

**New Hermeneutic, New Homiletic,
and New Directions:
An U.S. – North American Perspective**
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Abstract: *In the ongoing conversation between North American and European hermeneutics and homiletics, this essay summarizes key influences of the New Hermeneutic on the New Homiletic and gives particular attention to an area of ongoing interest and concern, the “turn to the listener.” The final section suggests questions related to current trends in homiletics and areas in need of further development. This essay is a modified version of a book chapter based on a lecture given at the International Bugenhagen Symposium in Pullach, Germany, in October 2009. The book bears the same title as the theme of the symposium: *Bibelwort und Kanzelsprache* http://www.eva-leipzig.de/product_info.php?info=p2944_Bibelwort-und-Kanzelsprache.html*

Two blocks from my seminary campus in Richmond, Indiana, a man regularly stands near a busy intersection holding a wooden pole with a large poster fastened on top. Several hours each week, summer, winter, spring, and fall, he stands on the corner displaying Bible verses in black print for all to see. My youngest daughter recently asked me why he does this and I was also curious as to what he hopes to communicate through the particular Scripture texts he displays. When we asked him, he explained that he does not select the Bible verses himself: he is paid by an independent church on the other side of town to hold up signs with different verses. For him, it is a part-time job. As my immigrant grandmother would say, “Only in America.”

If you want to understand hermeneutics and homiletics in North America and the U.S. in particular, it is important to acknowledge the many religious influences, resources, and perspectives that are part of the U.S. landscape. The intersections of many towns are inhabited by two or more churches with signs urging visitors to join them for Sunday worship or an upcoming potluck. On television, preachers and evangelists regularly urge viewers to give their lives (and often their money) to Jesus Christ and various ministries. Christian music flows through radios and the internet. Politicians regularly invoke God in their speeches and carefully consider how they will discuss their religious convictions during political campaigns. School boards argue over which science textbooks are acceptable in light of conflicting understandings of evolution and creationism. City councils hold heated debates about whether the Ten Commandments should be displayed near the courthouse. In many parts of North America you are just as likely to have a Muslim or Hindu neighbor move in next door as someone who is Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. In fact, the U.S. is home to a sometimes bewildering assortment of religious influences, many of which clamor for our attention and all of which require some degree of interpretive skill in order to understand, question, and interact with them.

Within this increasingly diverse and complex religious landscape, my interest in the relationship between hermeneutics and homiletics is academic and pragmatic, theoretical and practical. How we interpret the most important written resource of Christian faith, the Bible, and how we communicate faith with one another effect how we engage in public discussions about health care, race relations, education, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sermons provide a powerful opportunity for preachers and listeners to enter into theological reflection and public discourse, to listen and learn from Scripture, God, and neighbors, all of whom are essential to encountering God's living words among us.

For the purposes of our conference theme, "Bible Word and Pulpit Language: Homily and Hermeneutics in Dialogue," there are two questions I want to explore related to U.S.-North American homiletics. Both questions are related to developments in German hermeneutics and theology during the mid-twentieth century and both continue to be of lively interest in North America. First, how has the New Hermeneutic contributed to the development of the New Homiletic in the U.S.- North America in the mid-late 20th century? Second, how has the "turn to the listener," one of the most significant developments of the New Homiletic, been pursued in recent homiletics? I will conclude by noting a few areas of interest and subjects in need of further development in 21st century homiletics.

Contributions of the New Hermeneutic to the Development of the New Homiletic

In his landmark book, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*, sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes the 1950's in America as a period of religious engagement with the public sphere when renewed optimism arose among religious organizations.¹ Worship attendance increased noticeably during this period as many people returned to or joined local churches. According to Wuthnow, the church understood culture as a repository of values and sought to instill spiritual and moral values through religious education and the development of different religious organizations.²

By the 1960's, religious life, culture, and society in North America were undergoing radical changes. Wuthnow notes the decline in denominationalism and the rise in special interest groups, many of which contributed to a polarization between religious liberals and conservatives in the United States. The war in Viet Nam, anxieties about nuclear proliferation, growing awareness of racial prejudices and sexual injustices, and the call for civil rights were among the challenges faced by religious leaders who sought new ways of engaging church, politics, and society. Amid these changes, the role and authority of clergy persons were rigorously challenged and worship attendance among many mainline churches began a slow and steady decline. In short, the time was ripe for U.S. homiletics to develop new ways of relating gospel to the church and world.

In 1971, preacher and homiletician Fred Craddock published his landmark book, *As One Without Authority*.³ In it, he reflects on the crisis in American preaching as a

¹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religions: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1988).

² *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

³ Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1983).

crisis of language. Among the sources contributing to the perceived loss of language's power, Craddock names the bombardment of words by electronic and visual media in North American culture (which also contribute to a sense of literalism as people attach fixed meanings to printed words/media), growing mistrust of religious language and institutionalized religion, an increased emphasis on individualism in U.S. culture, the preacher's own lack of certainty in an era of contingency and questionable certitudes, and a new sense of what is needed in the relationship of preacher and listeners (less monologue and more dialogical means of engagement). All of this called for a new method in preaching, one that would address both the substantive and formal challenges of a new era. According to Craddock, "method is message: form and content are of a piece."⁴

During his sabbatical at Tübingen and its Institute for Hermeneutics in 1968-69, Craddock was greatly influenced by the scholarship of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs.⁵ He adapted their new "theology of speaking" (i.e., the New Hermeneutic) to a new "theology of preaching," what would be known in North America as the New Homiletic.

Among the many contributions of the New Hermeneutic to the development of the New Homiletic in North America, at least three have had enduring impact: a sense of the "eventfulness" of preaching, a revitalized understanding of the relationship between the form and content of the sermon, and a greater concern for the listener (often referred to as the "turn to the listener").

The eventfulness of preaching

The work of Ebeling and Fuchs helped American homileticians to recognize that language is inherently powerful. It not only expresses or signifies meaning; it creates it. For human beings who speak, listen, preach, and hear something of Divine Being amid the discourse of human beings, preaching not only *signifies* the Word of God, it *participates in* the Word of God.⁶ Scripture ceases to be mere language and the interpretation of it in preaching becomes an occasion for *Wortgeschehen* – a word event as we encounter the living Word of God. Drawing on Heidegger's notion of language as the "house of Being," Craddock and other proponents of the New Homiletic addressed questions of meaning and purpose through preaching that engages Scripture and listeners with one another in a dynamic encounter.

Related to the performative power of language was a shift in focus from what sermons *say* to what they *do*. According to Craddock, the sermon becomes an opportunity for the preacher and listeners to *journey together* in an experience of gospel. Instead of explaining texts or arguing a point of Scripture, the preacher may invite listeners into an encounter with God's Word in the sermon. Craddock's shift from a deductive to an inductive approach to sermon design "moves from the particulars of experience that have a familiar ring in the listener's ear to a general truth or conclusion."⁷

⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁵ Craddock cites several of Ebeling's works, including *God and Word*, *Theology and Proclamation*, *The Nature of Faith*, and *Word and Faith*.

⁶ According to Ebeling, "Word of God" is encountered amid the dynamic engagement of the written words of Scripture and the church's proclamation. In this way, the Word moves in, through, and beyond the text and the words of the preacher. See Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1963).

⁷ Craddock, 57. Craddock goes so far as to claim "the incarnation itself is the inductive method," 62.

Related to this interest in what sermons say and do, Thomas Long has developed a method of sermon design that urges the preacher to identify a sermon focus and function when s/he prepares a sermon.⁸ David Buttrick's method gives attention to the formation of communal consciousness in the preaching event. Through the selection and sequencing of sermon parts or "moves," Buttrick urges preachers to develop sermons whose content moves along a plot-like structure that functions to connect Scripture and the listeners in a more dynamic relationship.⁹

Form and content are inextricably related

Ebeling and Fuchs not only developed a new theology of speaking that fortified and revitalized the importance of proclamation; their work also encouraged homileticians to explore anew the relationship of Scripture's formfulness to its content. This (along with growing interest in literary criticism among North American biblical scholars) convinced many homileticians that the form and content of the sermon should not be separated from one another in the process of sermon design, just as the form and content of biblical texts must not be separated from one another in biblical exegesis. What the Bible says and what it does are necessary partners in what the sermon says and does.

Building on the inherent connections between form and content, Craddock insisted that preaching necessarily involves an appreciation for the various genres and literary forms found in Scripture. He hoped preachers would invite listeners into an imaginative encounter with Scripture. Inspired in part by his inductive approach to sermon design, narrative approaches to preaching claimed the attention of many homileticians throughout North America during the late 20th century (see below).

Concern for listeners

The New Hermeneutic also contributed to a heightened awareness of the listeners' role in preaching, the so-called "turn to the listener." Craddock underscored the importance of the preacher "as a listener to the Word of God" and the community which is presupposed and created by the preaching event.¹⁰ His inductive approach to preaching "respects the hearer as not only capable of but deserving the right to participate in that movement and arrive at a conclusion that is his [sic] own, not just the speaker's."¹¹ In relating texts to listeners, the preacher's task in the New Homiletic is perhaps best summarized by David Randolph in *The Renewal of Preaching*, originally published in 1969: "Preaching is the event in which the biblical text is interpreted in order that its meaning will come to expression in the concrete situation of the hearers."¹²

Language philosopher Kenneth Burke also insisted that words are never neutral but carry perspectives and emotions for those who speak, listen, write, and read.¹³ His

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), ch. 4.

⁹ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987).

¹⁰ Craddock, 43.

¹¹ Craddock, 62.

¹² David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching in the 21st Century*, with intro. by Robert Stephen Reid (Babylon, NY: Hanging Gardens, 1998), 7. Randolph's incisive analysis of the New Homiletic was originally issued in 1969 under the title, *The Renewal of Preaching*.

¹³ Burke describes words as "terministic screens" that move the hearer's attention away from some directions and toward others, each word carrying a "charge" that guides and is guided by the

understanding of the power of language to bear attitudes and behavioral force awakened new awareness of how words convey personal and socio-culturally prescribed meanings. For homileticians, the New Hermeneutic and movements in linguistic theory inspired a new appraisal of the role of listeners, their perceptions, and needs as integral to the preaching event. This move toward anthropological concerns resulted in listeners becoming central to the preacher's consideration of not only *what* to say but *how* to say it. Sermons were understood as capable of making their appeal not only through rational arguments but evocation, imagination, and addressing listeners' emotional needs as well.

Several weaknesses and concerns

Weaknesses are also apparent in the development of the New Homiletic as it has been informed by the New Hermeneutic in North America. Many of these shortcomings have been well summarized by David Lose in his 2000 paper for the Academy of Homiletics titled, "Whither Hence, New Homiletic?"¹⁴ I will name three weaknesses cited by Lose followed by two of my own concerns.

First, *the New Hermeneutic presupposes that the interpreter-preacher knows the correct questions* to ask of the Scripture text and to address in the sermon. As Lose asserts, Ebeling and Fuchs invariably insisted that "existence" is the question pressed upon us by Scripture and the interpreter-preacher was expected to orient the sermon accordingly.¹⁵ However, Lose notes that homiletician Lucy Atkinson Rose wonders if this approach leaves too much to the interpreter-preacher who not only decides which specific questions to ask but also directs the congregation toward an experience of question and discovery that is largely one-directional, from preacher to listeners.¹⁶ Preaching thus understood readily becomes a matter of transmission; it is the communication of timeless truths on the part of the preacher who bears the burden of identifying and addressing these on behalf of the listeners.

Second, *experience, like language, is ambivalent and both have limits* as to what they can accomplish in preaching. The New Hermeneutic's emphasis on event and experience does not readily acknowledge the inherent limitations of words and human experience. Lose notes that the uncritical acceptance of the eventful nature of language is a concern to Long who "cautions against measuring homiletical fidelity solely on the ambivalent grounds of existential experience."¹⁷ Language, like humanity, is imperfect. It is also inadequate since divine presence is sometimes experienced as an ineffable encounter rather than an articulate exchange.

Third, a focus on experience and language (and consequently, the formfulness of language) risks *drawing our attention away from the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel*. Although many would argue that theology and anthropology are necessarily

speaker/writer. See Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens" in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method* (Los Angeles, CA: University of CA, 1966).

¹⁴ David L. Lose, "Whither Hence, New Homiletic?", paper given in Dallas, Texas, at the Preaching and Theology Section of the Academy of Homiletics, December 2000. See collected papers of the 2000 meeting, 255-65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁶ Lose cites Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 78-81.

¹⁷ Lose, 262, cites Long as saying, "God does not always move us when we desire to be moved, and everything that moves us deeply is not God." See Long, 41.

related in Christian preaching, Lose cites biblical scholar and homiletician Robert Kysar who warns against theologies that are “swallowed up” by anthropology.¹⁸ What is often lost in the focus on anthropological concerns is an appreciation for the text’s ability to call into question the interpreter-preacher’s questions and insights, as well as those of the congregation.

In addition to Lose’s very helpful insights, two further questions and concerns claim my attention as I reflect on the New Homiletic and its preoccupation with the formfulness of preaching:

How does homiletics relate not only to hermeneutics but also to rhetoric, poetics, and theology? Although the New Homiletic was in many ways inspired and informed by the New Hermeneutic, it has for the most part flourished in the U.S.-North America through myriad developments in sermon design and attention given to the rhetorical nature of preaching (see below).¹⁹ If we remember Augustine’s insistence that the eloquent preacher seeks to teach, delight, and persuade, it is evident that much of what has arisen in U.S. homiletics during the rise of the New Homiletic has focused on delighting the listener through rhetorical appeals to literary artistry and narrative preaching forms.²⁰ Perhaps more than any other concern, the New Homiletic has addressed the rhetorical needs of late twentieth-century listeners.

As for poetics, the journey of discovery Craddock hoped to develop in guiding listeners through an encounter with God’s Word in Scripture finds sympathy with Paul Ricoeur who has argued that hermeneutics is less about persuasion than opening the imagination, allowing the text to signify more rather than less, and is thus closer to poetics than rhetoric.²¹ As for theology, it is true that Craddock states theological claims in the development of his homiletical method.²² However, as James Kay asserts, Craddock “defines preaching only from ‘below’ as a human task, and not also from ‘above’ as something God is doing.”²³ The relationship of preaching to theology is in need of further clarification throughout Craddock’s work and that of many other homileticians. It is not often clear how rhetoric, hermeneutics, poetics, and theology relate to one another among proponents of the New Homiletic.

Finally, how has the New Homiletic developed by Craddock and others accounted for the varied perspectives, experiences, and questions of individual listeners and the communities they inhabit? Craddock certainly identified the importance of listeners and their essential role in the sermon. However, his work assumed a common understanding

¹⁸ Lose, 262, cites Robert Kysar, “Demythologizing the New Hermeneutic Theology,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 37, 221.

¹⁹ See Edmund A. Steimle, Morris Niedenthal, and Charles Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), and Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

²⁰ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. with intro. by D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 136.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics,” in *From Metaphysics to Rhetoric*, ed. Michel Meyer (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 146.

²² For example, in chapter 3 Craddock outlines a theological presupposition underlying his “conviction that the experiences and viewpoints of the listeners constitute a part of the experience of the Word of God in the sermon” – i.e., they are the people of God and not alien to God, 60-61. Also, in support of his inductive approach to preaching, Craddock asserts “The incarnation itself is the inductive method,” 62.

²³ James F. Kay, *Preaching and Theology* from the series *Preaching and Its Partners*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2007), 91.

of human experience and identity shared by all people. Influenced by a humanist theory of subjectivity and Enlightenment notions of individual experience, Craddock and other homileticians not only assumed that the preacher needs to *identify with* listeners but can also *speak for* listeners. More recently, postmodern, collaborative, and other approaches to homiletics have drawn on deconstructive philosophies, postcolonial theories, and socio-cultural studies of ethnicity and gender to critique notions of sameness and interchangeability in preaching.²⁴ Many homileticians have sought to address the diverse and complex nature of social location and human experience as these relate to preaching.

The “Turn to the Listener” in Recent Homiletical Developments

In awakening the power of language and the eventfulness of preaching, homiletics experienced new life among what many believed were dry bones. The resurgence of interest among U.S.-North American homileticians in preaching during the latter half of the 20th century may be credited in large part to the “turn to the listener” – a greater awareness of the listeners’ role in preaching. Three expressions of the turn to the listener have been of particular interest among North American homileticians: innovations in the formfulness of preaching (including inductive and narrative modes of preaching), models for understanding and incorporating listeners’ (and preachers’) experiences and perspectives into sermons, and empirical approaches to the study of sermon listeners.

Before commenting on these, it is important to note that literary criticism and narrative criticism have also influenced homiletical developments related to listeners in the mid-late 20th century. In addition to historical-critical approaches to Scripture, by the late 1970s literary criticism (or “New Criticism”) awakened appreciation for biblical poetry, the psalms, and other genres, types, and styles of biblical literature. Narrative criticism, of course, focused on larger narrative structures, asking questions of plot, character, narration, the use of time, literary unity and the theological interpretation of narratives. In the last 20 or more years, literary and narrative approaches to Scripture have helped preachers to value the contexts and internal dynamics of biblical passages as well as to recognize the theological integrity of Scripture. These new approaches to biblical interpretation turn our attention to the internal structure, inherent beauty, theological coherence, and hidden potential of texts as they make available new ways for preachers and listeners to engage with Scripture.

Innovations in the formfulness of preaching.

In the United States, sermons of 50 years ago tended to be longer, more theologically weighty, and inclined to explain the Scripture text or highlight its most important points through rhetorical arguments and analogies. According to Long, “Today’s sermon, by contrast, is often less theologically and conceptually weighty, more dialogical and conversational in tone, less linear in structure, and more open-ended.”²⁵

²⁴ For this and other insights related to reception studies in homiletics, I am indebted to a presentation by John McClure at the Homiletics and Biblical Studies panel discussion on “Collaborative Preaching” at the Society of Biblical Literature Meeting in Boston, MA, November 2008. Unpublished paper.

²⁵ Thomas G. Long, “And How Shall They Hear? The Listener in Contemporary Preaching” in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, eds. Gail R. O’Day and Thomas G. Long (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 170.

Relying more on images, narratives, and evocative phrases, it will likely be concerned with ordinary, everyday events and how these may relate to and provide an occasion for experiencing the gospel. What were the reasons for preaching to have moved from offering convincing arguments to more dialogical modes of discourse? In large part this movement may be credited to a concern for the listener and the development of new ways of involving listeners in experiencing gospel. Many late-20th century preachers in North America turned away from mechanistic and rationalistic frameworks of *deductive* preaching toward more *inductive* approaches.

Craddock describes the *deductive* movement in preaching as beginning with a general truth or proposition and moving to the particular application or illustration of it; in other words, “the conclusion precedes the development.”²⁶ This pattern is sometimes caricatured as “three points and a poem,” with each “point” followed by a supportive argument, analogy or illustration. According to Craddock, the problem with a deductive orientation is that “there is no democracy here, no dialogue, no listening by the speaker, no contributing by the hearer.”²⁷

Instead, Craddock proposes an *inductive* orientation that begins with the particularities of experience (that which has a familiar ring in the listeners’ ears) and moves toward a more general truth or conclusion.²⁸ Inductive approaches invite the listener along a journey of discovery; a journey similar to that of the preacher who, in his or her study, encounters an experience of gospel in wrestling with Scripture and raises questions concerning this encounter. The theological presupposition behind this orientation is that the experiences and viewpoints of listeners constitute a part of the experience of the Word of God in the sermon.²⁹ According to Craddock, the Word of God in preaching is an event that brings listener, text, preacher, and God together so that “a preaching event is a sharing in the Word, a trip not just a destination... an arriving at a point for drawing conclusions and not handing over of a conclusion.”³⁰

Inductive preaching not only grows out of a keen appreciation for the role of the listener but also for the ways in which sermons are events through time; that is, they move along a trajectory or sequence similar to that of narratives. The same year that Craddock published *As One Without Authority*, Stephen Crites argued that our lives inherently follow a story-like movement as we go from moment to moment, day to day, year to year.³¹ Not only can we say that the Bible itself reflects an overall narrative structure (from creation to fall to redemption to apocalyptic expectation) but our experiences also have beginnings, middles, and ends. So do sermons.

The turn to the listener, influenced as it is by the New Hermeneutic as well as literary and narrative criticism, contributed to the development of myriad forms of

²⁶ Craddock, 54.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁸ To be sure, Craddock was not the first or only proponent of listener-centered approaches to preaching: Harry Emerson Fosdick was perhaps the most well-known advocate of preaching that addresses the questions, struggles, and needs of listeners (i.e., preaching as personal counseling on a group basis, or “the counseling sermon”).

²⁹ Craddock, 60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

³¹ Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971):291.

narrative preaching. According to Ronald J. Allen, four related but distinct approaches to narrative preaching have arisen in recent decades:³²

First, narrative preaching may be expressed through sermons that are themselves entire stories from beginning to end. In this approach, the sermon is an actual story and employs setting, plot, and characters to tell a story (or two) without commentary of any kind as it seeks to communicate its message. Advocates of this approach include Richard Jensen, Charles Rice, Edmund Steimle, and Morris Niedenthal.³³

Second, narrative preaching may be expressed through sermons that move in a story-like manner, although the content of the sermon is not a single, extended narrative. Allen describes Eugene Lowry's approach as exemplifying this type of narrative preaching.³⁴ Lowry begins with a felt discrepancy or conflict, further complicates the problem, makes a decisive turn or reversal, and moves toward resolution or closure. This story-like movement has gained widespread recognition and appreciation among many North American homileticians and preachers.

Third, narrative preaching is occasionally associated with "story theology." In this approach, the preacher may tell several stories, with or without commenting on them since the story itself is the conveyor of meaning and provides an encounter with gospel. C.S. Song represents this approach to preaching.³⁵

Fourth, Allen describes narrative theology as it is associated with the contemporary movement of postliberalism and preaching. In this approach, exemplified by Charles Campbell, the preacher as theologian retells the biblical story(ies) in order to clarify their claim on contemporary listeners and to draw the congregation into the world of the biblical narrative.³⁶ Seeking "to elucidate the story of the Bible on its own terms," Campbell and other postliberal homileticians do not ground revelation, truth or epistemology in philosophy or other modes of reflection outside the text. Instead, they seek "to narrate the congregation into the larger and ongoing biblical story."³⁷

In addition, other significant developments in narrative preaching have arisen among two distinct cohorts of preachers:

Many women preachers have contributed to developments in narrative preaching through the use of personal stories and a more conversational manner of public discourse. According to Beverly Zink-Sawyer, "personal story used as testimony has provided a way for women to validate their own experiences of faith, to legitimate their calls to proclaim the gospel, and to find a connection between their listeners and the theological constructs of the biblical text."³⁸ Many women homileticians, including Christine Smith

³² Ronald J. Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," in Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer, eds., *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2008), 27-29.

³³ Richard Jensen, *Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1980). Steimle, Niedenthal, and Rice, op. cit.

³⁴ See Lowry, *Homiletical Plot*, and *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997).

³⁵ C.S. Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999).

³⁶ Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: The New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub., 1997) and *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2002).

³⁷ Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," 28.

³⁸ Beverly Zink-Sawyer, "A Match Made in Heaven" in Graves and Schlafer, *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?*, 51.

and Teresa Fry Brown, have contributed to a deeper understanding of women's preaching and its storied nature.³⁹

Narrative styles of preaching have also thrived among African American preachers for many years. Long before the advent of the New Hermeneutic and the New Homiletic, black preachers have moved their listeners from exploring problems to discovering solutions (James Harris), encountering the gospel's inherent movement toward celebration (Henry Mitchell), and "telling the story" as he or she leads others toward a renewed sense of hope (Frank Thomas).⁴⁰ To varying degrees and in different ways, black preachers and homileticians identify with the story(ies) of Scripture and human stories as these convey God's power and presence among us.

Potential weaknesses of narrative preaching

All of the above approaches to narrative preaching have gained widespread credibility over the past several decades. However, they are not without potential and real weaknesses. Again, Allen offers helpful insights and words of caution:⁴¹

- Narrative preachers must be careful not to use trite, formulaic or unrealistic stories in their preaching.
- Not all listeners process communication in the same way: some listeners may be less inclined to follow the preacher through a journey of discovery and more appreciative of following a linear pattern of thinking that clearly states a main idea or thesis at the outset.
- Not all Scripture texts lend themselves equally well to narrative sermons (e.g., psalms, some prophetic texts). Similarly, different forms of biblical narrative (e.g., parables, miracle stories, family histories) cannot be preached in the same way. Preachers must be careful to honor the literary purposes of different biblical texts as the form and function of a text are necessarily related.
- Some occasions call for a more direct approach than is often typical of narrative preaching. Thus, ecological disasters, political crises, social controversies, human tragedies as well as celebrations urge us to adopt more direct modes of theological address and propositional preaching.
- Allen is careful to note that narrative theologians and preachers do not always recognize the diversity of viewpoints represented in Scripture and must not assume that the Bible contains one, unified theological narrative within which preachers can locate their listeners. Rather, preachers must help their listeners to hear the diverse – and sometimes troublesome – perspectives represented in Scripture, and develop theological norms and ethical means with which to critique and interpret problematic texts.

³⁹ Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989). Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003).

⁴⁰ James H. Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995); Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990); Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, OH: United Church, 1997).

⁴¹ Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," 36-40.

- Finally, our media driven culture is saturated with images and sound bites that are not conducive to critical thinking. Although narrative forms of preaching can develop intuitive and imaginative capacities among listeners, people need help in learning how to theologically interpret the meaning and implications of what they encounter in Scripture and the world around them.

Of course, narrative approaches to preaching are not the only forms of sermon design prevalent in the U.S.-North America. Expository preaching is well respected and widely practiced in many churches.⁴² Deductive modes of preaching appear to be especially popular among churches that focus on teaching basic principles of Christian faith. Nevertheless, narrative forms of preaching continue to flourish, adapt and evolve to new movements and contexts of worship.

New models for understanding diverse bodies of listeners

In contrast to models that assume a common or unified experience among listeners, other models recognize the complexity and variety of human experiences and perspectives. These models assume that although it is difficult to fully describe and critically analyze individual and collective perceptions and experiences, it is essential for preachers to recognize the diversity of listener experiences in order to hear and speak gospel faithfully to others.

In other words, these approaches do not assume that all listeners will travel along a common trajectory set out by the preacher in a sermon; nor do they assume that preachers and listeners fully understand one another. Rather, postmodernism has alerted us to the fact that in our effort to identify with listeners and to speak with and to them, we may be assuming that we know much more than we actually know. The widespread interest in reception theory among philosophers, linguists, and, more recently, homileticians reflects concern for the role that listeners and readers play in the shared work of interpretation.⁴³

In a paper delivered in a panel presentation on “Collaborative Preaching” at the 2008 meeting of the Homiletics and Biblical Studies section of the Society of Biblical Literature, John McClure asks, “What difference do race, ethnicity, gender, and social location make in sermon reception? What are the key individual differences that affect sermon reception?”⁴⁴ McClure notes the proliferation of “deconstructive and hermeneutical philosophies, postcolonial theories, cultural studies, standpoint epistemology, critical race theories, and feminist and womanist theories [that] have offered strong critiques of sameness or interchangeability with respect to human subjectivity.” He identifies the following four homiletical models that have arisen in response to the fragmentation of listener identity:

⁴² See Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁴³ See Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997).

⁴⁴ McClure, unpublished paper, 2008. Also, in ch. 3 of *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 200), McClure argues that we cannot assume hegemony among sermon listeners: we have exited the house of common human experience and we ignore human differences at our own peril.

First, perspectival or “target-audience” models are represented by the work of diverse groups of homiletics whose experiences and perspectives lend invaluable understanding to preaching. These include feminist, womanist, disabled, Asian American, African American, Mujerista, Native American, and cross-cultural studies in homiletics.⁴⁵

Second, ethnographic and congregational homiletics explore the situational and communal aspects of listener dynamics. This approach seeks to develop contextual preaching through careful exegesis of congregational settings and is exemplified by the work of Nora Tubbs Tisdale.⁴⁶ The symbols, ethos, values, economics, theology, and worldviews of congregational members are studied as preachers develop sermons that are integral to local communities of faith.

Third, conversational and collaborative homiletics focus on providing a hospitable space for persons to hear, speak, and share with one another in the work of preaching. These approaches are intentionally dialogical and hospitable in nature. They include the work of Rose who advocates preaching that is communal, relational, inclusive, and conversational in tone; Ronald Allen who understands sermons as theological interpretation through conversation; O. Wesley Allen who argues that the sermon should take on the character of conversation with the congregation; and John McClure whose method of collaborative preaching welcomes strangers and involves “others” in the preparation and presentation of sermons.⁴⁷

Finally, testimonial homiletics takes seriously the preacher as one who witnesses gospel to others. This approach includes the work of Long whose theological vision of preaching is one of the preacher bearing witness to what is seen and heard, and Anna Carter Florence who identifies the authority of preaching in giving testimony to the liberating power of God in the biblical text and the preacher’s lived experience.⁴⁸

Empirical studies of sermon listeners

A third development in the turn to the listener is found in a recent empirical study undertaken in the U. S. between 2000-2004. Interviewing individuals, small groups and pastors from twenty-eight Midwestern congregations, a team of homiletics worked on the “Listening to Listeners Project” to analyze listeners’ perceptions of sermon content, the preacher, listeners’ feelings, and issues of embodiment in preaching. This study included interviews of 32 preachers, 263 lay persons, and 28 small groups in a variety of rural, urban, suburban, ethnically and denominationally diverse settings.

⁴⁵ In addition to feminist, womanist and African American homiletics noted in footnotes 38 and 39 above, see: Mary Lin Hudson and Mary Donovan Turner, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1999); Marcia Y. Riggs and Barbara Holmes, *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996); Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1999); Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton, 2006); James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

⁴⁶ Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997).

⁴⁷ Rose, *Sharing the Word*; Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2009); John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), and *Other-wise Preaching*.

⁴⁸ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, and Anna Carter Florence; *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

In addition to the vast quantities of material generated by the interviews, the Listening to Listeners Project also inspired four books: *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*; *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling*; *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*; and *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*.⁴⁹ Many discoveries arose through this study, including an identification of the “settings” through which listeners process sermons (i.e., through sermon content, perceptions of the preacher and his/her ethos, pathos, and trans-verbal awareness). Many listeners also insisted that the purpose of preaching is to teach or instruct congregations and their members about Scripture and faith, and it was also remarkable how many of these listeners want preachers to speak more directly and frequently about controversial issues in their sermons.

My work on the supervisory board of the Listening to Listeners Project focused on two areas of interest: the role and authority of Scripture, and preaching about controversial and challenging matters of life and faith.⁵⁰ It is clear that the participants in our study not only want to learn more about the content of Scripture but they are eager to hear the preacher relate Scripture to individual, congregational, local, national, and international realms of life. The findings of the Listeners Project offer strong validation for the International Bugenhagen Symposium and its focus on the relationship between Scripture and preaching, and the importance of interpretation and proclamation for the church.

Closing Observations and Questions of Current Interest

The influence of the New Hermeneutic, developments in the New Homiletic, and recent interest in sermon listeners have contributed to several significant innovations in U.S.-American homiletics. The move from deductive, rationalistic, and mechanistic modes of sermon design to inductive, narrative, and listener-centered approaches to preaching has not been universally embraced or flawless in development. But many of these innovations have encouraged preachers to more creatively engage others in sermons and have opened the way for better awareness of and respect for diverse bodies of listeners. Whatever weaknesses we may identify in the New Homiletic and the attention given to listeners of sermons, these developments have inaugurated several much-needed changes in the field of preaching and have had many salutary effects.

In reflecting on current trends in U.S.-American homiletics, several questions and concerns claim my attention. First, how might theology be more intentionally related to homiletics? To be sure, some homileticians have been mindful of the role of theology in developing their approach to preaching.⁵¹ However, many have not explicitly named their

⁴⁹ Published by Chalice Press between 2004-06, these books were variously authored by the following members of the Listening to Listeners supervisory board: Ronald J. Allen, Dale Andrews, Susan Bond, John McClure, Dan Moseley, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Lee Ramsey, Jr., Diane Turner-Sharazz.

⁵⁰ See Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharazz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen, *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2005), chs. 2 and 5.

⁵¹ Two quite differently oriented yet theologically engaged homileticians represent this interest: see Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel: An Introduction to Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1998), and Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995).

theological interests and concerns.⁵² As preachers develop a keener sense of listeners' needs and perspectives and seek to relate these to the interpretation of Scripture and new forms of sermon design, further attention needs to be given to God's role in preaching and to whatever distinctly Christian approaches to homiletics we may identify. In a postmodern, post-Christian, pluralistic North American context, we cannot assume familiarity with the Bible, basic Christian beliefs, values and practices; preachers need to explore the meaning of such key facets of faith as gospel, reign of God, crucifixion, resurrection, reconciliation, grace, neighbor, Spirit, etc. As Dr. Meyer-Blanck asserted in his conference presentation, "*Eine gute Kanzelsprache ist pädagogisch.*" ("Effective preaching is pedagogical" or to paraphrase, "Good speaking from the pulpit is teaching oriented.")

Second, we must not ignore listeners' interest in relating God and Scripture to their lives and the world around them. This is an especially urgent concern when we consider ecological crises, ethnic and cultural rivalries, global recessions, and other ethical matters that demand our attention. Nearly two-thirds of the participants in the Listeners Project indicated that a major purpose of preaching is to teach the congregation and its members about the Bible and Christian doctrines so that these may be applied to religious faith and daily living.⁵³ The turn to the listener must not be narrowly construed as meeting the private interests and idiosyncratic needs of individual congregants. As gospel preachers, we are responsible for helping people connect the good news of God with matters of cultural, racial, economic, political, and religious import. In future decades, we need to more intentionally help others identify, interpret and understand theological questions and interests as these relate to various contexts, community interests, and personal experiences. The careful integration of theological and anthropological concerns in the development of new homiletical methods necessitates collaborative approaches to theological discourse. This means that our practices and theologies of preaching need to be more explicit, rigorous, creative, and welcoming toward others.

Third, how might recent developments in biblical interpretation relate to preaching? The most recent Quest for the historical Jesus has gained widespread recognition and interest in the U.S. but has not proven especially helpful to many preachers or people in the pews. Most of these historical-critical approaches seek to identify and/or verify authentic elements of biblical texts on the basis of historical and/or archeological research and hope to aid persons in the deconstruction of erroneous beliefs.⁵⁴ Often of greater help to preachers is the attention given to social modeling that sometimes accompanies studies of the historical Jesus. As noted by Amy-Jill Levine, these include comparative peasant economies, scribal communities, millenarian movements, psychobiography, cultural anthropology, political theory, and archeology.⁵⁵

⁵² Several homileticians cited in this essay are less explicit but nonetheless identifiable in their theological commitments and orientations: for example, Christine Smith is a liberation theologian; Kathy Black (like Ron Allen) is a process theologian; black homileticians range from liberation to systematic theologies in their approaches.

⁵³ Mulligan, et al, *Believing in Preaching*, ch. 1.

⁵⁴ See for example Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009).

⁵⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2006), 12-13.

However, social models based on historical reconstruction contribute to a backward-looking perspective on Scripture. That is why literary and narrative approaches to Scripture have proven more generative to preachers who seek to connect God, texts, and listeners with one another – and why homileticians must continue to enter into critical dialogue with biblical scholars as they contribute to interdisciplinary research.

Fourth, given that preachers are responsible for engaging ancient texts and diverse listeners with one another in worship, I wonder why homiletics has not more fully explored the impact of communications media on written and oral discourse. In particular, Werner Kelber's work on the hermeneutics of orality and writing may help preachers better understand the impact of communications media on the structure of life and thought.⁵⁶ Whereas a few biblical scholars have explored the implications of Kelber's approach, few homileticians have done so.⁵⁷ However, many creative developments in homiletics have arisen in relationship to performance theory – not only in the U.S.-North America (e.g., Jana Childers, Teresa Fry Brown) but among European homileticians as well (e.g., Martin Nicol, Alexander Deeg, Maria Elizabeth Aigner). International exchanges between these and other scholars will surely deepen our understanding of the dynamic nature of preaching and its relationship to diverse cultures and contexts.

My own interests take me in the direction of intertextuality and collaborative homiletics. Just as Scripture reflects myriad voices amid different contexts, so does preaching involve the voices of preachers and listeners amid various socio-political and cultural contexts.⁵⁸ Beyond tolerance for one another, I wonder how we might explore the “scandal of particularity” that our many voices represent: I wonder how we may engage one another with integrity, generosity, and conviction as we worship God and seek God's life-giving intentions for creation.⁵⁹ When we listen to the ways Jesus Christ is portrayed in Scripture as engaging others through questions, parables, confrontation, and poetic imagination, we discover God's confidence in our ability to engage one another despite our disagreements and for the sake of our different insights. Because of God's dynamic and life-giving presence among us, I wonder what we may yet hear and speak of the living God who moves through all cultures, continents, languages, and people.

⁵⁶ For a helpful review and discussion of Kelber's theories, see Tom Thatcher, ed., *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and Written Gospel* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2008).

⁵⁷ See Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, John Foley, eds., *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006).

⁵⁸ See Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, *Voices of Jesus: Preaching and Prophetic Engagement* (forthcoming, Westminster John Knox).

⁵⁹ The phrase, “scandal of particularity” is the title of a program series sponsored by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies and the Institute for Reformed Theology at Union-PSCE in Richmond, Virginia, conducted in 2006-08: “The Scandal of Particularity: Re-examining Jewish-Christian Relations.” See *Cross Currents*, Vol. 59 No. 2 (June 2009).