

Homiletic Transitions in The Netherlands

The Spirit, Human Language and Real Preaching

Theo Pleizier

Abstract

Preaching is in transition, so is homiletics as the theory of preaching. In this article the development of homiletics in the Low Countries is explored as a case-study within the dynamics of international homiletical thought. The material for this case-study consists of the doctoral theses that have been published since the turn of the century. The amount of doctoral work in homiletics, the variety of methodological approaches and theological perspectives, provide a viable entrance to homiletics as academic discipline. It will be concluded that homiletics has developed into an international, empirically oriented, culturally sensitive, and theological diverse field. Preaching is in transition, so is homiletics. The transition, as seen through the lens of recent Dutch contributions to scholarly discourse in preaching, has three focal points: pneumatology, language, and empirical research.

1. Introduction: Transitions in Preaching and Homiletics

The very act of preaching is a transitory act. Sermons negotiate between the biblical texts, its reception in the Christian tradition – as objectified in historical confessional texts, reworked theological treatises, and existentially appropriated through spiritual disciplines – and contemporary contexts and experiences. Sermons reflect exegetical and hermeneutic insights in the Scriptures, they express the dynamics and diversity in Christian traditions, and they embody a complex interaction with contemporary cultures and plural societies. Since every sermon is a specific combination of Bible, Christian traditions, and contemporary lived faith, the content of preaching is part of various transitions. Tracing the way preaching reflects these transitions, however, is rather complex. Rapid and deep changes in theology and society will somehow lead to changes in preaching. The way this works, however, is not very clear. In the process of understanding these transitions, homiletics plays a double role. First, homiletics – especially after the empirical turn – has changed into the art of detecting changes and developments in actual preaching. Sermon analysis and reception research are widely used as methods to find out what is going on in the preaching event. The empirical turn added descriptive science to the discipline of homiletics. Second, homiletics has also taken a lead in suggesting changes in preaching. New homiletical models, such as aesthetic, performative, and narrative homiletics, have stimulated teachers of

preaching to explore new pedagogical models and provided new pathways for preachers to start thinking differently about the relationship between form and content in preaching or about the importance of movement and structure of the sermon. So though the transitions of preaching specifically concern biblical hermeneutics, christian theology and cultural context, they are also homiletical-methodical. Homiletics thus both describes and determines transitions in preaching.

This article charts the territory between preaching as religious practice and homiletics as academic practice and highlights some of the transitions that have taken place in these areas. Both practices, preaching and homiletics, are contextual despite the fact that homiletics has developed into an international discipline. In this article I put the transitions in preaching and homiletics in the wider field of international and contextual developments, and as a Dutch theologian I focus on preaching and homiletics in the Low Countries. The case of this article is thus a regional case. The methodical assumption implied in this approach is the idea that international discourse within a discipline such as homiletics might be served best by developing cases of "regional homiletics": academic theory on contextual practices itself is contextual and by describing developments within regions international discourse might benefit for the sake stimulating a diverse scholarly conversation.

Two additional methodical reflections are in place. First, the material in this article is mainly taken from doctoral theses, defended between the years 2000–2016. Doctoral theses are academical products and thus reflect a stage in the development of homiletics as an academic discipline. Further, in the last 15 years, a doctoral thesis in the field of homiletics has been defended almost every year – a production that is quantitatively significant given the small range of Dutch theological productions. Finally, doctoral theses are especially relevant for exploring the interaction between local and international developments. The interest in practical-theological theses is usually fueled by local developments and the background of the research questions is mostly contextual, while the discourse in theses, given the academic genre, connects to international research and theory. So, doctoral theses – especially in The Netherlands as it is located between the German-speaking and English-speaking (scholarly) world - provide a special entrance to the developing field of homiletical thought.

Secondly, from the Dutch doctoral theses in homiletics, a threefold analytical interest emerges: empirical materiality, theological intentionality, and religious practice. First, increasingly, homiletical doctoral theses contain *empirical material*. Since Rudolf Bohren and Klaus-Peter Jörns in 1989 published a first, international, attempt to address the method of sermon analysis into the discipline of homiletics,¹ the empirical turn stimulated researchers to generate new empirical

¹ Die Predigtanalyse als Weg zur Predigt, Tübingen 1989.

material and to develop analytical strategies. Secondly, at the bottom of many research questions in homiletics the question of the relationship between God's word and human discourse in preaching either lies dormant or is very much awake. This central question in homiletics, prominently addressed in Barth's double definition of preaching,² not only seems unresolvable, it also fuels homiletical research with a permanent theological intentionality: how is God named in preaching, in what sense is preaching an instance of Divine-human communication, and what does it imply when we talk about preaching as "God's Word." Thirdly, in combining the empirical and the theological, homiletical research deals with preaching as *religious practice*. As Gerrit Immink observes, practices "depend for a great deal on the people who perform them [...] with their beliefs and convictions, with their desires and ideas, with their spirituality and faith;" practices "have social and communicative dimensions;" and "religious practices are motivated by, and express traces of, spirituality and lived faith."³ Hence, when studying preaching, the two aspects of human action on the one hand, and the expression of religious motivations and theological references on the other hand, come together.

So after positioning Dutch homiletics as a case for "regional homiletics" within in the wider field of international homiletics (section 2), I present the transitions in Dutch homiletics from three points of view: the theological is dealt with from the perspective of pneumatology (section 3), the practice is dealt with from the perspective of language (section 4), and the empirical is dealt with from the perspective of "real preaching" (section 5).

2. International and Regional Homiletics: The Case of The Netherlands

Homiletics as the theological reflection upon the practice of preaching started as a rather contextually bound field. Nineteenth century homiletics in the German (Friedrich Schleiermacher, 1768–1834), English (Phillip Brooks, 1835–1893), French (Alexandre Vinet, 1797–1847) or Dutch (Jan Jacob van Oosterzee, 1817–1882) language, seemed rather isolated enterprises, sharing the history of preaching as their common frame of reference. Obviously, there were still remnants of the shared academic language in Latin and scholarly interaction across linguistic and contextual borders. Both Vinet and Van Oosterzee were translated into English and found their way into American practical theology.⁴ J.J. van Oosterzee's textbook "Praktische theologie" [*Practical Theology*] is considered to be the first Dutch handbook of practical theology and includes sections on pastoral theology, liturgics, and homiletics. His work was translated into Danish, German, and

² Cf. *Karl Barth*, *Homiletik. Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*, Zürich 1966.

³ *Gerrit Immink*, *Theological Analysis of Religious Practices*, in: *IJPT* 18.1 (2014), 127–138, 127f.

⁴ Cf. *Friedrich Schweitzer*, *Praktische Theologie in Nordamerika*, in: Christian Grethlein/Michael Meyer-Blanck (eds.) *Geschichte der Praktischen Theologie. Dargestellt anhand ihrer Klassiker*, Leipzig 2000, 565–596, 568.

English.⁵ Van Oosterzee interacted with ideas from his contemporaries, such as C.I. Nitzsch, C.H. Spurgeon, and H. Ward Beecher. Despite the fact that the reflection of preaching was internationally shared, we have to bear in mind that: (1) homiletics had not developed into a specialized academic discipline, and (2) the reflection of preaching very much took place within the frames of particular theological traditions, such as presbyterian, liberal, or neo-orthodox. This changed, however, during the second half of the 20th Century.

As a practical-theological sub-discipline, homiletics started to interact more closely with other academic fields and methods. In the early 20th Century, a Dutch theologian such as T. Hoekstra already wrote extensively about how preaching related to explicitly non-theological fields such as psychology and rhetoric. As *sacred rhetoric*, rhetoric had been an important conversation partner in homiletical reflection witnessing classical texts such as by Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617–1666), who wrote the first Dutch homiletic in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.⁶ Yet by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth Century the field had become very dispersed. On the one hand, modern preaching tried to incorporate many insights from the human sciences. On the other hand, dialectical theology stressed the need for a theological articulation against the emphasis upon human consciousness and experience at the expense of divine revelation. Against this twofold theological background the Dutch practical theologian, T. Hoekstra, wrote about the relation between preaching and psychology or preaching and rhetoric. His approach was modern (the stress upon psychology), classic (the importance of rhetoric, even *rhetorica sacra*) and Reformed (the focus upon preaching as ministry of the Word). Inter- or intradisciplinary approaches in homiletics quickly became international. Interaction with C.G. Jung, with structuralist approaches to language and meaning, and with Clinical Psychological Education, such as in the work of H.-C. Piper and H. van der Geest⁷, entailed interaction with ideas that were developed in a variety of contexts, both academically as well as geographically. In the third part of the 20th Century this resulted in the first international meetings of homileticians, starting in 1986 with a colloquium about sermon-analysis instigated by Rudolf Bohren and attended by homileticians from Europe (Germany, Scandinavia and The Netherlands), Australia, North America and Japan. *Societas Homiletica* was founded.⁸ It may be appropriate to speak about an “international turn” in homiletics, during the second half of the 20th Century.

⁵ Cf. *David J. Bos*, A good enough parson. Early nineteenth-century Dutch discourse on requirements for the pastoral ministry in the Reformed Church, in: *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 83.1 (2003), 333–370, 334.

⁶ Cf. *T. Brien*, De eerste Nederlandse homiletiek, Johannes Hoornbeeck, vertaald en ingeleid, Goudriaan 2009.

⁷ Cf. *Hans Christoph Piper*, Predigtanalysen. Kommunikation und Kommunikationsstörungen in der Predigt, Göttingen 1976; *Hans van der Geest*, Presence in the Pulpit. The impact of personality in preaching, Louisville (KY) 1982.

⁸ In 2016, Societas Homiletica had its 12th international conference in Stellenbosch, South Africa (<http://www.societas-homiletica.org/>, visited December 2016).

What has been observed for Dutch theology in general also seems to apply to homiletics: because of its geographical location, having both the United Kingdom and Germany as its western and eastern neighbors, the Dutch have become accustomed to interacting with both German and English-speaking theology. Hermeneutic, analytic, empirical, and kerygmatic approaches in theology were usually connected to conversations with continental (hermeneutic and kerygmatic) or English-speaking (analytic and empirical) literature. As international as Christian preaching has been from its earliest beginnings – and as international as homiletics has become in the course of the emancipation of practical theology as a distinct academic discipline, including its different fields such as pastoral care, religious education, and homiletics – preaching and the reflection of preaching also remains “regional.” The larger story of preaching and theories of preaching cannot exist without the smaller stories of what preaching looks like in various theological traditions and local contexts. This reflects the nature of preaching itself. Each sermon participates in the ongoing practice of proclaiming the gospel of Christ and teaching the Scriptures of Old and New Testament. Yet each sermon does it contextually and locally. Homiletical reflection therefore can never become international in the same way that preaching can never become abstracted from time and place.

So what does a regional (Dutch, protestant) homiletics and its contribution to international homiletics⁹ look like at the beginning of the 21st Century? In order to answer this question I turn to the doctoral theses in homiletics that have been published in The Netherlands from the year 2000 onwards. First some statistics. It seems that the first decade has been very fruitful when it comes to publications in homiletics on a PhD level, having a dissertation published almost annually. In 15 year’s time, a homiletical dissertation was defended and contributed to the development of the field almost every year. This is remarkable when we compare it to the development of theological institutions in the Netherlands: out of 7 places where ministers were trained academically in the Dutch Reformed, Reformed, and Evangelical Lutheran churches in the Netherlands (since 2004 united into the Protestant Church of the Netherlands) by the end of the 20th Century, only 2 survived. Paradoxically, while the landscape of theology has changed drastically, the production of homiletical publications has increased steady. In Dutch homiletics this transition can be traced from three angles: the transition from studying preaching as source for dogmatics, to studying historical homiletic examples, to studying preaching as a religious practice. This transition reflects the broader empirical turn in practical theology. This does not imply that homiletics necessarily turned to empirical methodology, but the approach became increasingly focussed upon “real preaching.”

⁹ The notion of “regional homiletics” is borrowed from the contemporary field of ontology. *Martin Heidegger* distinguishes between fundamental and regional ontologies, since every domain (such as banking or biology) in reality has its own “science of being.”

Three dissertations before the turn of the century may serve as illustrations of this interest in real preaching. The study of sermons no longer served the reconstruction of systematic theological ideas. Sermons increasingly were studied according to their genre: how does this actual sermon embody the act of preaching? In his dissertation Van der Velden wrote about the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte and analyzed the transcriptions of tape-recorded sermons.¹⁰ The research questions were homiletical: how does a method of preaching emerge from studying these sermons? Similar homiletical questions were asked in subsequent doctoral theses. Arjen Velema compared Karl Barth's christological homiletical thinking with H.J. Iwand, Ernst Lange, and Rudolf Bohren.¹¹ Despite the difficulty of relating homiletic theory and actual preaching, Velema approaches the sermons from three homiletical angles: how preaching embodies spirituality, how reality is represented in sermons and the theological relevance of a sermon's structure. Wim Moehn analyzed sermons from John Calvin from the perspective of the implied hearer.¹² He applied the Heidelberger method of sermon analysis to Calvin's preaching. The goal was not to reconstruct Calvin's theology, but to understand his homiletical strategy: how do Calvin's sermons embody the relationship between God and human beings, and how do they exemplify the context of 16th century Geneva and its citizens. These three dissertations together give an overview of the interests of Dutch homiletics at the end of the 20th Century: the Reformed tradition with John Calvin as its prime point of reference, the reception of German preaching as it was influenced by dialectical theology, and an interest in major Dutch preachers such as Miskotte. Hence, Dutch homiletics moved within the area defined by three parameters: its theological (Reformed) heritage, the major international influences on Dutch theology (notably German dialectical theology), and examples of contemporary preaching (such as Miskotte).

In the meantime two features become prevalent: the empirical turn and the special interest in theological (research) questions. In 2004 Gerrit Immink wrote about the diversity of homiletics as a discipline.¹³ He also made a strong case for empirical research and theological analysis in homiletics. He stressed the fact that preaching as religious practice needs to be studied from a performative perspective. Not just communicative performance, but embedded in the interhuman communication, religious performance takes place. We cannot capture the preaching event well enough, when the empirical dimension is taken seriously without taking into account that within

¹⁰ Cf. *Marinus Jacobus Gerard van der Velden*, K.H. Miskotte als prediker. Een homiletisch onderzoek, 's-Gravenhage 1984.

¹¹ Cf. *Ariën Willem Velema*, God ter sprake. Een homiletisch onderzoek naar de vooronderstellingen van de prediking bij Karl Barth in vergelijking met Hans Joachim Iwand, Ernst Lange en Rudolf Bohren, 's-Gravenhage 1991.

¹² Cf. *Wilhelmus Hendricus Theodorus Moehn*, God roept ons tot zijn dienst. Een homiletisch onderzoek naar de verhouding tussen God en hoorder in Calvijns preken over Hand, Kampen 1994, 4:1–6:7. Abbreviated into English as *Wilhelmus Hendricus Theodorus Moehn*, God Calls Us to His Service, in: *The Relation between God and His Audience in Calvin's Sermons on Acts*, Geneve 2001.

¹³ F. *Gerrit Immink*, Homiletics. The Current Debate, in: *IJPT* 8.1 (2004), 89–121.

the preaching event God is the acting subject. The presence of God, according to Immink, “is not only a proclaimed presence, a presence of the proclaimed Christ, but also a presence on the part of the listener, an inward presence, a presence in faith and trust, a *communio cum Christo*.”¹⁴ Immink relates this insight to the typical Calvinist pneumatological emphasis that the Holy Spirit is present in the believer, preacher and listener alike. This has two consequences for homiletical theory and research. First the communicative framework of preaching is not as linear as some approaches have been emphasizing. Preaching is not about the transportation of a message from a Spirit-filled human being, the preacher, to an assembly that needs to hear this message. Rather, preaching is a communicative, religious event, in which the presence of God in his promise is mediated, not by the preacher in person but by preaching as an event of speaking and listening. Secondly, sermon reception becomes the center of homiletical reflection, not from a rhetorical interest only, but foremost as a religious category. Helpful in this respect are reflections that draw from speech-act theory, both regarding its performative and its interactive aspects.¹⁵ In the second part of this article I explore these issues as they interconnect in Dutch homiletics at the beginning of the 21st Century: pneumatology, language, and empirical research.

3. Pneumatology: The Word of God and Human Existence

What theological argument helps to understand how in preaching Divine discourse and human existence are related? This may be the perennial question in homiletics, especially after the nineteenth Century with its emphasis upon the human consciousness in matters of faith. More than in the centuries before, the insight that preaching as an instance of human communication seemed at odds with the theological conviction that in preaching salvation is mediated, since the communication of salvation is, indeed, theologically seen as a divine action. Is there a theological argument that helps to connect the two spheres of the human and the divine, when it comes to preaching, or should we leave them separated as Karl Barth suggests with its famous double definition of preaching in which a blank line is put between preaching as “God’s word spoken by himself” and preaching as “the attempt of the church to serve God’s Word.”¹⁶ Barth’s argument rests upon Divine sovereignty: it’s God’s freedom to act, while in preaching the church shows its obedience to a divine command. Barth also employs a christological model to show the relationship

¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

¹⁵ Cf. F. Gerrit Immink, *Human Discourse and the Act of Preaching*, in: Chris A.M. Hermans/Gerrit Immink/A. de Jong/J. van der Lans (eds.), *Social Construction and Theology*, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2002, 147–170; idem, *The Touch of the Sacred. The Practice, Theology, and Tradition of Christian Worship*, Grand Rapids (MI) 2014.

¹⁶ *Karl Barth*, *Homiletik. Wesen und Vorbereitung der Predigt*. Zürich, 1966, 30. (Karl Barth, *Homiletics*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels, Louisville (KY) 1991.

between Divine action and human discourse in preaching: it is like the unity of the two natures of Christ.

Drawing from different sources, Dutch theology, however, has usually been more influenced by a pneumatological argument to relate the divine and the human in the preaching event. Pneumatology is used as starting point for homiletical reflection by Jos Douma (2000) in his study of the role of meditation in the process of sermon preparation; by Ciska Stark (2005) in her typology of sermons in which she explicitly addresses the pneumatological dimension in order to solve the problem that comes with an emphasis on christology; by Jantine Nierop (2007) in her work on Rudolf Bohren's Predigtlehre; and by Marinus Beute (2016) in his study of the role of the preacher's self-image in the preaching event.¹⁷ These four studies show that the emphasis on the Holy Spirit is important to reconstruct how in preaching divine and human discourse may be related. In various ways they challenge Barth's "blank line" between God and human action in preaching, and they bring empirical ideas to understand the divine-human subjectivity in preaching. Starting with the premise that preaching is a real practice, we can distinguish between various parts that constitute the "whole" of preaching. The most basic parts are speaking and hearing, as two interacting realities that constitute the practice of preaching.¹⁸ The part of "speaking," itself, however, also consists of various parts, such as the process of sermon preparation, the interaction between content and form in the text of the sermon, and the role of the preacher in the performance of preaching. In each of these three directions, pneumatological reflection appears fundamental in Dutch theological-homiletical reasoning during the last two decades.

Douma focuses upon the practice of meditation in the process of sermon preparation. Meditation, he argues, is conceptually related to spirituality and creativity. Meditation is a contemplative discipline that fosters the attitudes of emptiness, attentiveness and receptiveness. Douma illustrates this with an analysis of Martin Luther's practice of meditation that he summarizes as "methodically shaped interaction with the Holy Scriptures, a deep listening to God's Word in order to be [...] moved, transformed, and guided by God."¹⁹ The contemplative discipline of deep listening is a practice where the Spirit of God moves the human spirit and shapes new insights in the Scriptures. Meditation and creativity are in some sense empirical realities: they exist in real life. These realities are fit for pneumatological reflection in Christian theology because they assume the

¹⁷ Cf. *Jos R. Douma*, *Veni Creator Spiritus. De meditatie en het preekproces*. Kampen 2000; *Ciska Stark*, *Proeven van de preek. Een praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de preek als Woord van God*. Zoetermeer 2005; *Jantine Nierop*, *Die Gestalt der Predigt im Kraftfeld des Geistes. Eine Studie zu Form und Sprache der Predigt nach Rudolf Bohrens Predigtlehre*, Wien/Berlin 2008; *Johannes Marinus Beute*, *Wie ben ik als ik preek? Bronnen en herbronning van het homiletisch zelfbeeld*, Zoetermeer 2016.

¹⁸ Cf. *T. Theo J. Pleizier*, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons. A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics*, Delft 2010, Chapter 2.

¹⁹ *Douma* (note 17), 119.

subjectivity of the Spirit of God that is stressed by the notions of gift and grace and the prayer *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Simultaneously, though, the Spirit of God cooperates with the human spirit: meditation being the space or environment and new insights (creative ideas) being the products of this divine-human cooperation.

The cooperation of the human spirit and God's Spirit has been theologically articulated by the Dutch theologian Arnold van Ruler, an important source for the German homiletician Rudolf Bohren and his pneumatological approach to preaching. Van Ruler coined the notion of "theonomic reciprocity" to understand the partnership between God and humans.²⁰ In her dissertation on the form of the sermon, Jantine Nierop uses Bohren's application of Van Ruler's concept in order to clarify how "miracle and technique [in preaching] are not opposites to each other, but different aspects of theonomic reciprocity."²¹ Again, the empirical, namely the linguistic shape of the sermon and the theological, the interaction between God's Spirit and the human mind, come together in homiletical reasoning. This also bears upon the discussion in homiletics of how preaching relates to rhetoric. Nierop shows how Bohren's understanding of *rhetorica sacra* combines the elements of the promise and the gifts of the Spirit. On the one hand, the promise of God's Spirit (*Verheissung des Geistes*) turns trust in human power into prayer. On the other hand, good preaching does not coincide with good rhetoric but includes joy, engagement, boldness, and hope in the preacher – all gifts of the Spirit.²² Finally, the role of rhetoric in shaping the sermon (notions such as intention of the sermon, persuasive techniques, etc.) must be qualified by the freedom of the listener. The awareness of the power of the pulpit and the danger of manipulating the listener creates responsibility on the part of the preacher, because the Spirit of God is not a spirit of manipulation or power.²³

While Nierop brings pneumatological reflections into play when it comes to the rhetorical aspect of preaching, Ciska Stark provides a different perspective. In the theoretical framework for an empirical study in sermons and listeners, she uses ideas taken from pneumatology in creating a typology of sermons. In her analysis of the relationship between preaching and Word of God in the history of (protestant) homiletics, she distinguishes between three different dimensions: sacramentality (the sermon realizes the Word of God), actuality (the sermon actualizes the Word of God), and referentiality (the sermon refers to the Word of God). These three ways of approaching the relationship between sermon and Word of God, Stark argues, cannot be seen exclusively from a christological perspective. "Word" should be understood as a pair with "Spirit,"

²⁰ *Arnold Albert van Ruler*, *Structuurverschillen tussen het christologische en het pneumatologische gezichtspunt*, in: idem, *Theologisch werk*. Deel I, Nijkerk 1969, 175–190.

²¹ *Nierop* (note 17), 87.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 209f.

²³ *Ibid.*, 237.

an insight that she derives from the turn to the listener.²⁴ She applies this to the analysis of sermons by constructing a sixfold typology, based upon the two aspects of text - hearer or Word-Spirit, operationalized as "text-centred" or "application-centred" preaching. In order to understand how sermons testify to God's redemptive action, how preaching anticipates God's promises and how listeners are spiritually nourished or empowered, she uses the concepts of kerygmatic, didactic, and paracletic preaching. Hence six types of preaching emerge: text centered-kerygmatic, application centered-kerygmatic etc. Next, specific sermons are studied as representatives of these types. In her approach to sermon analysis Stark demonstrates how the pneumatological perspective could be operationalized to understand how in sermons the presence of God is articulated. "In relation to the Holy Spirit we could ask: does it concern primarily the reception of the Spirit, the continuing work of the Spirit or the exemplifying work of the Spirit?"²⁵ Despite the fact that Stark's typology is deductively applied to sermons, it is important to see how pneumatology functions as a theoretical framework to study the content of preaching. The concluding remark that "the equation between Word of God and preaching in the protestant tradition always reckons with the activity of the Holy Spirit,"²⁶ stresses the liturgical *Sitz-im-Leben* of the sermon, since the epiclesis is the undercurrent of preaching or as Stark puts it: "the Holy Spirit guides the Word and facilitates faith."²⁷

In his recent doctoral thesis, Marinus Beute also stresses the pneumatological dimension of preaching, now from the perspective of the theological self-image of the preacher in preaching. Who am I when I preach, Beute asks. His answer has two levels: from an analysis of the role of personality in preaching in 20th Century homiletical theology, he moves to a biblically informed self-image of the preacher by a biblical-theological reconstruction of St. Paul's self-image as a preacher. The comparative approach leads to the insight, according to Beute, that the preacher participates in the mission of Christ, which in the end should be articulated pneumatologically. Namely, within the reality that is larger than the person and activity of the preacher, the preacher's self-image is determined by being absorbed in the field of influence of the Holy Spirit. Hence, the preacher depends upon the Spirit, is equipped by the Spirit, serves freely a cruciform existence, acts as the ambassador of the resurrected Christ, is focussed upon the glory of God, and is not able to organize the desired effect of preaching.²⁸ This self-image, determined by the preacher's self-awareness of participating in the "field of the Spirit," has consequences for how the preacher acts

²⁴ Stark (note 17), 195–206.

²⁵ Ibid., 242.

²⁶ Ibid., 464, emphasis mine.

²⁷ Ibid., 466.

²⁸ Cf. Beute (note 17), 158–163.

in relation with the text and in communicating with the listeners, thus influencing the entire homiletical process.

4. Language: The Question of Religious Reference

The concept of participation as used by Beute to explain the role of the preacher is part of a larger homiletical approach inaugurated by Kees de Ruyter in Kampen, The Netherlands.²⁹ The dissertation of Eric Watkins, *The Drama of Preaching*,³⁰ understands preaching as “participating in God's drama of redemption,” a phrase that is used to update the classic Reformed idea of redemptive-historical preaching. Based upon the work of Tom Wright and Kevin Vanhoozer, Watkins approaches Scripture in terms of a drama in five acts. The notion of “drama,” according to Watkins, helps to overcome some difficulties with the traditional redemptive-historical approach to Scripture:

“the peculiar contribution to this approach is that it does not presume an exaggerated distance between Scripture and the church or between doctrine and application. Rather, it starts with the presupposition of an inclusive script (Scripture) that intends to justify the proper role of every person in God’s drama of redemption – beginning with God, yet also including his covenant partners.”³¹

Though the notion of script also functions in a performative approach, such as presented by Gerrit Immink,³² Watkins relates it to a narrative approach to preaching and to the reworking of the Reformed emphasis on redemption-history in postmodern hermeneutics while retaining the original intention of God as prime actor. Earlier, Kees van Dusseldorp developed his narrative approach within the same homiletical school in which preaching is reconstructed within the postmodern challenge of reading Scripture and the renewals of the form of preaching, so-called “new homiletics,” with its emphasis on plot and experience.³³ In these reconstructions notions like plot, drama, roles, and story permeate homiletical discourse. Van Dusseldorp assesses the narrative approach in homiletics in the light of Reformed theology. The main theological tension is related to the idea of revelation: how should a narrative hermeneutic be related to a robust approach to

²⁹ Cf. *Kees de Ruyter*, *Horen naar de stem van God. Theologie en methode van de preek*, Zoetermeer 2013.

³⁰ *Eric Brian Watkins*, *The Drama of Preaching. Participating With God in the History of Redemption*, Eugene 2017. First edition published by Theologische Universiteit van de gereformeerde kerken (vrijgemaakt). Citations refer to this first edition.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

³² Cf. F. *Gerrit Immink* et. al. (eds.) (note 15).

³³ Cf. *Kees van Dusseldorp*, *Preken tussen de verhalen een homiletische doordenking van narrativiteit*, Utrecht 2012.

revelation and Scripture. Preaching participates in the larger story of God in such a way that it adds a new, current chapter to God's story.³⁴

Narrativity, both in its theological significance as it functions to rework the redemption-historical approach to preaching (according to Watkins), as well as in its significance for the form of the sermon (as Van Dusseldorp points out), is complemented by a more poetic or lyrical approach to the shape of the sermon. Taking his cue from the Dutch poet Martinus Nijhoff, Kees Bregman developed a formal-theological approach to the language of preaching. He takes the lyrical form of the "blank line" that separates the verses of a poem and turns it into a homiletical idea: the sermon needs silence.³⁵ The "blank line" creates space for breathing. When language stops, moments of intentional silence are created.³⁶ This formal characteristic of poetry, Bregman, argues, needs to be reworked in the syntax of sermons. The transcending and transforming moment in poetry is precisely the syntactical feature of the silence between the verses. The formal lyrical syntax, thus has theological quality, according to Bregman, since silence in the Scriptures has a dual meaning: there is silence on the part of both covenant partners. For preaching this entails that the preacher is aware of the fact that God is able to speak in the silence; and that the preacher learns to keep silent because he needs to wait for the word.³⁷ At this point, Bregman recalls the double definition of Karl Barth. Indeed, even the formal-theological poetic approach, leads back to the question of how divine discourse and human speech are connected. Barth's twofold definition underscores that theology needs a "blank line to verbalize what actually happens in preaching: God's word in human language."³⁸

Bregman's approach fits the agenda that has been put forward by postmodern homiletical approaches that speak of the sermon as "open piece of art" (Engemann; Martin). With Albrecht Grözinger's statement that the content of a sermon is always "structured language" (*gestaltete Sprache*),³⁹ the issue of language is put on the table. The pragmatic approach to language, as developed by the German homiletician Henning Luther with his emphasis upon language-use, took its lead from English philosophy of language put forward by J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle. Henning Luther stresses that in preaching, intentional interaction with listeners takes place.⁴⁰ The language of the sermon embodies both content and form: what is said is closely connected to how it is said,

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 167–169.

³⁵ Cf. *Kees Bregman*, *De stem uit de oneindigheid. Over de talige vormgeving van preken in het licht van poëzie en poëtica van Martinus Nijhoff* [A Voice of Infinity. Sculpturing Sermons in Light of the Poetry and Poetics of Martinus Nijhoff], Zoetermeer 2007.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 229.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 258.

³⁹ *Albrecht Grözinger*, *Homiletik. Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie*, Gütersloh 2008, 177.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Henning Luther*, *Predigt als Handlung*, in: *ZThK* 80 (1983), 223–243.

the objective referential and the subjective appropriation come together in the intention of the speaker and the uptake of the listener. The pragmatic approach, such as adopted by Luther, was a way of dealing with the interaction between speaker and listener and the functioning of preaching as discourse. In homiletical thinking in the Low Countries, however, the pragmatics of language-use in relation to preaching became two-pronged: a postmodern approach drawing from mainly French philosophical hermeneutics on the one hand, and a realist approach in which preaching as religious discourse is put into the framework of the divine-human relationship on the other hand.

Two dissertations explicitly address postmodern hermeneutics as context for preaching and homiletics respectively. Bert Altena studied the conditions for the sermon in a postmodern climate.⁴¹ From an analysis of postmodernism represented by Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, Altena enumerates six postmodern motifs that need to be assessed in homiletics: (i) terror free space; (ii) openness; (iii) margin; (iv) mystery; (v) imagination; and (vi) interruption. These six motifs stimulate the rethinking of an artistic image of the preacher, and borrow from the contexts of theater and poetics: the art of staging and the art of language. The metaphor of “staging” concerns the open structure of the language of preaching, the power of interpretation, and the space for production of meaning on the part of the listeners. The metaphor of the “poet” focuses on other aspects of language, the mysterious and the imaginative, and the de-regulative potential of language. Based upon a study of Derrida’s deconstructivist hermeneutics, Van der Rijst takes these ideas a few steps further.⁴² This leads to the view that language is unstable, meaning consists of an intertextual network, and referentiality is inherently problematic. Preaching is an example of dominating discourse, and preachers should be aware of the fact that we cannot articulate anything positively about God. Van der Rijst’s study shows that a conversation with postmodern hermeneutics, may lead to the end of preaching. Both structuralist as well as social constructionist approaches to religious language stress the effect of the linguistic structures and constructions upon the meaning making activity of hearers. It may be that the paradox that is given with the denial of referentiality on the one hand and the subtextual effects due to structures and meaning constructions in texts on the other hand are best addressed empirically. How do these mechanisms in language work in real preaching and listening? Do we need a more robust and realist approach to preaching? Sermons draw from positive theology: they shape the language of faith, mediate sacred texts, and refer to the redemptive realities of God and Christ. Equally, sermons address real people with real worries, spiritualities, and lives. Here we enter another domain in homiletics that

⁴¹ Bert Altena, *Wolken gaan voorbij... Een homiletisch onderzoek naar mogelijkheden voor de preek in een postmodern klimaat* [When clouds pass...], Zoetermeer 2003.

⁴² Cf. René van der Rijst, *De uitzaaing van het Woord. Homiletiek in het spoor van Derrida* [The Dissemination of the Word. Homiletics following Derrida], Zoetermeer 2015.

deals with preaching as discourse. In several dissertations in the Low Countries the empirical turn fundamentally shaped homiletical thinking and research.

5. Empirical Approach: The Act of Listening & The Text of the Sermon

Do sermons have effect, and if so, what kind of effects can be accounted for? Empirical studies in preaching tend to answer this question differently, depending upon the theoretical framework. In 2008 and 2010 two Dutch PhD-studies on sermon listening were published. Hanneke Schaap-Jonker and Theo Pleizier took two different approaches to the field of sermon listening, framed within a psychological and a religious research design respectively. Despite these different perspectives, our approaches share at least two characteristics. First, we approach listening as a practice. The act of listening is embedded in a larger framework of communicative interactions, religious experiences, and repeated instances of worship and preaching during time. These aspects of intersubjective action, experience, and repetitive behavior within an ongoing performed tradition, distinguish a practice from a single act.⁴³ Next, our studies show that the effect of sermons, albeit put within different theoretical frameworks, entails “real” interactions, such as the formation of meaning in relation to personality traits as Schaap-Jonker in her research demonstrates or the shaping of religious involvement as my own project illustrates. Finally, our empirical approach to the practice of sermon-listening also brings to the fore the impact of language in the reception of preaching. Metaphors and concepts may trigger certain images of God connected with certain personality traits of listeners, witnessing the statistical correlations between personality and sermon reception; sermon content generates various kinds of attentive involvement of hearers, since listeners connect to religious realities that are offered within the sermonic discourse.

Two examples may illustrate the importance for an empirical grounding of homiletical concepts. Reception aesthetics renewed homiletical theory in two respects: new concepts on the hearer (co-creator) and the sermon (spatial). Yet the relationship between hearer and sermon remained rather under conceptualized. The concept of “religious identification,” however, sheds more light how the interaction between the listener and the open world of the sermon takes place.

The second example takes its cue from the protestant idea that in hearing the Word, faith is shaped. The concept “actualizing faith” helps to articulate this more in depth.

⁴³James Nieman notes the following features of a practice: action, common, meaningful, purposive, strategic, cf. *James R. Nieman, Why the Idea of Practice Matters*, in: Thomas G. Long/Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (eds.), *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice. A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, 18–40, Louisville (KY), 2008.

The empirical turn not only stimulated reception analysis in homiletics, it also created a renewed interest in the actual the sermon. The second empirical interest in recent Dutch homiletics has been the area of sermon analysis. In his study on positioning Jesus' suffering in preaching, André Verweij analyzes sermons preached in the period of Lent. His focus was on the question of how in sermons during Lent the suffering and death of Christ was portrayed by preachers and how the theological theme of atonement is addressed. In the sermons four different redemptive arrangements emerged: standing close to the hearers (proximity); reaching out to the hearers (self-giving); showing listeners the way (guidance); standing in for humanity (exclusivity). It appears that all arrangements somehow connect the suffering of Jesus with today's hearers. The redemptive meaning of his life and death is arranged as proximity: Jesus comes close to today's listeners as they struggle towards redemption; as self-giving: Jesus' love carries the hearers through life's hardship; as guidance: Jesus' suffering has exemplary qualities and the listeners are guided to practice Jesus's life of faith in their own lives; and as exclusivity: Jesus stands in for humanity in a way that takes place without us and yet for us.⁴⁴ The study also highlights how preachers use four different sources in preaching in order to create these redemptive arrangements. They use the liturgical year, the Scriptural text, images of present-day suffering, and examples of self-disclosure. It becomes clear from Verweij's study how theological points of view take shape in a sermon in a broad variety. A homiletical theory of atonement does not coincide with the dogmatic models, so it seems.

With his study, Verweij confirms an idea that had been put forward by Gerrit Immink in a seminal article in which he argues that the theory of preaching should not be framed in terms of hermeneutics only, since the rhetorical dimension of the sermon sensitizes religious content that cannot be captured satisfactorily as "interpretations."⁴⁵ This becomes even more clear, in Pieter Boonstra's empirical study about the way preachers deal with the biblical text in their sermons.⁴⁶

In his dissertation, Boonstra, attends to the complex relationship between the biblical text and the actual sermon, which cannot be captured satisfactorily with either the concepts of "explanation and application," nor "interpretation." Surely, preachers are involved in interpreting, explaining, and applying when it comes to the biblical text. Yet, as Boonstra argues, we need more refined conceptual language for a proper description of what goes on in actual preaching when it comes to ways that preachers deal with the Scriptural text in the sermon. The complex whole of preaching from a biblical text for a contemporary congregation can be analyzed into four different categories: putting-in-perspective in faith; characterizing the contemporary context of the listeners;

⁴⁴ Cf. *André Verweij*, *Position Jesus' Suffering. A Grounded Theory of Lenten Preaching in Local Parishes*, Delft 2014, 85–122.

⁴⁵ *Immink* (note 13).

⁴⁶ Cf. *Pieter Boonstra*, *Omgang met de bijbeltekst in de preek. Een empirisch homiletisch onderzoek* [Dealing with the Biblical Text in the Sermon. An empirical homiletical research], Zoetermeer 2016.

contemporizing the biblical text in the current situation of the listeners; and focussed address from the biblical text in the contemporary context. These concepts take seriously the hermeneutical divide between biblical text on the one hand and the contemporary context of reading and hearing on the other hand. Sermon analysis, however, also singles out particular actions in relating text and context that preachers engage in. The common metaphor for understanding and communicating the Scriptural text for contemporary audiences – that it is like building a bridge – needs further refinement. Boonstra shows how notions like putting-in-perspective in faith; characterizing the contemporary context; contemporizing the biblical text; and focussed addressing of the congregation help to understand on a more detailed level the complexity of dealing with the Scriptural text in preaching.

Empirical research attends to grassroots “facts,” the actual practices of hearing or composing a sermon. We have only begun to enrich homiletics with field-related concepts. Much has to be done in this field. Take, for instance, the complexity of the process of sermon preparation or the difficulties of studying the performance of preaching. Both sermon-preparation as performance have been written about extensively in homiletical literature. Yet little theory has been generated based upon the study of actual sermon preparation or preaching performance. Though these domains are rather neglected in empirical homiletics, partly because of the methodical and theological complexities involved, the specific contribution of empirical theology, however, seems very promising. It both helps to move from larger concepts such as “interpreting” towards more nuanced and complex actions such as “identifying” in hearing a sermon or “contemporizing” in composing a sermon. PhD researchers in the Low Countries developed viable methods and techniques to add the tradition of qualitative research to the growing international body of homiletical literature.

6. Conclusion: Studying Transitions and the Current Agenda

Revisiting 15 years of homiletical thought in the Low Countries gives a fair overview of the academic emphases. In view of the size of the country and the marginal position theology got into during this decade and a half, the fact that 13 PhD theses in the field of homiletics were written is quite remarkable. These studies have been supervised in protestant universities. Three chairs have contributed to the academic production. Kees de Ruyter was professor of Practical Theology at the Reformed University in Kampen with a special interest in homiletics.⁴⁷ Henk de Roest holds the chair of Practical Theology at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen and

⁴⁷ De Ruyter supervised the thesis by Douma (2000) on meditation; Van Dusseldorp (2012) on narrative preaching; Watkins (2016) on the redemptive historical preaching; and Beute (2016) on the self-image of the preacher.

developed a broad range of PhD projects, including homiletics.⁴⁸ Until September 2016 Gerrit Immink held a chair in Homiletics, also at the Protestant Theological University in Groningen.⁴⁹

Immink's empirical-theological approach to the study of religious practices especially has generated some important insights. In his *The Touch of the Sacred*, Immink proposes a framework for understanding worship and preaching that focusses upon religious praxis, sharing in salvation, and the participatory act.⁵⁰ As religious praxis, preaching is both a participatory act in which faith and everyday life are not opposed realities, but come together in the act of speaking and hearing. Immink argues that both the 19th Century liberal tradition with its anthropological emphasis as well as the early 20th Century dialectical tradition with its kerygmatic emphasis fall short on the relation to actual life and actual preaching. Faith is both an anthropological as well as a theological category. It is shaped in religious practices such as preaching while it also remains connected to the truths of the Christian kerygma. Immink's approach is important in that it combines the emphases of the previous sections. The theological emphasis on the Spirit, the anthropological perspective upon the performativity of language, and the empirical reality of enacted faith or practiced religion, provide a helpful framework for homiletics. It combines the complexity of preaching and hearing in all its facets without giving in to non-empirical theological preconception or naturalistic social inquiry. With these emphases, Immink has theoretically guided the transition to a more empirical-theological approach to homiletics.

One observation, however, must be added. What about the political dimension of preaching? The fact that preaching also is public speech, has not been at the front of Dutch homiletical thinking. An explanation cannot be easily given. It may have to do with a strict separation of church and state, with the plurality of political views within congregations, and with the fact that due to the secular context the church sees itself as a minor player in the political arena. Two final remarks are in place. First, it may be typical for Dutch preaching that the first interest in preaching is in the faith-stories of the individual believer and the community of faith. Preaching is supposed to express our common faith and relates to my life. Especially the studies in sermon reception make this clear. This individual bias, however, does not lead to a view of preaching that is detached from everyday life but demonstrates how preaching relates to how listeners experience life and how their lives are at stake in hearing a sermon. Secondly, the fact that the political and public dimensions of preaching have not been at the front of academic homiletical reasoning does not imply, however, that the

⁴⁸ De Roest supervised the thesis by Nierop (2007) on Rudolf Bohren's pneumatological homiletics; Bregman (2007) on the relation between preaching and poetics; and Van der Rijst (2015) on the consequences of Derrida's hermeneutics for homiletics. The first supervisor of Van de Rijst's thesis was Eric Borgman, Tilburg School of Humanities at Tilburg University.

⁴⁹ Immink has been supervisor of the thesis by Pleizier (2010) on sermon reception; Verweij (2014) on preaching the suffering of Jesus; and Boonstra (2016) on dealing with the biblical text in preaching.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Immink* (note 15).

cultural dimension is missing at all. On the one hand, the dissertations that study homiletics from a hermeneutical or literary point of view do so because their perspectives depart from cultural developments such as postmodern aesthetics and theories of truth. Increasingly, however, it seems that preachers feel the need to address political realities. It opens up a wider field of research: preaching is not “just” an instance of religious discourse. It has a public dimension too. When preachers address congregations and when hearers connect their own lived faith to what they hear in sermons, this is not done on an island but as part of a wider society in which politicians address citizens and media address media consumers. As religious discourse, preaching is simultaneously public discourse. New transitions may emerge as the field of homiletics continues to develop.

Theo Pleizier, born in 1975, is Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at the Protestant Theological University, Groningen, The Netherlands.