

Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons

A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics¹

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1. Introduction

Christians worldwide listen to sermons. Despite the decline in membership and church attendance in the Western world, many believers still consider going to church as a vital means to maintain their faith in God. These ordinary listeners have been subject of empirical studies for several decades as the empirical turn in practical theology has also influenced the field of homiletics. My study, though, differs from these studies in at least three respects. First, I used Grounded Theory rather than survey, ethnographic or qualitative-data-analysis methods (section 3). Next, the study deals with theory as *outcome* or *result* rather than the starting point of research. The kind of theory generated is both empirically grounded and theologically oriented (section 4). For the purposes of this *Yearbook*, I close this piece with a few concepts that have been generated in the study and specifically deal with the relationship between preaching and worship (section 5).

Chapter 1 of the book presents the research question and puts it into three perspectives: an empirical-homiletical, a methodological, and a practical-theological perspective. The remainder of the study consists of three main parts and a closing chapter in which the results of research are discussed in terms of communication theory and a way forward for new research is indicated. The first main part of the study introduces the field of research in two dimensions: (1) an inter-human or social dimension that concerns the interaction between a preacher and the audience; and (2) a religious dimension in which preaching as religious event is analysed. These two dimensions unlock the substantive area for the empirical study of sermon reception as religious practice. The second part of the study discusses the research procedures and techniques and answers the question how one proceeds from generating data towards formulating a theoretical framework in which the data are abstractly rendered in concepts and their theoretical relationships. I show how Grounded Theory methods work and demonstrate the various cycles of sampling and coding. In the third and largest part of the study I present the theory of 'getting religiously involved' as it occurs in three stages: opening up, dwelling in the sermon and actualising faith.

¹ Th. PLEIZIER: *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* (Delft 2010). Promotie: Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, locatie Utrecht, 6 juli 2010, 16.15 uur. Promotor: prof.dr. F.G. Immink.

2. The field of study: homiletic interaction and divine-human dynamics

If empirical research does not start with a full fledged theoretical framework, a theoretical perspective is nonetheless necessary in order to determine the field of study. Hence the first part of the study (Chapter 2-3) introduces two terms in order to demarcate the substantive area within which data are generated and analysed: homiletic interaction and divine-human dynamics.

Homiletic interaction moves beyond preaching as form of inter-human communication. It conceives of preaching as social act, a pseudo-conversational discourse with a shared intentionality. The popular notion of ‘audience activity’ is criticized as being not specific and theoretically underdeveloped. Though preaching is not some kind of *sui generis* practice, preaching is neither a form of social or communicative interaction. Homiletic interaction points to the religious core of the preaching event. The concept of ‘divine-human dynamics’ is introduced to articulate the religious dynamic that is at stake in preaching. Chapter 3 discusses various approaches in homiletics to reflect on the Protestant idea that preaching embodies God’s Word (*praedicatio verbum Dei est verbum Dei*). But how does preaching signifies Divine speech? In order to narrow the field into one particular theological framework while simultaneously doing justice to the complexity of the subjects involved in the preaching event, three different kinds of dynamics are outlined, and each is analysed according to four parameters. In the kerygmatic dynamic, preaching represents God’s decisive speech in Jesus Christ. God’s *past* Word of the Christ event is presented in the present through preaching. The role of the preacher, the implied audience, the conceptuality of the sermon, and the religious function, can be understood accordingly. According to the interpretative dynamic, preaching focuses upon God’s *present* speech, and the role of the preacher is to interpret current human existence in order to hear God’s Word. Finally, the eschatological dynamic reconstructs preaching as a means to hear God’s *future* speech in the present. Regarding the conceptuality of the sermon this entails that justification by faith, divine judgment and the coming of the Kingdom are important themes.

The two notions of *homiletic interaction* and *divine-human dynamics* point to the two dimensions of the field of study. Within the area of preacher-audience discourse and the various ways in which the religious dynamic between God and humans may appear in the preaching event, empirical data are generated and analysed.

3. Grounded theory and research methodology

The next part, the methodical interlude, consists of Chapter 4 and 5. It is named *methodical* rather than *methodological*, since it describes the techniques and procedures that are needed to move from concrete data such as interviews towards an abstract, theoretical, rendering of the field in concepts and relations between concepts.

In the *methodological* literature a war is being fought over Grounded Theory as epistemology, ontology and the role of researcher concerns. Despite the various ways Grounded Theory is designed, the methods and procedures are roughly similar: empirical data is *coded*, codes are turned into *concepts*, and concepts are related into *hypothetical statements*. Chapter 4 describes the procedures of sampling data, coding, and memoing. Chapter 5 illustrates in detail the three main cycles of coding in Grounded Theory research: open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding. Two important insights are worth mentioning. First, coding data does not mean coding listeners, but aspects or incidents of listening behaviour. One interview does consist of many indicators for listening behaviour. These incidents are compared, coded, and conceptualised. Secondly, for practical theology the kind of concepts thus generated have a dual intentionality: they point both to social-psychological behaviour as well as religious realities. This dual intentionality of practical theological concepts integrate both religious language and empirical analysis.

4. A theory of religious involvement

The third part of the study presents the results of the empirical analyses. The socio-religious process of *getting religiously involved* is conceptualised in three stages, *opening up*, *dwelling in the sermon*, and *actualising faith*. Chapter 6 presents the first stage of religious involvement: opening up. The listener before the sermon has not been studied extensively in previous research. From the data emerges a multivariate concept of receptivity, consisting of three components. Liturgical receptivity has three properties: the liturgy functions as structural condition in moving towards the sermon, the liturgy is a preparatory environment in which listeners get prepared to hearing the Word, and the sermon is part of a larger dramatic flow of the liturgy. Communal receptivity is indicated in the data by the relational affiliation of the hearer with other members of the congregation, by the confessional affiliation with the common faith that is expressed in this particular Christian church, and by institutional affiliation in which the hearer values preaching as significant religious practice. Situated receptivity consists of two dimensions: the consciousness of faith on the part of the hearer (the hearer is very conscious of his or her relationship with God or experiences this relationship in a more opaque sense) and the situatedness of the hearer (between critical moments in life and the trivialities of everyday existence).

The next three chapters discuss the second stage of religious involvement: dwelling in the sermon. In hearings sermons listeners learn to inhabit the sermon as a world which they experience as a meditative environment (Chapter 7), and in which they perceive religious realities (Chapter 8), and make all kinds of religious identifications (Chapter 9). Experiential involvement, as Chapter 7 shows, points to two different attitudes of the hearer: an aesthetic attitude, through which the sermon is experienced as something to be enjoyed, and a functional attitude, through which the sermon has extrinsic significance. These

two attitudes are based upon St. Augustine's famous distinction between *uti* and *frui*. The meditative environment which is created by the sermon is enjoyed in itself (intrinsic experience) or reflectively 'used' by the listener (extrinsic experience).

Chapter 8 addresses the sub process of perceiving the sermon and demonstrates that attentive involvement has two aspects. First, from the point of view of the hearer the sermon consists of three illocutionary areas (the gospel, the biblical text, and everyday existence) to which preachers refer and which are attended to by the listener in hearing the sermon. Secondly, concentration is a degree of attentiveness and is a function of experiential involvement: having pleasure in listening needs an unbroken concentration on the part of the listener, while functional listening makes the listener aware of the argumentation in the sermon and its course.

Existential involvement is the result of a sub process of identifying with the world of the sermon. Identification follows perception, since it occurs to the listener that these realities that have been perceived makes sense to me or to others. Chapter 9 deals with the central idea of identification, namely religious recognition. Recognition has two important properties. First, two ways of religious recognition shape the process of identification: hearers may identify with the *symbolic-narrative world of the sermon* or they may identify with the *religious personality of the preacher*. These two ways generate recognition on the part of the hearer, either by the way how the preacher embodies faith in performing the sermon, or by the way symbolic language and narrative situations function in the sermon.

The third stage of religious involvement consists of *actualising faith*. Two dimensions are important. The dimension of the dialectic faith orientation is generated by the perception of the sermon. The listener's mind is directed towards the here-and-now life or is oriented towards the eschatological reality of the coming Kingdom of God. The dimension of the faith-encounter is generated by the process of identification: recognition leads to an affirmative or a critical encounter with God. These two dimensions propose a typology of actualising faith, consisting of a matrix with four types: a celebrative, a converting, a comforting, and a challenging type of actualising faith.

I can only touch upon the general structure here and must leave the details to the actual text of the book for those interested in the entire process of religious involvement. I close this summary by indicating a few connections between empirical homiletics and liturgical studies.

5. The liturgical connection

It has been widely acknowledged that preaching takes place in the *context* of worship. Some have used this insight to challenge the thinking about worship: what does it mean for liturgical reflection when worship centres around preaching? Others question the connection in the other way round: what does it mean

for preaching when it takes place within a particular liturgical tradition. Within this framework, an empirical study was conducted in the seventies of the previous century about the relationship between four different liturgical types and the way preaching is received within each of these types of worship. If the liturgy is considered as context for preaching, however, at least three aspects of the relationship between the two are neglected. As described above, getting religiously involved takes place in three stages: opening up, dwelling in the sermon, and actualising. Each of these stages bears upon the connection between sermon and liturgy, differently though than in terms of 'context'. During opening up, the liturgical receptivity of the listener is shaped; the listening-experience is liturgically qualified; and in hearing sermons the listener's faith is actualised anamnetically, a notion that is closely related to Eucharistic discourse.

As already hinted at above, during opening up the *liturgical receptivity* of the hearer is shaped. Liturgical receptivity concerns the relationship between the worship service and the openness of the listener to hear the sermon. This openness is both induced as well as forced by the liturgy. Being receptive to hear God's Word is induced by the liturgy when the songs, the prayers, the responses, the rituals and gestures are taken by the listener as preparatory for the sermon. The songs and prayers help the listener to become ready to hear the sermon. The simple fact that the children leave the sanctuary for Sunday school, helps the listener to become receptive for the sermon. Simultaneously, though, the liturgy also forces the listener to get ready for the sermon. The liturgy functions as structural condition in opening up as it moves towards the sermon whether the listener is personally ready or not. At some moment the sermon just starts, structurally conditioned by the liturgical movement of the service. A third aspect of the relationship between preaching and worship concerns the *dramatic flow* of the liturgy in which the sermon is not so much a separate element but part of a flow that is experienced as a whole. During interviews listeners are not always able to distinguish between what is being said in the sermon, sung in a song, or mentioned in one of the prayers. The sermon blends into the larger dramatic flow of the liturgy, rather than being a separate part.

A second liturgical connection is given in the aesthetic attitude of the listener towards the hearing experience. I call this the *liturgical-immediate* experience of hearing sermons. Hearing sermons has an intrinsic significant: hearing is worthwhile in itself. This *frui* aspect shows how hearing is itself a liturgical event. Experiencing the sermon, has ritual qualities. Not the ability of hearers to reconstruct the message of the sermon after the service counts, but the sermon as liturgical experience. Sacramentality and commonality are important notions in this respect. It happens *in* listening, rather than afterwards. The images of the sermon and the feelings of the listener create an immediate experience that transcends the usefulness of the sermon for life beyond the liturgy.

Being there, enjoying the gospel or the preached Word, generates arousal and enjoyment.

Thirdly, from the point of view of *actualising faith* it emerges that faith is actualised in a series of illuminative moments, or: insights; as well as in a continuing process of weekly hearing, an *anamnetic sequence*. Hearing sermons works just like the anamnesis works in Eucharistic liturgical texts: the remembrance of the mighty divine acts in human history represents the salvific presence of Christ in the here-and-now. Hearing sermons works like that: the listener's faith in God is actualised from week to week, when they keep their minds focused through the sermon on what God has done, what God still does, and what God is about to do in the future. Actualisation does not only take place through acquiring new insights into the biblical text through the sermon, but also when faith is renewed by hearing (again) about the gospel. This makes preaching part of the larger liturgical life of the church that goes on week after week.