otherworldly that it disregarded public issues and the socio-political situation.

A great contribution of the book to the homiletic guild comes from the fact that the author illuminates Barth as a practical theologian (although technically he was not a practical theologian himself). Hancock describes Barth's emergent decision on teaching homiletics as his theoretical and practical engagement in the human context. She regards Barth's preaching class as the praxis of preaching itself (17). Her exploration of Barth therefore rediscovers him as a practical theologian who not only responded to the historical emergency, but also himself practiced theology by teaching and preaching. Another interesting point of the book is that Hancock challenges the common criticism on Barth's homiletic. In contrast to the dominant criticism on Barth, Hancock finds that the theologian firmly claimed preaching the gospel based on or for *contextual reality* and *real people*. For Barth, preaching the gospel as the church's practice was to affirm the Goodness of God in reality and to function as a way of resistance against German nationalism.

Of course, there are a few details that the intrigued reader might want the author to include in the book. Other than the historical rediscovery of Barth's emergency homiletic, the reader might expect to read more about the author's own definition of and critical comments on the same, particularly in the 21st century American context. Moreover, several questions that

come to the reader's mind at the end remain possible research areas, "Is there any emergency call from God to today's church and preaching?" "What contribution will the new discovery of Barth's preaching make to contemporary homiletics?" "If any, what is the author's own opinion on American political rhetoric and the language of God in today's pulpit?" "Is today's American pulpit free from any ideological captivity?"

Obviously, Hancock's work sparks sharp arguments for concerned homiletic scholars, especially regarding the difference between Barth's published work, *Homiletic*, and the unpublished artifacts of the *Predigtvorbereitung*. Hence, this volume would be quite useful in advanced courses in homiletics at the seminary or graduate school level. Finally, Hancock's vast research on the multilayered context of Barth's theology and detailed description is also a very helpful resource for other theological areas, such as constructive theology and historical theology.

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Linda G. Jones. *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 298 pages. \$99.

There are books that open up a new world for the eyes of the readers, and Linda Jones' book, *The Power of Oratory in the Medieval Muslim World*, has the potential to do exactly this. The almost 300 pages of this book lead readers into the world of medieval Muslim preaching by combining sound research and source study with an intriguing ability to guide the readers on a smooth path into the sources and the different forms of Muslim preaching in the Middle Ages, which is true also for readers who are not specialists in Islamic history and even for those who do not even know Arabic. It seems to me that this book is of utmost importance at least on three levels: the historic, the homiletic, and the dialogical.

As a Visiting Professor of History of Religions at the University of Barcelona, Jones succeeds in concisely presenting the results of an in-depth source study of Islamic preaching, primarily in Muslim Iberia and Maghreb from the 11th to the 15th centuries. She offers this immense material in a well-structured and easy accessible way. The initial three chapters of the book open up the horizon, describing the scope of the study (chapter 1), presenting the *khutba*, as the "central jewel" of medieval Arab-Islamic prose and as the main liturgical sermon form in the Islamic Middle Ages (chapter 2), and describing its main rhetorical and discursive strategies (chapter 3). The next three chapters analyze some sermons of different types in more detail—the "canonical orations" on Friday and at weddings (chapter 4), political sermons and sermons on *jihad* (chapter 5), and the two types of homiletical exhortation and storytelling in para-liturgical settings (chapter 6). The two final chapters deal with the role of the preacher (chapter 7) and the behavior and reaction of the audience (chapter 8). The extraordinary diligence of this book is proven by the fact that not only a helpful index of names and terms, but also a "Glossary of Arabic Terms" is attached. Of course, a lot of these terms appear in the book's main text, but all of them are translated and transcribed, with even the Arabic letters printed in the main text (126) and explained to the readers.

Jones shows how the *khutba* (a form of oratory which existed also in pre-Islamic times) and the *khaṭīb* (the preacher) became institutionalized in the Islamic community, and underscores the established form of the *khutba*, usually consisting of three parts: the introduction with liturgical formulae, the main body, and the conclusion. In the Islamic Middle Ages the *khutba* was seen as "patterned upon customs and practices attributed to Muḥammad and his closest followers" (49). Preaching meant imitating the Prophet and making His voice heard again in the congregation. This practice included also the bodily behavior of the *khaṭīb*, which was meant to resemble Muḥammad's behavior. Even the number of stairs of the *minbar* (the 'pulpit') was seen to be in accordance with the prophet's context. In the Middle Ages the style of the sermon (including consideration of whether the preacher should use rhymed forms) and the use of the vernacular or classical Arabic were under discussion (as was the use of Latin or vernacular in Christian homiletics!). Besides the canonical sermon form of the *khutba*, Jones presents various forms of homiletical exhortations and their rhetoric, and offers insights in the biography of preachers from different contexts—among them, wandering preachers and even one woman preacher (preaching only to women congregations (226-227)).

All these aspects make the book not only important for those interested in the society and culture of Islam in the Middle Ages, but also for Christian homileticians. Jones quotes a description about a Muslim preacher: "he cried and made [others] cry whenever he preached" (232). From this starting point, Jones discovers the "mimetic aspect of preaching" (247): the congregation imitates the preacher's behavior, who himself is imitating Muḥammad—thus uniting past and present. Jones shows that the study of sermons must combine the text (language

and rhetorical features), bodily actions (ritualized and individual behavior), and the reactions of the audience. To achieve this goal, the author makes use of the ritual theories of Catherine Bell, Talal Asad, Pierre Bourdieu, Marsha Witten and others in order to show that the combination of these levels offers new insights into historical sermon research (whereas studies of the history of preaching among Christians often only consider sermon texts). In addition, Jones' book may challenge homileticians to consider how this intermingling of language, body, and ritual is taken into account in our homiletical discourses.

Reading the book may initiate a homiletical trialogue. In the 1990s Lawrence A. Hoffmann and Paul F. Bradshaw edited the "Two Liturgical Traditions" series, reflecting worship in Jewish-Christian contexts. Some years later, I was among those who sought to establish a Jewish-Christian homiletical dialogue (see: *Preaching in Judaism and Christianity*, 2008). The time has now come to open this up for a trialogue working on the history of Jewish, Muslim and Christian preaching and their various interrelations. For example, it would have been great if Jones had compared an Islamic Holy War Sermon, *khuṭab jihādiyya*, and a Christian sermon during the crusades, or developed ideas for an international and interreligious trialogue today.

Linda Jones' book is full of helpful information, interesting details, and open questions for further research. It is like a hand stretched out and open for Christian homileticians to grasp.

Alexander Deeg, Professor of Practical Theology, Leipzig University, Germany

Angela M. Yarber. *The Gendered Pulpit: Sex, Body, and Desire in Preaching and Worship*. Cleveland, TN: Parson's Porch Books, 2013. 151 pages. \$18.95.

Angela Yarber has shared a precious gift with us in her book, *The Gendered Pulpit: Sex, Body, and Desire in Preaching and Worship*. This gift is less of a scholarly treatment on how human sexuality—and LGBTQ sexuality in particular—bisepts Christian worship spaces than it is a manifesto for justice. In her call to “gender the pulpit toward justice,” Yarber invites us to consider how gender and sexuality play out in the preacher’s life as well as in the preacher’s proclamation. Throughout, she displays a rare blend of pastoral transparency and liturgical awareness—in fact her willingness to share the intimate fears, joys, triumphs, and setbacks in her own ministry do much to advance the central preoccupation of her book.

Writing as both a scholar of art and religion and an ordained Baptist minister, Yarber’s intended audience are those who have been marginalized on account of their gender and/or sexuality (12). The book reads as an extension of her pastoral ministry—embodying her unique gifting, calling, and orientation by God for the sake of those marginalized by society as well as the church.

The book follows a clear structure, with chapters that include personal testimony followed by biblical, historical, and theological treatments on the chapter’s theme, and ending with practical application/examples on how each topic might play out liturgically and homiletically. Appropriately, she focuses on her own Baptist denomination when examining the pejorative history of its (mis)treatment of women (preachers) and the different kinds of Baptists who have supported or denounced the welcoming and affirming movement.

Gendering the pulpit toward justice is multivalent. The practice hovers between discursive and non-discursive acts involving “personal narratives, scripture, history, theology, [and] inclusive language” and calling us to “recognize that our gendered, sexualized, and racialized bodies preach a message before we even open our mouths” (48-9). Or, as she puts it a bit later, “gender[ing] the pulpit in the direction of justice [is] for my sexuality to step boldly with me into the pulpit and proclaim the Word with my sexualized body” (52). Later, she adds that gendering the pulpit in the direction of justice also “involves queering preaching and worship” (69).

From a scholarly perspective the book was rather disappointing. The text is littered with many typographical and grammatical errors, which grate like nails on the reader’s chalkboard. More substantively, Yarber breezes over how racial identity impacts pulpit proclamation, lumping racialized bodies in with sexualized and gendered bodies (33), and she fails to acknowledge the nuanced scholarly perspectives that divide lesbian and feminist scholars. Further still, most of her scholarly interlocutors are somewhat out of date (many of her sources are from the 1970’s and 1980’s) or curiously peripheral to current debates on these themes (the exception being her chapter on dance). These shortcomings are rectified a bit by Yarber’s strong and compelling work on the body and its power in liturgical and sermonic dance, as well as by her candid and much needed discussion of eating disorders.

As for teaching preaching, I was frustrated that Yarber offered scant advice on how gendered/queer preaching might disrupt or challenge traditional sermonic methods. She does recapitulate a way of reading Scripture from a queer perspective and how a gendered/queer understanding of the incarnation can shape sermonic discourse; but nowhere do we find how Yarber understands gendering the pulpit to affect sermon development and delivery per se. She advocates the importance of gender inclusive language and candid testimony on the part of LGBTQ preachers, but as with theology and queer hermeneutics these merely form the *content* of sermons and liturgies. How does a preacher’s gender and sexuality call for a reexamination of

sermonic/liturgical *forms* and *delivery styles*? These limited approaches seem to miss an important opportunity for homiletical critique.

These critiques notwithstanding, Yarber has written an important book and its greatest contributions to the homiletical and liturgical guilds, as well as the church, are her radical transparency and passion for breaking the millennia of silence about matters of gender and sexuality in sermonic and liturgical discourse. Liturgical theologians and homileticians will find her insights—particularly her harrowing personal narratives—welcome supplements to more traditional texts. Here we have one female, lesbian, Baptist! preacher brave enough to let us read her life as a text written against injustice and oppression—a welcome gift to be sure!

Jacob D. Myers, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

Phil Snider. *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. 227 pages. \$26.

Phil Snider, who is Senior Minister at Brentwood Christian Church in Springfield Mo. and author of two previous books, here offers a way through an impasse that, he discerns, besets many pastors of progressive churches: how to preach transformatively about God to congregants who neither believe in the supernatural being, nor respond positively to the exclusively ethical exhortation that, from the pulpit, substitutes for God-talk? Snider identifies this impasse as “the modern homiletical crisis” (3). In this book, he traces the crisis back to the 18th century Enlightenment and modern theologies derived from it. Surprisingly and engagingly, he finds a solution in postmodern theory, especially Jacques Derrida as interpreted through the work of Syracuse University’s professor emeritus, John Caputo. The goal is to open a way persuasively to address the spiritual longing that brings folk to church in the first place, without recourse to what reduces in the end, for progressive congregations, to either magic or ethics.

Postmodern theory is an improbable friend on this homiletic quest. Snider knows how suspicious of it many of his colleagues in the clergy are. The chief critique is that it is wildly relativistic and indeed nihilistic. Friedrich Nietzsche, often identified by critics of postmodern theory as its source and inspiration, turns tutor here, at least in Snider’s hands. By dramatically announcing the death of God, Nietzsche simply reveals for us what is already implicit in Enlightenment reductions of religion to ethics. If God is merely godly human behavior, then God is effectively gone. This predicament supplies the book with its wittily ambiguous title. We are *after* God in two senses, both temporally, in that we postdate universal belief in a transcendent divine person, and affectively, in that we still continue to long for (pine after) the divine.

The book—dedicated to John Caputo—drinks deeply of his writing. The insight Snider draws from Caputo, who has it from Derrida, is that the path back to spiritual life quite literally rests on the tips of our tongues in our very capacity for language. Words are not mere marks on a page or airy vocalizations. They bear charges within them in both senses of that term—energy and call. Some words especially, such as “God,” charge us with a longing for a content they indicate but cannot contain, what Snider calls “the event” in them. This event is neither thing nor substance, but more an act that “stirs” in the word that “harbors” it. This event is not of our making, and so transcends us, but not supernaturally. As Snider puts it, “the event harbored in the name of God doesn’t exist, it insists” (77). And so it turns out that language performs a task philosophical humanity previously expected of ontological being—to ground spiritual life. Language is more potent than we know. Poets have been saying this all along; but it took postmodern philosophers to formulate this for us more discursively in terms of the event that stirs in the word.

The postmodern sermon plumbs for the event stirring most especially in the word, “God.” The preacher cannot present the event, for that would domesticate it. She can only register its call for the congregation and invite their response. Insofar as the call of God never transposes to the presence of God, postmodern preaching is ineluctably expectant, indeed eschatological and messianic. We are always waiting for what the postmodern sermon preaches. “A homiletic of the event prays and hopes and dreams and weeps” (121). The task is more easily instanced than described and so Snider helpfully concludes the book with several examples of postmodern sermons he himself delivered.

Snider concedes that the audience for his message is most likely limited by the felt need among clergy like himself. “If it is *not* difficult for you to . . . preach about the activity and agency of God in a post-Enlightenment context . . . then this book may not be of much interest to you” (15). But the book will hopefully draw a larger readership than that! It is a very instructive

illustration of the interdependence between philosophy, theology, and preaching. It may not domestic God, but it does put some very difficult thinkers on speaking terms with readers untutored in the higher reaches of postmodern theory. And for all its focus on what never quite arrives of the divine, it strangely reassures—God is somehow with us even without so being.

Ernest Rubinstein, Drew University, Madison, NJ

Richard Viladesau. *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*. New York: Paulist, 2000. 270 pages. \$12.48.

Twenty years into a life of congregational preaching and teaching I continue to read, study, and experiment with curating worship¹ as I ponder the fate of the sermon in an image-driven world. Pastors and congregations struggle to commune and communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ in a postmodern intellectual, spiritual, and experiential marketplace of truths. The curating worship movement moves art from the screen above the pulpit to the foundation of the worship experience, where the people (perhaps) might perceive the implicit Good News beyond the guiding hands of the keepers of the keys. Richard Viladesau, a theology professor at Fordham University, in *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*, curates an exhibition of aesthetic theology that reconciles art and theology, and ultimately demonstrates how the beauty of this union manifests in the rhetorical art (and logic) of preaching.

Viladesau invites readers to experience the beauty of ancient and classical Western music and art (mapping out an extensive discography and an online gallery) as he demonstrates the power of aesthetic theology to realize in art a bridge language between the academy and popular (lived) theology. Along the way, this musician/art patron/theologian asks questions about how the grammar of musical proportion and art perspective speak to our bodies, minds, and spirits. Through Viladesau's eyes and ears, you hear the "polyphony in stone" of Gothic cathedral architecture (18) and draw back to perceive the story of Western painting (and theology) writ large as artists seek in color to resonate with viewers' souls (94).

Things get really interesting as Viladesau guides readers to consider how this conversation between art and theology plays out in a sermon around the Table. Like all conversations, this one goes both ways. Viladesau encourages theologians to reflect on beauty and art, but he also invites pastoral practitioners of "the arts of ministry" to "incorporate theology as an intrinsic part of their functioning" in order to commune and communicate the beauty and unity of God (218). This effort is no mere sketch. Drawing on Jesus' use of parables, Viladesau argues for a "correlational" strategy in preaching that mines cultural imagination (in "poetry, literature, film, and art") to articulate questions that only the Gospel can answer (193). He also offers an insightful collection of triads articulated by Augustine, J. R. R. Tolkien, Bernard Lonergan, and Paul Tillich/David Tracy as fertile ground for crafting sermons that appeal to head and heart (199).

It is easy to get lost in this maze. This sketch is deliberately incomplete and complex. Viladesau draws together the reflections of many deep thinkers and artists. Just as apophatic spirituality—the *via negativa* or way of denial—contents itself with implicit truth, Viladesau does not resolve the tension between explicit and intrinsic beauty/revelation. The beauty that is art "both enables and limits its revelatory power" he warns at the outset (5). As he explores art as theological text in the third chapter, Viladesau argues for the necessity of conversion—with a crucial "eschatological proviso"—to aspire to know God's beauty as we are fully known (148-149; and 1 Corinthians 13:12). This side of eternity, we see only dimly, even through the lens of theological aesthetics. While Viladesau acknowledges "the event and person of Jesus Christ" as the "Christian classic par excellence" (152), Christ's resurrection veils all ultimate meaning "in the transcendence of God" (162). This transcendent beauty incorporates the whole of creation, "including those whose lives at present are far from beautiful" (149).

¹ See Jonny Baker's anthology, *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2010) and Mark Pierson's *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis, MN: Sparkhouse, 2010).

Viladesau offers no easy answers, but he curates a gallery that displays the iconic, sacramental power of art as a language and text to experience and understand God's beauty—"the unity of being" (220). With this exhibition, he calls on preachers and theologians, artists, activists, and those considered "far from beautiful" to experience the language of theological aesthetics as a community that is "nothing other than the achievement of common meaning" (188). While Viladesau's gallery includes only Western/European art, his exhibition intentionally invites more contributions to preach, to sing, and to paint God's story of magnificent and haunting unity that eludes, calls, and inspires us all.

Patrick B. Gordy-Stith, The United Methodist Church

Louis Weil. *Liturgical Sense: The Logic of Rite*. New York: Seabury Books, 2013. 140 pages. \$14.44.

Liturgical Sense: The Logic of Rite is the first of an occasional series of books by Louis Weil to highlight his most significant insights into liturgical theology and practice gained over the course of a career as priest, liturgical scholar and reformer, and professor in liturgics. Written in particular for priests and other worship leaders in The Episcopal Church, this volume focuses on historical developments in the theology and practice of presiding at the Eucharist, with special attention to how the Eucharistic rites and rubrics of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer of The Episcopal Church* represent a significant if not complete recovery of early Christian liturgical celebration in general and presiding in particular.

At the heart of this book lies one key concern. Weil hopes presiders at the Eucharist may become more open channels of the full participation of the gathered assembly through their reflection on and practices of presiding. To that end, Weil briefly traces the history of theological and practical changes in Western Eucharistic rites from early Christianity until the present day. He notes the scholarship on early Christianity disclosed a theology and practice of “full, conscious, actual” participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice by the whole assembly of the baptized led by their presider. This dynamic shifted toward a theology and practices of “priestly confection” and primarily visual participation by people from the Middle Ages roughly through the middle of the 20th century. Since that time, the results of liturgical scholarship and the consequent ecumenical liturgical renewal movements across the Western Churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have led many denominations to develop new rites or new teaching and rubrics about the rites, thereby embodying a shift once again to “full, conscious and actual” participation by the whole assembly.

Weil argues the long history in Western churches of the people functioning as full participants only in their own devotional acts while the priest or pastor “confects” the sacrament on their behalf will not be overcome by changing the language of the rites alone. How the presider presides matters much for how the people will understand their own role in the Eucharistic sacrifice. If the presider simply continues the same practices associated with priestly confection by special words and gestures, as he notes many Episcopal priests did after the adoption of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, the people will likely continue to perceive the priest’s role and theirs in no different ways than before.

Thus, Weil notes, how presiders preside cannot be left up simply to the whims or preferences of individual presiders. Presiding must be worked out in both teaching and listening to the people among whom they serve. Presiders need to teach the people how to claim and enact their role as full participants. And presiders must listen to the people to discern how or what they are doing as presiders is enabling or blocking their full participation. Ultimately, Weil argues, the only ritual action presiders may need to offer at the Eucharist, apart from the fraction at its conclusion, is the common prayer posture of *orans*: “Doing nothing, yet doing everything.”

To be sure, *Liturgical Sense* is written by an Episcopalian primarily for Episcopalians and other Christian presiders and worship leaders in the Anglican traditions. Yet this particularity of focus is what gives this book its power for presiders in many Western traditions. He has provided enough of the trajectory of both Roman and Reformed traditions of Eucharistic presiding that non-Anglicans can discover their place within his narrative of liturgical history and liturgical renewal. He has also modeled in his careful reflection on the development of Anglican and Episcopal rites how such reflection might bear good fruit when applied to one’s own tradition. As such, *Liturgical Sense* may rightly find its way onto required book lists for seminary classes on worship and liturgical theology, into workshops for continuing education of clergy, and even

in congregational study groups seeking to understand the history and meaning of their own Eucharistic ritual and practices far beyond its explicitly Episcopalian primary audience.

Taylor W. Burton-Edwards, The General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church