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The practice of homiletical theology in a confessional mode: an interim report on the Homiletical Theology Project

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**"The Practice of Homiletical Theology in a Confessional Mode:
An Interim Report on the Homiletical Theology Project"¹
David Schnasa Jacobsen**

Abstract

Preachers rightly fret about getting from text to sermon, but their commission is to go preach the gospel. While homiletical theology generally is focused on seeing preaching as a theological task focused on the “gospel in context,” confessional homiletical theology, as a particular type, considers preaching to be a theological enterprise centered on the gospel and brought into critical dialogue with texts, contexts, and situations. Consistent with the position of Andre Resner, who argues preachers start this dialogue from a “working gospel,” this article explores how this confessional, working gospel as theological habitus then dialogues critically with texts, contexts and situations reflectively and critically so the gospel might be heard for the life of the church and for the sake of the world that God so loves.

Two decades ago, theologian Edward Farley wrote a provocative piece in *Theology Today* in which he critiqued the field of homiletics for being unduly preoccupied with what he called “the bridge paradigm.”² Farley’s trenchant critique pushed back against the notion that preaching was simply a matter of bridging the gospel found in pericopes of ancient Biblical texts and then mediated through an act of rhetorical skill to the present. Unless one is willing to argue that the gospel, the good news, was equally distributed in every conceivable pericope or nugget

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at a special session of the Christian Scholars’ Conference on June 7, 2017 at Lipscomb University in Nashville TN and was revised for the North American Academy of Homiletics meeting in Dallas on December 9, 2017 to engage colleagues in the field. Although much of the Homiletical Theology Project (<http://www.bu.edu/homiletical-theology-project>) and its first two consultations at the Academy of Homiletics was initially devoted to mapping the different ways homiletical theology was already being conceived (see vols. 1 and 2 in the series *The Promise of Homiletical Theology* with Cascade Books, 2015), with this progress report I wish to identify what are the emerging central features of the kind of confessional homiletical theology I am advocating. The footnotes along the way will help illumine the ways that my conversations with colleagues have shaped my sense of what homiletical theology might look like.

² Ed Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” *Theology Today* 51:1 (April 1994) 90-103.

of Biblical text, the bridge paradigm ran the risk of failing to understand the truly theological task that preaching is. Farley shook the footings of the bridge paradigm and invited homiletics to see itself as more than rhetorical engineering, but a truly theological discipline. This is, broadly conceived, the goal of the Homiletical Theology Project—to place the theological task more squarely in the middle of the practice of preaching and in the field of homiletics.

Yet what seemed breathtakingly new to many North American theoreticians may not seem quite so novel to practitioners. While the notion that the practice of preaching bridges between ancient text and modern hearers is fairly widespread, in practice preachers are all too aware that preaching is more than applying the results of Biblical exegesis. As a theological act, preaching is not solely a place where theological method is practiced (though it is that), it is also a place where a *habitus* of theological wisdom is formed and exercised. As Ron Allen notes, preachers already preach gospel with many Biblical texts in the canon which themselves are representative of multiple theological voices or trajectories.³ Whether it is Paul and James, or Mark and John, preaching requires preachers able to sort through and relate the plural theological views within the canon itself. When preaching turns to situational moments where the gospel must be articulated (9/11, Katrina, and other crises), preacherly theological wisdom about the gospel also comes into the picture.⁴ In those moments, preachers as theologians of the Word live out their calling by naming the gospel—the gospel both nourished by the gift of the scriptures and yet tested ever anew in moments great and small over time. In practice, preaching requires

³ Ronald Allen, *Preaching is Believing: The Sermon as Theological Reflection*. Louisville: WJKP, 2002.

⁴ David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009). This matter of gospel and situation is even further developed with respect to the traumatic context of wounds in “Gospel as Transfiguring Promise,” in *Theologies of the Gospel in Context* (D. S. Jacobsen, Ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 141.

that preachers have a *habitus*, some theological core wisdom about gospel that helps them do their task.⁵

In this way, I am actually building on another part of Farley's work. In his book *Theologia*, Farley argues that theology is more than the kind of science as discipline, or *scientia*, with which we might be familiar in the modern university. Long before this, theology is *habitus*, a kind of existential disposition of the believer concerning the things of salvation.⁶ Farley does not wish to embrace *habitus* as a kind of romantic move toward disposition alone, apart from the more modern understanding of theology as *scientia* or discipline, but to see them in deep relation. My view is that both *habitus* and *scientia* are necessary moments in the way homiletical theologians discern gospel as they preach with respect to diverse Biblical texts and troubling situations.

This article therefore attempts to surface the dynamic that inheres in the process of exercising preacher's theological *habitus* in the activity of discerning gospel in the practice of preaching. Preachers rightly fret about getting from text to sermon, but underlying this is their commission is to go preach the *gospel*. In doing so, I start the process of theological work with a provisional confession of the gospel, i.e., as what I call confessional homiletical theology.

Confessional homiletical theologians think about preaching as a theological enterprise beginning provisionally with gospel and brought into critical dialogue with texts, contexts, and

⁵ Both Michael Pasquarello and Alyce McKenzie named early on the significance of practical wisdom lying at the center of an emerging homiletical theology. Pasquarello argues for a formed wisdom-like virtue in *Sacred Rhetoric: Preaching as a Theological and Pastoral Practice in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1, and elaborates on this in his article, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: On Becoming a Homiletic Theologian," in *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology* (D. S. Jacobsen, Ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 103-104. For a more interactive, inductive vision of homiletical theology as practical wisdom, see in the same volume Alyce McKenzie, "The Company of Sages: Homiletical Theology as a Sapiential Hermeneutic," 87-102. In this latter sense, Wes Allen and Ronald Allen argue for a kinship of her inductive model to their conversational one in *The Sermon Without End* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015).

⁶ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 51, 54. The word *scientia* also has currency in the age of theology/habitus, however it begins to take on a more methodological sense with the rise of what Farley calls theology/discipline.

situations.⁷ André Resner has given this provisional, confessional move a name: “working gospel.”⁸ This article explores how this confessional, working gospel as a kind of disposition (*habitus*) then dialogues critically with texts, contexts and situations reflectively (*scientia*) so the gospel might be heard for the life of the church and for the sake of the world that God so loves. In doing so, it hopes to trace the outlines of a kind of homiletical-theological method in what I call a confessional-correlational mode.

Gospel 101

Some will be concerned that a practical-theological emphasis on gospel will be equivalent to superficial sermons full of cheap grace. The problem here, though, is not with the gospel, but with our too simplistic way of conceiving it. It may be a bit frustrating to realize, but the gospel is not just one thing: grace, Christ, Christ and him crucified, etc. Simplistic definitions truncate the gospel and lead us away from mystery. Paul says that the apostles are to be viewed as “stewards of the mysteries” (1 Cor 4:1). This truth invites us to reflection, but more specifically to sober and humble reflection about the gospel itself.

This complexity around the gospel is at least as old as parts of the New Testament. In chapter 1:1-15 of Mark’s Gospel, the writer uses the word for gospel (*euangelion*) more than once in the first few verses alone. The first use of the term is surprisingly brief. It is in the title verse of 1:1, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ [Son of God].” Such a statement is

⁷ This critical relationship between gospel and text/tradition is found also in Luke Powery’s contributions, especially in “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See,” in *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching* (D. S. Jacobsen, Ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 85-107. To my mind a confessional view of homiletical theology begins with some sense of gospel, but also brings it into critical relationship with texts and traditions, in Powery’s case with respect to bodies and the Bible. Something similar is implied with Ron Allen’s willingness to link homiletical theology to a kind of re-discovery across theological families, “Preaching as Spark for Discovery in Theology,” *Homiletical Theology*, 129-152.

⁸ André Resner’s notion of “working gospel” first appeared in an insightful article, “Reading the Bible for Preaching the Gospel,” *Collected Papers of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, 223. Most recently, Resner elaborates on his notion of working gospel in “Do You See this Woman? A Little Exercise in Homiletical Theology,” *Theologies of the Gospel in Context*, 19-24.

true, of course, but even Mark refuses to stay there. Fourteen verses later he has Jesus come and preach the “gospel of God,” which consists in believing and repenting in light of the good news of God’s reign (1:14-15). Since *euangelion* is used in both places, gospel and gospel, the best way is to hold both in dialogue. The gospel *is* Jesus Christ (1:1), yet it is also the kingdom to which Jesus points, the gospel not just of himself, but of God (1:14-15). Mark invites us to reflect on this all through the Gospel that bears his name. The good news is played out again and again in terms of Jesus’ identity—no doubt. Yet the gospel of God is precisely that to which Jesus himself points: a *basileia* gospel that includes healing, feeding, exorcising as evidence of God’s coming reign. Even in Mark, probably committed to writing around 70 CE, talk of the gospel is not just simple talk, but an invitation to theological mystery. The gospel is Jesus Christ, yet ultimately points to God’s royal action right here and right now.

The problem, of course, is that preachers and homileticians sometimes hunker down in the language of mystery when the going gets tough. Mystery ought not be a term to use for sloppy or inadequate thinking. We are, after all, to love God with our whole mind along with our hearts, souls, and strength. Rather, mystery is a term used in unique way in the apocalyptic matrix in which early Christianity arises to name resurrection. Mystery is something *not yet fully revealed*. We believe not because we know it all, nor because it all can be named. We name gospel, rather, in bits and pieces using our best theological reflections because some day God’s purposes will be fully revealed. Paul puts it nicely in the KJV: “for now we see through a glass darkly, but then, face to face.” Mystery invites our faithful probing and theological brooding, but is done always with profound humility this side of heaven.

Martin Luther understood something about this need for humility in discernment. We usually think of Luther’s understanding of the gospel in terms of his Lutheran paradoxes as if

they were a mere dualism: grace vs. works, law vs. gospel. We remember how, in a kind of evangelical theological exuberance, Luther moves freely across the canon to make his point. Luther calls James an “epistle of straw” because of the Biblical author’s inadequate Christology. As for Revelation, Luther wonders, who is to say that the center of the gospel can be found there at all? Many of us remember that Luther did see the center of the gospel in his own unique reading of Paul: that we are saved by grace through faith. This gospel center becomes something of a critical principle for reading and preaching other parts of the New Testament. We may also recall now that much contemporary scholarship has called Luther’s reading of Paul into question.⁹ But it certainly cannot be said that Luther had no appreciation for the gospel’s *mystery*—that is, that the theological task of discerning the gospel was something easy to do. Luther apparently said that whoever could properly distinguish between law and gospel should wear his own doctor’s hat.¹⁰ In our age, discerning gospel is and will be a challenge to any theologian. It is in this deeper sense that gospel is mystery indeed.

Perhaps this is why contemporary theologian Edward Farley describes gospel the way that he does. The first thing to note is that Farley himself never puts a “the” in front of gospel. It is without a definite article, for gospel is not one thing, no simple thing, but ever new in every time and place:

Gospel is not a thing to be defined. It is not a doctrine, a delimited objective content. The summaries in Acts and in Paul of what is proclaimed, the formulas of the kerygma, attest to this. Phrases like the kingdom of God, Jesus as Lord, Christ crucified do have content, but that content is not simply a quantity of information. To proclaim means to bring to bear a certain past event on the present in such a way as to open the future. Since the present is always specific and situational, the

⁹ See Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

¹⁰ Although this saying is widely noted, it may well be apocryphal. I have found thus far that Luther does describe the *difficult necessity* of discerning law and gospel. Luther argues in *Table Talk* #1234 that only God in the Holy Spirit truly knows how to distinguish law and gospel, it is no human capacity and one that he himself is far from understanding in *Luther’s Works* (Hereafter, *LW*) vol. 54 (T. Tappert, trans. and ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 127, and likewise in his sermon on Gal 3:23-29 in *LW* (Sermons IV; B. Mayes, ed; St. Louis: Concordia, 2016): 67.

way that the past, the event of Christ, is brought to bear so as to elicit hope will never be captured in some timeless phrase, some ideality of language. Preaching the good tidings is a new task whenever and wherever it takes place.¹¹

Gospel *invites us* to just such careful, contextual reflection as a way of opening to the new thing God is doing. It is not that the gospel is some Freudian ink blot, but rather it is a kind of structured reflection for the here and now in light of God's unfolding purposes—something that only you as a local preacher can do by virtue of the faith to which you bear witness.¹²

This is why it is so important to think of the preacher as something other than the mere exegetical/rhetorical engineer who bridges by means of some delivery mechanism for every atomized pericope in the scriptures. The preacher does not try to manage the Word. The preacher does not merely apply the Word. The preacher also does not get out of the way just because the Word is from scripture and so bears no responsibility for its getting a hearing. Rather, the preacher is a *theologian* of the Word. She or he stands up in front of God and everybody and wrestles with what the scriptures say, in all their diversity (for one, because the scriptures themselves embody various theologies and do not agree!). There is no way of doing so apart from a careful act of theological reflection on the gospel. This is what makes preachers residential theologians of the gospel wherever they are. That is why the Homiletical Theology Project is committed to the idea that preaching is not just the place where theology is “applied,” it is where theology is done.¹³ Preaching is *doing* theology, for preachers and homileticians specifically doing *contextual* theology of the gospel in relation to a text and/or situation.

¹¹Farley, “*Preaching the Bible*,” 101.

¹² John McClure points out that the referential function of preaching Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is itself a form of “soft heresy,” which, in the normative frame of Christian liturgy, can function as “passing theories” that can be grasped with reference to the historical witness of Christian faith. Both the referential innovation and communicative-liturgical structure that grounds it are important, “Preaching as Soft Heresy: Liturgy and the Communicative Dimension of Homiletical Theology,” in *Homiletical Theology*, 64-71.

¹³ The argument in the section below recapitulates work I have done in the series *The Promise of Homiletical Theology* (vols. 1 and 2) and earlier in connection with a lecture in a Boston University School of Theology DMin course called “Situational Preaching for Transformation” (Spring, 2016).

Many of us in North America have not conceived of the relationship of theology to preaching that way. We may well have presupposed that preaching is where theology is applied, as if we merely derived theology in our sermons from an extant, authoritative deposit of tradition. We might think we need first to go to the dogmatic tradition or the systematicians, and only then turn to our hearers and apply theology for them. One apocryphal saying on the topic argues that “Theology exists to make preaching as difficult as it needs to be.” Having sat through a few theology classes, preachers may well find that statement true, but it does not yet capture the fullness of the relationship of preaching and theology in practice. Karl Barth may have come a bit closer when he said “All theology is sermon preparation.”¹⁴ Preachers likely know from experience that theological depth matters: whether preachers name the presence of God in a hospital room, at the barricades, or in the chancel next to a coffin. Cultural chirpiness will not suffice—so theology does, as Barth points out, *prepare* us to go into the breach to name God. David Buttrick, however, turned Barth on his head in a way that I think comes even closer to the truth. Buttrick suggests in his Foreword to Barth’s *Homiletics* that all sermon preparation is actually theology.¹⁵ Preaching is therefore theological from beginning to end: from first contextual inklings, to disruptive situations, through wrestling with the scriptures and doctrinal tradition, before the listening assembly ecclesial or otherwise, and yes, into the world. For preachers, this is *all* theology.

This notion that all sermon preparation is theology is so in part because we understand that theology does not issue from some primordial, immovable starting point either. In *Places of Redemption*, feminist practical theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson makes the case that

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 17.

¹⁵ David Buttrick, “Foreword,” in Barth, *ibid.*, 10.

theology begins with a wound.¹⁶ There is much in the Christian tradition that is unfinished, unresolved, and a struggle.¹⁷ Acknowledging the wound is more than honest, however, it focuses the theological mind. We approach Biblical texts and situations acknowledging wounds. McClintock Fulkerson does not stand alone in the claim that theology is not a dis-interested enterprise. Luther's theological breakthrough concerning the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as the center of the gospel takes place during his own struggle to find a gracious God, that is, in *Anfechtung*. A liberation theologian like Gustavo Gutierrez points to the reality of injustice and oppression that drives him to theological reflection on the gospel as both "annunciation" and "denunciation" in the liberation struggle.¹⁸

In practice, however, this preacherly talk about theology does not mean that the pulpit is now the place for the five-dollar words learned in a school of theology either. Preaching cannot be the place where pulpiteers aim to be obtuse with phrases like hypostatic union, *perichoresis*, or even *homoousios*. Preaching in practice and in context is doing theology within earshot of real hearers, which means that we work with theological clarity, but also poetic, metaphorical, imagistic, and narrative ability. Preachers will also need to bring theologies in the pew into conversation with the theological claims we are making in sermons. Rhetorician Chaim Perelman points out that some disciplines, say mathematics and philosophy, construct their claims with a kind of universal interlocutor in mind.¹⁹ This is not true to preaching! The practice of preaching entails real (and hardly universal) hearers who are already operating from various theological and broader cultural understandings. This means that preachers have an intrinsically

¹⁶ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12ff.

¹⁷ This realization about the unfinished, wounded, and unresolved nature of theology shows up implicitly in Luke Powery's work, *ibid.*, but also more extensively in the most recent volume with the contributions from Joni Sancken, Sarah Travis, Yohan Go and myself in *Theologies of the Gospel in Context*, 65-155. Although the theologies of the gospel vary, its character as response to a wound/trauma is key.

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973).

¹⁹ Chaim Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), xiv, 17.

hermeneutical theological task: that is, how to bring multiple theological and cultural understandings into conversation.

Given the unique task of preaching, it may be more accurate to expand on the nature of this hermeneutical notion. In my view, preachers have both a theo-rhetorical (an obligation to name our own claims clearly) and theo-conversational (an obligation to engage other theologies openly and with charity) task in practice. As an example, preachers might reflect on the surprising claims and discursive back and forth between the mysterious and unrecognized risen-crucified Jesus with his two disciples getting out of town to Emmaus in disappointment in Luke 24:13-35. Jesus clearly reminds his struggling disciples of scripture and tradition to help make sense of what happened in Jerusalem last Friday, but he also *converses* with them. Furthermore, Jesus does this to such a degree that, when the disciples' eyes are "opened" and they ultimately recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread in the gathering darkness, they confess that the conversation with Jesus on the road before had made their hearts burn. Jesus could be said to have theo-rhetorical and theo-conversational aims. Theo-rhetorically, Jesus attempts to persuade his disappointed, unrecognizing disciples. Theo-conversationally, he dialogues with them in the midst of praxis and wounds. In fact, the word to converse or dialogue in Luke 24:14 is *homiloun*—the same Greek word from which we derive homiletics. In the midst of struggle in an unbearable situation, the context, and the scriptures themselves, Jesus engages his disappointed, scared disciples as a contextual theologian of the gospel.

To be fair, homiletical theologians also need to be careful to remember that Luke knows contextual preaching can go awry. In Luke 4 Jesus preaches in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. After quoting Isaiah's "The Lord has anointed me..." Jesus' home-town sermon comes totally off the rails. The hearers in Nazareth are not ready for Jesus' contextualization of

their hard-heartedness in contrast to Sidonian widows in the days of Elisha. In fact, they aim after the sermon to throw him headlong over a nearby cliff (Luke 4:28-29). For those of us who have preached and failed, or fear preaching and failing, it is something of a consolation. It is also a reminder of the limits of what preaching as a theological act can actually do!

Such a limit to our efforts may be good to remember as practitioners reflect on this contextual-theological task of preaching gospel. God is God; we are not. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, which means that a confessional homiletical theologian needs to respect the mystery and otherness of God in any theo-rhetorical or theo-conversational enterprise. The theological work that preachers do to name gospel in relation to Biblical texts and situations is itself fraught with difficulty and ultimately bounded by mystery.

Nonetheless, this same theological mystery *beckons* preachers as theologians to speak yet again. Mysteries are not merely things we don't *know*; they are things *being revealed*. The language of mystery in the New Testament is, more often than not, eschatological language. Recall Paul's words yet again: "for now we know in part, but then, face to face." We preach gospel between now and then as mystery being disclosed.

The idea is not a new one for theologically tasked preachers. Luther speaks carefully about distinguishing between God hidden and God revealed, God preached and not preached.²⁰ On the one hand, preaching as a theological act requires great theological modesty and care. Human beings cannot speak definitively of God, let alone exhaustively. On the other hand, Luther notes that his focus on a theological center in the gospel, does offer some sense of God revealed and God preached. Luther's own take on the scriptures was to focus on "*was Christum treibt*," that which "drives Christ." Christ's own cross gives us pause to assume that we can trust

²⁰ Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde discusses the impact of this notion in his book, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 15-17.

what we see, yet Christ himself is God's disclosure of God's goodness toward us²¹ Therefore, in the midst of struggle, we clutch the promise, we hold to what we do know of the crucified, risen One.²² A confessional homiletical theology of the gospel realizes that preaching works with fragments and pieces in the midst of mystery. And yet, preaching can still hold a jagged shard of glass to the light, and gospel still emerges in the brokenness. Such theological preaching cannot dispel mystery (how could it?), but it does offer habitable space for life and discipleship, pointing even now to God's new creation.

Preaching Gospel and Theological Method: Texts, Situations, and Gospel

Now we turn to explore what such a confessional homiletical theology of the gospel might look like in practice. I begin with an assumption: texts, a theology of the gospel, and situations all belong to the moment of contextual preaching. Rather than set up a dichotomy of textual preaching and situational (or even topical) preaching, I view them along a single continuum. In my own practice, most preaching begins with a scripture text which offers not only subject matter but sometimes also structural features (say a narrative shape, an image/metaphor, or perhaps a rhetorical argument) that impact the sermon. Of course, no close reading of an ancient text is done apart from our contemporary context. In light of this, I argue that in those sermons that start with a Biblical text, something of a present "situation" becomes that "in light of which" preachers preach.²³ In the middle stands a working theology of the gospel as a kind of theological mediation. With the text in the foreground and the situation in the background, such sermons look like this in terms of theological method:

²¹ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 11.

²² Joshua Miller, *Hanging by a Promise: The Hidden God in the Theology of Oswald Bayer* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 22.

²³The language of "in light of which" actually comes from Farley's *critique* of situations viewed as the realm of application in the bridge paradigm, Farley, "Preaching the Bible," 92. The contrast in my continuum pictured above is that the gospel is still mediating "that which is preached," even when the text or a situation is the "starting point." See Jacobsen and Kelly, *Kairos Preaching*.

Exegetical/Textual Sermons:

Situation
Gospel
Biblical Text

By contrast, sermons that are shaped and impacted primarily by a situation call forth a kind of reflection on the gospel in praxis for which a Biblical text functions within a theo-rhetorical and theo-conversational structure. In sermons, say after 9/11 or whenever the church faces what David Buttrick calls a decision or limit moment,²⁴ the theological task foregrounds the situation while the Biblical text functions more in the background in a gospel mediation:

Situational Sermons:

Biblical Text
Gospel
Situation

The point is not to make a rigid, dualistic sermon typology, but to recognize the impact on the theological task of preaching when either a text or a situation is the *starting point* within a kind of homiletical-theological method around the gospel. In “situations,” preachers often are faced with moments that put them on their heels and where the scriptures’ impact is sometimes more indirect than direct. Yet what this interactivity reveals, is fundamentally a critical-correlational view of a confessional, homiletical theology of the gospel. Working gospel as *habitus* of the preacher is a starting point between the recognizable tradition and memory embodied in the scriptures and the claims of situations, what Farley calls their corruption and uncovered redemption in gospel,²⁵ in all their novelty. In the process of doing such theological reflection, sometimes the situation is “redescribed,” that is, understood in a new light, and sometimes the theoretical sources of recognizability of the Christian faith are revised or

²⁴ The language of decision and limit moments comes from Buttrick’s treatment of preaching in the mode of praxis in his book, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 408-11.

²⁵ Farley, “Preaching the Bible,” 102.

understood anew. The outcome of such a process is itself an ever-changing, more critically reflective understanding of gospel as mediation. In such moments, a theology of gospel does not solely remain a matter of *habitus*, but becomes ever articulated anew in what Farley calls *scientia* or critical theological reflection. The dynamic makes more sense when we locate this working theological method for preaching in context. For this, we turn to the work on theology in relation to social practices in Kathryn Tanner's *Theories of Culture*.

An Analogous Dynamic in Theology and Culture: Kathryn Tanner

Tanner pushes back strongly against notions of culture and identity that leave them both static and monolithic and incline theologians to believe that a study of cultural practices can lead to a univocal understanding of theology. Over against modernist conceptions of culture that assume culture is a bounded whole, Tanner argues for a postmodern understanding that views culture as dynamic and identity as a constant renegotiation. In chapter 4 of her landmark work, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Tanner shows how such a different view of cultural theory impacts the theological task—and precisely in a kind of practical mode. For Tanner, theology is a set of social practices related both to the academy and everyday life. These two sets of social practices, however, though focused on church practices nonetheless result in certain, unique material products and operations related to them. The social practices of academic theology are defined by the genres of papers, protocols of presentations, and material products like books and articles. Social practices of everyday theology, however, are not identical even if they are just as theological. Their close relationship to everyday life does not necessarily result in the same kinds of theoretical questions relative to practice precisely because of the relative demands of everyday life itself. In light of Farley's claim that *theologia* is more than *scientia* in the modern sense, but also *habitus* in the lives of believers, I would like to place

these two sets of social practices in a dynamic relationship and one in fact fraught with ever-renegotiated features of identity. What keeps cultural formation and identity dynamic in each of these cultures is not just their interaction with each other (academy vs. church), but the demands of their own practices in context.

In its dynamic relation to everyday theology, academic theology is cognizant of its theoretical revisions and pluralities and as needed “mediates” these to assembled communities of practice through institutions like seminaries and certifying bodies. As a tactical matter, a homiletical theologian of the gospel who is also involved in the dialogical, hermeneutical practice that is preaching leverages these differences as theories revise practices and practices revise theories. Others in everyday culture may have similar knowledge bases (e.g., the seeker layperson or the curious parishioner), but the preacher is put in the fraught position of being aware of both life forms of theology, both communities, their different social practices and their overlapping interests.

Yet at the same time, the homiletical theologian does theology not just in proximity to local practices and in their service (Tanner gives the example of situational needs for working through a temporary impasse of practice), but also in relation to what I might call “iconic theories” (understood as traditional sources of theology that make them “recognizable” as sources): repeated readings of scripture by means of the iconic appearance of the Bible in worship, ritualized action and words encoded in liturgy as an icon of memory/tradition, iconic objects like the ambo/table/font that both focus and disrupt that gathered assembly in their stipulated address (you) and action (hear, eat, pass through waters), which possibilize revision, occasionally of both theories (theological icons as sources) and practices. In other words, the theories and practices of academic culture overlap (but are not reducible to) with the theories and

practices of everyday culture precisely in the work of a homiletical theology of the gospel. Both external cultural products and internal sources of iconic meaning push back against everyday understandings and therefore call forth revision of both theory and practice. What is unique about the church, however, is that the theory of this cultural work is represented by icons of presence in worship: in the Bible read in the sanctuary, in sacred ritual, and in the very architecture of worship centered on Word and Sacraments.

What might such interactivity in theory and practice look like? In an ELCA congregation in suburban Boston, a slight, retired elementary teacher born and raised conservative Missouri Synod comes up most Sundays to help serve Eucharist. The sanctuary in which she does this practice is marked by classic features of North American Protestant architecture: split marble chancel with elevated pulpit and a large Bible on the lectern, a massive marble altar/table raised in the middle all under a tall cross suspended against the back wall. When this retired teacher comes up to help serve Eucharist, however, she knows she needs to help prepare the space to help the congregation receive the elements. Most weeks, she places her two forearms across the top of the Bible lectern and pushes back on it so it slides away from the edge of the marble chancel. She pushes back on Word to make room for Sacrament and people receiving promise in bread and wine.

My claim is that a homiletical theology of the gospel is precisely where analogous theological difference and struggle is negotiated in practice all the time. Preachers as theologians do their work not just in practice alone but in the presence of the iconic theories (scripture, memory, ritual, symbols) that at once support and question the gospel they name. Preachers may begin such a dialogical, hermeneutical process with a “working gospel” or *habitus* that takes up the dialogue, but the theological work that they do accomplishes more than revising practice in

the face of some impasse, it also impacts the theories iconically present in the worship moment itself, including a revision of gospel more in the form of *scientia*. If everyday culture has its own theology, practices and material products, the relationship is such that the interactivity of theories and practices happens at an intersection of the homiletical theologian of the gospel who has explored theology as a practice in the culture of academic theology as well. This is the two-fold engine of its mutual critical-correlational work: the double push back of another “cultural” theology and the internal push back of theoretical icons that dialogue productively with practices and contexts.

Conclusion

All this is to say that the homiletical theologian is involved in a task much more complex and interactive than mere application. It may begin with the *habitus* of the preacher, a kind of working gospel that helps form the conversation with texts or situations, but it also engages this practice in the very presence of the iconic theories that make the dialogue recognizable and locatable within the tradition: Bible on an Ambo, a Table with Bread and Wine, and a watery Font—at the very least. Because a dialogue is set into motion, however, preaching does not remain there. The unfinished tradition and grounding iconic theories do more than give answers, they prompt questions which open up the dialogue to ever wider truth claims even beyond the immediate horizon of the worshipping congregation. This very reflection calls forth deeper work on the part of the preacher, whose *habitus* or working gospel is now pushed toward a kind of critical reflection in an articulated gospel, a *scientia* more in the sense of discipline, that captures the full breadth of what *theologia* is: a disposition in dialogue with a critically aware form of theological reflection in connection with texts and situations in the very presence of the

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theoretical icons of the tradition and addressed ultimately to this particular, gathered people of God.

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