



# The 2019 Academy of Homiletics Workgroup Papers

## Table of Contents

<b>Hermeneutics and Biblical Studies</b> .....	<b>5</b>
“Crossing Over: Preaching in a Third Voice” Michael P. Knowles .....	6
“The Call Narrative Hermeneutic” Nicole D. McDonald .....	17
“Out of the Depths: A Liturgical-Historical Approach for Interpreting and Preaching Psalm 130” Garth E. Pauley .....	29
“Servant Song Sermons: Second Isaiah as Preacher and Homiletical Guide” David Stark .....	35
<b>History of Preaching</b> .....	<b>47</b>
“Preaching the Eucharist as Resistance: Oscar Romero’s Remembrance of Tortured Salvadorans as Members of Christ’s Body” Andrew Thompson Scales .....	48
<b>Justice, Ethics, and Preaching</b> .....	<b>60</b>
“Unmasking the Homiletical Whiteness of Jerry Falwell Sr. and the Moral Majority” Debra J. Mumford .....	61
“A Homiletical Interdisciplinary Interrogation of Unmasking Whiteness” HyeRan Kim-Cragg .....	73
“Against the Grain of Apathy and Conformity” Michael D. Royster .....	85
<b>Pedagogy</b> .....	<b>91</b>
“‘What Does Playing the Violin Have to Do With Preaching Sermons?: The Implications of Deliberate Practice on Preaching Pedagogy” Jared E. Alcántara .....	92

“Preaching in a World Exposed: Vulnerability, Accountability, and Accessibility” HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Shauna K. Hannan, and Sarah Travis .....	104
<b>Performance Studies .....</b>	<b>115</b>
“Performing the Human Prospect in Poetry and Preaching” Charles L. Bartow .....	116
<b>Preaching and Culture .....</b>	<b>125</b>
“A Voice Cries Out: The Role of Listening for Revealing Cultural Narratives and Unmasking Whiteness in the Pulpit” Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne .....	126
“Preaching Doubt: Toward a Metamodern Homiletic in the Aftermath of Deconstruction” Melanie Bockmann .....	137
“ <i>Communicatio Facit Civitatem</i> : Toward Empathetic Listening and Preaching Across the Racial Divide” Gregory Heille .....	149
<b>Preaching Media and Technology .....</b>	<b>160</b>
“iHomiletic: Preaching that Clicks” Dominique A. Robinson .....	161
“The Fair Use Sermon: When Verbal and Visual Borrowing Cross the Line” Rob O’Lynn .....	174
<b>Rhetoric .....</b>	<b>181</b>
“Of Handmaids, Mediatrices and Mothers: The Idealized Feminine and Rhetorics of Whiteness” Jerusha Matsen Neal .....	182
<b>Theology of Preaching .....</b>	<b>193</b>
“Preaching to the Baptized, Revisited” Richard L. Eslinger .....	194

“Repentance and God’s Kingdom: Theological Implications of Matthew 4:17 for Liturgical Preaching” J. Sergius Halvorsen .....	201
“A Homiletical View of the Epistemological Challenges of Human Self: Searching for the Related Insights from Buddhism and the Theology of the Cross” Joon Ki Kim .....	207
“Holy Presence, Holy Preaching: Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe as <i>Logotokos</i> ” Vincent J. Pastro .....	219
“A Theology for Expository Preaching within the African American Preaching Tradition” Larrin R. Robertson .....	230
<b>Unmasking White Preaching .....</b>	<b>242</b>
“The Missionary Connection: White Preaching in the British Colonies of the Caribbean” Gennifer Benjamin Brooks .....	243
“Betraying White Preaching: ‘Responsible’ and ‘Realistic’ White Preaching” Andrew Wymer .....	250
“Wrestling with Whiteness in Homiletical Pedagogy: A Reflection on Teaching ‘Proclaiming Justice in the Church & Public Square’” Richard W. Voelz .....	263
<b>Worship and Preaching .....</b>	<b>271</b>
“Patriarchy and Whiteness in Preaching” Gennifer Benjamin Brooks .....	272
“Preaching and Singing: Partners in the Dance of Worship” Catherine E. Williams .....	281

# Hermeneutics and Biblical Interpretation

Convener: Lance Pape

## **CROSSING OVER: PREACHING IN A THIRD VOICE**

**Michael P. Knowles, ThD**

**G. F. Hurlburt Chair of Preaching**

**McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario**

**<https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/>**

**Copyright © 2019 Michael P. Knowles**

**ABSTRACT:** Claiming Christian identity and preaching on the basis of a Christian worldview profoundly challenges all assertions of cultural privilege, at margins and centers alike. In the language of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, followers of Jesus inhabit an interstitial “Third Space” that is characteristic of pilgrimage between “This World” and “That Which is to Come” (as the title of Bunyan’s allegory has it). To preach in this theological “Third Space” requires a different way of speaking, one that is both culturally rooted and counter-cultural, situating preachers and hearers alike between overlapping theological domains of death and life, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, old creation and new creation in Christ. As illustrated by the heteroglossia of Pentecost, to preach in this Third Space acknowledges, yet at the same time de-privileges and de-absolutizes all other claims of native identity, subsuming them within the prior claims of Christ.

When entering the Roman city of Philippi, the apostle Paul and his companions would have passed through the city walls via the Neapolis Gate, a monumental portico bristling with Imperial imagery and statues of Roman deities. For any Roman city, the encircling walls were not merely defensive, but liminal: they marked the boundaries of consecration and colonial domain. Accordingly, to enter Philippi, passing through an arched gateway guarded by the figures of tutelary deities, was to cross a threshold into sacred space—from the primary domain of Thracian or Macedonian gods into the overarching dominion of Roma, the personification and protectress of Rome. Yet when he writes to the Philippian believers, Paul makes a bold counterclaim: for followers of Jesus, “our place of citizenship [πολίτευμα] is in heaven” (Phil 3:20). To join the tiny fellowship of Philippian believers would thus have involved not one but two sets of competing theological claims: where Roman deities had initially absorbed or replaced the native gods of Macedonia, Christ now supplanted them all. The place where these converts met for worship would therefore represent a sacred space within sacred space, a sanctuary consecrated to a victim of Rome within a civic domain consecrated to the imperial power that had crucified him.

For Paul and the church of Philippi, Christian space is always contested: it must be actively claimed in the face of competing assertions. Christian identity is itself contested, always hybrid and subject to negotiation. Accordingly, the situation at Philippi is instructive for the church of every age, which must continually work out its identity by negotiating between the claims and counter-claims of rival obligations (whether these be social, ethnic, theological, political, or ideological in nature). In the language of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, followers of Jesus inhabit a “Third Space,” an interstice of perpetual tension that is characteristic (as the title of Bunyan’s famous allegory has it) of “The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to That Which Is to Come.” To minister in this place of dual citizenship, divided loyalties, and

incomplete attachment is to recognize the need for an intentionally crafted Christian identity that is suited to the process of pilgrimage, risking alienation from our first homeland before we have fully arrived in the “better country” that is our anticipated destination. So also to preach in this theological “Third Space” requires a different way of speaking, one that claims neither too much nor too little, invoking the language and thought forms of our adoptive community in accents that yet betray the places from which we have come. In essence, to preach in a Third Space acknowledges, yet at the same time de-privileges and de-absolutizes all other claims of native identity, subsuming them within the prior claims of Christ.

### *Homi K. Bhabha and Third Space*

Notwithstanding his wide range of interests, Bhabha focuses initially on the formation of the modern nation state, observing that its emergence as an expression of ostensibly democratic, “Enlightenment” values coincides with the despotism of colonial conquest. He proposes, in fact, that one is a mirror of the other, since the “master narrative” of Western civility and civilization implies the denigration of all other stories and histories, relegating them to inferior rank or allegedly primitive status; in practice, the colonial enterprise acts out an ideology of cultural supremacism.<sup>1</sup> Just so in the Roman Empire, the negotiation of imperial identity requires the colonial “other” as an ideological foil, as a contrasting geographical and political landscape against which Roman identity may be asserted, and from which it must be distinguished. In the same way that the ancient Philippians perceive the need to erect walls for social and ideological as much as defensive purposes, so Rome must erect statues of its gods and inscribe those same walls with imperial propaganda not only to remind the Macedonians of who is now in charge but also as a means of consolidating Roman identity on otherwise “foreign” soil.

Bhabha’s concern is as much philosophical as social or political, for he proposes that even the process of formulating binary categories (us/them; colonizer/colonized; European/ non-European; modern/postmodern) does violence to the freedom, particularity, and individual identity of those it describes in such terms. For Bhabha, identity is never fixed, but is constantly in flux, requiring constant negotiation and compromise. Accordingly, “people cannot... be addressed as colossal, undifferentiated collectivities of class, race, gender or nation”; rather, the social identity of each group is always individual, always crafted and reinforced through the recitation of communal narratives and life stories that are constantly challenged and contradicted by countervailing narratives on the part of other constituencies.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly the case for colonized, immigrant, minority, or notionally “subaltern” peoples.

Whereas colonialism seeks to subsume all other identities within the overarching framework of a dominant culture and new immigrants are, correlatively, sometimes tempted to downplay or even abandon their cultures of origin, Bhabha sets the powerful and disempowered on a more equal footing, proposing that each must renegotiate their identity in light of the other. So, he says, “The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a

---

<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi K. Bhabha,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) 218–19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

tension peculiar to borderline existence.”<sup>3</sup> Bhabha returns repeatedly to the concept of an interstitial “Third Space” as the location in which authentic identity emerges. His most influential work to date, *The Location of Culture*, opens with a discussion of this critical principle:

These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself... This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.<sup>4</sup>

For Bhabha, it is vitally important that no one culture, perspective, or worldview may claim to provide the framework for interpreting others (since this is a key characteristic of the moral, military, and intellectual hegemony that colonialism entails): “The difference of cultures cannot... be accommodated within a universalist framework.”<sup>5</sup> “We should remember,” he insists, “that it is the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”<sup>6</sup> Bhabha repeatedly speaks of “hybridity” and the “incommensurable” character of cultural differences—the fact that different cultures simply do not “speak the same language.” Hence a difficult negotiation is required, with neither “majority” nor “marginal” cultures in a position to dictate the terms of their encounter. What seems particularly challenging about Bhabha’s perspective is that it implies a humanization of privileged and disprivileged alike, since each (histories of marginalization and the demand for justice notwithstanding) must now account for the other in such a way as to avoid replacing one form of oppression with another.

Notwithstanding the fact (as Bhabha reminds his readers) that Christian mission and cultural hegemony have often gone hand in hand, Christian theology adds a transcendent dimension to this process of cultural renegotiation. Considered in light of Paul’s assertion that the Philippians’ true πολιτευμα (citizenship, allegiance, commonwealth) is in heaven, rather than within the sacred precincts of the Roman colony in which they live, we may think of Jesus’ incarnation as the definitive reassertion of God’s reign in human affairs and his resurrection as the means by which God relativizes all human cultures and perspectives, radically reorienting them around the inbreaking of a new creation. Yet rather than imposing divine rule or enforcing compliance with the ways of God, Jesus does the opposite: he assumes the rôle of a slave (Phil 2:7), choosing to suffer violence instead of inflicting it. In his own person, Jesus embodies interstitial existence, bridging the distance and erasing the difference by embracing both poles of the metaphysical antithesis of human and divine. Contrary to expectation, he takes the place of the conquered and the colonized, entering the space that they occupy in order to transform it from within.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 218.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 1–2, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Bhabha, “Third Space: Interview,” 209.

<sup>6</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 38.

Bhabha insists that the necessity of negotiating interstitial identity “is no plea for unregulated open-endedness or the celebration of pluralism”:

It is, in fact, an argument for recognizing the necessity of that anxious movement of minority enunciation that insists upon the possibility of choice—ethical, aesthetic, political—in those negotiations of culture and identity, where the proximate relation of difference and distance reveals a straitened, precarious path between circling in pale dreams, and entering the deep current.<sup>7</sup>

A more obvious challenge is the likelihood that from both sides of a social, cultural, or theological divide, hybrid identity will be perceived as a form of grave disloyalty. As sociologist Paul Gilroy observes,

where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.<sup>8</sup>

Gilroy’s own concern is for Black experience and identity in Britain, seeking to address what he describes as “the continuing lure of ethnic absolutism in cultural criticism produced by both blacks and whites.”<sup>9</sup> “Hybridity,” Bhabha declares, “is heresy.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, he insists, “Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration”: to occupy a “Third Space” is, rather, to be poised in a “dangerous indeterminacy” between the two.<sup>11</sup> Although applying in its original context to an analysis of multinational economics and their impact on cultural expression, Bhabha’s description of the new identities that arise in such a “Third Space” seems even more relevant to Christian pilgrimage:

Being in the ‘beyond,’ then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also... to be part of a revisionary time... *to touch the future on its hither side.*<sup>12</sup>

To be a pilgrim, a person of faith, a follower of the resurrected Jesus, is likewise “to touch the future on its hither side.” Pilgrimage is, by definition, a liminal state, a journey undertaken in the direction of the sacred in full confidence that upon arrival, one will be able to touch, encounter, experience a reality more holy and transcendent than the place from which one first set out.

### *Third Voice and the Voice of Preaching: Pentecost as Precedent*

It is in this context that the Word of God bids us listen and on this basis that Christian preaching proceeds. Like pilgrimage in principle, preaching invites the listeners “to touch the future on its

---

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha, “Editor’s Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations,” *Critical Inquiry* 23.33, “Front Lines/Border Posts” (1997) 459.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993) 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 32, 225.

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, “Culture’s In Between,” in *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, ed. David Bennett (London: Routledge, 1998) 32, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 7 (emphasis original).

hither side.” Accordingly, the sermon does not rely for its force on customary strategies of rhetoric and persuasion (1 Thess 2:3–6), but on the counterintuitive, otherworldly, and eschatological character of its subject matter. Neither, of course, does the preacher stand in the place of God or speak directly on God’s behalf, not least because this is the prerogative of Christ alone. Rather, the preacher speaks with what we may venture to call a “Third Voice,” bearing witness to grace in a manner that coheres with the transformative graciousness that is the hallmark of resurrection.

Without suggesting that Pentecost itself is repeatable, the events of this day are theologically paradigmatic. Luke’s account is in three parts: a description of numinous experience (Acts 2:1–4), the response of the onlookers (2:5–13), and the explanation provided by Peter in the form of his first post-resurrection sermon (2:14–36). The essential feature of this experience is not its phenomenological details but their attribution to the Spirit of God:

<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages [ἡτέραις γλώσσαις], as the Spirit gave them ability.

(Acts 2:1–4)

The apostles speak with words that are not their own; their distinctive manner of speech establishes their place of origin, situating them as “other” and at some distance from the ostensible focus of God’s favour, which is Jerusalem. Already considered to be on the social margins, they are impelled by the Spirit of God to speak in the languages of those who are even further from the centre.

The second movement of Luke’s account addresses this question directly:

<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

(Acts 2:5–11)

In future, the miracle of heteroglossia will be replaced by the more prosaic expediency of translation, which may explain why it is never repeated. On this occasion, however, it makes an important theological point, as the Spirit of God moves each apostle to announce divine works of power (τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ) in words that affirm the linguistic specificity of the hearers, rather than that of the speakers. In fact, this is the exact trajectory of the Incarnation, which foregoes authority and privilege in order to announce divine salvation in terms that are native to its intended recipients.

Both sides of this equation—centre and margins, absolute and contingent, divine and human—are critical to the concept of “Third Voice.” On the one hand, that all those present on

the day of Pentecost should hear such testimony in their own “native language” affirms and ennobles the hearers. As Vinoth Ramachandra explains:

In many instances, language belongs to the core of what constitutes a cultural identity... What has distinguished the Christian movement from, say, the ancient Asian religions or global Islam is the way, from its inception, the church did not sacralize either the language of Jesus [or] the place of his origins. The language that Jesus used in his preaching was quickly abandoned in favor of country (Koine) Greek and “vulgar” Latin as the uniting media of communication. The entire New Testament was written in a language other than the one in which Jesus preached. That the eternal counsels of God belonged to the commonplace, everyday speech of ordinary men and women was a view that was, and remains, revolutionary.<sup>13</sup>

This insight is likewise central to the theology of West African scholar Lamin Sanneh, for whom God’s commitment to human culture via the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth validates all cultural expressions of the Christian gospel. “Christianity,” he writes,

has felt so congenial in English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, and so on, that we forget it wasn’t always so, or we inexcusably deny that the religion might feel equally congenial in other languages, such as Amharic, Geez, Arabic, Coptic, Tamil, Korean, Chinese, Swahili, Shona, Twi, Igbo, Wolof, Yoruba, and Zulu. Our cultural chauvinism makes us overlook Christianity’s vernacular character.<sup>14</sup>

But Sanneh is quick to point out the other side of the equation, which is that while God’s commitment to one culture in the person of Jesus of Nazareth implies a commitment to human culture in principle, the fact that this is a divine initiative ultimately relativizes all cultures and all forms of cultural expression:

The fact of Christianity being a translated, and translating, religion places God at the center of the universe of cultures, implying free coequality among cultures and a necessary relativizing of languages vis-à-vis the truth of God. No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive access or advantage to the truth of God, and none is so marginal or inferior that it can be excluded. All have merit; none is indispensable.<sup>15</sup>

His comments on biblical translation, understood in light of the Incarnation, apply in equal measure to the task of preaching:

Translation as radical pluralism promotes cultural particularity while affirming the universal God as its relativizing ground... Radical pluralism is radical in the boldness with which the word of God is invested in the vernacular, and pluralist in denying to any one language an exclusive claim in the “plan of salvation.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) 133.

<sup>14</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 105.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 105–106.

<sup>16</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture. Second Edition Revised and Expanded* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009) 243–44.

Christian proclamation is not therefore simply a matter of negotiating between the semantic domains of various different languages, cultures, or ethnicities. Rather, the prospect (and experience!) of being reconfigured by the reign of God is what impels communication across other, less radical boundaries of culture and language. Accordingly, the more obvious negotiation in Luke's account between centres and margins turns out to be provisional rather than intrinsic to the gospel of Christ. Contrary to the tendencies of a postmodern ethos, there is no privileging of the "margins" in Christian faith because the powerful and the disempowered alike are equally disenfranchised and equally embraced by divine grace. In this regard, it is helpful to recall the universal intent of Paul's insistence in Romans 3:22–23, which serves as the climax of his address to Gentiles and Jews alike, that "there is no distinction, for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (cf. Rom 10:12). Stated in more positive terms, as the letter to the Ephesians explains, the consequence of Christ having "proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" is that all without distinction are now equally "members of the household of God" (Eph 2:17, 19).

Thus the subject of apostolic preaching (Jesus of Nazareth), the life histories of those who preach, the language and manner of their speech, and the diversity of their addressees all entail the same cruciform tension that gives rise to the "Third Voice" of preaching. Preaching in a "Third Voice" is always poised between cultural particularity and the Christocentric relativizing of all cultures; between divine affirmation of our human identity and its transformation by the power of God. It stands at the margins not just of this culture or of that, but of all human cultures, and of humanity itself, in a Third Space that opens to new creation by means of God's gift of life.

### *Postcolonial Homiletics: Preaching Between Departure and Destination*

With or without explicit reference to Bhabha, postcolonial theory has provided a helpful framework for the recovery and empowerment of marginalised voices in the context of Christian preaching, as well as, more broadly, the development of homiletical approaches rooted in (for example) Hispanic, Caribbean, Korean-American, and/or Filipino-American cultural distinctives. Taking initiative to counter Eurocentric and colonial biases within Western homiletical tradition is wholly consistent with the radical diversity and cultural democracy expressed at Pentecost. As Pablo Jiménez observes, "Postcolonial homiletics challenge those deemed as subaltern by the colonial powers to embrace, claim and proclaim the full humanity that God has given them... The postcolonial preacher has the opportunity to shepherd a community of faith to a life of freedom and dignity."<sup>17</sup> According to Sarah Travis, preaching that seeks to unmask colonial bias assumes responsibility for examining cultural and historical legacies in light of the priorities of divine justice:

[This] include[s] recognizing difference and diversity within the listening community and beyond, naming colonialism/imperialism as a past and present reality, speaking against

---

<sup>17</sup> Pablo A. Jiménez, "The Troublemaker's Friend: From Text to Sermon in a Postcolonial Context," *Apuntes* 34.3 (2014) 85.

the damaging and destructive patterns and discourses that have emerged within colonial/imperial project, and coming to terms with the relationship between Church and empire.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, she insists,

postcolonial preaching disputes and/or resists colonizing discourse by casting an alternative vision of human community rooted in careful theological reflection...

Postcolonial preaching cannot happen unless preachers are willing to acknowledge to themselves and to their listeners complicity with imperial systems, the first step in bringing to consciousness the reality that all inhabit colonial spaces.<sup>19</sup>

Kwok Pui-lan advocates an even more radical approach:

As both globalization and localization intensify in our contemporary world, it is critical for the preacher as performer to understand multiple subjectivities and belongings among members of the congregation. She must avoid defining identity based on territorial essentialism (e.g. Asia or Africa), cultural essentialism (e.g. Confucian), or racial essentialism (e.g. Black), because identity is fluid, porous, and hybrid, and is constantly shifting.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the position implied by Paul, the church of Philippi, and Pentecost is more radical still. Postcolonial theory rightly demands justice and redress in the face of cultural hegemony; it sides with the colonized. A Christian worldview, by contrast, speaks of a universally rebellious creation and of wayward creatures who, like the tenant farmers who seize control of their master's vineyard (Mark 12:1–8), resist the Lord of creation and refuse to acknowledge his authority, sometimes violently so. On this view of things, it is Christ who sides with the colonized, but only so as to remedy their insurrection by means of resurrection, restoring their true *πολίτευμα* "in heaven." Accordingly, preachers and congregations at all points on the social, cultural, and political spectrum might do well to acknowledge their own resistance to grace, which is to say, our stubborn insistence that we are perfectly capable of constructing "new realities" and "new identities" on our own, without need of divine aid and without reference to a new creation that is of God's own making.

Taking Kwok's anti-essentialism to its logical (and theological) limit, such a perspective encourages us to read Travis in a new light:

Postcolonial theories continually question the power and authority of the "colonizer." In that sense, another question arises for affluent preachers. To what extent am I truly "powerful"? While I perceive myself to inhabit a privileged space, I may be suffering from a delusion of power that leads me to believe I have power to change a system over which I am actually entirely powerless.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014) 48.

<sup>19</sup> Travis, "Troubled Gospel: Postcolonial Preaching for the Colonized, Colonizer, and Everyone in Between," *Homiletic* 40.1 (2015) 47, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, "Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts," *Homiletic* 40.1 (2015) 10.

<sup>21</sup> Travis, "Troubled Gospel," 50.

To be fair, Travis is referring to “the instability of authority and identity in a postcolonial world,” rather than to human agency in principle, relative to the reign of God.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, she is fully conscious that Christian preaching is rooted by definition in prior divine action, and affirms that “The good news, the gospel claim of this approach is that we are being continually recreated to participate in an alternative discourse that has already been established by the Triune God.”<sup>23</sup> Just so, to preach in a Third Voice, in the Third Space that is between departure and destination, is to join “an alternative discourse that has already been established by the Triune God.”

In a perceptive analysis, Sunggu Yang offers an illustration of what this kind of homiletical discourse looks like from an Asian American perspective. “At the core of Asian American preaching,” he writes, “is the promise of the Promised Land.”<sup>24</sup> In one sense, America itself has proven to be a land of promise, yet it is also one in which Asian Americans often feel marginalised by a predominantly non-Asian culture. In his own discussion of hybrid identity, Sze-kar Wan concurs that it is difficult for Asian Americans to situate themselves within American culture: “In straining at creating ‘Asian American’ as an acceptable intellectual category, Asians living in the United States have succeeded in constructing—so far, only for themselves—a hybrid space between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ a space that has yet to gain official recognition.”<sup>25</sup> According to Yang, Christians seek to mitigate this tension by looking beyond an identity construed in binary terms as “Asian-American,” to the more radically liminal character of spiritual pilgrimage:

In other words, the immigrant’s spiritual experience of pilgrimage, as the perpetual sojourner walking in a strange world and looking forward to another (heavenly) world, determines the constructs of faith. The metaphoric idea or the promise of the Promised Land best represents the other heavenly reality that Asian Americans perceive as the eventual terminal of their spiritual pilgrimage. What is important here is that the idea or perceived reality of the Promised Land is not really ethereal or purely other-worldly.

Rather, the desired Promised Land synthesizes this-worldliness and other-worldliness.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, he writes, “Asian Americans construct their identity by means of *triple consciousness*,” which is to say, as “*Asian, American, and Christian*.”<sup>27</sup> That is, “faith in Christ enables Asian Americans to envision a third liberative reality as the eventual destination of their faithful lives and the ultimate transformation of the current hostile foreign land.”<sup>28</sup> This vision is expressly Christological, a manifestation of our call to new citizenship in what the Gospel of

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Sunggu Yang, “The Promised Land: A Postcolonial Homiletic of Promise in the Asian American Context,” in *Toward a Homiletical Theology of Promise*, ed. David Schnasa Jacobsen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018) 9.

<sup>25</sup> Sze-kar Wan, “‘To the Jew First and Also to the Greek’: Reading Romans as Ethnic Construction,” in *Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Prejudice Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 138.

<sup>26</sup> Yang, “Promised Land,” 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 11; emphasis original.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 15.

Matthew terms “the kingdom of the heavens” (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3, etc.). Central to such a vision is Jesus’ resurrection, understood as victory over the marginalizing forces of human existence, the power of death above all. As Sang Hyun Lee explains,

Jesus’ resurrection from death confirmed that the marginalizing forces in the world are not the ultimately real powers, and that the extreme form of marginalization, namely death, is proved to have no ultimate power over the life-creating power of the loving and compassionate God. For Asian American believers who have united with Jesus... their social liminality and marginality in the United States have not been changed by their Lord’s victory over the marginalizing forces. Their empirical, social situation remains the same as before. But the resurrection of Jesus in another sense has changed everything. Asian Americans who are united with Jesus are now united with the resurrected Jesus, and need not be afraid to face the disorienting and bewildering experience of liminality. They also need not be demoralized by their marginalization by the dominant white society. Dehumanizing marginalization has proven to be impotent in Jesus’ victory over death.<sup>29</sup>

Identifying with Christ in this fashion inspires a spirituality of liminal existence between “This World” and “That Which Is to Come,” which Yang describes as an “*already-but-not-yet* spirituality of the Promised Land.”<sup>30</sup> Construing the preacher as “a fellow pilgrim who knows exactly what it means and how it feels to live as a stranger in the wilderness,” he argues that “The preacher’s message promises the eschatological *Third Land* existing beyond Asian lands to which the people cannot go back and beyond American lands to which they cannot truly belong.”<sup>31</sup>

Self-evidently, faithfulness to the priority of Christ and the otherworldly call of his resurrection (to say nothing of Pentecost) require us to confess that preachers of all cultures and backgrounds are subject to the same conditions. To do otherwise—to cling, that is, to cultural privilege, epistemological prerogative, or claims of linguistic primacy—is to suffer from what Travis calls “a delusion of power,” an anthropological absolutism characteristic of too many labourers in the Lord’s vineyard. Not only, that is, those who grumble about their wages (Matt 20:1–16), but also those who resent their subaltern status and imagine that the vineyard would serve them better if they themselves owned the means of production (cf. Matt 21:33–41).

It is at this point that orientation to the resurrection of Jesus, Third Space thinking, hybrid identity, and the task of preaching converge. Whether physically, as at ancient Philippi, or in the broader terms of politics, culture, ideology, and worldview, Christian existence is in principle liminal, poised in an unresolvable tension between life *κατὰ σάρκα*, “according to the flesh,” on the one hand, and “new creation,” on the other. To be “in Christ,” mystically made one with him, is both to be affirmed in our essential humanity by his incarnation while at the same time made new by the power of his resurrection. Both are true for Christian pilgrims as the opposite poles of departure and destination: in practice, we are situated (whether physically, culturally, or

---

<sup>29</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, *From A Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 85–86.

<sup>30</sup> Yang, “Promised Land,” 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 24.

theologically) at neither extreme, but look to both as points of orientation relative to which we plot our trajectory and work out an interstitial, pro-tem identity for the life of the church. To preach from such a perspective is to discern in Pentecost the same two poles of orientation, with a robust affirmation of linguistic and cultural specificity that, in all its rich variety, is nonetheless transcended, re-oriented, and above all repatriated within the larger context of τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ—God’s “mighty works” of salvation. Christian preaching does not have the ability to bring this Third Space into being, nor does it directly transport its hearers to the “eschatological *Third Land*” of which Yang speaks. Rather, it names these things as the handiwork of God, telling stories of dislocation, instability, imperfect vision, homemaking while still en route, and promised arrival. In this sense, preaching is a species of joyful surrender; rather than presuming to stand in God’s place, preachers and their sermons are exercises in yielding to God’s transformative dominion, inviting hearers to yield in similar fashion as God calls us beyond ourselves, into the territory of promise that is the domain of resurrection, new life, and new creation. This is the essence of preaching in a Third Voice.

## THE CALL NARRATIVE HERMENEUTIC

Nicole D. McDonald, Ph.D Candidate in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric  
Sponsor: Frank A. Thomas, Ph.D., Director of the Ph.D Program in African American  
Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric/Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Th. Miller Professor of  
Homiletics

Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana [www.cts.edu](http://www.cts.edu)

Copyright © 2019 Nicole D. McDonald

ABSTRACT: The call narratives of African American women and other marginalized persons are a lens in which scripture is interpreted. This lens becomes another social location for hermeneutic discourse. The interpretation of scripture through the lens of the call is what I named “the call narrative hermeneutic.” The Call Narrative Hermeneutic is characterized using interpretation theory, personal experience, and close reading of call narratives. It is a theo-rhetorical lens that informs African American women’s views of God and challenges the ideology of the role of women in the church. In this paper, first, I outline the form and significance of Julia A.J. Foote’s call narrative as written in her autobiographical sketch, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*. Then, based on her call and other religious experiences, I provide an analyses of her sermon, “A Threshing Sermon,” to understand how those experiences impact her sermonic development through the interpretation of the scripture.

### Introduction

On October 27, 1850, an influential man in the community of Detroit, Michigan attended a church service. This man, a “sinner” and “concerned for his soul,” asked the preacher that day to speak from Micah 4:13—“Rise and thresh, Daughter Zion, for I will give you horns of iron; I will give you hooves of bronze, and you will break to pieces many nations. You will devote their ill-gotten gains to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.” The preacher took this request to the Lord, and from this encounter, the preacher felt confident to deliver a message from the text that the man desired. The sermon, now known as “A Threshing Sermon,” was delivered by Julia A.J. Foote. By her account, this preaching moment was quite effective in as much as “the unconverted man, who gave me this text for the above discourse, gave his heart to God, together with many others, before we left Detroit.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the ministry of Foote almost did not happen. In her description of her call narrative, Foote denied the call of God to preach three times. She fought and wrestled against the urge to preach until she could not resist any longer.

Julia A.J. Foote’s autobiographical sketch of her call fits squarely in the long history of the African American call narrative tradition that dates back to the period of African enslavement in America. During the 1800’s enslaved Africans chronicled their lives in what we now know as

---

<sup>1</sup> Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: an Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2010), 175.

“slave narratives.” These narratives from journal entries and autobiographies not only detailed the brutality of slavery, but also God’s activity in the lives of the enslaved Africans. Often, God’s activity manifests in visions and signs in which the Spirit was leading the individual to act on God’s behalf for the physical and spiritual liberation of the people. This call by the Spirit to lead God’s people through public proclamation of the Gospel is characterized as the call narrative in the African American tradition, which has evolved into “the call to preach.”

For example, in the book, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Turner describes the visions and signs from God that urged him to lead the rebellion of enslaved and free blacks in Southampton County Virginia in August of 1831. Even though Turner is considered a Baptist preacher, his ultimate call was an unction of the Spirit via signs and visions to lead God’s people towards physical liberation in the insurrection. Additionally, in *The Productions of Mrs. Maria Stewart*, Stewart, an orphan who grew up in the house of a clergyman, describes an experience in which she knew that she was called to devote the rest of her life to the uplift of her race through Christ.<sup>2</sup> Stewart, a socio-political activist, followed the leading of the Spirit by becoming a public speaker who spoke against poverty and oppression, while supporting the education of Negroes in the 1830s. During the same time, Jarena Lee, the first authorized woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was an itinerant preacher traveling in the North to preach the Gospel of Christ. Her call narrative is detailed in her biographical sketch entitled, *The Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*. Furthermore, in 1894, Frances Joseph Gaudet, a missionary, received a call from God to conduct mission work among Negro prisoners. In her work published posthumously in 1913, *He Leadeth Me*, Gaudet characterizes her call narrative as a demand from God as she was praying with a woman whose child was imprisoned.<sup>3</sup> And, finally, a more contemporary account of African American call narratives was published in 1992 by William H. Myers professor of New Testament and Hermeneutical studies at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ohio. He was the primary editor of the classic book, *The Irresistible Urge to Preach*, which is a collection of oral African American call stories of 86 men and women clergy from various Christian denominations.

This by no means is an exhaustive list of the published call narratives of African Americans. This list seeks to broaden the understanding of “the call to preach” by not limiting the call to Sunday morning proclamation within the church. But rather, this list returns to the historical context of being called by the Spirit to lead God’s people towards physical and spiritual liberation through public proclamation of the Gospel message. Therefore, the call narratives of Maria Stewart and Frances Joseph Gaudet, neither of whom were ordained clergy, are characterized within the call narrative tradition. The African American call narrative tradition is more than a “call to preach.”

A contemporary of Stewart, Gaudet, and Lee is Julia A.J. Foote, the first African American woman deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) church. Foote details her call narrative in her autobiography, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* in which she

---

<sup>2</sup> Chanta M. Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913*, Revised Edition (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 10.

describes her call from the Lord as the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of souls.<sup>4</sup> As a free Negro woman, Foote traveled near and far preaching the Gospel to save souls for the Lord. In this paper, I provide a close reading of Julia A.J. Foote's call narrative to establish the components of Foote's call in order to understand the form and significance of African American women call narratives in the 1800s. Then, I analyze her sermon, "A Threshing Sermon," to determine the ways in which Foote's call narrative and other religious experiences impact her biblical interpretation of scripture as evident by her sermonic development.

### **Julia A. J. Foote Bio Sketch**

Julia A.J. Foot was born in 1823 in Schenectady, New York as the fourth child of her mother who was born enslaved. Her father was born free, but stolen and enslaved as a child. Foote's father bought himself, his wife, and their infant child that became disabled through a tragic accident whereby Foote's mother and the infant almost drowned. Following the incident, Foote's parents made a public profession of faith and joined the M.E. Church. Foote was raised in the church with parents that shunned dancing and indulged in alcoholic beverages.<sup>5</sup>

At the age of fifteen Julia had a conversion experience in which she was saved and felt the redemption of God's grace.<sup>6</sup> Soon thereafter, George Foote, a sailorman, who also professed a faith in Christ, offered to marry Julia. A year later the two married and immediately moved to Boston where George was stationed in Chelsea. In Boston, Julia received her call to preach. Upon accepting the call, she traveled to New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and other places to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Julia did not have any children, which allowed her to travel freely as an itinerant preacher during George's deployments in the Navy.

### **Close Reading of Julia Foote's Call Narrative**

A close reading of Julia A. J. Foote's call narrative revealed the following components: preparation, divine commission, resistance, affirmation of the call, prayer, a supportive sisterhood, and acceptance. The first component of the call is preparation. Preparation is God-ordained opportunities to exercise the gifts before receiving the divine commission. The purpose of preparation is to gain familiarity with the call of God. Before receiving the call to preach the Gospel, Foote was already preaching for the salvation of souls in houses.<sup>7</sup> She states, "For months I had been moved upon to exhort and pray with the people."<sup>8</sup> Here, the implication is that the Lord "moved" Foote to exhort and pray. An exhortation is an extemporaneous expounding of scripture for the edification of the hearers, which is a model of preaching. God's move is an act of preparation that gives Julia experience in the Lord's use of her as a conduit for the salvation of souls.

---

<sup>4</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

The next component of the call is the divine commission by God for a definitive work. The divine commission is the command from God to a specific work, i.e., called to preach. The divine commission identifies one's function in ministry. For Julia, the Lord identifies her as "preacher." She understands her divine commission as being called by God to preach the Gospel so that persons can experience the salvation of Christ. This call to preach is the definitive work that the Lord prepared Foote for during the home visitation exhortations and prayers.

The first time God calls Julia for a definite work, she resisted by saying, "No, Lord not me."<sup>9</sup> Resistance is the third component of the call narrative. Resistance is the objection of God's call by the chosen individual based on her presumed insufficiency to fulfill the call. Foote thought, "it could not be that I was called to preach – I, so weak and ignorant."<sup>10</sup>

In Foote's call narrative, she resists God's call to preach three times. After the first resistance, the Lord sends an angel to affirm the call to Julia. The angel represents the next component of the call narrative – affirmation. Affirmation is the God-given sign directed to the chosen individual that confirms the call so that she undoubtedly knows the call of God upon her life. The angel appeared to Foote with a scroll in hand. The scroll read, "Thee have I chosen to preach my Gospel without delay."<sup>11</sup> As the angel disappeared, Foote cried out, "Lord, I cannot do it."<sup>12</sup> This second resistance occurs immediately following God's affirmation of the angel.

The third and final resistance of the call occurs after the affirmation of God via another visitation of an angel. As Foote wept at night and asked the Lord to remove this burden from her, the same angel appeared with words on the breast. The words read, "You are lost unless you obey God's righteous commands."<sup>13</sup> After this encounter and a bout with an illness, Foote resists saying, "Lord, I cannot go!"<sup>14</sup>

In Foote's call narrative, God is coercive and acts as a controlling deity. Each time Foote says no to God's calling upon her life to preach the Gospel, she becomes ill. Foote attributes the sicknesses to her disobedience to the Lord. This resistance comes with several excuses, first of which, Foote being "weak and ignorant."<sup>15</sup> Another reason is that Foote "had always been opposed to the preaching of women, and had spoken against it, though, (she) acknowledge(s), without foundation."<sup>16</sup> It is quite ironic that Julia is called to preach the Gospel having opposed women preachers throughout her life. However, the opposition of women preachers is normative during her time.

In "Chapter XIX: Public Effort-Excommunication" of Foote's autobiographical sketch, she describes how the minister, Mr. Beman, refused to allow her to preach in the church hall. He

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>15</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 67.

also forbade her to continue preaching in homes. According to Foote, Mr. Beman excommunicated her from the church based on false accusations simply because he did not agree with women preachers. Foote wrote a letter to the Conference requesting an impartial hearing on her excommunication. The Conference ignored the letter. Foote writes, “It was only the grievance of a woman, and there was no justice meted out to women in those days. Even ministers of Christ did not feel that women had any rights which they were bound to respect.”<sup>17</sup>

In Julia Foote’s call narrative, once she receives the divine commission – the command from God to a definitive work, she resists. After the resistance, God sends an affirmation – the God-given sign directed to the chosen individual that affirms the call so that she undoubtedly knows the call of God upon her life. Then, Julia resists again, and God responds with another affirmation of the call.

The next component of Foote’s call narrative is the supportive sisterhood, or as she describes them “a band of sisters.”<sup>18</sup> After Julia’s second encounter with the angel, an affirmation of God’s call upon her life, “Mam” Riley enters Foote’s room as darkness fell upon her. “Mam” Riley sees Foote’s anguish and leaves the room. Then, Foote describes the “band of sisters” in whom she confides. At least one of the women understands Foote’s plight and advises her to obey the Lord.

Christian women make up the supportive sisterhood who encourage the called woman to submit to the will of God and accept her call to preach. The most prominent of the supportive sisterhood and the only named woman in the call narrative is “Mam” Riley. Foote does not provide information as to her relationship with “Mam” Riley in the narrative. However, in “Chapter XIII: Removal to Boston – The Work of Full Salvation,” Foote explains how she met “Mam” Riley after her and her husband, George, moved to Boston.

“Mam” Riley is the Christian woman that Julia worked for as a housekeeper after she and George rented a house across the street from Mrs. Burrow’s boarding house. Foote characterizes “Mam” Riley as a mother to her in a strange land. She writes, “Mam” Riley, a most excellent Christian, became as a mother to me in this strange land, far from my own dear mother. Bless the Lord! He supplied all my needs.”<sup>19</sup> Julia considers “Mam” Riley’s presence in her life as a blessing from the Lord.

“Mam” Riley is part of the supportive sisterhood. From this chapter in Foote’s autobiography, Mrs. Burrows is part of the supportive sisterhood as well. Before renting their own house, George arranged for Julia to live with Mrs. Burrows while he was at work during the week. George worked in Chelsea as a seaman in the Navy. He could only see her once a week. Mrs. Burrows, a church-woman, provided a boarding house for Julia to live.

Additionally, in this chapter, Foote implies that she went to church with Mrs. Burrows the first Sunday that they moved to Boston. Julia joined the same church as her. Foote writes, “Mrs. Burrows was a church-member, but knew nothing of the full joys of salvation. I went to church the first Sabbath I was there, remained at class-meeting, gave my letter of membership to the

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 54.

minister, and was received into the church.”<sup>20</sup> Based on Foote’s description of Mam Riley and Mrs. Burrows, both ladies contribute to the supportive sisterhood of women.

Prayer, which is communication to God, is the next component of Foote’s call narrative. Foote communicates with God throughout her entire call narrative. Foote writes, “I prayed” as it relates to her wrestling with her call to preach. After Foote resists the divine commission, she writes, “I took all my doubts and fears to the Lord in prayer.” Immediately, the angel appeared as an affirmation of God’s call upon her life. The second time Foote prays, she is experiencing an illness that has her in bed under grave distress. She writes, “I seemed as one tormented. I prayed, but felt no better.”<sup>21</sup> Following this prayer, the angel reappears with words of the heart, “You are lost unless you obey God’s righteous commands.”<sup>22</sup>

The final component of a call narrative is acceptance. Acceptance is when the called woman submits to the call of God on her life by moving forward in the definitive work that the Lord has called her to perform. For Foote, that definitive work is the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of souls. Even though Foote does not write about her acceptance of her call in the call narrative, history details her acceptance through the accounts of those who witnessed her preaching ministry throughout the country. In the preface of Julia A. J. Foote’s autobiographical sketch, Thos. K. Doty<sup>23</sup> writes, “Our dear sister is not a genius. She is simply strong in common sense, and strong in the Lord. Those of us who heard her preach, last year, at Lodi, where she held the almost breathless attention of five thousand people, by the eloquence of the Holy Ghost, know well where is the hiding of her power.”<sup>24</sup>

### **An Analysis of “A Threshing Sermon” with the sermonic text as Micah 4:13.**

“Rise and thresh, Daughter Zion, for I will give you horns of iron; I will give you hooves of bronze, and you will break to pieces many nations. You will devote their ill-gotten gains to the Lord, their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.” (Micah 4:13 New International Version)

“A Threshing Sermon” is an impromptu exhortation from Micah 4:13. Foote states that an influential man in the community, a sinner, who was concerned about his soul asked her to speak from that text. She took the request to the Lord and was allowed to speak the words outlined in the written sermon. This sermonic introduction corroborates Foote’s description in

---

<sup>20</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 52-53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> William C. Kostlevy, ed., *Historical Dictionary of the Holiness Movement* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 86-87.

Thomas K. Doty is a minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church who “insisted that holiness destroys the line of color-prejudice and that it was sin “to padlock the lips” of anointed women preachers. Doty’s most notable published books are *Lessons in Holiness* (1881) and *The Two-fold Gift of the Holy Spirit* (1890). In addition to being a minister, Doty learned the printing trade and founded a holiness periodical, *Christian Harvester*, that he edited until 1913.

<sup>24</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 7.

the beginning of her call narrative as being “moved upon to exhort and pray with the people.”<sup>25</sup> When Foote says, “I took his desire to the Lord, and was permitted to speak from that passage after this manner,” she is referring to an act of intercession in which she prays to God on behalf of the sinner.<sup>26</sup> God responds to the prayer by empowering Foote to speak the words of exhortation.

Also, the sermon introduction supports Foote’s ministerial purpose of preaching the Gospel for the salvation of souls, as stated in her call narrative. By her account, this preaching moment was quite effective in as much as “the unconverted man, who gave me this text for the above discourse, gave his heart to God, together with many others, before we left Detroit.”<sup>27</sup> To that end, the sermon testifies to the effectiveness of Julia A. J. Foote’s ministry of preaching the Gospel. And, it validates Foote’s call by God to preach the Gospel because persons experienced the salvation of the Lord.

Julia is clear in her understanding of her call. She is called by God to preach the Gospel for the salvation of souls. The clarity of call is stated in the first sentence of “Chapter XVII, My Call to Preach the Gospel,” of her autobiography. Foote writes, “For months I had been moved upon to exhort and pray with the people, in my visits from house to house; and in meetings my whole soul seemed drawn out for the salvation of souls.”<sup>28</sup> The salvific nature of Foote’s call is emphasized in her call narrative when she says, “but a desire to work for the Master, and to promote the glory of his kingdom in the salvation of souls, was food to my poor soul.”<sup>29</sup>

Salvation is paramount in Foote’s understanding of her ministerial purpose of being called to preach for the salvation of souls. The emphasis of salvation must be considered in light of Julia’s personal conversion experience at the age of fifteen, which is detailed in “Chapter VII: My Conversion” of her autobiography. This conversion occurred during a Sunday evening quarterly meeting where the minister preached from Revelation 14:3 – And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts and the elders, and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand which were redeemed from the earth. As the minister preached, something kept saying to Foote, “Such a sinner as you are can never sing that new song.”<sup>30</sup> Foote became unconscious and was carried home. People stayed with her all night, singing and praying. Someone kept saying, “Such a sinner as you are can never sing that new song.”<sup>31</sup> Foote thought God was sending her to hell. She cried out, “Lord, have mercy on

---

<sup>25</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

<sup>26</sup> Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 174.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>28</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

me, a poor sinner!”<sup>32</sup> Then, the voice stopped. The darkness grew light. Foote caught these words, “This is the new song—redeemed, redeemed!”<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, the sermonic introduction of Foote’s description of intercession and exhortation substantiates the significance of prayer in her life, not only as a preacher, but throughout her religious experiences as a child prior to receiving the divine commission. Prayer is a significant component of Foote’s first remembrance of any religious impression at the age of 8. During the beginning of “Chapter II: Religious Impressions—Learning the Alphabet,” Foote writes, “I do not remember having any distinct religious impressions until I was about eight years old.” Then Foote describes her interactions with the gray-haired minister who asks her if she prayed? Her mother spoke to her about her soul and re-iterated the importance of prayer by telling her, “if (she) were a good girl, and said (her) prayers, (she) would go to heaven.”<sup>34</sup> According to Foote, this gave her great comfort. After this incident, Foote records that a white woman who came to their house to sew taught her the Lord’s prayer. Foote states that, “No tongue can tell the joy that filled my poor heart when I could repeat, “Our Father, which art in heaven.”<sup>35</sup>

Foote’s personal conversion experiences as well as her understanding of her call to preach for the salvation of souls create the hermeneutical lens in which she interprets scripture and develops sermons. Based on the introduction to “A Threshing Sermon,” Julia A. J. Foote’s understands Micah 4:13 as a scripture about the salvation of God’s people. The introduction focuses on a sinner who is concerned about his soul. Foote responds to that sinner with an exhortation that interprets Micah 4:13 from the perspective of salvation. She uses a metaphor of threshing corn. Foote’s use of the metaphor of threshing corn being compared to that of sinners is an attempt to create a meaningful experiential encounter with the word by enabling identification with the word.<sup>36</sup>

First, Foote discusses threshing corn from the period in which the prophet Micah lived, 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. During this time, oxen threshed corn by tramping on the corn with their feet. According to Foote, iron and brass were placed on the oxen’s feet to improve efficiency. Then, Foote builds upon the metaphor by referencing threshing in contemporary terms by means of flails. She writes, “I am doing no injury to the sentiment of the text by changing a few of the terms into those which are the most familiar to us now.”<sup>37</sup> The contemporary image of threshing draws the hearers into the Biblical text by providing a familiar image for the hearers to envision. Foote notes that this text is about the “Gospel times” for preachers and all of God’s people who are commanded to arise and thresh.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>34</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>36</sup> Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration & Experience in Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 174.

Julia's description of those commanded to thresh parallels her image of herself as it relates to her call to preach. She writes of the threshers, "The Lord was desirous of imparting stability and perpetuity to his own divine work, by granting supernatural aid to the faithful that they might perform for him those services for which their own feeble and unassisted powers were totally inadequate."<sup>38</sup> With regards to her own call, Julia says, "Day by day I was more impressed that God would have me work in his vineyard. I thought it could not be that I was called to preach-I, so weak and ignorant."<sup>39</sup> For Foote, God grants God's people the ability to work in the vineyard despite the human insufficiencies to perform the tasks. Her theological understanding of herself mirrors her interpretation of God's people in the biblical text.

Julia characterizes the threshing flail as an offensive instrument given to the saints to thresh the devil out of sinners. In the sermon, this threshing flail is symbolic of the word of God. Foote says, "This (the threshing flail) is called the sword of the Spirit, and is in reality the word of God."<sup>40</sup> When the weapon strikes the unhumiliated soul, the consequences are great. Foote's language of weapons and swords conjures images of a war between God and the devil in which the threshing flail removes the devil out of sinners in order to destroy the devil's work.

Hermeneutically, this war between God and the devil could substantiate the wars between Jerusalem/Zion (God's people) and the other nations – those not with God. This would exhibit a comprehension of the scriptural historical context. The preceding scriptures discuss the nations coming against Israel, specifically Micah 4:11- But now many nations are gathered against you. They say, "Let her be defiled, let our eyes gloat over Zion!" Therefore, Foote's references of weaponry and battle language connects to the biblical context of Micah. However, Foote does not give much attention to the historical context of the biblical text with regards to Jerusalem, her enemies, the captivity, the exile, nor the pursuit of justice and peace for the nation. Foote's only historical reference is the threshing in 710 B.C to which scholars believe that Micah, the prophet, lived during the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Emphasis on the historical context invites the hearers to consider salvation on a communal level as a society. This allows the preacher to address the societal injustices within economic systems and governmental structures. However, Foote maintains the emphasis of salvation on a personal level, which creates a focus on personal piety of God's people. She writes, "it (the Gospel flail) causes the very heart to feel sore and painful. Penitent soul, receive the castigation, and you will feel, after it, like saying: "Now let me be crucified, and this work of the devil, inbred sin, put to death, that Christ may live and reign in me without a rival."<sup>41</sup> Foote's main idea is that the Gospel flail creates a repentant soul that separates from the devil and allows Christ to dwell in them for salvation. To that end, Julia closes the sermon with a question to the

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>39</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 65.

<sup>40</sup> Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 175.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 175.

reader. “Reader, have you this salvation-an ever-flowing fountain-in your soul? God grant it. Amen!”<sup>42</sup>

In this sermon, Foote makes an important transition from salvation to atonement. In the beginning, she focuses on threshing, which produces salvation. She explains what threshing is both physically in threshing corn and spiritually in threshing sinners. She details how we thresh physically with oxen tramping on the corn. And, lastly, Foote justifies the spiritual threshing for purposes of destroying the devil’s works and getting the devil out of sinners.

The transition to atonement begins with this statement, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil, and this is one of the weapons which he employs in the hands of his people to carry his gracious designs into execution.”<sup>43</sup> This sentence introduces the bridge between sinners and salvation which is Jesus Christ. Foote crosses that bridge sermonically when she writes, “the Regulator says: “They overcame by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto death.” The atonement is the greatest weapon.”<sup>44</sup> Once again Foote uses the word weapon to characterize a theological term.

Towards the end of the sermon, Foote reveals the fate of the influential man who was a sinner, that was presented to the reader in the introduction of the sermon. She says, “that the unconverted man, who gave me the text for the above discourse, gave his heart to God... In after years, I was informed of his happy death. Praise the Lord for full and free salvation!”<sup>45</sup> With these words, Julia ends the sermon with an emphasis of salvation, which is congruent with her call to preach the Gospel for the salvation of souls. The theological emphasis on salvation is apparent throughout the entire sermon from beginning to end.

Foote references two scriptures in this sermon, Joel 2:28-29 and Isaiah 23:18; 9:6-9. The reference of Joel 2:28-29 is as follows: “Yet it has a direct reference to all God’s people, who were and are commanded to arise and thresh. Glory to Jesus! now is this prophecy fulfilled-Joel 2:28 and 29.”<sup>46</sup> The inference is that the threshing of God’s people is fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy that says, “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days (NIV Joel 2:28-29). Foote’s reference of the biblical text Joel is used to justify her statements in the exhortations. Joel 2:28-29 “proves” Foote’s statement that Micah 4:13 refers to the Gospel times that is not limited to preachers, but for all of God’s people. As the people of the Lord arise and thresh, God is pouring out God’s spirit to men and women.

Foot references Isaiah 23:18, 9:6-9, in the following manner: “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil, and this is one of the weapons

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>46</sup> Martha J. Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 174.

which he employs in the hands of his people to carry his gracious designs into execution, together with the promise that they shall beat in pieces many people (Isaiah 23:18; 9:6-9).<sup>47</sup> Isaiah 23:18 states, “Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the Lord; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the Lord, for abundant food and fine clothes (NIV).” Isaiah 23:18 serves as a proof text in which Foote is using another biblical scripture to prove Micah 4:13 with regards to the ill-gotten gains and wealth.

Isaiah 9:6-9 says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this (NIV).” The Isaiah reference is used by Foote as a “footnote” that provides further details to her statement about the purpose of the Son of God to destroy the works of the devil. Here, Julia missed another opportunity to engage communal sin with regards to systematic oppression within governmental institutions. The Isaiah text opens the door to discuss larger, societal sins.

In conclusion, Julia A. J. Foote’s sermon “A Threshing Sermon” expounds upon Micah 4:13 from the simple words- arise and thresh. Julia ingeniously develops a sermon from those two words by characterizing who arises, what is threshed, and why? This is an excellent example of the black preaching tradition, particularly with Foote’s use of metaphor and symbolism as illustrations to teach the Gospel.

Not only is the sermon reflective of the black preaching tradition, it is also reflective of Foote’s holiness tradition, which heavily influenced her theological perspectives. Two key theological components in the holiness tradition are salvation and sanctification. In Foote’s autobiography, she details her salvation experience when she was redeemed by the Lord. Also, she references her sanctification experiences with Christ. Throughout her ministry, salvation and sanctification were two elements in which Foote taught and preached. For example, after moving to Boston and joining a church, in her first testimony Foote “told of (her) thorough and happy conversion, and of (her) sanctification as a second, distinct work of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>48</sup>

Julia Foote’s personal religious experiences heavily influence her hermeneutic lens of the biblical text. She interprets scripture based on her life experiences, including the experience of being converted and being called to preach the Gospel. Specifically, in this sermon, Foote interprets Micah 4:13 from the perspective of personal salvation, which negates the historical context of the book of Micah.

The book of Micah is not about personal salvation. Micah prophesies about oppression and injustices towards the poor during the 8<sup>th</sup> century when superpowers were emerging as world wars continued throughout nations. The Assyrians rose to power during this time. Also, “the reign of King Ahaz (735-715) was characterized by weakness, injustice, and corruption. His lack of faith in the Lord and his openness to paganism went against the national spirit of Judah.”<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>48</sup> Julia A. J. Foote, *A Brand Plucked From The Fire* (Cleveland, OH: W.F. Schneider, 1879), 53.

<sup>49</sup> Juan I. Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty: A Commentary on the Book of Micah* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1989), 5.

During King Hezekiah's reign from 715-687, Israel and Judah were strengthened economically via trade routes, but the poor continued to experience oppression. During the reigns of King Uzziah and King Jotham, land became a commodity for wealth. The poor became landless and powerless, but Micah became their voice.<sup>50</sup> Micah's voice is one of liberation from systemic oppression. He believes that God is on the side of the oppressed.

Specifically, chapter 4 of Micah speaks to the restoration of Israel as a promise of hope for God's people with eschatological interpretations of the "final glory". After the destruction of the temple, God's people are promised a future of justice, peace, and prosperity.<sup>51</sup> Micah envisions a world in which there is no war, only peace and security in the Lord. The nation experiences restoration through suffering in exile. This restoration represents a national salvation, rather than personal salvation of individuals. Micah engages the idea of salvation further in the book in chapter 7. "Salvation will come through a return to Israel's origins, to its humble and lowly beginnings, by laying aside the pride and injustice of Jerusalem."<sup>52</sup> Micah's prophecies of salvation are Micah 7:14-19.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this paper outlines the form and significance of Julia A.J. Foote's call narrative. The form of her call is as follows: preparation, divine commission, resistance, affirmation of the call, prayer, a supportive sisterhood, and acceptance. Each component offers insight into Foote's theological understanding, which influences her sermonic development. Through the close reading of "A Threshing Sermon," that uses the text Micah 4:13, I have argued that Foote's call narrative and other religious experiences impact her biblical interpretation of scripture. I have coined this hermeneutic lens as "the Call Narrative Hermeneutic," which is characterized using interpretation theory, personal experience, and close readings of call narratives. The Call Narrative Hermeneutic is a theo-rhetorical lens that informs African American women's views of God and challenges the ideology of the role of women in church and society. It establishes the voice of those who continue to fight for legitimacy by including their lens as one of many in the field of biblical hermeneutics.

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 8.

**OUT OF THE DEPTHS:  
A LITURGICAL-HISTORICAL APPROACH FOR INTERPRETING  
AND PREACHING PSALM 130**

**Garth E. Pauley, Ph.D., Professor of Communication  
Calvin University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, <https://calvin.edu>  
Copyright © 2019 Garth E. Pauley**

ABSTRACT: Reading a biblical text in light of its multiple liturgical contexts *and* its various historical contexts can open new possibilities for preaching. This is especially true for the Psalms, many of which were composed as and functioned as responses to Israel’s historical and liturgical needs. Interpreting Psalm 130 in a liturgical-historical way reveals new meanings to be preached for contemporary listeners—meanings that are fresh and relevant while remaining faithful to the text and its multiple historical contexts and liturgical contexts. The essay presents a case study of Psalm 130, but its approach can be applied fruitfully to other Psalms and to other texts from the Hebrew Bible.

Psalm 130 is best-known as one of the seven penitential psalms, which have had a special place in Christian worship for centuries. For instance, the penitential dimension of the psalm has been emphasized in sacred choral music since the Middle Ages. Numerous *De Profundis* (“from the depths”) motets based on Ps 130 were composed during the Renaissance, including brilliant versions by Josquin Despres, Orlando di Lasso, and Andrea Gabrieli. The Baroque composer J.S. Bach’s cantata *Aus der Tiefe* (“out of the depths”) is based on the psalm and was composed for a penitential service during the Lutheran church year. In addition, the contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt’s *De Profundis* has become a common penitential anthem in Anglican and Episcopal worship services during Lent. This Lenten function of Ps 130 is reinforced in the Revised Common Lectionary, as it is the psalm reading for the fifth Sunday in Lent—Year A. These musical and liturgical appropriations point to one faithful interpretation of Ps 130 for Christians: We must acknowledge our sorry state and repent in order to truly hear the good news of redemption that is available to us in Jesus Christ.

But Ps 130 appears elsewhere in the lectionary, too, suggesting other meanings and functions for Christian worship. For instance, it is the psalm reading for the sixth and twelfth Sundays after Pentecost in Year B. The companion Old Testament readings for both Sundays call attention to the lament function of Ps 130, and in those two liturgical contexts “the depths” becomes an image for a situation of deep despair brought on by tragic life events. A faithful interpretation of the psalm for these two Sundays would emphasize that when the brokenness of our world reduces us to despair, we must remember our utter dependence on God and remember God’s love and redeeming intentions toward us.

Ps 130 appears once more in Year B, though, as an alternate psalm reading for the third Sunday after Pentecost. Considering the psalm in this liturgical context and in its original historical context suggests yet another faithful interpretation—but an unusual one. First, reading Ps 130 in conjunction with the gospel lesson and first Old Testament reading for the third Sunday

in ordinary time (Year B) is a valuable heuristic technique. It directs attention to the fact that many biblical texts point to the corrupting influence of Ancient Near Eastern traditions on Judaism. In Mark 3:22, the scribes associate Jesus with the Semitic deity Baal-Zebul (suggesting that Jews in the crowd were influenced by ANE religious thought to some extent), and in 1 Sam 8 the Israelites demand a king so they can be like other nations—which the Lord himself likens to Israel forsaking him and worshipping the gods of the other nations. Second, reading Ps 130 with this historical concern (i.e., the corrupting influence of ANE traditions) in mind is a valuable heuristic technique, too. Namely, it directs attention to the fact that many of the psalms were written during periods when the Israelites were especially susceptible to the influence of ANE religions. These liturgical and historical contexts suggest the following interpretation of Ps 130: Calling on the Lord from the depths—knowing that he is inclined toward his people, that he is the God of forgiveness and redemption—gives us hope that is unavailable to the people of “the other nations.”

The hermeneutic for Ps 130 I am suggesting here has several benefits for preaching and teaching. It is an interpretation useful for preaching and teaching Psalm 130 to a congregation well-versed in the bible whose members already have heard sermons emphasizing the penitential and lament-related functions of the psalm. It is an interpretation that addresses the church as a whole (rather than addressing Christians only as individuals). It is an interpretation that is relevant to the church’s current cultural context, even though the similarities between the world of the text and today’s world are not immediately apparent. Finally, it is an unconventional interpretation, which therefore might attract listeners’ attention.

The first feature of Ps 130 that suggests reading, preaching, and teaching it relative to the context of ANE religions is its location in the psalter. Ps 130 is one of the Songs of Ascent: fifteen psalms (Ps 120 to 134) composed during the time of the Babylonian exile or the period after the exile, depending on the psalm. These psalms address timely concerns like: the return from the exile; the re-establishment of the Jewish community in Judea; the importance of Jerusalem, Zion, and the temple; and the future of the dynasty of King David. As part of Israel’s worship, these psalms served an important function as pilgrimage songs—either for the return pilgrimage from Babylon to Judea or for a religious pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one of the major Jewish festivals, once the Israelites were back home. Ps 130 itself is dated to the time after the exile, to the Jewish community in Judea during the late-6th century BCE. Like the other biblical literature from this time, it demonstrates a heightened awareness of sin and of a need for God’s forgiveness. And a few of the Hebrew words used in the psalm are distinctive to late (that is, after-the-exile) Hebrew. Ps 130 functions wonderfully as a pilgrimage psalm. It builds anticipation to hear God’s word as part of the religious festival, and it builds anticipation to experience God’s presence in a special way at the temple.

This is not the only function Ps 130 aimed to serve, however. During the period after the exile, Israel’s religious leaders were determined to promote exclusive worship of YHWH: a faith unadulterated by the other so-called gods and goddesses of the ANE. Israel was back home in Judea, but its people were—essentially—resident aliens in the land, surrounded by people with different religious beliefs and practices. This was cause for concern, as Israel’s track record in resisting the temptation of the Canaanite deities was unimpressive. In addition, the Jewish community had just spent a half-century or more in Babylon. Given their history of apostasy and

idolatry, it is difficult to imagine that they had not succumbed to the influence of Babylonian religion. Israel had a bad religious habit, and its spiritual leaders needed to find a solution. The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, describe part of that program, and the exhortations of the prophets represent another. But the psalms were part of the solution, too. Specifically, Ps 130 functions as a kind of theological and liturgical polemic. The psalm seeks to remind Israel who their God is and that their situation is hopeless without him. Moreover, it aims to commit the people to the right kind of relationship with their God, YHWH.

As part of its polemic, Ps 130 presents a subtle, indirect rejection of a god who resembles the gods of Israel's neighbors. It presents an understanding of one's self in relation to God that is very different from the ANE religions that the Israelites encountered. For instance, the primary impulse in ANE religions was appeasement. People sought to serve the gods by providing for their needs, so that the gods might protect them and assist them. They did not seek the gods to have a meaningful relationship but rather for good fortune and freedom from harm. Theirs were not gods to be loved or even liked; one only sought them when you needed help. When people sought deliverance from their gods, it was from afflictions in this world, not a deeper spiritual malaise. And the idea of seeking redemption did not make sense, because sin—as a turning away from the divine way and the deity's broader purpose for humanity—was not a part of ANE religions. Finally, people tended to view their gods as distant and capricious. In general, they did not want the gods to take much notice of them, because the result usually was some type of condemnation or affliction.

During a time when Israel was susceptible to the influence of these ANE religions, Ps 130 called the Jews in Judea to maintain a religious posture that was distinct from the posture of its neighbors. The psalm was part of a religious program that aimed to shore up their faith in YHWH. If reciting or singing the psalm solidified the Israelites' understanding of the Lord's enduring righteousness, their reverence for him, and their hope in him (a posture that would have been foreign to Israel's neighbors) then the psalmist would have succeeded. The psalm would have functioned to help preserve the Israelites' religious inheritance and recommit them to it. How does, exactly, does the psalm work in this way?

First, Ps 130 communicates that when one is in the depths, it is acceptable to call on the Lord. If Israel's faith had become corrupted by ANE religions, people wouldn't have called on God in a state of deep despair and need. They would have called on god with a quid pro quo proposal: I will address your needs, and you will address mine. But the psalm reveals that the Lord, our God, is waiting to hear the cry of his people and invites their lament. They should call on God *because of* their sin and malaise. Indeed, the people of God should want to engage him in a conversation when they find themselves in a sorry state.

Ps 130 also emphasizes that God forgives. Whereas ANE religious rituals sought to appease the gods, this psalm announces that YHWH is not interested in appeasement—rather, he is interested in forgiveness. As v.4 suggests, it is *with him*; it is God's constant companion. Wherever God is, so is the opportunity for forgiveness. Moreover, Ps 130 suggests there is a deep purpose to God's forgiveness. God does not merely forget the misdeeds of his people or look the other way so they can enjoy prosperity and happiness. Instead, God forgives his people in order to bring them into a right relationship with him—as the psalmist puts it, so that he will

be feared. That is, God's mercy will lead his people respond to with worship, obedience, reverence, awe, and—above all—with love.

In addition, Ps 130 gives his people a strong reason to have hope. They have hope because YHWH is not capricious like the deities of the ANE. He listens attentively. He answers. He speaks to his people still. Like the psalmist, God's people should be hanging on his word of forgiveness and instruction—hopeful and anxious to receive it. The people of God wait in hope because of God's steadfast kindness and his covenantal love that endures forever. In v.7, the psalmist states that steadfast kindness—like forgiveness—is “with him,” “with the Lord.” The psalmist declares that great redemption is with God, too. Steadfast kindness and redemption are God's constant companions. For this reason, God's people can count on him and have hope in him. Their fear of the Lord is based on YHWH's amazing character, whereas the fear of ANE gods was based on sheer terror.

Finally, Ps 130 ends with a declaration that also functions as a promise: God will redeem his people from all their iniquities. This promise reveals the Lord to be loving and righteous in way that is incompatible with ANE religions. Surprisingly, this promise seems to exceed the boundaries of late-6th century BCE Judaism, too, as v.8 is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the verb *redeem* is linked with the object *sin*, or *iniquity*. Normally, sins are *atoned for* or *covered* through rituals, especially ritual sacrifices. And *redemption* usually means *physical redemption*. But Ps 130 suggests that God's plan is more expansive, that God has an overarching plan for saving his people from all their sins—a plan that works independently from any human agency. The promise of the psalm is a little vague, to be sure. Ps 130 does not say when or exactly how this great, complete redemption will happen. That the psalm is little vague on the details is not surprising, though. Indeed, the ambiguity of the promise in v.8 probably is strategic. After all, this psalm aims to draw the people of God together to watch and to wait, with hope. In other words, it seeks to cultivate authentic faith in the Lord in a cultural context where counterfeit gods tempted the people of YHWH.

Surprisingly, there are significant similarities between the challenges of maintaining the faith in post-exilic Judea and in contemporary America. Many of the features of ANE religions that Ps 130 implicitly rails against can be seen in contemporary American Christianity. Therefore, the polemic of Ps 130 applies to the challenges facing the body of believers today. Recent sociological research suggests American Christianity may be on the verge of becoming a faith that has little to do with sin, repentance, or redemption; with loving and serving a God who loves you; with being transformed by the spirit of God; with hope based on God's faithfulness; with being part of a religious community in which God has a special interest; with receiving and depending on God's transforming word.

Therefore, just as the Israelites had an obligation to preserve their religious inheritance during the time after the exile, so do Christians, in contemporary times. Indeed, how much greater might our obligation be, given that we know the good news of Jesus Christ, our redeemer? A sermon rooted in the hermeneutic I have been suggested is valuable, because Christians must hear and hold fast to the promises of redemption expressed in Ps 130. The psalm's redeeming plan must have seemed vague to late-6th century BCE Jews; but for Christians, it seems clear that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the promise expressed in the psalm. God's overarching plan for redemption was initiated in Christ's ministry, death, and

resurrection—and will be completed when he comes again. It is no wonder, then, that Martin Luther called Ps 130 a “proper master and doctor of scripture”—that is, a clear and succinct expression of the gospel. A sermon or bible lesson based on Ps 130 can effectively lead Christians to call on God and listen for his word. It can lead Christians to cling to the Lord and resist the temptations of counterfeit faith. And it can lead Christians to join the psalmist and the whole congregation of believers in watching and waiting—with yearning and with hope—for the complete fulfillment of God’s great redeeming plan.

## Bibliography

- Brown, William P. *Psalms*. Interpreting Biblical Texts. Nashville: Abingdon, 2010.
- Brueggemann, Walter and William H. Bellinger Jr. *Psalms*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Davidson, Robert. *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers in Telling the American Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- deClaisse-Walford, Nancy, Rolf A. Jacobson and Beth LaNeel Tanner. *The Book of Psalms*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.
- Goldingay, John. *Psalms*, vol. 3. Baker Commentary on Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Grogan, Geoffrey W. *Psalms*. Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Jacobson, Rolf A. and Karl N. Jacobson. *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.
- Mays, James L. *Psalms*. Interpretation. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.
- McCann, J. Clinton Jr. *A Theological Introduction to the Psalms: The Psalms as Torah*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.
- Miller, Patrick D. "Psalm 130." *Interpretation* 33 (1979): 176-81.
- Niditch, Susan. *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo Babylonian and Persian Periods*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.
- Schneider, Tammi J. *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.
- Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Waltke, Bruce K., James M. Houston, and Erika Moore. *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

**SERVANT SONG SERMONS:  
SECOND ISAIAH AS PREACHER AND HOMILETICAL GUIDE**

**David Stark, Instructor of Homiletics  
University of the South, School of Theology, Sewanee, TN**

**<http://theology.sewanee.edu/seminary/>**

**Copyright © 2019 David Stark**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper interprets Isaiah’s Servant Songs with a homiletical lens. Surveying rhetorical analysis of Isaiah 40-55, it explores the degree to which Second Isaiah’s genre can be understood as a form of preaching. It then examines Isaiah 42:1-9 as a homiletical test case that provides a different (rhetorical) frame for open exegetical questions, highlights alternative models for preaching older testament texts, and unmasks the preacher’s response to contexts of domination. Each of these insights offer guidance for interpreting the text and for OT preaching today.

In “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast,” Susanne Scholz argues that too often our hermeneutics ignore the biblical text’s connection to contemporary suffering.<sup>1</sup> She counters this hermeneutic with an approach that “fosters analysis of the various interpretation histories of biblical literature,” highlights “the historical, theological, political, and ideological implications of biblical exegesis in the world,” “exposes interpretations...as ideological constructs,” and seeks to foster an “appreciation for textual fluidity, multiplicity, and ‘creolization.’”<sup>2</sup> Scholz points to something that sounds similar to work that a good preacher might do—exegeting a text, analyzing something of its history of interpretation, appreciating the ways in which the text’s language and voice(s) come in contact with voices and language today, and looking for theological/political/ideological implications for a contemporary audience.

To highlight this shift, consider the interpretation of Isaiah’s Servant Songs.<sup>3</sup> These texts—perhaps more than others—bear the imprint of traditional biblical hermeneutics. Historical-criticism marks them as separate from their context and relegates reflection on suffering to

---

<sup>1</sup> “I posit that the internal violence experienced by so many people—women, men, and children—is aided and abetted by the biblical hermeneutics dominantly practiced in the United States. Mainstream Bible scholarship does not make connections to internal US-American violence; it is silent about it, sometimes even endorsing it. In fact, it is grounded in exegetical methods and reading strategies that distance biblical meanings from the various forms of violence plaguing the country, be it poverty, the death penalty, police brutality, or sexual violence. The resulting complicity with violence within US-American society instructs the public that the Bible, correctly read, is removed from the hurt, suffering, and pain in people’s lives” (Susanne Scholz, “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast: About the Politics of Biblical Hermeneutics within the United States of America”, 137—161 in *La Violencia and the Hebrew Bible: The Politics and Histories of Biblical Hermeneutics on the American Continent*. Susanne Scholz and Pablo Andiañach, eds. Semia Studies No. 82 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 139).

<sup>2</sup> Scholz 156-7.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, “Songs” is not a generic assessment. Rather “Songs” or “Servant Songs” refer to the well-known passages marked off by Bernhard Duhm from parts of Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 53. I agree with John Goldingay’s and David Payne’s assessment of Isa 49:1-6, which may be extended to all of the “Songs”: such a passage “might be described as a poem and/or autobiographical narrative and/or a testimony. It is not a song” (John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*. Volume II. New York: T&T Clark, 2006, 155.

Babylonian and Persian periods of domination. Christological readings of the Songs also ignore the surrounding Isaian context while focusing reflection on suffering to the experience of Jesus. The problem here is not with historical examination and theological reflection, per se. The problem is that such endeavors alone have not enabled the Church to think critically and speak clearly about the suffering of people in the contemporary world. Indeed, too frequently our historical and theological study enables suffering and domination.

This paper asks, what if we read scripture, and specifically Isaiah's Servant Songs, with a homiletical lens? Of course, interpreting the Songs as sermons does not eschew hermeneutics that engage historical<sup>4</sup> and theological<sup>5</sup> scholarship. Rather, this lens adds to these traditional sources an inquiry about how these texts speak to congregations then and now. Such an approach highlights Second Isaiah's preaching in the "Belly of the Beast" and may contribute to unmasking contemporary hermeneutical bias.

Dale Andrews once argued that more preachers need to learn to preach like Second Isaiah.<sup>6</sup> By employing a homiletic hermeneutic, I assert not only that these Songs can be understood as some form of preaching,<sup>7</sup> but that they can helpfully instruct OT preaching today. Since space does not allow full engagement with all four of the traditionally demarcated texts, this paper examines the first Servant Song (Isa 42:1-4 (5-9)) as a homiletical test case. Here, reading the Song as a sermon provides a different (rhetorical) frame for open exegetical questions, highlights models for preaching older testament texts, and unmasks the preacher's response to contexts of domination. Each of these insights helpfully guide OT preaching today.

---

<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, historical-critical analysis has delivered new insights into the workings of Isaiah while also obscuring the workings of Isaiah—especially when it comes to the Servant's identity. Thus, Shalom Paul implies that historical-criticism obfuscates: "Commentators are divided as to the identity of the servant in the four prophecies referred to as the 'Servant Songs,' ever since they were first isolated by Duhm in 1892.... In the rest of Deutero-Isaiah's early prophecies... there is unanimity regarding the identification of the servant as the nation in its entirety" (*Isaiah 40–66*. Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 18). Patricia Tull is more direct in her assessment: "The relationship between Israel and the servant was obscured for decades by Bernhard Duhm's theory of four servant songs in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53, discontinuous with their contexts" ("Isaiah" 255-266 in *Women's Bible Commentary*. Third Edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 263).

<sup>5</sup> The impact of Christian messianism on these passages is equally striking. In the Revised Common Lectionary, Isaiah 42 is read on the Baptism of the Lord, Epiphany, Year A. Isaiah 49 is read a week later, also in Year A. Isa 50 is read in the Liturgy of the Passion and on Wednesday of Holy Week in all three years. And, Isaiah 52-53 is read on Good Friday every year. Such a reading practice in the Church creates the impression that the Songs, and Isaiah as a whole, are primarily focused on Jesus. Thus scholars like James Luther Mays can opine about Isaiah in ways that point as much to (later) christology as to textual evidence within Isaiah: "Simply put, Adonai is sovereign; there is a city of God; and there is a son of God" (James Luther Mays, "Isaiah's Royal Theology and the Messiah" 39-51 in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*. Christopher Seitz, ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 39-40).

<sup>6</sup> Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology in the Black Church: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 124. Andrews speaks here specifically of Second Isaiah as a "hearer-response" preaching that reimagines older texts in light of contemporary experiences of suffering.

<sup>7</sup> Understood homiletically, the Servant in Second Isaiah's Songs can be seen to experience systemic injustice, economic depression, cultural disgrace, and theological abuse. In response, the Servant figure delivers "The word not heard in the street" (Isa 42:2b), has "A mouth like a sharp sword" (Isa 49:2a), speaks with the "Tongue of a teacher" (Isa 50:4a), and becomes "The startler of many nations" (Isa 52:15a). These passages offer a word in response to imperial domination. Further, homiletical reflection upon them can help uncover forces of domination within our own hermeneutics.

## Second Isaiah as Preaching

While I claim only that the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah *can be* read homiletically as words responding to various forms of domination, it should be noted that Second Isaiah's prologue begins with a call for multiple voices (plural imperative) to cry out or preach (*qara* in Hebrew, *predigt* in German, 40:1-2). This call is followed by a voice crying out in the wilderness (*qara* 40:3-5), a discussion about what to cry out (*qara* 40:6-8), and a call for a feminine herald to declare good news (*mevasheret*) from the mountaintop (40:9-11). Perhaps guided by this homiletically-centered prologue, many biblical scholars have begun to reflect on Second Isaiah's genre as a form of preaching.

For instance, in her summary of developments within the history of Isaiah scholarship, Patricia Tull notes that Second Isaiah has been treated as a collection of voices describing God,<sup>8</sup> that recontextualizes older texts,<sup>9</sup> seeks to expand meaning,<sup>10</sup> engages in conversation and debate,<sup>11</sup> learns from tradition,<sup>12</sup> and speaks "a word in season."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many scholars see in Second Isaiah marks of homiletic work.<sup>14</sup> Claus Westermann speaks of "Deutero-Isaiah's preaching" of "his gospel" and "proclaiming God's word."<sup>15</sup> R.F. Melugin argues that Isaiah

---

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Tull, "One Book, Many Voices: Conceiving Of Isaiah's Polyphonic Message" 279-314 in *As Those Who Are Taught: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL*. Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds. Society of Biblical Literature, 2006. Specifically Tull notes that the scholars of the Isaiah Seminar at the Society of Biblical Literature agreed broadly that the book of Isaiah is a sustained effort "to describe God's dealings with Jerusalem over the course of several centuries" (290, *emphasis added*).

<sup>9</sup> The book of Isaiah grew and took its final form as a result of "*Reinterpretation and recontextualization of the prophet's words for generations beyond his horizon*" (Tull, "One Book, Many Voices", 291, *emphasis added*).

<sup>10</sup> "Rabbinic Bibles presenting the Scriptures in the center of the page surrounded by commentary declare visually this expansion around the text that began with Isaiah's transmitters" (Tull, "One Book, Many Voices", 294).

<sup>11</sup> Here Tull notes that scholars, like Benjamin Sommer, portray Isaiah as "*a record of debate, of conversation, of revision within tradition*;" others, like Claire Mathews, assert that Isaiah is "*the product of a multiplicity of voices adding, generation by generation, to an original body of 'authentic' Isaianic prophecy, as that prophecy was reactualized, supplemented, and reinterpreted ... a kind of prophetic chorus—and sometimes cacophony*" (Tull, "One Book, Many Voices", 312, *emphasis added*).

<sup>12</sup> Tull's own view on Second Isaiah, and especially Isa 49-55, is that the prophet engages traditions from Jeremiah, Lamentations, Nahum, several Zion psalms, and First Isaiah (Tull, "One Book, Many Voices", 304-5).

<sup>13</sup> For Tull, Second Isaiah and its interpreters exemplify "the ongoing rhythm described by the prophet, of hearing and teaching, of listening in order to speak a word in season" (Tull, "One Book, Many Voices", 314).

<sup>14</sup> This understanding of Isaiah as preacher likely began in the NT period. In his study of Paul's use of Isaiah in Romans 9—11, Ross Wagner demonstrates that Isaiah's insights and images shape Paul's rhetoric. Even for something as important as Jewish and Christian relation to God, Paul will turn to the branches and roots of Isaiah's tree imagery (Rom 11:16b-24). These observations lead Wagner to conclude that "Paul finds in Isaiah a fellow preacher of the gospel. . . a veiled prefiguration of his own mission to proclaim the good news" (Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul <In Concert> in the Letter to the Romans*. London: Brill, 2002, 356).

<sup>15</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*. The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 14, 21.

40-55 “is a collection of originally independent units, but the arrangement is kerygmatic.”<sup>16</sup>

Klaus Baltazar reflects on Deutero-Isaiah as “liturgical drama” set within “the act of worship.”<sup>17</sup>

Shalom Paul’s description of Isaiah’s rhetoric also sounds like a description of preaching. He observes “the repetition of words for emphatic purpose,”<sup>18</sup> the use of “rhetorical questions,”<sup>19</sup> “the employment of triads for the purposes of accentuation” and “insertion of quotations” often as dialogue.<sup>20</sup> He describes further elements of proclamation, including multiple examples of assonance and alliteration,<sup>21</sup> the use of leitmotifs, and “the repetition of words and expressions.”<sup>22</sup> He finds poetic articulations of synonymous phrases and parallelisms and the engagement with many different literary genres, including: hymns, polemics, poems, words of consolation, rebuke, mock court scenes, eschatological tropes, and Servant Songs among others.<sup>23</sup> For all these reasons, Paul argues that the witnesses in Isaiah 40—66 demonstrate “a proclivity for words, expressions, and phrases.”<sup>24</sup>

Joseph Blenkinsopp argues this point even further. He asserts that “One could find in these chapters [Isa 40-55] examples of practically all of the numerous types [of rhetoric] catalogued in books 8 and 9 of Quintilian’s classic *Institutio Oratoria*.”<sup>25</sup> Far from merely acknowledging good rhetoric employed within a written manuscript, Blenkinsopp offers a generic assessment of his findings. He holds that Isaiah 40–55 “stood at the oral end of the orality-literacy continuum.”<sup>26</sup> These chapters point to an orator, trained in public speaking.<sup>27</sup> They participate in a homiletic tradition that arises following the fall of Jerusalem and continued through the early years Persian rule.<sup>28</sup> Their peers include a group of “public speakers, or preachers”<sup>29</sup> whose proclamation is documented in parts of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomic

---

<sup>16</sup> R.F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40-55*, BZAW 141 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976) 175, cited in Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011) 32.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*. Hermenia. Translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 22. John Wilks is not convinced of Second Isaiah’s focus on liturgical drama. He argues that the textual evidence suggests, at best, that Second Isaiah was an “incompetent dramatist;” however, Wilks finds ample evidence of Second Isaiah was a poet (John Wilks, “The Prophet as Incompetent Dramatist” *Vetus Testamentum* Vol 53 no. 4 (2003):530-543, 542).

<sup>18</sup> Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40-66: Translation and Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40—55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible, (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 63-4.

<sup>26</sup> Blenkinsopp 64.

<sup>27</sup> “there is enough prosodic indeterminacy in these chapters to justify speaking of their author as orator rather than poet. . . The orator, trained in an elevated, declamatory style of public speaking, makes use of as wide a range of linguistic resources as the poet” (Blenkinsopp 68).

<sup>28</sup> Blenkinsopp 53.

<sup>29</sup> Blenkinsopp 66.

strand in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and parts of Zechariah.<sup>30</sup> Blenkinsopp asserts further that the context of Isaiah 40-55 should be understood as a place of preaching, “perhaps an inchoate synagogue network of some kind—in which this activity was going on.”<sup>31</sup> He points to similar preaching settings for correlative works.<sup>32</sup> Taken together, these observations about Second Isaiah’s rhetoric, form, peers, and context lead Blenkinsopp to conclude: “The core of 40-55 may then properly be described as a rhetorical composition and its author as an orator or preacher.”<sup>33</sup>

All these observations do not prove that Second Isaiah is a form of preaching. Definitive evidence of oral communication from a marginalized group in the late Babylonian/early Persian period may always remain elusive. Nevertheless, these rhetorical studies show that there is enough support for reading Second Isaiah homiletically. The question then remains, How does a homiletical lens affect the interpretation of these chapters?

Importantly, if Isaiah 40-55 can be understood as preaching, then the Servant Songs become not just influential texts within Jewish and Christian traditions, but snapshots of exemplary preaching moments that are worthy of further homiletic reflection.<sup>34</sup> These Songs preach and can shape the way we think about preaching the older testament in contexts of domination today.

### **Preaching in Isaiah 42:1-4 (5-9)**

Reading the first Servant Song homiletically affects the interpretation of the text in at least three ways. *First, it offers a different perspective on many of the exegetical issues with which interpreters often wrestle.* Rather than seeking to solve the text, a homiletical approach looks what might be the impact of the text’s open-ended rhetoric. This Song’s poetic, flexible, and imaginative language refuses to be pinned down.<sup>35</sup> This polyvalence is not mere ornamentation but, when framed as a preacher’s work with a congregation, becomes a strategy for engaging multiple listeners and perspectives. To capture this dynamic, we might ask, Who is

---

<sup>30</sup> Blenkinsopp 53.

<sup>31</sup> Blenkinsopp 53.

<sup>32</sup> Here he proposes a context for Isa 40–55 like “the elders gathering in Ezekiel’s house (Ezek 8:1; 14:1; 20:1) and the religious center at Casiphia in southern Mesopotamia (Ezra 8:15-20)...a kind of clergy training center...where religious learning and training went on” (Blenkinsopp 64-5).

<sup>33</sup> Blenkinsopp 69.

<sup>34</sup> For more on the homiletic nature of the Songs see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Carolyn Sharp, “The Prophets and Homiletics” 627-651 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, Carolyn Sharp, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016) and Arvid Kapelrud, who expounds upon the idea that Second Isaiah “preached at the end of the Exile” (Kapelrud, “The Main Concern of Second Isaiah” *Vetus Testamentum* XXXII, 1 (1982): 50).

<sup>35</sup> Of course, poetic-prophetic preaching is not a new homiletical insight, for instance see Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*; Cleo LaRue, *I Believe I’ll Testify* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2011), especially LaRue’s chapters “Imagination and the Exegetical Exercise” and “Why Black Preachers Still Love Artful Language.” See also, Zachary Guiliano, *Preaching and the Theological Imagination*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2015); Kate Bruce, *Igniting the Heart: Preaching and Imagination*. (London: SCM Press, 2015). Linda Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching*. (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2003); and Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination*. (New York: Continuum, 1997). Still, its application as an interpretative lens in Second Isaiah opens up new possibilities, namely, that the author may intend to hold open their proclamation as a homiletic strategy for navigating domination and engaging a broad range of listeners and perspectives.

the servant in Isa 42:1? On the one hand, the servant was just described in Isa 41:8-9 as the people of Israel.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, many commentators hold that the language here refers to Cyrus and may evoke language from royal inscriptions about ancient kings.<sup>37</sup> Of course, this passage is also addressed to an audience that could identify themselves with the servant. Homiletically, the preacher in Isa 42 leaves the referent open to the hearer's interpretation. So, Cyrus and his supporters might hear affirmation of his rule, thus protecting the preacher/people. At the same time, exiled Israel, as an oppressed people,<sup>38</sup> might hear this word as a royal panegyric spoken over them, thus inverting the expected hierarchy. The effect of both interpretations is that the hearer is invited to join in God's work of return from exile.

A similar polyvalent, poetic dynamic lies behind other questions we might ask of this text: Is it YHWH's covenant in Isa 42:6 that is enacted by Cyrus, Cyrus's covenant that aligns with YHWH's, or perhaps YHWH's covenant that the people will help enact more fully? Is justice in Isa 42:1, 3 a Persian policy change or is it liberation from Babylonian and Persian control? Is the spirit's work in Isa 42:1, 5 creative, destructive, or liberative? Is the problem with idols in Isa 42:8 a reference to Nabonidus's reforms, to Cyrus's restoration of the gods, or to the power idols are granted in general? Is the preacher's audience a group of Jewish exiles, an individual prophet, or representatives of Cyrus? In all cases the best answer might be, simply, "yes."

Shoehorning Isaiah 42:1-9 into one meaning sacrifices the depth of this Song's rhetoric and the breadth of its impact upon an audience. Forcing one take above all others flattens out the preacher's words and saps them of their poetic potency as a resource for reflection. At the same time, this brief look at Isa 42 shows that polyvalent poetic-prophetic preaching is not the same as rambling, unfocused proclamation. What the preacher does in this Song is lead the hearer to reflect on what it means to be a part of God's work in subverting systemic injustice.

---

<sup>36</sup> Jacob Stromberg notes that other linguistic connections between these two passages suggest that Isa 42:1-4 developed with an awareness of the servant material in Isa 41. He writes, "42.1-4 (which was considered secondary) is clearly related to 41.8-10 (which was not). In both, one finds reference made to the 'servant' and 'chosen one' whom God will 'uphold' (*tmk*)—a verb occurring only one further time in the book where the connection is quite different (33.15)" (Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 33).

<sup>37</sup> Paul asserts that there may be a parallel in Isa 42:1 with Akkadian royal inscriptions that single out the king as the god's "beloved one" and "favored one" (Paul 185). In this light, a third appellation, the one "in whom my soul delights," could also be seen as evoking the Akkadian trope of divine favor for a leader. Such connections would put the servant in the place of a king. For this reason, Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests that "servant" here is a reference to Cyrus (compare 45:1), though he admits, "Much of what is said in these verses could also be said of Israel" (Blenkinsopp 211).

<sup>38</sup> David Reimer points to Norman Gottwald's work highlighting how Cyrus' policy of return was a "colonial situation" wherein a "ruling elite" were " beholden to the empire whose expectation was that the colony would be 'politically pacified and economically profitable'" (Reimer, "Isaiah and Politics" 84-103 in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*. David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009) 101.

*Second, reading this Song homiletically offers a distinct model for preaching Old Testament texts.* In chapter 42, the preacher engages the older parts of her scriptural tradition.<sup>39</sup> This engagement with the older testament notably does not participate in many of the ways that Christians have preached the Old Testament.<sup>40</sup> Instead, the preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of scripture as that which speaks into the present moment. Here, the preacher has God preach words of scripture to the congregation:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen...he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens...  
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness...  
I have given you as a covenant to the people...  
I am the LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. (Isa 42:1, 5, 6, 8).

Here the preaching references YHWH three times in five verses (5, 6, 8) while twice employing the expression first introduced in Exodus: “I am YHWH” (6, 8). There are clear connections of YHWH’s name with covenant, liberation, torah,<sup>41</sup> and return. Further, the verb “to bring forth” (*ys*’), which describes the task of the servant three times (42:1, 3, 7), is also the verb “used to describe the deliverance from Egypt.”<sup>42</sup> Along with these connections with the book of Exodus, the preaching of Second Isaiah develops subtle exodus nuances around the phrase, “I am

---

<sup>39</sup> Though if John Van Seters is correct, much of the biblical material that Isaiah cites is a newer version of older material: “the Yahwist and Second Isaiah were contemporaries, living among the exiles in Babylonia and very likely in very close contact with each other....When the two works are read in tandem, with the Yahwist providing the “biblical” text as a basis for much of the prophet’s message, this gives us remarkable insight into the new world of the diaspora community in Babylonia and the radical reshaping of their religion within a wider world view. Under the influence of the Babylonian universalistic religion of Marduk, the creator deity, or Nabonidus’s supreme deity, the god Sin, both Second Isaiah and the Yahwist present their deity YHWH not just as a national god but as creator of heaven and earth and the God of all humanity. Such a religion is not under the control of a priesthood or temple in a particular place, and neither author makes any mention of priests or the Jerusalem Temple 40. The form of worship of YHWH used by the patriarchs may be practiced in any place and is open to all without restriction” (John Van Seters, “Dating the Yahwist’s History: Principles and Perspectives” *Biblica* 96.1 (2015): 1-25, 24).

<sup>40</sup> The preacher here does not search for a sermon theme or concept. There is no allegorizing of an older text. If there is a typological reading, it is rooted in a shared experience of oppression in a foreign land. The preacher does not develop a promise and fulfillment schema here. The preacher’s look at the history of salvation is neither linear nor developing from lesser to greater. The older testament does not become a source of proof-texting for arguing a point. The preacher offers more here than an inductive, re-narration of scripture. Nor is there a 4-fold heuristic applied to an older text.

<sup>41</sup> Compare Leviticus 19, which has God saying, “I am YHWH,” after nearly every law (fifteen times in all).

<sup>42</sup> S. D. Snyman, “A Structural-Historical Exegesis of Isaiah 1-9,” 250-260 in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*. David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downer’s Grove: IVP Academic, 2009) 258.

YHWH.”<sup>43</sup> Taken together these exodus connections remind Jewish exiles that their liberator was not Pharaoh and it will not be Cyrus. God’s “I,” which appears eight times in this sermon, allows there to be focus on only one liberator.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, it is God who will overthrow oppressors, end domination systems, renew covenant, and lead God’s people to freedom and abundance.

As a part of the effort to have scriptural language speak today, the Isaian preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. The God of the exodus says repeatedly to the congregation, “I am YHWH.” Here the God of the older testament is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the one who gave breath, gives breath. The one who liberated slaves, liberates exiles. In the preaching of Isaiah 42:1-9, God’s nature and work are consistent—they do not change. What God has done in the past, God is doing now, and God will do more fully in the future. And, the preacher leads the congregation to hear and to speak this reality of God’s nature.<sup>45</sup>

*Finally, reading this Song homiletically highlights how the Old Testament is a resource for resistance to domination and for the alleviation of suffering.* On the one hand, this Song preaches a public transcript<sup>46</sup> to its overlords. If Josephus’ report is to be believed, Cyrus even read over some of these chapters and found them to be speaking affirmatively of him.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, the prophet proclaims to hearers-in-the-know a subtle, hidden transcript<sup>48</sup> that builds energy for liberation efforts. Thus, references to creation here can sound like a parroting of the

---

<sup>43</sup> Within Second Isaiah, the phrase “I am YHWH” is connected with calling generations (41:4), offering help (41:13), providing water to those who are parched (41:17), making covenant (42:6), claiming glory over idols and others (42:8), giving Egypt as a ransom (43:3), being the creator and king of Israel (43:15), providing treasures/ riches (45:3), establishing the supremacy of God (45:5-7), raining down righteousness (45:8), speaking truth (45:18-19), recognizing a righteous, savior God (45:21), redeeming that leads Israel in the way it should go (48:17), kings and queens being made to bow to Israel (49:23), oppressors consuming their own flesh and blood (49:26).

<sup>44</sup> Joan Cook also sees here an emphasis on the one-ness of God (“Everyone Called By My Name: Second Isaiah’s Use of the Creation Theme” 35-47 in *Earth, Wind and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) 42).

<sup>45</sup> For more on cultural-linguistic approaches to preaching (Jesus), see Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: The New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock: 1997) and David Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> James C. Scott describes the public transcript as the open way in which subordinates communicate to hide subversive messages in the presence of those who dominate (51). Examples of the public transcript include donning “the flattering self-image of elites” (18-9), engaging in rituals of subordination (35), “playing dumb” (133), and concealing “anger, revenge, and self-assertion” (55). James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Yale Press: 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Josephus. *Antiquities* 11.5-7. Joseph Blenkinsopp, among others, is skeptical about the accuracy of Josephus’ report—especially the notion that Cyrus’ reading of Isa 44:28–44:1 inspired him to liberate Jews from captivity and seek to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (81).

<sup>48</sup> The hidden transcript employs a “politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors” (Scott 18-9).

flattering self-image of imperial elites.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, however, a Jewish exile would hear phrases like “created the heavens” (v. 5), “breath to the people” (v. 5), and light given to those in darkness (vv 6-7) and hear the creation account in Genesis. These references to the creator God of Genesis highlight one who is more ancient and more powerful than any current divine or human overlord. It is this Creator God—and not any earthly leader—who “calls,” “takes,” “keeps,” and “gives” the servant, Israel (42:6). Thomas Mann calls this approach a “theology of creative redemption” that is akin to liberation theology.<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann adds that the servant’s preaching here is meant to ensure that Israel is “well protected and irresistibly energized.”<sup>51</sup> The message to the exiles is that their fate depends not on Cyrus’ political calculations but on the one who made them and who gives them breath. Their liberation is not the work of any overlord but of the “lord of history” who is about to “create new things.”<sup>52</sup>

So too, references to Exodus may reflect Akkadian language and logic.<sup>53</sup> Yet, they remind hearers-in-the-know that it is God—not foreign superpowers—who has called, taken, kept, and given the people in a covenant to bring justice, to bring out prisoners, and to shine light unto the nations (Isa 42:6-7). These resonances with the exodus narrative make clear, God will respond to

---

<sup>49</sup> Creation references in verses 5 and 6 contain two different echoes of Mesopotamian texts. As Shalom Paul observes, the phrases “stretched out [the heavens]” and “spread out the earth” have an echo in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*: “Wherever the earth is established (*šaknat*), and the heavens spread out (*ritpašū*)” (Paul 188, citing *BWL*, 58-9, line 37). So also, Isaiah’s line, “grasped you by the hand” has a parallel in the Cyrus Cylinder wherein Marduk “reached for a righteous king whom he would support [lit. ‘grasp by the hand’]” (Paul 188, citing M. Cogan, *COS* 2:315). These connections might lead Babylonian and Persian overhears to receive the words of this Jewish, exilic preacher as supportive of their agenda.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Mann, “Stars, Sprouts, and Streams: The Creative Redeemer of Second Isaiah” 135-151 in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, William Brown and S. Dean McBride, Jr., eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 150.

<sup>51</sup> Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* 43.

<sup>52</sup> Frederik Poulsen, *God, His Servant, and the Nations in Isaiah 42:1-9: Biblical and Theological Reflections after Brevard S. Childs and Hans Hübner*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107).

<sup>53</sup> Paul finds echoes of Akkadian language in verse 7, specifically with regard to references about showing light and setting free (190). Paul also asserts that the logic in 5-9 echoes the logic of the goddess Ishtar’s promise to King Esarhaddon: “Could you not rely on the precious utterance which I spoke to you? Now you can rely on this latter one too.” (Paul 191, citing Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. 10, lines 7-12). More importantly, however, because of earlier allusions to Marduk and Cyrus, verse eight’s prohibition against idols sounds differently in Babylonian and Persian ears. It may sound like a rejection of Nabonidus and his favored moon-god, Sin. As Nilsen narrates: “In the background of the [Cyrus] Cylinder stands Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king (ruling 556–539 B.C.E.). Nabonidus claimed to restore the forgotten cult of the moon-god Sin; according to his critics, though, it was not a restoration, but a new invention. Be that as it may; the situation led to a neglect of the cult of other gods, including that of Marduk, who was Babylon’s city-god, and the highest god of the pantheon. Supposedly even the *akitu* (New Year) festival, thought to be vital for ensuring peace and fertility for both land and people, was abolished by Nabonidus” (Tina Dykesteen Nilsen, “Creation in Collision? Isaiah 40-48 and Zoroastrianism, Babylonian Religion and Genesis 1,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*. Vol 13, Article 8, (2013):1-19, 10). 8). In fact, if the Cyrus Cylinder is to be trusted, the priests of Marduk are the ones who opened the gates to Cyrus’ army, whereupon Cyrus destroyed all relics for worshipping the moon god and reestablished the gods Nabonidus had removed. Such connections may help slightly conceal elements of the preacher’s anger, revenge, and self-assertion that are expressed in the line: “I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols” (42:8). For an exiled Jew hearing these words in the context of creation, covenant, and exodus, this verse is most clearly the rejection of all idols and those leaders who support them. Thus, it is not simply that “the text is criticizing the people who expect everything from ‘Cyrus,’” as Baltzer claims (135). Rather, the text criticizes Cyrus, the Persian rule, and Babylonian culture as idolatrous usurpation of God’s glory.

rectify the abuse: “See, the former things have come to pass [i.e. the exodus], and new things I now declare” (42:9).

However, it is not only the material from the older testament that is a resource for resistance. Isaiah 42:1-9 itself has become a text for resisting oppressive regimes through preaching. For instance, an early rabbinic interpretation of Isa 42:1-9 sees it as license to challenge Caesar’s domination and claim to be God.<sup>54</sup> At the Third International Convention of the United Negro Improvement Association in August 1922, Rev. James R. L. Diggs referred to Isaiah 42:4 in his work with Marcus Garvey to resist white nationalism in the South.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps most notably, Oscar Romero preached on Isaiah 42:1-7 in response to the oppression of Salvadorans and the defamation of clergy by the government.<sup>56</sup> In the sermon, Romero eschews strictly historical or christological referents for the Servant’s identity. Instead, he invites each member of the congregation to understand themselves, through Christ, as the Servant, working with God and challenging oppressive regimes. Romero’s preaching of Isaiah 42 makes clear that it is in the interest of oppressive regimes for preachers to interpret the text with solely historical or christological connections. These moves keep the message of the scriptural witness at a safe distance. To counter this dominating approach, Romero preaches with Isaiah 42: The God of the great deliverances of old is present here, speaking here, offering here an open call for all those who would resist oppression and co-labor with God in bringing liberating justice to the world.

### Concluding Reflections

What is suggested by examining Isaiah 42:1-9 can also be seen with regard to the other three Servant Songs. Reading these texts homiletically:

1. *Reading these texts homiletically aids interpretation of the biblical text.* When Isaiah 42 is read as a sermon to an exiled and marginalized people, the preacher’s rhetoric sounds intentionally bi-vocal. Thus, the Cyrus/Israel debate is reframed. So also, understanding Isaiah 49 through the lens of testimonial preaching can help navigate the exegetical debate

---

<sup>54</sup> In the story emperor Hadrian seeks to be declared God. Three philosophers advise him, the last of which presents to Hadrian a problem of a stalled ship at sea. The emperor says that he will send ships to rescue it, but the philosopher asks, “Sire, why trouble your legions and ships to go there? Dispatch a bit of wind there, and thus you will rescue it.” When Caesar admits that he is not able to create a wind, the philosopher states, “You cannot create a wind? How then can you make yourself God, in whose name it is said, ‘Thus saith the Lord, He that created the heavens, and stretched them forth, He that spread forth the earth and that which cometh out of it, He that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein (Isa 42:5)?’” (Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken, 1992) 509-510:52).

<sup>55</sup> To get a sense of the spirit of Diggs’s message, one need only look to his work at the UNIA Convention, when he joined Marcus Garvey in rejecting an offer from a “well known Bible Society” that wanted to give every UNIA delegate a Bible. Commenting on this rebuffed offer, Diggs told the *New York World*, “We are not atheists by any means, and we are not rejecting the Bible. What we are doing to-day is registering an emphatic protest against Christianity as it is interpreted in this country.” The UNIA proposed instead that the Bible Society distribute those Bibles in the South, “among those obsessed with race and religious prejudice.” Alan Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale, 2006) 171, citing Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism*. (Kingston, Jamaica: United Printers, 1963) 104.

<sup>56</sup> Romero, “BAPTISM, EPIPHANY OF THE MESSIAH” Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, The Baptism of the Lord, January 14, 1979. <http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/baptism-epiphany-messiah> Accessed March 12, 2019.

about servant Israel preaching to Israel about Israel. A homiletical reading of Isaiah 50 speaks into the debate about how this passage relates to its context. The sermon here can be seen as contributing to extended imaginative reinterpretations of the book of Lamentations. Finally, reading Isaiah 53 as dialogical preaching helps navigate the exegetical challenges of interpreting Isaiah 53 by showing that the sermon has a focus and function that seek to evoke a clear response and to provoke a directed reflection about suffering, domination, and hope in a wider range of hearers. This dialogue reframes the debate about the servant's biography or the (potential) use of vicarious suffering.

2. *Reading these texts homiletically provides a model for preaching older texts in new contexts.* The preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of the scripture, especially Exodus, as that which speaks into the present moment. The God of Exodus is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. So also, the preacher in Isaiah 49 invites the congregation to imagine life through the perspective of Jacob, Moses, and Jeremiah. In this way, the preacher uses older texts to build a bridge for the congregation to envision a different future for themselves and the world. Isaiah 50 opens up the congregation's imagination to what the preacher perceives to be the most helpful word from Lamentations for the congregation in the moment. Other lines from Lamentations lie dormant. Here the preaching does not seek simply to repeat the older text nor argue against it. Rather, the preaching endeavors to read the older biblical text through the lens of contemporary marginality and suffering. Isaiah 53 places Jeremiah and Leviticus in dialogue with each other and the congregation. Here the preacher reads scripture backwards (from the present, through Jeremiah, and to Leviticus) and forwards (from Leviticus, through Jeremiah, and to the present) in a way that does not allow ancient past, recent past, nor present to dominate the conversation.
3. *Reading these texts homiletically unmasks the contextual and hermeneutic influence of domination.* The preaching in the first Servant Song demonstrates that Exodus and Genesis are resources for resistance to systemic injustice. So also, Isaiah 49 responds to economic depression caused by imperial neglect by calls for the congregation to "bring Jacob back to YHWH," "gather Israel," "raise up the tribes of Jacob," and "restore the survivors." In Isaiah 50, the Servant must navigate the cultural assumptions linked to suffering brought about by Babylonian culture and interpreted within a Jewish sub-culture that had accommodated itself to life in Babylonian culture. This leads the preacher to a radical reimagining of Lamentations as a source for identifying God's presence in suffering and as a guide to resistance. Isaiah 53 responds to theological domination about the nature of the servant's suffering. The preacher seeks to foster dialogue and emphasize the voice of numerous perspectives (both rhetorically and exegetically) in an effort to build unity (but not uniformity) within the exilic community around hope, resistance to injustice, and return from exile.

Reading the Servant Songs with a homiletical lens invites us to do more than apply the tools of historical-critical method or christological focus to Old Testament texts. As these Songs preach they invite preachers to listen for the ways scripture speaks to the ancient and

contemporary suffering of people and to offer a poetic-prophetic word that opens up new possibility in the midst of domination.

# History of Preaching

Conveners: Raewynne J. Whiteley and Ted A. Smith

**Preaching the Eucharist as Resistance: Oscar Romero’s Remembrance of Tortured Salvadorans as Members of Christ’s Body**  
**Rev. Andrew Thompson Scales, PhD**  
**Post-Doctoral Instructional Assistant**  
**Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ, [www.ptsem.edu](http://www.ptsem.edu)**  
**Copyright ©2019 Andrew Thompson Scales**

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the theological and liturgical relationship between the Eucharist and tortured Salvadorans in Oscar Romero’s homily from June 1979: “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History.” As violence in El Salvador escalated to the brink of civil war, state-sponsored paramilitary groups tortured and murdered hundreds of civilians. Romero’s prophetic repudiation of torture and his remembrance of individual victims proposed an alternative vision of El Salvador shaped by the Reign of God. The thesis of the paper is that the act of remembrance of disappeared persons in the homily and eucharistic celebration re-members physically dis-membered human beings as participants in Christ’s living Body. This paper is an adaptation of a chapter from the author’s dissertation: “Every Last Christian Takes Part: A Homiletical Analysis of Oscar Romero’s Sermons and the Remembrance of Disappeared Persons in El Salvador” (defended April 22, 2019, supervised by Nancy Gross).

**Introduction:**

This essay examines Oscar Romero’s representation of Christ’s solidarity with disappeared and tortured persons in contemporary El Salvador in his homily from June 1979, “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-giving Presence of Christ in History.” The Eucharist serves as a theological and liturgical framing device to affirm the humanity of people who have suffered state-sponsored torture and erasure. Romero includes the names and stories of disappeared and dismembered persons despite grave potential political consequences. Furthermore, his preaching defies a “state of siege” that the Salvadoran President had imposed the previous month; that order justified silencing opposition and enabled torture of political opponents.

This essay examines Romero’s homily with three steps of critical analysis. Those three steps include 1) establishing the historical context of the preaching moment, 2) summarizing the content of the homily, and, 3) critical analysis of the homily with diverse conversation partners. The first step, establishing the historical context, offers a summary of political violence and repression from November 1977 to June 1979. The second step, summarizing the content of the homily, explores in particular how Romero represents Christ as tortured and disappeared persons in El Salvador. The third step, critical analysis with diverse conversation partners, considers Romero’s preaching about the Eucharist in conversation with Catholic theologians William T. Cavanaugh and Ignacio Ellacuría. This process will develop a particular theological and homiletical theme about the Eucharist: *the act of remembrance of disappeared persons in the homily and eucharistic celebration re-members physically dis-membered human beings as participants in Christ’s living Body.*

**Step One: Establishing the Context**

*Information About the Preaching Moment*

Romero delivered “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History” on June 17, 1979, the Sunday celebrating Corpus Christi. The lectionary texts were Exodus 24:3-8 (*Moses seals the covenant by dashing the blood of oxen on the people*); Hebrews 9:11-15 (*Christ mediated the new covenant with his own blood as high priest*); and Mark 14:12-16, 22-26 (*Christ celebrates the Passover/Last Supper with his disciples*).<sup>1</sup> Romero preached this homily in the Cathedral in San Salvador. At this point during his ministry as archbishop, his homilies were lasting much longer than before as he gathered up details about human rights abuses, explained the lectionary readings, and commented on urgent current events.<sup>2</sup>

### *Political Violence Escalates Amid Increasing Government Repression*

From late November 1977 through February 1979, the Salvadoran government imposed a “Law for Defense of Public Order.”<sup>3</sup> This legislation threatened prison terms for broad, vague offenses related to speech and writing that undermined the regime under President Carlos Humberto Romero.<sup>4</sup> Salvadoran theologian and martyr Ignacio Martín-Baró described the law as a justification for the government to oppress the broad opposition it faced from the Catholic Church, popular organizations, and rival political parties. Martín-Baró writes, “The law legitimized the arbitrary imprisonment of individuals or groups, it legitimized systematic torture, the suppression of the right to hold meetings, to spread ideas, even to think.”<sup>5</sup> Martín-Baró cites statistics from the archiepiscopal office for human rights related to political violence in 1978: 1,063 political arrests, 147 murders by security forces, and 23 disappearances.<sup>6</sup>

During Oscar Romero’s ministry as Archbishop of San Salvador from March 1977 to March 1980, the recorded number of persons the government disappeared was 611. By contrast, the number of disappeared persons between 1973-1976 was 48, and between 1966 and 1972 one person had been disappeared.<sup>7</sup> Historian Paul Almeida writes that President Carlos Humberto Romero continued to repeal a variety of human rights after imposing the Law for Defense of Public Order, such as “public assembly, freedom of association, and publicly dissenting with the government”; *habeas corpus* was also suspended later.<sup>8</sup> Rates of torture and murder of political prisoners by government forces reached unprecedented numbers between 1977-1980, such that,

---

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Romero, “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-giving Presence of Christ in History,” in *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People: The Complete Homilies of Oscar Arnulfo Romero*, vol. 4, trans. Joseph Owens, S.J. (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2015), 485.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

<sup>3</sup> *Note: Some sources also translate the document as “Law for the Defense and Guarantee of Public Order”; I use the terms interchangeably according to the citation of the particular source.—A.S.*

<sup>4</sup> James R. Brockman, S.J., *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J., “Oscar Romero: Voice of the Downtrodden,” in *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Paul D. Almeida, *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), 152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

Almeida writes, “By 1980, the state killed an average of nearly one thousand civilians per month.”<sup>9</sup>

The government repealed the Law for the Defense of Public Order in February 1979 in response to pressure from popular organizations, the archdiocese, and human rights groups. The reign of terror that the law had unleashed, however, was not over. The National Guard, National Police, and paramilitary groups committed a series of human rights atrocities against public demonstrators throughout May 1979, the month that preceded the sermon “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History.” In early May 1979, revolutionary forces of the BPR (“Popular Revolutionary Bloc”) had taken hostages in the Venezuelan embassy. Their intention was to bring attention to unjust detentions, and to demand the release of political prisoners from their party. On May 8, members of the BPR also occupied the Cathedral in San Salvador while Romero was on a visit to the Vatican. The police killed twenty-five people on the steps of the Cathedral with machine guns in front of television crews that broadcast the attack internationally.<sup>10</sup>

Government forces also shot and killed fourteen university students at a political demonstration in front of the Venezuelan embassy on May 22.<sup>11</sup> President Carlos Humberto Romero imposed a “state of siege,” martial law, from late May to September 1979.<sup>12</sup> Romero’s fourth pastoral letter from August 6, 1979 refers to the declaration of the state of siege as an ongoing policy that “favors the proliferation and activities of right-wing gangs of assassins.”<sup>13</sup> This “state of siege” was a cover for the National Guard and paramilitary groups to suspend human rights and inflict horrific torture practices in the name of national security.

Romero’s weekly homilies defied the state of siege and provided news to listeners about disappeared persons. The diocesan media, especially YSAX radio broadcasts of Romero’s homilies and the published newsletter *Orientación* by *Imprenta Criterio*, became the most reliable sources of news for many Salvadorans. Francisco Calles, a young adult who worked in the archdiocesan media offices,<sup>14</sup> described the confusion around the time Romero preached this homily in an interview, “News was getting so restricted by then that you could only find out about what was happening in the country by listening to YSAX and Monseñor’s homilies. The rest of the media was either being censored, was censoring itself, or just decided to be unhelpful and talk about meaningless things.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Brockman, *Romero*, 171.

<sup>11</sup> Ignacio Martín-Baró, “Oscar Romero: Voice of the Downtrodden,” 14.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 298.

<sup>13</sup> Oscar Romero, “The Fourth Pastoral Letter: The Church’s Mission amid the National Crisis,” in *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 121.

<sup>14</sup> Emily Wade Will, *Archbishop Oscar Romero: The Making of a Martyr* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 120-121.

<sup>15</sup> María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 179.

Romero preached the homily “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History,” after the repeal of the Law for Defense of Public Order, and it serves as an example of two important aspects of naming disappeared persons from the pulpit. First, the act of naming disappeared persons is a prophetic confrontation against human rights crimes perpetrated by the Salvadoran government. Second, naming disappeared persons reveals truths about violence in El Salvador that the government wanted to cover up and pretend did not exist. The homily challenges the authoritarian state’s claim to absolute control over human beings’ lives through torture. Romero proposes an alternative vision, one that frames the victims as participants in the Body of Christ and witnesses to the Reign of God.

### **Step Two: Summarizing the Content of the Homily**

Romero begins the homily by expressing his intention to “gather together all the blood and all the bodies massacred here in our country and in our sister republic of Nicaragua and in the entire world.”<sup>16</sup> His purpose in doing so is to “pay homage to the Body and Blood to the Son of Man.”<sup>17</sup> The liturgical occasion for the sermon was Corpus Christi, which reflects on the relationship between Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and the Church’s participation in his Body through the Eucharist. Romero explains: “...the Body of Christ that we venerate today on the altar, the Body that died but then rose again, lives now in resurrected glory. But it still bears the sign of torture, injustice, and murder as the protest of God’s eternal justice against the sin of the world.”<sup>18</sup> The practice of the Eucharist—raising and breaking the host, sharing the bread and wine together—is an act of witness to Christ’s presence in the world today amid all its injustices and pain. Jesus’ crucified Body is visible in the liturgy of the Mass, and it is visible in the streets of El Salvador, where the government exposes the bodies of tortured and murdered political prisoners.

The homily continues with an explanation of the covenant of blood that God established with Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness in Exodus 24. According to Romero, Moses’ act of sprinkling blood on the people constitutes an ancient form of communion, a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. The blood of the sacrificial animal gathers the Israelites symbolically as a “single family united in love.”<sup>19</sup> He relates this practice in Exodus to the depiction of Christ as a high priest in Hebrews 9. The Exodus narrative attests to God’s historical liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Christ’s self-sacrifice has brought about “earthly liberation” from “slavery and injustice,” and “the eternal liberation” from “sin and hellfire.”<sup>20</sup> Christ serves as both the victim and the host of the Eucharist for all who hope for El Salvador’s transformation and liberation. The sacrifice of Christ that the Eucharist signifies liberates people from injustice in history, and it exists as a promise of a spiritual, transcendent liberation.

After offering news about the schedule of upcoming church events in the archdiocese,

---

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Romero, “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-giving Presence of Christ in History,” 485.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

Romero describes the violence that had taken place recently in El Salvador. He speaks about the murder of twenty-two teachers at the hand of the extreme right-wing paramilitary group called the White Warriors Union (UGB).<sup>21</sup> He also names a list of *campesinos* who were killed by right-wing groups, as well as death threats against professionals and an unnamed priest.<sup>22</sup> He also calls for justice for wealthy businessmen and landowners who have been kidnapped by the leftist People's Revolutionary Army (ERP).<sup>23</sup>

Romero reads from a list of names of people who have been detained without due process of law, and it has become the Church's responsibility to advocate for these disappeared Salvadorans. Romero says in the pulpit:

Mentioning their names means that the church is defending them, and so I mention them now as the voice of their distraught families. They are Cruz Flores, Manuel Antonio Mejía, María Reina Mejía, Carlos Mejía, Blanca Elía Beltrán, all of whom are *campesinos*. Other names are Santana Antonio Rodríguez, Hernán Delgado, Mercedes Palacios, Pedro Juan Alvarado, José Mario Palacios, Cristóbal López, and Benjamín Gavidia. Because of a lack of time I cannot give more details, but these are cases of humble *campesinos* and workers who perhaps left to go to work or to visit someone and never returned home. Let us hope that their disappearance is not permanent.<sup>24</sup>

The naming of disappeared *campesinos* is accompanied by a call to return to human rights that have been guaranteed by the Salvadoran Constitution, and for a return to support for democratic institutions. Romero proclaims that justice can only happen if the rule of law returns to El Salvador. From this demand, he segues to a theological claim as his final point, that "the Eucharist is the inspiration and the force of the church's eschatological hope," a force that exists within, transforms, and transcends, human history.<sup>25</sup>

The Eucharist reorients the meaning of human life from a theological perspective, a perspective that reframes human beings' responsibilities to one another. Romero claims that the Eucharist serves as the sacrament, the mystery of God's liberating work, a sign that "nourishes

---

<sup>21</sup> Note: *The White Warriors Union* was one of the brutal far-right "death squads" that military officer Roberto d'Aubuisson organized, and operated with impunity throughout the Salvadoran crisis and Civil War. Described as a "psychopath" by Robert E. White, the United States ambassador to El Salvador, D'Aubuisson remains the prime suspect as the officer who ordered the assassination of Archbishop Romero on March 24, 1980.

See: Severo, Richard. "Roberto d'Aubuisson, 48, Far-Rightist in El Salvador," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1992, accessed September 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/21/world/roberto-d-aubuisson-48-far-rightist-in-salvador.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Note: *Father Rafael Palacio* was murdered three days later.

<sup>23</sup> Oscar Romero, "The Voice of Blood," in *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People: The Complete Homilies of Archbishop Oscar Romero*, vol. 5, trans. by Joseph Owens, S.J. (Miami, FL: Convivium Press, 2016), 43n3.

<sup>24</sup> Oscar Romero, "The Eucharist is the Living and Life-giving Presence of Christ in History," 497.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 499.

all the just claims of the earth because it gives them their true horizon.”<sup>26</sup> The Christian, according to Romero, must live in a way that envisions a dual horizon of both the historical exigencies of contemporary crises, and an eschatological reality that transcends, but gives meaning to, the current historical situation.

The homily concludes with a representation of Christ as the people who have been detained and tortured in El Salvador, and the promise of their liberation in his resurrection:

Let us thank God on this feast of Corpus Christi that among the people there is such great political force and determination to struggle, despite all the tragedy. Christ is no stranger here: Christ is the tortured prisoner; Christ is the man unjustly executed; Christ is the innocent one criminally killed. But Christ is also the great liberator who is giving meaning to all these dead bodies and all this blood. Without doubt he is sanctifying us with the hopeful perspective of eternal life: “Take and eat, this is my body. This is the blood of the eternal covenant. Let it be so.”<sup>27</sup>

As we turn to the third step—critical reflection on the homily with theological conversation partners—we will consider how Romero reframes the stories of tortured and disappeared persons as part of the Body of Christ. His homily remembers and reframes the victims through Christ’s radical solidarity with them in the present day: “Christ is the tortured prisoner; Christ is the man unjustly executed; Christ is the innocent one criminally killed....”<sup>28</sup> These aspects of the homily will ground the basis of our analysis about how God *re-members* people who have been *dis-membered* by torture and disappearance in the Eucharist.

### **Step Three: Analyzing the Homily with Diverse Conversation Partners**

Critical reflection on the content and context of “The Eucharist is the Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History” will examine how Romero makes meaning of torture victims’ suffering in light of the Eucharist. One of our conversation partners for this reflection is the Salvadoran theologian Ignacio Ellacuría, who wrote about Christ’s solidarity with oppressed people in contemporary Latin America in his 1978 essay “The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology.” Christ’s solidarity with disappeared and tortured persons is grounded in Catholic sacramental ecclesiology. The Eucharist establishes a historical and transcendent significance to the lives and witness of people suffering state-sponsored violence.

But there is also something going on here that deserves second-order discourse about the relationship between the Eucharist and tortured persons. Romero’s representation of Christ’s solidarity at the end of his homily—Christ not only *with*, but *as* tortured persons in El Salvador—constitutes public discourse that transforms their humanity beyond the powers of the state. The Eucharist establishes and remembers their meaning as human beings in light of the God who

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 500.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

made them, the Christ who redeemed them, and the Holy Spirit that works through history to establish the Kingdom of God against unjust earthly powers.

The form of the homily—how Romero structures it, and the narratives and names he includes—is connected to what the homily *does* theologically and homiletically. The homily represents a prophetic rebuke to a dehumanizing, repressive state; and it proclaims the Kingdom of God as an alternative reality to the horrors of repression. That Kingdom will be constituted by members of the Body of Christ who have died not only as political prisoners, but also as martyrs, witnesses to the crucified Christ.

For further insight into these dimensions of our claim about the Eucharist and disappeared persons, we will turn to the Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh's book *Torture and Eucharist*. *Torture and Eucharist* examines the Catholic Church's eucharistic resistance to repression in Chile during the 1970s and 1980s. Cavanaugh's theological reflection on the Eucharist as a sacramental act of resistance will serve as our point of entry to reflecting on what Romero does when he preaches a eucharistic homily. Then we will consider the claims of Ellacuría's work on the "crucified people," and its resonances with Romero's homily.

*Torture as Totalitarian Liturgy and Social Dismemberment in El Salvador*

In El Salvador during the late 1970s, Torture was a systemic evil that terrorized everyone in the nation with the power of the state. Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh examines the theological and liturgical dichotomies between the state and the Catholic Church in an analogous contemporary context: Chile under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship during the 1970s and 1980s. Cavanaugh's book *Torture and Eucharist* proposes that authoritarian or totalitarian regimes use torture to exert total control over citizens. Torture by representatives of the state is not a spontaneous crime of passion that reveals the state's inability to maintain its discipline and composure. Torture is, rather, a discipline that the state arranges, rehearses, and repeats as a means of social control and fragmentation.<sup>29</sup>

Torture functions as more than a means to extract information about political opposition or resistance movements. Torture is a means of control and subjugation that claims a person as an object that the state owns and can treat as it pleases.<sup>30</sup> The totalitarian state exerts control by revoking personal rights to speech and assembly, shuttering political opposition, and intimidating participants in civic and popular institutions. The state employs physical and psychological torture to fragment potential opposition by silencing and breaking human beings and the communities to which they belong.

Alone with the victim in the torture chamber, agents of the state inflict overwhelming pain to destroy the victim's capacity to think beyond the torture itself. God, family, friends, ideals, personal hopes: all recede in the face of the state and its absolute, coercive power and its capacity to dehumanize its prisoners.<sup>31</sup> They become objects of the state; the liturgies of torture erase personal subjectivity and identity. The only aspect of personality that remains is an

---

<sup>29</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 30-31.

obedient and submissive participant who possesses no other allegiances or connection to human community. If the person does not conform to the state through coercion, they exist as a broken warning in their psychological and physical distress. Their trauma endures as a sign to others of what happens when people speak out against the state in its absolute power.

Cavanaugh proposes that the elaborate disciplines of torture—practices that dismember the body, mind, spirit, and sense of human belonging—function as a perverse *liturgy* that demonstrates the state’s power.<sup>32</sup> In addition to physical abuse, torturers construct elaborate webs of lies and verbal abuse that break down their victims. Torturers tell their victims fictions about betrayal by friends or abandonment by loved ones. They persist in asserting the prisoner’s guilt in crimes they did not commit, sometimes with absurd accusations that have no grounding in reality. These practices are an attempt to remake the person in the state’s image by coercion.<sup>33</sup>

The torture chamber, its instruments, and its technicians represent a twisted and evil inversion of what the Eucharist seeks to accomplish. By contrast, the Eucharist serves as an eschatological affirmation of individual, God-given human dignity. The sacrament represents an invitation to free participation in community through faith in the liberating Christ. Sharing in the host and cup symbolize physical and spiritual integration as a body where believers belong to one another, that is, the Body of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

In extreme situations of totalitarian abuses of power, the Church represents an alternative reality through its practice of the Eucharist in worship. The Christian community inspires political and social resistance to the idolatry of state power through prophetic preaching and the sacraments. The Eucharist shatters all human horizons that demarcate the state as the limit and summation of human experience.<sup>35</sup> Christ crucified and raised stands alive as God’s repudiation of any authority that would sacrifice human wellbeing by torture and coercion for the maintenance of power and control. The crucifixion itself was a liturgy of torture in the Roman state by which opponents died exposed, broken, and isolated from human community. The gruesome torture of crucifixion has been exposed in Jesus’ resurrection as a claim to control by a false and weak human regime. Totalitarian regimes like the Roman Empire have been, and will be, vanquished by the Reign of God.<sup>36</sup>

The Eucharist represents the victory of Jesus Christ over the powers of this world, but it also, in contemporary practice against authoritarian regimes—represents the tortured and murdered victims as the “crucified people,” the dismembered and executed victims *with and for* whom Jesus died and rose to life.<sup>37</sup> The Eucharist expresses God’s solidarity with the crucified

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 70-71.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 280.

<sup>37</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology (1978)” in *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation*, ed. Michael E. Lee, trans. Phillip Berryman and Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013) 223.

people as a practice of *remembrance*.<sup>38</sup> Cavanaugh plays upon the word “remembrance” as “re-membrance,” meaning that the action of the Eucharist reintegrates human beings who have been dismembered by violence into the eschatological vision of the Body of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Christ is present in the members of his Body, no matter where they are or what has happened to them. They live in the present as the Body of Christ, and they continue to become the Body of Christ through their deepening solidarity with Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Cavanaugh represents this conflict between the Church and the world through the history of the early Church and its persecution under the Roman Empire. The Church stands as an opponent to the earthly powers, and its members’ deaths because of their faith make them martyrs, *witnesses*, to Christ’s continuing redemption of the world in history.<sup>41</sup> Their deaths as Christians subversively reveal the state’s cruelty and weakness. As Cavanaugh puts it, their executions make the Body “visible” as the state disappears bodies: “The Eucharist, as the gift which effects the visibility of the true body of Christ, is therefore the church’s counter-imagination to that of the state.”<sup>42</sup>

When Romero defied the restrictions on free speech in the Law for Defense of Public Order, he remembered and “re-membered” the deaths of dismembered Christians in El Salvador. In his homilies, he represents them as victims of violence, and as witnesses to an eschatological horizon beyond the state’s power over human life. Everyone who participates in the Eucharist has a role in remembering Jesus, both the priests who preside at the altar and the lay Catholics who participate. As Romero says in his homily,

When the priest raises the host and says, “This is the sacrament of our faith”, you respond with your belief: “We announce your death. We proclaim your resurrection.” This is the Eucharist: announcing the death of the Lord and proclaiming eternal life. This shows the confidence of men and women who know that, amidst the darkness and confusion of our history, they are following the bright light of Christ, who is eternal life.<sup>43</sup>

In remembering Jesus, the Church remembers Christ’s sacrifice as a victim of political violence during the Roman Empire. The Church also remembers that God’s final Word is the transformation of that sacrifice into the resurrection and the feast of the people of God.

This liturgical practice of the Eucharist is a mystery that reveals Christ to the world through the lives and deaths of faithful witnesses to Jesus in El Salvador. What happened to Jesus in his passion is similar to what happens to the disappeared Salvadorans whom Romero

---

<sup>38</sup> Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 229.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 229.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 233.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

<sup>43</sup> Oscar Romero, “The Eucharist is the Living and Life-giving Presence of Christ in History,” 491.

represents in his homilies. What happened in Jesus' resurrection is the hope for the victims and the whole country of El Salvador. The death that the state imposes will not be a final word, but will itself be destroyed by God's final Word of resurrection life. The eschatological and historical perspective that the Eucharist represents against a secular state's claim to absolute authority reveals itself in history through suffering persons whom theologian Ignacio Ellacuría describes as "the crucified people." We turn now to consider how Romero's focus on the Eucharist represents "the crucified people" as witnesses to the Kingdom of God despite the Salvadoran state's subjugation of them as victims without meaning.

*The Eucharist Reveals Christ's Solidarity with Disappeared and Tortured Persons*

The claims of Ignacio Ellacuría's seminal essay "The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology" resonate with Romero's representations of tortured and disappeared persons in his homily. Ellacuría published this essay in 1978 during the imposition of the Law for Defense of Public Order. It is in this context of violence and repression that Ellacuría asks the question, "What does the fact that most of humankind is oppressed mean for salvation history and in salvation history?"<sup>44</sup>

Ellacuría's answer is that Christians must recover the historicity of Jesus' crucifixion as a particular human being who is also the Son of God. Like the oppressed persons of El Salvador in the 1970s, Jesus suffered and died because of historical, political, and social injustices.<sup>45</sup> In Jesus, the immediate particularity of human suffering within a historical context intersects with the cosmic drama of his redemption of the entire world and history itself. The meaning of Jesus' death has consequences for our lived experience, as well as for what happens to us after we die: "Jesus' death is inseparably connected to the eschatological and historical coming of the Reign, and for that purpose the resurrection means not only a verification or consolation but the assurance that this work must continue and that he remains alive to continue it."<sup>46</sup>

Jesus' resurrection is an "inbreaking of the Reign," the Reign of God that is not exclusively a promise of life, redemption, and abundance after death, or a final, ahistorical eschaton.<sup>47</sup> The Reign of God is a reality that happens and unfolds in human history. Its establishment in history depends upon the actions of the people who remain committed to Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. The suffering people today are the locus for this hope in the Reign of God. The oppressed persons with whom Jesus lived and died in solidarity are the faithful disciples whom Jesus has entrusted with the furthering of his life and its mission. The search for God's salvation in historical narratives must begin with the people who live as Jesus did, suffering for, and proclaiming, the Reign of God in their lives and deaths.<sup>48</sup> The Eucharist, then, is a sign of "the definitive presence of God among human beings," a sacrament and practice of the Church that bears witness to a transcendent reality beyond history. More than that, God's

---

<sup>44</sup> Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," 196.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 196.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 206-208.

incarnation in Christ becomes imaginable in human history through the lives that constitute and participate in Christ's Body.<sup>49</sup>

Romero's homilies offer a stark contradiction to the Salvadoran state's narratives of absolute control and the inhumanity of its enemies. People who have had their identities erased by the government as anonymous enemies of the state have names in Romero's homilies. They belong to more than broad categories like *campesinos* or union leaders. They are Manuel Barahona Chávez, Domingo Murcia, Rubén Quezada, among many others.<sup>50</sup> Romero speaks about their family members who search for them tirelessly without any success. They have relatives, careers, hometowns, friends who have disappeared with them. Their disappearances take place with the immediate historical details like dates and locations. There are suspected responsible parties for the arrest like the paramilitary White Warriors Union or the National Guard. Those who discover them describe specific tortures they endured, and the marks on their corpses. Romero renders their lives and their deaths in vivid detail against the monotonous narrative that these persons were "the enemy." More than that, Romero contends that the disappeared and tortured people are not alone. Christ is with them. Christ is one of them.<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusion: Remembrance and Eucharist as an Alternative Reality in Christ**

Romero's homily, "The Eucharist is the Living and Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History," prophetically reclaims the humanity and diverse identities of the disappeared people over and against the prohibitions of the Law for Defense of Public Order and the state of siege. The *dis-membered* victims of the state are *re-membered* as members of Jesus' Body. Similar to the claims in Ellacuría's essay, "The Crucified People: An Essay in Historical Soteriology," Romero proclaims that Christ is in solidarity with the tortured and disappeared persons of El Salvador in 1979. More than that, the Eucharist is a sacramental mystery that unfolds in historical narratives, and it binds these believers together in the paschal mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Not only does Christ stand in solidarity *with* the tortured Salvadorans, he is present in El Salvador *as* the victims of state repression. Romero's words take on a prophetic power against the state's claim to ultimate authority over society when he closes the homily with a description of Christ as the victims: "Christ is no stranger here: Christ is the tortured prisoner; Christ is the man unjustly executed; Christ is the innocent one criminally killed. But Christ is also the great liberator who is giving meaning to all these dead bodies and all this blood."<sup>52</sup> They are represented in the sermon—Romero speaks their names and the details of their lives and deaths—but, more than that, Romero *re-presents* their identity as members of the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God that Christ brings with liberating power.

The Kingdom of God stands in opposition to the torturing state in El Salvador, offering a life-giving perspective on the world *as it is* in Romero's context of murders and political violence. The lives and stories of the disappeared and murdered Salvadorans are not only

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 207.

<sup>50</sup> Oscar Romero, "The Eucharist is the Living and Life-Giving Presence of Christ in History," 497.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 500.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

victims. They are witnesses to Christ in contemporary El Salvador, their deaths take on the sacramental aspect of revealing the passion Jesus endured to the world. Their lives, given up in hope for the in-breaking Reign of God, point toward God's liberation and salvation of El Salvador against the totalizing authority of the state.

In this homily, along with many others, Romero has reframed the identity of the victims as witnesses to God's coming salvation who, as Ellacuría describes Jesus's life in the Gospels, "sought for himself neither death nor resurrection but the proclamation of the Reign of God to the point of death, and that brought resurrection."<sup>53</sup> The Christians in El Salvador, living and dead, are the "seed of a new world."<sup>54</sup> Romero says, "If there is any hope for a new world, for a new country, for a more just social order, for a reflection of God's Kingdom in our society...it is you Christians who are going to bring about that wondrous new world. But this will happen only when we truly communicate to others this life that we receive in the Eucharist...."<sup>55</sup> Christians who live and die as participants in the Eucharist will transform the world as they bear the fruit of the Gospel through their lives.

With this sacramental worldview in mind, we return to the thesis that began this essay about the role the Eucharist plays as an organizing theme in Romero's preaching: ***the act of remembrance of disappeared persons in the homily and eucharistic celebration re-members physically dis-membered human beings as participants in Christ's living Body***. Romero *remembers* the victims of torture by naming them in his sermon: the Church will not forget the people whom the state seeks to erase from public memory. Furthermore, he *re-members* them, including them in the sermon and Eucharist as members of the Body of Christ as an alternative vision of reality against the state, which seeks to physically *dis-member* and erase the victims from public memory. The victims bear witness to the Reign of God as a proleptic sign of the state's ultimate failure against the in-breaking Kingdom that God inaugurated in the crucified Jesus. They will one day arise victorious with Christ over the present regime as a community of crucified people in solidarity with Christ.

---

<sup>53</sup> Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," 206.

<sup>54</sup> Romero, "The Eucharist is the Living and Life-giving Presence of Christ in History," 491.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 491.

# Justice, Ethics, and Preaching

Convener: Debra J. Mumford

*A note from the justice, ethics, and preaching workgroup:*

Justice, Ethics, and Preaching will consider its three contributions as part of a panel on the work group's submitted papers. The panel session will begin with comments from the authors to highlight important points in the papers, including why they chose to address the Annual Meeting theme of "Unmasking Homiletical Whiteness" from their perspectives.

Panelists: HyeRan Kim-Cragg  
Michael Royster  
Debra Mumford

# UNMASKING THE HOMILETICAL WHITENESS OF JERRY FALWELL SR. AND THE MORAL MAJORITY

Debra J. Mumford, Ph.D., Frank H. Caldwell Professor of Homiletics  
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky  
<http://www.lpts.edu>

Copyright @ 2019 Debra J. Mumford

ABSTRACT: Though the Moral Majority officially disbanded in 1989, it continues to influence politics and policies of the United States government. Analysis of the principles of the Moral Majority, and unmasking the whiteness at work therein, can shed light on the reasons current Christian conservatives support the Trump administration's policies and practices. Debra Mumford unmasks the homiletical whiteness of Jerry Falwell Sr., founder of the Moral Majority movement and father of one of Trump's first and most ardent Christian conservative supporters, Jerry Falwell, Jr. Mumford lays a foundation for her sermon analysis by first defining homiletical whiteness and then providing biographical information that puts Falwell's preaching in context.

Whiteness is a social construction that has created a racial hierarchy that has shaped all the social, cultural, educational, political, and economic institutions of society. Whiteness is linked to domination and is a form of race privilege invisible to white people who are not conscious of its power.<sup>1</sup>

The power of Whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness becomes transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior.<sup>2</sup>

From this definition of whiteness, it follows that homiletical whiteness is the art of preaching racial hierarchy that shapes the social, cultural, educational, political and economic institutions of our society. However, to allow homiletical whiteness to focus solely on race is to negate what Christine Smith calls a "web of oppressions" of which white racism is part. White racism cannot be separated from sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism and handicappism because of their primary source in the United States – elite white men. Therefore, unmasking homiletical whiteness entails not only identifying racism, but other oppressions that disempower all of those who do not fit the straight, white, able-bodied, youthful, financially independent male mold. So a more comprehensive definition of **homiletical whiteness is the art of preaching social, political and economic hierarchy that shapes the social, cultural, educational, political and economic institutions of our society.** For the duration of this paper, whiteness will be inclusive of the aforementioned web of oppressions.

Once preached, homiletical whiteness is transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behavior. Homiletical whiteness is a type of hegemony in which the values of powerful

---

<sup>1</sup> Carol Tator and Frances Henry, *Racial Profiling in Canada : Challenging the Myth of "a Few Bad Apples"* (Toronto Ont. ; Buffalo N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 353.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

white (primarily male) constituencies are held to be superior to and aspirational for all others. Through the imposition of whiteness in every segment of society all people are forced to adopt the norms, culture and values of powerful whites in order to fully integrate into dominant society. For example, in order to earn a Ph.D. in homiletics from my predominantly white institution and be prepared to teach homiletics in a predominantly white seminary, I had to achieve a mastery of white homiletical traditions and contemporary practices. For most predominantly white institutions, white scholarship forms the baseline of knowledge upon which curriculums are based. Therefore, white scholarship must be mastered by all who hope to teach in or earn degrees from those institutions.

Homiletical whiteness is insidious because not only does it claim widely accepted societal norms, cultures and values as its basis for legitimacy, but it also professes God to be the originator and ultimate enforcer of its claims. By claiming that their agendas are God's agenda, whites who are able to pair their religious claims with other dominant social, economic and political powers to force their agenda onto others are able to wield tremendous social, economic and political influence.

Understanding and locating homiletical whiteness, like locating whiteness in other manifestations, is challenging because its theology, approaches to biblical interpretation, and cultural assumptions have been widely taught to be the norm, the standard by which all homiletical approaches are judged. Therefore, analyzing sermons for whiteness can only be done thoroughly by first understanding the worldviews and social and cultural locations of the preachers who deliver them.

I will analyze a sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Jerry Laymon Falwell, Sr. for homiletical whiteness. I chose Falwell's preaching for several reasons. First of all, Falwell was the founder of the Moral Majority movement. The Moral Majority was a coalition of evangelical Christians organized to influence public policy. Their stated goal was to help America regain her former greatness.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the Moral Majority's legacy of mobilizing conservative Christians for political engagement is alive and well in the work of numerous conservative Christian organizations and through the leadership and influence of Falwell's son, Jerry Falwell, Jr. By understanding Falwell and the Moral Majority, we may be able to better understand how and why Christian conservatives can so steadfastly support President Donald Trump and his policies. Thirdly, Falwell Sr. founded Liberty University, a private, liberal arts college which has educated hundreds of thousands of people since its founding in 1971. Through the University, the values of the Moral Majority are being instilled in current and future generations. One of the primary missions of Liberty University is:

Encourage a commitment to the Christian life, one of personal integrity, sensitivity to the needs of others, social responsibility and active communication of the Christian faith, and, as it is lived out, a life that leads people to Jesus Christ as the Lord of the universe and their own personal Savior.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Doug Banwart, "Jerry Falwell, the Rise of the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election," *Western Illinois Historical Review* V, no. Spring (2013): 133.

<sup>4</sup> "Mission Statement," *LU Online* (2019), accessed October 14, 2019, <http://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=6899>.

Several sermons preached by Falwell will also be referenced. Falwell, Sr. was born on August 11, 1933 in Lynchburg, Virginia to a father who was an atheist and a mother who was a devout Christian. At the age of 18 in 1952, Falwell accepted Jesus Christ as his personal savior. He graduated from the Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri and founded the Thomas Road Baptist Church in his hometown of Lynchburg in 1956.<sup>5</sup> In 1967, he founded the Lynchburg Christian Academy.<sup>6</sup>

Two years before he founded the Academy, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. After this ruling, private white Christian schools began to spring up all around the country as a protest against *Brown*. Lynchburg Christian Academy was one such school. Private schools were not required to follow the *Brown* decision. Falwell Sr. was a segregationist. In a sermon he preached in 1965, nine years after the Supreme Court ruling, he defended racial segregation. He used the story of the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 5:6-12 to make his point. He claimed that when the woman said to Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" she was trying to draw Jesus into a discussion about segregation by highlighting the reality that Jews discriminated against Samaritans. But instead of being drawn into that discussion, Jesus ignored her prompting and instead focused on her spiritual well-being. Jesus told her all about her sinful life and her need for salvation. She received the gift of salvation that Jesus offered and through her testimony her hometown was also saved.<sup>7</sup>

For Falwell, Jesus' interaction with the woman was instructive for those who claimed to be Christians in his day. Christians, he argued, were not called to reform external conditions. Christians should only be focused on saving souls. He made this statement long before he decided to found the Moral Majority. In a sermon he preached at Thomas Road after the *Brown v. Board* ruling, he preached about his objection to the ruling:

If Chief Justice Warren and his associates had known God's word and had desired to do the Lord's will, I am quite confident that the 1954 decision would never have been made... The facilities should be separate. When God has drawn a line of distinction, we should not attempt to cross that line. <sup>8</sup>

Falwell believed that the bible clearly prohibited racial integration. He felt God wanted the races to live separately. In the same sermon he went on to say, "The true Negro does not want integration.... He realizes his potential is far better among his own race."<sup>9</sup> So, in keeping with

---

<sup>5</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Jerry Falwell American Minister," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2019), accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moral-Majority>.

<sup>6</sup> "Founder," *Liberty University Online* (2019), accessed September 13, 2019, <http://www.liberty.edu/aboutliberty/index.cfm?PID=6921>.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Avery Sutton, *Jerry Falwell and the Rise of the Religious Right : A Brief History with Documents, The Bedford Series in History and Culture* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013), Kindle Edition. Chapter 2.8.

<sup>8</sup> Max Blumenthal, "Agent of Intolerance," *The Nation* (2007), accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/agent-intolerance/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

his own biblical interpretation and racist beliefs, he founded the Lynchburg Christian Academy to keep white children from being forced to attend school with African American children.

However, his efforts and the efforts of other white Christian segregationists were thwarted by a decision of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, *Green v. Connally*. The decision declared that even private schools cannot discriminate based on race.<sup>10</sup> Soon after this ruling in 1971, Christian schools such as Lynchburg Christian Academy began receiving letters from the IRS inquiring about their admissions policies as it relates to race. This ruling and subsequent requirements to submit to government intervention of their private school admissions policies had many white Christian evangelicals looking for a way to reverse this government policy. They looked for a presidential candidate who would support their agenda.

Evangelicals believed they had found their candidate in fellow evangelical Christian, Jimmy Carter. However, rather than helping to further their cause of segregation, Carter's IRS commissioner proposed that schools that were founded or expanded during the period of desegregation of public schools should also meet a quota for minority students.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Carter supported the Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights and abortion rights. So evangelicals, completely frustrated with Carter, looked for someone who would support their agenda for the 1980 presidential election.<sup>12</sup>

Evangelicals chose to support Ronald Reagan, a divorced, remarried former actor, governor of California who had signed a bill into law legalizing abortion during his governorship. Choosing Reagan indicates that abortion was not a central issue for conservatives until the 1980's. During the presidential campaign, Reagan shared his belief that the federal government had been overreaching for years. He contended that power needed to be returned to states and local communities. He supported the teaching of creationism in public schools, was a virulent anticommunist, denounced the decline of the traditional family and criticized the

---

<sup>10</sup> A. Section 501(c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 does not provide a tax exemption for, and Section 170(a)-(c) of the Code, does not provide a deduction for a contribution to, any organization that is operated for educational purposes unless the school or other educational institution involved has a racially nondiscriminatory policy as to students. B. As used in this Order, the term "racially nondiscriminatory policy as to students" means that the school or other educational institution admits the students of any race to all the rights, privileges, programs and activities generally accorded or made available to students at that school, and which includes, specifically but not exclusively, a policy of making no discrimination on the basis of race in administration of educational policies, applications for admission, of scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and extra-curricular programs. See "*Green V. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150 (D.D.C. 1971)," *Justia US Law* (1971), accessed September 27, 2019, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/330/1150/2126265/>.

<sup>11</sup> Randall Herbert Balmer, *Evangelicalism in America* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016), 112-13.

<sup>12</sup> Sutton, Part One, Kindle Edition.

promiscuity of the sixties generation.<sup>13</sup> He made no promises related to abortion.<sup>14</sup> Falwell's views on race can be understood not only by his commitment to segregation, but also through his views of the civil rights movement in general and Martin Luther King, Jr. in particular. During the 1960's as Lyndon Johnson introduced civil rights legislation, Falwell conspired with J. Edgar Hoover to distribute propaganda created by the FBI against Martin Luther King to discredit King and the entire Civil Rights movement.<sup>15</sup> In a sermon entitled, "Ministers and Marchers," Falwell expressed his disapproval of the Civil Rights movement:

While the church leaders are so obsessed with the alleged discrimination against Negroes in the South, very little is said about the same situation in the North... If as much effort could be put into winning people to Jesus Christ across the land as is being exerted in the present civil rights movement, America would be turned upside down for God. Hate and prejudice would certainly be in a great measure overcome. Churches would be filled with sincere souls seeking God.<sup>16</sup>

In a *Crossfire* interview with Pat Buchanan in 1983, Falwell objected to the establishment of a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday supposedly because King's FBI records were under seal. Since the records were under seal, Falwell contended there was no way of attesting to King's true character. "He could be as clean as Billy Graham" Falwell said.<sup>17</sup> But there was no way of knowing without having access to his FBI records.

Falwell's commitment to racial segregation was not only exemplified in his opposition to integration of schools, he also supported segregation on an international scale through his support of the Botha regime in South Africa. While many public officials and clergy throughout the world and in the United States called for economic sanctions against the Botha regime to help

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

In the years leading up to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution to work for legislation that would allow for the possibility for abortion under conditions such as rape, incest, severe fetal deformity, and evidence of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.<sup>14</sup> The Southern Baptists reaffirmed that position on abortion in 1974 and in 1976. W.A. Criswell who had been president of the Southern Baptist Convention stated when *Roe v. Wade* was handed down, "I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person." He further stated, "and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed." Some Baptists even applauded the decision. W. Barry Garrett of Baptist Press wrote, "Religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision." Even the evangelicals who disagreed with the decision were not motivated to mobilize against the ruling. Floyd Robertson of the National Association of Evangelicals did not believe the decision would warrant legal action by evangelical. Rather, he contended that the decision was an indication of how different the moral standards of the state were from the higher standards of evangelicals, "The church and state must be separate. The actions and conduct of Christians transcend the secular community for which the state is responsible."

<sup>15</sup> "Jerry Falwell Sr., Laying Racist Foundations," *The Rogue Fundamentalist: Going AWOL from the Culture Wars and Loving Humanity* (2019), accessed September 13, 2019, <https://rcwilkinson.com/2019/05/09/jerry-falwell-sr-laying-racist-foundations/>.

<sup>16</sup> Sutton, Kindle Edition, Chapter 2.8.

<sup>17</sup> Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan, "Falwell Opposes Milk Day in 1983," recorded 1983, CNN, Atlanta, GA, accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcQbzZMW2Vo>.

bring an end to Apartheid, Falwell opposed sanctions. He publicly denounced Bishop Desmond Tutu as a phony and began a campaign to stop the imposition of sanctions against South Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Having established Falwell's history of racism, we can now move to analysis of one of his sermons for the ways his preaching supports the hierarchies that have shaped the social, cultural, educational, political, and economic institutions of the United States. We will also examine his preaching for ways white culture is portrayed as being the norm against which all other cultures, groups and individuals are measured and often found wanting.

In March of 1982, Falwell spoke at the Cleveland City Club. Though the setting was secular, Falwell contended during the question and answer period at the end that the words he was speaking are ones he spoke often from his own pulpit at the Thomas Road Baptist Church. Therefore, we will consider this speech a sermon. The purpose of the sermon was to convey to the listeners the principles of the Moral Majority. The Moral Majority was a coalition of evangelical Christians organized to influence public policy. Their stated goal was to help America regain her former greatness.<sup>19</sup> In the sermon, Falwell highlighted seven principles that facilitated America's ascendancy to greatness in the past and if embraced once more, would allow America to experience greatness again.

**Introduction:** Falwell stated that living by God's principles promotes a nation to greatness. Violating Godly principles brings a nation to shame. He posited that it was after World War II that America began to forget the principles that brought them to where they were.

**Analysis:** The whiteness that needs to be unmasked here lies in the contention that the United States was a moral nation before World War II. In order to focus on the post World War II period as the period of the United States' moral demise, he had to ignore obvious immoralities such as Native American genocide, African American slavery, discriminatory immigration policies (such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of the late 1800's) and Japanese internment during World War II just to name a few. Whiteness often does not perceive atrocities perpetrated against people of color to be immoral. In homiletical whiteness, wrong exists when laws, traditions and practices negatively impact white people. When white people are benefitting from immoral behavior against people of color who are the minority, the immoral behavior is deemed necessary or inconsequential for the well-being of the majority.

After World War II, social unrest began to be the norm in American society. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's, the gay rights movement of the 1960's and 70's, the fight to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in the 70's and early 80's were all affronts to the values of the Moral Majority. The web of oppressions that supported whiteness were beginning to unravel. The Moral Majority was a way for those committed to whiteness to fight back.

**Principle One: The principle of the dignity of human life.** He argued that if people looked back through the history of this nation, they would find that the United States had always stood

---

<sup>18</sup> Robert Pear, "Falwell Denounces Tutu as a Phony," *The New York Times*, August 21 1985, accessed September 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/08/21/world/falwell-denounces-tutu-as-a-phony.html?login=email&auth=login-email>.

<sup>19</sup> Banwart, 133.

up for the dignity of human life. He supported Reagan's policies in El Salvador because it was a rational thing to do. Reagan's policies would stop the spread of communism before it made its way to the United States. Roe v. Wade was a great violation of this principle of the dignity of human life. With the deaths of 10-12 million people, more died by abortion than by all the wars that have ever been fought. God is displeased with this nation for participating in biological holocaust.

**Analysis:** Whiteness can justify the use of military force against people of color when it is in support of policies they feel advance the preservation of their culture and beliefs. Reagan was a virulent anticommunist. When the leftist Sandinista revolutionaries in El Salvador overthrew the corrupt government and began to redistribute wealth and expropriate large estates, Reagan began funding the overthrow of the Sandinistas to the tune of \$3 billion. While Reagan's policies claimed to be stopping the spread of communism, the policies of the Sandinistas were socialist. Reagan effectively stopped the spread of socialism in Central America.<sup>20</sup> Hundreds of innocent men, women and children were massacred by Reagan Administration backed forces.<sup>21</sup> Whiteness does not apply the principle of the dignity of human life to people of color.

Whiteness prioritized the lives of the unborn over the lives of already born people of color because powerful social conservatives discovered that white Christian conservatives would vote if abortion was on the ballot.<sup>22</sup> Once white Christian conservatives showed up to the polls, they would support other policies the Moral Majority wanted them to.

**Principle Two: Principle of the traditional monogamist family.** One man and one woman for a lifetime. Since World War II, with the assistance of Hollywood, the television industry and social engineers, the nation has forgotten that the family is the basic unit of society. There is little emphasis on family besides *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Waltons*, and others where a man and a woman love each other and children respect their parents and leaders. There needs to be a role model other than the playing up of minority problems that do exist. Sure they should present life the way it is. They should also present that the reality that 93% of all Americans believe the husband and wife relationship is the ideal. Falwell stated that he did believe in civil rights and housing accommodations for homosexuals. However, society should not condone it as an acceptable lifestyle (legally or otherwise).

**Analysis:** Whiteness is threatened by abortion. If women have access to abortion they can achieve social independence and no longer need men to take care of them. The roles of women in society would change because they would no longer be confined to the home and be full-time nurturers of children.<sup>23</sup> Whiteness is thoroughly patriarchal. Note the ideal television families Falwell cited were white where the males are head of the households, women stayed at home to

---

<sup>20</sup> "Reagan and the 'Iran-Contra' Affair," *BBC News* (2004), accessed September 9, 2019, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/269619.stm>.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Bonner, "Time for a Us Apology to El Salvador," *The Nation* (2016), accessed September 28, 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/time-for-a-us-apology-to-el-salvador/>.

<sup>22</sup> "Jerry Falwell Sr., Laying Racist Foundations."

<sup>23</sup> Banwart, 139.

raise the children and the children were obedient to the parents. *The Jeffersons* and *Different Strokes* were also shows about families being aired when Falwell was preaching this sermon. However, they were not cited as models to be emulated. Whiteness is also threatened by homosexuality. The stated objection to homosexuality is that it is in contradiction with scripture. The actual objection is that homosexuality is outside of the straight male norm that is taught, socialized, and politicized. Sexism, male domination, and heterosexism are completely dependent on men having unrestricted access to women and women relating exclusively to men.<sup>24</sup> To make their public case against gay rights, adherents of whiteness likened homosexuals to criminal such as pedophiles, rapists and murderers.<sup>25</sup>

**Principle Three: Common Decency.** Modesty and decency used to be an acceptable principle. Pornography used to be hidden. Now it is in the convenience store at the eye level of a five year old child. Pornography is demeaning to womanhood and the value systems of boys and girls. Bedrooms scenes [in movies and television shows] could stop at the doorknob. Children should learn the values of life from the parents, teachers. Thanks to the work of the Moral Majority, there is a twenty-seven percent decrease in gratuitous sex and decreases in profanity and violence. Networks beginning to act responsibly. Good things happening.

**Analysis:** Whiteness claims its values to be the values of all. While there are many who would agree that pornography is misogynistic and demeaning of women, some of those same people would also advocate for sex education in public schools so that boys and girls would be empowered to make their own decisions. The Moral Majority and other religious conservatives object to sex education. The stated objection is that it undermines family values and assumes the role of sex educator that parents should play. The unstated objection of whiteness to sex education is that it chips away at the core of whiteness. In public school sex education curriculum, children and youth learn about sex, intimacy, the diversity of gender and sexuality, and the ability of each person to control his/her/their own procreation through contraception or willing participation in or abstinence from sexual activity. In the construct of whiteness, men control all bodies, sex is for procreation and the only legitimate genders are male and female which are lived as masculinity and femininity. A more expansive and inclusive sex education curriculum is a threat to whiteness.

**Principle Four: Principle of the Work Ethic** – We should help those who cannot help themselves. Instead, this country raised up two or three generations that believe they are owed a living because they belong to the human family. Teach young people, even those who don't have to work, to learn how to make a living, learn how to live and become self-sufficient. This country has become lazy. A doctor in Boston is criticizing Reagan because of cutbacks in entitlements and claiming that the aged are being hurt while at the same time Reagan is spending on war heads, building a \$50K dining room at the white house where senior staff could eat and meet at

---

<sup>24</sup> Christine M. Smith, *Preaching Justice : Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 87-109.

<sup>25</sup> Banwart, 146.

the same time. Reagan did not create the problems. Problems are not going to be corrected next week or next year. It is going to take a long time. Redistribution of wealth is problematic.

**Analysis:** Whiteness rears its head in this principle through its unwavering commitment to the individualistic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps quintessential American mentality. While Falwell acknowledged that cutbacks on entitlements may be hurting seniors, he was still staunchly opposed to the redistribution of wealth even if it meant that the elderly had to suffer. This unqualified commitment to support Reagan and his policies revealed that though he said he believed the country should help those who cannot help themselves, he was willing to sacrifice this belief to publicly support a president he hoped would pass legislation that would promote the Moral Majority's agenda. Falwell did not acknowledge that many of the corporations who were beneficiaries of the Reagan tax cuts which he [Falwell] supported did not pay a living wage. In his unflinching support of Reagan's policies, Falwell's whiteness is revealed as being pro-big business at the expense of the workers. Whiteness supports women earning less than men because men are supposed to be the breadwinners in a male-female household. Whiteness is unconcerned that the unemployment rate for minorities has always been and continues to be higher than the unemployment rate of whites. Whiteness refuses to acknowledge that some people have more and longer bootstraps upon which to pull than others.

Whiteness can also be found in the Moral Majority's support of Welfare Reform. Reagan's welfare reform policy was passed largely based on the myth of the Welfare Queen. The Welfare Queen was a culturally produced narrative of a single woman who is head of her household. She works full-time and has several children whom she cannot properly supervise because she is away from home for large periods of time working to support them. She is single because of her attitude and aggressiveness that her male friends and husbands find emasculating. Her black children fail in school and in life because of her failure to embody good moral values that would translate into better social status and conditions were they fully embraced. From a white, male, epistemological worldview, white upper- and middle-class children succeed because of the care and nurture they receive at home. Black children could succeed as well if they received similar attention.<sup>26</sup> The mythology of the Welfare Queen fails to acknowledge the reality of racial systemic injustice.

**Principle Five: The Abrahamic covenant.** God deals with nations based on how they relate to the Jews even though God loves all the races. The Moral Majority opposes any deal with the Jordanians. Many nations that surround Israel are committed to its extinction. God is dealing with America favorably because of our treatment of the state of Israel. There can be no doubt that legally, beginning in 1948 the land belongs to the Jews. We cannot get away from the fact that the Abrahamic Covenant says "I will bless those who bless you..."

**Analysis:** In this principle, whiteness insists that the fate of the entire nation is dependent on the Moral Majority's interpretation Genesis 12:1-3 also known as the Abrahamic Covenant. The Moral Majority's literal interpretation of scripture is the source of their steadfast support of Israel and its policies. They believe that as long as the United States supports Israel, we will be blessed

---

<sup>26</sup> Debra J. Mumford, *Envisioning the Reign of God : Preaching for Tomorrow*, first edition . ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2019), 135-36.

by God. If we waver in our support in any way, we will be cursed by God. Their biblical interpretation prevents them from acknowledging Israel's human rights abuses. According to Human Rights Watch, the Israeli military killed more than 2,000 Palestinians in the three Gaza conflicts of 2008-9, 2012, and 2014. Many of these deaths occurred because of Israel's failure to take precautions needed to protect civilians in accordance with international humanitarian law. Israel has facilitated the occupation of the West Bank by Israeli citizens which is in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and they expropriated thousands of acres of Palestinian land for Israeli settlements.<sup>27</sup> Whiteness, in this case, does not object to the suffering and death of people they deem to be living outside of the will of God. They are collateral damage.

**Principle Six: Principle of God centered education.** He and the Moral Majority believe in God centered but not Christ centered education. He was raised up in public schools which was his only contact with the bible or hymn or prayer. His father never attended church in his life. He [Falwell] was studying mechanical engineering in college at the age of eighteen when he heard Dr. Charles E. Fuller radio broadcast, the old fashioned revival hour. He accepted Christ as his savior and bought first bible in January of 1952. He enrolled in Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri. The Moral Majority is not in favor of mandated prayers or bible readings. They are for the recognition of the God in schools. Madeline [O'Hare] has the right to be an atheist with all the rights and privileges. She did not build this country nor her vintage. The nation was built by God fearing people and has become great because of it. He thinks that voluntary silent prayer would not be a violation of the separation of church and state.

**Analysis:** The term "God-centered education" is code for educating children into the ways, beliefs and traditions of values of white conservative evangelical Christians. The principle of God centered education is a means to controlling the future of whiteness by ensuring that future generations are taught to live by its core tenants. Whiteness is at the core of this principle and has its impetus in racism and the strivings of white conservatives for racial segregation. Beginning with the passage of the Green v. Connally decision which required private schools to admit students of all races, conservatives have been in pursuit of policies that would enable them to receive tax exempt status for their private Christian schools without any mandate for racial integration. The Moral Majority had hoped that Reagan would be the one to facilitate this. However, Reagan proved unhelpful.

**Principle seven: Principle of divinely ordained institutions.** There are only three intuitions ordained of God: Home, state or civil government, and the religious institutions (the tabernacle, temple, synagogue, church. In order for any nation to be healthy, three legs of the tripod must be healthy. The Moral Majority works for the rebuilding of the traditional family, healthy government and free government. They do not believe in violating the separation of church and state. Nobody ever yelled at Dr. King for violating the separation of church and state. When conservative men stand up, everybody has a hernia and there are more of us. We preached to ourselves that Christians should not be involved in politics. He [Falwell] has the right to speak as

---

<sup>27</sup> "Israel: 50 Years of Occupation Abuses: Ramp up Pressure for Accountability on All Sides," *Human Rights Watch* (2017), accessed September 28, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/04/israel-50-years-occupation-abuses>.

long as he doesn't violate the rights and privileges of others. There is a President in the White House who believes in the sanctity of life and is taking a stand on these issues. The President believes in the free enterprise system and is trying to reverse the terrible trend toward socialism. The President is trying to rebuild the military defenses of this country. He [the President] hates war. Any sensible person hates war. But the only deterrent to war is a strong national defense. People say they are in favor of unilateral disarmament. In response I always ask the question, "Do you lock your doors at night?" They always respond, "Of course I do." The fact is there are some bad people in the world. This is not the kingdom of heaven. It's the kingdom of earth. And while we hope there will never be another war, the only guarantee is that we are so tough, no one dares to pick on us.

**Analysis:** The whiteness underlying this particular principle can be unmasked by highlighting Falwell's whole hearted endorsement of the free enterprise system while denouncing the evils of socialism. Falwell and the Moral Majority believe the American Dream mythology. They believe that in this country anyone who works hard and plays by the rules can attain the American Dream. Free market capitalism plays a big role in their belief in the American Dream. However, they are willing to support a government, because it is divinely ordained, that does not make opportunities to attain that dream available for all. They willingly support a government that engages in war and kills innocent people as long as the war supports the advancement of free-market capitalism such as when Falwell endorsed Reagan's war in El Salvador to quell the spread of socialism. Whiteness hides its racism behind its moral principles.

The whiteness of the Moral Majority relies upon the hierarchy of biblical texts to further its agenda. Texts such as Romans 13 instruct the members of the early Christian community to subject themselves to governing authorities because governing authorities have been appointed by God. Texts such as the household codes in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 provide details of a divinely ordered household. Texts such as Matthew 16 declare that the founding of the church was God's will. However, Biblical scholars have critiqued these texts as being written to maintain power and influence of particular factions in the church. For example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza critiques the household codes. Fiorenza believes that the authors of Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, Titus and 1 Peter were motivated to prescribe patriarchal hierarchy, like Paul, by their desire for the Christian community to meet the Aristotelian-inspired patriarchal standards of the larger Greco-Roman society. The household codes directed wealthy women not to serve as leaders of churches. The codes made it possible for male and female slaves to be exploited, even in the Christian community.<sup>28</sup> Highlighting divine ordination as principle provides the Moral Majority with biblical justification for many elements of its agenda. Rejecting academic biblical scholarship and its critique of the bible which would, in turn, open up opportunities conservative Christians to apply academic biblical critiques to their world maintains patriarchal power inside and outside of the church.

### **Conclusion**

Homiletical whiteness is the art of preaching social, political and economic hierarchy that shapes the social, cultural, educational, political and economic institutions of our society. Jerry Falwell

---

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her : A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 291.

Sr.'s seven point sermon provided a vision of a world dominated by the principles of the Moral Majority. In that world women are dominated by men. LGBTQIA have few if any civil rights. Black and brown people throughout the nation and around the world serve as collateral damage when the future of divinely ordained government policies are at stake.

# A HOMILETICAL INTERDISCIPLINARY INTERROGATION OF UNMASKING WHITENESS

HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Timothy Eaton Memorial Associate Professor of Preaching  
Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, Toronto

<http://www.emmanuel.utoronto.ca/>

Copyright © 2019 HyeRan Kim-Cragg

**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the invisibility of whiteness, operative in homiletics and other disciplines. I demonstrate the lack of naming social location in academic writing as an example of whiteness. I also interrogate how the work of the racialized scholars is parceled out as specialized, while white scholars' work is universalized and normalized in the case of publishing edited volumes and selecting course readings for students.

Once the reality whiteness in the academic fields including homiletics is made visible, I make a case how the use of art in worship space and the location of the pulpit may convey whiteness. I also probe the symbolism of color (black and white) that is embedded not only in visible art but in language, especially within the text of the Bible. Finally, two stories in the Bible will be discussed as a homiletical interpretive task of unmasking whiteness leading to preaching justice.

## Introduction

This article examines the invisibility of whiteness. The invisibility of whiteness operates throughout academia beyond homiletics. One example is that white authors still rarely self-locate in their academic writing. White people's lack of self-exposure is juxtaposed with racialized<sup>1</sup> scholars' pressure to self-declare. Another example is that the work done by racialized scholars is parceled out as specialized, resulting in further marginalization, while white scholars' work is universalized and centralized. A further issue that teachers of homiletics must be conscious of is how we select (choose and omit) readings for students.

Once the reality of whiteness in the field of homiletics is made visible, I examine preaching practices and environments related to the issue. One example is the matter of the space within which the sermon is delivered. Here I make a case that the use of art and the location of the pulpit may convey whiteness. I also probe the symbolism of color that is embedded, not only in visible art but in language, especially within the text of the Bible. Two stories in the Bible from the Book of Ruth and Genesis will be discussed as a homiletical interpretive task of unmasking whiteness.

## Unmasking Whiteness in Writing, Publishing, and Selecting Readings

---

<sup>1</sup> Here the term "racialized" is used throughout the article, recognizing that race is a social construct, following Ontario Human Rights Commission that describes people as "racialized person" or "racialized group" instead of the more outdated and inaccurate terms "racial minority," "visible minority," "person of color" or "non-White." <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/racial-discrimination-race-and-racism-fact-sheet> (accessed July 23 2019)

I begin with an assumption: it is not a matter of asking if the scholarship of homiletics embeds whiteness but it is a matter of revealing how it does so. With that assumption, I self-critically examine how we as scholars write, how we publish, and how we select course readings.

### *Lack of Self-Locating*

Let me locate myself. I am a Korean migrant living in Canada. What I bring and contribute to the scholarship of Homiletics is intricately connected to my migration experience. I am racialized and bilingual. Along with migration experience, I engage postcolonial and feminist theories into my scholarship and teaching because colonialism, gender, language and race matter to preaching. As homileticians who write books and journal articles in scholarly publications, we need to articulate our particular points of views shaped by our social locations. This articulation should include naming our own biases and blind spots, our vantage points as well as our limits of such points of view that are also influenced by particular contexts including postcolonial realities.

While I am aware of the danger of generalizing here, I contend that many Anglo male homileticians of European descent have not taken sufficient time to self-identify in their scholarly writings. Because they do not consciously name their particular identities, but due to their positions in power, their claims and their views are considered universal. However, postmodern thought has taught us any universal and normative view should be questioned and deconstructed. To embody postmodern is to be “uncomfortable with and suspicious of words like ‘truth,’ ‘reality,’ ‘objectivity,’ ... ‘universality,’ and ‘absoluteness,’” Ronald Allen writes.<sup>2</sup> This postmodern insight contributes to the strategy to unmask whiteness.

According to Tema Okun, one of the signs of white supremacy culture is objectivity and neutrality. In white supremacy culture, there is the “belief that there is such a thing as being objective or ‘neutral’” and that “emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process.”<sup>3</sup> From the persistent work of feminists we know that emotions are equally valid, integral to wholeness and scholarly work. We also know such universal and logic-centered claims are power-laden. A good historical example of a universal claim embedded in language is the universal use of the word “men” to represent all humans when it really only reflects male normative dominance in the world.

Homileticians who study Gospel and culture know that culture in general and white Anglo male culture in particular are far from neutral, let alone beneficial to all. Thus, those of us who benefit from the racial and cultural hierarchy must recognize that we hold dominant power in society and that our experiences are regarded as normative. As Christine Smith noted, homileticians with racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation privileges find it difficult to describe their social location; whereas those who are marginalized and minoritized are usually better able to articulate and “take responsibility for the limited, prejudicial, and often oppressive dimensions

---

<sup>2</sup> Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Tema Okun, *White Supremacy Culture*, 2001. <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>

of one's human identity in relation to the rest of humanity."<sup>4</sup> I would like to nuance her argument on marginalized or the minoritized homileticians' abilities to better articulate their identities. It is not because they have a special ability or a special gift to take on this responsibility of self-awareness but because they often are forced to locate themselves. For marginalized communities, self-locating is not a voluntary choice but is often an involuntary imposition forced by the normalized gaze of colleagues, demanding that they legitimize their existence. "In the act of seeing," as Miguel A De La Torre puts it, people in power "create that which legitimizes and justifies their position, vis-à-vis the colonized and disenfranchised."<sup>5</sup> This position of gazing creates normativity. It is normal or acceptable for white male scholars not to self-identify. This normativity masks their whiteness. As a structure of power, whiteness produces the normative culture that continues to benefit white people.

The theme of this year's Academy of Homiletics, "unmasking homiletical whiteness," has chosen a good metaphor. The verb "unmask" conjures the image of revealing someone's hidden face. The mask of the whiteness exists. It conceals a hidden reality like air. Whiteness in homiletics is invisible but breathes deeply in the cultural norm of whiteness in the academia and preaching practice. Thus I propose that we begin this unmasking as a self-critical discipline by declaring our social location, naming biases and privileges. This naming is not an exercise in political correctness but a theological act of confession with humility and honesty. The homiletical task of self-locating requires humility and honesty because it involves vulnerability, exposing the preacher's own limits and weaknesses. Barbara Blaisdell puts it this way: "We must be honest about our own doubts, questions, and experiences as we prepare to write. This part of preaching is confessional. The final sermon need not be autobiographical, but it must reflect the real issues and struggles of a person of faith."<sup>6</sup> Confession is a theological act undertaken by a preacher.<sup>7</sup> Anna Carter Florence further develops the theological dimension of preaching by framing it as testimony in a confessional sense, and the preaching act as narrating one's life, a life that is inevitably shaped by colonialism, migration, and other difficult realities.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Racialization of the Publication Industry*

This homiletical task of self-locating goes beyond a personal discipline or an individual choice; it must also involve a structural look at academic publications as a system. The impact of whiteness is felt personally, but its nature is structural. As elsewhere argued, whiteness is a structural power and its presence is most prevalent in its invisibility.<sup>9</sup> Courtney Goto offers to

---

<sup>4</sup> Christine Smith, ed., *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Miguel A De La Torre, "Identity Cross-Dressing while Teaching in a Global Context," in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, eds. Kwok Pui-lan (Grand Rapids: Baylor University Press, 2015), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald J. Allen, Barbara S. Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnson, *Theology for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 182.

<sup>7</sup> Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Encountering Handicappism, Ageism, Heterosexism, Sexism, White Racism, Classism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "The Emperor Has No Clothes!: Exposing Whiteness as Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula," *Religious Education* 114:3 (2019): 239-251.

examine the edited volume as an example of the hidden structural problem of whiteness in practical theology. As an example she tackles *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*,<sup>10</sup> a volume edited by two white scholars who asked her to contribute to “the Asian American chapter.” She noticed two other racialized scholars were also asked to write their chapters (African American and Latino), while none of the white scholars were asked to write their own ethnic and racial chapters. Instead, they were invited to address approaches that are central (meaning foundational or well-studied) in the field. After Goto vocally raised the concern of the racial parceling out of volumes and subject matter, a chapter entitled “the white practical theology” was added. Yet, the whole structure of the book which included 15 chapters in total, Goto notes, “assumes that the field is divisible into broad approaches that are seemingly untouched by race, while the work of addressing issues of race is assigned to isolated chapters coded as such.”<sup>11</sup> She also points out that this practice is pursued in other theological disciplines as well.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to deny that academic publishing culture breeds white invisible normativity. The well-intentioned effort of including non-white scholarships ends up further ghettoizing and tokenizing their voices. That is why the late Dale Andrews who was asked to write an African American chapter for the same volume in question above writes, “We have not escaped the marginalization of studying the marginalized.”<sup>13</sup>

In this regard, it is worth highlighting one book that attempted to escape the marginalization involved in studying the marginalized. Ruth Duck’s textbook on introduction to Christian worship put white worship as “a” particular pattern along with African American, Korean, Latina/Latino worship patterns. Her intention to structure the book this way was to unmask whiteness. White worship tradition has “much to commend it,” she explained, “just as it has much to learn from other traditions, as it takes its place in the rainbow—but not as the norm—of Christian worship in North America.”<sup>14</sup> Compared to Duck’s textbook, James White’s *Introduction to Christian Worship*,<sup>15</sup> notwithstanding its excellent research, comprehensive historical view and encyclopedic knowledge of the classical patterns of Western worship traditions, is obviously an example of embedded whiteness. While it only presents the European and white North American measure of liturgy, its whiteness is masked by the lack of recognition as such. Unfortunately, however, this book is one of the most-well used textbooks for introductory worship courses in Protestant traditions not only in North America but in other parts of the world (translated into many different languages, including Korean, my mother tongue).

---

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Courtney T. Goto, “Writing in Compliance with the Racialized ‘Zoo’ of Practical Theology,” in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, eds. Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Boston: Brill, 2016), 112.

<sup>12</sup> Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), cited in *Ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Dale P. Andrews, “African American Practical Theology,” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, eds. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2013), 51.

<sup>15</sup> James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

The fact that the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition has been printed in 2000 underscores its importance and the widespread and uncritical acceptance of the whiteness of Christian worship education and textbook industry around the world.

Turning to textbooks in Homiletics, I wonder if there are any books that decenter whiteness. If we cannot locate such books in our homiletics bookshelf, the absence suggests that whiteness is still powerfully at work in the field of homiletics. To repeat, whiteness is most powerful when it is invisible. It breeds well in its absence. Andrew Wymer notes that the fact that white homiletical discourse in journal articles and books is silent about whiteness is an evidence that whiteness is pervasive.<sup>16</sup> The reality is dire when one looks at Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching* as an example, which is the most sold textbook (over 300, 000 copies) in Homiletics in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century in North America.<sup>17</sup> Robinson's book has been republished (in its 8<sup>th</sup> printing, 2007), and has been translated into other languages for use in different parts of the world. Yet, it too mainly reflects and represents the European and white North American experiences and understandings of homiletics. Few of the authors Robinson cites are racialized and thus the contribution of them is almost null. The absence of racialized voices in Robinson's is an indication that white voices in term of their experiences and perspectives become normalized and represented in unexamined ways. It is painful evidence that whiteness is not an issue that scholars in the fields of preaching, worship, and practical theology have taken seriously enough. Sharon Fennema puts it this way, "Whiteness comes with a sense of culturelessness because it is 'just there,' the atmosphere backdrop against which other cultures appear as exotic and unique." That is why "it may be hard to imagine overt manifestations of the power and privilege that constitute whiteness," yet, "the operation of whiteness as both invisible and normative within worshipping communities in the United States is pervasive."<sup>18</sup>

### *Selecting Course Reading Materials*

As instructors who choose books and journal articles for courses on preaching, we need to be careful and intentional about how we choose (or omit) reading materials for students. This is an important consideration, especially when we take into account the changing demographics of our student bodies, knowing their diverse identities and multiple social locations. As teachers we must include readings that reflect students' lived experiences and their marginalized (and privileged) identities. We also need to include readings that help our students grow in terms of broadening their limited views and challenging their unexamined prejudices. Barbara Lundblad invites us to think the following questions when we select readings: "Are there readings by women as well as men? Will the voices of different cultures and traditions be heard? Are theological perspectives from the worldwide, ecumenical church present? Are there readings that are grounded in our particular location, as well as those that help us see communities that are

---

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Wymer, "Knee-Deep Preaching: A Homiletical Engagement of White Bullshit" *Practical Matters* (July 2018): 7, found at <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Wymer-KneeDeep-Preaching.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Sharon R. Fennema, "Postcolonial Whiteness: Being-With in Worship" in *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One is Holy*, ed. Cláudio Carvalhaes (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 278–279.

very different from our own?"<sup>19</sup> It is imperative to self-examine whether materials written by nonwhite scholars are assigned as core and additional readings. Despite the growing numbers of racialized scholars, we have not paid sufficient attention to their work. When the academy as a space of whiteness functions as a status quo, it is easy to cite white authors exclusively without consciously and explicitly recognizing them as white.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far, I have examined issues that matter to scholars of homiletics as authors and teachers. We must learn to name our social location as the basic but necessary first step of unmasking whiteness, making our privilege and marginalization visible in scholarly writing. Conversely, as authors who work with different authors in edited volumes, we must be vigilant how non-white racialized authors may be singled out racially, and targeted or tokenized for work limited to a racial point of view. As teachers, who have power to choose readings for courses, we must also be responsible for decentering whiteness by including diverse voices and marginalized perspectives in our readings. In addition to race considerations, we may add class, age, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of different voices and perspectives needed. Next, we turn our attention to preaching and the preaching environment as we continue our unmasking of whiteness.

## **Unmasking Whiteness in Preaching Practices**

### *Preacher-Congregation Communication and Dynamic*

What is preaching? Can it include physical gestures, visual representations and even silence? What makes the act of preaching? There are many answers to these fundamental homiletical questions, but one may agree that preaching happens in worship. Preaching assumes that there is a gathered body who came to a particular place to encounter the holy that is revealed in but not limited to scripture. This question assumes that preaching is a distinct act that some are called to do. I do not promote a solo preaching idea here. As a matter of fact, I applaud the steady critique that preaching is not the monopoly of one person in a congregation but must be shared work of the congregation.<sup>21</sup> Germane to the topic of whiteness, I highlight that such an individualistic attitude of the solo preaching is one of the symptoms of the white culture for white culture privileges a focus on individuals and not groups.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Barbara K. Lundblad, "Designing the Introductory Course in Preaching," in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, eds. Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 211.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin, "White Practical Theology," in *Opening Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2014), 258.

<sup>21</sup> E. g., in a chronological order, Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: Seabury: 1967), Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1971), John McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Leonora Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), Lucy Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), Joseph Jeter and Ronald Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregations* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Tema Okun, *White Supremacy Culture*, 2001. <http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>

However, while advocating for the importance of the centrality of communication and interaction in the preaching event, I want to establish the difference between the preacher and the congregation without assuming that there is one single privileged person in a congregation. An effective and faithful preacher needs to know what the congregation's needs are. Meeting the needs of the congregation is challenging when it comes to the issue of whiteness in a predominantly white congregation. While whiteness culminates in the problem of racism, it embodies other issues, including gender. In fact, the problem of race and gender often intersects rather than exists in isolation; thus it may be fruitful to raise the issues of sexism and racism together in the discourse of whiteness in the pulpit.

According to The Faith Communities Today 2010 national survey, only 12% of 11,000 congregations in the US have a female as their senior or sole ordained preacher 12% and this reflects the decrease of Evangelical congregations dropping to 9%.<sup>23</sup> This data do not specify any ethnicity. However, it rings true to the experience of Teresa Fry Brown who came from Black churches. She presents a particular challenge as a Black woman preacher. The pulpit is generally the venue of men in Black churches, as it imitates, she writes, "the exclusivity of the white churches" that came from the colonial slavery era of 1700s. Yet she does not blame this sexist practice of preaching authority solely as the responsibility of the white church but holds the Black church accountable. She unearths how the propaganda of the Black church community as the "cradle of freedom" combatting racism and dismantling white supremacy masks the denial of the access to the pulpit for black women.<sup>24</sup> That is why another Afro-American scholar Katie Cannon also works to debunk and disentangle the messages in African American rhetoric when these messages of justice and liberation veil the injustice of keeping women from preaching.<sup>25</sup> Brown and Cannon's self-critical view of their own racial and ethnic churches find a kindred spirit of Eunjoo Mary Kim who is also self-critical of her own Korean churches in terms of sexist and individual blessing oriented preaching practices, while critiquing the negative influence of white cultural imperialism in Korean American preaching.<sup>26</sup>

The pulpit as a gendered and sexist space is an age-old problem in church. One may claim that heterosexist patriarchy is one of the oldest forms of oppression in human society.<sup>27</sup> The challenge today is that the change is slow and may actually be going backwards. Statistics tell us that sexual and domestic violence imbued with homophobia and racism have escalated in recent years. In the era of the "Me-Too movement," a term coined by activist Tarana Burke in

---

<sup>23</sup> [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick\\_question3.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question3.html) (accessed June 25 2019)

<sup>24</sup> Teresa Fry Brown, "An African American Woman's Perspective: Renovating Sorrow's Kitchen," in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 44-45.

<sup>25</sup> Katie G. Cannon, "The Wounds of Jesus" Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil," in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 112.

<sup>26</sup> Eunjoo Mary Kim, "A Korean American Perspective: Singing a New Song in a Strange Land," *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 99-112.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 16-20.

2006,<sup>28</sup> it is shocking but not surprising to find that sexual abuse, harassment, and assaults of men against women, especially racialized women and heterosexist men against members of the LGBTQ community take place almost ubiquitously, at home, at work, and in church and politics. In this alarming situation, Barbara Patterson asks, “How many sermons have we heard that have no shared experiences with real women who suffered violence?”<sup>29</sup> The lack of homiletical reference on gender-based violence is related to the male-centered pulpit when the majority of preachers are still very white and very male, as well as very heterosexist.

When the congregation is very white, middle class, sexist, and heterosexist it is more difficult if preachers want to engage whiteness. Preaching as a communicative event cannot take place without the congregation. Lenora Tisdale writes that preachers are called to be both prophet and pastor and yet to balance between these seemingly opposite poles in preaching is hard. She makes diagnoses why there is resistance to prophetic preaching among preachers, I draw on three fears that directly point to the preacher’s fear of challenging the congregation addressing whiteness: 1. fear of conflict, 2. fear of dividing congregations, 3. the fear of being disliked or even fired. The preacher is reluctant to tackle whiteness if it looks to be realizing any of these three fears.<sup>30</sup> These layered fears become even more challenging when the preacher is not white and preaching to a predominantly white congregation. The racialized preacher’s position and role is extremely vulnerable.

#### *Whiteness in Architecture, Art, and Authority in the Worship Space*

Preaching happens in worship thus worship space is essential to preaching. Philosopher Susanne Langer speculates that human perceptions are affected by physical forms. She argues that architecture serves more than a functional purpose because it shapes a space of “human relations and activities.”<sup>31</sup> In this regard, the pulpit, as architecture in worship space shapes the relationships in the preaching event. This shaping is subtle but powerfully and intuitively communicating a certain message in affective, and often effective ways. If a pulpit is built as a big, wide, and elegant structure, it may communicate the majestic authority of the preaching and the preacher but it may also communicate something domineering, too. The elevation of the pulpit is an important aspect of its architecture as well. A suitably elevated pulpit maximizes visibility and audibility. But too much elevation may overemphasize the authority of the preacher. Unless it is unpacked to examine its roles, the pulpit construction may serve to perpetuate a negative status quo of the preaching authority.

---

<sup>28</sup> 11 years later on October 5, 2017, Me-Too movement went viral when the New York Times and New Yorker’s investigation went into and revealed the sexual misdeeds of Harvey Weinstein. The #MeToo movement is now spreading to the entire globe and entering into a courageous fury over the ways women are mistreated.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Patterson, “Preaching as Nonviolent Resistance,” in *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, eds. John McClure and Nancy Ramsay (Cleveland: Chalice, 1998), 105.

<sup>30</sup> Leonora Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 10–20.

<sup>31</sup> Susanne Langer, “Feeling and Form” in *Art and Its Significance*, ed. Stephen Davis Ross (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 235.

Yet, the discourse on the pulpit, its location, and its use, is never simple.<sup>32</sup> The location of the pulpit is more than utilitarian but symbolic; it creates the environment of the theological encounter. James White puts it this way: the location of the pulpit is important “not because of the place itself but because what God does for humans in that place.”<sup>33</sup> In my qualitative research on racialized women preachers in the United Church of Canada, interviewees were divided over the issue of the use of an elevated pulpit while preaching.<sup>34</sup> Those racialized women who preferred to use the pulpit for preaching argued that the pulpit is a symbol of preaching authority and that using it compensates for their marginal identities of their non-white female bodies. They also pointed out that the pulpit, for many churches, is still a man’s space and a white space, so it is important to claim it as women’s space as well as a racialized space by preaching from that very location. However, the voices of those who opposed using the pulpit argued that the elevated pulpit sets the preacher above and apart from the congregation, symbolizing a colonial theology that overvalues the authority of the preacher.<sup>35</sup>

Since preaching is part of liturgy, we as preachers must also investigate how whiteness is manifested in the symbols and art related to the liturgical season, especially the ways in which the symbols of light and darkness are employed in liturgy.<sup>36</sup> For example, the color white is associated with manifestation of the Divine presence, the *theophany*. The story of the transfiguration, for example, appearing in the liturgical season of Epiphany, describes Jesus “transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2, NRSV). In this Gospel text, the use of white as a sign of the Divine presence is obvious. It is hard to preach against this obvious sign revealed in Scripture. It is like rowing a boat against a powerful current. Christmas and Easter also use the color white. Here white communicates the meaning of goodness, joy, new life, and holiness in the western liturgical symbolism and culture. However, white does not mean the same thing in other cultures. White clothes in Western culture is associated with joyful celebrations (the wedding dress, for example) whereas the wearing of black is common when one is mourning.

But in other cultures (Korean for example), people wear white during funerals, and red or multi-colors during joyful celebrations such as birthdays and weddings. The color white signifies death and sadness in Korean and other East Asian cultures. The color white may not be necessarily negative, but it certainly communicates solemnity rather than joy and happiness. One may also point out that black does not have negative connotations in western culture all the time.

---

<sup>32</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Probing the pulpit: Postcolonial feminist perspectives” *Liturgy* 34:2 (2019): 22-25.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “Sharing the Feast and Hearing Complex Calling: A Study of Racialized Ordained Women Ministers of The United Church of Canada,” report submitted to the McGeachy Senior Scholarship Committee, 2011, <https://unitedchurchfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/Sharing-the-Feast-and-Hearing-Complex-Calling-HyeRan-Kim-Cragg.pdf> (accessed June 15 2019)

<sup>35</sup> Roxanne, Mountford, Roxanne, *The gendered pulpit: preaching in American Protestant spaces* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003); Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Oakville: Equinox, 2011), 37–50.

“Black tie,” for example, denotes formality usually associated with very happy, special events such as weddings. Judges and academics have worn black gown, including the Geneva gown called preacher’s gown, to emphasize their authority, which is something that is honored and respected. However, it should be noted that a dark color, including black, is negative in most cultures. The ubiquity of the color black as negative poses a serious problem. In the worst case, the color black associated with sinful, dirty, and dangerous meanings, is used to stigmatize black people and racialized people. Exposing this imperative in preaching with a more sustained examination of the color symbolism is necessary because it moves beyond art but is also prevalent in the interpretation and the translation of the scriptural texts which we turn to next.

### *Whiteness in the Interpretation of Scripture*

Lastly, but not least, preaching practice involves reading and interpreting sacred texts. The Bible has often been used to propagate the idea that it is “the transcendental text which all people in all cultures at all times in all circumstances should obey.”<sup>37</sup> To say that the Bible serves as a tool of oppression is not to deny the importance of the Bible as a tool to resist and liberate. Without question, readers and communities of faith who have suffered oppression have also found the Bible to be a source of freedom and hope. The Bible readily lends itself to transcultural readings even as it is often used to repress affirmations of difference.<sup>38</sup> Being aware of the ambivalence of the biblical authority and its impact, let us approach two issues, the use of the symbolism of color and racial bias contained in the text. We may do so using two texts, biblical stories, one from the Book of Ruth and the other concerning Noah’s son in the Book of Genesis.

The greatest danger in the use of color symbolism is to have a color associated in a negative way with a particular racialized group as pointed out earlier. The *Inclusive-Language Lectionary* has the following to say: “The New Testament imagery of light versus darkness is often used to contrast good with evil. The equation of darkness with evil, or that which is done in secret and out of the light, has unfortunately led some persons and groups to condemn and reject anything that is black or any dark-hued person as evil or somehow condemned by God.... While the biblical context may be free from racial intent, the too-easy misconception that dark people are also condemned and to be avoided has led to the use in this lectionary of terminology other than ‘dark and white’ as metaphors for what is either condemned or loved by God.”<sup>39</sup> Such a dichotomy is pervasive in the cultural and visible representations of the Bible.

One vivid example of such an interpretation is found in a famous visual depiction of Ruth and Orpah by William Blake, a white British man who lived during the colonial era. His

---

<sup>37</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, “A New Teaching with Authority: A Re-evaluation of the Authority of the Bible,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 176.

<sup>38</sup> Kathleen O’Connor, “Crossing Borders: Biblical Studies in a Trans-cultural World,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 328.

<sup>39</sup> *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary: Readings for Year C*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox; New York: Pilgrim, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 262.

depiction is called “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” (1795).<sup>40</sup> In this painting, Ruth, who is interpreted to have been faithful by clinging to Naomi, the woman from Judah, Israel, is portrayed as lighter in complexion and with blonde hair. Orpah, on the other hand, is painted with black hair and wearing a darker color dress, turning away from Naomi. It is fair to assume that being both Moabite, Ruth and Orpah would have shared the same ethnic and racial identity. But Blake’s visual interpretation of the Bible suggests otherwise.

As teachers of preaching, we need to equip our students to learn to question why Blake painted that way, investigating what is behind his interpretation and who and what influenced his reading of this text. The invitation to question is a part of preaching, in line with hermeneutics of suspicion. This kind of preaching involves challenging the traditionally dominant and conventional readings of the Bible which reinforce racist and ethnocentric patterns of thought. In this regard, Laura Donaldson’s reading of Orpah is helpful for preachers.<sup>41</sup> Orpah has been cast by many Jewish and Christian scholars in a negative light who accuse without textual evidence that she is irresponsible and that she betrayed her mother-in-law. Some even go so far as to accuse her of being an enemy of Israel and cursed by God while praising Ruth choosing God of Israel because “Israel is the inheritor of the One Universal Creator.”<sup>42</sup> Donaldson instead lifts her up as the one who made a decision to go back to her mother’s house. She does this reading from her Cherokee perspective. Her social location shapes her biblical interpretation, enabling her to illuminate Orpah in a less biased way. Donaldson debunks the traditional interpretation of Ruth who chose to leave a childish life of savagery and clung to the promise of civilization and true religion, who has become an ancestor of Jesus, namely, Ruth as winner takes it all! Instead, she turns Orpha’s negative value into a positive one, resurrecting her as the woman who took a courageous step of self and communal affirmation: “the choosing of the indigenous mother’s house over that of the alien Israelite Father.”<sup>43</sup>

Another example from the Hebrew Bible that we need to look at to unmask whiteness practice is the story of Noah’s son Ham in Genesis (9:18-27). It is an important text to interrogate because it has been used to justify slavery of the black people. An interpretation of this text identifies Ham as the progenitor of those with black skin because Noah had cursed him. Thus he is said to be the ancestor of Africans traced back to Canaan. David M. Goldenberg has investigated every reference to blacks in Jewish literature up to the seventh century and discovered a misreading of Hebrew and other Semitic languages that led to the translation of the word “Ham” as “dark, black or heat.” But he also argues that there was no anti-black sentiment in ancient Greece, Rome or Arabia.<sup>44</sup> One may wonder, then, how such an interpretation of the

---

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/r/ruth-william-blake> (accessed July 15 2019)

<sup>41</sup> Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpha: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 159–170.

<sup>42</sup> Cynthia Ozick, “Ruth” in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, eds., Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballentine, 1994), 222.

<sup>43</sup> Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpha,” 168.

<sup>44</sup> David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Ham story in Genesis justified the enslavement of black people in the modern era. It has to do with the colonial conquest of the transatlantic slave trade that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when slavery was the established norm in the United States, pro-slavery Southerners were drawn to the story of Ham because it helped endorse this politically sanctioned practice.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, unmasking whiteness in homiletical reading practice and interpreting the Bible must incorporate complicated issues from literature study, colonialism, and cultural studies.

### **Conclusion**

We as preachers and teachers of preachers are called to proclaim the Good News that ultimately leads to life abundant. Some of our fellow citizens' lives have been suffocated by the toxic air of whiteness. To blow the wind of the Spirit to breathe, we are called to repent by learning to self-locate constantly scanning our own biases and prejudices when we preach, write, teach, and research. Unmasking homiletical whiteness as daily and regular practice takes multiple critical engagements, wrestling with how to preach with Scripture, and its various modes of interpretations, involving the location and the identity of the preacher and the people. Prophetic proclamation goes hand in hand with naming whiteness as structural, sustained by the systems, institutions, and the very environments (culture, space, and habitual practice). This prophetic act requires both exposing the hidden face of our own complicity in whiteness and exercising our commitment to dismantle it.

---

<sup>45</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

## AGAINST THE GRAIN OF APATHY AND CONFORMITY

Michael D. Royster, Assistant Professor

Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX (US), [www.pvamu.edu](http://www.pvamu.edu)

Copyright © 2019 Michael D. Royster

ABSTRACT: The normalization of “whiteness” has produced a climate in society and the pulpit that has neutralized institutional racism while producing structures and narratives that protect privileged interests while deeming contrary voices and actions as subversive. In the context of the twenty-first century the socially conscious preacher faces the challenge of proclaiming the Biblical Message in a way that it becomes received as “Good News” free from the constraints of “whiteness” as a synonym for conformity, to repent from the transgress state of apathy, and remove barriers that hinder solidarity and positive peace. Nevertheless, such an ideal exists within the context of acute racial polarization, where choosing sides becomes offensive resulting in word from God that fails to resonate. The complexity of institutional racism, the power of silence, and Western Christianity has placed the preaching task at odds with its own supporting institutions including in some cases the church.

### Introduction

There lies a strong possibility that the abstract sermon devoid of a willingness to clearly define, confront and challenge institutional racism reflects a failure in not only religious leadership, but also the call to preach within the context of unchecked injustice. As the title suggests, antiracist preaching functions as a means to recognize apathy as an alliance with injustice and denounce conformity as a public enemy. “One of the main issues the antiracist preacher faces is the resistance of people who identify with the predominant culture and enjoy privileges associated with it.”<sup>1</sup>

As a product of the ancient world, the Bible came into existence prior to the advent of the construction of racial categories. At the time tribes, ethnic groups, and nationalities did exist but a modern reader cannot assume that such distinctions and intergroup relationships had qualitative equivalencies to modern day racial hierarchies. The short-lived Azusa Street Pentecostal revival exemplified a counterculture movement of that momentarily transcended racial barriers. “Pentecostal restorationism, however, in the context of the racially divided U.S. equality in its worship, an equality directly counter to the cultural context, just as the first disciples broke through linguistic divisions of the first century.”<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastical desegregation alone fails to suffice in terms of ushering in sustainable justice through the eradication of systemic racism. Within the context of a Westernized modern era, simply preaching the Bible as written, could lead to supporting a racist status-quo by omitting the relevancy of race in terms of intergroup relationships, discipleship formation, and the call to build solidarity with those regarded as “others.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne. “Antiracist Preaching” *Liturgy*. 29 no. 3 (2014):12.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Haldeman. “American Racism and the Promise of Pentecost. *Journal of the Liturgical Conference* 14 no. 4 (1998): 45

Antiracist preaching entails more than a sermon about racism, but rather aims to prevent such beliefs and actions at its core even when the biblical text does not address the topic directly. One occasional sermon probably cannot transform a racist society, eradicate institutional racism, or empower victims of racism. However, it can begin the process of educating, equipping, and inspiring individuals and communities to see antiracism as part of God's self-disclosure in the twenty-first century. Second, antiracist preaching has the potential to function as a tool for discipleship formation. Although the spiritual disciplines play a role in cultivating a sense of a trajectory towards inward holiness, inward edification does no earthly good without an outward manifestation or action. "If preaching does not lead to concrete action, then that preaching is safe"<sup>3</sup>. Safe preaching may produce self-serving results, which in essence falls outside the true definition of preaching. Therefore, antiracist preaching constrains individuals and congregations to act as evidence of one's spiritual growth.

### **A Response to Urgency**

Social pressure has the power to provoke vulnerable preachers to choose the path of conformity because such an approach has the least amount of resistance, poses minimal threat to powers have vested interest in powers that derive from institutional racism, it avoids tensions, and seeks the approval of those who can administer positive and negative sanctions. Such types of institutional racism include: "residential, educational, employment, accumulation of wealth and upward mobility, environmental and health, mental health, criminal justice, and media."<sup>4</sup> The illusion of a fair and just society has made racism invisible to a significant portion of society across racial grounds, to the extent that the awakened preacher faces the crossroad to construct insubordinate space within the congregation such that honesty and openness can prevail or "tiptoe" around such life and death issues despite tangible urgencies.

The prevalence of passive racism, its ability to reproduce while hiding, and become so deeply embedded into the fabric of society and its institutions including the church has reduced the inattentive to the sense having a sense of collective responsibility. As a result, the need for antiracist preaching becomes regarded as less urgent. Rather than addressing racism head on as a breach of ecclesiastical etiquette and decorum, resorting to ambiguity becomes the conventional approach toward racism.

In order to defy apathy and embrace nonconformity, the antiracist preacher competes with racist propaganda and the production of its counternarratives. The late Audrey Borschel addresses some aspects of media literacy in *Preaching Prophetically When the News Disturbs* (2009). However, elements of propaganda exist almost everywhere that ideas become produced. "Those seeking to preach from an antiracist stance will want to be attentive to ways in which they generalize about specific groups of people in their sermons to avoid false notions of homogeneity."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas, 52

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Miller and Ann Marie Garran. "The Web of Institutional Racism" *Smith College Studies in Social Work*. 77 no.1 (2007): 35

<sup>5</sup> Duchesne Suzanne Wenonah. "Antiracist Preaching" *Liturgy*. 29 no. 3 (2014):14

The cumulative effects of propaganda have impacted education, and its supporting institutions as part of a web of racism that further complicates the task of antiracists preaching. “The web of racism also determines what is taught when people receive their training, how they are trained, and what is viewed as normative professional behavior.”<sup>6</sup> Practical theology including the discipline of preaching must become aware of the reach of such a web of racism to better preach a much needed “Good News” to fringed members of society who feel betrayed by the church, lack awareness of their miseducation, economic exclusion, political disenfranchisement, one paycheck away from homelessness, and one traffic stop away from a premature death due to stereotypes. Romanticizing exemplary African American achievements for example at best accomplishes nothing in terms of countering racist propaganda, but can reinforce racists information and ideas, because such talk, regard the individual or group as an aristocratically constructed model of an ideal person from a particular race; while leaving preexisting stereotypes intact and unchallenged. “Antiracism, as it achieves something of an institutionalized status, stands as a means to generate critical knowledge about whiteness and its operations, while also challenging, destabilizing, and shortcoming-circuiting the social routines by which white dominance is reproduced.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Power of Silence**

Solidarity with those regarded as the least functions as a theological mandate and consistent with the overarching biblical message. As racial minorities who have historically endured slavery, structural internal colonialism which accompanied extra-legal acts of lynching, Jim Crow’s de jure segregation of the South, and the industrial North’s de facto segregation with the persistence of lynching, and the post-civil rights movement mass incarceration, differential justice, and victim discounting into the twenty-first century have the vantage point to understand the depth of the power of silence. Just as the Disciples were silent while Jesus faced incrimination, torture while on death row, and state execution, the same spirit of silence remains as the enemy of the masses. In *Where Do We Go from Here* by Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), the author emphasized that the silence posed a greater threat to blacks than open bigotry. In the book entitled *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (2010), she exposes the problem of colorblindness and the widespread underestimation of the problem of mass incarceration to revive and fortify a racial caste legally.

Within the context of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James H. Cone (2011), there lies the theme of a sector of Western Christianity has become used to facilitate the conventions of privileged groups to resort to the rhetoric of faith in support of remaining silent to the actual and attempted systemic elimination of black people. Systemic elimination includes lynching but also includes a legislative and judicial system that produces and interprets laws that decriminalize the murder of black people. There lies a greater problem when Christianity fails to denounce such

---

<sup>6</sup> Miller and Garran, 61.

<sup>7</sup> John Hartigan, John Jr. “Object lessons in whiteness” *Identities Global Studies in Culture and Power*. 7 no.3 (2000): 374.

acts as evil. “Being human means being against evil by joining sides with those who are victims of evil.”<sup>8</sup>

The same sector of Western Christianity has allied itself with a version of American Civil Religion which silences blacks collectively, through acts of coercion into an exclusionary version of patriotism, denial of the rights to for individuals to follow their conscience and controlling the narrative and meaning of a patriot. A self-professed patriot is a hypocrite if one claims to the country but does not love the people that make up the country. “Nothing was more detested by whites than the idea that blacks were equal to them.”<sup>9</sup> Some sectors of the ‘black church’ have voluntarily resorted to silence by presenting Christianity as apolitical. “Prophets take risks and speak out in righteous indignation against society’s treatment of the poor, even risking their lives.”<sup>10</sup>

The white imagination of the dehumanized black man and woman has become deeply embedded into the fabric of American society. Such images function as a root cause behind the justification of relatively recent injustices ranging from “the Central Park Five,” the acquittals of those who slayed of Rodney King, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and the host of others who have either suffered a similar fate or narrowly escaped but have not received the recognition. Such example function as an illustration of how the white imagination has permeated into police culture. “Police culture is an emergent product of the mundane tasks of everyday policing and an institutional and political context in which race ideas flourish.”<sup>11</sup> (O’Grady, p. 622). In the song entitled “Karate Chop” (2014) by Future featuring Lil Wayne references Emmett Till within the context of a narrative describing an actor in a lewd scene. Such an example serves as a symptom of several dilemmas in terms of silence. The white imagination of black women as Jezebel and the “rapist beast” for black men has become interracially internalized. There lies a relative present disconnect from the emotional trauma of lynching as the ultimate sign of white supremacy that silences all black people while a significant number of whites remained silent due to fear. Social pressure has a way of provoking individuals to choose the wide gate of conformity to the status-quo of injustice rather than the narrow gate of love and liberation through exercising the courage to contrast with popular opinion and risk everything. Such images coexist which a compilation of dehumanizing images of black people that have been historically used to justify a broad disregard for black lives.

### **Homiletical Directions for Preaching the Biblical Jesus as Antiracists**

Within the prophetic preaching tradition lies a temptation of embracing a naivete that underestimates the power of apathy, and widespread fatalistic hopelessness that becomes sustained by a glimmer of hope. When preaching functions as a means of mere affirmation of

---

<sup>8</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 88.

<sup>9</sup> Cone, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Aoife O’Grady, Nigel Balmer, Bob Carter, Pascoe Pleasence, Alexy Buck, and Hazel Genn. “Institutional Racism and Civil Justice” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. (vol. 28/4 (2005): 622

social ailments, that does not lead to action whether direct or at least broad and subtle further empowers such apathetic tendencies.

“One truth is that racism and oppression is deeply embedded in the American experiment. History has taught that each time blacks have made strides for freedom, there has been backlash, retrenchment, and new forms of subjugation that appear on the American landscape; thus the old oppression gains a new guise.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, there lies a significant sector of the population that has grown tired of the cycle. If hopelessness becomes permanent rather than seasonal, then even prophetic preaching will become received as empty and irrelevant rhetoric for a different age. Preaching the Biblical Jesus entails bearing the cross to face inevitable resistance to dismantle the power of conformity, apathy, and silence so that hearers can become liberated and emboldened to live as agents of justice with an understanding that such an active faith epitomizes the meaning of a life in Christ, and the essence of Christian discipleship.

In the exegetical process as a requisite to the sermon, the antiracist preacher who aims to “unmask whiteness” and make institutional racism plain can approach the task of biblical textual criticism attentive within the context its existing power dynamics, the presence of nationalism, privilege, marginalization, and how does the text speak to intergroup relations in a racialized setting.

By regarding the preaching moment as a form of collective behavior rather than a ritualistic monologue, the preaching moment becomes a call to active engagement. Preaching support for social justice causes from the vantage point of disengagement may have rhetorically prophetic undertones but has a likelihood of lacking believability. “To preach about it and couple it with effective action is to go against the grain of apathy and conformity and to swim upstream against the tide.”<sup>13</sup>

Rather than a sole focus on a mere lament on behalf of victims of racism, or the other extreme of denying victims of their victimhood, a homiletical approach can include the following two areas: Shortcoming of racialized dichotomy glosses over the complexity, root meaning how did society including the church arrive at such a point, and how does the church and society subconsciously contribute to such an abandonment of racial progress, and continue to lack wholehearted solidarity with marginalized groups in comparison to the solidarity that the Biblical Jesus had with societies most fringed members.

One of the final tasks of the preacher as a practical theologian entails engaging in a theological reflection in concrete terms with the intent to acknowledge the presence of a gulf that lies between the message given and the message received. There lies a false assumption that the proclaimed “good news” resonates as good news. Racism functions as a means in which a fallen humanity uses at their disposal to make simple sense out of a complex and challenging life, therefore part of the antiracist preacher’s commission entails filling such a void that become entrenched in the human creature. Homiletic scholar Frank Thomas often references the need for

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, 53.

celebration as a key part of the preaching moment. Antiracist preaching would celebrate: the unmasking of at least one of many aspects of hidden institutional racism, the exposure of corruption, the saving of souls and lives in concrete terms. “A congregation needs to hear about new racial paradigms and experience this new knowledge for themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Dusesene, 18.

# Pedagogy

Convener: David B. Ward

*A note from the pedagogy consultation panel:*

## **Panel with the Wabash Consultation on Intercultural Communication and Homiletical Pedagogy**

This session will feature a panel discussion between members of the Wabash Consultation on Intercultural Communication and Homiletical Pedagogy concerning cultural competency in the homiletics classroom. Of particular interest to the consultation members is the value of intercultural competency for what is perhaps the greatest pedagogical challenge for teachers of preaching, in-class sermon feedback. Over the course of the past year, the consultation has engaged literature from the field of intercultural communication in order to address issues of identity, power, and difference for the purpose of developing better pedagogical practices for in-class feedback. During this panel discussion, participants will reflect on prior conversations, as well as more recent research and classroom experiences.

Panelists: Jared Alcántara

David Jacobsen

Gerald Liu

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby

Sarah Travis

# WHAT DOES PLAYING THE VIOLIN HAVE TO DO WITH PREACHING SERMONS?: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DELIBERATE PRACTICE ON PREACHING PEDAGOGY\*

Jared E. Alcántara, PhD, Associate Professor of Preaching  
George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

Waco, Texas [www.baylor.edu/truett](http://www.baylor.edu/truett)

Copyright © 2019 Jared E. Alcántara

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I propose a *deliberate practice* approach as a way to strengthen homiletical pedagogy. According to K. Anders Ericsson, one of the leading researchers on practice and expertise, those who aim toward excellence in any task must practice *in a certain way*. Repetitive practice does not automatically lead to long-term growth even if a person has been practicing for decades. In fact, years of non-deliberate practice typically lead to “acceptable performance and automaticity” rather than substantive improvement. Without deliberateness, a person can drive or dance or preach for years and not be significantly better than when he or she started. To practice deliberately, Ericsson claims, one must ascribe to at least four commitments: concrete goals, focused attention, a consistent feedback loop, and a willingness to take risks. This paper explores how Ericsson’s four commitments can have a positive impact on preaching pedagogy.

## Introduction

“If you want to get better at preaching, you have to practice.” Many a preaching professor has uttered this oft-repeated statement to seminarians, especially to those who have just started preaching. Practice makes all the difference in just about every other domain. In individual and team sports, coaches tell athletes, “Practice makes perfect!” “You win the game at practice!” Piano teachers tell students to practice if they want to perform well at the recital. For good reasons, preaching students get a little nervous if their professors over-emphasize practice, perhaps on account of the varied theological complexities concerning divine and human agency in Christian preaching. A preacher does not turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. One does not control or commandeer the Spirit of God - the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8). No amount can make a false gospel more palatable simply because one has been practicing it. Even so, understand why practice is necessary and valuable to growth. We can intuit that a basketball player needs to do more than read books in order to get better at shooting three-pointers. Anyone who fails to practice a task will weaken at it over time, whether that is a sport like basketball, a foreign language, ballet, or preaching a sermon. But, what if, “You have to practice if you want to get better,” is only partly true? What if our understanding of practice needs to be reconfigured?

In this paper, I propose incorporating a *deliberate practice* approach as a way to strengthen preaching pedagogy, one that foregrounds four commitments: focused attention, constructive feedback, concrete goals, and risk-taking. I use the phrase *deliberate practice* with intentionality here. According to K. Anders Ericsson, one of the leading researchers on practice, a person who strives for excellence at a task must practice *in a certain way* in order to improve – one’s practice must be deliberate. For a practice to be deliberate and thus lead to expertise, Ericsson argues, one must commit to well-defined and specific goals, focused attention, a

consistent feedback loop, and a willingness to get out of one's comfort zone. This paper explores how these four commitments can make inroads in preaching pedagogy. It highlights the research on deliberate practice, considers implications for homiletical pedagogy, and discusses the various limitations to a deliberate practice framework.

### **Understanding Deliberate Practice**

Although it might seem counterintuitive, consistency in practice and repetition of practice do not always produce improved outcomes. Most of us make the mistake of assuming that “someone who has been driving for twenty years must be better than someone who has been driving for five.”<sup>1</sup> However, Ericsson and his research collaborator Robert Pool point out that a level of “automaticity” can set in after a while, one that leads to deterioration of skill and diminishment of outcomes:

Research has shown that, generally speaking, once a person reaches that level of ‘acceptable’ performance and automaticity, the additional years of ‘practice’ don’t lead to improvement. If anything, the doctor or the teacher or the driver who’s been at it for twenty years is likely to be a bit worse than the one who’s been doing it for only five, and the reason is that these automated abilities gradually deteriorate in the absence of deliberate efforts to improve.<sup>2</sup>

It might surprise and even trouble us that the doctor who has practiced medicine for decades may not be as good as the doctor who started out five years ago, especially if *our* doctor is the former rather than the latter. But, perhaps we can find a silver lining here, especially as it relates to preaching pedagogy.

Take Ericsson and Pool’s claim, and apply it to a homiletics classroom. If a student has been preaching for two years, it does not mean that they cannot preach, and if a student has been preaching for twenty years, it does not mean that they can. Just as with any other task in which adherents pursue growth, preachers who practice in *a certain way* will improve, regardless of their aptitude, skill, or experience. Without deliberateness, consistency and repetition lead to

---

<sup>1</sup> K. Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2016), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13. In a more recent publication, Ericsson writes: “The expert performance framework proposes that some types of experience, such as merely executing the behavior proficiently during routine work without the intention to improve, may not lead to further improvement in objective performance, and that further improvements depend upon deliberate efforts to change particular aspects of performance.” See K. Anders Ericsson, “The Differential Influence of Experience, Practice, and Deliberate Practice on the Development of Superior Expert Performance,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*, ed. K. Anders Ericsson et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 745.

automaticity rather than growth. As Ericsson and Pool put it, “Generally the solution is not ‘try harder’ but rather ‘try differently.’”<sup>3</sup>

Ericsson’s work on deliberate practice started in 1993 when his research team published the results of an extensive study on classically trained violin students at the Berlin University of the Arts in Germany.<sup>4</sup> Although the university had a reputation for producing excellent pianists, composers, and conductors, the school was “well known for turning out world-class violinists,” many of whom would “rank among the world’s best violinists in a decade or two.”<sup>5</sup> The team identified three groups: those identified by their teachers as good, those identified as excellent, and those identified as exceptional. Students in every group demonstrated high levels of discipline, motivation, teachability, and skill; otherwise, they would never have been accepted to such a prestigious university. The research team wanted to test the conventional understanding at the time that innate talent separated the three groups, that exceptional students were born with a talent level that other students did not possess (and could not possess) no matter how much they practiced.

Ericsson’s research produced at least three significant findings concerning the nature of expertise in performance. First, *none of the students surveyed reached the highest level of performance without thousands of hours of practice*. “We found no shortcuts and no ‘prodigies’ who reached an expert level with relatively little practice.”<sup>6</sup> The team identified a link between commitment to practice and expertise in performance. This finding helped debunk the “lone genius myth,” a popular but deeply flawed way of understanding how talent and creativity work

---

<sup>3</sup> Ericsson and Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, 19. For more on deliberate practice, see Ericsson, “The Differential Influence of Experience, Practice, and Deliberate Practice on the Development of Superior Expert Performance”; K. Anders Ericsson, ed., *The Road to Excellence: The Acquisition of Expert Performance in the Arts and Sciences, Sports, and Games* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014); Lauren Eskreis-Winkler et al., “Using Wise Interventions to Motivate Deliberate Practice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 111, no. 5 (November 2016): 728–44; K. Anders Ericsson, “Acquisition and Maintenance of Medical Expertise: A Perspective from the Expert-Performance Approach with Deliberate Practice,” *Academic Medicine* 90, no. 11 (November 2015): 1471–86; Angela L. Duckworth et al., “Deliberate Practice Spells Success: Why Grittier Competitors Triumph at the National Spelling Bee,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2, no. 2 (March 2011): 174–81.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the Berlin study, see Ericsson and Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, 87–114.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 94. In a 2004 article, Ericsson writes: “From the perspective of deliberate practice, the scarcity of excellent and outstanding performance is primarily attributable to the environmental conditions necessary for its slow emergence, and to the years of deliberate practice required to develop the complex mediating mechanisms that support expertise. Even those individuals considered by themselves or others to have natural gifts gradually attain their superior performance by engaging in extended amounts of designed deliberate practice over many years.” See K. Anders Ericsson, “Deliberate Practice and the Acquisition and Maintenance of Expert Performance in Medicine and Related Domains,” *Academic Medicine* 79, no. 10 (October 2004): S79.

in performance.<sup>7</sup> When contextualized to the preaching classroom, the first research finding should give homiletics professors pause whenever they are tempted to make snap judgments or quick conclusions concerning who has natural gifts in preaching and why. As David Buttrick observes,

The odd idea that preachers whose hearts have been strangely warmed will spill out sermons, instantly compelling and exquisitely formed is, of course, nonsense. Just as a carpenter must learn to use tools in order to make a box, so preachers must acquire basic skills to preach. Though some preachers may be unusually gifted, preachers are not *born*, they are *trained*. We learn out homiletic skills.<sup>8</sup>

Yes, the Spirit anoints preachers with the spiritual gift of preaching and, yes, the Spirit also uses means and cooperates with human agency in order for that gift to be cultivated. Whenever students seem like “naturals,” the chances remain high that they did not come to it by way of innate talent, prodigious acumen, limited practice, or privileged access to God.

Second, Ericsson’s team discovered that *exceptional students went above and beyond conventional norms of practice*. Although students in all three groups engaged in thousands of hours of practice and demonstrated high levels of motivation, “the violinists who had spent significantly more hours practicing their craft were on average more accomplished than those who had spent less time practicing.”<sup>9</sup> Some of the hours that the exceptional violinists logged in practice predated their enrollment in the school; it took place during the preteen and early teen years. They came to the school with more practice hours logged and thus had more experience and expertise than their counterparts upon arrival. But, they also practiced more hours upon arrival. Commitment to practice before and after enrollment served as determinative factors in their level of expertise.

When Ericsson worked on other projects after the 1993 study, whether it was studying world-class ballet dancers or chess grandmasters, his research teams uncovered similar results, namely, a link between hours logged in practice and exceptional expertise. Usually, it took an individual a minimum of 10 years and about 10,000 hours of practice to move to the exceptional level. In 2018, Ericsson offered the following summation of more than 25 years of research on expertise in elite performance: “By now it is safe to conclude from many studies on a wide

---

<sup>7</sup> Montuori and Purser write: “Despite the considerable evidence that shows that socialization plays an overwhelming role in the development of creativity, the popular understanding of creativity, familiar to anyone who has taught creativity courses or discussed the subject in a bar, still seems to be that creativity cannot be learned – that one has is either blessed with it or not – and that social environment is, if anything, a hindrance to creative minds.” See Alfonso Montuori and Ronald E. Purser, “Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth: Toward a Contextual View of Creativity,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 35, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 78–79. The lone genius myth emphasizes “individual reclusiveness, artistic temperament, and mental illness as inextricably linked to the highest forms of creative capacity (161).” See Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation*, 161.

<sup>8</sup> David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 37. Emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Ericsson and Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, 94.

variety of disciplines that nobody develops extraordinary abilities without putting in tremendous amounts of practice. I do not know of any serious scientist who doubts that conclusion.”<sup>10</sup>

For homiletics professors, the link between expertise and practice means that we do not mislead students when we say: “If you want to get better at preaching, you have to practice” – the statement is *mostly* true. Since we only have students for a short time, usually one or two semesters, it also means that their trajectory for growth is far greater than our capacity to see. Those who are C-preachers this semester might have a brighter future than we think they do, especially if they are about 9,995 hours short of the 10,000-hour rule.

Third, and most pertinent to this paper, Ericsson’s team discovered that *exceptional violinists practiced in a certain way that marked out their habits from the habits of others*. Not only did they give a greater quantity of hours, but they also maximized the *quality* of hours spent in practice. Four commitments emerged – focused attention, constructive feedback, concrete goals, and a willingness to take risks – a habit of practicing that Ericsson’s team referred to as “deliberate practice.”<sup>11</sup> Other factors contributed to the violinists’ success such as investment of time and energy, parent support from an early age, access to resources, superior teaching, intrinsic motivation, opportunities for rest and recovery, and, of course, natural talent. But, remember that *everyone* in the study possessed talent, displayed similar traits, and worked in virtually the same environment. They all had natural gifts, high motivation, access to resources, high levels of support, as well as sufficient time and energy. Otherwise, they would not have students at the university. Quality of practice made the biggest difference. The exceptional students experienced better results through practice as a result of the deployment of strategic habits in practice.

As a result of the study, Ericsson and his team concluded that elite performance does not come about because “the expert performer must be endowed with characteristics qualitatively different from those of normal adults.”<sup>12</sup> Rather, it comes about as “the product of a decade or more of maximal efforts to improve performance in a domain through optimal distribution of deliberate practice.”<sup>13</sup>

Scholars of performance and expertise consider Ericsson’s 1993 study to be a classic, field-shaping work, especially in its description of deliberate practice over-against less qualitative forms of practice. The study has been cited in scholarly journals and publications close to 10,000 times. As Lauren Eskreis-Winkler et al. observe,

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Duckworth et al. describe what deliberate practice looks like among finalists at the National Spelling Bee according to Ericsson’s four commitments: “Deliberate practice entails engaging in a focused, typically planned training activity designed to improve some aspect of performance. During deliberate practice, individuals receive immediate informative feedback on their performance and can then repeat the same or similar tasks with full attention toward changing inferior or incorrect responses, thus improving the identified area of weakness.” See Duckworth et al., “Deliberate Practice Spells Success,” 174.

<sup>12</sup> K. Anders Ericsson, Ralph Th. Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer, “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance,” *Psychological Review* 100, no. 3 (1993): 399–400.

<sup>13</sup> Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer, 400.

Deliberate practice – a challenging yet highly effective form of practice – leads to world-class eminence across domains. It turns chess players into grandmasters, violinists into virtuosos, and gymnasts into Olympians. Even critics, who point to other relevant determinants of skill improvement, including talent, acknowledge deliberate practice is an ‘unquestionably important’ predictor’ of success (Macnamara, Hambrick, & Oswald, 2014, p. 1615).<sup>14</sup>

Ericsson’s research has impacted various fields, especially because it has shaped how researchers conceive of expertise in performance. It has been linked to “high levels of accomplishment in ballet, computer programming, aviation, firefighting, music, medicine, sports, and sales, among other fields... undergraduates who do deliberate practice when they study earn higher grade point averages.”<sup>15</sup> In the last few years, researchers have drawn on insights from deliberate practice research in order to enhance student exam scores at the secondary level and undergraduate level, the asynchronous training of nurses, and the advancement of entrepreneurial expertise.<sup>16</sup>

### **Teaching Preaching as a Deliberate Practice**

Insights from deliberate practice research add much-needed nuance to the homiletics professor’s claim, “If you want to get better at preaching, then you have to practice.” A more accurate statement would be, “If you want to get better at preaching, then you have to practice in a certain way.” Just as a driver who has practiced driving for twenty years might not be a better driver than one who has practiced for five years, so also a preacher who has preached for twenty years might not be a better preacher than the one who has preached for five years. Strange as it may seem, the preacher who has preached for twenty years might actually be worse. The question for preachers no matter how many hours they have logged behind a pulpit should be, “How can I practice preaching in a certain way?”

The same logic applies to teaching. I started teaching preachers in a local church context about 15 years ago, and I began teaching in a formal seminary setting about 10 years ago. I stand on solid ground when I state that I am a better teacher *now* than when I started 15 years ago – experience *does* make an appreciable difference. However, if Ericsson’s research is to be believed, then 15 years of teaching experience do *not* guarantee that I will be a better teacher five years from now *nor* do they guarantee that I will be a better teacher than the professor who has

---

<sup>14</sup> Eskreis-Winkler et al., “Using Wise Interventions to Motivate Deliberate Practice,” 728. For the phrase “unquestionably important,” see Brooke N. Macnamara, David Z. Hambrick, and Frederick L. Oswald, “Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 8 (August 2014): 1615. In a recent journal article, Miller et al. challenge Macnamara et al.’s critique of Ericsson’s deliberate practice framework through interrogating Macnamara et al.’s research sample. See Scott D. Miller et al., “To Be or Not to Be (An Expert)? Revisiting the Role of Deliberate Practice in Improving Performance,” *High Ability Studies*, 2018, 1–11.

<sup>15</sup> Eskreis-Winkler et al., “Using Wise Interventions to Motivate Deliberate Practice,” 729.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Dew et al., “Toward Deliberate Practice in the Development of Entrepreneurial Expertise: The Anatomy of the Effectual Ask,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*, ed. K. Anders Ericsson et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 389–412; J. H. Yeh et al., “Designing and Implementing Asynchronous Online Deliberate Practice to Develop Interprofessional Communication Competency,” *Nurse Education in Practice* 35 (2019): 21–26; Eskreis-Winkler et al., “Using Wise Interventions to Motivate Deliberate Practice.”

been teaching five years less than I have. Perhaps the homiletics professor should ask a similar question to the one that the pulpit preacher should ask: “How do I practice teaching in a certain way?”

According to Stephen D. Brookfield, many teachers engage in what he calls “naïve teaching.” We teach “innocently” and thus with naivete because we believe that we know “exactly what it is that we’re doing and what effect we’re having,” and we assume that “the meanings and significance we place on our actions are the ones that students take from them.”<sup>17</sup> Surely, we know what’s going on in our own classroom, we tell ourselves. We are veteran teachers. But, our natural instincts deceive us, he claims. Our “unexamined common sense is a notoriously unreliable guide to action.”<sup>18</sup> What do the best teachers do? Brookfield’s answer is simple: the best teachers engage in “critical reflection.” They interrogate their assumptions, question how those assumptions guide their actions, listen to and learn from feedback, recognize their limitations, evaluate outcomes, and make necessary adjustments.

We know from Brookfield that homiletics professors benefit when they engage in critical reflection on their teaching. But, what happens when we take Brookfield’s insight and relate it to Ericsson’s research? In other words, how can homiletics professors reflect on their teaching in conversation with the four commitments of deliberate practice? How can they practice teaching with focused attention? What concrete goals can they set in order to improve? What feedback loops can they leverage in order to grow? What risks can they take to stretch beyond their current capacity?

One-size-fits-all answers to these questions will not suffice even for the basic reason that homileticians engage in their work at various vocational stages and levels of experience, they exhibit different strengths and weaknesses as teachers (some of which are known and others of which are not known to them), they operate in diverse ecclesial traditions, and they display varied theological convictions. Instead of offering simplistic answers, I will describe how these four commitments have shaped my teaching in the last year.

### *Deliberate Practice to Improve Teacher Learning*

*Setting Concrete Goals.* Two teaching goals come to mind immediately, goals that I set for school year 2019-20. *Goal # 1: Practice hospitality with greater intentionality inside and outside the classroom through simple acts and gestures.* Some of these acts and gestures include arriving earlier than usual to class, engaging students in informal conversations before and after class, making sure to learn everyone’s names, inviting students to share their prayer requests with me, and facilitating office hours appointments for coaching, questions, and counsel.<sup>19</sup> Recently, I removed the office chairs from my office and replaced them with sofa chairs that I ordered for free from the University Surplus Store. The office chairs seemed stale and clinical whereas the

---

<sup>17</sup> Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Here is Brookfield’s insight in its context: “We fall into the habits of justifying what we do by reference to unchecked ‘common sense’ and of thinking that the unconfirmed evidence of our own eyes is always accurate and valid. ‘Of course we know what’s going on in our classrooms,’ we say to ourselves. ‘After all, we’ve been doing this for years, haven’t we?’ Yet unexamined common sense is a notoriously unreliable guide to action.” See *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> One resource that shapes my thinking on teaching as hospitality is Ellen L. Marmon, “Teaching as Hospitality,” *The Asbury Journal* 63, no. 2 (2008): 33–39.

new furniture is more comfortable and inviting. *Goal # 2: Develop a new rubric for my Spring 2020 Introduction to Preaching class*, one that comports well with the practice-centered model that I propose in my latest book *The Practices of Christian Preaching*. A new rubric will push me to be more concrete with what I expect from students. It will also make my teaching more amenable to evaluative measures and assessments of progress.

*Improving Focused Attention.* According to Ericsson and Pool, “You seldom improve without giving [a] task your full attention.”<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, teachers limit their trajectory for growth when they give partial attention rather than full attention to their task. I have identified at least three patterns in which I offer partial rather than full attention to teaching: first, when students are sharing stories or asking questions, too often I find myself formulating what I want to say next rather than listening closely to what they are saying; second, when I concentrate too much on what I am teaching and not enough on reading and responding to students as they process what I am teaching; and, third, when I listen to a less-than-stellar sermon in preaching lab, it is difficult to listen without being distracted. In each of these scenarios, over the last six months especially, I have tried to resist the tendency to lapse into partial attention rather than focused attention.

*Learning from Constructive Feedback.* More often than not, homiletics professors have established feedback loops in place at their institutions such as student evaluations, department chair evaluations, and dean evaluations. Institutional evaluations offer professors important insights on the effectiveness of their teaching but they are also limited in their scope and accuracy. In addition to conventional feedback loops, I have created other strategic feedback loops that support my growth as a teacher. For instance, I use SurveyMonkey in order to conduct mid-semester and end-of-semester anonymous surveys. In these surveys, students evaluate their experience of learning in the course. Some of the questions they answer on these surveys come directly out of Brookfield’s research on how teachers help students evaluate their learning.<sup>21</sup> Through reading the results of these surveys, I learn a lot about which subjects land with students and which teaching strategies are most effective. I started collecting data on my teaching in 2017, and each semester I learn something new about how students are processing what they learn.

*Taking Risks.* Deliberate practice requires an ability to push past complacency and discomfort. Ericsson and Pool write: “If you never push yourself beyond your comfort zone, you will never improve.”<sup>22</sup> I have stepped out of my comfort zone as a teacher in at least two ways over the last year. First, I spent more time internalizing my lesson plans so that I could teach more without notes. Second, I used the classroom space more purposefully so that I did not stay in the same location the whole class time. Both of these teaching practices did not come naturally to me even though I knew that they helped me be a better teacher.

### *Deliberate Practice to Improve Student Learning*

---

<sup>20</sup> Ericsson and Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, two of the questions on my surveys also appear in Brookfield’s five recommended reflection questions for student learning: “At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?” and, “At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?” See Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, 114–15.

<sup>22</sup> Ericsson and Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*, 18.

Now that we have examined how the four commitments of deliberate practice contribute to my own critical reflection as a teacher of preaching, we will consider how the same four commitments reveal themselves in my teaching practices.

*Setting Concrete Goals.* When my students evaluate the video recordings of their sermons, not only do they reflect on what they did well and could have done better, but they also set goals for their next sermon. I ask them: *What are three specific goals you could set for yourself in order to improve between now and your next sermon?* I interact with them concerning their goals when I give them my written feedback on their sermon. I also remind them of their goals when it is time for them to prepare their next sermon.

*Improving Focused Attention.* I have not yet made preaching without notes a requirement in every class. However, I am phasing it in through my upper-level elective courses and working my way to the required courses. In my judgment, preaching without notes helps students move from partial to focused attention in at least one tangible way. It sets them free to focus more of their attention on clarity, flow, progression, delivery, and, of course, contextualizing to the people in the room. Preaching without notes may or may not be the best way to facilitate focused attention in other classrooms. If it is not, consider what would have to happen in *your* classroom in order for one of your preaching students to move from partial to focused attention.

*Learning from Constructive Feedback.* Students receive feedback on their strengths and weaknesses in a variety of ways. In my Introduction to Preaching class, students hear feedback forward before they preach in class through workshoping their sermons with a coach and with their student colleagues ahead of time. They also hear real-time, in-class verbal feedback from their peers and from their instructor; they read written feedback from their peers who fill out evaluation sheets; they engage in self-reflection through watching their sermons on video and interacting with question prompts; and, they receive written feedback from the instructor after handing in their self-evaluations.<sup>23</sup>

*Taking Risks.* This commitment remains the most underdeveloped of the four when it comes to facilitating student learning. Broadly speaking, I encourage risk-taking in all my classes by reminding students that it is better for them to try and “fail” at an experiment in preaching class than to try and fail in church – the stakes are much lower even though they are receiving a grade. Sometimes during the sermon feedback process, I ask students who I perceive to be risk-averse: *How might you push yourself out of your comfort zone the next time you preach for us in class?* In one of my electives last semester, I asked students to preach on a subject that was difficult for them to talk about in order to get them out of their comfort zone. As a result of the assignment, they gained experience talking about vulnerable challenging subject matter from behind the pulpit.

More often than not, students in my classes engage in the four commitments of deliberate practice without knowing that they are doing it. Perhaps this is best. Perhaps not. I embed

---

<sup>23</sup> For recommendations for best practices in constructive feedback in preaching classes, see Geoffrey Stevenson, “Forming Future Preachers,” in *The Future of Preaching* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 190–205; Daniel E. Harris, “Methods of Assessment,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Chris Rappazini, “The Value of Feedback: Speaking the Truth in Love,” in *Training Preachers: A Guide to Teaching Homiletics*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 150–63.

deliberate practice in my pedagogy rather than make it overt or explicit to my students. I cultivate a classroom environment in which these commitments are embodied, encouraged, rewarded, and reduplicated.

In my latest book *The Practices of Christian Preaching*, I discuss deliberate practice briefly in the Introduction and the Conclusion, but spend most of the rest of the book embedding Ericsson's four commitments rather than foregrounding them.<sup>24</sup> On the companion website that accompanies the book, [www.practicesofchristianpreaching.com](http://www.practicesofchristianpreaching.com), I provide students with audio and video sermon clips to listen to and learn from in every chapter, video contributions from the collaboration team, group activities, individual learning activities, and a professors-only section. Every chapter has an "Individual Learning Activity" in which the student learner has an opportunity to interact with the four commitments of deliberate practice. In the written textbook, the video discussion with collaborators, and the E-learning activities, my aim is to help preachers "cultivate life-giving habits through deliberate practice" so that they might be empowered to "enhance their proficiency, grow in their commitment, and flourish in their homiletical ministry."<sup>25</sup>

These are some of the ways that I use insights from deliberate practice in my teaching. As an itinerant preacher, I also find myself asking the same questions of my preaching. What concrete goals can I set in order to grow? How can I increase focused attention when I preach? What feedback loops can I facilitate, especially by way of wise coaches and mentors who are much further along in their preaching? How can I take risks as a preacher so that I grow instead of become stagnant?

### **The Limits of Deliberate Practice**

Just as with any other theory, deliberate practice has its limits. Thus, I proposed that we *incorporate* deliberate practice and its four commitments into our pedagogies. Ericsson's work can influence and even shape our work as teachers but it need not control or commandeer it. Especially as the theme of this year's conference is "Unmasking Homiletical Whiteness," notice that Ericsson's work does not equip teachers with liberative strategies for dismantling racist and hegemonic impulses among students nor does it force teachers to confront their own biases. Neither does it encourage the level of intercultural competence required to meet the educational demands of teaching in a diverse twenty-first century classroom.<sup>26</sup> Deliberate practice provides

---

<sup>24</sup> Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation*, 7–13, 191.

<sup>25</sup> Alcántara, 5.

<sup>26</sup> For more on liberative pedagogies, see bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Henry A. Giroux, "The Hope of Radical Education: A Conversation with Henry A. Giroux," in *What Schools Can Do: Critical Pedagogy and Practice*, ed. Kathleen Weiler and Candace Mitchell (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 13–26; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993). For more on intercultural competence, see Lily A. Arasaratnam-Smith, "Intercultural Competence: An Overview," in *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Approaches, Assessment and Application*, ed. Darla K. Deardorff and Lily A. Arasaratnam-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2017), 7–18; Milton J. Bennett, "Becoming Interculturally Competent," in *Toward Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education*, ed. Jaime S. Wurzel (Newton, MA: Intercultural Resource Corporation, 2004), 62–77; Janet M. Bennett, "Cultivating Intercultural Competence," in *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, ed. Darla K. Deardorff (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 121–40.

educators with one more arrow in their quiver and *only* one. Many arrows make for better teachers.

Another limit of deliberate practice pertains the theological peculiarity of preaching itself. Preachers undoubtedly benefit from learning how violinists, ballet dancers, and chess grandmasters achieve excellence and expertise, but they also have permission to problematize categories like excellence and expertise. They can learn a lot from classically-trained violinists but not everything. Nearly every teacher of preachers must figure out a way to navigate this tension. Preaching can be learned but it is also a gift from God. Sermons are a communicative work but they also require “spiritual work.”<sup>27</sup> God is the subject matter of a sermon and somehow also the Speaker at the same time. A preacher might have severe limitations but, as Samuel D. Proctor reminds us, because of love for God and for people, “When that preacher gets up to preach, no matter how incoherent or incomplete the message may be, the life lived grants it a measure of authority that no skillful outline could ever give.”<sup>28</sup> In a sense, preachers exercise agency much like farmers do when planting seeds. They can learn best practices for how to plant seeds in a certain way – the best way possible. But, kingdom agronomy also works outside the confines of human agency: “Night and day, whether he [the farmer] sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain (Mark 4:27-28a).”

## Conclusion

Warren MacKenzie loved making pots. He lived in Stillwater, Minnesota, where he made ceramic pots in his home studio from 1953 until his death in 2018. He spent 65 years practicing the same task. On a good day, MacKenzie would sit at his Leach wheel and make about 40 or 50 pots – “some of them are good and some of them are mediocre and some of them are bad.” Only a couple of pots are worth selling and, among those sold, just a few “engage the senses after daily use.” Art enthusiasts enjoy quoting his now-popular statement: “The first 10,000 pots are difficult and then it gets a bit easier.”<sup>29</sup> MacKenzie had no interest in making one or two pieces over a lifetime, but preferred to combine quantity, quality, and usefulness. It turns out that MacKenzie was pretty good at what he did. A medium-sized MacKenzie-coffee pitcher costs about \$3,000. MacKenzie understood the basic principles of deliberate practice without being a skilled researcher in expertise or performance. He logged tens of thousands of hours of practice and created tens of thousands of pots but *always* with intentionality, focus, and commitment to creative production. He knew that he had to make pots in a certain way in order to get better at his craft.

---

<sup>27</sup> Blake Newsom writes: “Preaching is first and foremost *spiritual work*. Consequently, teaching preaching should be considered spiritual work....The Holy Spirit and spirituality in general are too often assumed and consequently overlooked in preaching texts and classes. However, Christian preaching and the homiletics classroom must not be devoid of the Spirit or spirituality.” See Blake Newsom, “What a Freshly Minted Preaching Professor Needs to Know (Part 2),” in *Training Preachers: A Guide to Teaching Homiletics*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 95. (Emphasis added)

<sup>28</sup> Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1994), 136.

<sup>29</sup> Alex Lauer, “Living with Pottery: Warren MacKenzie at 90,” *Sightlines*, February 6, 2014, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/living-with-pottery-warren-mackenzie-at-90>.

In a sense, homiletics professors who incorporate deliberate practice in their homiletical pedagogy decide that they will “make pots” in much the same way that MacKenzie made pots. That is to say, they will leverage their experience, utilize their expertise, and recognize the connection between quantity, quality, and usefulness in teaching. When professors improve in their ability to reflect critically on teaching, they “make a pot” that looks better than the one before it. When they help students practice preaching with more deliberateness, they make a pot that looks better than the one before it. And on it goes. To be sure, preaching students will reap the benefits when their professor commits to deliberate practice because it will mean that their teacher has decided to get better at teaching. Local churches will also benefit because it will mean that their pastor has learned the all-important difference between trying harder and trying differently.

**PREACHING IN A WORLD EXPOSED:  
VULNERABILITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ACCESSIBILITY**

**The Rev. Dr. HyeRan Kim-Cragg,  
Associate Professor of Preaching, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto**

**The Rev. Dr. Shauna K. Hannan  
Associate Professor of Homiletics, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary  
Core Doctoral Faculty, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA**

**The Rev. Dr. Sarah Travis  
Minister of the Chapel, Adjunct Faculty, Knox College  
Interim Director, Doctor of Ministry Program, Toronto School of Theology  
Copyright © 2019 HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Shauna Hannan, Sarah Travis**

**ABSTRACT:** Homiletics students emerge from and will minister in a cornucopia of postcolonial contexts. To teach preaching in a postcolonial context, especially for the teacher who is associated with colonizer, is to open oneself to critique. Because of this reality, vulnerability is a key practical and theological competency for both teachers and students in such social locations. This paper traces beginning contours for a pedagogy of vulnerability in postcolonial homiletics classrooms. By opening discursive space to multiple perspectives and personal stories, especially those that contradict or expand the dominant western narratives, this pedagogy creates new conundrums for the homiletics professor. The complexity of pedagogical challenges is outlined particularly where teaching authority and marginal racial, gender and cultural identities clash. Vulnerability, accountability, and communal stewardship of the pulpit are offered as ways forward. The paper ends with practical pedagogical methods to open homiletical imagination to a pedagogy of vulnerability.

### **Preaching and Vulnerability**

Preaching is a vulnerable act. As Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm writes:

Preaching is risky when we realize that our studying, praying, exploring, and speaking is never exhaustive or complete – we are always at risk of misunderstanding something about God, ourselves, our people, and our contexts. We are also vulnerable when we choose to reveal something of our own struggles, limitations, and uncertainties while addressing a particular sermon theme or context. Preaching is often a costly act.<sup>1</sup>

The act of teaching preaching is also a costly act. In my homiletics classrooms, a global and multicultural group gathers to learn to perform a costly act – from a white, female Canadian teacher with a high degree of social privilege. In a classroom populated by first, second, and third generation immigrants, there lies the potential for conflict and misunderstanding. My

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.societas-homiletica.org/archive/madurai-2014/preaching-vulnerability-naming-and-neglecting-reality/>. Accessed August 6, 2019.

classrooms are always postcolonial – insofar as students represent a variety of colonial histories, as does their teacher, and all of this takes place in a nation that wrestles with its own colonial history.<sup>2</sup> Students are learning to preach to congregations that represent a similar postcolonial cornucopia. So what skills will equip them to preach effectively, to reach out to a variety of others in a meaningful and open way?

Vulnerability is a key practical and theological competency for both teachers and students in such social locations. Before we can teach such a thing, we must embody it. The popular social science researcher Brené Brown defines vulnerability as: “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.”<sup>3</sup> With K. Bhattacharya, I “crave discourses of vulnerability, in which we unmask, allow ourselves to be genuinely seen, without the need to wield weapons for our safety. Discourses that enable us to work with honesty; to address prejudices, belief systems, and pain; and to discuss the possibilities for discovering a way forward based on connection, interrelatedness, and our shared humanity.”<sup>4</sup> There is a paradoxical strength to be found in vulnerability – a strength that can be shared by “being vulnerable together, by connecting with each other’s stories, by finding ourselves in each other’s stories.”<sup>5</sup> Bhattacharya insists that vulnerability is “non-violent, invitational and peace-inspired.”<sup>6</sup>

To be an incarnate creature is to be vulnerable. Traditionally, preachers have accepted a high level of authority and power, although such authority dwindles in the postmodern age. I began this paper by stating that preaching is a vulnerable act. It is. We bare our faithful souls – and sometimes our faithlessness – before an audience that confounds us even as we know the very details of their lives. Too often teaching itself has been associated with power and invulnerability. To teach preaching in a postcolonial context, especially for the teacher who is associated with colonizer, is to open oneself to critique. This requires a level of self-awareness and carries with it the potential to model openness and vulnerability. For me, vulnerable pedagogy cannot be viewed apart from the colonizing discourses that inhabit the classroom. These discourses are always interactive, as power is negotiated among those with variable colonial histories and experiences of marginalization.

Pastoral theologian Pamela McCarroll has succinctly outlined a reflective pedagogy for postcolonial classrooms, rooted in a theology of the cross which critiques systems of power. Her experience of teaching pastoral theology in a multi-faith, postcolonial context has led to deep

---

<sup>2</sup> Canada is a post-colony of Great Britain, with a history of profound inequality between settler and aboriginal peoples.

<sup>3</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love parent and lead*. New York: Gotham Books, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Bhattacharya, K. “The Vulnerable Academic: Personal Narratives and Strategic De/colonizing of Academic Structures.” *Qualitative Inquiry* 22: 309-321 (311).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 310.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 311.

reflection on the necessity of paying attention to the inner and outer dimensions of power, and “seeks to re-construct our way of showing up in spaces where we yield power and privilege.”<sup>7</sup> I believe her reflections can serve as a fruitful starting point for thinking about vulnerability in the homiletics classroom. As a white Canadian settler, McCarroll writes:

living in the illusion of the theology of glory feeds our egos and our (false) sense of security as life feels great on our terms with us (and people like us!) at the centre. Thus, for those with relative power, the tendency is to cling to a theology of glory—to ‘lie’ about ourselves and reality, trusting in our own self sufficiency, and seeking to wield control so as to convince ourselves ‘we’ve got this!’. However, this inward posture is an illusion, a ‘lie,’ and has outward ethical consequences that are played out in the world and cause more suffering.

A theology of the cross, on the other hand, leads to the realization that creation, and the creature, is “incomplete, vulnerable, limited, and finite.”<sup>8</sup> This movement toward the theology of the cross involves humility. “It is here too that G-d’s hidden presence can be glimpsed and we can be awakened to the sheer gift of being and relationship. Humility, gratitude, vulnerability, and trust can all be internal signs of this moment.”<sup>9</sup>

Such a perspective opens us up to being with others in a vulnerable way. McCarroll finds within the theology of the cross a three-fold model for pedagogical reflection. “The first move is a critical move and asks “what is going on here?” It unpacks ways “the theology of glory may be functioning through manifestations of power, control, mastery, and privilege.”<sup>10</sup> In the homiletics classroom, the teacher should be aware of her or his own social location, and the ways that privilege might manifest itself vis a vis the students. At the very least, this entails an awareness that particular worldviews (white, Western) are privileged in the course materials and perspectives, and naming this out loud in order to invite challenges and counternarratives. It is about opening the discursive space to multiple perspectives and personal stories, especially those that contradict or expand the dominant western narratives.

The second move in McCarroll’s pedagogical reflection model asks, “where is G-d in this?” In other words, how might we locate God in our experiences of vulnerability, suffering and limit? In the homiletics classroom, teachers can seek to hold open a space for conversation that allows students of various backgrounds to tell their stories about where they have seen God acting, and also the perceived absence of God. Dialogue and empathy-building cannot happen if we keep a

---

<sup>7</sup> Pamela R. McCarroll, “Keeping it Real: Decolonizing Christian Inter Religious Practice as an Exercise in the Practical Theology of the Cross.” *Religions* (10/3), 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030203>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 10

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

‘safe’ distance from each other. In the presence of God, we can tell our stories in a way that creates meaningful connection among participants.

McCarroll’s third move in reflecting on the theology of the cross asks, “how then must we live?” This is an ethical move that focuses on inter-relationality and mutual flourishing. In the homiletics classroom the teacher might continually ‘check-in’ with the class as a whole, inquiring about their comfort level, and whether there are issues that have arisen which cause discomfort. Obviously, this is a vulnerable kind of conversation for both teacher and student. As bell hooks notes: “a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks...in my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share.”<sup>11</sup>

While the brevity of this article precludes in-depth reflection on a pedagogy of vulnerability for the postcolonial homiletics classroom, such an attempt may be helpful to trace some of the contours of such a pedagogy.

### **A Conundrum of Pedagogical Dynamics the Teaching of Preaching**

Being cognizant of vulnerability and embodying it as homiletical practice helps the preacher become self-aware regarding the way the pulpit is both a powerful and vulnerable place. It is helpful to remember here how the New Homiletic movement came about in the 1950s. The movement emerged as a response to a post-Hitler generation that was increasingly conscious and critical of potential abuses of power in political and religious speeches. In particular, it highlighted the concern that preaching may have served as propaganda for the state.<sup>12</sup> Being vigilant of the danger of authoritarian preaching, the New Homileticians emphasized the experiences of congregations, and insisted that preaching should reflect their needs and earn their trust. They sought to descend out of the powerful space of the pulpit and connect with the pews. This movement advanced an approach to preaching that was more pedagogically sound and effective.

Embracing this New Homiletical approach, then as now, involves attending to the experiences of people in the pew. Over the last few decades thanks to the postmodern feminists, we have learned that experiences of the congregations are far from homogenous and static but heterogenous and fluid. The realization of the diversity of the experiences in the pew is closely linked to that of the diversity of experiences of the preacher, especially those who come from marginalized places. In this regard, vulnerability is an undeniable reality of a preacher who carries a non-white and female body. However, this vulnerability presents a conundrum. A

---

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 13.

<sup>12</sup> John McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethnic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 50.

conundrum, according to practical theologians Bonnie McLemore and Joyce Mercer, is a confusing or difficult problem or question. It is “a [c]atch-22 dynamic, which puts people in an aggravating and relentless dammed-if-you-do, dammed-if-you-don’t-position.”<sup>13</sup>

To elucidate this dynamic, let us imagine a preaching classroom where the teacher is non-white female who believes in democratic and radically egalitarian ways of teaching preaching. This teacher encourages students to think of their preaching contexts where people in the pew are racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse. The teacher has the first-hand experience of oppression due to her race and her gender. She knows the importance of challenging and dismantling the unearned privilege associated with preaching authority and power. Yet, when she actively pursues this approach by modeling a non-authoritarian style of teaching, she faces other challenges, experiencing further marginalization such as being stereotyped or labeled. These challenges are often hidden and such internalized oppression is manifest through a distaste or dismissal of one’s own identity and a desire to be white, assimilated into the dominant norm.

One of the stereotypes faced by Asian-North American women is the label of “model minority.” This label prompts us to think critically about cultures that are steeped in colonial legacy. Non-white students internalize their low self-esteem and overcompensate by performing white, which is associated with authority. To survive in the white dominant culture, non-white people attempt to become whiter than white people. This over-compensation happens in preaching. When a white male preacher avoids imposing kerygmatic preaching<sup>14</sup> and instead chooses a conversational style of preaching, he receives an overall positive feedback from the pew. Yet, when an Asian woman preacher adopts dialogical and more egalitarian style of preaching, some question her preaching authority. Their vulnerable position as a racialized female preacher seems to be at odds with her commitment to make preaching participatory and inclusive. Further fragmentation of experiences into particular sub-types occurs for people who find themselves minoritized by disability, sexual orientation, class, etc.

Another colonial legacy has to do with the continuation of the overly authoritarian and male-centered and clergy-centered preaching (Kerygmatic) which is prevalent in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Non-white non-European Christians from these places have emigrated to North America and bring an understanding of preaching with them which is deeply informed by the colonial experience. The churches that James Nieman and Thomas Rogers studied clearly demonstrate this issue:

A wide range of East Asian groups impute both high status and vast responsibility to their religious leaders . . . Among Latino groups. . . the preacher is still granted a

---

<sup>13</sup> Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds., *Conundrums in Practical Theology* (Leiden: Brill 2016), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 37-56. Rose reviews major voices in homiletics by organizing four different patterns, Kerygmatic, transformational, marginal, and conversational preaching.

large measure of unchallenged respect. Set against a [North] American religious ethos often skeptical about those in power and fiercely democratic about clergy-lay relations, such a view of the preacher may seem odd. . . . What preachers in cross-cultural situations need to realize, then, is that the preaching task is granted an official power fraught with vast potentials and ominous dangers. . . . Related to this, of course, are matters of gender and its place in an ethnic community. It comes as no surprise that ethnic groups steeped in patriarchy more readily ascribe public status and overt power to men.<sup>15</sup>

Pedagogical challenges get complicated when teaching authority and marginal racial, gender and cultural identities clash. Asian North American women theological educators raise a similar issue:

The question arises when these convictions are not shared by our students, especially students coming from Asian and other “high context” cultures who do not appreciate the attendant democratic practices. . . . Some Asian students need to view “the professor” as the expert with the requisite store of knowledge and wisdom which they expect to have transmitted to them. . . . [A]s Asian and Asian North American feminist teachers, we may have to recognize that to “give our power away” too drastically in the classroom may strip us of much of our authority as teachers, on top of its unconscious erosion by the perceptions of society in general because of our ethno-cultural and gender minority status.<sup>16</sup>

Compromising and negotiating all these dynamics, further questions arise: How can we affirm our teaching vulnerability as preaching practice and also acknowledge its limit? How can preaching combat internalized oppression and contribute to the empowerment of preachers and people?

An exploration of the notion of accountability may be helpful.

### **Preaching and Accountability**

We have explored the complex power dynamic in the preaching classroom such as when the teacher carries a non-dominant body. This conundrum calls for the need to both be vulnerable and to claim one’s authority in the classroom and pulpit. Negotiating the unspoken cultural and gender-based assumptions of teaching authority and preaching power is not easy. It is necessary to critique the very concept of vulnerability from a postcolonial perspective in this complicated identity negotiation. While the roles of teacher and preacher can be strong channels of

---

<sup>15</sup> James Nieman and Thomas Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew* (Fortress, 2001), 39.

<sup>16</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, et al., *Developing Teaching Materials and Instruction Strategies for Teaching Asian and Asian American/Canadian Women’s Theologies in North America*, ATS and Wabash Grant Final Report, November 1999, 11.

communication, they can also be liabilities,<sup>17</sup> especially for those who occupy positions which have been marginalized within the colonial discourse. Education is never neutral. There is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy for preaching. Those of us who suffer from internationalized racism, sexism and colonialism, must learn to be liberated from this colonial legacy which often leads to low self-esteem and an over-performance of white preaching. Liberative practice will lead us to preaching that supports self-determination and a profound affirmation of one's own worth and dignity out of their respectful communities. Preaching in this regard is the proclaiming of the Good News that each and everyone in relationships is created in God's image, however, fearfully, wonderfully, and differently. In this regard, postcolonial preaching seeks accountability for those of us who are beneficiaries of systematic power. Practicing vulnerability as a pedagogy of preaching is particularly important for those in power who need to acknowledge their unearned privilege. For those of us who are oppressed, preaching as accountability means claiming one's dignity and self-worth while contesting internalized oppression. This oppression is multi-layered and particular. That is why both white feminist and black homileticians in the US have stressed the importance in preaching of attention to their unique experiences of slavery, gender and race within a larger system of oppression rather than compartmentalizing them.<sup>18</sup>

Whether we have unearned privilege, or whether we share the oppressive colonized experience, all of us, as human beings, need to be held accountable to the earth itself. Canadian postcolonial practical theologian Lorrain Mackenzie Sheppard suggests that a postcolonial approach to teaching preaching must be accountable to the marginalized of the earth, and indeed to the earth itself.<sup>19</sup> What this means, in a Canadian context, to humbly learn Akwe Nia'Tetewa:Neren, which is Mohawk for "all my relations," as a basic principle for preaching, recognizing the earth and all its creatures as our relatives. For example, if a particular interpretation of the biblical text for preaching authorizes the abuse of the earth and its creatures, then it is no longer valid. If my interpretation of a text for preaching leads to the anti-Semitic bias, then, my sermon must be held accountable. If my sermon example is ignorant of and insensitive to LGBTQ issues and thereby contributes to discrimination and exclusion, then there has to be an accountability. Thinking through preaching acts in light of accountability helps us become a more faithful preacher and more pedagogically sound teacher of homiletics.

### **Pass the Mic: The Case for Pulpit Stewardship**

---

<sup>17</sup> Bhattacharya, "The Vulnerable Academic," 310.

<sup>18</sup> Christine Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989); Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Act* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); James Henry Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Lorraine MacKenzie Shepherd, "Feminist Theology and the Church: A Postmodern Alternative for Canadian Faith Communities," *Feminist Theology with a Canadian Accent: Canadian Perspectives on Contextual Feminist Theology*, ed. by Mary Ann Beavis, Elaine Guillemin, and Barbara Pell (Ottawa: Novalis Press, 2008), 39-57.

Dare we say that it is no longer faithful for a preacher to craft a sermon in isolation then stand as the sole proclaimer of the gospel? Frankly, we wonder if it ever was faithful for sermon preparation to be primarily a solo endeavor. While we hold this fundamental conviction both as preachers and as preaching professors, we have not always been at this place. We weren't taught this. And, frankly, for the most part, the way we were taught has worked. That is, we learned how to deeply exegete the biblical text, to craft a coherent, tidy, and poignant gospel message, and to proclaim it with conviction in order to connect with our hearers' lives of discipleship. Because we are the ones in the congregation who are seminary educated, the ones with the experience, the ones with the holy calling, giving up what we've always known to be "our" tasks feels risky and vulnerable. Even so, not acknowledging a lone ranger preacher mentality<sup>20</sup> as privilege and not giving up such privilege is too costly for those in the body of Christ whose voices are never heard.

So, to repeat, preaching "in the hands of" one person is not faithful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for preaching is not a solo endeavor. Rather, it is a ministry of a community, a whole congregation. The proclamation of the gospel is the privilege and responsibility of the baptized. Preachers do not own the pulpit, they steward it. As stewards, preachers bear responsibility for faithful proclamation in accordance with the scriptures, creeds and confessions. Even more, preachers bear responsibility to equip others to fulfill their baptismal call to proclaim.

The focus of a recent convocation of the Association of Teaching Theologians of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was "Unearned Privilege as Cheap Grace." In the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between costly grace and cheap grace, speakers were invited to "think through the critical distinction between God's unmerited grace and North America's unearned privilege in its many forms in order that the church more faithfully embody Jesus's calling to discipleship, to justice, and to become the beloved community." The group reflected on how the practice of preaching has privileged clergy over laity. And in the denominations of which we are a part that means we privilege white and male. We also privilege those who are straight, financially well-off and educated. Key questions become: Whose voices are not being heard? Who is not being seen? What unearned privileges are at work?

These are the same questions posed to the preaching professor who hopes students will learn to preach in ways that prioritize stewardship over ownership of the pulpit. In addition to vulnerability and accountability, such preaching professors teach toward accessibility. How does the homiletics classroom lead seminarians to a preaching ministry that includes more voices? The remainder of this paper will explore what pulpit stewardship looks like in three different periods: before, during and after the preaching event.

---

<sup>20</sup> See Justo L. and Catherine G. González, "The Neglected Interpreters" in *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 1994), 47-65.

## Sermon Preparation (“Feedforward”)

While most sermon preparation processes begin with the biblical text, preachers are encouraged to begin with context by writing brief reflections on what is known about the context going into this sermon: what is happening in the world, the church, the life of the particular ministry setting (e.g., the congregation), and the lives of individual hearers? Preachers should also reflect on their own state of being going into the sermon. Even more, inviting congregation members to share their reflections assists in making sure that the events that are front and center for the hearers are not ignored by the preacher. These reflections will likely be revisited as the preacher moves through the feedforward process.

Preachers are then encouraged to invite hearers into the process of discovering what the Bible has to say to a particular community at a particular time. Tom Long calls this crucial not-to-be-short-circuited time “attending to the text.”<sup>21</sup> The added dimension for the preacher who stewards the pulpit is to make these exercises collaborative. While some participate in “pastors’ text studies,” the argument here is that the collaboration should be with one’s hearers. For example, ask the music minister and/or other musicians in the congregation to set the pericope to music or facilitate a “Scripture Tableau” with an existing weekly Bible study group. Preachers could ask the poets in one’s congregation to write a poem based on the upcoming Sunday’s Scripture readings or encourage the community’s creative writers to craft a first-person perspective narrative from the point of view of one of the characters in the biblical text.<sup>22</sup> Essentially the preacher is crowdsourcing sermonic ideas. Justo and Catherine González put it this way:

But the problem comes when we seem to say that private Bible study is somehow better or deeper or more meaningful than corporate study—when we forget that the Bible comes out of a community and is addressed to a community . . . Rather than encouraging their hearers to delve further into the Bible, [Lone-Ranger preachers] are actually discouraging them. The Bible becomes an esoteric book that only those with specialized education or gifts can possibly be able to understand. It is not a book for the lay Christian, but only for the ‘professional.’ This is hardly an attitude that should be encouraged in the church.<sup>23</sup>

Collaborative sermon preparation is recommended not primarily because the preacher is incapable of crafting a meaningful sermon, but because engaging hearers makes the overall

---

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, ed. 3 (Louisville: WJKP, 2016), 92-101.

<sup>22</sup> Long, “Attending to the Text,” in *The Witness of Preaching*, 92-101. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Thomas Troeger, *A Sermon Workbook: Exercises in the Art and Craft of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013). John McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: WJKP, 1997). Alyce McKenzie Novel *Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons* (Louisville: WJKP, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See Justo L. and Catherine G. González, “The Neglected Interpreters” in *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 1994), 47-65.

process more meaningful for them. Not only will they become more biblically fluent, but they will listen to the sermon with a new expectancy. Even more, by inviting them into this shared process they are equipped to proclaim, thereby serving the preaching ministry of the congregation, in general, even as they serve the upcoming sermon, in particular. In this way, preparation for preaching is not preparation for ministry, it is ministry.<sup>24</sup>

As preachers begin to craft the sermon, it is recommended that they “test” sections (stories, illustrations, assumptions about knowledge of the biblical story) with some hearers who serve as conversation partners. These reflective stopping points go a long way in “getting the gospel heard.”<sup>25</sup> Again, the preaching preparation process could be a solo endeavor and still “work,” missing opportunities to walk with and equip others is too costly.

Just as preparation for preaching is not preparation for ministry but actually ministry, the homiletical classroom is not only preparation for how one will prepare to preach “out there,” it is an opportunity to walk through such preparation and preach with and to one another. We don’t just talk about this kind of collaborative as a good idea, we do it. In other words, there is no way to get to one’s sermon in preaching class without engaging in a collaborative process with one’s hearers; that is, with their classmates and their professor. The final time students preach for class takes place in congregations in which they’ve invited members of those ministry settings to share in the creative and collaborative process with them.

### Preaching the Sermon (“Feed”<sup>26</sup>)

Considering that the preparation process (before the preaching event) is called “feedforward” and the follow up after the preaching event is called “feedback” (see below), the preaching event might be considered actually feeding.

The creative and collaborative sermon preparation process (“before”) is sure to have a nourishing effect during the proclamation of the sermon. Even if the preaching moment appears somewhat traditional in that one person “has the mic” for 10-15 minutes, congregation members inevitably hear their own voices in what the preacher offers. There will be many more examples such as: “Recall what Vinny shared about his experience with ‘wilderness time,’” and “Kelly’s perspective of the woman at the well is so powerful. Thank you, Kelly, for allowing me to share this . . .” In this way, preachers are practicing the important skills of getting permission from and verbally citing conversation partners.

While these examples are metaphorically “passing the mic,” preachers are stretched to literally pass the mic in the midst of “their” sermons. For example, instead of sharing Vinny’s story, invite

---

<sup>24</sup> Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> O. Wesley Allen, Jr. *Determining the Form: Structures for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008). Allen asserts that “we are not called simply to preach the gospel but to get the gospel heard,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> Thanks to Doctor of Ministry student, Mark Rigg, for this insight.

Vinny to share it in that moment. As David Lose reminds, “. . . if our people have spent their entire lives watching others (the preacher) talk about faith but have never themselves had an opportunity to do so, where will they have developed the competence and confidence to do it themselves?”<sup>27</sup> Various members of the congregation will eventually develop comfort “in the pulpit” (i.e., “with the mic”) and the call of the baptized to proclaim (one might say, “to make disciples of all nations”) will thereby move one step closer to fulfillment.

The same is true in the preaching classroom. By being integrally involved in their classmates’ preaching process (before, during and after), students’ development as preachers is quicker and more profound, to name just two benefits.

#### After (“Feedback”)

Because the task of the preacher is not just preaching the gospel, but “getting the gospel heard,” receiving feedback assists preachers in finding out what was actually heard.

Students offer feedback to fellow preachers by responding to questions that are not explicitly evaluative, but provide helpful information for the preacher. For example,

- According to this sermon, who is God?
- How might your actions, behaviour, commitments change as a result of this sermon?
- What in this sermon makes you want to learn more about the Bible?  
For what and/or for whom does this sermon prompt you to pray?

This process is not only about the preacher; it also equips hearers for their own proclamation in the world. In other words, offering feedback regarding a sermon’s impact to classmates’ preaching in this way gives seminarians access to the role of “evaluator” and, in so doing, more of a chance to develop their voices as preachers. The preaching professor gives up being the sole provider of feedback in order to model access to a shared feedback process for the sake of the development of students. Why should such development stop in the classroom? The hope is that preachers will see the benefit of inviting their hearers to serve in this kind of role so that they too might encourage development of their hearers’ “muscles” for theological articulation and proclamation. In other words, following up on what one preaches in this way is not searching for ego strokes or, as it may be, receiving ego strikes. Rather, it *is* ministry in that keeps the cycle of conversation going.

In order to foster homiletical vulnerability and accountability in preaching settings (the classroom and beyond), preachers are encouraged to steward the pulpit by providing access to the sermon preparation process, sermon feedback, and even perhaps the pulpit itself. This continuous cycle suggests that as people are being equipped for faithful preaching they are also being equipped to equip others to preach faithfully.

---

<sup>27</sup> David Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—And Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 105.

# Performance Studies

Convener: Michael Brothers, interim

*A note from the performance studies workgroup:*

## **Off the Page! Performance Practices for Preaching**

This session will be an exchange of speech/performance practices and exercises that members have found most energizing, evocative and transformative in the preaching classroom. This workshop will be a series of brief presentations and demonstrations that will employ volunteers from the workgroup as participants.

Moderator: Michael Brothers

Presenters: Karyn L. Wiseman

Nancy Lammers Gross

Samantha Gilmore

Ruthanna Hooke

Jerusha Matsen Neal

Yvette Joy Harris-Smith

## PERFORMING THE HUMAN PROSPECT IN POETRY AND PREACHING

Charles L. Bartow, Professor Emeritus  
Princeton Theological Seminary  
Princeton, NJ, ptsem.edu  
Copyright © 2019 Charles L. Bartow

ABSTRACT: The natural order, and, more especially, the call of the gospel, is to homiletic and poetic performance of a human prospect governed by radical empathy, that is, the projection of oneself into the life of the unlike other, just as the Wholly Other, in Christ, assumed fallen human nature in order to lift it, with all of creation, into participation in the life of the eternal and holy beauty of the Infinite. This radical empathy — across racial, ethnic and even creaturely distinctions — is attested in Holy Scripture and is exemplified in poetic and sermonic works (arrested performances) of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century poets and preachers.

This is not a research paper. It is an exploratory essay. What startled me into this exploration was an observation made by Loren Eiseley in his imaginative and masterful study of evolution in the fossil record and in living nature, *The Immence Journey*<sup>1</sup> Eiseley observed that the unique attainment at the higher reaches of evolution, i.e., human beings, is development of a capacity for radical empathy, the ability to project oneself into the depths of a life not one's own; in Eiseley's case, even into the life of nature's creatures other than its human creatures. Instance: "The Sparrow Hawk", as I title it, from *The Immence Journey*.

### "The Sparrow Hawk"

By Loren Eiseley

He lay limp in my grasp and I could feel his heart pound under the feathers, he but only looked beyond me and up. I saw him look that last look away beyond me into a sky so full of light that I could not follow his gaze ... I suppose I must have had an idea then of what I was going to do, but I never let it come into consciousness. I just reached over and laid the hawk on the grass.

He lay there a long minute without hope, unmoving, his eyes still fixed on that blue vault above him. It must have been that he was already so far away in heart that he never felt the release from my hand. He never even stood. He just lay with his breast against the grass. In the next second after that long minute he was gone. Like a flicker of light he had vanished with my eyes full on him, but without actually seeing even a premonitory wing beat. He was gone straight into that towering emptiness of light and crystal that my eyes could scarcely bear to penetrate. For another long moment there was silence. I could not see him. The light was too intense. Then from far up somewhere a cry came ringing down.

I was young then and had seen little of the world, but when I heard that cry my heart turned over. It was not the cry of the hawk I captured: for, by shifting my position against the sun, I was now seeing further up. Straight out of the sun's eye, where she must have been soaring restlessly above us for untold hours, hurtled his mate ... And from far up, ringing from peak to peak of the summits over us, came a cry of such unutterable and ecstatic joy that it sounds down across the years and tingles among the cups on my quiet breakfast table.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Loren Eiseley, *The Immence Journey*. New York: Random House, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Eiseley, pp. 190-92.

Of course a host of poets, renowned and not so renowned, likewise have contributed to the late modern bestiary.<sup>3</sup> For example, in her brilliant and delightful, “The Centaur,” May Swenson, prolific and celebrated 20<sup>th</sup> century poet, remembering a childhood joy, creates a reverie of horse and rider become, as it were, a single, live mythical creature.

### “The Centaur”

By May Swenson

The summer that I was ten –  
Can it be there was only one  
summer that I was ten? It must  
have been a long one then –  
each day I’d go out to choose  
a fresh horse from my stable  
which was a willow grove  
down by the old canal.  
I’d go on my two bare feet.  
But when, with my brother’s jack-knife,  
I had cut me a long limber horse  
with a good thick knob for a head,  
and peeled him slick and clean  
except a few leaves for the tail,  
and cinched my brother’s belt  
around his head for a rein,  
I’d straddle and canter him fast  
up the grass bank to the path,  
trot along in the lovely dust  
that talcumed over his hoofs,  
hiding my toes, and turning  
his feet to swift half-moons.  
The willow knob with the strap  
jouncing between my thighs  
was the pommel and yet the poll  
of my nickering pony’s head.  
My head and my neck were mine,  
yet they were shaped like a horse.  
My hair flopped to the side  
like the mane of a horse in the wind.  
My forelock swung in my eyes,  
my neck arched and I snorted.

I shied and skittered and reared,  
stopped and raised my knees,  
pawed at the ground and quivered.  
My teeth bared and we wheeled  
and swished through the dust again.  
I was the horse and the rider,  
and the leather I slapped to his rump  
spanked my own behind.  
Doubled, my two hoofs beat  
a gallop along the bank,  
the wind twanged in my mane,  
my mouth squared to the bit.  
And yet I sat on my steed  
quiet, negligent riding,  
my toes standing in the stirrups,  
my thighs hugging his ribs.  
At a walk we drew up to the porch.  
I tethered him to a paling.  
Dismounting, I smoothed my skirt  
and entered the dusty hall.  
My feet on the clean linoleum  
left ghostly toes in the hall.  
“Where have you been?” said my mother.  
“Been riding,” I said from the sink,  
and filled me a glass of water.  
“What’s that in your pocket?” she said.  
“Just my knife.” It weighted my pocket  
and stretched my dress awry.  
“Go tie back your hair,” said my mother,  
and “Why is your mouth all green?”  
“Rob Roy, he pulled some clover  
as we crossed the field,” I told her.<sup>4</sup>

In a far less happy, hardly playful reverie, Richard Eberhart sees in the remains of every farmer’s creaturely foe, opportunity, even necessity, to mourn the loss of celebrated human lives and whole civilizations.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bestiary: According to dictionary definition, a medieval allegory or moralizing treatise on animals. Here usage of the term refers to a modern (or even postmodern) humanistic, poetic or homiletic such work.

<sup>4</sup> May Swenson, “The Centaur”, in *Nature: Poems Old and New*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1944, pp. 13-15.

“The Groundhog”  
By Richard Eberhart

In June, amid the golden fields,  
I saw a groundhog lying dead.  
Dead lay he; my senses shook,  
and mind outshot our naked frailty.  
There lowly in the vigorous summer  
His form began its senseless change,  
And made my senses waver dim  
Seeing nature ferocious in him.  
Inspecting close his maggot's might  
And seething cauldron of his being,  
Half with loathing, half with a strange love,  
I poked him with an angry stick.  
The fever arose, became a flame  
and Vigour circumscribed the skies,  
Immense energy in the sun,  
and through my frame a sunless trembling.  
My stick had done nor good nor harm.  
Then stood I silent in the day  
Watching the object, as before;  
And kept my reverence for knowledge  
Trying for control, to be still,  
To quell the passion of the blood;  
Until I had bent down on my knees  
Praying for joy in the sight of decay.  
And so I left; and I returned  
In Autumn strict of eye, to see  
The sap gone out of the groundhog,  
But the bony sodden hulk remained.  
But the year had lost its meaning,  
And in intellectual chains  
I lost both love and loathing,  
Mured up in the wall of wisdom.  
Another summer took the fields again  
Massive and burning, full of life,  
But when I chanced upon the spot  
There was only a little hair left,  
And bones bleaching in the sunlight  
Beautiful as architecture;  
I watched them like a geometer,  
And cut a walking stick from a birch.  
It has been three years now.  
There is no sign of the groundhog.  
I stood there in the whirling summer,  
My hand capped a withered heart,  
And thought of China and of Greece,  
Of Alexander in his tent;  
Of Montaigne in his tower,  
Of Saint Theresa in her wild lament.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Richard Eberhart, “The Groundhog”, in *Collected Poems, 1930-1976*. New York: Oxford University Press 1976, pp. 23-24.

As mentioned above, a host of poets have contributed to the late-modern bestiary. But we shall let the two just noted, Swenson and Eberhart, stand in for those not included here. And so we move to selected examples of poetic engagement with *human* lives other than, far different from, one's own. In this connection, and in light of our academy's 2019 theme, I cannot think of a more appropriate poet to start with than the contemporary prose poet, Catherine Sasanov. In her award winning, *Had Slaves*<sup>6</sup>, Sasanov, through careful research and painstaking attention to detail, traces her ancestors' history of slaveholding. Further, with what strikes me as remarkable success, she gives voice to those slaves' thoughts, along with others' thoughts about them, slaves' lives lost and slaves' experienced worth long "interred with their bones."<sup>7</sup> Just so Sasanov's ancestors' slaves speak to our present moment for those with "ears to hear".<sup>8</sup> It is not that Sasanov pretends to let dead slaves literally speak in their in their own voice through her. She is a poet, not a medium practicing the necromancing art of the woman with the familiar spirit at Endor.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Sasanov speaks of her ancestors' slaves as though their lives mattered and matter still. Listen:

**"At Bloody Island, 1864"**

By Catherine Sasanov

for Daniel Steele, Company B, 68<sup>th</sup> Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops. His last days and death in the Civil War, unearthed at the National Archives, Washington, DC

Thank God for your land-locked heart. That you had a wife to leave it with. Someone to tend it while you were gone.

When did she pass it to your infant son? When you returned to her on a comrade's tongue, buried on a drowning island?

The Mississippi picks at you. Who knew rivers skinned their knees? That you'd lay dying on a scab of land, half a river's width away from freedom?

Some nights you could barely breathe for the North Star straddling your chest. But what soldier didn't think himself the man to try Death on for size,

then take it off? Red marks blossomed in your mouth, your words scraped them into open sores: a voice thick with smallpox. *Quarantine*

was a wind blowing the barracks back to you, its companies of black men singing. Was that army just another owner? You'd seen the promise of money

changing hands—Your master enlisting you as business venture. When he strode off to fall knee-deep in God, not even prayer

would lend him an instrument sharp enough to cut that thousand dollar loss. *You moved.*

---

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Sasanov, "At Bloody Island, 1864", in *Had Slaves*. Danbury Ct: Firewheel Editions (Western Connecticut State University), 2010, pp. 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar", Act 3, Sc. 2, in *The Works of William Shakespeare*. Roslyn, NY: Black's Readers Service Co., 1937, p. 876.

<sup>8</sup> See Mt. 10:27, 11:15, 13:9, 13:43; Mk. 4:9, 4:23, 7:16, 8:8, 14:25.

<sup>9</sup> I Sam. 28:7 ff.

Now, no matter where he stood, you were a uniform,  
a gun, away from him. The weeks it took to march to St. Louis, fall out with Death. What  
wasn't buried of you was burned. Downstream,  
the war bled out without you as it had before. The Mississippi hauled your comrades on her  
back. She took you to herself.  
Which is worse: a river flooding the dead into its arms, or a white man setting slaves adrift  
beneath the dirt? In the end,  
it's the living left most unmoored. Like your child who had to take on faith an infancy he  
spent as slave, a war that broke him out. When his time came  
to remember you, your wife walked him to a mirror. How did he bring the word *father* back  
to you when  
the name had long been taken in his home? The red-haired, blue-eyed black man who  
answered to it was white enough to be his master. Your wife  
flourished in his arms.

*Enough —*

Military paperwork's no empty casket in a paper grave.  
Forgive me for exhuming yours. Forgive  
my propping open lines till they were wide enough to see between.  
Like bureaucracy (that budding artist), I render you (in pen, in ink),  
draw your loved ones closer to your death. A family portrait.  
Call it *Dead Soldier With A Minor's Claim for Pension*.  
Call it *Land-Locked Heart*.  
The river swallows. I fishing for the truth of you.  
The river swallows *hard*.  
How many answers can a question bear  
before the hook snaps off its question mark?

If ever there was a not unfrequently underappreciated voice and presence, it is the voice and presence of the African American mother, grandmother, great aunt who would not have her beloved child thwarted in overcoming obstacles and challenges to appropriate self-advancement. She would have them surmount obstacles, defeat odds, and, come what may, climb their way up passed her own attainments. As for the limits imposed by the oppressing "paleface", as a black mothering great aunt known to me personally put it, she'd have her child ignore those limits, defeat hostility and oppression. And, if the child came in from play tired out and "white with

dirt”, she’d have that child clean up, rest up and get going. Langston Hughes — to my mind, for all time poet laureate of the United States — painted her portrait memorably.

**“Mother to Son”**  
**By Langston Hughes**

Well, son, I’ll tell you:  
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.  
It’s had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I’ve been a-climin’ on  
And reachin’ landin’s  
and turnin’ corners,  
And sometimes goin’ in the dark  
Where there ain’t been no light.  
So boy, don’t you turn back,  
Don’t you set down on the steps  
‘cause you finds it’s kinder hard.  
Don’t you fall now---  
For I’ve still goin, honey,  
I’ve still climbin,  
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,<sup>10</sup>

Hughes’ mother in “Mother to Son” holds a determined, even defiant, hope despite the fact that “... humanity/It seems falls endlessly”, as I expressed it once in my poem, “Banished Eden”.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in contradictory motion to this falling, there is a forever lifting of disabled lives reaching for soul sense *Despite This Flesh* that marks us all, one way or another, disabled. The appropriately preferred euphemism for disability, we must agree, is “differently abled”. Black Lightning”, by Arthur Sze, makes of the euphemism just mentioned a statement of observed fact.

**“Black Lightning”**  
**By Arthur Sze**

A blind girl  
stares at me,  
then types out ten lines  
in braille.

The air has a scent  
of sandalwood and  
arsenic; a night-blooming cereus  
blooms on a dark path.

---

<sup>10</sup> Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son”, in Arna Bartemps, ed., *American Negro Poetry*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Charles L. Bartow, “Banished Eden”, in *Cries of Earth and Altar: Poems That Couldn’t Be Helped*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, a Division of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014, pp. 88-91, esp. p. 91.

I look at the  
short and long flow  
of the lines:  
and guess at garlic,  
the sun, a silver desert rain,  
and palms.

Or, is it simply  
about hands, a river of light,  
the ear of a snail,  
or rags?

And stunned, I feel  
the nerves of my hand flashing  
in the dark, feel  
the world as black  
lightning.<sup>12</sup>

As preachers of the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we come to this: did not the descending child of our God of Father-love, of Mother-care, make bold (through unimaginable, radical empathy, i.e., self-projection into alien lives) to lift the disabled flesh and soul of humanity — sans any crystal stair — to the heights of glory, into the presence of that Infinite Beauty of Holiness that was before the world began (big bang?) and that shall be after its last “whimper.”<sup>13</sup> As I see it, most of the Bible is theo-rhetorical poetry (or prose-poetry), an attestation of the devine poesis<sup>14</sup> Christian theology names the Incarnate Word. Let those with ears to hear — African-American, Euro-American, Native-American, Latin-American, Asian-American — hear:

**Philippians 2:6-11**

**NRSV**

... though he was in the form  
of God, [he]  
did not regard equality with  
God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the  
point of death —  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly  
exalted him

---

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Sze, “Black Lightning” in Vassar Miller, ed., *Despite This Flesh: The Disabled in Stories and Poems*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962, p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2010, p. 60.

and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and  
under the earth  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the Glory of God the Father.

Not to leave sermonic efforts this side of Holy Writ unmentioned, let me state as follows: many a preacher has explored the nature of nature and of nature's creatures other than its human creatures as, so to speak, singing the praises of God. The late Elizabeth Achtemeier's, "God the Music Lover," comes to mind, a sermon drawn from Psalm 148 and Colossians 1:9-20.<sup>15</sup> In our homiletic history there is also remarkable and often poignant insight into lives of a human sort at a very great distance from the life of the preacher herself or himself. Frederick B. Speakman's "Converted at Every Revival"<sup>16</sup> deserves mention in this regard. And in keeping with this thought, if not quite so notable in accomplishment, is my own "Wilhemina's House Is Clean."<sup>17</sup> Speakman's sermon and mine reflect something of what has to be learned from the narrative poetic art studied and exemplified by our rightly admired emeritus colleague, Eugene L. Lowry,<sup>18</sup> and more recently, Jeffrey Frymire. In his massive (446 page) *A Little Book on Form*<sup>19</sup> (please note the humor!) Pulitzer Prize poet and United States Poet Laureate (1995-'97), Robert Haas, indicated that poetic form is not, finally, the exclusive right of poets. So, I say, we preachers — and teachers of preachers — are called to explore all manner of form as we seek to perform the human prospect in what we write and in what we speak. We are called to explore, in proclamation of the gospel, the human prospect as it is and as God would have it.

My coda to this hymnic exploration into the poetic and homiletic performance of the human prospect as attested in nature and in Holy Scripture has two movements. The first is to note, as is implicit in all I have written here, that, according to any dictionary of English usage, "human" first and foremost, is an adjective. The word "human" refers to a *way* of being, not just, or even first of all, to a type of creature. We are intended, conceived, born to be human and to be becoming ever more human. We are not, humanly speaking, merely self-defined, settled, self-contented selves. James Loder observed, perhaps more pointedly than any other practical

---

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, "God the Music Lover", in *Preaching As Theology and Art*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984, pp. 62-70.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick B. Speakman, "Converted at Every Revival", in *Love Is Something You Do*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1959, pp. 107-14.

<sup>17</sup> Charles L. Bartow, "Wilhemina's House is Clean", in *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation*. Grand Rapids, MI: 1997, pp. 160-63.

<sup>18</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Haas, *A little Book on Form: An Exploration Into The Formal Imagination of Poetry*. NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017, Introduction, pp. 1-7.

theologian, that the self becomes itself, most truly, most fully, through conflict with (and even intimacy with) other selves and that Other Self, truly, fully human, truly, fully divine.<sup>20</sup> So, as my mentor in performance studies, i.e., speech communication in ministry, W.J. Beeners, often said, “If you think you have arrived, not even God can help you.” I should say that Loder, not infrequently, acknowledged his debt to Beeners on this point, i.e., constructive conflict theory and practice — in education, in psychology, and in theology, especially practical theology, including homiletics.

In this connection it seems appropriate to note that, for Calvin, the very essence of the Christian life is “humility, humility, humility”,<sup>21</sup> to identify with Christ in his humiliation and only thus, to be identified with him in his glorification, as attested in Philippians 2:6-11. We stand under each other’s care and caring, and under the care and caring (judgment and mercy) of the “Wholly Other”, or we do not stand at all but, instead, fall passed any hope of elevation. Biblically speaking we are all, all, slaves, slaves to self, to sin, to pretending masters and to sin’s author. Or, on the other hand, we are slaves to God and to God’s righteousness.<sup>22</sup> Only *so* are we emancipated from the plight of being less than fully alive and truly human. In a word, the gospel of Jesus Christ is our emancipation proclamation. So Jesus calls his obedient servants (or slaves) his friends (as in John 15:14-15).

The second movement of the coda, briefly stated is this: our calling to be and to become increasingly, and ever more truly human, is manifest in our election,<sup>23</sup> laity and clergy alike, as servants of the Word”.<sup>24</sup> And those of us in homiletics and related disciplines (e.g. speech communication in ministry) are privileged to be “servants of the servants of the Word”<sup>25</sup> as long years ago I remarked in my inaugural address as Egner Professor of Speech Communication in Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. Acceptance of this calling — and the humbling of ourselves to the work entailed in it — yields for us hope, and joy, and peace (with not a little disturbance of our peace — blessed disturbance!) for we are his who has called us into the fellowship of his friends, *his* emancipated sisters and brothers.

---

<sup>20</sup> See “James Loder: Fundamental Practical Theology”, in Gordon S. Mikoski and Richard Osmer, *With Piety and Learning: The History of Practical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, 1812-2012*. Berlin: Lit. Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2011, pp. 146-63, esp. p. 162.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.11, ed. John T. McNeill, Jr. trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, pp. 268-69.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 6:1-25, esp. vss. 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982, pp. 82-83. Nancy Lammers Gross also has dealt with this matter in her inaugural lecture and convocation address at Princeton Theological Seminary, Sept. 2019. Prof. Gross’ lecture is yet to be published.

<sup>24</sup> H.H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Charles L. Bartow, “In Service to the Servants of the Word”. *Princeton Theological Seminary Bulletin*, 13, no. 3 (1992), pp. 274-286.

# Preaching and Culture

Conveners: Leah Schade and Eunjoo Mary Kim

*A note from the preaching and culture workgroup:*

## ***Preaching in the Purple Zone* Panel Discussion: Research Methods and the Sermon-Dialogue-Sermon Process**

In her book, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, Leah D. Schade draws on her research data of 1200 mainline Protestant preachers to build a model of preaching about difficult social issues called the “sermon-dialogue-sermon” method. Three panelists – Alyce McKenzie, Ronald J. Allen, and Jerusha Neal – will share their experiences either working with or observing the results of Schade’s research and method. They will discuss how they have seen the method used for educating clergy and laity, and how the research strategies can be useful for students developing their own methodology for studying the relationship between preachers, congregations, and culture. Schade’s response will include preliminary findings from her Wabash grant project assessing the clergy, lay leaders, and congregants of ten churches involved in a training program for implementing the sermon-dialogue-sermon method.

Moderator: Eunjoo Mary Kim

Panelists: Alyce McKenzie

Ronald J. Allen

Jerusha Neal

Respondent: Leah D. Schade

# A VOICE CRIES OUT: THE ROLE OF LISTENING FOR REVEALING CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND UNMASKING WHITENESS IN THE PULPIT

Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne

Adjunct Faculty in Pastoral Theology

Moravian Theological Seminary, Bethlehem, PA, <https://www.moravianseminary.edu/>

Copyright © 2019 Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne

**ABSTRACT:** Beginning with the Story of the Water Protectors in Standing Rock this paper explores the role of listening in unmasking whiteness in the pulpit by confronting the prevailing white colonial narrative that influences the worldview of Amer-european preachers. It describes the connections between worldview, sacred cultural narrative, and speech. It presents the dominant white supremacist cultural narrative in the United States of America, based on the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery. It offers listening as a means of interrogating the dominant worldview. It also introduces particular practices of listening as experienced by the author in Indigenous relationships which has the potential for awakening preacher to their own collusion with the dominant narrative.

## Introduction

In April of 2016 voices began to emanate from the Dakotas. LaDonna Brave Bull Allard founded Sacred Stone Camp, which she described as a “spirit camp we built to lay our prayers to our water, to protect it from the Dakota Access pipeline,” (DAPL) by Energy Transfer Partners.<sup>1</sup> The 1,200-mile, \$3.8 billion pipeline was projected to carry half a million barrels of oil daily from North Dakota through South Dakota and Iowa to a distribution point in Illinois.<sup>2</sup>

Originally the pipeline was slated to run near to the capital Bismarck which is home to a predominantly white population, but they rerouted the planned pipeline.<sup>3</sup> As a result, it threatened the Standing Rock Sioux tribe’s water supply as well as their sacred sites. The planning was based on old surveys from 1985 and designed without tribal consultation.<sup>4</sup> The company and the Army Corps of Engineers who approved the plan, were in violation of “Article 2 of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty which guarantees that the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe shall

---

<sup>1</sup> LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, “How Powerful Could We Be If We Agree to Stand Our Ground on Our Treaty Land,” *YES! Magazine*, February 4, 2017, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/to-save-the-water-we-must-break-the-cycle-of-colonial-trauma-20170204>.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Humes, “Complete DAPL Protest Timeline: One Year after Camps Were Cleared,” *KFYR-TV*, Feb 23, 2018, <https://www.kfyrtv.com/content/news/Complete-DAPL-protest-timeline-one-year-after-camps-were-clear-474968483.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Max Bearak, “U.N. Officials Denounce ‘Inhuman’ Treatment of Native American Pipeline Protesters,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/15/u-n-officials-denounce-inhuman-treatment-of-north-dakota-pipeline-protesters/>.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson Meyer, “The Law Behind the Dakota Access Pipeline Disaster,” *The Atlantic*, September 9, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/dapl-dakota-sitting-rock-sioux/499178/>.

enjoy the ‘undisturbed use and occupation’ of [their] permanent homeland, the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.”<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the summer tensions rose and by early September sacred sites had been bulldozed. Members of the Lakota Nation located at the Standing Rock reservation battled for their land on two fronts both with the pipeline company and the United States Civil Corps of Engineers. Meanwhile supporters streamed into Standing Rock swelling the prayer camps from a couple dozen to thousands of people. Many of them were Indigenous peoples from around the world and some were religious leaders.<sup>6</sup>

The Rev. David Wilson a member of the Choctaw Nation and Superintendent of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference (OIMC) of The United Methodist Church arrived with others from OIMC bringing food and supplies. He knew the challenges facing the prayer camps so he did not come empty handed.<sup>7</sup> The religious presence at Standing Rock was not limited to clergy either. Laypeople such as environmentalist Lynne Hunter and biologist Charles Hunter, both non-Native, drove 13 hours in order to “stand in solidarity” with Water Protectors as the protestors were now becoming known.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Importance of Relationships**

Though they came to provide resources and assistance, the importance of relationships stood out strongest in the statements from those who visited Standing Rock. Rev. David Wilson said, “Perhaps the most significant way that United Methodists can respond is by learning about and building relationships with our Native neighbors.”<sup>9</sup> Lynne Hunter evidenced the awareness that comes in the midst of building relationships when she remarked that water protection is not just a Native issue, “The whole time we were at the campsite, it kept occurring to me, where are all the white people?”<sup>10</sup> Building relationships and engaging in advocacy with people different from herself began to intersect with her own identity. Not only did she identify as white but she began to notice who was missing and the import of that observation.

October 6-8, 2016 the Northeast Jurisdiction Native American Ministries Committee (NEJNAMC) of The United Methodist Church met for their annual meeting. As the newly elected Communications Committee chairperson, I was asked to write a letter on behalf of the all the Committees within the jurisdiction showing support for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe as they fought to stop construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

---

<sup>5</sup> Wakinyan Waanatan, “Pipeline Fighters Set Up Spirit Camp to Block Construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline,” *Indigenous Environmental Network*, <http://www.ienearth.org/pipeline-fighters-set-up-spirit-camp-to-block-construction-of-the-dakota-access-pipeline/>

<sup>6</sup> Doreen Gosmire, “United Methodists Stand with Standing Rock,” *United Methodist News Service Minnesota Annual Conference News*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.minnesotaumc.org/newsdetail/united-methodists-stand-with-standing-rock-6009367>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ginny Underwood, “United Methodists, Native Americans Oppose Pipeline,” *United Methodist News Service*, Sept. 1, 2016, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodists-native-americans-oppose-pipeline>

<sup>9</sup> Doreen Gosmire, “United Methodists Stand with Standing Rock.”

<sup>10</sup> Ginny Underwood, “United Methodists, Native Americans Oppose Pipeline.”

By this time militarized private security forces had clashed several times with Water Protectors in Standing Rock. Guard dogs, mace, and rubber bullets had been used against them even as they stayed on private land watching the bulldozers tear swaths through the landscape.<sup>11</sup> Intimidation, profiling, and strip searches were becoming usual practice against protectors and their families - especially Natives traveling to or from the reservation.<sup>12</sup>

The NEJNAMC letter would be a sign not only of advocacy and solidarity with the tribe but also a deeply relational act. Several of the leaders in the jurisdiction had family members and friends who were tribal members from the Standing Rock Reservation and some were related to the Water Protectors. The Native American youth caucus also known as the Peg-leg Flamings, traveled to Standing Rock with NEJNAMC representative, Raggatha RagghiRain, (Cherokee Heritage), just a few weeks earlier and shared life-changing stories.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a few members both Native and non-Native, marched in the Philadelphia Solidarity March for Standing Rock in September.<sup>14</sup> The stories coming out of Standing Rock mobilized our community to act swiftly.

As a non-Native serving on my Annual Conference Native American Ministries Committee for the past three years and an antiracism trainer for my Annual Conference I learned the importance of seeking guidance from Native peoples before embarking on activist activities. I also became aware of the value of relationship and community. As a result of these lessons, I asked for volunteers to help me draft the letter. Joined by Ruby Richardson Olson (Haliwa-Saponi), and Larry E Siikanen (Lakota), the letter was drafted and brought before the full body of Jurisdictional representatives the next morning. We refined the language through consensus and mailed it out the following Monday.

My relationships paved the way for the letter to be written in a manner that honored the values of the community. The role played by listening in this action cannot be underestimated. The importance of listening would become more fully a part of my conscientization process over the next few years. Similar to Lynn Hunter, I found that the practice and exploration of listening would intersect with my own identity. Listening would change the direction of my activism, my scholarship, my homiletic, and the very language I used to express myself.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ryan W. Miller, "How the Dakota Pipeline Battle Unfolded," *USA TODAY*, Dec. 2, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2016/12/02/timeline-dakota-access-pipeline-and-protests/94800796/>

<sup>12</sup> For a full report see "Report and Statement from Chief Edward John Expert Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Firsthand Observations of Conditions Surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline," November 1, 2016, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/2016/Docs-updates/Report-ChiefEdwardJohn-DAPL2016.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Julie Dwyer, "Peg-leg Flamingo Symbolizes Challenges Faced by Native American Youth," *UMNEWS*, March 6, 2017, [UMNS https://www.umnews.org/en/news/peg-leg-flamingo-symbolizes-challenges-faced-by-native-american-youth](https://www.umnews.org/en/news/peg-leg-flamingo-symbolizes-challenges-faced-by-native-american-youth)

<sup>14</sup> Verna Colliver, "CONAM Members Join Philly's Standing Rock Protest," <https://www.epaumc.org/news-information/racial-ethnic/native-american-ministries/2016/09/conam-members-join-phillys-standing-rock-protest/>

The Indigenous people with whom I developed relationships “heard me into” a new way of speaking.<sup>15</sup> Through these relationships I observed the ways in which listening could lead to an experience of conscientization. Christian ethicist and mujerista theologian, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz in her book, *En la Lucha*, describes conscientization as the process by which a person’s experiences lead them to recognize the difference between the nature of things and cultural differences, to unmask unjust myths and to explore alternative moral decisions.<sup>16</sup> The practice of listening presents an opportunity for a new moral consciousness to emerge within a person which has the potential to transform their worldview as well as the ways in which they express their worldview, including through their speech.<sup>17</sup>

As an Amer-euro-christian woman, in a position of privilege within the dominant white culture in the United States, and influenced by a settler/immigrant worldview, meeting with people from tribes and Nations with different views and experiences awakened me to ways in which my worldview and the language I used in the pulpit were inadequate.<sup>18</sup> I was concerned about the ways in which preachers, particularly those of us belonging to the dominant white settler/immigrant culture in the United States, colonize our speech with colonial narratives steeped in the concepts of white supremacy, euro-christianity, and Manifest Destiny from the pulpit. I began an exploration of the impact of intercultural relationships on the preacher’s voice.

### **The Power of Narrative to Unmask Whiteness**

According to Juan Luis Segundo, the development of a person's worldview begins when they are quite young and is formed by the shared values that are passed on to the developing child by his or her family and wider community.<sup>19</sup> Worldview forms and reforms over a lifetime.

---

<sup>15</sup> Nelle Morton, “In the Rising Woman Consciousness in a Male Language Structure,” in *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 29. This concept is based in feminist theologian Nelle Morton’s work which describes how women come to new understandings about themselves and their place in the world through the process of being heard. Similarly, a way of speaking I call, beloved speech, invites people to envision a new worldview. “[The women] came to know both the pleasure in sharing their new self-knowledge and the necessity of the sisterhood for maintaining their life. They came to know they were called into being because someone heard and the hearing drew forth their speech.”

<sup>16</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En la Lucha In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 160-161.

<sup>17</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz wrote, “the formation of moral consciousness has to do with enabling the process of conscientization of the person.” Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En la Lucha In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> I will use terms such as white euro-christian settler/immigrants or Amer-europeans in my descriptions when I want to clarify who I am addressing. I base this in the work of George Tinker and Jace Weaver. George Tinker stresses the role of european christianity in the colonization of the Americas using terms such as western euro-christian to describe the colonizer. For more of Dr. Tinker’s work explaining the euro-christian worldview see Tink Tinker, “Rites of Discovery: St. Junipero, Lewis and Clark,” *Intotemak* 49, (Fall/Winter 2016): 97-100. Jace Weaver offers a compelling alternative to the term Euro-American stating that, he opts “for the use of the term of John Joseph Mathews (Osage), Amer-european, as more adequately reflecting the relationship of the progeny of colonizers to the American land.” Jace Weaver, ed, *Native American Religious Identity: Unforgotten Gods*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), xi. However, I will maintain the capitalizations and descriptions used by different authors out of respect for their particular articulation of their worldview.

<sup>19</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 5.

Karl Mannheim says, “We belong to a group not only because we are born into it, not merely because we profess to belong to it, nor finally because we give it our loyalty and allegiance, but primarily because we see the world and certain things in the world the way it does.”<sup>20</sup> The social narratives passed on from families and formative communities have the capacity to reinforce or challenge worldview. Worldview influences a preacher’s theology, biblical interpretation, and cosmology which in turn affects perceptions of the world, infiltrates speech, and reveals itself through preaching. Philosopher Stephen Crites describes sacred narratives as those which permeate cultures but are seldom spoken specifically. Instead they lie deep in the consciousness of the people but are hidden within the stories people tell.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, stories presented from the pulpit reflect a preacher’s worldview and convey the sacred cultural narratives.

Worldview often passes from generation to generation and if it remains unexamined, specific values can become concretized within a community. If those who hold these values are in authority, these unexplored values become the norm for the community.<sup>22</sup> In the United States, white supremacy and the colonial narrative that created the United States of America infiltrates the collective imagination of members of the dominant settler culture. It has become the sacred cultural narrative of Amer-europeans. It has influenced a specific worldview based in the Doctrine of Discovery that advocates self-sufficiency and domination and results in the permeation of Manifest Destiny throughout all levels of United States society.

Therefore, to understand the impact of the colonial narrative on preaching requires more than just an analysis of the sermon content. The problem is not just a matter of words and images employed but rather a deeper issue of identity. Underneath colonizing words and images lurk the narratives created by the dominant culture in the stories told and retold within United States society. That means the words and the images employed by preachers in the United States – particularly white settler/immigrant preachers such as myself – can reify colonial norms that pervade society in the United States unless the preacher is actively trying to undermine the dominant sacred cultural narrative.

Unexamined worldview runs the risk of reifying colonizing narratives not only through damaging imagery but by hiding systemic forces that seek to silence alternative worldviews that expose narratives of conquest. In order to expose worldview and unmask the ways in which whiteness and colonization are affecting our speech, preachers who belong to the settler/immigrant culture will need to put ourselves in a position of listening for alternative worldviews. White immigrants, that is anyone not Indigenous to the territory now known as The United States of America, move in an ocean of privilege that is invisible to them unless there is someone to point it out to them.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1936), 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Crites, *The Narrative Quality of Experience*, Eerdmans, 1989; quoted in Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*, 315.

<sup>23</sup> There are many iterations of Peggy McIntosh’s essay but it originally appeared in a working paper titled, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” and was excerpted in: Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Multiculturalism*, (Oct. 1992), 30-36.

White preachers need to humbly acknowledge ways in which the words they speak reify historical erasure, continue to dehumanize people who do not share a western white settler worldview, and reinscribe prejudicial, racist, and colonizing narratives.

To undermine narratives of conquest that dehumanize and perpetuate psychological, spiritual, and physical violence I suggest that preachers, particularly those belonging to the dominant culture in the United States, engage in an antiracist decolonizing homiletic that will elicit antiracist, decolonizing, and humanizing speech called beloved speech.<sup>24</sup> This essay presents one aspect of that homiletic, namely the practice of listening.

### **The Role of Listening**

Listening is not easy – especially for those who are accustomed to controlling the conversation and the narratives underlying conversation. As I began the journey into deeper relationships with my Lakota, Choctaw, Cherokee, MVSOKE, and Kiowa guides I discovered that I had a lot of learning ahead of me. Listening unmasked the extensive nature of whiteness to reveal an intersectionality of race, colonization, sexism, and religious bigotry that expands the depth and reach of those systems. It exposed the larger colonizing culture that pervades the United States of America and it brought me face to face with my own colonizing tendencies that affected my speech, not the least of which was a tendency to speak when I needed to listen.

The first rule of relationship, particularly with the Indigenous peoples I am in relationship with, requires a willingness to listen deeply when one needs to and only share when asked. Relationships are built over time because the history of Indigenous peoples within the boundaries of the United States and around the world testifies to the betrayal and deceit that continues to attempt to silence them and render them invisible. Because of this history, trust needs to be built with great care and an empathetic heart. Since different nations have different customs and cultural norms, protocols concerning the practice of listening will change. There may be some similarities, some subtle differences, or major differences so an open heart is the key to engaging in this deep listening in a good way that honors the traditions so relationships can deepen.

Keeping an open heart through listening allows relationships to deepen to the point where participants can become vulnerable enough with each other for Natives to offer and non-Natives to receive guidance on proper protocols. There is a kenotic aspect to the listening whereby the hearer humbly empties themselves and allows themselves to abide with the other person so that they may be more fully present with the speaker.

When white euro-christian settler/immigrants engage in relationships with Indigenous peoples, the relationship goes beyond the individual to their family, friends and nation, as well as their ancestral land. To come to know a person more fully one needs to appreciate where they come from. The stories told and the perspectives voiced will come through the lens of the land. This provides an opportunity for conscientization in the white euro-christian settler/immigrant concerning their own ancestral place and encourages them delve more deeply into their own immigrant identity.

---

<sup>24</sup> This essay is based in a portion of my dissertation, *Beloved Speech: Language and Legacies of Methodist Women Leaders Of The Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference With Antiracist/Decolonizing Strategies for Preaching*, that presents a three-fold homiletic of which listening is one of the cornerstones.

As the listening progresses, an alternative to the dominant narrative can be heard in the stories of those who hold a different worldview. Different stories of relocation and occupation will emerge and settlers of the dominant culture engaged in deep listening will be invited to hear alternative interpretations of history. This experience will help them to better understand their social location within in the historical narrative and the legacy they have inherited. Stories shared in this way may or may not be autobiographical, but they will always involve truths. If Amer-europeans can respectfully listen to the stories then we can be “touched” and those truths can convict us.

### **The Practice of Listening**

In some ways engaging in the hospitality of deep listening seems similar to the listening theory presented by Carl Rogers and Richard E. Farson in their 1957 article entitled, *Active Listening*. In addition to psychological counseling and pastoral care, their techniques have been utilized in western practices of business leadership development courses as well as conflict resolution.<sup>25</sup> However, some of the techniques recommended by Rogers and Farson run contrary to the listening I advocate. The most noticeable difference is the assumption built into Active Listening, that both parties are equal partners in communication. For those who belong to the dominant culture, listening involves an understanding of cultural protocols and asking for guidance concerning the expectations before actions are taken or assumptions are made. Engagement in communication between white euro-christian settler/immigrants and Indigenous peoples is not a partnership. It requires an Indigenous guide in order to develop the trust required for a relationship to develop.

Additionally, Active Listening encourages behaviors that are contrary to respectful communication as it is practiced in the Native American communities I have visited. Rogers and Farson write, “it is important to test constantly your ability to see the world in the way the speaker sees it. You can do this by reflecting in your own words what the speaker seems to mean by [their] words and actions. [Their] response to this will tell you whether or not [they] feel understood.”<sup>26</sup> In contrast, one of the key aspects of listening to an Indigenous person as a white euro-christian settler/immigrant involves what Suanne Ware-Diaz (Kiowa) calls, Vocal Constraint.<sup>27</sup> She explains that, quiet moments are part of the exchange and demonstrate reflection, indicate pondering, and convey the importance of what is being shared as opposed to questioning and interruptions which are generally perceived as disrespectful.<sup>28</sup>

The most important aspect to remember about the kind of listening I am advocating for is that it is forged in relationship. A humble stance that allows both the speaker and the listener to

---

<sup>25</sup> Examples and practical uses can be found in Gordon, Thomas. *Leader Effectiveness Training: L.E.T.: “L.E.T.”* (New York, N.Y: Berkley Publishing Group, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Carl R. Rogers and Richard Evans Farson, *Active Listening* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2015), 12.

<sup>27</sup> Suanne Ware Diaz served as one of the highest-ranking Native Americans in The United Methodist Church as the Associate General Secretary at the General Commission on Religion and Race (GCORR) Native American Portfolio.

<sup>28</sup> Suanne Ware-Diaz, conversation with author, 17 January 2019.

be vulnerable with themselves and with each other will lead an ever-deepening connection. Professor of social work, Brené Brown, studies the relationship between connectedness and vulnerability and says that, “[s]taying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection.”<sup>29</sup> Vulnerable listening keeps the relationship from remaining superficial.

As I learned in Native communities and stated earlier, Indigenous peoples have no reason to consider non-Natives trustworthy. If we non-Natives stumble then we must begin again, otherwise the legacy we live into is one of betrayal and distrust. Therefore, preachers who identify as white euro-christian settler/immigrants need to avoid superficiality and form lasting alliances to dismantle the colonial project. Alliances between Indigenous peoples and non-Natives will require a deep commitment to relationships that are based in concrete communities through deep listening and honoring of values and protocols.<sup>30</sup> It cannot be said enough that building trust will take time, so white settler allies will have to be willing to enter into relationships for the long term.

Let me make it clear that when I use the term allies I am talking about someone who will remain steadfast and work with people in situations that may carry risk.<sup>31</sup> As actions are taken, the pedagogical relationships between settler allies and Indigenous guides deepen. In order to truly decolonize our speech, we who are non-Native must experience what it means to struggle and allow ourselves to be conscientized as we stand with those whom we have committed to work with in solidarity. Historian David Phillips Hansen says, “Instead of simply advocating for others, we must learn what it means to stand in deep solidarity with others. It is the only way to divest ourselves of our false assumptions.”<sup>32</sup> According to Paulo Freire, this kind of “active engagement with real structures... brings us as humans back to our birthright right of “love of humanity” and an “oceanic feeling” of connection, with ourselves, with one another, and with the animate world.”<sup>33</sup> Encountering each other as beloved human beings makes us more human.

Therefore the listening that will bring the most change happens within a committed relationship that includes dedication to joining causes for justice that will dismantle the colonial project. Bonilla-Silva says, “thinking and theorizing about change is good, talking about change is better, working toward change is the only way it will happen... so all people of good

---

<sup>29</sup> Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden Publishing, 2010), 53.

<sup>30</sup> An alternative to alliances would be an accomplice model, which “seeks ways to leverage resources and material support...to further liberation” For more information see Jessica Powell & Amber Kelly “Accomplices in the Academy in the Age of Black Lives Matter,” *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 2017, Vol. 6, No. 2, 42-65.

<sup>31</sup> The persons I am in relationship with are uncomfortable with the term Accomplice thus I do not use it but this an aspect of the definition I give here for Ally. Powell and Kelly, “Accomplices in the Academy in the Age of Black Lives Matter,” *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 6, No. 2, (2017), 44.

<sup>32</sup> David Phillips Hansen, *Native Americans, the Mainline Church, and the Quest for Interracial Justice*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2017), 23.

<sup>33</sup> Mab Segrest, “The Souls of White Folks,” in Birgit Brander Rasmussen et al., *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Duke University Press, 2001), Kindle Location 937.

conscience [need] to become activists.”<sup>34</sup> Preachers can begin by getting involved in organizations that are multicultural such as my ongoing work with my Committee on Native American Ministries. Our work with organizations such as this allow opportunities to actively work together to undermine and dismantle colonial norms.

To change the system, however, we will want to match our performance of the action to the outcome we wish to achieve. Those of us with privilege given from the dominant culture will want to take a backseat and follow our guides who can see more clearly. This does not mean we become passive but rather we maintain a listening stance, ready to step up when we are asked.

The difficulty arises when white euro-christian settler/immigrants make mistakes and begin to become defensive and recolonize with our words or actions. Any settler/immigrant who would engage in activism must realize that the colonial narrative is strong and it will require intentional reflexive work to change the narrative. As Harry Brod explains,

Privilege is not something I take and which I therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.<sup>35</sup>

Those who partner with us, both Native and non-Native, can be a guide to help us move through the difficult business of decolonizing our voices over and over again. Listening will become more intense. As we work together, side-by-side conversations will emerge, confrontations and challenges erupt, and that is when settler/immigrants have a choice to stay or go.

The listening I am advocating for involves a humble posture of one who is willing to hold space for someone to speak. Part of listening deeply will require the listener to remain steadfast even when the communication is difficult to receive. This is especially true for white euro-christians of the settler/immigrant culture in the United States. Listeners will be challenged particularly if white settler norms result in micro-aggressions against the other person. When this happens, settlers will need to have courage to hear the other person’s perspective.

In *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, Robin J. DiAngelo writes that she initially “dreaded getting feedback from people of color on [her] racist patterns and assumptions,” but later as she matured, she welcomed feedback and saw it as a positive sign of relationship.<sup>36</sup> She mentions that she also experienced embarrassment or defensiveness when confronted with problematic patterns but took this also as a sign that the person trusted her enough to take the risk of confronting her.<sup>37</sup> Viewed through this lens it became clearer that these kinds of interactions were not completely due to personal failing but

---

<sup>34</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 236-237.

<sup>35</sup> Harry Brod, "Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael Messner (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 280.

<sup>36</sup> Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 147.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

also a consequence of systemic colonization and white supremacy. Instead of triggering hurt feelings and shame feedback can become a source of growth and a sign to stay and remain in relationship even and especially when it is uncomfortable to do so.

My experience of guidance from Indigenous men and women mirrors what ethicist Andrea Smith talks about in her monograph *Conquest*. She presents Native women activists who do not depend on “domination and force [in their activism] but rely on systems of kinship, respect, and reciprocity.”<sup>38</sup> During these moments if white euro-christian settler/immigrants can remain vulnerable enough to listen and learn about alternative ways of being in the world then deep listening can continue, and horizons of knowing and understanding can expand. The honoring of each other in these situations has the potential for an incredible expansion of worldview. The kinship and respect born out of these experiences will create new narratives that will reform our actions and inform the words we use as we share one-on-one or in the pulpit.

## Conclusion

The experience of listening surveyed in this essay is based in a praxis learned in the midst of intercultural interactions with guides from the Lakota, Choctaw, Cherokee, MVSOKE, and Kiowa Nations. This method of listening has the capacity to unmask whiteness in all its racial and colonial aspects. Since there is not one homogenous Indigenous culture, the attention to protocols that comes through the praxis of the kind of listening outlined in this essay provides a framework that could be translated into other intercultural interactions. When preachers engage in deep listening and particularly when Amer-european preachers are willing to listen and learn, they will hear a multitude of different narratives that will confront the violent colonial story cloaked in civility. They will be faced with a choice. They can either concretize their worldview based in the colonial narrative or open themselves up to decolonize their worldview and change their understanding of the dominate sacred cultural narrative.

Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, who explore the role of personal narrative in identity construction, write, “An amazing dynamic exists between our lives and our stories: each one shapes the other. Our collective life experiences are interpreted through a personal narrative framework and shaped into a master story that, in turn, influences subsequent interpretations.”<sup>39</sup> They go on to say that, “We can rewrite our personal narrative and those we live by... it is possible to find new stories for shaping meaning in our lives and by so doing bring forth new worlds of possibility.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally Stephen Crites offers that in times of change narrative “enables people to perceive new configurations between their experience and the sacred stories of their culture... which enable human beings to re-orientate their cultural identity to meet the challenge of new times.”<sup>41</sup> This is a sign of hope for those of us settlers who seek to be not

---

<sup>38</sup> Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories Dangerous Rituals*, (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1998) 11.

<sup>40</sup> Anderson and Foley, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” in *Theological Reflection: Methods*, ed. Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, (London: SCM Press, 2005), 63.

limited by the “sacred” colonial story taught to us. There are alternative narratives besides the prevailing colonial narrative in the United States and they have the power to shift cultural consciousness.

## **Epilogue**

We know that allies at Standing Rock encountered many difficulties and yet they remained. The protectors stayed even as temperatures dropped and water cannons drenched their bodies causing instant freezing and dangerous risk of hypothermia. By January, an Executive Order had been signed that recommenced construction in spite of the United States Justice and Interior Departments order of an environmental study.<sup>42</sup> In March 2017 the pipeline was functional.<sup>43</sup> This particular fight may have been lost on the land but the voices of the Protectors continue to cry out in the courts.

Stories such as those told by the Water Protectors at Standing Rock have the ability to influence change. Their stories continue to impact many across the United States, including the members of the NEJNAMC. In 2018 and 2019 CoNAM’s from the Northeast sent representatives to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and met with Water Protectors. United Methodist Church members from all over the world convened in New York City forging committed relationships and deeply listening to each other’s stories. Several difficult conversations led to experiences of connection amongst Amer-europeans and many cultures of Indigenous peoples from North, Central, and South America, and the Philippines. The difficult conversations that began there informed my worldview in ways that forever changed my own personal narrative, the way I interpret scripture, and the stories I tell. But I know the unmasking has only just begun.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ryan W. Miller, “How the Dakota Pipeline Battle Unfolded”.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony Humes, “Complete DAPL Protest Timeline: One Year after Camps Were Cleared.”

# PREACHING DOUBT: TOWARD A METAMODERN HOMILETIC IN THE AFTERMATH OF DECONSTRUCTION

Melanie Bockmann

PhD Student in Homiletics & Liturgics

Sponsor: John McClure, PhD, Charles G. Finney Professor of Preaching & Worship  
Vanderbilt University, Nashville [www.vanderbilt.edu](http://www.vanderbilt.edu)

Copyright © 2019 Melanie Bockmann

**ABSTRACT:** Western society seems to be shifting from postmodernism to a new cultural trend many call “metamodernism,” due partly to its characteristic fluidity and self-conscious, intentional transcendence over and suspension between diametrically opposed poles. Meanwhile, there is an ongoing exodus of people encountering profound doubt, believing they can only have safe conversations about doubt outside church. Preachers can assume, then, some of their listeners are experiencing a “death of God”—or the death of their tradition’s conceptions of God—while sitting in the pews. In conversation with Ricoeur’s essay, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” this paper argues that not only is “atheistic fire” necessary for faith, but this optimistic metamodern cultural moment offers unprecedented opportunity for preachers to bring complex conversations of faith and doubt into the pulpit, leaning into the tensions and letting doubt break down idols of God-like projections to create space for new conceptions of the God who is.

Earlier this year, two high-profile evangelical leaders publicly broke up with Christianity. Marty Sampson (Hillsong musician) and Josh Harris (author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and former sexual purity advocate) both announced that Christianity is no longer for them. Harris, who days earlier posted a picture of himself on Instagram with his wife announcing their separation, followed with another surprising post: “I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus,” Harris wrote. “The popular phrase for this is ‘deconstruction,’ the biblical phrase is ‘falling away.’ By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.” Harris apologized to the LGBTQ+ community for his former views and asked for forgiveness for his “writing and speaking” that “contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry.” While grateful for his Christian friends’ prayers, he said, “I can’t join in your mourning. I don’t view this moment negatively. I feel very much alive, and awake, and surprisingly hopeful.”<sup>1</sup> Sampson, also in an Instagram post that has since been removed, told his followers it was “time for some real talk,” and went on to disclose, “I’m genuinely losing my faith...and it doesn’t bother me...I am so happy now, so at peace with the world.” He noted the number of preachers that ‘fall,’ the scarcity of miracles, biblical contradictions, the idea that a loving God could send people to “a place” for not believing, the fact that science keeps “piercing the truth of every religion,” and yet, he says, “no one talks about it.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0ZBrNLH2sl/>

<sup>2</sup> Leah MarieAnn Klett, “Hillsong Writer: ‘I’m Genuinely Losing My Faith,’” accessed August 18, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/hillsong-writer-reveals-hes-no-longer-a-christian-im-genuinely-losing-my-faith.html>.

Given the reactions, it is apparent that the double rejection stung the Christian community. In an interview, noted evangelical Franklin Graham responded, saying he does not see them as leaders, and doubted they had “a very strong faith, or if they even had a faith at all to begin with.” Graham continued, “for whatever reason they have decided they’re going to turn their back on God and God’s standards. And I feel sorry for them. They’re in a very dangerous place...out from under God’s protection.” Graham stated he believes the Bible is the word of God, and though he does not understand all of the Bible, he does “believe every word of the Bible.” Graham suggested that the only reason they renounced their faith publicly was to gain publicity. “Otherwise, why [didn’t] they just leave their faith and just be quiet about it? But no, they had to make a big thing about it, trying to get others to follow them, to do the same. And I’d just say, ‘shame on them,’ and ‘you’ll stand before God one day and give an account to Him.’”<sup>3</sup>

Forums buzz with opinions of other Christians. Some are gracious, though the majority have overtones of condescension, anger, dismissal, sadness, betrayal, and bewilderment. On the whole, the responses contain a semantic theme communicated directly and indirectly by the Christian church throughout its history: doubt is unacceptable. Rejoinders categorizing Sampson and Harris as either being rebellious turncoats *or* as having weak faith to begin with, impart a clear message: healthy faith and legitimate doubt are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable.

Harris and Sampson are high profile defectors garnering attention commensurate to their influential status; however, as Barna Group, Pew Research Center, and other entities have indicated, for the past few decades, the church has witnessed a mass exodus of less conspicuous Harris and Sampsons. The number of those, particularly young people, who reject their faith (or the church’s version of faith) continues to increase, leading Barna Group to label them the “de-churched”—those who “have been churched in the past but are currently on hiatus,” and who represent “the fastest growing segment, presently one-third of the population.”<sup>4</sup>

Many of those “opting out of church” are Millennials who don’t find religion or its practices to be important for their lives and who question their belief in God.<sup>5</sup> On their way out the door, more than one third of Millennials say the main factors in their decision are “the church’s irrelevance, hypocrisy, and the moral failure of its leaders.”<sup>6</sup> A significant number of those departing believes that “legitimate doubt is prohibited” in the church.<sup>7</sup> Following closely behind the Millennials is Generation Z—a complex generation that embodies fluidity in ethnicity and culture, gender and sexuality, and, unsurprisingly, religion and spirituality. While nearly 8 out of 10 Gen Zers (though with widely varying levels of certainty) say they believe in God, the Barna Group reports “the percentage of teens who identify as [atheist] is double that of the

---

<sup>3</sup> Hemant Mehta, “Franklin Graham: Joshua Harris and Marty Sampson Ditched God for ‘Publicity,’” *Friendly Atheist*, accessed August 18, 2019, <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2019/08/16/franklin-graham-joshua-harris-and-marty-sampson-ditched-god-for-publicity/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” *Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life* (November 3, 2015), accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

<sup>6</sup> Group, “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

general population (13% vs. 6% of all adults).”<sup>8</sup> Of those who do believe in God, 59% say that church is not personally relevant to them, and 61% say they can find God elsewhere.

For James F. White and others who use generational research data to figure out how to bring young people back to church, being “relevant” seems to mean creating an artificial church habitat, using contemporary music styles, talking to young people, wearing trendy clothes, or offering Instagram-friendly Bibles.<sup>9</sup> However, for many young people, being “relevant” means being awake to the human situation, being civically engaged in dealing with issues such as unemployment and terrorism,<sup>10</sup> working toward solutions for racial justice and immigration,<sup>11</sup> and thinking about issues of gender—including being “sensitive to ways that the pressure for men to be traditionally masculine can lead to negative social impacts.”<sup>12</sup>

When Gen Zers see churches not only *not* working to promote equality, for example, but also being part of the problem by reinforcing compulsory gender roles and expressions, or using self-deceptive semantics such as, “we *accept* LGBTQ, we just don’t *affirm* LGBTQ” to dodge accusations of intolerance or homophobia, as though they have found a linguistic loophole that will make a discernable difference to the way LGBTQ+ persons feel in their churches, then no amount of “relevant” music or technology is going to be enough to convince Gen Zers to attach their identity to those churches. Because of technology and instant/constant access to information, “Gen Z are bombarded with messages and... can quickly detect whether or not something is relevant to them.”<sup>13</sup> So much for strategizing with generational research to lure Generation Z back into the fold. Jana Riess, in her blog, “Flunking Sainthood,” points out that Generation Z “can sniff out inequality and white male privilege like a basset hound... why, then, would... Gen Zers fall in line with churches that so obviously disregard gender equality?”<sup>14</sup> Demographer William Frey, from the Brookings Institution, says, “They kind of look at the rest

---

<sup>8</sup> “Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z,” Barna Group, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/peter.holley.923>, “An Instagram-Worthy Bible Aimed at Millennials,” Washington Post, accessed April 19, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/an-instagram-worthy-bible-aimed-at-millennials/2019/03/08/5a303cc0-411f-11e9-922c-64d6b7840b82\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/an-instagram-worthy-bible-aimed-at-millennials/2019/03/08/5a303cc0-411f-11e9-922c-64d6b7840b82_story.html).

<sup>10</sup> “Will Parkland Student Activists Define Post-Millennial Generation?,” VOA, accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/will-parkland-student-activists-define-post-millennial-generation/4417573.html>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EugeneScott202>, “Analysis | The State of America, According to Generation Z,” Washington Post, accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/01/11/the-state-of-america-according-to-generation-z/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Young Americans Increasingly Flexible About Gender Expression, See Connections Between Gender and Violence,” *PRRI* (blog), accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.prrri.org/spotlight/young-americans-increasingly-flexible-gender-expression-see-connections-gender-violence/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Gen Z: The Elusive Generation,” accessed April 5, 2019, <http://www.nielsen.com/eu/en/insights/news/2018/gen-z-the-elusive-generation>.

<sup>14</sup> “Reaching Generation Z: A How-Not-to Guide for Churches,” *Religion News Service* (blog), December 6, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/12/06/reaching-generation-z-a-how-not-to-guide-for-churches/>.

of us older people as something to push aside,” Frey says. “Not in a bombastic way, but basically just sort of shrug their shoulders and say, ‘Let’s move on from all this.’”<sup>15</sup>

While many saints assume church outsiders haven’t “found” Jesus, “More than two-thirds of skeptics have attended Christian churches in the past—most for an extended period of time.”<sup>16</sup> As one blogger says, “The church may want to stop focusing on those elusive and extremely sensitive ‘seekers’ for a while, because now, even believers are starting to leave the church.”<sup>17</sup>

Given the large-scale evacuation of young adults and others from the church, it is reasonable to assume that in addition to the de-churched “dones” on the outside, there are also “almost dones” on the inside—people who have not left, but whose faith is withering on the vine. According to research at the University of Colorado, “On any given Sunday, there are 7 million people sitting in the pews who report that they are on their way out the door, never to return.” Church attendees and even leaders such as Harris and Sampson are essentially experiencing the death of God—or at least the death of religious conceptions of God—being inwardly confronted by complexities and challenges that increasingly swamp what remains of their faith, and the only conversations they can honestly and safely have about doubt are outside the church.

The blame for the emergence of religious confusion and doubt is typically affixed to postmodernism and its deconstructive tendencies—an accusation that may be well founded. But cultural theorists have been writing an obituary for postmodernism for years (noting the morphological changes that push beyond the characteristics of the postmodern trend) and are eagerly scanning the horizon for a new trend to materialize as the next identifiable cultural era.

The cultural progression that seems to be emerging as the offspring of postmodernism is a somewhat protean trend many call “metamodernism,” a self-descriptive term whose prefix *meta* “derives from Plato’s *metaxis*, describing an oscillation and simultaneity between and beyond diametrically opposed poles.”<sup>18</sup> This movement “between and beyond” and transcending opposing poles is recognizable in current culture: in the fluidity of musical genres, in which artists collaborate and mix elements to intentionally create genre-defying compositions; hybridized “spatial realities” as seen in images of [metamodern architecture](#); genre-bending novels by authors such as Neil Gaiman and David Foster Wallace; “gender-fluid and pansexual” characters such as Loki in Marvel’s new young adult novels;<sup>19</sup> and [poetry](#), [art](#), and cynical yet warm and human “mockumentaries” and TV shows such as “Modern Family” and “Community.” Metamodernism appears to evince an ironic and speculative post-postmodern

---

<sup>15</sup> “Will Parkland Student Activists Define Post-Millennial Generation?”

<sup>16</sup> Barna Group, “2015 State of Atheism in America,” *Articles in Faith & Christianity* (March 24, 2015), accessed December 1, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-state-of-atheism-in-america/>.

<sup>17</sup> Jim, “Barna Study: Even Christians Are Leaving Our Churches,” *Not for Itching Ears*, January 21, 2015, 2015, accessed December 1, 2016, <https://notforitchingears.com/2015/01/21/barna-study-even-christians-are-leaving-our-churches/>.

<sup>18</sup> Luke Turner, “Metamodernism: A Brief Introduction,” *Notes on Metamodernism* (blog), accessed April 2, 2019, <http://www.metamodernism.com/2015/01/12/metamodernism-a-brief-introduction/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Loki Will Be Pansexual & Gender-Fluid In New Marvel YA Novel,” ScreenRant, December 12, 2017, <https://screenrant.com/loki-gender-fluid-marvel-comics/>.

aesthetic that is “at once coherent and preposterous, earnest and somewhat self-defeating, yet ultimately hopeful and optimistic.”<sup>20</sup>

The metamodern aesthetic walks in the tension of contradictions and incongruities, self-consciously and intentionally transcending and suspending itself between binaries. This is also the paradigm in which religious hybridity has flourished, where individuals engage in a “build your own” religion/spirituality that adopts varied components from the religious and ideological marketplace that may or may not contradict one another. In the context of the metamodern cultural moment, a healthy faith and a legitimate doubt can and do co-exist.

In the world of Franklin Graham-style “faith,” many preachers preach from what they believe is a secure position of given premises (i.e. metaphysics, Creation/God metanarratives, scripture as ultimate authority, etc.), believing pulpit time is for propositional preaching and formation of congregation members whose attendance is evidence of acquiescence. Exegetical leaps over chasms of doubt are acceptable, weekly exhortative booster shots for anemic faith are sufficient, and preachers can be content with “the simple juxtaposition of a reductive hermeneutics.”<sup>21</sup> However, if a percentage of church members are passing through a “doubt journey” or “atheistic fire,”<sup>22</sup> perhaps homileticians should accept the metamodern challenge and accompany them in the flames with an intra-sermonic hermeneutic of suspicion that actually *affirms* doubt as a necessary component of faith.

In his book, *Otherwise Preaching*, John McClure introduces a “deconstruction of preaching” that exits “through the deconstructions of the four overlapping authorities that have bequeathed preaching to us: the authority of the Bible, the authority of tradition, the authority of experience, and the authority of reason.” The purpose of this “exiting” is to create “redemptive space within discourse.” Ideas, McClure says, “can be deconstructed, placed under erasure, and then reclaimed...as new ground in which to grow ideas that are other-wise.”<sup>23</sup> Maybe if we applied the concepts of deconstruction and the possibilities of reconstruction to sermonic content, leaning in to metamodern skepticism and tension while also claiming metamodernity’s optimism and reconstructive intent, we could use a hermeneutic of suspicion to create an oscillating, “redemptive space” for both doubt *and* faith that is “otherwise” to the metamodern conversation. Feasibly, we would find ourselves on an “open horizon” with potential for “a postreligious faith for a postreligious age.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps unwittingly anticipating metamodernity in his essay “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” Paul Ricoeur argues in favor of atheism as a means by which we reach a better-situated

---

<sup>20</sup> Turner, “Metamodernism.”

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 448.

<sup>22</sup> David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain : From Hobbes to Russell* (London ; New York: Croom Helm, 1988), 110.

<sup>23</sup> John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2001), 150.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 440.

faith.<sup>25</sup> Atheism, in this context, “is not limited in meaning to the mere negation and destruction of religion.”<sup>26</sup> Rather, he sees it as both a “division” and a “link” between religion and faith, and an important critique that unmasks religious culture and identifies the representations of culture that are symptomatic of underlying “fear and desire.”<sup>27</sup> Atheism, this way, is a gift that helps untangle faith from the “product[s] and projection[s] of our own weakness.”<sup>28</sup>

Prominent theologians, Christian philosophers, and ministers throughout Christian history have admitted to experiencing crippling doubt and claimed it strengthened their faith. Some, such as Paul Tillich, view doubt as a necessary component of faith.<sup>29</sup> Similar to Ricoeur, Derrida links atheism and faith: “I think we may have some doubts about the distinction between atheism and belief in God. If belief in God is not also a culture of atheism, if it does not go through a number of atheistic steps, one does not believe in God.”<sup>30</sup> He goes on to say, “In order to be authentic... belief in God must be exposed to absolute doubt.”<sup>31</sup>

Even with historical precedence for the importance of doubt, homileticians do not typically address profound doubt from the pulpit. Rather, it seems the preacher’s role is to eschew and excise doubt, to momentarily acknowledge doubt as a superficial speed bump on the way to Hebrews 11. Doubting and critiquing faith, then, are dirty things we do by ourselves when no one else is watching. But should these “atheistic steps,” as Derrida calls them, be a solitary journey, or should doubt be liberated and recognized from the pulpit for its value to faith?<sup>32</sup> Would doubters stick around for the conversation instead of renouncing faith?

Ricoeur’s primary concern in his discourse on atheism and faith is not homiletics.<sup>33</sup> He disqualifies himself from homiletical responsibility, saying “the philosopher is not a preacher.”<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur *does* provide subtle critiques for preachers, however. One of the reasons “the philosopher is not this prophetic preacher” is “the philosopher, as a responsible thinker, remains suspended between atheism and faith. For he cannot content himself with the simple

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 440, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 1 edition (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 19.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage, 2009), 515.

<sup>31</sup> John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart, Yvonne Sherwood, "Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 46.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur demonstrates in his essay that the critique goes both ways—we also challenge the mask behind which accusers make their accusations. He called out Nietzsche’s “accusation of accusation” that “falls short of a pure affirmation of life.” He also determined that nothing is “finally decided” except those certain points of atheistic accusation that find their mark in religious cultural representations and unmask false projections.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 448.

juxtaposition of a reductive hermeneutics.”<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur imagines how preachers might attempt to use his ideas, but as a philosopher, not a preacher, “his task is not to reconcile, within a feeble eclecticism, the hermeneutics that destroys the idols of the past and the hermeneutics that restores the kerygma.” He says, “To think is to dig deeper until one reaches the level of questioning that makes possible a mediation between religion and faith by means of atheism.”<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur says preachers may be tempted to leap over “this last stage of our itinerary” and go directly to “faith.”<sup>37</sup> He dryly adds, “Only a preacher with the freedom of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra would be able to make such a radical return to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith, and at the same time, make of this return an event which speaks to our own time.”<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps Ricoeur’s critiques of “reductive hermeneutics” and “feeble eclecticism” in preaching are well-aimed. There is always the temptation for preachers to create faith gimmicks, to fabricate flimsy questions for convenient homiletical conquests, to create atheistic straw men that are easily destroyed in a triumphalist 30-minute homily, offering “proof texts” as apologetic ammunition (though for metamodernism proof texts are the rhetorical equivalent of shooting blanks), or as Ricoeur says, to proffer “a clever and hypocritical method of taking back with one hand what one was forced to relinquish with the other.”<sup>39</sup> However, a preacher who wants to preach the *depths* of faith must be willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of doubt alongside her congregation.

To strengthen faith, many preachers have (perhaps unknowingly) employed an early homiletic version of William J. McGuire’s inoculation theory—a communication theory that suggests that small attacks on belief strengthen its defenses with “immunizing efficacy.”<sup>40</sup> John Broadus, for example, whose work influenced generations of preachers, noted there are believers “whose religious affections and activity might be encouraged by convincing and impressive proofs that these things are so. Even in cases in which reasoning seems superfluous,” he says, “it may be greatly useful, since its object is not so much to prove what is not yet believed as to fill the mind with the evidence.”<sup>41</sup> Research indeed reveals evidence “that persuasive message recipients become resistant to attitudinal attacks in the same way that bodies become immunized from viral attacks.”<sup>42</sup> However, the accomplishment of a sermonic “vaccine” is not so much a strengthened faith as it is a more protected naïve faith. The motive for introducing a metamodern

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 447-48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 442.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 441.

<sup>40</sup> Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word : Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 114.

<sup>41</sup> John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons: Fourth Edition*, 4th ed. edition (New York; London: HarperOne, 1979), 142.

<sup>42</sup> William J. McGuire, *Constructing Social Psychology : Creative and Critical Processes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 61.

deconstruction/reconstruction to sermons is not to vaccinate faith against attack. Rather, it is to *alter the ontology of the faith altogether*, so it is not the same naïve faith it was before.<sup>43</sup>

Some preachers, concerned about listeners becoming trapped in disillusionment, hesitate to bring doubt into the pulpit, fearful they would be releasing naïve faith into wide-open spaces of suspicion where it may or may not survive. However, this kind of preaching does not abandon listeners in a deconstruction zone. Ricoeur, in proto-metamodern style, follows his hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutic of reaffirmation, accepting only the gifts from atheism that purify faith. In a way, metamodernism, with its wary skepticism, optimism, and desire for reconstruction, offers promise of a post-critique faith that is aware of the ironies, incongruities, and contradictions, and seeks a redemptive space where those discordant questions are invited into the worship of a dialetheistic<sup>44</sup> and queer God,<sup>45</sup> who themselves exist in a multiplicity of divine paradoxes, tensions, and possibilities.

The biggest challenge for metamodern-minded preachers may not be the donees or the “almost donees” in the pews—it may be the believers whose buoyant belief systems keep them bobbing in the shallow end of religion, removed from the depths of doubt. While believers will claim to have faith, what they actually have is belief. This is more than a simple semantic distinction. Faith requires doubt that accepts risk and refuses certainty.<sup>46</sup> Faith wrestles with cognitive dissonance and engages not in belief, but in an intentional suspension of disbelief.<sup>47</sup> Belief, on the other hand, as James Carse suggests, “marks the line where our thinking stops, or, perhaps better, the place where we confine our thinking to a carefully delineated region.”<sup>48</sup>

Confined, hermetic thinking sequesters believers from doubt and outside “others”—and also, perhaps, from a deeper faith. Isolated thinking empowers a self-satisfied sense of being bearers of “*the truth*,” energizing the hubris of colonizing mission, rendering itself unsusceptible to the inconveniences of social and theological humility and self-reflexivity. It is oblivious to the critique mirrored back to it by generations of “apostatized” thinkers and doubters—a critique that questions the church’s theology and traditions regarding rigid male/female binaries and accompanying hierarchical gender roles, abuses of power, shameless devotion to a white male/masculine God, and prejudicial practices designed to exclude a messy and beautiful spectrum of humanity that does not conform to the western ideal “Christian” social construction.

How, then, does a metamodern homiletic go about the task of affirming (or even introducing) doubt and purging Christianity of its “life-denying components” when its bastions

---

<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 441.

<sup>44</sup> In philosophy, dialetheism is the view that there are true contradictions; in other words, true statements whose negations are also true. This view has also been applied to the sometimes paralogical mysteries of the divine.

<sup>45</sup> Queer, in this context, is used as a broad umbrella term for non-normative, as described by Gerald Loughlin, et al., in the edited volume, *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*.

<sup>46</sup> Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (Rest Fenner, 23, Paternoster Row, 1817), 2. Referring to his description of a poetic “willing suspension of disbelief.”

<sup>48</sup> James P. Carse, *The Religious Case Against Belief* (Penguin Books, 2008), 24.

are fortified by an army of battle-ready believers content with the “truth” they already have? When the church is willing to make shallow cosmetic changes in order to create the artificial environment of worship it thinks young people want, but is not willing to allow rhizomatic change that would actually be meaningful to a younger generation? When the church desires to form others, but is averse to the possibility of being formed, and fiercely guards its comatose theology against awakening into a living, ambulatory—and therefore unmanageable—thing?

The foundation of metamodern preaching, it could be argued, is the disruption of the divine “normative,” the breaking of the invisible mirror onto which our human conceptions of God are projected, the smashing of the ideological casts we formed according to our likeness and into which we pour our molten preferences for a God worthy of our worship. Our conceptions of God are ciphers by which we interpret humanity—and vice-versa—which may explain why Christianity has been comfortable for so long with racial inequities, gendered hierarchies, ecological degradation, and the exclusion of non-normative “others,” which, as it happens, are the same key issues over which young people are leaving the church. Megan DeFranza points out Calvin, among others, understood that “theological anthropology and theology proper are mutually conditioning.” In other words, “How we conceive of God affects how we conceive of the human and how we interpret the image of God. Likewise, how we conceive of humans affects how we conceive of the image of God and also impacts our understanding of God.”<sup>49</sup>

While we have secular and religious cultural depictions of the divine, theologically speaking, the Bible does not reveal much about the person and image of God, reminding us we “know in part” (1 Cor 13:12)—which means when it comes to the ontology and physicality of God, there are gaps in our perception. The human brain, according to neuroscientists, is not satisfied with gaps. Research indicates when there is an interruption in sight or sound in its environment, the brain’s visual and auditory systems supply missing information by filling in gaps. Scientists say it is a matter of efficiency—most of what we see is incomplete, so the brain furnishes the missing pieces for itself. If it didn’t, then “every time you looked at an object from a slightly different view, it would be a different object that would be very confusing and difficult to cope with.”<sup>50</sup> Filling in visual gaps helps the brain understand the world around it. Human ears do the same thing when in conversation or listening to music, for example. When irrelevant sounds in the environment obscure what we are trying to listen to, the brain creates an “auditory continuity illusion” that restores “sounds of interest even when they are partially masked.”<sup>51</sup>

Whether through sight or sound, the human brain continually constructs its circumambient world, using imagination to create a continuity illusion, and what it constructs becomes its truth. This holds potential for understanding how and why people understand God in particular ways. If our minds fill visual or auditory perceptual gaps, this “deputizing” of the imagination may also happen with other perception “gaps”—such as supplying phenomenological evidence to support religious experience, or filling in the missing pieces of an

---

<sup>49</sup> Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015), 5.

<sup>50</sup> “Discovery Shows How Brain ‘Fills In Blanks’ To Help Us See.”

<sup>51</sup> Lars Riecke et al., “Hearing Illusory Sounds in Noise: The Timing of Sensory-Perceptual Transformations in Auditory Cortex,” *Neuron* 64, no. 4 (November 25, 2009): 550–61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2009.10.016>.

aggregate picture of God. Do our brains construct an illusory God that then becomes our “truth”? Further, if we believe we are created in God’s image, what *social* consequences derive from believing in the image of a God whose mystery has been imaginatively trespassed, whose *via negativa* has become *via imaginatio*? If God is imagined male, how does that impact perceptions of what it is to be female, trans, or intersex? If God is imagined white, how does that impact perceptions of what it is to be a person of color? If God is heterosexual, (i.e., the “bridegroom”) how does that impact perceptions of what it is to be a non-hetero person? If our imaginations supply auxiliary information to fill out our understanding of the divine, then it is also our imagination that figures deeply into our understanding of humanity. Our mental construction of the *imago dei* determines what in humanity “fits” with the image of God and what does not.

While it may be tempting to criticize the “imagining” of God, the fact is we do not have enough information about the God who *is* in order to conjure a complete image, and it is natural for people to “fill in the gaps.” It is not the *imagining* that is necessarily the issue; rather, it is *what* we imagine—what we plug those theological holes *with*—that we must allow our homiletic to interrogate. What we *imagine* of God is open for inquisition, because it is not the absolute, unmitigated given revelation of Godself. It is human-supplied content, coming from our culture of religion, our subconscious or pre-conscious brain soup, our values, our preferences, our desires, our fears, which maintains our illusion of continuity.

Some of the supplied continuity is a projection of self. Jean-Luc Marion compared “idolatrous” divine experiences to “an invisible mirror” in which people only see projections, forgetting “that the God they worship is only a God made after their own likeness.”<sup>52</sup> Durkheim, also, believed that humans create God in their own image, a philosophy called “projection theory, in which individuals view God as they view themselves.”<sup>53</sup> The underlying purpose for maintaining “images of God that confirm their self-views,” Benson and Spika explain, is “in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. In this way, both projective and attributional theories are perpetuated by similar self-affirming psychological mechanisms.”<sup>54</sup>

Ironically, we “conceive of God in ‘our image,’ in idealized human terms,” contends Wesley Wildman, and “we are instructed then to imitate God.”<sup>55</sup> Our idealized self-image of the divine becomes authoritative as we hold ourselves accountable for imitating sacralized projections of ourselves. It is no wonder deconstruction of one’s picture of God can be painful; in some measure, our deconstruction of God is also the deconstruction of ourselves.

In addition to being self-projections, these imaginative constructions “are also conditioned by the prodigiously diverse contexts in which they are first created and then received and transformed,” says Wildman. He imagines what would have happened if the idea of a Black God instead of a European God had been the prevailing image in the early colonies in America,

---

<sup>52</sup> Joeri Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings?: The Decentering of the Modern Subject in Recent French Phenomenology* (Albany, N.Y.; Bristol: SUNY Press, 2012), 31.

<sup>53</sup> Christina D. Lambert and Sharon E. Robinson Kurpius, “Relationship of Gender Role Identity and Attitudes with Images of God,” in *The Image of God and the Psychology of Religion*, ed. Richard L. Dayringer and David Oler (New York: Routledge, 2011), 56.

<sup>54</sup> Lambert and Robinson Kurpius, 56–57.

<sup>55</sup> Dayringer and Oler, *The Image of God and the Psychology of Religion*, xii.

and if “African slavery in America would have been impossible to rationalize the way it was.”<sup>56</sup> We can minimize “anthropomorphic defects” in our divine imaginings by paying attention not only to “models” we create, but also to “the purposes served in the making of them.”<sup>57</sup> Who benefits from the God we’ve imagined? Who is excluded, or damned, or less than? And which conceptions perpetuate the “life-denying” components of Christianity that need to be revoked?

Due to limits of imagination, God is necessarily “reduced” to a size befitting our cognitive capacities. However, God *Godself* is not restricted “to that which human beings can know, represent, or experience of God...the mode of God’s epiphany should be unconditional and thus not restricted to the limits set forward by any mode of (human) knowledge whatsoever.”<sup>58</sup> Instead of reading biblical descriptions of God as *hints* of God’s multi-dimensional eternity, many people read them instead as *parameters* around God’s being.

Wildman suggests a kind of “apophaticism” in thinking about our ultimacy model, our picture of God, which “is radically permissive, promoting precision and play, and inspiring vigorous conceptual wrangling until the very last and best of our concepts fracture into shards at our clay feet.”<sup>59</sup> For many people—including preachers—the prospect is a frightening exercise in “unbridled fantasy mated with unconstrained relativism.”<sup>60</sup> Compared with our unbridled tendency to create God in our *own* image, however, perhaps we could use a little bit of “unconstrained relativism” in exploring God outside the limits of our conditioned imagination.

When unshielded by denial, people often recognize that God, or their conception of God, is inadequate. “While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static,” J. B. Phillips says.<sup>61</sup> The God we attached to felt boards in Sunday school and prayed to at bedtime with eyes squeezed and little fingers folded is not the God an adult can worship, “unless he is prepared to deny his own experience of life. If, by a great effort of will, he does do this,” Phillips says, “he will always be secretly afraid lest some new truth may expose the juvenility of his faith...it will always be by such an effort that he either worships or serves a God who is really too small to command his adult loyalty and cooperation.”<sup>62</sup> It may be worth considering that perhaps new generations don’t want to leave *God*—maybe they are seeking a more expansive God they can’t find in church, and the only alternative is to leave that God behind along with the church of their childhood.

The metamodern homiletic exposes the juvenility of that faith, revealing the inadequacies of a constructed God, exposing us to the noise of clashing metaphors, until idolatrous divine

---

<sup>56</sup> Wesley J. Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumbblings at the Limits of Language* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Wildman, *In Our Own Image*, 46.

<sup>58</sup> Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings?*, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Wildman, *In Our Own Image*, viii.

<sup>60</sup> Wildman, viii.

<sup>61</sup> J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), v.

<sup>62</sup> Phillips, v.

conceptions crumble. What happens when the too-small, one-dimensional idol we have imagined as a stand-in for the infinite God falls off of its pedestal, dethroned and deconstructed, finally disappearing in the implosion of its own inadequacy? For some, that is the end of God; they lose the will to faith, succumbing to the disillusionment of pulling back the curtain to find what they hoped in and prayed to is not what they thought, bitterly unwilling to expose themselves to the vulnerability of seeking beyond the tomb, beyond what they can control or understand.

Richard Kearney explores this a/theistic liminality, asking, “What comes after God? What follows in the wake of our letting go of God? What emerges out of that night of not-knowing, that moment of abandoning and abandonment? Especially for those who—after ridding themselves of ‘God’—still seek God?”<sup>63</sup> He proposes a “third way,” a path “between atheism and theism: those polar opposites of certainty that have maimed so many minds and souls in our history.” Kearney calls this third way, “anatheism,” by which he means “God after God.” Anatheism, Kearney says, is an “idiom for receiving back what we’ve given up as if we were encountering it for the first time.”<sup>64</sup> What we receive is not simply a re-do of our previous experience; rather, it is the experience of opening up to the future with a “holy insecurity,” a truth-seeking “not knowing” that prepares us to receive what we were too full to receive prior to this death of God.<sup>65</sup> This is the place beyond deconstruction to which metamodern homileticians want to lead congregations, where we enter “into a clearer understanding of the fact that what is at issue with the death of God is not God but our understanding of God.”<sup>66</sup>

Given the immense potency of the pulpit for the deconstruction and reconstruction of a shared worldview between pastor and congregation, the task takes on another dimension. The preacher must be an assassin, methodically eliminating the puny gods we have imagined and worshiped in hopes that eventually, the believers can join the doubters in seeking God after God.

This metamodern moment offers an unprecedented theological opportunity to be inspired by a culture and a generation that sees itself as fluid, and that could help us see God and God’s people as fluid, as well. To accept doubt as part of faith. To be open to possibilities that break traditional norms. For some churches, it is a welcome progression. For others, held captive by traditional social and religious structures, the response is fear, uncertainty, defensiveness. It will take a special homiletic to speak a bigger God into those contexts—a metamodern homiletic that discerningly causes the kind of trouble that will open up new spaces for conversation and understanding, and will turn the hearts of people toward God and each... “other.”

---

<sup>63</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann, *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God with James Wood, Catherine Keller, Charles Taylor, Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo, Simon Critchley, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, David Tracy, Jens Zimmermann, and Merold Westphal* (New York, UNITED STATES: Columbia University Press, 2015), 177, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vand/detail.action?docID=4050775>.

**COMMUNICATIO FACIT CIVITATEM: TOWARD EMPATHETIC LISTENING AND  
PREACHING ACROSS THE RACIAL DIVIDE**

**Gregory Heille, O.P.**

**Professor of Preaching and Evangelization**

**Director, Doctor of Ministry in Preaching**

**Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis, Missouri, [www.ai.edu](http://www.ai.edu)**

**Copyright © 2019 Gregory Heille**

ABSTRACT: Since the 2014 police shooting in Ferguson, I have been thinking about the challenge of bridging the racial divide in the St. Louis Catholic Church. In this essay, I introduce the Ferguson Report's call upon civic leaders to be catalysts for the conversations and empathy required for positive change. I argue that if Catholic preachers in St. Louis are to claim antiracism as a moral imperative for preaching, they need help to dismantle the white fragility that prevents congregational conversation across the racial divide. Then, by way of engaging four short pieces by Catholic authors Katie Grimes, Shawn Copeland, Bishop Edward Braxton, and Bryan Massingale, I consider Catholic complicity in American's original sin of racism, and I take a theological stand as to whether the Catholic Church can ameliorate the deeply webbed white privilege that prevents proper celebration of word and sacrament across the racial divide.

***Communication Builds the City***<sup>1</sup>

In the two years following the August 9, 2014 police killing of Michael Brown, Jr. by Darren Wilson in suburban Ferguson, Missouri, leaders in my community struggled with questions of solidarity and understanding in the face of what the Ferguson Commission called the "racial equity disparity" of St. Louis. In 2015, the volunteer Ferguson Commission appointed by Governor Jay Nixon issued a report of 189 calls to action and 47 signature priorities, titled "Forward through Ferguson: A Path to Racial Equity."<sup>2</sup> In a public television interview, the Forward through Ferguson lead catalyst Nicole Hudson described the ongoing work of Forward through Ferguson as being "a catalyst for the uncomfortable conversations, alignment, and empathy needed to move our region forward toward positive change" and as calling upon St. Louis leaders to come together at tables we had not sat at before, to exercise new muscles of radical listening and collaboration, and to exercise of the virtue of empathy.<sup>3</sup>

In a recent integrative seminar with graduating divinity students, my students and I studied Howard Thurman's 1949 *Jesus and the Disinherited* as a companion piece to the

---

<sup>1</sup> "*Communicatio facit civitatem*," Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics* (II *Politicorum* c.1).

<sup>2</sup> "Forward through Ferguson: A Path toward Racial Equity," The Ferguson Report (14 October 2015), at <https://forwardthroughferguson.org/report/executive-summary/clarifying-our-terms/>, The Ferguson Commission referred to "Constructing a Racial Equity Theory of Change: A Practical Guide for Designing Strategies to Close Chronic Racial Outcome Gaps," The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (September 2009), at <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/images/Roundtable%20on%20Community%20Change%20RETOC.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Stay Tuned STL, "Lead Catalyst Nicole Hudson Explains Forward through Ferguson" (25 February 2016), at <https://youtube.com/watch?v=xkes9DaqOrA>.

Forward through Ferguson report. In a classic work of political theology, Thurman considers the “significance of the religion of Jesus to people who stand with their backs against the wall” (7).<sup>4</sup>

On the side of civic engagement, Thurman writes: “Mere preaching is not enough. What are words, however sacred and powerful, in the presence of the grim facts of the daily struggle to survive” (69)? On the side of theological engagement, Thurman writes: “I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall” (13).

### ***White Fragility in the St. Louis Catholic Pulpit***

As the Academy of Homiletics prepares for the 2019 annual meeting at Princeton Theological Seminary on “Unpacking Homiletical Whiteness: Theory, Theology, Pedagogy, and Practice,” I recall my first theological engagement with the topic of whiteness in 2010–2011, when my faculty did a communal study of nine theological essays in a Catholic Theological Society of America volume on *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*.<sup>5</sup> In more recent years, as an institutional participant in the Lilly Endowment Initiative to Strengthen Christian Preaching, my school has further engaged in learning conversation with a small circle of church and civic leaders about the challenge of antiracism preaching in our city.

Why, in Lent 2019, when St. Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson called upon all priests of the diocese to preach a Sunday homily about racism, did so few priests do so; and why did so many priests express anger or bewilderment at the archbishop’s request? At the encouragement of a Doctor of Ministry in Preaching graduate who had been an active leader in the aftermath of Ferguson, a small circle of Aquinas Institute of Theology faculty, staff, and alumni sat down together to discuss Robin DiAngelo’s, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. In her book, DiAngelo talks about white fragility as a form of social control: “White fragility is much more than mere defensiveness or whining. It may be conceptualized as the *sociology of dominance*: an outcome of white people’s socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy.”<sup>6</sup> We realized that many, perhaps even a majority, of white Catholic preachers are co-opted into the wiles of white supremacy and become victims of systemic ignorance and fear. This is hardly conducive to emphatic or prophetic preaching across the racial divide. If we want Catholic preachers to preach across the racial divide and to see antiracism as a moral imperative in preaching, white preachers and their congregations need help to work outside the pulpit to learn and to talk about racism and to dismantle their own white fragility. With this realization, our inquiry team read *Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk about Race and How to Do It* by Shelly Tochluk, Ph.D., of Mount

---

<sup>4</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1949; reprinted: New York, Beacon Press, 2012), original at <https://ia801602.us.archive.org/35/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.260684/2015.260684.Jesus-And.pdf>. Thurman’s preaching students at Howard University gathered every Sunday in his home to discuss the day’s preaching. King, who became America’s preacher across the racial divide, carried this book with him throughout his itineracy.

<sup>5</sup> Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 113.

Saint Mary's University in Los Angeles.<sup>7</sup> We also met with Mary R. Ferguson, Ph.D., the Racial Justice Director of YWCA Metro St. Louis to learn how she uses this book in ten-session facilitated dialogues for white folks to witness whiteness and talk about race.<sup>8</sup> Aquinas Institute of Theology is now working with the YWCA to bring together Witnessing Whiteness groups of white faculty and staff and local clergy. We want to rise to the Forward through Ferguson challenge by coming together at tables we had not sat at before, to exercise new muscles of radical listening, and to grow in the virtue of empathy. We believe that conversations such as these are an essential step toward dismantling the white fragility that stands in the way of authentic preaching about race in the Catholic pulpit and that prevents so many Catholic faithful from hearing the church's call across the racial divide.

### ***Unpacking Whiteness and Power***

In the packet of short study pieces sent by the executive committee of the Academy of Homiletics to prime a discussion of "Unpacking Homiletical Whiteness: Theory, Theology, Pedagogy, and Practice," a lecture by Catholic theologians M. Shawn Copeland and an article by Katie M. Grimes were included. These two short pieces in political theology demonstrate differing understandings of how power applies to the racial divide in church and society.

Kathleen (Katie) Grimes earned her Ph.D. in theological ethics from Boston College in 2014 and is an assistant professor of theological ethics at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, where in Fall 2019 she is teaching two courses on racism and resistance in the Catholic Church. Her 2017 article on "Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of White Supremacy"<sup>9</sup> makes a strong case that the Catholic Church in the United States is bound up in the same white supremacy that, in the "afterlife of slavery" (41), continues to privilege whiteness in ways that violate the sacramental integrity of the church by serving the self-interests of white supremacy: "Baptism served slavery in the following ways: it severed the kinship ties of the women and men it helped to enslave, it re-branded their bodies with marks of white ownership, it coerced slaves into Christian community, it served to infantilize enslaved adult women and men, it aggrandized white women and men as masters of both heaven and earth, and it helped to make and maintain race" (24). In language fitting to describe the devil who prowls around looking for someone to devour, Grimes writes: "[B]lack slaves were incorporated into Christ's body not so much by eating the body of Christ, but by being eaten by it" (31).

When white church folk take the segregationist practices of society as the glue of social cohesion by which the church effectively blesses whiteness over and against all others, then the church's sacramental signs are corrupted, and in all probability, the Gospel is no longer preached or heard. Grimes argues that the church, thus taking white flight from the otherness in its midst,

---

<sup>7</sup> Shelly Tochluk, *Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk about Race and How to Do It* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Education, 2010). See <http://shellytochluk.com>.

<sup>8</sup> See "St. Louis groups are fighting racism—by keeping their own membership whites-only," *Riverfront Times* (26 June 2019), at <https://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/st-louis-groups-are-fighting-racism-by-keeping-their-own-membership-whites-only/Content?oid=31819571>.

<sup>9</sup> Katie M. Grimes, "Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of White Supremacy," *Political Theology* 18:4 (February 2017): 22–43, at [https://www.academia.edu/15775674/Breaking\\_the\\_Body\\_of\\_Christ\\_The\\_Sacraments\\_of\\_Initiation\\_in\\_a\\_Habitat\\_of\\_White\\_Supremacy](https://www.academia.edu/15775674/Breaking_the_Body_of_Christ_The_Sacraments_of_Initiation_in_a_Habitat_of_White_Supremacy).

cannot save itself. She argues persuasively: “Because the sacraments of initiation incorporate Catholics into racially segregated parishes, the church cannot sacramentally perform its way out of its white supremacist habituation” (42).

Grimes argues that there can be no social redemption for a segregationist church with its white supremacist ritual practices without a more porous understanding of the wall of apartness separating the church from the larger culture. I agree: The church is part and parcel with the larger culture and remains deeply influenced by America’s original sin of racism.

However, Grimes also argues: “We should not expect white Christians either to choose new social habits or to change the racial character of the white supremacist places they inhabit... White people cannot save themselves. The vice of white supremacy must be unmade by the transformative grace of Black Power, which places black life and freedom first. Theologians need to learn to care less about how to persuade whites to do the right thing and more on what they need to be made to do” (43).

Of course, white Christians cannot save themselves. Does this correctly infer, however, that white Christians are irredeemably without moral agency—and indeed, then, without meaningful responsibility—in the social and ecclesial project of dismantling racism, white privilege, and white power? Black agency and empowerment are necessary, but can black power, of itself—ecclesiastically exercised from within the church, or socially directed from outside the church—effectively counter or dismantle white privilege without a universal call to responsibility and empathy? I think not.

Having borrowed the expression “sacramental optimism” from Stanley Hauerwas, Grimes refers to what she believes to be a false belief “that the church’s practices can, if enacted and understood properly, possess a demonstrable capacity to resist the atomizing individualism of the modern world and thereby enable the church to *performatively receive its identity as the body of Christ*” (34). In reference to the phrase which I have italicized here, Grimes says she is paraphrasing the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet—a theology which, regrettably in my belief, she rejects in favor of an alternatively politically optimistic turn to black power.

Grimes sees the church’s sacraments as so corrupted by white supremacy as to have lost the radical performative power of sacramental grace to function as an effective sign of contradiction to systemic sin. Likewise, Grimes seems ill-disposed to a dialectal theological imagination that allows for God, nevertheless, to break the church free of its racializing self-destruction through the medium of preaching. Grimes’s political manifesto puts its trust in black power while appearing to make no room for God’s redemptive in-breaking into our history in a paschal mystery of eschatological rebirth through sacramental right relation. Are we left with only the human justice of law and power, or does God see in our human relations room for a more graced and virtue-oriented transubstantiation of the human spirit?

Making reference to the theology of James Cone, Katie Grimes draws her conclusion: “The vice of white supremacy must be unmade by the transformative grace of Black Power, which places black life and freedom first” (43). While I concur absolutely that dispossessed black lives deserve to be privileged, I think Grimes too easily dismisses white agency and white responsibility with respect to claiming and addressing the sin of white supremacy. Even more fundamentally, I propose to argue for the Spirit-empowered performative role of word and sacrament on behalf of the transforming *basileia* of God—notwithstanding the virtually

unspeakable sins of slavery, racism, privilege, and supremacy. At the risk of being sacramentally naive, I modestly propose that ours is a time to be theologically and sacramentally, if not optimistic, then earnestly committed to the Word of God alive and active in the church's performance of the Gospel, the sins of racism notwithstanding.

And yet honestly—to give Katie Grimes her due credit—I too have struggled as a preacher, in the face of racism, to see what a ministerially effective performance of the Gospel will look like. Though my ministerial imagination may be lacking, I am staking my claim on the power of engaged conversation as a pathway to empathy and social and sacramental inclusion.

### ***Attentively, Intelligently, Reasonably, Responsibly***

At the time of her 1997 Santa Clara Lecture, M. Shawn Copeland taught at Marquette University with a Ph.D. from Boston College/Andover Newton Theological School. She went on to teach at Yale University Divinity School and at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies of Xavier University of Louisiana, and now is a professor of theology at Boston College, where she studies theological anthropology, political theology, and African-American intellectual history.

In her public lecture on “Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the Land of the Free,”<sup>10</sup> given twenty years before Katie Grimes wrote her article on the white supremacist sacramental practices of the Catholic Church in America, Copeland makes a helpful distinction in respect the exercise of power. She says: “Political theology makes explicit the ‘distinction between the political as the employment of legitimate power’ and the political as the unmindful, predatory acquisitive manipulation of power in society” (4). As we read further into the Copeland lecture, we see a theologically hopeful stance on how the church might proceed.

Mid-lecture, Copeland responds to the original sin of five hundred years of slavery, racism, and white supremacy in the Americas with a theologically direct invocation of the kerygma, as she calls church people of the Americas to take a stand before Jesus on the cross:

Theology as political in the United States will grow out of a notion of the Christian church as a repentant community that thinks, moves, acts, serves, and lives in memory of the life and ministry, suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity is so very deeply implicated in the conquest and colonization of the peoples of the Americas. Pressed into the service of kingdoms of this world, Christianity became an agent of empire. It posed as a transcultural religion and, thereby, transgressed geographic, metaphysical, cosmological, cultural, personal, and social boundaries.... What sort of church are we? What sort of church must we become? We cannot live authentically—that is, attentively, intelligently, reasonably, responsibly—under the aegis of the reign of God and sleep through the distortion and deformation of the whole people of God. In rethinking ways of being Christian or ways of being church, we must begin by taking up a place before the cross of Jesus of Nazareth. It is here that we grasp the enormity of the human suffering and oppression of the Indians, Africans,

---

<sup>10</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, “Memory, Emancipation, and Hope: Political Theology in the ‘Land of the Free’” (1997). Santa Clara Lectures 18, at [https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc\\_lectures/18](https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/sc_lectures/18).

and mestizos. It is here that we grasp the meaning of a triumphal church's collusion (intentional or not) in that suffering and oppression. (10)

While making only the briefest reference to Edward Schillebeeckx's theological corrective to the naive optimism that is associated with a Catholic sacramental/analogical theological imagination which sees grace revealed from within experience, Shawn Copeland acknowledges the political and theological challenge of claiming hope and agency for change in the face of the cooption of our sacred practices by systemic sin. Copeland writes:

To take oppression as a point of departure for doing theology, is to advert, once again, to paradigm shift in theology (what Edward Schillebeeckx has termed "theology after a Christian history of domination and victors"). Theology in this paradigm risks encounter and engagement with the dynamic purifying powers of God in history 'even before we are completely liberated.'" Thus, the incarnation, that is to say, the concrete, powerful, paradoxical, even scandalous engagement of God in history, changes forever our perception and reception of one another. Jesus of Nazareth forever changes our perception and reception of the human other, of humanity. For humanity is his concern, neither merely, nor incidentally; rather, humanity is his concern comprehensively, fully. It is for the full and complete realization of humanity, for our full and complete realization, that he gave his life. (15)

As church people invoke the Holy Spirit to guide their best efforts to disempower the slavery, racism, and white privilege corrupting our communal and sacramental experience, Shawn Copeland reminds us of the iconic stumbling block of the Cross which can invert this 'experience of contrast' (Schillebeeckx) in favor of an authentically performative proclamation of the Good News of the *basilea* of God in word and sacrament.

In addition to her cross-shaped assertion of the kerygma, Copeland says she takes inspiration as she looks deeply into the eyes of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the Americas, to contemplate the peoples' faces reflected there: "It is almost as if when Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared she took a picture of the people who were before her.... We all—brown, black, red, and white—meet in the eye of the Guadalupe. To propose to do political theology under her gaze is to recognize ourselves and each other in our stories, our memories, our hopes; to grapple with our collective, intersecting pasts; to struggle creatively for freedom: to work, celebrate, worship, and hope together" (5–6).

In the mestizo Mary's eye-to-eye encounter with the peasant Juan Diego at Tepeyac in December 1531, God crossed the racial divide of conquest in the Americas—even when God's call to communal encounter, then as now, could so easily be denied.

Twenty years earlier, in 1511, God had also crossed the racial divide on the West Indies island of Hispaniola where a small community of Dominican friars delegated their best preacher, Fray Antonio de Montesinos, to preach to the island's Spanish mine owners against the

encomienda system's enslavement of indigenous laborers. In his historic Advent sermon of December 11, 1511, he preached, "Are they not human beings, too?"<sup>11</sup>

That small prophetic community of Dominican friars in La Isla Española also engaged in theological dialogue with Dominican friars at the University of Salamanca in Spain. This probing dialogue about Christian anthropology between pastoral agents in the New World and theologians in Spain gave birth to a political theology of human rights and laid a lasting foundation for what we know as international law.

One of the *encomienderos* in Antonio de Montesinos's congregation was Bartolomé de las Casas, who had arrived as a teenager with his father on the third voyage of Columbus. Swayed by his encounter with the Dominicans, he eventually freed his slaves to become a Dominican friar and then an evangelist and champion of indigenous rights in Guatemala, Venezuela, and Mexico—where he became the first bishop of Chiapas. Even today, he is remembered in the oral culture of the Mayan people in mountainous Chiapas as a champion of the poor.

While we might question the power of an apparition to a peasant in Tepeyac or of a sermon to conquistadors in Hispaniola, or of a preaching community prompting a university faculty to do practical political theology in Salamanca, Shawn Copeland reminds us, still, of the implicit potential of communal reflection to set our theological anthropology straight, to undergo personal conversion, and to speak truth to power. She reminds us also of the amorality of not doing our listening or our personal or communal reflection well:

As a tool of colonization and conquest, dogmatic or doctrinal theology severely compromised the Christian doctrine of the human person or Christian theological anthropology. Despite the morally courageous work of men like Bartholomé las Casas, it allowed the social (dis)order to dictate the very terms by which being human was to be understood. This 'empirically based' and biased definition drove the Indians, Africans, mestizos and their descendants to the very periphery of humanity. Without a critical analysis of culture, society, race, and gender, political theology risks proposing an exclusivist and amoral notion of person. (10)

### ***The Dred Scott Decision in St. Louis***

Edward Braxton, the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Belleville, Illinois since 2005, holds the Ph.D. and S.T.D. degrees in systematic theology from the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. Bishop Braxton gained attention as a Catholic commentator on race in America, when he issued pastoral letters on "The Racial Divide in the United States: A Reflection for the World Day of Peace" (January 1, 2015) and "The Catholic Church and the Black Lives Matter Movement—The Racial Divide in the United States Revisited: A Reflection for the World Day of Peace" (February 26, 2016).<sup>12</sup> His account in the first of these two letters of

---

<sup>11</sup> See Francisco Rodés, "A Sermon for the Ages: Friar Antonio Montesinos and the Quincentenary of Indigenous America's Reformation," at <https://www.circleofmercy.org/docs/OurStoriesPDFs/SermonfortheAges.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Download at <https://www.diobelle.org/documents/diocese/bishop/289-racial-divide-study-guide/file> and <https://www.diobelle.org/documents/diocese/bishop/290-racial-divide-revisited/file>.

the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, John Crawford III, Michael Brown, Jr., Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice is just one example of his command of detail and insightful analysis of racial violence in America.

In 2017 and 2018, Bishop Braxton gave versions of a lecture on “The Catholic Church and the Racial Divide in the United States: Old Wounds Reopened” at the Catholic University of America (September 21, 2017),<sup>13</sup> at the Institute of Catholic Thought and Culture of Seattle University (October 17, 2017), and as the annual Montesinos Lecture of Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis (September 23, 2018). In the lecture, Braxton asked whether “the extreme racial divide we are witnessing today [could] be a residue of a fundamental flaw born of moral blindness” (par. 9) by the Catholic chief justice of the Supreme Court Roger B. Taney in the Dred Scott decision given in St. Louis on March 6, 1857—which held that descendants of African slaves could not be citizens of the United States. In the decision, Taney observed:

They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race.... This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race. It was regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics, which no one thought of disputing, or supposed to be open to dispute; and men in every grade and position in society daily and habitually acted upon it in their private pursuits, as well as in matters of public concern, without doubting for a moment the correctness of this opinion.... They spoke and acted according to the then established doctrines and principles, and in the ordinary language of the day, no one misunderstood them. The unhappy black race were separated from the white by indelible marks, and laws long before established, and were never thought of or spoken of except as property. (Braxton par. 13, citing 60 U.S. 19 How. 393 393, 1856).

In a passage in Braxton’s lecture that cracks my heart because it shows Bartolomé de las Casas to have seen the humanity the indigenous slaves of Hispaniola, but not the humanity of black slaves from Africa, Braxton writes:

Unfortunately, there were, within the horizon of possibilities of the Catholic Church, firmly held opinions that made Taney’s decision possible. There was a “flaw at the foundation,” which was, sadly, supported by teachings at the highest levels of the Catholic Church. We learn from history, and credible historical documents suggest that one of the first extensive shipments of human beings from West Africa in the Transatlantic slave trade was probably initiated at the request of a Roman Catholic Bishop, Bartolomé de las Casas. In 1548, Pope Paul III declared that both clergy and laity had the right to own enslaved free human beings. The Catholic colonies of Spain and Portugal were the major agents of the slave trade in the Americas. (par. 16)

---

<sup>13</sup> Bishop Edward K. Braxton, “The Catholic Church and the Racial Divide in the United States: Old Wounds Reopened,” an address given at the National Catholic School of Social Service at the Catholic University of America (September 21, 2017), at <https://www.diobelle.org/our-bishop/writings/1133-the-horizon-of-possibilities-the-catholic-church-and-the-racial-divide-in-the-united-states-old-wounds-reopened>.

The pope at that time, Pius XI, wrote, “It is not contrary to the natural and divine law for a slave to be sold, bought, exchanged or given” (par. 17). Neither did any of the leading Catholic bishops in the United States condemn the Taney decision, including (now Saint) John Neumann of Philadelphia (par. 18).

Even though the Taney ruling was overturned by the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), the Civil Rights Act (1866), and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution (1868), involuntary servitude still persists for incarcerated blacks in America by virtue of Section 1 of the Thirteenth Amendment, which reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Is it any wonder that there are more incarcerated blacks in America today than there were slaves freed by the Emancipation?<sup>14</sup>

Braxton speaks correctly of a “flaw at the foundation” of both American civil society and the church (par. 16). Five hundred years ago, while the most prophetic Catholic pastoral practitioners and theologians affirmed the humanity and rights of America’s indigenous peoples, it appears that even they could not affirm that enslaved black Africans were human, too. Is it really any wonder, then, even though both Black and Hispanic Catholics in the United States struggle under the weight of white supremacy and racism, and despite the rich spiritual tradition of both Black and Hispanic Catholics, the Black church remains far smaller and less resourced than the Hispanic church in Catholic America? And is it a surprise that the descendants of anti-black and anti-abolitionist Irish Catholic immigrants are now mainstream American Catholics, which is to say “white” (cf. par. 20)?<sup>15</sup>

Speaking fervently as a black bishop on behalf of the Church, Bishop Braxton writes:

The Church wishes to contribute to building stronger relationships among people of different races in our communities in order to anticipate, prevent, and even resolve recurring conflicts. The Bishops approach these efforts chastened by the awareness of the Catholic Church in the United States’ long, sad history of supporting the racial divide seemingly embracing Chief Justice Taney’s vision. Catholics, including John Carroll, the first Bishop of Baltimore, Georgetown University, and many other individuals and institutions “owned” enslaved free human beings. The Church did not oppose segregated neighborhoods, segregated churches, segregated schools, or segregated and unfair employment. The Church refused to accept People of Color in convents, seminaries, and the ranks of the clergy. Evangelization in African American communities has not gained momentum, in part, because people have long memories. As I have said many times, the Catholic Church has made extraordinary efforts to correct its past grave misdeeds, which placed it on the wrong side of history. The Church has, however, made many significant contributions that have supported African American people by means of civil rights,

---

<sup>14</sup> View Ava D’uVernay, “13th” (Netflix, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

education, employment, housing, health care and social advocacy. Nevertheless, it is with regret that I must say that I do not believe there are any grounds for hoping that the number of African American Catholics will increase significantly in the coming generations. Indeed, the number may actually decline. (par. 43)

### **From Indifference and Complicity to Empathy and Solidarity**

A past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and author of the much-acclaimed *Racial Justice in the Catholic Church*, Fr. Bryan Massingale, S.T.D., is a professor of applied Christian ethics at Fordham University. A priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, he holds his doctorate from the Academia Alphonsianum in Rome and has taught at Marquette University and at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies of Xavier University of Louisiana.

In a short interview in 2017 by Susan Ross on “White Supremacy, the Election of Donald Trump and the Challenge to Theology,”<sup>16</sup> Massingale builds out the picture of Braxton’s “flaw at the foundation” with a critique of the response by United States Catholic bishops to the Black Lives Matter movement:

I have been critical of the bishops in their response, or lack of it, to the Black Lives Matter movement... [T]he bishops tend to look at racial issues in terms of race relations, especially individual race relations. In my book, I write that they see racism as involving isolated acts of individuals or isolated incidents of bad behaviour. They don’t look at broader, institutionalized patterns of living. Absent a demonstrable ‘intent to harm’ based on race or ethnicity, the bishops tend to be very quiet on that...

The bishops reflect very much a ‘manual’ understanding of moral theology, where you need to have three conditions for sin: a violation of the law, clear intent to violate the law, and the choice to do this anyway. So implicit bias, unconscious motivation, which are very much at play in the shootings of black people by police officers, those are not present in their minds, not present in their moral landscapes.

... to them, ‘Catholic means ‘white’. And so, the equation, when it comes to Black Lives Matter, goes something like this: police officers are white and Catholic; black protesters are black and not Catholic. (68–69)

In his book on *Racial Justice in the Catholic Church*, Massingale correctly asserts, “Racial solidarity is a *paschal* experience, one that entails a dying of a false self and a renunciation of racial privilege so as to rise to a new identity and a status that is God-given” (121).<sup>17</sup> He then speaks to the “radical equality conferred in baptism” (123) and the “social egalitarianism at the heart of the Lord’s Supper” (124).

I believe as Massingale believes: “The faith community thus serves as a kind of incubator for new life. Through its rites and sacred story it offers the assurance of new life and identity on

---

<sup>16</sup> Bryan N. Massingale, “White Supremacy, the Election of Donald Trump and the Challenge to Theology,” interview by Susan Ross, *Concilium* (2017/3): 65-73, at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/58d3/928cd97963246cb6f42472b04dd0af8d70d2.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

the other side of loss and transition. In this way, it can sustain the journey undertaken to a fuller and more authentic racial identity, one purged from the set of meanings and values that justify racial supremacy and white privilege” (122).

By way of conclusion, sometimes it helps me to remember the esteemed homiletician, David G. Buttrick. Thirty years ago, in his *Preaching Jesus Christ*, David wrote: “The sacraments, which once had been glad signs of the kingdom—Baptism, an entrance into the new humanity, and Eucharist, a messianic banquet of the new age—in time became sacraments of the church. As wry skeptics have often observed, instead of the kingdom of God, the church arrived” (42).<sup>18</sup>

Buttrick asked, “[W]hat happens to Christian faith without the notion of a new age? We lose all sense of being a new humanity in the world and again and again give way to cultural accommodation. . . . The notion of the new age is intrinsic to our Christian faith; in a deceptive world, it is nothing less than Christian realism” (67–68).

Realistically speaking, I believe we Christians can do this: In our congregations and in our pulpits, we can talk about race and do our bit to dismantle white fragility and white privilege and stake our claim on a path to racial equity and ecclesial authenticity. Neither slave nor free, we already are a new humanity in Christ Jesus.

---

<sup>18</sup> David G. Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988).

# Preaching Media and Technology

Convener: Karyn L. Wiseman

## **iHOMILETIC: PREACHING THAT CLICKS**

**Dominique A. Robinson, Assistant Professor, Dean of Chapel  
PhD Student, African American Preaching & Sacred Rhetoric**

**Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, <https://www.cts.edu>**

**Sponsor: Dr. Teresa L. Fry Brown, Bandy Professor of Preaching, Candler School of  
Theology, Emory University**

**Copyright © 2019 Dominique A. Robinson**

**ABSTRACT:** Serving as a NextGen Pastor for a decade at several congregations, I noticed a stark disconnection between the preaching moment and reception of the message millennials attendees. My observations prompted my desire to have research to support the work “reconnecting” work that I found myself doing. As a result, in 2013, I embarked on an ethnographic research journey to examine the relationships between Black millennials, Black churches, preaching and pop culture. I coined and trademarked the term, iHomiletic™ as a result of the research completed. iHomiletic™ is a method of preparing, embodying, executing, and following up on a sermon; it uses the language of the day, social media linguistics, to offer hope to millennials attempting to navigate the social ills of society through the use of the preached Gospel. It argues that a preacher must align her sermon development and implementation with that of Apple product marketing in order to resonate with Black millennials – sleek, compact, concise, user-friendly, and in a constant state of upgrading. This paper provides insight for practitioners to become better mavens of the Gospel, both in the church and in the virtual world, for the sake of Black millennials.

Technology and social media can effectively be used in/with preaching, particularly within Black preaching genres, for the purposes of re-connecting Black millennials to the Black Church. This has proven to be extremely valuable for Black religious leaders. The research offered here allows for the sentiments, thoughts, priorities, spiritual needs and desires of the Black millennial to be heard and considered in the sermon development, execution and follow-up. The iHomiletic methodology can aid a religious leader, particularly the Black preacher, in approaching, preparing, and delivering her message during the sermonic moment; this information would be helpful to the Black preacher as she seeks to use the heartbeat of the Black Church, preaching, to remain relevant in the lives of Black millennials. This study focuses on the preaching moment within a Black church’s worship experience.

While serving as a NextGen Pastor for several churches in the metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia area, many colleagues and I found that the largest missing constituent our churches was that of youth and young adults, ages 13-30. Regardless of denomination, ethnic, socio-cultural, or economic make-up youth and young adults were and still are absent from the Church; it is painfully evident on Sunday mornings when we survey the landscapes of our parishes. Youth and young adults drop out of church for a myriad of reasons:

Students are dropping out of churches at an alarming rate. Of those who will drop out of church, 70 percent do so between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. We are losing an

entire generation at one of the most crucial junctions in their lives. They leave because of life changes. They leave because of poor leadership in the church. They leave because of a lack of authenticity. They leave because the church has not reached out to them and their peers. They leave because the church has nothing for them at their life stage.<sup>1</sup>

A generational gap in our congregations has had a detrimental impact on the state of our churches as well as on the lives of youth and young adults.

Youth and young adults need the Church and our youth and young adult ministries to help guide them through the transitions from childhood to adulthood. Today's generation of youth and young adults has been left to

...figure out faith on their own. They are patching together a religious system apart from the church. These dropouts are creating a dangerous, piecemeal personal faith. They find faith in the Internet, in social circles, and through popular books, but for many this faith they find is a farce.<sup>2</sup>

However, while youth and young adults need the Church, the Church, too, needs them. Youth and young adults offer vibrancy, share a myriad of giftedness, serve as bridges to other youth and young adults, and give hope for the future management of the Church.

Youth and young adults are vital to the life of the Church because they bring a vibrancy to the "80 percent of North American churches [that are] stagnant or declining."<sup>3</sup> They are the generational bridge that brings the babies, youth, adults and seniors together as a full and complete Body of Christ.

The youth and young adults that we speak about in the above section, those missing from the Church, are a generation of educated, skeptical, over-stimulated, stressed out individuals. They are not Generation Xers, the Lost Generation or the Hip Hop Generation; they are Millennials – the iGeneration.<sup>4</sup> The youth and young adults of today have had technology shape their identity, faith, intellect and life; they are more than tech geeks. Black Millennials are

---

1. Sam S. and Thom S. Rainer III, *Essential Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group 2008), 132. The authors of this book serve as the President and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources and Rainer Research; they are a father and son team that have consulted with more than 500 churches, served as pastors to five churches, and written several books. LifeWay Christian Resources is one of the largest Christian resource companies in the world; Rainer Research is a well-respected research consulting team that assist with revitalizing churches. Both authors and organizations focus primarily on Caucasian evangelical congregations.

2. Rainer and Rainer, *Essential Church*, 83.

3. *Ibid*, 83.

4. Zack Whittaker, "Defining the iGeneration: Not Just a Geeky Bunch of Kids," ZDNet, June 20, 2010, accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/igeneration/defining-the-igeneration-not-just-a-geeky-bunch-of-kids/5336>.

5. Millennial is more of a social term than a chronological or generational (by date of birth) term.

6. Ed Stetzer and Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: the Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2009), 22 and 28.

7. Bryan T. Calvin, "Why Aren't Black Millennials Leaving the Church?" *RELEVANT*, August 21, 2013, 1, accessed November 8, 2013, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/why-aren%E2%80%99t-black-millennials-leaving-church>.

8. Stetzer, Stanley, Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 33.

today's youth who range from 0 to 35 years of age with several subsets. Millennial is more of a social term than a chronological or generational (by date of birth) term<sup>5</sup>. Millennial is an umbrella for which persons who were born from the 1980s to present were born; there are various subsets within the larger grouping of persons that range from the Hip Hop generations, Generations X, Y, and Z, and Digital Babies.

Despite the various subsets of what can be considered a millennial, there is one common characteristic – having been heavily influenced by technology and/or social media in the formative years of life; this influence includes the introduction of video games, handheld devices (Game Boy) and pagers. Technology has had a tremendous impact on the ways in which we communicate – from mode to modes. There were not as many choices for communication, or life, just ten years ago. College majors/concentrations were not as numerous as they are today. The option to purchase clothes and home appliances online are leading today's consumer trends. Unlike the 60s, there are a myriad of options to choose from for lifestyle, education, occupation/vocation, clothing design, music choice, dining availability, relationship status, and so much more. You no longer must fit the traditional family unit, live in the neighborhood where you study or work and frequent the eateries close by. Your life's adventures and obligations can be as spread out as wide as you would like for them to be. The choices are even more vast and diverse when it comes to attending churches, either physically or virtually or not at all.

Research has shown that African Americans attend church more than their counterparts, believe in God (the one described in the Bible), that Jesus did in fact die and was resurrected, that Christianity can have a positive impact on society, and that believing in Jesus Christ has an influence on how they live their lives.<sup>6</sup> Blacks of all ages are more likely to maintain their religious affiliations than whites and Black Millennials make up twenty-four percent of Historical Black Churches.<sup>7</sup> Black Millennials believe more than their counterparts that the Church is full of hypocrites and that their lifestyles would not be acceptable to the Church.<sup>8</sup> Black Millennials remain members of their churches because the Church still offers safe space for them just to be - their Blackness is accepted and celebrated. The Black Church is still the center for the Black family unit where gatherings such as weddings, baptisms, funerals and family reunions are hosted.<sup>9</sup> It is my contention then, that most Black Millennials are remaining involved with the Black Church because of familial ties and socio-cultural freedom rather than a spiritually meaningful identification with their communities of faith, which is very different than the generations before them; the congregants of the past viewed the Black Church as their socio-cultural, economic, political and spiritual refuge, as seen during the Civil Rights Movement.

---

9. Calvin, "Why Aren't Black Millennials Leaving the Church?"

The Black Church used to be the center of the Black community for all ages but that has slightly changed for Black Millennials.<sup>10</sup> I would ascribe that many Black Millennials' apathy and disconnection from the Church is directly related to the preaching. This is where I believe the disgruntled-ness of the churched, hostile Black Millennials lie; and therefore, I argue Black churches need to try to reclaim and retain through their preaching ministries. Therefore, if the preaching, which is generally viewed as the heart of the Black Church and religiosity, became relevant to Black millennials again then their remaining connected to their churches would be spiritually motivated rather than reduced to a socio-cultural obligation.

iHomiletic™ was birthed because of these observations, questions and research. Like many other churches the absence of youth and young adults is painstakingly obvious in the Black Church and I argue that a unique homiletical approach that incorporates preaching and social media linguistics and offers hope can re-engage Black Millennials to the Gospel and the Black Church in creative and compelling ways. This unique and new approach is iHomiletic™. This project is not about examining how social media and technology can improve the overall digital footprint of the Black church/Black churches or how they, social media and technology, would function in all aspects and ministries of the local church or denomination; this research is solely focused on the effective use of social media and technology in Black preaching to Black millennials in a Black church setting. In the next portion, I will discuss the setting(s) in which this research was conducted.

I was permitted to conduct much of my research primarily at three churches: St. Stephen AME Zion Church, Solid Rock AME Zion Church and New Life Presbyterian Church; the remainder of my research was completed by a survey, practicum, observations, informal questionnaires and social media communications with Black millennials across the United States, mostly on the east coast. Though the churches, research ministry sites, vary in their geographical location, embodiment of theology, and much more, they all could be classified as being a part of the “Black Church<sup>11</sup>.” Allow me to share the idiosyncrasies of the congregations I observed, worshipped with and worked within:

Table 2:1 Context(s) of Three Research Ministry Sites

	St. Stephen AME Zion Church	Solid Rock AME Zion Church	New Life Presbyterian Church
Location	Asbury Park, NJ	Lithonia, GA	College Park, GA

---

10. Leo, “6 Reasons Young Black People Are Leaving The Church,” Atlanta Black Star, January 24, 2014, accessed August 9, 2015, <http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/01/24/6-reasons-young-black-people-are-leaving-the-church/>.

11. More will be said about the “Black Church” later in this project.

12. Members “on roll” indicate how many persons have joined the church versus “active” members are the number of persons that are engaged in the life and ministries of the church and attend worship on a consistent basis.

Size of Congregation	335 (on roll) 225 (active)	254 (on roll) 150 (active)	619 (on roll) 241 (active)
Theology of church	Wesleyan; Black liberation	Wesleyan; Black liberation	Calvinism; Black liberation
Info about senior pastor	Black male, mid-60s, M.Div., raised in NC, conservative, 20+ year tenure	Black male, mid-60s, DMin, raised in AL, conservative, 20+ year tenure	Black male, early-30s, Th.M., raised in FL, neo-liberal, 6-year tenure
My timeframe at the church	8/2013 – 12/2016	1/8/2014-7/5/2014	7/5/2014-6/1/2016
Age range of youth	13-18 years old	13-24 years old	0-30 years old
# of youth on membership role	22	34	102 (under 18) 107 (18-30)
# of youth I saw regularly	15-20 Quarterly Friday or Saturday workshop/sessions and Sunday morning worship experiences	15-20 During the practicum at SR we hosted/attended approximately 8-10 youth-oriented worship experiences, 4 district events, 4 tutor sessions, 5 bible studies, 9 special youth events, and 15-20 “normal” Sunday morning worship experiences	8-15 Weekly Wednesday evening bible study; 1-2 Sunday morning worship experiences a month

The information in the table above is a snapshot of critical details about each congregation; this contextual material helps us to better understand the data that was generated.

All three sites are in urban environments heavily populated with people of color (POC). The scarcity of resources, lack of accessibility to fresh produce and well-connected public transportation, increased developments of low-income housing, below average educational resources and student performance in the school system, as well as the low median household incomes and increased numbers of persons who live beneath the poverty line define and describe what I would consider to be an urban context.

The embodied theologies of the churches are very similar; the one distinction between the churches is that of their founding fathers. All three congregations are considered Black churches

rooted in Black liberation theology; this is a cornerstone of the Black Church – to contextualize the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### The Black Church

As I have stated, all my research was conducted in the Black Church. The term “Black Church” has been used as an attempt to simplify an effort of inclusivity, meaning in an endeavor to include a wide spectrum of faith communities whose members are of color; the term has been used to ease the task of naming all within that spectrum. However, it has had the inverse effect especially in the world of academia. The term “Black Church” has the potential to negate the diversity of culture and myriad of liturgy and worship styles among people of African descent. “Black Church” is too narrow of a term which leads one to question what type of congregation would be acceptable as a Black church, for instance, one could question the belongingness of a congregation whose membership is predominately African American but belongs to a White denomination, United Methodist for example, or question the identification of a congregation located in the Caribbean. There are too many factions within the “Black Church” that embody and possess their own unique richness of heritage that it would be an incredible insult to categorize them all under the auspice of “the Black Church.” Therefore, in this project, what one would consider to be the “Black Church” is synonymous with “Black churches” and “Black communities” as places of worship (regardless of denomination, doctrine, structure, or locale) in various living environments (urban, suburb, or rural) predominately composed of members who come from the African Diaspora to honor the tremendous plurality that exists.

To fully understand this project, one must take the time to become acquainted with the role of Black churches to Black communities and the relationship of Black preaching to Black persons. Black churches have been known to be at the center of Black communities and Black preaching at the heart of Black churches.<sup>12</sup> Preachers of the local congregations were community leaders. “The Negro...was an important figure and at bottom a vital factor. It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity.”<sup>13</sup> Preachers and their craft, preaching, became key factors of influence within Black communities. “His power for good or ill was very great. It was the old-time preacher who for generations was the mainspring of hope and inspirations for the Negro in America... This power of the old-time preacher, somewhat lessened and changed in his successors, is still a vital force; in fact, it is still the greatest single influence among colored people of the United States.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, preaching had become extremely significant to the existence of the community.

---

15. Historically, Black churches hosted meetings, afterschool activities for children, granted employment opportunities, and were the hub for Black families to gather for worship, fellowship, safety, and education. The preacher was the known leader of the local church and community as was evident during the Civil Rights Movement when many of the religious leaders were main actors in the movement. The act of the preacher, preaching, was admired, esteemed, and centered within the religious traditions.

16. James Johnson Weldon. *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin 1972), 2.

17. *Ibid.*, 2.

Preaching in Black churches is a powerful art that has been admired, mimicked, and examined by many. It has been known to be the “lifeline” of many Black churches, giving verve to its parishioners. Prophetic preaching has been a necessity of Black churches as a result and response to the poor conditions in which members of Black communities have been forced to live, survive, and thrive in. Though the socio-cultural, economic, and political influences on Black communities have changed over time, the need and purpose of prophetic preaching in Black churches has not wavered.

What has been known as classical Black preaching of the 20<sup>th</sup> century possessed the hallmark of prophetic witness; socio-historically, prophetic preaching within Black churches has been deemed to be quite viable and transformative. Though some would argue whether prophetic preaching still exists in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, I contend that Black preaching is still prophetic, at the heart of Black churches, necessary for the encouragement and guidance of Black communities but has taken on a new form of execution and embodiment. Hence this project and the development of iHomiletic™. iHomiletic™ is not a new form of Black preaching but an expansion on the classical tenets of Black preaching.

Some do not view Black preaching as having to always be contextual; however, in our examination we find that Black preaching at its prime is radically contextual. If that be the case then when we examine the socio-cultural climate of today, Black preaching in 2019 at its best cannot be done without consideration of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Just as Black preachers spoke directly to the social ills during the Civil Rights Movement, Black preaching now must address the intense racial, economic depressive, heterosexist, corrupt, unjust, classist, elitist, ageist systems we navigate every day. More than ever racial violence has become a part of Black communities’ everyday regime – anxiety, fear, and absence of hope are running pervasive.

For the sake of clarity, the Black community has always been painstakingly aware that racism still existed in the United States. The major difference in how the Black community accesses and receives the information about the deaths of members of their community has transformed. During the Civil Rights Movement, one had to wait for the evening news on television or radio broadcast to discover that a heinous crime had been committed. Now, thanks to social media and technology, the inhumane racist acts are recorded and shared without regard. The pain strikes even deeper within the Black community when the belief is that now that the crime can be seen then justice should easily “roll down like rivers.” WRONG! Here is where the context of this research is clearly depicted: increase in technology and use of social media, Black communities, Black churches, and the Black Lives Matter Movement.

So then, what does this mean for me as a young Black preaching scholar and practitioner? What does this mean for the Black Church or Black community? How do these killings, trials, verdicts, and character assassinations impact Black millennials, how they hear the Gospel and what they look for from their churches and God? These questions will be explored further in this project.

The foundational theoretical/theological frameworks for this project are rooted in my ministerial experience; my understanding of scripture; the Black Methodist tradition, my ecclesial and ideological setting; Wesleyan, Womanist and Black Liberation theological convictions; and with socio-cultural and ethnic assumptions. I identify as both a practitioner of

homiletics in the Black Church and a member of the millennials in need of the Church to become relevant (again).

The intertwining of biblical exegesis, characterization, and real-life examples is my homiletical habit. I believe that my preaching practices have been birthed out of my religious rearing and educational exposure; they are biblically based and deeply contextual.

In a general sense, I understand preaching to address all people, any and every person who is willing to listen and act on what is being shared. However, on a personal level I understand that I preach for a specific public, that being the Black community, particularly the Black academe and the Black Church. I understand that my public (congregants) will include individuals who do not always hold office in both or either the academy or the Church but will have a place in the Black community.

My theoretical assumption as it relates to Black preaching is that it (preaching) must be radically contextual and relevant to the lives of its hearers/receivers; I approached this project from a constructive theological perspective which allowed me to have a contemporary slant to classical theological doctrines/themes to “fit” my context(s). My theoretical construction was a blended theological approach that included the translation model of contextual theology and the ethical-political theology of preaching.<sup>15</sup> The translation model of contextual theology focuses on the unchanging message of the Gospel but conveying it in a way that is relatable and adapted for the context – this is being radically contextual. This theoretical framework is the cornerstone for the development of iHomiletic™.

Considering the socio-cultural-political-economic climate we find ourselves in as Americans, it would be remised to investigate the art and impact of preaching without considering the overt social ills of the day; because of this, the ethical-political theology of preaching proved to be a must for this project and the birthing of iHomiletic™. According to Dr. John McClure, the ethical-political theology of preaching presents the Gospel as an alternative for injustices, inequities, social ills, and -isms; this is an absolute requisite for Black millennials living in the times of the BLM movement. Due to social media and technology, Black millennials are bombarded with the information and images of the slaughters of young black persons; alternatives for justice are a necessity. Black preaching offers its members hope and through the ethical-political theology of preaching, the iHomiletic™ has a grounding to do such with a new way of expression when conjoined with the translation model.

My assertion is that this blended framework was most appropriate because it begged to answer the question, “So/for what?” as it relates to developing a homiletic for the Black millennials. This is what Karl Barth did as he penned Church Dogmatics where he was attuned to the need for a method of preaching that was contextual to the early 1930’s situation: the decline of the Weimar Republic and the emergence of a global level, world economic depression that set the stage for the emergence of German National Socialism/Hitler (1933).<sup>16</sup>

#### A Millennial Mixed (Blended) Methodology

---

18. John McClure, “Working Preacher Theology and Interpretation,” June 19, 2008, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2079>.

19. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1959).

The objectives and purposes of this research were to discover the sociological, cultural, and spiritual makeup of Black millennials to determine their generational genres and the impact of culture on their identity; this information will prove to be useful in determining which homiletical tools will be most effective in conveying the Gospel to Black millennials. The driving question for this project is, “How does one effectively convey the written and lived Gospel to African American millennials (those born 1980s-present) through preaching in a Black Church context?” The assumed answer for this project is that the effective use of social media linguistics and technology is the answer for improving the preaching moment for the sake of Black millennials. From the foundational guiding question come supportive inquiries that can test the assumed solution:

- What are the traditional/classical characteristics of Black preaching?
- Are these tenets still relevant for Black Millennials?
- What makes preaching significant for the Black Millennial? Does it matter for their attendance at Church? If so, why?
- What additions/modifications can be made to the traditional characteristics of Black preaching to reconnect Black Millennials to the worship experience/Church, if reconnection is needed?
- How does the rise and use of social media and technology shape the preaching moment for/with Black Millennials? How do they shape their faith?
- What is my theology of Black preaching to Black Millennials?
- What does the “i” mean (according to Apple) or how do I interpret it?

#### What Works for Me: Research Methods

To fully answer the above questions, a mixed methodology of qualitative research approaches was employed—ethnography and the critical research method. These approaches were selected because they are most fitting for the ways in which I wanted to gather, analyze, interpret, report and utilize the data. The project’s focus was on how Black millennials engage and receive the preached Gospel within Black church settings; this required learning who Black millennials are and what shapes them spiritually, culturally, emotionally and even physically as well as revisiting what the tenets of classical Black preaching have been and currently are.

The research for this project was conducted in the following ways: (1) observations of three ministry sites which included (1a) completing a practicum and (1b) administering an informal text message questionnaire and (2) performing a large-scale survey with 300+ participants.

This data illustrates the diversity of interests that Black millennials in Black churches have as it relates to how the sermon is presented and its content. However, this data also overwhelmingly demonstrates the desires that Black millennials have for social media linguistics to be used from the pulpit; the language, imagery, content, and examples of the sermon make a huge difference for Black millennials. The language and content of sermons needs to speak to

the context in which Black millennials find themselves; therefore, the distinction in how a Black millennial hears and experiences a sermon is significant.

#### iHomiletic: Where Do We Go From Here?

We must conclude that Black Millennials need to be reconnected to Black churches by way of preaching to them in a way that speaks directly to them in a language they are familiar with. Black millennials' exposure to violent injustices have instilled anxiety, fear, and low morale and self-esteem which causes for the need to offer hope to Black communities through Black churches, and that hope being offered through the preaching. Preaching at its most effective state is contextual and Black preaching at its best offers hope and an alternative reality considering the tangible inequalities that unfortunately despite everything oppress Black people.

I would like to offer the term iHomiletic as the “new” method of preaching to Black Millennials. Interdisciplinary, this method utilizes homiletics, youth ministry practices, and social media/technology with a primary focus on preaching. Like the term iGeneration, iHomiletic “is derived from the Apple lineup of popular products which especially took off in the younger market, specifically the iPod music device and more recently the iPhone. The little 'i' and the subsequent capital second letter is a homage to Apple's impact on today's youth, though the company does not own the rights to the term.”<sup>17</sup> It is my belief that if Black preachers prepare and present their sermons in the same manner that Apple markets its devices, it would prove to be most beneficial for the reconnection of the Black millennials to Black churches.

The iHomiletic is a technique of preaching that deals directly with where Black millennials locate themselves socially, culturally, psychologically, physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. It addresses their questions and makes the Gospel practical and relevant to their lives. Like the very successful manufacturing of Apple products, the iHomiletic embodies a high-quality design. Homileticians who embrace and employ the iHomiletic know the “product” that they are creating; “they are light on their feet, inquisitive and interested in being wrong. They are motivated by failures and optimistic about change.”<sup>18</sup> These homileticians know that the product – the sermon – must have focus and simplicity.

The iHomiletic™, like Apple products, must have a clean, flawless, and operational design. All of what impacts Black Millennials must be seamlessly incorporated in this sermon development and articulation. The iHomiletic is a way of preparing and delivering sermons to Black Millennials that starts and ends with their questions about life, makes the Gospel user friendly, compact (easy to carry and share), concise (to the point), sleek (attractive), practical and relevant; and makes God easily accessible, an iGod.<sup>19</sup>

How Does Social Media and Technology Impact the Preaching Moment in Black Churches?

---

20. Zack Whittaker, “Defining the iGeneration: Not Just a Geeky Bunch of Kids,” ZDNet.com, June 20, 2010, accessed July 14, 2014, <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/igeneration/defining-the-igeneration-not-just-a-geeky-bunch-of-kids/5336>.

21. “5 Rules of Apple's Sleek Design,” Apple iPhone Blog, December 5, 2012, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://iphone.blogvasion.com/2012/12/5-rules-of-apples-sleek-design.html>.

22. Craig Detweiler, *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives* (MI: Brazos Press, 2013).

This expectation of an iGod – access to God who is just like me whenever I want God – has been shaped by the intrusion of technology into our lives. Because Black Millennials are so accustomed to receiving any type of information they want at the click of a button, the iHomiletic must render a direct line between Black Millennials and God without a middle man. The concept of an iGod also means that Black Millennials can share the news of God at the click of a button. This preaching style must be powerful, direct, and concise; it must be like an app on a phone that offers the ease of a retweet or the passion to want to share. The everyday use of social media and technology has expanded the classical Black preaching component known as the call and response. Instead of the traditional standing, dancing or verbal affirmation, Black millennials take to social media posting and sharing what is transpiring in the worship experience. Who God becomes to Black millennials is something, someone, worth sharing and easily accessible to others around the world.

Though the process of gathering the data was a process of casting the net wide the initial assumed theory proved to be correct. From observation of youth at a church to survey results to direct text message responses, the researcher found that while all church-going Black millennials may not feel that their pastors' sermons are failing them, they do emphatically agree that the use of social media linguistics would help them better connect with the preached Gospel. Social media linguistics refers to the terminology that is used on social media accounts, such as trending hashtags, pop culture quotes and sayings, memes, videos, challenges and emojis/emoticons.

Social media linguistics is important for the church, because this language is what people are encountering outside of the church every day. Therefore, incorporating social media linguistics in sermons would help close the gap between Black millennials and the church. It would also sanctify the language that others have used to denigrate our people. Like the once derogatory words, “nigga” and “queer,” the preacher can take words like “connect” or “plug,”<sup>20</sup> clean them up, and transform how millennial congregants understood and employ them. The use of such language in the preaching moment can be empowering and educational. Likewise, by speaking in the idiom of Black millennials, the iHomiletic preacher can narrow the gap, transforming social media linguistics into God/church-talk.

The widespread use of social media and technology has changed the way persons now receive and accept the information given in sermons. Now persons can quickly verify what the preacher is saying or if it is all his/her original work. Now the preacher is no longer the sole authority on the information preached; this shifts the dynamics of trusted source within the congregation. Black millennials will quickly dismiss the authority of a preacher if it is discovered that the preacher is not being original or correct.

The use of devices in worship changes the actual demeanor and body language of persons in the congregation. Millennials may have their head down during most of the preaching moment, but this does not mean that he or she is not engaged in the sermonic experience. The preacher cannot become dismayed by the new body language and the millennial congregant must remember to look connected during worship by looking up from his or her device every now and then.

### The iHomiletic Sermon

---

23. These terms are often used as slang to refer to a source for illegal drugs.

iHomiletic™ considers Black millennials in every stage of the sermon – preparation, execution and follow-up. While preparing the sermon, an iHomiletician is considering the liturgical season, context of the church, community narrative as a people of color, current political, social and economic events, pop culture, spiritual development and goals, and much more. One is determining whether the use of screens is appropriate for the sermon or whether there will be a deliberate moment to invite congregants to use their devices or social media accounts.

As preachers develop their sermons, they need to consider the “i” in iHomiletic. For the most part, when a person writes a lowercase “i,” he or she writes the stem and then the dot. When constructing and articulating one’s sermon, a preacher should render the dot first and then the stem in iHomiletics. Black millennials like to be given the main point first and then they will choose if it is worth following you on the stem of the “i” as you move forward in your sermon. This is a unique feature of iHomiletics, the sermonic movement in which one presents their theological claim(s). Be sure that the dot in your move is an attention grabber.

When giving the subject or focus of your sermon, offer a hashtag; this becomes a gesture of hospitality, allowing congregants to use their technological devices and social media mediums. Here is where social media linguistics can be extremely helpful; when offering a hashtag for your sermon’s focus, you can make use of popular song lyrics, to-date slang sayings, current television shows (well known phrases from the shows), or subjects that are already trending.<sup>21</sup> This allows for the preacher to practice follow-up after the actual preaching moment; one can then go to social media mediums and reply to the posts that congregants shared during sermonic experience. This proves to be extremely beneficial as it relates to connecting with Black millennials. As a church leader, one must be willing to meet the Black millennials where they are, in their virtual worlds. Following up to reply and converse with Black millennials on their social media accounts informs them that you care and are willing to engage them on their turf. Here is where another unique characteristic of iHomiletic is made known, digital follow-up.

During the delivery of the sermon, the congregation’s context is in contact evaluation and engagement. The preacher is determining whether to linger on a subject or move on quickly. The preacher is doing a fine dance with language to keep persons’ attention but also to upset the status quo. The language used in the sermon, though is the language of the day, is also intentionally selected to make persons think as well as feel during the sermonic experience. The iHomiletic sermon possesses a rapid pace, cadence and rhythm. It is embodied with authenticity; the preacher should never come across like he or she is trying too hard.

One should also consider the generation in which he or she is seeking to reach while developing an iHomiletic sermon. Millennials are a large grouping of many subsets, Generations X, Y, Z and Digital Babies. The subsets vary based on how heavily each was influenced by technology; this technology starts with computers in school, second phone lines at home, pagers and the first edition of video games. Millennials range from those born in the mid-to-late 1980s to 2017. What one sees change drastically for the subsets of millennials is the increased use of video games and exposure to “real life” animation, i.e. Game Boy, Pixar and Disney. These developments impacted millennials by stifling their imagination. Those who were born in the 80s

---

24. Subjects that are currently being widely discussed on social media platforms at the time.

read books like Goosebumps or The Boxcar Children. All the characters looked completely different in each readers' mind and no one could dispute them; however, as time progressed when youth began to read the Harry Potter series or the Hunger Games, films with real life animation dictated how each character and setting should look. Youth no longer had to imagine people, places or things because the depiction was given to you. This lack of imagination skills has a direct impact on faith and how millennials hear the Gospel. If everything is clearly explained or illustrated for millennials and they do not have to imagine things, how difficult is it for the preacher to explain a God they have never seen? Therefore, the specific use of social media linguistics, language of the day, is significant to iHomiletics because it allows for the preacher to "paint the text" vividly for Black millennials in words that carry imagery and connotations they can understand and identify with. How do we do this?

Preachers need to learn how to incorporate social media mediums in the actual preaching moment, i.e. having a live Twitter feed visible during the sermon. Whenever possible ask Black millennials to use their devices to stream or plant social media posts during the preaching moment; this directly engages Black millennials, give them a buy-in, and reconnects them to the sermon and Church at large. If possible, use software like Kahoot! to administer a test of what you covered during your preaching or teaching moment; this strongly encourages Black millennials to pay attention and desire to participate with your sermon in a virtual/digital world. Though the "i" in iHomiletic helps shape the sermon, this method is more about "us" connecting to each other, the Church and God.

## THE FAIR USE SERMON: WHEN VERBAL AND VISUAL BORROWING CROSS THE LINE<sup>1</sup>

Rob O'Lynn, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Ministry and Director of Graduate  
Bible Programs

Kentucky Christian University; Grayson, Kentucky; [www.kcu.edu](http://www.kcu.edu)

Copyright © 2019 Rob O'Lynn

**ABSTRACT:** This paper hopes to add to the conversation regarding plagiarism by approaching this issue from a different angle, primarily in regards to how we should properly use (and cite) sources that fall more into the realm of fair copyright usage. We live in a what has been called a wired world, meaning that we who speak for God must practice integrity in all aspects of our teaching ministry—including our creative aspect, such as audio, video and visual imagery. This paper, then, will discuss this concern, looking first at the problem of both verbal and visual borrowing, then provide an explanation of fair use codes, and then conclude with a discussion of existing and creative solutions especially as they relate to visual borrowing.

A former student of mine returned from a weekend away to inform me that he had listened to another former student preach at a youth event. While the sermon was well-received by the audience, my former student felt awkward. He felt awkward because he had heard the sermon before. I had preached it about a year earlier, and this other former student had preached my sermon word-for-word without offering any mention as to where he had heard the message before. When my former student approached this other student, the other student stated that I would not care that my sermon had been preached. Obviously not.

I spoke at a denominational preaching conference a few years back and told a story about teaching my children. I have a son and a daughter. About a couple of years later, I was at another denominational conference and heard a fellow preacher share a story that was, you guessed it, identical to mine—because it *was* mine. This preacher had two sons, yet he had a son and a daughter in the story he told. When I asked him about it afterward, he said that no one was the wiser. Except me, the guy who he got the story from.

But what about imagery? Maybe you have been searching through sermons on Paul's letters to the Romans and come across an intriguing series that has some excellent graphics. Then the next sermon collection on YouTube uses...the exact same graphics. No credit has been given to the originator of the material, not on their printed or digital materials. You soon chase the rabbit down the hole far enough to discover the congregational worship arts team that actually designed those eye-catching visuals in the first place. Or, in reviewing a student sermon, you find her selection of a visual image (one you seem to remember seeing years ago in your college art appreciation class) compelling. But when you search her notes to find any information regarding the image, you discover the disheartening feeling of disappointment in that there is no reference at all. Is this simply bad research, or does this constitute plagiarism?

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Tiffany Brooks and especially Robert Stephen Reid for their helpful comments and thoughtful critique in the development of this paper.

The issue of plagiarism, both verbal *and* visual, is not a new issue to the preaching profession. As far back as 1952, Webb Garrison, then the preaching professor at Candler School of Theology, stated that “Any minister can consistently produce original sermons. Yet there is a steady stream of instances in which plagiarism is detected in published works.”<sup>2</sup> The Internet has made this practice of “borrowing” immensely easy. To be honest, this author has been guilty of visual borrowing frequently in the past. The need to preach stimulating insights accompanied with evocative visuals has become essential in the pastoral marketplace due to the exponentially increasing expectation of those who give ear to our sermons.<sup>3</sup> We have wrestled with this issue so much that “to cite or not to cite” is more than just a paraphrasing of Shakespeare’s immortal line from Act 3 of *Hamlet*. The challenge is, like it or not, preachers and worship leaders are bound by what is called “fair use” law for proprietary material. The desire to be creative does have some limits, and those limits are serious. This paper will discuss this concern, looking first at the problem of both verbal and visual borrowing, then provide an explanation of fair use codes, and then conclude with a discussion of existing and creative solutions especially as they relate to visual borrowing.

### **The Problem of Verbal and Visual Borrowing**

In a day when learning management systems arrive to campus with plagiarism detection software built into its coding, one would think that this issue of verbal and visual borrowing would be on the decline. However, it seems that the problem is getting worse rather than better.<sup>4</sup> On one end of the spectrum is Rick Warren, who is famous (infamous?) for quoting Adrian Rogers, who said, “If my bullet fits your gun, then shoot it,” meaning he has no problem with other preachers using his material verbatim in their own preaching, teaching and even writing.<sup>5</sup> On the other end of the spectrum are preachers like author (and former attorney) Carey Nieuwhof of Connexus Church in Ontario, who has argued that preachers should not provide sermons to a wider audience.<sup>6</sup> Both of these views are adventures in missing the point.

First, what is current problem with verbal borrowing in sermons? There was a time when, to borrow a homiletical insight—or an entire homily—one had to consult books, sermon books specifically. Collections of sermons have been a popular publication avenue for decades,

---

<sup>2</sup> Webb B. Garrison, “Plagiarism and the Development of Originality,” *Religion and Life* 21 (Autumn 1952): 573.

<sup>3</sup>For example, see both arguments for and cautions against the use of visual imagery in preaching in Rick Blackwood, *The Power of Multi-Sensory Preaching and Teaching: Increase Attention, Comprehension, and Retention* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), Richard A. Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Preaching in an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), Thomas H. Troeger, *Ten Strategies for Preaching in a Multi Media Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), and Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching for the Contemporary Service* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>For example, see Scot McKnight, “Hey, Preacher, Is That Sermon Really Yours?,” [www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2019/03/18/hey-preacher-is-that-sermon-really-yours/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2019/03/18/hey-preacher-is-that-sermon-really-yours/), accessed 29 August 2019.

<sup>5</sup>Ed Stetzer, “Preaching, Plagiarism, and Sermon Central,” [www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2008/may/preaching-plagiarism-and-sermon-central.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2008/may/preaching-plagiarism-and-sermon-central.html), accessed 16 April 2019; see also Thomas G. Long’s critique of Warren’s statement in “Stolen Goods: Tempted to Plagiarize,” *Christian Century* 124 (17 April 2007): 18.

<sup>6</sup>Carey Nieuwhof, “5 Reasons You Shouldn’t Preach Other People’s Sermons,” <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-reasons-you-shouldnt-preach-other-peoples-sermons/>, accessed 4 September 2019.

with even modern major publishers running sermon series. Then there were the sermon tapes, and later the CDs. Lynn Anderson is a popular preacher within my denomination whose “tape ministry” was quite successful. That is until the week the tape did not record. Blank tapes were sent across the United States, much to the dismay of many preachers. Anderson said that he decided to discontinue the taping of his sermons when he received the call from one flustered preacher who asked what he would preach in a couple of weeks because he *only* preached what Anderson had preached.<sup>7</sup>

It is one thing to cite an insight from a popular preacher like Barbara Brown Taylor or Andy Stanley in a sermon. It is also common to cite a passage from a the preacher’s favorite commentary on that passage. However, despite recent statements from William Willimon such as “Stealing really isn’t stealing if it’s done unselfishly for the good of my neighbor” and “My sermonic borrowing is an indication of how much I love my people,”<sup>8</sup> it is wholly another thing to borrow these insights—or entire sermons—without attribution simply to create an Aha! moment for the listeners. This is what Reid and Hogan have called the problem of inauthenticity. They note, “In reality, there is a lot of borrowing and influence that goes on in the production of anything worth reading or hearing. That is a good thing. Once the term *plagiarism* is applied to borrowing, however, it suggests a large amount of uncited, verbatim usage rather than just influence. It also reframes the activity as a form of cheating.”<sup>9</sup> The issue that is at play here is not ingenuity but integrity. As Tom Long noted over a decade ago, “There is a difference between being a debtor and being a thief....Preachers who strive to tell the truth, who seek to honor the communion of saints, who desire to maintain the trust of the faithful community—that is to say, preachers with ethical integrity—will wrestle with these questions and make the best decision they can.”<sup>10</sup>

On one hand, “intellectual property” is a thing that should be respected. While one preacher may be okay with anyone using his material, this is not and cannot be seen as a blanket view of those in the pastorate. On the other hand, any sermon, just like any book, can have value to a wider audience when used appropriately. As Bradley Munroe once humorously mused, “Perhaps I am being much too negative about the possibilities for good and way too cautious about petty moral hindrances to good preaching....The ‘demise’ in modern preaching could be ‘cured’ overnight.”<sup>11</sup> One view is confronting plagiarism head-on by embracing it as an option, while the other view is preventing plagiarism at any cost.

It is hard to believe that Chris Stinnett’s article on citing our sources was written nearly twenty years ago.<sup>12</sup> However it is still as timely a read as ever. There have been back-and-forth

---

<sup>7</sup>Jim Martin, HOML 7140 lecture notes.

<sup>8</sup>William H. Willimon, “Kleptomania Homiletica,” *Journal for Preachers* 42 (Pentecost 2019): 43.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Stephen Reid and Lucy Lind Hogan, *The Six Deadly Sins of Preaching: Becoming Responsible for the Faith We Proclaim* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 261.

<sup>11</sup>W. Bradley Munroe, “On Ethics on the Internet: The Brewing Crisis in Pulpit Ministry,” *Journal for Preachers* 21 (Advent 1997): 49.

<sup>12</sup>Chris Stinnett, “Footnotes in the Pulpit,” *Leadership* 21 (Fall 2000): 89-90.

conversations<sup>13</sup>, as well as entire issues of academic journals dedicated to the topic.<sup>14</sup> Yet the present essay is not about borrowing another preacher’s sermon. Look, it is 2019. If you still think borrowing another’s sermon (or sermon illustration or whatever) without giving that preacher some form credit is acceptable, then you need to have a little talk with Jesus because Jesus is upset with you. As Jeffrey Peterson argued twenty years ago, we live in a “wired world,”<sup>15</sup> meaning that we who speak for God must practice integrity in all aspects of our teaching ministry—including our creative aspect, such as audio, video and visual imagery.

### Defining “Fair Use”

The issue that is before us is that of “fair use,” which, according to the Stanford Fair Use Project, is defined as “any copying of copyright material done for a limited and ‘transformative’ purpose, such as to comment upon, criticize, or parody a copyrighted work.”<sup>16</sup> The question, at large, deals with how the material is being used, specifically in regards to whether permission has been sought from the original author. The issue focuses on the term “transformative,” which is an artery that feeds into the heart of the ongoing free-speech debate.

The question that is central to the discussion of “transformative” is *how* the material in question is being used, for what purpose is the material in question being improved by or improving the newer material. On one hand, there is the issue of “commentary and criticism,” meaning the material being borrowed is either being commented on or being used in a commentary. For example, if you have noticed, this essay has already pulled from a number of resources to *comment* on the issue of plagiarism. Additionally, citing lines from a book in a professional review—with page numbers noted—in order to critique the author’s point of view falls under the area of *criticism*.

On the other hand, there is the issue of “parody,” where one work is mocking or imitating another work in a comical. For example, *Saturday Night Live* has been in the business of parody for over forty years, pulling materials that are immediate, such as the famous 1976 parody of the *60 Minutes* “Point/Counterpoint,” starring Dan Aykroyd and Jane Curtin.<sup>17</sup> The parody is meant to remind the audience of the original, only in a new and humorous way.

What is at stake is whether the user has “infringed” on the original author’s intellectual claim to the material. Has the copyright, the original author’s right to legally disseminate his or her work in whatever manner he or she sees fit, been violated? In short, we have committed “copyright infringement” when we perform or broadcast the work without a prior arrangement, distribute copies of published materials without compensating the author, or align ourselves

---

<sup>13</sup>For example, William H. Willimon, “Borrowed Thoughts on Sermonic Borrowing,” *Christian Ministry* 28 (January-February 1997): 14-16, and Laurie Tiberi, “Borrowing is OK—Lying is Not,” *Christian Ministry* 28 (January-February 1997): 17-18.

<sup>14</sup>For example, see the Autumn 2005 issue of *Encounter*, the faculty journal for the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

<sup>15</sup>Jeffrey Peterson, “Preaching Technique: The Ministry of the Word in a Wired World,” *Christian Studies* 17 (1999), 47-56.

<sup>16</sup>Rick Stim, “What is Fair Use?,” <https://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/what-is-fair-use/>; accessed 13 July 2019. See also, Rick Stim, *Getting Permission: Using and Licensing Copyrighted-Protected Materials Online and Off*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Berkley, CA: Nolo, 2016); and Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi, *Reclaiming Fair Use: How to Put Balance Back in Copyright* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1-15.

<sup>17</sup>See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=c91XUyg9iWM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c91XUyg9iWM); accessed 15 July 2019.

against the original material in a derivative manner without previously informing the original author.<sup>18</sup>

In an example of a work of art, it qualifies as copyright infringement when the preacher does not give the original author credit for the piece of art. She has cited it as directly connected to the Bible story that we were talking about, as if it had been painted in the moment Abraham was about sacrifice Isaac to God. This is not true, of course. However, without the proper citation to Caravaggio—even with a citation on the slide—*she* is taking credit for the work, as if she painted it for the sermon. And then broadcast the sermon on Facebook live to the general public, which displays our wonderful painting? See why this is a problem.

In an example of a video, it qualifies as copyright infringement because, again, when the preacher does not give credit to the original author for the video. Without any other reference, what else is an unsuspecting audience to think than he produced that video himself? YouTube’s filter, however (especially since it is powered by Lord Google), knows better, pulling the plug on your worship service video before anyone gets to see it. The issue here can be resolved in a couple of easy ways. First, by purchasing a broadcast license from CCLI and then culling from their robust catalogue of worship-related videos. Or, by citing the pertinent details of the video in your own video’s description.

### **The Solution for Verbal and Visual Borrowing**

The challenge pertinent to this discussion is the question of being a congregation that is “resource rich” versus one that is “resource poor.” The challenge is that larger congregations have dedicated staff that can put the time in to developing creative audio, video and visual materials for worship and preaching, while smaller congregations simply cannot compete. The larger congregations, whose preachers are often given short sabbaticals or “study breaks” to plan out their preaching months in advance, are then able to plan corroborating worship service with sufficient time, whereas the preacher at the smaller congregation is fortunate to get the song list from the liturgist by Friday afternoon’s bulletin printing.<sup>19</sup>

Lack of staff or time does not justify violating fair use laws. The law is clear on what is considered fair use and what is considered copyright infringement or plagiarism.<sup>20</sup> And yet, there must be this caveat: as social media continues to evolve and develop, the laws pertaining to protecting copyright and privacy and fight against copyright infringement and plagiarism will have a sense of fluidity to them in the coming years. For example, on the day that this paper was finished the *New York Times* reported that Google and YouTube have agreed to pay a \$170

---

<sup>18</sup>“Copyright Infringement,” [www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/copyright-infringement](http://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/copyright-infringement); accessed 16 April 2019.

<sup>19</sup>For more on this discussion of creative teams and the worship arts, see Jennifer Allen Craft, *Placemaking and the Art: Cultivating the Christian Life*, Studies in Theology and the Arts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue*, Engaging Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), Kevin J. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Service: Creating a Taste of Heaven on Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), and especially Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Taking Flight with Creativity: Worship Design Teams that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

<sup>20</sup>If you would like to delve deeper into the legality of copyright infringement and plagiarism in a digital world, I would encourage you to review the [Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998](#) (US) and/or the [Digital Economy Act of 2010](#) (UK).

million fine related to privacy and copyright violations.<sup>21</sup> Diligence must be the watchword in our emerging digital landscape.

As was mentioned above, integrity must rule all of our homiletic endeavors, including how and why we source images, audio files or videos. But how can “resource poor” congregations engage in the creative process without resorting to plagiarism or copyright infringement? First, develop your own videos. It is amazing what one can do with a smartphone these days. Shoot a “person on the street” video by asking others questions related to the content of the sermon and then upload the video to the church’s Vimeo account. Second, use your own pictures. Again, smartphones are a wonderful tool, especially if you use a tool like Evernote. Snap the picture, save it to an Evernote file, and then download it later into the sermon PowerPoint or Keynote presentation. Third, develop your own visuals, what I call “anchor images.”<sup>22</sup> Using a platform like Canva or Adobe Spark, develop an image that can be used with all visual, printed and digital worship products (i.e., the bulletin, website or Instagram account).

If all else fails, and you resort to using another’s material, remember to cite your sources. Here are a couple of suggestions on how to practice authenticity and integrity: First, it can be as simple as citing the work in your bulletin, sermon worksheet or lesson notes. For example, the week that I wrote this essay, I prepared a sermon from Psalm 48 about the dedication the ancient Jewish people had to Jerusalem and the dedication that modern Christians should have for the local church. At the end of the sermon, I talked about four qualities that we should possess. On the bulletin, I listed the four qualities and also cited the sources that I had pulled the qualities from, noting author, book title and the year the book was published.

Second, you can create a digital image file of your sermon notes for distribution on social media (including being uploaded to the description for your sermon video file). For example, my friend Tracy Tooley is the lead minister for reGeneration Church in Huntington, West Virginia. His social media coordinator, Lynsey Bowe, posts his sermon notes each week by posting a screenshot of the template that she developed in Pages and then converting that screenshot to a PDF. The screenshot is then uploaded to Instagram and Facebook. The images contain black boxes with sermon content in each of them, content such as scriptures used, sermon ideas *and* citations referenced. Both of these approaches provide appropriate citation of the resources used and also provide a way for a listener to follow up on the material.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Now the question comes as what to do with all of this? In the article reference above, Ed Stetzer offers a pledge that he recommends preachers take in order to be more authentic in their preaching. The pledge focuses on using only scripture to base the sermon on, commentaries only as supporting—not supplanting—material, and to accurately communicate God’s word.<sup>23</sup> In addition to that pledge, I would like to ask you to commit yourself to the following pledge for

---

<sup>21</sup>Natasha Singer and Kate Conger, “Regulators Fine Google \$170 Million for Violating Children’s Privacy on YouTube,” [www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/technology/google-youtube-fine-ftc.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/technology/google-youtube-fine-ftc.html) , accessed 4 September 2019.

<sup>22</sup>Rob O’Lynn, “DIY Sermon Graphics,” 2018 Preaching Roundtable, Kentucky Christian University, Grayson, Kentucky; 9 October 2018.

<sup>23</sup>Stetzer, “Preaching, Plagiarism, and Sermon Central.”

digital citizenship. It covers more than borrowing another's sermon. It includes appropriate use of illustrative materials, such as videos, visual images and published resources.

- I pledge to not to borrow another's message without properly citing the original preacher and asking that preacher's permission to use the sermon (if possible).
- I pledge to not broadcast another's video without properly citing the video's publication information, either in print or in broadcast.
- I pledge to not broadcast another's song without properly citing the song's publication information, either in print or in broadcast.
- I pledge to not project an image on the screen—*especially if the sermon or service will be broadcast*—without properly citing the image, to the best of my ability, on my slide.
- I pledge to not borrow a piece of sermon or worship art, such as an Adobe Spark or Canva image, without asking permission from the image's creator.
- I pledge to not quote a print resource, such as a book, journal article or blog, without citing, at minimum, the author, resource and, if relevant, page number on my slide, in the bulletin or on a lesson worksheet.

# Rhetoric

Convener: Joseph Evans

**OF HANDMAIDS, MEDIATRIXES AND MOTHERS:  
THE IDEALIZED FEMININE AND RHETORICS OF WHITENESS**

**Jerusha Matsen Neal, Assistant Professor of Homiletics  
Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC, <https://divinity.duke.edu/>  
Copyright © 2019 Jerusha Matsen Neal**

*“After breaking a few stained-glass ceilings, I am tempted to center myself  
as savior, heroine, and victim simultaneously...”*

a white ordained woman, discussing the dangers of patriarchal racism

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines how the long-standing trope of “proper rhetoric” as “proper woman” supports the agenda of “whiteness” in pulpit performance. Drawing on Krista Ratcliffe’s description of “whiteness” as practices that work for stasis by denying or resisting difference, the paper notes how rhetorical training has worked to control, objectify and perpetuate cultural lineage through pulpit speech. Turning toward the contemporary homiletic classroom, the paper asks if rhetorical training can subvert agendas of patriarchal racism or if the two are inextricably linked. The question is particularly potent for white, female preachers called to “proper” proclamation. Can they resist the temptation of Western rhetoric’s “proper woman” and her complicity with “whiteness?” The paper lifts up three tactics of resistance suggested by feminist rhetoricians of color. These tactics (“listening,” “speaking the unspeakable,” and “piece-making”) are then located in the work of three contemporary homileticians.

**I. The Paradox of the “Handless Maiden:” A Parable**

There is a gruesome, European folktale of a young woman who loses her hands to the Devil. Her starving father makes a blind trade with a disguised Lucifer: prosperity in exchange for whatever stands behind his barn. He thinks he is giving away an apple tree, but on this day, his daughter stands beneath its boughs. The father begins an urgent negotiation over her fate. The Devil does not carry all the cards. Apparently, the young woman’s skin must be caked with dirt in order for the Devil to touch her – and her tears keep falling onto her hands, washing them “pure white and clean.” In a rage, the Devil forces the father to cut off his daughter’s hands with an ax, but her tears keep falling, cleaning the stumps of her arms. Frustrated, the Devil storms away. The maiden’s tears and white skin have protected her from the worst consequences of her father’s betrayal. But they have also left her maimed. Handless, she leaves her home, depending on wild fruit trees to feed her.<sup>1</sup>

The folktale is a Jephthah-like story of patriarchal violence but, in a world where “pure” and “white” are adjectives twisted by the logic of white supremacy, it also becomes a parable about privilege. It describes the terrifying danger facing women whose future is up for barter. It also suggests that the danger is far greater for those whose tears do not translate into

---

<sup>1</sup> There are many versions of this story found across Middle and Eastern Europe, sometimes called “The Handless Maiden” or “Silver Hands” This version is a compilation found in Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 389-394. I follow Estés’s telling, but not her interpretation.

“whiteness.” Indeed, it narrates a deep truth about what it means to be a white woman living in the intersections of patriarchal racism. It names tears and whiteness as strategies of survival.

For certain white women in my classroom, being denied their calls to preach by their denominations is not unlike having their hands removed. It is, perhaps, the first time their strategies for survival – their wells of emotion, their white skin, their ability to follow the rules of their fathers – could not save them from the Devil’s maiming. Their eyes are haunted and their movements skittish. The rules and persons they thought would keep them safe have proved untrustworthy. And yet, their wounds are a sign of privilege as well as trauma, for their bodies are visible. They have not disappeared into some unseen underworld; they sit in a divinity school classroom. They have left their father’s home but have managed to save their skin.

I’m grateful for those survivals.

There are other haunted eyes in these homiletic classrooms. There are the eyes of black women and men who are tired of the “ingenuities”<sup>2</sup> required in the predominately white halls of my institution. There are transgender eyes and undocumented eyes. There are eyes of students of every ethnicity, hungry because their school bills have eaten away their food budgets. The Devil is busy in all sorts of intersectional ways. But in this essay, I talk about the eyes of handless maidens – particularly white, handless maidens – not because their eyes matter more, but because such women can themselves become dangerous. In searching for lost hands of privilege, a woman can play into the hands of a Devil she thought she had escaped.

## II. “Proper Rhetoric,” “Proper Women” and Whiteness

In her work on the connections in Western thought between rhetoric’s persuasive power and the female body, Jane Sutton traces of the metaphor of “proper rhetoric” and “proper woman” from Ancient Greece through the Enlightenment. She compares the tradition’s fear and fascination with rhetorical persuasion to its fierce categorization of the gendered body.<sup>3</sup> Rhetoric could be “wifely” or “whorish,” submissive and hardworking or overly adorned and promiscuous.<sup>4</sup> Women’s bodies might not have been considered appropriate vessels for public speaking,<sup>5</sup> but as a trope, they haunt the rhetorical tradition. Calvin speaks of rhetoric as the

---

<sup>2</sup> Lisa L. Thompson describes “ingenuity” as a posture engaged by “outsider” preachers – and particularly African American women – to claim authority, connection and voice in the exclusionary currents of congregational power structures, in *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Sutton, “The Taming of the Polos/Polis: Rhetoric as an Achievement Without Women,” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, eds. John Louis Lucaites, Celeste Michelle Condit and Sally Caudill (New York: the Guilford Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Alan of Lille praises rhetoric that avoids the “excessive coloration and adornment” that so disgusted Tertullian in the garments of Christian women. Claire Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures: Preaching, Performance and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>5</sup> Beverly Mayne Kienzle describes the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century polemics which describe women preachers as “Jezebels,” in “The Prostitute Preacher: Patterns of Polemic against Medieval Waldensian Women Preachers,” *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, eds. Kienzle and Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 99-113.

“handmaid” of the Word.<sup>6</sup> Augustine uses treatises on female virginity and inappropriate cosmetic adornment to illumine his discussion of rhetorical style.<sup>7</sup> Socrates describes rhetoric as an “untamed filly” in Plato’s *Gorgias*.<sup>8</sup> Proper women, like proper speech, are tamed, submissive to reason, beautiful – but not sexual. And it is no surprise that proper women are also aligned with structures of power. They are not “Other” women. When Dionysius of Halicarnassus critiques the rhetoric of his day as emerging from “some Asiatic deathhole,” he maps categories of gender and sexual promiscuity onto categories of ethnicity. He describes good rhetoric as the Athenian wife and false rhetoric as an “Amazonian erotic woman.”<sup>9</sup>

Of course, actual women were never intended to embody either rhetorical category. Instead, proper rhetorical practices were mapped onto female tropes which could then be properly embodied by men. Men played the part of the handmaid that lived in “subjection to the Word”<sup>10</sup> while wielding “hidden power which leaves nothing in man untouched.”<sup>11</sup> Men offered their immaculate flesh to the preaching labor, believing that “perfectly pure, obedient humanity might utter divinity... a transparent medium.”<sup>12</sup> Men embodied the grammar of the Church’s mother-tongue, drawing on patriarchal tropes of the feminine ideal to protect their theological traditions.

The dangers of the archetypal Feminine (with a capital “F”) are well known to feminist thinkers. Such idealizations have been co-opted by patriarchal theologies and political agendas for centuries, excluding and regulating the bodies of actual women.<sup>13</sup> My own work has emphasized the theological dangers of such idealizations in the homiletic tradition, arguing that they outsource the work of the Spirit to human preachers – whether male or female – who can never live up to such pure, powerful, submissive, job descriptions.<sup>14</sup> But feminist rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe’s work on “whiteness” in the rhetorical tradition gives another reason for

---

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor. 1:17-18, Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948), 75.

<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 134-7.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, tr. W. C. Helmbold (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), 461-481.

<sup>9</sup> Sutton, 106. Quoting Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On the Ancient Orators*, in *The Critical Essays*, vol. 1, trans. S. Usher (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 5-15.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Corinthians*, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 4:11-13, Jean Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1949), 102.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Brooks, “Episcopal Convention Sermon,” St. Paul’s Church, Boston, May 14, 1879. Quoted in Alexander Allen, *The Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks*, vol. 2. (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1900), 246.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Coakley, for example, addresses the romantic feminism Leonardo Boff, arguing that the “feminine ‘other’” that he lauds is a “male construct” and a “thinly disguised reorientation of traditional gender stereotypes,” in “Mariology and ‘Romantic Feminism,’” *Women’s Voices: Essays in Contemporary Feminist Theology*, ed. Teresa Elwes (New York: Marshal Pickering Publishers, 1992), 106-110.

<sup>14</sup> Jerusha Matsen Neal, *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit and the Body of the Word*, unpublished dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, March, 2014. My argument is indebted to Elizabeth’s Johnson’s work in *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003) who describes her Catholic tradition’s outsourcing of the Spirit’s work to Mary, Jesus’ mother, 89.

concern. Ratcliffe's analysis reveals a similar functionality undergirding "whiteness" and the trope of the feminine ideal in the rhetorical tradition.

In her article "Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness and Rhetoric," Ratcliffe draws on Ruth Frankenberg's definition of "whiteness" as a set of practices that signify privilege and "foster stasis by resisting and denying differences."<sup>15</sup> Ratcliffe, a white academic, then describes the ways that she sees "whiteness" impacting practices of rhetoric in the contemporary moment and in her composition classroom. She posits that "whiteness," in its desire for stasis, works to circumscribe rhetorical agency across four sites: "discursive, authorial, readerly and cultural."<sup>16</sup> 1.) "Whiteness" works to limit discursive agency in flattening and stabilizing a text's meaning, denying language play, and ignoring the relationality of binary categories (like whiteness and blackness) in textual interpretation. 2.) "Whiteness" works to limit authorial agency by reducing concepts of "ethos" to individual ethical appeal. In celebrating the successful rhetor as an autonomous hero or heroine, for example, the cultural construction of "ethos" remains unexamined. 3.) "Whiteness" works to limit readerly agency in its relegation of readers to secondary importance in the making of meaning. 4.) And "whiteness" limits cultural agency by denying the influence of cultural structures on everyday life, speech and performance. "In sum," she states, "whiteness (in its desire for stasis) celebrates discursive agency in which language is made literal, an authorial agency in which ethos is reduced to individualism, a readerly agency in which readers are relegated to secondary importance in the construction of meanings, and a cultural agency in which the influence of cultural structures on identity are occluded."<sup>17</sup>

Ratcliffe's description of rhetorical "whiteness" underscores the tradition's fascination with rhetoric that can be controlled, enclosed, objectified and used for the perpetuation of a lineage. As such, the rhetorical tradition's fascination with the "proper woman" as a guide for "proper rhetoric" intersects and reinforces the impacts of "whiteness" on discursive/authorial/readerly/cultural agency. The question is less about origins, and more about usage: both "whiteness" and the "proper woman" trope have worked to promote stasis in the tradition. A handful of examples suffice. In submission to the text's plain meaning, handmaid rhetoric has limited the text's generative agency.<sup>18</sup> In a desire to persuade, queen rhetoric has bent the

---

<sup>15</sup> Krista Ratcliffe, "Eavesdropping as a Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric," *JAC*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2000): 87-119, quoting Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 236-7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-111

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Carter Florence speaks of the violence done against biblical texts through reductive explanation in, "Put Away Your Sword! Taking the Torture out of the Sermon" in *What's the Matter With Preaching Today*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville: WJK Press, 2004). "Explaining" the text propositionally relates to Platonic understandings of "rhetoric is the mere handmaid of right reason," William Wainwright, *Reason, Revelation and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 87.

listener to her will.<sup>19</sup> In its celebration of purity, immaculate rhetoric has insisted it can “fade away.”<sup>20</sup> In its attempt to transcend divides, mediatrix rhetoric has tried to speak for all.<sup>21</sup> And in its desire to embody ecclesial tradition (note the singularity of the noun), mother rhetoric has passed down the church’s mother-tongue, taming the tongues of outsiders.<sup>22</sup> In each case, difference is denied or resisted.

The problem with practices that grow from such idealizations is that they become rigid and cold to the touch. They lose their relationality and vulnerability. They maintain stasis, rather than growth. And if such idealizations are rooted in the desire to protect privilege, stasis is deadly. Not only do such idealizations continue to amputate difference across lines of gender, race, sexual orientation, class, nationality and theological conviction, they also project the tradition’s fears onto the traditions and bodies of others, fueling new idealizations as attempts to resist negative representation. Chanequa Walker-Barnes understands the “StrongBlackWoman” archetype as a “racialized version of the cult of true womanhood – a White, middle-class ideal characterized by piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness.”<sup>23</sup> Walker-Barnes makes plain the heavy toll the “StrongBlackWoman” has had on the mental, physical and spiritual health of black women, despite its attempt to reject racist caricatures.

In the “Handless Maiden” folktale, a prince finds the maiden in a forest. He falls in love and gives the woman a wedding gift: two silver hands. His gift is meant to make up for her loss. It is meant to show care and honor. It is a precious gift, meant to mirror the hands that have been removed. But of course, silver hands are different from real hands. My fear for the students in my classes – particularly those who receive the silver hands of “proper wifely rhetoric” along with their stoles – is that these silver hands will become the source of their confidence, security

---

<sup>19</sup> The humanists of the Renaissance wanted rhetoric crowned as “queen of the liberal arts” with a renewed emphasis on rhetoric’s transformative power. Wayne Rebhorn, *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 10. Lucy Atkinson Rose have cautioned that placing the transformation of the congregation into the preacher’s job description is “potentially dangerous,” placing too much control in the preacher’s hands, in *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Pulpit* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1997), 133.

<sup>20</sup> Phillips Brooks’s desire to be “transparent medium” is linked to his belief in the possibility of “perfectly pure obedient humanity,” “Episcopal Convention Sermon.” This connection between holiness and “fading away leads to underdeveloped theologies of personal sanctification and social holiness that imagine themselves “color-blind.”

<sup>21</sup> Alison Weir describes how, in the Western tradition, women are forced to “*be* mediation, to unify human and divine law, individual and community, the male self with himself and the universal.” Weir argues that the flesh and blood female disappears in this “mediation of differences into unity,” Alison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 97. White women’s hegemonic descriptions of “women’s experience” show the erasure that flows from this mediatrix role. Not only does the particularity of white women disappear. The particularities of women who do not speak from the privilege of whiteness also disappears. Jacquelyn Grant’s critique of white feminism continues to have contemporary relevance, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Sally A. Brown discusses the hegemonic danger of postliberal homiletic projects that emphasize the singularity of “story” and “tradition” in passing down communal grammar, “Exploring the Text-Practice Interface: Acquiring the Virtue of Hermeneutical Modest,” *Theology Today* 66, no. 3 (October 1, 2009): 286-7. Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” describes the painful imposition of communal grammar on identity, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014). Walker-Barnes description of the cult of true womanhood comes from Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, vo. 18, no. 2, Part 1, (Summer 1966): 151-174.

and authority. As such, these practices of stasis and privilege (i.e. practices of “whiteness”) will become idols.

### III. Resisting Silver Hands

The lure of silver hands can be particularly potent for women who have experienced the violence of “whiteness” but can still draw on its power. White women who pursue a call to ministry no longer satisfy the criteria the “cult of true womanhood,” but they have privilege left to wield and privilege left to lose. This can make the silver hands a difficult gift to turn down, no matter how heavy they hang on one’s wrists. Women of color have observed this complicity as a recurring motif in the history of white feminism. Audre Lorde’s famous response, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”<sup>24</sup> was made at a conference where the experiences of white, straight women academics “resisted and denied differences.”<sup>25</sup>

But even for white women who desire a better way, the question of how to avoid the “silver hands” of static, privileged practices is a difficult one. If practices that deny difference and promote stasis are considered “proper rhetoric,” how else does a woman called to the work of holy wordsmithing fulfill her role? Can she, in good conscience, do this work at all? It is a dilemma feminist rhetoricians have been asking in the secular academy for more than fifty years. For Sutton, “It means I write with an eraser.”<sup>26</sup>

The crisis is especially acute for me, a white female homiletician, because the teaching of rhetorical practices is in my job description. One does not need to scratch deeply beneath the surface of homiletic rhetorical history to find unholy ghosts. In *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination*, Gary Macy frames the preaching reforms of the late Middle Ages as responses to the fear that the exclusivity of the male priesthood was being threatened.<sup>27</sup> Claire Waters agrees, arguing that the influx of preaching handbooks at the time reflected anxiety around decentralization in pulpit authorization and women preachers who were exceeding many of their male counterparts in dynamism.<sup>28</sup> It is enough to give a homiletician pause. The first flurry of homiletic handbooks in church history served to centralize ecclesial power and exclude women and lay persons from the preaching task. And there are many similar examples. Rhetorical practices that protected privilege grew out of the explicit racism in elocutionary training in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States<sup>29</sup> – or out of colonial agendas that shaped the language of theological

---

<sup>24</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113. Stephanie Jones-Rogers maps the deep roots of white women’s complicity with patriarchal racism in the United States in, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Frankenberg, 236-7.

<sup>26</sup> Sutton, 121.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 125.

<sup>28</sup> Waters, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Dwight Conquergood notes that elocutionary training and minstrel shows draw on similar “protocols of taste, civility and gentility,” marking racialized “others.” “Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and Other Figures of Speech,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4 (October 2000): 326.

education and the translation of scripture around the world.<sup>30</sup> *What does this mean for my classroom?* How do I teach rhetoric without reducing that work to handing over “silver hands” (i.e. practices that resist or deny difference)?

The following tactics of resistance<sup>31</sup> have been proposed by secular rhetoricians who are also women of color. After describing each tactic, I point to contemporary homileticians who employ similar techniques to subvert “whiteness” in their classrooms and in the pulpit:

A. *Jacqueline Jones Royster and the Tactic of “Listening”*

Revising her chair’s address to the 1995 CCCC meeting, Jacqueline Jones Royster’s classic article “When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own,” recounts three vignettes in which her contributions and particularity as an African-American female rhetorician were ignored. Drawing on this personal testimony, Jones Royster notes how “listening” has been undervalued in the rhetorical tradition. For Jones Royster, relation and appropriate action are listening’s goal, not submission and silence. She states, “The goal is not ‘You talk, I talk.’ The goal is better practices so that we can exchange perspectives, negotiate meaning...with the intent of being in a good position to cooperate.”<sup>32</sup> Developing an “afrofeminist”<sup>33</sup> methodology for studying rhetorical history, Jones Royster teases out the contours and scope of deep, relational “listening.”<sup>34</sup> Describing the work of “critical imagination,” “strategic contemplation,” “social circulation” and a “globalizing point of view,” Jones Royster repurposes “listening” to animate the agencies of readers, texts, cultures and communities. Her description of “strategic contemplation” serves as an example. Combining both scholarly inquiry with “an inward journey” that notices how researchers “process, imagine and work with materials,” strategic contemplation attempts to “reclaim a genre of research and scholarship traditionally associated with processes of mediation, introspection and reflection.”<sup>35</sup>

Donyelle McCray’s homiletic work embodies practices of deep listening, particularly in regard to traditions that have not “counted” as preaching. Her attentiveness is seen in her analysis of Harriet Power’s quilting as sermonic speech<sup>36</sup> or the intercession of church mothers

---

<sup>30</sup> Mosese Ma’ilo discusses colonial centralization of power through bible translation/interpretation efforts, *Bible-ing My Samoan: Native Languages and the Politics of Bible Translation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, (Apia, Samoa: Puila Publications, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Ratcliffe’s naming of “many tactics” being used by feminist rhetoric to counter “whiteness” is a good starting place for reflection, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Jacqueline Jones Royster, “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 47, no. 1 (Feb. 1996): 38.

<sup>33</sup> Jacqueline Jones Royster, *Traces of a Stream: Literary and Social Change among African-American Women*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 279.

<sup>34</sup> Jones Royster’s fullest articulation of her method can be found in Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Royster and Kirsch, 84-5.

<sup>36</sup> Donyelle McCray, “Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers,” *Religions* vol. 9, iss. 2 (2018):46.

as pastoral labor.<sup>37</sup> Her honoring of strategic contemplation as a rhetorical practice, however, might be best exemplified in her upcoming book, *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher*.<sup>38</sup> Reframing Julian's contemplation as rhetorical action reanimates silent corners of the homiletic tradition, past and present. It refuses to let speech obfuscate bodies, insisting that bodies speak. In an early paper on the subject, McCray speaks of the relationality of embodied rhetorical labor. "There is no objectivity... Our broken bodies bind us to Christ and to one another and are full participants in the mystery and miracle of call."<sup>39</sup> This is not listening in which one's body fades away. It is listening that preaches.

### B. Shirley Wilson Logan and the Tactic of "Speaking the Unspeakable"

As an African-American female professor who teaches rhetoric in predominately white classrooms, Shirley Wilson Logan describes the difficulty of discussing racism with white students. A lifetime of instruction has convinced her of the truth of bell hook's affirmation that "all knowledge is forged in conflict."<sup>40</sup> She has also seen how her presence in the classroom leads white students to "avoid topics that are controversial. It becomes safe to discuss only the 'them' not represented in the classroom."<sup>41</sup> The challenge for Logan is to find ways for students to "speak the unspeakable,"<sup>42</sup> to talk about the issues surrounding race, class and gender so that students can analyze the assumptions that undergird their behaviors. Her pressing of the conversation brings differences within the student body into view, as well as differences in how cultural scripts shape rhetorical practice. In both of these ways, she counters the resistance and denial of difference that marks "whiteness."

In her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Toni Morrison describes the danger of speaking the unspeakable if one's goal is to tame or domesticate the trauma of racism as an issue. She notes the violence that lies beneath attempts to "monumentalize," "sum up," or "pin down" the depths of "slavery, genocide or war."<sup>43</sup> But the speaking that Logan describes is not for the purposes of coercion or domestication. It is similar to Morrison's description of reaching out one's hands to feel the hands of the listener.<sup>44</sup> The point is not harmony or conflict in its own right. The point is encounter and critical reflexivity.

---

<sup>37</sup> Donyelle McCray, "Mothering Souls: A Vocation of Intercession," *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 98. Iss. 2 (Spring 2016): 285-301.

<sup>38</sup> Donyelle McCray, *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, forthcoming October 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Donyelle McCray, "When Illness Calls: Insights from Julian of Norwich's Call to Frailty," paper presented at the 2010 Academy of Homiletics, Atlanta, GA.

<sup>40</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 31.

<sup>41</sup> Shirley Wilson Logan, "'When and Where I Enter': Race, Gender and Composition Studies," *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*, ed. Jarratt and Worsham, (New York: MLA Publishing, 1998), 55.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 26.

Lis Valle's creative work in postcolonial liturgy is a beginning attempt to imagine rhetorical action that "speaks the unspeakable" through worship practices of tension, imagination and connectedness.<sup>45</sup> While Valle refuses to create rigid binaries between colonized and colonizer, she is committed to bringing these categories and their communal impact into view. She draws on the pre-Columbian religion of the Taínos to create a Christian liturgy that makes space for complementary duality and encounter. This duality, performed in time, is not held in stasis. Interruption and tension, including spoken testimonies describing the impact of imperial violence and colonization, are the first step toward connection. It is worth noting that Valle shares Morrison's reticence about language's ability to sum up such pain or evoke meaningful hope. She quotes Walter Brueggemann's description of the preacher's goal as, "not a grand scheme or a coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations."<sup>46</sup> Her attention to movement, ritual and celebration provide a depth of congregational resources to engage that work.

### C. *Ellen Gil-Gomez and the Tactic of "Piece-Making"*<sup>47</sup>

Ellen Gil-Gomez isn't sure what to make of "practices" – feminist or otherwise. In her response to those attempting to construct feminist practices for the composition classroom, she notes the stress that the discussion of "practices" produces in her as a mestiza writer. In one way, the root of her discontent is related to the question that haunts my homiletic instruction: Is it possible to create a practice that liberates the classroom from its patriarchal roots? But for Gil-Gomez, the problem is greater than acknowledging that classrooms are patriarchal spaces. She fears that practices themselves produce false unities and static traditions. They ignore the "fragmentation" she understands as central to her identity – and indeed, central to what it means to be alive and human.<sup>48</sup> "Questioning the meaning and content of a practice *is* a feminist practice," she states.<sup>49</sup> Rather than standing in "the privileged status of truth-tellers . . . , we must be willing to reveal our pieces."<sup>50</sup>

Lisa Thompson's *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* speaks from the particularity of a black female preacher's experience. Her "pieces" are different than Gil-Gomez's. And yet, her struggle with the stability of communal practices that resist difference resonates with Gil-Gomez's description. Thompson describes an encounter with a woman who admits to not liking

---

<sup>45</sup> Lis Valle, "Toward Postcolonial Liturgical Preaching: Drawing on the Pre-Columbian Caribbean Religion of the Taínos," *Homiletic*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2015), <http://vurj.vanderbilt.edu/index.php/homiletic/article/view/4119>, accessed, Sept. 20, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and the Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993), 18. Valle draws on Michael Jagessar and Stephen Burns's use of Brueggemann in "Fragments of a Postcolonial Perspective on Christian Worship," *Worship* 80, no. 5 (September 1, 2006): 430.

<sup>47</sup> Ellen Gil-Gomez, "The Practice of Piece-Making: Subject Positions in the Classroom," *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*, eds. Jarratt and Worsham (New York: MLA Publishing, 1998), Gomez defines piece-making as "nurturing my fragments and accepting the conflicts they raise inside me," 204.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

woman preachers. “But I like you,” the woman continues, “You don’t sound like a man, but you don’t sound like a woman either.”<sup>51</sup> Thompson admits to the discomfort this back-handed compliment brings her. She feels caught between her commitment to a community and the subject positions into which she is pressed by that community’s expectations. “Doing or not doing whatever some think they mean by ‘black preaching’ or ‘women’s preaching’ is risky business.”<sup>52</sup> The “ingenuity” described by Thompson is fluid, committed and vulnerable work. It requires embodied engagement and prayerful negotiation of one’s role and one’s voice. It requires a coming to peace with one’s “pieces.”

For Thompson, the work is also theological. It refuses to let static practices and silver hands substitute for the disruptive presence of the risen Jesus. When communal expectations become synonymous with a preacher’s understanding of her role, “we potentially close off...the possibility of sacred in-breaking through the practice of preaching itself.”<sup>53</sup> For Thompson and Gil-Gomez, something more than new practices are called for to counter the “whiteness” of rhetoric’s “proper woman.” Provisionality, vulnerability and critical engagement are needed. Practices of flesh, moving in time and pieced together in relationship, are required.

#### **IV. Hands of Flesh**

The folktale has a hopeful arc, for all its sorrow. The maiden’s hands grow back. She leaves the palace with her silver hands in a box, and in the forest, her hands begin to grow. They appear first as a baby’s hands, then as a young girl’s hands, until miraculously, they become the hands of a woman. What ties together the tactics of these female rhetoricians is their commitment to the embodied relationality of language and their rejection of linguistic stasis. They desire hands of flesh for their students, even when those hands are vulnerable to the scarring of a cruel world.

The problem with the idealized Feminine has never been the rhetorical qualities that it celebrates. Power, submission, piety and modesty are not dangerous, in and of themselves. Each can be appropriate in a given context. Neither is the disruption of tradition a universal good. Fijian sociologist Akanisi Tarabe notes the importance of reclaiming traditional practices in her Fijian context as a prophetic stance against Western globalization.<sup>54</sup>

The problem with the “proper woman” trope is her stasis, her lack of human limits and her invulnerability to text, community, and world. Such rigid idealisms create practices requiring amputations. To draw on Frankenburg’s definition, her “whiteness” is the problem. She is locked into a subject position that cannot admit fragmentation and multiplicity. And as such, she locks others into corresponding positions, restricting agency, encounter and learning. Her flesh becomes statuesque or shadowy, a divinized “norm” that denies and resists difference – even the

---

<sup>51</sup> Lisa Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>54</sup> Akanisi Tarabe, “White Clothing and the Fabrication of Identity,” *Na Uli: The Davuilevu Journal of Theology and Practice*, issue 1 (August 2015): 28.

difference introduced by Christ's body and Christ's Word through the mediating work of the Spirit.

The white, female pastor quoted in this paper's epigraph describes the temptation to center herself as "savior, victim and heroine" in her ministry. But "that is not the space I'm called to as a white woman," she continues. "The work is in the claiming of radical honesty, in the de-centering of white womxn, in the checking of my selfishness...in the ridding of ego...so that I may become more real...formed through intersectionality and women that don't look like me."<sup>55</sup> There is a cost to embracing hands of flesh, but there is also joy – the joy of genuine relationship.

Gil-Gomez ends her essay by challenging teachers of rhetoric to "risk our identities" alongside the risks of our students. "We cannot expect our students to challenge the stability of their...ideologies while we simply 'provide'...opportunities to do so."<sup>56</sup> In light of her call, I share a "piece" of myself.

When I was a young mother in my early thirties, I had a dream that I was presiding at the communion table with silver hands. It was a season when I didn't feel "real" in my ministry, and the role of "proper pastor" weighed heavy on my spirit. There were prophetic words I did not speak and questions I did not ask. Complicated fragments of my own identity were swept into corners. In my dream, those silver hands were a necessary grief. I had no idea how to serve at the table without them.

Ten years later, I was at an Anglican monastery at a writing retreat. My final morning, I came to the daily communion service assuming that one of the men who ran the retreat center would preside. I was surprised to find a woman behind the table instead. She was dressed in full priestly regalia, sporting a shock of hair that looked like snow. Her eyes snapped with humor. And when she raised her hands in blessing, I saw that she was missing a hand. There was a piece of thumb and half a palm, but not enough to lift the chalice and paten. A layperson stood beside her. Together they lifted the elements and poured the wine. Together - using one hand each - they lifted the bread and tore it in two. She showed us her "pieces" - dependent, unafraid and real. And the fragments were re-membered as flesh.

---

<sup>55</sup> Much gratitude to Rev. Molly Brummett Wudel for her willingness to share these reflections, written in response to an African-American woman's invitation for white women to share their journey of healing from "whiteness."

<sup>56</sup> Gil-Gomez, 204.

# Theology of Preaching

Conveners: Deborah Organ and Susan McGurgan

**PREACHING TO THE BAPTIZED, REVISTED**  
**Richard L. Eslinger**  
**Professor Emeritus of Worship and Homiletics**  
**United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio [united.edu](http://united.edu)**  
**Copyright © 2019 Richard L. Eslinger**

ABSTRACT: “Preaching to the Baptized, Revisited” begins by contrasting William H. Willimon’s 1992 description of the assembly’s self-conscious and detailed awareness of being or becoming the baptized, with those who are about to be baptized with our church situation some thirty-seven years later. Exploring the New Testament image of baptism as forgiveness of sins, the paper makes the case that North American Christians live within constructs of sin and evil which is either embedded in individualism or, with Edward Farley, a “social-ism” in which institutions, political and social structures are the sole habitus of such corruption. The essay then turns to a survey of several rites of renunciation within recent, reformed baptismal liturgies. It is noted that these renunciations reflect a far deeper, more biblical construal of sin and evil than the polar motifs of Farley’s analysis. Finally, some homiletical implications are proposed for the use of the renunciations in preaching.

In 1992, William H. Willimon wrote a popular level book, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*.<sup>1</sup> His goal was direct:

*What difference does it make to our preaching that all of us there are either preparing for baptism or else trying to figure out what happened when we were baptized?<sup>2</sup>*

But that was in 1992, a year before Bill Clinton assumed the presidency. Now, American Christianity is in a much different place and our more post-Christian context invites a new visit to the theology and praxis of preaching to the baptized. Of course, the first thing that pops to mind is that there are fewer of the baptized and about to be baptized in the churches on Sunday morning; the “all of us here” has suffered some serious shrinkage. (Interestingly, the rapid blossoming of the “nones” religious movement began just as Dr. Willimon was writing this book.<sup>3</sup>) A further, less discussed factor in the shifts in American religious and non-religious belief and practice is that an increasing percentage of those who have joined in the Sunday assembly for worship have not formally become part of the official membership of that church and its communion. Whether driven by an acquiescence to these shifts or by more intentional

---

<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> The Pew Research Center reports that the group that has experienced the greatest gains over the last two decades is that of the “religiously unaffiliated” (currently at about 23% of American adults and growing). Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (accessed August 21, 2019) <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

strategies to cut losses, the approach of many contemporary worship churches has been to refocus the Sunday “celebration” to appeal to seekers rather than the baptized. Here, we have now turned full-circle from the Willimon assertion. The worship and preaching are specifically *not* to assist worshippers in figuring out “what happened at their baptism.”

Nevertheless, for most (formerly) mainline churches and Catholic parishes, many of the worshipers remain among the baptized and the prayer for seekers present to the Sunday liturgy is that their budding faith will lead them through the catechumenate to the waters of baptism. Those called to preach will therefore be more alert in their homilies to the baptism identity of their listeners and explore with care the biblical witness to Holy Baptism centered in the specific images of baptism in the New Testament. The baptismal practices in the tradition and in the contemporary reforms of the sacramental rite will also inform their preaching. Preachers need to be deeply involved in this project since the theology and praxis of the sacrament of baptism provides rich resources for preaching throughout the liturgical year. Moreover, there may well be those in the Eucharistic assembly who are “either preparing for baptism or else trying to figure out what happened when we were baptized.”

Any survey of the core baptismal images in the New Testament will be advised to consider the seminal statement of the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (the “Lima Text”).<sup>4</sup> Here, a series of images are presented that comprise the core of the New Testament witness to Holy Baptism. The Lima text summarizes these core images as follows:

Baptism is participation in Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12); a washing away of sin (I Cor. 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a re-clothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (I Peter 3:20–21); an exodus from bondage (I Cor. 10:1–2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27–28; I Cor. 12:13). The images are many but the reality is one.<sup>5</sup>

Maxwell Johnson has offered a more recent analysis of these “diverse, albeit complementary images,” including “forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of our investigation into the theological and homiletical resources of the baptism rites, their words and actions, we will limit ourselves to the core image of baptism as forgiveness of sins.

## BAPTISM AS FORGIVENESS OF SINS.

---

<sup>4</sup> World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1982), 1 (“Baptism,” II., 2).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Maxwell E. Johnson, *Images of Baptism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ashland City, TN: OSL Publications, 2013), 1-2.

The image is widespread throughout the New Testament, heard initially in the Baptist's proclamation in the wilderness: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near" (Matt. 3:2). In much the same words, Jesus pronounces his programmatic kerygma following the Temptations ((Matt. 4:17). At the Ascension, St. Matthew writes, that Jesus' words direct that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations..." (Matt. 24:47). The trajectory from this New Testament image of baptism to the baptismal rites of the early church is followable and compelling. The baptismal Lent structured the journey of the catechumens from darkness to light, from slavery to the world and its "Prince" to the Holy Triune God, and from lives of sin to those of holiness. The particular rites and catechetical lectures provided the steps and stages of the journey. The exorcisms and the anointing during the Forty Days are directed to the ones seeking enlightenment who, according to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "came in with your soul spattered with the mud of your sins and with your intentions soiled."<sup>7</sup> Once enrolled in the catechumenate, those seeking to be enlightened are called upon to renounce Satan, his pomp, works, and his service. This renunciation of the Evil One is that fearsome act by which the catechumens reject as null and void the contract with Satan that has enslaved body and soul and all the affections. This past contract was the foundation for every sin and all evil, and now it is renounced.

Given the rage and wrath of Satan at losing one of those enslaved to him, the rites all now lead to an anointing with sanctified oil, sealing the newly emancipated one from any danger, their being now under the protection of Christ. This war will be protracted until the catechumen is baptized at the Great Vigil, receives the anointing of the Spirit, and shares in the Holy Eucharistic. Between the first exorcism and that profound Night the catechumens are anointed regularly "as athletes of Christ"<sup>8</sup> before being led into the arena. Baptism as forgiveness of sins encounters its "*schwerpunkt*" ("center of gravity" or "concentration point") at these recurring renunciations of Satan and adhering to Christ.

As the churches have recovered this "point of concentration" in their reformed liturgies of the catechumenate and the sacrament of baptism, several issues also now are impinging on the matter. Savvy preachers, for some time now, are aware of the ways in which sin and evil have become psychologized into more acceptable notions such as "dysfunction" and "self-actualization." A more grave and disturbing dynamic in North American Christianity is also at work as it distorts the very notions of sin and evil themselves. Edward Farley provided us with the terminology and characteristics of this relatively new situation. On one hand, the traditional perspective of the culture's individualism has located sin and evil most fully within the individual self. The emergence of a new Evangelicalism carries with it the paradigm of such individualism. Within this context, baptism is emphatically about forgiveness of sins! Yet the focus is on the individual self and her or his own salvation. The individualism of this domain of American piety is reflected in the gospel songs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as in much of "contemporary worship" song—the first-person pronoun dominates in both. On the other hand, Farley identifies an alternate perspective that "the most decisive bearers of human

---

<sup>7</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, "The Procatechesis," ed. E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, rev. and expanded ed. by Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> John Chryostom, "Stravronikita Seies No. 2," *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 46.

reality are not individuals, but groups.”<sup>9</sup> This “social-ism” (not Marxist thought and practice) holds that sin and evil most fully inhabit institutions and their enduring structures. Such social-ism, Farley reflects, is most fully to be found in church bureaucracies, main-line seminaries, and certain intellectual movements.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, during the fifteen years since the publication of *Practicing Gospel*, social-ism has increasingly become the dominant paradigm in main-line Protestant’s institutions including many of its more influential local congregations. It remains, however, that most depictions of human sin “fall on the side of the corrupted individual self or the corrupted structures of society.”<sup>11</sup> The heart of the problem with the image of baptism as forgiveness of sins in our contemporary church situation is that many of the faithful bring polar understandings of the question and, therefore, of their commitments. Even an attempt to put both in the driver’s seat—a project Farley names the “new dualism”<sup>12</sup>—leaves them not “merged” nor “integrated,” but “co-existing” with both remaining abstractions of humans and the human condition.

At this “concentration point” of the renunciation of sin and evil along with words and actions at the adhering to Christ, the reformed rites of baptism provide a rich resource for preaching. Given this new dualism quandary we encounter in our churches, it is critical to discern how the renunciations of sin and evil either transcend this polarity or, on the other hand, perpetuate it. Following, then, is a survey of the words and actions at the renunciations from several sacramental traditions.

#### RENUNCIATIONS IN RECENT BAPTISMAL RITES

**Roman Catholic** – In *The Rite of Baptism for One Child*, the renunciations follow the Blessing and Invocation of God over Baptismal Waters. Two alternate forms are offered, the first asking the parents and godparents the traditional question, “Do you reject Satan and all his works, and all his empty promises?” with its three-fold response of “I do.”<sup>13</sup> The alternate renunciation asks parents and godparents to reject sin (“so as to live in the freedom of God’s children?”), to reject the glamor of evil (“and refuse to be mastered by sin?”), and to reject Satan (“father of sin and prince of darkness?”)<sup>14</sup> In concert with early church rites of baptism, the rejection of Satan by the baptisand or parents and possibly godparents of an infant has far more significance than modern individualism allows. By itself, without preaching and teaching that interprets the “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:12) in league with Satan, this historic renunciation may remain vague. The second alternative in the rite involves two interpretations of the sin that is

---

<sup>9</sup> Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’ Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 242-43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 243

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>13</sup> Roman Catholic Church, “The Rite of Baptism for One Child,” *iBreviary*, accessed September 8, 2019, <http://www.ibreviary.com/m/preghiere.php?tipo=Rito&id=103>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

being rejected. On one hand, that renunciation invites the baptized to “live in freedom as God’s children.” On the other hand, there is a firm rejection of the “glamor of evil” with a refusal “to be mastered by sin.” The rejection of Satan completes the three renunciations. Certainly the “new dualism” with its “selves without a world” (individualism) and “world without selves” (social-ism) is not to be found within these renunciations.

**Episcopal Church, U.S.** – In the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979,<sup>15</sup> the renunciations—spoken by the candidates for baptism or the parent and godparents in the case of children—once more take a three-fold form. After the opening question regarding the rejection of Satan, the second and third questions ask that “the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God” and “all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God” be rejected. Here, it appears that both the deeply personal and worldly dimensions of sin and evil are linked together for teachers and homilists to interpret. Perhaps in the next revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the renunciation that speaks of the evil powers “which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God” could be expanded to add, “and God’s creation.”

**Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.** – The new *Book of Common Worship*, 2018,<sup>16</sup> refrains from mentioning Satan, but seeks to balance the personal (“do you turn from the ways of sin”) and social/communal (and renounce evil and its power in the world?) aspects of sin and evil.<sup>17</sup> Here, the church invites renunciations in ways that are broadly stated. More regional and particular aspects of that which is being renounced depend on teaching and preaching in the congregation. Here, in the *Book of Common Worship*, neither individualism nor social-ism have defined the renunciations.

**United Methodist** – The Holy Baptism text is interesting in that there is one large renunciation encompassing in descending order the cosmic forces of sin and evil, the manifestations of evil in the world, and, finally, a personal repentance of sin:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?<sup>18</sup>

A second question asks the candidate to “accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”<sup>19</sup> The descending order of the elements in the renunciation itself both insures that neither polarity of the new dualism will exercise exclusive dominion regarding the church’s convictions as to theological anthropology. The second question is somewhat of a hybrid, leaning forward to expand on the

---

<sup>15</sup> The Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 302.

<sup>16</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

<sup>18</sup> United Methodist Church, “Baptismal Covenant I,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 34.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

implications of the profession of faith that follows while inviting resistance to “evil, injustice, and oppression,” whatever forms they present. Both elements in the renunciation embrace person, social, and even cosmic dimensions of evil and the rite asks the candidate to resist every form of sin and evil. The motif of resistance, oddly, is not found in any other location within the United Methodist Service of Holy Baptism. The various expressions of sin and evil in sacramental baptismal rites will typically contain in some prayer or blessing the “gospel-alternative” that is among the gifts of grace at Holy Baptism.

## HOMILETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Several approaches to shaping the homily and providing for its imagery are provided as resources within the baptismal rites’ renunciations. These include:

1. Shaping the homiletical plot. On such liturgical occasions as the Baptism of the Lord, a homily could be plotted by way of the United Methodist “ladder” of sin and evil.

David Buttrick’s “mode of praxis”<sup>20</sup> provides the preacher with an excellent way to shape such a sermonic plot. It would serve best to have the first move begin at the bottom of the “ladder” with the personal focus on repentance of sin. Then, the successive moves could track upward, concluding with the “spiritual forces of wickedness.” However, within each move or, alternatively, in an additional move, we must “name grace”<sup>21</sup> and not let the homily dwell primarily on bad news.

2. Serving to image a move. Recent observances of the baptismal rite offer the preacher an opportunity to provide a refreshed image of key elements of the sacrament. By way of imaging the solemn “I do” of parents and godparents as they “refuse to be mastered by sin,” (Catholic rite for infants and children), the homilist can now expand that renunciation to particular expressions of sin and evil and to the entire assembly.
3. Providing the illustration for a move. At the Easter Vigil, a sermon may well trace the progression of the rites of Christian initiation, including the renunciations, to the vision of Christ’s triumphal resurrection as depicted in the Orthodox icon of the Anastasis. The risen Christ strides boldly out of the tomb, lifting up old Adam and Eve from their coffins as saints and the angelic host watch on. Falling into the pit under the risen Lord’s feet are not those who have renounced Satan and all his charms, but the broken chains and locks of their bondage to that defeated “prince of darkness.”

The words and actions of every element in the liturgy of Holy Baptism may provide such opportunities to shape the plot of the homily, to image one of its moves, or to more extensively illustrate the move’s theology and implications for praxis by the congregation. Of course, this

---

<sup>20</sup> David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 405-48.

<sup>21</sup> See: Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

all implies a careful use of these sacramental rites along with patient mystagogy regarding the sacrament.

**REPENTANCE AND GOD’S KINGDOM:  
THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MATTHEW 4:17 FOR LITURGICAL  
PREACHING<sup>1</sup>**

**J. Sergius Halvorsen Ph.D., Asst. Professor, Homiletics and Rhetoric  
St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, Yonkers, svots.edu  
Copyright © 2019 J. Sergius Halvorsen**

**ABSTRACT:** Preaching within the context of the Lord’s Supper is an opportunity for a transformative encounter with Jesus Christ. The summary of Jesus’ preaching in the Gospel of Matthew, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4:17) establishes a theological template for this transformative encounter. This paper explores the concept of repentance in light of a first-century understanding of “kingdom” and “king” that stresses personal relationship and obedience. Additionally, this investigation demonstrates how the gospel subversively uses this understanding of “kingdom” and “king” in Jesus the crucified messiah: the lawgiver who judges from a position of mercy and vulnerability. The investigation concludes with a brief reflection on how this theological basis impacts the persuasive rhetoric of preaching.

From the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry, after he was baptized in the Jordan, he began to preach, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”<sup>2</sup> This elegant summary of Jesus’ preaching establishes the fundamental theological and rhetorical basis for our preaching, as well as establishing the fundamental narrative framework for the structure of our preaching. The phrase begins with the imperative, “repent,” change course, change one’s mind, turn away from sin. It is Jesus’ call to stop following a path of self-indulgence and to follow the commandments of God. The second part of the phrase provides the rationale for why one would make such a radical course correction: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is not that we repent in order to enter the kingdom; it is not that we do something to please God and therefore earn citizenship in God’s kingdom. Rather, the command to repent is based on Jesus’ radical claim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, now, today.

The radical and apparently preposterous claim that the kingdom of heaven is present now, only makes sense within the framework of personal relationship and obedience inherent to kingdom and king in first-century Palestine. In the twenty-first century—and especially for citizens of the US and other countries that are not monarchies—the idea of “kingdom” tends to be more geographical than relational. From the perspective of a US citizen, the United Kingdom or the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are primarily geographic regions: nations with political borders. When Americans think about the U.K. or Saudi Arabia, they rarely consider the person of the British or the Saudi monarch. While the commander in chief function of the American President is monarchical, the constitutional, democratic nature of the government means that the identity of the nation is not specifically tied to a single individual. When Americans hear the word “kingdom,” they are likely to think of Disney’s Magic Kingdom, which is a uniquely American concept of kingdom. The Magic Kingdom is an amusement park with distinct borders, and ports

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a chapter in a forthcoming book with the working title, “Iconic Biblical Preaching.”

<sup>2</sup> Matt 4:17.

of entry where people pay handsomely to enter, but there is no king, and herein lays Disney's money-making genius. One pays to visit the Magic Kingdom in order to *be* the kind of king or queen, prince or princess that is only concerned with his or her personal enjoyment. We do not pay good money to go to the Magic Kingdom so that we can bow down in obedience to a king and do his will, we go there, so that for a brief time, we can feel like we have all the perks of royalty, without any of the burdens. This idea of king and kingdom stands in stark contrast to that of first-century Palestine.

In Jesus' time the existence of the kingdom and the person of the monarch were coextensive. The king's word was law. One sees a similar kingly role in countries that maintain an autocratic monarchy and where national identity is closely linked to the person of the monarch. In these kingdoms, one is a subject of the monarch who has great power but who is also personally responsible for the wellbeing of the kingdom. The security, prosperity and longevity of the royal subject is intimately tied to the monarch: the kingdom is personal, it is the realm of the monarch. This is why the death of the king is announced with the phrase, "The king is dead, long live the king." One wishes long life to the new king while simultaneously announcing the death of the previous king. This uninterrupted monarchy is essential because the existence of the kingdom is predicated on, and defined by, the person of the king who establishes and maintains the kingdom.

In light of this first-century understanding of king and kingdom, Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, does not refer to a unique region with geographic borders. Saying that the kingdom of heaven is at hand is a proclamation that the king of heaven is seated on the throne of judgment, his decrees and commandments are in effect; and our wellbeing is defined by our obedience to the king. The Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church begins with the bold claim, "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages!" In the Liturgy, our task is not to prepare a castle suitable for the Lord to enter into, nor is the divine king gracing us with a visit because we are sufficiently powerful to warrant this attention. Coming before the King of Glory is much better captured in one of the Eastern Orthodox pre-communion prayers,

O Lord my God, I know that I am not worthy nor sufficiently pleasing that You should come under the roof of the house of my soul for it is entirely desolate and fallen in ruin and You will not find in me a place worthy to lay your head. But as you humbled yourself from on high for our sake, so now humble yourself to my lowliness.<sup>3</sup>

In the liturgy, we do not enter the kingdom of heaven as foreign dignitaries, whom the King of Heaven receives with the pomp and circumstance of a formal state visit. If this were the case, we would be acknowledging that we serve another king—a false god—and are only temporary visitors to God's Kingdom. Well-appointed church buildings, liturgical vestments, and "Sunday best" clothing notwithstanding, we do not come before God to impress and negotiate trade or a treaty. Rather, the kingdom of heaven comes to us, we encounter Christ as refugees, widows and orphans, looking for salvation, and the Lord graciously offers us citizenship in God's kingdom. When Christ "comes under the roof of my house" he brings God's hope of new life and salvation, just like a king might come to visit wounded soldiers in the hospital, or people's whose

---

<sup>3</sup> OCA Liturgy Book, 1967. 94.

homes have been devastated by war or natural disaster. But this offer of new life cannot be accepted on our terms. To affirm Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, means that we place ourselves in obedience to our merciful savior. The only way to be saved is to follow the course of treatment prescribed by the physician of souls; the only way to escape destruction is to follow the orders of the one who can guide us to safety. By opening our hearts to God's grace, we are given the opportunity to encounter God by the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is "in all places and fills all things."<sup>4</sup>

Encountering the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is never a casual affair, and always involves a recognition of one's unworthiness to stand before the divine king. When Moses encountered God on the mountain, he was not allowed to see God face to face.<sup>5</sup> When Isaiah encountered God he cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"<sup>6</sup> When Ezekiel encountered God he fell on his face as he heard God's voice.<sup>7</sup> When Simon Peter realized that he was in the presence of God at the miraculous catch of fish, he says to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."<sup>8</sup> When Saul encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus, he was struck blind.<sup>9</sup> According to Scripture, an encounter with God always includes a realization of one's unworthiness to stand in God's presence. Encountering the living God is not an opportunity for cosmic voyeurism, it is not an opportunity for us to sneak a peek underneath God's cassock, nor is it the moment that we get to satisfy our curiosity about the hidden mysteries of the Holy Trinity. One cannot encounter the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as one might dissect an organism in a laboratory or conduct surveillance with a hidden camera. An encounter with God is intensely personal, because it reveals to us just as much—if not more--about ourselves than it does about God. As St. Paul says, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.<sup>10</sup>

The eucharistic liturgy makes possible an encounter with God that is just as, and perhaps even more, intimate and intense than any of the biblical accounts of divine encounter. The faithful gather around the Lord's table to receive the broken body and spilled blood of the Crucified Messiah, to eat his flesh and drink his blood, that we may abide in him and he in us.<sup>11</sup> While the eucharistic elements are bread and wine, the stuff of basic human nourishment, Jesus' crucifixion is unequivocally central for this divine encounter, because we partake of the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus: for the Christian, the fundamental encounter with God is in the crucified messiah. This reality becomes most obvious during the celebration of Holy Week and

---

<sup>4</sup> From the prayer "O Heavenly King" which is an Aposticha verse from the Orthodox service for Pentecost; is part of the Trisagion Prayers that are included in many services, and which are also used in daily, private prayers. "O heavenly king, comforter, spirit of truth, who is everywhere and fills all things, treasure of blessings and giver of life: come and abide in us and save our souls O good one."

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 33:18-23.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 6.5.

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 1.28.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 5.8.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 9:8.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 10.13.

<sup>11</sup> John 6:53-6.

Pascha, the heart of the Christian Mystery. It is precisely through Christ's passion and death on the cross that we encounter the terrifying depths of God's love for us. "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son."<sup>12</sup> As Fr. Thomas Hopko would often say, God's love and God's judgment are the same thing; we are judged by the intensity of God's love which is perfectly revealed in the crucifixion. In that moment when humanity betrays God most grievously, when we reject, betray and execute the messiah whom God sent to save us, Jesus responds with mercy and forgiveness. "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do."<sup>13</sup> In Jesus' voluntary submission to the greatest evil that mankind can imagine and inflict we behold the fearful depths of God's love for us, and in experiencing a love this severe, we are judged, not so much in a juridical sense, but in the sense that God's love is so powerful and so good that we cannot help but be reminded of our weakness and wickedness. Christ commands us to break bread and share the cup, saying, "Do this in remembrance of me" and as St. Paul reminds us, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."<sup>14</sup>

Divine judgment is coextensive with divine encounter. However, this judgment is predicated on divine love and mercy because the King of Glory whom we encounter, and who judges us, died on the cross for our salvation. This is not the capricious judgment of a despot who seeks his own glory, comfort and pleasure, but the Son of God who does only the will of his Heavenly Father. Therefore, God's judgment is much more along the lines of a critical self-reflection, a penetrating self-examination that reveals our sinfulness, rather than the handing down of a verdict. Encountering Christ is judgment inasmuch as the profound goodness, mercy and love of the Crucified Messiah reveals wickedness, hatred and sin by way of extreme contrast. New Testament references to preparation for the Lord's Supper are most often in terms of this kind of self-critical judgment. "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself."<sup>15</sup> However, the human being is always free to deny the truth of what is revealed in the judgment of divine encounter: God never rescinds the gift of free will that has been bestowed upon humanity. Free will allows for the fearful possibility for denying truth and living in delusion. As in the case of Jonah, God does not compel the one to whom God appears: one is always free to run away. According to one line of thought, it is precisely this prideful rejection of loving divine judgment, the willful ignoring of what has been revealed—both God's mercy and human sinfulness—that constitutes the torment of hell.<sup>16</sup>

For the Christian, the fundamental encounter with God is an encounter with the Crucified Messiah, and the heart of this encounter is our Eucharistic worship, the partaking of the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus. Therefore, the word we preach, especially in the context of our

---

<sup>12</sup> Jn 3.16.

<sup>13</sup> Lk 22.34.

<sup>14</sup> 1Cor 11.24; Lk 22.19.

<sup>15</sup> C. F. D. Moule, "The Judgement Theme in the Sacraments," in *Background of the New Testament: Studies in Honor of C. H. Dodd*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956) 469. 1 Cor 11:28. See also Rom 14:23; Gal 6:4 and 1Jn 3:19-21.

<sup>16</sup> C.S. Lewis captures this idea beautifully in *The Great Divorce*.

eucharistic worship, is to be an encounter with the Incarnate Word, the Crucified Christ. It is a message that calls us to repentance and declares the presence of the divine king.

### **Following Christ to the Kingdom**

Perhaps the most daunting task facing the Christian preacher is to persuasively make the claim that following Christ is the best life possible. But following Christ requires great sacrifice, it means taking up our cross and following Christ to Golgotha where we will be co-crucified with Jesus as we obey his commandment to love our neighbor to the point of laying down our life for our enemies. In a world that glorifies self-gratification and the “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” it is not immediately obvious how following Christ and obeying his commandments to love God, love the neighbor; forgive those who sin against us; embrace a life of humility, chastity and generosity; is necessarily a good option. In fact, most of Christ’s commandments are perceived by the world as utter foolishness. Nevertheless, our radical claim is that a life of purity and holiness in Christ is the very best life that one can possibly live.

Most Christians would acknowledge that God commands us to live a certain way, and often preachers will present God’s commands in terms of an obligation to be fulfilled. “We must follow Christ’s commandments in order to go to heaven.” However, this message is rhetorically weak and theologically deficient because it is a *quid pro quo* argument: if you do what Jesus says, then you’ll be able to go to heaven after you die. (Far more threatening and clumsy is the negative form of the argument: If you don’t do what Jesus says, then you’ll go to hell when you die.) Now, it is important to affirm that Scripture unequivocally states that when the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will sit on the throne of judgment and separate the “sheep from the goats.” Those who have not obeyed God’s command to love the neighbor will go into eternal punishment. (Mt 25) However, the idea that the kingdom of heaven is something that we can encounter only after death directly contradicts Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom. N. T. Wright summarizes this problem succinctly:

In much popular modern Christian thought we have made a three-layered mistake. We have *Platonized* our eschatology (substituting “souls going to heaven” for the promised new creation) and have therefore *moralized* our anthropology (substituting a qualifying examination of moral performance for the biblical notion of the human vocation), with the result that we have *paganized* our soteriology.<sup>17</sup>

Seeing the kingdom of heaven as that which exists *only* after our earthly death, or the Second Coming, is perhaps the ultimate “prosperity gospel” argument: do such and such in this life, and you’ll get the ultimate payoff in the next. But what is even more troubling is that this faulty notion of the God’s kingdom implicitly denies the reality of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of Christ in our lives today. Eternity does not merely consist of the time after death, but eternity both transcends space and time, and touches upon all of time, past present and future.

To encounter Christ, to participate in the kingdom of heaven, it is a moment in which the timeless, uncreated God intersects with created human persons in time. The encounter is simultaneously an opportunity for judgment and transformation in that the timeless, eternal

---

<sup>17</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016) 147.

Kingdom of God manifests God's goodness in the midst of a fallen and sinful world. An authentic encounter with Christ, the Incarnate Word of God who simultaneously transcends space and time, and is incarnate as a human being, is not limited to somewhere "out there" in the future. Rather, as Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4.17), so for preachers who dare to proclaim the Gospel and for those with ears to hear, the divine encounter is a present reality. Preaching transforms sinful spectators, like Zacchaeus, into participants in the divine drama, and as we dine with the Lord, we have an opportunity to receive Christ's blessing, "Today salvation has come to this house."

**A HOMILETICAL VIEW OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF HUMAN SELF: SEARCHING FOR THE RELATED INSIGHTS FROM BUDDHISM AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS**

**Joon Ki Kim, Ph.D**

**Minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, New Glasgow, NS**

**Knox College, Toronto <http://knox.utoronto.ca/>**

**Copyright © 2019 Joon Ki Kim**

ABSTRACT: This paper considers the epistemic challenges that beset humans regarding how to perceive themselves and others in relation to preaching ministry. As humans are naturally egocentric, preachers may understand themselves, their congregation and preaching ministry self-centeredly. The teachings from Buddhism and the theology of the cross commonly emphasize the significance of recognizing and overcoming the illusive ideas which humans have about themselves and the world. The cornerstone of Buddhism's sophisticated epistemology is its insight of the epistemic challenges of human self. It is required to negate the idea of the ownership of self, projected onto all experiences. The theology of the cross indicates: by encountering the God of the cross revealed in suffering vulnerably and ceasing to worship the God created by theologians of glory, fundamental changes take place in terms of how to understand oneself and others, which is crucial for the transformation of preaching ministry.

"I happen to see myself desiring to be complemented as a worship leader and preacher. I love to be loved." During an interview for a theological student's certification in the Presbytery, to which I belong, the student who had the experience of preaching ministry said to the interviewers candidly, asking: "But I also have realized that to be high and lifted up as a preacher can be a problematic distraction when my ego is fattened by it. How could I understand the place of myself, or the role of my self-understanding and its image as a preacher?"

"Be yourself." I saw the phrase not a few times from the books about preaching. It is not only catchy but also positive and encouraging. Yes, preachers have been called to be authentic. The voice – in both a literal and figurative sense – of each preacher is supposed to be irreplaceably authentic. As long as it means, "Discover, appreciate and deepen your authenticity, not seeking any form of disguising forgery or cheap imitation," what the two-word phrase requires is valid. Nevertheless, to the preachers questioning sensitively about the intense complexity or even dubiousness which may be found emerging or having been developed within themselves, the upbeat-mood phrase may sound unsubstantial and even hollow.

Undeniably, how a preacher looks at oneself and one's surroundings may be entangled with his or her misguided epistemic perceptions, related to psychological, cultural and spiritual dimensions. It is not absurd to posit that a preacher may preach to others while being seized by a grievous misunderstanding about preaching ministry, himself and the world. Preaching the grace of "justification by faith alone," the preacher herself may long to be justified by the approval of the listeners. In case there is a cultural or racial sense of superiority, subconsciously shared by a preacher and a group of listeners, the deceptive view may be aggravated by the preacher's not speaking of it at all or speaking of it wrongly. Paul's strong aspiration for the continuous

transformation of himself – “after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27) does not sound irrelevantly ascetic to the preachers who reflect on themselves with sobriety and honesty.

### **Preaching and self-centeredness**

Robin Scroggs states: as a universal human mode of being is the anxiety about oneself, the main thrust of human life can be defined as “the project of securing our place in the sun.”<sup>1</sup> As “human individuals are naturally egocentric ... without exception biologically and psychologically,”<sup>2</sup> everyone is susceptible to regarding others mainly in terms of one’s own benefits; one can use others – without loving others – for the desperate purpose of one’s survival, safety, and its perpetuation. Obviously, the culture of consumerism is in line with the innate and primary desire to secure one’s own place in its best possible form even by ignoring or making use of others - especially the poor and laborers. In case of preaching, when a preacher is bombarded by the biological inclination and cultural provocation, a congregation may be recognized as a usable object – consciously or subconsciously – that is to soothe the preacher’s anxiety about his being. It is a possibility that is chilling, as it is not implausible.

Richard Lischer calls the preacher’s self-centered view of preaching ministry “the concupiscence of preaching.”<sup>3</sup> Here Lischer uses the word concupiscence by quoting Paul Tillich’s understanding of it. According to Paul Tillich, concupiscence is not restricted only to sexual dimensions. It “refers to all aspects of man’s relation to himself and to his world. It refers to physical hunger as well as to sex, to knowledge as well as to power, to material wealth as well as to spiritual values.”<sup>4</sup> In the entire range of what it means, concupiscence is to be understood as, the never-quenchable, and never-satiable desire to become the center of the world and “to draw the whole of reality into one’s self.”<sup>5</sup> The more power one can use to make the unpredictable realities of life be submissive to the agenda of the persistence of one’s stability, the higher possibility of actualization of the goal is apparently secured. It is not demanding, however, to find an example revealing what destructive symptoms may be accompanied by attaining immense and formidable power, when one puts oneself in the center of the world, along with what has been possessed for oneself. By quoting Kierkegaard, Tillich gives the examples of the Emperor Nero, Mozart’s Don Juan, and Goethe’s Faust,<sup>6</sup> who respectively demonstrated the embodiment of concupiscence as the longing for “the totality of the conquest.”<sup>7</sup> Lischer points

---

<sup>1</sup> Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church’s Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 47 and 53.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*, rev. ed. (150 West Broadway: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 2: Existence and Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 68.

out that in case of preaching, the preachers' advanced knowledge, techniques, witty imagination etc. can be used (misused) for the purpose of appealing to, mesmerizing the listeners and subordinating them under the charming peculiarities, and thus forgetting about the preacher's own *creatureliness*.<sup>8</sup> The possible accumulation of maximum power and tangible or intangible resources for oneself is never the answer to the innate constant human anxiety.<sup>9</sup> Not only the realization of such domination but also the yearning for it can result in dehumanizing human life and de-Christianizing Christian ministry including preaching.

### **Challenges in human cognition**

We are aware that the idea of objectivity has been used in order to damage the credibility of the scholars or activists and silence them, who form their arguments from the viewpoint of the specific oppressed groups of people. Objectivity is based on the conviction that human subjects can achieve "the correspondence between reality and our epistemological grip on it."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we know that some of the critical questions related to "objectivity" are: whose objectivity or rationality is it? For what purpose and in what context is the idea of objectivity being summoned and played? As Solberg rightly points out, "to neglect ... how power and privilege help define legitimate knowers and knowledge ... is to free epistemology from any accountability."<sup>11</sup> Another strong opposition comes from the biological perspective to the view that humans are able to use an impeccable objective grip on realities. Robert Wright remarks:

If you ask the question "What kinds of perceptions and thoughts and feelings guide us through life each day?" The answer, at the most basic level, isn't "the kinds of thoughts and feelings and perceptions that give us an accurate picture of reality." No, at the most basic level the answer is "The kinds of thoughts and feelings and perceptions that helped our ancestors get genes into the next generation." *Whether those thoughts and*

---

<sup>8</sup> Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 69. Karl Barth sends out his serious warning to preachers who are forgetful of their own creatureliness. Even though we do not buy into the whole of his homiletical understanding, his thunderous voice is still effective in this particular regard: "Is there not every likelihood that men will seem to have undertaken and ... accomplished the feat of taking God's word on their lips as their own? ... What are you doing, you man, with the word of *God* upon *your* lips? Upon what grounds do you assume the role of mediator between heaven and earth? ... And, to crown all, to do so with results, with success? ... One does not with impunity cross the boundaries of mortality!" Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 125-126. [emphasis in the original]

<sup>9</sup> Lischer explains that another aspect of the concupiscence of preaching is preachers' dependence upon "audience response" for their own self-gratification, therapy, or comfort. Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 68. Mary Lin Hudson also says: "It hasn't taken many years of teaching homiletics for me to realize how intimately wedded to the proclaimed word is the personal identity of the preacher ... How often do ministers measure their self-esteem by the praises of the congregation ...!" Mary Lin Hudson, "Preaching the Gospel for Liberation," in *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Edward Farley (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 119. In that case, when they preach, preachers may feel as if they are glorious conquerors or abject depressives according to what words they hear or what looks they see from the listeners. As long as the goal of stroking oneself through others' hands is set in a preacher's mind, "the quantitative adding up of compliments in a row doesn't make the next criticism any less stinging." the Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

*feelings and perceptions give us a true view of reality is, strictly speaking, beside the point.*<sup>12</sup> [emphasis mine]

Natural selection has contributed to the constant reproduction of life on the planet. Nevertheless, Wright understands that it is crucial to be reminded that “natural selection has designed our mind to have perceptions and beliefs that would help take care of our genes”<sup>13</sup> for successful proliferation; not to see the world and ourselves as clearly as possible. The human brain – as it naturally works – cannot be trusted as the consummator of the objective or reliable grasp of true realities.<sup>14</sup> The teachings from Buddhism emphasize that the human mind in itself is not “a translucent, luminous” and “reliable vehicle of knowledge acquisition.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is not right that “the world is constituted by discrete objects [and] when they come into contact with a mental organ, give forth an experience.”<sup>16</sup> Especially, mind-only school of Buddhism has specialized in the epistemological view that “the very objects that are presented in cognition are themselves the results of habit-formations, one’s long-nurtured and deep-seated distortions that serve to mold not just experience, but even the inner and outer objects that one encounters, which is to say one’s whole life-world.”<sup>17</sup> The truth is that “a subject of experience and the world toward which she is oriented arise together as a joint effect in a beginningless sequence of causes.”<sup>18</sup>

Solberg indicates that in the realm of Christian theology, it is the theology of the cross that attacks the reliability of human epistemic faculties. Insightfully, Martin Luther pointed out that humans tend to invent their own God, that suits their preferences and desires (biological, psychological, cultural and spiritual prosperity and their continuous proliferation in their own terms!) while being convinced that the delusional God, that is a mere creation of their own mind, is the true biblical God that is revealed through Christ. That is why they end up calling evil good and good evil.<sup>19</sup> It is not that they simply pretend as if they could recognize rightfully good and evil and distinguish one from the other. Theologians of glory can be genuinely persuaded that they are able to do so appropriately, which is a huge epistemological malfunction. This is how Solberg diagnoses the seriousness of human epistemic distortion: we even cannot fathom how severely warped the frame of reference of our perception is.

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Wright. *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (Simon & Schuster, Kindle Edition), 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *Why Buddhism is True*, 3-4. Wright also says: “what do you expect from natural selection? Its job is to build machines that spread genes, and if that means programming some measure of illusion into the machines, then illusion there will be.” Wright, *Why Buddhism is True*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Joy Cecile Brenann, “A Buddhist Phenomenology of the White Mind,” in *Buddhism and Whiteness*, Kindle Location 7193-7197.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle Location 7302.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle Location 7288.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle Location 7288-7292.

<sup>19</sup> Harold J. Grimm ed., *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), Vol. 31, 53.

Humans' constitutional proclivity for misnaming is rooted in the brokenness the Christian tradition associates with the Fall, an estrangement from God whose completeness is such that humans are not even aware of the extent of its impact. From the human point of view, *it is as if the framework for the reality within which humans live and move has fractured*. At the most fundamental level – the sense a person has of who he or she is – this fractured framework produces an entirely distorted self portrait. Relationship with others are equally distorted. The sense of who one is in relation to and with God – which gives shape and form to everything about one, within oneself and in relation to others – is out of reach.<sup>20</sup> [emphasis mine]

By ourselves and for ourselves, we can neither know correctly who God is and who our neighbors are, nor even who we ourselves are. The power of delusion that surrounds and infiltrates into our cognition is massively overwhelming and total to the point that it is virtually impossible for the overall contour and shape of the delusional power to be observed and discerned nakedly within the boundary of our daily cognitive habits. It is highly intriguing to juxtapose Solberg's diagnosis, based on the theology of the cross, and the view about the same challenge from a Buddhist philosopher, Jessica Locke. Locke remarks:

While the significance of our world seems seamless and totalized, in fact the specificity of its meaning for us is underwritten by the subjective styles by which we experience it. Our perceptual habits draw forth the meaningful particularities of our world ...the significances that stand out to us as meaningful are ... given to us through the subjective structures that we provide for having a world at all. Nonetheless, *the subjective contribution we make toward its appearance for us is hidden behind its seamlessness and totalized quality*.<sup>21</sup> [emphasis mine]

The distorted frame of reference, that is the whole of “the subjective structures that we provide for having a world at all” is elusive because of its seamlessness, and irresistible because of its totalizing scope. It results from the Fall from the Christian point of view, and unavoidable human ignorance (avidyā) and ensuing delusions in Buddhist terms. Buddhism emphasizes that one of the serious cognitive fallacies, produced within “the habitual, phenomenological structures that run much deeper than our explicit intellectual commitments”<sup>22</sup> is none other than the idea of human self.

### **Buddhism's understanding of self**

---

<sup>20</sup> Solberg. *Compelling Knowledge*, 74-75.

<sup>21</sup> Jessica Locke, “Making Consciousness An Ethical Project: Moral Phenomenology in Buddhist Ethics and White Anti-Racism” in George Yancy & Emily McRae eds., *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections* (Lexington Books, Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 4382-4386.

<sup>22</sup> Locke, “Making Consciousness An Ethical Project,” Kindle Location 4386.

Buddhism's teaching about human self is complex, evasive, and opaque to understand on an intellectual level. Buddhists use the term *no self*. Does it mean that physically, no personal being in the whole wide universe exists at all? Andrew Olendzki says, "the Buddha never said there is no self, only that the self [as we know it] is a mistaken interpretation of experience."<sup>23</sup> Regarding the natural ways we experience the being of our *selves*, he explains:

The Buddha may have had deep insight into the selflessness of all phenomena, but I sure do feel a lot like a self ... First, I feel as though I am the occupant of my body, the one who inhabits it. I find myself at the center of the world that I am constructing, as various strands of sensory information are synthesized into coherent meaning. I feel entirely and exclusively identified with it [my body] ... Second I have a ...sense of being the beneficiary of the feeling tones ... the one who experiences both pleasure and pain ... Third I am the artiste ... Each of us has a creative narrator functioning within us ... as we put our hand to work, there is a tangible sense that we are expressing our selves ... Fourth I also feel like an agent, the one who makes choices, who acts out those choices, and who experiences the consequences of those actions ... Sometimes I do good, and sometimes I do harm, but succession in this particular stream of experience, provides the basis for a continuous sense of self ... Fifth I am that upon which it all depends [as a form of essence], around which it all congeals, the very heart of all that unfolds here and now as "me."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the Buddha presents a radically different view. "The Buddha parses the apparent self into five aggregates or categories." They are "the aggregates of material form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness" and the aggregates "serve as the basis for our taking on the view of being the person who is the occupant, the beneficiary, the artiste, the agent, and the essence ..." Contrary to our common view, the Enlightened One asks if these can truly be construed as an entity called self; namely "an independent, essential self, metaphysically distinct from other independent, essential selves"<sup>25</sup> in the most fundamental sense. Olendzki goes on to explain:

When asked how it [the sense of myself] comes to arise, the Buddha answers, quite simply, that it arises when we regard the aggregates as "this is mine, I am this, this is my self." Self, in other words, is *a projection of ownership onto all experience* (this is my body, these are my feelings, perceptions, formations, and this is my consciousness). The five aggregates really do occur — that is not in question. *They just don't belong to*

---

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Olendzki, *Untangling Self: A Buddhist Investigation of Who We Really Are* (Wisdom Publications. Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 656-657.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Kindle Locations 641-657.

<sup>25</sup> Emily McRae, "White Delusion and Avidyā: A Buddhist Approach to Understanding and Deconstructing White Buddhism and Whiteness" in *Buddhism and Whiteness*, Kindle Location, 1501.

*anybody*. Experience occurs, but the person who owns it is an additional construction ....<sup>26</sup> [emphasis mine]

The sense of ownership of self is assumed very naturally but Buddhism teaches that with an awakening, we can realize that it is only a view which cannot be substantiated by an undeniable evidence. The idea of permanent substance or entity called self is only “a projection of ownership onto all experience,” a false mental formulation,<sup>27</sup> which is mistakenly and tragically put in the center of the world of one’s mind. According to the Buddha “We are simply a collection of ever-changing parts, which are dependent on changing conditions, and are themselves empty of any inherent existence.”<sup>28</sup> In this sense, from the Buddhist point of view, to put the existence of “I myself who thinks,” as the unquestionably reliable foundation for cognition cannot be more wrong; to realize the deceitfulness involved in the idea of self is the initial and primary step to enlightenment, which is “diametrically opposed to the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*: ‘I think, therefore I am.’”<sup>29</sup>

As the idea of the ownership of self is an illusion, the idea of the ownership of various kinds of tangible or intangible property, admirable reputation (for example, as a preacher or theologian), diverse form of power or influence, owned by oneself is consequently an illusion - with no permanent substance at all. The idea of self as the sense of ownership and identification evokes and triggers “a host of related unwholesome emotions and behaviors.”<sup>30</sup> A Buddhist scholar Walpola Rahula remarks:

... the idea of self [that] is an imaginary, false belief ... produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine’, selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Olendzki, *Untangling Self*, Kindle Locations 657-673.

<sup>27</sup> Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught: Revised and Expanded Edition with Texts from Suttas and Dhammapada*. (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., Kindle Edition) Kindle Location 665. In the philosophy of Buddhism, constant change of everything is one of the basic premises. For that reason, to postulate a metaphysical world where a form of divine or a certain timeless essence is always kept intact is not to be acknowledged in the teachings of Buddhism.

<sup>28</sup> McRae, “White Delusion and Avidyā,” Kindle Location, 1506. A Korean philosopher of religion Kim Yong Ok points out that the grammatical structure of language, in which the subject of a sentence can be seen as an independent entity, regardless what the specific predicate of the sentence mentions intensifies the cognitive confusion. Kim Yong Ok, “What does Anatta mean?” accessed 28 September 2019, available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0raQn5uhm8k>

<sup>29</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Kindle Location 682. Olendzki says that “instead of ‘I think therefore I am’ we need only say ‘thinking occurs,’ or ... simply, ‘awareness occurs.’” Olendzki, *Untangling Self*, Kindle Locations 733-734.

<sup>30</sup> Olendzki, *Untangling Self*, Kindle Locations 674-675.

<sup>31</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Kindle Location 1180.

Barth's acute criticism of the preachers who think as if they can *own* the word of God on their lips and establish themselves with the possession of it takes on a new and deeper meaning, when we read the paragraph by Barth quoted above, considering the radical teachings from Buddhism.<sup>32</sup> Joy Cecile Brenann remarks: "The whole arc of Buddhist philosophy tends toward the notion that unless we have experienced the kind of epistemic achievement that the Buddha experienced, our experiences are essentially delusional."<sup>33</sup>

On the basis of the Buddhist point of view about self, the issue of racial and cultural hierarchical inequality in society can be meaningfully considered and addressed. The sense of racial or cultural superiority rises from the thought that certain conspicuous or presumed merits of a race or culture are *owned* by an individual self or selves who share in those traits. Nonetheless, it means that the projection of ownership of self is expanded so that the related delusional appraisal about a group of people may be shared within themselves, who, as a result, believe that they are normative and superior knowers. Regarding the white mind, that is convinced of the normalcy of its cognition, and its "ability to grasp the world accurately,"<sup>34</sup> Brenann says that "to be white is a sign of being the quintessential knower and vice versa, the white subject ... is the one who identifies her mind as transparent ... luminous, as an organ of knowledge." But as mentioned above, the expectation and belief that "reality is encountered without the distortions of the *historically and collectively embedded 'mind'*"<sup>35</sup> [emphasis mine] is incorrect. A way to maintain the status of ignorance, namely to refuse to see the truth that one is living in delusions is to be "[obsessed] with self and [cling] to fixed narratives about the self - in the case of white delusion, 'I'm not racist' or 'I've earned and deserve everything I have.'" <sup>36</sup> It means that the specific mind "has not understood the historical embeddedness, collectivity, and ... misrecognition within which any act of cognition takes place."<sup>37</sup> Brennan indicates that from the view of The Chan school of Buddhism, which started around the 5<sup>th</sup> century in China, "the ultimate knower ... lives amid a constant reversal: a reversal of understanding, a reversal of power, a reversal of life and death, a reversal of self and other, a reversal of knower and known."<sup>38</sup> In the Chan Tradition the ultimate knower is not "a person with kingly self-possession of his faculties and the power to make everyone who encounters him recognize his supreme knowledge."<sup>39</sup> He is "portrayed as limited, bound by time, place and circumstance, appearing sagely to those who understand him but a simple fool to those who do not."<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 7273-7278.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 7173.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 7331.

<sup>36</sup> McRae, "White Delusion and Avidyā," Kindle Location 1394.

<sup>37</sup> Brennan, "A Buddhist Phenomenology of the White Mind," Kindle Location 7327.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 7236.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, Kindle Location 7245.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

### **The theology of the cross as a bedrock of Christian epistemology**

What insights and implications - in terms of Christian epistemology - could we discover by contemplating the teachings from Buddhism? Buddhism declares that at the root of all kinds of illusions that seize human mind, there is the misguided understanding of self and the obsession with the ownership of self. The theology of the cross indicates that at the root of personal, cultural and spiritual epistemic misconceptions, there is the abandonment of the God of the cross, revealed through Christ.

This is clear: he who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. ... These are the people whom the apostle calls ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ [Phil. 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works ... God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said ... It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows ... his works are not his but God’s.”<sup>41</sup>

When one refuses to stand vulnerably facing Christ on the cross, one’s illusive ideas about his or her own works and possessions survive without being “deflated and destroyed.” Given “the framework for the reality within which humans live and move has fractured,” Gerhard O. Forde states: “we are inveterate theologians of glory. We are tempted and bound to be so. We invest all our capital in works.”<sup>42</sup> The habitual, phenomenological, psychological and related epistemological structures, which constantly convince preachers to be theologians of glory “run much deeper than [their] explicit intellectual commitments.” From the Buddhist point of view, theologians of glory are those who seek, cherish and deepen the illusions about themselves and the world, and thus put themselves in the center of the world of their mind, which lead to countless forms of evil. The Gospel proclaims that true awakening or enlightenment from the darkened view comes from the cross.

If we follow Luther’s pointing finger to the Cross, we find God yet more deeply hidden ... Can the man hanging there help us in our weakness? .... it is precisely in seeking to evade the suffering face of God, the face with nothing in its “appearance that we should desire him,” that we make our idols ... What we want from the gods we project is affirmation and empowerment ... But the real God appears with nails in his extremities and mockery over his head ...<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> *Luther’s Works*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 83.

<sup>43</sup> Robert J. Jenson, “Contemporary Theological Significance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 280.

“God can only be found in suffering and the cross.” Without following the crucified, abandoned Lord, and participating in the broken God’s suffering in the world, the sin of idolatry and epistemological distortion continue and proliferate. The Buddha is the one who sees things as they really are. When theologians of glory call good evil and evil good, theologians of the cross “call the thing what it actually is.”<sup>44</sup> By being able to see things as they truly are, one does not use others for one’s own interest anymore but learns to love them – as deep as love can go.

### **Epistemological transformation of human self and neighborly love**

Buddhism teaches that by realizing the fallacies involved in the idea of self and laying down the ownership and identification, one learns to love those near and far, not as an object of love and affection coming from oneself, but as a part of one body, transcending the boundary of “I and They” and even “I and You.” It is selfless compassion and mercy, that is not curtailed by the distinction of each self. In *Blessed Are the Consumers* Sallie McFague presents her interpretation of the commandment “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

This used to strike me oddly self-centered, suggesting that you could not love others until you loved yourself. Does self-love come first? ... [Here is] a better interpretation [that] is much more radical: *you* are the neighbor, the neighbors. The world is your body; you are a universal self, and hence to love others as yourself means the extension of the same feelings of empathy, attention to basic needs, and concern for recognition of intrinsic value that one “naturally” has for oneself.<sup>45</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Quaker John Woolman lived the life of an exemplary selfless love. McFague introduces an important incident in his life:

During a serious illness, [Woolman] had a dream in which he “forgets” his name: “Being then delirious to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy color between the south and the east, and was informed that this mass was human beings in a great misery as they could be, and live, and that I was mixed with them, and that henceforth, I might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.” During the dream, there came to his mind the words of Paul, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” The dream ends with the words, “John Woolman is dead.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> *Luther’s Works*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are The Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 115.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

The teachings of the Buddha and the theology of the cross commonly declare that “true humanness is realized in utmost solidarity with others,”<sup>47</sup> and for that purpose, fundamental and radical change in terms of how we understand the being of ourselves is required. The theology of the cross reveals the truth that “God lives in the interdependence of community, has died in the communion with us, and humanity is liberated from narcissistic self-destruction for the wholeness of persons-in-togetherness.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Another look at the homiletical debate about persuasion**

About twenty years ago, an interesting debate took place between Lucy Lind Hogan and Lischer. Hogan insisted that preaching needs to be persuasive; the matter of persuasion deserves to be a crucial goal of preaching when we consider the essential nature of the work of persuasion and the preaching ministry. Nevertheless, Lischer was not against employing the power of persuasion for preaching at all. He appreciates the effectiveness of rhetoric and the beauty of language. Lischer says that the preachers who care about those who will hear them “craft [their] sermons and tailor [their] diction”<sup>49</sup> with their love for them. It seems that Lischer was concerned about what ideological, cultural, and psychological influence that is not congenial to the Gospel may seep into preachers’ mind by setting persuasion as a paradigm for preaching, about which Hogan did not mention in her essay “Rethinking Persuasion: Developing an Incarnational Theology Of preaching.” Hogan emphasizes that persuasion is in fact for genuine connection and communication between a preacher and her listeners. But we can hope for the beautiful communal growth, to which persuasion can contribute, when the preacher and congregation learn to look at themselves in a fundamentally new way, being surround by the presence of God who journeys with them for the transformation of everything broken.

One pastor discovered the poor in his parish, and something happened to his preaching; another devoted herself to prayer as never before and began to speak with power; one discovered the goodness of his congregation as his wife lay dying, and suddenly in the midst of unspeakable sorrow he became a free man in the pulpit.<sup>50</sup>

Disruptive suffering or prayer filled with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit may tilt a preacher’s stabilized epistemological axis and lead her to see that she herself is not a distinct, separate being, that needs to prove herself by good work and no one actually is, as God fills all with God’s broken bread, to be all in all as one body.

Lee Yong Do (1901-1933) is a Korean mystic preacher who was well known for his prayers, tears, and sermons that often gushed out even for hours. In his lifetime, numerous

---

<sup>47</sup> Alan E. Lewis, “Unmasking Idolatries: Vocation in the *Ecclesia Crucis*,” in *Incarnational Ministries: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family*, ed. Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1990), 126.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>49</sup> Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Lischer, “Why I Am Not Persuasive,” *Homiletic* 24, no. 2, 16.

Korean people groaned under the imperialistic oppression of Japan, suffering extreme poverty and living hopeless days. Lee wrote: “How could I show the way of the truth to these abandoned lives. As they grieve, I grieve. As they starve, I am painfully hungry.” When his pneumonia was exacerbated to a very serious extent, he stood in front of a congregation, that mounted up to about one thousand people to lead worship. When they were singing a hymn together, Lee began to cry – presumably lamenting his grief and the whole country’s. Soon his tears met the congregation’s. The crying was unstoppable.<sup>51</sup> It was when a wordless sermon took place, which touched and consoled their broken lives ineffably, when the distinction of You and I dissolved in their tears and God’s.

Mary Lin Hudson remarks that “we must let [the word that we have proclaimed] and the preacher in us die” so that “the Word’ [may be] broken into words, shared, and received by the community of faith, taking on a new form of life in the work and love of the ones who receive it.” She implies that our death as a preacher is not a one-time event but is supposed to be multiple occasions as long as our preaching ministry continues.<sup>52</sup> As Paul did (“I die everyday” 1 Cor. 15:31), when we preach, our self and life are surrendered so that we may be united to Christ through the ministry of preaching, the baptismal water that soaks us again and again with its death and life. When we leave the pulpit, a baptismal font for us every Sunday, we will not look at anyone from a human point of view (2 Cor 5:16), including ourselves and Christ the Lord. As we have died with him, we will serve, love and preach freely as a new creation in the presence of the Resurrected One.

---

<sup>51</sup> Park Ji Eun, “A foolish man who embraced the life of Christ,” accessed 27 September 2019, available from <http://www.saegilchurch.or.kr/sermon/617417>

<sup>52</sup> Brennan says that the Buddhists’ effort to see things rightly “must be undertaken anew with regard to each new moment of experience, and it must be undertaken endlessly.” Brennan, “A Buddhist Phenomenology of the White Mind,” Kindle Location 7380.

**HOLY PRESENCE, HOLY PREACHING:  
SANTA MARÍA TONANTZIN GUADALUPE AS *LOGOTOKOS***

**Vincent J. Pastro, DMin**

**Adjunct Professor of Preaching and Evangelization  
Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis, MO, [www.ai.edu](http://www.ai.edu)**

**Copyright © 2019 Vincent J. Pastro**

**ABSTRACT:** The “Holy Preaching” is so much more than just the Sunday preaching event. As envisioned by St. Dominic of Guzman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Otto Semmelroth, and others, it is a *Person* and a *Community*. This image of the Holy Preaching has been largely neglected by the theology of preaching and pastors and preachers in their day-to-day ministry. I propose a fresh look at the Holy Preaching and its theology, inspired by Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) and the experience of the Mexican people.

I recently attended a regional conference for Hispanic Ministry organized by two white male theologians. At one point in the conversation, the topic of clericalism came up. One of the theologians offered that he was just returning from a conference where clericalism was a major theme. All of the theologians present, he said, agreed that a major point for clarification was the theology of “ontological change,” which is enjoying a resurgence among more traditional circles. He was, however, roundly challenged by two of the Latina theologians at our conference, both who had spent their entire and long ministry with the people, the *pueblo*, at local community levels. They asked him what he meant by “ontology” and “change” and then suggested that these terms made no sense to the *pueblo*. Rather, clericalism, which sorely needs to be addressed by the institutional Church, can only be dealt with by accompanying deacons, presbyters, and bishops as they experience their *Baptism*.

**Preachers by Baptism**

If there is any “ontological change” validly spoken of in ecclesiology and the theology of preaching today, it is the “transubstantiation” that occurs in every member of the people of God by their Baptism. In a recent book, the Bolivian theologian Víctor Codina, SJ, in speaking of theological training today in Latin America, mentions Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde as a model. Bonhoeffer told the clandestine seminarians he was training in Nazi Germany that theological reflection truly begins when it is “urgent” and “necessary.” Codina bases his reflection on Bonhoeffer’s experience, as well as several points developed by Clodovis Boff on theological training. Among other things, it should be based on “mystigological theology” (prayer), “symbolic theology” (poetry, art, symbol, etc.), and “narrative theology” (proclamation through story).<sup>1</sup> The same thing can be said about preaching. It should be mystigological, symbolic, and narrative.

In a recent visit to Mexico, I had the opportunity to spend a week in Yanhuitlán, a town about seventy miles north of the city of Oaxaca. For many years beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, Yanhuitlán was an important center for the community of the Holy Preaching, the *Sacra*

---

<sup>1</sup> Víctor Codina, SJ, *Una Iglesia Nazarena* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2011), 189–98.

*Praedicatio*. A very large Dominican church and *convento* dominate the skyline of the town, the unfortunate result of the Spanish destruction of the indigenous religious structures that formed the center of the *Mixteca Alta* culture of Oaxaca. It is very possible that the great Bartolomé de Las Casas stayed with the Dominicans in Yanhuítlán on his way to Chiapas.

The *patrón* of Yanhuítlán is a vivid image of the Crucified Jesus called *El Divino Señor de Ayuxi*—the Divine Lord of the Poor. As I sat in the small chapel dedicated to the *Señor de Ayuxi*, a family came to visit the *Crucificado*—grandparents, parents, children, cousins, *tíos y tías*. The *abuelo* (grandfather) eventually took the youngest by the hand up the stairs that allow a closer look at the image. He said the traditional prayers to the *Señor*, which the boy repeated devotedly. The *pueblo* maintain the traditions of the *religiosidad popular* (popular religiosity), an indispensable connection to indigenous roots going back centuries. Latin American theologians like Codina consider these *sacramentales* of the *pueblo* genuine expressions of sacramental activity. These prayers, and many others, are the *sacramentos del pueblo*, the sacraments of the people. The celebration of these *sacramentales* are nothing less than the *pueblo* exercising its baptismal ministry, which, in turn, is firmly rooted in the Baptism of the prophetic Master and his *unción* by the Spirit of Life:

In a clear allusion to his baptism, (Jesus) declares that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, because (the Spirit) has anointed him. The baptismal anointing of Jesus can be interpreted, accordingly, in the sense of a prophetic consecration. Furthermore, the comparison of Jesus with Elijah and Elisha, realized in posterior verses of the story, favors this interpretive line. . . . The synagogue of Nazareth, in effect, is the scene of one of the (prophetic) manifestations of Jesus in favor of the poor.<sup>2</sup>

This living example of the *sensus fidelium* in the context of the poor, inspired by the breath of the Spirit, is manifested through the “sacraments of the Baptized.” Although the traditional sacraments of the Church are important to the people, there is a profound sense of sacramental life, rooted in Jesus’ Baptism and the Holy Spirit, *outside* of the institution. The *pueblo* has a natural inclination to express, however humbly and tentatively, the sacramental charism of Baptism through which the Holy Preaching is concretized in prayers, praxis, and customs, handed down from generation to generation, father to daughter, mother to son. This is a powerful example of the Holy Preaching at work, inspired by Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe<sup>3</sup> and the living presence of the Spirit of God among the people. The *pueblo* maintains the faith, reminding us that preaching—as all the evangelical charisms—is grafted into each member of the people of God through Baptism. Ordination (ideally!) enables preachers to grow more deeply into the charism given at Baptism. But preaching is a charism of the *Baptized*.<sup>4</sup> The *abuelito* who taught his *nieto* (grandson) the prayers to the *Divino Señor de Ayuxi* is preacher *par excellence*, sharing

---

<sup>2</sup> María José Caram, OP, *Nuestra Tierra Dará Su Fruto: El Espíritu Santo en el Mundo y en la Historia* (Salamanca: Editotial San Esteban, 2009), 59. Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> The title Santa María Tonantzín or Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe is one of the traditional indigenous and popular Mexican names for Our Lady of Guadalupe.

the gift of the Holy Preaching with the young, who will, in turn, *preach* it with their children. Our Lady of Guadalupe's ancient story told by the *Nican Mopohoa* in *Nahuatl* can perhaps best be seen as the “meta-narrative” of the Mexican people, where Mary treasures all these experiences of the *pueblo* in her Spirit-filled heart (Luke 2:19).

### Unmasking Homiletic Whiteness

The story of Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe can help us theologians of the Holy Preaching to reflect on the “ontological change” that happens for all of us at Baptism. We are “changed” into Jesus, baptized and anointed with the same Spirit. Perhaps the greatest need in theology today is to help people recover the human dignity given through Baptism—a dignity especially important in non-white, non-dominant cultures and races. Preaching is not the domain of the clergy. It is, like all evangelical charisms, gifted to every follower of Jesus by the breath of the Spirit through Holy Baptism, where it lies deeply in the heart of the *pueblo*, waiting to be nurtured. Indigenous Mexican theologians maintain that it was not the *Doce Apóstoles*—the first twelve Franciscan friars to arrive in Mexico—who “converted” the *pueblo*.<sup>5</sup> It was, rather, Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe who gave dignity and worth to the *pueblo* as daughters and sons of the living God. Their “Baptism” was the result of the *acomañamiento* of Santa María Tonantzin, the *Guadalupana*—also called *La Morenita*, “the beloved Brown One.”<sup>6</sup> Baptized by the Word permeated through her entire being, she is the “Holy Preaching” *par excellence*. She is the Preacher, the *Logotokos*, the Bearer of the Word, Mother of the Word, the One who tells the people of God’s “love, compassion, help, and defense,” leading the *Mexica* people to “put on” the image and likeness of God amidst the unconscionable consequences of the Conquest.

In 1531, a *Mexica* catechumen named Cuauhtlatoatzin (“the one who speaks like an eagle”—the Spaniards had given him the name “Juan Diego”) was crossing the hill of Tepeyac on his way to Mexico City when he saw and heard “flowers and song,” the *flor y canto* so important in *Mexica* and other Mexican indigenous cultures. He drew closer and saw a young indigenous woman, dressed in the clothing of *Mexica* royalty. She spoke to him not in the Spanish language of the *conquistadores*, but in his native *Nahuatl*. Her skin was not the white color of the European invaders. She was the *morenita Mexica* color of the *pueblo*. The brilliant sun is behind her, the crescent moon under her feet—not “blocked out” in condemnation of “idolatry,” but so that the rays of divine sunlight and the presence of the astral bodies would illuminate the divine presence in her. The stars, planetary symbols deeply important in indigenous cosmology, are wrapped about her mantel. Around her hands is the black ribbon, symbol of the woman with child in the *Mexica* culture. The gist of the narrative of Santa María Tonantzin is that St. Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin<sup>7</sup> was asked to go to the bishop in Mexico City with the simplest request: the woman asks for a *casita*—a little house—to be built on the summit of Tepeyac so that she could express to the people all of her “love, compassion, help, and

---

<sup>5</sup> I believe I first came across this reference in Javier Garibay Gómez, SJ, *Nepantla Situados en Medio: Estudio Histórico-Teológico de la Realidad Indiana* (México DF: Centro de Reflexión Teológica, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, *La Morenita: Evangelizadora de las Américas* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Canonized on July 31, 2002.

protection” (*amor, compasion, auxilio, y defensa*).<sup>8</sup> As a colleague of mine says, *una mujer peleonera por su pueblo*—“a warrior woman for her people”! It should be noted that this was only ten years after the “Conquest”—a horribly violent tragedy imposed on the indigenous people that authors have rightly referred to as genocide.<sup>9</sup> This genocide included the death wrought by warfare, sickness, forced labor, marginalization, imposition of culture, and—dare it be said—the Christian faith that accompanied the *conquistadores*. The Spaniards wished to wipe out every trace of what they considered “idolatry” through the massive, planned, merciless destruction of indigenous holy places—including the temple on Tepeyac to the *teotl* Tonantzin, the Mother of Ometeotl.<sup>10</sup> As Cuauhtlatoatzin crossed the hill of Tepeyac, he walked over the ruins of the indigenous temple he remembered fondly. This manifestation of the Tonantzin Guadalupe, along with her simple request sending him to the bishop of Mexico City as her “ambassador,” was a powerful experience of the love, compassion, help, and protection of the God of life who abhors injustice and oppression and accompanies the poor and the afflicted. In Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe, God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52 NRSV). It is St. Cuauhtlatoatzin who is chosen as ambassador, and not a colonist, friar, or bishop. She speaks to him in *Nahuatl*.<sup>11</sup> Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe preaches the Word of God’s love, compassion, and accompaniment of the people. She is the Holy Preaching, capacitating the people to take on, to become, the Holy Preaching through Baptism. She is what Raimon Panikkar calls a “Christophany”—a manifestation of the presence of Jesus to a *pueblo pobre, conquistado, oprimido*. Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe represents three presences: the presence of the Incarnate Word Jesus in Christophany; the divine presence in the *religiosidad popular*, the culture, and the *pueblo*; and the presence of Mary, *Panhagia*, Spousal Chamber of the Word, *Theotokos*, and *Logotokos*.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Holy Preaching and Santa María Tonantzin as *Logotokos***

The traditional title for Mary in the oldest apostolic Churches is *Theotokos*, translated as “Mother of God” (God-bearer). This title for Mary had always been held by ancient Christians as *sensus fidelium*—the “sense of the faithful”—and was confirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431, where the people waited for the bishops to emerge from the council basilica and, after the official proclamation of Mary as *Theotokos*, carried them through the streets of Ephesus in procession!<sup>13</sup> However, there were other titles of Mary that were held in the hearts of the ancient Christian

---

<sup>8</sup> José Luis Guerrero, *El Nican Mopohua: Un Intento de Exégesis, Tomos 1 y 2* (México DF: Universidad Pontificia de México, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, OP, calls the results of the *Conquista* a “total demographic collapse.” See *En Busca de los Pobres de Jesucristo: El Pensamiento de Bartolomé de Las Casas* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1992), 639.

<sup>10</sup> The *Nahuatl* word *teotl*, wrongly translated as “god” or “goddess,” actually refers to a divine manifestation..

<sup>11</sup> The entire Guadalupe story was originally written in *Nahuatl* and is called the *Nican Mopohoa*. The best Spanish translation I have seen is from José Luis Guerrero, cited above.

<sup>12</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fullness of Man* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004). See especially 39–46.

<sup>13</sup> Panikkar, 4. He maintains that *Theotokos* is eminently Christological. “God has a human mother, and humanity a divine Father.”

faithful: *Panhagia*, the All-Holy One, and “Spousal Chamber of the Word” are two significant examples. *Panhagia* and Spousal Chamber of the Word could readily be applied to Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe. She is *Panhagia*, the All-Holy One, manifestation of the Divine Holy, Holy Presence, Holy Preaching. Mary holds a place of honor among the communion of saints. She is first among the saints, the one chosen to remind the poor that God “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:53 NRSV).

But Mary *Panhagia* is much more. Santa María Tonantzin, the *Guadalupana*, manifests the divine presence to a people sorely oppressed. It is a consoling presence, but also seeks justice in the midst of suffering. José Marins, a pastoral theologian who for years has worked with the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (base ecclesial communities), says that God’s Holiness is God’s justice, and God’s justice is God’s Holiness.<sup>14</sup> Santa María Tonantzin is full of the Holy Spirit, who is “the voice of the poor.”<sup>15</sup> When Santa María Tonantzin says to Juan Diego Cuauhtlatotzin that she wishes a *casita* to be built on Tepeyac, the Holy Spirit, through the “warrior woman,” asks to accompany the oppressed people with her love, compassion, help, and protection—a divine assurance of the constant presence of the Holy Spirit, the “Father-Mother of the poor” (*Veni Sancte Spiritus*).

Mary is the Spousal Chamber of the Word. Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe is different from other Marian manifestations. The *Virgincita Morenita* does not ask prayers for conversion, or repentance, or a grand basilica in her honor. She asks for a “little house” so that the God of the poor can be present and “pitch tent” with the people concretely, in the flesh, as one of them, as poor woman (cf John 1:14). Another unique aspect of the *Guadalupana* is that Mary appears as a pregnant woman (I am not aware of any other where this is the case). She is literally permeated with the presence of the Word of God. She is Holy Preaching to the *pueblo*. Full of grace, full of Spirit, she is Holy Presence, Holy Preaching.

But just what is the “Holy Preaching”? As I have reflected on the question over the years, I cannot give a ready “definition.” I have often thought that the *via negativa* is the best methodology to approach the sacred mystery of the *Sacra Praedicatio*—what is it *not*? But I am still left unsatisfied—must we not say *something* of what it is? Raimon Panikkar gives an excellent description of the Tradition that I think can readily be applied to what the Holy Preaching is in its essence:

Is faith no more than the correct interpretation of doctrine? ... Clearly, tradition means much more than this. The “transmission” (*tradere*) of tradition is not limited to producing a version of scriptures that is correct, in proper form, and up-to-date. What tradition transmits is life, faith, a sense of belonging to a community, an orientation of life, a participation in a common destiny. Christian tradition is not doctrine alone: it is also *ekklēsia* in the deepest sense of the word. It has to do *not only with what Jesus said and did but with who he was and who we are*.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> José Marins is a presbyter and theologian who, as a young priest, was a *peritus* for the Brazilian bishops at the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>15</sup> José Comblin, *La Vida en Búsqueda de la Libertad* (Santiago: Movimiento Teología de la Liberación, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Panikkar, *Christophany*, 53. Italics mine.

Is it best described by a synthesis of ontology and epistemology into something new? Being? Knowledge? Praxis? Panikkar seems to say: “We *become* what we *know*,” in reference to the move in Christology and Christophany from “doctrine” to “presence.”<sup>17</sup>

Preachers know the story of St. Dominic of Guzman, the founder of the women and men throughout the world who have dedicated their lives to the charism of preaching. When St. Dominic named the first group of preaching Dominicans (women ten years prior to the men!), he decided that the *community* dedicated to preaching should be called the *Sacra Praedicatione*, the Sacred Preaching, the Holy Preaching. The entire community is given this name. Usually when we think of preaching, we have in mind the stereotypical idea of the “preaching event” as it occurs in most Christian communities. Every preacher knows, of course, that this is important. But theologically, the “Holy Preaching” goes much deeper than what we simply see on Sundays. For St. Dominic, it is identified with a *community* of preachers. What, then, the community of the people of God, the Baptized? And is the community of the Baptized not the *body of Christ*?

Academic theologians in Nazi Germany (one had to take a fidelity oath to Adolph Hitler to teach theology at the time) said that St. Paul was speaking metaphorically when he says to the Corinthians, “You are the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27). Dietrich Bonhoeffer countered that St. Paul does not say, “You are *like* the body of Christ” but “You *are* the body of Christ.” Shortly after, when he was director of the clandestine seminary in Finkenwalde, he defined preaching as “the living Christ walking among the people (*Gemeinde*, “church-community).”<sup>18</sup> The Holy Preaching is not an event. It is a *Person*. It is a *community*.

When Antonio de Montesinos preached in the Church of Santo Domingo on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 1510, in present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, to condemn the colonial enslavement and genocide of the indigenous *Taino* people, he was not the only presence in the pulpit. He claimed to be “the voice of Christ” (not the Baptist!) crying in the midst of the wilderness of the slavery and oppression on the island.<sup>19</sup> He was the voice of Christ *and* the voice of the community of the *Sacra Praedicatione*, the Dominican friars who had together prepared the preaching over the course of the previous months of prayer and study. When the authorities later came looking for Antonio de Montesinos, Pedro de Córdoba, the superior, said that they would have to detain every friar in the community. The preaching had been prepared as a Holy Preaching by *all*.<sup>20</sup>

Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe is the Holy Preaching. She carries the presence of the Word. She shares compassionate, protecting, divine presence in the midst of the *pueblo*. Preaching is *the* activity of the living Christ, the Spirit of life who is the voice of the poor. It is

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>18</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 14: Theological Education at Finkenwalde, 1935–1937*, English Edition Edited by H. Gaylon Barker and Mark S. Brocker, translated by Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 510.

<sup>19</sup> His text was John 1:23.

<sup>20</sup> See Vincent J. Pastro, “Antonio de Montesinos: Preaching Prophetically in Our Context.” In *Montesinos’ Legacy: Defining and Defending Human Rights for Five Hundred Years*. Edited by Edward C. Lorenz, Dana E. Aspinall, and J. Michael Raley. Assisted by Alice M. Richard. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 2014), 121–31.

the “two hands,” Word and Spirit, of the Triune God. The divine activity is a human activity, the human, divine—an *identity*, a living Person who *is pueblo*.

Otto Semmelroth, SJ, sees preaching as integral part of the liturgy. Jesus is the *Wort*, “the very Sermon of God,”<sup>21</sup> the Word springing forth from the mouth of God and coming to the people in the Liturgy of the Word. He is the *Antwort*, the Answer the people give to God in Jesus, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Holy Preaching is the “living Christ” and the “voice of the Spirit,” liturgically celebrating with the people, gratuitously sharing *Wort*. The *pueblo* liturgically returns the *Antwort* to the God of love. “The Eucharist makes the Church, the Church makes the Eucharist” is also “the Word makes the Church, the Church makes the Word.” *The Preaching Word*—the title of Semmelroth’s book—is the Holy Preaching: Living Word, Living Community, Living Spirit.<sup>22</sup>

I would like to propose an additional title for Mary as manifested in Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe—she is *Logotokos*, the Mother of the Word, the Word-Bearer. She bodily holds in herself, by the breath of the Spirit, the Word Incarnate. Mary *Logotokos*, *La Gaudalupana*, is the Holy Preaching.

In the spirit of dialog, and in fidelity to the tradition, the title *Logotokos*—Mother of the Word—provides a fitting description for Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe as font of the Holy Preaching. Mary is the Bearer of the Word to the suffering *pueblo*. Poor Christians throughout the world feel a special closeness to Mary, and some theologians have referred to the *Guadalupana* as the “Maternal Face of God.”<sup>23</sup> The *Guadalupana* is intimately intertwined, maternally related, to the Word. She is presence of the Word for the *pueblo*. She is hand of God working through the Word, “the mission of the Son.” She is also hand of the Spirit, “the mission of the Spirit,” for both missions of the Holy Trinity (St. Irenaeus of Lyon) are one in the proclamation of the “Sacramental Word.”<sup>24</sup>

### *El Cauterio Suave*

Mathew Vekathanam, OCD, writes the following of the Holy Spirit:

The redemptive act of Christ enters a particular phase in the sending of the Holy Spirit; it is in the event of the Pentecost that the universal relevance of the salvation realized in Christ was concretely manifested by visible signs of transformation among Christ’s disciples and those who came to hear their message. The sending of the Spirit was necessary to make the disciples experiences in a tangible way the power of Christ’s Resurrection. So, any discussion on the universal relevance of Christ’s unique redemptive

---

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Paul Janowiak, SJ, for this insight and for introducing me to the writings of Otto Semmelroth. See *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Otto Semmelroth, SJ, *The Preaching Word: On the Theology of Proclamation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965).

<sup>23</sup> Elizondo, *La Morenita*.

<sup>24</sup> Pastro, *Enflamed by the Sacramental Word*.

act logically leads to a consideration of the role of the Holy Spirit in universalizing the uniqueness of the Christ-event.<sup>25</sup>

Western theology has been criticized for concentrating almost exclusively on the work of Jesus—to the exclusion of the Person and Mission of the Holy Spirit.

But God is not *manco*, one-handed, says Víctor Codina.<sup>26</sup> God works with both hands. The two hands of God—the vivid image of the Trinity presented by St. Irenaeus of Lyon—are Son-Word and Spirit-Life. In Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe, we see the fullness of the action of the Holy Trinity. She shares Word—and Spirit—with the *pueblo*. These traditional “two missions” are not confused, changed, separated, or divided—to use the Chalcedonian terminology of the two natures of Jesus. Mary has a special place in the tradition and, as with the Word, she is intimately associated with the Spirit. Is it any wonder that the Holy Spirit was often “written” as a woman in ancient Christian Syriac iconography?

Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe is filled with the Holy Spirit and fire. She is impassioned with love and justice for the people she accompanies with the fire of the Spirit. The Word is conceived by the Spirit and so present in Mary—“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed among all women” (Luke 1:28)—that when one sees her, one sees, hears, and experiences the Spirit-anointed Word.

St. John of the Cross, in the *Spiritual Canticle*, writes in poetry (*Oh, Llama de Amor Viva*) of the *mano blanda*, the soft Hand who is the Father, the *toque delicado*, the delicate touch who is the Son, and the *cauterio suave*, the tender cauterization who is the Holy Spirit. During John’s time, cauterization was used as a last resort for healing a wound. It was very effective because it stopped bleeding, healed, and disinfected at the same time. But it was extremely painful. John speaks of the “tender cauterization” of the “gifted wound” (*regalada llaga*).<sup>27</sup> This is his vivid image for the Holy Spirit—and these three profound metaphors underlie his theology of the Trinity.<sup>28</sup> What better way to speak of the mystery of the Trinity than through symbol and poetry?—even more so in the case of the Spirit, who is like the wind. The effects are seen but one knows not from where it comes or where it goes. So those born of the water and the Spirit, Jesus tells Nicodemus (John 3:8). We are born of the Spirit—Holy Preaching by Baptism. Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe, full of Spirit *Cauterio Suave*, reminds the people of God’s love and protection. They are *dignos y dignas*, like St. Cuauhtlatoatzin.

Oxford theologian Sebastian Brock, who has specialized in the theology of St. Ephrem the Syrian, suggests that academic theology has lost its integral connection with *symbol*. When one speaks of symbol, one necessarily speaks of Spirit. Ephrem (“the Harp of the Spirit”) used

---

<sup>25</sup> Mathew Vekathanam, OCD, *Indian Christology: Perspectives and Challenges* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2004), 550.

<sup>26</sup> Codina, *Creo en El Espíritu Santo*. I cannot locate the page number.

<sup>27</sup> *St. John of the Cross, Alchemist of the Soul: His Life, His Poetry (Bi-Lingual), His Prose*, Translated with Commentary by Antonio T. de Nicolás. Forward by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Boston: Weiser Books, 1996), 128–30.

<sup>28</sup> *San Juan de la Cruz: Llama de Amor Viva, Primera Redacción*, Edición Adoptada al Castellano Actual por Antonio J. Mialdea (Córdoba: Editorial Cántico, 2012), 50.

poetry and hymnody to express the deepest theological truths of the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> Raimon Panikkar says that theology is *fides petens intellectum*—faith “praying” for understanding. Theology is “rational,” he says. But more than anything, it is symbolic.<sup>30</sup> Through Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe, the gospel is preached much more through *symbol* than doctrine. This is also a consistent theme in the theology of Víctor Codina, SJ, who ties symbol to his cultural-sacramental theology. He maintains that Latin American theology has rediscovered the importance of the *religiosidad popular*—the popular religiosity. The *pueblo* does theology not so much through “Western logic.” Rather, symbol is of deep import to the people. If symbol is indispensable to culture, why has Western theology (including some classic liberation theology of the 1970s and 80s) relied so heavily on European academic theology? Codina, along with many others in Latin America, are calling for a new paradigm in theology. Perhaps “systematic theology” is no longer the way for Church and academy today. Rather, symbolic theology should *preach*, in the spirit of the Mothers and Fathers—and in the spirit of contemporary Latin American, Asian, and African, eco-feminist, and contextual theologies.

Contemplatives and mystics are an important source for symbolic theology. St. John of the Cross has already been mentioned; but there is also St. Teresa of Avila, St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Julian of Norwich, St. Gregory of Nisa, St. Catherine of Siena, Thomas Merton, and many others from the contemplative tradition. They teach us how to reinvigorate the theological task today.<sup>31</sup> Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe, and the Mexican experience of the Holy Preaching, is “mystical” and an exercise in contextual symbolic theology. She is the “warrior woman” filled with the Spirit of Life, the *Cauterio Suave* who heals the open, festering wound of the *pueblo* and tells of God’s love and *acompañamiento*.

#### **Conclusion: *Loci Theologici, Loci Praedicationes***

I have mentioned Víctor Codina, SJ, a number of times in this essay. In my opinion, he is one of our greatest living theologians. He has written a “trilogy” on pneumatology. The first (*Creo en el Espíritu Santo*, 1993) sets out his vision for a post-modern, post-colonial theology of the Holy Spirit, a major theme of the present essay summarized in Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe as metaphor for Mexican reality.

In *Creo en El Espíritu Santo*, Codina deals with *loci theologici* for a new paradigm. *Loci theologici* are *loci praedicationes*—places from which reflection on the Holy Preaching should be done.<sup>32</sup> Codina implies that traditional *loci theologici* have been objectified, and he encourages a new approach that makes them *subjects*. My sincere desire is that these five *loci praedicationes* will also be of help to any person of good will who wishes to pursue the call to the *Sacra Praedicatio*. Codina—a Bolivian theologian—connects these *loci* to Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Studies, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> Panikkar, 11. Panikkar reserves, as well, an important role for the traditional *fides quaerens intellectum*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> See Panikkar, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Codina, *Creo en El Espíritu Santo*, 193–209.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 212–14.

The first *locus* is religion. Codina mentions how religion, as manifested through the *religiosidad popular* of the *pueblo*, has been alienated from contemporary society and theology. He uses Karl Barth's famous reflection on *faith*, not religion, as the starting point for theology. Religion, Barth says, is a *human* creation and thus suspicious. Faith, on the contrary, is a *divine* creation and the place from which theology should proceed, according to Barth. Codina says this short-changes religion. It is high time to recover a theology of *religion*—particularly regarding the *religiosidad popular*. Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe as Holy Preaching is a good place to begin. She forms the center of popular religiosity for the Mexican *pueblo*.

The second is creation and the earth. The first words in the Scriptures are: "In the beginning." In the beginning is "formless void and darkness," and the Spirit hovers over the waters (Genesis 1:2). Codina calls this a deeply maternal image of creation. As preachers, we are summoned: go back to the beginning, to the formless void and darkness becoming creation and light by the Spirit of God! Where are our roots? Latin American indigenous cultures have in common an integral respect for *Pachamama*, *Madre Tierra*, Mother Earth. Western cultures—and we preachers—have lost our connection to the earth, to creation. We are called to return, and Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe as Holy Presence, Holy Preaching, can help us in this endeavor.

The third is indigenous and African-American reality. A major part of today's population in Latin America (and in North America!) is indigenous and African American. They have been overlooked and alienated in contemporary society and Church. This oppression forms a major part of our deliberations at this gathering dedicated to "Unmasking Homiletic Whiteness." Codina reflects on the prayer used for the closing of the World Indigenous Congress at Mexico City in 1990. Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe is invoked, and God is addressed as Mother-Father who accompanies the suffering peoples of the world with all *amor, compasión, auxilio, y defensa*. Indigenous peoples and African Americans are a concrete *Rostro de Cristo* ("Face of Christ") for the *pueblo*.<sup>34</sup>

The fourth is women. Women have been too long, too far, from the center of the theological endeavor. This has slowly changed over the last thirty years, led by women *doing* theology. Codina mentions Ivone Gebara, Georgina Subiria, María Pilar Aquino, María Clara Bingemer, Rosemary Radford Reuther, and many others. In the Academy of Homiletics, we are blest with a multitude of women preacher-theologian-pastors. I wonder if the lack of theological reflection in the North American and European academies on Santa María Tonantzin Guadalupe has been because the *Guadalupana* is ... an indigenous woman!

The fifth is celebration and *fiesta*. José Marins has added two more "stages" to the traditional triad of Latin American theology—*ver* (see), *juzgar* (judge), and *actuar* (act). *Evaluar* ("evaluate") and *celebrar* ("celebrate") are the additions. One cannot live in Latin American and Mexican reality for very long without knowing the importance of *fiesta*! We preachers, dedicated to the Holy Preaching and Santa María Guadalupe Tonantzin, must make celebration with the *pueblo* a priority! Gerhard Lohfink, the great German exegete who is a favorite of Gustavo Gutiérrez, points out that the multiplication of loaves and fishes in Mark 6:30–44 is misnamed. "Mark is describing a banquet," he says. Lohfink continues:

---

<sup>34</sup> *Puebla*, 31–39.

In many newer translations the miracle is now called “Feeding the Five Thousand.” That still skips over what is crucial here. “Feeding” makes us think of “feeding the poor,” “soup kitchens,” “feeding the pets,” and so on. It does not evoke the idea of a feast, as festival dinner, a banquet. And Mark really does want to speak of a “feast.” When a translation reads, “[Jesus] ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass, it is much too closely accommodated to today’s table customs. What Mark 6:39 really says is that Jesus ordered the disciples to see to it that everyone should “recline,” that is, make themselves comfortable for a banquet.<sup>35</sup>

¡*Celebrar!* The word becomes Word and summarizes what the Holy Preaching is—the eschatological banquet that begins *now*, in Person, in *pueblo*, in Holy Presence. The poor understand because it forms part of their being, their flesh and bones. Animated by the “Christic presence” (Panikkar) of the *Guadalupeana Morenita*, filled with the breath of the Holy Spirit, they are the *Sacra Praedicatio*. May Santa María Tonantzín Guadalupe, font of the Spirit and the Word, *Logotokos* and Holy Preaching, inspire us preachers to solidarity with the poor through her Holy Presence! Amen.

---

<sup>35</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *No Irrelevant Jesus: On Jesus and the Church Today*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 37.

# **A THEOLOGY FOR EXPOSITORY PREACHING WITHIN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PREACHING TRADITION**

**Larrin R. Robertson**

**Ph.D. Candidate, African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric**

**Sponsor: Frank A. Thomas, Ph.D. Director of the Academy of Preaching and Celebration  
and Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Th. Miller Professor of Homiletics**

**Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, [www.cts.edu](http://www.cts.edu)**

**Copyright © 2019 Larrin R. Robertson**

**ABSTRACT:** Effective preaching accounts for the world of the text, contemporary human experiences, and appropriate responses to both. Whereas expository preaching and African American preaching both claim allegiance to the text, contemporary practitioners struggle to identify an approach that satisfies both. This paper explores a developing theology of preaching that honors a commitment to Scripture and engages human experiences while seeking liberative responses to the message contained in both text and proclamation. Theological and homiletic considerations interact with hermeneutics and rhetoric to examine the nature and purpose of preaching that fuses a genre (expository preaching) and a tradition (African American preaching) to create a supporting homiletic method. Scripture, traditional and contemporary homiletics, and cultural identification join in dialogue to aid the development of this theology and the dialectical-influenced method that it produces.

## **Introduction**

Preachers committed to the African American preaching tradition and to the expository preaching genre are often challenged to maintain fidelity to both tradition and genre. At issue is whether expository preachers, owing to an attending theology, are unable or unwilling to account for human experiences as a necessary element of the preaching event. This paper develops a theology of preaching in conversation with the history, nature, purposes, and definitions of preaching, African American preaching, and expository preaching. Following the framework advanced by L. Susan Bond,<sup>1</sup> I examine the nature and purpose of preaching (Section I), the authority of scripture to reveal its relationship with preaching (Section II), and the relationship between person and message to reveal the purpose of faith communities (Section III). Each section includes a discussion of the influence of African American preaching or expository preaching. Section IV presents a preaching methodology to support expository preaching the African American preaching tradition.

I locate myself within the homiletic tradition of African American preaching as an expository preaching practitioner. To incorporate textual and practical illustrations and points of application, I fuse traditional expository preaching with dialectic textuality as proffered for the

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Susan Bond. *Contemporary African American Preaching: Diversity in Theory and Style*. (Chalice Press: St. Louis) 2003.

field of homiletics by Samuel DeWitt Proctor.<sup>2</sup> Cultural influences and expository preaching as a preferred genre are presented in each section as I explore the potential for this theology of preaching within my social and cultural location.

## SECTION I: NATURE AND PURPOSE OF PREACHING

Christian preaching takes its cues from the biblical record because it preserves for us the hope, presence, words, and work of Jesus, and it gives an account for hope yet to be realized. Its historical dependence on sacred text is seen in the events recorded in Acts Chapter 2 where Peter recites and explains Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:28-32), David's vision-psalm (Psalm 16:8-11), and the then-contemporary events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. From among the gathered crowd, in response to what had just been proclaimed, the question arose: "what shall we do?" Christian preaching, then, is the proclamation of the Gospel that addresses human experience and provides a way to respond. Bond asserts that "homiletical purposes come in a variety of forms" including salvation that produces changed hearts, improved behaviors, challenges of social structures, instruction of congregations, and formation of communities, among other outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

These outcomes are the products of preaching's persuasive element where I view preaching as primarily theological with appropriately attending rhetoric. Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid note that preaching is a rhetorical act that persuades the hearer to respond.<sup>4</sup> Preaching can convince unbelievers to become believers, it can enrich individual and societal morals and values, and it can challenge and transform both pulpit and pew. These are but some of the responses of the hearer who has been persuaded by preaching.

### *The Nature and Purpose of African American Preaching*

I contend that the nature and purpose of African American preaching are much the same as the general understanding advanced above. However, African American preaching is produced from a hermeneutic lens which seeks liberation. As Bond notes, this desire for liberation has its genesis in the preaching of the enslaved, it is interwoven in the experience of African Americans, and it continues in the theology of contemporary homileticians.<sup>5</sup> Brad R. Braxton helps to advance this understanding: "African Americans have an existential rationale for the necessity of liberation. We are separated from what we believe is our destiny, namely, to be leading and contributing citizens on a large scale."<sup>6</sup> James Henry Harris posits: "Preaching liberation is one means by which the preacher helps individuals and groups move from suppression of possibility

---

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed view of Proctor's homiletic method see Samuel D. Proctor. *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority*. (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Bond, p.8.

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid. *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Bond, p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Brad R. Braxton. *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*. (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 2002), p.2.

to possession of possibility.”<sup>7</sup> In each case, liberation is non-negotiable for African American preaching.

### *The Nature and Purpose of Expository Preaching*

Before engaging the nature and purpose of expository preaching, a definition is necessary. In short, I define expository preaching as the proclamation of a central theme drawn out of a singular biblical textual unit. Though beyond the scope of this writing to explicate what can be a textual unit for expository preaching, I assert that the best representation of expository preaching promotes an extended passage of Scripture over a singular verse. African American pastor and practitioner of expository preaching, Albert Louis Patterson, Jr., previously advanced a method of expository preaching that “move[s] in the direction of the sequential, segmented sense of the scripture.” Further, Patterson describes an expository method that looks “at the pericope—the individual unit of a trend of thought—as is written by the wonderful Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> I contend that expository preaching confronts the theological assumptions of preacher and listener by challenging doctrinal positions, prejudices, and presuppositions and requiring preacher engagement with Scripture on its own terms. The text is privileged and emerges victorious in disputes between scriptural revelation and presuppositions. Haddon Robinson agrees: “an unflinching expository ministry opens us to truths in tension.”<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier warns against adherence to a proposition conceived with the aim of a predetermined conclusion, noting the possibility of paralyzing God and forming theology based on a God limited to one’s own “truth.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, a cautionary note serves as a guardrail for expository preaching. The nature and purpose of exposition permits the text to speak and lead the conversation.

### *My View*

With Paul Scott Wilson’s *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* as an aid, I view my preaching as alive and available to conversations and experiences that inform and produce a preacher who connects persons with God by way of a biblical text. I agree with Wilson: “Preaching needs to result in people doing something.”<sup>11</sup> In my context, “doing something” can result from my ability to guide others toward an understanding of what that “something” is, and to persuade them to act upon what has been proclaimed. By joining African American preaching with the expository method, my aim for preaching is to address the exigencies of African American experiences from within the biblical text for the purpose of persuading toward liberation and transformation. As Wilson suspects, this preacher “depends on homiletics to think through what it is [I] do” so that I may “to do it with greater economy, skill, and insight.”<sup>12</sup>

## **SECTION II: THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE**

---

<sup>7</sup> James H. Harris. *Preaching Liberation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p.68.

<sup>8</sup> A. Louis Patterson, Jr. “In You,” sermon, Columbus (OH) Baptist Pastor’s Conference, Simultaneous Revival, New Salem Baptist Church, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Haddon W. Robinson(b), *The Relevance of Expository Preaching*, p.90

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth T. Achtemeier, *Preaching the Authority of the Canon*, p.69

<sup>11</sup> Paul Scott Wilson. *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, (Chalice Press: St. Louis, 2004), p.119.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150.

### *Sacred Sources*

The expository genre and the African American preaching tradition are rooted in the authority of the Scripture and its treatment. Ronald J. Allen notes that verse-by-verse preaching, a character of historical exposition, “first appeared in full dress in the community that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran...Early in the Common Era many of the rabbis employed it.”<sup>13</sup> It is plausible that this practice of reading and interpretation would have been held over by early-Jewish Christian communities as well. For example, a case can be made for this as the practice noted in Acts 17:10-15 as the Bereans searched the Scriptures daily.

Returning to the events recorded in Acts 2 we reiterate and ground the authority of scripture for Christian preaching, generally, and expository preaching in the African American tradition, specifically. One of the results of Peter’s sermon was the affirmation of scripture (which reflected Israel’s historical and spiritual journey with God) as a primary means of communicating the Word of God to the people of God. The preaching event, inclusive of preacher and listener response, is both formed and informed by this received text. The text as proclaimed, explained, and applied serves as the foundation upon which the preacher claims authority to speak and listeners permit the preacher to propose responses to what has been proclaimed. Likewise, expository preaching provides an approach by which the preacher assigns authority to scripture within community to understand what the text offers and propose responses within the framework of what the text offers. Turning again to Patterson’s approach within the tradition of African American preaching, this happens as the preacher honors “the sequential, segmented sense of scripture.”

### *The Nature of the Gospel*

Preaching is a primary vehicle for communicating the message of the gospel in that it promotes love, mercy, redemption, hope or liberation as central to the message. My claim for the nature of the gospel presents preaching as an evangelistic enterprise because the gospel message anchors the faith of Christians. Among Bond’s four orientations of homiletic theory, the evangelistic orientation joins the nature of the gospel with the mission of the church. Hence, the nature of the gospel and the mission of the church become inseparable. As Bond notes, “the church’s primary function is to convert unbelievers to the faith.”<sup>14</sup> Following this note, I contend that the church’s primary function includes presenting the gospel in truth and in response to human experiences. This is where I view the promise of the gospel as a liberative and transformative message. Conversion becomes both a spiritual and an experiential concern. Allen addresses the nature of the gospel in his review of topical expository sermons where he writes, “The expository sermon is a window through which to look at the gospel in relationship to the congregation.”<sup>15</sup> Allen advocates for a partnership where the preacher simultaneously leads and joins the congregation into an experience of the text. There are several implications here: 1) preaching the gospel is a community act; 2) the gospel is the aim of preaching; 3) the gospel unites the preacher and congregation around a message; and 4) the gospel guides the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ronald J. Allen. *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, (Chalice Press: St. Louis, 1998), p.29.

<sup>14</sup> Bond, *Contemporary African American Preaching*, p.20.

<sup>15</sup> Allen, *Preaching the Topical Sermon*, p.2.

preacher and congregation toward an understanding of scripture and their response to it. As will be developed later, the Holy Spirit is here involved.

### *Preaching and Scripture in Relationship*

Robinson insists that the expositor privilege the biblical text above all else. For the message of the Bible to be accomplished and to have its intended effect in the listener's experience, the sermon must be grounded in a biblical text. To guide the preacher toward the intended end-goal, in the expository method, Robinson insists that the preacher must "get the idea of the sermon from the idea of the text."<sup>16</sup> As can be seen, expository preaching serves several purposes. It respects tradition, it is an aid for the preacher, it focuses the preacher and listener on the Scripture, it provides a dependable approach to Scripture for the hearer's spiritual development, and it marks the authority given to the pulpit to affect transformation. Each of these reasons helps to explain the importance of expository preaching.

Not to be lost is the effect of expository preaching on the preacher. According to Robinson, "expository preaching also develops the preacher into a mature Christian. When an expositor studies the Bible, the Holy Spirit probes the preacher's life. As a preacher prepares sermons, God prepares the person."<sup>17</sup> Expository preaching becomes important for the preacher as he or she seeks to understand God's intention through Scripture and attempts to appropriate this understanding for herself or himself. Again, preaching that is grounded in scripture accounts for the human experience, even the experience of the preacher.

Achtemeier points to the practical benefit expository preaching can have on the preacher. She says: "There are still preachers across the land who cannot think in a straight line – cannot move logically from one point in the sermon to the next. So they wander from subject to subject, and the congregation has no idea where they are going."<sup>18</sup> Employing Patterson's segmented, sequential sense of scripture focuses the preacher on the text and reveals a homiletic roadmap from within the selected passage of Scripture.

Robinson and Bryan Chappell promote another aspect of the relationship between expository preaching and Scripture – the establishment of "divine authority." Robinson makes the case that expository preaching is "the type of preaching that best carries the force of divine authority."<sup>19</sup> Chappell notes that there are "two opposing forces [which] challenge the effective exposition of the Word of God." The first foe named by Chappell is "the erosion of authority," the second is the preacher's making of "moral instruction or societal reform the *primary* focus" of the message. Chappell offers Christ-centered exposition as the way to defeat these two "foes."<sup>20</sup>

Robinson and Chappell view expository preaching as the solution (or, at least a primary solution) to remedy what they view as the loss of the authority of the preacher and of preaching. It is the "divine authority" as revealed in and moving through Scripture, to which they turn to recapture and persuade both person and soul Godward. They assert that expository preaching

---

<sup>16</sup> Robinson(b), *The Relevance of Expository Preaching*, p.83.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson(c), *What is Expository Preaching?*, p.63.

<sup>18</sup> Achtemeier, *Preaching the Authority of the Canon*, p.67-68.

<sup>19</sup> Robinson(a), *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, p.19.

<sup>20</sup> Bryan Chappell. *Christ-centered Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 194), p.11-12.

must have God's word as its foundation and focus, and those who proclaim the text faithfully will be able to claim the source of authority it seeks to make known – God. Robinson and Chappell believe this reclamation effort will be realized through the practice of expository preaching.

Robinson notes that “a good expository sermon will reflect the passage not only in its central message but also in its development, purpose, and mood. As this happens, people not only learn the Bible as they listen but are also stimulated to study the Scriptures for themselves.”<sup>21</sup> On the development of an expository sermon, and notably the preacher's role in development, Robinson says: “To preach effectively, an expositor must be involved in three different worlds...knowledge of the Bible...currents swirling across his own times...his own particular world.”<sup>22</sup> This is to say preachers do well to be conversant in human experiences to which scripture speaks. An initial read of Robinson's three-world approach may cause one to suppose that there is some other source upon which the expository sermon can be authorized. To clarify his stance, Robinson offers this statement: “Preachers young or old who abandon the Scriptures for some lesser thing have no more credibility than those of politicians campaigning to be elected spouting whatever they think their audiences want to hear.”<sup>23</sup>

### *My View*

We affirm the primary role of Scripture in shaping and informing expository preaching in the African American tradition. Out of a given biblical text, the preacher seeks to discover authorial intent, sacred meaning, content for preaching, and the themes, ideas, and applications of hope for the listener. While this view situates the preacher within the expository genre, there is an awareness of some concern about advocating for Scriptural authority. Specifically, there are concerns that this theological position promotes a Eurocentric view of God that applies hermeneutical principles and homiletic privileges that do not account for the experiences of persons who are neither white nor male. On this note, Bond is right: “As soon as you claim a biblical authority, you are confronted with the problem of which biblical authority is really authoritative.”<sup>24</sup> Is it the biblical authority that licensed enslavement and in some ways continues to promote ethnic and racial exclusive privilege? Or, is it the biblical authority that requires the preacher to note that the Source of salvation requires liberative action in response to what has been proclaimed? Of Bond's two proposed camps, I side with those who believe that “God was using Jesus to renew our understanding of the same promises and providence to which the First Testament witnesses.”<sup>25</sup> What is advanced in the First Testament is borne out in the Second, and continues to have agency in the present.

Postmodern homiletics embraces rhetorical ambiguity concerning God and truth claims. Bold post-modernist claims notwithstanding, it is dangerous to silence the original producers and consumers of the biblical text in service of decentralized authority, precisely for the reason

---

<sup>21</sup> Robinson(c), *What is Expository Preaching?* p.62.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, p.77-78.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, *The Relevance of Expository Preaching*, p.79-80.

<sup>24</sup> L. Susan Bond. *Contemporary African American Preaching*, p.11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

postmodernists claim to engage with homiletics. Wilson notes that there is a danger for postmodernist and other contemporary theologies that the question of what is ethical (i.e., authoritative) is resolved at best within the preacher's community; at worst this is a self-approved ethic (i.e., authority). This harkens to Bond's identification of theology "from below" which contemporary methods privilege over theology "from above."<sup>26</sup> Where contemporary views of authority depend on a moving target—i.e., human awareness—apart from the Divine as the source of ethical considerations, the post-modernist favors Bond's "from below" theology.<sup>27</sup> This African American theology of preaching is available for conversations about the hermeneutic lens employed, provided that foundational to the conversation is the presence and work of God as seen in Scripture. Where God is "decentered" and left out of the discussion, as Wilson says of postmodern homiletics, this theology has difficulty locating common ground because it is asked to remove the very foundation upon which it has been built and maintained over time and throughout the harshest of human experiences.<sup>28</sup> Liberative, African American preaching that is grounded in the authority of scripture has historical precedence and it offers current and future theological and homiletic stability.

### SECTION III: PERSON & MESSAGE

Preaching influences. Preaching is also influenced. This second aspect of preaching captures the attention of Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, and Andre Resner. The preacher and the message both factor into the preaching moment and provide the basis of analysis for a review of Hogan and Reid's *Connecting with the Congregation* alongside Resner's *Preacher and Cross*. These two analyses, alongside Frank Thomas's *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, summarize preaching as a rhetorical act due to the role of rhetoric in preaching. This, then, gives way to a conversation about person and message in preaching.

#### *Persona in Preaching*

Following Augustine's view of rhetoric's role in the preaching moment, Resner advances the idea that rhetoric involves the speaker's ability to influence an audience. Like Resner, Hogan and Reid develop rhetoric's attending elements and conclude that a speaker's persona is an integral part of the rhetorical act. Their analysis is that listeners steward the authority necessary for speakers to engage in persuasion. The audience judges the speaker's persona – i.e., *ethos* – and determines if the speaker's rhetoric will have any effect.<sup>29</sup> For Hogan and Reid, the speaker's *ethos* is the agent which convinces the audience that a message is worth the audience's time and attention because the speaker is worth the audience's time and attention. A second rhetorical element, *pathos*, involves the preacher's choices to persuade the audience to care about the message. According to Hogan and Reid: "When preaching, you can, and should, attempt to affect the emotional response of your listeners."<sup>30</sup> The rhetorical element of persuasive

---

<sup>26</sup> L. Susan Bond. *Trouble with Jesus: Women, Christology, and Preaching*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), p. 40-42.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Scott Wilson. *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, p.144-45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>29</sup> Hogan and Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

passion is not void of care of the listener. The rhetorical situation of preaching involves the preacher's tone, facial expressions, timing, word selection, and phrasing. Each adding to the listener's thoughts concerning the speaker's level of concern for them, and in turn, the listener's decision for message acceptance.

Further situating preaching as a rhetorical act, Hogan and Reid remind that “[preachers] have a point of view, and we offer reasons we hope our listeners will find convincing and compelling.”<sup>31</sup> This understanding highlights the message – i.e., *logos* – as a critical rhetorical element. So fundamental to preaching is *logos* that Resner suggests that establishing an understanding of “what preaching's message is and how it relates to the use of rhetoric” is a first-order concern.<sup>32</sup> In this view, preaching apart from *logos* is not possible.

I agree with Thomas's assessment that *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* are inherent to the nature of preaching, particularly as they relate to African American preaching. Thomas examines “playing the dozens” and signifying as rhetorical acts in African American culture and preaching. In the culture and in preaching, each of the three rhetorical elements influences, or shapes, the act while simultaneously being influenced, or shaped, by the act.<sup>33</sup> With Thomas alongside Hogan and Reid, and Resner, preaching is seen as a rhetorical act.

### *Person and Message*

I acknowledge and agree with the position that the preacher's *ethos* impacts an audience's willingness to receive a message. However, I do not agree with the donastic view that the preacher's moral improprieties necessarily suppress the efficacy of the message. When weighed against the message to be proclaimed, the message exceeds the importance of the person. A brief reminder is provided here concerning the efficacy of expository preaching. It may be supposed that listeners desire preachers of sound moral character, thought, and activity. So, where a preacher's morality is questioned, the audience is right to also question the preacher's message – the *logos*. Preaching that is grounded in and pointing to the biblical text enables listener confidence beyond *ethos*. This does not excuse or ignore questionable or flawed moral character; *ethos* matters. Yet, where *ethos* fails, the message can remain. For this theology of preaching, person and rhetoric are authorized by the text from which a message proclaimed. Augustine reflects on Paul's insistence that preaching Christ (i.e., the message) is the main criteria for determining success, over the motivation for one's preaching (i.e., the *ethos*, hence the person).<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Resner points to “the message-driven demands of the gospel and the hearer-driven demands of the rhetorical situation that is preaching” to present a distinction in the discovery of importance.<sup>35</sup> Where the demand of the gospel is always about “love of God and of neighbor” the demands of the rhetorical situation are constitutive of preacher-audience context variables. Message consistency grounds these potentially diverse demands.

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>32</sup> Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> Frank A. Thomas. *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), p.78-84.

<sup>34</sup> Resner, 54.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 58.

An examination of persons throughout time who have preached absent questionable *ethos* would lead one to conclude that not one person is completely morally qualified to preach. Yet, many have professed a Divine call to preach. The call is not the proclamation of the preacher's person; rather, it is a call to proclaim Good News. Resner assesses that the Good News does not come from the preacher thus does not require absolute dependence on the preacher's fitness or ingenuity.<sup>36</sup> Resner comments: "What is annulled at the cross, then, is not rhetoric as such but its *kata sarka* ("according to the flesh") enslavement."<sup>37</sup> This annulment gives way to a theological message as viewed *kata stauron* ("according to the cross"). Thomas continues this view: "When the preacher preaches the cross, the message of the cross covers the weakness of the preacher's life...the cross subverts the world's standards for credibility...into Christ's standards."<sup>38</sup>

### *The Role of the Holy Spirit*

In their discussion of preaching, Stephen Olford and Haddon Robinson address the Holy Spirit's role in the practice for expository preaching. Their definitions, provided in Section IV, indicate that preaching cannot be described as expository preaching without the active participation of the Holy Spirit. Following their argument leads to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit's activity advances the practice of expository preaching beyond an academic exercise. The conversation on the role of the Holy Spirit is a welcomed consideration for this theology of preaching because of the need for homiletic cooperation between head, heart, and experience. Concerning the role of the Holy Spirit, Graeme Goldsworthy dissents. Goldsworthy suggests that the definitions offered by Olford and Robinson are not altogether appropriate. Pertaining solely to the naming or identification of expository preaching, Goldsworthy says that, "Bringing the Holy Spirit's role into the definition...tends to a definition by results, as important as results are." Goldsworthy continues, "The expository sermon should...be defined in terms of the preacher's method and approach irrespective of its results."<sup>39</sup> In Goldsworthy's view, the inclusion of the Holy Spirit, being critical to any effective preaching, serves only to tie expository preaching to other styles for preaching. Goldsworthy does not dismiss the role of the Holy Spirit but cautions that the Holy Spirit does not differentiate expository preaching from any other type.

## **SECTION IV: PREACHING METHODOLOGY**

I am an expository preacher who seeks textual meaning through a process which produces a text-driven sermon product that teaches (revelatory) and explains (explanatory) a text with an eye toward a response (application). This grounds me within the historical tradition that James F. Stitzinger says includes Jesus.<sup>40</sup> It is seen again that the notion of expository preaching as both method and theology is grounded in the biblical era. In the early-church age, Origen's use of allegory is credited with attracting attention to exposition. Over time, however, the same use

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p.120.

<sup>40</sup> James F. Stitzinger. "The History of Expository Preaching," *The Master's Seminary Journal*. Vol. 3/1 (Spring 1992, p.5-32), p.7-11

of allegory is what prevented others from recognizing the value of exposition. Reversing this trend away from exposition, John Chrysostom's "'verse- by-verse' and 'word-by-word' expositions on many books of the Bible" is credited with ushering a renewed fervor for biblical exposition.<sup>41</sup> Since that time attempts to reduce the practice of expository preaching to a singular definition has been difficult. However, with the foregoing in view, and in consideration of my own *praxis*, I offer another attempt.

### *Expository Preaching Defined*

Traditional theory and *praxis* present expository preaching as the consecutive or verse-by-verse proclamation of a biblical text.<sup>42</sup> Donald G. Miller defined expository preaching as "an act wherein the living truth of some portion of Holy Scripture, understood in the light of solid exegetical and historical study and made a living reality to the preacher by the Holy Spirit, comes alive to the hearer as he is confronted by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit in judgment and redemption."<sup>43</sup> Olford and Robinson affirm Miller's concern for exegetical inputs that inform expository preaching.<sup>44, 45</sup>

With the expository genre in view, and with a desire to combine the tradition of African American preaching and with said genre, this paper presents a method to honor both. Taken together, this method of preaching as a living event for the liberative proclamation of a central theme drawn from a single biblical passage that is explicated and contextualized through the lens of African American experiences. Where liberation does not explicitly arise from a text, I contend that the proclamation of Good News is inherently liberative. Thus, proclaiming Good News may require an intentional and oppositional pronouncement against the biblical narrator, constrained of course, by the exegetical work which precedes the sermonic event.

### *Development of My Method*

This theology of preaching aligns preaching and preparation for preaching with the earlier call for expositors to privilege the text in preparation. As such, the method of preparation mirrors Robinson's 10-step approach for developing expository sermons.<sup>46</sup> To Robinson's method, I add a final step of writing a sermon manuscript from the inputs provided in this 10-step process. I view it as critical to the preaching event that a full manuscript be written to promote clarity of thought and reasoned selection of word choice, both of which attend to the needful persuasive element of preaching. Though not required for the preaching moment, the manuscript helps the preacher to achieve clarity and reason for effective persuasion.

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.15

<sup>42</sup> Frederick B. Meyer's 1912 published definition of expository preaching is "the consecutive treatment of some book or extended portion of Scripture on which the preacher has concentrated head and heart, brain and brawn, over which he has thought and wept and prayed, until it has yielded up its inner secret, and the spirit of it has passed into his spirit." *Expository Preaching Plans and Methods*, (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912,) p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> O.C. Edwards, Jr. *A History of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), p.683.

<sup>44</sup> Olford and Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching*, p.69

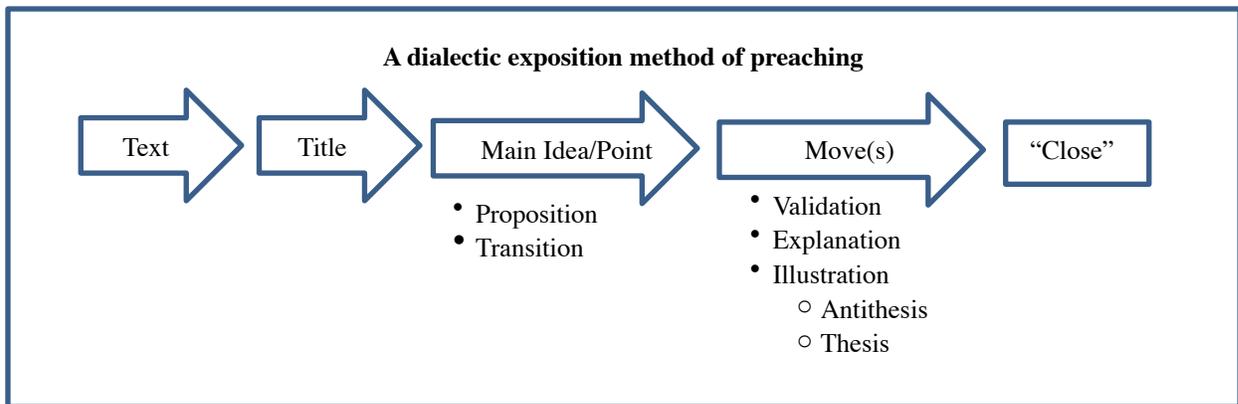
<sup>45</sup> Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, p.20

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Following Robinson’s 10-step process guides my movement from text to sermon.<sup>47</sup> Within this process, freedom of choice is granted in several areas that allow the application of contextual concerns to the step in-progress. For example, as an expository preacher, the matter of determining the sermon’s purpose is the result of the best understanding of purpose that can be drawn out of scripture. The exegetical work that produces the text’s purpose, must not be confused with the choices to be made in how the purpose will be accomplished.

*My Method for Proclamation*

For the purpose of this paper, it suffices to present the method which supports the theology presented above. To support my effort to join together a tradition and a genre, I borrow the Hegelian dialectic method of argumentation as it was popularized in the African American reaching tradition by Samuel DeWitt Proctor.<sup>48</sup> The method—a dialectic exposition—is now presented:



Adopting Proctor’s dialectic method provides for direct and explicit contextualization within the sermon because the placement of Proctor’s thesis and antithesis provides an outlet for the announcement of Divine initiatives in response to human experiences. African American experiences (or, any other hermeneutic lens) may be applied to the sermonic form that requires the preacher to offer a Word from God in response to human experience; a Word that finds residence in the selected text. In some sermonic forms, this dialectic aspect is similar to illustrations that help improve listener ability to “get it.” I contend that the presence of the dialectic as a necessary element of the sermonic move represents an opportunity for the preacher to offer speak on behalf of God who “pleads through us” to the effect that “we implore you.”<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Of the wealth of resources available to also aid the movement from text to sermon, I found the *Elements of Preaching* series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), edited by O. Wesley Allen Jr., valuable. Among this series Marvin McMickle’s *Shaping the Claim* (2008) stands out for its unique contribution to my sermon development process.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel D. Proctor. *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 1994.

<sup>49</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20

## **Conclusion**

My theology of preaching is that God works through the message proclaimed by the preacher in community to affect change. The preacher is granted authority to determine how to move through the process that creates a sermon out of a text, but the preacher's authority is limited and defined by the text. The exercise of the preacher's authority flows from the preacher's view of self in contrast to the preaching moment and the God who calls forth the preacher and the moment. I conclude that the text reveals God's will and binds the preacher to that message.

In my desire to join together African American preaching and expository preaching, I provided a cursory review of each tradition. Much more has been said of each by others. Those works are commended for further discussion. I note the difficulties associated with defining either tradition exclusively. This makes a definition of the merged traditions exponentially difficult. For those who, like me, are African American practitioners of an expository method, the effort is worth the challenge. Critiques of my definition and method may be helpful as I think more deeply about the implications of the effort.

Limited by the scope of this paper, more may have been provided on the nature and purpose of both African American and expository preaching. A good foundation on which to build is provided, however. Further research and a fully developed comparative analysis on nature and purpose would increase my resolve to explore the union of the two traditions. The outcome may produce a blueprint for other cultural preaching traditions to emerge in scholarship through the validity afforded to a historically accepted method.

# Unmasking White Preaching

Conveners: Lis Valle and Andrew Wymer

**THE MISSIONARY CONNECTION: WHITE PREACHING IN THE BRITISH  
COLONIES OF THE CARIBBEAN**

**Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, PhD, DMin**

**Styberg Professor of Preaching & Styberg Preaching Institute Director  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL [www.garrett.edu](http://www.garrett.edu)**

**Copyright © 2019 Gennifer Benjamin Brooks**

**ABSTRACT:** The era of British Protestant foreign missions to colonies of the British Empire of the West Indies during the heyday of British foreign missions in the period from 1700-1886 resulted in a missionary presence that had great negative impact on the culture of African slaves who were the subject of their evangelistic fervor. The evangelistic carried out by white missionaries is well defined as white preaching. White preaching reflects and is undergirded by a white supremacist, racist agenda that denies the full humanity of natives and people of color, specifically the African slaves and their descendants.

The subject of foreign missions and white missionaries being sent to countries inhabited by people of color has always caused great angst in my inner being. The source of that deep discomfort eluded me for a long time even after my theological horizons broadened during study of significant theological theories and ecclesial movements. But eventually I came to the understanding that it originated from the reality that the missionary movement<sup>1</sup> was the purveyor of a theology of whiteness that reflected the belief in white supremacy and that added serious injury to the lives of persons who were already suffering the hegemony of slavery in places far from their native shores.

White missionaries sent by their denominations or compelled by their inner voice to go and preach Christ to the natives, did so supposedly out of a conviction of a divine call or the sense of the need to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. If asked, most might well say that they were responding to Christ's command and commissioning as recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Unfortunately, the reality was the invasion by and the infusion of a white patriarchal system that brought a condemning God, a selective redeemer, given to partiality that favored the cause of whiteness or white supremacy and a condescending Holy Spirit that offered grace according to a caste system where native thriving and dignity ranked low, if not last on the list of divine favor. According to this system, human sin engaged by native peoples was magnified based on a value system that stemmed from a belief in white supremacy, which in turn placed missionaries second only to if not in line with the person of Jesus Christ. This value system originated from and was sustained by a hierarchical, anthropological structure of their own making and disseminated to the people upon whom they unleashed their missional zeal.

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I am referring specifically to British Protestant Missions as described by Andrew Porter in *Religion versus empire: British Protestant missionaries and overseas expansion, 1700-1914*, (Manchester University Press, 2004.)

This paper takes a brief, if not cursory look (given the breadth of historical information pertaining to this period) at the British Protestant foreign missions, and particularly the cultural impact of the missionary presence and their evangelistic preaching in the British colonies of the West Indies during the heyday of British foreign missions in the period from 1700-1886. It identifies the content of the preaching of the white missionaries of the period as white preaching, which I define loosely as preaching that reflects and is undergirded by a white supremacist, racist agenda. Such an underpinning of homiletical engagement denies the full humanity of natives and people of color, and specifically in this context, African slaves and their descendants.

In the period immediately following the beginning of the slave trade by Portuguese traders, and the subsequent enslavement and degradation of African people, as slavery spread to the many nations on the African continent and was adopted as a legitimate commercial enterprise that served to expand European empires, people of good will (or so they thought), both Catholic and Protestant, individuals and churches set out with Christian zeal into what they considered to be fertile fields of mission among the unknown people, considered heathen, and to whom they determined to preach the Christian gospel. History, written as it mainly has been by proponents of empire, tends to absolve the missionary movement from direct collusion with the goal of expansion of the British Empire. However, as Max Warren notes, it is relatively easy “to show how, during this period (1785-1859) and even more in the nineteenth century, Christianity was closely interwoven with both Commerce and Imperialism, infusing into both an element never easily digested ...”<sup>2</sup> For this writing, that element is the impact of white (supremacist) preaching that continues to extend its tentacles into the preaching of the established Protestant churches in the West Indies in the twenty-first century. The reality of the mission enterprise and the structure that systematized the work of the missionaries, although not fully recognized by the churches involved, owed its identity and ultimately much of its success, to the empire within which the missionary societies existed and operated. As Andrew Porter notes:

The growth and adaption of Christian missions and the processes of empire-building or dissolution have often coincided in both period and place. Periodically intertwined as they have been, the relevance of the one to the other in particular settings overseas has been much discussed. Nevertheless, even for the period 1790-1914, when the modern missionary movement got into its stride and enthusiasm for imperial expansion reached its peak not only in Britain but throughout Western Europe and the Atlantic world, there has been no general recognition or study of the problem as a whole ...

Occasionally it was acknowledged that missionary activity contributed to imperial expansion, but the manner in which it did so remained undefined. There was a tendency for religious questions to be treated in the context simply of growing secularization of European society, and for histories of Europe to ignore the significance of overseas agents such as missionaries for the continent’s own domestic transformation.<sup>3</sup>

In much the same way, the white supremacist behavior of the missionaries and its impact on and transformation of the countries, nations, societies and cultures of the peoples to whom they

---

<sup>2</sup> Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Porter, *Religion versus empire*, 2.

spread their Christian witness was also ignored. The white (supremacist) agenda of their privileged status was so ingrained in these missionaries and made such inroads into the lives of the native<sup>4</sup> people, that despite the subordinate and dismissive treatment the people suffered at the hands of their white “superiors,” they were made to believe and became convinced for the most part that it was an honor and privilege to serve their white missionary family, even when it meant neglecting their own families. This system of belief was the basis from which white missionaries preached to the people.

Preaching is the proclamation of the gospel. That is and ever will be my mantra for the homiletical task to which I believe I have been called. And the gospel that Christian preachers are called to proclaim is the salvation of Jesus Christ offered freely as the epitome of divine grace to all people equally. In the case of white missionaries, that gospel became subverted, infected by, inculcated with a white supremacist agenda that made of the Christian proclamation something much less than the freedom which Christ has offered to all people. Christianity and the church became an institution, a place where empire, human empire, and in the case of my reality as a native of the Caribbean, the British empire had ascendancy over the idea of the beloved community, under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. As a new territory caught in the web of ongoing exploration and expansion, the hierarchy wherein the subject nation was ruled by a distant monarchy was perpetuated in the structure and content of worship and preaching.

As a Methodist, Max Warren’s analysis of this period as “A Time of Exploration” and the role of Methodism’s founder in it, is of particular importance for me and for this writing. Warren states “The century which was to see John Wesley and many others exploring the world of religious experience and mapping in a new way the highlands of Christian perfection was a century which can be described as an age of curiosity.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that curiosity extended to the peoples, especially those of color encountered by white missionaries. If that held sway in their encounter with native peoples, it seemed to be of the type that viewed any but those who resembled them in all aspects, especially with respect to racial identity, as something less than and therefore worthy of the same exploitation as that suffered by the lands “discovered” during exploration on behalf of the empire.

It bears noting that the reality of empire as a system is based on a hierarchical structure that strives to maintain a mode of dominance over its subjects. That was the reality that prevailed in the mission churches. The culture of empire that white missionaries impressed upon native people resulted not simply in a devaluation of their culture, but did widespread damage to the prevailing society, even as the missionaries strove to replace native culture with their own. In the case of African slaves in the Caribbean, having been torn from Mother Africa and the myriad cultures and religions represented in the melting pot of tribes forced together as a result of their enslavement, the yet unformed community was not only vulnerable to, but unable to withstand the pressure of a fully formed, operational system of white supremacy represented by the British empire and her missionary subjects.

---

<sup>4</sup> “Native” here refers to the Africans and their descendants, slaves, who inhabited the islands. The original native peoples, the Arawaks and the Caribs had been virtually killed off by Europeans.

<sup>5</sup> Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1965), 18.

It is certain that the British missionaries dismissed immediately any thought that the slaves had a recognizable culture or any formal system of belief. Dale Bisnauth, writing on the *History of Religions in the Caribbean* notes that “the general view of English planters that the African slaves did not hold to a system of beliefs that could be described as a religion. At best – so the planters felt – their beliefs amounted to nothing more than heathenish superstition.”<sup>6</sup> That belief was erroneous, as the Africans were generally a religious people. That may even have worked to the favor of the missionaries and the African religious history may have been the preparatory foundation to their indoctrination by the missionaries. However, that was not the understanding of either the missionaries, or even of those who later documented the mission activities. In fact, in a chapter entitled To Preach Deliverance to the Captive, F. Deaville Walker, writing on missionary activity in the West Indies notes:

The task Methodism undertook in the West Indies was no light one; but it was one for which she was singularly well-fitted and prepared by God. Had her first missionary effort been to the subtle-minded Brahmins of India the results would have been less satisfactory. But to preach salvation through Christ to the lowly and sinful that was her own peculiar work. Long experience of evangelism in England and Ireland had trained her messengers in just such methods as would succeed in the West Indies.

Dark and helpless was the condition of the slaves who formed the bulk of the population in those beautiful islands ... They were mere cattle in the eyes of the law ... In most of the islands legal marriage was forbidden, and the slaves herded together like cattle. Can we wonder that their few opportunities for pleasure led them too often to drunkenness, dancing and immorality? Their revelries were often carried far into the night, fires were lighted, and drunken songs were accompanied by such wide musical instruments as could be obtained. It would be different to paint the picture too dark, but there were gleams of light. The marvelous cheerfulness of the African race; the love of music, song, and dance; the love for their children; their friendliness and sense of comradeship among themselves; their kindness and generosity, and above all their tendency to look for brighter days – all these traits made their wrongs and sufferings easier to bear. It was quite a thing for slaves to show the utmost devotion gratitude, and love to kind masters and mistresses; and many, in times of peril, have cheerfully given their lives to save masters and children from harm.<sup>7</sup>

Walker’s description of the people is indicative of the erroneous analysis of African people that exists to the detriment of their personhood, their mores and culture(s), which were (and are) derided, devalued and dismissed as primitive, heathen, ungodly, highly sinful and even unnatural (where white ways are seen as normal, acceptable, and natural, if not perfect).

Given that both slave owners and missionaries were white, the reality of their way of being was that it more closely resembled and fit quite easily into the practices of white slave owners. Certainly, the missionaries considered themselves a cut above cruel slave owners, but despite their so-called Christian message of freedom in Christ, their preaching did not extend

---

<sup>6</sup> Dale Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean*. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), 82.

<sup>7</sup> F. Deaville Walker. *The Call of the West Indies: The Romance of Methodist Work and Opportunity in the West Indies and adjacent regions*. (London: The Cargate Press), 49-51.

into territories that may have encouraged slaves to seek freedom from daily oppression. Their focus in preaching was “to teach the slaves about the Love of God and to implant within their hearts the Christian hope.”<sup>8</sup> However, the missionaries, like their slave exploiting counterparts did not see these African peoples as equal to whites, believing that “it was less easy to teach them to live a Christian life.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, they may have even missed the reality that the slaves were full persons imprinted with the *Imago Dei* in the same way as both the missionaries and the slave-owners were. They were unable to see beyond their white-supremacist prejudice against people of color.

Walker names his own prejudices even as he describes the preaching task of the missionaries. His belief in the enormity of the preaching challenge of the white missionaries continues in his description of their mission context. Speaking of the slaves, he says:

Most of them were little removed from the heathenism of West Africa, and many had been made worse by contact with white men, whose vices they had learned. There were many failures among the converts. It could scarcely have been otherwise. Often it was necessary for the missionaries to exercise discipline; sometimes members had to be suspended or even expelled.<sup>10</sup>

What does it say about Christ’s church that those who declare their Christian identity and are initiated into the body of Christ can be expelled? Are we all not repeating sinners continuously justified and redeemed by Christ? With the foundation of whiteness (or white supremacy) found in both the mission church and in their society, for their preaching, it seemed almost a natural progression that the missionaries would follow a trajectory in both their proclamation and their lives that would locate them in the hierarchy that existed in the mission field, at the highest rung, perhaps even in the place of God, although it is certain they would have denied any such accusation.

As such the slaves previously a religious people in their own way but converts to the missionaries’ teaching of Christ would be placed in the role of the rejected sinner, needing to be saved by being brought into line by their missionary saviors. And based on their actions that stemmed from their belief in their superiority over the converts, it enabled the empire to continue to use the missionaries to their gain by using the converted status of the slaves as the erstwhile whip to keep them in line. The work of missionaries and particularly the substance of their preaching so impressed the governing bodies that as Walker records, in one case on the island of Tortola: “The Governor sent for missionary Turner and requested him to organize a force of slaves for the defense of the island – feeling able to trust them with arms if under the leadership of the missionary.”<sup>11</sup> That the missionary in question did so with success speaks directly to the impact of the preached message on the native people.<sup>12</sup> It was an indoctrination, the like of which

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>12</sup> The slaves of these islands during this period were no longer African born, but descendants of erstwhile African slaves, born in the Caribbean.

changed the nature of African peoples with respect to their worship practices, from that of open and exuberant joy, to somber, sedate, repressed, and even silent worship.

An example of such indoctrination into the white supremacist culture of missionary preachers of which I have actual experience, is the requirement that worship services be somber and worshippers maintain silence except when required to join in communal prayer or song. In my own time, not only was any type of outburst or verbal or emotive expressions forbidden, or perhaps not even considered, but if one attended a concert within the church premises, no outward sign of appreciation for a good performance could be shown, except the waving of the program – no clapping, no noise. Additionally, in some denominations, despite the extremely hot temperatures in the Caribbean, women were required to cover themselves completely – long sleeves, high necked, ankle-length dresses, somber colors with no adornment on either their person or their clothing such as makeup or jewelry. Such items or modes of apparel that were contrary to these dictates were considered heathen and those who wore or used them were denounced in preached sermons, or even read out of the church. Additionally, musical instruments, especially those connected with African culture, such as drums, were condemned as instruments of the devil and the subject of vituperative sermons. White was the preferred color for garments worn in worship and was absolutely required for participation in Holy Communion. One might consider if this requirement was a way of reinforcing the superiority of the whiteness of people over persons of color. White was perfect and every other shade was a discoloration of perfection and those who wore such colors in worship represented a lower rung on the hierarchy of people.

In my estimation, the hegemony of slavery that made real and popular the devaluation of individuals was a disease that infected the preaching of the gospel and made suspect the efficacy of mission work in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to all nations. Even beyond the abolition of slavery by Britain, the gospel that was proclaimed to the people found its base in those biblical texts that highlighted best the sinful state of human beings, and necessitated a strident call to the hearers to repent and to abase themselves to the preacher (in the place of God) in order to attain divine favor. It called for hard and diligent work, a sacrifice of both dignity and self-worth in order to be heard by God and ultimately receive the blessing of God. And that blessing was doled out reluctantly, minuscule drop by minuscule drop by the preacher, who in the mission of Christ dispensed the largesse found in the cup of salvation.

Brian Stanley provides some important words of summation on the issue of white missionary preaching, which I submit had more to do with the expansion of empire, than the spread of the reign of God. Stanley writing on the relationship of British missions to political or economic imperialism notes:

The contribution of the missionary movements as a whole to cultural imperialism (substitute white supremacist preaching) ... is overwhelming ... missionaries have been guilty of foisting their own cultural values on their converts. They have upset the stability of indigenous social systems, and saddled the younger churches of the Third World with a thoroughly 'foreign' Christianity ... one of the highest priorities for the Third World churches today is to unwrap the gospel from its alien cultural packaging and develop expressions of the Christian faith which are genuinely indigenous to their particular cultured contents ... There can be little dispute that, for most of the nineteenth century,

British Christians believed that the missionary was called to propagate the imagined benefits of Western civilization alongside the Christian message. It was assumed that the poor, benighted 'heathen' were in a condition of massive cultural deprivation, which the gospel alone could remedy<sup>13</sup>

Stanley's analysis fits directly the tenet of white supremacy that plagued the missions undertaken by the church, and continues to plague church and society alike. That one group should presume to substitute its culture and norms for another on the basis of believing that theirs is the best and should take precedence over any other is the foundation of whiteness and white preaching.

What makes this study relevant for the present is that a new model of missionary zeal has overtaken many Caribbean countries and even places in South America such as Brazil. Like the missionaries of the earlier period, they have brought with them a zeal for evangelizing the natives that impinges on current culture in much the same way that British missionaries did. The white preaching of present-day Pentecostals is also directed to the prevailing cultures and whether the preachers are racially white (and many are) or African American, their zeal for Christ seems predicated on spreading a message that attacks cultural activities that they consider primitive, and which they believe have a negative impact on one's soul. This includes participation in native festivals and gatherings that are considered heathen.<sup>14</sup> It is missionary preaching at its worst in my estimation, since the good news of God's love gets lost in the vituperative rhetoric used to name sin in the people. It is to my way of thinking white missionary preaching at its worst.

As preachers, we are called to disseminate one gospel equally to all people. That gospel is the proclamation of free divine grace, salvation for all equally, without cost or price. To offer anything else is to defame the message of Christ and it is to circumvent the mandate of Christ that sends each and all of us into the mode of proclamation. To follow that mandate by engaging in missionary preaching is commendable only when the proclamatory message is given in the context of the people's culture. To deny the full worth of the people by defaming who they are and not making every effort to engage their culture is to change the message we are called to preach. To modify the substance of preaching in any way is a hegemony that must be rooted out and avoided at all costs in order to make one's preaching truly the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ and make real the mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant missions and British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, (Great Britain: Apollos 1990), 157

<sup>14</sup> In Brazil, the Pentecostal missionaries have condemned the religion of Candomblé, which is of deem African origin. There have been serious and concerted attempts to have stop the practice of this long practiced way of worship.

<sup>15</sup> This is the stated mission of The United Methodist Church.

**BETRAYING WHITE PREACHING:  
“RESPONSIBLE” AND “REALISTIC” WHITE PREACHING**  
**Andrew Wymer, Ph.D. Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship**  
**New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, NJ, [www.nbts.edu](http://www.nbts.edu)**  
**Copyright © 2019 Andrew Wymer**

ABSTRACT: Drawing upon reflections on the nature of our conference theme, I will briefly survey homiletical discourse on the nature of black preaching as one example of the longstanding unmasking of white preaching done by racially minoritized homiletical scholars working at the intersection of race and preaching, and I will draw from this discourse observations about the identification of white preaching as a distinct racial and homiletical category. I will argue that the heart of white preaching is a position of racialized social, political, and economic domination, i.e. racialized violence. I will then consider a pathway that might lead us—particularly those of us who are claimed by whiteness—toward decentering, deconstructing, and destabilizing white preaching. I will utilize Richard Delgado’s notion of white “responsibility” and Derrick Bell’s understanding of “racial realism” to reimagine neo-abolitionist discourse on racial treason that can be applied to white preaching in the era of Trump.

At this 2019 annual meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, our theme is “Unmasking White Preaching.” This title evokes the work of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* and the works of numerous other scholars utilizing the imagery of masks to engage critical race theory.<sup>1</sup> To the degree that we, the Academy, intentionally follow the non-dominant imagery of our theme to its sources outside of white-dominant discourse, our theme has the potential to draw us outside of white-dominant discourse in ways that may decenter white preaching, white preachers, white homiletics, and whiteness more broadly. However, this theme is not without potential limitations that might subsequently aim the trajectory of our conversations to centering white preaching, white preachers, and white homiletics, even if negatively.

The first limitation is that without the addition of further grammatical modifiers our theme may contribute to a perception that, as a body of homiletical scholars, we are entering “unexplored” or “undiscovered” territory and for the first time initiating the unmasking of white preaching. As I will argue in this essay, we must acknowledge that our efforts should be categorized in the scope of the field of homiletics as *further* or *continued* unmasking of white preaching. I argue that there already exists a significant tradition of unmasking of white preaching in some racially minoritized homiletical discourse. This emerged long ago in the work of scholars engaging homiletics specific to racialized experiences bearing the direct costs of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

violently gained “privilege” necessary on the part of those deemed white in society to “mask” white preaching, white preachers, and white homiletics in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

The second limitation is that the theme does not provide an explicit reference to a trajectory whereby, after carefully examining white preaching, we can continue in the long-standing homiletical legacy of some racially minoritized scholars who decentered, deconstructed, and destabilized white preaching in order for more life-giving preaching to emerge. I do not want to minimize the need for those of us who benefit from whiteness to sit with and study the ways in which we are caught up in the violence of preaching whiteness; however, at some point we must chart a trajectory whereby we will join the already begun, difficult work of decentering, deconstructing, and destabilizing white preaching.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing upon these observations, I have two primary tasks in this essay. The first task is to continue to unmask white preaching, and it has two key elements. These are: 1) to briefly survey homiletical discourse on the nature of black preaching as one example of the longstanding unmasking of white preaching done by some racially minoritized homiletical scholars and 2) to draw from this discourse observations about the identification of white preaching as a distinct racial and homiletical category. In this first section, I will argue that the heart of white preaching is a position of racialized social, political, and economic domination, i.e. racialized violence. The second task is to then grapple with pathways that might continue to lead us—particularly those of us who benefit from whiteness—toward decentering, deconstructing, and destabilizing white preaching. In this second section, I will briefly survey the concept of “race traitor” in neo-abolitionist discourse and subsequent critiques of it in critical race discourse in the late-twentieth century. Through these critiques, I will utilize Richard Delgado’s notion of white “responsibility” and Derrick Bell’s understanding of “racial realism” to imagine what it might mean to so significantly disrupt brutal systems of whiteness and white preaching in the era of Trump.

### **“Unmasking” White Preaching**

As was previously observed in a general way and bears a more specific restatement, it is important to note that the burden of grappling with white preaching as a racial and homiletical category has primarily and historically fallen to persons from racial groups whom whiteness targets. As a result, critical interpretations of homiletical whiteness have been present for some time in racially minoritized homiletical discourse engaging the intersection of race and preaching. While some racially minoritized scholars have long been tugging at the masks of white preachers and white homiletics, forcing, at the very least, partial exposures of their “faces,” too often those efforts have been disregarded. It seems that preachers, who are deemed white or benefit from whiteness have too often been so mired in our sociocultural formation into racial dominance and “privilege,” the violently gained economic, social, and political material plunder of whiteness, that we have either ignored or disregarded these critiques.

---

<sup>2</sup> Within the works surveyed later in this essay, “white preaching” is a critical racial and homiletical category, and while its unmasking is not always explicit or even the primary focus of these authors, white domination inside and outside of the pulpit is a sociocultural and ecclesial backdrop against which efforts at constructing or curating non-dominant homiletics have been pursued in the USA.

<sup>3</sup> This is also not intended to minimize the further work that needs to be done in examining the practice of white preaching.

In Sara Ahmed's article, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," she argues that in order for persons deemed white to move beyond simply performing anti-racism our work must acknowledge that expertise in the subject of race and responding to race lies outside of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> Ahmed can speak into our conversations, reminding us that all persons—including preachers—who benefit from being deemed white must first recognize that expertise in and solutions to white preaching lie outside of ourselves and outside of white homiletical theory or practice. By implication, we must listen to and learn from racially minoritized critiques of whiteness in a way that both engages the complex evil of whiteness and ultimately leaves us profoundly aware that any answers came or will come from outside of ourselves.

As I have stated previously and bears repeating in an even more pointed way, racially minoritized homiletical discourse engaging the intersection of race and preaching has long explicitly and implicitly argued that race distinctively and profoundly shapes participation in the preaching moment within the context of the United States of America (USA).<sup>5</sup> This is clearly evidenced in a sustained manner in some black homiletical discourse. Here, I must note that I do not necessarily wish to limit engagement of race to a black/white binary or to a North American dominant conversation. However, black homiletical discourse in the USA engaging the intersection of race and preaching represents a significant and sustained body of homiletical literature upon which to draw for the very limited scope of this essay.

In this section I will draw the following basic observations from a survey of the contributions of a few significant works in black homiletical discourse engaging the intersection of race and preaching. 1) Preaching in the USA is distinctively and profoundly shaped by race, itself an imposition of whiteness. 2) The distinct and profound impact of race on preaching has necessitated recognition of distinct schools of preaching along racial lines (e.g. black preaching, white preaching...) each complete with its own homiletical characteristics. 3) Awareness of and sensitivity to the profound and distinct impact of race on preaching is necessary if preaching is to impact the unfolding drama of race in the USA in a revolutionary manner.<sup>6</sup>

A longstanding, influential theme in black homiletical discourse engaging the intersection of race and preaching is that of identifying the racial and homiletical distinctiveness of black preaching in order to reclaim or preserve its powerful potential to contribute to the survival and thriving of black persons and communities in a white-dominant society.<sup>7</sup> A mid-twentieth-century example of black homiletical scholarship explicitly connecting race and preaching is

---

<sup>4</sup> Sara Ahmed. "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism" *Meridians* Vol. 7, No. 1, 2006, 104-126.

<sup>5</sup> I recognize the global implications of whiteness; however, the scope of this essay and my own familiarity have compelled me to limit the scope of this study.

<sup>6</sup> I utilize the term "revolutionary" in its contemporary sense as referencing the emergence of something new rather than its classical sense of referencing the return to something that once existed.

<sup>7</sup> This tendency is not without critique. In *Rethinking Celebration* Cleo LaRue argues that black homiletical discourse needs to move beyond "an endless engagement of contrasts and comparisons with white homiletics," because it, "precludes the breaking of new ground in our own black tradition." Cleophus LaRue. *Rethinking Celebration: From Rhetoric to Praise in African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

William Pipes' *Say Amen, Brother!: Old-Time Negro Preaching, A Study in American Frustration* (1951).<sup>8</sup> Pipes identifies the two primary sources of "old-time" black preaching as, "the mixing of early American and traditional African religious practices," and, "the need for an escape mechanism by a people held in bondage."<sup>9</sup> Cornel West observes that Pipes viewed, "black sermonic practices as integral to black culture, social, and political quests for empowerment and emancipation."<sup>10</sup> In his analysis, Pipes examines the distinct characteristics of old-time black preaching as flowing out of these two primary sources of traditional religious practices and the violent domination of whiteness, the latter of which he explicitly links to "white preachers" and their roles in its maintenance and defense.<sup>11</sup>

This pattern of searching for the distinctive sources and resulting distinctive characteristics of black preaching and the explicit naming of white preaching as harmfully connected to white violence is repeated in Henry Mitchell's much later work, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (1990), which was a compilation of earlier sources published in the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Like Pipes, Mitchell highlights how black culture and black hermeneutics were fundamentally shaped both by African traditional culture and by the brutality of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery, the latter which were justified by European and Euro-American agents and institutions through the violent imposition and maintenance of racial hierarchies. He then assesses the unique characteristics of black preaching that have emerged from those sources.

The concerns of these earlier works are reflected in *The Heart of Black Preaching* (2000) by Cleophus LaRue. However, LaRue makes a more focused argument that the "heart," or singular essence, of black preaching that renders it distinctive is its biblical hermeneutic shaped by black "sociocultural experience."<sup>13</sup> Sharing concerns similar to Pipes and Mitchell for the continued positive impact of black preaching in black life, LaRue argues that clarity about the "fundamentals of African American preaching" is vital, because, "our inability to name the basics of black preaching makes it difficult, if not impossible, to teach systematically the dynamics of this style to those who stand within as well as outside the tradition."<sup>14</sup> He is concerned that students and practitioners not only learn the "style" of black preaching but that they might learn the "substance" of the underlying commitment that shapes black preaching from the inside out, rendering it a source of power.<sup>15</sup>

These themes are also present in womanist homiletical scholarship; however, womanist scholars have contributed to discourse engaging race and homiletics by expanding critique beyond a singular focus on race to engage issues of gender, class, and sexuality. One example is

---

<sup>8</sup> William Pipes. *Say Amen, Brother!: Old-Time Negro Preaching, A Study in American Frustration* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Pipes. *Say Amen, Brother!*, 71.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> This work was published in 1990, but it combined two books, *Black Preaching* and *The Recovery of Preaching* respectively written in 1970 and 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Cleophus LaRue. *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 1.

<sup>14</sup> LaRue. *The Heart*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Teresa Fry Brown, who, in *Weary Throats and New Songs* (2003), searches for the “distinctive nature” of black women’s preaching.<sup>16</sup> While she does not explicitly claim a particular heart or essence, I understand her argument to indicate that the sources of the distinctiveness of black women preaching are 1) the “resistance (weary throats) [sic],” experienced at the intersection of race, class, and gender and, 2) the “support” and emergence of revolutionary “new songs” led and experienced by black women in “religious and social communities.”<sup>17</sup>

As was mentioned previously and bears repeating, I do not wish to limit engagement to a black/white binary, and I am utilizing these sources as one potential example of racially minoritized discourse that is critical of whiteness. Justo and Catherine González are an example of Latinx voices that explicitly, critically interpret whiteness as it relates to preaching in the USA. The González’s utilization of the—perhaps not coincidentally masked—“Lone Ranger” and “Tonto” to critique white, male preaching is sustained throughout *The Liberating Pulpit* (1994).<sup>18</sup> From these works and others outside the scope of this essay, it should be painfully clear that white preaching exists, and its existence has been being unmasked to some degree for a significant period of time.

As I previously stated and bears repeating, those of us who are deemed white or who benefit from whiteness must learn to deeply listen to those persons and schools of thought that have developed expertise in unmasking white preaching. As part of this listening, I believe that it is important to continue our own grappling with white preaching as a racial and homiletical category. In that spirit and taking my cues from LaRue, I briefly want to consider what is the heart, or pulsating essence, of white preaching from which has emerged or emerges any distinctively white homiletical style, biblical interpretative stance, ritual movement or language, constructive language about God, engagement of society and culture, or any other unique homiletical component.

I argue that the heart of white preaching, which renders it distinct from the preaching that emerges from other racialized social locations deemed non-white by the dominant, white social structure in the USA, is a position of racialized economic, social, and political domination—and necessarily racialized violence—from which emerges any distinctively white homiletical style, biblical interpretative stance, ritual movement or language, constructive language about God, engagement of society and culture, or any other unique homiletical component. This essence of racialized domination is one in which white preachers, white congregations, and corresponding white ecclesial structures, whether consciously or subconsciously, impose the structural and material domination of whiteness through the component actions of preaching onto texts, participants, and society in a manner that reflects and perpetuates broader systems of racial domination.

In order to hedge against any claims that I am essentializing race, I must note that I understand “white preaching” as first and foremost a political reference to preaching that occurs in social locations that politically benefit from or are perceived to benefit from the imposition of

---

<sup>16</sup> Teresa Fry Brown. *Weary Throats and New Songs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Weary Throats*. <sup>18</sup> Fry Brown’s work suggests the limitations of the singular focus of this essay.

<sup>18</sup> Justo and Catherine González. *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003).

a hierarchy of power according to the fluid racial constructs of whiteness. James Perkinson observes the political essence of whiteness, writing, “There is no one literally white, the term is a cipher for a social position of domination underwritten by a text of absolutism.” I do not primarily utilize “white preaching” as a biological reference to the preacher’s or the listening community’s skin color, though the two usually are correlated.<sup>19</sup>

My argument regarding the violent heart or essence of white preaching is supported implicitly and explicitly in arguments by a number of homiletical scholars engaging whiteness from a critical perspective, of whom I will engage just a few. As an example, in his work, “Sanctification, Liberation, and Black Worship,” James Cone names the backdrop of black worship and preaching as the death-dealing “white society,” and he describes white worship and “white spirituality that is culturally determined by American values and thus indifferent to oppressed black people’s struggle for racial justice.”<sup>20</sup>

These liturgical connections between whiteness and white worship in which white preaching takes place are explored at length in Scott Haldeman’s book, *Towards Liturgies of Reconciliation: Race and Rites among African American and European American Protestants*. He writes:

Between whites and blacks, the [liturgical] differences derive in large part from racist attitudes, and the ritual structures that proceed from and support them. African-American worship serves those who live on the underside of white supremacy. While African-American religious life is much larger than a series of communal responses to racism, these traditions are unique sanctuaries for a people who suffer daily indignities and provide an alternative arena where one is honored and accorded dignity. African-American worship heals the wounded, comforts the disconsolate, and empowers the weary. In contrast, most examples of European-American worship rest on white privilege, support the status quo, and provide solace to those who benefit from oppressive structures.<sup>21</sup>

While I would push Haldeman’s argument here to expand the sources of racial divides beyond “racist attitudes” to include racist structures, he names the fundamental domination of white worship as it supports systems of whiteness while, at best, providing acts of mercy that function to perpetuate white domination.

Haldeman’s work echoes James Harris’ earlier critique in *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching*, in which he decries the complicity of the white church in the maintenance of white supremacy.<sup>22</sup> He writes, “The God of the white church has historically been grounded in the status quo, the constitution, and a white-supremacy ideology. This “triune god [sic]” enables the white church to be an agent of the government, a harbinger of civil religion, an arm of the republic or the democratic state, and a propagator of the state’s agenda

---

<sup>19</sup> James Perkinson, *White Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 14.

<sup>20</sup> James Cone. “Sanctification, Liberation, and Black Worship” *Theology Today* Vol. 35, Issue 2, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Scott Haldeman. *Towards Liturgies of Reconciliation: Race and Rites among African American and European American Protestants* (London: Routledge Press, 2007), 237.

<sup>22</sup> James Harris. *The Word Made Plain: The Power and Promise of Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

and ideology.”<sup>23</sup> White church and white preaching have been and continue to be dramatic forces in the maintenance of racial hegemony.

In light of this essence of racialized domination, white preaching necessarily has the intrinsic and strategic material function of reasserting “white privilege,” the violent socioeconomics of whiteness in which structures of whiteness brutally exploit and even exterminate those persons and people groups deemed non-white and redirect economic, political, and social benefits to those whom society deems white. Not only does white preaching necessarily reassert white privilege, it benefits from it to one degree or another. Over the past few centuries, white homiletics in the USA has benefitted from and reinforced the validity and morality of the largesse of fortunes accumulated on bloodied and stolen ground and wrung from slave labor that have been lavished on churches, seminaries, and denominations.

The dominating essence of white preaching and the material spoils of whiteness from which it benefits have resulted in it centering itself as the pinnacle of Christian preaching to the point that it has escaped recognition on the part of those deemed white as a racial and homiletical category. Emerging out of the heart of violence, white homiletical styles, biblical interpretative stances, ritual movements or language, constructive language about God, engagements of society and culture, or any other unique homiletical components were imposed as homiletical standards while escaping recognition and subsequent critique as racially contextual. In centering itself, white preaching has rendered other schools of preaching as “abnormal” or “other.”

In comparison with the sustained work of racially minoritized scholarship at the intersection of race and preaching as part of an ongoing struggle for empowerment and emancipation, the violent essence of white preaching can be maintained with little *overt* effort at all. While the confines of this essay limit an exploration of the uniquely white rhetorical characteristics of preaching, I argue that these include active racialized silence, strategic ignorance or disregard for racially minoritized life, misdirection and deception about underlying racialized economic, political, and social agendas, and racially coded language perpetuating racialized domination.

### **The Preacher as a “Responsible” and “Realistic” Race Traitor**

Taking cues from racially minoritized homiletical discourse, I have argued that the heart of white preaching is a position of racialized economic, social, and political domination—and necessarily racialized violence. In light of this, a pressing question for all practitioners and scholars of white preaching who are themselves deemed white by society or who benefit from brutal systems of whiteness is how we can join in the charting of a trajectory whereby we will continue the already begun, difficult work of decentering, deconstructing, and destabilizing white preaching, white preachers, and white homiletics. Here, I will survey the concept of “race traitor” and engage the works of Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Zeus Leonardo as a way of reflecting on one potential path toward white homiletical “responsibility” in the era of Trump.

In Richard Delgado’s “Rodrigo’s Eleventh Chronicle: Empathy and False Empathy,” two characters, Rodrigo, a law student, and his professor, speak over a dessert. Rodrigo expresses disappointment at the failure of white, “liberal” empathy to contribute to the struggle against racism, and he argues for the plausibility of two strategies in place of empathy, both of which he

---

<sup>23</sup> Harris. *The Word*, 13.

thinks have potential to advance the interests of racial minorities.<sup>24</sup> The first strategy for which he argues is Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey's articulation of "race traitor," in which white persons betray whiteness by outspokenly rejecting white privilege and aggressively challenging racism to the point that they both begin to lose some of their material white privilege and the system of white hegemony begins to break down.<sup>25</sup> After discussing this possibility at length, the professor prompts Rodrigo to share his second strategy. As his second strategy, Rodrigo argues that white "liberals" must take their "campaigns" against racism out of their "elite" conversations and into conversations with lower-class white persons.<sup>26</sup> As Rodrigo and his professor reflect on the challenge of critically white elites<sup>27</sup> engaging lower-class white persons, Rodrigo observes that, "They ["radical" white elites] took the easy way out ... They abandoned their own people. Empathy—the shallow chic kind—is always more attractive than *responsibility*, which is hard work."<sup>28</sup>

I will return to Delgado's perspective below, and it is important to now introduce the term "race traitor." It has been deployed in a variety of ways in the USA. In present, popular usage, self-identifying white supremacist groups utilize the term to denounce white persons whom they perceive as supportive or accepting of persons deemed to be racial minorities. Online forums such as 4chan, 8chan, Daily Stormer, and Stormfront contain numerous examples of this term being deployed in this popular sense as well as variations including, but not limited to, "gender traitor." However, I am engaging the term in specific reference to the emergence of late-twentieth century discourse on the "abolition of whiteness" (which Delgado is referencing as well) and an abolitionist movement that took at least partial expression in the launch of the journal, *Race Traitor*, by Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey.

The mantra of *Race Traitor* is that, "Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity."<sup>29</sup> They define a "race traitor" as, "...someone who is nominally classified as white, but who defies the rules of whiteness so flagrantly as to jeopardize his or her ability to draw upon the privileges of white skin."<sup>30</sup> Their understanding of the possibility of racial treason and the subsequent disruption of whiteness is based on a political, rather than a biological or phenotypical, interpretation of whiteness as a social system that validates the economic "privileging" of persons and subsequently imposes racial hierarchies according to the privileged or non-privileged, as the case may be, status of a particular group of persons.

---

<sup>24</sup> Richard Delgado, "Rodrigo's Eleventh Chronicle: Empathy and False Empathy" in: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.). *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 615.

<sup>25</sup> Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (eds.). *Race Traitor* (London: Routledge Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Delgado. "Rodrigo's Eleventh," 617.

<sup>27</sup> Here by "critically white" elites, I am attempting to denote folk who have to some degree critically engaged their whiteness in relationship to non-dominant perspectives.

<sup>28</sup> Delgado. "Rodrigo's Eleventh," 617.

<sup>29</sup> Ignatiev and Garvey. *Race Traitor*.

<sup>30</sup> Noel Ignatiev. "Treason to Whiteness is Loyalty to Humanity" in: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.). *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 607.

Ignatiev and Garvey argue that this is different than anti-racism. They argue that the term “racism” is nebulous and that anti-racism implicitly accepts racial distinctions as natural while rejecting inequalities based on racial distinctions. They write, “. . .people were not favored socially because they were white; rather, they were defined as “white” because they were favored.”<sup>31</sup> With this understanding of social, economic, and political discrimination as the heart of race and something which racial hierarchies are intended to defend, they argue that social discrimination cannot begin to be addressed until the white race is destroyed as a unifying political and economic force in which persons deemed white hold their position in the racial hierarchy over and against any other human identification or interests. While I will critique this argument later, Ignatiev and Garvey place “faith” in their understanding that, “majority of so-called whites in this country are neither deeply nor consciously committed to white supremacy; like most human beings in most times and places, they would do the right thing if it were convenient.”<sup>32</sup>

Racial treason signifies a tactic whereby a small minority of persons deemed white disrupt this unifying political force upheld by what they believe to be is a silent majority of potentially well-intentioned white persons. They do so by transgressing the rules of whiteness in visible and aggressive ways that disrupt the unification upon which racism and racial hierarchies rely. They write:

For the white race to be effective, it must be unanimous, or nearly so. The reason is that if the cops and the courts and so forth couldn’t be sure that every person who looked white was loyal to the system, then what would be the point of extending race privilege to whites? And if they stopped extending race privileges, what would happen to the white race? Our strategy seeks to bring together a determined minority, willing to defy white rules so flagrantly they make it impossible to pretend that all those who look white are loyal to the system of racial oppression.<sup>33</sup>

These acts of flagrant defiance can be varied in their degrees of force up to including violent physical engagements, and these treasonous acts can also result in the violence of whiteness being turned against the traitors themselves as they break the rules of whiteness. As these race traitors cause a breakdown in the white order, Ignatiev and Garvey hope that this will lead to engagement of the silent majority of possibly well-intentioned whites in a way that will permanently disrupt white supremacy and lead to revolutionary social shifts.<sup>34</sup>

As was recouter earlier, in “Rodrigo’s Eleventh Chronicle” Delgado appears to both affirm the concept of race traitor as an appropriate white response, but by juxtaposing it with a critique of the elite liberals whose work never translates to the local level, I read Delgado as

---

<sup>31</sup> Ignatiev. “Treason to Whiteness,” 608.

<sup>32</sup> Ignatiev. “Treason to Whiteness,” 609.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 611.

<sup>34</sup> The concept of race traitor as associated with the new abolitionist movement has met with critique from various perspectives, and I recommend reading “Rediscovering ‘Race Traitor’: Towards a Critical Race Theory informed public pedagogy” by John Preston and Charlotte Chadderton for comprehensive survey and critical engagement of those critiques. John Preston and Charlotte Chadderton. “Rediscovering ‘Race Traitor’: Towards a Critical Race Theory informed public pedagogy” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* January, 2012.

perhaps critiquing “race traitor” language by insisting that it must be intentionally brought down to the grass roots level in order to organize non-elite whites. In their “rediscovery” of “race traitor,” John Preston and Charlotte Chadderton echo Delgado’s critique. They argue for what Delgado might call an even more “responsible” concept of “race traitor” that intentionally: 1) moves beyond elite conversations to organizing or participating in organized movements; 2) is connected with non-white efforts and not “autonomous;” and 3) is always only ever conditional and must be daily renewed.

In *Race, Whiteness, and Education*, Zeus Leonardo critically engages white abolition perspectives, and he particularly critiques what he sees as Ignatiev’s failure to deal with the material expressions of whiteness as they are expressed economically, socially, and politically. While I would argue along with Preston and Chadderton that the collective work of the race traitor movement does grapple with the material implications of whiteness, Leonardo’s critique of Ignatiev is important to consider. While he faults neo-abolition with this previous critique, he observes, “abolitionism’s relentless attack on whiteness and the white frame of mind begins race analysis on the right foot.”<sup>35</sup> Leonardo sums up his argument on racial treason, writing, “... renouncing one’s whiteness is a speech act of revolutionary proportions. It is not guided merely with the pronouncement “I am not white,” but by the commitment “I will not act white.””<sup>36</sup> Leonardo presses racial treason and the broader field of abolition approaches to whiteness to reckon not just with the idea of whiteness but also the material realities of racism. Any reaffirmations of racial treason as a viable approach to whiteness in the era of Trump must take the materiality of race and racism into account.

The era of Trump reveals a fundamental miscalculation of Ignatiev and Garvey that must be addressed if the concept is to have value for efforts at white solidarity today. They posit that there is a silent majority of “good” whites, who, if provoked with a necessary degree of external stimuli, will enter into an effort to abolish whiteness. The role of racial treason is to disrupt the system of whiteness to the tipping point where this silent majority rises to the occasion of eradicating whiteness as a political force in the world. This calculation must, at the very least, be complicated in the era of Trump, in which a significant majority of white persons in the USA voted to elect a candidate who throughout the election and the subsequent administration repeatedly utilized racialized dog whistles and overtly racist language in an attempt to reasserting white nationalism and white supremacy.<sup>37</sup> In 2016, there was no “silent majority” of white persons, and it is quite possible that there may never be a “silent majority” of white persons ready to rise up to begin to abolish whiteness. However, I still believe there is value in the notion of racial betrayal.

Derrick Bell’s concept of “racial realism” in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* is helpful to this discourse, because it has the possibility of destabilizing naïve approaches to racial treason grounded in fantastic, privileged notions of the imminent abolition of white privilege and white power—which upon their inevitable failure would likely

---

<sup>35</sup> Zeus Leonardo. *Race, Whiteness, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 73.

<sup>36</sup> Leonardo, *Race, Whiteness, and Education*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Ian Lopez defines dog whistles as, “coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward non-whites.” See: Ian Lopez, *Dog Whistle Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

reinforce whiteness.<sup>38</sup> Bell argues that: 1) racism is permanent; 2) the economic implications of racism are essential to interpreting racism; 3) “salvation” is “through struggle” as opposed to victory; and 4) we must be “realistic” or honest about racism, striving for both “truth and justice.”<sup>39</sup> Bell’s argument is built on a frank analysis of the whipsawing history of racial progress and regression in the USA, and I believe that his racial realism can recenter our approach to racial treason by reminding persons deemed white that our primary motive for racial treason should be resistance through which we might be able to grasp at becoming more fully human. Ignatiev and Garvey clearly agree with Bell’s second point, approaching race from perspectives sensitive to economics and class; however, Bell’s first, third, and fourth points, fundamentally help us to reimage racial treason.

If indeed racism, that is the power of whiteness to shape local and global economics, is permanent, and our responses to it must be focused on faithful, sustained struggle about which we are always realistic, then racial treason becomes a matter of long-term subversions less focused on one-time dramatic displays of disruption intended to bring about an imminent revolution and more focused on acts of betraying whiteness spread out over the long term. Racial treason can become less triumphalist, itself a troubling characteristic in the context of whiteness and religion, and more focused on active, sustainable subversions that are ultimately sourced in non-dominant discourse that conditionally draw race traitors outside of white power structures in ways that allow us to momentarily glimpse a fuller more responsible human experience.

Racial treason is also an important concept for our conversations as an Academy, because it also represents a potential measurement of whether or not those of us who are deemed white are actually disrupting whiteness in any significant way. The self-protecting systems of whiteness will not mark those of us as race traitors unless we are disrupting, dismantling, and decentering whiteness to such an intense degree that agents and institutions of whiteness perceive a distinct threat. White discourse on race is prone to “bad faith” declarations of concern or what Delgado calls “false empathy” that salve white consciences and perpetuate systems of whiteness.<sup>40</sup> The social dimension of racial treason suggests that good faith efforts to address whiteness will necessarily meet in significant resistance and come at a steep social cost. As the Academy considers future responses to white preaching, may we do so in ways that are significant enough to risk declarations of our betrayal of whiteness and white preaching, i.e. our commitment to not only not act white but to act intentionally to undermine whiteness.

### **“How to Be a Race Traitor” Homiletically Revisited**

In *How to Be a Race Traitor: Six Ways to Fight Being White*, Ignatiev offers up six concrete examples of how to betray whiteness, which are:

1. Identify with the racially oppressed; violate the rules of whiteness in ways that can have a social impact.”
2. Answer an anti-black slur with, “Oh, you probably said that because you think I’m white. That’s a mistake people often make, because I look white.” Reply “Me, too” to

---

<sup>38</sup> Derrick Bell. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Bell. *Faces*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, (New York: Humanity Books, 1999).

- charges that “people on welfare don’t want to work, they just want to stay home and have babies.”
3. Oppose tracking in the schools, oppose all mechanisms that favor whites in the job market, and oppose the police and courts, which define black people as a criminal class.”
  4. Do not merely oppose these things but seek to disrupt their normal functioning.”
  5. The color line is not the work of the relatively small number of hardcore “racists”; target not them but the mainstream institutions that reproduce it.”
  6. Finally, do not reject in advance any means of attaining the goal of abolishing the white race; indeed, the willingness to go beyond socially acceptable limits of protest is a dividing line between “good whites” and traitors to the white race.”<sup>41</sup>

My sense is that Ignatiev offered up these practical suggestions as just a few of many possible ways to enter into racial treason.

Here, I will reinterpret these for the context of white preaching, white responsibility, and racial realism. 1) Inside and outside of the pulpit humanly “identify with the racially oppressed.” 2) Whenever possible “violate the rules of whiteness” and white preaching “in ways that can have” an ecclesial and “social impact.” 3) In the pulpit explicitly critique and trouble your whiteness, and in cases in which racist activity occurs in your congregation or community, publicly and materially reject—if only conditionally, partially, and temporarily—the benefits of white privilege. 4) Explicitly oppose any “mechanism that favors whites” in your church, community, or institution, and consistently engage in activism resisting racism in any of its tangible material expressions (including but not limited to: immigration law, mass incarceration and the criminal (in)justice system, environmental racism, housing exclusion, homelessness, wage theft, discriminatory hiring practices, workers’ rights, and predatory banking). 5) Do not simply be non-racist or even anti-racist. Be an anti-racist or race traitor “with teeth.”<sup>42</sup> “Seek to disrupt” the “normal functioning” of whiteness in your church and community. 6) Remember that racism intersects with issues of class, gender, and sexuality. Work to build community in which issues of class, gender, sexuality, and ecology are held in hand with race. 7) “Target” your efforts at both “hardcore” white supremacists who might endanger the lives of person deemed non-white, and also target the “mainstream institutions” and agents through which racism is “reproduced.” 8) Be open to “any [homiletical or other] means of attaining the goal of betraying the white race; indeed, the willingness to go beyond socially acceptable limits of protest is a dividing line between “good whites” and traitors to the white race.”<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

As I reflect on our theme of “[Further] Unmasking White Preaching,” I offer up acknowledgement of the inherent violence of white preaching and the notion of racial betrayal as

---

<sup>41</sup> Noel Ignatiev. “How to be a Race Traitor: Six Ways to Fight Being White” in: Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (eds.). *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 613.

<sup>42</sup> I heard this phrase from Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale in conversation about sanctuary for immigrants. He emphasizes that immigrants need “sanctuary with teeth.”

<sup>43</sup> Ignatiev. “How to be...”, 613.

a potential pathway forward for those who are deemed white or who benefit from whiteness. What would it mean for some members of the Academy, or the Academy itself, to publicly recognize and significantly document the violence at the heart of white preaching to such a degree that we would betray whiteness and white homiletics? In our individual and collective work, how are we accounting for the sustained history of violence in our discipline and the ways in which white homiletics—intersecting with patriarchy, classism, and heterosexism—has blood on its hands? Are we willing to grapple with the extensive racial violence in our discipline as it is expressed often as silence, impartiality, or neutrality to issues of race in so many of the “great,” white homiletical works.

What would it mean for some members of the Academy, or the Academy itself, to publicly recognize and significantly betray our longstanding intimacy with the violence of white preaching and white homiletics? How can we, the Academy of Homiletics, betray white preaching in a way that organizes white preachers who may or may not be present in our elite conversations to join us in betrayal of white preaching and white homiletics? How can we plan for a faithful future of betraying white preaching?

I am deeply appreciative of our theme of “[Further] Unmasking White Preaching,” and I hope we do not stop here. Having been shown the violence of white preaching, we cannot “unsee” it, and we must, to the degree that we are claimed by or benefit from whiteness, betray it. We must betray it in ourselves, in our families, in our churches, in our institutions, in our communities, in our society, and in our Academy.

# WRESTLING WITH WHITENESS IN HOMILETIC PEDAGOGY: A REFLECTION ON TEACHING “PROCLAIMING JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH & PUBLIC SQUARE”

Richard W. Voelz

Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship

Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA, upsem.edu

Copyright © 2019 Richard W. Voelz

**ABSTRACT:** In the Fall 2018 semester, I taught a new elective course at Union Presbyterian Seminary entitled “Proclaiming Justice in the Church and Public Square.” The course was designed not only to help equip and empower students for the work of proclaiming justice in those two spaces but to do justice in the entirety of the course design and collective work through the semester. This paper seeks to reflect on that experience as an act of “Unmasking White Preaching” through anti-racist pedagogy. The paper will begin with reflection on pedagogical backgrounds for the course, moves to pedagogical principles and strategies that sought to enact the work of unmasking white preaching, and then finally reflects on the pedagogical discoveries and challenges of the course.<sup>1</sup>

## **Pedagogical Background**

### *Instructor*

In the work of “Unmasking White Preaching,” I begin with a recognition that my own homiletic history is unsurprisingly marked by the mask of white preaching. Through my seminary studies I was slowly making my way out of a conservative evangelical tradition (though not fundamentalist), well before the current so-called #Exvangelical or post-evangelical trends. I recognize now, but did not then, how that tradition in particular, and Evangelicalism as a whole, is fraught with the perils of whiteness, born out of the white supremacy of the theological academy. I cannot recall having been assigned a preaching text, major or otherwise, authored by a racial-ethnic minority through the course of my M.Div. studies at a small, predominantly white institution. Apart from the exceptionally rare chapel preacher, the only other contact I had with homiletics from the perspectives of racial-ethnic minorities would have been reading on my own after my interest in homiletics was sparked. This was the case with nearly all my M.Div. coursework, with notable exceptions in my theology courses. When I came to my doctoral studies at Vanderbilt, my world changed significantly, having the opportunity to work closely with Brad R. Braxton and, though later and less thoroughly, with Dale P. Andrews. Additionally, the student body at Vanderbilt was unlike the nearly homogenous institution from which I had come.

I trace my own background in order to say that I resolved early in my doctoral studies to not repeat the missteps of my own M.Div. studies, were I to have the privilege of teaching preaching in a seminary setting. This has proven easier to achieve in classes like the introductory class to preaching and worship (one course at UPSem) than it has been for a course like “The

---

<sup>1</sup> A PDF copy of the syllabus can be found [here](#).

Christian Year.” The subject matter makes a difference; liturgical studies perhaps suffers from whiteness in more pronounced ways than does homiletics.

I necessarily begin with some self-consciousness about the task. Mark Perry notes, “there is a line, sometimes thin, although seldom recognized by the white practitioners, between genuine transformation and antiracist appropriations.”<sup>2</sup> Any pedagogical move I make in an ostensibly antiracist direction runs the risk of uncritical appropriation of another’s work. Awareness of my own motives and *how* I use the work of others needs to be elevated. Perry goes on to suggest that teaching should be an “ongoing process of learning, exemplified in the equation experience + reflection = growth.”<sup>3</sup> I have achieved perfection in this regard, nor is this reflection an exercise in self-congratulatory back-patting. The work of unraveling whiteness and dismantling white supremacy in homiletic pedagogy is ongoing work of growth, not perfection.

### *Institution, History, Geography*

Pedagogical context makes a difference for antiracist pedagogy. A word is in order regarding the setting in which this course took place: Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA. From 1830-1860, Richmond was the largest source of enslaved Africans on the East Coast.<sup>4</sup> In Richmond, historical sites of the slave trade were and are quite literally masked over with newer construction, in addition to the infamous monuments to Confederate figures on Monument Avenue. Although the seminary was located 70 miles southwest of Richmond on the campus of Hampden Sydney College until 1898, Union professor Robert Louis Dabney was the highly influential architect of the Presbyterian Church’s theological defense of slavery (and later helped found Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary). In 1870, he published a textbook on sacred rhetoric which record his lectures on preaching. This text was taught at Union until 1908,<sup>5</sup> and was reprinted as late as 1979. Though only a brief historical snapshot, these glimpses form part of the backdrop for our seminary context and, beyond that, the everyday frame of life in Richmond, VA. We grapple daily with race and class as a direct inheritance of the slave trade, Civil War, and civil rights struggles in the 1950s-1960s, especially in the areas of educational and housing justice, as well as conflicts over infamous Confederate monuments. Further, the campus of UPSem itself forms a liminal geographical space, a literal dividing line between racial and class differences in Richmond’s Northside. The seminary sits in an area where white flight took place in the 1950s as the residents of the predominantly Black Jackson Ward neighborhood closer to downtown were displaced by the strategic construction of Interstate 95 through the

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark Perry, *Walking the Color Line: The Art and Practice of Anti-Racist Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 168.

<sup>3</sup> Perry, 175.

<sup>4</sup> “Richmond Slave Trail,” accessed July 3, 2019, <http://www.richmondgov.com/CommissionSlaveTrail/documents/brochureRichmondCityCouncilSlaveTrailCommission.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that Dabney’s text was replaced with John Broadus’ famous text, whose legacy as a slaveowner and white supremacist is documented here: <http://www.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Racism-and-the-Legacy-of-Slavery-Report-v3.pdf>. Broadus’ text was in use at Union at least until the 1928-1929 school year, when the records become inconclusive about which texts were used for the course. My thanks to UPSem reference librarian and archivist Paula Skreslet for assistance with this information.

neighborhood. Parts of Northside where white flight took place are now gentrifying, even as the seminary's direct neighbors are a predominantly white private school and historically high-priced homes on one side and low income/subsidized housing on the other. These are unavoidable and important considerations as to why I made specific decisions with regard to sources from Black authors and Black/white dynamics over a broader, more representational pedagogical strategy. I am aware that "unmasking white preaching" reaches beyond Black/white, but this dynamic plays a very particular role in my context. I ground this preface in the belief that unmasking white homiletic pedagogy accounts for these kinds of institutional, historical, and geographical factors.

### *Students*

Related to the institutional, historical, and geographical factors are the students themselves. In terms of framing "white fragility" among our student body, most of the students I teach in elective courses are in their middle or final years of study. Most are highly cognizant of the complexities of Richmond or, more popularly, RVA.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for this course in particular, most if not all students would have completed Introduction to Christian Ethics with Katie Geneva Cannon<sup>†</sup>, whose work to help students engage in conscientization around identity and ethics, and whose very life and presence would have begun the work of understanding whiteness, if it had not begun prior to this course. As Karen Teel notes, institutional support empowers social justice pedagogy.<sup>7</sup> And though I encountered some missteps with a couple of students, I did not see the resistance inherent to fragility in this course. The course consisted of seven students, with the following demographics represented: PC(USA) – 2 identifying as white male, 1 identifying as white female, 1 identify as Black female. Mennonite – 1 identifying as white female, National Baptist – 1 identifying as Black female, Pentecostal – 1 identifying as white male. Further, it is important to note that perhaps only as many as three or four of these students were preparing for ministries of congregational leadership, while others were preparing for non-profit or parachurch ministries, chaplaincy, and/or academia. With this background in mind, I now turn to describing the pedagogical principles and strategies that stood at the core of the course.

## **Pedagogical Principles and Strategies**

### *Pedagogy that Unmasks White Preaching Shifts Centers of Knowledge*

The most obvious pedagogical decision for the construction of the course was the center of knowledge for the course. While Karen Teel advocates for "diversifying the syllabus" in white antiracist pedagogy, I wanted to move from diversifying to decentering.<sup>8</sup> Hebrew Bible scholar Nyasha Junior's Twitter hashtag #SyllabusSoWhite has popularized a sort of anti-mantra (or damning assessment, depending on one's perspective) for syllabus construction. Kenyatta

---

<sup>6</sup> For this distinction, see Michael Paul Williams, "Williams: We Remain Two Richmonds - RVA Blossomed While Richmond Is Being Left Further and Further Behind," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, accessed July 8, 2019, [https://www.richmond.com/news/local/michael-paul-williams/williams-we-remain-two-richmonds---rva-blossomed-while/article\\_2c9d466f-c300-55fd-9ddb-7ba85bef339b.html](https://www.richmond.com/news/local/michael-paul-williams/williams-we-remain-two-richmonds---rva-blossomed-while/article_2c9d466f-c300-55fd-9ddb-7ba85bef339b.html).

<sup>7</sup> Karen Teel, "Getting Out of the Left Lane: The Possibility of White Antiracist Pedagogy.," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 17, no. 1 (January 2014): 19.

<sup>8</sup> Teel, 10.

Gilbert's *A Pursued Justice*, Frank Thomas's *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, and Leah Gunning Francis's *Ferguson and Faith* were three of the five main texts for the course. While Richard Lischer's *Preacher King* is obviously written by a white person, its focus on Martin Luther King, Jr. helped center King as an exemplar. Essays by Teresa Fry Brown, Raphael Warnock, and Willie Jennings provided additional indispensable insights. But I sought to carry this decentering work beyond the course texts. As an initial assessment, I recognize the need for more Black women among these main course texts.

Each week, I wove insights from the class readings with a Scripture text that grounded a student's understanding of justice (a week one opening activity) into an opening prayer for the class session. In this, I wanted to reinforce that not only were the class readings a source of our mutual *academic* learning, but that the insights from these scholars were a *spiritual* foundation for our work together, constituting a source of spiritual knowledge. If I may engage in a dualism between the academic and the spiritual, if only for a moment, the work of antiracist/anti-whiteness pedagogy is both a head and heart endeavor.

Additionally, for one of our class sessions, I facilitated a conversation between our students and my colleague Rodney Sadler, who joined us via distance technology. Rodney is a faculty colleague in the Bible department on our Charlotte campus, an organizer/activist in the Charlotte community, and leads our seminary's Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation. This was an additional effort to center a voice different from my own as a source of knowledge.

In a course on preaching and public proclamation, this also meant incorporating sermons and public speeches from various settings into class assignments and discussions. We watched and discussed quite a bit of video in the course. These included persons such as Teresa Fry Brown, Yvette Flunder, Dale Andrews, William Barber II, Terri Hord Owens, Traci Blackmon, and Michael Curry. Unmasking white pedagogy also means unmasking white pedagogical practices. As an initial step in this direction, I adapted the "homiletical brief" from Kenyatta Gilbert's book *Exodus Preaching* to help students prepare sermons and public speeches.

### *Pedagogy that Unmasks White Preaching Shows Anti-Whiteness at Work*

Even as I attempted to center Black scholars, pastors, and activists, this was not a complete promise fulfilled, and intentionally so. For other readings and multimedia, I chose materials that either explicitly or implicitly showed antiracism/anti-whiteness at work.<sup>9</sup> Another Twitter hashtag underscores an element of the direction of the course: #WhiteChurchQuiet has voiced the criticism of the white church in antiracist/anti-whiteness work. White students need to see the possibilities of this work in action in their contexts. And I take the hashtag to mean that Black students do as well. So while it was of utmost importance to decenter whiteness by centering Black voices in much of the in-class materials, it was also crucial for all students in particular to see the work of antiracism modeled in academy and church. As Dana Nichols notes, this helps white students "begin to forge new, proud, and positive antiracist identities."<sup>10</sup> In seeking this balance, Nora Tisdale's *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach*, Richard

---

<sup>9</sup> Dana Nichols, "Teaching Critical Whiteness Theory: What College and University Teachers Need to Know" 1, no. 1 (2010): 7ff, <http://www.wpcjournal.com/article/view/5421>.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, 9.

Lischer's aforementioned work on King, and my then in-process work *Preaching to Teach* served as examples of core texts I used in the course, as well as an essay by David Schnasa Jacobsen.

In terms of those who model anti-whiteness in their preaching and public proclamation, we analyzed sermons from Amy Butler, as well as a sermon from Nora Tisdale to complement discussion of her book. Contemporaneity played a significant role in these choices as well, which is why I used a segment of the summer 2018 "Reclaiming Jesus" conference. This showed Jim Wallis and Michael Curry speaking back-to-back and exchanging a deep embrace which provided a moment for us to analyze not only the power of their words but the ways in which embodiment accompanies proclamation. One of the timeliest sermons we reviewed together was a sermon preached by Texas Baptist minister George Mason in the wake of the murder of Botham Jean by a police officer. These examples of written work and proclamation serve as markers of anti-whiteness at work on a pedagogical level.

### *Pedagogy that Unmasks White Preaching Exhibits Historical Consciousness*

Just as the history of my institution and the city of Richmond functioned as significant background, the course contends that anti-whiteness pedagogy exhibits historical consciousness. As mentioned above, one of the core texts for the course was Kenyatta Gilbert's excellent *A Pursued Justice*. In using this text, I not only wanted to establish that proclaiming justice has been a historically and contextually situated act, as Gilbert's text so ably shows. For Black students, I hoped that they would gain a greater familiarity with (and celebrate) the "cloud of witnesses" particular to Black preaching traditions, especially beyond isolating Martin Luther King, Jr. as a lone central figure. I also hoped that the white-identifying students especially would sense that proclaiming justice in church and public square have been central tasks in Black preaching traditions. For me to allow white-identifying students to remain naïve or unaware of these historically situated traditions would be at our collective peril.<sup>11</sup>

To reinforce this point, one of the assignments that accompanied this reading was for students to prepare a two to three-minute section of one of the sermons in the appendices and re-preach it to the class. This exercise intended to go beyond simple appropriation of words, forming a critical exercise intended to generate discussion about valuing a wider tradition rooted in the particularity of African American experience in the Great Migration and beyond. "Trying on" someone else's words in this regard went beyond simply reading them, and we did not engage in mimicry. Instead students were encouraged to re-perform in their own voices them with historical consciousness, attuned to how those words might have been experienced then, what effect they carry in the present, and how they impacted the students' understandings of history and the task of proclaiming justice. Even if momentarily, this was an important act for white-identifying students to apprentice themselves to another's proclamation. In this sense, historical consciousness was another effort at centering/decentering.

### *Pedagogy that Unmasks White Preaching Considers Intersections*

---

<sup>11</sup> See the section "Null Curriculum of Whiteness: The Violence of Forgetting of History" in HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "The Emperor Has No Clothes!: Exposing Whiteness as Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula," *Religious Education*, April 29, 2019, 6ff, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2019.1602464>.

In the beginning stages of course design, I wrestled with either choosing a specific thematic focus for the course on race in Richmond or allowing students to pursue their own interests. Rather than limiting the scope of the class, I chose a more student-centered approach, allowing students to select their own justice issues to pursue through the semester. Mark Perry suggests that this student-centered approach is a hallmark of social justice pedagogy, and it meant that I had to give up some of my control and become a learner as the instructor.<sup>12</sup> I believe this too was an act of modeling antiracist, antipatriarchal pedagogy since I was not managing the content and direction of the class at every level.

What emerged from this decision in student interests were justice issues that they analyzed in ways that tried to make sense out of the intersectional factors of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, etc. The students also naturally connected their issues to local manifestations: white privilege, especially in the wake of the events of Charlottesville (a commuter student from Charlottesville, VA); public education in Richmond and surrounding areas; gentrification in Richmond's Northside; mass incarceration and release of the formerly incarcerated among Black churches in Richmond; health care in Richmond; disability/neurodiversity among Richmond youth and young adults; and immigration policy stances among local politicians. While some students did this almost reflexively, a newer resident of Richmond needed some coaching through how public education in Richmond has been and continues to be a function of whiteness, which demonstrated how "local history [functions] as powerful object lessons of how racial formation functions."<sup>13</sup> Leah Gunning Francis' text *Ferguson and Faith*, which shows ministerial work from different perspectives in Ferguson, MO was a crucial teaching text in this regard, even as it came near the end of the course.

### *Pedagogy that Unmasks White Preaching is Accountable to the Public*

The course attempted to be a formational space but it was not constructed to be a "safe space." While Anne Wagner describes "'safety' as an untenable goal" with regard to maintaining conflict-free notions of white identity and classroom discussion,<sup>14</sup> this lack of safety also translated to the nature of the major assignments for the course. Since the course was a "Church in the World" curriculum elective, two of the major assignments were "community engagement" activities. The first required an interview with a local church pastor about proclaiming justice from the pulpit, with Nora Tisdale's text shaping the questions they asked. The second required students to report on a conversation/interview with a civic leader/elected official and/or a gathering associated with their selected issue (such as a protest, a rally, an organizing meeting, etc.). Students then analyzed how religious speech functions in those settings and described their understanding of how religious speech should function, in conversation with course readings and discussions. The other two major assignments were (1) a sermon for the UPSem community on their justice concern and (2) a 7-minute public proclamation, in which the class provided a public forum livestreamed over the internet.

---

<sup>12</sup> Perry, *Walking the Color Line*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> See Nichols, "Teaching Critical Whiteness Theory," 7–8.

<sup>14</sup> Anne E. Wagner, "Unsettling the Academy: Working through the Challenges of Anti-racist Pedagogy," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 265ff, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320500174333>.

Having engaged in a variety of antiracist/antiwhiteness instructional strategies inside the classroom setting, these assignments raised the stakes for a publicly accountable classroom. As the instructor, I was a participant in the live preaching and public forum as convener. This suggested that I was a participant as well and had some “skin in the game.” Taking student learning and work beyond the bounds of the classroom in real time encouraged students to take risks now and not when just students find future ministry placements or force them to awkwardly work on justice issues in field education settings.

I also sought to model public accountability of unmasking white pedagogy through my Twitter account (@RevDrVoelz). Before each class session, I tweeted out a thread of the day’s course readings and videos, tagging the authors/speakers (as available) to amplify their work, naming the major topics/questions we would be covering, and a screenshot of the day’s prayer (as described above). My Twitter following is not large, so I do not want to misrepresent the impact of this practice, but the “signal boost” for the underrepresented authors through Twitter sought to create an additional layer of public accountability for the pedagogical choices I made and to chip away at the whiteness of homiletic discourse in a public, digital space.

### **Pedagogical Challenges & Discoveries**

I am pleased with how the course turned out, though I remain modest in what the course achieved. As such, I remain open to critique and perspectives to which my vision remains obstructed, in the hopes that the next iteration of this course will reflect my own learning and growth. I conclude with a few observations about the course’s challenges and discoveries.

As all teachers know, not all well-intentioned choices go as planned. One of my discoveries centers around an improvisational learning activity in which my whiteness remained unchecked. For one of the class sessions, I planned an improvisational in-class assignment of responding to a current event. Students were given thirty minutes to plan and deliver three-minute remarks for a simulated local faith leader press conference responding to the October 2018 act of white domestic terrorism at a Louisville, Kentucky Kroger grocery store.<sup>15</sup> In my estimation, this story had received less air-time than the shooting at the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh that occurred three days later. My error was not in the nature of the assignment as a whole. But in trying to be responsive, I did not think through the implications of requiring each person in the class to respond to this event, especially two Black women, and the emotional labor they might need to perform in order to complete the assignment. Neither of the students reported that they experienced the exercise in traumatic ways, and our relationship is such that I believe these students would have said something if they had (still, I note the instructor/student power dynamic). Quite the contrary, they expressed thanks for this assignment; it was one where the increased stress level and having something at stake was designed to prepare them for something upon which they might be called to do. But as the instructor I remain with a bad taste in my mouth at a failing in sensitivity to these students, especially since the assignment and the scenario was unannounced.

---

<sup>15</sup> “Kentucky Kroger Shooting Suspect Charged With Federal Hate Crimes,” NPR.org, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/15/668476169/kentucky-kroger-shooting-suspect-charged-with-federal-hate-crimes>.

One insightful comment on a course evaluation was thus: “The only suggestion I have is to invite a few more outside presenters who are active in the Richmond community. The community engagement assignments accomplished this. In-class presenters, however, tend to invite diverse conversations and facilitate future partnerships with a variety of leaders that students may not have access to.” While this is not a direct overture to the effects of whiteness, I take it as an invitation to think about the ways I might further decenter myself as a white instructor, with all the power that resides in my position and voice, and use the classroom as a space that builds power for and solidarity with others.

I remain curious about two considerations. First, as I mention above, I made the conscious decision to frame the course around dynamics of Black/white in terms of racial formations. And the student demographics in the course allowed that to be somewhat unproblematic. But in future iterations of the course, this will not necessarily be the case, as students will likely come from various cultural, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds. A persistent question will be how to continually keep the dynamics that I name above in terms of institution, history, and geography foregrounded while offering a broader, more inclusive representational pedagogy to students who will come from different social locations.

Second, recognizing that (1) not all students will be entering congregational ministries and (2) that ministries of public witness and proclamation are a growing area for competency, I decided not to offer a course that might more traditionally would be called “prophetic preaching.” Thus the course title opted for “proclamation” rather than strictly “preaching,” as well as designations of “church” and “public square.” The course’s design moved in the direction of preaching to public proclamation, ensconcing an assumption about the relationship between these practices (an assumption better interrogated theoretically in another venue (viz. – Is preaching in liturgical settings the practice upon which we should base current practices of public proclamation?), one based at least in part upon the historical inheritance of clergy involvement of the Civil Rights Movement and the porous nature of ecclesial spaces for both Sunday worship and organizing in that era (and Sunday worship that served organizing). So I wonder if and how my basic distinctions between preaching and proclamation as well as church and public square might be interrogated under the critical lenses of whiteness. What interests of whiteness do those distinctions and the relationship inscribed in the course design protect? What historical legacies might they be couched under? Or is this assumption one which the Black church tradition safeguarded? These are sites for further reflection.

# Worship and Preaching

Convener: Joy J. Moore

## **PATRIARCHY AND WHITENESS IN PREACHING**

**Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, PhD., D.Min.**

**Styberg Professor of Preaching & Styberg Preaching Institute Director  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, IL [www.garrett.edu](http://www.garrett.edu)**

**Copyright © 2019 Gennifer Benjamin Brooks**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper looks at the interrelationship of whiteness and patriarchy in the worship act of preaching, focusing specifically on three areas connected with preaching: the person of the preacher, the biblical content of the message and the preacher's performance in the delivery of the sermon. It names the interrelationship of whiteness and patriarchy as influences of a dominant white culture based on skin color, and the ideologies of white supremacy that skews the content of the message as the human sin of idolatry whereby a human person, the preacher, takes the place of God.

This paper looks at the interrelationship of whiteness and patriarchy in the worship act of preaching. It names practices and behaviors that are representative of the system of white supremacy resident and operative in society and its overlap into the preaching of the church. For this paper, the term "whiteness" represents the influence of a dominant white culture based on skin color, and the ideologies of white supremacy that privileges people defined as white as the zenith of a false hierarchy of human worth that engenders oppression against all others considered "people of color." "Patriarchy" refers to the power claimed by men that overrides the thoughts and needs of women or any other persons gendered other than male. Its use in this work is focused on the sense of superiority that results in a stance taken by male preachers, and especially white male preachers that moves them to act in authoritarian ways especially in relation to the content and delivery of sermons. Where whiteness impacts persons of color specifically, patriarchy extends its reach to all non-male-gendered persons. Both the issue of whiteness and the impact of patriarchy in worship and specifically the worship act of preaching brings us front and center with the human sin of idolatry whereby a human person, the preacher, takes the place of God. This paper will focus on whiteness in preaching and name the attendant patriarchy in the privilege of a white supremacist ideology.

Preaching is an act of worship, through which the people of God are wont to experience, once again, the proclamation of God's unending grace that offers transformation of individuals, the community and situations through God's active presence in the everyday lives of human beings. Christian worship, in its truest form, is not the result of human initiative. At the center of our worship is Jesus Christ. It cannot and should not be any human presence, no matter how attractive or charismatic. As such it is essential in our acts of worship, when we engage in worship activities, including preaching, that we take the focus away from ourselves, whether one individual leader or a group of persons, and place and maintain it in God. That means that whatever the shape of the worship event, whatever is done during the service with, by or through the gathering of the people of God must be for God's glory.

Worship should enable the gathered community to offer praise to God for God's gracious and merciful love. As such, it is the outpouring of a response of thanksgiving and praise to the unending, unstinting, unfettered grace of God. As a United Methodist, grace is an idea, a concept, a doctrine, that is more than familiar. It is intrinsic to the content of Christian faith and witness and the initiating source of Christian worship. Recognition of God's love in worship is a mark of our Christian faith, that names us as members of the Body of Christ, initiated into the beloved community through our baptism and nurtured at Christ's table of grace.

Romans 12:2 directs us: "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." Adhering to this mandate means that we, the church, the body of Christ, the worshipping community should not be in collusion with, nor should we be victimized by the world's systems of oppression and injustice. It means that the church should not align itself with the mores of culture and society, when they represent, cause or support inequities among people. Instead, the church is called to be counter-cultural as it follows the path set by Christ that offers good news to the poor, proclaims release to those in captivity, and offers freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18). And yet, despite its call and expressed commitment to be the beloved, community, the reality is often the opposite, and that can be experienced in the acts of worship and within the proclamatory voices that often claim to speak "the Word of God to the people of God." The worshipping community is filled with the same diversity of people that we find in the world. There is also diversity of culture and ways of worship, and too often diversity of one kind or another is the cause of problems within congregations, across denominations and throughout Christendom.

In the introduction to her work that takes a critical look at what vital worship requires in our time, Ruth Duck says,

From the very beginning, Christian worship has been diverse. Over the centuries, Christians have worshipped God through their local cultural expressions... At times Christian worship has created distance from culture (for example, by using a language the people don't speak daily); at times, Christians worship may almost collapse into culture (for example, by emphasizing secular holidays more than Christ-centered celebration)."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, from my perspective, too often there is a collapse of world culture into the church, so that instead of celebrating both human uniqueness and differences through our oneness in Christ, the challenges to and from human diversity are allowed to infect the church to its detriment. One of the sources of those challenges is whiteness, or the misguided belief that difference in skin color means deficit in human beings; that depending on one's God-given racial identity, one has greater or less human value and have the benefit or denial of privilege because of the color of one's skin. Another challenge that is just as pervasive is the patriarchal stance taken by white male preachers that they believe gives them the authority to determine all things related to worship of the divine. There is an interrelationship between whiteness and patriarchy, where one often fuels the other in white male preachers that makes for a situation that is almost lethal in its implementation and that does untold harm to the people of God. Beneath it is the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), xv.

issue of privilege, which becomes the guiding principle in developing and preaching sermons and also to the overall worship life of the congregation.

Based on its etymological origin in Old English, the word worship “means ascribing worth to someone.”<sup>2</sup> The someone that is or should be the only object of our worship is God. Yet, in too many worship services, the one to whom worth is ascribed by the worshipping community in the preacher. If one reviews the complete structure, content and performance of the people at worship, and for this paper, specifically the role of the preacher, who is charged to proclaim Christ to the nations, what we find is that the preacher takes center stage in all aspects of the worship life of the congregation and the worth is ascribed to him rather than to God. This paper will name and address three specific areas connected with preaching that have fallen victim to such white supremacist ideology of privilege that also fuels patriarchy.

### **1. The person of the preacher**

Kenyatta Gilbert, following in the footsteps of trailblazer Henry Mitchell and other stalwarts, such as James Earl Massey, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Marvin McMickle and Frank A. Thomas, has looked deeply into the genre of African American preaching and concludes that it “is more than artistic expression, it is foremost an act of worship. It is ministry of spoken and embodied Word in service to the gospel of Jesus Christ for the community.”<sup>3</sup> And although the subject of this paper is not focused on the African American church context, the applicability of these words to the topic of whiteness and patriarchy in preaching, make them foundational for addressing the issue. It bears repeating to say that preaching in an act of worship.<sup>4</sup> However, in focusing on whiteness, the issue of privilege lived out in ways that make the preacher the object of worship, Kenyatta’s trivocal preaching offers perhaps an explanation and a starting point for eradicating whiteness from the worship act of preaching.

Borrowing Gilbert’s language and thought, one is called to consider what authenticates the preacher in the role of proclaimer of the gospel message. He names for the preacher the roles of “prophet, priest, and sage, which, theologically follow a trinitarian pattern...[having] a mutually influential relationship [that when] synthesized [can be]appropriated in one’s preaching life.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, what Gilbert claims is necessary for a lived reality as preacher of the gospel is the realization that one is called to be (a) the “mediating voice of God’s activity to transform church and society in a present-future sense based on the principle of justice,”<sup>6</sup> (b) “a sacramental mediating voice of Christian spiritual formation that encourages listeners to enhance

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>4</sup> I find it interesting that my esteemed colleague, Ron Anderson, in two volumes on “Worship Matters” did not include preaching as a matter connected with. That may well speak to the marginalization of the role and work of the preacher in wider academic circles.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 12.

themselves morally and ethically,”<sup>7</sup> and (c) “a conferring and peculiarly communal voice of biblical wisdom and realistic hope.”<sup>8</sup>

Speaking as the prophet of God, in God’s name the preacher offers both freedom and justice, grace and favor, and calls the people of God to be the living presence of God in the world. Whiteness would have the preacher lay claim as originator of the spoken words so that they emanate first and foremost from the preacher’s study and points to the preacher’s wisdom in discerning what God requires of the people. Whiteness thus places the person of the human preacher above the person of the divine. This is true in all places where adulation and celebration of a preacher’s skill become skewed, such that God’s work of transformation in the lives of the people is credited to the preacher’s ability to sway the hearers to the preacher’s way of thinking and being, instead of helping to direct the hearers to follow the will of God. This is often too easily observed in Charismatic traditions, although it is not necessarily applicable to all preachers in all such traditions.

On the other hand, the person of the preacher as a functionary in mediating the worship of the people to accomplish its goal of faithful response to God’s grace may be coopted by the preacher laying unwarranted claim to being the originator of the voices of both the priest and the sage. Gilbert rightly considers the priestly voice as the one that “emphasized the importance of congregational worship and being justified, redeemed and sanctified by Jesus Christ’s atoning works...[that] interprets and mediates the requirements of covenantal obligation to God and God’s people...”<sup>9</sup> This element plus that of the sagely voice “that daringly speaks within the context of radical social and ecclesial change for the purpose of keeping vital the congregation’s vision and mission”<sup>10</sup> represent fertile ground for the infection of whiteness in the life of the preacher. They speak of a treacherous and extremely slippery slope that can lead the preacher to assume a position that pretends what is a false reality of divine wisdom. Such movement on the part of the preacher offers the temptation of patriarchy whereby the preacher may succumb to a fallacious belief in their infallibility to make expansive and life altering decisions on behalf of the people without their consent. Such a preacher, in the throes of white supremacist behavior, takes upon himself/herself the position of creator that belongs only to God. In other words, the preacher becomes the handmaiden of patriarch, and the arbiter of whiteness in worship. Overcoming such an infection requires the preacher to lay claim to the humility of spirit that comes only through a deep and abiding relationship with God through prayer.

## **2. The biblical content of the message**

At many and varied places I have declared the necessity for every sermon to be intentional and specific about offering good news.<sup>11</sup> Further, the good news is not necessarily

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>11</sup> See Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, *Good News Preaching Offering the Gospel in Every Sermon*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), xiii-xv.

happy news. Instead the good news is the active, present, transformative action of God in human life and endeavor. In order to deliver that good news, the preacher must connect text and context. The content of the message rests on the foundation of scripture, which must be interpreted deliberately on several counts, including that of diversity. The preacher must allow the text to speak in its original context or contexts before bringing it forward into the context of the congregation and the setting where it will be proclaimed. Lucy Lind Hogan reminds us the “underlying the preparation of your sermons is your understanding of Scripture and the role that it plays in preaching and in the life of the church.”<sup>12</sup> As stated previously, scripture is the foundation of the sermon, unfortunately in the case where whiteness, the sense of privilege skews the understanding and interpretation of the biblical text. As a result, even when the preacher engages in what would be considered comprehensive interpretation of the text, the principles of white supremacy, that dismisses the influence of human diversity, results in a skewed understanding of scripture that further supports a white supremacist and patriarchal agenda.

This hegemonic action connected with preaching arises from the preacher’s privileged position and action regarding the content of scripture, whereby the preacher develops a sermon without the appropriately critical interpretive work that is necessary to locate the text in an expansive congregational context that considers the social and cultural realities within and beyond the immediate congregation gathered for worship. As stated in *Good News Preaching*, the interpretive process of homiletical exegesis seeks to unearth the elements of text or topic that are critical to developing and offering good news in the sermon...Biblical interpretation allows the text to be heard in its own language and its own images to be seen. Such exegesis brings to light important nuances in the text, and through it, the preacher delves as deeply as possible into the biblical record to determine its meaning and focus historically in as many time periods as is relevant for applying it to the present.<sup>13</sup>

Such activity of biblical interpretation is undertaken by the preacher who, with a sense of humility recognizes the lack or paucity of knowledge connected with both the breath of the biblical situation that spawned the text and the wisdom it offers for the present. It requires openness to the new and unknown in and beyond the written text to the multiple contexts and tradition that gave and continues to give it meaning for the people. Such openness negates any feeling of superiority of knowledge common to both whiteness and patriarchy.

There is also the issue of whiteness resident in the somewhat widespread belief among academicians that only those interpretive and pedagogical methods that derive from Western thought are of value and represent “real” exegesis. These methods, such as the historical critical method, literary form and redaction criticism are indeed valuable and valued methodologies that may be used in determining the meaning of the text. However, their value in bringing to light what is truly the Word of God is somewhat compromised if they do not take into consideration the particularities applicable to people of color and other gendered and social and cultural

---

<sup>12</sup> Lucy Lind Hogan, *Graceful Speech: An Invitation to Preaching*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 93.

<sup>13</sup> Brooks, *Good News Preaching*, 34.

categories. Lisa Thompson addresses this issue directly in her focus on “Recovering Sacred Texts for Preaching.”<sup>14</sup> She says:

Interpreting scripture requires the preacher to discover points of slippage, movement, or connection between the world of the text and her world; these points are sites of interplay. In preaching we attend to the chasm among when, for what purposes, and for whom the stories of a text were once rendered, and how a text might ring anew. We approach scripture in search of relationships between two worlds – the ancient and contemporary worlds.<sup>15</sup>

The chasm of which Thompson speaks is bridged easily by care and attention to culture, not only of the congregation to whom the sermon will be preached but nationally and globally. Eunjoo Kim calls this Transcontextual Preaching.<sup>16</sup> She rightly notes the “dramatic shift in both our individual and communal lives, where we find ourselves moving into a new world, characterized by globalization...[marked by] the relocation and integration of diverse cultures outside their geographical origins.”<sup>17</sup> This new phase of human history challenges preachers to critically evaluate the ethical and theological responsibilities of all believers. As they plan the content and style of contemporary Christian preaching, critical and theological insights into the social and cultural contexts that exist in a globalized world are indispensable prerequisites.<sup>18</sup> It is the call and commission of preachers in this global world, one that whiteness ignores, as preachers infected by this anti-Christian mode of operation stand fast on their tradition of superiority over all others that is the heart of white supremacy.

Aligned with the patriarchal identity that the preacher has adopted, such a-cultural<sup>19</sup> interpretation of scripture leads to sermons that deny the free and full grace of God to all persons. In such a case the preacher is unable to engage what Frank Thomas calls the moral imagination<sup>20</sup> in order to develop a sermon that adequately represents the grace of God. Thomas provides four qualities of the moral imagination in order to combat whiteness and patriarchy in preaching.

1. Envision equality and represent that by one’s physical presence
2. Empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice
3. Sources of wisdom and truth in ancient texts, the wisdom of the ages
4. The language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates the human spirit by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope and mystery<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, ix.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, xi.

<sup>19</sup> Here “a-cultural” means no cultural affiliation.

<sup>20</sup> Frank A. Thomas. *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), xix.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, xxi.

Like Gilbert, Thomas approaches his material from his location as African American and directs his work first and foremost to the African American church, however the reality is that where whiteness and patriarchy exists in worship and preaching, regardless of the preaching location, these qualities have the ability to reverse the trend. They can help to move one's proclamation from the hegemonic place of privilege and white superiority, which as Thomas notes hinders the moral imagination. Added to that is the preacher's willingness to engage and interpret the text so that it can come to life in the here and now. Dow Edgerton and Charles Cosgrove call this process Incarnational Translation.<sup>22</sup> It results in "a performance of Scripture in translation, a contemporizing translation ... with the purpose of homiletical commentary, the effort to connect the ancient text with a contemporary time and place."<sup>23</sup>

Ideally such contemporizing takes the onus of making the text speak into the present, and has the potential to move the text beyond the limitations of the preacher, as the people hear the scripture in their own language and can understand and relate to the sermon as representative of their lives and their concerns, as well as of the wider concerns of their world. Since the preacher is the one who initiates the translation, there is still the danger that the authority of the message may reflect the preacher, but the people have a greater opportunity to experience the Word of God in language that is appropriate to their lives.

### **3. Performance in the delivery of the sermon**

This third and final area of preaching and its reflection of whiteness and patriarchy being addressed is perhaps the most readily observed by the worshipping congregation. The delivery of the sermon exposes the person of the preacher to the view of all in the congregation. It is a sad reality that preachers other than white males are often met with skepticism. Even in some congregations where white people are not the predominant group, too often the members consider their community of greater regard and value in the eyes of the community when their leader/preacher is white, and even greater when the preacher is white and male. It is a reflection of the insidious nature of whiteness or white supremacy on the church. The preacher is called to embody the Word of God, to deliver a message of divine grace that speaks of God's equal and unfettered love for all people. In his book *The Embodied Word*, Charles Rice reflecting that in preaching "the Word of God comes through human beings,"<sup>24</sup> quotes Phillips Brooks' definition of preaching: "Preaching is the communication of truth through personality,"<sup>25</sup> and his teacher Joseph Settler who defines preaching as: "a function of the preacher's whole existence, concentrated at the point of declaration and interpretation."<sup>26</sup> In other words, who the preacher is as an individual, is reflected in who the preacher is as a proclaimer of the Word of God. What

---

<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton, *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), xi.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

then does that say about the preacher who reflects white supremacist ideology as intrinsic to their person?

More directly, as is the focus of this paper, whiteness shows itself in the preacher's position, demeanor, voice and general embodiment of the message. A misplaced, unwarranted sense of superiority, resulting from the preacher's charisma, makes itself heard and seen in the preacher's presentation of the sermon. Overcoming such a feeling may be possible as one is led to consider preaching as a burdensome joy. James Early Massey considered preaching "is "burdensome" because of the way the preparation and delivery aspect of the pulpit task weigh upon the preacher's selfhood – and with so many unique demands. But preaching is also a "joy" because of the divine purpose that makes it necessary."<sup>27</sup> In other words, preaching as an act of worship is initiated by the will of God. Many preachers gain exceptional and overwhelming acclaim for their charismatic sermonic delivery, which at times appeal so highly to their personal ego that they fall victim to the belief that they are worthy of the "worship" that is the purview of the divine. It is one source of patriarchy and whiteness in worship. Preachers are called to embody the message of God's love, which is impossible to do with authenticity and to effect in the lives of the hearers when the personal privilege obscures the reality of themselves as preacher. That situation is worsened when the preacher loses sight of the reality of God's people, all God's people regardless of race, ethnicity, color, ability, gender etc., as evidence of the *Imago Dei* and partners with God in the re-creation of the divine order. Overcoming those issues and all others, requires humility of person and a active connection to God.

### **Conclusion:**

Whiteness is a scourge in society and in the church; a plague that must be eradicated. Although the supposed beneficiaries are those whose skin color and ethnicity cause them to be considered white and therefore persons of privilege, in reality, where whiteness (white supremacy) prevails, there is no real benefit since in the global economy of the twenty-first century, every person is impacted by every other person. Likewise, patriarchy skews the construct of society and culture away from the will of God for humanity. The social constructs of society in the United States of America, and most of the world serve to privilege white persons, and particularly white males through a hierarchical structure that devalues every "other" person or group. Wholeness in worship and preaching, as addressed in this paper is representative of a broad, prevailing problem of preachers who through their person, their sermonic work, and their proclamation strive to take and maintain a position of ascendancy over the very people they are called to serve.

The impact of whiteness and patriarchy on preaching as an act of worship shifts the location of the preacher in the relationship between the human and the divine, between the preacher and the people and between the people and the divine. They cause the preacher to assume in significant ways the role of the divine and to claim for themselves or become the object of worship offered by the people. For this writing, it is less about domination and more about a usurpation of place and a disruption of the divine/human relationship. Certainly, there is much more to the issue its infection on preaching and the church, and on cultures of people of

---

<sup>27</sup> James Earl Massey, *The Burdensome Joy of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13

color everywhere that needs to be addressed. As preachers of the gospel, we must work to eradicate its presence in and impact on our world, on society, on the church and on our preaching.

## PREACHING AND SINGING: PARTNERS IN THE DANCE OF WORSHIP

Catherine E. Williams, PhD

Assistant Professor of Preaching and Worship

Lancaster Theological Seminary Lancaster, PA

[www.lancasterseminary.edu](http://www.lancasterseminary.edu)

Copyright © 2019 Catherine E. Williams

**ABSTRACT:** What is going on when preaching and singing break free from their silos and invite each other to dance in African-oriented worship? The answers to this question are not found in the majority of required textbooks in Preaching and Worship syllabi, particularly in White mainline seminaries. These answers are more likely found in reflection on the worship practices of communities of color whose voices are typically absent from mainstream homiletical discourse. This paper examines closely the symbiosis of preaching and singing as experienced in traditional or folk Black worship in North America and the Caribbean.

I gave a presentation to a global group of diverse researchers of congregational music this past summer – July 2019. The presentation was titled *Preaching Songs and Singing Preachers: A Decolonial Approach to Worship*. My thesis was essentially that preaching and singing flow into and out of each other naturally in the worship practices of African-oriented worshipping communities, in contrast to white mainline worship practices, where preaching and singing tend to be discrete liturgical aspects.<sup>1</sup> One white colleague confessed to me later that the presentation held up a mirror to her whiteness in a way she had not had her Eurocentric perspective reflected before. All her life she had experienced preaching and singing as mutually exclusive elements of worship, believing this was the way it was everywhere all the time. Hers is not an uncommon assumption. In many white mainline churches across America on any typical Sunday morning worshipers experience preaching and singing as discrete elements, each with its own beginning and ending time. This norm, with its bent towards order and precision, is seen as part of the universal standard of high church worship, to which colonized communities often subscribe.

This paper challenges the dominance of that norm, declaring it to be adequate and appropriate for a particular culture, while being inadequate and inappropriate for others. I am making a particular comparison and contrast between European-oriented and African-oriented worship practices in their respective diasporic groups. Preaching and singing, when functioning organically in non-White communities, often merge into each other in a dance more free-styled than choreographed. Such difference merits room around the table of homiletical discourse, speaking of itself in its own language and on its own terms.

### **White Preaching**

Preaching, as defined by Euro-centric norms, is a proclamation of the gospel done by the one to the many. The doctrines of sixteenth century Protestant reformers gave preaching a

---

<sup>1</sup> Mainline in this presentation refers to congregations across denominations whose worship liturgies are scripted, based on the church calendar year, and highly given to predictability and the classical *ordo* of worship.

prominent, even dominant place within the worship service, all other elements of the service being seen as leading up to and away from that high point. White mainline preaching is generally monologic in nature, and uni-directional in delivery, moving from pulpit to pew with little if any audible feedback from the listeners. It is done by seminary-trained or at least well-educated persons. According to the Aristotelian categories that govern rhetoric, White preaching values *logos*, or a coherent line of reasoned content, over *ethos* the credibility of the preacher, or *pathos*, any appeal to the range of affect among the hearers. Frank Thomas describes traditional Western, Euro-American preaching as heavily influenced by Greek logic with a primary focus on words, seeking from the text a proposition or idea, from which elaborate deductions were made in order to persuade the listener.<sup>2</sup> In theological seminaries where preaching is taught, students receive the standard fare of expository, exegetical, topical or narrative approaches, reading books mainly by White authors on methods developed by White homileticians. Black preaching is often introduced tangentially, represented by far fewer texts than have been written by Black preachers or homileticians.

### **Black Preaching**

In Black communities life tends to be more fluid than neatly ordered, and worship practices tend to follow more Spirit than script. The rational and irrational (relative, value-laden words) tend to live in tandem and with little if any critical questioning. Body, mind, soul, and spirit – named and unnamed categories of personhood - are all brought into worship practices, often with great freedom and abandon. Neat liturgical or homiletical categories don't hold up very well. Preaching can be any form of public proclamation of good news, supported by or situated within the Bible – its stories, its wisdom, its characters, its songs, and its prayers. Thus, preaching is often testimony and exhortation, spoken and sung. What is going on when preaching and singing break free from their silos and invite each other to dance? It could be expressed in what Evans E. Crawford calls *The Hum*. Reflecting on what William C. Turner Jr. calls homiletical musicality, Crawford considers how it comes together in “the way in which the preacher uses timing, pauses, inflection, pace, and other musical qualities of speech to engage all that the listener is in the act of proclamation.”<sup>3</sup> This engagement of “all that the listener is” takes into account every aspect of Black life. Cleo LaRue reminds us that the life situations of the congregation may fall into any of several domains of experience, which may be the vantage point or focal point of the black sermon. The preacher may focus on *personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, corporate concerns*, or issues concerning *the institutional church*.<sup>4</sup> In each of these domains the preacher is careful to accentuate the sovereign and overriding activity of God at work in people, in the church, and in the world outside of the church. As every Black homiletician will attest, this dance of preaching and singing then, takes place squarely within the context of Black lived experience.

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Evans Crawford with Thomas H. Troeger, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 28.

## **White singing**

Congregational song, in the context of Euro-American worship practices, is often drawn from a repertoire of historically preserved hymnody. This legacy is handed down through a series of printed books, thus expressing the White orientation towards literacy as a primary form of communication. These hymnals, updated every twenty years or so, are organized into sections based on major themes of worship, including but not limited to the persons of the Trinity, the Bible, the Christian year, the Christian life, sacraments, mission, and so on. Hymns in White services are often appropriately sprinkled throughout the liturgy and may appear, functionally, as an opening hymn, a hymn of preparation, a hymn of response, and a closing hymn. Hymn lyrics tend to be strophic, metrical, and linear in thought. Congregations tend to value them for their literary and artistic contributions, and maybe even for their sentimental associations with some meaningful time in the life of the singer or the congregation. Subsequent to the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which had quite a ripple effect on Protestant liturgical practices, different streams of congregational music have been flowing into denominational hymnals.<sup>5</sup> Yet the singing of these different genres of sacred music remains scripted, methodical, and functional. They are embraced in White worship for their artistic value and their refreshing connection to the global Church, but in their relocation from their original musical home, something of the spirit of these songs gets lost in translation. Apart from congregational song, singing in the White mainline tradition is frequently done by a choir of select voices, and or paid and volunteer soloists. This speaks to the artistic value placed on music in this social location.

## **Black singing**

In African-oriented communities, congregational song is often more spontaneous, and more experiential than functional in the role it plays within the service. Rarely is the music planned weeks or months in advance; it is not often selected based on the scripture or theme of the day; and if selected from a hymnal, chances are many in the congregation know it by heart. Black congregations tend to value their canon of songs not so much for their literary and artistic merit as much as for their affective and spiritual impact. The song has to mean something to the singers' experience so they can render it expressively. This value placed on meaning is one reason the songs are often sung for extended periods of time. Black choirs and soloists are often part of Black worship services, most frequently on a volunteer basis. Renditions by such choir and vocalists are expected to draw in the listeners to a shared experience of Spirit encounter. Hymns have their place in Black worship spaces to be sure, but more beloved and well-worn are the cyclical songs or those with refrains that may be repeated and improvised upon. What is going on when the song or refrain is repeated at will and extensively? Many would claim that the music is massaging the weary soul, refreshing the tired spirit, calming nerves stretched taught by oppression and resistance, replenishing hope-filled hearts, fortifying flagging resolve, reminding God's people of God's promise to be present through the fire, flame, and flood. This takes time,

---

<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of streams of congregational song is used by C. Michael Hawn in his edited volume, *New Songs of Celebration Render: Congregational Song in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (GIA Publications, 2013).

and time is counted very differently in White worship spaces than it is in Black traditional or folk congregations.

### **White concepts of time**

The White value placed on timeliness is reflected in the impact of the clock on worship services. Not only do services begin promptly at the appointed time, they are likely to last one hour – seventy-five minutes at the most. Included in their list of characteristics of White Practical Theology, Beaudoin and Turpin list orderliness and procedural clarity, valued historically by Whites as a way “to increase efficiency and convenience.”<sup>6</sup> Pastors of White congregations know that one way to incur the annoyance of their congregants is to extend the service past the agreed-upon schedule. Time is often tied to economics, which makes it a highly valued commodity, not to be wasted. Making every minute count, eliminating “dead” space in worship, and keeping an eye on the clock are phrases that express the White attachment to *chronos* time.

### **Black concepts of time**

By contrast, African-oriented worshipping communities embrace the concept of *kairos* time, where an activity is measured according to what is a fitting or appropriate duration for the outcome desired. So that a singing community in the midst of an inspired, inspiring song will not count minutes but rather intuitively gauge effect and affect. The song is over when the weary soul feels revived, when the tired spirit feels energized once more, and when nerves stretched taught by the tension of daily resistance are once again relaxed within a safe and nourishing space. Then the song will expire on its own accord. When I explain this process to my White colleagues their anxiety often becomes palpable. They want to know who is in control, who is keeping time. Brenda Aghahowa articulates the thinking around this fluid concept of time in African American churches: “Whether it is the prayer time...the praise time...testifying, congregational singing, the sermon, the call to Christian discipleship, or even the offertory period – no element or moment in the service is considered dull, a waste of time, unimportant, or uninspiring.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Affect in Black and White worship**

In one of my worship classes where the students were reflecting on diverse worship practices, we were using Ruth Duck’s text on worship as a discussion guide.<sup>8</sup> In her chapter on diverse worship Duck lists characteristics and practices commonly found in the worship services of African American, Korean American, Latino/a, and White worship. I asked my students at the end of the chapter, and after having watched a few videoclips sampling some of these cultural differences, to name the characteristics of the different modes of worship. They were encouraged

---

<sup>6</sup> Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin, “White Practical Theology” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, edited by Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 258.

<sup>7</sup> Brenda Aghahowa, *Praising in Black and White: Unity and Diversity in Christian Worship* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1996), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 35.

to use judgment-free words meaningful to the worshipers in the contexts under examination. This made them thoughtful. I was asking them to steer clear of stereotypical language, to avoid being dismissive or patronizing, and to put themselves in the shoes of the other. When it came to characterizing the affect of white worshipers, they were surprised at how difficult it was to speak fittingly of white emotional restraint and bodily containment in worship. One person suggested limited affect, to which one white student objected that the word limited suggested negativity. She offered “reserved” affect instead, to which her white colleagues nodded in agreement. When it came to describing the affect of black worship, one black student reacted negatively to the phrase “acting out,” used in one of our textbooks, to allude to moments of high ecstasy and celebration in worship. Even though the phrase “acting out” was in quotes, indicating it was not necessarily the author’s point of view, it was still deemed derogatory by the black students. Discussion around that was difficult too. How does one describe what happens in those moments when “the anointing falls” upon a person, or when “the spirit moves” a person, or when a person senses “a quickening?” All of those phrases were used by the black students but did not translate into the existential understanding of their white colleagues. After much debate, we settled on a substitute for “acting out.” It was “an ecstatic response to the felt presence of the Holy Spirit.” It is in those moments of ecstasy that preaching can become singing and singing can become preaching.

### **The Dance of preaching and singing**

How does preaching sing? One ready answer comes to us from traditional African American preaching. There comes a time in the delivery where the preacher’s speech becomes intoned. The words are lengthened and shortened to produce rhythmic patterns, they are sung to snatches of chant to produce melody, and often an organ or other instrument nearby will join in to produce some kind of counterpoint or harmonic support. This is better experienced than explained to be sure. If this kind of intoned delivery is sustained for a period of time, chances are a song will actually burst forth from the preacher – either an improvised one that repeats an inspired phrase, or an actual song whose lyrics are well matched with the preacher’s thoughts. This is a moment of high affect in worship. In the elegant language of Albert Raboteau, “The relation of music and preaching has been symbiotic. There is a vocal continuum between speech and song in the sermon, as speech become rhythmic chant, and chant in turn becomes tonal and shades into song.”<sup>9</sup>

How does singing preach? Once we can expand the classic definition of preaching as public proclamation of the gospel in reasoned, organized, rhetorically eloquent ways, we can begin to include such forms as testimony and exhortation. These are functions of many favored hymns and songs in the Black worship tradition. Amazing Grace and Blessed Assurance are songs of testimony. I Don’t Feel no Ways Tired and I Will Trust in the Lord are songs of exhortation. Often testimony and exhortation precede and interweave one another in practice, particularly during the time of devotions that takes place at the beginning of the worship service.

---

<sup>9</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 147.

One seasoned preacher calls the song “the sermon you take home with you and preach to yourself all throughout the week.”<sup>10</sup>

The engagement of these two worship practices within the context of Black worship is often unscripted, unplanned, communal, Spirit-inspired, and organic. Black worshipers often take this dance for granted, as it reflects the fluidity of interpersonal interaction within Black communities. It is one of the distinctives of the worship life and style of a people whose worldview does not dichotomize or compartmentalize, but rather integrates into wholistic patterns. “Africa has bequeathed to American society a way of worship that is rich in expression and content – its music...its expression of the Word in preaching and praying, its communal and ecstatic responses in “call and response” antiphony, the shout, the falling out. All these...are deep expressions of an African way of life and worldview. When African Americans capture this spirit in worship, one will hear the folksy expression as they depart from the place of worship, “We had church today!”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Spirit**

The presence of the Holy Spirit is a core value that runs through much of Black Practical Theology, particularly the areas of peaching and worship. Spirit activity is integral to the practice of African-oriented religions. Maynard-Reid reports of worship in Afrocentric worship communities in the Caribbean, “the supreme religious experience of almost all is possession by a spirit of the Spirit (as is true in many African American churches).”<sup>12</sup> African cosmology does not allow for an impermeable barrier between the material and immaterial world, between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit. The plane of spirit connection, spirit possession, and spirit-filled worship is the continuum along which we find preaching and singing. The symbiosis between them is their ability to afford worshipers the kind of religious experience that transports them from one realm to the next and back. This is why the preacher will often not begin until the singing has generated a certain level of intense energy in the room. It is also why the preacher may launch right into a song upon completing the sermon. It is also why musicians may be cued to begin playing as a preacher begins to wrap up her sermon. The energy flows from the one activity into the other, all with the intention of moving the worship and the worshipers from one realm of reality to another.

The element of Spirit is critical to any discussion or understanding of Black worship. The aim of the service is to invite and experience the presence of God the Holy Spirit to infuse every aspect of worship. This is why the singing often continues for as long as it takes to sense that numinous presence. This is why the preaching is often lengthy. The preacher may begin calmly in a didactic mode until that time she senses the energy of the spirit at which point her entire affect may change, becoming more animated, as the preaching becomes more intoned, embodied, and vernacular. Prayers in folk worship are never scripted or read, they are uttered extemporaneously and again the expectation is that they will continue until the Spirit begins to

---

<sup>10</sup> Author’s conversation with Rev. Williams B. Roane Sr., Westhampton, NJ, September 22, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives* (IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

blow through the prayer. Soloists are never artists or performers, they are ministers who use their gift to bring more of the Spirit into the room.

Discussions about spirit in this light often stymies my white students. Colonial epistemologies are primarily cognitive, funded by empirical sensibilities. Influenced by Enlightenment thinking these ways of knowing create an allegedly impermeable division between the scientific world and anything that cannot be scientifically accounted for – generally labeled as superstition or pre-critical. African cosmology defies and resists this dichotomous way of being in the world. It insists that while there is a material world where reason and cognition lead to knowledge and a certain kind of reality, there are other ways of knowing influenced by the world of the spirit, which leads to its own kind of reality and experience. Whereas Enlightenment thinking imagines an impermeable barrier between the world of science and the world of what some call superstition, across the African diaspora people cross and re-cross that barrier as a matter of course in everyday living. This world of the spirit is so intrinsic to wholeness and well-being for Africans whether in the homeland or diaspora that it cannot be extracted out of life.

### **A field study example**

I invite you to come with me to a small Afro-Caribbean church in Trinidad & Tobago, with no local denominational ties. Its pastor is known in the town for her healing powers. This is a mid-day, mid-week deliverance service, where folks come from all over the island to be prayed for, seeking to be delivered or freed from their sicknesses and diseases, whether physical, mental, emotional, financial, or relational – the pastor refers to all of these needs in her welcome greeting. At the scheduled start time of the service there is a family of five and two other adult women in the room. They are preparing for the service with no hurry or sense of being late. Thirty minutes or so later the pastor enters, accompanied by three others. After individually greeting those assembled, myself, the researcher, included, she settles into a chair on the front row, the signal for the service to begin. Three women, microphones in hand, take their places at the front. The first song begins after an opening prayer.

This is really a set of cyclical songs, short discrete choruses or refrains from hymns strung together on extended repeat. A keyboard at the front of the room and a couple of tambourines played by people in their seats provide the musical accompaniment, along with clapping hands and stomping feet – body percussion is a matter of course in African-oriented worship. After about twenty minutes the pastor takes a microphone. She takes the lead, selecting the songs, interspersing them with verbal cues, and glossolalia. Almost an hour into the singing the air is charged with a different kind of energy than at the beginning. Bodies are animated, hands are in the air. Folks are shouting “hallelujah” and “thank you Jesus,” often riffing off the words of the song of the moment,

The preaching hasn't yet begun but the pastor is in preaching form. In between the song-sets she quotes scripture verses to encourage the people to believe that God can do anything, she tells stories of her own experiences of miracles. She begins to sing again, then pauses to invite people to the microphone to offer testimonies of their own miracles. After a few testimonies she launches into singing again, which turns into a call and response chant. At first the words are recognizable, then the chant becomes a series of syllables that are not quite glossolalia but are

not English either. They are intoned grunts and groans that accompanying the dancing and jerking movements of the congregation.

At the height of this spirited, animated singing the preacher signals for the music to subside as she picks up her Bible. She reads a few verses of Scripture followed by a brief, maybe six-minute exhortation which organically segues into more testimony and a call for folks to come forward for prayer. During the prayer the singing continues unabated. At this point the sound in the room is a combination of prayer, singing, shouting, and body impact. The decibel and energy levels are high. Everyone seems caught up in this melee of sound and spirit. The focus is at the front of the room where the preacher is laying hands on people, prophesying to them giving them counsel, speaking and praying in tongues, picking up a few bars of the current chorus or refrain, and sometimes calling out to someone in the audience to come forward for special prayer.

As the researcher in the room, I observe, with mild concern, the lack of their attention to the clock. Actually, there *is* no clock in the room! By the time I have to leave to catch my ride home, which I have twice called already to postpone, I have been with this congregation well over three hours. And when I slip out, the energy is still high; prayer and song are still in full swing. Bodies are still jumping, jerking, and swaying to the music, and any concept of an “order of service” has been scrambled or abandoned.

This is but one example of what I have called decolonial worship. My understanding of decoloniality is influenced by sociologist Walter D. Mignolo in his work, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. According to Mignolo, decoloniality is a delinking from - and a divesting of - coloniality in its theory and practice. Decoloniality urgently desires *a new subjectivity*; it claims the right to exist in the global environment and be acknowledged therein as a valid way of thinking and doing; it claims the right to its own content and categories of knowledge.<sup>13</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan reflects on the kinds of decolonized thinking necessary for preaching that effectively delinks from oppressive Euro-centric norms and values. She speaks of postcolonial preaching as performance. “Preaching as performance emphasizes the act as an art form; hence, it can borrow from different creative styles, such as dialogue, storytelling, dramatized presentation, skit, street theatre, call and response, and mixed media with images and music.”<sup>14</sup>

The significance of any and all of this comparison and contrast stems from the historical hold White norms and values have had on the field of Practical Theology as a whole, and on preaching and worship specifically. In their deeply reflective chapter on White Practical Theology, Beaudoin and Turpin name several key features of this culturally embedded by product of colonial Christianity. With indicting clarity they confess, “white theology presumes to speak for and about others without a sense that the others might also be speaking too, and speaking back. It innovates strategies for keeping others silent by hemming them in rhetorically through effective theological forms – logic, conceptual clarity, love-paternalism, abstraction – which are forms of aggression masked as neutral or even positive Christian ways of proceeding.”<sup>15</sup> This is the classic representation of the European colonialists who assumed the

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), xii

<sup>14</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” in *Homiletic* Vol 41 No. 1, 2015., 13

<sup>15</sup> Beaudoin and Turpin, 254.

linguistic differences of the people they met on foreign shores meant these people could not speak for themselves. There was no mindset of accommodating difference so the Westerners took over the dance, introduced new steps, changed the music, silenced the original performers, and rendered their version of dance immoral and illegal. In response to her study of Black and White Christian worship, Branda Aghahowa responds to those who might wonder “Why talk about Black worship at all? Why raise barriers? We’re all Christians and we all worship. Worship is (or should be) generic.” Citing the thought of Cyprian Lamar Rowe, Aghahowa responds that for non-Blacks “to deny the uniqueness of Black worship (and to deny the validity of the existence of such uniqueness) constitutes a kind of *liturgical imperialism* that suggests, ‘They (African Americans) should worship like us.’”<sup>16</sup> This implied inferiority of Black worship practice is insidious. It has served to whitewash the uniqueness of non-White cultures, thus eclipsing whole swaths of non-Western history.

Some Blacks whose worship practices are reflected in this paper have heard themselves stereotyped and criticized as unreflective and non-critical – code language for unintelligent. Such adverse naming has had the effect of depriving them of a genuine encounter with God in worship. The God of all flesh continues to call their names and identify with them regardless. Some Blacks whose worship practices align more closely with European values have sought to distance themselves from certain folk practices such as named in this paper. While anyone may preach and worship in any way they choose, to give practical or pedagogical privilege to any one practice of preaching or worship enables rather than disrupts Christian accommodation to whiteness. Let the dance go on! Let preaching and singing move gracefully or wildly together as the wind of Spirit blows upon them. Let the worship of God reflect the nature of God in whom all things hold together.

---

<sup>16</sup> Aghahowa, 27.