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Identifying and Addressing Students' Fears in Preaching

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Abstract: *What can be done for student preachers who are afraid to preach? To determine an answer to that question, this paper considers a body of research into a phenomenon called communication apprehension (CA). In so doing, it provides practical help for teachers of preaching that they might improve their ability to identify students who are afraid, understand more deeply the possible causes of their students' fears, understand the effect of fear on their students' sermon delivery and ministry career; and finally, acquire practical skills for alleviating their students' apprehension when stepping into the classroom pulpit.*

“Sometimes preachers are given the rather lame advice to “be natural” in the pulpit... [Yet] we cannot be natural when we are not feeling natural. Preachers are not immune from nervousness, tenseness, or moodiness, and these conditions affect us when we preach...”

— Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*¹

When a young preacher panics as she rises from her seat to preach, what is a teacher of preaching meant to do? When a student is shaking or pacing in the pulpit, what is their professor meant to advise? When a beginner preacher's voice quivers, when he rushes through his notes, when he "Ums" and "Ahs, and doesn't know where to put his hands, what help does a homiletics instructor have to offer?

In the past, teachers of preaching have suggested their anxious students “take a deep breath,” or “stand still,” or “take a moment” to compose themselves. Perhaps others have, as Thomas Long attests to above, told their students to “be natural.” Still others might say, “You don't need to be scared.” Yet these suggestions – are they really any more successful at assuaging fears than telling a toddler, “Don’t be afraid!” when he’s up late, scared of the monster lurking under his bed?

Homiletics professors *can* do better for the scared, nervous, or anxious student than urging him or her to “be natural” and “don’t be afraid.” This paper draws upon a field of study that has addressed the issue of fear and anxiety in public speaking for the past fifty years – a field of study that homileticians have largely ignored. This area of scholarship, begun by speech communication researcher James C. McCroskey, examines a phenomenon known as *communication apprehension*. This paper seeks to summarize the central findings of that research and consider how it might benefit educators who are seeking to identify and address their students’ fears in preaching.

What is Communication Apprehension?

Communication apprehension (formally abbreviated “CA”) is the technical term for what some might call “a fear of public speaking” or “stage fright”—though it encompasses more than both of those terms. It was coined by McCroskey in 1970 and is defined today as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication

¹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 270.

with another person or persons.”² This fear or anxiety may appear in a variety of oral communication settings: in an interpersonal setting, in meetings, in group discussions, and during public speaking.³

An employee apprehensive about asking his boss for a raise, a teen who is nervous making telephone calls, a Sunday school member afraid to share with the group, and a businessperson anxious before delivering a conference presentation—these are all examples of CA. In the classroom, professors of accounting have identified CA among their accounting students; healthcare educators have identified CA among nursing students; language professors have identified CA among their foreign language learners; and business professors among MBAs.⁴ *Any instance* of one person being scared, anxious, fearful, or nervous to communicate with a person or persons is subsumed under McCroskey's definition. This would, therefore, include a preaching student feeling nervous about preaching in front of a class.

Types of Communication Apprehension

In his work, McCroskey identifies four distinct types of CA: 1) trait-like CA, 2) context-based CA, 3) audience-based CA, and 4) situational CA. Understanding the four types of CA may be a helpful first step toward understanding the variety of experiences individual students might have as they are apprehensive about preaching.

The first type of CA is *trait-like CA*. Trait-like CA is the type of CA experienced by an individual who exhibits CA across every communication environment: in group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking.⁵ It is called “trait-like” since it appears as something like a general orientation, or personality trait, of a speaker.⁶ When a preaching student appears to be apprehensive about communicating *all* the time—in the pulpit, in class discussions, in meetings one-on-one—that student may be experiencing trait-like CA.⁷ Teresa Fry Brown's story of “Frank,” the student who could barely preach, who had sought medical help for his difficulty communicating and “was told that it was a psychological issue,”

² First used in James C. McCroskey, “Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety,” *Speech Monographs* 37, no. 4 (1970): 269-277; Further developed in Virginia P. Richmond, Jason S. Wrench, and James C. McCroskey, *Communication Apprehension, Avoidance, and Effectiveness* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2013), 41.

³ James C. McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” in *Avoiding Communication* ed. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 16.

⁴ For apprehension among accounting students, see Marann Byrne, Barbara Flood, and Dan Shanahan, “A Qualitative Exploration of Oral Communication Apprehension,” *Accounting Education* 21, no. 6 (December 1, 2012): 565–81; Among nursing students: Shannon Schulenberg et al., “Exploring Communication Apprehension in Nursing and Healthcare Education: A Scoping Review,” *Nursing & Health Sciences* 25, no. 4 (December 2023); Among foreign language learners: Nike Arnold, “Reducing Foreign Language Communication Apprehension with Computer-Mediated Communication: A Preliminary Study,” *System* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 469–86; Among MBAs: Asal Aghaz and Soroush Dehghan Salmasi, “The Impact of Cultural Values on Students' Communication Apprehension in Online Classrooms: The Moderating Role of Gender,” *The International Journal of Management Education* 22, no. 3 (November 1, 2024).

⁵ James C. McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2006), 41.

⁶ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 41.

⁷ Studies into trait-like CA and shyness have revealed that shyness and trait-like CA are not the same, yet related: while not all shy speakers experience CA, persons with a shy personality are more likely to experience trait-like CA. James C. McCroskey, “Communication Apprehension: What Have We Learned in the Last Four Decades,” *Human Communication* 12, no. 2 (2009): 189.

who “was in therapy and was trying to overcome his fear of public speaking”⁸ is almost certainly an account of someone with trait-like CA.

The second type of CA is *context-based CA*. Context-based CA is apprehension “restricted to a single generalized context.”⁹ Context-based CA may be present in the preaching student who is a confident communicator during class discussions but appears deeply apprehensive about preaching to the class. When Fry Brown recalls the irregular behavior of “Paula,” who “approaches the podium with her head down, shuffling her feet,” who “is physically and emotionally disengaged when preaching” yet is generally “talkative in class” – Fry Brown may be observing, in this situation, Paula’s context-based CA.¹⁰

The third type of CA is *audience-based CA*. Audience-based CA “represents an orientation of the individual toward communication with a specific person or group of persons,”¹¹ irrespective of context. McCroskey writes, “Some people feel little stage fright if they are asked to give a speech before a class of their friends, but succumb to panic if asked to speak to a group of strangers. Many others have exactly the opposite reaction.”¹² A preaching class example of audience-based CA might be the student who reports feeling relaxed preaching to her home church yet nervous preaching in the presence of her professor.

Finally, the fourth type of CA is *situational CA*. This is the type of CA that appears in an individual in a specific context, before a particular person or persons, at a specific moment.¹³ To describe situational CA, McCroskey offers the example of “a student who experiences little or no apprehension when going to a teacher to ask a question about an assignment but is suddenly terrified when the teacher instructs the student to stay after class to meet.”¹⁴ In his article, “An Intimate Relationship With Flunk,” Frank Thomas describes a series of situations in which a preacher might “flunk.” Thomas describes “flunk” as “to be lousy at preaching, not lousy every time, but lousy this particular time.”¹⁵ Flunk shows up, Thomas argues, in situations where the pressure is high, where the preaching assignment is “major,” where the preacher is underprepared, where the preacher is unrested or preoccupied, or where the worship is flawed in some way. In each of these instances, “flunking,” this one-off failure to “connect with or meet the needs of the people and the resulting emotional, physical, and spiritual distress the preacher experiences upon that realization,” may, in fact, be situational CA.¹⁶

Causes of Communication Apprehension

What causes communication apprehension? A number of theories have been proposed, and to date, three significant causes have emerged. The first is a speaker’s *self-perceived communication incompetence*.¹⁷ Even when a speaker is a skilled public speaker, she may nevertheless experience CA if she does not perceive herself as skilled. Self-perceived

⁸ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon: Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 1-2.

⁹ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 42.

¹⁰ Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 59.

¹¹ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 43.

¹² McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 43.

¹³ McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 18.

¹⁴ McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 19.

¹⁵ Frank Thomas, “An Intimate Relationship with FLUNK,” *The African American Pulpit*, (Winter 2002-2003): 23.

¹⁶ Thomas, “An Intimate Relationship with FLUNK,” 23.

¹⁷ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 44.

communication incompetence is especially prevalent among those speakers experiencing trait-like CA and is related to several personality traits, including low self-esteem, introversion, and low sociability.¹⁸ A preaching student low in self-esteem may tell themselves that they are not good enough at preaching and, as a result, experience CA—even if these thoughts are irrational.

The concept of self-perceived communication incompetence is particularly important in classrooms with second-language (L2) speakers. While Jenifer Lucas once wrote, “If international students are apprehensive about speaking their own language, their fear of communicating in English must be magnified tenfold,” research by McCroskey et al. into both Puerto Rican and Japanese students determined that “speaking a second language does not necessarily significantly increase an individual’s level of CA.”¹⁹ Allen, O’Mara, Long, and Judd attempted to replicate this finding and found strong correlations again between CA in speakers L1 and L2, consistent with McCroskey’s original research.²⁰ How could this be when teachers observe their L2 speakers being nervous about speaking up in class? In such cases, it is not that L2 speakers exhibit higher levels of CA in their second language; it is that these students are experiencing heightened levels of self-perceived communication incompetence.

Self-perceived communication incompetence causes students to be reticent to speak up in a classroom.²¹ Considering that speech practice is one mode for reducing CA, this puts L2 speakers at a disadvantage—it’s possible their CA may not improve in a speech class at the same rate as L1 speakers. As preaching classrooms in the US are ever-increasing in their cultural and linguistic diversity, especially as classes welcome international students via Zoom, teachers of preaching must employ targeted strategies to help them overcome this specific problem. A few such strategies are listed under “Strategies to Reduce Communication Apprehension below.

In addition to self-perceived communication incompetence, a second well-documented cause of CA is *learned negative expectations*.²² When a speaker finds himself in a situation in which he has no positive expectations for success—perhaps where his previous communication attempts were unsuccessful—he may find himself with such negative expectations that “a fearful response is the natural outcome.”²³ Sally Brown observes such a fearful response in her classroom when she encounters a student who “dreads preaching class” because he “can’t shake a bad experience from a high school public speaking class.”²⁴ Brown writes, “Each time he gets up to speak, that memory takes up a seat at the back of the room and grins.”²⁵ That student is

¹⁸ Virginia P. Richmond, James C. McCroskey, and Linda L. McCroskey, “An Investigation of Self Perceived Communication and Personality Orientations,” *Communication Research Reports* 6, no. 1 (1989): 28-35. See also James C. McCroskey and Linda L. McCroskey, “Self-report as an approach to measuring communication competence,” *Communication Research Reports* 5, no. 2 (1988), 108-113.

¹⁹ Jenifer Lucas, “Communication Apprehension in the ESL Classroom: Getting Our Students to Talk,” *Foreign Language Annals* 17, no. 6 (1984): 594; James C. McCroskey, William B. Gudykunst, and Tsukasa Nishida, “Communication Apprehension among Japanese Students in Native and Second Language,” *Communication Research Reports* 2, no. 1 (1985): 14.

²⁰ Jerry L. Allen et al., “The Relationship of Communication Anxiety, Avoidance and Competence of Non-Native English Speakers in the U.S” (International Communication Association Convention, Honolulu, HI, 1985).

²¹ Nancy F. Burroughs, Vicki Marie, and James C. McCroskey, “Relationships of Self-Perceived Communication Competence and Communication Apprehension with Willingness to Communicate: A Comparison with First and Second Languages in Micronesia,” *Communication Research Reports* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 230–39.

²² McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 28.

²³ McCroskey, “The Communication Apprehension Perspective,” 28.

²⁴ Sally A. Brown, “Embodying the Sermon,” in *Ways of the Word*, Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 189.

²⁵ Brown, “Embodying the Sermon,” 189.

potentially experiencing CA due to learned negative expectations he has carried since high school.

The third proven cause for a speaker's CA is *learned helplessness*.²⁶ Learned helplessness is a model of instrumental (or "operant") conditioning. Instrumental conditioning occurs when a creature (human or animal) engages in a behavior and that behavior is rewarded or punished. The general rule of conditioning is that rewarded behavior increases and punished behavior decreases.²⁷ However, in learned helplessness, *every* behavior is punished (for example, if a dog goes right, it receives an electric shock, and if the same dog goes left, it also receives an electric shock) such that eventually, the creature who is being punished completely shuts down, and ceases to do anything at all.²⁸

Learned helplessness may occur in speaking (or preaching) when a speaker receives negative feedback for one behavior and then, in altering that behavior, receives negative feedback for the *opposite* behavior.²⁹ Fry Brown describes such conditioning in her own life in her book *Weary Throats and New Songs*:

too much or too little makeup, too long or too short hair, too colorful or too dull dress, too low or too high shoes ... [this] was the source of criticism. My mannerisms were also evaluated—smiling too much, crying too much, speaking too loudly or too softly, being too happy or too sad, reading too properly or with too familiar language...³⁰

Fry Brown's experience details the kinds of patterns that lead to learned helplessness. According to McCroskey, these experiences will eventually lead to a malfunction in communicative ability and feelings of strong anxiety related to speaking.³¹

It should be kept in mind that McCroskey identified these last two causes as "the product of an interaction between an individual and the responses of other individuals in the environment."³² This means it may be possible for a teacher of preaching to increase or even create a student's CA through inappropriate responses to their preaching in class. The ability to engender apprehension in the communication efforts of others is a sobering reminder of the special responsibility preaching educators have to nurture their students and their gifts.

There are also some *context-specific causes* for CA, one of which, again, teachers of increasingly diverse preaching classrooms should be made aware of, and that is *the presence of cultural differences*.³³ This expression of CA is referred to in CA literature as *intercultural*

²⁶ McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

²⁷ Saul McLeod, "What is Operant Conditioning and How Does It Work?" Simply Psychology, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/operant-conditioning.html>.

²⁸ Martin E. P. Seligman, *Helplessness: On Development, Depression and Death* (New York: WH Freeman, 1992).

²⁹ McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

³⁰ Teresa Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 13-14.

³¹ McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

³² McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 29.

³³ Other context-specific studies that may be of interest to teachers of preaching include a study by professors of pharmacy that explored the relationship between race and CA among pharmacy students. Joseph M. LaRoche and Aryn C. Karpinski, "Racial Differences in Communication Apprehension and Interprofessional Socialization in Fourth-Year Doctor of Pharmacy Students," *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 80, no. 1 (February 25, 2016); A Portuguese study that explored the role gender played in CA among the university students in their context is: Marlene Loureiro, Norberto Loureiro, and Rui Silva, "Differences of Gender in Oral and Written

communication apprehension or ICA. ICA was first formally named and measured by Neuliep and McCroskey in 1997 and has been defined as “the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people from different groups, especially different cultural or ethnic groups.”³⁴ Neuliep and McCroskey believed ICA in general stemmed from “uncertainty,” but subsequent research identified more specific causes such as language barriers, negative stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and, as for general CA, previous negative experiences.³⁵ ICA has been shown to “impede cultural understanding and adaptation, and is associated with a reduced willingness to communicate, ethnocentrism, and perceptions of White racial superiority.”³⁶ This list alone reveals the seriousness of ICA. Within the preaching classroom, ICA has the potential to negatively impact sermons, student feedback, and teachers' attitudes toward students different from themselves. While this paper's primary focus is on communication apprehension more broadly and can therefore only briefly address ICA, the implications of ICA for preachers and preaching merit further exploration.

In addition to considering how cultural differences may shape communication apprehension in preaching contexts, homileticians might also ask whether something inherent to the preaching task itself contributes to CA among preachers. One potential cause for CA unique to preaching may be *holy fear*. One way preaching is distinct from other acts of public speaking is that preachers understand themselves to participate in a divine act. As John Koessler writes, “The God who spoke the world into being uses our words to bend the world to his will.”³⁷ Leah Schade, Jerry Sumney, and Emily Askew argue this kind of communication event *should* logically engender some apprehension in a preacher: “If a preacher doesn’t feel some level of ‘fear and trembling’ for the task they are undertaking with preaching, that would be cause for concern. Why? Because there is a great deal at stake in the preaching event for the congregation and their relationship with the preacher, God, one another, and the larger society, as well as God’s Creation.”³⁸ David Rockness, whose thesis is one of the few studies into CA that references preaching, does consider the role of holy fear in his study of CA and speech.

Communication Apprehension of University Students,” *Education Sciences* 10, no. 12 (December 2020); A study in 2021 that explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CA is: M. K. Sealy, “Communication in the Time of COVID-19: An Examination of Imagined Interactions and Communication Apprehension During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 41, no. 2 (December 2021): 158–86; Another by a group of communication professors at the University of Maryland that explored the impact of online learning upon a student’s CA is: Victoria Ledford et al., “Communication Apprehension in the Online Presentational Speaking Course: Considerations for Synchronous Course Meetings and Asynchronous Presentations,” *Communication Teacher* 37, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 64–82.

³⁴ James W. Neuliep and James C. McCroskey, “The Development of Intercultural and Interethnic Communication Apprehension Scales,” *Communication Research Reports* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 148.

³⁵ For ethnocentrism, Mary C. Toale and James C. McCroskey, “Ethnocentrism and Trait Communication Apprehension as Predictors of Interethnic Communication....,” *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 70–83; for negative stereotypes and language barriers, Jessica Overbay, “Let’s Talk: How Communication Apprehension and Intercultural Communication Affect Intercultural Conflicts and International Relations,” *Honors Theses*, May 12, 2023, https://encompass.eku.edu/honors_theses/944.

³⁶ Laura Jacobi, “Seeking to understand the impact of collaboration on intercultural communication apprehension,” *Journal of International Students* 10, no. 4 (2020): 892–893.

³⁷ John Koessler, *Folly, Grace and Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 20.

³⁸ Leah D. Schade, Jerry L. Sumney, and Emily Askew, *Introduction to Preaching: Scripture, Theology, and Sermon Preparation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 278.

However, he fails to assess the degree of holy fear among his test subjects or the relationship of holy fear to CA.³⁹ This is also an area that warrants further investigation.

Effects of Communication Apprehension

What are the effects of CA on speakers and their speech? Understanding the effects of CA may help teachers of preaching better identify the presence of CA among their students and understand the effects of fear on a student preacher's sermon and person.

Positive Effects

It is possible there may be positive effects of CA on speakers and their speech. This is not discussed in speech communication literature, though it is worth considering for the sake of homiletics, especially if one potential cause of CA in preaching is holy fear. Consider Paul's confession in 1 Cor 2:3, "And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." The apprehension Paul describes is not negative but a boon for his clear transmission of the gospel. Rockness also considers this a possibility—that CA might positively impact preachers and preaching—when he writes, "this primal emotion can lead towards a greater reliance on God, a strengthening of faith, and an opportunity for transformed living."⁴⁰

Negative Effects

Traditionally discussed within the CA literature are the negative effects of CA, the first being *an internal experience of discomfort*. McCroskey proposes that these internal feelings of fear, anxiety, nervousness, or apprehension are the universal effect of CA across all individuals and CA types.⁴¹ Fearful speakers report a number of bodily sensations along with this anxiety: "a rapid beating of the heart, increased perspiration, some shakiness, and dry mouth."⁴² At times, these physiological responses can interact with high levels of CA to such an extreme that "a person can be subject to nausea or dizziness ... [even] blacking out temporarily."⁴³

Preaching students do regularly report experiencing these exact kinds of discomfort when preparing to preach. What teacher of preaching has not heard a student say, "I felt sick to my stomach" or "My heart was racing"? When G. Robert Jacks wrote of butterflies as big as supersonic aircraft "hatching in the stomachs" of his students, he was writing about this internal experience of discomfort caused by CA.⁴⁴

Beyond those internal effects, externally, CA *interrupts a speaker's attempt at smooth delivery*. Speech communication theorists have developed scales to measure the extent to which CA affects a speaker's delivery. One of these—the Behavioral Assessment of Speech Anxiety (BASA), created by Mulac and Sherman in 1974—lists the following 17 categories of visible symptoms of CA. A scale like the BASA provides a useful list of all the ways CA might negatively impact a preacher's speech:⁴⁵

³⁹ David F. Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking" (DMin diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2016) 14-20.

⁴⁰ Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking," 20.

⁴¹ McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 33.

⁴² McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 54.

⁴³ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 54.

⁴⁴ Jacks, *Getting the Word Across*, 22.

⁴⁵ Anthony Mulac and John M. Wiemann, "Observer Perceived Communication Anxiety," in *Avoiding Communication* ed. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 111.

Voice: 1) Quivering or tense, 2) Too fast, 3) Too soft, 4) Monotonous / lack of emphasis
Verbal Fluency: 5) Non-fluencies, stammers, halting, 6) Vocalized pauses, 7) Hunts for words, speech blocks
Mouth and throat: 8) Swallowing, 9) Clears throat, 10) Breathes heavily
Facial Expression: 11) Lack of eye contact, extraneous eye movements, 12) Tense face muscles, grimaces, twitches, 13) "Deadpan" facial expression
Arms and Hands: 14) Rigid or tense, 15) Fidgeting, extraneous movement, 16) Motionless, lack of appropriate gestures
Gross Bodily Movement: 17) Sways, paces, shuffles feet.⁴⁶

Each of the items contained within this scale has been observed by preaching teachers as an example of what not to do in sermon delivery. Fry Brown warns against rigid or tense arms and hands: "Exaggerated, stiff, military posture decreases vocal efficiency."⁴⁷ She also warns against motionless delivery, recounting the story of "Elizabeth" who preaches completely still: "She clearly communicated her fear, but any sermon intent was lost."⁴⁸ Bryan Chapell warns against poor eye contact: "A speaker who will not look people in the eyes is deemed aloof, afraid or incompetent."⁴⁹ Schade, Sumney, and Askew warn against being too quiet: "If the congregation cannot hear the preacher, then the sermon will be lost."⁵⁰ Charles Spurgeon warns against a monotonous voice, claiming, "Exceedingly precious truths may be greatly marred by being delivered in monotonous tones."⁵¹ Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald Allen relate the account of a listener frustrated by their preacher's vocalized pauses: "I was in the car one time with a bunch of tapes from a minister that I happen to really like, but this minister constantly says, 'Now, listen. Now, listen. Now, listen.'"—eventually, she switched him off.⁵² Ultimately, each of these homileticians, and others, make the same claim about these symptoms of CA: they impede the preacher's message. As Luke Powery proclaims, "Bad delivery can destroy a sermon."⁵³

What none of these homileticians have addressed, however, is the relationship between these mannerisms and CA. Preachers are told to train themselves out of these distracting habits. "Preachers can learn to control their bodies," promises Charles Bartow.⁵⁴ "Choose one item to improve and go from there," instructs Mary Hulst.⁵⁵ While it's likely not every instance of poor sermon delivery is related to CA, for those students whose poor delivery results from chronic apprehension, this advice is akin to picking the leaves off a weed without tearing out its roots.

⁴⁶ Mulac and Wiemann, "Observer Perceived Communication Anxiety," 112.

⁴⁷ Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 39.

⁴⁸ Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 5.

⁴⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 311.

⁵⁰ Schade et al., *Introduction to Preaching*, 274.

⁵¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 110.

⁵² Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005), 109.

⁵³ Luke A. Powery, "Embodying the Sermon," in *Ways of the Word*, Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 188.

⁵⁴ Charles Bartow, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery*, (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1995), 92.

⁵⁵ Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 139.

Finally, CA has been shown to *negatively impact a speaker's success*, both in school and beyond. CA has been shown to adversely affect a student's grades as well as their ability to interact with other students.⁵⁶ It has also been shown to prevent a speaker from seizing future opportunities to speak.⁵⁷ Moreover, CA has been shown to affect career choice: "To avoid having to experience high CA, people may select occupations that involve low communication responsibilities."⁵⁸

To bring these studies into the ministerial context, CA may cause a student to struggle in seminary and may cause a preacher to avoid opportunities to preach. Rockness's study suggests that CA may cause Christians to avoid their calling to ministry.⁵⁹ A study by John W. Luton found that for those apprehensive preachers who eventually entered the ministry, their experience of CA has been linked to ministerial burnout.⁶⁰

If holy fear is a part of CA, perhaps not all CA needs to be eradicated from the life and work of a preacher. However, when one considers the significant adverse effects of much CA upon both the sermon and the preacher, it becomes clear that at least these negative aspects of CA do need to be addressed. How, then, do teachers of preaching make a difference in the lives of students experiencing communication apprehension?

Diagnosing Communication Apprehension

An important step in effectively addressing CA is diagnosis. At present, teachers of preaching assess a student's level of fear in one of two ways: through self-report or by observer report.⁶¹ Alyce McKenzie describes her classroom self-report process in her sermon "Wise Up! The Lenten Journey from Fear to Faith."⁶² At the outset of each semester, McKenzie explains that her students are required to supply their "greatest fear" on an index card with respect to the class ahead. Pat Batten's hybrid self-report/observer report process involves having students take turns standing before the class during their first session and asking them to share "one hope and one fear" for the semester ahead.⁶³ This early speaking assignment allows students to both report their fears and for Batten to observe any apprehension speakers might have before their first preaching assignment.

While these methods for identifying apprehension are useful, they are limited in one way: they are not quantitative. Yet, quantitative measurement of CA is possible. It has been made so

⁵⁶ Regarding CA's effect on grades, see James C. McCroskey, "Classroom consequences of communication apprehension" *Communication Education*, 26 (1977): 27–33; regarding its impact on student interaction, J.A. Dobos, "Collaborative learning: effects of student expectations and communication apprehension on student motivation" *Communication Education*, 45 (1996): 118–134.

⁵⁷ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 55.

⁵⁸ McCroskey, "The Communication Apprehension Perspective," 35.

⁵⁹ Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking," 75.

⁶⁰ John W. Luton, "Effects of religious orientation and perceptions of communication competence and apprehension on burnout potential," (PhD diss., Regent University, 2000).

⁶¹ These terms come from Barbara Mae Gayle et al., *Classroom Communication and Instructional Processes: Advances Through Meta-Analysis* (Routledge, 2009), 214, where it is written, "Three methods of assessing CA exist: (a) self-report, (b) observer report, and (c) physiological measures." Physiological methods for CA assessment are unlikely to be found in the preaching classroom since they require access to machines that report physiological changes such as blood pressure, heart rate, and palmar sweat.

⁶² Alyce McKenzie, *Wise Up! The Lenten Journey from Fear to Faith*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_0nd-nIvi0.

⁶³ Patricia M. Batten, "An Apology for Learning Educational Theory," in *Training Preachers* ed. Scott M. Gibson (Bellingham: Lexham, 2018), 29–30.

by the assessment instrument developed by McCroskey known as the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, the final version of which is designated the PRCA-24.⁶⁴ Both printable versions and electronic versions of the PRCA-24 are available online.⁶⁵

The PRCA-24 is a simple, 24-question survey that any speaker can complete to identify their level of communication apprehension in each of the four settings: in an interpersonal setting, in meetings, in group discussions, and during public speaking. A completed PRCA-24 is able to reveal the loci of a subject's apprehension, the degree to which they are apprehensive, and the type of apprehension they are experiencing. It takes less than 15 minutes to complete.

Perhaps the first place to address CA among preaching students would be to distribute, at the outset of a preaching class, the PRCA-24. Administering this standardized test would enable teachers to assess with greater accuracy which students not only have a history of CA but in what contexts and to what degree. With the PRCA-24, those students with CA will already be identified well before they get up to preach for a grade.

Educators in other disciplines have already used the PRCA-24 in their classrooms, not only to identify CA but also to assess their attempts at reducing it. Karen Dwyer and Dennis Fus at the University of Nebraska administered the PRCA-24 (along with the S-E scale, a self-efficacy measurement tool) at the outset, midpoint, and close of a semester to determine the relationship between self-efficacy and CA among their communication students.⁶⁶ Through this research, they found that improving a student's self-efficacy did reduce their CA. Nike Arnold, a linguistics professor at Portland State University, used the PRCA-24 to determine that computer-mediated language learning, which had previously been thought to reduce a speaker's fear, actually had no significant impact on CA among foreign language learners.⁶⁷ The PRCA-24 could be an invaluable tool for preaching teachers who wish to assess both the general progress of their students with respect to their fear of preaching and the effectiveness of any attempted intervention.

Strategies to Reduce Communication Apprehension

With respect to interventions—this leads to the final question: how might CA be reduced? After identifying CA in their classroom, what can teachers of preaching do about it?

Following McCroskey's initial research, a plethora of projects have explored potential practices for addressing CA. These practices are most often identified as 1) *skills training*, 2) *cognitive modification*, and 3) *systematic desensitization*.⁶⁸ Although these strategies originated

⁶⁴ The earliest iteration of the PRCA is found in McCroskey, "Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety." The PRCA-24 is found in McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 40-41.

⁶⁵ For the printable version, see "Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)," University of California, Merced, accessed March 30, 2025, https://assessment.ucmerced.edu/sites/assessment.ucmerced.edu/files/page/documents/personal_report_of_communication_apprehension.pdf; for the online version visit "Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)," Across Cultures, accessed March 30, 2025, <https://acrossculturesweb.com/unit1/prca.html>.

⁶⁶ Karen Kangas Dwyer and Dennis A. Fus, "Perceptions Of Communication Competence, Self-Efficacy, And Trait Communication Apprehension: Is There an Impact on Basic Course Success?," *Communication Research Reports* 19, no. 1 (2002): 29-37.

⁶⁷ Arnold, "Reducing Foreign Language Communication Apprehension with Computer-Mediated Communication," 469-86.

⁶⁸ Susan R. Glaser, "Oral Communication Apprehension and Avoidance: The Current Status of Treatment Research," *Communication Education* 30, no. 4 (October 1, 1981): 321-41; Michael Weissberg and Douglas and Lamb, "Comparative Effects of Cognitive Modification, Systematic Desensitization, and Speech Preparation in the Reduction of Speech and General Anxiety," *Communication Monographs* 44, no. 1 (March 1, 1977): 27-36.

in the field of psychotherapy and were originally intended to assist individuals experiencing high levels of CA, they have, over time, transformed into practical exercises for the speech classroom.⁶⁹ In fact, Lucas lists many of the strategies below in his widely used speech textbook, *The Art of Public Speaking*. It is likely, therefore, that although at first glance some of these strategies may seem complex, they may be able to be adapted to the preaching classroom, too.

Skills Training

The most straightforward method for supporting students who struggle with CA is to *provide them with a class*. Lucas identifies this as “the first step” in reducing nervousness and promises, “as the class goes on, your fears about public speaking will gradually recede.”⁷⁰

However, not all classes in public speaking are equally effective in reducing CA. Classes that are concerned with theories and abstract concepts do not fall under the umbrella of skills training. The classes that will help apprehensive students are those that involve targeted instruction in the specific competencies required for preparation and delivery—skills such as selecting a topic, organizing material, and vocal and bodily delivery.⁷¹ To address the context-specific issue of intercultural communication apprehension in a diverse preaching classroom, skills training in interpersonal communication competency (ICC) might also be integrated into such a class.⁷²

A second strategy for reducing CA through skills training is *encouraging thorough preparation*. Lucas advises his students to “prepare your speeches so thoroughly that you cannot help but be successful.”⁷³ McCroskey explains that “complete preparation” is essential for reducing CA, especially situational CA. He writes, “the more fully and carefully prepared you are the less likely any situational factor will be able to get to you.”⁷⁴ Conversely, “inadequate preparation will leave even the most confident speaker open to potentially severe stage fright.”⁷⁵

This strategy is particularly important for reducing the anxiety of L2 speakers. One study of language learners in Malaysia revealed that CA increases dramatically when L2 speakers are asked to speak publicly without time to prepare.⁷⁶ In light of this, preaching instructors should consider eliminating impromptu assignments for L2 students to help reduce unnecessary stress and support more effective learning.

How might preaching teachers encourage all students to invest more time in preparing their sermons? One approach may be to devote focused time to preparing introductions. Research indicates that speech anxiety is “highest during the minute prior to speaking and the first minute of speaking, respectively.”⁷⁷ Anxiety typically declines thereafter. As Lucas promises, “Once you get through the introduction, you should find smoother sailing the rest of the way.”⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Graham D. Bodie, “A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts: Defining, Explaining, and Treating Public Speaking Anxiety,” *Communication Education* 59, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 86.

⁷⁰ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 10.

⁷¹ Graham D. Bodie, “A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts,” 89.

⁷² Lily A. Arasaratnam, “Further Testing of a New Model of Intercultural Communication Competence,” *Communication Research Reports* 23, no. 2 (June 2006): 93–99.

⁷³ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 10.

⁷⁴ McCroskey, *Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 58.

⁷⁵ McCroskey, *Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 58.

⁷⁶ Mahfuzah Binti Rafek et al., “Gender and Language: Communication Apprehension in Second Language Learning,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 123 (March 20, 2014): 90–96.

⁷⁷ Chris R. Sawyer and Ralph R. Behnke, “Reduction in Public Speaking State Anxiety during Performance as a Function of Sensitization Processes,” *Communication Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (January 2002): 111.

⁷⁸ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 15.

A third strategy for reducing CA through skills training is to *supply students with carefully structured assignments*. A 1989 study into CA and speech assignments found that it was the “highly anxious students [who] often seem to be the ones who ask endless and innumerable questions about an upcoming speech assignment.”⁷⁹ Building on this insight, speech educators realized they could support anxious students by supplying them with assignments that, in a detailed manner, guided them through the speechmaking process.

However, research by communication studies professor Melanie Booth-Butterfield revealed that this strategy may be counterproductive for students with low levels of CA. These non-anxious students, she explained, “appear to communicate more competently when given unstructured tasks, ones which they can direct themselves.”⁸⁰ In response, Booth-Butterfield recommends offering all students two outlines. The first would contain the basic requirements for an assessment, and the second would contain a detailed outline of what students *may* want to include in their speech – and allowing students to pursue whichever assessment outline supported them best.⁸¹

Finally, CA may be reduced by simply *speaking more often*. As Lucas explains, “The more you learn about public speaking, and the more speeches you give, the less threatening speechmaking will become.”⁸² This notion is supported by CA research. A study by rhetorician Mary Marcel revealed that a speaker’s CA tends to diminish with experience.⁸³ Teachers of preaching might accelerate this process by assigning multiple preaching assessments throughout the semester as well as encouraging apprehensive students to pursue additional opportunities to preach outside of the classroom.

It has already been stated that students in an L2 environment might be especially hesitant to speak, and students experiencing ICA might avoid speaking across cultural divides. How, then, might a preaching teacher encourage these students to speak more often if this is a strategy that would assist them in overcoming their fears? One strategy worth considering is to have students speak in culturally or linguistically diverse pairs. This approach may increase speech frequency while simultaneously eliminating the anxiety engendered by speaking in front of the class. Perhaps, in the preaching classroom, students could be paired to give feedback to one another on portions of their sermons before preaching their entire sermon for a grade.

Many of these skills-based strategies align with common-sense approaches to teaching preaching. It may not surprise teachers of preaching, therefore, that a 1997 nationwide survey identified skills training as the most frequently used method for addressing CA.⁸⁴ Yet, despite its popularity, skills training has also been shown to be the least effective of the three strategies outlined in this paper, particularly for speakers with high levels of trait CA.⁸⁵ For these students, “simply being enrolled in a class is sufficient to cause anxiety,” and they “are more likely to

⁷⁹ John A. Daly et al., “Pre-Performance Concerns Associated with Public Speaking Anxiety,” *Communication Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1989), 45.

⁸⁰ Melanie Booth-Butterfield, “Stifle or Stimulate? The Effects of Communication Task Structure on Apprehensive and Non-Apprehensive Students,” *Communication Education* 35, no. 4 (October 1986): 342-343.

⁸¹ Booth-Butterfield, “Stifle or Stimulate?,” 343.

⁸² Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 10.

⁸³ Mary Marcel, “Communication Apprehension Across the Career Span,” *International Journal of Business Communication* 59, no. 4 (October 1, 2022): 523.

⁸⁴ Thomas E. Robinson II, “Communication Apprehension and the Basic Public Speaking Course: A National Survey of In-class Treatment Techniques,” *Communication Education* 46, no. 3 (July 1, 1997): 193.

⁸⁵ Robinson, “Communication Apprehension and the Basic Public Speaking Course”; Mike Allen, John E. Hunter, and William A. Donohue, “Meta-Analysis of Self-Report Data on the Effectiveness of Public Speaking Anxiety Treatment Techniques,” *Communication Education* 38, no. 1 (January 1989): 54-76.

withdraw from public speaking classes."⁸⁶ Furthermore, high-trait CA speakers "do not effectively use their preparation time," and as it has already been stated, are less likely to seek out more opportunities to speak.⁸⁷

Therefore, skills training alone is insufficient for student preachers experiencing such elevated levels of CA. For them, at least, additional strategies must be considered.

Cognitive Modification

The second group of strategies for addressing CA falls under the general heading of *cognitive modification*. Employing cognitive modification to reduce CA involves taking irrational beliefs related to interpersonal communication, analyzing those beliefs, and replacing them with new "coping statements incompatible with anxiety."⁸⁸ While skills training involves doing differently, cognitive modification involves thinking differently.

Although cognitive modification might seem out of reach for the preaching instructor, Lucas has also adapted this principle in *The Art of Public Speaking* into several basic strategies to address CA. While he does not name these "cognitive modification strategies," they are no different than those proposed by CA researchers. Each involves taking one thought, examining it, and working to replace it with another.

First, Lucas recommends anxious students *think positively*.⁸⁹ This process, he explains, involves transforming negative thoughts into positive ones—for example, turning "I'm always nervous when I give a speech" to "Everyone's nervous. If other people can handle it, I can too."⁹⁰ In the preaching classroom, students may learn to think positively by writing out negative thoughts they have concerning preaching and, with the help of their peers, their teacher, or even a trained counselor, work on constructing a list of new, positive statements about preaching.

Second, Lucas reminds students that *most nervousness is not visible*. This strategy involves modifying a single cognition—turning the thought, "everyone can see how nervous I am" to "only some of my internal anxiety is visible on the outside."⁹¹ With a little guidance, it is possible for students to discover this through watching themselves preach on video. Psychologists Thomas Rodebaugh and Diane Chambless explain that watching a tape of oneself can help decrease the discrepancy between a speaker's felt anxiety and their observers' perceptions of their anxiety. Additionally, this task has been shown to most effectively impact speakers who are highly critical of themselves.⁹²

Third, Lucas recommends students *let go of expectations of perfection*. Again, this involves modifying a single thought: exchanging the notion "I need to be perfect" to "there is no such thing as a perfect speech."⁹³ Although research into perfectionism has not been able to support claims that perfectionism *causes* CA, it does reveal that perfectionism and CA are

⁸⁶ Graham D. Bodie, "A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts," 89.

⁸⁷ Graham D. Bodie, "A Racing Heart, Rattling Knees, and Ruminative Thoughts," 89.

⁸⁸ Frederic D. Glogower, William J. Fremouw, and James C. McCroskey, "A Component Analysis of Cognitive Restructuring," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 2, no. 3 (1978): 209.

⁸⁹ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 12.

⁹⁰ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 12.

⁹¹ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 13.

⁹² Thomas Rodebaugh and Dianne Chambless, "The Effects of Video Feedback on Self-Perception of Performance: A Replication and Extension," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 26 (October 1, 2002), 629-644.

⁹³ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 13.

related, leading researchers to hypothesize that "interventions to treat perfectionism may reduce one's CA."⁹⁴

Finally, Lucas recommends students *use the power of visualization*. As described by Lucas, visualization involves "creating a vivid mental blueprint in which you see yourself succeeding in a speech."⁹⁵ The standard practice for reducing CA through visualization is to have students relax using techniques borrowed from systematic desensitization (see below) and then visualize themselves experiencing success, rather than failure, at various stages in the speaking event. Such a visualization task in the preaching classroom could occur through a script written by a professor or with students writing and guiding themselves through their own personal visualization of the preaching event.

While Lucas does not address this in his textbook, there are also some cognitive modification strategies known to be particularly effective in supporting students in a culturally diverse context, the first of which is *careful teacher and peer evaluation*. Molnar's study into L2 speakers in the foreign language classroom revealed that their CA is exacerbated by a fear of negative peer in-class evaluations.⁹⁶ Although Molnar might not name it as such, there is a cognition at work here: "I am going to be judged harshly for my difference." Educators might alleviate such fears by providing detailed instructions on what does and does not constitute appropriate feedback, offering scripts for feedback, or responding openly to potentially harmful feedback. Engaging in such practices, teachers of preaching may be able to work with their students to move their negative cognition toward a more positive one.

In addition to careful feedback, Stevie Munz and Janet Colvin's study of communication students in Utah determined that when students find themselves in a cross-cultural context, their ability to have and feel like their own identity is supported in the classroom can alleviate their CA.⁹⁷ How might a teacher preaching support student's identity in their classroom? According to Munz and Colvin, educators should first increase their awareness of "a spectrum of public speaking practices and identities that are rooted in cultures and co-cultures."⁹⁸ For the teacher of preaching, this means familiarizing oneself with the preaching traditions of one's students. Additionally, they encourage giving voice to those on the margins, including practically assigning these students more practice/speech lab time.⁹⁹ Prioritizing marginalized students in this way may modify their cognition from "I don't belong in this space" to "I am welcome here"—a worthy goal for any teacher in any discipline.

Systematic Desensitization

While skills training and cognitive modification may seem to be the simpler methods of addressing CA, the current, more effective than both, is a process called *systematic*

⁹⁴ Stephanie Shimotsu and Timothy P. and Mottet, "The Relationships Among Perfectionism, Communication Apprehension, and Temperament," *Communication Research Reports* 26, no. 3 (August 19, 2009): 190.

⁹⁵ Lucas, *The Art of Public Speaking*, 12.

⁹⁶ Draženka Molnar and Gabrijela Crnjak, "Exploring Foreign Language Communication Apprehension among the English Language University Students in the English Language Classroom Setting," *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research* 5 (August 1, 2018): 27–39.

⁹⁷ Stevie Munz and Janet Colvin, "Communication Apprehension: Understanding Communication Skills and Cultural Identity in the Basic Communication Course," *Basic Communication Course Annual* 30, no. 1 (January 24, 2018).

⁹⁸ Munz and Colvin, "Communication Apprehension," 191.

⁹⁹ Munz and Colvin, "Communication Apprehension," 191.

desensitization. This process has been found to be extremely effective at reducing the CA of between 80 and 90% of all speakers who have received it.¹⁰⁰ Systematic desensitization is a process for reducing anxiety that includes “1) training in deep muscle relaxation, 2) a construction of hierarchies of anxiety-eliciting stimuli, and 3) the graduated pairing, through imagery, of anxiety-eliciting stimuli with the relaxed state.”¹⁰¹

The first step in reducing CA through systematic desensitization involves teaching speakers to relax their entire body. This is taught using a method called *progressive relaxation*. Progressive relaxation is the art of successively tensing and relaxing muscle groups throughout the body as instructed by a trainer. “A common sequence involves hands, bicep and triceps, shoulders, neck, mouth, tongue (extended and retracted), tongue (mouth roof and floor), eyes and forehead, breathing, back, midsection, thighs, stomach, clavicles and feet and toes.”¹⁰² With practice, speakers should be able to tense and relax all their muscle groups, allowing them to tense and relax their bodies on cue.

The next step in the systematic desensitization process for CA involves constructing a 10-15 step list of speech-related tasks. These tasks are ranked from the least anxiety-producing task related to the issue being addressed all the way to the most anxiety-producing.¹⁰³ G.L. Paul and D.T. Shannon conducted a study in 1996 on systematic desensitization and constructed a list of these situations related to public speaking. They are:

- 1) Lying in bed in a room just before going to sleep—describe the room.
- 2) Reading about speeches alone in a room (one to two weeks before).
- 3) Discussing the coming speech a week before (in class or after).
- 4) In the audience while another gives a speech (the week before the presentation).
- 5) Writing speech in the study area (room, library).
- 6) Practicing speech alone in a room (or in front of a roommate).
- 7) Getting dressed the morning of speech.
- 8) Activities just prior to leaving for speech (eating, practice).
- 9) Walking over to room on the day of the speech.
- 10) Entering room on the day of the speech.
- 11) Waiting while another person gives speech on day of presentation.
- 12) Walking up before the audience.
- 13) Presenting speech before the audience.¹⁰⁴

Adapting this list for the preaching classroom is as simple as replacing “speech” with “sermon.”

The final stage of systematic desensitization is to induce the state of relaxation learned previously and then present the speaker with those stages of anxiety-provoking stimuli one by one. The speaker is not expected to *be* in these situations; all that is required is to *imagine* them.¹⁰⁵ Whenever the speaker feels tense, they must relax. “Thus, the sequence is relax,

¹⁰⁰ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 57.

¹⁰¹ Gustav Friedrich and Blaine Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” in *Avoiding Communication* ed. John A. Daly and James C. McCroskey (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984), 175.

¹⁰² Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 176.

¹⁰³ Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 176.

¹⁰⁴ G.L. Paul and D.T. Shannon, “Treatment of anxiety through systematic desensitization in therapy groups.” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 71, no. 2 (Apr. 1966): 124-35.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 178.

imagine, stop imagining, relax.”¹⁰⁶ This continues all the way along the hierarchy of situations until the speaker is able to relax even when considering the most stressful of situations – presenting the speech before the class.

Systematic desensitization may seem a strange practice to incorporate into the preaching classroom, but it is adaptable, easy to learn, and can be administered remotely. McCroskey’s research into systematic desensitization involved training three separate speech communication departments—at Michigan State, Illinois State, and West Virginia University—to effectively reduce the CA among their students.¹⁰⁷ If they can learn it, surely teachers of preaching can too. Educators concerned with finding the resources necessary for this program should know that there are many audio guides for progressive relaxation for free online. A quick search for “progressive muscle relaxation” on YouTube produces hundreds of results. Educators concerned with how time-consuming such a process might be should be aware that systematic desensitization effectively reduces CA in groups (no need to work with students one-on-one) and reduces CA through tape recordings (no need for the professor even to be present).¹⁰⁸ The entire process could be constructed for students as a unit of study they engage with online.

Moreover, this process has, in fact, been recommended to preachers before. Nancy Lammers Gross in *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching* and Robert Jacks in his *Getting the Word Across*¹⁰⁹ both promote progressive relaxation as a tool for improved sermon delivery. However, neither of them linked progressive relaxation to systematic desensitization for the purpose of reducing CA. Homiletics has had, for some time, half the prescription—all that is needed is the second half of the process to arrive at the cure.

Further Strategies of Support

While systematic desensitization is currently the most effective known single method for reducing CA among most speakers, teachers must be aware that some students require professional counseling from a licensed mental health practitioner to address their CA. Recall again Fry Brown’s student Frank who required this kind of assistance.¹¹⁰ This is particularly the case for students who exhibit trait-like CA or CA that has developed as a result of many repeated negative experiences.¹¹¹ Research has shown that anti-depressant medication is also able to reduce a speaker’s CA.¹¹² Encouraging a whole class to consider pursuing such help might normalize medication and therapy for preaching students and allow the most apprehensive students to hear this advice without feeling particularly targeted.

Finally, could it be possible for homiletics to have its own unique strategy for reducing CA? The most obvious answer to that question is found in the power of prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit. Jacks tells the story of one student, Jeff, who confesses, “If God is to use my voice and my presence in ministry, I will need to pray for God to provide me a butterfly net so that I can catch the butterflies in my stomach that hatch five minutes before preaching.”¹¹³ Rockness also writes of this in his thesis when he references Jesus’s promise of the Holy Spirit in

¹⁰⁶ Frederick and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 178.

¹⁰⁷ McCroskey, “Communication Apprehension: What Have We Learned in the Last Four Decades,” 185.

¹⁰⁸ Friedrich and Goss, “Systematic Desensitization,” 179.

¹⁰⁹ Nancy Lammers Gross, *Women’s Voices and the Practice of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 102; Jacks, *Getting the Word Across*, 127-128.

¹¹⁰ Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon*, 1-2.

¹¹¹ McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 53.

¹¹² McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 53.

¹¹³ Jacks, *Getting the Word Across*, 22.

John 14:27 to calm his disciples' fears and of the act of "giving one's fear to the Lord," as inspired by the Psalmists' prayers.¹¹⁴ Rockness offers an example of such a prayer—the prayer of a youth pastor experiencing CA, desperately anxious, who cried out before a sermon, "Do this for me because I cannot do it on my own."¹¹⁵ In this youth pastor's case, his prayer was answered, and his fears were relieved.

However, even with the Spirit's aid, teachers of preaching should not ignore the other methods and tools that are available to reduce CA. To do so would be akin to the Christian who refuses medical attention when sick or injured. Prayer, a reliance on the Holy Spirit, *and* the steps offered above can be employed by teachers of preaching in tandem to address the problem of CA in their classroom. Developing gifts for ministry is a partnership. God gifts preachers, but preachers are also tasked with the responsibility of developing those gifts in any way they can.

Conclusion

James C. McCroskey did not invent communication apprehension. He merely observed it, gave it a technical designation, and developed a way to measure it. From there, McCroskey was able to construct different strategies to reduce CA and assess their effectiveness. Not only that, with a technical name and assessment tool, a group of scholars across many disciplines and even continents have been able to collectively investigate this phenomenon and share their findings. For these scholars, having a term and a tool was like finding a common language across a cultural divide—they could finally dialog about a phenomenon they had all encountered for so long.

Teachers of preaching have encountered this phenomenon, too. Teresa Fry Brown, Thomas Long, Charles Bartow, Nancy Lammers Gross, G. Robert Jacks, Sally Brown, Luke Powery, and others have all reported instances of fear of speaking in their classrooms. Now, with this term and the PRCA-24 in hand, this author hopes that homileticians will be able to enter this scholarly discussion, too. More than that, through a deeper understanding of CA and CA research, they will be able to begin to urge more than "be natural" and "don't be afraid." Instead, with more targeted, informed, evaluated care, teachers of preaching might see their apprehensive students thrive.

¹¹⁴ Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking," 18, 20.

¹¹⁵ Rockness, "Addressing the Fear of Public Speaking," 94.

**Trauma-Aware Preaching in the Lenten and Easter Seasons:
A Proposal of the Themes for Lent, Triduum, and Easter Sermons**

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Abstract: *The reality of trauma in the world is a call for the church, as the Christian community, to become a trauma-healing community. Therefore, this article highlights the role of the preaching ministry in the process of fulfilling this call through a trauma-aware preaching approach. This approach is grounded in an in-between theology that embraces suffering, pain, and grief as well as hope, resurrection, and redemption. Thus, the preaching approach uses eschatological hope about suffering and hope as good news. In addition, this article offers a practical application of the trauma-aware preaching approach in sermons during Lent, Triduum, and Easter.*

Introduction: In the Reality of Living with Trauma

I was born an Indonesian with Chinese ethnic blood, although I only accepted my full Chinese Indonesian identity when I was eighteen. Before that age, I knew myself simply as an Indonesian without an added ethnic identity. This was because my parents had indoctrinated me into thinking of myself as Indonesian rather than Chinese Indonesian. When I began researching the history of political conflict in Indonesia, I realized that, as Chinese Indonesian descendants, my parents and family had been through many traumatic experiences. They had concealed their Chinese identity because those of Chinese ethnicity were scapegoated in almost all the conflicts in Indonesia from the time of the Dutch colonial period onwards.¹ My family passed down their trauma to me. My story is not unique. In her art project, *Chinese Whispers*, Rani Pramesti explains that she and the second generation of Chinese Indonesians living in Australia after the May 1998 riots also lost their identity. They didn't know why they felt so insecure when people

¹ Benny G. Setiono, *Tionghoa Dalam Pusaran Politik (Chinese in Politic Whirlpool)* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Penerbit Elkasa, 2003), 203-4. The Dutch colonists targeted the Chinese as scapegoats for economic-political advantage. From the beginning of the Dutch colonization of Indonesia, they classified the population into three groups: the first group, the European/Westerners, included Indo-Europeans (descendants of mixed marriages between Europeans and Asians); the second was the Foreign Orientals, comprising ethnic Chinese, Arabs, and other Asians; the third were the *Inlanders* (the native people) also named *Bumiputera*. Laws and regulations for these groups were written in several different books, and court proceedings and judgments were followed in different courts. Only in matters of commerce were the ethnic Chinese ruled under Dutch Commercial Law. However, if crimes occurred in trade matters, ethnic Chinese were treated as having the *Inlander's* status. If there were problems with competition with Chinese traders, the Dutch would drive the natives to fight ethnic Chinese and spread negative views about them. The massacre of ethnic Chinese in Batavia (or Jakarta) on October 9, 1740, is an example. The Dutch government extinguished several groups of ethnic Chinese by spreading the rumor among the natives that ethnic Chinese would kill them and rape their women and children. The rumor stirred attacks on the ethnic Chinese. More than 10,000 ethnic Chinese were killed. The corpses and blood of the ethnic Chinese scattered along the roads in Batavia led to the naming of *Kali Angke*, meaning *Red River*, and *Tanah Abang*, meaning *Red Land*, to mark these two locations in Jakarta that once turned red from bloodshed in a massacre. These names remain in use today. The political way of controlling people by turning ethnic Chinese into a scapegoat also occurred under the second presidential government of President Soeharto and the army. Indeed, almost all the riots in Indonesia have involved anti-Chinese sentiments.

identified them as Chinese or when they found themselves in the midst of a group of native Indonesians.²

According to Gilad Hirschberger's analysis, these stories result from collective trauma—a form of trauma that stems from a tragedy affecting an entire society because the group retains a collective memory of the event.³ He points out that collective trauma has long-standing effects among second and third-generation survivors and can damage their fundamental sense of security. Such people display individual and collective fear, vulnerable feelings, injured national pride, a crisis-ridden identity, and a predisposition to react with heightened vigilance to new threats.⁴

I believe that my story and my country's story are also other people's stories. Our world faces the reality of discrimination, racism, poverty, and marginalization from people of different faiths, races, ethnicities, economics, and politics. Some people might experience this directly. Some, like me, may experience it indirectly because it has been passed down to them by previous generations.

Collective traumas stem from a variety of events such as natural disasters, pandemic disasters, gun violence, wars, or other brutal events that happen in neighborhoods, societies, and nations. These traumas make the survivors feel unsafe in the place where they belong and cause them to mistrust their neighbors or other people that they knew before.⁵ They begin to live out Kai T. Erikson's description of the effect of collective trauma: "'I' continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. 'You' continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But 'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body."⁶

Besides collective trauma, some people might witness someone they know or who is close to them suffering from individual trauma, perhaps because of the loss of a loved one or injury, illness, relational abuse, domestic violence, or sexual abuse. They discover that the person is no longer the same as she was before. She experiences doubt about others and themselves.⁷ She is haunted by the traumatic events and perhaps even experiences a sense of shame.⁸ She feels abandoned, utterly alone, alienated, and disconnected. According to Judith Herman, when trust is lost, "traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than the living."⁹ She loses the words to describe her terrible experience because trauma steals their narrative processes

² Rani Pramesti, *Chinese Whispers*, 2014, Digital Graphic Novel, 2014, <https://thechinesewhispers.com/>.

³ Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>.

⁴ Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma," 3.

⁵ Kai T. Erikson, "Loss of Communitarity at Buffalo Creek," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 133, no. 3 (March 1976): 303–5, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.133.3.302>. Erikson mentions three behavioral manifestations of bond damage in society because of collective trauma. First is demoralization, which is when the traumatized community has a numb feeling about the future. Second is disorientation, which is when the victims have a sense of dislocation in the community to which they belong. Third is loss of connection, which is when the victims feel separated from other people. They feel as if they live in a strange land where nobody cares, so they keep their distance from others. They are haunted by the traumatic event, which makes them even more isolated.

⁶ Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Deconstruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 154.

⁷ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015), 53.

⁸ Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Scores: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Viking, 2014), 13.

⁹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 52.

and incapacitates their language.¹⁰ In Herman's terms, the "*unspeakable*" becomes a new word for the way traumatized people convey the tragic event that remains unspoken.¹¹

All the examples of trauma that I identify here emerge from the widespread trauma that exists in the world. This is the world's reality, a context in which trauma is "suffering that does not go away."¹² This reality affects the lives of individuals as well as whole societies, including Christian communities. According to Diana Langberg, the church belongs in the context of trauma, and this might be the most significant mission field in the twenty-first century.¹³ It is also the reality that reminds the church that traumatized people are all around her. They come to and are members of the church. They attend her services, sit in the pews, and listen to the sermons. They could even be the ministers, the leaders, the seminarians, and the preachers of the churches and seminaries.

My article is a response to this reality of trauma around the readers and a plea to become aware of the readers' calling as a Christian community where they are one body of Christ and belong to the world society. As Kimberly Wagner says, each preacher has an obligation to extend care to those communities deeply impacted by trauma. Thus, we need to have an honest and sincere conversation about that reality.¹⁴

I intentionally focus this paper on a model of preaching that takes into account the traumatic reality and puts that model into preaching practice. Using the preaching trauma healing approach developed by homileticians such as Sarah Travis, Kimberly R. Wagner, and Joni Sancken, this paper provides the theological-homiletical foundations and goal of trauma-aware preaching as a model for preaching amid trauma. In applying this model, I focus on Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons that belong to the two seasons of the church's liturgical calendar, namely Lenten and Easter.¹⁵

Trauma-Aware Preaching Discourse

Preaching amid trauma is difficult since the task involves sharing the gospel in the midst of a complex and complicated discourse. As Shelly Rambo recognizes, "the good news lies in the ability of Christian theology to witness between the death and life, in its ability to forge a new discourse between the two."¹⁶ When preaching in the face of trauma, there is "a pause, a disconnect, between trouble and grace."¹⁷ This means, as Sarah Travis says, "the primary task of Christian preaching is to express good news, but good news in the face of trauma is neither

¹⁰ Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology*, Kindle (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), ch.1, loc. 610.

¹¹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, 1.

¹² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

¹³ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁴ Kimberly R. Wagner, "The Work We Can't Ignore: Preaching and Gun Violence," *Interpretation* 76, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643221096132>.

¹⁵ According to the liturgical year of the Christian tradition, the Easter cycle consists of fourteen Sundays - six Sundays of Lent, seven Sundays of Easter, and one Sunday of Pentecost. In addition, there are several other commemorations between these weeks: Ash Wednesday and the Triduum: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, which is a journey from Christ's passion and death to his resurrection. See Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2003), 105, 111.

¹⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 8.

¹⁷ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

straightforward nor easily expressed.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, we must consider preaching in the face of trauma as challenging rather than impossible. It is an opportunity for seminaries and congregations to become healing communities of God’s grace in a world that is suffering greatly from trauma. Healing in the context of trauma means, in the case of individual trauma, the survivors reconnect with their community and the world.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the case of collective trauma, the traumatized community offers a safe place to share their wounds.²⁰

If we are to treat preaching as a challenging opportunity to share the gospel, then preaching in the face of trauma needs to be based on a trauma theology located in a position between the life and death of traumatized people and survivors. Rambo calls this an “in-between” position because the reality of trauma means the witness will be speaking in the difficult space between death and life, past and present, and absence and presence.²¹ Travis argues that this position is “a space between trouble and grace, a space in which trouble and grace intermingle.”²² She explains, “We are invited to live between trouble and grace, despair and hope, death and resurrection. This is a liminal space that is not one thing or the other—it is a third space between death and resurrection. We are invited to dwell in this space.”²³

Moreover, Rambo points to an “in-between” theology of trauma in the liturgical Christian calendar, located between the cross and the resurrection, i.e., on Holy Saturday, when Jesus descended into hell. Traumatized people suffer as if they were living in hell: “There is extreme loneliness, forsaken, and abandonment in hell, and they are completely cut off from all forms of relationship.”²⁴ However, Holy Saturday uncovers another dimension of God’s love, for it is “a testimony to the persistence of love in utter forsakenness and abandonment.”²⁵ The Holy Saturday events are marked by chaos and emptiness and, simultaneously, by “the unidentifiable ‘fruit’ coming out of this wound.”²⁶ She continues by saying that bringing the “in-between” of Holy Saturday into preaching means preaching the reality of hopelessness through the death of God, yet also the reality of a new beginning.²⁷

When interpreting Rambo’s “in-between” trauma healing preaching, Joni S. Sancken suggests such preaching takes place when the preacher resists preaching “tidy” grace or giving easy answers.²⁸ Following Sancken on the preaching of “tidy” grace, Travis locates preaching in-between in a time of waiting between the trauma and the resurrection, a time when few words can be said.²⁹ She writes:

We tell two stories at the same time: one of a resurrection that has overcome death and one that testifies to the ongoingness of death even in the face of the resurrection.

¹⁸ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

¹⁹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, 3.

²⁰ Kai T. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma Exploration in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 186-7.

²¹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 3.

²² Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

²³ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

²⁴ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 49.

²⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 53.

²⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 57.

²⁷ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 73.

²⁸ Joni S. Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls*, The Artistry of Preaching Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 22.

²⁹ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc.1341.

Sometimes, our stories end raggedly without being wrapped up with a smart and tidy bow.³⁰

In other words, preaching in-between admits the messiness of the stories of the traumatized and makes room for irregularities that result from trauma. Sometimes, there is no clear conclusion to a disorderly and incoherent story shared in the sermon. Wagner provides a clear example of preaching in a liminal place:

Such preaching takes seriously the experience of narrative fracture, acknowledging and even welcoming the fragments of people's experience. It welcomes the hurt, pain, questions, unknowability, confusion, and frustration. Such preaching does not shy away from hard emotions, grief, or lament but embraces and even models these hard truths in the preaching event. At the same time, this preaching does not resist the longing for hope or the promises of God that, though not always sensed at the moment, are already present and coming toward us. Such preaching lives in the tension between brokenness and hope, between death and resurrection, between loss and redemption.³¹

Hence, Wagner proposes trauma-aware preaching as a healing approach to trauma. She defines trauma-aware preaching as "preaching that takes seriously and is attentive to the traumatic realities that may be knowingly or unknowingly present in communities every day.... It is preaching that does not divorce experience of trauma or the ongoing reality of trauma events from holy spaces of worship and proclamation."³² By this definition, trauma-aware preaching provides a safe space for traumatized individuals and communities to reconstruct narratives, foster individual and community resilience, and reconnect with the community.³³ Therefore, Wagner concludes that trauma-aware preaching consistently performs one of the steps of trauma healing: "establishing safety."³⁴

The challenge in preaching trauma healing is putting this homiletical model into practice. Then, how do preachers and congregations incorporate this theology into their worship and preaching ministries? Since the ministry of preaching is part of practical theology, it is an *activity* of believers in sustaining their reflective faith in daily life and also *a method* or way of bringing theology into practice.³⁵ For this reason, in the next part of this article, I will discuss the model and the theme of trauma-aware preaching for Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons.

Trauma-Aware Preaching for Lent, Triduum, and Easter Sermons

To instill preaching in-between into preaching practice, especially during the Lenten and Easter seasons, preachers must be attentive to the preaching process. What is advantageous in preaching amid trauma during the Lent and Easter seasons is that trauma theology is based upon the story of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, which is, of course, also the central theme

³⁰ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 1350.

³¹ Kimberly R. Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, Kindle (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 96.

³² Wagner, "The Work We Can't Ignore," 244.

³³ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 30, 49; Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch.1, loc. 746.

³⁴ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 49.

³⁵ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5.

of these seasons of the liturgical year. Moreover, this theme sounds of sadness, mourning, death, and resistance, which is the lamentation form of traumatized people and communities. Therefore, I suggest that preachers consider the theme and form as they begin their preaching trauma healing process for Lent, Triduum, and Easter.

First, consider the theme of preaching trauma healing. Trauma-preaching homileticians agree on using preaching “in-between” as an approach in which the sermon functions as a means of trauma healing. As I stated above, preaching in-between shows that God’s grace allows suffering, loneliness, and hurt to coexist with the hope of healing. Preaching in-between stands in the tension between death and resurrection. Specifically, Wagner proposes “eschatological hope” as the good news communicated in preaching. A message about Christ’s resurrection as a form of God’s mercy and grace offers future hope, redemption, and comfort to all creation.³⁶ She argues that “eschatological hope” is based on the cross of Christ, which shows that God takes upon Godself the path of suffering and abandonment and then transforms it into new life. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ show the redeeming and life-giving character of God, who “does not ignore or erase pain and suffering.” He instead takes that suffering, redeems it, overcomes it, and transforms it.³⁷

Hence, preaching in-between is about preachers committing to holding an eschatological tension that takes seriously “both the horrid reality of the traumatic experience and the promise of God.”³⁸ In fact, there is a tendency to preach more about hope and God’s promises and ignore the pain, hurt, disorientation, and suffering. The fear of re-traumatizing listeners by mentioning traumatic events can undermine the tension of eschatological hope, with sermons offering instead cheap grace. Preaching only hope can create an unsafe space for traumatized people.³⁹ At the other extreme, there is a tendency to glorify pain and suffering in preaching. Fearful of giving false assurance and cheap grace, preachers ignore the message of redemption that God has effected and, as a result, allow trauma to steal the message of hope and anticipation of the future.⁴⁰ The solution is preaching in tension: “holding the reality of brokenness, pain, and traumatic loss on one side and hope, resurrection, and redemption on the other.”⁴¹

This does not mean preaching 50/50 or always holding to the middle of the two extremes, as “preachers may find themselves preaching [more] to one side or the other.”⁴² Wagner suggests that even if preachers find during their preparations that the theological position of the sermon is leaning more strongly to one side, they should still try to hold the tension on the other side. In fact, when preaching after a traumatic event, preachers need to be intentional about naming and acknowledging the reality of brokenness and pain while proclaiming hope and God’s promises as the good news in the sermon.⁴³

Second, ponder the lament content and form for preaching trauma healing. Preaching in-between thus encourages preachers to find a form that can hold this tension between brokenness and pain and hope in God. Both Wagner and Travis point to “lament as a language of faith” that addresses this tension.⁴⁴ As a language of faith, lament reveals the paradoxical reality of

³⁶ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 62.

³⁷ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 63.

³⁸ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 65.

³⁹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 66-7.

⁴⁰ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 68.

⁴¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 68.

⁴² Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 70.

⁴³ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 70.

⁴⁴ Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 238; Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 5, loc. 1311.

brokenness and hope that is part of life. In the Bible, the genre of lament shows the fragility of human beings, their response to suffering, and their courage to bring that suffering to God.⁴⁵ Moreover, Wagner explains “lament as a generative act” that has various functions: lament gives voice to those who are voiceless because of trauma, provides healing when individuals and communities of laments have space to bring their plea, becomes a form of protest against injustice that is brought before God and the public, and presents people’s faith to a God who can heal the world in its broken condition.⁴⁶ In addition to human lament, Eliana Ah-Rum Ku mentions divine lament, which appears in the crucifixion story, as God’s way of responding to and expressing God’s solidarity with human suffering and God’s great compassion. Through divine lament, “human beings can embrace hope and express a lament that is transformed in the reality of suffering.”⁴⁷

Lament addresses the relationship between the laments, others, God, and the community. When sin and systemic evil cause the breakdown of relationships, lament functions to bring about social change through community reconciliation. Lamenters crying out against those who have oppressed them is what Sancken calls “constructive anger” because it offers a radical critique of injustice, a call for change, and the desire to transform reality. In addition, preaching lament demonstrates solidarity between the preacher, the audience, and the wounded community. As Sancken points out, “Lament in Preaching uses ‘we’ language to include the preacher in solidarity with the suffering and to acknowledge our own complicity in the cause of lament.”⁴⁸ The ‘we’ in lament suggests an inseparable relationship between preachers and the wounded community, who share the same experience of violence and bear witness to the suffering caused. Therefore, the community of faith, the place where the sermon is preached, “contributes to promoting healing by respecting and listening to the life experiences of all, including those who are marginalized, giving them the assurance that the voices of suffering will be heard and accepted.”⁴⁹ Ku adds that lament sermons open up healing spaces for wounded communities to embrace “difference” through invitations to preachers, listeners, and other communities to engage in broader dialog about traumatic events.⁵⁰

Given the advantages and richness of the lament content and form for preaching trauma healing, I suggest that Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermon texts be modeled on the lament genre. Preachers who preach in congregations that use the lectionary tradition should choose the Psalms as their preaching texts.

Themes of the Lent, the Triduum, and Easter Sermons

For the suggestion of the themes, I am in debt to Wagner when I am using her “five essential characteristics of trauma-aware preaching:”

⁴⁵ Joni S. Sancken, *All Our Grievs to Bear: Responding with Resilience after Collective Trauma* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2022), 60.

⁴⁶ Kimberly R. Wagner, “What Do We Preach? Trauma, Lament, and Social Action,” *Call to Worship* 52, no. 3 (2018):12, <https://www.preachingandtrauma.com/post/what-do-we-preach-trauma-lament-and-social-action>; Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, 53, 180-1.

⁴⁷ Eliana Ah Rum Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching: Proclaiming Hope amid Suffering* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024), 178.

⁴⁸ Sancken, *All Our Grievs to Bear*, 67.

⁴⁹ Eliana Ah Rum Ku, “A Call for Practicing Hospitality Based on Lament in Preaching for a Wounded Community,” *Homiletic* 47, no. 2 (November 30, 2022): 20, <https://www.homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5368>.

⁵⁰ Ku, “A Call for Practicing Hospitality Based on Lament in Preaching for a Wounded Community,” 22.

First, this “preaching invites bold truth-telling. Preachers must be honest about what has happened and what has been lost or broken.”⁵¹ Even though telling the truth runs the risk of shaking the community’s belief, preachers must be honest about the effect of traumatic events on individuals and communities.⁵² Thus, in a case of gun violence, for example, the preacher might name gun violence directly as part of a sermon illustration and application.⁵³

Second, preaching that is attentive to a “traumatic narrative fracture” acknowledges and names the complex emotions of the community.⁵⁴ Wagner believes that “naming grief, guilt, and gratitude (among other feelings) invites people to bring what they are carrying into the preaching space before God and one another.”⁵⁵ Travis says the same, suggesting, “Perhaps preaching is also an opportunity to give a name to the nameless, unspeakable reality of trauma.”⁵⁶ When a preacher names events or tragedies as trauma, sermons give language or vocabulary to the very real emotions and experiences that shape the individual and community’s lives.⁵⁷

Third, preaching allows traumatized individuals and the community to pose their confused questions. Preachers are invited to be wise in suggesting answers and acknowledging people’s unanswered questions without rushing too quickly to present solutions.⁵⁸ Wagner suggests the lament model in the Bible is a relevant example of trauma-aware preaching. Those who lament ask hard questions that reveal their confusion about various tragedies. They plead with God to intervene in their suffering. Preachers who preach the lament model apply their pastoral and priestly gifts because, in so doing, they “embody the work of faithful questioning as well as call out to God with and on behalf of the community.”⁵⁹

Fourth, when the effect of trauma has broken the bonds of a community, trauma-aware preaching calls on Christians “to prepare the ground for communal reconstruction and reimagination, not merely a return to some impossible-to-recover past.”⁶⁰ Through their sermons, preachers invite people in the community to give and receive care among themselves in order to heal the damage caused by trauma.⁶¹ Wagner emphasizes that the sermon is “an invitation to participate in broader dialogue... It invites people to respond honestly and makes space for communal wrestling and dialogue.”⁶²

Fifth, trauma-aware preaching summons preachers to be aware of and be honest about “the existence and nature of the sin and evil” that cause violence, injustice, hate, destruction, loss, and hurt in the world. In such a sermon, preachers seek to identify sin and evil mindfully, invite the community to practice confession, and tell them about God’s grace and love, thus making it possible to defeat evil in the world. Hence, this sort of preaching creates a safe place for people to bring their brokenness, as well as to promote justice and peace.⁶³

To apply these characteristics of trauma-aware preaching, I propose the following themes for Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons.

⁵¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 56.

⁵² Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 244.

⁵³ Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 244.

⁵⁴ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 57.

⁵⁵ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 57.

⁵⁶ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 3, loc. 1674.

⁵⁷ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 3, loc. 1674.

⁵⁸ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 58.

⁵⁹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 59-60.

⁶⁰ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 60.

⁶¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 61.

⁶² Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 245.

⁶³ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 61.

TRAUMA-AWARE PREACHING ON LENT, TRIDUUM, AND EASTER SERMONS

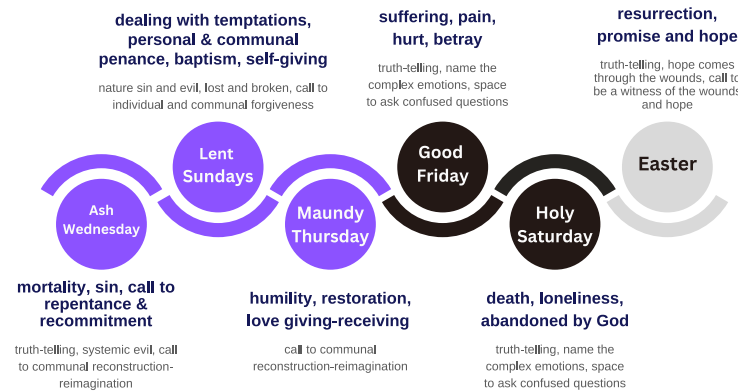


Figure 1: Trauma-Aware Preaching on Lent, Triduum, and Easter Sermons

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the start of Lent, which is itself the beginning of the story of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. The first step in the journey to new life in Christ calls the congregation to recognize and face the human mortality and the community fragility that brings her to the edge of death.⁶⁴ This reality invites the congregation to remember her fragility, sins, and the call to return to God. Therefore, Ash Wednesday calls for repentance and recommitment.⁶⁵ In the liturgy, the symbolic action of ashes placed on the forehead with the sign of the cross indicates that we are fragile—*memento mori*: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:1)—while the grace of Christ has returned to the God who created human beings.

For this event, I recommend that sermons cover various events in this world that cause trauma because of sin and evil. Preachers might mention violent events or disasters occurring in the context of this world (truth-telling). While there are disasters for which we cannot find the cause, many humanitarian tragedies occur because of original sin and systemic evil, which then lead to civil and social death. Original sin is the sin that “we inherit it by virtue of being born in a society that is marred by sin; we inherit it because we live in a society whose institution has been corrupted and the corruption has been perpetuated.”⁶⁶ This systemic evil, which legalizes unequal power and privilege, causes violence and suffering in human life. It dehumanizes, corrupts, and kills people by restricting their access to the necessities of life.⁶⁷ The result is civil death. Here, a person or community is still part of society, and they seem to live normally, like other people. They live in the same neighborhoods as other people and are free to think, talk, and

⁶⁴ Bower, *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, 109.

⁶⁵ Anna B. Olson, “Ash Wednesday: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Commentary 2,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 12.

⁶⁶ Eliazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in the Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 67.

⁶⁷ Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 72.

do anything. However, their civil rights are limited. For example, they may lack the right to own property, to vote, or to bring a legal case to court.⁶⁸

This Ash Wednesday event is an invitation to recognize the congregation's fragile state due to original sin and systemic evil. The sermon calls the congregation to do personal and collective repentance, as well as issue an invitation to the Christian community to fight against sin and systemic evil. As part of society, the congregation can build networks with communities outside the church, with non-Christians, interfaith groups, and even the government, to fight for equality, justice, and peace.

Lent

Lent is the forty-day period during which the Church prepares for Easter and which is characterized by the discipline of fasting. This discipline is connected to the story of Jesus, who fasted for forty days and forty nights in the desert, where he was tempted by the devil before beginning his ministry in the world. This temptation of Jesus, according to Abbot Prosper Guéranger, is the reason why the Christians commemorate Lent with fasting because they are dealing with the three temptations that come from "the devil, the flesh, and the world."⁶⁹ Therefore, Lent has a theme of repentance, both personal and communal. In this case, "not only do the individual and his conduct, attitudes, and values need changing, but so also do societal structures, attitudes, values, and procedures."⁷⁰ This change of life marks another Lenten theme, that of rebirth, marked by the event of baptism.

The themes of Lent are largely the same as those of Ash Wednesday, namely, truth-telling, original sin, systemic evil, and repentance. Affirming the suffering of this world from the traumatic events that devalue human life and eliminate community is an early step in preaching trauma healing during Lent. Through the sermon, the congregation is reminded that the suffering in this world occurs because, as individuals and communities, she falls into the three temptations of life mentioned above. In response, she can be a bystander, allowing violence and oppression to occur in society. She can be a community that does not provide space for victims to speak out. She can allow the community to be complicit in systemic evil and do nothing to confront it.

There are several suggestions for trauma healing through Lenten sermons. Personal and community repentance remains the preaching call of the season. Learning from Christ's self-giving, such repentance should be followed by personal and communal acts of proclamation, such as asking for apologies to victims and forgiveness for perpetrators. In *Risky Hospitality*, Septemmy E. Lakawa suggests that, as a part of the hospitality practice, communities in conflict create spaces for sharing everyday experiences of violence, making meaning of them, and connecting them to the suffering context of this world.⁷¹ She believes that the process of trauma healing is to share people's unspoken wounds and link their wounds with the wounds of the other community.⁷² Therefore, in this season, the call to be a community of forgiveness and to work on

⁶⁸ Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), xviii, xx.

⁶⁹ Abbot Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year: Lent*, trans. Dom Laurence Shepherd, Jubilee Year 2000, vol. The Liturgical Year 15, 5 vols. (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2000), 22.

⁷⁰ Eduard Richard Riegert, "Lent-Easter Cycle," *Lutheran Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (February 1974): 12–23, <http://www.lutheranquarterly.com>, 19.

⁷¹ Septemmy Eucharistia Lakawa, "Risky Hospitality: Mission in The Aftermath of Religious Communal Violence in Indonesia" (ThD diss, Boston, Massachusetts, Boston University School of Theology, 2011), 5–6.

⁷² Lakawa, "Risky Hospitality," 455.

trauma healing in collaboration with communities outside the church or beyond is a powerful theme for preaching trauma healing.

Maundy Thursday

The meaning of Maundy Thursday calls the congregation to restore their lives through penitential acts and the declaration of pardon. Peter Bower recognizes that “the act of foot-washing connotes humility and intimacy, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper embodies the mystery of Christ’s enduring redemptive presence.”⁷³ This event is a call to imitate and remember the humility, intimacy, and love of Christ through the ritual of foot washing and the Lord’s Supper. When a church engages in this tradition, he explains, it finds itself transformed in loving others and the world as it joins with other Christians in caring for all creation.⁷⁴

Emphasizing the act of imitating Christ’s love for the world, the proposed sermon theme for this event is a call to communal reconstruction and imagination. In this theme, the sermon focuses on inviting the congregation to work on healing trauma by engaging her members, churchgoers, and other communities outside the church. Involving the congregation’s members and churchgoers in preaching trauma healing means that they are open to a process of dialogue about the traumatic event and the trauma that remains in their community. If the trauma was caused by conflict within the congregation, then the Maundy Thursday sermon is an opportunity to reconcile the conflict. The willingness to ask for and give forgiveness is a concrete example of learning to be Christlike in humility.

Meanwhile, Maundy Thursday sermons are an invitation to foster resilience in society by engaging the broader community in trauma healing. By talking about trauma and consistently preaching a theology of the tension between death and resurrection, preachers build a theology of resilience for a society under the weight of trauma. In addition to equipping congregations to survive, such preaching opens opportunities for them to care for one another as a community of recovery and to form communal support systems.⁷⁵ When traumatic events occur in the future, the congregation and society will become better at surviving and supporting each other.

Good Friday

On Good Friday, the church commemorates Christ’s journey of suffering on the cross. For C. S. Song, a Taiwanese theologian, the theology of the cross has two symbolic meanings. First is the pain-love of God, which means that God suffers and experiences the same suffering as human beings in order to save the world from sin. Therefore, the cross speaks of the suffering, pain, hurt, betrayal, violence, sacrifice, and survival experienced by human beings and also by Jesus as God in solidarity.⁷⁶ Second, the cross is a symbol of redemption, where Christ’s suffering defeats the oppressive, destructive, deadly power of the oppressors.⁷⁷

The theme of the cross reveals violence, oppression, and abuse of power and thus becomes a preaching language of truth-telling that also applies to cases of trauma in everyday life. In addition, the cross represents God’s compassion towards human suffering, both physical and emotional. This perspective, according to Ku, leads each individual and community to see

⁷³ Bower, *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, 114.

⁷⁴ Bower, *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, 114.

⁷⁵ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 136.

⁷⁶ Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 89.

⁷⁷ Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 188.

the suffering of others as part of the communal self. That means suffering is not silenced or hidden but is brought into the public sphere. This perspective has implications for the themes and content of trauma-healing preaching. The reality of the suffering of others becomes the communal self, and lament becomes the way in which the incarnation of Jesus is present in the restorative community.⁷⁸

Therefore, the sermon provides space for the listeners to express emotions arising from their own or others' experiences of trauma. This can also become a corporate lament. Questions about suffering, power, and theodicy that are not easily answered may also be addressed in Good Friday sermons for trauma healing. In addition, such sermons can offer small examples of what congregations can do to restore suffering people by proclaiming Christ's solidarity. The congregation can be invited to join with others in public mourning, for example, and accept the suffering of others as their own in a way that promotes healing.⁷⁹

Moreover, the symbol of redemption in the cross of Christ in the Good Friday sermon is applicable in its content about injustice, crime, poverty, and suffering in this world caused by the nature of sin and systemic evil. The good news of Christ's redemption on the cross in the trauma preaching healing invites the congregation to participate in efforts to fight injustice and strive for peace and prosperity in the context of society and the world.

Holy Saturday

Ku notes that Holy Saturday represents a "dark night for the soul" and a "full descent" with no hope of recovery. It is a time to face the death of Jesus and the silence of God. Jesus showed his strongest solidarity with people when he was abandoned by God in death. "Jesus responds to sufferers with his soul and life, actively and passionately staying with people at the end of suffering."⁸⁰ She calls this moment God's solidarity with "our God-abandonment."⁸¹ His solidarity is also seen when He gives space to the suffering and the traumatized to express all the expressions of grief, anger, pain, hurt, and death itself. The process of healing occurs because this space for lament processes negative emotions into a journey toward hope.⁸²

Preaching about God's solidarity through the metaphor of God's silence can be interpreted as God being present because, in his silence, he listens to those who suffer. He offers "a space of waiting, of embracing death, pain and life."⁸³ Therefore, the themes of Holy Saturday relate to the wounds and suffering of trauma; the condition of traumatized people, such as being in death (truth-telling); providing space for the expression of complex emotions, such as anger, disappointment, hurt, and confusion; and providing opportunities for lament in the sermon, as well as space to ask perplexing questions about the traumatic event and God's presence and role therein. Holy Saturday sermons are thus also open to moments of silence and not necessarily filled with the words of preachers but with art forms such as dance, poetry, song, and images.

Easter

The Christian community celebrates Christ's victory over death through the resurrection. This event signifies redemption from sin, victory over evil and death, and new life. In the context

⁷⁸ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*.

⁷⁹ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 304.

⁸⁰ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 157-9.

⁸¹ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 157-9.

⁸² Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 199.

⁸³ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 270-1.

of trauma, the resurrection is the hope of restoration. Because Christ is with sufferers in death, he gives them redemption by accepting the wounds, pain, and suffering of traumatic events. At the same time, Christ invites individuals and communities to be witnesses to traumatic events and witnesses for change and to work for justice, peace, and love.

The call to be witnesses of the resurrection is a powerful message for Christian people and communities. It is consistent with the process of trauma healing in which victims, survivors, families, perpetrators, and even the process of recovery itself become witnesses to the trauma experienced by individuals and communities. Since preaching, by definition, also means a testimony to God's work for humanity and all of creation, it plays an important role as a space where trauma is named and remembered. Therefore, the theme options for preaching trauma healing on Easter Day are telling the truth, hope coming through the wounds, and the call to be a witness of the wounds.

According to Rambo, in his Gospel, John gives the resurrection a sense of trauma when the testimony of the risen Christ comes from the witnesses' struggle to understand life after death.⁸⁴ As a traumatized witness to the resurrection, Mary Magdalene gives a unique testimony: she remains in a state of mourning, she weeps (John 20:11-14), she is not immediately able to see and recognize the risen Christ (John 20:15-16), and she is not immediately able to touch Jesus (John 20:17).⁸⁵ Here, a witness to trauma does not negate her grief but encounters the absence and the presence of Jesus at the same time.⁸⁶ Another resurrection story is Jesus' encounter with Thomas Didymus (John 20:24-29). The process of trauma healing occurs when Jesus invites Thomas to see and touch his wounds. Seeing and touching Jesus' wounds is part of a journey toward truth and truth-telling. People such as war veterans who do not recognize their wounds caused by moral injury are invited to recognize them through the wounds of Christ.⁸⁷

Conclusion

When the reality of trauma and its effects on society and the world is inescapable, the call of the Christian community is to be a healing community. This means that all ministries of the community are directed toward the process of healing from trauma, both individually and collectively. One aspect of ministry that can provide a restorative space is preaching. Trauma-aware preaching calls the congregation to proclaim the good news of God, who is with those who are suffering, hurting, and grieving from trauma. The good news of the tension between suffering and liberation, grief and hope, and death and resurrection becomes the gospel in trauma-aware preaching.

Trauma-aware preaching emerges from a theology of Christ's suffering and resurrection that accepts the reality of pain, grief, and suffering, as well as offers hope for trauma healing. In fact, this theology, which is the cornerstone of the faith, is celebrated by Christians every year during the Lenten and Easter seasons. Through each event of the seasons, the themes of the sermons show that the hope of trauma healing is growing—albeit slowly and gradually, and not superficially and prematurely—in the hearts of every suffering person and community.⁸⁸ Therefore, the themes of Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons are truth-telling, naming complex

⁸⁴ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 81.

⁸⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 89.

⁸⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 89-90.

⁸⁷ Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 136-7.

⁸⁸ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 289.

emotions, asking difficult questions, calling for community rebuilding and reimagining, and showing the reality of the nature of sin and systemic evil.

Given that talking about trauma is so complex, preachers must recognize that trauma-aware preaching runs the risk of triggering and exacerbating trauma. Wagner reminds preachers that in trauma-sensitive preaching, preachers need to be mindful of stories, images, and words in the Bible and in their sermons that might trigger trauma. She suggests that preachers preface their sermons with a content warning and an invitation to self-care, either in the bulletin or the order of service.⁸⁹ In fact, Travis suggests that preachers give listeners permission to leave the sanctuary without risk of censure if the sermon disturbs them.⁹⁰ The most important thing to remember is that preaching is a church ministry that does not stand alone and is pastoral in nature. This means that preachers, if they are pastors, continue their pastoral work for listeners who are traumatized after the sermon.

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⁸⁹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 134.

⁹⁰ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 3, loc. 1921.

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“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 location 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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Sunggu A. Yang, *Arts and Preaching: An Aesthetic Homiletic for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

**A Time to Keep, A Time to Throw Away:
Preaching and White Christian Nationalism**

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Abstract: *As white Christian nationalism takes center stage in American politics and the second Trump administration, preachers and church leaders find themselves disoriented and concerned about what this means for the church and the nation. Through sociological, historical, theological, and homiletical perspectives on white Christian nationalism and its antecedents in U.S. history and culture, this article offers a starting point for interpreting the present moment of uncertainty and volatility. The article considers related themes such as American exceptionalism, the American rhetorical “jeremiad,” and civil religion that reflect cultural and social myths that can hamper prophetic and authentic preaching and even Christian discipleship, and suggests what preachers might “keep” and “throw-away” in their preaching and leadership.*

Introduction

My brother-in-law David has an ongoing conundrum. An “evangelical” pastor, David lives and works in contexts that have become more socially and politically conservative than he is—which is to say, he does not support the policies, rhetoric, or values of “Trumpism.” His commitment to evangelicalism has been put to the test as words like “evangelical” have come to mean something he does not believe—so much so that he has given up that label for himself. After receiving backlash for calling evangelical peers toward more generous, compassionate, and Christlike approaches to immigration, racism, and economic justice, he had all but given up posting on Facebook. Since the second inauguration of President Trump, however, David can no longer hold his tongue, God bless him. His posts of lament and fear and hope and compassion have returned, backlash be damned.

David is not the only one struggling with the shifting tides of “evangelicalism” and the melding of conservative Christianity with ardent support for Donald Trump. A tidal wave of books, think pieces, and podcasts dissecting these trends has been flooding the public sphere for at least a decade.¹ Studies of the first Trump administration show that 16 percent of white Trump supporters who were not evangelical in 2016 began to identify as evangelical or born again by

¹ For example: Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020); David Brooks, “The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewal.html>; “How Support for Trump Is Causing a Rift in the Evangelical Church,” *NPR*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/29/1215806967/how-support-for-trump-is-causing-a-rift-in-the-evangelical-church>; Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York, NY: Harper, 2023); Peter Smith, “Jesus Is Their Savior, Trump Is Their Candidate,” *AP News*, May 18, 2024, sec. Religion, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-christian-evangelicals-conservatives-2024-election-43f25118c133170c77786daf316821c3>; Peter Wehner, “Evangelicals Made a Bad Trade,” *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/01/evangelicals-trump/681450/>; Stephanie McCrummen, “Army of God,” *Atlantic Monthly* (Atlantic Media Group, LLC, February 1, 2025); Brad Onishi and Dan Miller, “Straight White American Jesus Podcast,” accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.straightwhiteamericanjesus.com/>.

2020 (compared to only 1 percent of non-supporters).² Simultaneously, by 2019, about 50 percent of self-identified, politically conservative evangelicals said they never go to church, up from about a third in 2008. As political scientist and Baptist pastor Ryan Burge put it in 2021, “Now, the data indicate that more and more Americans are conflating evangelicalism with Republicanism—and melding two forces to create a movement that is not entirely about politics or religion but power.”³ As I was writing this article, Pope Francis issued a letter to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in which he criticized U.S. policies of mass deportation and directly refuted theological claims made by Vice President JD Vance, who is Catholic. What “evangelical,” “Catholic,” or even “Christian” means in the United States seems more disorienting by the day.

The early months of 2025 find the United States in a significant moment of uncertainty, instability, and crisis. Many of us who lead and guide Christian communities and institutions feel unmoored as our congregations react to national events and as we witness the confusing and alarming ways in which Christianity is being used and coopted in cultural and political spheres. Often at the center of the discussion is the rise of white Christian nationalism, both as a movement and as a demonstration of the distortions of Christianity in U.S. society. This article attempts to assess some of the implications of white Christian nationalism for preaching and homiletics by examining what it is and is not and by understanding some factors that have led to its current ascendancy.

Because the consequences of white Christian nationalism have varying impacts on different people and groups, I begin by naming my own social location. I am a cis het white woman, a U.S. citizen, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), through whose institutions I received most of my education; I have a PhD from an elite institution (Vanderbilt University); I have no major health issues or conditions; I have no children (but do have a cat); and I am married to a Presbyterian minister who is the head of staff at an established, relatively healthy, and financially stable congregation in Louisville, Kentucky. Thus far, I am not at the top of any list of “enemies” of white Christian nationalists or the federal government.

I would guess that a majority of *Homiletic* readers also are not at the top of white Christian nationalist target lists—not yet, anyway. Readers who are persons of color and/or immigrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and others who are vulnerable in various ways may rightly feel more at risk. For all of us, though, social location and cultural identification are important considerations in our response to white Christian nationalism, especially as the meaning of the very words we use to describe ourselves—such as “Christian”—continues to shift. For those of us in (typically white) mainline denominations whose traditions have enjoyed forms of cultural power and influence, attention to our identity is of particular relevance as we examine white Christian nationalism.

Homiletic has many readers outside of the United States. My focus here is on U.S. history and identity, and is addressed first and foremost to the U.S. context. This is not incidental. Rather, I believe the U.S. Christian community needs to attend closely to these matters precisely because of our influence abroad and because of our often myopic and self-absorbed orientation

² Gregory A. Smith, “More White Americans Adopted than Shed Evangelical Label during Trump Presidency, Especially His Supporters,” September 15, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/15/more-white-americans-adopted-than-shed-evangelical-label-during-trump-presidency-especially-his-supporters/>.

³ Ryan Burge, “Opinion | Why ‘Evangelical’ Is Becoming Another Word for ‘Republican,’” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/opinion/evangelical-republican.html>.

toward Christian identity throughout our national history. I am grateful for those beyond the borders of the United States who help us see ourselves more clearly, and I look forward to further transnational and intercultural conversation.

In what follows, I bring together elements from sociology, history, theology, and homiletics to craft an understanding of white Christian nationalism in the United States, along with some of its historical roots and expressions, and pose contemporary implications for preachers and the American Christian church. Everything is changing rapidly, making these conversations disorienting as the ground shifts under our feet. I draw wisdom from Ecclesiastes 3:6, where there is a season and a time for everything under heaven—and in this time, I propose we assess what remains ours to keep and what it is time to throw away.

Framing White Christian Nationalism

Despite common usage, the phrase “white Christian nationalism” does not lend itself to a simple definition. None of the words “*white*,” “*Christian*,” or “*nationalism*” can be taken at face value; behind each lies a cluster of beliefs and ideologies traceable through U.S. history and made new in the 21st century.

First, what do we mean by *Christian nationalism*? At a basic level, Christian nationalism prioritizes and privileges a form of Christianity as a central component of American identity. The Christians Against Christian Nationalism movement, organized by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, states, “Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian.”⁴

What is meant by “Christian,” however, is not easy to pin down. While certain theological beliefs may align with Christian nationalist ideology, correlation and causation are less obvious. In *Taking America Back for God*, sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry describe Christian nationalism as “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture,” specifically ideological beliefs about historical identity, cultural preeminence, and political influence.⁵ The primary interests of Christian nationalists are political rather than religious, which is why the attitudes and activities of Christian nationalism often appear fundamentally opposed to traditional or even conservative Christian ethical commitments.⁶ According to Whitehead and Perry, in sociological terms, “a commitment to Christian nationalism is not in any way similar to ‘religious commitment.’”⁷ Importantly, Whitehead and Perry summarily reject the assumption that “evangelical” is synonymous with Christian nationalism, despite how these words may be used in popular culture:

Christian nationalism is a framework that orients Americans’ perspectives on national identity, belonging, and social hierarchies. American evangelicalism, strictly speaking, is a theological tradition prioritizing certain doctrinal commitments, including biblical

⁴ “Statement from Christians Against Christian Nationalism,” accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>.

⁵ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, eBook (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), Preface.

⁶ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Ch. 2, Power.

⁷ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Introduction.

inerrancy and conversionism. While a large percentage of Christian nationalists are affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations and hold characteristically evangelical beliefs, many non-evangelicals (or non-Christians, for that matter) also hold strong Christian nationalist beliefs. Conversely, many white evangelicals in surveys unequivocally reject Christian nationalism.⁸

Beyond a general desire to merge a form of Christianity with American identity, what beliefs distinguish Christian nationalism? In *The Flag and the Cross*, Perry and another sociologist, Philip Gorski, outline seven “indicators” that together serve as markers for American Christian nationalism. Each demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between “Christianity” and the identity and purpose of the United States. Gorski and Perry measure overall agreement with these statements (or disagreement, in the case of #5) to assess the strength of Christian nationalist belief:

1. I consider the founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution to be divinely inspired.
2. The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.
3. The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.
4. The federal government should advocate Christian values.
5. The federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state.
6. The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.
7. The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.⁹

Gorski and Perry provide an extended explanation as to why these indicators are useful for measuring and interpreting Christian nationalism. For the purposes of this article, it will suffice to note that Christian nationalists are concerned with things like whether God has a special relationship with the United States, how U.S. history is interpreted in relationship to Christianity, and what kinds of policies the federal government should enact. Perhaps tellingly, these indicators suggest little in the way of Christian theology or doctrine.

Given this basic framework for Christian nationalism, what do we mean by *white* Christian nationalism? Gorski and Perry’s work seeks to answer that question through demographic interpretation of the data. When analyzed alongside racial markers, Christian nationalist indicators do not merely designate conservative political viewpoints but strongly correlate with ultra-conservative beliefs *held by white Americans in particular*. In other words, while Americans of various racial and ethnic backgrounds may affirm elements of Christian nationalism, the strength of Christian nationalist indicators correlates with racist white beliefs, such as that white Americans face more discrimination than Black Americans. Thus:

Indicators of Christian nationalism. . . are powerful predictors of ultra-conservatism for white Americans, especially on any issues involving race, discrimination, xenophobia, or

⁸ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Preface.

⁹ Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 15–16.

justice. . . Whiteness is the hidden link that transforms the deep story of Christian nationalism into a political vision.¹⁰

The concepts of “whiteness” and “Christian” thus converge to define what counts as “American.” In fact, the distinctions between these terms are blurred in white Christian nationalism; as Gorski and Perry put it, “At issue is not just religious nostalgia or even religious conservatism, as if such things transcended ethnic and racial identities. Rather, it is an acute strain of ethno-traditionalism in which ‘white’ and ‘Christian’ are conflated into a single identity—‘white-Christian.’”¹¹

The “deep story” of Christian nationalism preserves identity and beliefs in which white American Christians are the only ones worthy to receive the full benefits of being American. “Whiteness” has long symbolized goodness and righteousness, especially in triumphalist narratives of American history, as conveyed by “City on a Hill” or “manifest destiny” visions of success, blessing, and strength. The white narrative can also be that of persecution, in which the purity and virtue of white Christian America have been “polluted” and its success and prosperity stolen by “outsiders” who are undeserving of its benefits.¹² Either way, heroic or persecuted, within white Christian nationalism, whiteness remains the defining measure of American-Christian purity and “worthiness.”¹³

Because the deep story of white-Christian identity centers on who counts as a real Americans (namely, “good people like us”), this identity and its benefits must be protected.¹⁴ “Liberty,” therefore, translates to the authority and freedom to exercise control over “others” (everyone else) through violence when necessary. Within this framework, “others” are seen as savage, disorderly, sinful, uncivilized, and dangerous by nature. The rhetoric of “freedom” and “order” signifies a patriarchal and racial hierarchy of power, authority, and dominance, specifically that of “(white) men exercising (righteous) violence to defend (their) freedom and

¹⁰ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 22.

¹¹ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 27.

¹² Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 110–12.

¹³ A clear example of this ideology currently being executed is the purge of “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” efforts in the federal government, initiated by executive order on January 20, 2025, entitled “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing” (The White House, “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing” (2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>). While the order is vague about what constitutes a “DEI” program, later governmental instructions were more specific. For instance, the Department of Defense claimed that “DEI content includes but is not limited to information that promotes programs, concepts, or materials about critical race theory, gender ideology, and preferential treatment or quotas based upon sex, race or ethnicity, or other DEI related matters with respect to promotion and selection reform, advisory boards, councils or working groups. Content requiring removal also includes that which is counter to merit-based or color-blind policies (e.g. articles that focus on immutable characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, or sex) or promotes cultural awareness months as outlined in Secretary Hegseth’s January 31, 2025, Memorandum, ‘Identity Months Dead at DoD’” (Sean Parnell, “Digital Content Refresh Memo,” Department of Defense, February 26, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Feb/27/2003652943/-1/-1/1/DIGITAL-CONTENT-REFRESH.PDF>). This DoD order led the department to flag more than 26,000 images for removal from its website (a number that may increase to more than 100,000), including some recognizing war heroes who happened to be persons of color or women, or even had the name “Gay” (The Associated Press, “War Heroes Are among 26,000 Images Flagged for Removal in Pentagon’s DEI Purge,” *NPR*, March 7, 2025, sec. Race, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/07/nx-s1-5321003/pentagon-images-flagged-removal-dei-purge-trump>).

¹⁴ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 96.

impose (racial and gender) order.”¹⁵ Because white Christian nationalists believe themselves to be the only worthy, true Americans whose actions are righteous and pure, their “freedoms” must be protected at the expense of others, their “values” privileged over the beliefs of others, and their violence blessed in the name of “order” over the disorder of others. Violence is justified in the pursuit of “freedom” and the protection of righteous order, hierarchy, and power.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the causes for the current surge in white Christian nationalism, though sociologists cite the recent decline in the U.S. Christian population (and thereby Christian dominance over cultural and social norms) as one reason some portions of the U.S. public have come to support Christian nationalist ideology.¹⁶ Perceived threats to cultural and social power can also draw white Christians toward Christian nationalism as a way to maintain status, control, and dominance in a changing nation.¹⁷ Regardless, the underlying beliefs of white Christian nationalism are not novel. Perry and Gorski name four significant moments in U.S. history where “the dream of racial equality was sacrificed on the altar of (white) national unity”: in the 17th century, when white “chosenness” and domination overtook the possibility of coexistence with native peoples and sanctioned enslavement of kidnapped Africans in the American colonies; in the 18th century, when the founders of the United States chose “unity” over enshrining actual equality in the Constitution; after Reconstruction, when the Civil War was recast as a war of states’ rights and segregation was sanctioned and institutionalized; and after the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century, when white conservatives resisted integration under the guise of religious freedom, recast racism as an individual rather than systemic issue, and embraced libertarianism.¹⁸ For Gorski and Perry, the United States again finds itself at a crossroads: a path toward a multiracial democracy or a path toward continued and intensified white supremacy and domination.¹⁹ Historians, sociologists, theologians, and philosophers would tell us the nation has been at a crossroads like this before, and the future is not yet written.²⁰ But the path we take may depend significantly on what we choose to keep hold of at this moment and what we are willing to let go of and throw away.

Exceptionalism and the American “Jeremiad”

In 2020, saving the “soul of America” was a constant refrain from Democrats and Republicans alike as they battled over whose values would win the national election. Again, before the midterm elections in 2022, President Joe Biden gave a speech on “The Continued

¹⁵ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 89. Parentheses in original.

¹⁶ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Chapter 1.

¹⁷ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, Chapter 2. For more on these moments in U.S. history, including a deeper analysis of theological shifts undergirding them, see (among others) Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 129.

²⁰ In a Substack post on April 9, 2025, American historian Heather Cox Richardson offers a clear and concise summary of this reality at the end of the Civil War, which had been fought over the question of whether or not “all men were created equal.” See Heather Cox Richardson, “April 9, 2025 (Wednesday),” Substack newsletter, *Letters from an American* (blog), April 10, 2025, <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/april-9-2025-wednesday>.

Battle for the Soul of the Nation.”²¹ Then, in his farewell address in January 2025, President Biden said:

The Statue of Liberty is. . . an enduring symbol of the soul of our nation, a soul shaped by forces that bring us together and by forces that pull us apart. And yet, through good times and tough times, we have withstood it all. A nation of pioneers and explorers, of dreamers and doers, of ancestors native to this land, of ancestors who came by force. A nation of immigrants who came to build a better life. A nation holding the torch of *the most powerful idea ever in the history of the world: that all of us, all of us are created equal. That all of us deserve to be treated with dignity, justice and fairness.*²²

For Biden, the soul of the nation is intrinsically connected to the maintenance and expansion of equality, justice, and fairness, which he believed could only be accomplished through a multiracial democracy.²³ He echoed Thomas Jefferson and many others in deliberately asserting human equality as a distinctly American value.

Biden also did something else: he claimed, not for the first time, that the idea that all people are created equal is not merely foundational to America but makes the United States *unequaled in the history of the world*. Special. Exceptional.

That the United States is set apart for (or because of its) greatness is not a belief held by only one party, nor is it unique to this moment.²⁴ Especially in public speech, articulations of American exceptionalism have long been at the center of U.S. self-understanding. Since early colonization, Americans have asserted that the nation was chosen by God and given a specific destiny to fulfill.²⁵ As evinced in Biden’s speech, “The idea that America is a unique nation—an exceptional nation—set apart and qualitatively different from, even superior to, the rest of the world is alive and well.”²⁶

American rhetoric, especially political and religious speech, has been strongly influenced by the *American jeremiad*, a political sermon form that emerged from New England Puritans in the 17th century. Generally speaking, a jeremiad (named for the biblical prophet Jeremiah) was a type of rhetorical address that decried the ways of the world, called out the sins of the people, and announced God’s impending wrath.²⁷ In Europe, it was a traditional sermon form from the medieval through Renaissance eras, in Catholic and Protestant settings, which was brought to the Americas by early Puritans. In the so-called “new world,” however, New England Puritans modernized the jeremiad to align with their experiences, re-envisioning the wrath of God as

²¹ Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation” (Philadelphia, September 1, 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/01/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-continued-battle-for-the-soul-of-the-nation/>.

²² Biden, “Farewell Address.” Emphasis mine.

²³ Interestingly, journalist Elizabeth Dias wrote in 2020 that rhetoric about the state of America’s soul has often been connected to the treatment of Black people, wherein the American “soul” is troubled or sick when it ignores the oppression it inflicts. This meaning seems to have been greatly diminished in recent years. Elizabeth Dias, “Biden and Trump Say They’re Fighting for America’s ‘Soul.’ What Does That Mean?,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/us/biden-trump-soul-nation-country.html>.

²⁴ See Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*, eBook (New York, NY: Random House, 2018).

²⁵ John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 16.

²⁶ Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion* 15.

²⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 7.

corrective rather than destructive and laying claim to the special mission God had for New England to become the “new Jerusalem.”²⁸ Moreover, Puritans used crises they faced as a means to strengthen their resolve: “They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress. Crisis became both form and substance of their appeals.”²⁹ Because their cause was just and their destiny a divine mission, hardship could be endured—and, when overcome, be interpreted as a sign of progress.³⁰

Puritans understood themselves to be in a covenant agreement with God, and while the rhetorical jeremiad might indict them for the ways in which they had strayed from that covenant, it was in the end “a cosmically reassuring form of political and religious rhetoric precisely because it was firmly situated within the context of the national covenant.”³¹ The high standards to which the New Englanders were being held were a sign of God’s providence and particular care and love for them; judgment and favor were interconnected within the covenant framework. Further, a “blessed existence” in the next life and a “prosperous existence” were not either/or but were bound together as the fate of the burgeoning nation became infused with eternal significance.³² This evolution from judgment into consolation and from national success into fulfillment of divine purpose became the basis for the distinctly American form of the jeremiad.

In his 2012 book *American Dream 2.0: A Christian Way Out of the Great Recession*, Frank Thomas asserts that at the heart of the cultural myth of the United States is *an unshakeable optimism in the fundamental goodness of the American experiment*. While the theological framing of the early Puritan jeremiad has since been replaced with more generic forms of civil religion,³³ the key belief underlying the contemporary American jeremiad remains that:

²⁸ Bercovitch writes that for the Puritans, “The purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.” Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 8-9.

²⁹ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 62.

³⁰ A complete overview of these developments is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Bercovitch points out that by the last decades of the 18th century, the jeremiad was used to envision secular change as divine progress, including the justification of the Revolutionary War as the fulfillment of divine will (Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 132–34). However, Bercovitch writes, tension remained between “rebellion” and “revolution”—specifically the libertarian impulses laid bare by rebellion against imperial power and the “revolutionary” forces seeking to maintain power in the hands of the propertied and educated elites. The fear that a “‘contagion of liberty’ become license had infected the body politic” led public leaders to seek to “tame” and “restrain” the selfish appetites of those “anarchists” and “mobs” who protested stratifications of power and wealth in the newly formed democracy. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 135-138.

³¹ Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 177.

³² Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt*, 178. Over time, the image of a covenant between God and the Puritans shifted to a more ecumenical understanding of national “chosenness,” encompassing multiple Protestant traditions in the colonies. By the time of the Revolutionary War, the jeremiad was used not to indict those in the colonies (who by now had come to be seen as God’s “new Israel”) but the English and the Loyalists, now portrayed as “Assyrians” or “Babylonians.” The language of the biblical prophetic oracles against Israel’s enemies was extended to whoever opposed New Englanders and their pursuit of liberty. Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt*, 214–20.

³³ Kaveny points to the “generic-ness” of the American jeremiad today: “The Puritans balanced their belief that the American people were specially chosen for great privilege with the conviction that they were also called to great duties. Moreover, they were convinced that both privilege and duties were not a matter of entitlement or good luck but were conferred by God for His own purposes. In contrast, in our era, we have retained the idea of chosenness without any firm conception of a chooser. We have maintained the idea of national privilege but have not always sustained a clear sense of national duties. Our destiny is far from manifest. We think of ourselves as a shining city on a hill, but our view of the path from that august vantage is decidedly cloudy. Contemporary Americans may

Any looming challenge is only a test of character and not a fatal error or structural flaw in the American system. Any crisis may be overcome by a return to the optimism of traditional American ideals rather than the identification of fundamental and structural flaws in American values.³⁴

This quintessentially American form of the jeremiad asserts that though the nation may fall short of its calling to be the City on the Hill or the welcome port for those yearning to be free, *the fundamental values and structures upon which the nation was founded remain inerrant and unassailable*.³⁵ Over the centuries, the belief in America's "chosenness" and "set-apartness," coupled with an insistence on its exceptionalism, became the rhetorical expectation for public speeches and civic sermons, regardless of racial, religious, or party affiliations. Even the most pessimistic of political speeches, like Trump's 2016 inaugural speech remembered for its dire reference to "American carnage," follow the jeremiad (in that case, by proclaiming a return to a bygone era when America was "great," but never questioning the existence of greatness).³⁶

Thomas highlights the American jeremiad both as a reminder of how American exceptionalism became part of the public rhetorical (including homiletical) norms in the United States and because the American jeremiad has come to define what constitutes *acceptable public dissent* in American life. Simply put, in American public speech, it is acceptable to express dissatisfaction and a desire for national reform but unacceptable to challenge American exceptionalism or the unique, God-given destiny of the United States.³⁷

To illustrate the American jeremiad's power to dictate the bounds of political and religious rhetoric, Thomas analyzes sermons and speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., Jeremiah Wright, and Barack Obama. In each, the speaker is responding to situations of injustice and a failure of the nation to live up to its ideals. Thomas first compares King's 1965 sermon, "Our God is Marching On" in Montgomery, Alabama, and his 1967 sermon, "Beyond Vietnam," at Riverside Church in New York City. In 1965, following the Selma March, King's message was realistic but hopeful, affirming the democratic ideals and possibilities for justice not yet realized—but coming soon. King employs the refrain, "How long? Not long." The overall sense was that progress toward civil rights was happening despite the obstacles and that with a patient and steadfast march toward the good, justice would eventually win the day.

see themselves as 'chosen' for special blessings. We have largely lost sight, however, of the cosmic religious and moral framework, including covenantal structure, which makes sense of our chosenness." Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt*, 231–32.

³⁴ Frank A. Thomas, *American Dream 2.0: A Christian Way out of the Great Recession* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 6–7.

³⁵ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 9. Much more could be said here about the theological framework and justification for this understanding of the basic goodness of the United States, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. In this section, my intention is to focus on the rhetorical implications of the American jeremiad and its formulation of exceptionalism.

³⁶ Interestingly, many (if not most) Americans who have critiqued systemic injustice *also* use the jeremiad as their framework, arguing that economic inequality or racial disparity remains "a matter of unfulfilled values and not a structural flaw in the American system." Thomas notes that African Americans used a "black jeremiad" to critique slavery and the treatment of African Americans prior to the Civil War and through Jim Crow to the present day — a jeremiad that generally affirmed the American jeremiad and used its framework to call the United States to live up to its ideals. Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 13.

³⁷ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 52.

By 1967, King's refrain had changed. Instead of celebrating the desired but unrealized ideals of the American experiment, King names the moral culpability of the United States in the war in Vietnam. The horrors of Vietnam and the unjustified actions of the United States signal that this is no longer a matter of "unfulfilled American values, but a clear example of the fundamental defects in the American system."³⁸ Rather than affirming and anticipating justice and righteousness on the part of the United States, King critiques the basic values that underlie U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Rather than expressing confidence in American ideals, King positions himself as a global citizen and "a son of the living God"—something beyond the calling of race or nation or creed.³⁹ As he concludes this speech, his sentences begin, "If we will but make the right choice..."⁴⁰ In two years, King's rhetoric has shifted from "Not if, but when" to "Not when, but if."

Predictably, the Montgomery sermon was much more positively received than the one given at Riverside. At the risk of oversimplifying Thomas' larger argument, the Montgomery speech upheld the American jeremiad, and the Riverside speech did not. As Thomas puts it, "In that era, and today as well, the American audience had/has a difficult time with the premise that America was/is morally corrupt."⁴¹ Thomas continues,

What truly incited the critics to regard 'Beyond Vietnam' as 'ineradicably radical' was that King called on America to give up its concept of American uniqueness and exceptionalism. For King, one of the by-products of American uniqueness and exceptionalism was imperialism, an attitude that resulted in genocide, slavery, racism, and violence. 'Beyond Vietnam' was unquestionably regarded as radical because King adopted the formidable rhetorical challenge of reshaping centuries of American identity and mythology.⁴²

In 2008, sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, came under intense attack after media outlets announced that the then-presidential candidate Barack Obama attended the church. Wright's rhetorical style and content, often modeled on Old Testament prophetic proclamation, became harshly criticized as "anti-American," "radical," "alarming," "angry," and that of a "grievance-mongering preacher animated by the voracity of hate."⁴³ As with "Beyond Vietnam," Wright's sermons represented the vehement cultural rejection of speech outside the American jeremiad. "When one makes radical rhetorical moves outside of the cultural myth," Thomas writes, "then condemnation and demonization is often the response. The American jeremiad limits the political choices of the social critic and does not allow for assessments of structural flaws in America, and therefore functions as a discourse of social control."⁴⁴

Racial bias and lack of familiarity with Black pulpit traditions clearly played a role in the vilification of Wright, but here, Thomas's focus is not on the race of the speaker but on the use of the American jeremiad to limit dissent and reject that which does not reflect American

³⁸ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 52.

³⁹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 53.

⁴⁰ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 55. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 68.

⁴² Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 68.

⁴³ Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, "Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System," *Monthly Review*, September 1, 2008, <https://monthlyreview.org/2008/09/01/jeremiah-wright-in-the-propaganda-system/>.

⁴⁴ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 75.

optimism. That many who have voiced dissent by contradicting the American jeremiad are people of color and other recipients of injustice and violence inflicted in the name of the United States is not incidental but intrinsic to Thomas' argument. Those who operate outside the jeremiad are often those who, because of their experiences, were never able to accept it to begin with.

Thomas then turns to Barack Obama's speech, "A More Perfect Union," offered in March 2008 in the wake of the maelstrom over Wright's sermons. By the time Obama gave the speech, the public conversation had landed squarely on the issue of race in America — namely, how critique of American greatness felt unpatriotic and demeaning to many white Americans, while unabashed patriotism and celebration of American greatness caused deep pain to African Americans who had never been fully included in American democracy.⁴⁵ Obama threads this needle by affirming the "unquestionable greatness" in the founding documents of the nation but suggesting that the idea of democracy is "unfinished," to be completed by each succeeding generation through common responsibility to form a more perfect union across all divisions (including race).⁴⁶

Obama's speech succeeded in lowering the tensions around his association with Jeremiah Wright (whose words he publicly denounced in the speech), and Obama sought to align the grievance of Black America with that of others who had felt left out of the American Dream. For Thomas, "A More Perfect Union" was an effort to persuade a composite audience of white and Black, privileged and aggrieved, immigrant or U.S.-born (Obama's parents included both), to embrace a common vision that would make progress toward a better nation for everyone.⁴⁷ The strategy worked: the speech was generally well-received, and the overarching message helped Obama win the 2008 and 2012 elections. But a simultaneous backlash against America's first Black president also grew. Donald Trump's use of white grievance, misogyny, and white Christian nationalism helped him capture the White House—defeating in 2016 the first female presidential candidate of a major party and, in 2024, the first female and person of color to be vice president of the United States. The results again revealed the ongoing and polarized battle—if not for the soul of America, then for power over who controls its trajectory. As Whitehead and Perry put it:

Throughout its history, America has experienced several transformations—cultural, political, technological, demographic, economic—many of which are interrelated. Like any society in which old orders and regimes are threatened by rapid transition, those who have historically benefited from the status quo not only marshal justifications for the old order, but rally a coordinated response among those who stand to lose the most if that old order topples.⁴⁸

The Status Quo and American Civil Religion

One of Thomas's arguments is that continual reinforcement of the American jeremiad in the public square has helped maintain the status quo and hindered the larger social transformation needed for the achievement of greater equality. Because the jeremiad sets boundaries around acceptable dissent and disallows deep critique of "American values," and

⁴⁵ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 96.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 96–98.

⁴⁷ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 90–91.

⁴⁸ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Conclusion.

since these are also values to which the jeremiad appeals, attempts to challenge systems and structures tend to get coopted and subsumed by the status quo. For instance, the idea that the United States was established on the claim that “all men were created equal” limits the freedom to question the truthfulness of that claim; in order to demand equality, the challenger has to point to the fundamental American value that would grant it, which is itself a demonstration of the existence of the American value in the first place. Even if the argument is that the value has not been fully realized, the naming of the value lends itself to being above critique.⁴⁹

Further, the resistance to critique allows for justification of the very thing the value rejects. For example, Thomas identifies twin dynamics of the American empire: “the release of more creative energy than any other modern nation coinciding with unparalleled levels of violence, genocide, and domination of subjected people.”⁵⁰ Rather than rejecting the latter while honoring the former, the need to support “creative energy” became the justification for the “necessary” violence, genocide, and domination that makes U.S. innovation possible. At our current crossroads, white Christian nationalism claims that protection of our “freedoms” requires the expulsion of immigrants who are unworthy of America’s benefits, the firing of “DEI” hires who are unworthy of their jobs, and the disregard for those who “depend” on the government instead of being independently “successful,” as the American dream proscribes. Within this construct, preserving certain elements of American cultural identity becomes a value, even as doing so is a betrayal of that identity. According to Thomas, King experienced a similar reality after his “Beyond Vietnam” speech:

For King, at the top of his hierarchy of values was the brotherhood and sisterhood of all, and when one treated another as “enemy,” one demeaned their brotherhood and sisterhood. For the American public, at the top of their hierarchy of values was the preservation of the unique character of American freedom, democracy, and free-market economy—the preservation of American cultural identity. For the American public, an enemy was anyone who threatened these cherished values. Many Americans would be willing to kill or be killed to preserve these unique values. As a matter of fact, it is a presumption from the perspective of the majority of the American public that all rational beings make war on their enemies to sustain their way of life. This value was a presumption that was regarded as normal and taken for granted by the majority of the American people.⁵¹

Particularly challenging for U.S. Christians today is not just that white Christian nationalism has long roots in U.S. history but that the values that underlie it are not that far from general cultural and religious beliefs held by many middle-of-the-road Americans. As we saw previously, white Christian nationalism is a combination of beliefs: that the success of the United States is part of God’s plan, that the federal government should advocate Christian values and allow for prayer in schools and religious symbols in government buildings, etc.⁵² Sadly, many of these values emerged from distinctly mainstream—and, in fact, *mainline*—undertakings of the 20th century.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 22–25.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 131.

⁵¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 67.

⁵² Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 15–16.

In *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism*, Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood detail how mainline Protestant denominations in the United States led and participated in efforts we might now see as indistinguishable from Christian nationalism.⁵³ For example, in 1950, the inaugural meeting of the ecumenical National Council of Churches (at the time a largely white, mainline Protestant body) took as its theme “This Nation Under God,” and early NCC presidents and vice presidents spoke strongly of the mission to make the United States a truly Christian nation.⁵⁴ At a Rose Garden ceremony in 1952, representatives from the National Council of Churches presented President Harry Truman with the first copy printed of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.⁵⁵ The phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance after Rev. George Docherty of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church preached a sermon advocating its inclusion, intentionally given on a February Sunday in 1954 when he knew President Eisenhower would be in attendance. Docherty argued that to omit “under God” from the pledge was to “omit the definitive character of the American way of life.”⁵⁶ On June 14—Flag Day—the same year, Eisenhower signed the change into law, as “Onward Christian Soldiers” was played on the Capitol steps.⁵⁷ U.S. Representative Charles Bennett, a member of a Disciples of Christ congregation, lobbied and won support for making “In God We Trust” the official national motto (the unofficial but traditional motto had been *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many, one), which became law in 1956.⁵⁸ Over the 230 years of chaplaincy in the U.S. House and Senate, 83 percent of all chaplains have come from just four denominational traditions: Presbyterian, Methodist, American Baptist, and Episcopal.

Important to highlight here is the dominance and influence of particular forms of white Protestant Christianity throughout U.S. history, as noted by PRRI (and Kaylor and Underwood):

Mainline Protestant denominations have played an outsized role in America’s history, given that most of the nation’s founders were members of what we now refer to as mainline Protestant churches. Until the 1960s, more than half of American adults identified with the largest seven mainline Protestant traditions.⁵⁹

This role was partly strengthened by the positive orientation most mainline Protestants held toward Enlightenment ideas, ecumenism and interfaith cooperation, and global partnership, which opened avenues for collaboration with government and other institutions. Simultaneously, however, this openness “created an environment where God and country were too easily joined

⁵³ “Mainline Protestant” refers generally to white, non-evangelical Protestants. “The common definition of mainline Protestants focuses on the historic denominations sometimes called the ‘Seven Sisters’: American Baptist Churches USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.” Brian Kaylor and Beau T. Underwood, *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism* (Des Peres, MO: Chalice Press, 2024), 9.

⁵⁴ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 70–74.

⁵⁵ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 110.

⁵⁶ Congressional Record 1954, A1795, quoted in Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 76–77.

⁵⁷ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 78.

⁵⁸ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 92–93.

⁵⁹ Public Religion Research Institute, “Clergy and Congregations in a Time of Transformation: Findings from the 2022-2023 Mainline Protestant Clergy Survey,” PRRI | *At the Intersection of Religion, Values, and Public Life*. (blog), September 13, 2023, <https://www.prri.org/research/clergy-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-transformation-findings-from-the-2022-2023-mainline-protestant-clergy-survey/>.

together. The relationship was perceived as mutually edifying—or at least innocuous—but has proven to be destructive to both.”⁶⁰

The slipperiest dynamic is perhaps the relationship between white Protestant Christianity and so-called “American civil religion.” In his seminal 1967 essay, Robert Bellah described civil religion as a “collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity,” suggesting that civil religion was neither “religion in general,” “sectarian,” nor “in any specific sense Christian.”⁶¹ Similarly, historian John Wilsey writes “Civil religion is a set of practices, symbols and beliefs distinct from traditional religion, yet providing a universal values paradigm around which the citizenry can unite. Unity is key to understanding civil religion.”⁶² Seeking “universal” values and common identity can help form a “unified” citizenry, but it is a delicate balance, says Wilsey. Relying too strongly on theological or religious foundations can be a pitfall for civil religion. However, when civil religion is confined to cultural and/or political values, “It can serve to unify the nation around those values transcending time and circumstance: the rights to life, liberty and property, religious freedom, equality, rule of law, individual dignity and justice.”⁶³

Wilsey not only claims these values as uniquely and exceptionally American, he suggests that they are and always have been *universal*.⁶⁴ But Wilsey distinguishes the deification of values (or the religion behind them) from the potential of shared values to unify a diverse nation around goals to pursue and values to emulate. Wilsey vehemently advocates for the latter and rejects any overt connections between American Christianity and these universal values. His intention is to distinguish between two American “exceptionalisms”: “closed,” which sits firmly in the realm of idolatry and is rooted in (false) Christian beliefs of American superiority and mission, and “open,” which promotes the nation as a beacon of freedom to the world’s oppressed based on “universal,” nonsectarian values.

The issue, of course, is that these exceptionalisms cannot truly be disentangled from each other. Throughout U.S. history, civil religion has relied on Christian images and symbols, like the use of biblical archetypes (the Exodus and a Promised Land, a Chosen People, a new Israel and/or new Jerusalem, etc.).⁶⁵ American civil religion has long affirmed the idea that the collective and the individual are obligated to carry out God’s will on earth, which served as the “motivating spirit” behind the nation’s founding and has been carried forward by every subsequent generation.⁶⁶ The importance of democracy and its perpetuation were juxtaposed against “godless communism” during the Cold War, further enmeshing monotheism—if not Christianity—with “universal” values like freedom. Bellah also names the centrality of “God” in civil religion, suggesting presciently that this could pose a challenge if the populace no longer adhered to a common belief in God’s existence:

⁶⁰ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 11. In their book, Kaylor and Underwood expand on the idea of how Protestant influence in the government has been detrimental to the church; unfortunately, that discussion is largely beyond what can be covered in this paper.

⁶¹ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 15–16.

⁶² Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 20.

⁶³ Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 26.

⁶⁴ Of course, as Thomas points out, “The ritual and benefit of freedom of America as *always* been restricted to a few certain privileged groups within American culture.” Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxxiv.

⁶⁵ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 18.

⁶⁶ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 5.

If the whole God symbolism requires reformulation, there will be obvious consequences for the civil religion, consequences perhaps of liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification that have not so far been prominent in this realm. The civil religion has been a point of articulation between the profoundest commitments of the Western religious and philosophical tradition and the common beliefs of ordinary Americans. It is not too soon to consider how the deepening theological crisis may affect the future of this articulation.⁶⁷

Regardless of any universal claims American civil religion hoped to represent, Bellah clearly saw Christianity as its basic foundation. Thus, the decline in U.S. Christianity beginning in the 1960s was a potential disruption to that civil unity. More importantly, Bellah also suggests that without shared *religious* conviction, the nonsectarian values undergirding civil religion could shift or falter. Kaylor and Underwood take that concern a step further, arguing that in the midst of increased religious (and non-religious) diversity, the Christian-ish language used by civil religion has already lost influence and definition in the national mindset. As a result, a civil religion so deeply enmeshed with the language and symbols of Western Christianity will continue to be associated with those most loudly claiming the title of “Christian”—which means American civil religion “might not function much differently in practicality from Christian Nationalism.”⁶⁸ While civil religion has often been seen as harmless (or even unifying), it has predominantly reflected white mainline Protestants who believed their enlightened perspectives could speak for everyone else. At the same time, to be “universal,” civil religion watered down Christian theology into vague expressions of “freedom,” “service,” and “sacrifice,” devoid of deeper understanding and easily coopted by those seeking to maintain the “status quo” when their grip on power and influence was threatened.⁶⁹

In truth, civil religion was only ever “universal” in as much as it encompassed diverse viewpoints, and like the American jeremiad, it continued to hold to American exceptionalism, often at the expense of important self-reflection. While the separation of church and state might have been novel when the United States began, the Western/Christian religious formulas that undergirded both the founding documents and the development of civil religion have come full circle to lend support to white Christian nationalism and idolatry of the state—so much so that white Christian nationalists now occupy the highest positions of leadership in the government, and are demonstrating daily that their loyalties were never to democracy or the rule of law, despite their invocation of the trappings of American civil religion.

A Time to Throw Away

The question of whether the United States has perpetually waged a battle over the “soul of the nation”—a push and pull between an authoritarian form of governance and an inclusive, multiracial democracy—is probably best left to historians and social scientists. What is clear, however, is that the voices of those who cling to the American jeremiad tend to get a public hearing. Those who reiterate the belief that the United States is an experiment rooted in unassailable foundational ideals receive the applause. Those who modulate their critiques with

⁶⁷ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 15–16. In 1967, 92 percent of Americans identified as Christian. By 2022, that number was 68 percent, and as indicated previously, that marker may not indicate actual Christian belief or practice. See Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 42.

⁶⁸ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 42.

⁶⁹ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 45–48.

appeals to the universal values of American civil religion win elections. Thomas points out the dilemma Obama faced when he gave the “A More Perfect Union” speech: Obama was attempting to express social critique in a way that could be persuasive to a composite, multiracial audience *and* deliver social change.⁷⁰ The question Thomas raises is whether or not change is truly possible when bounded by the limits of the American jeremiad.

Writing in 2012 in the wake of the Great Recession and during Obama’s first term, Thomas concedes that “the current reality of the Great Recession in America demands a critique outside the American jeremiad and at the level of the structural values of America.”⁷¹ At that time, Thomas’ purpose was to incite an uprising of pastors, congregations, and people of goodwill to reclaim the American Dream in ways that were non-exploitative of others and moved from exclusively economic and consumeristic understandings to a vision akin to King’s “Beloved Community.”⁷² In 2018, in the wake of Donald Trump’s first successful run for the U.S. presidency, Thomas pushed further:

What is it going to take to overcome America’s original sin of racism? . . . While I am not a prophet of doom, my belief is that it is going to take a great deal of common death to break past the radical divisions in our culture to allow a window for genuine empathy . . . What kind of death will provide the window that we need to bridge the racial divide, economic inequality, and all the terrible divisions that we saw front and center in the [2016] presidential election, and looks like will continue into the foreseeable future? We are the most diverse nation on earth and that makes the American experiment unusually beautiful and extraordinarily tense. What will it take to overcome division?⁷³

I suggest one of the “deaths” Americans need to consider is that of the American jeremiad. It seems clear we will not get to “a more perfect union” until we are willing to throw out our aversion to foundational and existential critiques of the nation. No more can the United States fool itself into believing that some fundamental goodness in our ideals is enough to absolve our national sins. No longer can we hide behind the arrogant conviction that we are “exceptional” and that our exceptionalism is sufficient to justify injustice or give license to our oppressive and imperialistic fantasies of righteousness. As I write in April 2025, the façade of American exceptionalism seems to be crumbling for many who had long believed it could withstand any challenge. As government officials dismantle critical infrastructure, abandon the rule of law, reject free speech and due process, and side with dictators while threatening long-time allies, the narrative of the superiority of “American values” rings particularly hollow. Unfortunately, this is not the first time we have made collective choices to compromise our public values while maintaining the assumption of our own exceptionalism.

The call to Christian leaders in this moment—and especially to preachers—is to attend to the fact that voices from within our fold have frequently been the ones championing American exceptionalism, supremacy, and foundational inerrancy.⁷⁴ Theologically, we know these beliefs to be contrary to Christian teachings that all people are created in the image of God and that no

⁷⁰ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 90–92.

⁷¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 21.

⁷² Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 149.

⁷³ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 21.

⁷⁴ Discerning readers will also recognize that American exceptionalism has been infused with triumphalist Christian exceptionalism. For more on this alignment, see Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*.

one is intrinsically more important or worthy. But we who live in the United States are constantly bombarded with the message that this is the most powerful nation on earth—and that makes us the best. Our international dominance is continually equated with our superiority, and “superiority” indicates our *worthiness*. Thus, if we are not the best, we are not anything. This is the heart of the American jeremiad: we cannot critique our foundations because if they are *not* faultless and exemplary, then they have no value at all. While we may instinctively reject the ugly rhetoric of white Christian nationalism, many of us have quietly come to associate the ultimate power of the United States with “what God wants” for the world.

The complexities of American civil religion, public religious rhetoric and the American jeremiad, and limited religious and biblical literacy in the U.S. populace, make our responses to white Christian nationalism exceptionally challenging. In the face of increasing threats to free speech and a crackdown by the government against those who critique or oppose its goals, those who hope to respond faithfully and bravely as Christ’s disciples may have a tough road ahead. Two temptations seem probable for the U.S. church: first, an avoidance of the political and a retreat into the “spiritual” as a means to sidestep controversy and keep people “safe”; and second, equating the preservation of multiracial democracy with the *missio Dei*—the “perfection of the Union” as a fulfillment of Christian discipleship (which would be, ironically, a kind of nationalism). In an era when white Christian nationalism has usurped the tropes of civil religion and American Christianity, and because mainline Protestants played a significant role in shaping and supporting American civil religion, U.S. Christians who want to resist white Christian nationalism need to be especially conscientious about who we are, what we stand for, and how we talk about it. This is not merely a question of semantics and rhetoric but of *identity*.

A primary task for preachers and other Christian leaders will be to help congregations and communities let go of long-held and problematic self-understandings. White mainline Protestants who have enjoyed political and social power have begun to recognize (though perhaps not truly accept) their waning influence and dwindling numbers. An additional and crucial move for U.S. Christians of all stripes will be to release our beliefs in American exceptionalism. This is not to say that we must reject values we believe in, but it is time to finally and completely throw out false notions that so-called American values are intrinsically superior to all others. It is possible to be proud of something and to value it without having to believe it is better than everything else or that it must be imposed everywhere else. We can reject the premise that good ideas must compete with one another, with only one possible winner.

Similarly, it is time to abandon the American jeremiad that claims the United States was foundationally ideal and without fault and that any problems were just bumps in the otherwise providential road. The colonialism, imperialism, genocide, and violence of our national story are not side hustles alongside the real work of exemplary (if messy) democracy. Over and over, the “success” of the United States has been built on choices to abandon the very values the jeremiad trumpets: equality, freedom, and justice. We will not be able to combat authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism through the tired and false narrative that “this is not what America stands for.” This has *always been* a path at the crossroads, one which the nation often has chosen.

Throwing away these aspects of American/Christian identity may be unsettling and scary for many among us, especially if our personal and communal beliefs are deeply rooted in these identities. Like the comprehensive work necessary to address racism, this change in identity will require confession and repentance, as well as reparation and restitution. Fortunately, Christian theology offers tried and true means to engage such practices. Similarly, this work will require

lament and grief for all that we have discovered we are not and all that we had hoped we were. A time to throw away is necessarily a time to grieve what has been lost.

Letting go of these American/Christian identity markers may also lead to another fear: that without these beliefs, we do not know who we are. Those of us who have grown up in a dominant culture in the world's "most powerful nation" that sees itself as a beacon to the world have a great deal of un/learning to do about what it means to be a "good" America without having to be *the great* America. We must un/learn how to affirm the political and social values we hold *as a result* of our faith without having to make them *exclusive* to our faith; to stop using righteousness to excuse our violence, domination, and consumption; to be humble and honest, as well as noble, without having to be specially "chosen."

Finally, we need to throw away the idea of a battle for America's soul that offers only two paths forward, both of which emerge from our exceptionalism. Perhaps it is time for a different metaphor: a *metanoia* or U-turn of the American soul, a reimagination of the American soul, a reconstitution or rehabilitation of the American soul, a rebirth for the American soul. A time to throw away may mean the chance to find ourselves newly unburdened and unhindered by the need to reiterate untruths or prop up false narratives. Instead, we may suddenly be able to envision possibilities we could not have conceived before.

A preacher who wants to address questions of identity and its loss—especially in relationship to white supremacy and racism—might consider Frank Thomas' *dangerous sermon* approach focused on cultivating moral imagination. Through "moral imagination," the preacher is able to "grasp and share God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity," in order to truly envision freedom for ourselves *and others*.⁷⁵ In preaching, the moral imagination a.) embodies equality in the sermon and in physical presence(s); b.) uses empathy from the present moment as a bridge toward future decisions for peace and justice; c.) seeks wisdom and truth in ancient texts; and d.) elevates through poetry and art to inspire wonder, hope, and mystery.⁷⁶ This moral imagination approach could help a congregation use empathy toward themselves and others to release previously held identities and embrace a new, inspiring vision for the future.

Similarly, in *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, John McClure suggests that a *liberative ethical approach* is useful for sermons aimed at "unmasking, critique, and change of current social systems (economic, political, religious, educational, health care, etc.)."⁷⁷ Through sermons aimed at raising awareness and offering critical education, liberation ethic preachers provide ways for the congregation (and themselves) to come to new self-understandings about the hegemonies—subconscious oppressions—in which we all operate, with the goal of resisting and dismantling them. This kind of preaching is often infused with non-dominant voices and/or those most affected by the hegemony being exposed. Framing American exceptionalism as a kind of subconscious oppression that prevents true reflection and honesty could be a way to begin to examine its power in U.S. society and the church.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiii–xxiv, xxvi.

⁷⁶ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 45.

⁷⁷ John S. McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching: Choosing the Best Way to Preach about Difficult Issues* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), 61.

⁷⁸ In his 2024 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, McClure played with ideas about how preaching might respond to white Christian nationalism, especially in the third lecture in the series, "The Critical Homiletics of Genre: Case Studies for Reflection," presented October 9, 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgTVhHqlboc&list=PLbQINmUy3n7Yzm9pO4gO1BnZFAr14j5Ng&index=3>).

Worship services might also engage liturgical practices to help congregations let go of problematic ideas and claims about American exceptionalism. Confession and repentance, alongside reiteration of shared beliefs (e.g., ecumenical or international confessions of faith), could be partnered with sermons that express the need for *metanoia* or turning in new directions in relationship to our identity as American Christians. Prayer practices focused on grief and lament about the loss of what we hoped for our nation (or what we believed about it) might be integrated into existing programs of care for our communities.

Two additional homiletic approaches are worth mentioning here. Leah Schade's *Preaching in the Purple Zone* offers a sermon–dialogue–sermon method that would lend itself well to discussions about white Christian nationalism and its implications. This method would allow the preacher to offer an initial overview of the concepts, perhaps from a theological perspective, followed by a more in-depth conversation about what is at stake for congregation members, and then a second sermon shaped by the dialogue.⁷⁹ In *Preaching to Teach*, Rich Voelz suggests a “teaching” model of preaching that resists the typical pedagogical orientation of “information transmission,” instead using critical pedagogy as a model and cultivating an attentive critique of the status quo, future possibilities and hopes, and a “radical imagination” about what could be.⁸⁰

A Time to Keep

The Beloved Community preached by King required a “revolution of values” rooted in a new communal identity for the United States.⁸¹ Thomas articulates a similar reign of God:

The reign of God is not simply over a country or a group of people, but over the whole of human history. The reign of God is not about a geographical country or a particular race or ethnicity. It does not settle on boundaries and divisions that human beings make. The reign of God is not about a sentimental vagueness that does not require anything of us except that we try to be ‘nice.’ The reign of God is not a national or a political kingdom, but a community in God’s care that lives in love, joy, peace, and righteousness.⁸²

In this time of “keeping,” the first thing we hold on to is the grounded truth of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We remember and remind each other that even as our identity as American Christians might be shifting, breaking, or taken from us, our identity as followers of Christ—the healer, the giver, the preacher, the calmer, the prophet, the crucified and resurrected one—transcends this moment and this place. Once, many years ago, I visited the Presbyterian Church in Cuba, and a pastor there said she is often asked by Americans how she lives her Christian faith in a communist country. She responds by asking if the questioner would like the polite answer or the honest answer. Then she gives the honest answer: “How can you live out your faith in a capitalist country? In Cuba, we have to trust God. We live by faith.”

The future of the United States is unknown, though the last few months indicate that we are likely in a profound existential crisis not seen since the Civil War. For the time being, the trajectory is not yet fully determined or irreversible. This is all the more reason to hold tight to

⁷⁹ Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

⁸⁰ Richard William Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act*, Artistry of Preaching (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2019).

⁸¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 120.

⁸² Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 139.

and reassert what it means to be a Christian over against the false teachings of white Christian nationalism and also against a civil religion that would blow past the severity of the situation with prideful assertions of our idealized virtues. We have a wealth of deep theological resources available to help us plainly express our Christian faith and how our Christian faith calls us to demand truth, integrity, and justice from our local and national governance. This is a moment for preachers and other church leaders to keep speaking clearly and forthrightly, not only about Christian faith but about its implications for our life together.⁸³

Currently, we remain free to assert our religious beliefs even if they contradict federal leaders. However, the virulent response from the Trump administration and conservative leaders after Bishop Marian Budde's sermon at an inaugural prayer service in January could indicate that those willing to challenge political officials publicly will not experience for much longer the freedoms we once did.⁸⁴ Accordingly, Christian leaders—especially those in positions of most privilege—must remain vigilant over the freedom of all to speak and exercise their religious beliefs. Curtailing press freedom and access is not separate from the freedom of religious expression or speech; as much as any one of these rights is under attack, all may be subverted or eliminated. Meanwhile, as we keep watch, we keep nourishing our capacity for courage and resilience. Those of us used to being dominant, powerful, and influential will need to cultivate a different kind of strength to be a different kind of Christian in a different kind of nation. We do not know what is coming, but even in a best-case scenario, we will need to draw on resources and fortitude we may not have had to use before.

Finally, this is a time to keep in touch. As trust in American institutions crumbles, along with the institutions themselves (which appears to be the intent of many in the federal government), we will need more than ever communities of connection where trust can be built and sustained. Interracial, intercultural, interreligious, and international networks will be key to keeping Christian communities from isolating into self-protecting enclaves awaiting a return to the status quo. Academic guilds that intersect with religious institutions can be sources of interdisciplinary awareness and solidarity as information gets repressed or proves untrustworthy. Local organizations, non-profits, educational systems, medical facilities, libraries, art centers, and councils—all these places where trust in the community is necessary can be places of sustenance or apathy and deterioration. Now is the time to strengthen connections, before resources are scarce and fear is overwhelming. Now is the time to reach for each other and reaffirm commitments to one another.

When I first began work on this paper, I believed my task to address white Christian nationalism would be akin to previous efforts to assess preaching in relationship to racism or trauma. While there is some overlap between those important arenas and this one, white Christian nationalism in 2025 cannot be divorced from the slide of democracy toward authoritarian rule in the United States. Preachers who want to attend to the heresy of white Christian nationalism are unlikely to be able to do so without engaging the larger political realities in which this movement now flourishes—even as we must continue to differentiate our

⁸³ Amanda Tyler's 2024 book, *How to End Christian Nationalism* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books 2024), is helpful in this regard, especially the second chapter, "Ground Yourself in God's Love," in which she encourages readers to dig deeply into their own traditions to remember the roots of their faith and to resist the exploitation of Christianity for racist and nationalist purposes.

⁸⁴ Additionally, as academic institutions are already becoming targets of the administration, our relative safety may change for any of us at any time.

civic and Christian callings. I hope the U.S. church will answer faithfully the wider call. There is no time to lose.

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Preaching on the Edge: Presence, Concealment, and the Tension of Truth

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Abstract: *Preaching is often imagined as fearless proclamation—unmasking truth in the full light of day. Yet for many preachers, especially those navigating identity-based vulnerability, full self-revelation is neither safe nor possible. This article challenges the familiar dichotomy between pastor and prophet, arguing instead for a homiletic that honors both presence and concealment as interwoven expressions of faithful proclamation. Drawing from incarnational theology, kenotic Christology, performance theory, and queer and coming-out discourse, this study reframes strategic withholding not as a failure of authenticity but as a theological practice of love and wisdom. Through close readings of Scripture and historical exemplars—including Oscar Romero, Pauli Murray, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—it explores how truth may be proclaimed through subtext, timing, gesture, and silence. In doing so, it proposes a model of preaching rooted in pastoral discernment and prophetic courage, where embodiment becomes proclamation, and discretion emerges as a Spirit-led mode of truth-telling.*

The Paradox of Presence in the Pulpit

Preaching is often imagined as holy exposure—a bold ascent into the pulpit with heart bared and voice steady, proclaiming the gospel in the full light of day. The preacher stands as a living witness, embodying the Word with breath and body and unflinching truth. But what if presence is not always safe? What if it is not only a virtue to be summoned but a risk to be weighed?

For many preachers, stepping into the pulpit is not an act of uncalculated courage but of careful negotiation. LGBTQ+ clergy, women in patriarchal spaces, racial minorities in predominantly white congregations, pastors in politically divided communities—each carries the weight of what can be spoken and what must be held in silence. For them, presence is not just proclamation; it is survival.

This is not a new dilemma. The gospel itself is steeped in paradox. Jesus revealed himself in moments and withheld himself in others, speaking in parables, retreating to quiet places, and telling his disciples, “My time has not yet come” (John 7:6).¹ Even in his final hours, he stood before Pilate in the tension between testimony and silence. If the Incarnate One navigated revelation with such care, then perhaps the call to preach is not merely to proclaim but to discern *when* and *how* truth is made known.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this tension well. He knew the delicate art of saying enough without saying too much, the power of timing, the necessity of subtext. In “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” delivered the night before his assassination, King did not explicitly name his impending death, yet every word trembles under the weight of it. “I may not get there with you,” he repeated; the absence in his sentence spoke as loudly as the words themselves.²

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1986), 279-86, at 285.

This is the kind of presence that does not simply declare truth but discerns how truth must be told.³

As a queer pastor who navigates this tension regularly, this author recognizes that he is not alone. Many preachers stand at this same threshold, carrying truths that must be stewarded with care—torn between the call to authenticity and the demand for pastoral discretion. While homiletical scholarship has long emphasized the preacher's voice—from Fred Craddock's inductive method to Luke Powery's work on embodiment—less attention has been given to the homiletics of restraint: from withholding, to waiting, to speaking *slant*.⁴

This article explores that tension—the space between revelation and reticence. It argues for a broader homiletic imagination that invites preachers—and homileticians—to reconsider what it means to tell the truth and when it is wisest not to tell it all at once.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary method to examine the tension between presence and concealment in preaching. Drawing on historical theology, performance theory, homiletics, and rhetorical studies, it explores how preachers—especially those in marginalized or high-risk contexts—navigate disclosure and discretion through embodied rhetoric.

This study engages scriptural texts in which Jesus practices subtextual or delayed revelation (e.g., the Messianic Secret, parables, silence before Pilate), theological models such as kenosis and incarnation, and case studies of preachers who have used gesture, timing, and coded speech to proclaim the gospel in contexts of constraint. These include figures like Oscar Romero, Pauli Murray, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and James Baldwin. By synthesizing theological reflection with rhetorical and performance theory, this article seeks to reframe *discretion* not as a failure of proclamation but as a faithful and theologically grounded homiletic practice.

Embodied Proclamation and the Limits of Visibility

Preaching has never been a disembodied act. The preacher does not merely speak the Word; they enflesh it, standing as both messenger and message, vessel and voice. A sermon is not just received through the ear but through the presence of the one who proclaims it—through gesture and pause, silence and sigh. The body preaches as surely as the tongue.

This is no accident. The biblical tradition is rich with prophets whose very bodies bore the weight of revelation. Hosea's marriage, Jeremiah's yoke, Ezekiel's street theatre prophecies—each one a sermon without a pulpit, an embodiment of the Word spoken before a single syllable was uttered.⁵ Then, in the fullness of time, came the Incarnate One: the Word who did not *send* a message but *became* one. Jesus's ministry was, at its heart, a homiletic of presence. His body healed, His hands broke bread, and His voice called forth life from the tomb. His very being was a proclamation.

The Sacramental Nature of Presence

As Ruthanna Hooke articulates in *Sacramental Presence*, preaching is not merely a verbal event but a sacramental one—an encounter in which the preacher becomes a living

³ James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 236–38. Cone reflects on King's final sermon and the prophetic discernment in his later witness.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 108; Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 87–91.

⁵ Timothy Beal and Tod Linafelt, *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 189–92.

conduit for grace.⁶ She writes that “the body is not incidental to preaching; it is the vehicle through which the Word becomes present to the congregation.”⁷ Presence, then, is not a neutral fact but a theological reality: the preacher’s very being mediates divine encounter through voice, posture, breath, and even intentional silence. In light of Hooke’s theology of sacramental presence, concealment is not just personal discretion but has theological weight. When presence is modulated for survival, what is withheld is not mere absence but a sacrament carried with care.

Liturgical theologian Don E. Saliers echoes this understanding, emphasizing that liturgical action does not simply point toward the divine but becomes the very means through which God’s presence is enacted and received.⁸ Similarly, Thomas Long affirms that preaching is not the transmission of religious information but an act of embodied witness, in which the preacher stands not apart from the gospel but *within* it.⁹ For preachers in precarious spaces, this sacramental understanding deepens the stakes: what is offered is not just content but communion. Concealment in such contexts is not a diminishment of proclamation but the sacrament of truth carried reverently and carefully.

As Roberto Goizueta affirms, the incarnation is not simply an event to be proclaimed but an aesthetic reality to be *embodied*—a way of being that mediates grace through the ordinary and the fleshly.¹⁰ For Goizueta, presence is not abstraction but accompaniment: “God is not simply revealed through doctrinal statements or ecclesial structures but through our companionship with one another in history.”¹¹ In this light, the preacher’s body becomes a site of solidarity as well as proclamation—a companioning presence that mediates the divine in fragile human form.

Throughout Christian history, the preacher’s embodied presence has been celebrated as a source of power. Luke Powery notes that in the Black preaching tradition, the preacher’s body is not incidental but essential—an instrument of meaning-making, a site where theology is *enfleshed* in breath and rhythm.¹² Similarly, Kenyatta Gilbert’s tri-vocal preaching model underscores how voice, presence, and embodiment work in concert to create a holistic act of proclamation.¹³

But such discussions often assume that the preacher is free to be fully seen and to embody the Word without fear. In many situations, that freedom is not guaranteed. Contemporary preachers find themselves in an era that demands transparency yet offers no guarantee of safety. Preachers must therefore learn to inhabit their presence with wisdom: to know when to speak, withhold, proclaim outright, and trust the weight of their silence. Whether through stillness or movement, a carefully chosen phrase or an image that lingers, the preacher’s body remains a site of proclamation. Even when speech must be guarded, the presence of the preacher still speaks—and sometimes, that is enough.

⁶ Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Sacramental Presence: A Theology of the Body in Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 61.

⁷ Hooke, *Sacramental Presence*, 61.

⁸ Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 39-41.

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¹⁰ Roberto S. Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 11

¹¹ Goizueta, *Christ Our Companion*, 5.

¹² Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 87-91.

¹³ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 58-63.

Concealment as Strategy: The Cost and Ethics of Withholding

A persistent myth haunts the pulpit. It whispers through homiletics classrooms and ordination councils, shaping the expectations of those who dare to stand before God's people. The myth says that to preach well is to be fully transparent: to declare everything without hesitation, to stand without shield, to offer one's whole self on the altar of proclamation. But for some, full self-disclosure is a cost too great to bear.

The assumption that good preaching demands full self-disclosure is neither biblical nor sustainable. For many preachers—especially those navigating the fragile space between personal identity and communal expectation—the pulpit is not only a place of proclamation but a place of negotiation. It is where truth must be weighed against consequence, where words must be measured against their cost, where presence itself carries risk. Here, concealment may not be cowardice but strategy.

These dynamics are illuminated by queer theory's interrogation of visibility and identity, particularly in the discourse around *coming out*. Far from a singular act, coming out is increasingly understood as a form of strategic disclosure—a calibrated, continual discernment of visibility, vulnerability, and safety. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the binary of “closeted or out” flattens the complex and lived realities of selfhood, obscuring the fluid and relational dimensions of identity.¹⁴ Such binary logic, she suggests, not only oversimplifies identity but reinforces coercive power structures by positioning public disclosure as the only legitimate form of authenticity.¹⁵

Annamarie Jagose furthers this critique by exposing the *normative* force often hidden within the so-called liberatory act of disclosure. The pressure to be “out” at all times, in all places, can itself become a form of regulation, rendering invisibility suspect and imposing a moral weight on visibility.¹⁶ In this light, contextual visibility becomes a more honest and pastorally sensitive framework—one that recognizes how identity, safety, and power intersect in ways that demand nuance.

Judith Butler contours the discussion with an ethically rich reframing of vulnerability and performativity. She reminds readers that the self is never fully transparent or wholly knowable and that any act of self-disclosure is inherently partial, filtered through relationship, language, and power.¹⁷ This offers a crucial insight for preaching: prudential concealment is not deception but an ethic of contextual discernment. The preacher who withholds is not necessarily evading truth but honoring its timing.

These theories remind us that disclosure is not an all-or-nothing act but a negotiated act of vulnerability and agency that mirrors the preacher's own precarious discernment within the community. To preach from a place of *discerned withholding* is not to dilute the gospel but to embody it more truthfully, with pastoral wisdom and ethical care. Like the wise steward in Luke 12, the preacher must give “food at the proper time,” attending not only to what is true but to when and how truth can be spoken (Luke 12:42). In such moments, discretion is not faithlessness; it is a form of love.

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 67-73.

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 71.

¹⁶ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 76-79.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 22-26.

Some preachers hide not because they wish to deceive but because they have no other choice. An LGBTQ+ pastor in a theologically conservative church, whose survival in ministry depends on a careful silence about certain convictions; a woman minister serving under patriarchal scrutiny, who must temper how and when she asserts authority; a clergyperson with private doubts or evolving theology in a community not ready to receive them—full disclosure is not a luxury they can safely afford.

To hide is not always to deceive. Sometimes, it is to protect. The biblical narrative is full of those who withheld themselves until the time was right, who carried truth with careful hands, waiting for the moment when revelation would serve life rather than destroy it. Esther did not deny her Jewish identity in the Persian court but she did not declare it either. She watched. She waited. She discerned the moment when unveiling the truth would matter most (Esth 2:10).¹⁸ Joseph, too, concealed himself when his brothers stood before him in Egypt, letting the weight of his hidden identity press into the moment before revealing himself (Gen 42:7-8). Faithfulness in specific contexts requires delicate discernment: how to speak truth in ways that do not invite immediate destruction yet do not abandon the truth altogether.

Paul understood this. “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). His words have often been read as adaptability, but they were something deeper: a theology of strategic presence.¹⁹ He was not inauthentic—he was aware. Aware of how truth must be shepherded carefully into the light, how revelation must be timed with precision. There is a difference between a seed that is buried and a seed that is planted. One is hidden for the sake of disappearance. The other is hidden for the sake of growth. The preacher must discern the difference. This is not imagined in theory alone. Its weight and witnessed power have been demonstrated in the lives of those who bore such truth ahead of its time.

Historical Models of Strategic Presence

Pauli Murray—priest, poet, legal scholar, and civil rights activist—carried truths few were ready to receive. Black, queer, and female, Murray lived at the margins of the very institutions she sought to transform, tasked with speaking boldly while remaining heard. She understood that prophetic witness does not always arrive through open declaration. Sometimes, it must come cloaked in metaphor, exile, and homecoming. She preached through scriptural narratives of wilderness and redemption, crafting sermons that rang clear to the marginalized yet passed safely through gatekeepers of power. To some, her words seemed like harmless theology. To others, they were a lifeline. This was not deception; it was strategic presence—truth encoded for survival and hope.²⁰

For preachers today who cannot afford full disclosure, Murray’s model is instructive. When direct speech is dangerous, parable, allusion, and indirection offer ways to proclaim. Her witness reminds us that holy discretion can be life-giving: the sermon that hints at truth may plant seeds more deeply than one who declares it outright.

Archbishop Óscar Romero, preaching under the Salvadoran dictatorship, also learned to speak in layered tones. To name injustice too directly was to risk assassination, yet silence was

¹⁸ Adele Berlin, *Esther: The Jewish Publication Society Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 22–24.

¹⁹ David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Preaching in the New Creation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 78–81.

²⁰ Donyelle C. McCray, “Pauli Murray: In & Out of the Pulpit,” *International Journal of Homiletics*, Supplementum (2019): 19–37.

another form of betrayal. So, Romero crafted sermons that operated in two registers. He frequently referenced Pharaoh and the suffering Israelites—a veiled critique of his nation’s violent regime. Those with ears to hear recognized his warning; others dismissed it as Scripture-as-usual. His homiletic was not avoidance but wisdom—a double-voiced discourse that shielded the preacher while exposing the powers.²¹ Romero trusted that Scripture itself could carry confrontation, freeing him to speak subversively under the guise of orthodoxy. His method offers a path for preachers navigating similarly precarious terrain: to preach prophetically while preserving one’s capacity to preach another day.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer confronted similar constraints under Nazi rule. Direct opposition to fascism could cost one’s life—but silence was complicity. Bonhoeffer opted for subtext. His underground sermons and theological writings, including *The Cost of Discipleship*, concealed resistance within orthodox reflection. On the surface, his work expounded grace and obedience; read closely, it dismantled the idolatry of state-aligned religion. Bonhoeffer’s homiletic strategy trusted that those formed in faith would discern his meaning—that layered speech could resist evil without triggering censorship or execution.²² His example endures as a roadmap for preaching truth with nuance when blunt force would be fatal.

Howard Thurman, too, practiced a strategic presence that defied convention. As biographer Paul Harvey recounts, Thurman’s approach was one of spiritual subversion—embodying a preaching ministry that offered no easy answers but carried a depth of moral resonance through silence, stillness, and contemplative clarity.²³

To withhold is not always to retreat. Sometimes, it is to wait, discern, and endure long enough to bear witness when the moment is right. Murray, Romero, Bonhoeffer, and Thurman remind us that concealment, wielded with wisdom, can be an act of pastoral care. The question is not whether to speak or stay silent—but how and when the truth may serve life rather than hasten its end.

Christological Grounding: Discernment and Delay

Jesus’s ministry models a homiletic of discernment. Repeatedly, He instructs silence—whether with healed individuals (Mark 1:44), demons who name Him prematurely (Mark 1:34), or disciples who glimpse too much too soon (Mark 8:30). Jesus repeatedly enjoins those He heals to “say nothing to anyone” (Mark 1:44), a pattern so striking that German scholar William Wrede famously labeled it the “Messianic Secret,” theorizing that Mark portrayed Jesus deliberately concealing his messianic identity until the culmination of his mission.²⁴ Even modern historians of Jesus, like N. T. Wright, note Jesus’s keen sense of timing in self-

²¹ James R. Brockman, *Oscar Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 117-139.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1959), esp. chs. 1-4; See also Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Vintage, 2015), 301-325.

²³ Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

²⁴ William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1971). Wrede famously argued that Mark’s Gospel portrays Jesus concealing His identity as Messiah, commanding demons and disciples alike to silence, as a theological motif to explain why Jesus was not widely recognized as Messiah during his ministry.

revelation, refusing to satisfy premature demands for clarity.²⁵ As Jesus told his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12).

This “Messianic Secret” does not represent avoidance but is a matter of timing. “I still have many things to say to you,” He tells them, “but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). Truth withheld is not abandoned—it is loved into readiness. Philippians 2:6–7 deepens this: Christ, “though in the form of God... emptied himself.” Kenosis is not denial but divine hospitality—presence made receivable. Sarah Coakley names it an “opening”: a humility that makes space for relationship. In this light, restraint is not absence but reverence.²⁶ Jesus knew the power of a well-timed silence. When interrogated by Pilate, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus did not launch into a defense or declaration; “he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge” (Matt. 27:11, 14).²⁷ And when a furious crowd dragged a woman caught in adultery before him, clamoring for a verdict, Jesus did not respond with words—instead, he “bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground” (John 8:6).²⁸

The Incarnate One shows that divine truth often comes to hearers on a *schedule not their own*, sometimes swathed in mystery. If He chose subtext and silence at times, these surely provide holy precedents for the preacher’s own discretion.

Subtext in Preaching: Silence as Presence, Not Absence

This theological claim on behalf of silence runs deep in Scripture. Elijah encountered God not in wind, earthquake, or fire but in “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kgs 19:11-13). The psalmist counsels the faithful, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). Jesus himself often withdrew into silence, choosing the hush of prayer over public speech (Luke 5:16). God, it appears, often speaks without words. Yet, in the modern pulpit, ministers sometimes speak as if every holy thing must immediately be put into words, as if faithful preaching demands exhaustive explanation and full disclosure. But some truths must ripen in silence before they can be received.

Tradition echoes this wisdom. Augustine of Hippo speaks of silence as the soul’s preparation for the Word.²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar identifies Christ’s descent into Holy Saturday the ultimate kenosis—a silence even God entered.³⁰ Preaching, then, becomes a participation in this mystery: a space where absence becomes presence and delay becomes an invitation. Homiletician Thomas Long notes the charged hush before a sermon as an “electric silence” that itself proclaims the Word.³¹ Tiffany Dahlman and Lucy Rose identify preaching as a wager of meaning, where truth unfolds through shared discovery.³² Trauma theologians such as

²⁵ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 491-495. Wright discusses how Jesus calibrated the revelation of his messianic vocation, often redefining popular expectations by veiling his identity until the climax of his ministry.

²⁶ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3-7.

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 518.

²⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 333–34.

²⁹ Augustine, *Sermon 117.5*, quoted in John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons III/4* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 176.

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986), 215-218.

³¹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 33-35.

³² Tiffany M. Dahlman, “Kenotic Homiletics and Narrative Preaching,” in *Journal for Preachers* 46, no. 2 (2023): 27-34; Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 22-25.

Shelly Rambo and Peter Capretto urge preachers to honor silence not as a void but as a presence charged with reverence, trust, and care.³³

For many who preach, this insight is not abstract but painfully practical. In every generation, there are preachers who cannot afford full transparency, whose survival in ministry depends on a careful negotiation of what can be said openly. LGBTQ+ clergy, women in patriarchal churches, racial minorities in predominantly white congregations, pastors prophetically challenging their flocks' political idols—these must discern what to reveal and what to withhold. Their call to preach is not less authentic, but it is necessarily strategic. As Sally Ann McKinsey observes, these marginalized preachers often grapple with “the complexities of voice and visibility” in the pulpit, balancing genuine witness with personal risk.³⁴

For such preachers, silence is not a cowardly evasion of truth but a different kind of truth-telling. It is the silence of wisdom and presence. It is a homiletical strategy of *kenosis* or self-emptying that refuses to force revelation on unreceptive ears. Instead of full disclosure, they practice a patient trust that what remains unspoken might, in time, be discerned by those with ears to hear. In these cases, the very restraint becomes a theological act. Discretion keeps the door open for ministry tomorrow while still honoring the truth today in a subtler form.

Crucially, silence in preaching is never mere emptiness. It carries substance and makes space for the hearers to engage. Homileticians like Luke A Powery and Lisa L. Thompson remind us that preaching is not merely about words but about bodies, breath, movement, and space.³⁵ The preacher does not simply *speak* the Word; they *inhabit* it. A well-placed pause, a moment of intentional stillness, can stir the congregation as profoundly as any sentence. In the Black church tradition, such silence is often an invitation: a rhythmic break that draws the listeners in, prompting call-and-response or giving time for the communal “Amen” to rise.³⁶ In contemplative liturgical traditions, silence is woven into the fabric of worship—moments of stillness where the congregation is invited to sit in the presence of mystery rather than grasp at facile answers. In each case, what might seem like an absence of speech is, in fact, a *fullness* of presence. As one classic text on inductive preaching notes, a preacher can lead listeners to discover the message by guiding them through hints and pauses rather than spelling it out—an approach that trusts the active work of the Holy Spirit in the silence between words.³⁷

One need not look far to find historical echoes of strategic silence. As noted earlier, Bonhoeffer chose a subtextual mode of proclamation—embedding anti-Nazi critique in the coded language of theology and discipleship that his congregation could understand, even if the Gestapo could not. His sermons in the clandestine seminary at Finkenwalde and his theological writings (such as *The Cost of Discipleship*) carried a bold message of costly grace and resistance

³³ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 77-104; Peter Capretto, “Empathy and Silence in Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, no. 4 (2015): 1400-1412.

³⁴ Sally Ann McKinsey, “Queering the Pulpit: The Complexities of Voice and Visibility in Homiletics,” *Homiletic* 46, no. 1 (2021): 15-28. McKinsey explores how queer preachers negotiate the pulpit, often modulating what they reveal in order to survive and minister effectively.

³⁵ Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as the Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 27-28, 32-35.

³⁶ Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 78-80.

³⁷ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 45-53. Craddock advocates an inductive homiletic method wherein the sermon's message emerges through story, hint, and listener insight rather than through an upfront thesis—demonstrating the power of implication and listener participation in preaching.

but under the veil of orthodox Christian teaching.³⁸ Those “with ears to hear” heard it. Here was silence as *shrewdness*: truth smuggled in by implication.

Beyond the pulpit, the writer James Baldwin—though not an ordained minister—embodied a prophetic voice shaped by cadences of the Black church tradition. He could indict the soul of America without naming it outright; through searing storytelling and nuance, he forced attentive listeners to confront truths that were never explicitly articulated but always unmistakably present.³⁹ As Eddie Glaude, Jr. observes, Baldwin’s witness remains urgent for our time: a careful dance of love and critique, truth-telling entwined with restraint.⁴⁰ In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin layers biblical imagery with subversive prophecy, warning, “No more water, the fire next time,” he warns, invoking divine judgment and national reckoning.⁴¹

Baldwin’s genius lay not in volume but *precision*—knowing when silence or metaphor could speak louder than direct confrontation. Homiletician Lisa L. Thompson terms this strategy “homiletical ingenuity”—the art of subversive subtext honed by those at the margins.⁴² Baldwin’s approach echoes Jesus’s counsel to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16), balancing courage with shrewdness. He reminds preachers that truth need not be shouted to be heard—it must be shaped to be received.

Contemporary homiletical thinkers have begun to affirm this same paradoxical power of unspoken truth. Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest and theologian known for preaching the uncompromised gospel, insists that sermons must resist the lure of neat resolution. She urges preachers to linger in the discomfort of paradox, suffering, and unanswered questions. In *The Crucifixion*, Rutledge argues that true gospel proclamation does not sanitize the horror of the cross or rush prematurely to Easter morning; the preacher must be willing to dwell in the long, aching silence of Holy Saturday—when God lay silent in the tomb—as an integral part of the story of salvation.⁴³ She warns that our modern appetite for quick, tidy answers can domesticate the gospel and rob it of its power to disrupt. For those preaching from a place of personal risk or marginality, her insight is vital: when full disclosure is not possible, silence itself can become proclamation. A preacher constrained by circumstance can still invite the congregation into deep theological waters, not by shouting every secret from the rooftops but by *refusing to offer easy answers*. Indeed, Rutledge contends that ambiguity in the pulpit is not failure, but often fidelity, for God is frequently encountered in the very absence of clarity.⁴⁴

³⁸ Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2015), 234-36. Marsh details how Bonhoeffer, in the mid-1930s Confessing Church seminaries, adopted a nuanced preaching and teaching style that embedded anti-Nazi critique in biblical and theological exposition to avoid detection while still conveying his message.

³⁹ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, NY: Crown, 2020), 107-113. Glaude analyzes Baldwin’s oratory, noting how Baldwin employed a prophetic tone and often lets the implications of his words indict his audience more forcefully than a direct accusation could.

⁴⁰ Glaude Jr., *Begin Again*, 15-18.

⁴¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, NY: Dial Press, 1963), 105.

⁴² Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 18-19, 91-96.

⁴³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 295-302. Rutledge underscores the importance of Holy Saturday—the silence of God between the crucifixion and the resurrection—and warns that bypassing this silence in our preaching domesticates the radical nature of the gospel.

⁴⁴ Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*, 73-80. Here, Rutledge observes that much of Scripture embraces unanswered longing. For example, many Psalms end without resolution (e.g., Psalm 13), and the original ending of Mark’s Gospel (Mark 16:8) leaves the resurrection account in stunned silence and fear. She argues that this scriptural witness legitimizes ambiguity and silence in preaching.

Even apart from crises, wise preachers have long understood that some truths sink deeper when the listeners arrive at them on their own. Pioneering homiletician Fred B. Craddock built his inductive preaching model on this premise. Rather than directly stating the “big idea” at the outset, Craddock would unfold a narrative or sequence of images, allowing important insights to be inferred by the congregation before being named. In his classic *As One Without Authority*, he demonstrates how holding back immediate conclusions can spur hearers to participate in meaning-making so that when the truth is finally articulated, it has already taken root in their experience.⁴⁵ In other words, a sermon’s power can lie as much in what it invites the listener to ponder as in what it explicitly declares. This homiletical strategy dovetails with what this article has argued: silence and subtext are not antithetical to proclamation but can be instruments of it. They beckon the listener to lean in, discern, and actively engage with the gospel rather than passively receive prepackaged answers.

This homiletical artistry is embodied in the work of the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a contemporary Lutheran pastor known for her radical candor and narrative skills. Bolz-Weber’s sermons are frank and unflinching about sin and grace, yet she, too, employs the discipline of withholding to great effect. In an Easter sermon recounting Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Christ (John 20:11-18), Bolz-Weber doesn’t rush to the triumphant declaration. Instead, she lets the congregation sit with Mary in the predawn garden, weeping at the tomb. She describes Mary’s confusion and grief in vivid detail and then pauses, allowing a tense hush to linger just as Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener—that moment *before* recognition. Only after this prolonged suspense does Jesus speak Mary’s name and the resurrection dawn is unveiled. Bolz-Weber’s deliberate pacing gives space for the weight of absence—the silence of Holy Saturday carried into Easter morning—to be viscerally felt by her listeners.⁴⁶ It is a homiletical move that mirrors Jesus’s own pedagogy of patience and subtext. Rather than immediately explaining the miracle, she invites the congregation to *experience* the emptiness and longing that precede it. In doing so, she reinforces a profound truth: the gospel’s power often lies in the waiting, at the moment when nothing seems to be happening, but everything is about to change.

Her approach illustrates that radical honesty in preaching does not mean saying everything all at once; it means telling the truth the way *the moment requires*. One can be fully truthful without divulging the whole truth prematurely. As Bolz-Weber exemplifies, narrative can act as a kind of shield for the preacher—a way of revealing divine truth indirectly, “allowing the congregation to discover meaning rather than having it handed to them.”⁴⁷ In her sermons, what is unsaid is as crucial as what is said, protecting the sacred story from an impulse to control it and allowing God’s grace to sneak up on listeners in its own timing.

In all of this, the wisdom of silence in preaching is not avoidance; it provides opportunities for discernment. It recognizes that preaching is an incarnational act carried out by fallible, situated preachers among fallible, situated people. Holy wisdom, therefore, sometimes counsels restraint. Faithful proclamation does not always answer every question or expose every

⁴⁵ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 1-8. Craddock’s foundational thesis is that preaching “without authority” (i.e., without assuming a domineering, omniscient stance) engages listeners through narrative and inductive development, which inherently involves strategic silence and delay in stating conclusions.

⁴⁶ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2013). While *Pastrix* is a memoir rather than a sermon collection, Bolz-Weber describes her approach to preaching and narrates how she often lets biblical stories speak for themselves. In the episode of Mary Magdalene, she emphasizes creating space for the hearers to inhabit the story’s tension before revealing the resolution, illustrating her commitment to pacing and restraint in proclamation.

⁴⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, 139-144.

personal truth of the preacher, nor does it give everything away at once. Sometimes, the most powerful witness a preacher can offer is a willingness to stand with the congregation in the unanswered moment, bearing testament by presence rather than explanation. The eloquence of a pause, the gentle implication of a phrase, the truth conveyed through a tear or a steadfast silence—these, too, are channels of the living Word.

In the end, there is profound power in what is left unsaid. The silence of the preacher who could say more but chooses not to can itself become a testimony to the gospel, trusting that God's Spirit will fill the quiet space with meaning. Such silence is not a denial of the truth but a delay for the sake of love. It is the silence of Jesus before his accusers, the silence of Holy Saturday before the dawn. It is silence as presence, not absence—and in that silence, the Word still speaks.

Strategies for Sustaining Authenticity in Difficult Contexts

For preachers in vulnerable positions—queer pastors in hostile congregations, women under patriarchal scrutiny, ministers with evolving theologies—authenticity requires more than courage; it requires strategy. In such settings, bold proclamation must often be tempered by careful discernment: not whether to speak truth, but how and when.⁴⁸ This section explores the theological grounding and practical necessity of strategic concealment not as a failure of integrity but as a faithful posture rooted in scriptural precedent and pastoral wisdom. As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, prophetic speech often relies on "imaginative, indirect speech" to sustain witness in hostile terrain.⁴⁹ Augustine, too, saw in Christ's withholding (John 16:12) not avoidance but care, recognizing that timing and capacity matter in the unfolding of truth.⁵⁰ In Augustine's view, truth-telling must consider the listener's readiness; timing is part of truth's economy. Premature clarity can overwhelm rather than transform. Barbara Brown Taylor echoes this pastoral instinct, observing that "restraint in preaching" is not about hiding the Word but honoring its gravity—revering both the message and the hearer.⁵¹ This is not an invitation to avoid a difficult word but to steward it. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, "truth is always relationship"—an utterance must fit the speaker, the hearer, and the time.⁵² Truth is not diluted by discretion—it is shaped by love.

In what follows, this author considers several strategies by which preachers in hostile or high-risk settings might sustain authenticity: by preaching with dual layers of meaning, by cultivating safe spaces for full disclosure, and by building trust through patient, layered proclamation over time.

Preaching With Dual Meanings

One strategy evident in Jesus's own ministry is the use of double-voiced discourse, speaking in multiple layers of meaning at once. The Gospels portray Jesus not only as a bold truth-teller but also as a master of veiled speech. Time and again, his words carried a surface message accessible to anyone "with ears to hear" and a deeper subtext grasped only by those

⁴⁸ McKinsey, "Queering the Pulpit: The Complexities of Voice and Visibility in Homiletics," 15-28.

⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 34-36.

⁵⁰ Augustine of Hippo. "Tractate 97 (John 16:12-13)," in *St. Augustine: Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John; Soliloquies*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes, 374-76, (First Series. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1888).

⁵¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1998), 3-4.

⁵² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "What Is Meant by 'Telling the Truth'?" in *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 365-366.

willing to wrestle with mystery (Mark 4:9-12). He spoke of seeds and harvests, banquets and vineyards, lost coins and hidden treasure. These were more than agrarian anecdotes; they were doorways into deeper realities—truths too weighty to be spoken plainly or too dangerous to declare outright.

As discussed earlier, Jesus's use of parables and his intentional withholding of messianic identity reflect a layered communicative strategy. More recently, N. T. Wright has argued that Jesus's parables and symbolic actions were a conscious prophetic strategy: they revealed the kingdom of God to those with open hearts while concealing his messianic claim from opponents until the appointed time.⁵³

This layered approach can be a lifeline for contemporary preachers in precarious spaces. Not every sermon must say everything all at once; indeed, attempting to do so may backfire if hearers are not ready. Instead, a sermon can be crafted with multiple levels of meaning, allowing the truth to speak to different listeners in different registers. This is not deception but pastoral wisdom. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale insists that prophetic preaching must always be intimately attuned to context and congregation, carried out with pastoral concern even as it challenges listeners.⁵⁴ The preacher who employs nuance and metaphor recognizes, as Jesus did, that some truths are best inferred and internalized rather than loudly proclaimed and summarily dismissed. In homiletical terms, this approach trusts the work of the Holy Spirit in the listener's heart to decode and appropriate the message in time.

The goal is to speak truth in parable, offering just enough to unsettle and inspire while withholding enough to keep dialogue and reflection alive. In the biblical tradition, prophets sometimes performed symbolic actions or told stories to prompt an acknowledgment of truth that a direct accusation might never elicit (such as Nathan's parable when confronting David in 2 Sam 12:1-6). Likewise, today's preachers may, at times, best serve the truth by strategic understatement—speaking in a minor key so that the community can hear the major chords of the gospel for themselves.

Cultivating Safe Spaces

A second strategy for sustaining authenticity under constraint is to recognize that not all truth must be spoken in the pulpit. Some truths require the intimacy of trusted relationships and smaller circles before they can be broadcast more widely. Jesus himself modeled this wisdom. To the crowds, he spoke in parables, but in private, he explained the deeper meaning to his close disciples (Mark 4:33-34). There were insights about his identity and mission that He only revealed to the Twelve behind closed doors (Mark 8:27-30). Similarly, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus confiding in the beloved community of his disciples during the Last Supper, sharing truths that he could not declare to the hostile world at large ("I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you," John 15:15). In short, even the Incarnate Word needed safe space for full disclosure. This pattern legitimates the preacher's need for off-pulpit arenas of honesty.

⁵³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 91-95. Wright interprets Jesus's parables as veiled announcements of God's kingdom, revealing truth to those "inside" while frustrating those hardened "outside," in line with Isaiah 6:9-10. See also pp. 180-185 for Jesus's strategic use of symbolic actions.

⁵⁴ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010). Tisdale argues that effective prophetic preaching grows out of genuine love for one's people and careful listening to their hopes and fears; only with relational credibility can hard truths be fruitfully spoken.

Many ministers serving in difficult contexts find sanctuary in a private conversation: a late-night discussion with a trusted colleague, a candid confession over coffee with a mentor, or the loving challenge of a spiritual director or therapist. Such spaces are not just emotional refuges; they are theological lifelines. In them, a preacher can voice unfiltered convictions, doubts, or pain without fear of career-ending backlash. The importance of these safety valves is hard to overstate. Homiletician Luke Powery, reflecting on the African American preaching tradition, notes that the Spirit's speech often emerges in the tension between lament and hope—sometimes through sighs and silence as much as through words.⁵⁵ Womanist theologians have especially emphasized the need for community support in the vocation of truth-telling. Emilie Townes reminds us that justice itself “involves the radical act of truth-telling—of reality testing and reality challenging” and this must be rooted in the lived experiences and traditions of one's community.⁵⁶ In other words, courageous speech is seldom a solo endeavor; it draws strength from the networks of solidarity and love surrounding the speaker.

For those who cannot fully reveal themselves in their congregations due to hostile environments, finding or cultivating alternative spaces for truth-telling is not optional. It is essential for survival. This might mean forming a small clergy support group, seeking out a counselor who understands one's context, or nurturing friendships in which one's whole self (including one's questions and convictions) is welcome. These private sanctuaries do more than preserve the preacher's mental health; they inform and enrich preaching itself. Insights tested in late-night conversations with trusted friends may shape a sermon's subtext later. Anger or grief first vented in a personal journal or support group can then be sublimated into pastoral passion in the pulpit without overwhelming the sermon. In this way, strategic concealment in public is paired with full disclosure in private. The two modes sustain each other: prudent silence in one arena is balanced by candid speech in another. Such balance is, ultimately, an act of wisdom. As Leonora Tubbs Tisdale argues, the most effective prophetic preachers are “pastorally grounded;” they speak from within webs of relationship and accountability, not from isolated ivory towers.⁵⁷ Cultivating such spaces honors the incarnational reality that the Word dwells among people: messengers need each other to hear and bear the Word in its fullness.

Building Congregational Trust Over Time

A third crucial practice is patience, building congregational trust over time and allowing truth to unfold gradually rather than all at once. Lasting theological or social transformation in a community is rarely the result of a single incendiary sermon; more often, it emerges from the cumulative effect of consistent, faithful preaching over months and years. The most effective prophetic preachers are those who play the “long game,” leading their people step by step. Here again, one finds a Christological pattern: Jesus did not announce his Messianic identity; rather, His self-revelation was incremental. Through healing encounters, ambiguous titles (Son of Man), probing questions, and the slow tutelage of the disciples, He led His followers into a deeper awareness of His identity. Even among the Twelve, understanding came gradually, not in a single epiphany. “Who do you say I am?” Jesus asks, inviting them to articulate insight in their own time and in their own words (Mark 8:29). Only after a relationship of trust had been

⁵⁵ Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 125–27.

⁵⁶ Emilie M. Townes, “Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 42–44.

⁵⁷ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 27–30.

established did Jesus speak plainly about the suffering Messiah (Mark 8:31-32) and even then, full comprehension of this awaited the resurrection. As the Gospel of Mark dramatizes, Jesus's own followers grasped his identity only gradually. The whole truth of the gospel is sometimes best communicated in stages. It was only at the cross that the centurion finally cried, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). The truth was there all along, but only in retrospect did it become clear.

Translating this insight to pastoral leadership, a congregation will not shift its deeply held beliefs or ingrained attitudes overnight. A single sermon is rarely enough to break through entrenched ways of thinking. But patient, iterative preaching can prepare the ground of the community's heart. Over time, as trust grows, the preacher can lead the flock into challenging territory that would have earlier caused panic. This is slow work, akin to tilling soil and sowing seeds season after season. The Apostle Paul hints at this in his agricultural metaphors: one plants, another waters, and God gives the growth in due time (1 Cor 3:6). The wise preacher chooses when to push and when to wait, discerning the congregation's readiness. In homiletical praxis, this might mean introducing a difficult theological idea in a gentle, exploratory way months ahead of addressing it head-on, or it might mean using a narrative approach one year and only later connecting the dots in a more doctrinal sermon. By spacing out revelations, the preacher is not withholding truth out of fear but stewarding truth in the hope that it will take deep root.

Building trust requires consistency between the preacher's words and life as well. Over time, a congregation comes to know the preacher's heart, whether she or he genuinely loves them, respects the Scripture, and seeks the common good. If that trust capital is stored up, when the day comes that the pastor *must* say a hard word, the people are more likely to receive it, knowing it comes from a place of love. In practical terms, this might involve the preacher sharing their own spiritual journey and struggles in appropriate moments so the congregation senses transparency and vulnerability. It might involve hospital visits, potluck conversations, and funerals tended—ordinary bonds that, slowly but surely, knit pastor and people together. Then, when a crisis of truth arises (say, addressing racism or a theological controversy), the congregation has a reservoir of trust to draw on: *we know our pastor, and we know she cares for us*. This doesn't guarantee agreement, of course, but it can temper the backlash. In any case, the ethics of timing in truth-telling demand that the preacher consider not only *what* to say but *when* and *in what order* to say it. It is a profoundly pastoral discernment. As theologian Eddie Glaude, Jr. notes, revelation does not happen all at once—even God's self-disclosure in history is progressive, at many times and in various ways (Heb 1:1). The preacher, then, might humbly participate in that divine pedagogy, trusting that God's timeline is wiser than our own sense of urgency.⁵⁸

None of this patience should be mistaken for passivity. Choosing one's battles and pacing one's words are very different from abdicating one's prophetic duty. In fact, it is often a sign of greater commitment to change in refusing to settle for the fleeting catharsis of one fiery sermon in favor of the painstaking conversion of minds and hearts. An alternative world cannot be imposed by force; it must be evoked and invited. Thus, the patient, imaginative preacher is doing the slow work of culture-making, one sermon at a time. Over months and years, the accumulated effect can be powerful: the congregation finds that its vocabulary, its questions, and even its sympathies have shifted toward the gospel's vision of justice and mercy. In retrospect, it may

⁵⁸ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, NY: Crown, 2020), 68–69.

seem a dramatic transformation, but it was accomplished through countless small moves and measured words.

Clarifying Strategic Concealment and Silence

Strategic concealment, rightly understood, is not evasion—it is discernment in service of love. When truth-telling risks immediate rejection or harm, temporary restraint may create space for eventual revelation. As Emilie Townes and other womanist ethicists remind us, truth-telling is always relational and contextual, tethered to justice and survival.⁵⁹ Concealment, in this view, becomes a pastoral strategy: not to silence the truth, but to protect it—and those who bear it—until it can be heard. The preacher, then, does not forfeit integrity by exercising restraint. Rather, they join a long tradition of faithful witnesses who spoke with urgency and timing like the prophets and Christ himself. The ethical measure is not volume but love: love for God's Word and love for God's people. In some contexts, that love will call for bold disclosure; in others, for tender withholding. But in every case, the preacher's task is to discern again and again what faithfulness looks like here and now.

In other words, strategic concealment is a tactic, not the endgame. It's the seed-planting phase of prophecy, not the harvest. If a preacher uses restraint perpetually and never returns to the hard truth, it ceases to be strategic and simply becomes silence. The homiletical task is to discern what can be spoken now and what must wait and to revisit that discernment continually in light of the Spirit's prompting.

To clarify, strategic concealment does not mean the preacher becomes a cipher or resorts to bland generalities. It is possible to preach with passionate authenticity while exercising restraint on certain details. The key is integrity: saying fully what can be said given the constraints and not saying what cannot or should not be said yet.

The preacher who stands before the congregation with wisdom and restraint is no less faithful than the one who proclaims with prophetic urgency. Both are necessary. Both bear witness. In withholding, a preacher may very well align with a God who is not desperate to prove Godself in human terms.

In homiletical practice, then, restraint and revelation are dance partners. The preacher's art is to enter into faithful timing. Preachers in high-risk situations may lean more on restraint, while those in more open settings may press harder at times. Yet even the boldest prophet must discern moments to hold back (lest the pearls be trampled, Matt 7:6), and even the most cautious pastor must eventually speak up (lest the rocks cry out, Luke 19:40). The ethical touchstone is love: love for God's truth and love for God's people. If love serves as the guide, one's speaking or silence will serve redemptive ends. As Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and other womanist thinkers point out, marginalized voices especially have had to negotiate when to speak and when to be quiet for the sake of survival—but that survival was often precisely so that the *community's* truth could live on and find another day to speak.⁶⁰ The end goal was never to remain silent but to stay alive *to tell the story*. In times of rising polarization and even violence against truth-tellers, that calculus is notably relevant across contexts (from pastors addressing racism to scientists speaking on climate change). Strategic concealment, rightly understood, is part of the biblical

⁵⁹ Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," 42-44.

⁶⁰ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Wake Up!: Black Women and Respectability* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 85-88. Floyd-Thomas and Kirk-Duggan discuss how Black women's speech has been policed and silenced and how womanist "crooked room" strategies (navigating distorted expectations) enable speaking truth powerfully in contexts of intersectional oppression.

witness and the communion of saints' practice. It is not antithetical to truth but a testimony to a deep and communal commitment to the *telos* of truth.

Homiletical Implications: Balancing Prophetic Boldness and Pastoral Wisdom

Preaching is often framed as fearless proclamation, but faithfulness in the pulpit is not always loud or immediately impactful. Scripture points to a different kind of courage—one shaped by timing, discernment, and the slow unfolding of truth. As explored earlier in this article, Jesus Himself did not reveal everything at once. His ministry was marked by silence, subtext, and story. These were not evasions but acts of *phronesis*—practical theological wisdom rooted in trust: trust in the Spirit's timing, in the hearer's readiness, and in the power of truth well spoken.

This reframes the homiletical task. Faithful preaching does not require full self-disclosure or constant boldness. It requires attentiveness—to the text, the context, the moment, and the body that speaks. Not every truth must be told at once. Some truths need time. Some need quiet. This is not avoidance but stewardship. Strategic restraint allows truth to be layered over time, like Jesus's own parables. Subtext, silence, and metaphor are not rhetorical flourishes—they are modes of revelation. They create space for discovery rather than demanding agreement.

For educators and preachers alike, this calls for a broader imagination. The binary between prophetic urgency and pastoral care collapses. Integrity and empathy must travel together. The preacher who withholds for love's sake is no less faithful than the one who speaks with fire. Restraint, of course, carries risk. It can become avoidance if untethered from truth. But rightly practiced, it is a form of anticipation—a trust that the Word will take root when the soil is ready and that even what is held back now may yet be revealed in time.

To preach this way is to follow Christ's path of self-emptying (Phil 2:7)—not grasping for control but making room for grace. Where authenticity is dangerous and vulnerability exacts a cost, holy concealment becomes an act of pastoral courage. The key is integrity: saying fully what can be said given the constraints and not saying what cannot or should not be said yet.

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Accompanying Preaching: A Lived Experience

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Abstract: *Preaching has traditionally been understood as verbal proclamation within religious settings. However, Accompanying Preaching introduces a novel pastoral-theological framework that expands this concept by integrating presence, relationality, and solidarity with the lived experiences of individuals. This paper explores the practices of Accompanying Preaching as a lived experience, particularly in contexts of social and pastoral challenges. It draws from real-life experiences in catechetical missions, educational settings, and moments of crisis, illustrating how preaching is fundamentally an act of being with others rather than just speaking to them. By formalizing this approach, Accompanying Preaching is proposed as a theological and pastoral framework that may serve as a guide for preachers, catechists, and pastoral workers in their mission. Grounding this framework in theological reflection and practical experience, this study contributes to the broader discourse on mission and pastoral engagement.*

Introduction

Though deeply rooted in Christianity, the Philippines faces contemporary challenges such as religious formalism, secularism, and declining youth participation in church activities. The interplay between secularism and religious formalism presents profound challenges to the practice of preaching and the sustenance of vibrant faith communities. Secularism, which emphasizes the separation of religious institutions from state affairs and often prioritizes empirical and material perspectives, has become increasingly influential in modern society. This shift manifests in several ways that affect both preaching and personal faith.

One notable impact is the diminishing authority of religious voices. As secular viewpoints gain prominence, relevant traditional religious teachings may be perceived as outdated or misaligned with contemporary values. This perception can lead to a questioning of the relevance of sermons and religious guidance, especially among younger generations. Moreover, the rise of moral relativism, often associated with secular thought, challenges the absolutes that many religious doctrines uphold. In a culture where personal choice is paramount, the idea of universal moral truths can seem restrictive or antiquated.

Conversely, religious formalism, characterized by a rigid adherence to rituals and traditions, can also impede genuine spiritual growth. The annual "Translacion" procession of the Black Nazarene in Manila is one of the most attended devotions of Catholics in the Philippines. On January 9, 2025, over 8 million devotees participated in this event, which lasted nearly 21 hours and covered a 6-kilometer route. Many participants walked barefooted, jostling to touch the centuries-old statue of Jesus Christ, known as the Black Nazarene. This focus on external conformity can result in worship that is mechanical rather than heartfelt. When individuals participate in rituals without understanding or embracing their significance, they become devoid of spiritual vitality and risk draining them of their meaningfulness.

Another challenge in preaching is youth participation. The youth, representing a significant portion of the Philippine population, are vital to the Church's present and future. However, recent studies indicate a decline in active participation among young Filipino

Catholics. A 2023 survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) revealed that only 38% of Filipinos attend religious services weekly, with a notable drop among the youth demographic.¹

The disengagement of youth from traditional church settings has become a pressing concern for religious communities worldwide. A significant factor contributing to this trend is the perception among young people that church teachings and practices are irrelevant to their daily lives and contemporary issues. This sense of disconnection manifests in various ways, leading to a decline in youth participation and a growing skepticism toward institutionalized religion. Many young individuals find that traditional church teachings do not resonate with the realities they face daily. A study highlighted that one-third of young adults describe church as "boring" and about one-quarter perceive faith as irrelevant, with biblical teachings being unclear to them.² This sentiment suggests a disconnect between the church's message and the pressing concerns of the younger generation. When sermons and religious discourse fail to address topics pertinent to youth—such as mental health, social justice, and scientific advancements—young congregants may feel that the church is out of touch with modern society.

The methods by which churches convey their messages can significantly impact youth engagement. Reliance on traditional, lecture-style teaching without incorporating interactive or multimedia elements may not align with the learning preferences of today's youth. According to the above study, "When youth ministers rely solely on lecture-style teaching or dated curriculum, they lose their audience before they even start."³ In an era dominated by digital media and interactive content, static and unidirectional modes of communication can render church services less appealing to younger audiences.

Pope Francis emphasizes that evangelization should not be about imposing doctrines but about journeying with people patiently, allowing them to encounter Christ in their own time and context. In this light, Accompanying Preaching transforms preaching from mere instruction into friendship, rooted in genuine relationships and sustained by compassionate action.

The (R)evolution of Preaching: From Traditional Proclamation to Accompaniment

Preaching is often understood as the solemn proclamation of the gospel within structured religious settings. However, my journey as a theology teacher and lay preacher in the Philippines has led me to a profound realization: true preaching extends beyond the pulpit. It is a continuous act of accompaniment, a lived experience that weaves the sacred into the fabric of everyday life. This paper explores my personal journey of discovering and embracing "accompanying preaching." Reflecting on my years of ministry, I recognize that personal experiences have profoundly shaped my approach to preaching. Engaging with individuals and communities in their unique contexts has not only deepened my understanding of the gospel but also reinforced the importance of lived experiences in effective ministry. In the Philippines, a predominantly Christian nation, I have observed how cultural and spiritual environments shape one's understanding of vocation, ministry, and proclamation of the Word. While this context provides fertile ground for nurturing faith, it also presents a profound responsibility: to ensure that preaching does not become a mere repetition of doctrine but rather an active, engaging force. In a

¹ Social Weather Stations. "SWS: Only 38% of Filipinos Attend Religious Services Weekly." Philstar, February 21, 2023. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/02/21/2246557/sws-only-38-filipinos-attend-religious-services-weekly>.

²The State of the Church 2020, February 19, 2020, www.barna.com/research/current-perceptions/.

³The State of the Church 2020.

society deeply rooted in religious traditions, preachers must cultivate faith that is both firmly anchored in Christian teachings and actively engaged in the realities of the world.

Historically, preaching has undergone significant evolution. In the Old Testament, it was primarily directed toward the Israelite community, focusing on instruction, prophecy, and communal worship within the temple or synagogue. The audience was the "assembly of the holy ones," emphasizing a collective experience of faith. While there was an awareness of a broader audience, the universal mission of preaching remained a future prospect. With the coming of Jesus Christ, the nature of preaching transformed dramatically. His message of salvation and resurrection expanded the scope of evangelization, shifting it from an inward-focused practice to an outward mission directed to all of humanity. This development gave rise to two fundamental forms of proclamation: the edification of the Ecclesia and Evangelistic Outreach.⁴

Today, preaching has transcended traditional settings. The advent of digital media has revolutionized religious communication, providing preachers with new platforms such as podcasts, vlogs, and social media to extend their reach beyond the confines of church walls. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this transition, compelling many faith communities to adopt online services and virtual gatherings. These digital advancements have not only broadened access to spiritual guidance but have also allowed individuals who may not regularly attend church to engage with faith in new and meaningful ways. Beyond digital presence, contemporary preaching thrives in personal encounters. As preachers, we are called to accompany individuals in their faith journeys, meeting them where they are and guiding them through life's complexities.

Accompaniment in Preaching

In the Gospels, Jesus is depicted not merely as a preacher but as one who walks alongside people. In the narrative of Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), the risen Jesus joins two disciples on their journey to the village of Emmaus. Unrecognized by them, He engages in conversation, listens to their concerns, and offers insights into the Scriptures. This paradigm of accompaniment is further exemplified in the Gospels where Jesus is not merely depicted as a preacher but as one who journeys with people. These and other encounters highlight the importance of being present with others in their moments of confusion and despair. Throughout the encounter at Emmaus, Jesus listens attentively to them. After listening, He offers guidance by interpreting the Scriptures, helping the disciples understand the events they witnessed in a new light. Pope Francis emphasizes this approach, urging ministers to adopt a pastoral process he refers to as "accompaniment." He highlights that Christ's very incarnation placed Him in a relationship of accompaniment with us. Jesus became one of us, walked with us, shared meals, healed, and ultimately offered us salvation.

Presence and Listening: The First Component of Accompanying Preaching

Evangelii Gaudium emphasizes that "missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples."⁵ This statement underscores that evangelization is not merely about teaching or

⁴Edification of the ecclesia is preaching to those already gathered in faith, nurturing their spiritual growth and reinforcing their commitment to the teachings of Jesus while evangelistic outreach extends the message beyond existing believers. Robert Barron, *What Christians Believe: Understanding the Nicene Creed* (Irving, TX: Word on Fire, 2020), 74-91.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel), no. 173 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

instructing but about walking with others in their faith journey. The notion of accompaniment is deeply embedded in the Church's evangelizing mission, as reflected in *Gaudium et Spes* which stresses that the Church must "scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel."⁶

Accompanying Preaching begins with presence. Before any preaching can be effective, there must be a genuine engagement with people in their lived experiences. Pope Francis emphasizes this, urging the Church to be a field hospital that first listens and heals before instructing.⁷ In my preaching ministry, I have seen how deeply transformative simple acts of being with people and listening to their stories can be.

A good example is my encounter with people in the province of Batan, Aklan, located in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines. Batan is a fourth-class municipality with a regular income between ₱90 million and ₱130 million (\$1,600 and \$2,200 in U.S. dollars) and a population of approximately 35,000. While it may not be a high-earning town and the people lead simple lives, their faith in God and neighbor is a remarkable trait that even visitors or tourists have noticed. I learned about Batan through priests Msgr. Pedro Frac, then a 73-year-old parish priest, and Fr. Joebert Villasis, rector of a school there and a friend of Msgr. Frac. Their parish needed formation training for their teachers. The public school teachers had long wanted to offer catechism classes to their students since government schools do not provide religious education. At that time, there was only one parish priest for all 20 barangays in a 30-square-mile area surrounded by mountains and fish ponds. It was difficult for the priest to visit all the areas for religious services, especially in providing religious formation. Thus, the public school teachers took the initiative of securing permission from the Department of Education. They were allowed to provide religious classes under the conditions that the program would be voluntary, outside of class hours, and without government funding. Various logistical and financial challenges arose. Despite these obstacles, their desire to share their faith remained steadfast. However, since they were not catechists, they needed training and formation.

Collaborating with Msgr. Pedro Frac, we provided alternative ways to provide training. Given the high costs of flight travel from Manila to Aklan,⁸ we initiated an online religious education training-formation program for teachers. Most of the teachers then didn't have a good internet connection. The parish provided internet access, allowing 300 public school teachers to participate. However, financial constraints hindered many from traveling to the parish office from their homes to continue their studies. With each trip costing two dollars, this expense proved unsustainable for teachers earning approximately \$25 per week.

We adjusted our approach in order to continue with the ministry. Instead of conducting online courses, my team and I traveled to Aklan during summers and semester breaks to provide in-person formation and training. Since the teachers were situated in different barangays and transportation was costly for them, we went in pairs to their locations. It is easy to see this as something focused on us as we helped them, but that was not the case. This was not a one-sided

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 4 (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1965).

⁷ The Church as a "field hospital" was used as a metaphor by Pope Francis in an interview with Antonio Spadaro in August. Vatican.va. Accessed March 14, 2025.
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papafrancesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html.

⁸ Batan is 49 kilometers (30 mi) from the provincial capital of Kalibo. There are no flights directly to Batan. Manila to Kalibo has a distance of 361.06 km or 194.83 nautical miles via air and has a population of 33,484 as of the 2020 Census, and a land area of 79.22 square kilometers.

mission; it became a reciprocal journey. Despite their hardships, the teachers extended hospitality—offering food and shelter, even though they have not much to spare. Their families welcomed us under their roofs for several weeks, demonstrating generosity beyond material wealth. Being a poor municipality, they had to contribute. They gave their crops, sometimes even their chickens, and every Sunday, they contributed a measure of rice until they had enough to feed more than 300 participants. Truly a multiplication of loaves and fishes.

Incorporating active listening into ministry is not merely a technique but a profound act of humility and love. By prioritizing others' perspectives over our own, we embody the biblical exhortation to "honor all people" (1 Pet 2:17).⁹ This approach demonstrates genuine concern for individuals' experiences and viewpoints, encouraging open dialogue and allowing them to share their stories without fear of judgment. This requires ministers to be fully present, offering undivided attention and empathy. It fosters trust and openness, creating a safe space where individuals feel valued and understood. Moreover, by understanding the unique challenges and needs of the people, pastors, preachers, and priests can offer tailored guidance and assistance, addressing specific concerns more effectively. This personalized support not only meets immediate needs but also contributes to long-term spiritual development.

Preaching that proclaims God's message to his people is always personal. Thus, it is not a lecture form with abstract language and concepts. It seeks to "open" the Scriptures as Jesus did, informing our listeners about its content, but always making the text's relevance apparent to them.¹⁰ We recognize that we are not merely giving a speech, but we are preaching to people about their personal relationships with God and their neighbors. That is to say, we will cast our sermons in a second-person mold. The dominant word will not be I, he, she, it, but you.¹¹

Accompanying Preaching as Relational

Accompanying Preaching transcends the mere transmission of doctrinal knowledge; it is an embodied praxis of relational encounter. Rooted in the incarnation of Christ, this form of preaching emphasizes journeying with others in their faith, fostering a reciprocal transformation between preacher and community. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The incarnation signifies God's choice to enter fully into human existence through Jesus Christ. By doing so, God didn't remain distant but chose to walk alongside humanity, sharing our joys, struggles, and sorrows. This divine act of becoming human serves as the ultimate model for accompaniment, illustrating that just as God immersed Himself in our world to understand and guide us intimately, we are called to be present in the lives of others.

As Pope Francis articulates in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Church must be a "community of missionary disciples" who engage in a dynamic of listening, dialogue, and shared learning.¹² Accompanying Preaching is thus a pastoral method that affirms the dignity of every individual, recognizing that the gospel is best communicated within lived relationships rather than solely through proclamatory speech.

The essence of Accompanying Preaching is a two-way engagement. It does not position the preacher as a mere conveyor of divine truths but as a fellow traveler in the faith journey. This

⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

¹⁰ Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 25.

¹¹ Robinson and Larson, *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 36.

¹² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Joy of the Gospel, no. 21.

mirrors the Emmaus narrative (Luke 24:13–35), where Christ walks with the disciples, listens to their concerns, and illuminates their understanding. The relationality inherent in this model underscores that authentic preaching is not unilateral but deeply dialogical. Yves Congar's ecclesiological reflections affirm that the Church is fundamentally a "communion" wherein ministry arises from relational participation rather than hierarchical imposition.¹³

This theology of accompaniment finds resonance in our experience with Msgr. Frac and the teachers. We, too, were accompanied by the people of Aklan. Their faith, struggles, and insights shaped our own spiritual journey, reminding us that evangelization is never a one-directional movement. Instead, it embodies the mutual conversion spoken of by St. John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*, where both evangelizer and evangelized undergo a process of deepening faith.¹⁴ Evangelization is a dynamic and reciprocal process, enriching both the evangelizer and the evangelized. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others. As preachers share their faith, they experience a deepening and revitalization of their own beliefs. Conversely, those who receive the message embark on their journey of faith, leading to mutual spiritual growth. This mutual enrichment underscores the transformative power of God's word, fostering a deeper communion among all participants.

Through this shared experience, 316 public school teachers became catechists—not through a detached instructional process but through lived witness and participatory faith formation. This mirrors the early Church's catechetical model, where faith was handed down through communal engagement and discipleship. St. Paul's exhortation in 1 Thess 2:8 captures this beautifully: "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also ourselves, because you have become very dear to us."

Solidarity in Crisis: Preaching Through Action

Accompanying preaching holds exceptional power during times of crisis. When Typhoon Ulysses struck the Philippines in November 2020, it devastated parts of Marikina in Metro Manila. More than 20 senior citizens, some with dementia, were stranded in their flooded, church-run hospice care facility. To survive the 8-foot floodwaters, they sought refuge on the roof of their bungalow. In the aftermath, a Catholic school offered its classrooms as temporary shelter, where they spent Christmas and New Year until a new residence could be found. The priest overseeing their care sought assistance beyond financial aid, emphasizing the need for companionship, care, and well-being. Together with other volunteers, we provided support through our presence, listening to them, and organizing the donated items and relief goods to make them feel at home, ensuring their well-being and respect. This effort was especially challenging amid the pandemic, as we took precautions to protect their health.

These experiences demonstrate that preaching is not confined to words. It is about living out the gospel message, especially when people are most vulnerable. St. Francis of Assisi's instruction—"Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words"—captures this ethos perfectly. In such moments, the line between giver and receiver blurs. The seniors we assisted were not just beneficiaries; they became our teachers, reminding us of the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of presence. Their gratitude was evident not just in words but in the warmth of their smiles and the tightness of their grips.

¹³ Rose M. Beal, *Mystery of the Church, People of God: Yves Congar's Total Ecclesiology as a Path to Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 224-231.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate), no. 2 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990).

This experience underscored that in times of crisis, our actions become the most powerful sermons. By standing in solidarity with those who suffer, we live out the teachings of Christ, offering hope and love through tangible deeds. Jesus Christ did not merely speak of salvation but lived among His people, experiencing their suffering and joys (John 1:14). His ministry was not distant rhetoric but an active presence—healing the sick (Mark 1:40-45), feeding the hungry (John 6:1-14), and mourning with the grieving (John 11:33-35). This embodied preaching challenges ministers and laypeople alike to respond to crises with both material and spiritual support.

The principle of solidarity in Catholic social teaching emphasizes that we are all responsible for one another. Pope John Paul II, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, defines solidarity as "not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."¹⁵ Pope Francis reiterates this call in *Fratelli Tutti*, where he exhorts the faithful to embrace a "culture of encounter" that transcends social, economic, and even physical barriers.¹⁶ Crises provide a stark reminder that accompaniment is not optional but a mandate rooted in Christ's way of caring for and engaging with the world.

Accompanying Preaching, particularly in times of crisis, is an urgent response to the call of the gospel. It is the tangible expression of faith that moves beyond words into action. As the Letter of James reminds us, "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). To preach in crisis is to be present—to listen, to console, to uplift, and to serve. This is the essence of solidarity in crisis: a preaching not of mere words but of profound, incarnational action.

Witnessing as Preaching

Witnessing serves as a powerful testament to faith, inspiring and encouraging others. Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, asserts that "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."¹⁷

Witnessing is deeply rooted in Scripture. In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus commissions His disciples, saying, "You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8). This mandate emphasizes that disseminating the gospel is intrinsically linked to personal testimony. In this context, a witness is someone who has encountered the risen Christ and, through their transformation, bears evidence of His enduring presence in the world. The Gospel of John provides a poignant example through the Samaritan woman at the well. After her encounter with Jesus, she returns to her community and proclaims, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (John 4:29). Her testimony leads many to believe in Christ, illustrating the profound impact of sharing one's faith journey. Similarly, the Apostle Paul frequently recounts his conversion experience as a testament to God's grace, using his narrative to connect with diverse audiences (Acts 22, 26).

In the Philippines, the intertwining of faith and daily life is evident, particularly in education. The 1987 Philippine Constitution acknowledges the importance of religious

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), no. 38 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987).

¹⁶ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), no. 30 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020).

¹⁷ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World), no. 11 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975).

instruction in public (government supported) schools, stating, "At the option expressed in writing by the parents or guardians, religion shall be allowed to be taught to their children or wards in public elementary and high schools within the regular class hours." (Article XIV, Section 3, No. 3) This provision opens avenues for catechesis within the public education system, allowing faith to permeate the academic sphere.

The public school teacher-catechist in Batan is a good example of a tangible manifestation of witnessing. These educators transcend their conventional duties by imparting religious education to their students without additional compensation or formal recognition. Their commitment stems from a profound sense of vocation, viewing their profession as a conduit for evangelization. These teachers navigate numerous challenges, including limited resources and the delicate balance of adhering to educational policies while fulfilling their catechetical mission. Their perseverance exemplifies the essence of witnessing; their lives become a testament to the faith they profess.

However, the call to witness is not without challenges, especially in an increasingly secular world. Societal secularization, diverse belief systems, and potential misinterpretation can impede the effectiveness of personal testimony. The rise of secularism presents numerous challenges to the Christian faith and its values often lead to a pronounced indifference toward religious expressions, creating an environment where faith-based perspectives are marginalized. This societal shift can result in the erosion of religious values and a diminished public presence of faith communities. For individuals striving to live out their beliefs, this secular backdrop can foster feelings of isolation and apprehension, as their expressions of faith may be met with apathy or even hostility.

In the Philippines, despite its rich religious heritage, secularism presents unique challenges to witnessing. The principle of "benevolent neutrality" that was adopted by the government aims to balance the separation of church and state while accommodating religious practices. However, this approach can lead to ambiguities in the public expression of faith, particularly within educational institutions. While the constitution permits religious instruction in public schools upon request, the implementation varies. In some cases, religious education is infused with specific denominational undertones, potentially alienating those of different or no faith backgrounds. This complex interplay between secular policies and religious practices necessitates a nuanced approach to witnessing, one that respects diverse beliefs while remaining true to one's faith convictions. Navigating this landscape requires discernment and a commitment to embodying the teachings of Christ in a respectful and authentic manner, fostering genuine dialogue and understanding in a pluralistic society.

Journeying Together: Shared Responsibility

In this framework, preaching is not a solitary endeavor but a collective mission that thrives on shared responsibility. This collaborative approach fosters a culture of giving and mutual support, as exemplified by the *Isang Salop ng Bigas* initiative in Batan.¹⁸ In this program, families contribute a measure of rice every Sunday, a practice that has been expanded to provide meals for catechists and teachers undergoing formation. This communal generosity is a form of lived preaching, demonstrating the power of shared responsibility. The biblical foundation for such communal efforts is evident in the early Christian communities. The Acts of the Apostles

¹⁸ In the Philippines, *isang* (*isa* means one) *salop* is roughly 2.5 to 3 kilos depending on the region. *Isang salop ng bigas* or a measure of rice was what the teacher-catechist contributed every Sunday mass so that they can feed more than 300 participants.

describes believers who "were together and had everything in common," (Acts 2:44) sharing their resources to support one another.

In Aklan, the *Isang salop* initiative embodies this principle by transforming individual contributions into a collective force for good. What began as a modest effort to feed a few volunteers has expanded into a robust support system for those dedicated to catechesis and education. This evolution underscores the impact of shared responsibility, where each person's offering, no matter how small, contributes to the greater mission of evangelization. Moreover, this initiative highlights the reciprocal nature of accompanying preaching. As the community supports its catechists and educators, these individuals, in turn, are empowered to nurture the faith and education of the community's members. This cycle of giving and receiving fosters a vibrant faith community rooted in solidarity and mutual encouragement.

The success of the *Isang salop* initiative also reflects the broader cultural values of the Filipino people, particularly the concept of *bayanihan*,¹⁹ or communal unity and cooperation. By embracing shared responsibility in their evangelization efforts, the community in Aklan not only addresses immediate needs but also strengthens the bonds of fellowship and collective faith. In essence, accompanying preaching as a shared responsibility transforms the act of evangelization into a communal journey.

Conclusion, Accompanying Preaching: A Seeking Preacher

Preaching and mission are two facets of the same endeavor, each energizing and informing the other. Preaching acts as a catalyst for mission by inspiring and equipping believers to engage in God's work beyond the church walls. Conversely, the mission offers real-world experiences that deepen and enrich the content and delivery of preaching.

Missiologist Eckhard Schnabel writes about a missionary approach that encompasses two key elements: intentionality and movement.²⁰ These components remain integral to contemporary missions. Mission originates from an authority that dispatches messengers with a message to the people. Intentionality reflects the mission's purpose as conceived by the sender, which should align with the messenger's understanding. Therefore, the messenger must clearly grasp the sender's intent. Movement, meanwhile, extends beyond mere geographical relocation. As Schnabel asserts, mission is not limited to traveling to distant lands or crossing cultural boundaries; it encompasses the entire effort of proclamation—the determination, labor, and struggle of stepping out of one's comfort zone.

The call of a preacher is to be a seeking preacher. This entails rediscovering the importance of going forth, and embracing the essential nature of a pilgrim Church. Preaching is not confined to the pulpit; it is an outward movement, a response to Christ's initiative. As an evangelizing community, we acknowledge that the Lord has taken the first step. He has loved us first, enabling us to go forth boldly—seeking those who have strayed, standing at the crossroads, and welcoming them back. Mission, in turn, is the Church's active participation in God's

¹⁹ There is no direct English translation for *bayanihan*. *Bayanihan* is a Filipino trait that embodies communal unity, cooperation, and mutual help. Traditionally, it refers to the practice of community members working together voluntarily to achieve a common goal, such as helping a neighbor move their house by physically carrying it on bamboo poles. Beyond its literal meaning, *bayanihan* represents the Filipino value of solidarity and selflessness, especially in times of need. It can be seen in modern contexts, such as disaster relief efforts, volunteer work, and collective problem-solving within communities.

²⁰ Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 22-23.

redemptive work throughout the world. This includes evangelization, advocating for social justice, and demonstrating Christ's love in diverse settings.

One of my experiences as a seeking preacher led me to the remote islands of the Philippines, specifically to St. Bartholomew Parish of the Dominican Order in the Calayan Islands.²¹ Situated in the northernmost part of the country, the island is home to about 20,000 residents across 12 *barangays*. Reaching it requires a *lampitaw*—a 5 to 7-hour journey across the open sea from Aparri, Cagayan.²² Despite its vast area, the parish has only two priests. To reach the most distant communities, they must walk 10 to 12 hours from the Centro, where the convent is located. Consequently, when a priest visits, he administers five sacraments in a single visit. Conducting church services is already challenging—catechesis even more so.

If teaching and nurturing faith is both a sacred duty and an inalienable right of the Church, then every baptized person is compelled to preach. By virtue of baptism, all are called to continue the apostles' work. When I was invited, along with a team, to help train catechists for the island, the task felt daunting. The journey alone was long and arduous. However, upon arrival, we were most struck by the people's unwavering commitment.

There is only one church on the island, meaning attending Mass requires walking several hours. Yet, during our training sessions, not a single participant arrived late—despite having to trek 10 to 15 kilometers down the mountains. From our lodging near the convent, I witnessed a profound testament to Christian life. Their sacrifice—their willingness to walk, to spend time learning, to serve as catechists—was a living expression of faith.

This experience deepened my understanding of accompanying preaching, a concept rooted in the belief that preaching is inseparable from mission. In places like Calayan, where access to priests and formal catechesis is scarce, preaching assumes a new form. It is found not only in homilies but in every act of presence, every conversation, every shared burden. The people there did not merely listen to the gospel—they lived it. They embodied St. Paul's words: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16). Their lives became a proclamation, a mission of faith.

This is the essence of accompanying preaching—it is preaching that does not leave people behind. It does not remain distant, speaking solely from a position of authority. Instead, it seeks out, listens, and walks alongside others. It understands that evangelization is not only about words but also about witness. Mission, then, is about bringing the gospel to people and discovering Christ with them. The call to go forth is not about mere movement; it is about encounter. And true encounter demands accompaniment. This is the challenge for every preacher: to view preaching not as a task but as a pilgrimage. To step beyond comfort, to meet people where they are, and to proclaim Christ not only through words but through presence. In doing so, preaching becomes more than an act—it becomes a mission.

Thus, preaching in a Christian society is both a gift and a challenge. It is a privilege to proclaim the gospel where its language is familiar, yet it is a responsibility to ensure that it

²¹ The Calayan Islands, part of the Babuyan Group of Islands in Cagayan province, are approximately 530 kilometers (330 miles) north of Manila. There are no direct flights from Manila to Calayan. It is 10-12 hours bus ride from Manila to Claveria. From there, a *lampitaw* ride takes 4-7 hours depending on the waves.

²² A *lampitaw* is a traditional wooden outrigger boat used in the northern Philippines, particularly in Cagayan and the Babuyan Islands. It is designed for long-distance sea travel, usually powered by a diesel engine, and reinforced with bamboo outriggers for stability. A medium to large size *lampitaw* can carry 15 to 40 passengers along with cargo. Since Calayan has no airports, *lampitaws* serve as the primary mode of transport between the mainland (Claveria or Aparri) and the island. It is an open-air boat thus passengers are exposed and can get wet.

remains a living, breathing force for personal and societal transformation—preaching that becomes an act of accompaniment, witnessing, and educating in faith.

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Building Bridges of Collaboration Across the Cultural and Socio-Political Divides in Cameroon¹

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Abstract: *We live in times of strife, mainly due to cultural division and polarization in many countries, leading many to look to the Church for solutions. Although our faith calls us to Christian unity, our churches unfortunately remain divided along ethnic, tribal, religious, and political lines. The Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon (SDS) preaching method proposed by Leah D. Schade has proven effective in fostering collaboration and peacebuilding in divided regions. Having tested this method at Saint Charles Lwanga Parish in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and in various ministerial contexts across Cameroon, I propose the SDS method to equip preachers in Cameroon to mediate peace and build bridges of collaboration across the political divisions in this country.*

Introduction

Amid strife and cultural and socio-political divisions in many countries, the pulpit has served and continues to serve directly or indirectly as the bedrock of activism. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, used the pulpit as a preacher to address the severe moral deficits in society. As an erudite preacher, King understood the power of the preached word. He used his rhetorical agency to move his listeners beyond complacency to places of empowerment. During significant turbulence, war, and economic and racial injustice threatening the human race, King offered humanity precious pearls in sermons bearing the message of hope to shattered humanity.

In the same light, preachers in Cameroon can use this same platform, the pulpit, to help build a new, peaceful society in light of longstanding divisions across our country (see description of these below). Preachers in Cameroon have a crucial role in bringing about peace. Everyone in Cameroon knows the significant influence of religion in this country. In major state events, religious leaders are given privileged positions. The Church can be the harbinger of a new political future not by taking the place of politicians but by making its voice heard through what it knows best to do: preach. Instead of instigating division, the Church can use preaching to build bridges that will bring love and peace in our socially and politically divided context.

I am not an engineer and have never built a physical bridge. However, I am glad to share how “Preaching Builds Bridges with Indigenous Tribes and Communities.” Working with Professor Leah D. Schade, I have learned how to build bridges of collaboration across our cultural and political divides in Cameroon using the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon (SDS) method. I will first present my motivations for embarking on this work of building bridges; second, I will account for the political and cultural divisions in the context of Cameroon; third, I will show how preaching has been effective in building bridges in the cases of Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Gandhi; fourth, I will affirm that the SDS method is an effective tool for building bridges in our culturally and socio-politically divided country. Finally, I will present the training

¹ In keeping with the overall theme of the 2024 meeting of the Academy of Homiletics (held exclusively online), “Preaching Builds Bridges,” this paper was presented as part of an international panel asked to speak about how the theme relates to the speaker’s context. This author chose to address “Preaching Builds Bridges with Indigenous Tribes and Communities” in the context of divisions and challenges in Cameroon.

I received from Professor Leah Schade and how I trained other Roman Catholic priests and church leaders to apply this in different contexts in Cameroon.

Motivation to become a Preacher of Peace through the Sermon Dialogue Sermon Method

I was born in Bamenda in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. I had my primary and secondary education in the English-speaking part of the country, with English as the official school language for my primary, secondary, high school, and first-degree programs. I then studied in Cameroon's capital, Yaoundé, in the Center Region, using French for my novitiate and theology degree programs as a Claretian Missionary. I identify as an "anglophone," although I am bilingual and fluent in French.

Cameroon has almost three hundred distinct groups and over three hundred indigenous languages. There are two distinct regional cultures, both influenced by colonialism; one primarily speaks English and the other French, and both use different legal systems. Cameroon has ten Regions (provinces, states). Two of the regions, the Northwest and the Southwest, are English-speaking. These two regions are called the "Anglophone Regions" or the English-speaking part of the country. Due to political, religious, cultural, and tribal polarization, fractions are increasing in Cameroon. Antagonisms are causing mounting tensions, with the "Anglophone war of independence" variously known as the Anglophone crisis, the Ambazonia war being the consequence—with the Church caught in the middle.

As a Church leader, the religious context of the Church of Cameroon challenges me to analyze how church leaders can preach in this situation of great divisiveness. These differences influence the way we think in all spheres of life. The Church, of course, is not limited to a building or the clergy. How can the Church, both laity and clergy, mediate peace, justice, and the reign of God in the socio-political realm of Cameroon? I ask daily what I can do to build bridges across my country's various cultural and political factions. As a preacher with responsibilities as a church leader, I want to help preachers preach peace amid my country's socio-cultural and political divisions.

The immediate context that has propelled me into building bridges is my country's crisis, which escalated in 2016 and gradually led to the unfortunate situation we have now in the anglophone regions of Cameroon. The problem has been aggravated in some areas by having no schools because of the incessant violence, kidnapping, and killing of people, burning of houses stemming from disgruntled youths known as the "Amba Boys," and the excesses of the official government military. In this contentious context, preachers are caught in the middle. Any preaching that favors the separatist group's plight will be seen as a betrayal of loyalty to the government and can earn the preacher a jail sentence. Any preaching that even hints at supporting the government against separatist groups can lead to the kidnapping and eventual killing of the preacher. I was abducted alongside four other Claretian Missionary team members on November 23, 2018, when we went on a food rescue mission to the parishioners of Saint Dominic's Parish in the Diocese of Buea, in the Southwest/English region of the country. Some youths who had lost houses, property, and loved ones became members of the separatist groups claiming to defend the people and the territory. Claretian Missionaries have served in this parish for over ten years and followed the Christians to where they are still ministering to the people today.

After being kidnapped, I knew how dangerous it would be to dare engage in prophetic preaching in the divided zone. My discovery of Leah Schade's *Preaching in the Purple Zone* gave me the basis for prophetic preaching in a divided context and helped me to learn how to

build bridges through preaching. I took an elective course with Professor Schade. Eventually, I wrote a thesis titled “Preaching Peace in a Culturally and Politically Divided Context: Church Mediating Peace in Cameroon.” My project was presented to the Faculty of the Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis, Missouri, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry in Preaching degree in December 2023. I graduated in May 2024 with strong convictions about the power and potential of preaching in building bridges across the cultural and political factions of Cameroon.

Identifying and Accounting for the Various Cultural and Political Divisions

Before identifying the various cultural and political divisions in Cameroon that need to be bridged, I will present short descriptions of different aspects of Cameroon.

Cameroon, the Thorn-Crowned Glory of Africa

Cameroon is a country in West/Central Africa and one of Africa’s most diverse countries. Jean-Germain Gros attests, “Like many of its neighbors, a wide diversity of ethnic identities is present. They animate intra- and inter-group relations in the country. It has regional differences, and its topography and natural resource endowments vary, affording grasslands, forests, and petroleum products. Regional variations also include distinct religious, ethnic, and political orientations.”² In addition to this, Cameroon “has one of the most complex colonial histories, having been colonized and/or administered by three European powers—France, Britain, and Germany.”³ Diversity, in this case, should be an advantage. However, in Cameroon, this has not been the case.

Cameroon faces several internal issues contributing to significant religious, cultural, and political divisions. Terrorism linked to the *Boko Haram* insurgency in the country’s Far North Region causes much insecurity and the displacement of many.⁴ Since October 2016, Cameroon has witnessed unrest, violence, and separatist armed conflicts, especially in the country’s North West and South West Regions. Many people from English-speaking areas have moved to French-speaking areas to attend school because separatist groups trying to fight government forces opposed the reopening of schools. The immediate cause of this problem is the strike organized by the Anglophone Lawyers and the Teachers’ Trade Unions of the English Sub-system of Education. However, these tensions go back to the colonial period. A brief survey into the history of Cameroon will account for the inherent cultural and political divisions within the context of Christian ministry.

Cameroon, a Country Imbued with Cultural and Political Division Throughout Its History

The name Cameroon traces its origin to the exploration of the River Wouri by the Portuguese in 1472. In effect, “when they entered the Wouri estuary (the Cameroons River), they

² Jean-Germain Gros, *Cameroon: Politics and Society in Critical Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), x.

³ Gros, *Cameroon*, x.

⁴ “Boko Haram, officially known as Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād (Arabic: جماعة أهل السنة والدعوة والجهاد, lit. ‘Group of the People of Sunnah for Dawah and Jihad’), is an Islamist militant organization based in northeastern Nigeria, which is also active in Chad, Niger, northern Cameroon, and Mali.” Wikipedia.org. Wikipedia, s.v. “Boko Haram,” last modified May 19, 2025, 14:14, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram.

found a variety of prawns in the region.... They called the river *Rio dos Camaroës or River of Prawns*.”⁵

From 1884, Kamerun (German for Cameroon) became a German territory with borders fixed in 1894 by an agreement that Germany concluded with France and England. On this note, Harry Rudin attests that “Germany’s brief connection with the Cameroons began in 1884 when Bismarck changed his mind about colonial matters and decided to give Germany’s overseas trade the kind of protection that domestic trade had been given by the protective tariff of the late seventies.”⁶ Before 1884, however, there were settlements and organized tribal kingdoms in different parts of Cameroon. The various tribes and cultures migrated due to jihads, intertribal wars, the slave trade, searching for fertile land for grazing and food cultivation, etc. This accounts for the diversity and multiplicity of the indigenous population of Cameroon.⁷ The process of migration involved raiding and subjugating neighbors, forcing displaced persons to migrate elsewhere, and even intensifying the expansion of the Muslim faith throughout the country. This further “created animosity between powerful and weak kingdoms.”⁸ These changes account for the cultural divisions and hatred that exist today among the different ethnic groups in the country.

The First World War ended in Germany’s defeat, and as a consequence, Germany lost all its African colonies, including Cameroon. England took control of one-fifth of Cameroon, and France took over four-fifths.

Accounting for the Cultural and Political Divisions in Cameroon

The partition of Cameroon into French Cameroon and Southern (English) Cameroon, each administered independently by France and England, did not freeze the movement of people and goods. Animosity and divisions were heightened at the partitioning of Cameroon. Professor Nkwi observes, “The partition of Cameroon into French and English suddenly saw people look at themselves as enemies and, to a larger extent, strangers.”⁹

French Cameroon became independent of France on January 1, 1960. Southern Cameroon (English-speaking) chose to reunite with the Republic of Cameroon, forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961. With each region becoming a state in the Republic of Cameroon, the former Republic of Cameroon took the name of Eastern Cameroon,

⁵ Victor Julius Ngoh, *History of Cameroon since 1800* (Limbe: Pressbok, 1996), 45. In discussing Cameroon’s History, an orthographic note is in order, given that authors of different cultural backgrounds spell ‘Cameroon’ differently, each spelling accepted in its context. English-speaking authors spell it *Cameroon* or *Cameroons*, French authors spell *Cameroun*, and German authors spell *Kamerun*. See Asombang Raymond Neba’ane, “*Bamenda in Prehistory: The evidence from Fiye Nkwi, Msi Crater and Shum Laka Rockshelters*,” (Ph.D. diss.); University of London, 1988, 5.

⁶ Harry R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons, 1884-1914: A Case Study in Modern Imperialism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 414. Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) was known as the “Iron Chancellor,” serving as Chancellor of the newly united German Empire from 1862 to 1890.

⁷ To get these facts, I interviewed history, sociology, and anthropology professors from the University of Buea in Cameroon: Walter Gam Nkwi, Efuetnkeng Stephen Denis Fomin, and Henry Kam Kah. Dialoguing with these professors provided me with an overview of the history of Cameroon. They identified migration, intertribal wars, jihads, and the slave trade as the major causes of the diversity of cultures found in Cameroon. While accepting these as the causes of divisions, Prof. Nkwi asserted vehemently that the transition from Kamerun, one country, to the French and English colonies portrayed how a united country became divided. Up to the present day, brothers see themselves as rivals. This unfortunate phenomenon has eaten deep into the country’s politics, sociology, and religion. Cameroon, thus, is divided and in need of healing.

⁸ Ngoh, *History of Cameroon since 1800*, 1.

⁹ Walter Nkwi. Interviewed by Jude Thaddeus Langeh. Buea, Cameroon, August 22, 2023.

and the former Southern Cameroon became Western Cameroon. This federal experience lasted only eleven years. On May 20, 1972, the people formed the United Republic of Cameroon by an overwhelming vote.¹⁰ Then, on February 4, 1984, President Paul Biya renamed the United Republic of Cameroon the Republic of Cameroon. In effect:

it is worth noting that he consulted the National Assembly before carrying out this constitutional modification. Although he consulted the National Assembly, most of the Members of Parliament had been elected on a single list, meaning their number could not decisively influence the decision. That constitutional modification went a long way to fuel the sentiments of the Anglophone elite.¹¹

It may not be surprising that what is now called "the Anglophone problem" in Cameroon reflects the feeling of marginalization of the Anglophones in the face of a longstanding Francophone majority. The former feel marginalized by the majority of French speakers, while the latter feel the minority group feels much entitled. In this situation, it sometimes becomes challenging for some people to cohabit in the same area. Prof. Walter insists, "One of the topics of contemporary Cameroon history which, since the mid-1980s, has attracted the attention of historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, religious leaders and ordinary Cameroonians has been the 'Anglophone Problem.'"¹²

Accounting for the cultural divisions in Cameroon, scholar Shirley Ardener opines that "Cameroon is a meeting ground for a wide diversity of cultures and polities both native to Africa and intrusive from Europe."¹³ For example, in the "grassfields" of Cameroon, she notes a

multiplicity of political communities predicated on heavily stressed linguistic singularity, varying modes (and extent) of centralization of powers, and the seemingly idiosyncratic parceling up in individual polities of elements from a common core of cultural forms and practices. While not unique, this multiplicity of fiercely independent and linguistically distinct groupings is distinct from other broader and more homogeneous ethnic blocks such as the Yoruba or even the Tikar, from whom, paradoxically, many grassfields dynasties claim origins. The political and linguistic diversity of grassfields societies is susceptible to differing interpretations.¹⁴

Cameroon has experienced conflicts throughout its history, and these clashes have led to many community divisions. Churchill Ewumbue-Monono explains the situation, especially noting the Bamileke tribe spread over Cameroon:

In Cameroon there have been over 60 low-intensity conflicts emanating from conflict of interests between host and settler communities. For instance, the dynamic of Bamileke

¹⁰ Some scholars attest that after the vote, President Ahidjo, the first president of Cameroon, unilaterally changed the country's name from the Federal Republic of Cameroon to the United Republic of Cameroon. Victor Julius Ngoh (ed), *Cameroon from a Federal to a Unitary State 1961-1972: A Critical Study* (Limbe: Design House, 2004).

¹¹ Walter Gam Nkwi, "The Anglophone Problem," in *Cameroon from a Federal to a Unitary State*, 185.

¹² Gam Nkwi, "The Anglophone Problem," 185.

¹³ Shirley Ardener, "The Catalyst: Chilver," in *African Crossroads: Intersections between History and Anthropology in Cameroon*, eds. Ian Fowler and David Zeitlyn (Oxford: Berghahn Books 1996), ix.

¹⁴ Ian Fowler and David Zeitlyn, "The Grassfields and the Tikar," in *African Crossroads*, 1.

settlers have clashed with many groups throughout the country. In 1956, there were clashes between the Bamilekes and the Bulus in Sangmelima. In 1960 there were clashes between the Bamilekes and the Bamouns in Bamendji in which over 100 people were killed. Another clash occurred in Douala between the Bamilekes and the Doualas in 1960, killing some 19 people. Finally, in December 1967, a clash occurred between the Bamilekes and the Bakossis in Tombel, leading to over 250 deaths.¹⁵

Preachers need to be aware of this. Our churches continue to suffer in light of this history. In most parishes, Masses are divided across cultural and linguistic groups.

A Call for the Church to Use Preaching to Build Bridges of Reconciliation in Cameroon

My research into the Doctrine of Nonviolence supports the idea that nonviolent preaching may effectively contribute to peacebuilding in Cameroon. Political activists like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. used their preaching and public speaking to work nonviolently for peace and justice. Preachers can learn how to share the nonviolent Word of God peacefully, which is made manifest in Jesus Christ. Preachers may use love and welfare to create a peaceful community by studying nonviolence.

William H. Willimon has said, “Preaching and leadership are inseparable.”¹⁶ As leaders, the preacher must do what Maurice Nutt recommends: “Injustice in the world must always and at all times be condemned by the Christian preacher, Catholic or Protestant.”¹⁷ The preacher, thus, as Ronald Allen would have it, “is called to help the congregation interpret social issues and a Christian response from the perspective of the gospel. The Church seeks for every social world to conform to the gospel, that is, to manifest relationships that are loving and just.”¹⁸

Our Cameroon society is riven with conflict and polarization regardless of where we go, what we watch, or how we connect. Regrettably, Christians appear caught up in the same hostility as the culture. Despite being called by our faith to be united as Christians, the unfortunate reality is that our churches face divisions of class, ethnicity, gender, and politics. The preacher’s function becomes increasingly significant when these societal divides widen within and beyond the church walls. Preachers, therefore, should use their influence in their pulpits to promote unity and reconciliation in their churches and communities.

Jean-Marc Ela, examining the Church in Cameroon, insists on the role of church leaders in preaching the liberation of the human person at all levels. Ela invites the Church to invest in the “liberation project of the African man and woman with an evangelical content.”¹⁹ He insists that “we must believe in Jesus Christ and put up a mighty resistance to all structures of oppression.”²⁰

Preaching as a Tool for the Church in Cameroon to Build Bridges of Peace: a Critique

¹⁵ Churchill Ewumbue-Monono, *Indigenous Minorities and the Future of Good Governance in Cameroon: An Inquiry into the Politics of Local Governance in the Local Councils of Fako Division 1866-2001* (Buea: CEREDDA Publications, 2001), 14-15.

¹⁶ William H. Willimon, *Leading with the Sermon: Preaching as Leadership* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), 10.

¹⁷ Maurice J. Nutt, *Down Deep in my Soul: An African American Catholic Theology of Preaching* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 162.

¹⁸ Ronald Allen, *Patterns of Preaching* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 199.

¹⁹ Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, trans. Robert J. Barr (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 101.

²⁰ Ela, *African Cry*, 138.

While not asking the Church to meddle in dirty politics, it is worth noting that the Church has a great platform to educate and form its faithful in its preaching. Through preaching, the Church can touch the lives of millions of Cameroonians daily and weekly. People still have confidence in the Church, and people come to the Church for the sake of their salvation.

On a sad note, churches in Cameroon throughout history have not been the best models of those who preach by example. This situation is common to all churches in Cameroon; however, this work appears concentrated in the Catholic Church. According to Paul Gifford, “The Catholic Church reflects the same deep and pervasive divisions as the country at large—in many ways it holds up a mirror to the nation.”²¹ Though the situation is getting better, it still affects people of God negatively, so that tribalism has eaten deeply into the heart of the Church. We see a dire need to build bridges through preaching.

Despite the inherent spells of tribalism, disunity, and divisions in the Catholic Church of Cameroon, “it has real leaders of considerable moral stature and intellectuals whose analyses carry weight.”²² In the Church’s history, the leaders have tried to combat oppression and injustice, even to the extent of suffering the martyrdom of its clergy. Much still has to be done by Cameroon preachers to propagate a new Christian identity based on renewal. There is a need to identify true Christian identity based on peaceful and respectful relations among people across tribal identities and loyalties. For this reason, I am convinced of the importance of building collaborative bridges through preaching. How can we do so in a divided Cameroon? I believe that hope is found in the Sermon Dialogue Sermon Method.

Using the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon (SDS) Method to build bridges in Cameroon

Preaching prophetically in a divided zone is a significant challenge for preachers. Because of this, many shy away from controversial topics and end up not being prophetic or relevant to their context. In sharing how Leah Schade trained me through the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon method and how I have used it to empower preachers to preach well in a divided zone, I believe that this method will be useful for preachers in different contexts as well.

Building Bridges of Collaboration in Saint Charles Lwanga Parish

Leah D. Schade proposes a “sermon-dialogue-sermon” process for preaching on politically difficult or controversial issues related to social justice. I find this process insightful in that it doesn’t assume a completed sermon when the minister leaves the ambo; instead, this preaching style invites ongoing dialogue that leaves room for a communal proclamation to emerge from the whole worshipping community. Raising difficult topics while listening and learning from one another affords real opportunities to initiate change in our congregations. Clearly guided dialogue that includes well-described steps is very helpful in leading conversations about difficult topics in various contexts and cultures.

Cameroon has no clear-cut red-blue divide as there is in the United States, as described in Leah Schade’s book, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*.²³ Rather, Cameroon is experiencing multiple divisions in terms of language, culture, politics, religion, etc. However, before training preachers, I began with myself. Schade prepared me to test and see whether the SDS method and the “purple zone” principles would translate to a context outside of

²¹ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 255.

²² Gifford, *African Christianity*, 270.

²³ Leah Scade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2019).

the United States. In other words, would this method work in a country and congregation beyond the American purple zone? I decided to apply it to Saint Charles Lwanga Parish, Nkolbisson, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

I have known my congregation since 2006, when I began undergraduate theological studies in Nkolbisson, Yaoundé. By then, the Anglophone Community had fifty families, and my Claretian superiors assigned me to help minister to them. I gave catechism classes and strengthened different groups in the Church. Being the minority group in the parish, the community felt discriminated against. They prayed in the parish hall while others would use the Church. They were not always included in the decision-making of the parish. However, from 2006 to 2020, they had grown to more than two hundred families and constituted a significant force in the parish, contributing to its financial strength. With this growth, the “enemy” was no longer the Francophone community. Instead, there were internal divisions based on tribe, social status, political affiliations, and regions of origin. They were not collaborating enough with the entire parish or even among themselves. I sought to build a bridge of collaboration across the cultural and political divisions inherent in the community.

Description of the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process

In my context, I chose to do a variation of Dr. Schade’s outline of the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon process. In her method, the pastor preaches one sermon called the Prophetic Invitation to Dialogue that invites congregants to engage in the deliberative dialogue. Then the deliberative dialogue is held, followed by a second sermon called the Communal Prophetic Proclamation that integrates the spirit and insights from the shared dialogue and casts a vision of moving forward with next steps. Because of my parish’s layers of complexity and divisiveness, I decided that more than one sermon was needed to prepare the congregation for the dialogue. I preached three sermons as a prophetic invitation to dialogue, then held the deliberative dialogue session, followed by preaching the communal prophetic proclamation sermon.

I used the Revised Common Lectionary readings for the Sundays of July 11, 18, and 25, 2021, to preach sermons that would prepare the congregation for the dialogue. The lectionary text for my first intervention was based on Amos 7:10-17 and fit well into the context of division in my community. I aimed to address the tribalism, regionalism, and division within our Christian community. Reading John S. McClure’s *The Roundtable Pulpit*, especially portions related to collaboration, I chose the theme of my SDS process: *Living Together through Dialogue: Ministry of Collaboration in a Purple Zone*.²⁴ Speaking theologically, I feel that the Holy Spirit gave me an excellent opportunity to preach in the Purple Zone. The last paragraph in each sermon was an invitation to dialogue on the importance of collaboration in our local congregation.

During the Deliberative Dialogue, there were twenty-four people, including myself (there were also six other people who either came late or left early, so I am not counting them). Among the participants were eighteen adults between the ages of 18 and 65. As a church community, we sought to address division in our families, parish, local community, town, and country. As the opening question, I asked: *Have you ever been a victim of or experienced division in your community?* At first, people were hesitant to share these stories. It is not an easy thing to be vulnerable in a group situation. I offered my own story first about how I was discriminated against for being an Anglophone in a Francophone-dominated community. Then, one by one,

²⁴ John S McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995).

people opened up and discussed their painful situations. In an open discussion, members shared situations where they had faced rejection, stigmatization, and separation based on tribe, social status, religious and political affiliation, or economic divisions between the rich and poor. This is important because it shows that with modeling and permission-giving, this congregation was willing to be honest and forthright, to share their experiences and feelings in a way that builds trust. The people were open to sharing their experiences, including talking about rivalries between the rich and poor which inhibits collaboration. One person also expressed concern about the division among religious denominations and faith traditions (Muslim, Christian, etc.) within school contexts.

After the deliberative dialogue, I had the opportunity to share the Communal Prophetic Proclamation the following Sunday. Fortunately, the lectionary readings for this week coincided well with the themes of dialogue and collaboration: Exodus 16:2–4, 12–15 and John 6:24–35. I invited my congregation to see Jesus as the food that binds us despite our differences. The need for physical food by the participants helped me to talk about the importance of actual food for nourishing our bodies. We learned something about the power of God to bring us together, help us listen deeply to each other, receive shared wisdom, and envision a future of everyone being nurtured physically and spiritually. In effect, I encouraged my parishioners to continue to value family and community meals that bind us together. With that experience, I was satisfied because I felt I had succeeded in building a bridge to help my community work harder to bring together peace and unity.

Analysis of the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon process in Saint Charles Lwanga

Organizing a Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon process has been a fascinating way of building cultural and political bridges in my community. The choice of the theme of collaboration fits well into the dialogue process because “the tone and the use of language in the Communal Prophetic Proclamation sermon are what communicate this prophetic collaboration experienced in the deliberative dialogue.”²⁵ Looking through the lens of Amos 7:10-17, I understood the inherent divisions running through the Anglophone community itself due to regional, tribal, social, and political differences. Choosing the theme of collaboration was not only important for the parishioners but also for me to learn consultative and collaborative leadership. On this note, McClure insists:

Consultative and collaborative forms of leadership, however, are more effective when leaders hope to build the strategic prophetic, evangelistic, and pastoral commitments that are needed in our churches today. Situational studies of leadership demonstrate that collaborative forms of leadership are particularly effective in building lay commitment and lay leadership.²⁶

With this in mind, I strove to move toward a collaborative homiletic. My prophetic invitation to a dialogue sermon and the whole process centered around collaboration for a compelling mission. Collaboration comes from the Latin *Collaborare* (*Co* and *laborare*)—work with. When applied to the process of preaching, McClure describes collaboration in this way:

²⁵ Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 124.

²⁶ McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 12.

The word *collaboration* means "working together." It implies a form of preaching in which the preacher and hearer work together to establish and interpret the topics for preaching. They also decide together what the practical results of those interpretations might be for the congregation. The preacher then goes into the pulpit and represents this collaborative process in the event of sermon delivery.²⁷

I understand McClure's insistence that the preacher "collaborates with members of the congregation, galvanizing in the pulpit the actual talk through which the community, in response to the biblical message, is experiencing and producing in its own congregational life and mission."²⁸ It became apparent that the Deliberative Dialogue and the principles of the Purple Zone worked in my context of Saint Charles Lwanga, and I deemed it worthwhile to widen its application to other parts of Cameroon.

Training Preachers in Different Cultural Contexts in Cameroon to Build Bridges through the SDS Method

Having built the bridge of collaboration in Saint Charles Lwanga and been coached by Schade, I felt equipped to train other preachers to use this method in their congregations. Specifically, I trained two priests and one layperson to use the SDS process in various congregations in Cameroon. The training, therefore, involved a thorough understanding of Schade's *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, a presentation of how I applied it to my Cameroonian context, and words of caution and suggestions on how the collaborators could use it in their different contexts. I also drilled them on sermon preparation by using the dialogical lens to exegete their texts. At the end of the training, I can attest that my collaborators showed signs of satisfaction and readiness to serve in their different parishes. I encouraged each collaborator to choose a topic and propose a theme for the sermon-dialogue-sermon method.

My collaborators organized the SDS process in their different parish communities. Each of the three collaborators minister in a different diocese in Cameroon, spread across three distinct cultural and political regions: Center (Yaoundé), Littoral (Douala), and North West (Kumbo) Regions of Cameroon. These interventions represent areas with pronounced needs: Kumbo, where the current armed conflict is at its apex; Yaoundé, which is the political capital of Cameroon; and Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon. Two collaborators were from the English side of Cameroon and did their training in the French side of Cameroon. One was a French-speaking Cameroonian, and he did his intervention in the English-speaking side of Cameroon. I choose them to ensure a balanced appraisal of the method across different Cameroonian contexts.

The total number of participants was 39, comprising 20 men and 19 women, primarily young and middle-aged. Thus, there was a relative gender balance among participants. Analyzing the data, I can infer tips and lessons from the dialogue and questions I gathered with my collaborators. Training preachers to preach in a divided zone can be challenging and necessary as it involves addressing sensitive issues and promoting understanding, empathy, and unity among diverse communities.

After going through the post-deliberative dialogue survey and reading through the reports of the preaching collaborators, Dr. Schade pointed out moments of tension that arose during the SDS process. The participants were wrestling with feelings of harm and mistrust. There was

²⁷ McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 48.

²⁸ McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 50.

legitimate airing of grievances, expressing their feelings and not letting the pot boil over to become strained. Dr. Schade said: “A container was created to hold these problematic thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and it relieved some anger, despair, and frustration because at least they were being heard.” This appraisal alerted me to several insights learned in our Cameroonian context from the deliberative dialogue process.

Insights Gleaned from the Cameroonian Context of Building Bridges

Analyzing the SDS process of my collaborators with Dr. Schade, I agree with her observation that “The dialogue occurred in a country where people have been colonized. In this case, white colonizers imposed on them without getting their feedback.” True enough, Cameroon passed through three white colonial masters: the Germans, the French, and the English. Despite whatever positive impacts colonialism may have had, one understands the comment of historian Thomas Pakenham in his book *The Scramble for Africa*: “The European powers had no regard for African rights or interests. They simply partitioned the continent among themselves, drawing arbitrary lines on maps and ignoring the existing political and ethnic boundaries.”²⁹ Thus, the first insight to be gleaned from participation in the SDS process is a renewed awareness of the imposition of colonial control and its extensive impact on the development of Africa. It resulted in the deterioration of traditional African cultures and institutions and the exploitation of African resources to benefit European powers. Africa still feels the effects of colonialism. Many African countries are still grappling with the economic and social difficulties generated by colonial control. Sometimes, they have made significant decisions with the “chiefs” without consulting the people. Concerning local chiefs, we can make the second contextual observation.

Second, the interventions of colonial leaders took place within the context of a traditional monarchy and a hierarchy in which the chief (*fon*) is considered “next to a god” in stature and authority.³⁰ In effect:

The *fon* is exceedingly prestigious and regarded as being quite apart from other human beings. He obtains the protection of the late *fons* and their benedictions for abundant crops. He is sacred; he performs rituals... Many things in the life of the *fon* indicate his separate status... He does not eat in public, and in fact, many people believe he does not eat at all. People do not talk openly about him or about his body, but only indirectly or by metaphors. No one would say ‘the *fon* is ill’ but ‘there is sickness in the palace;’ or ‘the palace is hot.’ His children and wives are not referred to as the *fon*’s children and wives but as ‘children and women of the palace.’ His eyes are ‘stars,’ and his feet are ‘things.’ No one could talk to him unless they bowed, cuffed their hands over their mouth, and spoke through their hands in a low voice.³¹

It is important for leaders in the SDS process to acknowledge that church authorities sometimes behave like alternative forms of religious *fons*, contributing to a high degree of clericalism.

²⁹ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (London: Abacus, 1991), 590.

³⁰ Exodus Tikere Moffor “The Making of Fons Kings: An Insight into the Regalia of a Newly Crowned Cameroon Grassfields Fon” in *IJIRMP*, 10, no. 5, (September-October 2022), 3.

³¹ Cf. Paul Nchoji Nkwi and Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields* (Yaoundé: Department of Sociology, University of Yaoundé, 1982), 61.

Third, clericalism within the Church continues to pose significant problems. A harbinger for justice cannot sit quietly amid gross social inequality and the suffering of the poor masses facing famine, drought, and disease. After experiencing this weight of suffering, injustice, and deep frustration, Jean-Marc Ela offers “small steps of liberation” and the faith’s impact on marginalized peasants’ lives. In *My Faith as an African*, Ela observes that many African people still have empty granaries, lack of health care, and experience increasing injustice. Stemming from this assertion, Ela insists that the Church must root the Gospel in the people’s lives. Therefore, he presents the Church community as “the conscience of a conscienceless society.”³² In contrast to a Church marked by clericalism, it should be a Church of the poor.

My collaborators called people into dialogue within such political, cultural, and ecclesial contexts. In such situations, it is not unusual to observe from the beginning that there will be a lack of trust. In effect, each preaching collaborator confirmed they experienced a timid beginning because participants were very reticent to share their stories. By contrast, the dialogue process, in the words of Leah Schade, asserts, “Your voice is important, and we are going to figure out how to live together in community and not just impose upon you from the outside and the upside.” There was no imposition in the deliberative dialogue. It was dialogue, indeed. In effect, the SDS process provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of this dialogical approach for addressing division and fostering unity within a congregation, community, and country.

The SDS process also encouraged greater congregational engagement and participation. Congregants shared their views and perspectives during the dialogue. Observations indicate that participants from diverse backgrounds, age groups, and points of view felt secure expressing their opinions during the dialogue phase. The intervention demonstrated that the dialogue process positively affected the relationship between the preacher and the congregation, promoting a sense of candor and connection between them. True enough, in the different contexts of my preaching collaborators, I observed that dialogue allowed the division to be addressed and steps toward reconciliation were taken. Our experiences confirmed that the SDS process promotes healing and reconciliation, increasing empathy and understanding. Participants shared that the SDS process positively impacted the relationships within congregations, diminishing the sense of division among them. Many felt it helped bridge divides and create a more inclusive and caring community.

Specific Findings after using the Sermon Dialogue Sermon Method to Build Bridges

The Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon method used for our ministerial context was initially developed for the United States political context of the red-blue divide. During my independent study with Leah Schade, I tested this method in a different cultural, political, and religious context. I then absorbed this material, made it my own, and went further to train others. In a video discussion with Dr. Schade, she expressed her gratitude for this move and likened it to “taking a musician’s piece of music to another symphony and having them learn and perform in a concert.”³³

The most significant adjustment I had to make was to take this method from a red-blue divide to a multifaceted context. There was a shift in context. Cameroon has divisions at many different levels of tribe, language, and religion. I took the method from a clear-cut red-blue divide to a multi-division perspective. That is the main shift in what I did. The first and most

³² Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 51.

³³ Zoom discussion on September 13, 2023.

important finding is that the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon method, which worked in a red-blue divide, can also work in a multifaceted divide. It is a method that can work in different contexts.

The three preachers successfully conducted the SDS method in their different work areas. I agree with Dr. Schade when she observed, “The whole thing was about trying to find a way for people to literally not kill each other and to be respectful and to be empowered, to have their voices empowered.” I can attest that the method worked. The preachers were able to identify specific problems and call people to round-table discussions. Before, it was the big man or woman standing and talking. In this process, however, we have been collaborators in preaching—naming a problem, looking at it together, and trying to make everyone’s voice heard. The most outstanding achievement was the capability of creating round-table pulpits, circles where people listened to their problems as they were spoken of in sermons and could react to them by making their voices heard. After the preaching moment, they could sit in a group and talk about what they were experiencing and propose possible solutions for the problems being discussed.

From this, I can attest that the SS method is a way to preach and teach that can be adapted to fit different cultures. This way of presenting a message takes into account how important it is to keep the audience’s attention and get them talking and involved. The Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon method works well in Western societies, where independence and critical thinking are valued. During the dialogue part, it encourages people of all ages to get involved and talk by asking questions and giving their points of view. In many African and indigenous cultures, communication is based on oral history, stories, and group conversation. This method fits in with these ways of communicating. The Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon process fits well with these cultural ideals and can help bridge the gap between traditional spirituality and Christian teachings.

Conclusion

Political activists have used lessons and sermons to direct listeners toward a culture of nonviolence and to build beloved community, thus changing a violence-oriented society into an oasis of peace. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. used the pulpit not only to give speeches. As a minister and preacher, he moved from the pulpit to the streets. The current society of Cameroon is in dire need of leaders who can preach peace. The preachers and church leaders in Cameroon have the pulpit at our beck and call to redress the nation by preaching peace to a culturally and politically divided Cameroon.

To help preachers use nonpartisan, biblically-centered approaches and deliberative dialogue to address Cameroon’s current situation of division, I found that the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Method of Leah Schade fits well into my context. Before delving into teaching others, I had the opportunity to learn and practice the deliberative dialogue process myself. Preaching prophetically in a culturally and politically divided context is a great challenge, especially for the preacher. In the bid to help my congregation collaborate with one another despite our inherent divisions, I wondered if the SDS method would work in a country and congregation beyond the “purple zone” of the United States. I have journeyed with the English community of Saint Charles Lwanga Parish, Nkolbisson Yaoundé, utilizing the SDS process and have ascertained that it works outside of a United States context. To use the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon method in various cultural settings, one must be sensitive, flexible, and familiar with the audience’s cultural norms and beliefs. It means understanding how vital conversation and involvement are in identifying different issues concerning the cultural and spiritual needs of the community.

Preachers need to be attentive to their particular congregation's culture, language, political conflicts, and unique experiences. Still, the SDS process holds the hope of being applicable to other contexts (including interfaith contexts) as well.

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Mick Pope. *From Creation to Canaan: Biblical Hermeneutics for the Anthropocene*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2024. 126 pages. \$36.

In *From Creation to Canaan: Biblical Hermeneutics for the Anthropocene*, Mick Pope guides readers through a classical analysis of Genesis and Leviticus with a distinctly ecological hermeneutic. More specifically, he offers a reading shaped by the Anthropocene—our current geological epoch, defined primarily by human activity and its impact on Earth systems.

Pope's aim in this slim volume is to delve deeply into the Primeval History and Holiness Codes of Genesis 1–2 and Leviticus 17–26, exploring how ancient understandings of land, holiness, and human vocation can inform faithful responses to today's ecological crisis. While the Anthropocene is an unprecedented chapter in human and geological history, the destruction of land, the sin of humanity against creation, and the ending of worlds are not unfamiliar themes for the writers of the Priestly traditions and the Holiness material in the Pentateuch. Helpfully, Pope begins with a definition and interrogation of the Anthropocene. He both welcomes the term as a helpful framework for grasping this planetary moment and critiques its generality, turning to alternative concepts like the Capitalocene, which more precisely trace responsibility to the systems—and people—who have profited from the Earth's unraveling.

Taking all this as the soil from which his work grows, Pope poses two guiding questions: “First, what was Israel's responsibility for the land in these texts, and how was this linked to their understanding of divine sovereignty and to the nature of the land itself?” and “Secondly, how might an understanding of this responsibility impact religious communities who continue to acknowledge this text as scripture?” (xii).

Pope stands on an ecotone. Meant literally, an ecotone is a transitional area between two bioregions, such as an estuary between saltwater and freshwater zones. Here, as metaphor, ecotone signifies an intersection between two ecosystems of thought. While his text is primarily concerned with close exegetical readings of Hebrew scripture, his broader intent is to inform Christian theology and ethics in the Anthropocene. Like most ecotones, this intersection proves fertile and generative. While much scholarly work has been done in agrarian theology, land-based biblical studies, ecotheology, and environmental ethics, Pope's deep engagement with the Holiness traditions—filtered through an Anthropocene lens—offers a welcome contribution to the ongoing work of reimagining scriptural engagement for a planet in peril.

This is a book for anyone interested in deeper questions of theology and human flourishing in the midst of a world turned upside down. While rooted in the tools of biblical scholarship and theological reflection, *From Creation to Canaan* is not limited to those already working within the field of ecotheology. Pope writes with clarity and accessibility, making this book a valuable resource for scholars, clergy, students, and lay readers alike—anyone seeking to understand how scripture speaks into the ecological crises of our time. It offers not just interpretation, but invitation: to read the Bible as if the Earth matters, because it does.

Pope's unique vocational perspective is essential to his interpretive approach. As both a theologian and a meteorologist, he brings together disciplines rarely in dialogue. While the scientific study of meteorology may seem far removed from the agrarian worldview of the Priestly and Holiness writers, Pope's attentiveness to atmospheric patterns and climate systems becomes a hermeneutical lens in its own right, shaping how he reads scripture in a time of environmental disruption. His capacity to discern the signs of a changing climate reflects a deeper sensitivity to the ecological undercurrents of biblical texts. It is this kind of interdisciplinary entanglement that is needed to weather the storms of the Anthropocene.

This is a book not simply about how to read the Bible in the Anthropocene, but about how the Anthropocene reshapes our reading of the Bible—and how the act of reading these texts might, in turn, disrupt the destructive ways of thinking that brought us here. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), novelist Amitav Ghosh has written that in the Anthropocene, “we recognize something we had turned away from . . . the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors” (30). The crises of our epoch invite us to remember that humanity is not separate from the rest of the created world. Nor can our biblical interpretation be. Reading scripture through the land invites us into hermeneutical questions we may have forgotten. It may even help us remember what the agrarian, Indigenous authors of these texts knew: “the land cannot be finally dominated. Against appearances, it is quietly stronger than the humans” (Pope, *From Creation to Canaan*, 55).

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Patrick Schreiner. *The Transfiguration of Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Reading*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. 208 pages. \$26.99.

Contributing to the current Evangelical reappropriation of patristic theology, this wide-ranging exploration of Jesus' Transfiguration combines folksy personal anecdotes and references to popular culture (*The Lord of the Rings*, Seinfeld, Harry Potter, and Kung Fu Panda) with abundant citations of Orthodox commentators likely unfamiliar to most readers (Cyril of Alexandria, Ephrem the Syrian, Pantaleon, Timothy of Antioch, Gregory Palamas, Leo the Wise, Anastasius of Sinai, Maximus the Confessor, and many others).

Schreiner's argument is that, reflecting the Messiah's pre-existent and future majesty, "the transfiguration reveals Jesus as both the heavenly glorious Son and the earthly suffering messianic Son" (94). Lamenting its relative neglect in Western tradition, Schreiner examines this episode from three perspectives: "The Glorious Setting" (chapter 2); "The Glorious Signs" (chapter 3); and "The Glorious Saying" (chapter 4). Via the four classical perspectives on interpretation—literal (historical), spiritual (typological/allegorical), tropological (moral), and anagogical (eschatological)—each detail (timing, setting, participants, dialogue, and so on) becomes a springboard for a "globally expansive reconstructive" (36) exploration of related theological themes and symbols, generating "a multivalence of meaning" (86). Thus, for example, Peter, James, and John become "new covenant priests" (48); Jesus' luminous face and robes inspire extended discussion of light as characteristic of God, with the Son proceeding from the Father as "light from light" (60–67). "The cloud symbolizes divine presence—more specifically, the Holy Spirit" (72), rendering the Transfiguration fully Trinitarian; the voice from heaven ("This is my beloved Son") simultaneously alludes to the "sacrifice" of Isaac, Psalm 2, and the suffering servant of Isaiah 42, as well as Daniel's "Ancient of Days" and "one like a son of man" (102–117); "Listen to him" is intended as a "new covenant Shema" (123). Indeed, the Transfiguration accounts are said to mirror Adam's prelapsarian glory, along with the baptism, passion, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ (130–144). All this seems like a lot of weight for one set of texts to bear.

With the focus primarily on doctrinal considerations, there is less attention to the moral or "tropological" sense of Scripture. Schreiner's brief discussions of spiritual illumination and participation in the divine nature (88–90, 124–127) would have benefited from attention to Eastern Orthodox iconography, which depicts the light of Transfiguration materially transforming all three disciples on Mount Tabor—and with them, those who view such icons devotionally.

In taking the approach that he does, Schreiner seems not to recognize that de-anchoring exegesis from its textual foundations (if only in part) unwittingly cedes an axiomatic Reformation principle, which is the determinative priority of the "plain sense" of Scripture. A fourfold interpretative horizon is governed by the *regula fidei* or "rule of faith"—not, however, in the usual Protestant sense that interpretation of Scripture must be governed by Scripture (xv), but in the broader, Catholic sense of *theological* tradition, crystalized in Vincent of Lérins's formula: "What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." Schreiner assumes a consensus of orthodox theological conviction, but without sufficiently acknowledging it as such or—apart from an important discussion of "Christological Grammar" in chapter 4—clearly articulating its contours. The classic Protestant impulse has been to subject Christian theology to the standard (hence, "canon") of Scripture; theological exegesis takes the opposite tack, subjecting Scripture to theology (56). Whereas Protestantism has traditionally anchored

theological repristination in the faith and practice of the New Testament church, this study appeals instead to Christological affirmations from the ecumenical councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon.

However moot such matters may appear to a conservative Evangelical audience, they are critical for all readers of sacred texts, preachers among them, for they pose a key question: on what basis may we distinguish between valid and invalid forms of interpretation? Can a single text convey anything and everything we wish it to, as seems to be the case here, even within the bounds of traditional orthodoxy? In reviewing previous interpretations of this important passage, Schreiner catalogues the full range of its possible meanings. Yet freighting a single pericope with so many possibilities underscores, for preachers especially, the importance of letting Scripture speak for itself.

This study demonstrates the difference between biblical interpretation in the modern sense and the history of interpretation. Schreiner provides a fascinating introduction to the latter, highlighting a rich tradition that until recently has been largely overlooked in the West. It concludes with an extensive reference bibliography and indexes. As a minor point, the name index is incomplete, listing few of the many patristic authorities cited in the course of discussion.

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Christian T. Collins Winn. *Jesus, Jubilee, and the Politics of God's Reign*. Prophetic Christianity. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023. 272 pages. \$29.99.

Christian T. Collins Winn's *Jesus, Jubilee, and the Politics of God's Reign* offers an insightful and thought-provoking examination of the confluence of theology, social justice, and political involvement. The book investigates the biblical understanding of Jubilee, proposing it as a foundational lens for interpreting Jesus' ministry and its modern implications for Christian life and the work of justice.

The enticement of Sara Wilhelm Garbers's foreword captures the reader's attention: "By connecting the Torah and Leviticus 25 with the psalms, prophets, and apocalyptic texts, Collins Winn shows how Jesus indeed is the kingdom, and the kingdom is here in our midst through the work of the Spirit (x)." Garber continues, "Collins Winn offers hope and a renewed vision that another way of being is possible. We long for this good news in a world where George Floyd was killed and the horrors of war, violence, and strife seem to reign. Here we cry out: 'God, where are you? Where is your justice? Where is your kingdom and is it coming, or will it ever come?'" (x).

At its core, the book is driven by the idea that the Jubilee—a year of societal and economic restoration as outlined in Leviticus—manifests a radical vision of divine justice. Collins Winn asserts that Jesus' words and deeds embody this vision, consistently opposing systems of oppression, inequality, and marginalization. By applying this ancient principle to today's societal and political challenges, the author crafts a compelling and timely argument for how Christians can actively work toward transformative change in their communities and the world.

One of the book's standout qualities is its meticulous engagement with scripture. Collins Winn takes a close look at key biblical texts, with particular focus on passages from the Gospels, to illustrate how the Jubilee ethic shaped the mission and ministry of Jesus. His reading of Luke 4:16–21, where Jesus aligns himself with the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies, is especially noteworthy. It clearly shows how Jesus presented himself as the initiator of liberation and renewal.

Collins Winn masterfully bridges theological reflection with practical application. He invites readers to consider how the principles of Jubilee—such as wealth redistribution, debt cancellation, and care for the vulnerable—might shape personal behaviors and community life today. Rather than dealing in abstract theories, he offers tangible examples of how these values could be effectively implemented in present-day contexts.

The tone of the book strikes a balance between academic rigor and accessibility. While it is evident that Collins Winn draws from a deep reservoir of scholarly expertise in theology and biblical studies, his writing style remains engaging and unambiguous, catering to pastors, preachers, theology and homiletic students, and general readers alike. This monograph would be beneficial to those studying liberative theologies as well. The strength of his arguments is bolstered by thorough research, yet he avoids inundating his audience with unnecessary technical language.

A potential critique of the work lies in its expansive vision, which at times leads to certain areas seeming underexplored. For instance, while the theological underpinnings of his arguments are well-developed, readers seeking pragmatic policy recommendations or direct strategies for political or social engagement may want more specificity. Yet this appears

intentional, as Collins Winn focuses more on igniting a fresh vision of God's reign than delivering prescriptive solutions.

Overall, the highly recommended *Jesus, Jubilee, and the Politics of God's Reign* is a profound and timely contribution to discussions about faith and social justice. This author, who is at once a theologian–preacher–activist, cogently summarizes the six chapters of his book by stating, “This is the reign of God that people of good will, and those who want to follow Jesus, are invited to seek in the power of the Spirit and to bring to bear on a world that is in deep need of healing, wholeness, justice, peace, and joy” (208). Christian T. Collins Winn challenges readers to imagine what it would mean to take Jesus' proclamation of Jubilee seriously in their own contexts. For anyone interested in the intersection of theology and activism, this book is an essential read. It is both an invitation to reflect deeply on the radical nature of Jesus' message and a call to embody that message in acts of justice and mercy.

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Alyce M. McKenzie and Owen Hanley Lynch. *Humor Us!: Preaching and the Power of the Comic Spirit*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023. 239 pages. \$28.00.

When a preacher steps up to the pulpit, the last thing they want to see is yawning listeners, frequently checking their watches or cellphones for how long the sermon will last. Humor has often been viewed as a quick remedy for preachers to solve boredom and make their sermons more engaging. In their book *Humor Us!*, however, Alyce McKenzie and Owen Lynch, teachers in preaching and communication, respectively, recognize the power in humor that goes beyond mere entertainment. They argue that humor is a “universal and essential part of human social life” that can be used to “heal or hurt” (1). Furthermore, humor is a “gift of God, part of what it means to be made in the image of God” (2). Therefore, McKenzie and Lynch team up to help preachers reflect on and utilize the power of humor more faithfully and effectively by exploring various fields such as history, psychology, communication theory, and homiletics.

The book has thirteen chapters in three parts. In Part One, “The Gift of the Comic Spirit,” McKenzie and Lynch discuss the theological aspect of humor—that it is the very nature of God who “displays the divine habit of reversing our expectations and upending the status quo” (19). God invites us to laugh at the discrepancy between what we hope for and what we observe, especially the incongruity between worldly values and those of the reign of God. The authors argue that since human beings are created in the image of God, they inherently possess the capacity to appreciate amusement, incongruity, and learn to laugh more as they grow mature. Since humor is a gift from God, the authors encourage preachers to recognize it as such and unlock its full potential for their preaching.

In Part Two, “The Sermon and the Comic Spirit,” McKenzie and Lynch provide an interdisciplinary understanding of humor in sermons, as discussed in communication theory, psychology, and literature. Used in the proper context, humor can enhance one’s physical, mental, and emotional health, promoting creativity, new perspectives, and social relationships (51). The authors also address communicational theories of why we use humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity. Humor is often utilized to emphasize the inadequacy of others, especially those in power; release stress and anxiety; and enjoy the playfulness in dissonance (83). Since tragedy and comedy have been the primary frames in understanding life, narrative, and literature, McKenzie and Lynch encourage preachers to develop a comic spirit that allows them to end sermons with comedy rather than tragedy. Readers will especially enjoy chapter eight, “Foes and Fans,” where the authors humorously and playfully describe how philosophers and theologians have approached humor from Ancient Greece to the Reformation.

In Part Three, “The Preacher and the Comic Spirit,” the authors address the inspiration for comic vision through the models of jester, fool, and sage—those who have used humor to speak the truth, challenge the power, and offer a new vision in court, religion, and public. In chapter nine, “The Preacher as Comic Spirit,” McKenzie and Lynch describe the disposition of preachers with a comic spirit as those who embrace humility, ambiguity, joy, and community. Although everyone may not naturally be a good humorist, the authors offer a way for preachers to develop a “knack for noticing humor” by paying attention to their “inner lives (inscape); their congregational, community, and cultural contexts (landscape); and the biblical text(s) they are in dialogue with for their sermons (textscape)” (166). In the last chapter, the authors offer practical tips for preachers to craft their original comedy by exploring how jokes work and analyzing the structure of humorous storytelling.

While humor has often been appreciated and discussed in other academic disciplines, it has been relatively neglected as a noteworthy topic in the homiletical circle. Through their in-depth research, therefore, McKenzie and Lynch pave the way for homileticians to reflect on humor not only as a practical matter to improve one's preaching, but also as an essential question of the identity and call of the preacher who catches and proclaims the comic vision of God, especially in the midst of tragedy and suffering in the world. Some readers may wish the authors engaged more with black preaching as a critical topic to reflect on how African American preachers have already adopted the interplay between tragedy and comedy for their preaching and have boldly proclaimed God who enables them to laugh with God at the folly of powers and principalities.

Nevertheless, readers will appreciate the authors' wit in their creative engagement with the thoughts of philosophers, theologians, and preachers regarding the role of humor in Christian faith, hermeneutics, and preaching. Additionally, they will also admire the authors' humility, as they humorously share stories about their own mistakes in their preaching, teaching, and life.

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Sunggu A. Yang. *Digital Homiletics: The Theology and Practice of Online Preaching*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 176 pages. \$19.99.

While using digital platforms for preaching is not entirely new, the COVID-19 pandemic forced preachers worldwide to adopt online preaching as a regular practice. In his timely and much-needed work *Digital Homiletics*, Sunggu A. Yang addresses the lack of critical understanding that accompanied the rapid rise of online preaching. He observes that this sudden shift left online preaching “standing on shaky theoretical ground with no concrete performative strategy” (1). Yang’s groundbreaking contribution has a twofold purpose: first, to provide a robust theological foundation for online preaching, and second, to explore a variety of digital preaching styles, offering deeper theological reflection alongside practical strategies for contemporary preachers in the online age.

Throughout his work, Yang demonstrates bifocality. He grounds his insights in deep theological reflection while also offering highly practical advice. He respects the traditional foundations of preaching while embracing fresh strategies suited to today’s digital landscape. In the opening chapter, Yang builds a theological scaffold rooted in Reformed-conventional theology, drawing from the work of Karl Barth. Barth’s understanding of the Word of God appears in a threefold form: 1) the Written Word—Scripture, marked by immutability and reliability; 2) the Incarnate Word—Christ, characterized by proximity and presence; and 3) the Preached Word—Proclamation, defined by transference and assurance. Barth maintains a concrete unity among these three, referring to the Trinitarian doctrine (3).

However, the pandemic disrupted this conventional framework, leading to what Yang introduces as a “fourth dimension” of the Word: the *Word digitalized*. This new form, he argues, inherently contains the previous three dimensions—written, revealed, and preached—but transforms their characteristics in the digital environment. For instance, the digital Bible shifts from immutability to *fluidity* and from static reliability to *usability*. Christ’s image, now shared widely across cultures and platforms, morphs proximity and presence into *ubiquity* and *connectivity*. Meanwhile, online preaching, accessible anytime and anywhere, trades the Preached Word’s transference and assurance for *spontaneity*, *accessibility*, and *shareability*.

In comparing Barth’s six traits (derived from the threefold Word) with his newly identified seven traits of the digital Word, Yang emphasizes that this is not a matter of replacing the old with the new. Rather, the emerging traits rely on the foundational six while pushing them toward self-transformation. Effective online preaching, Yang asserts, thoughtfully integrates these traditional and emerging elements into a renewed homiletical theory and practice (13). This thought-provoking insight invites readers to consider the Trinity within a new technological dimension and challenges them to expand their understanding of the Word of God in a digital world.

Chapters two through eleven delve into ten distinct styles of online preaching, offering practical guidance alongside relevant homiletical theory. While not exhaustive, these ten styles are among those most commonly adopted by contemporary preachers. The styles include: Podium Style, Conversation Style, Reporter Style, Metaverse/VR Style, Interview Style, Drama Style, Zoom/Chat Style, Rock Concert Style, Film/Vidpod Style, and Artist Style. Each is explored in depth, including how it functions, where and when it fits best, and to whom it might appeal. Yang connects each style to homiletical theories such as testimonial preaching, the four-page sermon, roundtable preaching, vivid preaching, and episodic preaching, grounding his practical guidance in sound theoretical underpinnings. In each style, Yang traces the presence of

the seven traits of digital preaching: fluidity, usability, cross-cultural ubiquity, connectivity, instant communication, holistic artistry, and shareability.

As a reader, I found myself wondering whether an eighth trait might be added: *retrievability*. Yang notes, “we must respond to the needs and requests from the ‘digital pews’ (that is, anywhere people now worship online) as pastorally as possible” (82). But these digital pews don’t just span physical spaces—they transcend time. Traditionally, preaching has been tied to the present moment—a sermon delivered to a particular congregation, in a specific place, during a specific season. But in the digital age, sermons are saved, archived, and re-watched. The sermon continues to “preach” long after its initial delivery. This raises a profound theological and pastoral question: Are we, as preachers, responsible not only for the needs of our immediate audience but also for those who may encounter the Word days, months, or years later? In this light, I believe the retrievability of digital preaching demands further exploration.

Yang’s work opens the door to rich conversations and invites a broader digital homiletical imagination. Readers of *Digital Homiletics* will find themselves inspired to engage this new online era with renewed curiosity, theological depth, and the practical support needed for meaningful participation in today’s evolving landscape of digital ministry.

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Eunil David Cho. *Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience: Religious Stories Korean American Dreamers Tell in the Face of Uncertainty*. Leiden: Brill, 2024. 228 pages. \$60.

In *Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience*, Eunil Cho offers an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of ten undocumented Korean American immigrants, all of whom are Christian recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Established in 2012, DACA is a federal policy that grants individuals who entered the United States as undocumented minors a renewable two-year deferral from deportation. While it provides recipients with a measure of stability and hope, it also introduces heightened uncertainty—particularly under the Trump administration. Korean DACA recipients comprise a numerical minority among the predominantly Latinx DACA population—over 90%—rendering their experiences largely underrepresented in scholarly and public discourse.

The thesis of Cho’s work is that “*we are the stories we tell*”—namely, that humans construct their identities by telling their stories (2). This interdisciplinary study draws upon the sociology and psychology of religion, Asian American studies, education, and critical race theory. Cho argues that undocumented Korean immigrants engage in a theologizing process—interpreting their lived realities through religious narratives, symbols, and spiritual practices—as a means of identity formation and meaning-making. In the first chapter, Cho delineates his methodology, identifying it as both pastoral-theological and qualitative. These approaches uniquely position him not as a detached observer but as a “co-creator” of narrative, journeying alongside marginalized individuals as they make meaning of their experiences. He fosters what he terms a “narrative environment”—a safe and supportive space where participants are empowered to share and reflect upon their stories (30, 33).

Chapter two outlines the theoretical framework of the study, informed by key narrative theorists and their critiques. Cho affirms the view that human beings are inherently narrative-driven, with identity shaped through processes of meaning-making. Following Thomas Long’s *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, which he references, Cho engages Paul Riceour, albeit from a pastoral perspective, to reveal how life narratives evolve through a process of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration (67-68). He argues, “the person is not merely the one who tells a story nor merely the one about whom the story is told, but both a reader and a writer of the person’s life” (69).

In the second half of his book, which is divided into three chapters, Cho dives deep into the lives of 10 South Korean DACA recipients and carefully narrates and interprets their stories. Chapter three explores their pasts—delving into the traumas associated with pre-migration, migration, and post-migration phases. The interviewees recount experiences of family separation, emotional abandonment, guilt, shame, systemic racism, and the absence of nurturing adult figures.

In the fourth chapter, Cho speaks of “the violence of uncertainty” and “narrative identity foreclosure”—a condition and state where a person is unable to develop meaning and hope and imagine a future due to systemic injustice, lack of a support system, and recurring trauma. I find this chapter to be quite triggering, as some of the stories are deeply painful and gut-wrenching. It reminded me of the isolation I sometimes feel as an international student—away from home and out of pocket. Most of Cho’s interviewees also internalized “the redemptive self-story” myth that comes from the ideal model-minority narrative that tells that Asian Americans are the most successful and resilient immigrants, forcing them to fit into the mold of their community’s expectations, leading to shame and guilt when they differ from these standards.

In the final chapter, Cho emphasizes the redemptive potential of religious narratives and spiritual practices—including caregiving, mentoring, companionship, and prayer—in helping undocumented immigrants interpret and cope with their realities. Conversely, the absence of such spiritual resources, compounded by continued uncertainty and trauma, prepares for spiritual discontent. Reading this chapter raises a question: what of spiritual care in non-religious or non-Christian settings to undocumented Asians or religious Asian immigrants who are unchurched?

As a homiletician, I find profound inspiration in Cho’s work. It resonates with Howard Thurman’s “life as a working paper” metaphor, which reminds preachers of the importance of working with narratives and being a story companion.¹ Across each chapter, Cho consistently underscores the significance of storytelling in human identity and highlights the collective labor required to sustain life-giving narratives. Moreover, Cho demonstrates that practical theology should be aimed at providing people with the tools for ongoing “self-making” processes, to examine harmful narratives critically, and to foster nurturing communal spaces. Although centered on a specific demographic, this work offers essential insights for practical theologians, justice workers, and spiritual caregivers amid the continual visibility of systemic violence against immigrant communities.

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¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), i.

Colleen Mary Mallon. *Inclusivity and Institutional Change in Education: A Theologian's Journey*. Theological Education between the Times. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024. 171 pages. \$19.99.

In *Inclusivity and Institutional Change in Education: A Theologian's Journey*, Colleen Mary Mallon explores what it means to embody *veritas*—truth—as a theological educator navigating the “in-between spaces” of institutional change. A theologian and a sister in the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), she chronicles her experience as director of mission formation at a Catholic high school reckoning with its legacies of racial inequity and white privilege. At the heart of her reflection is the Dominican tradition of “the holy preaching”—the conviction that one’s actions either validate or betray one’s public proclamation of the gospel. Throughout, she considers the implications of this Dominican tradition for contemporary institutional life.

For Mallon, transformation is both personal and communal. On a personal level, she recounts receiving an unexpected “pink slip,” a result of institutional financial constraints that compelled her to leave her position as an Associate Professor at a theological school. She writes, “This book is my story of reflecting on the call (or was it a shove? still to be determined!) to move out of traditional academic settings into an in-between space of theological education” (10–11). Standing at the threshold of a closed door, she followed a call to turn around and meet God somewhere new. As institutions of higher education—within and beyond the theological academy—increasingly target religion and theology programs for mergers, closures, and radical reinventions in response to financial precarity and political pressures, Mallon’s account of unexpected disruption and the grace that meets us there offers a timely book for scholars, teachers, or ministers navigating life’s contingencies.

On an institutional level, Mallon carefully details the steps she took in partnership with a predominately white Catholic secondary school striving to align its culture with its core value: *veritas*. Her intervention moves beyond what she calls “white damage control,” urging theological educators to ground their antiracist and anti-bias commitments not only in moral obligation and social justice rhetoric but in their desire to seek the *truth* for the sake of the gospel (20). In this sense, Mallon provides much-needed theological grounding for sustained institutional change. Drawing on her broader experience in Catholic healthcare, her role as a graduate theology professor, and her vocation as a Dominican sister, Mallon brings a rich perspective to the complexities that institutions face when trying to live out what they profess.

Administrators, in particular, will appreciate Mallon’s candid inclusion of real-world communications—emails, workshop prompts, community policies, mission statements, feedback protocols, event invitations, and more. Through these concrete materials, she skillfully weaves together Catholic Social Teaching with the school’s commitments to equity and inclusion, modeling how everyday practices can bear witness to God’s delight in human diversity.

One of the book’s many strengths is Mallon’s use of reflection prompts in each chapter, inviting both personal and communal discernment. Some are practical—“What policies and procedures are in place and are regularly evaluated to secure the kind of inclusion that Jesus is all about?” (78)—while others are introspective—“What have been the significant closed doors, pink-slip moments, and pivots you’ve had to make in your theological journey/career?” (6). These prompts are adaptable across a range of contexts. I can easily imagine them being used in theological classrooms, departmental meetings, spiritual retreats, and beyond.

The narrow scope of this project—its focus on an all-girls Catholic boarding school—may leave some readers wanting more: additional theological lenses, greater engagement with

Catholic anti-racism work beyond secondary education, or a longer institutional view. For instance, at times I found myself longing for a deeper discussion of missionary legacies in California. However, this desire for *more* is not a shortcoming of *Inclusivity and Institutional Change in Education*. Rather, it is a testament to the groundedness of Mallon’s work. She writes from where she stands—with clarity, courage, and a deep grasp of the theological stakes. As Mallon puts it, “Theological education is about midwifing the faith that wants to be born out of the questions that have made some kind of ultimate demand on us, questions that will not let us go, because something new wants to come to life” (141). What sets this monograph apart is precisely this blend of theological insight and practical wisdom. It’s an essential resource not only for theological educators, but for pastors, lay leaders, and administrators seeking to lead faithfully in the “in-between” times of disruption and change.

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Al Tizon. *Christ Among the Classes: The Rich, the Poor, and the Mission of the Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. 201 pages. \$35.

“Ushers, close the doors!”¹ A well-known Black Gospel Singer and Pastor repeatedly implored during the offering period of a worship service, to raise \$40,000. In a clip that has now gone viral, the Pastor says that if each member of the congregation of a thousand people, each gave \$20 they could come close to reaching their goal. This image of the doors of the church being closed directly contrasts with the church’s idea of the doors of the church always being open for salvation through Jesus. For some people, this moment elucidated one of the major concerns of the modern Christian Church: less of a focus on the mission of Jesus and more on financial gain.

It was against the backdrop of this unfolding viral moment that I began reading Al Tizon’s critical examination of classism in *Christ Among the Classes: The Rich, the Poor, and the Mission of the Church*. Tizon calls classism “a great evil that drives all other kinds of evil” (161). Further, he argues that the evil of classism, as it goes unchecked, does “great damage to the church’s witness in the world” (xxi).

Tizon structures the book in two parts: Christ Among the Classes, and Church Among the Classes. Part one explores how Jesus’s ministry was deeply connected with those who were not a part of the ruling classes of society. Jesus’ solidarity with the poor challenged those who were rich to redirect their wealth toward the gospel’s mission. The incarnation itself, as Tizon emphasizes, is the perfect illustration of God intentionally choosing commonality with the common people. Chapter one explores Jesus’ humble beginnings starting with his lowly birth story and the shepherds who were present at this miraculous event. The following two chapters juxtapose Jesus’ association and relationship with those who were considered poor, powerless, and riffraff as opposed to how he interacted with those who had power and resources. Tizon ends the first section of the book by contemplating if Jesus’ teachings on money were a total condemnation of wealth. He reviews the story Zacchaeus, which for him showcases that the love of Jesus does surpass class differences.

In Part two, Tizon builds on the teachings of Jesus by offering six steps the Church can use as a self-evaluation tool to confront the “classism that resides naturally in our hearts and in the structures of our institutions” (47). The six steps are: (a) awakening to compassion, (b) self-gain to generosity, (c) accumulation to simplicity, (d) propriety right to hospitality, (e) savior complex to friendship, (f) and safety to solidarity. Tizon uses these steps to create the Church Among the Classes Inventory (CACI) tool that individuals and churches may utilize to measure their engagement with the poor.

One of the strengths of this book is Tizon’s call for the Church to realign itself with the life and ministry of Jesus. The teachings, interactions, and examples of Jesus as the basis of the faith, require the Christian Church to reexamine its relationship to and treatment of those who are economically marginalized. As Jesus intentionally aligned himself with the “least of these,” so must the people and Church that profess to be followers of this Christ.

The challenge of the book was in its lack of exploration concerning the way that issues of class interact with race, gender, sexuality, or colonial history. I believe it is impossible to talk about class without including some analysis of racism, sexism, and other forms of injustice. Yes, the pursuit of wealth led to many colonial atrocities, but it is impossible to divorce that conversation from matters of race or even gender.

¹ “Close the doors” clip: <https://www.tiktok.com/@tmz/video/7486574026807102766>

Christ Among the Classes is a clarion call to the Christian Church to examine itself so that it might be free from the evil of classism. Tizon reminds us that Jesus was counted among the riffraff of society, and it is our mission to do the same. We have not been called to close the doors to meet our budget, instead, we must fight to open the doors so the whosoever may come.

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Jennifer L. Ackerman. *Preaching the Gospel of Justice: Good News in Community*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 160 pages. \$19.99.

Definitions of justice vary. Jennifer L. Ackerman approaches justice not through legislation and policy but through Scripture, grace, and practice. She asserts, “The task of every preacher and of every sermon is to preach the gospel of justice” (2). Ackerman’s dynamic background as a professor, pastor, and director of a preaching institute equips her to offer practical wisdom for leaders concerned with justice. She peppers her work with personal stories, non-judgmental musings, and significant questions which invite the reader to consider her ideas while reflecting on their own. She divides her work into three chapters, each ending with a sermon illustrative of the key themes within the chapter.

In chapter one, “A Call to Community,” Ackerman provides a compelling examination into the preaching life. She views preaching as personal and communal, while acknowledging the “precarious,” politically divisive, and polarizing nature of preaching. She empathizes with preachers: “Outside of a seminary classroom, preachers often find themselves feeling isolated, harried by the relentless pace of Sunday coming every week, and struggling to meet all the demands on their time...” (20). Time for sermon feedback is limited, though it is critical. As such, preachers need a prophetic community (such as peer-to-peer Micah Groups, with which Ackerman has extensive experience through her leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary) to hold them accountable, provide solidarity, and assist with discernment. Preachers also need a learning community to mentor them and assist with the feedback process.

In chapter two, “A Covenant of Justice,” Ackerman delves deeper into definitions and her theological position. For Ackerman, justice preaching is Good News, it is scriptural, and it is necessary for preachers themselves to experience. However, she acknowledges a potential conflict for readers: “Many preachers will surely disagree with this compulsory link between gospel and justice.” (39). Ackerman’s acknowledgement proves effective due to her inviting tone. She prepares readers for her lengthier and more pressing point:

All too often, though, I found myself listening to so-called ‘justice sermons’ that seem to leave out the Good News altogether. I’ve heard stirring calls to action around racial reconciliation, creation care, immigration advocacy, LGBTQ+ rights, and so much more. Often, I am in complete agreement with the message, and perhaps I can readily imagine a biblical theology to support it, but the preacher has not actually proclaimed one (41).

Ever careful and clear, she offers a more palatable but equally effective explanation. Rather than being therapeutic talks or political speeches, “sermons must point first to what God is already doing in the world, and second to how we are able to join that work” (41). She encourages preachers to use an exegetical journal to study scripture and reflect on their preaching.

Ackerman opens the third chapter, “A Prophetic Witness,” by reflecting on her journey as a singer and musician turned preacher and explores the burden and privilege of preaching. Then she examines the preacher as a prophet (one speaking truth among other messages) who uniquely embodies prophetic witness (community-specific preaching) and uses prophetic imagination through the 3Cs (curious, creative, and courageous engagement). “The call to preach bears the responsibility of being a faithful witness, seeking the truth that may disrupt what we thought we knew” (75). Ackerman’s artistic background and invitation to creative preaching shine in this chapter.

Ackerman concludes her work with a focus on worship, thus coming full circle to emphasize community. The manuscripts of four sermons by preachers from diverse cultures and perspectives are gems within the book. Additionally, each sermon (one in Spanish and translated into English) can be accessed through podcast or YouTube, so that readers can experience the sermon beyond the written text. Ackerman cements her message by providing an exegetical journal template to provide a space for capturing reflections from engaging with and meditating on the biblical text.

Professors, preachers, lay leaders, students, and justice-seekers will benefit from Ackerman's work. Her appeal for community and self-reflection will be especially beneficial for preachers who want feedback but feel apprehensive in seeking it, as well as those who feel removed from the weekly preaching experience or sense that their sermons are missing something. Those following the *Working Preacher* book series will be pleased with Ackerman's contribution which challenges preachers to be creative while strengthening their spiritual life. It will also stretch readers to consider theological, cultural, and social perspectives different from their own.

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Jerusha Matsen Neal. *Holy Ground: Climate Change, Preaching, and the Apocalypse of Place*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2024. 379 pages. \$57.99.

Jerusha Matsen Neal's *Holy Ground* is an extraordinary book that brings readers into the climate-ravaged Indigenous islands of the South Pacific and asks what preaching means for their communities and beyond. "Apocalypse of place" is the unveiling of injustice and devastation that results from centuries of colonialism, capitalism, and a fossil-fueled economy that wreaks havoc on places often unseen and unnoticed by the developed world. Neal's approach in this book fuses post-colonial biblical exegesis, environmental ethics, and cultural studies to create a homiletic suffused with clear-eyed, heartbreaking honesty about the realities of displaced peoples.

Neal spent three years teaching as a missionary at Davuilevu Theological College at the invitation of Indigenous leaders of the Fijian Methodist Church. Moved by the plight of these ministers, as well as their unrelenting faith, she decided to engage in an ethnographic sojourn with fifteen of them. In their various ways, each sought to proclaim God's Word to a people enduring catastrophic storms and, for some, the forced choice to relocate from their ancestral homes. She aimed to construct "a practical theology of place that equips preachers from various contexts to proclaim God's Word in the face of climate catastrophe" (xvi). She does this by bringing the book of Ezekiel alongside the sermons of these Fijian Methodist preachers to find the resonances and responses between the ancient exiles of Israel and the contemporary exiles of the South Pacific. The result is a harrowing yet necessary interrogation of the White, Western, neocolonial church and what its preachers dare to say in the face of unthinkable loss.

A key question at the heart of preaching for exiled people is, "What is God's relevance—and the relevance of God's covenant—to those dislocated by imperial violence? Is God's creation powerless in the face of voracious greed?" (xv). Further, "Can the creation and covenant of a good God come undone?" (5). Preachers must navigate these questions like a *drua*—the boat used by South Pacific islanders—steering through the swelling waves of a tempestuous sea. Neal employs the image of the *drua*, the symbol used by the Methodist Church in Fiji, as a primary metaphor throughout the book. In turn, the book itself is like this boat that Neal expertly navigates, even as readers are pitched and swayed by the stories she tells and the realizations she reveals. "Climate change reminds preachers that the pulpit is not only fraught with power; it is fraught with powerlessness" (44), in the sense that no amount of words can turn back time or erase the losses of bleached coral reefs, hurricane-ravaged islands, and beaches slowly engulfed in rising seas. What, then, is the purpose of preaching amidst such tremendous theft by overwhelming global systems?

Holy Ground responds to this question by exploring the concepts of sovereignty, belonging, and loss as experienced by the Fijian people. Throughout the book, Neal extensively footnotes the impressive research that undergirds her project. She is a diplomatic and incisive conversation partner with the scholars who inform her work, always holding scholarship accountable to the Fijian people and their vulnerable islands.

Neal's primary biblical conversation partner is the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel whose community suffered exile and loss of land, heritage, and culture at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. While there are obvious differences between ancient Israel and modern-day Fiji, Neal makes a convincing case that Ezekiel is precisely the biblical book needed for her apocalyptic homiletic due to its complicated relationship with hope amid imperial trauma. Chapters two and five are outstanding examples of the deep exegetical work needed to construct sermons of resistance to empire.

Neal models intercultural engagement with humility and studious attention to language, history, and socioeconomic complexities. She shares her initial misunderstandings of seemingly naïve practices such as fasting, prayer, and sacramental rituals used by the ministers to formulate their responses to unimaginable loss from climate change. Then, through careful listening and reconsideration, she comes to understand the power of these spiritual practices as “courageous, vulnerable postures of relating to the world, the pulpit, and the biblical text” (85). Thus, she reframes our own understandings of sovereignty to include not just humans, but that of the oceans, islands, trees, and all of God’s Creation. In this way, readers come to internalize their own shifts in understanding the relationships between Creation, God, and those who have hubristically claimed sovereignty over all. This leads to the realization that preaching from an apocalypse of place is both pastoral care and resistance to empire, and that *place* itself preaches.

While the book is intended for both scholars and clergy, chapter four’s recounting of the history of colonization in the Fijian Methodist Church may be difficult for some readers. A glossary of Fijian terms would have been helpful. But like the recounting of Israel’s history in books such as Leviticus, this chapter bears witness and preserves the memory of an embattled community. Neal’s command of the chronology, terminology, and historical nuances is respectful and impressive, especially for one not born in that culture.

The final chapter, “Leaves of Healing,” draws out the implications of preaching when it is answerable to the voices of uprooted communities and to Creation itself. As with the entire book, there is enough exegesis, imagery, and ecotheological richness in this chapter to sustain a preacher for the difficult, painful work of proclamation amidst violation. She assures preachers not to be afraid of the “big questions” of Scripture and devastated communities; indeed, they are what reveal God’s call to respond to “the world God loves—a world in present danger” (258). Neal’s book educates, empowers, and equips preachers to respond to that call.

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Robert Stephen Reid. *The Four Voices of Preaching: Communicating Faith in a Connected World*. Pasco, WA: Integratio, 2024. 248 pages. \$28.

The Four Voices of Preaching: Communicating Faith in a Connected World is a follow-up to Robert Reid's previous work, *The Four Voices of Preaching: Connecting Purpose and Identity behind the Pulpit*. The earlier work was explicitly designed for preachers in a church context. In this new book, Reid looks to expand the idea of homiletics beyond traditional settings, stating, "even as I was writing the first edition, it was already clear that new online ministries of podcasting, blogging, vlogging, and webinars were developing followers" (xix). This means that not just preaching but all faith communication needed to be considered in a new light.

This particular work seeks to help the reader understand their voice not in terms of diction or elocution, but regarding that which drives the preacher. For Reid, every preacher comes to the sermon with what he calls "hidden determinants" that guide the preacher to their purpose in preaching (9). These different aspects of faith consciousness and social circumstances lead to each voice seeking a different response from the listener.

Reid provides a matrix that showcases cultural responses in conjunction with the expected reaction of the listener to measure the preacher's hidden determinants. Reid walks through different social and political situations throughout the history of the United States, from the country's founding to the present day. Reid shows how a distinct voice in preaching responded to each era in the country's history. Each new voice created a tradition that is still carried out to this day. The goal of the voices was to present the gospel in a way that would bring about a response.

Reid provides four categories for these voices: Testifying, Sage, Teaching, and Encouraging. Each voice is born from a combination of historical events and ideological shifts. Reid explains that each voice was a response to the social and political shifts in the United States throughout the nation's history. Because of new issues that have arisen over time, each voice needed to show the gospel in a way that made the people respond to the gospel message in distinct ways.

Reid states that this book seeks to be a map, albeit distorted, because it is hard to get all the details exactly right. However, in his description of the different voices and the situations that formed them, he looks at each voice seeking to tackle the problems of that specific period. In his description of the social and political events that formed each voice, Reid does not want to judge the morality of the situations but rather give an anthropological understanding of how each voice is formed. The book aims to help the preacher understand where they stand as far as their voice and cultivate the ability to employ other voices as needed.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork for the voices by giving the preacher an idea about how to apply the lesson to their preaching ministry. Chapters three through six provide history and examples of significant events that shaped each of the voices. Each chapter closes with a sermon from a preacher who uses that particular voice. The concluding appendices provide other resources to make the book more applicable to the reader.

The goal of this work is to help each preacher understand where they locate themselves within the matrix of voices that undergird their preaching. Whether a novice or an experienced preacher, readers will be able to identify their particular voice, have a clearer understanding of how that voice developed, and hone their voice to get the response they are seeking from their audience.

This book does what it sets out to do: it provides a guide for preachers and other faith communicators to understand what truly drives them and what response they seek from their audience. Reid provides practical aids to assist the preacher in further understanding where they are and how they can expand in their voice or even begin to work with other voices to develop their skills as a preacher. The book is practical and informational, helping preachers become aware of the silent ideas that are said aloud in their preaching.

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Jared E. Alcántara. *The Challenge of Joseph H. Jackson: How America's Most Powerful Preacher Became a Forgotten Man*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 376 pages. \$34.99.

Few would disagree that there are innumerable untold stories of Black clergy that have been discarded into the dustbin of history. The collective narrative of the institutional Black Church contains main characters who were the architects of culture and visionaries for Black futures over the decades through their leadership as pastors. Still, little exists in pure biographical form to tell the stories of these remarkable figures whose towering legacies petitioned for the possibility of immortality. Yet, through the inevitable passage of time and generations since, these Black luminaries have faded in influence and memory. In *The Challenge of Joseph H. Jackson: How America's Most Powerful Preacher Became a Forgotten Man*, Jared Alcántara tempts fate to rescue the legacy of one such man.

The Reverend Joseph H. Jackson, as Alcántara notes, “remains one of the most important, but least known figures of twentieth-century religious history” (xiii). Regarded most for his 29-year presidency of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), USA, then the largest Black Protestant denomination by far, from 1953 to 1982, Jackson holds a mythic quality within Black Baptist culture. As a form of African American midrash, conventional wisdom remembers the story of Jackson, during his tenure as convention president, leaving Martin Luther King, Jr. denominationally homeless over the issue of civil rights, as Jackson advocated incrementalism in contrast to King, Jr. and others who organized around civil disobedience. Alcántara’s book finally offers a fuller historical account of King, Jr.’s exodus from the convention resulting in a schism that rocked the Black church world. This book is not so much interested in relieving the myth of its duties, but rather in offering a rigorous account of a man who “like other human beings... contained multitudes” (xxii).

Alcántara’s aim in this biography is to present a study of Jackson that “will reveal a dynamic preacher, enigmatic leader, and cautionary tale” of a man “whose life and ministry merit historical recovery and contemporary humanization” (xv). Part of this aim is achieved by archival research at the Chicago History Museum where 350 boxes of Jackson’s public addresses, articles, denominational records, and over 1,000 sermons exist. Along with the short biography *Images of a Preacher: A Study of the Reverend Joseph Harrison Jackson* by Sherman Tribble, Alcántara’s research benefits greatly by having access to Jackson’s archives after his death in 1990, whereas Tribble conducted his research during the 1980s when no such archive existed. This monograph also includes significant sourcing from Black-owned newspapers, especially the *Chicago Defender*, which cared deeply about the goings-on of the Black Baptist church world.

Perhaps leaning into the way larger-than-life leaders are better understood, even the ones reviled by history, Alcántara uses chapters 2 through 6 to provide an origin story. A product of the Great Migration, Jackson’s story begins in the South, namely Mississippi. Spending considerable time accounting for the migration of Blacks to northern cities, Alcántara is keen in noting that “if Harlem was the center of Black cultural production in the 1910s and 1920s, then Chicago was the center of Black hopes for freedom” (48). Alcántara also provides a thorough history of Olivet Baptist, the church where Jackson pastored from 1941 until his death, the second oldest Black church in Chicago established in 1850 when the city itself was only 13 years old.

Chapter 3 provides information about Jackson's early years before he accepted the call to pastor Olivet. Beginning as an itinerant preacher in Mississippi, he eventually accepted a pastorate in Omaha in 1927. After pursuing higher education degrees, he eventually moved to Philadelphia in 1934 with his wife and child to pastor until 1941 when Olivet called him as their pastor. Condensed in a time frame barely spanning one calendar year, chapter 4 provides granular detail of both personal and public correspondence that led to his acceptance of the pastorate at Olivet. Chapters 5 and 6 are an account of Jackson's denominational activity while serving at the denomination's flagship church and the political shrewdness that made his ascendancy to president of the National Baptist Convention almost ineluctable.

Chapters 7 and 8 tell the history of why Jackson's name exists in history books in the first place: the contested convention elections of 1957, 1960 and 1961 that caused a schism leading to the emergence of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. Alcántara is a careful storyteller in this regard. He lays part of the blame on Jackson himself who ran in 1953 on a platform of term-limits and then reneged on his own pledge in 1957. The faction that wanted new leadership grew to a head by 1960 with a disputed vote occurring at the convention's annual fall meeting where the anti-Jackson faction allegedly cut microphone cords to prevent speeches and in-fact staged a veritable sit-in. Chapter 9 starts in 1961 with the writing metaphorically on the wall for a split when a convention attendee fell from the main stage. The fall happened during a melee that broke out and the attendee ultimately died from his injuries. The chapter concludes with the immediate fallout between Jackson and King, Jr. as the two formally parted ways denominationally as well as ideologically.

Chapter 10 attempts to consolidate three decades of Jackson's life, from the schism to his death. Half of the chapter takes place in the remainder of the 1960s as Jackson was relegated to the shadow cut by King, Jr. who had a national spotlight shone on him. Alcántara's narrative seems to suggest that King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) would have had more successes in bringing the civil rights movement to Chicago in 1966 if they had had the cooperation of Jackson's massive network of Black Baptist churches and his political alliance with then-mayor Richard J. Daley. Ultimately, Jackson's fate was sealed when he committed an unforgivable sin that lives in both local Chicago lore and infamy in the Black Baptist world. After King, Jr.'s assassination, the city opted to rename the major thoroughfare on which Olivet Baptist Church stood from South Parkway to Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive. Jackson then successfully changed the church's main address to be on the cross-street, 31st Street, rather than have King's name on the stationary for the church or the denomination.

One clear contribution of Alcántara's archival research is that he successfully rebuts the minor details of civil rights history that accumulatively render Jackson as nothing more than a cartoon villain whose evil lair was located on 31st Street. Throughout the book, he notes embellishments and omissions made by civil rights historian Taylor Branch. One such example Alcántara refutes is Branch's claim that Jackson spent \$50,000 to effectuate the address change by sealing up the main entrance on what is now King Drive. According to Alcántara, no such efforts ever took place. He writes, "If Branch got these details wrong, perhaps he got the \$50,000 figure wrong as well" (293). This is notable in that Branch's *Parting the Waters* still exists as a pre-eminent account of the civil rights era thereby serving the narrative that Jackson fell on the wrong side of history. It is abundantly clear that this monograph is attempting to "resist the urge to engage in reductivism as it obscures rather than clarifies" as the civil rights canon paints Jackson as a two-dimensional character that was simply jealous of King, Jr. (321). For Alcántara, Jackson should be best understood as a "committed evangelist and a cautious optimist: a

committed evangelist for Black power devoid of militancy and a cautious optimist for integration devoid of power imbalances” (316).

The book’s epilogue does not provide any excuses for Jackson’s pettiness nor his political miscalculations, but instead offers a worthy rationale for the ideological differences between Jackson and King, Jr. as a faithful attempt to correct a historical record. But this book still leaves a notable question in the mind of readers: what made the presidency of the National Baptist Convention, USA such a powerful position? Was it simply the prestige accompanied with title? Was it the administrative and budgetary oversight? One wonders if a fuller treatment of this organization, especially its origin, would have painted a better picture for the reader as to how Jackson became so powerful and provide motivations as to why he sought the office. As the foremost religious denomination for Black Americans formally organized in 1895, the National Baptist Convention, USA still today boasts membership amongst its affiliated churches over 8 million. A reader may struggle to understand the motives for Jackson to attain and maintain his leadership beyond the title and prestige if ignorant of the intricacies of polity and the role of the preacher within Black Christian religious culture. Alcántara unfortunately leaves unexplored how Jackson forged relationships with those in denominational leadership as well as how he leveraged his connections with Chicago’s elected aldermen and mayors and to what institutional end.

Ultimately, Alcántara provides a blueprint for resuscitating the biographical witness of ecclesial leaders who were famous and have now faded from memory. In resisting the sensationalism of Jackson’s feud with King, Jr., he rescues him from being a mere cartoon villain, to someone who has earned their rightful place in the history books. I predict that this biography will stand the test of time as the solitary reference point for scholastic pursuits about the history of Black Baptists and for those interested in counternarratives to the modern civil rights movement.

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Rodney Wallace Kennedy. *Dancing with Metaphors in the Pulpit*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024. 224 pages. \$29.

Dancing with Metaphors in the Pulpit invites readers to embrace, or re-embrace, rhetoric, persuasiveness, and boldness in preaching. Rodney Kennedy envisions the book as a “prequel to preaching” (14) designed to shape the preacher’s ethos. The book is not concerned so much with how to preach as it offers suggestions for shaping ethos for convincing and inventive preaching. Kennedy’s work identifies four major categories for this development: rhetoric, philosophy, writing, and poetry. Drawing inspiration from Paul, and the first few centuries of the church, he argues for a rhetorical and scholarly quality of the early church’s preaching. Kennedy sees rhetoric as the paradigm of preaching and as the lens through which other disciplines can inform persuasive preaching.

The first chapter begins with a call for preachers to be truth-tellers about the world, life, and the human condition. Kennedy invites preachers to be avid readers and to learn from the insights and methods of great novelists. Preachers can become better wordsmiths and utilize the imagination more effectively by reading novelists. In addition, reading novelists provides quality material to incorporate into preaching. Chapter two turns to poets and poetry. It draws from metaphor theory to discuss the creative potential of metaphors in general and to learn from the psalms in particular. Kennedy writes, “Metaphor possesses epistemic power to produce a new reality in the face of an oppressive old reality” (77). This seeks to establish the centrality of metaphor to preaching.

Chapter three discusses philosophy and the philosophers, drawing from Plato, Aristotle, Charles Taylor, and James K. A. Smith. Kennedy wants preachers to respond to secularism with deeper sophistication than pop-psychology and pop-philosophy, even as he holds onto the great importance of sermonic theological depth. As elsewhere throughout the book, Kennedy develops his arguments in agreement and conversation with Stanley Hauerwas, often critiquing evangelicalism and liberalism. Chapter four opens with a central focus on rhetoric by saying, “Homiletics belongs in the family of rhetoric” (125). Kennedy recognizes that rhetoric has fallen in influence within homiletics, which he seeks to change. He offers a few recognizable definitions of rhetoric before saying, “In my understanding, rhetoric is argument,” (126) which he connects with understanding reality paradigmatically. Sermons are arguments which must offer convincing and just ways of orienting within the world. Here, Kennedy takes an approach to preaching as a “human act” (152) rooted in rhetorical and metaphorical ways of understanding and orienting within the world. The conclusion draws this into the realm of ethos to name that “Faithful preaching turns out not to be a technique but a rhetorical attitude” (183). Kennedy is concerned with shaping this ethos as an essential aspect of the preaching life. The book concretizes this with specific references to topics like racial justice and ecology.

Dancing with Metaphors in the Pulpit has a sustained focus on shaping the ethos of the preacher to be rhetorically sophisticated and metaphorically inventive. The book is a welcome contribution to the field of homiletics. Kennedy invites preachers to deepen and expand their preaching through everyday learning. The work synthesizes insights and topics from theological and non-theological sources. Preachers looking for inspiration regarding ongoing study and the recognition of the importance of preaching will find it in these pages. Kennedy names preachers as the intended audience of the book and this intention aligned with my reading of the work. Still, preachers looking for guidance on how to preach or a homiletical method would find

clearer resources elsewhere. The high number of allusions in the book can also be distracting at times.

Kennedy's tone in the book is argumentative, which he believes aligns with his intentions for preachers "to drop the infernal niceness of being a preacher and fight back with stronger arguments, more scholarly debate, and better discernment" (2). While he does not envision the preacher in opposition to the congregation as much as in opposition to general secularism, this tone and approach differs from the more recent collaborative approach in much of the literature of homiletics. At times, I found Kennedy's tone unhelpful. Yet, I found many of Kennedy's points worthwhile even if the rhetorical style was not always to my liking. Kennedy leaves much of the application of his work on ethos up to the reader. Those with an existing homiletical method and who are further along in ministry may find it easier to incorporate the work's insights.

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María Teresa Montes Lara and Vincent J. Pastro. *Holy Presence, Holy Preaching: Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe as Preacher and Community*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023. 182 pages. \$27.

Holy Presence, Holy Preaching is a refreshing interdisciplinary text suitable for preaching, worship, and theology classes as well as for non-academic settings. Montes Lara and Pastro, Catholic ministers who have primarily worked with Latino communities, engage multiple perspectives. They explore theological and philosophical concepts succinctly and thoughtfully in relation to the book's focus, which is Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe, the Preaching Woman, as a model for preaching as community.

In the Foreword, Allan Figueroa Deck describes the work as “a theological-pastoral-homiletic *contemplation* with roots in church history and in the encounter of cultures and religions so characteristic of our age of globalization” (xi). He notes the authors' use of “evocative and metaphorical [language] in line with the styles used in many if not most parts of the non-Western world and certainly among great mystical writers. As such it may not appeal to readers with a dialectic imagination rather than an analogical one” (xiii). This includes the use of native languages, like Náhuatl, the Aztec language, throughout the text. In many cases, this allows for a more accurate understanding of words that have crossed into English, like *pueblo*.

In “Introduction: Preaching Woman, Preaching *Pueblo*,” the authors describe the book as examining “Guadalupe's intimate union with Word, Baptism, and Spirit and her proclamation of the Sacramental Word as preacher, pedagogue, and prophet” (xvi). The book's intent is “to assist preachers in a deeper self-understanding of their life and preaching as manifestations of the Sacramental Word... [with the] hope that it will be of interest to all readers wishing to know more about the *Guadalupana*” (xvi).

Twelve main chapters are evenly divided into three segments: “Holy Word,” “Holy Baptism,” and “Holy Spirit.” In “Holy Word,” chapter 1, “Poor, Woman, and Indigenous,” the authors propose a “a radically different Mariology, contextualized for women, the poor, the indigenous, those whose skin color is dark, the LBGTQ community, and others ostracized from dominant society” (4). This “Mariology for the third millennium,” examines the theological, pneumatological, and homiletical significance of Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe, also known as Mary of Guadalupe and Our Lady of Guadalupe, as well as the context of her story amid the early 16th-century genocide and attempted cultural obliteration of the *Mexica* people (4). In 1531, Guadalupe appears to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, an indigenous man, on the hill of Tepeyac. Tepeyac becomes a *locus theologicus* and a “New Word, eternally engendered in the fullness of time by the Spirit of life and the ‘yes’ of Mary, is enfleshed as Holy Preaching. The Word permeates the sacred body of the Preaching Woman... and the *pueblo* [community in relationship] she proclaims as God's very own” (17).

In chapter 2, “A Phenomenology of the Sacramental Word,” the authors explain their phenomenological method in which a European method, focused on Emmanuel Levinas' work, is used as an auxiliary to Latin American theology and theological methodology. They invite readers to look to Guadalupe to perceive of religious experience and the mystical as something available to all in everyday life. Citing John 1:14, they argue that the Word “comes to ‘pitch tent’ among the *pueblo*...and is proclaimed by...Guadalupe, the Preaching Woman. It springs forth from the silence of desolation.... Guadalupe assures the people that Life has the final Word and will never abandon them” (21). They further assert, “The Preaching Woman is as present to the

pueblo now as she was to St. Cuauhtlatoatzin. The promise to ‘pitch tent’ with the *pueblo* is eternal, ever-present in each instant” (28).

Chapter 3, “Evil, Preaching, and Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe” begins by challenging the separation of demonic evil from everyday life. In support of their position, the authors cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hannah Arendt, and Marguerite Porete, among others. They “relate the question of evil and genocide to...Guadalupe and, especially, to the preaching event,” asking, “How do we prophetically denounce evil that is neither illusory nor part of God’s plan for humanity? How do we speak from the pulpit about genocide, injustice toward the poor, and the ‘banality of evil’?” (37). For the authors, Guadalupe provides a key as she “carries within her femininity and her indigenous culture and race the Incarnate Word she preaches through holy presence. To whom does she preach? To the poor, the *Mexica* people who have experienced genocide, culturally, racially, violently, in their living body” (37).

In chapter 4, “What Shall We Do?,” the authors put Latin theology in conversation with Paul Ricoeur’s work examining three ways of addressing evil: seeing [as looking into the victim’s heart as a form of solidarity], judging, and acting. They argue that Divine judgment does not shy away from naming injustice as evil and emphasize speaking of acting as responding to evil instead of as conquering evil.

Chapters 5 through 8 explore the authors’ contention that Holy Baptism “is, perhaps, more symbol than sacrament. Raimon Panikkar reminds us that the symbol *is* reality, while the sign points to something else only signifying reality” (52). Chapter 5, “Preachers by Baptism”, emphasizes helping people “recover the human dignity given through Baptism” with a realization that preaching is not only for clergy (55). In chapter 6, “*Imago Dei*”, the authors present Guadalupe as a model preacher whose proclamation, along with the *pueblo*’s Baptism, “says that they, as all peoples, are eternally born *into* this Word, *of* this Word, *from* this Word, *by* this Word, *through* this Word” with the eternal presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit (88). Part two closes with the chapters “Living Our Baptism” and “Baptism by Clouds and Snow.”

Part three, “Holy Spirit,” explores the Preaching Woman as “the presence of the Sacramental Word among the poor *pueblo*” and the study of her as interweaving Pneumatology, Mariology, ecclesiology, and Christology in liberating and holistic ways (98). The chapters are titled, “Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe, the Sacrament of the Holy Spirit,” “A Spirit-Filled Trinitarian *Pueblo*,” “Mother Earth, the *Pueblo*, and Synodality,” and “The Place of *Convivencia* with the Triune God.”

The conclusion, “Mothering God, the Divine *Fiesta*,” pays homage to Guadalupe with a focus on motherhood and the Divine Feast or Eucharist and a concluding prayer. The authors summarize their work stating, “all who are poor, or in solidarity with the poor, are carried with the Sacramental Word in the womb of Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe. And the *pueblo* carries in its womb the divine presence and the *Virgencita*” (135).

In this work, Montes Lara and Pastro invite readers to understand and model Guadalupe. Like the Preaching Woman, contemporary preachers can recognize the Divine Word as it is embodied within and through us and the communities with whom we preach, especially those who society marginalizes.

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Paul Rorem. *Singing Church History: Introducing the Christian Story through Hymn Texts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 240 pages. \$34.

What can we learn about the history of the church and the development of Christian doctrine through the witness of hymn texts? In this illuminating book, Paul Rorem examines several major eras and turning points in church history by attending closely to the church's song. In so doing, the reader is introduced not only to the history of the church and its doctrine but also to the history of congregational singing. Along the way, readers encounter many influential figures, some well-known and some lesser known. The result is a greater appreciation for the ways in which music has contributed to the development of doctrine and the formation of Christian worshippers.

Roughly half of the book focuses on the Reformation era and following, which is not surprising, given the enormous changes to congregational singing brought about by Martin Luther and other figures in the Protestant Reformation. Given that reality, however, it is a significant achievement to focus the first half of the book on many lesser-known hymn texts and hymn writers from pre-Reformation times. This includes many theologians whose names might be familiar to us—Ambrose of Milan, John of Damascus, and Thomas Aquinas—but whose contribution to hymnody may be unknown or underappreciated.

Any author who approaches the history of church music needs to provide context for the many biblical and extrabiblical sources of hymn lyrics, as well as the many functions of congregational singing, whether tied to the “Ordinary” of the mass (a.k.a., “service music”) or serving some other liturgical function (e.g., corporate prayer or praise). Rorem does an admirable job of explaining this context—even explaining the evolution of Western church music itself—while staying focused on the main purpose of the book, namely, to trace some of the major contours of Christian doctrine and piety through a sampling of significant hymn texts.

Whether intended by the author or not, the book also became, for me, an occasion for gratitude. Even though I am broadly familiar with many of the texts, tunes, writers, and theological turning points Rorem covers, this book deepened my appreciation for the work of so many figures throughout history who have inspired devotion by means of poetic texts paired with memorable tunes. To give one example, the name John Mason Neal reoccurs multiple times throughout this volume, demonstrating Neal's enormous impact—and the impact of the nineteenth century Oxford Movement more broadly—in providing modern English translations of classic texts. Although the average reader of this volume may be familiar with hymn writers such as Fanny Crosby and Thomas Dorsey, it is doubtful that Neal is widely known outside of church music specialists. Yet the influence of translation work is an indispensable part of the story. As Rorem reminds us, “Protestants sing more hymns from the Middle Ages than they might realize” (41).

It makes sense that the author of this volume is a Lutheran pastor, given the influence of Luther himself as a translator, writer, and fervent promoter of congregational hymn singing. In many ways, this book highlights the valuable but often unseen labor of hymnologists—especially, in this case, the compilers of the hymnal *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW). However, because of Rorem's choice of ELW as a hymnal of reference, the book sometimes reads like an insider text for the Lutheran world. Even with this limitation, the book does an excellent job of explaining the historical context of beloved hymns from a range of traditions and highlighting some hidden gems from the early centuries of the church. Nonetheless, the focus on

Lutheran compilations may cause some non-Lutheran readers, such as myself, to feel that the book is not written for them.

This focus on (printed) Lutheran worship resources might also explain Rorem's lack of engagement with a major musical movement in today's church—the global phenomenon of “contemporary worship” or “praise and worship music.” Although the author provides a helpful overview of indigenous, postcolonial songwriting in Africa, Latin America, and East Asia post-1950, he leaves the “contemporary worship” movement unexplored. Despite this omission, the book demonstrates an impressive command of church history, Christian theology, and congregational song practices. Readers—especially those with an interest in church music—will be delighted to learn more about the scriptural, theological, and historical context of hymn texts and to see how those texts have both expressed and shaped the faith of Christian believers throughout the centuries.

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