

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This concluding chapter highlights the central features of text-guided preaching. Additionally, I will attempt to offer some general reflections on the most important aspects of the study in respect of what has been done and what has to be done.

6.1 Text-Guided Preaching: A Summary

The central idea of text-guided preaching is that sermons must sufficiently reflect those literary and rhetorical features that are essential to biblical texts. In short, sermons must regenerate what texts are saying and doing. Major insights of this theory of preaching are drawn from the work of the American scholar Thomas Long, most particularly his *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*.

6.1.1 Speech-Act Theory, Biblical Interpretation, and Homiletics

The claim that sermons must regenerate the performative force of biblical texts is grounded in a particular Anglo-American philosophy of language. The later Wittgenstein has drawn our attention to the performative dimension of

ordinary language. A central idea is that words function in many different ways and serve many different purposes.

J. L. Austin's important work *How to Do Things with Words* builds on Wittgenstein's idea of language and develops what is now known as speech-act theory. A speech act is what a speaker does when she utters a statement. In other words, a speech act refers to an illocutionary act that a speaker performs with a locution. Speech acts are meaningful acts because they are integral to our social practices and activities.

Speech-act theory has been appropriated by biblical and homiletical scholars. The theologian Anthony Thiselton has persistently advocated the importance of viewing biblical texts as performing a variety of speech acts. One of his key insights is that a single passage may embody multiple speech acts. According to Thiselton, a paradigmatic biblical speech act has at least three fundamental features: the intention of the author, relevant facts, and transformative effects.

The American philosopher Nancey Murphy cautions that speech-act theory should not be taken as a complete theory of biblical interpretation but rather as a guideline underlining all the relevant dimensions of understanding. She explains that to achieve a firm grasp of what a biblical text is doing we need to attend to relevant linguistic and social conventions, referential and psychological elements, and what the author intended to do by means of the text.

Fred Craddock, who is widely acknowledged as the pioneer of the new creative tradition in American preaching, articulates the importance of speech-

act theory for homiletics in his influential work *As One without Authority*. He is convinced that the recognition of the creative or performative power of language offers new, fresh possibilities for preaching. It is, however, Thomas Long who has developed a theory of preaching partly on the basis of speech-act theory. His main thesis is that what the biblical texts say and do should shape what sermons say and do.

Cas J. A. Vos also has used speech-act theory to explain the three fundamental levels of the language of preaching. A sermon as a communicative act not only communicates a particular content but also performs a particular speech act and aims to achieve some particular impact. Vos stresses that every preacher must recognize that the function of the sermon cannot be confined to communication of the content of the text. It is pivotal for preachers to recognize the transforming power of the sermon. By means of a sermon a preacher may effect significant change.

6.1.2 The Hermeneutical Process

Preaching involves a process of interpreting the text. This hermeneutical process begins with an understanding of the world of the preacher and the congregation. There is a gap between the world of the ancient texts and the world of the modern readers. It is inevitable that an understanding of an ancient text is partly determined by the life situation of its reader. The goal of the hermeneutical process is to glean what sort of claim the text makes on us in respect of our current situation.

H. J. C. Pieterse and Cas Vos have stressed the importance of beginning the hermeneutical-homiletical process with a firm grasp of our existential world. Pieterse draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Paul Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics to emphasize the central importance of the contingent situation of the preacher and the congregation in the preaching process. Gadamer's main idea is that application constitutes the starting-point of understanding. Extending this idea, Ricoeur asserts that the interpreter's critical self-understanding allows the text to effect genuine transformation.

Pieterse makes four pivotal points. First, the preacher enters the world of the Bible from some particular contingent point. Second, the preacher interacts with the text, trying to locate answers to the questions the members of the congregation are asking. Third, the biblical texts are preeminently open and have the power to speak to different people in different situations. Fourth, preaching requires imaginative and faithful translation of what God says to the congregation by means of the text.

Vos draws our attention to the importance of the arts as windows into the complex experiential world of the congregation and the larger community. Such diverse forms of expression as poetry, painting, music, story, and film not only disclose various levels of experience but also evoke feelings and effect changes. Films, for instance, offer more than entertainment. In many cases they offer social commentary, showing how things and people may appear from particular standpoints.

The hermeneutical process begins with an understanding of the everyday world of the preacher and the congregation and then moves into the textual world. The preacher has to discern what the text is doing with the aim of communicating the text's illocutionary force by means of the sermon. Thomas Long regards understanding of what the text is saying and doing to be the heart of the textual interpretation. Understanding a text consists neither in grasping an idea nor in having some aesthetic experience.

Long insists that preachers have to carefully attend to the literary and rhetorical dynamics of biblical texts to fully grasp what the text is capable of doing. To fully interact with biblical texts preachers must understand how various literary forms and devices work to determine meaning. In dealing with psalms, for example, preachers must be familiar with how Hebrew poetry works. In addition, preachers must understand the rhetorical effectiveness of poetry in shaping how we perceive and experience the world around us. Psalms operate at the level of the imagination, often relying on some powerful metaphors.

6.1.3 The Homiletical Process

The hermeneutical process leads to the homiletical process of shaping a sermon that communicates what the text has to say to the modern congregation. The homiletical process is concerned with bridging the text and the sermon. The task of the sermon is to regenerate some impact or claim of the text in view of some particular communicational situation. A sermon does not communicate everything a text does but only a portion of what it does. A sermon

communicates the illocutionary force of some portion of a text for a particular congregation.

There can be a variety of ways of bridging the text and the sermon. Long explains four basic text-to-sermon patterns. First of all, the movement of the text may shape the movement of the sermon. Second, the conflict in the text may shape the conflict in the sermon. Third, the sermon may be developed around a central insight that resonates with the central insight of the text. And finally, the sermon may aim to express some particular mood that reflects the dominant mood of the text.

A sermon by Vos provides an excellent example of how the movement of the text may shape the movement of the sermon. In fact, this sermon closely follows the movement of a series of psalms known as pilgrimage psalms (Psalms 120-134). The sermon begins with Psalm 120, creatively regenerating the desire of a believer living in exile and alienation. Then the sermon moves on to Psalm 121, on the basis of which the preacher exposes the impotence of contemporary “gods.” Then the sermon moves on to Psalm 122 recreating the experience of the pilgrims who find God in the Jerusalem Temple. The second half of the sermon focuses on Psalm 134 to regenerate the extraordinary experience of the faithful preparing to return home after their pilgrimage.

6.2 General Reflections

1. This study takes an *empirical approach* to the practice of preaching. This study has used Johannes van der Ven’s empirical-theological research program

as its theological-theoretical framework, following the problem—induction—deduction—testing—evaluation cycle.

This reflects a growing trend among practical theologians to make the results of their studies less speculative and more practical. As we mentioned, Don Browning believes that theology in general is “practical through and through and at its very heart.” As van der Ven asserts, empirical-theological investigation protects theology from dogmatism. Practical theology must be intimately connected with socially embodied Christian practices, taking into account their social contexts.

A research in practical theology must begin with a traditional, communal practice that is important to some community of believers. It does not and cannot begin with a theological concept. Moreover, the Christian practice in question must be scrutinized firstly in its natural setting. Why is this practice problematic? What are its problems, inconsistencies, or limitations? How does the practice as it is practiced now affect our community, our identity, our core beliefs and practices?

Our study began with the traditional practice of preaching in the Korean church, which has favored a single type of preaching, the topical-deductive. The socio-cultural context of the Korean church is changing rapidly. The transformation of the larger Korean society is real and enormous. Korean preachers need to use a diversity of hermeneutical-communicative strategies to be heard.

Our study has, unfortunately, left out the task of examining Korean preaching in the context of the social transformation. Such task would be important to the first and second phases (formation of the problem and induction) of the empirical-theological cycle. Discussions on new directions for Korean preaching have to be based on some contextual analysis.

2. This study has explored in some detail one particular type of preaching, *text-guided preaching*. It is largely based on the American homiletician Thomas Long's important work that focuses on the idea that textual dynamics should be channeled through sermons.

Many traditional homiletics have emphasized the centrality of cognitive content in interpreting and communicating the message of the Bible. In reaction to this approach to preaching, new homiletics have emphasized the primacy of experiential event in the interpretative-communicative process. The trend in American homiletics is to shift focus from cognitive content to experiential event.

This mirrors the dichotomy in American Protestantism between conservatism and liberalism. The conservatives maintain that theology seeks knowledge and truth really matters. The liberals maintain that theology belongs to the domain of feeling and what really matters is meaning, or more precisely, existential or experiential meaning. Theology has accepted the philosophical, epistemological distinction between knowing and feeling.

From Long's standpoint, however, knowledge and experience are closely bound together. The meaning of a particular biblical text cannot and should not be confined to either the cognitive or the experiential aspect. For biblical texts

are capable of multiple communicative functions or speech-acts. They do many things. They may evoke emotions, inform facts, issue commands, invite praises, and so on.

Not only biblical texts but sermons also should be viewed as verbal performances. From this point of view, Long asserts that a sermon should aim to regenerate a portion of what the biblical says and does. In other words, there should be some degree of continuity between the performance of the text and the performance of the sermon.

This in fact addresses an important theological issue. Christians want to learn and obey the will of God. This is the primary reason for reading the Bible and listening to the preacher. Preaching is a crucial instrument of discovery, discovery of God's will. Usually by means of the sermon the congregation discovers what God said in the biblical text. So this theological point should encourage preachers to find creative ways to regenerate textual speech-acts.

Our study could have benefited significantly by a robust, extensive account of a diversity of possible text-to-sermon paths or movements. I believe that such a study should be undertaken shortly and be incorporated into my future homiletics courses at World Mission University, since it would be of tremendous help for our theological students who are being equipped for pastoral and other forms of ministry.

3. This study has taken quite seriously the relationship between the preacher and the congregation. One of the problems with traditional preaching is that it creates a gap between the preacher, who is viewed as the primary (if

not sole) interpreter and instructor of the biblical truth, and the listeners, who are viewed as passive recipients.

The gap between the preacher and the congregation is much more serious in the Korean church, which has largely accepted the highly hierarchical social structure of the larger society. The Korean preacher is elevated so far above his congregation that his interpretation and proclamation can hardly be challenged. His sermons are often either too theological or too moralistic.

Because the preacher is usually viewed as the interpreter-communicator of the timeless truth or universal spiritual principle, he or she has very limited interest or need for interpreting the everyday, real-life situations of his or her listeners. Because of this reality, sermons often fail to connect with the listeners, as some of the participants in the case study have observed.

One of the encouraging findings of the case study is that seven of the eight participants recognized the task of interpreting the experiential world of the listeners as either the most significant or the most difficult element of text-guided preaching.

What they need is ways of connecting with the listeners. It is crucial for homiletical theories to emphasize the importance of interpreting the listeners' context. It is also important to discuss how preachers may establish meaningful relationships with their congregations that enable real understanding possible.

4. Our discussion of the empirical findings indicates that the theory and practice of text-guided preaching require improvements. First of all, my presentation of text-guided preaching has to be less technical and more practical

in explaining key notions of philosophical hermeneutics and speech-act theory of language. Secondly, it can be improved by incorporating a brief, practical manual of exegetical procedures. A third area in need of improvement has to do with the text-to-sermon movement. There is a need to develop a manual that explains in detail a variety of creative text-to-sermon patterns.

5. The empirical findings lead us to ask some far-reaching questions. What could the theological faculty of World Mission University do to help the students to become competent interpreters of the cultural context of Christian life and preaching? There is a need for the faculty members to seriously debate the necessity of courses dealing with interpretation of the cultural context.

Another fundamental question concerns biblical studies at World Mission University. How can the faculty of biblical studies department reorient their focus from the theological content to the performance of the Bible? We have to look into possible ways of incorporating literary and rhetorical methods into biblical exegesis.