

International Developments in Homiletics

Is There Still a Place for the Sermon?

Some Observations in German-speaking Homiletical Books and Discussions

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In January 2022, Swiss Protestant pastor *Kathrin Bolt* took a chain-saw, publicly sawed apart her pulpit, and transformed it into a table to replace the sermon with conversations and meals. In February, the congregation in Bolt's parish was invited to four Sunday services 'without a sermon.'

To make things clear: there is surely no trend in German-speaking countries to remove pulpits from church buildings. But this action can be seen as a paradigmatic sign for ongoing discussions and as an expression of uncertainty about whether we still 'need' sermons (in their traditional expository form), whether the effort is still worth it, whether preaching makes an impact, or is nothing other than an empty ritual. During the Corona pandemic, many pastors and lay preachers sought new digital forms which were usually shorter and much more 'personal' in nature. Nonetheless, in empirical studies when people were asked what they expect most in Protestant services, the sermon is at the top of the list. There are very many pastors for whom the preparation of a sermon is a central part of their own pastoral spirituality as well. And when in 2018 a revised lectionary was introduced in German Protestant Churches – in effect doubling the number of texts from the Hebrew Bible – many pastors and congregations were enthusiastic. Perhaps we can be sure of only one thing: in German-speaking contexts (as perhaps for other parts of the world), preaching is in a time of transition. The Protestant and Catholic Churches are rapidly losing members (in 2022, for the first time in history, Christians were a minority in Germany) and influence. Churches had to find their voices and their practices in new ways during the pandemic and now in times of war in Europe.

What is *homiletics* currently addressing in this situation? I share four observations:

(1) It may not be surprising that in times of transformation, homiletics asks *fundamental questions*: What is preaching all about? Why should we continue to preach? *Manuel Stetter*, professor of Practical Theology in Rostock, described "Preaching as a Practice of Change" in his dissertation (published in 2018).¹ Stetter reflects on the basic tension between the intentionality of the preacher and the autonomy of the listeners; his work is a profound rereading of recent homiletical developments, and a reflection on aesthetic approaches and their insights in creative and innovative moments in preaching. But he also posits a reappraisal of argumentative and persuasive ways of preaching. One year later, *Martin Nicol*, retired Practical Theologian in Erlangen whose "Dramaturgical Homiletics" gained great influence in homiletical education and was greatly influenced by his study of homiletics in North America, published his book "Mehr Gott wagen."² Again and again Nicol asks the central homiletical question, How is it possible to 'dare more God' in our preaching (this is a rough English translation of the German title) by reflecting on the structure and language of sermons, the role of preachers, and by being

¹ Manuel Stetter, *Die Predigt als Praxis der Veränderung. Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Homiletik*, APTLH 92, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018.

² Martin Nicol, *Mehr Gott wagen. Predigten und Reden zur Dramaturgischen Homiletik*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2019.

constantly in dialogue with artists, writers, poets, etc.? Ferenc Herzig, a Practical theologian in Leipzig, is inspired by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his homiletical dissertation, “Unsinn zur Unzeit.”³ Herzig’s thesis may be typical for a time of uncertainty, ambiguity, and transition as he asserts that we may never know what preaching ‘is’ but we keep on preaching, expecting the ‘Ereignis’ (event) to happen.

(2) Next to these fundamental reflections, there is a certain trend among homileticians to deal with the *Bible, exegesis, and hermeneutics*. This may be connected with the revision of the lectionary and intensive discussions about biblical hermeneutics (especially the relationship between the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Testaments), the relevance of the Bible, and the future of expository sermons. But it also shows that during confusing times, homileticians go back to the cradle of Protestant homiletics: namely, the proclamation of the Bible. In 2019 Christine Wenona Hoffmann, Professor of Practical Theology in Frankfurt, focused on the relationship between homiletics and exegesis.⁴ While fewer and fewer preachers seem to be interested in the work of exegetes, it is also true that exegesis at German Universities is not always connected with questions of homiletics but much more with historic, archaeological, linguistic, etc., matters of research interest. Hoffmann’s work is a plea to rediscover the fruitful perspectives of an ongoing dialogue of the two ‘partners,’ exegesis and homiletics – which may help homiletics to leave some of its conventions behind and discover new and fresh insights in biblical texts. In 2021 Johannes Greifstein published his book “Vom Text zur Predigt” (‘From the text to the sermon’),⁵ making a plea for a new dimension of intradisciplinary theological work by connecting exegesis, dogmatics, and homiletics. It might be true to say that German homiletics is coming closer to the reality of North American homiletical work with a much more direct overlap between these three disciplines.

(3) As in all other fields of Practical Theology, also in homiletics a *mega-trend toward empirical research* can be discerned in German-speaking countries. Scholars work with qualitative empirical methods to understand the preachers’ views on the role of preaching today and their own biblical hermeneutics; there are many quantitative and qualitative empirical studies about digital forms of proclamation and the changing role and ‘habitus’ of pastors in these media contexts; there are text-based studies of formal homiletical trends; and studies of sermon listeners. In the years to come, we will know much more about these aspects of preaching and many more.

(4) One other trend is worth noting: there is a growing awareness of the sermon as just one part of the worship service and growing interest in an *integration of homiletics and liturgical studies* – e.g., the works of Ferenc Herzig and Johannes Greifstein show but also provide evidence of this in the book series “Evangelische und Katholische Studien zu Gottesdienst und Predigt” (‘Protestant and Catholic Studies on Worship and Preaching’).

I write these lines fourteen months after the beginning of the brutal attack of Russia against Ukraine. In many sermons, pastors are continuing to deal with the question of war and violence and want to find ways to express the disruptive message of God’s shalom in our time. I

³ Ferenc Herzig, *Unsinn zur Unzeit. Ein Dialog mit Gilles Deleuze über „Ereignis“ im homiletischen und liturgischen Horizont*, EKG 6, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Würzburg: Echter 2020.

⁴ Christine Wenona Hoffmann, *Homiletik und Exegese. Konzepte von Rechtfertigung in der evangelischen Predigtpraxis der Gegenwart*, APTh 75, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2019.

⁵ Johannes Greifstein, *Vom Text zur Predigt. Ein Beitrag zur Praxistheorie homiletischer Bibelauslegung*, Praktische Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart 34, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021.

think it may be fair to say that in future years, an overview of current trends in German-speaking homiletics (and liturgical studies) will show increased attention given to homiletical research related to this theme and interest in whether preaching makes a difference – even in times of war. Times of uncertainty and struggle are never easy but may also provide opportunities for reconsidering what preaching and the field of homiletics may yet become in the years ahead.