

“Love Bade Me Welcome”: An Ethic of Beauty for Preaching

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Abstract: *This article claims that preachers use words well (that is, ethically) when they use them beautifully, so that the sermon becomes compelling. This is done by preaching words that are fresh, in forms that suit the subject matter and delight listeners, in an effort to arouse and shape the affections of the congregation. Drawing on the work of poet-preacher George Herbert as an exemplar of beautiful Christian speech, this paper discusses the role of beauty in homiletical ethics and turns to Herbert for inspiration.*

“This imperative [arising from a new, postmodern landscape] reveals the need for theopoetic preaching, preaching that speaks of God in poetic ways. This is not preaching poems; it is poetic preaching that treasures language—with all of its frail images, symbols, and metaphors—to communicate God.”

—Paul Scott Wilson¹

Introduction

In his “farewell to poetry,” T. S. Eliot laments how “one has only learnt to get the better of words.”² The poet expresses a problem for those who, like preachers, deal in words: using words in ways that are unethical, unloving, and ugly. Words are the raw material of preachers, and craftspersons care for their raw materials. The chef cares for the produce, the musician for her reed, the carpenter for his boards. How ought preachers care for their materials? Desperate to conclude another sermon, are words merely *gotten the better of*? This essay claims that preaching may helpfully be characterized by beauty. Sermons are never truly ethical until they are beautiful and lovely and have like effects on those who hear them. Joseph Wooddell supports this claim, writing that “Christianity is true, for it corresponds to reality; but being true, it is also both (morally) good and (aesthetically) beautiful.”³

Discussions of ethical preaching tend not to explore this connection. Often, they revolve around the topics being preached, the environmental crisis, for example. Sometimes they focus on power dynamics on which preaching depends, such as whether hearers are being helped or hurt by what they hear. They may spotlight the *ethos* of the preacher and whether the character of the messenger matches the message. Or they may examine how the sermon moves listeners to greater morality, such as living in response to the teachings of Christ. But they seldom discuss the ways preachers care for words themselves, the aesthetic qualities of sermons, or the long-term (if intangible) affects of sermons on those who listen. These considerations equally belong in conversations of homiletical ethics.

¹ Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty, Goodness, and Truth in Every Sermon* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014), xiv.

² T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York, NY: Mariner, 1971), 30. Frank Kermode called this work Eliot’s “farewell to poetry” on an endorsement which appears on the back cover of the work.

³ Joseph D. Wooddell, *The Beauty of the Faith: Using Aesthetics for Christian Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 109.

If ethical preaching is characterized by beauty and loveliness (both in its quality of language and its effect), then few are better positioned to serve as guides than poets.⁴ This essay advances in dialogue with Christian poet George Herbert, highlighting him among many poets because Herbert was both a poet and a preacher. His writing demonstrates how “beauty and beauteous words should go together.”⁵

It is a great loss that none of Herbert’s sermons survive.⁶ If some corpus of sermons had survived, this essay may be the simpler. One could analyze the sermons, engage Herbert-the-preacher in more direct conversation, and translate the analysis for preaching today. Without such sermons the translation is more complicated but nevertheless worth attempting. Herbert’s poetry serves as homiletical inspiration, the sort others have attempted elsewhere. For example, Trey Clark has demonstrated how poetry readily becomes preaching in his reflections on poet Amanda Gorman.⁷ Likewise, Donyelle McCray describes “the shoreline of homiletics,” consisting of various art forms, where one may unexpectedly find preaching, where preachers may find inspiration.⁸ Thomas Troeger comes nearest to this essay’s interests in his 2016 Beecher Lectures in turning to George Herbert’s poetry for homiletical insights on prayer.⁹

Poet and Preacher

“Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?”¹⁰ Such is the prayer-question that begins Herbert’s poem “The Windows.”¹¹ The three-letter “how” is quite a large word, theologically speaking. After all, who dares speak for God but God? Humans are insufficient for such things. The Dean of the American Pulpit, Gardner C. Taylor, said as much when famously stating that “preaching is a presumptuous business.”¹² How can time-bound mortal man speak for eternal God? “How” runs in another direction, also. Say human beings are found qualified to preach: in which manner ought they do so? Which words ought they to use in conveying the eternal Word of God? Herbert’s lifework brought him to the question of “how.” It also brought him to an answer.

⁴ Paul Scott Wilson also suggests that preachers “might look for inspiration to poets like Maya Angelou, Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Billy Collins, James Weldon Johnson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Langston Hughes, Margaret Avison, and more.” Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 21.

⁵ George Herbert, “The Forerunners,” *The Complete English Works*, in Everyman’s Library, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 173.

⁶ In fact, his poems scarcely survived. When Herbert was on his deathbed with consumption at age 39, he handed his poems to a friend, Nicholas Ferrar, who was to decide if they should be published. John Drury, *Music at Midnight: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 4.

⁷ E. Trey Clark, “Spirit, Spoken Word, and the Search for Common Ground: Amanda Gorman as Contemplative Preacher,” *Homiletic* 49, no. 2 (2024), 28–41.

⁸ Donyelle C. McCray, *Is It a Sermon? Art, Activism and Genre Fluidity in African American Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2024), 1.

⁹ Troeger’s lectures were subsequently published as: *The End of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2018). Troeger writes, “I am using Herbert’s poetry to fuel my own work of imaginative homiletical theology” (17). Troeger’s work centers on one particular line in the first poem of Herbert’s *The Temple* (“praying’s the end of preaching”) in order to reflect on the relation between preaching and prayer. The work ties together Herbert’s poetry and modern homiletical theory and so bears resemblance to the present essay. Yet, Troeger’s primary focus is on prayer, not beauty. Therefore, that work will be engaged below, but it is not central to this essay.

¹⁰ George Herbert, “The Windows” in *The Complete English Works*, op.cit., 64–65.

¹¹ Herbert, “The Windows,” 64–65.

¹² Gardner C. Taylor, *How Shall they Preach?* (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist, 1977), 24.

George Herbert was born in 1593 in Montgomery on the border of England and Wales.¹³ Herbert's family had held power for generations, and that privilege refracted itself into their intellectual lives. George's brother, Edward, for instance, was something of a Renaissance Man, and he attended Oxford as an undergraduate.¹⁴ This occasioned the move by George and his mother to that region for support. It was a propitious move, too, for during that time, George's mother, Magdalen, became close friends with John Donne, the poet-preacher of the day, *par excellence*.¹⁵ Herbert was home-schooled until moving to London where he attended the Westminster school (annexed to the Abbey).¹⁶ Here, he was educated by the great linguist of his day, another poet-preacher, Lancelot Andrewes, who is said to have known fifteen languages and is remembered as a chief contributor to King James's Bible.¹⁷ Westminster advanced Herbert in the direction of a sort of *philology*—"word love"—instilling in the lad a love for language and equipping him with more adroit skills in writing and oratory. Herbert's education included intense language study: he mastered Latin, and later became acquainted with Italian, Spanish, and French.¹⁸ When it came time for the next step, Herbert moved to university at Cambridge where he received instruction in rhetoric and dialectic.¹⁹ He studied Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. He eventually earned the prestigious post of University Orator, a role charged with delivering the most important speeches for the university, including eulogies, elegies, and speeches honoring visiting domestic and foreign dignitaries.²⁰ Herbert was growing into his fullness as a skilled intellectual and becoming a "poet worthy that name."²¹

Herbert's formation did not rest solely on his education in linguistics and rhetoric, but also on Scripture and piety. He was a Christian, like most of the world around him, and so his teachers—his mother, Donne, Andrewes, and others—were also Christians. Some of these were preachers, too, which modeled for Herbert a serious and studied homiletic. At Westminster, Herbert's education involved daily engagement with Scripture and he was taught by Andrewes who was, among other things, one of the leading scholars in the most preeminent English translation of the Bible. "Doctrine and life" were combining and mingling, indeed,²² so that Herbert was beginning to embody Quintilian's famous quip concerning the *telos* of rhetoric: *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the good man speaking well.²³

The prominence of his worldly success would not be enough for Herbert, and in short time he renounced his post for the pulpit. His final performance as Cambridge's Orator was in July 1626.²⁴ The following year, his mother died and left him enough wealth to establish

¹³ Herbert has been biographed by several scholars. Most notable is Drury's work (*Music at Midnight: The life and Poetry of George Herbert*.) which integrates his poems into his life. It is the source of most of the biographical information in this article.

¹⁴ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 30.

¹⁵ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 38.

¹⁶ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 54.

¹⁷ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 60.

¹⁸ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 115.

¹⁹ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 89.

²⁰ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 94.

²¹ "After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,) After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,/ After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,/ Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,/ The true Son of God shall come singing his songs." Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," <https://poets.org/poem/passage-india>, accessed 28 February 2025.

²² From Herbert's poem, "The Windows."

²³ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 12.1; Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 101.

²⁴ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 181.

independence.²⁵ He was free, for once, to do and to be what he *should*, not what he *must*.²⁶ It was not immediately clear what to do. He puzzled out his dilemma through verse, visible in poems such as “The Priesthood.” In the end, he decided to become a deacon in the church and then a priest.²⁷ He served first at Leighton Bromswold in Huntingdonshire.²⁸ Finally, he became the rector of Fugglestone and Bemerton.²⁹ He served only three years before his death at age 39 of consumption.

Before Herbert became a preacher, he was trained in rhetoric and served in one of the most prestigious posts in rhetoric in the world. Later, he preached, and he wrote briefly about preaching in *The Country Parson* and also in some of his poems. Whether in rhetoric, writing, or poetry, Herbert demonstrates a love for words. One can only imagine that he wrote sermons as he wrote poetry, to wit, *beautifully*.

Preaching without Beauty

Eliot’s expression “learnt to get the better of words” says something true about preaching. The exigencies of the office push preachers to “get the better of” their words, not to mention their time and maybe also their parishioners. One homiletician observes that Sundays “come upon [preachers] with an unyielding regularity, as if Sundays come every three days instead of seven,”³⁰ and, for most preachers, the sermon is only one part of the job. There are emails to draft, outings to organize, house calls to make, and meetings to attend. Such demands crowd out aesthetic reflection and make beauty seem superficial to the work of preaching. Paul Scott Wilson anticipates such reactions, writing that, for preachers, “poetry might seem hopelessly romantic,” and “beauty may seem like a frill.”³¹ Who cares if the sermon is beautiful, so long as it is done? Perhaps many have come to see words as so much lumber lying around, to borrow an image from H. Grady Davis. Each week in sermon prep, preachers knock and hammer together whatever words they find (grateful for any and all they find) as one might take scrap lumber to pound together a doghouse.³² The sermon, after all, consists of only so many words, and the quicker the preacher bangs, splices, and vices so many together—Bible verses, anecdotes, illustrations, set pieces—the sooner the preacher can be off doing something else.

The demands of the pastorate are just one reason preachers are driven to *use* words. There are other reasons that run more deeply than full schedules. Western society seldom has time and space for consideration of anything that does not yield product or profit. Time is money, cash is king. One sees this with readers’ engagement with poetry. Billy Collins, former U.S. poet laureate, chides readers who look only for a poem’s payout: readers who want to “tie the poem to a chair with rope/ and torture a confession out of it.”³³ The way many moderns approach poems reveals something about the way they approach sermons (not to mention the planet and its resources, or any activity in which they are engaged). There is an appetite for consumption, a lust

²⁵ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 182, 185–86.

²⁶ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 186.

²⁷ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 193.

²⁸ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 166.

²⁹ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 203.

³⁰ Jared E. Alcántara, *Learning from a Legend: What Gardner C. Taylor Can Teach Us about Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 13.

³¹ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 8.

³² H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1958), 82.

³³ Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46712/introduction-to-poetry>, accessed 28 February 2025.

for production, a desire *to get to the point*. Charles Taylor uses the phrase a “rage for order” that led the West to destroy the old world of enchantment and to build a new one toward exclusive humanism.³⁴ In a society where there is so much *use, misuse, abuse* of people and materials, is it any wonder that even words suffer violence?

Today, preachers are infatuated with the possibilities that websites reliant on Artificial Intelligence can write sermons for them. Again, preaching shows itself beholden to the industrial and technological.³⁵ But, what about beauty? What about art? Art, beauty, the poetic—these cannot be manufactured by machines, they are the products of humans. Merlin’s advice to the Wart in *The Once and Future King* holds relevance: “He said you could not use magic in Great Arts, just as it would be unfair to make a great statue by magic. You have to cut it out with a chisel, you see.”³⁶ The wizard’s advice is homiletical counsel. Faithful sermons are not produced by websites or algorithms, but by embodied humans, through hard work of mind and heart. Preaching is never simply “truth” but “truth through personality.”³⁷

The Persuasion of Beauty

Throughout Christian history, beauty (like truth and goodness) has been understood as transcendental: not merely a characteristic of God but a name.³⁸ An encounter with beauty, therefore, may be considered an encounter with God. Hans Urs von Balthasar captures the dynamic between *form* and *depths*:

The form as it appears to us is beautiful only because the delight it arouses in us is founded upon the fact that, in it, the truth and goodness of the depths of reality itself are manifested and bestowed, and this manifestation and bestowal reveal themselves to us as being something infinitely and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating. The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, *and* it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths.³⁹

Balthasar identifies how form *and* depths are bound.⁴⁰ In encountering something beautiful, one comes into contact with the source of (that is, the reality of) beauty which transcends the discrete

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard, 2007), 63.

³⁵ Referencing a quotation Leon Wieseltier, Thomas Troeger calls this the “idolatry of data.” Troeger, *The End of Preaching*, 20. Paul Scott Wilson describes a similar modern infatuation with “math” versus poetry. Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 3ff.

³⁶ T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York, NY: Ace, 1996), 32.

³⁷ Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1898), 8.

³⁸ As is the case with love: God does not merely possess love, but is love. This view of beauty as ultimate traces back to Plato and Plotinus and makes its way into Christian thought, especially in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Although there is some debate on whether Thomas understood beauty as transcendental, “he wrote as though beauty too is such a transcendental.” Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 3.

³⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form: Volume 1 of The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio & John Riches (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2009), 115–16.

⁴⁰ Paul Scott Wilson describes “two levels of beauty,” which relate (albeit imperfectly) to Balthasar’s concepts of form and depths. The deeper level has to do with God. Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 30–31.

object. Yet one cannot contact that source apart from its form. One is not able to “leave the (horizontal) form behind us in order to plunge (vertically) into the naked depths.”⁴¹

These dynamics are at play in preaching. After all, preaching’s *form* (namely, the sermon) is only a composite of materials like words and sentences, sound and volume, ideas and affect. Preaching aims beyond these immanent “supplies” in hopes of encountering God. In short, the aesthetic qualities of preaching attempt what the words attempt: to foster a meeting of God and God’s people. The poet captures the hope of preachers: “to be a window, through thy grace.”⁴² Will Willimon suggests that the only reason to bother the church with the sermon is *theological*.⁴³ A sermon is never merely information or advice. If God does not “show up,” it is not a sermon.

A consideration of beauty is instructive for ethical preaching, especially in consideration of those who listen to sermons. Like preaching, beauty works by avoiding the extremes of either abandoning the other or coercing them. Preachers neither abandon their congregations by remaining aloof and silent nor harm them through force and aggression. Charles Campbell calls out any form of violence in preaching:

Even while resisting direct, interpersonal, physical violence, preaching often participates in acts and systems of domination that involve harmful forms of psychological, spiritual, even physical coercion that must be considered violent. . . . Preachers have often used language in ways that support and sustain the domination system. . . . Preachers have frequently used the pulpit as a way of dominating their congregations. . . . The preacher places himself or herself *above* the congregation and employs manipulation or threats in order to coerce people toward a certain position.⁴⁴

Persuasion, properly understood, “represents an ethically and morally correct form of influencing, unlike coercion, propaganda, or manipulation,” it is “a liberal process” that maintains the individual’s free decision.⁴⁵ Preaching cannot be ethical if it “gets the better of” hearers. Richard Lischer writes that the preacher must strive “to make the language of the sermon true to its subject by deploying words in such a way that they are consistent with the ministry of reconciliation.”⁴⁶ Making language true to a gospel of peace involves more than what is said.

Beauty respects the freedom of the individual, even while surprising and interrupting them. Beauty lovingly arrests attention, it awakens the imagination, and floods the bodily senses. Beauty draws the beholder unto itself by causing them to yearn for it. Augustine preached about

⁴¹ Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 116. C. S. Lewis captures this desire and frustration: “We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001), 42.

⁴² Herbert, *Complete English Works*, 64–65.

⁴³ William Willimon, “Preachers Dare: Speaking for God, Beecher Lecture I,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaV8Ix-Yuzw>, accessed 11 March 2025.

⁴⁴ Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 83–84.

⁴⁵ Jana Pelclová and Wei-lun Lu, “Persuasion Across Times, Domains and Modalities: Theoretical Considerations and Emerging Themes,” in *Persuasion in Public Discourse: Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture* 79, eds. Jana Pelclová & Wei-lun Lu (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2018), 2.

⁴⁶ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 158.

the “energy” of the lovely: “Every kind of love has its own energy, and in the soul of a lover love cannot be idle; it must lead somewhere.”⁴⁷ Beauty fosters this energy that draws the other. For this, Herbert prayed: “Immortal Heat, O let thy greater flame/ Attract the lesser to it.”⁴⁸

Such yearning yields an acknowledgement of the space between oneself and the beautiful. So, beauty works from a safe distance, but strives to overcome that distance by appeal. David Bentley Hart suggests that “distance” is the gift of the beautiful. “At the level of ordinary experience, the distance within the beautiful is found in the space between oneself and the object held in one’s regard.”⁴⁹ These dynamics of distance and overcoming distance occur in everyday life, in small ways and great: viewing a sunset, encountering a snatch of poetry, observing a tender moment between lovers. Homiletician Jana Childers describes the “space” of preaching that is not too much to create disinterest, and not too little to violate personal space.⁵⁰ Preaching operates with appropriate boundaries—not only physical space, but also the spiritual space that allows the wills of human agents to decide freely. “Just as it is impossible to see something that is held up too closely to our eyes, so it is impossible for us to believe something pounded too forcefully into our minds and hearts.”⁵¹ The individual is always free to choose.

Preaching Poetry

Herbert once claimed that “Beauty and beauteous words should go together.”⁵² That marriage, of beautiful things spoken of beautifully, is seen in few places more clearly than the *magnum opus* of Herbert’s poetry, “Love (III),”⁵³ what Simone Weil called “the most beautiful poem in the world.”⁵⁴

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack’d any thing.
 A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:
 Love said, you shall be he.
 I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

⁴⁷ Augustine, “Exposition of Psalm 121,” in *Essential Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2015), 94.

⁴⁸ George Herbert, “Love (II),” in *The Complete English Works*, in Everman’s Library, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 52. One is reminded of Donne’s prayer-poem: “Batter my heart, three-person’d God.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44106/holy-sonnets-batter-my-heart-three-persond-god>, accessed 12 March 2025.

⁴⁹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 18–19.

⁵⁰ Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 46.

⁵¹ Childers, *Performing the Word*, 47.

⁵² “True beauty dwells on high: ours is a flame/ But borrow’d thence to light us thither./ Beauty and beauteous words should go together.” George Herbert, “The Forerunners,” *The Complete English Works*, in Everman’s Library, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 173.

⁵³ Herbert saw “Love (III)” as the “crown” of his work. Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 141.

⁵⁴ Simone Petrement, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York, NY: Mowbrays, 1976), 330.

Who made the eyes but I?
 Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
 And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
 You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.⁵⁵

This poem's "truth and beauty speak directly to readers anywhere and at any time at the deepest psychological level."⁵⁶ The subject matter is lovely, it is Love itself, God personified by the greatest Christian virtue in accord with John's words, "God is love" (1 John 4:8).⁵⁷ All that Love does for the unworthy guest is lovely: *welcoming, drawing near, questioning, responding, promising, assuring, reassuring, leading, accepting, reminding, forgiving, feeding*.

The poem *moves*, and not just from the interpersonal action between two subjects: *approaching, drawing back*, "quick-eyed" *reacting, coming near, taking hands*, ultimately, *bringing to table*. The poem also moves through its meter, the combination of short and long syllables. Drury draws this out:

In the first scene-setting line of "Love (III)" the short syllables in "Love bade me welcome," springing from a stress on the first syllable, give it a sprightly alacrity. Then the three stressed syllables at the end of the line, "soul drew back," make a heavy drag. This sets the tune for the dialogue in the rest of the poem between Love, coaxing the soul in light-footed metres, and the soul responding with ponderous reluctance.⁵⁸

Herbert is preforming through form and sound what he is saying. He is not content to tell a gnostic story, with nude rationalism stripped of its senses, as though ideas had souls and not bodies. Rather, through and with the words themselves, their sounds and syllables, their combinations in syntax, Herbert makes this poem come alive. Herbert preaches through his poetry, demonstrating how beauty suffuses speech. The poem is about love and it is lovely. This work and skill are illustrative for preachers. Herbert matches content and form, to strike both head and heart at once; "form which strikes directly and silently below all rational defenses."⁵⁹

A love of beauty was shared by Augustine who, like Herbert, benefited from serious rhetorical training. Augustine wrote what is often called "the first homiletics textbook ever written."⁶⁰ *Beauty*, per se, does not feature prominently in *De Doctrina Christiana*, but love, delight, and pleasure certainly do. Augustine seizes upon the Ciceronian conception of *speech that delights*. Truth is naturally delightful,⁶¹ and if all rhetoric and eloquence is aimed at truth, then the sermon inherently ought to delight. Makoto Fujimura states that "a lack of attention to beauty in presenting a truth hampers its appeal and adoption," and that a disinterest in beauty

⁵⁵ Herbert, *The Complete English Works*, 184.

⁵⁶ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 1.

⁵⁷ This and all other Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (fully revised and updated by the SBL, 2023).

⁵⁸ Drury, *Music at Midnight*, 2.

⁵⁹ Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 5–6.

⁶⁰ O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 106.

⁶¹ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996), 4.28.

leads to disinterest in truth and goodness also.⁶² Carol Harrison remarks about Augustine's homiletic that "to make preaching aesthetically pleasing, is . . . to do full justice to [its] subject matter and to make it accessible."⁶³ "To do full justice to" is in Herbert's words, that "beauty and beauteous words should go together."⁶⁴

Paul Scott Wilson suggests that unified sermons are beautiful. "A theme sentence is the single most important source of unity and hence beauty in a sermon," he writes.⁶⁵ This involves the preacher being simple and clear, elements that contribute to a sermon's beauty.⁶⁶ The sentence crafted is interesting, memorable, embodied, and invitational.⁶⁷ Simple and clear sermons are elegant sermons.⁶⁸

Wilson clarifies what it means to see the preacher as a poet. It is at least being sensitive to language and its limitations, but it is also more than that.⁶⁹ The preacher-as-poet is not one "composing sermons in verse with rhyme scheme and meter."⁷⁰ Wilson writes,

Poetry is a way of pointing to God in the world, of praising God's beauty and love, and finding both mystery and ongoing purpose and meaning, often in the midst of suffering. Poetry here refers to the capacity of the sermon to "put a frame around the mystery," as Frederick Buechner once described preaching, or to awaken a sense of wonder, as Thomas Troeger says. Poetry refers to the sermon's ability to take the fragmented nature of daily life and offer in and through it glimpses of a coherent and meaningful whole and, even more, the hand of a loving God.⁷¹

For Wilson, being a poet in the pulpit is first "a way of seeing."⁷² This is why the concept of unity relates so closely with beauty. For Wilson, the poet is able to hold together seemingly incompatible data in a way the logician cannot. The preacher is able to see (and then to describe in language) how "all things work together for good for those who love God" (Rom 8:28).

Poets see and then find compelling language to profess what they see. One is reminded of the preaching of John Henry Newman. Newman has been described as a "poet-preacher" (like others, including Kingsley and Robertson in the Victorian Age) "whose sermons were in themselves 'poetic,' in their modes of address, use of language, or actual citation of poetry"; a poet-preacher "less because [he] wrote in metrical verse than because [he] possessed the power . . . of creating sympathy and of using language vividly to convey emotion to an audience."⁷³ In one sermon, for example, Newman describes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as pervading the

⁶² Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for our Common Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 49.

⁶³ Carol Harrison, "The Rhetoric of Scripture and Preaching: Classical Decadence or Christian Aesthetic?" in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 224.

⁶⁴ Herbert, "The Forerunners," 173.

⁶⁵ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 33.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 33.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 34–35.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 33.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 6.

⁷⁰ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 7.

⁷¹ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 7.

⁷² Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 10.

⁷³ Kirstie Blair, "The Poet-Preachers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2012), 569.

Christian “as light pervades a building, or as a sweet perfume the folds of some honorable robe.”⁷⁴ Like Herbert, Newman relies on prosaic imagery for the suffusion of God and beauty. For Herbert, it is home, table, and meal; for Newman it is light and building, perfume and robe. The ordinary hosts the presence of God; love tabernacles in the mundane.⁷⁵

One is also reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr., who once said that “in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher.”⁷⁶ He was a preacher whose “genius was poetic in nature.”⁷⁷ An African and oral tradition influenced the Reverend. “Like a poet, King took pleasure in the purely labial quality of language. He did not look *through* words or *behind* them for deeper meanings. He enjoyed their surfaces and glorified in pronouncing them.”⁷⁸ Lischer notes his use of rhyming and repetition, and excerpts a portion of King’s sermon from John 12:

“And Sir,” they said, “the radiant lights of philosophy, of poetry, or art, and of all earthly wisdom, hanging resplendent along our pathway are not sufficient to illuminate the way of life. Sir, we would see Jesus, the light of the world. We know about Plato, but we want to see Jesus. We know about Aristotle, but we want to see Jesus. We know about Homer, but we want to see Jesus.”⁷⁹

Even while dismissing the poets, King becomes one. His words sing off the page.

Beauty is a necessary part of preaching because preaching is ultimately about God, and God is beautiful. “One thing I asked of the Lord; this I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple” (Ps 27:4). God’s beauty is suffused into the gospel that preachers proclaim, even into Scripture. For this reason, Paul Scott Wilson suggests that preachers should let the Scriptures instruct them about beautiful speech.⁸⁰ Jesus Christ, God incarnate, is the truly beautiful one, and the Spirit transforms the church (and its preachers) into his likeness “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18).

A Beauty of *Ethos*

Ethics in homiletics tends to focus on content. The ethical sermon is one in which an ethical issue is talked about; it is where the world is seen rightly, and truth about the world is spoken. Charles Pinches writes that it is “in the sermon as much as in any other place in the common life of the Christian community that ‘ethics’ is done.”⁸¹ This *doing* of ethics seems to

⁷⁴ John Henry Newman, “The Indwelling Spirit,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1997), 368.

⁷⁵ Newman knew the importance of words and the demand on preachers not only to fill the mind but to touch the heart. He asks, “What do we gain from words, however correct and abundant, if they end with themselves, instead of lighting up the image of Incarnate Son in our hearts?” Newman, “The Humiliation of the Eternal Son,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 591.

⁷⁶ “The UnChristian Christian,” *Ebony* 20:10 (August 1965): 77. My thanks to Richard Lischer for including this quotation in his work.

⁷⁷ Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America*, updated (New York, NY: Oxford University, 2020), xxxv.

⁷⁸ Lischer, *The Preacher King*, 116.

⁷⁹ “We Would See Jesus,” 5 May 1967, MLK, Atlanta. Quoted in Lischer, *Preacher King*, 116.

⁸⁰ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 21.

⁸¹ Charles Pinches, “Proclaiming: Naming and Describing,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas & Sam Wells (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 180.

imply a focus on the sorts of things one preaches *about*, less, say, on the aesthetics of preaching. This aesthetic involves crafting words kindly and having regard for how they sound and combine. This aesthetic pays attention also to form. H. Grady Davis writes that “form does its work immediately and at deeper levels than logic, persuades directly and silently as it were, form has an importance second only to that of thought itself.”⁸² Wayne Booth writes that “the quality of our lives, especially the ethical and communal quality, depends to an astonishing degree on the quality of our rhetoric.”⁸³ “Quality” transcends content; it involves also the *manner* in which content is given; the *how* of preaching matters as much as the *what*.

A significant way the sermon becomes ethical is by becoming beautiful and compelling. That beauty is not simply housed in the sermon (in its *content*), but seeps into the very warp and woof of the preaching event. The sermon’s speech must be made beautiful, rather than crude or clichéd. The preacher’s words “must issue fresh and fresh, as from the preacher’s mouth, so from his breast, if they are to be ‘spirit and life’ to the hearts of his hearers,” Newman wrote.⁸⁴ The form, too, is thoughtful and appropriate to the message. The atmosphere of the sermon matters, where loving, honest, friendly, relaxed dialogue can transpire. This is the openness and invitational stance that Paul Scott Wilson prescribes for preaching: not the “theo-logic” that pretends “we have all the answers in the face of the mystery of God,”⁸⁵ but “theopoetics” which points “to the mystery and possibility of an integrated life in God’s care,” and “emphasizes faith, taking a risk.”⁸⁶

Loveliness must pervade the life of the one who preaches, also. Hardly is this a new suggestion, or one that is strictly Christian. Centuries before Christ, Aristotle instructed speakers about the importance of character: “Proof through character occurs when a speech is delivered in such a way as to make the speaker credible, since we trust good men more fully and more readily. . . . It is hardly an exaggeration to say that there is no more authoritative proof than character.”⁸⁷ *Ethos* is the perceived character of the speaker, undergirding or undermining all a speaker says.

Herbert masterfully captures the preacher’s *ethos* in his poem “The Windows”:

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?
 He is a brittle crazy glass:
 Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
 This glorious and transcendent place,
 To be a window, through thy grace.
 But when thou dost anneal in glass thy story,
 Making thy life to shine within
 The holy Preacher’s; then the light and glory
 More rev’rend grows, and more doth win;
 Which else shows watrish, bleak, and thin.
 Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one

⁸² Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 5.

⁸³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004), xii.

⁸⁴ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1982), 320.

⁸⁵ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 14–15.

⁸⁶ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 11.

⁸⁷ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York, NY: Oxford, 2018), 7.

When they combine and mingle, bring
 A strong regard and awe: but speech alone
 Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
 And in the ear, not conscience ring.⁸⁸

Here returns the massive question, “How?” “How can man preach [God’s] eternal word?” The preacher is only a “brittle crazy glass.” Then as now, light bounced off glass in blinding ways, and four hundred years ago, glass was more fragile. This is the image of any person, but one Herbert chooses for the preacher. Humans are “frail children of dust, and feeble as frail.”⁸⁹ Karl Barth comes clean on the sinfulness of every one of God’s spokespersons: “A sermon is always the work of sinners who have neither the ability or will for it but whom God has commanded to do it.”⁹⁰

The answer to “how” is given an initial answer in Herbert’s third line: God “dost him afford.” Only because God invites humans to preach can they—only because “God has commanded to do it,” in Barth’s words. One finds Herbert writing elsewhere, “Only, since God doth often vessels make/ Of lowly matter for high uses meet,/ I throw me at his feet.”⁹¹ Preachers become windows through the sheer grace of God.

This much has been said before and rather prosaically: the preacher becomes glass through which the church peers to catch sight of the Lord. Barth said as much.⁹² But this is not all Herbert says. The image *moves*, transforms beneath the eyes, though never spoken explicitly. This glass has annealed into it God’s story. Christ’s light shines within. Which glass is this that allows light *through* but also *in*? The reader has already discerned. “Colours and light,” stained glass.

For Herbert, the preacher’s life is not merely a problem. No ultimate opacity blocks the light of God. But, neither is the preacher’s life transparent, as though the preacher could “disappear behind the cross” so that *all* that the church saw was God’s light.⁹³ Opacity and transparency are uncharitable and unrealistic extremes. No, the sanctified life of the preacher becomes a work of stained glass which allows the church not only to see God *through* but also to see God *in* the preacher.⁹⁴ Once more, Augustine is found to be Herbert’s kindred spirit. He speaks to the person of the preacher in the *finale* of his homiletics text:

If anyone is unable to do both [that is, speak eloquently and wisely at once], let him say wisely what he does not say eloquently, rather than say eloquently what he says unwisely. If however he cannot even do this, let him so conduct himself that he not only earns a

⁸⁸ Herbert, *Complete English Works*, 64–65.

⁸⁹ Robert Grant, “O worship the King all glorious above,” https://hymnary.org/text/o_worship_the_king_all_glorious_above, accessed 28 February 2025.

⁹⁰ Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley & Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 88.

⁹¹ George Herbert, “The Priesthood,” in *The Complete English Works*, in Everman’s Library, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 157.

⁹² “Barth once said that the ideal sermon is like a polished pane of glass that we look through to God.” Will Willimon, *Preacher’s Dare: Speaking for God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2020), 102.

⁹³ One thinks of Jerusha Neal’s types of preachers: the disappearing, the disillusioned, and the dangerous. Jerusha Matsen Neal, *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 44.

⁹⁴ Ann Pasternak Slater, “Introduction” in George Herbert, *The Complete English Works*, in Everman’s Library, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), xii.

reward for himself, but also gives an example to others, and so his manner of life can itself be a kind of eloquent sermon.⁹⁵

Any ethic of preaching must take seriously the life of the preacher, “for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34). The life of the preacher is “the most difficult sermon” a preacher will ever preach.⁹⁶

Conclusion

The purpose of these reflections has been to see through George Herbert’s poetry helpful ways of imagining ethics and beauty in preaching. None of his sermons remain, but his poetry may be read as commentary on preaching. Elizabeth Achtemeier captures the poetic dynamic for preaching:

Artists, of whatever medium, rarely confront us directly with the demand that we accept their words or adopt their views and perceptions. The poet does not say, ‘This is the truth; believe it.’ The dramatist does not insist, ‘This is the only way human life is.’ The painter does not imply, ‘This is the one shape of reality.’ Instead, these artists present to us that which they see, in words so evocative and expressions so suggestive that we are enabled to enter into their experiences and to see the world as they see it. They prompt us, by their imagery, their imagination, their nuance of expression, to live through what they have lived and to know what they have known. Thus they enlarge our vision and give us new possibilities for seeing and doing.⁹⁷

When preachers preach as poets they reveal a belief in the power of indirect communication. God’s work in and through preaching is not limited to a single way, the locution of what is preached. The sermon’s effect includes *and* extends beyond what is direct and obvious.

Gerard Manley Hopkins once lamented the unfortunate fact that in a world “charged with the grandeur of God . . . all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/ And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell.”⁹⁸ In the Cathedral of the cosmos, God’s name is soiled—and also in Temples made by hands; so, Rilke longs for a time when there will be “no churches where God is imprisoned and lamented like a trapped wounded animal.”⁹⁹ There are dangers which one must admit; some from “plain style” preaching traditions may naysay. The Apostle Paul seems to eschew the artistic in preaching. He characterizes his own preaching as not done with “superior speech or wisdom” nor with “persuasive words of wisdom” (1 Cor 2:1, 4).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 4.61.

⁹⁶ Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 59; Thomas Troeger also takes up the matter of *ethos* and the way preaching shapes character. See Troeger, *The End of Preaching*, 66ff.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching: Finding the Words* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 35.

⁹⁸ Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44395/gods-grandeur>, accessed 28 February 2025.

⁹⁹ Rainer Maria Rilke, “All will come again into its strength,” *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, trans. Anita Barrows & Joanna Macy (New York, NY: Riverhead, 1996), 121.

¹⁰⁰ John R. Levison questions Paul’s presentation of his preaching, that “a disparity exists between *what* Paul says and *how* Paul says it.” 1 Corinthians is “peppered with figures of thought and speech,” including antithesis (1:17), anaphora and litotes (1:26), antistrophe (1:26–28), accumulation (2:1–5), enthymemes (2:10), and others. John R. Levison, “Did the Spirit Inspire Rhetoric? An Exploration of George Kennedy’s Definition of Early

Herbert himself seems to prescribe a plain approach to preaching, writing of the preacher that “the character of his sermon is holiness: he is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but holy.”¹⁰¹ Likewise, Augustine says there is great risk in aiming at eloquence: do not “let what you had to say escape your mind, while you [are] giving all your attention to saying it artistically.”¹⁰²

Dangers abound in aiming at beauty or eloquence in preaching. Christians have recognized these dangers for 2000 years, as well as non-Christian rhetoricians. Cicero warned speakers lest their rhetoric devolve into “an empty and ridiculous swirl of verbiage.”¹⁰³ Meaningless words can hardly be beautiful.¹⁰⁴ Paul Scott Wilson cautions preachers from being “too poetic.”¹⁰⁵ Yet, it is possible that the lazy preacher hides behind such half-truths, preferring not to “rethink” or “overthink” the sermon, just to “get it done.” Dangers exist, but broad ditches do not make impassible roads. Steven Mulhall reminds preachers that “the best way to appreciate the transcendence of God to human language is thus not to fall into silence . . . [but to] endlessly employ that language in relation to him.”¹⁰⁶ This involves what is said and how.

The ethical sermon is concerned with beauty. This is not merely sermonic sugar to help the medicine go down, or an aesthetic preference, but because *God is beautiful*, and preachers speak *of God*. “One thing I asked of the Lord;/ this I seek:/ to live in the house of the Lord/ all the days of my life,/ to behold the beauty of the Lord,/ and to inquire in his temple” (Ps 27:4). Preachers are tasked with offering the gift of this beauty, however they may, of ushering their congregations into the house of the Lord. Preachers take care that the sermon’s *speech* is beautiful, that the *space* the sermon creates and sustains is beautiful, and that the *soul*, or life, of the preacher is being made beautiful by God.

More could be offered. Preaching with beautiful words rejects certain assumptions about *language*: language does not exist merely to serve a utilitarian function, but its existence points us to the existence of God.¹⁰⁷ Preachers must learn to put *utility* in its proper place. Thus, Thomas Troeger cautions preachers not to allow questions of method to become ultimate lest preaching be reduced “to issues of language, organization, rhetoric, and the use of one’s voice and body.”¹⁰⁸ Ministry does not work entirely by standards of utility; preaching does not

Christian Rhetoric,” in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Duane F. Watson (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 36; Levison cites R. A. Humphries dissertation which deals with this in more depth. See, R. A. Humphries, “Paul’s Rhetoric of Argumentation in 1 Corinthians 1–4” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1979), 50–104.

¹⁰¹ George Herbert, “The Parson Preaching,” in *The Complete English Works*, in Everman’s Library, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 204–05.

¹⁰² Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 4.4.

¹⁰³ Cicero, *On the Orator*, 1.5.17.

¹⁰⁴ Brad Leithauser discusses “message poems,” and how many of these are not good poems, or ought not be considered poems at all. He may go a step too far in diminishing the message, but he is correct that *what* a poem says is inseparable from *how* it is said. “Poems are hardly the place to look for interesting messages, as the wise poet and critic L. E. Sissman used to remind us. If you happen upon an interesting message—marvelous. But many imperishable poems—poems you wouldn’t wish to live without—have little to say. Their content isn’t why we preserve them and revere them. Perhaps A. E. Houseman put it best: ‘Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it.’” Brad Leithauser, *Rhymes Rooms: The Architecture of Poetry* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2024), 76.

¹⁰⁵ Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry*, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *The Great Riddle: Wittgenstein and Nonsense, Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 59.

¹⁰⁷ See Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Troeger, *The End of Preaching*, 64.

either.¹⁰⁹ Hugo's Monseigneur Bienvenu answers one who is worried about usefulness: "The beautiful is as useful as the useful. . . . Perhaps more so."¹¹⁰

Preaching with beautiful words assumes a proper *anthropology* for preaching, one where our listeners are seen not only as *intellectualists* or as *thinking things*.¹¹¹ Preaching with beautiful words captures proper Christology, of a God who speaks creation into existence and then becomes what God has made, the Word made flesh. Anthropological assumptions color how preachers preach, thus Dana Gioia writes of contemporary Christian speech that Christianity "has lost its senses, all five of them. . . . Contemporary Christianity speaks mostly in ideas. Potent ideas, to be sure, but colorless and hackneyed in their expression."¹¹² Likewise, Thomas Troeger calls for a more holistic understanding of life, and pushes against "cognitive imperialism."¹¹³ He writes:

Preaching whose end is prayer can be a potent antidote to the data-driven diminishment of our humanity, especially when the end of preaching is to pray with all our heart all our soul, all our mind, all our strength. By enegaging the fullness of our humanity with the source and core of being that can never be digitized or quantified, prayer reveals that people are far more than "just a pile of information."¹¹⁴

A proper understanding of human embodiment (both for those who preach as well as for those who listen to preaching) is critical. Such anthropological assumptions powerfully shape how words are used and how sermons are created, and what they are designed to do.

Preachers are stereotyped for their verbosity—for never being short on words. Yet, however abundant their words, preachers realize they can never say it all. What preachers offer on Sunday "will not and cannot be the last word."¹¹⁵ This much is clear: however much one speaks, however often we preach, we have not said enough until we have used words beautifully. Only when we freight our sermons with beauty—in whichever holy ways we can—have we spoken well. Far be it from Christians that those tasked with preaching good news should fill sermons with words vulgar and profane, "bleared, smeared with toil." God forbid that preaching ministries spanning decades should not produce congregations more beautiful, lovely, and full of life, who change (perhaps, imperceptibly) not only because our "purpose" or "function" of each sermon *did* what *we* wanted it to do, but because our speech was lovely, that it lifted the church to a higher plane. After all, preachers speak of God and God's good and beautiful news. As homiletician Paul Scott Wilson says, "Preaching can be a source of beauty."¹¹⁶ "Beauty and beauteous words should go together."¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁹ Henri Nouwen grasps this, calling ministers to disappoint parishioners' expectations of utility and relevance: "I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self." Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1989), 28–30.

¹¹⁰ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Julie Rose (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2008), 21.

¹¹¹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 3.

¹¹² Dana Gioia, "Christianity and Poetry," *First Things* (August/September 2022): 29.

¹¹³ Troeger, *The End of Preaching*, 59.

¹¹⁴ Troeger, *The End of Preaching*, 57.

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Edge of Words*, 69.

¹¹⁶ Paul Scott Wilson, "Postmodernity and Preaching," *Touchstone* (February 2014): 20.

¹¹⁷ Herbert, "The Forerunners," 173.

For Further Reading

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