

RETHINKING THE BASICS OF HOMILETICAL EDUCATION—
FOR AN ERA OF GREAT THEOLOGICAL DIVIDES

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This is a paper that I have tried to write for the past several years. Always unsuccessfully. Each time I filed the draft away. This one may not be any more successful than the ones in past years, but at the urging of our colleague Robert Reid I have agreed to turn loose of it this time. What follows are some of my own deepest struggles, not so much about preaching itself, but much more specifically about the practice of *teaching* preaching.

Several years ago, in the middle of a class of beginning preaching students—we were listening to sermons that day—I realized something that was new to me, at least overtly. My guess is that most in this academy have made a similar realization at some point in their career with beginning preaching students. The realization was that every single person in that class of more than twenty was a mature member of a distinct and well-defined church or denomination; indeed, almost every single person had come into the class in some way as a “representative” of that denominational system of theirs. Not only that, but almost all of them had not only come out of that particularly denomination but were planning to return to it, even to a position of leadership within it.

I understand that this is probably one of those “Duh” realizations, the logical response to which among my homiletical colleagues is a kind of dumbfounded, “well, yeah.” But I am a tad slower than most, so it was a very good light bulb moment for me. What I really realized as we all listened to their student sermons that day was that we were hearing an amazing spectrum of theological and biblical orientations. These were students with their own rather well-defined views of the Bible and even major biblical doctrines; they were still working to articulate those views, but, for the most part, their “growing up” in a particular church denomination or tradition had taught them fairly well. These were students, too, who also reflected, much more than I had grasped, their own tradition’s theological perspectives, whether liberal, evangelical, or even bordering on fundamentalist.

In short, they had come out of their own traditions, were in my particular class to work on how to articulate what they brought with them, and they were all expecting to return at the appropriate time to the heart of their own tradition as a fluent spokesperson for that denomination or tradition to which they were committed.

Ironically, what the class overall most enjoyed, as I did, was the sheer variety of theological and doctrinal viewpoints to which class preaching exposed us all. There were mainstream students, some Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian and so on; but there were also, in almost every class, just as many from very different theological backgrounds, usually from diverse African American traditions, and almost always some from contemporary mega-church backgrounds. Nor is it unusual, even in mainstream

seminaries, to have students from various Assembly of God or holiness denominations along with the occasional Baptist, and on more than one occasion I have had a good student or two from the Reorganized Latter Day Saints tradition.

Along the way, for me, were some interesting extremes, even. Once, for example, long before 9/11 and the trauma of Iraq, I had two Orange County Muslim imams who were taking courses at Claremont and asked if they would be welcome in my beginning preaching course. The class and I together decided that they would be. That semester we listened as both of them preached to us from the Koran, on texts that had their counterparts in the New Testament. They wanted to become better preachers for their own assemblies. I did make a deal with them. In exchange for their presence in the preaching class, they would have to give us an evening's introduction to the basics of Islam from their point of view. It turned out to be an unforgettable experience for me and everyone in the class.

What is obvious, of course, is that each of these students holds a very different understanding of what the Bible is, how it is to be used, of who Jesus was, and how "salvation" works. Often views of these kinds of basic matters are held with considerable passion. In short, within our beginning preaching classes, we have what John Berthrong of Boston University School of Theology has called a theological "divine deli." Without question, this is one of the fun parts of teaching those introductory homiletics classes.

I realize that I am talking primarily about seminaries that are consciously and overtly ecumenical, seminaries whose faculties, even preaching faculties, are drawn from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds—drawn virtually from any denominational background. Students, in turn, are assumed to be drawn from any denominational or theological background as well. My experience has been that even in the so-called evangelical seminaries or theological departments, this kind of educational ecumenicity is not unknown.

On the other hand, there are many seminaries whose affiliations are closely tied to their denominational structures, ones who seek out faculty, and particularly preaching faculty, from within that particular denomination. By and large, these seminaries are expected to be the educational arms of the denomination, training clergy to become part of that particular denominational structure. These are the places where the experience I described above may not be the case. Students in these seminaries are expected to come out of the same denomination, be well trained in every respect in that denomination's expectations, and be certified to take places of leadership where they came from.

Yet even these seminaries, we are learning, appear to be in for a bumpy theological ride in the coming years. Take the Presbyterian Church, for example. My friend and colleague Terry Mattingly, a journalist whose Scripps-Howard religion column appears in more than 300 newspapers weekly, not long ago wrote about what he called the Presbyterian alphabet soup. "The Presbyterian Church in America," he wrote, "is not the same thing as the American Presbyterian Church. Also, Orthodox Presbyterians are not to be confused with Bible Presbyterians, Cumberland Presbyterians,

Reformed Presbyterians, Associate Reformed Presbyterians or Evangelical Presbyterians.” Then, Mattingly urged the reader to take a deep breath “because Presbyterian affairs are about to get much more complicated as new divisions and unions reshape the churches that trace their roots to John Calvin and his Reformed branch of Protestantism.” The problem, he said, is that the old common doctrines that used to hold the mainline Protestant denominations together are themselves coming unraveled in this “era of conflict about biblical authority, ordination standards, sexual ethics and a host of ancient doctrines, especially the belief that salvation is found only through faith in Jesus Christ.” He quoted one Presbyterian leader as saying that “while we’re seeing churches fly away from the core doctrines that once held them together, we’re also seeing new bonds being formed . . . a [doctrinal] realignment across the boundaries between our churches.” Similar conflicts and subdivisions, unravelings and realignments, Mattingly added, “are shaking the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in American and other oldline Protestant bodies.”

The point is that even in the grand old denominationally founded and backed seminaries the expectation of a common theology held by preaching students, or even preaching faculty, is probably unrealistic. The question, instead, will be what kind of a Methodist, or a Presbyterian, or an Episcopalian, or a Baptist, is that student. And the varied answers will reflect just how profound the theological “divides” are among the students in the beginning preaching class—even among those who consider themselves, say, Presbyterians.

When I return to that preaching class of mine in the ecumenically-oriented seminary, what struck me more than anything else was that virtually none of my students came from or was working out of my own theological outlook and background. I am a product of the uniquely American historical tradition theologically that produced not only the Disciples of Christ but also two other groups—the one known as the Church of Christ, a highly conservative, almost literalistic tradition, and a relatively moderate one which called itself just the Christian Church, where independent congregations refused to become linked into a formal denominational structure. That is the one in which I grew up.

This American stream in which I was reared was far more influenced by the Enlightenment political philosophy and Jeffersonian ideas than it was by mainline Reformed or reformed (small r) traditions, by Lutheranism or Anglicanism or even Wesleyan fervor. My tradition’s faith is best described as “of the head,” as more intellectual than spiritual (as odd as that sounds), a tradition as profoundly distrustful of emotions and passionate outbursts as it is of liturgical flourishes. It is, to top things off, also a tradition that rejects contemporary miracles, original sin and infant baptism. In other words, I have my own “denominational” tradition which I have come to love and value over the years.

This is important because it reminds me that that beginning preaching class of mine is not about my own theological tradition, beliefs, or outlook, at least not unless I happen to teach in a seminary of this tradition where this odd view of things lurks in the

background. But even these seminaries are now overtly and enthusiastically ecumenical. When ecumenicity in theological education prevails, the “content” of the sermons preached by students in class cannot help but represent the unique theological understandings of the student’s own religious place of origin. And it is not my role to argue or contend with any of those student preachers over that content. If I think a particular biblical text has been seriously misused, that might become a focus of some class discussion. Such would not be inappropriate if the preaching professor remains mindful that different traditions have very different “definitions” of the Bible, as well as different accepted “readings” of particular biblical texts. But for me as the professor to argue with or contend with a student over some theological or textual matter, however subtle, with which I might disagree seems to me to be inappropriate.

What I am there to do is to help each student become as good as he or she can possibly be at articulating or giving understandable voice to what he or she wishes to say. I am there to critique in as professional a manner as possible not what the student has attempted to say, however much I may disagree with or even be offended by the sermon’s “message.” I may believe that, theologically, the student’s “message” is dead wrong, or even that it is miles removed from what I take to be some of the main ideas of classical theology. The fact is that in many sermons preached by those from today’s many “contemporary” denominations, particularly the charismatic, literalistic, ones, that is precisely what I often think. I may even, on occasion, not be able to hold back a remark to that effect, though I know that if I say it in the wrong way I will regret it later. I have even found myself in a position of having later to apologize to a troubled student for something I said about one or his or her cherished beliefs.

Instead, my task, however strange it sounds, seems to be to respect or even honor every student’s unique, even if undefined, theological, denominational, and congregational “home base,” whatever it may be. In fact, it seems to me that, as a teacher of preaching students, I have to be ever vigilant not to plant in any student’s mind seeds of doubt, however authoritatively I might do that, about the truth or validity of some theological, doctrinal, or even ecclesiastical idea that a student preacher articulates from his or her own church background.

So what is my “philosophy” of teaching in the homiletics classroom, which may be another way of asking the very old question of what preaching really is? Here is how I have come to answer that, omitting, for now, the preacher’s formal ordained role within a particular congregation or denomination. Preaching involves the isolating of some specific theological, doctrinal, or ethical idea, shaping that idea into a clear, meaningful form for public address, and then presenting orally to a congregation what one has prepared with as much communicative skill as one can summon. That sentence will not, of course, satisfy a lot of homileticians or preachers. Many will want to know, particularly, where God is in such work. I firmly believe that God is involved in this entire process, though I am firmly convinced as well that the line between what God does and what the preacher, the talented, trained human being, is called on to contribute to the process is impossible for any of us to draw, much less understand. In my judgment (and theology), to say that God and God alone “controls” or presides over the preaching

“event” from beginning to end is simply unacceptable. Even to say that God controls the “outcome” of that event overstates what I take to be good theology.

In my theological tradition, the one I described a bit ago, preaching is generally understood as a very human act in which one person, someone who has committed his or her life to God—however that takes place—stands and speaks openly and energetically to others who are thinking about a similar commitment to God, who are in the process of making such a commitment, or who have already made a commitment and enjoy being confirmed in it or in some way growing within it. That is a also complex definition of preaching (as most are), but it is one that I have labored long and hard over for a number of years.

I would emphasize, though, that this is intended to be a definition of preaching—not for the preacher as much as for the teacher of preaching. It is a “classroom” definition of preaching intended to keep all of the divergent theological, denominational, and even ecclesiastical doctrines and practices as much as possible “out of sight.” It does not try to specify either the process or the form by which one’s life is “committed to God,” whether for preacher or congregant. No two church traditions, even those within individual denominations, will understand that process the same way. The definition does try to incorporate the one thing that all Christian preaching, as far as I can tell, has in common, regardless of denomination or tradition: it involves public speaking in the form of open and lively public address from pulpit or platform to those who are drawn to that particular church and preacher at the appointed time. What may be said to “take place” in that particular setting, however miraculous or mundane, however God may or may not “make” something happen there, will never be a matter on which any two church traditions will ever fully agree. So those things do not belong in this working classroom definition.

This keeps the focus of teaching homiletics, as far as I can tell, fairly clear. It is not about the “merging” of theology and preaching. On the contrary. The practicalities of teaching preaching in our increasingly pluralistic classes almost require us to keep our own theologies—as well as our denomination’s own fine-tuned theology—out of our preaching classrooms. In years past I have even been in preaching classrooms as a student only to be embarrassed at the outbreak of quarrels between the professor and two or three students over something theological, often something that I didn’t even understand, since I was from a different theological tradition. And—as much as conscientious social activities might cringe—this also applies to the freedom of student preachers to articulate social or ideological ideas that we do not share and often find downright anger-generating. Gentle statements from the professor in the preaching classroom are one thing in such a delicate situation, but for the preaching professor to feel obligated to “straighten a student out” is simply unacceptable, in my judgment. Different traditions often have their own passionate social outlooks which students reflect, and which other traditions do not necessarily share.

I admire my theologian friends, since theology in its broadest sense is very complex. It involves, among other things, the nature of theism, Biblical inspiration,

Christology, ecclesiology, soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology. I am not sure how theologians keep track of it all. I am in awe of those few great ones, even in our time, who manage to thread the pieces from all of these historical strands together. I am not sure, though, where or how over the past hundred or so years that the specific arts and disciplines of effective preaching, once so well demarcated, got rolled into that big bundle of theological twine. But it did. The problem, though, has been that in becoming intertwined with that theological bundle, we have tended to lose track, in my view, of what was uniquely our responsibility as homileticians within the theological educational system.

In effect, we have tended to give up the one thing for which we were responsible and which no one else in the “academy” knew much at all about. Indeed, the role of the homiletician, or teacher of preaching—as great homileticians of the past insisted—called for a highly-trained and very unique scholar, one just as committed to theological education as the theologians, but with a strikingly different educational and practical expertise. Since preaching was acknowledged to be the “public” side of the ministerial/pastoral enterprise, the one in which pastor and congregants meet face to face in a unique relationship, the dynamics of that relationship needed to be as important a part of theological preparation as the lessons learned in the theological and biblical classrooms. In this case, though, the teachers needed a high level of expertise in communication and speaking skills, as well as in organizational and rhetorical skills—understanding and abilities that would “complement” in myriad ways the work of the theologians, the Biblical scholars, and the historians.

In a real sense, the great homiletical scholars of a century or more ago are not outdated at all, despite the changing nature of the sermon and worship situation. In fact, what they tried with considerable success to achieve within the theological academy is what has been distressingly negated over the past forty or fifty years. They argued for a place for the “teaching of preaching” within the seminary setting. They contended that the teaching of theology, Bible, history, and the like was not enough for those who would take on roles of denominational and congregational leadership. Once those things were learned, it was also necessary for that theologically literate person to stand up and speak clearly, passionately, and interactively to an audience of people. They contended, in fact, that that was where all of that theological education would prove its mettle.

Moreover, they argued in book after book, musty old books that are still on some seminary library shelves, that people, even highly educated people, are not just “naturally” public speakers. That was not, they said, just something that with a good education anyone could do on his or her own. Effective public address, the kind that would make a difference in people’s lives, required careful education and training as well—in the just-as-complex arts of public presence, interaction, and address. Those homileticians, particularly the ones in the latter years of the Nineteenth Century, did manage to carve a place for the “teaching of preaching” as a separate but important discipline within the theological academy. There would be theologians and there would be homileticians and there would be a kind of respect between them. It would be an

intellectual respect, with most of the theologians acknowledging that the speaking and rhetorical arts were a legitimate intellectual part of the seminary's mission.

Then, through the middle decades of the Twentieth Century, cracks began to appear in that. While there are a number of reasons for this, one of the most obvious is that a couple of prominent and influential theologians wrote books that trashed the process of preaching enough to throw it back into the disrepute of much earlier eras. No one did that with more force or persuasiveness, unfortunately, than Karl Barth. Tom Long, among a few others, has taken account of Barth's damning influence on preaching, referring at one point to what he called a "Barth attack" on the pulpit.

Ironically, it was not that Barth actually denigrated preaching; rather, it was that he raised it to a "miraculous" level, one that effectively dislocated it from the down-to-earth dynamics of public address, a move that so trivialized the humanity of the sermon as to make it unworthy of serious attention. That, in itself, undid most of what an army of early homileticians had done to make the teaching of effective public address a viable and more or less respected part of seminary education. Many theologians, particularly younger ones at mid-century, following Barth and a couple of others who wrote similar things, literally changed their views about the importance of homiletics and the role of public speaking in the life of the church—and seminary.

Preaching didn't need to be taught, or so they contended both implicitly by their actions and explicitly by their statements. And if not preaching, certainly not public speaking; it was all just too crude, too plebian for a divine seminary. The view that emerged was that if students are taught their theology well, and if God was at the heart of everything concerning that theology, then God would see that what was said from the pulpit would be whatever it was supposed to be. Homiletics and public speaking were superfluous to such a view of things.

But still there were homileticians. And many of them after the World War II saw the handwriting on the wall for their "discipline." How did they react? What seems to have occurred to many of them was that to hold the spot they had carved out for themselves within the seminary system, they would have to lean in the direction of becoming theologians themselves. Preaching class would become just an extension, of sorts, of whatever went on in the theological, Biblical, and history classes. It would be about "theology and preaching," with the emphasis on theology and on preparing speeches about theology and various biblical themes. Sermons would be written out as essays, like the papers in the theology and history classes; and they would be read to congregations just like the theological and biblical scholars read their papers at their academic meetings. That would win back seminary approval for preaching professors.

The preaching classes would not emphasize public speech, or public speaking, or related things. They would emphasize the preparation of theological "statements" or biblical exegeses with students being largely coached in how to read them aloud in public. In other words, the teaching of preaching would have to change to how theologians thought about preaching, particularly as that was understood from reading

Barth's scattered paragraphs about "reading the sermon." Moreover, those who taught preaching would be expected to be well-trained theologically, adjunct to the theological faculty, in a sense, even though it was assumed that they should at least be interested in preaching, whatever their formal preparation in public address. The latter, though, was largely thought to be irrelevant. This view in seminaries seems to have prevailed from the 1960s well into the 1970s, when finally it began to change. Strangely, it was the growing plight of the mainline denominational churches, which began to empty out at an alarming rate, that finally made many ask what had happened to preaching.

What had happened was that it had been theologically co-opted for several decades, and had all but died. Without a few great preachers of that era, like George Buttrick, and a handful of homileticians who refused to be thrown under the theological wheels, and who continued to write their preaching books—Andrew Blackwood chief among them—who knows what might have happened to the art of the sermon. Then came the 70s and with it a host of new young homileticians began to claim preaching as a discipline unto itself—many of their names known well to this Academy; some of them are still active among us. To them today we owe much.

Strangely, though, the work of reclaiming (as I would still put it) homiletics as a vital, independent part of seminary education is not finished. Many homiletics folk are still deeply influenced by the pull of theology within the seminary. There is nothing particularly wrong with that, on its face. The truth probably is that there are people teaching preaching today who enjoy theology a lot more and would rather be teaching it, so they are naturally tugged in that direction.

What is wrong with theology's remaining hold over homiletics, though, is that it means that homileticians are still not fully comfortable with being homileticians. That is, there is a strong stain, probably felt within us all, that is embarrassed—maybe that is the best word—at being "just homileticians," as though we want to be more than that. We believe we are still labeled in seminaries—maybe we are—as second class citizens, responsible for just "teaching speech" to the students. We know that there is much, much more to it than that—it is a complex, difficult process to master, as all communication processes are. But unless theology students, preparing for positions of ministerial and pastoral leadership, master the processes and materials that we homileticians teach, the churches where they work will never really excel. We know that. Still we feel ourselves intimidated.

Let me give what I believe is one striking example of this intimidation, though I do not mean this as a negative comment about any of our colleagues. One striking sign of how all of this has played out over the past few decades has been what has happened to the word "deliver"—as in public speaking referring to the "delivery" of the sermon, a complex notion at the heart of homiletical work. It has become a truly bad word in many homiletical circles, a word to be avoided. In a collectively written book on listeners a couple of years back, a group of our colleagues, still tending to operate in the Barthian mode, did a real number on the idea of "delivering" a sermon, noting that "the term 'delivery' could imply no more relationship between congregation and preacher than the

parcel service delivery person has with the householders who receive the parcel.” It is, for me at least, a singularly unfortunate sentence, probably intended to do exactly what it does, which is to shift attention away—as many theologians still want to do—from those complex and difficult processes involved in learning to “speak” clearly and interactively as one to many. The authors of that book propose the word “embodiment” to replace the homiletician’s use of “delivery,” saying that “embodiment” refers to the moment when the sermon comes to life in the pulpit. I beg to differ with that assertion. To me it makes little sense.

I look at it this way. It is the preacher who gradually, over time, from youth upwards, comes to “embody” in mind and heart a particular kind of Christian faith, the faith of her or his own tradition. This is that passionately held set of ideas and concepts about God, sin, grace, salvation, resurrection, miracles, the second coming, etc. that student preachers are able to gush forth within in discussions and in their student sermons in class. It is this set of ideas and passionate understanding, whatever they are, that have driven young (and older) adults out of their jobs and into seminary. These are the things that can’t wait to get out there and preach. This, for me, is what the word “embodiment” carries in it. When ideas and concepts and assertions (doctrines) carry emotional force for people, those things can be said to take “bodily” form. We come to “embody” as we grow, we learn, we become theologically acculturated into our church, our personal religious community, so to speak.

We are given an opportunity, then, to preach—and the task becomes how to “get said aloud” some small part of what, over time, we have come to “embody.” That is the point, it seems to me, where the homiletical process kicks in. It is a “how to get it said and said well” discipline. I don’t think we have to be embarrassed about that. To learn to preach is to learn to communicate with body, voice, speech form, and language as effectively as we are able to the people who come to listen and share the experience with us. We are not appearing at someone’s door, anonymously dropping off a package. That is not what rhetorical or speech “delivery” is about. Anyone experienced in professional public speaking knows that there are countless aspects to effective “delivery” of what one wishes to say to a group of assembled, attentive people. Despite its essentially monological character, when done well it is overwhelming dialogical, as dialogical as any rock concert in which only the band on stage is actually playing music. There are processes of interaction underlying the delivery of a passionate statement to a group that are as profound as any that happen when many people are talking back and forth. The bottom line, for me, is that when we lose the focus on such critical homiletical processes as “delivery,” then we as homileticians are all in trouble. More than that, our preachers, as well, will be less than they otherwise could be.

Three other comments and I will draw this polemic to a close.

First, underlying everything I have said here is my belief that the role of theology itself, in all of its myriad forms and configurations, has to be different for the teachers of preaching than it is for working preachers themselves. Preachers serving congregations have to be the primary embodiments of the theology, both theoretical and practical, of the

denomination/congregation that they serve. They are the unabashed public advocates of everything that their congregation stands for, theologically, biblical, ethically, and I am sure some in other areas of thought and life as well. And no matter where they are or what they are doing, those preachers are to represent in a thousand ways that particular theological stance of their people. When they preach, they are the spokespeople for that unique theological orientation within that group; and that is as it should be. Those of us who teach preaching, however, face a different, much more restrained, obligation. In our classes, we are not preachers to a congregation; we are not the embodiment of a theological stance that represents all of the students before us. Our obligation is to teach and train them to communicate what they embody as effectively as they are able. That is our expertise, and we need have no reservations or apologies for the importance of what we provide for the educational life of our students.

Second, the question that invariably comes up when one raises these bedrock issues about the nature of homiletics is whether there isn't such a thing as a "theological of preaching" that we should be pressing for. The answer to that, for me, is that every different theological orientation shapes its own "theology of preaching." One's theology of the Holy Spirit, for example, has a profound impact on how one thinks about the purpose and outcome of preaching. The problem, however, is that since no two theologies of the Holy Spirit are ever quite alike—some, in fact, are profoundly different—so no two "theologies of preaching" are, or ever can be, alike. There are, in short, as many "theologies of preaching" as there are theological perspectives. Any debates on such issues in a preaching class have to be built around that understanding, as far as I can tell. By the same token, for us in this Academy to believe that there is "a" theology of preaching simply makes no sense. The bottom line is that it is just as difficult—and just as fruitless—to debate "theologies of preaching" as it is to debate "theologies" themselves.

Finally, just as in our preaching classes our task (in my view) is not to challenge or denigrate any theology that a student brings to a sermon, I find myself within our Academy being unnerved at times at how often we end up vigorously challenging and even speaking critically—not of each other's homiletical ideas—but of each other's theological orientation. Some seem to believe that our theologies and our homiletics are part and parcel with each other and that if one's theology is "together" then one's homiletics, one's preaching, will be, too. I am urging that, for educational purposes in our highly pluralistic seminary culture, we not understand the situation that way—that homiletics be as divorced from theology as we can make it. The theological divides in this Academy (as we all know) are as profound as those within any community with a hundred different churches. We are trying to teach each other and to learn from each other about "how preaching works," and we as an organization, truth be told, face the same theological dangers of conflict and animosity that confront any two church congregations of different denominations across the street from each other in any town or city. Reminding ourselves regularly of that will, in my judgment, keep us a viable, even vibrant Academy.