

Research in Homiletics

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Societas Homiletica *

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We teach homiletics in the hope that students become effective preachers. Our teaching is rather practical. We ask questions like: how to prepare and deliver a sermon, how to communicate the gospel in such a way that the community of faith is adequately addressed? But is homiletics also a serious field for doctoral *research*? In this workshop we will deal with homiletics as an academic discipline in the broader field of *Practical Theology*. We are reflecting on a real praxis, a praxis in which human beings act and in which the life of faith is a relevant factor. One of the main issues in this field of research is the nature of the theoretical framework that structures the research. How do we perceive real practices and what exactly is a practical theological theory?

1 Research in the Practice of Faith

1.1 Practice of faith

I suggest that the practice on which practical theology reflects is best defined as a *practice of faith*.¹ In Practical Theology we primarily deal with faith-as-it-is-lived. We can differentiate between the following four dimensions: (a) faith as a subjective personal commitment and (b) faith as it is expressed in our daily lives (as faith becomes manifest in ordinary life, in one's calling and lifestyle). According to Charles Taylor the combination of these two elements, namely personal commitment and the emphasis on the concrete practice of

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¹See my Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction, forthcoming spring 2005, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Dutch edition: F.G. Immink, *In God geloven. Een praktisch-theologische reconstructie*, Zoetermeer: Meinema 2003

daily life, is characteristic for the Protestant view on faith.² Faith also has an (c) institutional component: the praxis of the church. This implies among other things the communication and celebration of faith; the social interaction, et cetera. And, finally, there also is (d) a civil religion: traces of faith in the public realm.³

1.2 Theory of practice

Practical Theology as an academic discipline is a *theory* of practice. We seek to develop a theoretical framework in order to gain more insight in the life and the communication of faith. What type of theory is developed in Practical Theology? Here it becomes manifest that the field of research is rather complex. For faith-as-it-is-lived always finds its shape and form in the human condition. Faith-as-it-is-lived expresses itself in the mental and spiritual capacities of the human heart, in the psycho-social life-style of the human existence. In addition, the practice of faith by nature is a communicative practice. Therefore, when we reflect on faith-as-it-is-lived we have to deal with anthropological and social structures. When we reflect on the communication of faith, we have to reflect on human interaction. Consequently the nature of this practice demands an *intradisciplinary* approach.⁴ As we reflect on faith we will eventually have to deal with the human being as a spiritual and social being and with the various forms of interpersonal discourse. Therefore, it seems reasonable that we incorporate the findings of the human and social sciences, for they also reflect on these matters. For homiletics this implies that we have to deal with rhetoric and discourse analysis.

1.3 Theological discipline

Nonetheless, Practical Theology remains a *theological* discipline. We have to conceptualize the practice of faith with theological concepts. However, at the same time we take due notice of the results of other disciplines. Not in the sense that practical theology simply follows the other sciences. We must rather think in terms of a critical correlation - practical theology has the lead and must define the field of inquiry and specify the nature of this field. The main task is to develop theological theory that fits the domain and to find the appropriate practical theological question which must be answered.

1.4 Faith

What is characteristic for a theological theory? Here the structure of faith might help. We observed that faith is a human phenomenon. The human self is involved and this implies that we can analyse faith from a psychological and a

²Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge 1989, 211–233.

³Dietrich Rössler, *Grundriß der Praktischen Theologie*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1986, 81.

⁴See below, section 4.1.

sociological perspective. Faith, however, also is a relationship between God and the human being in which God has the initiative and the priority. Faith is a gift of grace; it is an answer to God's word of forgiveness. In Reformation theology the concept of faith is intrinsically related to the doctrine of divine justification: it is God who justifies the sinner. Faith just is the approval of the divine judgement. God is the primary actor, his benevolent word is decisive. This movement from God towards humanity is characteristic for the Christian practice. Concepts like revelation, promise, covenant, election, justification, et cetera underline this. From a theological perspective we cannot construe faith simply as an anthropological category. Faith is not simply our awareness of God, but it consists in an existential relationship between God and the human being - a relationship in which God's word and promise take priority. Thiemann observes that '[p]romise provides a category within which the notions of relation and priority can be held in a dialectical balance'.⁵ God therefore receives priority in the divine - human encounter and consequently God is depicted as a subject of speech and communication.

Thesis 1 *Practical theological research employs theological concepts in an intradisciplinary frame of reference. Practical theology has to search for those theological concepts which fit the field of research.*

2 The communication of faith.

Preaching is a communicative act in the community of faith and preaching intends to initiate and to sustain the life of faith. Before we plunge into the field of preaching, let us first make a short inquiry into the complexity of the communication of faith. We notice that at least two dimensions are involved. Firstly, preaching is an inter- and intrahuman act of discourse. In our reflection on preaching we have to consider the psycho-social structure of discourse. Since discourse is intrinsically related to the social and cultural environment, the communication of faith is always *contextual*. Secondly, we have to consider that human discourse functions as an *intermediary*: the life of faith is activated and intensified by means of this human discourse. Thus human discourse plays a *mediating* role with respect to our communion with God. Does this imply that human discourse brings about /accomplishes our communion with God? Is there some sacramental/causal or pneumatological/spiritual relation between the act of discourse and the life of faith? Or more precise, does the human act of discourse bring about the divine presence?

Preaching is an act of human discourse in a *dialogue situation*. In homiletics recently much attention is paid to this aspect of preaching. However, the emphasis was mostly on the preacher. Homileticians argued that the preacher must pay full attention to the experiences, questions and beliefs of the hearers.⁶

⁵Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology. The Gospel as Narrated Promise*, Notre Dame 1985, 151

⁶Henning Luther, 'Predigt als Handlung', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, (80) 1983. Lucy

However, in addition, we must also turn to the listener for his or her own sake. The hearer has an active role in the preaching process: he or she *completes* the sermon. Here we come across a new complexity which we must describe both in terms of discourse as well as in terms of theology. Both in continental European and in American homiletics we have seen a turn towards the listener.⁷ In contemporary homiletics the preaching process is understood as a circular process of speaking and hearing, producing and receiving, re-presentation and reception. This turn to the hearer is, however, primarily carried through on the level of human discourse. Attention is paid to the reception process, especially to esthetics, to the plurality of social consciousness as a characteristic of postmodernism⁸, to hermeneutics as an interpretation of the hearer.⁹

But what happened to the theological dimension of homiletics? Unfortunately, the hearer did not receive full attention from this perspective. Perhaps our theological grammar must be elaborated a little more in detail before we can reflect theologically on this subject. It is often argued that preaching is the proclamation of the gospel, the ministering of the Word. Indeed it is. But we cannot solely look at the christological part, for preaching also has a *pneumatological* structure.¹⁰ The gospel is not only proclaimed, but also, be it incomplete and fragmentary, realized in the human world and history. The sinner is not only justified, but also regenerated and renewed. Divine grace is not only bestowed upon us, but also internalized and lived. This is the distinctive work of the Spirit, a work *in* us and *with* us. In Reformed theology we can find the very helpful idea of the *inhabitation* of the Spirit, the *indwelling* of the Spirit. Through the work of the holy Spirit the human subject receives a new understanding. The Spirit brings enlightenment and change in the human self. This is accomplished by the *gratia interna*, the internal teaching of the Spirit¹¹ Therefore, when we analyse the process of preaching, it is important that we not only look at the christological dimension, but that we also consider the pneumatological dimension: the work of God in the *appropriation* of salvation, the *ordo salutis*.

Under the influence of kerygmatic theology preaching was primarily considered to be proclamation. In the Protestant tradition, this certainly is a central focus; it is in line with the doctrine of iustification of the sinner. And especially in our modern times where human experience receives full attention, we must remember the divine initiative and the priority of God in the human-divine relation. However, we would miss the point if we were not able to do justice to the role of the human subject as a hearer. For preaching does mediate

Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word. Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1997

⁷See F. Gerrit Immink, 'Homiletics: The Current Debate', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 2004, Heft 1

⁸John S. McClure, *Other-wise preaching. A postmodern ethic for homiletics*, St. Louis: Chalice Press 2001

⁹G.D.J. Dingemans, *Als hoorder onder de hoorders. Een hermeneutische homiletiek*, Kampen: Kok 1991.

¹⁰See F.G. Immink, *In God geloven*, chapter 5

¹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.1

understanding, experience and volitional power in the human consciousness. God brings it about in the mode of the Spirit, that means that the human self is subjectively involved, creative and active. Isn't it significant that in the New Testament with respect to preaching we also find concepts like *teaching* and *paraklesis*?¹² More than kerygma, these concepts focus attention to the appropriation of salvation. The Spirit does not exterminate our human subjectivity, instead she stimulates and regenerates the human self.

Thesis 2 *Interhuman discourse mediates divine salvation. How?*

3 Faith as Human Awareness of God

Preachers do name God, at least kerygmatic preachers do. They expect that naming God - however not as a matter of course - will bring about God's self-disclosure. 'Predigt ist Namenrede' Bohren argues.¹³ But what about our human *awareness* of God? Do we really experience God in and through the sermon? The question arises how the divine self-disclosure is related to our subjective understanding of God.

If we want to investigate faith-as-it-is-lived, we must review the fact that faith is a relationship between the divine and the human subject. In theological terms, faith implies the actual communion between God and humankind. Consequently, the structure of faith is such that we cannot reduce faith to an anthropological phenomenon. Nonetheless, faith finds its concrete shape and form in the human realm. The community of faith has a certain opinion about God and individual members do experience God in a specific way. I assume that the sermon (and of course the liturgy) plays a role in the formation and sustainance of faith-as-it-is-lived. Even stronger, sermons shape our faith-cognitions and bring about and deepen our awareness of God. But how does it work? Can we investigate how faith is nurtured by the sermon?

If we want to investigate the reception of the sermon, we have to interview the hearers. In one of our Ph D projects in Practical Theology at Utrecht University Theo Pleizier is doing this type of research. I will present a small part of that project.

He gathers data from interviews with a broad selection of hearers: both man and woman, adults from different ages, people with a different religious biography. The data he generates consist of in-depth interviews addressing issues of sermon expectations and evaluations.

The analysis of the data starts with sensitizing questions like: 'what do the data reveal about the function of preaching for the hearer's faith-as-it-is-lived' or 'what do the data show about the hearer as an active agent in the production of meaning.' These questions open the data to let substantial codes emerge as building blocks for the theory that conceptualizes the reception of preaching in both its anthropological and theological dimensions. Let me highlight

¹²See H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1958, 98-138

¹³Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre*, München: Chr. Kaiser 1986, 90-91

three categories that emerge from the data by following standard procedures of analysis and coding.

Category 1 *Revelation*

Listening to the sermon helps to see everyday life in the light of the gospel. The sermon opens new dimensions. People receive fresh insight in the reality of faith. These notions can be captured under the category of *revelation*. Listening to a sermon is participating in a revelatory event. There is a sense of otherness. The struggle of everyday life is finally not the end of things. Hearers feel elevated to new heights, transcended beyond the here and now.

Category 2 *Cultivation of faith*

The hearers find that their life of faith is cultivated by the sermon. The sermon brings new knowledge and makes old knowledge alive. They receive consolation from the gospel, and take courage to continue a Christian lifestyle. Further, the sermon creates a sense of togetherness among the people in the pews. These aspects are captured under the heading *cultivation of faith*. Cultivation is the effect of the performative power of the sermon that helps the believer's faith to grow and flourish.

Category 3 *Concentration*

The third category that emerges, *concentration*, requires a stronger sense of activity on the part of the hearer than the cultivation of faith. It turns out that hearers are more or less actively involved in gaining, retaining or losing concentration. Sometimes hearers need to work hard to concentrate on what is being said. A highly motivated hearer is able to capture the sermon, but a less motivated hearer will lose attention. At other times rhetorical qualities of the sermon facilitate the concentration, so that the hearer is being 'helped' in retaining attention. The data strongly suggest to unravel the category of concentration into a *level*-dimension (concentration can be high or low), an *involvement*-dimension (the hearer is passively or actively involved), and a *process*-dimension (gaining, retaining and losing concentration). Unlike the other two categories, concentration does not have a specific theological content, but is a rather common concept in communication studies.

The data give reason to assume relationships between the three categories. Take for example the categories revelation and concentration. They correlate positively, which means that when a hearer talks about a revelatory moment in the sermon, she also talks about a high level of concentration. The attention is high, when the otherness is experienced. This brings an interesting question to the fore: are more attentive hearers more open to aspects of revelation? If this will be confirmed in a next phase in the research-cycle, hearer's activity becomes an important, maybe even central concept in a theory of sermon reception.

Thesis 3 *When revelation and concentration do correspond, then revelation has become illumination.*

4 Methodology

4.1 Empirical homiletics and intradisciplinarity

Research is conducted according to certain methodological standards and procedures. Since the preaching event is theology in praxis, we have to do with an empirical dimension in homiletics that is insufficiently dealt with if only systematically described. Actual practice needs an empirical approach. We have to consider, however, that empirical homiletics is yet theology and not a reduction of theology to social scientific research. The place of social sciences in practical theology is a matter of much discussion, and this is not the place to enter this discussion here. I will only touch on the issue of intradisciplinarity to explain the point that use of empirical methodology does not reduce homiletics to a subsidiary of social scientific research. In the research project that has been described above, we attempt to incorporate both the communicative dimension as well as the dimension of the divine involvement in the act of preaching. In order to do so, we need two different types of theoretical concepts that satisfy the following conditions. First, the concepts cannot be reduced to one another. Second, they are being used to describe dimensions of the same phenomenon, namely sermon-listening. Finally, concepts are open for theoretical integration. They do not exclude each other on a higher theoretical level of abstraction. One way to work resist the temptation of reducing homiletics to another type of communication science is to generate concepts that are the result of an intradisciplinary research design.¹⁴

4.2 Grounded Theory

Empirical research can be done in several ways. Two strategies are favourite among researchers: the empirical survey method and ethnographic description. Survey research starts with a set of precisely defined concepts from which hypothesis are derived and finally a survey is compiled consisting of several topics. Data are generated from a specifically defined sample, and analysed by statistical procedures. Variation is determined and correlations mapped in matrices. In homiletics this procedure has been applied to a large amount of data taken from a representative sample of congregations and listeners in Germany during the seventies and eighties of the 20th century.¹⁵ The results show interesting correlations for instance between the religious orientation of hearers (normative versus progressive believers), background variables like age,

¹⁴Johannes van der Ven discusses intradisciplinarity in practical theological research in his *Practical Theology. An Empirical Approach*, Kampen (The Netherlands): Kok Pharos Publishing 1993, 101–112. See also F. Gerrit Immink, *Faith* (forthcoming), Chapter 9.

¹⁵See for instance, K.-F. Daiber et. al., *Predigen und Hören. Band II. Kommunikation zwischen Predigern und Hörern. Sozialwissenschaftliche Untersuchungen*, München: Kaiser 1982 and its subsequent volume *Predigt als religiöse Rede* (1991). A similar approach though departing from a different theoretical framework had been adopted by Grandthyll in his thesis *Die Wirkung der Predigt. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer empirischen Überprüfung*, Münster 1977.

gender (even income and employment are included) on the one hand and features of the sermon like themes, tone and structure on the other hand. A second strategy to obtain empirical knowledge is by studying a social practice by means of ethnographic observation and description.¹⁶ A practice is studied to produce a 'thick description'¹⁷ of it and captures cultural meanings of participants. Description is usually limited to a few individual units and the results can hardly be generalised.

To these two more common approaches of empirical research I would like to introduce an approach that is developed by the American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss: Grounded Theory (GT).¹⁸ Glaser and Strauss offer a strategy for qualitative research including both using inductive and deductive research techniques that aim for a more generalisable theory on the level of conceptuality. The objective of GT is to produce a conceptualisation of a particular substantive research area. Usually these areas are social practices, that are analysed by coding strategies and captured in concepts, categories and theoretical statements. GT enables the researcher to analyse texts, documents, interview material and field-notes to capture ideas and phenomena that are present in the data into abstract concepts. The process of conceptualisation leads to broader categories and dimensions, that together forms a theory with conceptual propositions. Here we have left the level of individual units, but we are only interested in concepts and their relationships. A well-written grounded theory presents those concepts that fit the substantive area of research, are relevant to the participants in the social practice and work in terms of the participant's interest in her participating in the practice that is being investigated.

To connect this irresponsible brief characterisation of GT with the previous issue of intradisciplinarity: GT is open to employ whatever concept is needed, so both communication and theological concepts are candidates to be used within a substantive theory generated by GT-procedures.

4.3 Demarcating the field of study

Grounded Theory attempts to conceptualise a substantive area. In homiletics we can define the field of study or substantive area with help of the term 'homiletic interaction'. The communicative interaction between a preacher and his hearers is a form of interaction in which the participants believe God is involved, both actively as a subject in the communicative event and intentionally in the referential acts in speaking and listening. Preaching is a communicative act between human beings, but transcends the social dimension and turns human discourse into a means of grace. In studying homiletic interaction we study how the call of the gospel is received. Since hearing is part of a commu-

¹⁶An influential manual following this approach is J.P. Spradley's *Participant Observation*, New York: Rinehart and Winston 1980.

¹⁷The term is from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, see his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic 1973.

¹⁸B.G. Glaser, A.L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago: Aldine 1967.

nicative event we need to employ empirical means to understand this event. The theological conceptualisation of the substantive area keeps the researcher open for theological dimensions in the data.

The main focus in generating Grounded Theory is concern of the participants in a particular social practice. In the practice of preaching we study the concerns of its participants, and an important participant in the event of preaching is the listener. In listening to the sermon a listener has her own role in the co-creation of meaning. The experiences of the listener are worth being investigated from a theological point of view. Sermon-hearing is as much a theological act as sermon-speaking. The Spirit does not need to open the mouth of the speaker only, but in the process of reception hearts are being opened by the Spirit as well. The event of preaching does not only involve an act of faith on the part of the speaker, but also an act of faith on the part of the listeners.

These brief notes will suffice to understand the study of sermon reception as a intradisciplinary study of both communication and theology. As such we present it as a truly homiletical research problem, that attempts to take the empirical dimension as seriously as possible. The main problem for our project is captured in the question: what are hearers doing when listening to a sermon as a Christian community gathers for worship? What is their interest and what constitutes the practice of sermon listening? Homiletic interaction therefore is being studied as a social-psychological communicative event in which somehow a theological reality is present or at least expected.

In sum, the issue of intradisciplinarity prevents us from starting with an implicit assumption of homiletics being reduced to some kind of social social science, without neglecting the social dimension of the practice of preaching. The method of grounded theory provides us with procedures and techniques to produce concepts that are needed for a fruitful intradisciplinary approach of the field. The issue of demarcation turns the attention of researchers to the actual interest of hearers and takes their practise of listening seriously from a theological point of view.