

## The Once and Future “Pulpit”: Hearing Gerhard Ebeling Again

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**Abstract:** *The hermeneutical theology of Gerhard Ebeling has been tremendously influential upon New Homiletic preaching. This influence has been rightly critiqued. Ebeling’s theology, when pushed too far, invites pastors to overconfident and irresponsible uses of language and reinforces a hierarchical gap between preacher and hearer. Nevertheless, Ebeling’s encouragement to vigorously engage secular life with a public homiletic is a crucial aspect of his thought. This aspect was present in some early writings of the New Homiletic, but has been largely ignored by subsequent practitioners. Developing a more public homiletic prevents proclamation from becoming ingrown and calls preachers to a greater linguistic engagement beyond church walls.*

This paper will examine the relationship between the New Hermeneutic and New Homiletic, focusing in particular on the theology of Gerhard Ebeling. My central purpose is to identify a thread within the work of Gerhard Ebeling which seems to have been dropped in the practice of the New Homiletic, a thread which, I propose, homiletics would do well to take up once again. Homiletics has tended toward fascination with the *contents* of New Hermeneutic theology and has largely ignored the linguistic *contexts* that concerned Ebeling. We will establish the paths by which the New Hermeneutic traveled into the early literature of the New Homiletic and outline some critiques of that influence. Last, I will offer a fresh reading of Ebeling and thereby suggest a potential path for contemporary homiletics.

### The Development of the New Hermeneutic

Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs are together considered the progenitors of the New Hermeneutic. Their work grows out of the thought of Martin Heidegger (particularly the “later Heidegger”) and Rudolf Bultmann. In his later work, Heidegger was concerned about the relationship of language and being. Prior to his writing, language had been primarily understood as a vehicle or a scientific tool whereby persons could express notions about their being. Heidegger came to understand language as constitutive of being, “the house of being.” Language is not something we “do;” it is who we are. Being in time and history is enabled by the gift of language; no pre-lingual notion of being in the world exists.

For Bultmann, the language of Scripture is problematic. When modern people encounter mythical references to miracles, resurrections, demons, angels, etc. that are so far outside our realm of experience and scientific knowledge, they find Scripture to be unintelligible. For Bultmann, the hermeneutical task is to translate the Scriptures into linguistic forms that peel away the dead skin of the fantastic to reveal the still-ripe kerygmatic fruit within. All of this is, of course, in service to the task of rendering Scripture (or the message of Scripture) more intelligible to the modern reader through the process of demythologization.

Ebeling, a student of Bultmann, took up his teacher’s concern for the intelligibility of the Scriptures in the scientific age; i.e., “how to allow revelation to become contemporaneous with us today.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, his work is essentially hermeneutical, but somewhat different from Bultmann’s. Instead of searching for kerygmatic meaning beneath the mythic crust of the

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics* (London: SCM, Ltd., 1991), 153.

Scriptures, Ebeling viewed the Scriptures with the assistance of the later Heidegger's ontological understandings of language. If language is disclosive of being, then cannot the Scriptures be disclosive of God's being? And if that is the case, then cannot the being of God directly address human beings through the Scriptures? As the Scriptures are read and interpreted something of the original word-event which spawned them occurs again. Humanity finds itself addressed in the contemporary situation. This communication is always a "promise" that refers to something absent in such a way that the absent presents itself, "open[ing] a future to [the one addressed] by awakening faith within [them]."<sup>2</sup>

In the 1963 essay, "Word of God and Hermeneutics," Ebeling most clearly relates his thinking to the homiletical craft. Something akin to a homiletical theory emerges in that essay, and it is compelling reading: "the sermon as a sermon is not exposition of the text as past proclamation, but is itself proclamation in the present--and that means, then, that *the sermon is EXECUTION of the text*. It carries into execution the aim of the text. It is proclamation of what the text has proclaimed."<sup>3</sup> One can see how such a theology of proclamation, all in the indicative (nearly imperative?) mood, when combined with elements of depth psychology and anxiety about a secularizing movement in public life, could produce strong medicine for the pulpit. This essay is the most cited piece of Ebeling's work regarding preaching.<sup>4</sup>

Two elements stand out in the context of Ebeling's thought toward this definition of preaching. First, when Ebeling says "sermon" he explains that he means not simply the Sunday sermon of the normative worship service; he means "the pregnant sense of proclamation in general."<sup>5</sup> So, he is using "sermon" both literally and metaphorically. Second, he distances the concept "Word of God" from the Scriptures themselves by saying that the term most appropriately refers to an event, "something that happens...the movement from text to sermon." The central question of his essay is how to get from text to sermon well, how to *do* the Word of God rightly. He states in essence that biblical interpreters and theologians have spent years wrestling with the *text* to unlock meaning. Ebeling proposes that what is at stake is not understanding the text, but understanding *what the text is pointing to*: "The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding *of* language, but understanding *through* language."<sup>6</sup> The homiletical task is that of "letting the text become God's word again."<sup>7</sup> The direction of the hermeneutical task is reversed. Instead of bringing interpretive aids to the text to excavate some applicable meaning, the text applies itself to the reader, interpreting the reader according to its own word: "*Thus the text by means of the sermon becomes a hermeneutic aid in the understanding of present experience*. Where that happens radically, there true word is uttered, and that in fact means God's Word."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutics," in *Word and Faith*, 1963, 327.

<sup>3</sup> Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, 331.

<sup>4</sup> See David Randolph in *The Renewal of Preaching*, 97; Lucy Rose in *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, 68; Fred B. Craddock in *As One Without Authority*, throughout; John McClure in *Other-wise Preaching*, 80; Paul Scott Wilson in *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, 62; John Rottman in "Performative Language and the Limits of Performance," in *Performance and Preaching*, Jana Childers and Clayton Schmidt, editors, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, 311.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 331. This particular essay was introduced on this side of the Atlantic through James Robinson and John Cobb's 1964 volume, *The new hermeneutic*, *New frontiers in theology* (Harper & Row, 1964).

## From New Hermeneutic to New Homiletic

The North American pulpit received the benefit of Ebeling's thought through two seminal works of the New Homiletic: David Randolph's *The Renewal of Preaching* (1969) and Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority* (1971). Randolph's book led with the essay "Preaching and the New Hermeneutic" which was first delivered in 1965 at the inaugural meeting of what would become the Academy of Homiletics. In this essay, Randolph identified the New Hermeneutic as a theology capable of forming a new homiletic linking the ancient texts to present experience. And which contemporary experience in particular did Randolph have in mind? The experience of the Civil Rights movement: "...the great task of preachers and of teachers of preaching at this moment in our history is to launch an offensive which will establish, clarify, and advance the truth which has come to light again in the civil rights movement and elsewhere: *Preaching is the pivot on which the Christian revolution turns.*"<sup>9</sup> For Randolph, Ebeling's hermeneutic was capable of strengthening pastoral voices (which had been "tempered" by the heat of the movement) because it promised efficacy through the proclamation of the Word of God in existentially threatening, concrete situations. Randolph also emphasized the eventfulness of preaching and the use of language in structuring a sermon using rhetorical and aesthetic forms such as poetry and narrative. The language of preaching is performative and brings the ancient text to bear upon the contemporary situation, not in guaranteed ways, but in ways that assist the Word of God to break open in our midst.

While he does not so explicitly link preaching and the civil rights movement, Fred Craddock does long for a homiletic that engages the world: "We will know power has returned to the pulpit when and where preaching effects transformation in the lives of [human beings] and in the structures of society."<sup>10</sup> The theology of Gerhard Ebeling thoroughly informs his approach. By 1971, several other Ebeling works had been published in English and are included by Craddock. Reading the quotations from Ebeling and considering the footnotes in *As One Without Authority*, one sees that Craddock is very attracted to the notion of the capacity of language, through the word-event, to "touch and change our very life" in very personal ways, but he also seems to believe that the New Hermeneutic can restore the power of contemporaneity to the pulpit: The right Word for the right people at the right time.<sup>11</sup> This rightness is possible, of course, through the "reversed" hermeneutic of the biblical text. Craddock quotes Ebeling: "God's Word is not so much 'a light which shines upon God but a light which shines from Him.'"<sup>12</sup>

Both Craddock and Randolph are delighted with Ebeling's assertions about the ability of language to disclose being, to not only "say" but to "do," to bear God's Word to the here and now. Both of them are also deeply concerned with the erosion of relevancy and authority in the pulpit. They both look to Ebeling's thought to bring a renewed pastoral authority that rests not in a "from-above" doctrinal exposition, but rather in an experience, mediated by the sermon, of being personally addressed by God's Word specifically located in Jesus Christ. These two themes are firmly linked. The performativity of language in the event of preaching has the capacity to empower the role of the preacher herself.

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<sup>9</sup> David Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1971), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 186, as quoted by Craddock in *As One Without Authority* on p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Craddock, 75.

## Recent Criticism of Ebeling's Influence

Since the early 1990s, the New Homiletic and its connections with the New Hermeneutic have been evaluated, and I will examine the criticism of two of those evaluators: David Lose in his fine paper, *Whither Hence, New Homiletic?* explicates the gifts to preaching borne by Ebeling's approach: 1) it puts preaching back into the central focus of biblical exegesis; 2) it helps "redefine truth in experiential rather than cognitive terms," which leads away from the proposition-based forms of the Old Homiletic;<sup>13</sup> 3) the potency of language as described by Ebeling leads to "the investigations of the evocative power of image and story" along with literary and narrative approaches to text interpretation;<sup>14</sup> and 4) most importantly, Ebeling contemporizes the address of these ancient texts through a word-event that occurs on the deep and personal field of human experience, a first gyration in a turn to the hearer.

Lose then outlines four critiques of the influence of Ebeling's theology on the pulpit; critiques which are, in my view, quite apt but which call for further comment. First, the New Hermeneutic leaves as much power in the hands of the preacher to "ask the right [existential] questions" of the text in crafting a word-event as the Old Homiletic preachers needed to mine the right cognitive truths from the text.<sup>15</sup> In other words, shifting the preacher's object from reason to experience still leaves the preacher in thorough control of the meaning of the text and the meaning of the event itself. Second, Lose states that according to Andrew Thistleton, the New Hermeneutic trades the criteria of fidelity to the text for one of effectiveness.<sup>16</sup> Language and experience are equally effective and yet ambivalent. At the same time that language powerfully mediates an experience with the divine, language is simultaneously fallen, sinful, and can be used effectively by forces other than the divine. Third, drawing on Robert Kysar's critique, Lose finds that the New Hermeneutic's emphasis on personal experience risks the danger that theology is both *always and only* anthropology.<sup>17</sup> Mark Ellingsen and Charles Campbell lament how experience trumps both form and content in the New Homiletic; in their desire to "create a *profound, even transformative* experience the New Homileticians risk sacrificing a *genuinely Christian* experience."<sup>18</sup> Lastly, Thistleton (via Lose) accuses Ebeling and his New Homiletical heirs of a belief in "word-magic" and of basing his hermeneutic in the "surprisingly foundational premises about the power of words" and ignoring the contextual, conventional properties of language which are key to making meaning in actual sermons.<sup>19</sup> Then, Lose makes a key connection with Thistleton: "having loosed themselves from the moors [*sic*] of the New Hermeneutic [some New Homileticians] have also elevated 'story,' 'consciousness,' 'imagination,' 'narrative,' or some other purveyor and securer of authentic 'experience' as a universally-applicable cure-all for whatever ails contemporary preaching."<sup>20</sup> In other words, the New Homiletic took the New Hermeneutic farther than it was capable of going or, perhaps, farther than Ebeling ever meant it to go.

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<sup>13</sup> Lose, 260.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* However, I do not find this preoccupation with narrative in Ebeling's writing.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Thistleton, "The New Hermeneutic," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1972, revised 1979), pp. 308-333. Quoted by Lose on 261.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kysar, "Demythologizing the New Hermeneutic Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XXXVII, no. 3 (1969): 215-223. <http://jaar.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/doi/10.1093/jaarel/XXXVII.3.215>.

<sup>18</sup> Lose, 263.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

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

Lose's excellent critique is essentially two-fold. First, Ebeling gave homiletics a fresh sense of the power of language, but preachers were *irresponsible* with all of the ramifications of language, the "fallenness" of it. Still, Ebeling is writing primarily in the early 1960s. The feminist critique of language has not gotten to him yet, much less poststructuralism. What will come in the 1970s and 1980s is a painful awareness that language is both ontological *and* instrumental, one sense feeding into the other. Indeed, language is not simply something that people do; it is something that people powerfully wield. In fact, the some of the language of Scripture has destructive intent and effect embedded right in it; far from revealing the truly human, it can also serve to unmake the human. Second, Ebeling endowed homiletics with a fresh sense of the power of language, but preachers were *overconfident* with their capacities to employ language's connection to being and existence. Lose et al. are wise to point out that New Homiletic preachers are presented by Ebeling with a sizeable temptation: to tinker under the hood of being with the tools of both scriptural and contemporary language. Combined, these two critiques have considerable force: Ebeling's hermeneutic tends to produce a homiletic which reinforces a distance between preacher and hearer and which uses language to create events that seem like bread-crumbs trails that hearers must follow to find the "correct" existential meaning.

Lucy Rose's chief complaints about the New Homiletic are very similar, especially in her assessment of what she describes as the "transformational" school of homiletics, which happens to include those figures who express the most affinity for Ebeling's hermeneutics: Fred Craddock, Thomas Long, Charles Rice, H. Grady Davis, Eugene Lowry, and David Randolph, among others. While some of these scholars may be somewhat skeptical about any presumed innocence of language, they are unwilling to view language in general as wholly "fallen, freighted, vested with the interests of its users."<sup>21</sup> For Rose, if the point of preaching is to use language, both scriptural and contemporary, to create experience-events of the gospel, then she wants to ask how such preaching can be descriptive of the gospel without being prescriptive of the experience: "The preacher remains in the privileged position of the one who has already experienced the transformation that the congregation now needs to experience. The congregation remains in the subordinate position of recipients whose options are rejecting or receiving...."<sup>22</sup> Rose instead recommends a conversational mode of preaching that "aims to gather the community of faith around the Word where the central conversations of the people of God are fostered and refocused week after week."<sup>23</sup> Preachers would seek solidarity with congregants through a conversation rather than dispensing "answers."

### **Taking Another Look at Ebeling's Influence**

But can these faults be laid entirely upon the New Hermeneutic? Lose and Rose are, centrally, correct about both language and event and what that means for pastoral identity. Perhaps the clearest criticism leveled at the tendencies of the New Homiletic come from Sally A. Brown: "Lurking in the background of both the New Hermeneutic and its various offspring (all wearing New Homiletic t-shirts) was a highly vulnerable presupposition-the presupposition of the innocence of the text."<sup>24</sup> But can one really suppose that Gerhard Ebeling, matriculant in the

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<sup>21</sup>Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, 78.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> Sally A. Brown, Homiletix E-Forum, "Whither the New Homiletic: After the Lost Innocence of Word/Words." September 14, 2006, [http://www.homiletics.org/pdfvisitors/homiletixfall2006/homiletix\\_fall2006\\_brown.htm](http://www.homiletics.org/pdfvisitors/homiletixfall2006/homiletix_fall2006_brown.htm) (accessed November 20, 2009).

underground seminary led by Bonhoeffer and Confessing Church pastor in Berlin during World War II, is ignorant of the human capacity to twist language and even the language of Scripture to horrendously destructive ends? Ebeling himself condemns what he terms “false” uses of language which corrupt the Word of God.<sup>25</sup> So, fifty years on, Ebeling indeed seems a bit naïve in his notions of language, but not as thoughtless as some might assert: “We must not irresponsibly continue to talk of God, nor irresponsibly stop doing so.”<sup>26</sup> The critiques of Lose and Rose concerning pastoral identity are also quite apt. The New Hermeneutic has tended to produce preachers with Old Homiletic qualities: one person dispensing answers to questions of their own devising. The currency appropriate to the sermonic transaction is what has shifted, from doctrinal propositions in the Old to transformative experience in the New.

The question for the purpose of this essay is whether Ebeling must bear much responsibility for these problems; I think he bears some. The notion of a preacher having the capacity to mediate a transformative, experiential event of Jesus Christ through her or his own words and the words of Scripture is not exactly a “roundtable” homiletical image. However, I do not think it appropriate to label Ebeling as being opposed to collaboration in the process of sermon creation. In terms of the preacher’s own work, Ebeling views the best interpretive contribution to be the removal of obstacles from the path for the Word of God between the first event and the current event.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the preacher’s ideal approach would not be deductive or inductive but *reductive*. The good preacher must ask, “What can I say in this sermon that will remove hindrances that keep the text from doing what the text will do?” As I read him, Ebeling actually espouses a humility that is difficult to square with some of the less flattering images of preacher that critics of the New Homiletic employ.

Still, what Ebeling seems to be asking is this: Are the Scriptures capable of revelation? If one says no, then one may leave Ebeling aside...perhaps along with any notion of Christian preaching sustaining a link with Christian tradition. However, if one says yes, then taking what Ebeling has to say into account is very important. The language of Scripture is corrupted and corrupting, particularly in an instrumental sense; however, we continue to preach with some degree of confidence in the efficacy of the word-event. People still testify to having the Word *happen* in sermons, and it happens with language. Is it not possible for the notion of word-event to endure withering criticism and for Ebeling’s central claim to remain true? Sally Brown asserts,

evidently, reports of the Word’s transforming potential are as difficult to squelch as rumors of resurrection. The more we specify the conditions under which Word may happen, or what counts as Word, the less we seem to be in charge of it. Despite our misgivings about the medium (language) by which Word has historically traveled, this Word still presses into speech of a Sunday morning, and those who listen testify that they have met a Promiser who keeps laying claim to their future and ours, against all odds.<sup>28</sup>

Might Ebeling be right that the Scriptures are not themselves God’s word, but rather that the “word of God, according to the biblical tradition, thus seeks to be understood as a word event that does not go out of date but constantly renews itself?”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *God and Word*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ebeling, *God and Word*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, 40.

In summary, I have sought to invite Ebeling's critics to review his work again without reading him too narrowly or pushing his thought farther than he would intend. Through Craddock and Randolph, Ebeling's thought enters the North American pulpit with a bent toward the recovery of some sort of authority through the power of performative language. Without doubt, Ebeling makes big claims about Christian proclamation and bears some of the burden for the critiques leveled at the New Homiletic. Still, his detractors have overlooked an important aspect of Gerhard Ebeling's work, one which metes out a crucial critique of the New Homiletic.

### Speaking Freedom in the Public Sphere

While the New Homiletic inherited the above traits from the New Hermeneutic, one gene seems to have been bred out of the offspring. What seems to have developed are theories and then methods for an *intra-ecclesial* homiletic. The focus of much of the New Homiletic appears to be about crafting a good, biblically-shaped Sunday sermon that is effective in the lives of twentieth century North American Christian churchgoers. This *in-church* context could be part of the reason that the New Homiletic in the end looks so much like the Old Homiletic. Aside from any turn to the hearer, preaching is still practiced as one person on the raised dais speaking to a crowd at 11 a.m. on Sunday. To be sure, sermons have been made more effective upon the field of human experience, but to what end? Toward which goals? For me, the great lapse of the church and of preachers in the New Homiletic has been to exercise *upon itself* the power of Ebeling's thought. We have preached to the choir. We understood the *content* of what Ebeling was saying about the Word, but we paid little heed to the *contexts* into which he was calling us to proclaim.

In his 1967 work, *God and Word*, Ebeling laments the loss of vitality in God-talk in a secularizing culture: "it looks as if talk of God, and all that goes with it, is nothing more than just a tradition, a mere form of speech, a dead relic of the language of the past."<sup>30</sup> He finds that Christians are speaking from a "ghetto" of language that is no longer negotiable as cultural currency and that secular cultures are pushing the church into silence, incapable or unwilling to speak coherently of God. In the church, we claim to speak for God. But how can we, asks Ebeling, if we are just as godless as the rest of the world? If we are all, without exception, sinners before God and thus, technically, godless ourselves, then how can we speak of God? Perhaps our hubris in wielding traditional God-talk is part of the reason that an age of hyper-rational scientific inquiry has pushed aside our speech as irrelevant. In the face of the horrors of the mid-twentieth century how can we speak of a God of love, compassion and justice? We, who claim to speak of God, are quite incapable of doing so; we live under this contradiction – "on the one hand having to speak of God and on the other hand being unable to speak of God."<sup>31</sup>

If a preacher speaks, it is as one sinner to another. If the church speaks, it is as the damned to the condemned. Bound, we have heard the Word of God both in its judgment and its graciousness. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has spoken "Freedom!" to us. Not only have we heard a word about our freedom; God has also given us a future. We *must*, then, do something with our freedom and our new future. We can choose to do nothing and waste the freedom God has given, or we can choose to participate in God's continuing speech. In other words, we can speak freedom to others. We are *responsible*, having been addressed and freed by God, to do this. "It is true," says Ebeling, "that use of force can to a certain extent destroy freedom, but it cannot create freedom. Freedom can only be called into being as one

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 13.

literally ‘speaks freedom’ to his neighbor.”<sup>32</sup> Ebeling is sharing a theology of eschatological liberation through language. God’s future comes to meet us in the event of the Word of God to speak freedom to us and freedom on more than simply a spiritual level. Freed, we are then utterly responsible to speak freedom and open up a new eschatological possibility for others, not by *our* word, but by faith in God’s Word to do what human beings cannot command.

Ebeling then asks us to compare this notion of language as the Word of God with “church language which is of importance only for the initiated”.<sup>33</sup>

It is, moreover, unfortunately true that Christian proclamation has largely become a ghetto language.... it has assumed the character of a group language for private use. The language of public life on the other hand, the language of the workaday world of politics, economics and industry, of science and culture, has been secularized and has become ... so technical that the word of God is entirely out of place in it. Apart from noncommittal forms of speech, talk of God is confined to specially reserved, institutional places and occasions—Sunday worship, religious education, marriages and funerals, religious papers or the religious column in the daily press, particular hours on radio and television, and so on. Amid the plurality of languages in modern society, talk of God occupies only one narrow sector, and is itself in turn split into many dialects.<sup>34</sup>

Would not Ebeling on this basis esteem a wholly in-church idea of homiletics as “group language for private use?” Perhaps not, for, as Sally Brown reminded us, people do experience the freeing event of the Word of God in their congregations through the sermons that they hear. However, preaching can be and often is dangerously close to “ghetto language” and is in violation of the spirit of proclamation that Ebeling is espousing.

How does one solve this problem, asks Ebeling. How can the church find its language relevant as Word of God to this age? We cannot simply update our vocabulary: “Coloring our language with splashes of alluring jargon underlines a lack of confidence in the word, which is fatal to Christian proclamation.”<sup>35</sup> Could we redouble our efforts and make our confession of faith more bold and courageous? We could, says Ebeling, but then we run the risk of too great a degree of self-assertion. This is not *our* word, but *God’s* word. Because of the ghetto-ization of God language, we must be ready, with “healthy modesty,” to “assume responsibility *before the public and for the public*, namely the readiness to say plainly why using the word ‘God’ is necessary and what the Word is which authorizes us to do so.”<sup>36</sup>

Ebeling is distressed about the silencing oppression brought about by the dehumanizing “technification” of human life which “tones down” any sense of mystery in life, a worry that could be easily expressed fifty years hence.<sup>37</sup> Of equal concern to him is the quashing of individual responsibility by “mass society,” which, I suppose, is a comment upon the totalitarian and communist regimes functioning at their zenith as he was writing in the mid-1960s. These secularizing social forces have combined to silence God-talk and to cause Christians to worry whether the Word of God can even exist through modernity.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 37-38, emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 36-37.



Ebeling scoffs at this notion: “Whoever, therefore, has grasped what is meant by ‘word of God’ cannot be ridden by any sort of anxious concern for the word of God and ultimately therewith for God [’s own self]; [she] can only be driven to concern for humanity and for the world.”<sup>38</sup> God’s word is no “rare and sensitive plant which belongs to tradition and must be preserved from extinction.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, the test of whether one has indeed grasped the word of God is an assurance that the word of God has had a “saving effect in history,” as God continually grants the gift of language to humanity. That *all* language has its origin in God as gift gives us authority over the powers which would silence us.<sup>40</sup> Mere conservatism cannot account for the preservation of the Scriptures. No, the event of the Word of God mediated by those Scriptures continues to happen and prompts the tradition to conserve the canon, not as the source of something in itself, but as the source of the event of the word. *We find ourselves responsible to proclaim the Word into the world that is open before us.*<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, what he says of theologians is also applicable to preachers: we are “more easily devoted to talking than to hearing.”<sup>42</sup> The task requires patience, for in our passion to speak, we may fail to listen to others.

Writing at the hinge of the twentieth century, following world wars and genocide, in the midst of increased industrialization and the birth of the technological age, during the universal fight for civil rights and justice for all people, Gerhard Ebeling was calling the church (and preachers) to a vigorous, confident, unashamed proclamation into *public* life. Ebeling believed that Christian tradition maintained its viability through an experience mediated by its specific language. The church’s hope for communication with the world lay in God’s desire continually to surprise the world through God’s very gift of language already resting within them. The church needs only to speak in full assurance; God will do both the work of revelation in Scripture and the awakening of reception in the hearer through the general gift of language. Ebeling invoked the prophets and apostles as the church’s forebears in this public work, women and men who engaged the world and not just their insulated religious communities.

### **The New Homiletic as a Public Homiletic**

David Randolph grasped Ebeling’s theological vision and at a seminal moment in the New Homiletic he crystallized that theological vision into a homiletical one. He begins his book: “A new preaching is coming to birth in the travail of our times. In the civil rights movement, in the engagement with communism, in the ‘secular city,’ in the ecumenical enterprise, in the theological school, in the parish church, in the liturgical movement, and elsewhere, preaching is being rejected as a habit and affirmed as a happening.”<sup>43</sup> Note that the first locales in his list are the *public* ones. He invites preachers to place quotation marks around their fixed notions of pulpit. In a vivid story, Randolph transports the reader to Brown Chapel in Selma, Alabama, on March 9, 1965, the Tuesday after Bloody Sunday, when non-violent protesters against racism in the American South sought to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in a march to the state Capitol and were brutally beaten. “A young minister,” says Randolph, “an aide to Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks: ‘I am not a lawyer. But I am a preacher. Today that Edmund Pettus Bridge will be my pulpit, and I will preach from it.’”<sup>44</sup> Randolph had faith that homiletics as a Christian practice

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

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>43</sup> Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2.

was *responsible* to speak to the world. Preaching was not just a matter of what preachers *can* do with language in the church, but also of what they *must* say into the public arena of secularized, technified (read dehumanizing) machinations: “The field of homiletics, like that of the gospel, is the world. Homiletics must never be reduced to theological intramurals. Preaching must wear like a brand the admonition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to get out ‘into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world.’ . . . Authentic language will be born only out of vital encounter with the world at its points of maximum stress, and the most torturous listening for the word.”<sup>45</sup>

Craddock, as much as Randolph, actively seeks in his first chapter to help preaching become more engaged in public life: “In much of the ‘new preaching,’ one can detect a longing, not just to be heard and understood, but to be accepted by a world that has been alienated by the religious jargon of a self-addressing church.”<sup>46</sup> He even decries the divorce between preaching and a distinctly American activism (brought wholly to fruition in the social gospel movement) which eschews empty words for deeds, the barely tolerable blather of preaching for far more consequential social action. This ignores the power of preaching to inaugurate and sustain lasting social change. Both Randolph and Craddock then proceed in their books to describe homiletical theories and methods that are, apparently, to be used both in pulpits and in “pulpits.” Nevertheless, a vigorous public homiletic does not really emerge out of the first chapter of the *New Homiletic* with the exception perhaps of the African-American “pulpit” which has more consistently sought to maintain those quotation marks. This insight lends considerable weight to Dale P. Andrews’ criticism that the *New Homiletic* (and in particular the work of Randolph and Craddock) is simply black preaching repackaged for white preachers and churches.<sup>47</sup> One might add the criticism that the *New Homiletic* is essentially black preaching *sanitized of public social engagement*.

Gerhard Ebeling believed it was incumbent upon preachers to bring the Word of God to bear upon the wide fields of human experience. The Word of God, rooted in the event of Jesus the Christ, foretold by the prophets and preached by the apostles, wants to speak to humanity, to our economies and our militaries, to our healthcare systems and adult gaming empires. Ebeling invited us to remove the obstacles out from before that Word. Oddly, we ourselves may prove to be the most daunting stumbling block to that proclamation.

### **Conclusion: Where are the Edmund Pettus Bridges?**

I do not contend that Ebeling is offering a full-fledged theology of public homiletic to us. Still, he is at least calling preachers to a greater public awareness and engagement in the task of preaching. What might happen if we maintained our trust that God wanted to speak to human lives in a word-event but sometimes changed the *venues* of that event? The questions that Ebeling was asking fifty years ago ring no less true today. How can God’s Word then become God’s Word now, not just in the church, but in many locales within the culture?

According to Ebeling, having received faith in Christ from our own encounters with the word-event, we inherit a deep responsibility, not solely to the church, but to the world, which God loves. I think pastors are no strangers to responsibility. Some of us feel responsible for just about everything that happens in the church! But do we experience a sense of public responsibility to bring the Word of God to bear upon our neighborhoods and communities, our

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>46</sup> Craddock, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Dale P. Andrews, “New to Whom?” Homiletix E-Forum. September 14, 2006. [http://www.homiletics.org/pdfvisitors/homiletixfall2006/homiletix\\_fall2006\\_andrews.htm](http://www.homiletics.org/pdfvisitors/homiletixfall2006/homiletix_fall2006_andrews.htm) (accessed Dec. 12, 2009).

cities and our world? My sense is that we *do* feel that sense of public responsibility. But we struggle to know *how to act on those responsibilities*. I recently spoke with the Rev. Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, a still-active Methodist preacher in Alabama who preached a gospel of social justice to white congregations and communities during the civil rights movement. I shared with him my work on this paper and Randolph's story about that preacher in Selma. I asked him why he thought preaching was not more socially engaged. He replied, "Because there are no more Edmund Pettus Bridges."<sup>48</sup> What he meant was that finding a contemporary commonplace where homiletics may be effective as a different form of comment or protest than social activism is hard. With the advent of social networking does a definition of "public" even exist anymore? How can academic homiletics assist us in developing a more public homiletic?

Addressing those persons nervous about the viability of preaching in 1969, David Randolph noted, "... the question is not whether preaching has a future but whether the church will develop a homiletic worthy of the future which opens before it and thus assist preachers to rise to the occasion."<sup>49</sup> Gerhard Ebeling is not simply a distant, historical influence upon us. In lively, even demanding ways, his work speaks to preaching's opening future. He encourages us to renew the New Homiletic by engaging a more worthy, more *public* homiletic.

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<sup>48</sup> Conversation with the Rev. Dr. Thomas Lane Butts, December 11, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Randolph, 17.