

**The Personal Presence of the Preacher in Preaching:
An Explorative Study on Self-Disclosure in Sermons at Pentecost**

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Abstract: *How does self-disclosure work in preaching? This study explores that question empirically, using a variety of data collection methods such as sermon analysis, focus groups, and interviews. Self-disclosure is an ambiguous concept in homiletical and theological literature, and it remains an ambiguous concept when considered from an empirical approach. Our focus is on how self-disclosure works brings to the fore three different homiletical processes: negotiating homiletical space, shaping the homiletical relationship, and performing self-disclosure. This study argues that researching implicit self-disclosure provides a better, though more complex, way of understanding the public presence of the preacher, than an analysis of the explicit use of the first pronoun “I” in preaching.*

Introduction

In a recent study, Marinus Beute addressed the question of preacher self-image by asking, “Who am I as a preacher?”¹ Others, such as Hans-Christoph Piper and Hans van der Geest, explored how preachers’ personality traits influence concrete sermons.² However, the particular theoretical concept considered here is “self-disclosure.” How do preachers disclose themselves while preaching? Communication scholars have argued that no communication takes place without self-disclosure.³ McClure explains self-disclosure in relation to cultural interest in authenticity, character, personality, and relationship in preaching.⁴ References in a sermon to the preacher’s life and inner feelings (the use of “I” in the sermon) are indicators of self-disclosure.

In previous research, we discovered empirical indicators of self-disclosure. For instance, in a study on sermon reception, Pleizier found that listeners identify themselves with the sermon through the person of the preacher. The study showed that relational identification takes place when listeners recognize personal traits in the preacher, such as “being an example,” “showing perseverance,” “having a caring attitude,” or “demonstrating personal faith.”⁵ Further, in an empirical study on preaching in Lent, Verweij discovered that self-disclosure functions as a “preaching resource” through which preachers can make the suffering of Jesus tangible.⁶ For

¹ Marinus Beute, *Wie ben ik als ik preek? Bronnen en herbronning van het homiletisch zelfbeeld* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Academic, 2016).

² Hans van der Geest, *Presence in the Pulpit. The Impact of Personality in Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Hans-Christoph Piper, *Predigtanalysen. Kommunikation und Kommunikationsstörungen in der Predigt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976).

³ F. Schulz von Thun, *Hoe bedoelt u? Een psychologische analyse van menselijke communicatie* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1982), 17–19.

⁴ John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 122–124.

⁵ Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 242–246.

⁶ André Verweij, *Positioning Jesus’ Suffering. A Grounded Theory of Lenten Preaching in Local Parishes* (Delft: Eburon, 2014), 175–193.

example, by relating the preacher's own experience of pain to the pain Jesus suffered, the preacher was able to present Jesus as standing next to us in our pain.

In this article, we build upon these earlier findings and focus upon the phenomenon of self-disclosure as it occurs in the preaching event. We ask how self-disclosure takes place by looking at real sermons and talking to preachers and listeners. How do preachers present themselves in their sermons and how do listeners respond? In this article we report from a small qualitative sample of four worship services that took place in one geographical area during the time of Pentecost. Pentecost shows how the Spirit involves human beings to make the communication of the gospel unique, embodied, and personal.

First, we provide a concise theoretical framework on the concept of self-disclosure. How does it function in current theories on communication and in homiletical literature? Next, we provide an outline of the empirical study. Then, the results of the analyses demonstrate how self-disclosure works in our sample of four Pentecost sermons. Finally, the article closes with a brief discussion and a concluding statement.

The Concept of "Self-Disclosure" in Homiletics

Self-disclosure is an essential part of interpersonal communication because it represents "the cement that binds the bricks" in a relationship.⁷ Hargie argues that without self-disclosure relational structures are inherently unstable and prone to collapse. Hence, the appropriate use of self-disclosure in communication is crucial to the development and maintenance of relationships, and this is especially true for long-term relationships.

Definitions of self-disclosure often restrict the field of study to what individuals verbally reveal about themselves. However, according to Hargie, self-disclosure includes nonverbal communication. He defines self-disclosure as "...the process whereby person A verbally and/or nonverbally communicates to person B some item of personal information that was previously unknown to B."⁸ Four categories of self-disclosure can be distinguished: observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. In contrast, Tardy limits self-disclosure to verbal disclosures, although he does not require explicit markers such as the personal pronoun "I" or other self-referential language such as "my" or "mine" in order to consider something self-disclosure. He defines self-disclosure as "a verbal response unit which describes the subject in some way, tells something about the subject, or refers to some affect the subject experiences."⁹ Finally, Neff points to the criterium of intentionality. In his view, self-disclosure is "...the process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and that would not normally be known by others." He adds that "the sender must communicate the information verbally" and "another person must be the intentional target."¹⁰

In homiletical literature on self-disclosure, the personal pronoun "I" is often considered a criterion for identifying a statement as self-disclosure. For instance, Manfred Josuttis distinguishes between four uses of "I" in the pulpit: the verificational use (the experience of the preacher verifies the truth of scripture); the confessional use (the preacher is a witness of the divine promise); the biographical use (the complexity of life is demonstrated through the life of

⁷ Owen Hargie, *Skilled Interpersonal Communication: Research, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge 2017), 231–268.

⁸ Ibid., 241.

⁹ Charles H. Tardy, "Self-disclosure: Objectives and Methods of Measurement," *A Handbook for the Study of Human Communication: Methods and Instruments for Observing, Measuring, and Assessing Communication Processes*, ed. Charles H. Tardy (Norwood: Ablex, 1988), 331.

¹⁰ Blake J. Neff, *A Pastor's Guide to Interpersonal Communication* (New York: Haworth, 2006), 45–46.

the preacher), and the exemplary use (the life of the preacher illustrates the message of the sermon).¹¹ Richard L. Thulin points to the ambiguity regarding the use of “I” in a sermon. On the one hand, the biographical use of “I” contributes to the authenticity and thus the authority of the preacher. On the other hand, however, the dangers of narcissism, privatism, and isolationism are never far away.¹² Manfred Josuttis discusses self-disclosure against the background of dialectical theology according to which an explicit presence of the preacher in preaching is considered to be suspicious. However, Josuttis argues that self-disclosure contributes to a democratic and dialogical understanding of preaching. He argues that the preacher should not be able to hide behind phrases like “God says” or “the Bible says,” and explains that through the “I” of the preacher the hearers are also entitled to an “I.”

However, self-disclosure takes place even without the explicit use of personal pronouns. In his study on the concept of “ethos” in preaching, Resner emphasizes that preachers cannot avoid self-expression in the pulpit.¹³ Preachers make statements about themselves all the time by their choice of scriptural texts and illustrative stories, as well as by their personal appearance in the preaching event. Further, Lapsley states that “...the personality of the preacher will have an impact on the congregation, even though she or he, consciously or unconsciously, attempts to suppress it, or the effort of suppressing it will itself have impact upon it. Body language, inflection, tone, pitch, cadence all give it away.”¹⁴ According to Lee Ramsey Jr., self-disclosure consists of “...those elements within the sermon style and substance that disclose the personhood of the preacher...for the purpose of elucidating the gospel.”¹⁵

Many of these insights from homiletical theory have been confirmed by empirical research. In their “Listening to Listeners” project, Mulligan and Allen found that hearers “...are engaged by sermons in which preachers refer to their own questions, struggles, insights, and joys...and reflect theologically on the meaning of their own experience as a lens through which to help the congregation encounter the gospel.”¹⁶ Interviewees suggested that preachers should share their own vulnerability with the congregation, and Mulligan and Allen thus conclude that employing self-disclosure can help preachers to deliver more engaging sermons.

Methodology

Preachers and listeners may reflect differently on the advantages and disadvantages of self-disclosure in preaching. This study does not start from a normative theological position, but rather proceeds from an open, descriptive research question: how does self-disclosure work in actual sermons?

However, the idea of the “actual sermon” is rather ambiguous. There are at least three different understandings of the actual sermon. First, the sermon as prepared by the preacher (in

¹¹ Manfred Josuttis, “Der Prediger in der Predigt. Sündiger Mensch oder mündiger Zeuge?” *Praxis des Evangeliums zwischen Politik und Religion. Grundprobleme der Praktischen Theologie* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988), 91–94. Josuttis also mentions the representative and fictitious uses of “I,” but they do not concern self-disclosure on the part of the preacher.

¹² Richard L. Thulin, *The “I” of the Sermon. Autobiography in the Pulpit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

¹³ André Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 160.

¹⁴ James N. Lapsley, “Personality,” *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon, Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 372.

¹⁵ G. Lee Ramsey Jr., “Self-disclosure,” *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 133.

¹⁶ Mary Alice Mulligan, Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive. Lessons from Laity* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 25–33.

many instances the “product” or manuscript) is a source for studying the prepared sermon. Second, we can consider the situation of performance or the “preached sermon.” Yet, sources for the actual preached sermon are in themselves rather complex. For instance, visual recordings provide different access to the preaching event than transcripts of the spoken text. Finally, we can consider the “received” sermon. However, the received sermon as such does not exist. Wilfried Engemann coined the idea of “auredit,” the sermon that is “heard with the ear,” which is analogous to “manuscript,” meaning “written by hand.”¹⁷ There are as many “auredits” as there are hearers. Based upon these distinctions, the self-disclosure of the preacher has three different aspects: the construction of the preacher’s “self” in the production of the sermon (the phase of preparation, resulting in a manuscript), the performance of the “self” in the actual preaching moment (the preached sermon, resulting in a transcript of the audio recording), and the reception of the preacher’s “self” (the heard sermon, resulting in an “auredit”).

In this study we collected material on each of the processes of production, performance, and reception. Interviews with preachers and examining sermon manuscripts provide two different entrances into the process of *producing* the sermon, transcripts of the actual preached sermon enable study of the *performance* of the sermon, and focus groups or interviews with listeners were used to reconstruct the process of *reception*.

We collected four sermons preached in local parishes of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands on Pentecost Sunday, May 20, 2018. The parishes are in large villages in the geographical area between Rotterdam and The Hague. Sermon A was preached by pastor “Carol,” Sermon B by pastor “Jack,” Sermon C by pastor “Harry,” and Sermon D by pastor “Arthur.”¹⁸ Interviews were held with all four pastors. In addition, four members of Carol’s church were interviewed, two members of Jack’s church, three members of Harry’s church, and one member of Arthur’s church. The results of the sermon analysis and the interviews were compared separately for each pastor. Next, we compared the individual analyses. In three cases (pastors Carol, Jack, and Arthur) a manuscript of the sermon was available. However, pastor Harry does not use a manuscript, and so in his case only a transcript was available (made from the audio recording).

In order to analyze the data, coding procedures based upon grounded theory were used.¹⁹ Coding in grounded theory aims to formulate new concepts. Therefore, the results of the analysis are a conceptualization of how self-disclosure in preaching works. The resulting concepts aim to contribute to homiletical theory. The following sections present three different aspects of self-disclosure that emerged during the process of coding. First, self-disclosure negotiates the homiletical space in both a challenging and an invitational way. Second, self-disclosure contributes to shaping the homiletical relationship during the preaching event. Finally, self-disclosure is a performative act. Preachers may use explicit self-disclosure in their sermon manuscripts, but in the end self-disclosure takes place during the actual performance. Together, these three aspects provide a preliminary answer to the question of how preacher self-disclosure takes place for both preachers and listeners in the preaching event.

¹⁷ Wilfried Engemann, *Homiletics: Principles and Patterns of Reasoning* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 10–13.

¹⁸ The names are fictitious.

¹⁹ Judith A. Holton, “The Coding Process and Its Challenges,” *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Kathy Charmaz, Antony Bryant (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 265–289.

Negotiating Homiletical Space

The preaching event creates a “homiletical space” in which the preacher and listeners can meet.²⁰ Preachers negotiate the homiletical space by using self-disclosure. When negotiating the homiletical space, they can use two different strategies: they can *challenge* the homiletical space by bringing in their own opinions and struggles, or they can *invite* listeners into the homiletical space through everyday life experiences.

Challenging the Homiletical Space Through the Preacher’s Opinions and Struggles

Pastor Jack tells two personal stories at the beginning of his sermon. He starts with a story about a visit to the dentist. In the waiting room he picks up a magazine and reads an article about Pentecost. He is disappointed by the simplified way in which the story is told as the apostles receive flames on their heads and begin to speak foreign languages:

This is not what actually happened. The Bible isn’t a book of magic, where things happen that cannot happen. [...] The story of Pentecost isn’t some sort of spectacle.²¹

Parallel to the waiting room story, Jack tells a second story about his daughter. She is preparing to take a language exam and has to work hard for it:

Pentecost doesn’t mean you don’t have to learn anymore...the Spirit doesn’t take over our brains so that we can do things we normally can’t do. [...] Pentecost is about one language people are speaking, one fire that is burning.²²

From here, pastor Jack further explains what the story of Pentecost means. He does this in a challenging way. The hearers are invited to enter a “Pentecost discussion” with two options: they can either agree with the preacher or leave the homiletical space. In this negotiation, there is little room for compromise. Jack’s view on Pentecost is one the hearers must “take or leave.” In the interview with hearers Winston and Josh, it is clear that they do not agree with the pastor’s interpretation of Pentecost. They claim room for their own views:

Winston: I’m sorry, but this is not the way I read the Bible. It hurts me when I hear this [...] we have to accept what is written.

Josh: It’s quite something for him to say: I am the preacher and I will tell you what this all means.²³

Hearers Winston and Josh do not feel engaged by Jack’s stories. Here, self-disclosure does not bring them closer into the space of the sermon:

²⁰ Compare Gaarden’s and Lorensen’s remarks about a “room, where the churchgoers...create new meaning and understanding. It is not a room that the listener or preacher can control or occupy, but a room in which both engage.” Marianne Gaarden, Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives,” *Homiletic* 38 (2013): 28.

²¹ Sermon B.

²² Ibid.

²³ Interview with hearers of pastor Jack, November 29, 2018. Names are fictitious.

Josh: I'm not really interested in the stories about the dentist and the exams of his daughter.

Winston: I found that part of the sermon rather vague...I didn't understand his intentions.²⁴

Later, both listeners point out that they know pastor Jack quite well. Despite their differing opinions they find him an amiable, talented person. A clear distinction comes to light between how they honor Jack as a person but disagree with him about how the Bible should be interpreted.

What is happening in this “negotiation”? Jack enters the space of the sermon with two personal accounts in order to confront a traditional explanation of Pentecost. Listeners Winston and Josh sense that the preacher is making a theological point they do not agree with. For them, this makes his sermon less interesting. They break off the negotiation, and retreat from the homiletical space. From an “ethos” setting, they appreciate Jack as an admirable person with whom they also engage in congregational and village life. However, from a “logos” setting, they disagree with Jack on how to understand the Christian faith.²⁵ Which setting has more weight? Winston and Josh do not tolerate the pastor's opinions just because he is a respectable person. Their disapproval of Jack putting forward personal views increases the pressure on their feelings toward the pastor. The “logos” disagreement overshadows their “ethos” admiration. Thus, it seems that taking up self-disclosure in ways hearers do not find inviting decreases tolerance, not only of *what* is being said but also of *who* says it.

Pastor Harry also uses self-disclosure in a pronounced way. In the opening part of his sermon he tells about his struggles with the reading from Colossians 3:12–15. A popular Dutch translation says, “You must do good things.” Harry struggles to accept that he *must* do something, because the Christian message is about *accepting* the gifts of God. In another translation he reads about the clothes God *gives* his children. Here the idea of being “impelled” to do something is left out:

A burden fell from my heart [...] a whole new meaning appears. What we “must” do is given to us.²⁶

A large part of the sermon consists of Harry's self-disclosure. The pastor's thoughts and questions are very present in the homiletical space. When asked about this, Harry says he has “received a call” to lead the congregation into the salvific world of the Bible. His struggles are intended to create an “opening” through which hearers can find a similar route:

I take the hearers by the hand on an experimental journey. [...] I am the one who has the privilege to take them along.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Empirical studies point out how hearers listen to sermons on different settings: “ethos,” the perception of the character of the preacher; “logos,” the perception of the ideas of the sermon; “pathos,” the perception of the feelings stirred by the sermon. Ronald J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship—Content—Feeling* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 1–17; Gerrit Immink, *Over God gesproken. Preken in theorie en praktijk* (Utrecht: Boekencentrum, 2018), 130–134.

²⁶ Sermon C.

²⁷ Interview with pastor Harry, July 24, 2018.

Hearer “Jean” says she feels inspired by how pastor Harry relates his struggles to the Bible. This is a crucial element of her “negotiation.” If self-disclosure is not related to the Bible, there is no use for it. However, in this case she gladly accepts the invitation:

He takes me along in the thoughts he presents, he shows me something of himself all along, the steps he takes. [...] I enjoy this...it really comes across.²⁸

Hearer “Ann” is also engaged by Harry’s self-disclosure, although she is not interested in the pastor’s arguments. For her, it is important to hear about his relationship with God. This gives the sermon a “ring of authenticity” and proves the pastor is a person who loves God. Ann reveals her “negotiating stand”:

I hear he has a relationship with God, a love for God. For me, this is important...it gives the sermon a positive note.²⁹

Both Jean and Ann feel invited to step into the homiletical space and encounter what is being said. They do not feel pushed away, but rather beckoned in. This illustrates Wilfried Engemann’s remark about how the congregation “...is enabled to compare the preacher’s testimony with their own experiences—of which they may only come aware through his testimony.”³⁰ The testimony of the preacher stimulates participation in the sermon. In this case, taking room creates room.

However, hearer “Lucy” finds it hard to identify with the self-disclosure. Why is Harry’s “struggle” so important? It takes time for her to find out what the problem is and what is at stake. Her negotiation with the pastor stumbles:

What is his line of thought? I don’t get it. I’m puzzled. Sometimes, when I think about it and understand it, then it’s OK, but it takes time.³¹

The pastor’s struggles do not “work” for Lucy as they do for Jean and Ann. The “I” of the preacher becomes an obstacle to entering the homiletical space and connecting to the message of the sermon. The room that pastor Harry takes leads to less room for herself. Thus, self-disclosure can also hinder the invitation to become part of the sermon.

The strategy of challenging the listeners puts the burden on the listener. The listener may get lost in the mutual use of homiletical space. A dominant preacher voice that puts the preacher’s experiences and opinions out in the open can easily put off listeners. Using personal experiences and including professional opinions in the sermon may help the preacher to illustrate certain truths in the gospel more clearly. However, it decreases the space available for the listener to become part of the sermon and to enter into the sermon, to think along with the sermon, or even to arrive at a contextual understanding or personal appropriation of the gospel.

²⁸ Interview with hearers of pastor Harry, October 4, 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Engemann, *Homiletics*, 74.

³¹ Interview with hearers of pastor Harry.

Inviting into the Homiletical Space Through Everyday Life Experiences

While preaching, pastors may *challenge* the listeners to take part in the homiletical space. However, another strategy becomes evident when examining the use of self-disclosure by two other pastors: Carol and Arthur provide examples of a more *invitational* strategy.

Pastor Carol is uneasy about taking up too much room for herself. She is reluctant to make the preacher the center of attention, because this may exclude the listeners. However, *too little* self-disclosure may also exclude the listeners:

I notice people appreciate it when experiences they recognize are spoken about...when I say: this reminds me of something and I tell them a personal story.³²

The moments when Carol does become personal are noticed by her hearers. They say it makes the sermon come closer; especially through *everyday life* examples. Carol creates a “balance”: (a) she uses a limited amount of personal space, leaving enough space to allow hearers to find room for themselves; (b) she combines a limited use of self-disclosure with a restriction to common, everyday life experiences. This “balancing” smooths the negotiation between hearers and the preacher. According to hearer “Mary,” Carol’s stories make the sermon more accessible. Lofty themes are connected to “normal life”:

Sometimes she tells us about her children. [...] I think she does this on purpose, to make things a bit more human [...] it works like a little bridge to normal life.³³

Carol attempts to “bridge the gap” between the sermon and the world of the hearers. Her self-disclosure is an opportunity for hearers to enter the space of the sermon *from where they are*. They use the “little bridge” offered to them. In her sermon, Carol refers to a popular Dutch singer:

I was thinking about a song André Hazes sung, about a little boy. The boy is warned by his father about the grownup world. [...] It really touched me, how the childlike innocence of that boy is broken to prepare him for this harsh reality.³⁴

Carol says that many people were speaking about the song during coffee after the service: “I liked that, because it shows they were touched by the song’s themes.”³⁵ The way the song touched Carol paves the way for the hearers to be touched themselves.

Pastor Arthur is also reluctant to take up too much room for himself in his sermons, although his congregation does appreciate such personal moments. Hearer “Justin” says he remembers a sermon in which Arthur became rather emotional:

He told us how he fails to remain close to God and have quiet time with the Lord. There are so many things I have to do, he said, bring the children to school, pick them up again [...] On moments like these, he preaches for himself, he was really frank.³⁶

³² Interview with pastor Carol, September 13, 2018.

³³ Interview with hearers of pastor Carol, February 1, 2019.

³⁴ Sermon A.

³⁵ Interview with pastor Carol.

³⁶ Interview with hearer of pastor Arthur, November 15, 2018.

Justin speaks positively about Arthur's sermons. What makes them engaging is how he relates the Bible to what people experience in daily life:

At Pentecost he brought a hair dryer into the pulpit, with a piece of paper, to show how the wind works. [...] I remember things like that [...] it brings the sermon closer, especially when he speaks about being a father for his children.³⁷

In the interview, Arthur explains why he is hesitant about saying personal things. It is mainly due to the presence of his wife and children in church:

I wouldn't want my father to talk about me in church. That's why my stories are personal but in an indirect way [...] people will recognize the personal elements anyhow, for example when I talk about being a father.³⁸

The hearers of Carol and Arthur point out that *reluctant* use of self-disclosure increases the involvement of the listeners.³⁹ It eases their "negotiation" and brings them closer to what the preacher aims to say. This is especially the case when self-disclosure relates to "daily life frailty," such as "things that occur in the family," "being a father or a mother," or "moments of personal weakness." Instead of putting forward theological viewpoints, Carol and Arthur use self-disclosure to *create a bond* between preacher and hearers. They thus echo Richard L. Thulin's remark about how the "I" of the sermon should aim to "envision friendship and companionship within the church community."⁴⁰

Here it becomes clear that self-disclosure is not evaluated in terms of *how much* self-disclosure takes place, but rather by *how it is being used* by preachers. Carol and Arthur speak about everyday life to share common experiences; Jack uses personal stories to take a stand concerning Pentecost; Harry refers to his struggles in order to share an experience of the Bible with his hearers. The responses above show that self-disclosure can both challenge and invite listeners to become part of the homiletical space. It appears that the strategy of inviting listeners, by the preacher referring to common human experiences, facilitates listeners negotiating their own positions in the homiletical space.

Shaping the Homiletical Relationship

Harry presents himself as a "guide" who leads his hearers; Jack "teaches" a new understanding of Pentecost; Arthur "shares" aspects of his spiritual life; Carol "draws near" to hearers in their everyday lives. While the self-disclosure of Harry and Jack moves in an *outward* direction toward the worlds of Bible and theology, the self-disclosure of Carol and Arthur focuses on *where hearers are now*: their life and faith experiences. In the "guide" and "teacher" images, Harry and Jack present themselves as "experts" who know what they are talking about. In contrast, Carol and Arthur reveal vulnerability and solidarity. Their self-disclosure touches hearers more directly and brings preacher and congregation together through shared life-experiences. Overall, it is clear that self-disclosure *shapes the homiletical relationship between*

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Interview with pastor Arthur, July 19, 2018.

³⁹ For involvement in the preaching event, see Pleizier, *Religious Involvement*, 185–187.

⁴⁰ Thulin, *The "I" of the Sermon*, 24.

preacher and listeners. Our study presents two different relationships: the pastor as a theological expert and the pastor as a fellow believer.

The Pastor as a Theological Expert: Guiding and Teaching

In his interview, pastor Harry says he always hopes an existential experience will enlighten him during his sermon preparation:

I don't always have such moments of inspiration. But when Pentecost comes, this is more important than ever, because now we are celebrating the Holy Spirit, and I am the one who stands before them.⁴¹

Harry says there is a relationship between the illumination of the preacher and the illumination of the hearers. The first leads to the second, according to Harry. It paves the way for the congregation to experience what the Bible intends. Harry thus takes up the role of a "guide" whom people can trust, and this shapes his relationship with the congregation. A guide knows where people are going and is an "expert" in his field. The preacher-guide takes up an exclusive position in which he stands as a "mediator" between the Bible and the hearers. Harry says, "It is not enough when I hand my hearers the articles of faith and all the other things the church believes in."⁴² He believes that what really matters is attaining a living experience of the Bible, and he considers the preacher to be the linking piece that mediates this experience. Focusing on his mission as a preacher, Harry is aware of how important self-disclosure is to achieving this mission. Taking up the role of an "experiential guide" shapes his relationship with the hearers. For Harry, this approach is rooted in his theology of Pentecost and the way the Spirit works.

Pastor Jack also leads his hearers into an understanding of the Bible, although the way he realizes this differs from Harry. Jack creates a "classroom" setting. He takes up the role of a "teacher" who presents a theological view of Pentecost and challenges his "pupils" to learn and internalize this view. This "teacher-pupil" role-taking shapes the relationship between preacher and hearers:

I try to take make clear to the congregation a new understanding of the Bible. It's not easy to read the Bible in a new way [...] it is a long process. It's hard, because your mind, your thinking has to change.⁴³

The pastor has been through this process himself: "It's been hard for me too." Jack's focus is on sharing insights and know-how *he has discovered for himself*. While Harry's mission focuses on "emotional" responses (guiding the hearers into a faith experience), Jack's teaching has a more "rational" aim: to persuade the hearers of a more literary understanding of the biblical stories.

However, Jack is not very optimistic about the results of his teaching. In his sermon, he spontaneously says, "It's about time we start learning this." In the interview, he reflects on this remark:

I've been a minister here for thirteen years. I've preached many Pentecost sermons. In every one of them I teach the congregation what this story is about [...] although I doubt

⁴¹ Interview with pastor Harry.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Interview with pastor Jack.

whether the congregation understands it. But I'm convinced this is what I must tell them.⁴⁴

At the beginning of the sermon, when Jack talks about the magazine in which the Pentecost story is shared, he feels that he must correct the story's flaws. His self-disclosure is an introduction to his own teaching about Pentecost. The traditional reading is challenged by a personally achieved "know-how" which he presents to the hearers. Jack sums up his position as follows:

This is something you will find in all my sermons, I am a teacher, not just a pastor...⁴⁵

Jack's self-disclosure is part of his teaching project. Whether they appreciate it or not, the hearers are placed into a "pupil role," and they must listen to this teaching time and again. Since the teaching is independent of the hearers' appropriation, the "teacher-pupil" relationship remains a one-sided affair. Jack's sermon is more of a monologue than a dialogue. Although multiple hearer responses are known to the preacher, they do not become part of an "educative exchange."

Compared to Harry's role as "guide," Jack's *educative drive* has a more confrontational edge: "This is what I must tell them." While Harry assumes hearers will follow his struggling path into the world of the Bible, Jack is less optimistic about whether hearers apprehend his teaching. His interpretation of the Pentecost story remains distant to them even after years of preaching. His approach to teaching is reminiscent of the biblical idea of remembrance. Just as Pentecost is about remembering God's law, so preaching reminds us of God's acts through Scripture.

The Pastor as Fellow Believer: Sharing Everyday Life and Faith

Pastor Carol begins many of her sermons with "life incidents" she has experienced herself. Such introductions create an environment of "sharing" in the relationship with the congregation. Preparing for her Pentecost sermon, she recalls a conversation she heard on the radio:

With Pentecost coming up, I listened to a conversation on the radio with a minister in Amsterdam. I thought: how can I use this to talk about how Pentecost touches us today?⁴⁶

Engaging with this conversation is Carol's way of entering the world of everyday life. It is notable that Carol does not feature as the "main character" during her sermon introduction. Rather, she is present as someone who listens and then shares what she has heard with the congregation. She takes up the role of *observer* and invites hearers to observe with her. This shapes their homiletical relationship.⁴⁷

Later on, Carol does become the primary subject of her sermon when she talks about how she was moved by a popular Dutch singer's song: "The song really touched me." However, there

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Compare Long's remarks on the distinction between "personal experiences in which we are the primary subject and those in which we are the observer." Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 250–251.

too she moves on to “observe” the message of the song, pondering what the message could be. She thus becomes a “hearer” herself as she appears to sit next to the other hearers in the pew, on the lookout for the meaning of Pentecost in everyday life.

The song by André Hazes refers to the grownup “struggle for life,” which brings to a halt all “playing around,” typical of children. This is the real-life world Carol connects to. It shapes her relationship with her hearers into one of solidarity. Life itself, with its own excitement and questions, is in focus. Her self-disclosure does not aim to put forward specific theological viewpoints or biblical interpretations as in the guiding or teaching modes of self-disclosure. Rather, she creates a communion of shared life-experiences between herself and her hearers, and together they move toward a deeper level of engaging with life.

Pastor Arthur says he hesitates when it comes to sharing personal stories. He does not enjoy standing in the sermonic spotlight. Rather, he finds it embarrassing for his wife and children, who are also sitting in church. However, at times he does share personal stories, particularly now that he is a father of young children:

I don’t often tell things about myself [...] but it’s all right if you experience something that is related to the message of the sermon. [...] I sometimes say things about being a father of young children.⁴⁸

Arthur utilizes a more “indirect” way of referring to himself. He mentions being a father in his sermon when he says:

If you have children, you will do anything to protect them... Nobody else may touch them. Because they are your children, you love them, that’s how the heavenly Father loves you...⁴⁹

When Arthur says, “If you have children,” he is convinced that most of his hearers know that he is also talking about himself. He is the pastor of a small congregation in which people know each other, and they know the pastor:

Having children...has changed my life, and here I say something about that in an indirect way.⁵⁰

When Arthur compares how fathers love their children to how God loves his children, he is certain that hearers will recognize that he is also *speaking about himself*. Arthur is keen to share the common experience of fatherhood, although he knows it can be overshadowed by pain and grief. This *indirect sharing* shapes the homiletical relationship with the congregation.

In the hearer interview, Justin says people appreciate Arthur’s personal stories, because they get to know their pastor’s own faith-questions through them:

I remember...what Arthur said about his failing to take time for God in prayer [...] this was really emotional [...] and what he said about a faith-issue: I am not sure of this, he

⁴⁸ Interview with pastor Arthur.

⁴⁹ Sermon D.

⁵⁰ Interview with pastor Arthur.

said, I doubt about this too. This is what our community appreciates. Things aren't always easy.⁵¹

Arthur's self-disclosure is similar to the way Carol creates forms of solidarity between pastor and hearers. He knows what being a father is like, he too has faith questions he cannot answer, and he also "fails" in his spiritual life. What characterizes Arthur's shaping of the homiletical relationship is that it not only reveals solidarity in everyday life, but also in a shared *life of faith*, such as practicing prayer and quiet time.

Performing Self-Disclosure in Preaching

The Pentecost sermons reveal moments of self-disclosure. The pastors say "I" and they bring in a range of personal experiences with different goals and outcomes. They also speak about themselves *in the interviews*. They talk about sermon preparation, the mood they are in, the pitfalls they face in the pulpit, aspects of congregational life, how they view their hearers, why they preach the way they do, and aspects of personal biography. In their reflections on preaching, they add another dimension to self-disclosure in preaching: self-disclosure takes place in the actual performance; preachers perform self-disclosure. This section explains how *performing self-disclosure* in preaching emerges from the conversations with the preachers. Data from the interviews shed light on the more opaque, *implicit* "I" in the sermons.

Becoming Personal: Toning Down Proclamation and Accelerating into an Experiential Style

During the interview, pastor Carol is asked about the differences between the manuscript and the transcript of her Pentecost sermon. In fact, Carol discovers these differences for the first time during the interview. In the manuscript, she speaks about Pentecost in a "declarative" way:

This is the meaning of Pentecost today [...] it is a movement from God, who brings us in motion once again. Pentecost is a gift from God, his Spirit is handed out to us today.⁵²

Spoken from the pulpit, the same passage, has a less declarative tone:

Maybe this touches the meaning of Pentecost today [...] I think it is a movement coming from God, who moves us. [...] Perhaps we can experience Pentecost as a gift from God.⁵³

This is not only the case here; Carol uses a hesitant tone of voice on nine other occasions in her sermon performance. She uses phrases like: "I think," "perhaps," "maybe," and "we could." They are "added" by Carol to the manuscript, as if she is gearing down her proclamation during sermon performance. There is a difference in communication style between manuscript and transcript. The manuscript has a "herald" tone of voice, while the transcript reveals a "pastoral" voice.⁵⁴ Where does this come from?

⁵¹ Interview with hearer Justin.

⁵² Manuscript sermon A.

⁵³ Transcript sermon A.

⁵⁴ Compare the first two images of the preacher, discussed by Long: the herald image emphasizes the connection between preaching and the direct address of God, while the pastor image focuses on the impact of the sermon on the hearer. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 19–39.

I don't do this on purpose. It just happens, because when I stand in the pulpit, with the people in front of me, I am still working on the sermon. [...] I think about what I say and proclaim it one more time. That leads me to saying "I" so often.⁵⁵

With the hearers sitting in front of her, and while "thinking through" what she is proclaiming, Carol tends toward a more "pastoral" communication. She downplays her "herald" voice by adding "phrases of probability." The presence of the hearers has an impact on the performance of her message. Her communication style is adapted in order to connect to the hearers and make the sermon's message more accessible to them. While her "declarative" heart beats during sermon preparation, the moment she stands in the pulpit she feels, unconsciously, as though she has to hand out her message in a pastoral way, as a "proposal" to be considered, rather than a proclamation they must "take or leave."

The hearers of pastor Jack are critical of his interpretation of the Pentecost story. They feel that the "wonder of the Gospel" disappears due to his alleged rationalistic reading of the Bible text. However, there is one moment when listener Winston says he was positively moved by what the preacher said:

I was touched by the way he spoke about the Song of Songs, I really appreciated that part of the sermon.⁵⁶

This is a rare moment, because in the rest of the interview Winston repeats that, although he appreciates Jack as a person, he does not agree with the preacher's theological views. However, in this instance he is "touched" by the preacher's words about the Song of Songs. In the interview, pastor Jack is asked why he refers to the Song of Songs:

The Song of Songs is special to me. When my wife and I got married, the minister read from the Song of Songs during the wedding service. We asked him to do this. [...] The Song of Songs really spoke to us that day.⁵⁷

At other times Jack presents himself as a teacher, who instructs the congregation about how to understand Pentecost. However, when he refers to the Song of Songs at the end of the sermon a *new performance* emerges. "The beauty of love" receives center stage:

There is only one book in the Bible where we read this in full, and that is the Song of Songs, that beautiful song about love between two people [...] that feeling and longing, intimacy and passion. That's the feeling of Pentecost.⁵⁸

The biographical elements in the interview clarify the sudden "pathos" setting of Jack's sermon performance: his rationalism is toned down and accelerates into a certain mystical-experiential style. The Song of Songs is bound to Jack's marriage, and it brings back memories. He speaks about this in lyrical terms. Without the knowledge from the interview, this background does not come to light. The interview with pastor Jack reveals that there is an opaque, *implicit* self-

⁵⁵ Interview with pastor Carol.

⁵⁶ Interview with hearers of pastor Jack.

⁵⁷ Interview with pastor Jack.

⁵⁸ Sermon B.

disclosure at work during the performance, and this results in hearer Winston—and probably other hearers, too—being *moved by this passage*. This is true even if they do not agree with other parts of the sermon and even if they do not know the relevant biographical background of the preacher. The hidden biographical element inspires Jack to perform in a different mode and this makes it possible for him to build bridges to “critical” hearers.

Performing the Self: the Biographical and the Constructed Self

In Arthur’s interview he speaks about his background with the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, an experiential-orthodox church in the Netherlands. This is the church he grew up in and it has both a very different spiritual climate and even holds to different beliefs than the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, where he now serves as a pastor. Arthur says he is disappointed by the congregations in the area, including his own congregation. Many members of his community believe in God, but only in a practical way. The experience of faith in God, the longing for a personal relationship with God, is neglected:

Many people I meet just want to live a good life. Experiencing faith in an inner kind of way they find difficult. But it is important. I miss it. That’s why I finish with a personal appeal and ask, well congregation, how is your spiritual life?⁵⁹

What Arthur says in the interview is confirmed by the final part of his sermon:

I hope you experience something of the work of the Spirit in your life. If you do not feel this way, pray for it. The Spirit wants to give you this security in your heart. I hope you recognize this, that you feel it, that you notice it.⁶⁰

Arthur’s emotional “appeal to the listeners” in his performance comes from his spiritual roots. In his youth, nearly all sermons ended this way, and Arthur continues this practice in his own church. Here too, an *implicit* self-disclosure comes to light. Arthur’s biography, as referred to in the interview, clarifies why he ends his sermons the way he does.

In the interview with pastor Harry, he is asked why he begins his sermon by sharing about his struggles with the Bible text:

I have to serve the communication process in innovative ways. I am staging my own play. That’s why I make a caricature of myself. I exaggerate. This is not who I really am. I’m a clown. I take this freedom and use it, I behave a bit crazy, to connect with the people.⁶¹

Harry chooses a form of *self-caricature* in his performance. He does this “to serve the communication process.” His aim is to reach the hearers in the present day, and this is not easy. Therefore, he does not only present himself as a personal “guide” who leads hearers to an experience of the Bible. Rather, Harry is convinced that he has to take a further step and construct a caricature. He thus “exaggerates” his performance in order to reach his hearers. “Being himself” and “showing vulnerability” is not enough. The preacher climbs the stage to

⁵⁹ Interview with pastor Arthur.

⁶⁰ Sermon D.

⁶¹ Interview with pastor Harry.

perform in the role of a “clown,” a “caricature figure” who inflates the struggles and joys he presents in his sermon.

The interview sheds light on why Harry starts off his sermon the way he does. His struggles with the Bible text are “exaggerated” on purpose. Harry is convinced a “caricature communication style” is needed in contemporary culture. However, as hearer Lucy implies in her interview, such exaggeration also puts people off. She is not moved by “clown-like” performances. Authentic, down to earth performances speak to Lucy—and other hearers with her—in more helpful ways. Here some critical feedback emerges regarding constructing the self in the actual performance. The thoughts preachers have about themselves are always revealed explicitly, but also in more opaque, implicit ways, in sermon performance. The interviews with the hearers of the Pentecost sermons demonstrate that feedback on this performance could help preachers think through and adapt pulpit practices in order to connect with their congregations in more meaningful ways.

Discussion

In empirical homiletics, the topic of self-disclosure has generally appeared as a by-product. Studies on sermon reception describe self-disclosure in relation to connecting with the listener.⁶² In sermon analysis, self-disclosure appears as a source of sermon material.⁶³ However, in this article we focus on self-disclosure in the act of homiletical communication. Since the “self of the preacher” in homiletical communication is a complex phenomenon, this empirical study helps to unravel a few methodical complexities. In this study we combined multiple sources: focus groups with hearers, interviews with preachers, and the comparison of the manuscript of the sermon with the sermon’s transcript. During the project, particularly through conversations with hearers and the study of the actual transcript via audio files, we discovered that nonverbal communication between preacher and listener is an important source of self-disclosure. Wilfried Engemann warns that “[r]educing the communication of the gospel to the spoken parts... creates an artificial tension between message and ritual and is uncalled for as it disregards the “bigger picture” and the processual character of the service as a whole.”⁶⁴ Research into nonverbal communication requires different methods of data collection and analysis. It thus strengthens the importance of empirical research in homiletics and the collection of multiple types of data. According to Engemann, preachers “...*always* speak as subjects, as individuals with particular personality structures.”⁶⁵ Our study aptly confirms this statement because it demonstrates that each preacher has a personal style of communication, reflects on it in relation to his or her (religious) biography and spirituality, and, in evaluating the sermon, listeners accept and take into account the preacher’s personality. We also found that nonverbal communication has roles that can only be studied through verbalizing the preaching experience, such as by interviews.

Engemann considers the personal in preaching from a normative point of view: a personal sermon requires self-perception as a basis for congruence, individuality as a basis for originality, and reference to experience as a basis of authenticity. Our research partly confirms and partly challenges these normative aspects. In the performance of self-disclosure, the listeners react to the exaggerated self of the preacher. Both congruence and authenticity are at stake when

⁶² Mulligan, Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive*, 25–33; Pleizier, *Religious Involvement*, 242–246.

⁶³ Verweij, *Positioning Jesus’ Suffering*, 175–193.

⁶⁴ Engemann, *Homiletics*, 321.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

the preacher constructs a self-caricature. However, the caricature also touches on the public role that the preacher performs in the act of preaching. It points to the phenomenon that, in a public performance, certain personality traits become “bigger” or “smaller.” Furthermore, self-disclosure in preaching shapes the “homiletic relationship” between preacher and congregation. The congregation gets to know the preacher through preaching, and this generates a particular “personal” knowledge. The “homiletic relationship” is necessarily a relationship between one person (the preacher) and a group (the congregation). Preachers are aware of this special homiletic relationship, particularly when it comes to the presence of family (e.g., spouse and/or children) in the worship service. This is also the case for members of the congregation who meet the preacher for pastoral counselling. Therefore, the homiletic relationship remains a public relationship.

Sermon reception is often studied from an interpretative or constructivist perspective: listeners craft meaning or they construct interpretations. However, one of the findings in our study challenges this to some extent. In the space of the sermon, meanings are negotiated, rather than just constructed. Listeners engage with the meanings that the preacher puts forward in a creative and sometimes even challenging manner. In negotiating the homiletical space, preachers and listeners exchange religious values, understandings, and references. The study of self-disclosure highlights a significant pattern in homiletical communication. Around the person of the preacher, religious insights are shaped, maintained, discussed, and perhaps even transformed. Empirical research thus helps to strengthen the broader interpretative and constructionist frameworks. It provides a level of detail to the homiletic communication that is lost if scholarly reflection does not move beyond larger theoretical (or philosophical) frameworks.

Conclusions

Through self-disclosure, listeners and preachers negotiate the homiletical space. When communicated in the sermon, personal stories and the opinions of the preacher provide a space for the listener to reflect on everyday life experiences, and challenge the space that is actually available for listeners. Self-disclosure is the center in which space is negotiated: if the preacher takes too much space, the listener does not experience invitation but instead adopts an attitude of defense.

Further, self-disclosure shapes the relationship between preacher and congregation in the act of preaching. We found two different preaching modes: a mode of guidance and a mode of solidarity. In a guiding (or teaching) mode, the preacher uses self-disclosure to show the hearers a way forward in life, a way the preacher has already taken. In such cases, the pastor is revealed as a theological expert. In the mode of solidarity, the preacher attempts to shape life experiences into the sermon in such a way that the listener is not put in the position of learner, but rather feels understood by the preacher. In this mode, the pastor communicates as a fellow believer.

Finally, self-disclosure takes place in the act of performance. Engagement with the audience can be explained by self-disclosure. For instance, pastor Carol wrote a rather declarative sermon manuscript, but her sermon transcript was actually much more personal and invitational. In the act of performance, she adapted her “self” to the congregation.

The study of self-disclosure thus helps to more clearly reveal the complex role of the preacher in the productive and receptive processes of the preaching event.