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Fearing God and Evil Spirits: The Preaching of Malagasy Shepherds

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Abstract: *This article investigates how so-called “shepherds” (mpiandry) in the Malagasy revival movement (Fifohazana) recognize, identify, and address fears through their preaching in what here are called healing services. The services follow a strict liturgy and allow for homiletical spaces where fears are expressed and addressed. This essay presents a few detailed stories from field material produced from qualitative research interviews and observation of preaching in these services. The specific emphasis in the material reveals how in their preaching the shepherds interpret the problems of life in terms of a fight with evil spirits and the devil. Preaching in the movement transforms and empowers vulnerable and excluded people, it reconciles them with God, and it gives meaning and direction to their day-to-day struggles. The preaching, however, is mainly occupied with individual salvation. The author challenges the movement to find contextually and culturally coherent ways to advocate for justice for the vulnerable and excluded.*

Introduction

Madagascar is a beautiful country with natural riches and endemic species of plants, birds, and animals. In spite of this, its inhabitants are poor and caught up in a struggle for life on a daily basis.¹ The reasons for this are many. The period from 2001 has been marked by political instability, economic losses, and climatic shocks, coupled with unemployment in the non-agricultural and urban sectors.² In such a situation, it is fair to say that fears run rampant in the lives of the people.

The Christian churches are vibrant in Madagascar. In the Malagasy Lutheran Church (*Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy*), where I served from 1983-1994, there are now 8,110 congregations all over the island.³ How do the churches face the different kinds of fear among the people? How do they address the fears through their preaching? How do the churches reach out to people with the biblical promise, “Do not fear”?

In this article, I delimit the investigation to the Malagasy Lutheran Church (MLC), and show how a group of consecrated workers in this church, so-called shepherds (*mpiandry*), recognize and address fear through their preaching at what I call healing services. My research question can be framed as follows: how in their preaching do the shepherds interpret people’s problems in life in terms of a fight with evil spirits, and what are the effects of such preaching?

¹ According to World Bank statistics 77.6 percent of Madagascar’s 25.6 million inhabitants live at a poverty headcount ratio of \$1.90 a day (2011). See <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/MDG>, accessed May 31, 2018.

² http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_MDG.pdf, accessed May 31, 2018.

³ Cornelius Munkvik, *Madagaskar: Mennesker Og Menigheter Etter 150 År Med Norsk Misjon* (Suldalsosen: Mosaikk forlag, 2017), 9.

The Malagasy Revival Movement and Preaching in Healing Services

The Malagasy revival movement (*Fifohazana*) started in the Soatanana-area in 1894, and consists of four major branches, each with their founder. It is a revival movement but it is also institutionalized as departments within the Protestant churches, and is organized with committees at each level of the church, from the parish to the national level.⁴ The consecrated workers in the movement are called shepherds, and are laypeople not salaried by the church. A two-year, part-time training program for novices leads to a consecration ceremony at a revival center, called camp (*toby*).⁵ Shepherds are spread all over Madagascar in large numbers, and they organize healing services in these camps or in ordinary parish churches.⁶ The camp may be called a healing center, where shepherds welcome all sorts of ostracized people: mentally ill, poor, and persons they believe to be “assaulted by demons.” The treatment is singing, preaching, free prayer, compassion, expulsion of demons, prayer with intercession, social training, and work in the fields when their health allows them to do so. So-called healing services in the camp are organized several times a week, and in parish churches normally once a week but sometimes more often. The first part of these mid-week services consists of free prayer, singing of hymns, and preaching. The second part is expulsion of demons and prayer with intercession.⁷

Preaching the word of God is vital in the shepherds’ theological understanding, and is a mandatory part of every healing service. It is the preached word of God that acts, liberates, and saves people, and signs and wonders following the preaching are seen as only effects, according to Kevin A. Ogilvie.⁸ Attending shepherds and novices have a standing invitation to share their testimonies, and it is common that three to six persons do so in each service. In addition, there are one or two sermons by appointed shepherds. The testimonies and sermons are oral, without written manuscripts.⁹

The founder of the oldest branch of the revival movement, Rainisoalambo, commissioned his followers not to do like the present preachers (foreign missionaries and Malagasy pastors), saying, “They preach but do not heal the sick and they do not cast out demons. But you will do all these things.”¹⁰ Rakotojoelinandrasana Daniel shows how holistic thinking has shaped the revival movement from the beginning, and how this view of life corresponds to Malagasy expectations. He asserts that the Malagasy “sought a religion that understood a loving and powerful God who was able to deal with all of the problems of daily life.”¹¹ Preaching in healing services thus stands in the context of care, and a main characteristic of preaching in this setting is its close context of exorcism and prayer with the laying on of hands. It must be taken into account that the preaching in the first part of the healing service is accompanied by concrete actions of exorcism and prayer, done by the same persons.

⁴ Hans Austnaberg, *Shepherds and Demons: A Study of Exorcism as Practised and Understood by Shepherds in the Malagasy Lutheran Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 42-45.

⁵ Persons in the training program to become shepherds are called *mpiomana* (those who are preparing).

⁶ According to the latest available statistics (2016), there are 144 camps and 42,216 shepherds in the MLC. Munkvik, *Madagaskar: Mennesker Og Menigheter*, 9.

⁷ For a detailed presentation of these services, see Austnaberg, *Shepherds and Demons*, 97-143.

⁸ Kevin A. Ogilvie, “Breaking Words: Towards an Oral Theology of Homiletics” (University of KwaZulu-Natal: School of Religion and Theology, 2010), 145.

⁹ Austnaberg, *Shepherds and Demons*, 106-109.

¹⁰ Cited in English in Daniel Rakotojoelinandrasana, “Holistic and Integrated Care of Spirit, Mind, and Body as Practiced by the Fifohazana,” *The Fifohazana. Madagascar’s Indigenous Christian Movement*, ed. Cynthia Holder Rich (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008), 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

Fieldwork Material and Analysis

My material stems from qualitative fieldwork in Madagascar in November 2009, with observation of preaching in healing services and qualitative research interviews as the main data acquiring methods.¹² The year 2009 was an especially fearful time in Madagascar because of what some called a *coup d'état* that resulted in political tumult. From my experience with the revival movement from 1983 onwards, the material presented below is characteristic of preaching in healing services. As a piece of qualitative research, I hope this will also find resonance in other, similar contexts in Madagascar and internationally. The material consists of eighteen testimonies/sermons at three different services—one healing service in a camp and two healing services in ordinary congregations, all of them in the Antsirabe-region. The testimonies/sermons are from one and a half to seventeen minutes in length.¹³ None of the preachers were pastors.¹⁴ After each service, my research assistant and I interviewed eight persons. The twenty-four interviewees varied with regard to age, gender, and relation to the revival movement. Fifteen of them turned out to be consecrated workers in the movement (shepherds) or were in the training program to become such, while the rest were ordinary attendants in the service. The material was taped and a native Malagasy speaker transcribed it. Afterwards I checked the accuracy of the transcription.¹⁵

With regard to the present article, I have delimited the analysis of the material to how the shepherds' preaching addresses the fears of people. I have arranged the material thematically, giving examples of peoples' fears when lacking the most basic needs, in illness, and in the middle of political tumults. Within each section, I add contextual information about the Malagasy Revival Movement, explaining what is implicit in the informants' sayings. However, I still consider this to be an emic perspective,¹⁶ and my main aim with the article is to give an empirical contribution about how shepherds address fear in their preaching. In a concluding section, I take an etic perspective discussing some possible effects of this preaching.¹⁷

Empirical Material

Fears in Hardships of Life

Many of the sermons in my material refer to the harsh living conditions. A woman, around forty years of age, says:

¹² Steinar Kvale, *Interviews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks, CA, London, New Delhi: SAGE, 1996); John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016).

¹³ As you may imagine, there is a lot of preaching in every service. Each service may last for two to three hours.

¹⁴ I have elsewhere shown differences in preaching between shepherds in the revival movement and ordained pastors in the church. See Hans Austnaberg, "Ordained Pastors and Lay Preachers in Madagascar: Listeners' Experiences of Differences in Preaching," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 156 (November 2016).

¹⁵ Having worked in Madagascar for several years, I speak the language fluently.

¹⁶ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 194.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* A brief overview of homiletical literature on preaching in Madagascar can be found in Hans Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching by Listening to Listeners: Sunday Service Preaching in the Malagasy Lutheran Church*, vol. 15, *Bible and Theology in Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 31-35. There is a pressing need for more research on preaching in this context and the present paper contributes to this.

The life we are facing these days is difficult. And, the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. However, this is our confidence: all these things are enemies that Christ has conquered. Let this be our confidence! Even the low number of people present today shows that our battle as believers for the fight of living is hard indeed. None of us will say, I believe, that we are not in a severe battle these days (Mifi3).¹⁸

Another woman preacher says, “People really have worries in these difficult times... People do worry indeed. They are worrying, saying, ‘What are we to eat?’ ‘What are we to drink?’” (Mifi4).

In the face of caring for the most basic needs in life, the first informant above uses the metaphor of a battle. Part of this battle is with the devil, whose work is to ruin people, possibly also considered as partly responsible for the misfortunes and shortages in life. The paradox is that, in spite of “the fight of living,” there is confidence in being a Christian. The reason is that Christ has won victory. He has conquered all kinds of enemies.

Another preacher, an old woman, takes John 15:7 as her point of departure in her testimony (“If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you”). She starts by describing how Jesus loves all of us and calls us to himself. He stands by the door knocking. He knocks on the door of the heart, so just let him reign in your life, she says. Then you will not be disappointed when burning issues hit your life. Do not leave Jesus, for he loves you. Then she goes on to tell a story about herself in which she went to visit one of the centers in the revival movement. When she arrived there, she got the message that there had been burglars in her home. The people were almost afraid to tell her about it.

However, I was not distressed by hearing this. I felt lucky. I smile whatever may happen during the night, even if all the belongings were gone. I was not discouraged, my friends, because Jesus does not leave me. Jesus does not abandon me. He gives peace. He has surrendered his life and I have put my life in his custody. I do not have anything to hope for, my friends, except Jesus who takes care of my life (Amfi1).

She uses her own story to give strength to the listeners who may experience similar problems in their lives. She does not here mention evil spirits, but burglary is a wicked action and it may be implied that this stems from the devil’s work. Repeatedly, she points to Jesus and his caring in the middle of all the hardships of life. Certainly she had no insurance that would cover her lost belongings, and most probably she did not have enough money to buy what had been taken away from her.

These stories show that when encountering burglaries, shortage of food, and poverty, my informants bring all this to God through prayer and worship. They find peace and confidence in their Christian faith in spite of all the pressing needs in their lives. They preach, “Do not fear,” and this gives them courage to keep on, and confidence in God who will not forsake them.

Fears in Illness

It is important to keep in mind that the Malagasy words translated ill/illness in English (*marary, aretina*) cover a wide range of meanings. Hilde Nielssen, having worked among the ethnic group of Betsimisaraka, says that the term may “refer to almost any unwanted condition

¹⁸ I use the acronym to retrieve the original place of the citation. “fi” in the middle of the name means testimony/sermon, “i” means interview.

that threatens the general wellbeing.”¹⁹ It may be physical or psychological. One of the textbooks in the revival movement talks about bodily, mental, and spiritual sicknesses,²⁰ but the border between these labels is permeable. Rakotojoelinandrasana Daniel, who emphasizes the holistic understanding of illness in the revival movement, holds that the movement has a particular role in treating mental illnesses but that the procedure has also shown to be effective for most diseases and symptoms.²¹

This being said, I do not try to classify the healing stories in my material. Neither do I specify what may be the causes of illness. Rather, I retell a couple of characteristic stories that refer to evil spirits. One interviewee tells me that he has belonged to this church for ten years but he became a sincere Christian only three years before the interview. I asked him to explain how this change happened, and he told me about his former life of playing for money, drinking alcohol, and smoking cigarettes. Suddenly, his wife turned ill and he began reflecting deeply on death. As these thoughts did not leave him, he also turned ill. By then they had consulted traditional healers, and afterwards his heart and his whole body turned ill, he told me, and his blood pressure went up and down. He started to reflect deeply on his own death, and he tried to envision how his future could be. Then, the couple went to the pastor and he advised them to throw away all the charms and other remedies given by traditional healers. Soon afterwards, his wife decided to follow the advice. However, he returned to what he calls idol worship, and many things happened during his time of illness. He consulted a medical doctor who told him that he could not find anything wrong with him. The doctor advised him to see if he could find a cure elsewhere. He was still in the middle of sickness, but when he attended the treatment at the healing services, especially expulsion of demons and prayer, he recovered and his strength returned. “This healed me,” he said, “and this is why I became a Christian” (Mii6).

To consult traditional healers means to seek guidance from the spiritual world, but it may be mediated through charms or different kinds of medical plants. Traditional medicine is often tried out before coming to the church. The traditional healer’s sanctification always adds supernatural qualities to the medicine.²² This kind of cure did not bring the man health but instead aggravated the illness. The revival movement vehemently opposes traditional healing practices and attributes the power behind them as stemming from the devil.²³ This opinion may somehow count for my informant’s dark picture of traditional healing practices. He also consulted Western medicine, but it is not clear what kind of medication the doctor prescribed. The medical doctor did not find any symptoms that fit into his scientific categories of illness. It is interesting that it was the medical doctor who proposed to the informant to try a cure elsewhere. This may point to a possible spiritual cause of the sickness, which ought to be cured by spiritual means, according to the doctor. Since the informant had tried traditional healers, now he turned to the church healers, i.e. the shepherds in the revival movement. The healing part of the story is too short to get a clear picture, but the main point is clear. What could not be cured by traditional

¹⁹ Hilde Nielszen, *Ritual Imagination: A Study of Tromba Possession among the Betsimisaraka in Eastern Madagascar*, vol. 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 57.

²⁰ Tobilehibe, Ankaramalaza. *Ny Fifohazana, Ny Toby, Ny Mpiandry, Ny Asa Sy Fampaherezana. Foto-Pampianarana Momba Ny Asan’ny Mpiandry*, (Edisiona faharoa: Fifohazana Tobilehibe Ankaramalaza, 1997), 125.

²¹ Rakotojoelinandrasana, “Holistic and Integrated Care,” *The Fifohazana*, 90.

²² Lesley A. Sharp, “The Possessed and the Dispossessed: Spirits, Identity, and Power in a Madagascar Migrant Town” (Doctoral diss., University of California Press, 1993), 205-206.

²³ Rakotojoelinandrasana explains this trait historically by saying that all the great revival leaders had experiences and contacts with “religious animistic practices,” and they came to see these practices as deceptive (Rakotojoelinandrasana, “Holistic and Integrated Care,” *The Fifohazana*, 87).

or Western medicine can be healed by Jesus' intervention through the church. The informant especially points to the expulsion of demons and the prayer with laying on of hands, but this is never separated from the preaching. His body, mind, and spirit were healed, but his Christian faith was also strengthened.

One of the questions to the interviewees was to tell about experiences of change. Several of the informants told stories about sickness, the search for a cure, and how they eventually found healing in the revival movement. Often the stories were detailed in regard to date, time, and place.

Let me give one example of the preaching these people experience in the services. The woman referred to above chose the biblical text from Rev 12:7-11. She started by saying that Revelation was written in order to give hope to Christians in severe persecution. She applied this to the present hardships of life, and her aim was to strengthen hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. She went on to cite Eph 6:12, saying that we were not fighting against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Both biblical texts talk about a battle, and she described some of the devil's purposes to accuse people and prove them guilty of punishment, especially those who are willing to serve God. This accusation leads to a deep sense of disappointment and heartbrokenness.²⁴ "But," she said, "there is one thing that can oppose this satanic strategy." This is confidence and faith in Jesus, who poured out his blood at the cross and rose from the dead. She talked about forgiveness and new strength. She cited part of 1 John 1:9, that Jesus "will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness," and asserted that if we live by these words, they will become flesh and live together with us. She ended the preaching by spelling out in more detail the present fight for living, saying, "We have confidence because Jesus, our king, has won victory over the enemy accusing us" (Mifi3).

From the beginning of her preaching, this woman's aim was to strengthen listeners not to lose hope in spite of the many fears of life. She posited a battle between the devil and Jesus and attributed the listeners' disappointment and heartbrokenness to the devil. Jesus has already won the victory, however, and those who trust and believe in him will not be disappointed. It is worth noting that the battle moves on two levels. The fight of everyday living is clearly acknowledged but there is also a spiritual fight going on between the devil and Jesus. Human beings are in the midst of this fight, and it is only through belief in Jesus that people are able to win victory. Jesus is the center of promise. It is only through confidence in Jesus that she can say, "Do not fear."

Fears in Political Tumult

Madagascar witnessed tremendous political turmoil during the year 2009. It started with strikes and protests in the capital Antananarivo in January. The fight between the sitting president and the mayor of the capital became uncontrollable, including looting of shops and businesses, and confrontations that resulted in high numbers of deaths and injuries. At the end of March, the new president was sworn in but demonstrations continued. There were several efforts to solve the crisis through negotiations led by the Council of Christian Churches in Madagascar and by international mediators, but without results. By the end of the year, the situation was as chaotic as in the beginning, with bad conditions for democracy and freedom of speech, and

²⁴ The wording in Malagasy (*mamoy fo*) is composite and includes the heart, the center of the person. The root of the *mamohy* is *foy*, which literally points to the chicken breaking out of the egg. It is a strong sense of being down (Abinal and Malzac, *Dictionnaire Malgache - Français*, 4th ed., Tananarive: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1930, 180).

growing corruption. International reactions to what was called a *coup d'état* were strong, and resulted in sanctions, suspension of aid, job losses, and damage to businesses.²⁵

I was struck by the almost total silence about this situation in the testimonies/sermons and in the interviews.²⁶ There are many references to problems, hardships, lack of the most necessary means for living, illness, and misfortunes, but this is not explicitly related to the political situation. Only a couple of informants mention it directly, one in a sermon on Amos 4:2 about the punishment of people not repenting from their sins: “Why has our country come into this deep hole? Isn’t it because of our sins that these things happen to our country now? Therefore, God calls us to conversion” (Mafi3). Another informant mentions the political situation in prayer, saying:

Today, the Malagasy nation will reason together with you [God]. All the Christians who seek you will reason with you. We repent, O God. We convert. We ask you for forgiveness. Do not let the politics destroy our country, especially our faith and the church, O God.

There still have to be things keeping us in constraint, O Jesus, since our prayers are not yet answered. Where are you, beloved Jesus? Hurry to save our country! We are so poor. Take care of the orphans, those who have nothing to eat. There is no longer anything to eat. There is nothing left in their houses because of this fight going on in our country now. We are so poor. Where are you, Jesus? Where are you? Save our country, O God! (shouting) Save the Christians, O God, who listen to all kinds of preaching. Where are you, O Jesus? (Amfi7).

The first citation relates the misery in the country directly to sin. The inclusive “we” does not only point to the hearers but probably more generally to the sinfulness of the Malagasy people. She interprets the political crisis as a call to conversion. If people convert to God, this will bring about peaceful existence again. The second citation also focuses on the peoples’ repentance and conversion, but what they should repent from is not named. The informant implores God to intervene. His testimony has taken its point of departure from Isa 1:18a (“Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord”). In the original context God accuses his people of all their wrongdoings (Isa 1:10-17). The turning point comes in verse 18, when God offers the people forgiveness in spite of their sins. It is similar to criminal proceedings, where God one-sidedly offers the people forgiveness if they are “willing and obedient” (1:19). I interpret the reference to “things keeping us in constraints” to be a search for the reasons for misery, with an undertone of the people themselves being responsible for what has happened. If this is right, it seems as my informant understands the political turmoil as a punishment from God for the sinfulness of the nation. This does not, however, rule out the possibility of evil forces.²⁷

²⁵ Austnaberg, *Improving Preaching by Listening to Listeners*, 37-41.

²⁶ The topic was not raised directly in the interviews, but I would have expected that the political instability would have surfaced related to conversations about problems and hardships.

²⁷ Cf. the discussion about how other shepherds see a relation between political turmoil and evil spirits.

Concluding Discussion

The listeners come to the healing services because they have trouble in their lives and are looking for a solution. The shepherds' preaching in these services stands in the context of care, and the services consist of both preaching and exorcism with personal intercession. I have shown in the previous section how the shepherds' preaching in this context addresses the fears of the listeners, especially fears of the devil and evil spirits. Repeatedly, the shepherds exhort the listeners to trust in Christ's victory over all enemies, won by his death and resurrection. To be a Christian gives confidence in spite of worries about not being able to secure the most basic needs in life. This confidence in Jesus, who does not ever abandon his people, is what I have labelled "fearing God" in the heading of this article. The metaphor of a battle is especially apparent in the illness stories, and it seems that illness is to a large degree connected to the work of evil spirits, causing people to lose hope. The shepherds' preaching points people to Jesus, who is able to perform change in the actual situation by securing healing, and to strengthen their faith. The way shepherds address fears in political tumults indirectly exhorts people to trust Jesus. The main point is to call people to repentance and conversion to God, to fear God.

In applying an etic perspective on the fieldwork material, I want to put three concepts from the Lutheran World Federation publication *Diakonia in Context* into conversation with the material, namely transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment.²⁸ These concepts may be said to summarize the terms and images used by my informants themselves, and they enable me to shed light on the field material, but also to voice some critique of the shepherds' preaching.²⁹ The special focus in the following is to discuss the effects of the shepherds' preaching. Since I do not have any comprehensive material from the preaching's listeners, these concepts may yield at least a preliminary answer to the question about the effects of the preaching.

Reconciliation is a gift from God, reconciling the world in Jesus, and the church is called to participate in God's promise for a broken world, furthering peace and reconciliation. The church follows the example of Jesus in its mission of reconciliation, in his presence among the poor and defense for the excluded, in his healings and announcements of forgiveness, and in his work for justice.³⁰ Reconciliation with God is a significant issue in the shepherds' preaching. The Christian faith gives confidence, and the shepherds' main obligation is to preach the gospel. One informant exhorts the listeners to give to the poor and take care of them, but emphasizes that to tell them about Jesus is the most important. If they do not know Jesus, they will be lost (Amfi2). The preaching aims at individual salvation, but the shepherds are present among the poor and excluded, not only by announcing forgiveness but also with healing and caring. They give voice to the vulnerable and silenced. The shepherds' preaching reorients the lives of those seeking their healing, especially by identifying dehumanizing forces as the devil and evil spirits. They redefine traditional medicine and point to Jesus as the conqueror.

Transformation reorients the lives of people; it rejects what dehumanizes and affirms what gives sanctity of life, and peace and justice in society. Transformation is a process involving change; it respects human dignity and it is closely related to social development. It is a

²⁸ Kjell Nordstokke, ed., *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 43-47.

²⁹ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 194.

³⁰ Nordstokke, *Diakonia in Context*, 44-45.

gift from God, revealed in Jesus Christ, leading to mutual care for one another.³¹ The shepherds' preaching effects transformation and a restoration of human dignity. This takes place through exhorting people to trust and have confidence in Jesus. People regain their strength through healing, understood holistically. People become subjects and are included within the fellowship in the church setting, but also in the wider social setting as they recover from their illness.

Empowerment takes its point of departure in creation theology. All human beings are created in the image of God, and their apparent social situation does not influence this. As the first apostles were empowered at Pentecost (Acts 1:8), so God continues to empower people, especially those who have not been given opportunity to speak. Included in empowerment is both the denunciation of injustice and work for a more just and sustainable society.³² By accepting vulnerable and excluded people into the healing centers, the shepherds show that all people are created in the image of God, regardless of their present situation. Empowerment is realized through the victory Jesus has won over the demonic forces. When people are freed from their fear of evil spirits through faith in Jesus, they regain confidence and new strength. The second part of exorcism, the prayer with the laying on of hands, is in Malagasy actually called empowerment/strengthening (*fampaherezana*), and informants witness about feeling relieved after the shepherds' treatment (Mii7). Nielssen and Skeie emphasize the empowerment aspect of the revival movement, saying that the shepherds "empower people in ways that few if any other movements are able to do."³³

The three concepts from *Diakonia in Context* all include societal aspects: justice in society, defense for the excluded, and work for social development. However, the shepherds seem to neglect the social realm and tend to keep social issues at a distance. In their continuous efforts for healing of the body and the mind, the shepherds seem to see people's individual spiritual needs as most significant to meet.³⁴ Other researchers also have observed this trait. Ogilvie asserts that the revival founder Nenilava was not interested in changing the greater society, and that her battle was purely spiritual. He says, "Her calls were for individual repentance, and her 'chapters and verse' given to supplicants were for individual salvation."³⁵ Holder Rich observed that the consciousness of being advocates in public society is missing in the movement. Her fieldwork revealed that this task never seemed to have occurred to the shepherds, or that they considered it to be not spiritual and therefore to be avoided.³⁶ Nielssen and Skeie build on fieldwork done in the immediate aftermath of the *coup d'état* in 2009. They assert that the revival movement as a whole has been involved in the political sphere from the

³¹ Ibid., 43-44.

³² Ibid., 45-47.

³³ Hilde Nielssen and Karina Hestad Skeie, "Christian Revivalism and Political Imagination in Madagascar," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 44, no. 2 (2014), 206.

³⁴ Jyotsna Melanchton, writing about the Dalit situation in India, asserts that many pastors preach a "salvation theology," which means an individualistic and personal approach to Christian faith. This orientation has neglected the social realm and does not include a social salvation, she holds. Pastors seem to keep the many pressing social issues at a distance. She criticizes the theological thinking of the Protestant churches that has been confined to a message about the new status of the heart before God, without paying sufficient attention to economic needs and development. She also accuses the early missionaries to mostly being interested in saving souls and not addressing the social issues of caste, which has led to a dichotomy of Christian life (Monica Jyotsna Melanchton, "Preaching the Word in the Context of Increasing Perplexity and Hopelessness," *Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2004), 280-286). Melanchton's article is interesting because of the similarities between the Dalits as an oppressed ethnic group and the troubled people treated by the shepherds.

³⁵ Kevin A. Ogilvie, "The Conquest by the Spoken Word," *The Fifohazana*, 177.

³⁶ Cynthia Holder Rich and Mark H. Rich, "Prospects for Research and Renewal," *The Fifohazana*, 239.

beginning, but that the movement took an active and more visible role in national politics from the 1990s onwards.³⁷ The shepherds are occupied with healing individuals in their daily practices but the movement has extended their field of action through their involvement in the political sphere.³⁸ Both of the opposing parties in the conflict in 2009 called on shepherds for support and ritual services as religious experts.³⁹ If there were political wings among the shepherds, how could they possibly call attention to injustice in the society? During the crisis, there were rumors and accusations that powerful charms and magic were kept by both the former president and the newcomer.⁴⁰ This may be the reason why my informants talk about the political crisis as a punishment for sins and a call for conversion, since the shepherds vehemently oppose traditional medicine. In spite of shepherds taking part in national politics in the 2009 crisis through expulsion of demons in public, there is nothing in Nielssen and Skeie's article about them speaking against different kinds of injustice. The main battle fought by the shepherds was on a spiritual level against invisible forces seemingly active in the misery of the country. If the shepherds see the real actors of the crisis externalized to a spiritual level (the devil, evil forces, magic), then it is more understandable that they are silent about political issues of injustice and societal inequality. By moving the battle to a higher spiritual level, social conditions in daily life may be considered symptoms and not worthy of their engagement.

The shepherds' preaching in healing services addresses the fears of their listeners, often related to fear of evil spirits. Their preaching gives meaning and direction to peoples' day-to-day lives, and further reconciliation, transformation, and empowerment. Their emphasis is on individual salvation, holistically understood as comprising the whole human being, and their distinct focus of preaching in this setting is the preoccupation with Jesus' victory over the devil and all evil forces.

My findings affirm what other researchers have found, namely that the shepherds seem to neglect the social realm and seldom enter into social issues.⁴¹ In spite of Nielssen and Skeie's assertion that the shepherds have had an active role in the political sphere from the 1990s onwards, this does not seem to have resulted in more advocacy for justice in the society. This silence about injustice challenges the movement and is a calling to the leaders of the movement as to how this challenge can be met in a way that is contextually and culturally coherent.⁴²

³⁷ Nielssen and Skeie, "Christian Revivalism and Political Imagination," 198. Cf. Kjetil Aanowho asserts that "an expression of political protest and a demonstration of a spirit of independence" is intrinsic to the revival movement ("The Missions and the Fifohazana: Cultural Clashes and the Question of Power," *The Fifohazana*, 63).

³⁸ Nielssen and Skeie, "Christian Revivalism and Political Imagination," 217.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴¹ When presenting part of this paper in the Societas Homiletica meeting in Durham, NC, in August 2018, Rantoo Letšosa criticized my interpretation, claiming that African people see themselves in a holistic perspective. When the pastor addresses a person/an individual, their whole social and political context is included. Letšosa challenged me for having separated what in African thinking may be understood as unified.

⁴² Rich and Rich, "Prospects for Research and Renewal," *The Fifohazana*, 236.

**Sermons That Have Changed My Life:
A Qualitative Study of the Factors in Sermons that Elicit Change**

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Abstract: *Can people be changed by sermons? This study focuses on the impact sermons can have on people's lives, and the factors involved. A qualitative study was conducted among a group of sermon listeners. The results show that all the respondents experienced a change in their lives through sermons. Moreover, the respondents show remarkable unity in their views about which factors in the sermons caused them to change. The results illustrate that the connection between the message of the sermon and the actual question, the listener's challenge or field of interest, and the preacher's ability to communicate in a surprising and novel way are key factors in a sermon to elicit change.*

Introduction

With the revival of the speech as a mode of presentation, persuasion research on the aspects and results of oral communication needs to be intensified. Because sermons are and continue to be a mode of mass communication, there is considerable scope to learn about their effects on people. However, insights into how sermons can influence people remain limited. Numerous books and articles have been published reflecting the opinions of homileticians, but research into this realm is remarkably scarce. In this paper, we contribute to effect-research in homiletics, and to understanding the reasons why certain sermons influence people more powerfully than others. The aim of our research is to gain a better understanding of the factors in sermons that play a role in influencing peoples' lives.

Our research question is as follows: when people recall sermons that have influenced their lives, which factors play a prominent role? To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study among respondents from various denominational backgrounds. The following section discusses the theoretical background of the study, and is followed by a discussion of the design and results of our study.

Theoretical Background

There has been an ongoing debate about the extent to which sermons can change people. Normally, researchers tend to underestimate the change effect of sermons. At best, what a sermon can do is reinforce already existing ideas. Abbey has noted that people tend to filter messages that agree with the positions they already hold.¹ Nye, Savage, and Watts have

¹ Merrill R. Abbey, *Communication in Pulpit and Parish* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

concluded, “We cannot make someone change their attitude or behavior.”² At the same time, homiletics refuses to accept these notions and persists in claiming that communication in general and sermons in particular not only have the duty but also the power to change people.³ Carrell has stated that effective sermons express a clear call for change, are well organized, delivered well (i.e., with emotion and connection), and connect the content of messages with the needs of listeners.⁴

The impact of communication does not depend solely on the speakers’ choices or philosophy; the audience plays an important role, too.⁵ Geertz speaks of symbolic webs of significance among any given group of people who gather on a regular basis and thus develop a shared culture. These webs of significance should be studied and interpreted to gain an understanding of the influencing factors in the given subculture.⁶ Every preacher needs to find a way to bridge the cultural gap between the Bible and contemporary society. However, Long sets aside the need for analyzing the congregation, as he presupposes that preachers are deeply embedded in the church culture, and are thus unable to distance or disconnect themselves from it. Although Long stresses the importance of being connected with the public, he claims that this connection has already come about in a natural fashion.⁷

The New Homiletic movement, with its focus largely on the form and content of sermons, advocates a form of communication that leads to learning and experiencing new things.⁸ At the same time, hearers’ contextual settings have attracted great interest.⁹ The preacher-hearer relationship demands both dissonance and consonance. If there is a lack of consonance, hearers will not feel inclined to connect with preachers and be persuaded by them. Where there is a lack of dissonance, surprise, or even conflict in the interaction, there will not be adequate grounds for effective communication. When probing the effect of communication on hearers, the aforementioned factors need to be considered, illuminating aspects that may influence preaching.

Method

Semi-structured interviews

Since we were primarily interested in learning about the effect of sermons on participants’ lives and why such an effect, if any, occurred through that particular sermon, a qualitative approach was identified to be most appropriate. Interviews with participants lasted 90 minutes. All of the interviews were audiotaped by permission. The participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. During the interviews, participants

² Rebecca Nye, Sara Savage and Fraser Watts, *Psychology for Christian Ministry* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 135.

³ For example Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change: Seven keys to Irresistible Communication* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008).

⁴ Lori Carrell, “Communication Training for Clergy: Exploring Impact on the Transformative Quality of Sermon Communication,” *Communication Education* (58, 2009), 15-34.

⁵ For example, Hanneke Schaap-Jonker, *Before the Face of God: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Meaning of the Sermon and the Hearer’s God Image, Personality and Affective State*, Vol. 6 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008).

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

⁸ David J. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching in the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

⁹ Rochelle L. Cathcart, “Culture Matters: How Three Effective Preachers (Tim Keller, Rob Bell, Father Pfleger) Engage Culture in the Preaching Event,” *Trinity Journal* (Vol. 33, 2012), 209-222.

were invited to share their history of sermons to find the general number of sermons that each participant would have heard in his or her lifetime.

We started the interviews by asking the participants to describe the history of their church attendance in general, and church services and sermons in particular. Then we asked participants about their expectations when attending a service and listening to a sermon. Next, we focused on the sermons that participants could recall, which enabled us to identify which sermons stood out from the hundreds of sermons that the participants had heard in their lifetimes. We asked the participants to describe the sermons that had made a lasting impression on them. This helped us gain insights into the reasons these sermons were recollected. Afterwards, we focused on the sermons that had changed the participants' lives. Not only were the participants asked what sermons had changed their lives, but also how their lives were affected and why they thought the changes came about through those sermons. In addition, participants were asked about the role that these sermons played in their lives on a regular basis. In this way, we were able to gain an understanding of the long-term effects that sermons could have on people, and investigate how deeply sermons could influence peoples' lives. During the interviews, the main focus was invariably on *why* and *how*: why did a particular sermon result in a particular outcome? How exactly did it stand out?

Participants

A total of 15 participants were asked to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. To be invited, the participants met four required selection criteria. First, we aimed at people who had attended church for a considerable number of years; this would prevent the participants from simply sharing their recollections of the last two sermons they had heard, and would allow them to delve into the experiences that had really shaped their lives. Second, participants were required to represent a broad denominational spectrum; this would prevent the findings of our study from being limited to a certain branch or subculture of a church, and would rather reflect wider congregants. Third, we strived for a balance between males and females. Finally, we selected the participants from three age groups: early (aged 20–30), which comprised six participants; middle (aged 31–49), which included five participants, and late (aged 50–70), which involved four participants. This age range gave us the opportunity to explore whether sermons have had any long-term impact. All of the invited participants agreed to take part in this study. The participants were not rewarded for their participation.

All the participants (nine men and six women) attended church on a regular, weekly basis for multiple years. The participants were between 20 and 68 years old (mean age = 38 years). The participants came from ten different church backgrounds, from Catholic to Dutch Reformed, Evangelical, and Pentecostal.

Data analysis procedure

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 146 pages of text. Using a multistep content-analytic procedure, we analyzed the data with three coding rounds. In the first round of coding, the first author read the transcripts multiple times and generated a list of reasons why certain sermons had had a lasting impact on peoples' lives. In this phase, the first author looked for patterns in the answers by the different participants.

In the second round of coding, the first and the second author looked for categories, while maintaining an open discussion regarding the categorization of the comments. The categories were compared with literature regarding persuasion and communication. Additionally, the

researchers searched for words such as *changed, remember, new, surprise, process, move, image, and person*. Applying an iterative procedure, we moved back and forth between the data and literature on persuasion and communication and adjusted our framework when necessary. The resulting subcategories were labeled to capture the meaning reflected by the group of comments. All of the categories and subcategories were then carefully defined in a codebook. Since the purpose of our analysis was to look for common ideas and patterns in the participants' convictions, (sub)categories represented by single comments made by one participant were not taken into account.

In total, we identified 79 statements that gave information as to why sermons had had an impact on the participants. Of these, 34 statements were grouped under "connection to process." All the participants contributed to this list of statements. Another 22 statements illustrated the importance of surprise and novelty in presenting old truths in a new fashion; these statements were made by all but two participants. The final category consisted of 13 statements related to the personality of both the communicators and the hearers.

In the final coding round, the codebook was given to an independent coder. This coder re-categorized each of the comments into the defined (sub)categories. This independent coding resulted in an initial kappa of .39. After extensive discussion with the first author and a repetition of the steps described in rounds 1 and 2, the kappa increased to .95. The quotes presented in the "Results" section are illustrative of the 15 interviews.

Results

We identified three categories of influence: (a) connection to process, (b) presenting old truths in a new fashion, and (c) factors related to the personality of the preacher and the hearer. Before we discuss the results for the categories of influence, we first present the ways in which people have experienced change through sermons.

Areas of change through sermons

The participants indicated three different areas of change that occurred in their lives because of sermons: in their thinking about or connection with God, in their behavior, and in their inner world (i.e., self). Table 1 shows the change people experienced through sermons in their lives.

Table 1. Indicated areas of change through sermons

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>Spiritual</i>		
<i>Image of God (10)</i>	The way a person thinks about God	<i>A sermon on Jesus being our Lord and our Savior influenced me. If he is our Lord, it suits me to be humble and obedient. Although I am an independent person, I try to be humble.</i>

<i>Connection to God</i> (7)	The devotion a person experiences in relationship to God	<i>The sermon of that pastor really turned my life upside down. It was everything: the sermon, the setting, the ritual. That combination resulted in me being overwhelmed with a sense of God's grace for me.</i>
<i>Behavior</i>		
<i>Behavioral change</i> (8)	Change in behavior on the basis of faith	<i>A sermon on the armor of God made me realize that I have to keep certain things out of my life. I work in the corporate world and with the right excuses and a little bit of lying one can make a lot of extra money. Through that sermon, I decided to protect myself from going along in those patterns of behavior.</i>
<i>Social engagement</i> (4)	The involvement of a person in activities of social justice	<i>A sermon on justice had a great impact on me. A picture was shown of a vulture waiting next to a starving child. I was so impressed. Since that sermon, I have been engaged with compassion, helping liberate children from poverty.</i>
<i>Self</i>		
<i>Encouragement</i> (6)	The reception of inner strength and peace in concrete situations	<i>Listening to a sermon strengthens me. That during the week it dawns on me, "Would this be connected with the message of last Sunday?" And that I conclude, "Yes, I do think so."</i>
<i>Image of self</i> (4)	The convictions a person has about him- or herself	<i>A sermon on the prodigal son radically changed my life. I was an action- and result-driven man. This sermon made me realize that being loved does not have to do with what you do, but rather with what you have or what others say about you. One is loved because of Jesus' presence.</i>
<i>Destination of life</i> (2)	The purposes a person dedicates his or her life to	<i>My wife and I love to play music. Through a sermon, we realized we had to invest in the next generation. So, that is what we do now. We coach church music groups throughout the country.</i>

Spiritual

As sermons take place in a religious setting aimed at experiencing spirituality and seeking knowledge about God, it is not surprising that the primary area of change acquired through preaching involved how people think about God and shape their relationship with God. The interviewees stated that through sermons they began to alter their views about God. Often this

change was described as a differentiation between distant and personal, aloof and caring, and judgmental and gracious:

I was raised with the image of a holy God that should be revered. God was a God from afar, from on high. He was distant. Through the sermons I heard, he has come closer. It is difficult for me to describe it, but it has become something of my everyday life. I have discovered it is possible to walk with a holy God.

The change people experienced in their views about God and self was not limited to conviction or thinking. The participants indicated that sermons had also changed their perceived connection with God. The knowledge about God changed something on the inside:

We are all lost sons. To come to the conclusion that we accept the gift of a Father saying, “come, in spite of everything you have done” is... I have cursed God; I blamed him for everything that happened. And then to find grace, to receive mercy, that is difficult.

In the interviews, some of the participants were lost for words to describe the change they had experienced from within. The holy God from afar had become a loving father with whom the respondents experienced an intimate connection.

Behavior

Change did not only occur in the spiritual realm but in practical behavior, too. The respondents pointed out that they had changed the way they viewed and reached out to people, as well as the way they spoke, dealt with money, used their time, raised children, and prioritized their tasks. The change the respondents had experienced resulted in caring more for people:

I heard this sermon “God gives people.” That message encouraged me to share more love with people. I mean, one can remain passive...but this sermon made me realize I can influence peoples’ lives by doing something small, like sending a card or a message or reaching out to a person in need.

Moreover, it made people aware of social injustice and prompted them to rise and be the change for people in need:

A sermon on the Good Samaritan challenged my thinking on people in need. It made me look at them differently and encouraged me to come to their aid.

Self

Lastly, the respondents said that they experienced change in the way they viewed and felt about themselves, as well as how they wanted to live their lives. The respondents indicated that they felt strengthened by the sermons. In times of need or loss, they sought fresh courage or perspective to carry on:

That sermon made me realize, “Wait a minute! God can handle everything, and I belong to God, so everything will be alright.”

In addition, it helped them come to peace with who they are, and feel loved and accepted:

I am both a perfectionist and chaotic. That's not a good combination. Through a sermon of Jacob's fight with God, it dawned on me that I am okay the way I am. That was a crucial turning point in my life.

Through the sermons they had heard, some respondents were strongly encouraged to change the course of their lives and navigate in new directions:

That sermon literally made us do new things; it helped us leave our comfort zone and make choices in our lives.

Categories of influence in sermons

Connection to process

In their interviews, all the participants indicated that sermons that had made a profound impact on their lives made a strong connection with the process they were going through when they heard the sermon. Table 2 shows the types of connection that the hearers experienced.

Table 2. Communicative impact in sermons: connection to personal process

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>Personal process (13)</i>	The sermon is connected with a process the hearer is going through at that moment	<p><i>The fact that these sermons have changed me the way they have is because they were the right sermons at the right time; it's the right place, the right time.</i></p> <p><i>The sermons that have meant the most to me are those sermons that were preached at that moment of my life when I was really working on those issues. Those sermons were connected with my actual situation in life.</i></p>
<i>Crisis (7)</i>	The sermon is delivered during a time of personal crisis or loss	<p><i>Through the sermon on "It's Friday, but Sunday is coming," I found myself in a situation where I thought, "I just feel...I do not know how to move on. I didn't know what to do. I had a crisis in my faith, many problems in my private world...my sister being very sick, my business not taking off, being cheated on by someone. Everything hit me at the same time. And I felt "Where is God?"...And this sermon fit my situation in that moment. I felt like Friday, but it will be Sunday, and there is hope. That message landed in my heart.</i></p> <p><i>Fourteen years ago, I had a burnout. At that time, I read a story about a prodigal son. That was a revelation to me: it's not about what I do, but about what Jesus has done for me...I heard the writer of this book, Henri Nouwen, had preached on this subject three times...That sermon changed my life.</i></p>

<i>Confronting personal beliefs (7)</i>	The sermon is experienced as a confrontation with one's beliefs or values	<i>I heard a sermon on this subject, "Is Jesus your Lord and Savior?" That really spoke to me because I am an independent person. This sermon stayed with me because it encouraged me to apply the message to my life. It also caused me to reflect on my life.</i>
<i>Special occasion (4)</i>	The sermon is delivered during a memorable occasion	<i>Two of the three sermons I remember were delivered at funeral services. The sermon on the barren bones made a deep impression on me. I heard it 29 years ago but still remember it. I think this is also the case that we buried my father-in-law the Thursday before and baptized my daughter on the Friday before the sermon.</i>
<i>Personal identification (3)</i>	The sermon is connected with the past or personality of the hearer	<i>I remember the sermon on the prodigal son. It made me realize what had happened in my own life. My father had one brother and, through an argument over inheritance, they would not talk to each other anymore. I was 19 when I left home. I was sent away and coming home was never nice. So, this story made an impression on me. The idea that God would never drop me. That Father always says, "Come home and bring the fattest calf." ...And also, the reaction of the oldest brother, the one that stayed at home the whole time. I recognized myself in him, too.</i>

Personal process

The participants often stated that the influence of a sermon was determined by the connection they experienced between the sermon and their personal phase of life or process at the time. Some indicated that they had already been contemplating the subject of the sermon when they heard the message. The hearers' life circumstances created a new openness to receive the message that was being delivered. One respondent even said that s/he hopes for the sermon to be connected with the specific situation where s/he is in at that given moment:

I always hope that a sermon connects with the process I am in at that moment, that, for example, when I am busy, the sermon is about being busy and creating balance. I hope to receive some good advice, and that it really motivates you to start working on it.

The processes that create openness for a certain message can be very different. In any given message, people have personal issues, questions, hopes, and dreams:

There was this sermon on dreams and how to explain them, and I responded to the altar call to receive prayer because I had this same dream over and over again.

Talking about dreams may not be the first subject that comes to mind when trying to choose a subject that connects with a broad audience, but for this specific listener, it was a subject s/he was processing already. Someone else said:

I remember a sermon I heard 29 years ago on the barren bones from Ezekiel. That was about this valley that was full of dead and dry bones, but they were brought back to life. And I remember that sermon because that still is what I hope will happen to me one day.

This specific sermon apparently addressed a question this person was already dealing with at the time when s/he heard the sermon, and this same question continues to be relevant today. The questions we have, the things we go through, or the challenges we face all prove to be elements that make communication resonate in deeper ways. For sermons to be remembered, it is important that they connect with the processes people are going through. One particular category of process people go through creates a special receptivity in communication: crisis.

Crisis

In studying the results of the process connections that the hearers experience, we noted that the impact of the sermons often occurred in a phase of life that could be described as “being vulnerable”:

There’s a world of difference between the way I listen to sermons before and after my divorce. It’s like living two lives. Before, I was the man who had everything under control. Then I got a divorce and burned out. The sermons have never been the same since then. I have become more vulnerable and emotional during the sermons.

Respondents described situations of burnout, despair, depression, and loss that connected with sermons that had a profound impact on their lives. One needs only to take heed of today’s statistics of divorce, burnout, or sickness to realize that in any given audience there are people who are grappling with moments of darkness. Similarly, there are processes that people go through in connection with certain events in their lives or society. A public tragedy such as a plane crash or terrorist attack can unsettle people and create new openness to receive the gospel:

I remember this sermon that was held by the previous pastor of my parents’ church right after MH17 plane crash. Two teenagers of that church had been killed. The pastor returned from his new church to comfort the congregation, and that really was a special service. The pastor himself was really moved, and he handled the loss in a beautiful way.

This quotation helps connect various elements that are important in creating an impact. The respondent describes that the pastor was moved himself, illustrating authentic communication. The shock of MH17 plane crash was intertwined with the shock in society, unsettling people and rousing fear. At the same time, the impact of this event was palpable among the congregants themselves, as two of their teenage members had been killed in the tragedy. The broad shockwaves of this act of terror particularly affected this church, thus creating a delicate common ground for communication. It seems that having to deal with personal crisis, illness, divorce, or loss creates an opportunity for communication to resonate in more profound ways than otherwise.

Confronting personal beliefs

A subcategory in the connection between hearers’ process and the message may sound counterintuitive: a few respondents indicated that a sermon that confronts their beliefs and values

could result in change. The sermon first connects with the hearer's system of beliefs and values, but takes it further or flips it around, thus resulting in changed beliefs and values. A respondent who described himself as "independent" was persuaded to abandon his independence and become a Christ follower based on a sermon that stressed the importance of service and following. It seems that because the notion of the sermon was so counterintuitive to the way the hearer saw himself, he decided to change his beliefs:

I heard that sermon, and it spoke to me in such a powerful way that I wanted to hear it again. It connected with me at that moment. That sermon made many pieces fall together. That faith requires action that your partner can lead you to the entrance of the gate, but that you yourself have to step across the threshold.

The respondent apparently believed that faith did not require action, and that the faith of the partner would suffice for God. This sermon was experienced as a wake-up call, mainly because it connected with the set of beliefs and values that the hearer espoused. However, by taking them to a new level, the sermon was experienced as persuasive. If a preacher intends to persuade his or her audience, a key initial step involves connecting the sermon with the personal process of the people in the audience. This connection is multifaceted and complex. In one audience, there can be one person battling burnout, one grieving over a divorce or a loss, and another pondering how to interpret his/her recurring dream, and yet another celebrating 25 years of marriage. It seems impossible for every sermon to connect with everybody at the same time. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why most people who listen to many sermons in their lifetime only find a few that really make all the difference.

Memorable occasion

A specific category of crisis occurs during funeral services. Both collective and personal tragedies can render individuals vulnerable, resulting in an openness to the message being preached. People may end their marriage, lose their health, or, more seriously, lose loved ones:

Two of the three sermons I remember were delivered at funeral services.

The significance of the moment of the funeral creates receptivity to the message. Conversely, joyful occasions may also create an atmosphere for memorable communication. This is what a participant said:

I remember sermons that are connected with significant moments of my life, such as my wedding, New Year's Eve, and other days of celebration, like my confession.

It seems there are certain memorable occasions, both sad and joyful, which create great opportunities for successful communication.

Personal identification

Apart from the connection with a personal process of questions, beliefs, challenges, or crises, it appears that on a more existential level sermons can connect with the basic beliefs and views people have of themselves, and thus create an impact. In one instance, a respondent explained how the story of the prodigal son reflected his own life for many years, creating

identification between him and the story, and thus leading to change in his life. Another interviewee made the following remark:

When the pastor preached about Esther, I just felt like her. *I was Esther.* I even wrote the pastor an anonymous letter, saying that I felt like Esther. I felt so stupid that I did it. I asked myself, “Why?” I don’t know why this happened at that sermon! Why did I feel like Esther?

Apparently, stories from the Bible can result in close identification by hearers even in such ways that they may not be able to explain what really happened—only that it had such a profound impact that it convinced the participant above, for example, to write an anonymous letter to the pastor.

Making old things new

In the delivery of sermons is a peculiarity: the main body of the audience consists of people who have usually attended numerous services throughout their lives, have read the Bible, and know the stories presented to them from childhood. The audience is familiar with the stories and their outcomes, which renders sermons predictable—a major disadvantage. During the analysis of the interviews, it became clear that sermons that had created an impact were those that were *not* predictable; rather, they were delivered as though they were new, causing the hearers to awaken to fresh and/or surprising understandings. It seems that ambiguity and the ability to reach deeper layers of the traditional text are critical. Table 3 shows the elements that help make old things new.

Table 3. Communicative impact in sermons: making old things new

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>Surprise (10)</i>	The sermon contains a spark: new, surprising elements	<i>A good sermon awakens me to something. It is like someone turning on the light. You think, “Ah yes! That is the way it is, indeed.” It works like affirming, in the sense that it affirms what you already know or believe, but it sheds new light on it.</i> <i>The sermons that appealed to me are those sermons that are out of the ordinary.</i> <i>Something happens in those sermons and that stays with me.</i>

<i>Text and context</i> (6)	The sermon successfully bridges the gap between “then” and “now”; it turns the truth into reality	<i>I love it when a preacher succeeds in disclosing hidden treasures; “little secrets” that are new and make an old story speak to you in a completely new way.</i> <i>There was this preacher in my parents’ church who was very old; I think he was in his eighties, and you just sensed that this preacher was very intelligent. And the way he preached, using historical background and painting the picture of the context of the story, helped me learn many new things and thus get to know God better.</i>
<i>Visuals</i> (6)	The sermon uses rich imagery through multimedia or mental pictures	<i>I heard this sermon on social justice, and the preacher showed a picture of a vulture waiting to eat a starving child. I was deeply impressed. I was confronted and knew that I had to do something.</i>

Surprise

The respondents described the sermons that they remembered and had made an impact on them as “shedding new light,” “out of the ordinary,” “surprising,” “eye-opening,” or “intriguing.” The respondents described that the “new” in the newness of the impactful sermon is not a total and complete new, but one that elaborates what is already known.

It works like affirming, in the sense that it affirms what you already know, but it sheds new light.

The content and form of impactful sermons are intertwined in such a way that a surprising, new experience is delivered:

I remember sermons that have surprised me. I love it when the preachers take a story from the Old Testament, for example, and apply it to our daily lives. That is such a surprise. They take me by surprise, and then the sermon sticks with me. Just a few weeks ago, I heard this sermon on the Good Samaritan, and the way the pastor unfolded this familiar story was just marvelous. And that makes me remember the story.

The stories are familiar, yet there is something in the way impactful sermons are presented that causes the old stories to receive new flavor. The point of reference is changed, new perspectives are offered, or people point out that the way the familiar story was presented made the message “come to life.”

Text and context

A second aspect of making old things new involves the skillful manipulation of text and context, which preachers of impactful sermons exhibit. The findings of our research show that

people like to learn new things, and that learning new things enhances the probability that sermons are remembered and impactful. One respondent said the following:

It is important that the explanation of the scripture is intriguing. When people read for themselves, they do not discover the new things; but when a preacher explains the scripture clearly, that sounds beautiful.

An element that appeals to people involves explaining the text in an enlightening and fresh way. This does not just have to do with the text only, but with the context, too. The broader scope of the text and the history in which the stories are delivered shed new light on old knowledge. This is what a respondent had to say:

Our pastor spoke on the building of the tabernacle, and how everybody sacrificed goods to make this happen. He explained the happenings in such a way that I was awestruck. He talked about the mirrors and what they meant. Every item was listed. He could explain it historically so well.

Historical context adds new meaning to an otherwise predictable, complicated, or dull text.

Visuals

A third element in creating novelty amidst preconceived ideas of familiar texts is the use of visuals. Various respondents mentioned that it was the surprising use of visuals that illuminated a message, leaving them feel deeply affected. Visuals do not only mean the use of pictures or videos; the language itself can also create vivid pictures, causing the message to stick with people. One participant said:

I remember sermons that have really communicated to me. Sermons that have deeply moved me, that have given me the realization, “O yes, indeed...” because the sermon used such powerful imagery. I love it when the sermon becomes a small play and you just see it unfold before your eyes. When there’s no clear picture, I forget the sermon.

For this respondent, the receptivity to the sermon became possible when the sermon was able to elicit surprise, “O yes, indeed...” This surprise does not comprise totally new information, but is connected with the knowledge that is already present, hence the use of “indeed.” Old, latent information is presented in such a new way that arouses excitement. The sermon paints a picture in its own right.

The influence of communicator and hearer

Apart from the importance of connecting with hearers’ process and preachers’ ability to present old truths in a new fashion, our research introduces several conditions conducive to creating the environment for successful communication. The first of these conditions involves the person of the preacher, and the second includes the person of the hearer. Table 4 shows the results of the role of the preacher and the hearer in the sermon process.

Table 4. Personal conditions for communicative impact in sermons

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>The preacher</i> (8)	The person of the preacher plays an important role in the reception of the message	<i>The person of the preacher is very important for the impact of the sermons. When you can sense that they are authentic, connected with God, and preached in a loving way, this speaks volumes.</i>
<i>The hearer</i> (5)	The person of the hearer determines in part how the message comes across	<i>One has to be willing to be confronted. I really believe so. When you enter the room with a hard, distant attitude, then the sermon will not have as much impact. Still, a preacher may sometimes have the ability to break down your walls.</i>

Person of the preacher

The respondents emphasized the importance of the preacher's manner through which the sermon comes across. The authenticity of the communicator is a factor that creates the right atmosphere for people to tune in and receive the message. Likeability and knowledgeability were described as aspects that create authenticity. A participant stated that:

I have been changed through the sermons but also through the person of the preacher. He is so forbearing and friendly.

Sharing human interest stories at a personal level can enhance the credibility and likeability of a preacher:

I love it when a preacher becomes personal and has the courage to share his personal life.

Person of the hearer

In addition to the person of the preacher, the condition of the hearer plays an important role in determining how the communication comes across. An interviewee commented:

It matters if I have had my morning coffee or not. When I am tired or do not feel like going to church, I am not motivated to learn. The way you attend a service determines your level of openness to receive something. And sometimes the only thing you are thinking about during the service is getting home.

If people are not prepared to learn or receive a message, it becomes difficult for a preacher to effectively convey the message—although he may still succeed on special occasions, as one participant observed. When the hearers' minds are occupied with different things, when they are physically present but mentally absent, or when there are internal barriers to receiving the preachers' message, a communication breakdown is almost inevitable. This is how a participant concluded:

I believe the most important factor for retention lies in oneself. I mean, how busy you are inside your head. Apart from that, it's important how the pastor preaches.

Discussion

Three factors of importance

The aim of this study was to examine, from the perspective of the hearers, the factors that create impactful communication in sermons. Our study shows that three factors are crucial: (a) the connection of the message with hearers' internal processes and needs, (b) the preachers' ability to present old truths in a new fashion, and (c) the role of both preachers and hearers in the preaching process. The prominent role of connection with the personal process of the hearer is congruent with the findings of other researchers.¹⁰ Our results show that connection with personal processes often occurs in times of personal crises, during memorable occasions, when personal beliefs are challenged, or when there is personal identification.

The importance of presenting old truths in new ways as a distinctive feature of effective sermons is supported by Mulligan and Allen when they advise preachers to present the message in a lively manner for listeners, both in content and delivery.¹¹ Our research illustrates that presenting old truths in fresh ways becomes possible when preachers deliver the content of the message in a surprising manner, present new elements from the text and context, or use strong visuals or images.

Previous sermon-effect research confirms our findings but challenges some of the past findings, too. Our core findings are all supported by several theorists and researchers.¹² Nonetheless, not all the findings of previous research featured in our findings. For example, the duration of sermons or the clarity of the call to action did not figure in our investigation. However, data from our interviews advance our understanding of how communication works and what happens in the moments when memorable communication takes place.

Theoretical contributions

This study makes at least five contributions to the homiletical and communication literature. First, the results show that sermons can have considerable impact on peoples' lives. Not only did every respondent have at least one memorable experience connected with a sermon, these experiences could also be traced back as many as 29 years. Our research shows that change occurred not only in the spiritual realm but also in behavior and view of self. Although previous research has shown that sermons have limited or no impact on hearers, our data suggest that long-term commitment to sermons gives hearers a great chance of being significantly influenced

¹⁰ Mulligan and Allen, for example, comment that the message needs to relate in practical ways to listeners' lives (Mary Alice Mulligan, and Ron J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005). Alan Ehler insists on the importance of relevance in sermons (*Preach to Reach: Seven Characteristics of Effective Evangelistic Preaching*, D.Min. diss, George Fox University, 2007), and Ian Hussey states that a key aspect of effective preaching is the connection of sermons with the practical issues of life ("The Other Side of the Pulpit: Listener's Experiences of Helpful Preaching," *Homiletic*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2014).

¹¹ Mulligan and Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*, 2005.

¹² For example Long, *Witness*, 2016; Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); Ehler, *Preach to Reach*, 2007; Mulligan and Allen, *Make the Word*, 2005; Carrell, "Communication Training," 2009; Hussey, *Other Side of the Pulpit*, 2014.

by at least one specific sermon. However, what is clear is that the impactful sermon remains a rarity; people are not deeply moved week after week. Once in a while, a sermon occurs that has a profound impact on listeners. Our conclusions provide ample evidence that preachers should communicate for change; at the same time preachers should realize that change through sermons requires sermons and hearers' settings to connect in unique ways.

Second, our study offers new insights into the connection between hearers' personal process and the preachers' message. The importance of the connection of communication with the hearers' personal process is not new. Furthermore, studies in the homiletical field have suggested that the influence of a sermon is limited to the possible strengthening of already existing beliefs. Our data show that this is not always the case. Almost half of the respondents indicated that conflict with their already existing beliefs created the impact. There was sufficient connection with the hearers' personal process to enable the communication to work, providing preachers with the opportunity to stretch or challenge the hearers' beliefs without causing a communication breakdown.¹³ Confrontation is a means of connecting with hearers. Confronting and confirming hearers' worldviews should be balanced to allow connection with personal conviction in order to bring about change.

Third, it is crucial for preachers to know their audience and the questions they have, the challenges they face, and the values they espouse. In the past decades, there has been a move from the text to the hearer. But how drastic should this move be? Does it require the scrutiny of the congregation to be able to connect well with an audience? Is there a need to study postmodernism and its effects on society, as some advocate? Especially when a preacher stays with a congregation for a long period of time, or when one preaches on a regular basis to the same public, it is worthwhile to immerse oneself in the dynamics of that specific situation. Mere intuition does not suffice. If intuition had been able to accomplish the job, there would be no doubt about the impact of preaching today. However, these doubts are widespread. It is not self-evident that sermons will be impactful, mainly because too often people do not realize the connection between the message and their lives. For preachers to connect well with their audience, it is vital to have a profound understanding of the culture in which people live, the pastoral reality that can take place in a person's life, and the dominant processes that a congregation goes through. Since the connection between preachers and hearers is central to the effectiveness of sermons, we propose further research to be conducted in this realm. A good way to gain further insights is by conducting qualitative research among top communicators in the church, which will allow for exploration of how successful preachers deliberately create connection in their preaching.

Fourth, our data show that inductive preaching—making use of ambiguity—as advocated by Craddock and Lowry, is a strategic way of communicating if one wants to create an impact.¹⁴ The respondents indicated that many of the sermons that influenced them were communicated in a narrative style. The use of biblical stories can help hearers register close identification with the message. To enable this, the message should be presented in the full form of a story without abridgement. Many of the influential sermons that the respondents referred to were well-known narratives of the Bible, such as the story of Esther, the story of the prodigal son, or the story of the good Samaritan. Apart from presenting sermons in a narrative style, our research illustrates

¹³ Long, *Witness*, 2016.

¹⁴ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 2001; Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

that surprise is a key element in impactful communication. The respondents reflected on the familiar stories, yet the way they were presented was surprising and novel, and hence impactful. Perhaps the point of reference was changed or new perspectives flourished. The respondents indicated that the way the familiar story was presented made the message “come to life.” Our research encourages pastors to narratively preach even the stories that may be considered too familiar by the audience. Moreover, there are benefits to integrating the fields of rhetoric and homiletics. Work on the art of storytelling provides training for both corporate and religious communicators, where both serve as positive role models and learn from each other.

Finally, this study shows that there are many variables at play in sermon effectiveness. It is impossible to ascribe persuasion to the message and the messenger alone. Peoples’ attitudes, opinions, and events all determine the extent to which sermons are effective in persuading congregants. The person of the hearer serves as a hygiene factor for the impact of communication. Whether the hearer has missed his or her morning coffee, last night’s party finished too late, or one’s mother-in-law visits for coffee right after church, for example, can all undermine the impact of the message. Conversely, in times of crisis people may be more receptive to the message than ever before. In moments of vulnerability, there may be unusual openness to receive the word from the pulpit. Our results illustrate the multiplicity of different factors causing change. It cannot be restricted to the novelty of communication, though it is an important factor in effective communication. Further, communicators’ authenticity cannot produce persuasion on its own; the actual process listeners experience can greatly influence the extent of persuasion a message can elicit. In short, this qualitative inquiry demonstrated a nuanced and theory-based exploration of the underlying dynamics that may create impact preaching.

Limitations and Future Research

We believe that this study is a useful, albeit inconclusive, attempt at examining the factors that can transform sermons into impactful events. Several limitations should be noted. First, this is a typical single-perspective study, mainly because we did not involve preachers in our study. We encourage researchers to examine how preachers prepare their messages, how they deliberately work on bridging the gap between the text and the audience, and what they believe are the determining factors that create an impact in their sermons. There has lately been greater attention to the role of hearers in the preaching process, and throughout centuries, concern for the text has been predominant in the preaching process. However, the role of the person of the preacher has received limited attention in research. Traditionally, preachers were viewed as the machines of study, as mouths, whose job involved proclaiming what was written in the ancient text. Homiletic textbooks provide detailed, multistep processes to arrive at a robust sermon, but they often overlook the complications involved in communication, and tend to be oblivious to strategies necessary to bridge the gap between the audience and text. Thus, it would be useful to examine how experienced preachers influence their congregations, and to find out what this means in light of the findings of our current study.

A second limitation is that we only focused on sermons as a form of mass communication. In the political, corporate, and educational realms, communicators try to persuade their audiences into new modes of thinking or behavior. Although the respondents spoke about communication outside the context of sermons, our analysis focused only on change effected through sermons. While the results of this study shed light on different communicative

arenas, perspectives on eliciting impact through communication allow for a broader investigation than the one presented herein.

Further, our findings are based on a small number of respondents ($N = 15$). Although theoretically data saturation can be achieved with twelve interviews, we do not claim that the identified factors influencing impact in communication are the only ones that may play a role. We eagerly anticipate similar studies using larger samples to enable comparison with and extension of our findings.

Conclusion

Our research among a selected group of listeners of sermons illustrated that every respondent had experienced decisive change through a sermon at least once. This change was effected in the spiritual, behavioral, and self domains. In the spiritual realm, people experienced a change in their image of God and a change in their connection with God. In the realm of behavior, the respondents experienced a behavioral change and a greater involvement in social justice. In the domain of self, people experienced encouragement, a change of convictions about self, and a discovery of the destination of life. The factors in the sermon processes that effected these changes included a connection between the sermons and the listeners' personal processes, and the preachers' abilities to present old truths in a fresh, surprising way. Lastly, the person of the preacher and that of the hearer played a role in the process. The connection with the listener's personal process is especially experienced in times of crisis or on special occasions, and when the preacher succeeds in confronting listeners' personal beliefs without causing a communication breakdown. Listeners experience old things being presented in new ways, especially when they sense that sermons successfully bridge the cultural gap between "then" and "now," and when sermons in content and delivery contain new, surprising elements.

Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler, Jr. *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016. 182 pages. \$35.

In *The Genesis of Liberation*, biblical scholars Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler offer a provocative account of the early history of African American biblical interpretation. They locate this history not in the emergence of the black theology movement in the 1960s, but in eighteenth and nineteenth-century “freedom narratives,” a term the authors prefer instead of “slave narratives.” Drawing on a diverse array of formerly enslaved authors during the antebellum period in the U.S.—such as Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and Solomon Bayley—Powery and Sadler demonstrate how a “hermeneutics of emancipation” was used in freedom narratives to provide alternative interpretations of Christian scripture that challenged the oppressive, dehumanizing beliefs and practices of slavery (33). *The Genesis of Liberation* will be of interest to biblical scholars, homileticians, and pastors eager to learn about this important yet neglected dimension of the history of biblical interpretation.

The book is arranged into six chapters. In the opening chapter, Powery and Sadler argue that despite Christian scripture being used to legitimize enslavement, African Americans came to know “the liberating power of the God of Scripture” as well as “the liberating emphasis of Scripture itself” (2). They suggest that it was awareness of the liberative potential of scripture that led many formerly enslaved African Americans “to engage in the act of resistance that is reading” (11). The authors introduce the term “functional quotations” to refer to the way formerly enslaved authors modified the revered King James Version of the biblical text to support their own liberative, rhetorical ends (13). In chapter 2, building on the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Powery and Sadler consider the trope of the Bible as a “Talking Book,” as first introduced in James Gronniosaw’s narrative (36). They suggest that as formerly enslaved authors gained literacy they began to “talk back” to the Talking Book, a book that in the hands of slaveholders silenced and subjugated black humanity (60).

The third chapter explores how freedom narratives defied slaveholders’ restrictive interpretations of appropriate practices on the Sabbath. For example, Powery and Sadler note that the formerly enslaved “redefined the First Testament concept of rest as activity that involved the well-being of the human person,” including planning escapes from slavery (81). Perhaps one of the most intriguing examples of a hermeneutics of emancipation appears in chapter 4 of the book. The authors tell how William Anderson’s 1857 narrative challenged the racialized interpretation of Genesis 9 that deemed blackness a curse. Through drawing attention to Elisha’s leprosy curse on Gehazi in 2 Kings 5, Anderson proposed “a theory of racial origins” in which whiteness, not blackness, was a curse (103). In chapter 5, after demonstrating the way the apostle Paul was used in the sermons of white ministers to legitimize enslavement, Powery and Sadler reveal how formerly enslaved authors interpreted the apostle Paul as a fellow sufferer who could relate to their own experiences of struggle during the exigencies of slavery.

In an excursus, Powery and Sadler illustrate how stories of conversion, prayers, and sermon commentary show how the formerly enslaved found Jesus to be “a reconciler, a redeemer, a fellow sufferer, a companion, and a confidante” that stood in direct contrast to the slaveholder’s oppressive Christianity (146). The book concludes by stating that the freedom narratives remind us that space, race/identity, and ideology matter for the development of liberative interpretative practices that challenge the mainstream Christian community today (163).

Powery and Sadler draw from a range of freedom narratives written by women and men—including some that are lesser-known—to provide a unique window into an early tradition of African American biblical interpretation. In doing so, they demonstrate the agency, creativity, and resilience of early African American interpreters of scripture in the midst of the dehumanizing reality of slavery. One growing edge in their work is that some of the material is repetitive (58, 129). That aside, *The Genesis of Liberation* provides a compelling portrait of an all-too-often overlooked tradition of biblical interpretation. Biblical scholars, homileticians, and pastors will find it not only an illuminating history, but also an inspiring history, one that can energize emancipatory interpretation and proclamation of Christian scripture today.

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Frank A. Thomas. *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018. 111 pages. \$17.99.

Where do we turn for moral imagination when the highest office of American government propagates white nationalism and white supremacy? Frank A. Thomas's *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* provides a timely response for revolutionary proclaimers who would help free individuals, communities, and the nation of its moral depravity. Be ready, though, warns William J. Barber II in his foreword—the prophetic preaching that Thomas advocates is not for the risk-averse. Like the biblical and contemporary prophets whose moral imagination cost them their lives, those who take up Thomas's charge will likely face the oppressors' indignation, a worthy calling for the hope of divine liberation.

Drawing on Edmund Burke's origination of the term, Thomas defines moral imagination as the preacher's aptitude, despite the melee of human experience, for perceiving and relaying "God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth" for the good of the "individual and common humanity" (3). America is in desperate need of moral imagination, argues Thomas, because the powerful and privileged rationalize their dominance and the restrictions it imposes on the unfree—"black, Latinx, female, LGBTQ" and others, including disenfranchised whites, all denied the rights and privileges of freedom reserved for an ever-narrowing category of whiteness (12). Only moral imagination can supplant the white supremacy that America's "idolatrous and diabolical imagination" reproduces (xxxii). This is the role of the church.

Thomas identifies four qualities of moral imagination in preaching through a close reading of Robert F. Kennedy's campaign address on the night that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and King's last sermon, "I've Been to the Mountain Top," the night before his murder. Situating both orations in light of their exigencies and rhetorical contexts, Thomas demonstrates how the two male political figures, one white and one black, envisage equality and embody that vision through their tangible presence; recognize the possibilities that empathy creates for moving beyond the past and establishing future pathways to justice and harmony; draw on the knowledge and veracity found in ancient text-based resources; and evoke a sense of "wonder, mystery, and hope" in the audience through art and poetry (45). The strategic juxtaposition of Kennedy's and King's moral imagination lays bare not only the historical situatedness of their addresses, but also the possibility and obligation for every preacher to declare the injustice of withholding freedom and equality from the marginalized.

In the chapter that follows, Thomas applies the qualities of moral imagination to national leadership, thereby illuminating the extreme dearth of morality in the American imagination, the Trump presidency, and other national and local leaders. The way forward, says Thomas, is for those with moral imagination to impart what is lacking. For the preacher, this means bringing the qualities of moral imagination into their sermonizing. Thomas offers a preaching worksheet and questions aligned with the four qualities of moral imagination for preachers to use in sermon development. He also walks the reader through the process, using his own responses to the questions to compose a dangerous sermon on a selected biblical text. The result is a practical illustration of gospel preaching that is timely and culturally responsive.

The last "word" Thomas gives to luminary Prathia L. Hall, which prevents the near omission of a female exemplar. A contemporary of King in the fight for civil rights, Hall's political activism and homiletical genius captures the essence of "freedom faith," a concept that she began delineating in the mid-60s and that, as Thomas acknowledges, closely resembles the four qualities of moral imagination that he articulates. While Thomas does not make this known

until the end of the book, there is something to be said for the womanist theologian having the final say. Thomas presents the text of Hall's 2000 sermon, "Freedom-Faith," in its entirety and without analysis. In tribute to her legacy, he prefaces the sermon with an informative biographical sketch and explanation of the resonance between Hall's freedom faith and the qualities of moral imagination. Thereafter, Hall speaks for herself and her words sound a clarion call for freedom. There could be no more fitting close to what is sure to become a seminal text for 21st century prophetic preaching.

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Tim Hutchings. *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 264 pages. \$110.42.

Throughout the history of Christianity, churches have utilized various means of communication to reach out to people and invite them to discipleship—letters, print media, TV, and radio. As the internet has become the primary platform for news, business, education, and relationships, many churches have also turned to cyberspace as a mission field where people can find new faith by engaging in prayer, attending services, or even practicing the sacraments, such as baptism and Eucharist. While digital religions have existed since the 1990s, Tim Hutchings believes that research has not engaged with more in-depth questions, such as why people join online churches, what these churches do, how and why they change over time, and what institutional ties support them. Therefore, Hutchings defines the purpose of his book as to “tease out a more thorough and grounded understanding of what it can mean to be church online” (5).

In chapter 1, Hutchings states that online churches originated as early as the 1980s. He illustrates how churches began to increase their online presence with the advent of the World Wide Web in 1990, by providing “graphics, text and hyperlinks, and online communities” (11). In chapter 2, Hutchings introduces five topics that consistently arise in relation to cyber-churches: the relationship between online and offline activity, the validity of online community, the form and efficacy of online ritual, the design of virtual architecture and sacred space, and the impact of digital media on religious authority. In chapter 3, he discusses the methodology used for his research, namely ethnography. The ethnographer seeks “personal knowledge of what inhabitants do and eventually hopes to learn to see the world as they see it” (52).

Chapters 4 through 8 cover the five online churches that were the subject of Hutchings’s ethnographic research. He collected data on these churches by engaging in online discussion, attending worship, exploring the churches’ online architectures, and interviewing both leaders and participants. Church of Fools, whose main sponsor was a British Methodist, experimented with a new type of church by offering 3D worship services that participants could attend in avatar form. I-Church was part of a diocese of the Church of England that sought to nurture Benedictine spirituality among its participants. Church of Fools eventually relaunched as St. Pixels, which operated independently of denominations. Here, people could not only worship by typing their prayers, but could also share their reflections on blogs or in the forum. The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life appealed to Anglicans who were already familiar with their tradition by recreating the cathedral architecture and using the Anglican liturgy. Finally, Church Online at LifeChurch.tv differed from the other four churches in that it emphasized conversion rather than conversation and controlled the extent of participation.

Chapters 9 and 10 present critical analyses of these case studies, the aim of which is to understand the role of religious institutions in their use of technology. In chapter 9, Hutchings describes the religious-social shaping of technology (or RSST) and the institutional approach to the mediatization of religion. The former emphasizes the “agency of religious designer,” while the latter “conform[s] to a pre-established ‘logic’ of the media.” Hutchings suggests a third way that combines both approaches, which he calls “Mediatized Design.” In chapter 10, Hutchings envisions these online churches as a “third space” in which the participants are positioned between full integration into the religious and social networks and separation from these networks. While negotiating between the religious agencies and expectations of online cultures, online churches provide more options that allow for the users to adjust their commitments.

It is noteworthy that although the Barna group, a Christian polling company, predicted that online churches would gradually replace local congregations (25), the results of Hutchings's research show otherwise. Many participants have added the online churches to their everyday lives while still remaining connected to their local congregations. It seems rare for individuals to find new faith by joining online groups; rather, most of them "had current or past experience of attending a local church" (229). As it is an ethnographic study, it is regretful that Hutchings's work does not proceed to discuss the theological interpretations of such observations or to suggest what actions church communities may need to take.

Hutchings's research was originally conducted for his doctoral dissertation and was later developed into a book. Although his work does not aim to offer practical wisdom regarding how to create online churches, it still poses some challenging questions such as the nature of church, the grace of God in online communities, churches' openness to theological challenge, and their hospitality toward those who cannot physically participate in the life of their local congregation. Although Hutchings limits his research to sociological analysis, this book would be a useful resource for clergy and theologians to reflect on how churches negotiate their identities through their use of media.

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Amy P. McCullough. *Her Preaching Body: Conversations About Identity, Agency, and Embodiment Among Contemporary Female Preachers*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018. 178 pages. \$24.

As a female preacher, I took particular interest in Amy P. McCullough's book *Her Preaching Body*, but it is also a book for anybody who preaches or wants to understand more about the embodied act of preaching. McCullough asserts, "Since one cannot preach without her body, to explore preaching is to explore the body" (13). Her work is based on qualitative interviews with contemporary female preachers and seeks to understand more fully what it means to preach with a female body and how women preachers name and claim their identity as an embodiment of the word of God.

McCullough traces (and ultimately dismisses as inadequate) three theories of embodiment: women are essentially different from men (essentialism), women's bodies are formed by and conform to cultural contexts (social constructivism), and women exercise linguistic agency (performance). By adopting the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*The Phenomenology of Perception*) who contends perception begins not with cognition but with the body's lived experience and views "physicality, cultural influence, and individual choice as three interwoven, constantly interacting, and shifting aspects of the self" (23), McCullough critically analyzes the body of the preacher as the locus of negotiations between flesh, culture, and actions. She seeks to bring into the light these "habitations operating in the body that are often hidden from conscious comprehension" (29) so that a female preacher can be more mindful of the messages she gives and receives from others.

Throughout Christian history, as the female preaching body has attracted scrutiny, women employed (knowingly or unknowingly) four habitations to overcome cultural resistance and to give their message a hearing: rising above the female body (habits of transcendence), adopting signs of maleness (masculine form), becoming an impeccably moral woman (virtuous woman), and breaching boundaries (transgressors). Uncovering unnamed assumptions or unreflective behaviors gives a female preacher tools to analyze her preaching decisions, "thinking about her agency in her efforts to embody God's word" (61), because, whether in or out of the pulpit, with or without words, consciously or unconsciously, the "preacher's body is always preaching" (45).

"What should I wear today?" is not a superficial question for female preachers, but a deeply symbolic query, because as one woman interviewed astutely realized, "my clothes preach and teach" (63). Analyzing female preachers' choices of pants or skirts, robes or stoles, high heels or dangling earrings, short or long hairstyles, McCullough argues that every decision is a means to exercise agency and authority, and at the same time, to affirm identity as an embodied preacher who discloses a divine word.

As perplexing as it is, McCullough demonstrates how awareness of the fact that congregations will not notice a male preacher's body but will observe and comment on a female preacher's body can actually empower female preachers to become embodied preachers. One preacher said, "Believing we are made in the image of God with beautiful, amazing, and diverse bodies...with the word of God dwelling within us...my role as the preacher is to give voice to that word of God, [so that] God wells up in other people" (146). Whether it was through utilizing her strong voice, exercising the clergy robe as a tool, preaching without a manuscript, or claiming pregnancy as an illustration of incarnation, the women McCullough interviewed gave

witness to the fact that the more they became self-aware about how their bodies communicate, the better preachers they became.

Among the most significant contributions of McCullough's work is her application of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to homiletics in order to critically analyze the unique role the body, especially the female body, plays in preaching and worship leadership. Although we may find ourselves seeking a homiletical practice with a proven method for matching the messages of the body and mind, McCullough demonstrates that there is no one prescribed way to do it, but that it is an ongoing negotiation. In the #MeToo era with increased attention to women's bodies and voices, McCullough's work of theory, history, perception, and practice makes a valuable contribution to the conversation, even while inviting further theological and homiletical research. The questions for interviews McCullough included (Appendix B) invite all preachers into a deeper awareness of our preaching body.

By shining light on the body of the female preacher, McCullough gives women the tools to analyze the internal and external conversations about their bodies so that they might be more than silent repositories of preconceptions, and that they might knowingly make decisions on how to fully preach—in body, mind, and spirit—the word of God.

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Alyce M. McKenzie. *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018. 218 pages. \$17.

Alyce McKenzie considers the shifts in attention span in a digital age to be not merely a problem but an opportunity for homiletics. Cell phones, digital devices, and the divided minds they engender are not simply a source of lamentation for the preacher but an occasion to re-envision what the craft of preaching might look like for a time such as this. McKenzie proposes an alternative: preachers should learn to make a scene.

For McKenzie, such a “scene” represents a most promising way to reach out homiletically to the visual listeners of the digital world. She is suspicious of the ability of longer narratives to carry the freight that they once did for hearers. At the same time, she is clear that the visual logic of the scene, a kind of constituent element of a narrative or drama, may prove all the more useful for the task of preaching today. A scene is a strong, brief, visually-oriented, narrated moment that ideally includes dialogue and invites the participation of listeners in the story. In its best sense, a scene has the potential to connect to larger narratives but need not presuppose that a listener is already familiar with a longer narrative arc, whether of the Bible as a whole or the cultural narratives that we human beings tell ourselves. McKenzie is convinced that a well-designed, engaging, participatory scene meets the needs of the changing media age while opening up wider opportunities to relate to the narrative of God, understood as a kind of theo-dramatic view (Vanhoozer) of the whole.

Her argument develops over five variegated chapters. In the first chapter, McKenzie makes her case for “scene” as the new story. Here she also locates her work relative to developments in story and narrative in recent homiletic theory. Chapter 2 gives McKenzie the opportunity to describe the preacher as scene maker. She draws on her own previous scholarship in the wisdom literature to ground this scene-making task in the work of the sage, pointing specifically to skill in “noticing” matters of inner experience (inscape), the shape of biblical texts (textscape), and wider shared experience in contemporary life and culture (landscape). In chapter 3, McKenzie considers how texts already manifest this scene-making capacity for noticing. Although she begins by looking at how this holds true in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, she expands her treatment to include Jesus’ own teaching. All of this seeks to correlate God’s knack for noticing with our own human capacity *and* in relation to the person of Jesus, God’s incarnate wisdom. The fourth chapter is concerned with “Making a Scene in the Sermon.” Here she reconnects her argument with Vanhoozer’s concern for a dramatic shape of the gospel in scenes. For the most part, however, the chapter is concerned with laying out options for using scenes in sermons (deductive, multi-scene, single-scene, etc.) that can appeal to different kinds of hearers and open up a greater of variety of options to the preacher at the same time. Chapter 5 then gives examples of several types of scene sermons and allows the reader to correlate the sermons with the more explicit methodological options she describes in the previous chapter. These final two chapters are especially helpful to read side by side, or even back and forth, in order to grasp the whole of her project. Two appendices follow that can aid the preacher to go and do likewise. They offer a kind of checklist for making scenes, and exegetical hints to help in scriptural interpretation for preaching in scenes.

Her book is useful and will help preachers think in a wider variety of ways about how “scene” connects to experience and biblical texts. Its proximate goal is thus well-met in these pages. McKenzie offers useful guidance for reconsidering a more modest goal for narrative in an age of digitally shortened attention spans, while not losing sight of theology. At the longer end of

its goals, however, I would have also been intrigued to imagine how a book about “scenes” in a media-saturated age might look if it also took on some of the issues raised every time a new medium threatens to change the sensorium (Ong, or in a sense, McLuhan). For with the change of media, as even philosophers like Socrates noted with writing, capacities and possibilities for both memory and identity are altered as well. A change of attention or awareness may just involve both “making a scene” and “remaking ourselves” in surprising ways.

I highly recommend this book. Preachers will find it useful and practical for dealing with how our minds are changing in the new media environment. Homileticians will find an insightful conversation partner in the ongoing struggle over the future of narrative homiletics—I could see it fitting well in my narrative sermons course as a way of carrying that important disciplinary conversation forward into a new media context. All of this is to say that, McKenzie is, in fact, a sage herself and a scholar with much wisdom to offer to a field on the edge of something new.

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Caitlin Doughty. *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017. 248 pages. \$24.95.

That the American funeral industry overcharges and underwhelms in its ability to meet the needs of grieving families is not a new argument. However, Caitlin Doughty's recent book approaches the topic via an unconventional path and is remarkably effective at exposing the extent of the predicament. Doughty, a mortician, author of the best-selling *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, founder of the Order of the Good Death, and director of a non-profit funeral home in L.A., has a lot to say on the topic of funerary services and traditions. What she delivers in this fascinating and spirited traveler's memoir is less about what she has learned from her own many achievements than what she has learned from people and practices around the world whose perspectives differ radically from those representing the normative American experience. She explains this method in the introduction, urging us not only to consider how we tend to view death rituals that are different from our own as savage, unhygienic, naïve, or even dangerous (when they are not), but more than that, to see the beauty in difference. If we can put aside the impulse to recoil from the strange, we find there is a lot to learn from unfamiliar death practices.

The book's eight chapters center on eight extraordinary encounters with dead bodies and the living people who interact with them. In order, the chapters describe the following: open-air cremations in Crestone, Colorado; the care for and interaction with corpses in the house-graves of South Sulawesi, Indonesia; *Días de los Muertos* in Michoacán, Mexico; experiments with corpse composting in Cullowhee, North Carolina; "grave recycling" in Barcelona, Spain; the Ruriden columbarium of glowing Buddhas in Tokyo, Japan; the special powers of the *Fiesta de las Ñatitas* skulls in La Paz, Bolivia; and natural burial options in Joshua Tree, California. The chapters are written with a lightness and humor that embraces the ordinariness of death and of dead bodies. And, perhaps in anticipation of the reader's stretched comfort zone, the chapter's illustrations are just cartoonish enough to avoid perceptions of goriness, even where the descriptions of decomposition are fulsome. As a result, the reader is left having had a remarkably enjoyable experience for such a journey, in addition to an expanded understanding of the world's rich variety of rituals and beliefs about death.

The literary mode of *From Here to Eternity* is that of storytelling. Doughty's affection for the personalities and places grounding these eight encounters is apparent on every page. She also has a knack for telling stories within stories, weaving in additional anecdotes, such as that of the corpse hotel, or "Lastel," of Yokohama, Japan. We read descriptions of the sky burials of various lands, where corpses are ritually laid out for bird consumption. We learn about the wonder of whale falls, and what it's like to watch the ritual slaughter of a buffalo. Doughty also engages with the topics of miscarriage (Mexico chapter) and suicide (Japan chapter), suggesting, again, that a cross-cultural perspective is beneficial to understanding one's own way of thinking about and ritualizing death.

The aim of the book is part education and part activism. Doughty wishes to disabuse us of many popular myths about dead and decomposing bodies, such as that a corpse must be embalmed to be safe, or that ashes from a cremation will nourish the soil of a growing tree. She wants us to be critical of more traditional funerary services as well as some of the green alternatives being marketed popularly, and suggests ways to improve our practices with real benefits for the environment and for those who bury their dead. Fundamentally, this is a book about bodies and about grief. It is about the need for grieving people to be with the bodies they have so loved. She explains this in the Epilogue as a call for holding space: "Holding the space is

crucial, and exactly what we are missing. To hold the space is to create a ring of safety around the family and friends of the dead, providing a place where they can grieve openly and honestly, without fear of being judged” (232).

From Here to Eternity is a must read for anyone studying or teaching about death and/or immortality, and for anyone ministering to those who encounter their own mortality or grieve in the wake of a loved one’s passing.

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George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez, eds. *Come, Let Us Eat Together: Sacraments and Christian Unity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018. 243 pages. \$18.19.

If Katherine Sonderegger is right in describing the current state of ecumenical work as standing on Mount Nebo “spying that land of unity” but without ever crossing the Jordan, then *Come, Let Us Eat Together* offers a significant scouting report of the specific challenges, possibilities, and pathways toward the promised land (112). Featuring 13 essays written by scholars from Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical perspectives and edited by George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez, *Come, Let us Eat Together* reflects the proceedings and papers from the 2017 Wheaton College Theology Conference. Marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the conference provided space for presentations focused on two issues not always at the forefront of evangelical theology: the sacraments, and visible church unity. The resulting volume is both painfully honest and provocatively hopeful.

Several essays cover the familiar terrain of ecumenical impasse with regard to Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant sacramental theology. These essays clarify for an evangelical audience the immovable barriers to sacramental unity and full communion. For Thomas G. Weinandy, fundamental differences between Catholic and Protestant understandings of ordination reveal a vast gulf between the two communities at the Lord’s Table. Protestants, Weinandy laments, will not say “Amen” to the priest operating *in persona Christi* in the Eucharist, and so the table remains divided. Exploring possibilities for sacramental unity from an Orthodox perspective, Bradley Nassif repeats Metropolitan Kallistos Ware’s insistence that Christian reunion must be preceded by full agreement in the faith. Starting from what he calls a “Eucharistic ecclesiology,” Nassif suggests that the problem of ecclesiological division is centrally a problem of Eucharistic division, for “the bread creates the body” (99). Claiming both historical continuity and practical integrity, Nassif calls Protestants and Catholics back to the early church fathers, and into the Orthodox fold. While honest and clear, such essays offer few glimpses of unity and focus more on the obstacles keeping ecumenists on Mt. Nebo.

Another set of essays engage the biblical witness to the Eucharist. Amy Peeler explores Paul’s instruction to a divided Corinthian church, emphasizing the Christocentric and cruciform elements of the practice. Cherith Fee Nordling connects narratives of ascension to the practice of Eucharist to clarify the eschatological tension displayed in the practice of a divided church, while Matthew Levering identifies a similar focus on the agency of the resurrected Christ in the Emmaus narrative of Luke 24. These essays tend to clarify the contradictions of current practice—it is the one Christ who hosts us at the one table—but fall short of any proposal for Eucharistic unity in a divided church. They richly describe the land of unity but do not illuminate a path forward.

However, when authors situate themselves in the spaces between traditions, theologies, and practices, *Come, Let Us Eat Together* offers cautious ecumenical hope. D. Stephen Long, for example, interrogates his own journey from a United Brethren baptism to inclusion in the Methodist Church to clarify the “practical messiness” of any ecclesiology (68). Cautioning against idealist understandings of church and sacrament, Long articulates an Anabaptist vision of catholicity. D. Zac Niringiye similarly situates questions of unity in the contextual and political dimensions of ecclesial practice and theology. He describes Anglican and Catholic dialogue in Uganda to clarify how the political and nationalist divisions of European Christendom were exported into his own context and mapped onto local ethnic divisions. He concludes that initial

steps of ecclesial and political cooperation witness to unity that is not yet possible at the Eucharistic table.

In the closing chapters of the book, Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen offer theologically creative approaches to bridge ecclesial traditions. Gavrilyuk reimagines Orthodox Eucharistic theology in light of eschatological hope, suggesting, along with Sergei Bulgakov, a “dogmatic minimalism” for shared participation in light of God’s promised unity for the church (174). Kärkkäinen situates the problem of sacramental unity within the question of ecclesial recognition, demonstrating how the Protestant concern for “*pure* gospel and *right* administration of sacraments” can offer a constructive means for mutual recognition across ecclesial traditions (229). While not charting a whole path down from Mt. Nebo, these essays do provoke readers into new patterns of thought and action.

As one might expect from a book of essays based on a conference, *Come, Let Us Eat Together* unevenly engages the central question of ecclesial and sacramental unity. This means that those who seek a collaborative and comprehensive vision for church unity may struggle to build connections between the disparate proposals. But for those hoping to understand the problems and possibilities of this question from across the ecumenical spectrum, *Come, Let Us Eat Together* can be a rich partner in conversation.

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Stephen Farris. *So, Tell Me A Story: The Art of Storytelling for Preaching and Teaching*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018. 179 pages. \$9.99.

Stephen Farris has put together a wonderful collection of short stories designed to teach, delight, and persuade those who read these stories (4). At the outset, Farris clarifies what this book does not intend to do. It is not an exposition of narrative theology nor a theology of narrative, even though the stories do convey theology. It is not a how-to manual on the techniques of storytelling. Rather, he says, “This is a conversation; sit down with me at an imaginary table, and share stories” (xii). The stories he tells are not like parables or Aesop’s Fables. Nor are they “Chicken Soup for the Soul” stories. Rather, they are personal stories that come from Farris’s experiences, observations, and ministry. They are ordinary stories of life.

As he shares his stories, especially in the first four chapters, Farris devotes some time to the art of storytelling. As he tells them, Farris reflects on issues related to preaching, issues such as the use of self-disclosure. In one of his stories, Farris tells of helping out a stranger but does so discretely without drawing attention to himself or becoming the hero (77). He reflects on unethical ways of telling stories. These include claiming a story happened to you that did not. Or telling only half of a story (the good half) and not telling how later on things did not turn out so well (63-64). He ends by offering a few practical guidelines for ethical storytelling (64).

Throughout these first four chapters, he offers delightful tidbits of advice. He observes that telling stories “that unambiguously set forth examples for us to follow are the most likely to become tedious for listeners.” They easily become moralistic pablums (14). He maintains that interpreting a story must be like “Goldilocks’s porridge, not too little, not too much, but just right” (34). He issues a caution about cluttering a story with too many facts: “Too many details clog the arteries of narrative like cholesterol” (32). By just reading these stories, the reader learns to become a better storyteller.

Farris tells stories that follow the church year (chapter 5), that deal with church life (chapter 7), that highlight stories of grace (chapter 8), that revolve around the sacraments (chapter 9), that are about bicycles (chapter 10), and that are appropriate for civic kinds of occasions (chapter 11). Sometimes he tells stories simply because they are interesting and without assigning to them any particular lesson. Chapter 6, however, is unique to the book. In that chapter, Farris crafts an imaginative and inspiring short story using a framework built around the life of Christ and revolving around a character named Simon. It is a story that traces the life of Simon between the birth and death of Jesus.

Farris stresses the importance of being sensitive in telling certain stories. For example, in Chapter 10, “Bicycle Stories,” he tells how his Dad taught him to ride a bike. But in telling this story, he wanted to be sympathetic to those children and adults who did not have loving fathers who spent time with them. He suggests making sure you know who you are telling the story to. Or, as he suggests, you might just consider saving certain stories for telling your grandchildren (147). Then he concludes with this observation: “However, almost any story powerful enough to touch the heart, and certainly any story that speaks specifically about personal relationships, has the capacity to hurt some listener” (147). Therefore, tell such stories with gentleness.

The stories told in this book cover the gamut of ordinary life. They are about learning to ride a bicycle, taking communion, showing grace and love, suffering and loss, marriage, raising children, and embarrassing moments. They are, if you will, “homemade” in the best sense of that term. These stories come from Farris’s experiences as a youth, a seminary student, a minister, a

professor, a husband and father, etc. Most of the stories take place in his home country of Canada.

This book accomplished its goals: to teach, delight, and persuade. It gave me an even deeper appreciation for the art of storytelling, enabling me to experience the whole array of human life and emotion. And it persuaded me to look closer at the stories in my own life and the stories that are all around me as resources for learning wisdom and for teaching and preaching.

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Kimberly Johnson. *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. 177 pages. \$90.

The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit invites the reader to consider what womanist preaching entails and encourages them to consider the rhetorical strategies used by womanist preachers. In the book Johnson offers four rhetorical models that she uses to analyze the sermons of four Black women who are preachers. Her models stem from the four-part definition of womanism as categorized by Stacey Floyd-Thomas. They are: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. The aim of the book is to excavate the voice of Black women from the margins and to name the rhetorical strategies used in womanist preaching.

The introduction of *The Womanist Preacher* serves as a thorough and helpful literature review of the scholarship that Johnson is building upon. The reader gets a clear idea of the scholarly lineage in which Johnson imagines herself as she articulates her movement from Alice Walker's definition to Stacey Floyd-Thomas' categories derived from that definition. She looks at the rise of womanism and takes the reader through some of the scholarship in this introductory chapter as a helpful set up for her own argument. Johnson then walks through some of the literature engaged specifically with homiletics, focusing on Katie Cannon, Elaine Flake and Donna Allen. This chapter is exemplary in setting up the argument because it allows readers to follow Johnson's train of thought while giving them an abundance of resources to continue reading should they want to delve more deeply into womanism or, more specifically, womanist preaching.

Chapter 2 through chapter 5 look at specific sermons by Black women to note the rhetorical strategies seen under the categories of radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love and critical engagement. Each chapter introduces the category and then does a critical textual analysis of the sermon(s). In chapter 2, Johnson analyzes sermons by Gina Stewart and Elaine Flake to consider radical subjectivity. Chapter 3 focuses on traditional communalism through Cheryl Kirk Duggan's sermon. Chapter 4 looks at redemptive self-love through a sermon by Melva L. Sampson, and chapter 5 examines a sermon by Claudette Copeland to consider critical engagement. Each chapter gives the reader a chance to read a powerful sermon and to note the rhetorical strategies Johnson identifies. Johnson's main argument and conclusion is best stated in the final chapter. She writes, "A womanist rhetorician must work at re-imaging victims to victors, calling us back to our communal beliefs and values using a rhetorical Jeremiad, reimagining villains to heroines, and offering a culture critique of the oppressive power structures that continue to marginalize people. Both womanist preaching and womanist rhetoric have the moral responsibility to fight for the social justice and liberation of all people" (126). In short, she finds their preaching liberating from and subversive of normative structures by using the strategies of radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love and critical engagement.

In this book Johnson contributes to the field of homiletics as well as the field of communications by centering a voice that is often marginalized: the voice of Black women. This book is a good starting point for someone trying to begin engaging with womanist preaching and wanting a base for what womanist rhetoric can be. The models found in the final chapter also offer examples that someone could use to analyze their own words to see if they are using the strategies offered. While I think the book is helpful, I also wonder if separating the tenets does a disservice to the definition of womanism that intentionally holds them together. I think the next

step would be engaging the tenets together. By separating them into different chapters, one could assume that you only focus on one aspect of womanism in your preaching. However, as evident in many of the sermons lifted, all four tenets are present and operating alongside one another. The way the categories are interwoven in womanism offers a different understanding of the strategies needed to engage in what someone might call “womanist preaching.” Overall, this book is a helpful read that can benefit both scholars and practitioners with any interest in preaching and/or rhetoric. It continues a necessary conversation about womanist preaching and posits a helpful series of strategies for the reader to consider.

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Phil Snider, ed. *Preaching as Resistance: Voices of Hope, Justice, and Solidarity*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2018. 167 pages. \$19.99.

What stance does the church take regarding civic institutions, legal authorities, and national governments that often enrich those who have power, wealth, education, and position to the detriment to “the least of these”? The pulpit through the ages has oscillated between being either complicit or prophetic depending on time, location, and theological commitments. The strange complicity between the state and religion in the birth and passion narratives in Matthew’s Gospel deserves not only theological reflection but also provides an early case study for how Christians navigate institutional and systemic powers. Advocating complicity is not an option. Snider has gathered representative sermons that address current political and ethical themes that require Christian action rather than a passive stance. The sermons collected in *Preaching Resistance* overtly challenge several established political and religious groups that compete for position among the principalities and the powers.

While these sermons vary in hermeneutics, exegesis, homiletics, theology, and social location, they consistently demonstrate an apt word for politically tense situations. Some preachers and traditions choose silence, knowing that congregations reflect the bipartisan nature of the current political landscape. Whether the preacher chooses silence or is silenced by unreceptive constituents, the result is the same. Depending how color-coded your church is (red, blue, or purple), the sermons collected here will be received differently. Blue churches will offer the “Amen!” Red churches will have mixed reactions that range from hostility to placation. Yet most churches live in the reality of “purple.” Purple churches, or at least the churches where I preach, will be sympathetic to the sermons collected here and yet perceive them as too politically charged and therefore explosive. Most readers will probably find at least one “hot potato” topic too intense for their local congregation. What does a preacher in a “purple” church do?

Snider offers these sermons as a small representation of the possibilities. The sermons exemplify being proactive rather than reactive. Reactive sermons will not be able to keep up with the constant barrage of accessible bad news. Yet through an ongoing diet of catechetical preaching that undergirds resistance to the powers, preachers will shape the practical wisdom and communal discernment of the congregation.

Both the Introduction (by Snider) and the Afterword (by Richard W. Voelz) articulate a way of thinking about *Preaching Resistance*. Succinctly, the theology of resistance articulated includes: 1) comparing and contrasting “the world as it is in comparison to how God wants it to be,” 2) inviting “listeners into another space and time wherein the transforming realm of God is experienced and celebrated,” and 3) equipping “listeners to do the truth, or make the truth happen, by responding to the call of justice and love harbored in the name of God” (5). Additionally, resistance preaching requires a nuanced vision of the kingdom of God, a larger community of support, an historic consciousness, a revised sense of pulpit authority, and an open door to participation in a new and “hope-filled way” (165-166).

I noted three patterns in these sermons. First, often a guest speaker whose ethos garnered respect delivered the sermon. Both ethos and hospitality between the speaker and the congregation were evident. Second, few of the sermons had as their direct focus a particular headline and could not be categorized as “protest” or “reactive.” Instead the sermons grounded resistance in larger theological roots. I heard repeatedly the idea, “This is not the kind of people we want to be.” Or, “This is the kind of people we aspire to be.” Third, Will Willimon is often cited as someone who is committed to the lectionary no matter what the headlines read. Sticking

to the lectionary often brings connections that the preacher might not make otherwise. Several of the collected sermons modeled how the lectionary served the purposes of resistance (“When I Kept Silent,” and “Take a Knee” were two overt examples). In this way the lectionary functions as one tool that over time transforms a community prepared not only to resist but also to invite new ways of being community in the public square.

Whether or not you embrace the politics and theological commitments of the preachers, the collection can serve as case studies of hermeneutics in practice and concretizations that promote action. I recommend *Preaching Resistance* for its models of apt words, but also as an encouragement to preachers who need both the reassurance and permission to speak in a way that promotes hope, unity, peace, and solidarity.

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Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim, eds. *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018. 192 pages. \$21.99.

Every homiletician approaches the craft of preaching differently. *Homiletics and Hermeneutics* is a conversation among four seasoned preaching professors about the hermeneutical implications of their preaching methods. The collaborative work allows Bryan Chapell, Abraham Kuruvilla, Kenneth Langley, and Paul Scott Wilson to describe their homiletical methods and respond to each other.

Chapell describes a redemptive-historic method of preaching whereby preaching the wider “context” of redemption throughout scripture situates a text in relationship to the pinnacle of revelation in Christ (4). Through an exposition of the text and its connection within redemptive history, redemptive-historic preaching relates human depravity with grace in Christ. Kuruvilla offers a christiconic view of preaching, which understands the central task of preaching as conforming to the image of Christ. The function of a biblical text is to invite readers to live in God’s “ideal world” through an understanding of what the author was doing in the particular passage (57). The text invites interpreters to conform to a facet of Christ uncovered in the chosen pericope.

Langley proposes a theocentric homiletic where God is at the center of preaching. He is wary of preaching models that regulate God as secondary to Christ and believes that the Bible is primarily about God. Langley argues that any other central focal point for preaching is not broad enough. Wilson’s law and gospel approach is grounded by the notion that the word of God “both condemns and liberates” (117). Preaching is about proclaiming the gospel, which requires law to be heard. Sermons move from law to gospel, even as the terms are not mutually exclusive. The work concludes with comments from the editors that offer a helpful analysis of the four models.

The responses at the end of each chapter acknowledge that privileging a certain theme or theological belief is directly connected to homiletical methods. This format invites readers to grapple with tensions and complexities within the field of preaching. While each preaching model makes unique contributions to the book, two specific areas of concern are especially worth highlighting. Throughout the book, the authors wrestle with whether sermons should always make an explicit turn to Christ. A second general topic is the place of the Old Testament in preaching. These central questions continue to be dividing within evangelical homiletics. The debates are left unsolved, but readers are invited to reflect on the topics and their implications. When responding to each other, the authors help the readers to identify what is at stake in the discussions.

This book does not simply describe the authors’ previously published preaching models. Each author responds to criticisms they have received over time about their work, which allows them to provide greater clarity. In addition, the juxtaposition of the models in dialogue with hermeneutics and theology offer fresh insights into the models. The work clearly illustrates that the way a person approaches scripture has a significant influence on the model of preaching. Whatever the authors believe the Bible or God’s word is primarily about, redemption-history in Jesus, conforming to the image of Jesus, God, and law and gospel become primary for how the homiletician understands preaching.

The evangelical nature of the models is evident throughout the book. This is most clearly seen in the strong emphasis each author places on the text or word of God. Those outside the evangelical tradition might find some parts challenging but the work is a valuable addition to the field. It offers an entry point into the approaches and debates within evangelical homiletics. At

times, I found myself disagreeing with the authors and their views; however, the descriptive purpose of the projects invites a diversity of perspectives. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the work is its general lack of attention to the way that contexts and identities shape preaching, hermeneutics, and theology.

The work could serve well as a supplemental text in a preaching course. Students will find the models within their grasp and are given the necessary source information to study each model in more depth. *Homiletics and Hermeneutics* bring together four preaching scholars to discuss the complex relationships between interpreting scripture and preaching. The authors make it clear that theology and hermeneutics are not secondary to preaching. Preaching is formed by them. Ultimately, the authors seek to be faithful to their callings in the formidable task of preaching. They have found methods that work for them, and they invite you to do likewise.

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Carolyn B. Helsel. *Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2018. 132 pages. \$17.38.

In a divisive socio-political atmosphere in the United States, the resurgence of overt racism becomes more and more apparent. Despite its grievous effects on the lives of people of color, racism is a topic preachers avoid in their sermons. Preaching about racism to predominantly white congregations is an especially difficult task for white preachers. In her book, *Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders*, Carolyn B. Helsel, assistant professor of homiletics at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, provides preachers with both a critical examination of racism and a practical guide for preaching about racism to white congregations.

This book comprises seven chapters. In chapter 1, Helsel lays a theoretical and theological basis for the book. She contends that preaching about racism to white Christians needs to begin from a place of gratitude, not shame or guilt (9). By integrating Paul Ricoeur's work on three forms of recognition with the concept of original sin and God's response to sin, Helsel offers an explanatory framework for how preaching on racism can move toward gratitude. Gratitude is not merely feeling thankful but it is a form of recognition that points us toward others. The recognition of racism, and the recognition of God's ongoing redemptive work in us despite our inability to completely free ourselves from racism, lead to a sense of gratitude that motivates us to preach on racism and invites us to keep engaging with this challenging issue.

In chapter 2, Helsel reveals how white preachers' and congregations' default interpretive lenses are blinded by racism. To overcome one's interpretive blindness, three forms of recognitions are necessary: the recognition of racism, the recognition of one's racial identity as white, and the recognition of ways to respond to racism through the practice of gratitude. Chapter 3 traces the shift of racial categories and the definition of racism over time. Not only do people have different definitions of racism, racism is also a concept that is constantly changing. Hence it requires ongoing conversation with others to define what it is (29). Although there is no clear-cut, single definition of what racism means, myths about racism hinder people from expanding their capacity to respond to racism; Helsel thus debunks ten common racism myths. In chapter 4, Helsel introduces racial identity development theory as a helpful framework to understand the process of fostering the formation of a positive white racial identity, and explicates its implications for preaching.

In chapter 5, Helsel examines how to preach biblically about racism. For this task, Helsel tackles Haddon Robinson's understanding of biblical preaching that identifies the Bible with the word of God itself and attempts to find a unilateral meaning of the text. She offers an alternative perspective of biblical preaching that acknowledges the multivocality of the biblical texts and attends to God's works in the present, responding to the current forms of oppression, including racism. In chapter 6, Helsel provides her own theological understanding of racism for preaching in relation to three Christian metaphors for sin, namely idolatry, estrangement, and bondage. Racism as idolatry elevates whiteness as a symbol of truth, virtue, and superiority, while treating people of color as invisible (73-74). The sin of racism as estrangement causes the loss of connection from God and other people, and harms our ability to relate to others across racial divides. The metaphor for the sin of racism as bondage shows the embodied nature of racism and its intractability (79). In response to each metaphor for sin, preachers are called proclaim hope through faith in Jesus Christ on the basis of the deep sense of gratitude. Chapter 7 offers a

practical guide for sermon preparation for preaching on racism, and how to engage beyond the church walls on the issue of racism.

Helsel deeply engages with the challenging topic of race and racism from diverse theoretical and theological perspectives, and writes about it in highly readable and compelling manner. Prophetic preaching about racism to white congregations often stimulates feelings of guilt and shame, and demoralizes people. However, Helsel reminds readers that at the heart of preaching on racism is a deep sense of gratitude for God's ongoing redemptive work in a broken, racist world. As a person of color who serves a white congregation, I found in this book many practical tools for preaching on racism. However, I also realize a missing part in her work. The power dynamic between a white congregation and a pastor who is a person of color is different from that between a white preacher and a white congregation. Although Helsel claims that "I write not only to other white Christian leaders, but to all faith leaders" (3), I suspect that her primary intended readers are white Christian leaders rather than the people of color. Nevertheless, this book is a much needed and valuable resource for both scholars and preachers.

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Lisa L. Thompson. *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018. 193 pages. \$29.99

Lisa L. Thompson, soon to be Associate Professor and Cornelius Vanderbilt Chancellor Faculty Fellow of Black Homiletics and Liturgics at Vanderbilt Divinity School, presents a thought-provoking book titled, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*. In this book, Thompson describes the reality that the bodies, personhood, and lived experiences of black preaching women have mostly been neglected, being outsiders within our guild and in black faith communities. She lifts up the preaching voices of black women who continue to navigate the disheartening reality between the external expectations of listening communities and traditions and their own personhood, and she invites readers to learn from their creative preaching practice (6). In other words, Thompson argues, illuminating the full personhood of these black-preaching-women will bring fresh air from the outside or margin that can reshape our view and practice of preaching.

Thompson's first two chapters lay the foundation for a concept of *ingenuity* for the theology and practice of preaching as an outsider. The rest of the chapters attend to the shape of sermon development and design, built upon the concept of ingenuity, in engagement with actual sermons of black-preaching-women.

In chapters 1 and 2, Thompson laments that black women, although uniquely shaped by the intersection of race, class, sexuality, gender, and social location, remain(ed) outsiders within the preaching ministry, especially under male-centered dynamics in communities of faith (13). In that context, the preaching practice of black women—both by force and by choice—becomes unimaginative, replicating against their real, female bodies the bodily practice and imitation of the already-established images and practices of black male preaching. In a way, every preacher stands in conversation with her community and a tradition beyond herself, competing with the established images of black preaching and negotiating a space for her voice in the various contexts of ministry (32). What is needed in this situation is for black-preaching-women to intentionally disrupt the situation by utilizing, as Michel de Certeau suggests, the “tactical use” of traditional practice and expectations of black preaching with creativity and ingenuity in order for preachers to find their own voices. Thompson asserts that preaching is ultimately to make a way to encounter the sacred-in-breaking (the word of God), which not only affirms but also pushes and expands communal beliefs, experiences, and practices of preaching and proclamation for the sake of God's justice in the community and world (18-19, 26).

Chapters 3 through 6 are each framed by four major sections: hearers' expectations of preaching, the personhood of black women, black women's creative use of those expectations for the practice of preaching, and practical advice for sermon development. Chapter 3 explores how everyday life and the lived experiences of the community (including black women) can be used as a resource in preaching by recovering invisible narratives (the unfamiliar), and then weaving them with familiar narratives for the sake of the transformation of the community (39-40).

In chapter 4, drawing on the idea that both scripture and lived experience are sacred texts in preaching, Thompson argues that preaching should be an interplay and play between the ancient world and contemporary world, creating points of identification for shared encounter and meaning of texts (80-87). In other words, scripture and lived experience of listeners are mutually influential in the negotiating process of interpretation within the community.

Chapter 5 illuminates how preaching as an outsider can bring about the shared experience of God as a “very present truth” for life abundant (survival and thriving) in the community here

and now, by adopting a communally-assertive mode (pulse or movement) of preaching, which is characterized by confident utterances, immediate relevancy, and buildup (layering one's claim in small increments at a time) (122). Thompson further asserts that this mode disrupts false dichotomies between authoritarian and communal understandings of preaching by identifying the message, imagining the possibilities, and creating mutual experiences.

Chapter 6 asserts that the preacher's task is to make a way for the sacred-in-breaking of God as a very present help, and to develop and expand the working faith claims of the community in a nuanced way. Based on the notion that life with God, life with others, and the lives of the people of faith are interconnected, Thompson avers that the preacher should make explicit links between the overarching faith-story, the everyday, and an awareness of God on personal and communal levels through preaching (160).

While this book is to be applauded in many ways, I want to specifically highlight two contributions. First, this brilliant book, deeply contextual and trans-contextual in its entirety, shows how marginalized voices and experiences, especially of black-preaching-women, can contribute to the enhancement of our homiletical, practical-theological understanding of preaching and proclamation on the personal, communal, and theological level. Second, Thompson's practical suggestions about how the preacher as an outsider should navigate the various and complex power dynamics within the community is extremely helpful, not only for black-preaching-women but for any preachers who find themselves on the margins in our postmodern context.

However, there are also some minor issues to be mentioned. First, it is not clear if Thompson's revisionist and problem-solving approach developed for the communal context of those marginalized preachers can transform the power structure deeply embedded within the communities. Second, some homileticians may wonder if Thompson's suggestions, based on the logic of identity, truly include all marginalized voices within the community beyond those called to preaching ministry, thus failing to give other voices autonomy and agency for the sake of their vibrant subjectivity.

Despite these issues, I highly recommend this book for all preachers who might find themselves in a space of marginalization within and beyond the faith community. Additionally, Thompson's book is an excellent guide for many homileticians and scholars who desire to learn how to negotiate and navigate power differentials with ingenuity for the task of preaching.

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Thomas H. Troeger. *The End of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018. 74 pages. \$15.99.

Demonstrating an ease of reflection birthed from the wisdom of an emeritus homiletician, preacher, poet, and psalmist Thomas Troeger invites the readers of this text on a journey of homiletical contemplation accompanied by the witness of the Beecher Lecturers that came before him. He asks the reader to wonder with him, “What is the end of preaching?” This is not a question as to whether or not preaching has reached its conclusion, or even if it is in danger of becoming less important in the culture. Instead, Troeger asks those who read this text to reflect on the purpose of preaching both for themselves and for sermons that they have heard. This book is full of questions asked directly to the reader that if answered honestly would require time and honest reflection. Troeger welcomes the reader into a virtual lecture, asking those who open these pages to use this text as a guide of self-discovery. Even though this book is an adapted version of Troeger’s 2016 Beecher lectures, it reads almost like an academically rigorous, contemplative homiletical devotional for preachers and scholars alike.

Ever a student of context, Troeger carefully researched those who had given the Beecher lectures before him and found that many of his predecessors wrestled with naming an end to preaching. He observed that “there are numberless ways to complete the statement ‘the end of preaching is...’ and they change continually as the historical context changes” (9). Troeger focuses the bulk of this book on answering this question for himself in our current cultural and historical context while also inviting readers to answer this question for themselves. Troeger adapts a line from George Hubert’s poem “The Church-Porch” as the beginning of his inquiry, “Praying’s the end of preaching” (10). From this moment in the text, Troeger lifts off into an imaginative deliberation on the different ways that prayer is the end of preaching. More expansive than it seems at first glance, Troeger works through six classic types of prayers as the end of preaching: adoration, confession, supplication, intercession, thanksgiving, and lament. Though this is not an exhaustive list of the possible kinds of prayer to be birthed from preaching, Troeger believes that these categories serve as a basis for exploration.

This poetic take on preaching is not devoid of action or prophetic witness. Troeger manages to describe a preaching practice that takes the preacher regularly to the altar but that also calls the preacher and the community into action. As I began reading, I was worried that the preaching that Troeger was calling for would be overwhelmingly internally focused and that it would lead to communal contemplation without activity in the world. But he makes it clear that prayer is the beginning of Godly action. Lament, for example, must be the prayerful end of preaching that recognizes evil for what it is and begins to address that evil.

Towards the end of the book, Troeger suggests that the phrase that sits at the heart of the work, “prayer’s the end of preaching,” is deceptively simple (67). I believe that this observation is true of the entire book. This short tome is, too, deceptively simple. Its brevity might suggest that it lacks a certain intellectual rigor, but in reality the opposite is the case. This carefully worded work is short out of necessity; Troeger wants the reader to experience what he’s writing as much as read it. He leaves room in his writing for the reader to pause, and though not explicitly named this way Troeger seems to want the reader to move slowly through this work, savoring the words and the ideas that it brings forward. One aspect of Troeger’s thought that becomes evident in this work is his lack of enthusiasm for the development of homiletic methodology. One might argue that this is not a “how to” work, but Troeger is clear that he is less concerned with teaching preachers “how to” preach but is much more interested in calling preachers into a reflective practice of preaching that develops the character of the preacher more

than their rhetorical acumen. Here I found myself desiring just a bit more of Troeger's wisdom, wondering what steps one might take to develop preaching that sees its end as prayer.

The End of Preaching serves very much as the beginning of journey of self-reflection for any pastor or scholar who sincerely submits to the experience of this work. Though brief, this work is the kind that can be regularly reread, with each interaction promising another nugget of wisdom to mull over.

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Margo Kitts. *Elements of Ritual and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 113 pages. \$18.

A slim volume sweeping in scope, *Elements of Ritual and Violence* by Margo Kitts provides an overview of ritualized violence that draws on empirical cases from biblical texts to Islamic State beheading videos to theoretical perspectives spanning classical anthropological works to recent developments in cognitive science. With twenty pages dedicated to bibliography, the book is essentially a literature review. It is a succinct orientation to two subjects that are notoriously difficult to define and theorize—violence and ritual—and the complex relationship between them.

The first major section is centered on violence. It begins with the recognition that what constitutes violence “is in the eye of the beholder” (5). Kitts invites the reader to behold violence from three viewpoints. First, she examines popular perspectives on violence in art and media, which serve as an accessible starting point for the volume. Second, she presents philosophical and anthropological discourse on violence, with a focus on the roles of pain and violence in personal and social transformation and theories of the performance of religious violence. Third, through a study of ancient cultural practices Kitts considers whether there is a human disposition for or against violence, and determines that the evidence is inconclusive.

The second major section is centered on ritual, minimally defined as “organized behaviour which is less technical than symbolic in outcome” (38), and arguably an experience that “eludes discursive dissection altogether” (37). Kitts approaches ritual as it relates to violence through the interconnected categories of ideation and formalization.

Ideation includes “the emergence of ideas, images, and awareness, including sensory-affective awareness and a sense of personal transformation and social identity” (38). Following an outline of classical theoretical perspectives on the primacy, multivocality, and dynamism of ritual and the development and critique of linguistic paradigms, Kitts turns to two examples of violent, ideologically-motivated, political rituals: the 9/11 attacks and the self-immolation of Buddhist monks in Tibet. Both groups amplify their message through ritualization and may contribute to generating a “violent imaginary,” an inarticulate yet menacing understanding of the world.

Formalization includes “embodied behaviour,” and encompasses rhythm, kinesthetics, expressive register, and more (38). Kitts first considers ritual as communication, both in the form of speech acts and patterned visual and sensory performances. She discusses features of ritual communication that distinguish it from everyday communication, such as formality and fixity, and how these may serve a violent intent. What rituals communicate, however, is often semantically imprecise and thus there is grave potential for miscommunication. Kitts next considers the seductive quality of ritual through a comparison of ritual and music, both of which are anchored in somatic experience—rhythm, pain, pleasure, emotional arousal—and privilege the body as integrally connected to imagination. Ritual has the capacity to excite emotions and to express emotions through a range of ritual textures, yet at times ritual may have an emotional distancing effect. Genocidal killing and maiming during the conflict in Rwanda are taken as an example throughout. An extended excursus describing and critiquing cognitive theories of religious belief and ritualization as a way of coping with perceived threats concludes the discussion.

The final section of the book applies the analytical frameworks for violence and ritual to the case of rituals of menace—“cursing and threatening rituals” (84)—through the specific

examples of ancient Near Eastern oath-swearing rituals and the Islamic State staged beheadings of 2014.

Elements of Ritual and Violence is anchored in an anthropological approach to religious studies yet draws on insights from other disciplines and would be a valuable introduction for those engaging questions of ritualized violence from various fields. The primary audience is academic rather than pastoral practitioners, although it may serve as a point of access to conceptual tools to assist in the interpretation of sacred texts and the shaping of contemporary rituals.

This handbook-style volume is impressive in scope as a high-level overview of a vast array of theoretical frameworks connected to empirical examples from diverse global and historical contexts. In-depth engagement with specific theories or cases is unavoidably absent. As Kitts writes, “Curious readers will consult the forenamed sources, but following is a summary of the main points” (78). Despite the survey style, Kitts directly tackles challenging questions about how to interpret source material, including ancient texts and prehistoric art, and engages crucial issues in defining and accessing ritual experience. When embarking on a study of ritualized violence, *Elements of Ritual and Violence* is not the last book to reference, but it is an excellent place to begin.

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Jacob Daniel Myers. *Curating Church: Strategies for Innovative Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018. 198 pages. \$29.99.

In *Curating Church: Strategies for Innovative Worship*, Jacob Daniel Myers offers ministers and other church leaders the “motif of curation” as a way of equipping them to “engage more meaningfully with [their] contemporary cultural realities and move toward authentic transformation in ways that do not shut down but open up conversation and interpersonal engagement” (xxv). In the Introduction, Myers lifts up the Latin noun *cura*, which contains the double meaning of “care” and “cure.” He returns to these terms throughout the book as a way to reveal similarities between curators and church leaders: both “care” about the people and cultures with which they engage and hope that their work contributes in some manner toward the “cure” of personal and societal ailments. Both function as specialists in a particular area, conserving, filtering, and organizing materials within that area and, as the reliable experts, adding value to the things that they choose to present. While the materials they work with already exist within culture, both also help shape and transform culture by “reinforcing, challenging, and pruning the materials and concepts that will in turn reinforce, challenge, and prune future cultural artifacts” (xvii). Myers hopes to help church leaders do this work with greater intention and creativity by awakening their curatorial imaginations.

The rest of the book is divided into three “galleries.” Gallery I offers four examples of “theological and liturgical curation in action” from Meyer’s own experience as a leader of an experiential worship gathering called “rechurch” (xxiv). This community let go of the limiting structures of traditional and contemporary worship in order to create space to ask better questions and imagine creative ways to “foster engagement with God, with one another, and with the world God loves” (9). Myers leads us through the hopes of each experiment, points to practical and pastoral challenges that presented themselves, and offers glimpses of the transformation that was fostered in the community. His discussion of the theologically or otherwise problematic elements of the experiments gives the reader permission to make mistakes while encouraging ongoing critical reflection and conversation.

Gallery II shares the curatorial vision and critical reception of five art installations from around the world, with the hope of stimulating in the reader a curatorial sensibility and imagination that engages with cultures, conserves what is best in cultures, and seeks to trouble/transform cultures. Each section concludes with “liturgical takeaways” that the reader can glean from each installation as it relates to “curating church.” These almost seem to function as criteria, with the repeated phrase, “*Curating church ought...*” Myers notes relevant issues and questions that each exhibition raises, and imagines how a similar use of curatorial imagination could be put into practice in a liturgical context, usually by putting diverse voices in conversation with one another and creating space for congregants to engage with and reflect upon them in various ways. While the sometimes condensed language used in the “liturgical takeaways” might be difficult to follow for church leaders not already familiar with historical figures/events or concepts like destabilizing “hegemonic, colonial/imperial ideologies” (91), subverting “binary ways of thinking” (93), or “thinking along multiple axes of difference” (127), the audacious visions manifested in these diverse exhibitions are bound to galvanize the imagination of the reader and awaken the kind of new liturgical possibilities for which Myers is hoping.

Gallery III attends to isolationism, racism, and alienation in order to model what it looks like to engage with “matters of contemporary cultural and theological significance” with a curatorial imagination (137). Myers expresses hope that the reader will take the work he does

here and consider with a diverse group of people how to connect with, resource, and cultivate spaces of potential transformation in one's own context. While I wonder whether this section might have been strengthened by articulating the process that led Myers to the resources with which he engages as a way of showing the reader how they might start from nothing on a new issue, to do so might have offered the kind of limiting template Myers is trying to avoid. Regardless, this research will likely spark many creative experiments dreamt up by liturgical teams.

Curating Church will be a welcome resource for church leaders seeking to reimagine liturgy and engage more intentionally and creatively with the cultural realities of their congregations and larger communities. It will also serve well in worship courses as a way to help students imagine liturgical possibilities beyond the confines of traditional and contemporary worship.

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R. Matthew Sigler. *Methodist Worship: Mediating the Wesleyan Liturgical Heritage*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019. 248 pages. \$103.20.

R. Matthew Sigler's *Methodist Worship: Mediating the Wesleyan Liturgical Heritage* adds to the burgeoning Routledge Methodist Studies Series. To date, with the exception of hymn studies by Martin V. Clarke and Julie A. Lunn, Sigler's monograph offers the most sustained examination of Methodist worship in the bunch. Yet practices are not his focus; intellectual history is. The book begins with an historical artifact—an advertisement for a 1970 contemporary worship service “designed with today's young adult in mind”—and discusses how its concerns and hopes still ring true for many Methodist worship leaders two generations later. Sigler builds upon that observation to explore an understanding of how Methodist worship balances “form and freedom” and “distinction and inculturation” by tracing the development of Methodist liturgical scholarship—what Sigler calls “liturgical biographies”—from three key figures: 1) Thomas Osmund Sumners (1812-1882), 2) Nolan Bailey Harmon (1892-1993), and 3) James F. White (1932-2004). Therefore, the subtitle of the book is a key preview of what lies within its pages.

I cannot think of a Methodist worship book that crafts a scholarly genealogy like Sigler has. The synthetic work of *Methodist Worship* is a notable achievement, and it belongs on the shelf of any serious student or researcher of Methodist worship. For example, I can imagine the book included in doctoral exam bibliographies and within upper level seminars of Methodist liturgical thought. For readers more broadly interested in Protestant liturgy and worship, *Methodist Worship* provides a focused, chronological portraiture of three leading white men who helped to define what Methodist worship has been, is, and should and can be. Sigler's attention to Sumners as an overlooked foundational figure of Methodist worship scholarship is thorough and illuminating as a historical touchpoint for students and teachers of Methodist liturgy looking for an ally who takes a moderate stance with regard to form and freedom in Methodist worship. Sigler's retrieval of Sumners also challenges earlier claims from Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt that Methodist liturgical scholarship began with Nolan Harmon's *Rites and Ritual of Episcopal Methodism* in 1926 (24). Sigler writes, “Sumners embodies the tension between form and freedom in Methodist worship...yet he also made plain his desire for flexibility in the use of those forms” (70). Sigler also reminds readers familiar with the titanic scholarship of White that White was not doctrinaire. From the 1990s onward, White began to relax his earlier stances and “suggest that it is better to speak, phenomenologically, of underlying ‘spiritualities’ within American worship tradition” (163). Drawing from interviews with Don Saliers as well as White's own later writings and speeches, Sigler states of White:

The tension between his own liturgical preferences and his appreciation for vast liturgical variety was a perpetual one within White. He was enough of a liturgical theologian to have strong sensibilities about worship but the stronger side—the liturgical historian in him—would not allow him to overlook the multiplicity of forms within Christian worship. He maintained this conviction through to the end of his career (164).

Sigler concludes *Methodist Worship* by embracing the plurality of Methodist worship, and locating it within what seems like a “growing liturgical crisis” that can be addressed by the work of Sumners, Harmon, and White. Their writings point toward a liturgical piety that emphasizes the importance of knowing Methodist liturgical heritage, the necessity of

inculturation, the delicate balance of personal and corporate dimensions and desires of worship, and envisioning form and freedom as two sides of the same coin, all anchors for expressing recognizably Methodist worship in any age (200-210).

Still, liturgical scholarship related to large-membership Methodist church worship and other traditions of Wesleyan heritage such as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Methodist Church, the Korean Methodist Church, and the Hispanic/Latino and Native American Ministries of the United Methodist Church is missing. Granted, such scholarly resources are scarce. Sigler even notes that his work would “look different” if laity, women, or persons of color” were featured more prominently (210). That said, it still seems like *Methodist Worship* also indicates how badly we need more varied Methodist liturgical scholarship. That is not only a matter of production, but also institutional and peer reception. *Methodist Worship* privileges John Wesley’s *Sunday Service of Methodists in North America* and its subsequent interpreters. Yet congregational use of the *Sunday Service* is hard to determine. Arguably, scholars cherish it most.

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