Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise*

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Preaching is in trouble today because it does not know that it is in trouble. There is no Harry Emerson Fosdick to ask, "What Is the Matter with Preaching?," as he did in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1928. There is no Helmut Thielicke whose synoptic mastery of theology and communication entitles him to speaking-rights for millions of dissatisfied Christian worshippers. Contemporary preaching appears to be fat and self-satisfied with its role in church and society, and no useful purpose will be served by resurrecting another generation's anguish or by attempting to document something so obvious and perennial as bad preaching. It is more important to expose the root of the crisis in homiletics and to suggest a solution that already lies at the heart of the Christian tradition.

I. WHO SETS THE AGENDA FOR HOMILETICS?

Homiletics was once a branch of a beautiful tree called theology. Theology had several limbs and many branches and twigs, but its trunk was sturdy and solid, and its roots grew deeply from God's own soil. There were many branches but only one tree. Those who prayed and worked in the shade of this tree were called theologians.

The tree of theology once manifested several kinds of unity: one was a unity of spirit or *sapientia* which suffused the whole being of the theologian; another was a catholicity of doctrine and domain; yet another was a distinctive

and predictable method. *Sapientia* has given way to specialization and expertise. Catholicity has been replaced by regional and disposable "theologies of...." Theology's method has been confused by other methods and infused with the presuppositions of philosophy, psychology, politics, historiography, and many others. *Theology* has become a shorthand expression for what is in fact a mélange of methods or hermeneutical perspectives from which the theologian ascertains the possibility of receiving, understanding, articulating, or enacting the truth of the divine presence in the world.[1] We may say that such pluralism does not represent theology proper and reaffirm the unity of the one true theology, but within the theological marketplace—where even the church spends its time "in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21)—the announcement of a single science of theology with a single object and a universally accepted method is met with skepticism and charges of triumphalism.

And what of homiletics? Whenever I receive third class mail addressed only to "Professor of Homiletics, Duke University," it is inevitably routed through the University's Medical School. It usually works its way through orthopedics and pediatrics until someone scrawls on the envelope, "Try anesthesiology." The name of our discipline, homiletics, has a scientific, even medical, ring to it, but when the uninformed are apprised of its true meaning, they usually respond, "Oh, you mean preaching." There is a "science" of homiletics, and there is an activity, the oldest and most enduring of the church, called preaching. The crisis in homiletics is linked to that of theology. Homiletics is faced with such a bewildering array of theological options by which to understand itself, that it sometimes chooses none. Instead it turns elsewhere for guidance.

Homiletics has failed to adopt a theological rationale for the practical activity upon which it reflects. As a teacher I have noticed that students not only have difficulty connecting biblical or theological studies with preaching, but that they resist the connection, as if the curriculum's separation of theology and practice represents a moral imperative or point of honor. How has homiletics failed? It has not built upon the foundations established by the great theologians of the Word—Luther, Calvin, and Barth—whose work so definitively established the *whence* and the *why* of preaching. But since preaching is an *activity* of the church, it also includes a *how*. Too often homiletics has understood the Word of God as the *impetus* for preaching but has not allowed that Word's authority to inform the shape and transmission of the sermon.

To be sure, several theological construals are possible and greatly contribute to our understanding of preaching as an activity of speech. For example, following Augustine, Thomas Aquinas grounds human language and the proclamation of the Word of God in the procession of words that characterizes the Holy Trinity.[2] To follow another approach, Luther implicitly justifies the earthiness and realism of his preaching in the realism of the Incarnation, a posi-

[1]Edward Farley has traced the long development of the concept in *Theologia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

[2]*S. Theol.* 1, q. 93, a. 8.

tion Bonhoeffer explicitly develops in his homiletical lectures.[3] Barth portrays the freedom of preaching as the result of the freedom of God to choose our language at his pleasure and to make it the Word of God.[4] In Rudolf Bohren's *Predigtlehre* this same freedom of preaching derives from "theonomic reciprocity" (A. A. van Ruler), which is the interplay of the Holy Spirit and the preacher within the bounds of language. By means of the Holy Spirit the great gulf between God's Word and our words is bridged.[5]

Despite the power of these and other theological analyses, homiletics continues to rely on non-theological disciplines to teach it *how* to articulate the principles of effective argumentation, design, and persuasive delivery. This is at once a natural and a historic dependence. For preaching is what the English philosophers would call a speech act. It is not a doctrine or a message but a transmission whose constituent parts fulfill the usual criteria for defining a rhetorical situation.[6]

Historically, homiletics has sought a model for this act of speech in the several satellite disciplines associated with the speaking and receiving of messages which, for purposes of convenience, I shall call "rhetoric." The influence of both classical and popular forms of oratory

upon the Christian sermon was enormous. Despite its early rejection of so much of the classical heritage, Christianity held to its heart a tradition, that of the orator, which the church saw as potentially adaptable to the uses of preaching. The patristic image of the minister shows remarkable similarities to that of the classical orator drawn in Cicero and Quintilian.[7] Periodically the church attempted to reform its preaching, often by discarding what Puritanism called "the airy dews of effeminate Rhetorick" and returning to the language of the Bible.[8] But in the history of homiletics, reform proved to be a minority report, and the rhetorical tradition survived and today, under other guises and titles, flourishes. In 18th and 19th-century England and America the Elocution Movement dominated the teaching of homiletics. The Elocution Movement roughly corresponded to the classical and decadent interest in declamation, and was focused exclusively on

[3]"The proclaimed word is the Christ bearing human nature." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching (Finkenwalde Lectures on Homiletics),* ed. Clyde E. Fant (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1975 [1935-1937]) 127. Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960 [1949]) 31, understands preaching as the logical extension of Luther's *communicatio idiomatum.*

[4]"Ubi et quando visum est Deo." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* Vol. I, pt. i (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975 [1936]) 117.

[5]Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (4th ed.; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1980 [1971]) 76-77.

[6]I use the term "speech act" in the widely accepted rhetorical sense and not in the more controverted theological sense of "word event." The philosopher J. L. Austin distinguishes three forces of sentences: the *locutionary* is a descriptive statement; the *illocutionary* is a performative utterance which does something; the *perlocutionary* utterance effects a response in the hearer. Austin ultimately rejects the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary utterances, stating that in most cases language is not neutral. Mood, tone, cadence, emphasis, and situation give even the most factual language a particular force. Cf. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975).

[7]Ronald E. Osborn, "The Ideal of the Orator. The Influence of a Classical Tradition on Patristic Christianity" (unpublished paper), pp. 4-5.

[8]William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 132.

delivery, voice, and bodily action. The most influential American homiletician, John Broadus (1827-1895), defined homiletics as "a branch of rhetoric, or a kindred art."[9] From the same period, the Presbyterian Robert Dabney produced a textbook in homiletics entitled *Sacred Rhetoric* (1870), the first chapter of which addresses not the Word of God or the Holy Spirit but the subject of eloquence.

Although contemporary American homiletics no longer speaks of eloquence, its preoccupation with the formal characteristics of the sermon is a continuation of the rhetorical tradition. The most widely used textbook in preaching in the last two and one-half decades has been *Design for Preaching* (1959) by Grady Davis, a text that thoroughly analyzes the development of many kinds of sermon forms, but to the exclusion of exegetical, hermeneutical, theological, and liturgical concerns altogether.

The concern with form in homiletics is closely linked to theories of anthropology. As our understanding of human experience has changed, we have searched for the rhetorical form that best fits or explains our own identity. The "old" rhetoric of preaching stressed the rationality of person and message. Its divisions and subdivisions seemed to mirror the orderliness of the cosmos and society, as well as that of the individual soul. But that sense of order is no longer

adequate to explain who we think we are. We are above all historical creatures. We are not only in time, said H. Richard Niebuhr, but time is in us.[10] What then becomes of homiletical form? According to recent theories the sermon should be a story or a string of images in order to reflect the stories and experiences of our lives as well as the overarching story recorded in scripture.[11] In this view, the move from theological anthropology to rhetorical form yields an instant payoff. The implicit hope is that if only we could find the perfect glass slipper of form, not only would the sermon be transformed into a beautiful princess, but we ourselves would also be transformed. Some would understand rhetoric as a natural ally of homiletics. But when rhetoric is accompanied by an implicit anthropology, as it always is, it poses a danger to homiletics. Homiletics then finds itself in crisis to the extent that it takes its cues from principles not its own.

II. A PROPOSAL FOR A *THEOLOGICAL* RHETORIC: RECLAIMING THE CENTER

If we have any doubt that the chain reaction of crisis between theology and homiletics will continue in the local congregation, we need only visit the incubator of the crisis, the homiletics classroom. There we see the crisis at its origin where all its components are overtly present: theology, homiletics, rhetoric,

[9]John Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1889 [1870]) 25-31, on rhetoric and homiletics.

[10]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941) 51. See Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 291-311.

[11]For example, Edmund Steimle, et al., *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Richard A. Jensen, *Telling the Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980); George M. Bass, *The Song and the Story* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1984). For another view, see Richard Lischer, "The Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38 (1984) 26-38.

culture, and "practice" preaching. It is not unusual to hear student preachers talk *around* the center of Scripture and the Christian faith, which is God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ. They touch on many subjects and experiences, but when they draw near to the center they, mysteriously, pull away from it. Somehow the Word that rests at the very center of all our words is the most difficult to speak. Perhaps our young preachers will reclaim the center when homiletics reclaims the center, when homiletics grounds the rhetorical act of preaching in God's own speech act.

That act is the gospel. Of course, no one seriously questions the Word-centeredness of the Christian faith. What I am proposing is simply this: that homiletics understand the speech act upon which it reflects not merely by means of rhetorical, literary, or anthropological principles, but in terms of the rhetorical implications of the gospel itself. If I may paraphrase Paul in Philippians 1:27, "Only let your manner of *preaching* be worthy of the gospel of Christ."[12]

Is there any one form this message requires? Emphatically not. Already in the New Testament we have a Paul who can argue the gospel like a rabbi or a Stoic philosopher or even a forensic orator (cf. Acts 24:1-21). He can marshal evidence, draw inferences, and create syllogisms. At the end of the Bible we have a visionary whose symbolic, apocalyptic rendering of the future of Jesus Christ has sustained generations of persecuted Christians. In James we have the language of practical wisdom, in Acts the gospel as theological travelogue, and in the Gospels we have *evangelion* as narration. Likewise in the history of its preaching the church has moved from form to form, ranging from the artless homily to the formalism of the Enlightenment

"pattern sermon"; from the ecstasy of Pentecostal "shout'n" to the learned reflectiveness of an Austin Farrer or Joseph Sittler. No form of sermon design has proven normative—only the rhetorical situation remains.

Many have sought a blueprint for the form of sermons either in the rules of rhetoric or in the form of a particular text. Form is integral to the sermon. The Holy Spirit uses all forms but is bound by none. Therefore we must resist saying that all sermons must be a story, or all inductive, or all with three points, or all with at least six illustrations, etc. I propose to "burn off" the many forms of sermons in order to get at the gospel's basic *disposition* of language. In order to do this it may be helpful to make the old distinction between language and speech (or discourse), that is, *Sprache* and *Rede.* What I wish to describe are the basic "rules" governing the language of preaching. How these rules are shaped by the exigencies of text and worshipping situation and how they are expressed in the speech or *Rede* of a particular sermon cannot be legislated.

Before we adopt the wisdom of psychology or anthropology, and even before we borrow the best of the old and new rhetoric, we shall ask what kind of language flows from the speech act called the gospel. The great Scottish Congregationist P. T. Forsyth once said, "A theology is not evangelical by its conclusions but by its principles," and this is doubly true of preaching.[13] Before we

[12]The KJV cooperates with my intent by translating it, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ."

[13]P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind* (New York: Armstrong, 1905) 205.

seek yet another design, let us discover the principles inherent in the gospel's own design. Perhaps in this way we can bridge the divide between the theological *impetus* for preaching and the rhetorical act of preaching itself. What is it that emerges from the grace of God, and what is the language we now seek to express?

III. SPECIFICATION OF THE GOSPEL: PROMISE AS PROTOTYPE FOR PREACHING

It is the promise. The promise is an ideal prototype for preaching. A prototype is not a scale model of something that does not yet exist. Rather, it is the *first* production which, because it already exists and works, includes in itself all its successors. In terms of time and value promise is *first* in God's order of speaking to his people (as Paul insists in Galatians 3:17), thereby indicating God's true preference for the kind of discourse he wishes to perpetuate with the church. The promise is not a quality in God like love, or an attitude in the believer like hope, but it is a genuine and familiar speech act whose nature has already been defined with linguistic precision.[14]

Other speech acts which come under the wide umbrella "gospel" might have been chosen from the New Testament to serve as prototypes for preaching. One thinks of "proclaim" associated with *kerusso*, "exalt" implied by the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2, the creative power of "name" alluded to in Genesis 1-2, "witness" which is taken from the root "remember," and of course "announce" contained in *euangelizomai.* Yet the choice of "promise" is not an arbitrary one. It lies close to the heart of the gospel (*evangelion*/*epangelion*), a relationship that is recognized in one of the original meanings of *praedicare,* "to promise."[15] Most of all, it says and does what God intends for those he loves.

In the discussion of "promise" as a rhetorical form we maintain a balance between the absolute priority of God as the source, content, and life of all sermons, and an appreciation of the rhetorical shape in which that life is transmitted to us. The New Testament itself does not make so sharp a distinction between form and content as we often do, and it does not disparage rhetorical form with the vehemence of Barth who insists that we see God "in spite of" the form of God's Word.[16] Such dualism appears to be contradicted by the New Testament where the terms translated "form," "likeness," and "image" (*morphe*, *schema*, *eikon*) usually refer not to the external appearance of the person or thing in question but to the total reality. Amos Wilder writes, "this kind of holistic thinking is confirmed in our modern philosophy and aesthetics by our better knowledge today and appreciation of primitive art, as well as by modern

[14]J. R. Searle uses promise as a test case in his analysis of performative or illocutionary language in "What is a Speech Act?," *The Philosophy of Language,* ed. J. R. Searle (London: Oxford University, 1971) 46-53 (section on "How to Promise").

[15]Hans van der Geest, *Presence in the Pulpit* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 96. See the section "Predigt als Verheissung" in Bohren, *Predigtlehre,* 222ff., and Julius Schniewind and Gerhard Friedrich, "*Epangello, epangelia,*" " *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76) 2.576-86.

[16]*Church Dogmatics,* I, i, p. 166.

psychology. In all genuine artifacts, including language-forms, shape and substance are inseparable and mutually determinative."[17]

Barth worried that once he had established a series of "attributes" of God's Word that he had only succeeded in describing a *logos* other than the divine.[18] That is to say, he worried about falling into the trap of foundationalism by which the truth of the divine Word comes to depend upon its philosophical, political, or literary foundation.[19] Not only theology, but also homiletics, has been susceptible to foundationalism. In homiletics it is a short step from *appreciating* the oral, narrative, or promissive form of God's word to declaring those forms *necessary* or *prerequisite* to God's self-communication. In American homiletics this has been the case with the unreflective embrace of story preaching. When a particular mode or form is elevated to a necessity, what usually follows is a celebration of the moral goodness of a particular form rather than the God who gives it and emerges by its means.[20]

In sum, when we attempt to reclaim the promise as the prototype for preaching, we will appreciate the commitment God makes to humanity by means of the formal structures of words, sentences, and larger units of speech. Just as God bound himself to humanity in the Incarnation, so in his written and preached Word he binds himself to the whole reality of language. We believe that the speech act called promise indeed contributes to that which God intends in his self-revelation. Luther writes, "For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise."[21] Thus when grounding preaching in the promise, we will ground it

[17]Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1971) 25.

[18]*Church Dogmatics,* I, i, p. 162.

[19]An excellent discussion of foundationalism in various theologies of revelation is found in Ronald

Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985) 1-91. Thiemann argues for the narrated promise as an alternative to foundational theologies.

[20]In Eugene L. Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), the author describes "sermon time" as the "ordering of experience." The book is devoted to the importance of narrative in preaching for foundational reasons. Lowry fails to mention that the only reason Christians are fascinated by time and narrative is God's involvement—over time—in the unfolding story of Israel, Jesus, and now the church. In a more substantial study, Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), creates a fascinating portrait of the orality of the gospel message. His notion of orality as absolutely foundational to the gospel, however, leads him to transfer attributes of God's Word to the oral mode in general. For example, he argues that the personalizing and participatory qualities of the gospel are explainable less by Christ-mysticism than by the dynamics of language (pp. 147-150). Sometimes foundationalism expresses itself by making exaggerated claims about the nature of the Hebrew language and mentality in general, citing characteristics, such as its efficacy or concreteness, which are said to necessitate a particular kind of witness to the Word of God. The trouble with this familiar exposition of biblical language is that linguistic philosophers are now making similar claims for *all* language. The foundational claims once made for the language of the Word of God are now relativized by our knowledge of the dynamics of everyday speech.

[21]Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 36:42. Also cited in R. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology,* 96.

in the promise of *God* and not in the universality, goodness, or necessity of making promises.

Had we enough time it would be possible to sketch an entire set of rules for speaking the gospel, regardless of the particular text or situation. Here let us note five general characteristics of preaching as it partakes of the promise and then briefly suggest some uses of language appropriate to each of the characteristics. The language of preaching is personal, emergent, honest, generous, and open to the future.

IV. THE RHETORIC OF PROMISE

If preaching is an event derived from the speech act of the promise, surely its first noticeable characteristic is the intensity of the relationship between the one who makes the promise and the one who receives it. Preaching happens in what, for lack of a better word, we may call a *personal* relationship. It is not a personal relationship like that of a husband and wife or a brother and sister, but the characteristics of such a relationship, such as trust, need, and love, are present in preaching. Before the gospel assumes a discursive content or a narrative linearity it is a particular kind of speech act, one that by its very nature reveals much about the giver and the receiver of the promise as well as the nature of their relationship.

If we are too quick to separate content, delivery, and the person of the preacher, we may overlook the transactional unity of the act of preaching. By analyzing the components of preaching, we may miss the very thing that makes the promise—and with it preaching—distinctive: not only does the promise *contain* something but, because it is Christ's promise, it *bestows* something in the act of promising.[22] Such claims are made for other kinds of illocutionary statements (= performative utterances; see note 6) as well. But when that which is bestowed is the life of God in Jesus Christ, both the speaker and the hearer have left the realm of the demonstrable attributes of language and entered upon faith in the Christ who uses language.

The promise reveals commitment, reliability, and even passion in the one who promises. It is not merely a message. A message can be detached from its point of origin or from its sender. A promise cannot. A promise loses its very character apart from the one who promises. If I am

out of work and on relief, and the owner of the local grocery store promises me a job in two weeks, whether or not I now adopt a stance of hope in the world depends on the character of the one who promises. Does he have a history of faithful actions from which I can abstract the quality of faithfulness and ascribe it to him? Are there testimonies to his faithfulness? If so, my life has already changed. It changes with the issuance of the promise.[23] The promise always implies the one

[22]See Thiemann's analysis of Melanchthon's use of "promise" in the *Apology* in his *Revelation and Theology,* 97.
    [23]"The word of promise therefore always creates an interval of tension between the uttering and the redeeming of the promise. In so doing it provides man with a peculiar area of freedom to obey or disobey, to be hopeful or resigned." So writes Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 104.

who says, "I promise you." Jürgen Moltmann may have a point in his analysis of Barth, when he claims that the form of the mediation of God's revelation is not *naming* but *promising,*[24] for God's name *is* a promise: "I will be what I will be" (Exod 3:14), or as Gerhard von Rad interprets the Tetragrammaton, "'I will be there (for you).'"[25] Preaching is personal, then, not in the sense that I the preacher tell you all my secrets, but because it is a pledge from a personal God.

The best language for conveying this promise is not data, with which our metaphor-hating culture is obsessed, but an expressiveness more appropriate to personal transaction. Expressive diction does not deny the worth of hard data but it wields the facts in ways that deepen or enlarge their significance for persons. Like the ringing of great bells, such language has resonances that touch the heart. Preaching is a rational organization of what Luke calls "the facts about Jesus" (Acts 18:25, NEB: *ta peri tou Jesou*), but the promise always entails the coloration of these "facts" by their advocacy and their evocation of response. Philip Wheelwright's word for this expressive power of language is "tensive," by which he means language that is alive with conflict, elasticity, suggestion, and plurality of meaning.[26] By its very nature the promise gives rise to a series of applications and partial fulfillments in succeeding generations. The unit of tensive language that most closely approximates the effect of the promise is metaphor, whose many layers of meaning never fully exhaust the original vehicle.

Preaching is an *emergent* word, for, like the promise, it arises from the matrix of a specific history, a specific community, and for a specific use. The most rudimentary studies of language and metaphor show that the *place* of any speech does much to give it its meaning. George Lindbeck has codified this insight by arguing for a "cultural-linguistic" model of doctrine and preaching. Before Christian discourse can assert anything about the objective reality of God or the subjectivities of human existence, it must first see to it that it is following the rules of speech and action authorized by the community.[27] Lindbeck's proposal is not the answer for Christian preaching, for it is susceptible to charges that the faith has been turned into a "language game" for those who want to play. His position has the potential for sealing off Christianity from the outside world, which also belongs to God. Yet his alternatives to foundational approaches may serve preaching as a useful first—not final—step toward regaining its own communal principles and language.

When the writer of Hebrews says, "Faithful is he that promised" (10:23), he is placing

that assertion into the context of liturgical observance (10:25) and

[24]Ibid., 115, and K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I, i, p. 363.
[25]Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 1:180.
[26]Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962) 101-109.
[27]George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985). Lindbeck describes two other options: (1) the "cognitive" stresses the ways doctrines function as propositional claims about objective realities, and such claims require proofs; and (2) "experiential-expressive" language, in which doctrines appear as non-informative and non-discursive symbols of inner feelings or attitudes (pp. 17-18).

historical recital (11:1 ff.). The promise is not a "word event" in the sense that it can be abstracted from the church's re-experience of God's faithfulness to Israel and Jesus. Once abstracted from that history even the promise loses its distinctively Christian identity.

Thus the promise is not merely *capable* of narration. It *must* be narrated according to the community's memory of salvation. The promise has a past. Already in the Scriptures the word of address is complemented by the narration of that promise as depicted in the great narratives of the Old Testament and in the Gospels. The stories are often indirect statements about the reliability of God and make no explicit claim to "truth." But they are structured in such a way that the reader knows that they have more than "historical" value. They are the promise narrated and now addressed to the reader's community.

The liturgy also clarifies the force of the promise and contributes to the sermon's meaning. The preached Word will take its place as one kerygmatic element within the narrated (and sung) kerygma which is the liturgy. Within the service the sermon "promises" or points toward another manifestation of God's grace, the Eucharist.

The presence of the narrated promise within the liturgy implies an additional dimension of the language of preaching. It is communal. The vocabulary of Scripture and liturgy establishes the sermon's lines of intent. Although such language may no longer startle hearers with the novelty of its metaphors, its familiarity contributes powerfully to the cohesion of the community. Whereas poetic rhetoric employs private metaphors often peculiar to the poet's experience, rhetoric in the pulpit is both public and communal drawing on pervasive and generic relationships as well as the great stories and themes of the Bible. Black preaching in the United States has always known this. Others are beginning to learn.

Preaching is personal not only because it comes *from* a person but because it is addressed *to* someone. One of Luther's language rules for the gospel is that the Good News is always *pro nobis* or *pro me*. The word I use to characterize this approach to preaching is *honesty*. This is a non-technical term whose rhetorical implication is realism and whose theological implication is the proper distinction between law and gospel.

First, realism. Honesty in preaching demands the kind of economical realism we find in the New Testament. The New Testament narrative portrays a world that is not alien to our own. Erich Auerbach claims that there is nothing in the writings of classical antiquity that compares to the story of the encounter of Peter and the servant girl in the high priest's courtyard. Classical literature portrayed the lower classes only in comic modes; yet in the Bible tawdry episodes and common people—to say nothing of the most explicitly realistic dialogue—serve as vehicles for the most sublime truth.[28] Yet they are not merely vehicles. These are three-dimensional people not unlike ourselves. When we turn to the Old Testament we feel that we have met the callow

Absalom and his doting father, the cunning Jacob who always lands on his feet, or the hypocritical Judah, ready to ruin a woman for the sake of his reputation. We

[28]Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953) 37.

pray the Psalms and discover that we are praying *with* human beings whose querulousness, delight, vindictiveness, anxiety, love, hope, and anguish are no less developed or sophisticated, no less human, than our own.

Too often our congregations are forced to suspend their disbelief in the world as it is portrayed in the pulpit. Preachers have a knack of creating two-dimensional facades, like the old Hollywood sets, which cannot do justice to the three-dimensional realism of the New Testament. The result is that the world of the *unhappy* ending escapes untouched and unscathed by a "be-happy" gospel. After a sermon dealing with divorce, I overheard a woman say to the preacher, "Thank you for talking about it." She did not say, as is the custom, "Nice sermon," or, "Enjoyed it." It was enough for her that the gospel made contact with the world she inhabited.

One of the marks of Luther's genius as a preacher was his honesty—both in the sense of his masterful portrayal of real life *and* his command of the law-gospel dialectic. The two are related. Although faith believes in two realities, the physical and the spiritual, in Luther's best sermons there is only one. He is the supreme clinician of the Incarnation and so tells the story of Mary, the scared and lonely teenager about to give birth in a shed, or the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple from the perspective of distraught parents who think they have "lost" their child![29] The promise requires such realism, by which I mean the believable rendering of people (and an entire world) who cannot subsist by any means other than the promise.

The second, more theological implication of honesty in preaching is the necessity of the proper distinction between law and gospel. As an emergent word, preaching entertains a disposition of language and follows certain rules of discourse. The distinction between law and gospel, or what Melanchthon called "the law and the promises" (*Apol.* IV, 5), is one such hermeneutical and homiletical rule. For students it has proven to be the single most difficult dimension of preaching—as Luther predicted it would always be.

The eschatological promise of God assures the believer of the future of Jesus Christ and at the same time calls into question the sinfulness of the present situation.[30] It criticizes all that has not yet attained the fulfillment of the promise and all that now masquerades for it. Thus the promise of perfect peace, to take a single example, contains the seeds of a radical critique of everything in our world that is not peace. On the other hand, because it is *God's* peace, the promise makes the future so palpable that the present becomes livable. So law and gospel is not a static stencil to be laid over every text. The word of law and gospel is never addressed to people who are perfectly whole or wholly corrupt but only to those who are being healed or getting sick. It is a dynamic and honest method of discerning "the times" in order to redeem them.

The promise is not an idea or a thing at all, but the life of the coming God. Sometimes the promise is confused with a sign or token of this coming God. The promise becomes an object that can be manipulated by human repentance. In

[29]For more extended comments on Luther's realism as a preacher, see Richard Lischer, "Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983) 490-95.

the vacuum between the promise and its fulfillment the promise undergoes a "conditionalizing."[31] In place of the absolute promise, whose grammatical key signature is "Because God...therefore you," the conditional promise says, "If you...then God." This is the grammar with which many church-going Christians are familiar.

The rhetorical implications of law and gospel are related not only to how the preacher speaks, but to how the audience hears. If language is at least fifty percent *hearing,* then law and gospel is also a method of listening. Every year in our university I lead a small seminar of residents in psychiatry on the subject of Christianity and psychiatry. Every year without fail the discussion turns to what the residents consider to be the elements of the Christian faith most toxic to the human spirit. "I grew up in the Lutheran church, and I never heard anything healthy about human nature, nothing about recreated humanity in Jesus Christ, but only 'don't do this and don't do that.'" Another doctor complained about the arrogance of Jesus in making claims beyond the Ten Commandments. As it turned out this year, each of the eight psychiatrists was a disaffected Christian. So it was not that these residents had never heard the words, characters, metaphors, and stories that make up the gospel. But *to their ears* the components had invariably been assembled in a configuration that spelled "law." They claimed to have never heard the message presented in any light other than obligation. The inheritors of Christendom, they had never heard the promise.

Generous or grace-ful language is the theological and linguistic skill that shows God to God's best advantage. Here even the philosopher's carefully worked out specification of "promise" is transcended by the grace of God. Whereas the philosopher J. R. Searle says that a promise is to be uttered only if the hearer prefers it,[32] the apostle Paul says, "While we were yet sinners [and presumably unable to 'prefer' grace] Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). God's pledge to be *for* us in Christ partakes of a familiar form of speech, one that exists outside as well as within the church. However, God does more than use this form as a vessel. In the church he reconstitutes it. The promise creates a habitus of speech that shatters the conventional uses of generous language. Once Christians learn their own language they will never again be satisfied with preaching that is merely morally upright or inspirational. Such talk is cheap. Once Christians begin to *live* the grace-fulness of the gospel, as they are trained to do in the church, then the church itself will have become God's new language.[33] Pentecost is the beginning of the reversal of Babel. Preaching participates in that great reversal and is a sign of hope in its consummation.

Finally, the true work of promise, the work for which it is justly famous, is its power to give believers the capacity to hope in God's future. Paradoxically, Paul offers that future by explicating the promise given to a figure of the dim past, Abraham (Rom 4; Gal 3). In and of itself that promise is no longer of great

[31]Ibid., 123.

[32]J. R. Searle, "What Is a Speech Act?," 52.

[33]I am indebted to my colleague Stanley Hauerwas for this insight. Over the specific rules that govern Christian discourse we might place R. Thiemann's "meta-rule": "Let all Christian interpretation [and preaching] proceed in a manner which recognizes the absolute primacy of God's promising grace" (*Revelation and Theology,* 149, all italics).

consequence. But the resurrection of Jesus revives the promise of evoking the same kind of hope that Abraham had in the God "Who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17). The resurrection reconnects the church to the hope of Abraham. The resurrection occurred as the fulfillment of promises made in time and space. Christian preaching therefore does not describe the eternal being of a God above us but the faithfulness of the God who is with us. The amazing secret of the promise is that the One who was with us is the same One who awaits us. The future has broken into our time in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel is the last judgment leaked out ahead of time.[34] The future is not *more* history but the transformation of history in the One who will be all in all. Preaching too, because its subject and object is the risen Christ, not only announces this end but participates in it. It is a sign of the end. Preaching-as-promise strains forward to align itself to that finality which has been loosed among us.

Yet there is a pulpit language that appears to convey the very opposite of the promise. It secures doctrines or organizational principles but misses connection with the most characteristic feature of the New Testament preaching—its abandonment to God's future. Liberal Protestantism has identified the promise of the kingdom with the endorsement of sociopolitical projects or with the entelechy of personal fulfillment. Its message is not, "Participate in the advent of the Kingdom" but "You can be all you were meant to be!" By missing the eschatological horizon of the gospel it individualizes and ultimately trivializes all that it touches. Conservatives and fundamentalists, on the other hand, have so concentrated on the historical signs which *must* occur *in* history as a prerequisite to the end, that they relinquish God's freedom *over* the end. The historical conditions attached to the fulfillment of the promise are so specific and complex that they smother the flame.

Preaching that would conform to the eschatological hope has something to learn from the narrative thrust of the biblical witness and from the historical and pilgrim-like quality of the people of God. The rhetoric of thesis, propositions, subpoints, and proofs underwrites the bondage of the promise. Such rhetoric establishes truths at the expense of possibilities. But preaching-as-promise is not neat or buttoned down. Like Israel, eschatological proclamation continually reappropriates and reapplies the promise not on the basis of a philosophy of history but as an on-going process of interpretation.

New Testament preaching continues the process. It produces preaching that is fragmentary in nature. The New Testament is a collection of unfinished and therefore future-oriented works. Its very structure witnesses to the reality of a coming God. The Gospel narratives do not merely illustrate established truths. They render the truth in an open-ended way and thereby invite the participation of God's pilgrim people.

Our aim is to create sermons, the form of whose content enlivens hearers to the presence and the future of Jesus Christ. This will not be accomplished by filling sermons with stories, as is the custom among many Protestants, but by

[34]That wonderful sentence belongs to Robert W. Jenson, "The Authority of the Ordained," *Lutheran Partners* 1/2 (July/August 1985) 28.

unfolding the gospel in such a way that the truth is not pronounced but arrived at. In place of a string of polished anecdotal gems, each with its own lustre, the sermon may weave together witnesses and analyses, arguments and plots, from the massive traditions with which our history and culture abound, so long as everything in the sermon proceeds in explicit fealty to and execution of God's promise of grace. Although operating according to a narrative logic, such preaching will never invest in the narrative form to the extent that it is embarrassed by the language of direct address: "Your sins are forgiven." The rhetoric of the gospel maintains a balance between the promise that has been fulfilled and which is now sacramentally celebrated in the church, and the promise of further participation in God's future. Such sermons are true to the unfinished quality of human life and true to the pilgrim character of God's community. But they are truest of all to the essential texture and temporality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8).

In this article I have done little more than sketch the implications of one form of divine speech for preaching. Much more could be said about the gospel—its personal, emergent, honest, generous, and open qualities—and many more detailed connections could be drawn from it to the language of the sermon. Although homiletics-as-theology and preaching-as-promise may seem unrelated, I believe that when preaching relearns its own language, homiletics too will recover its integrity as a theological discipline.