CHAPTER 3

NEW HOMILETICAL THEORIES

3.1 Introduction

American homiletics in recent years has witnessed almost an explosion of homiletical theories. The dynamic, creative movement has been discussed in numerous works. One of the fundamental ideas of the new, contemporary movement is that there are a variety of methods of reasoning and communication.

Many contemporary American homileticians seek to replace or compliment the deductive form of thinking, which thus far has characterized American preaching, with inductive, narrative, and other forms of thinking. As Eugene Lowry puts it, the movement involves moves from "from theme to event, from description to image, from point to evocation, from authoritarian to democratic, from truth to meaning, from account to experience" (1993,96).

In this chapter we, first of all, briefly describe the traditional homiletical theory that considers preaching to be a means of interpreting and delivering the timeless biblical truth. Second, we trace the emergence of new theories in American homiletics with reference to new hermeneutical, theological, and developments. Third, we discuss main characteristics of new homiletical theories under the categories of the form, content, and purpose of preaching.

Fourth, we look at different styles of preaching: inductive, story, narrative, phenomenological, and conversational.

This chapter concludes with a section on the importance of theoretical hermeneutics on preaching. We will discuss some implications of Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics for homiletics as a hermeneutic communicative act. The important idea that the hermeneutical process of interpreting a biblical text for a sermon involves from the outset a practical aim, a particular application, draws on their theoretical accounts of interpretation.

3.2 Traditional Homiletical Theory

According to traditional homiletical theory the preacher's aim is to communicate the Word of God. The preacher tries to persuade the congregation to accept the truth contained in the biblical text. Traditional homiletical theory that focuses on delivering a biblical message or truth through the sermon presupposes a gap between the preacher and the congregation. The preacher is the sender of a message and the congregation consists of receivers. The gap is problematic because it embraces a hierarchical relationship.

One of the challenges for preachers is to find ways to establish the ethos or character of a Christian leader in the pulpit. They need to view preaching no longer as a religious, persuasive discourse but as a more democratic process, as a dialogue that takes listening by the hearer quite seriously. They must foster a new understanding of the relationship between the preacher and the congregation.

Accepting the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, many preachers have rejected critical approaches to biblical interpretation and consequently pay little attention to the historical-social gap between the biblical texts and contemporary life situations. The sermon is understood as communication of the truth contained in the text of the Bible. It is the preacher's task to explore a biblical passage for its central truth and to communicate and explain by means of the sermon the relevance of the biblical truth to the life situation of the congregation.

Generally speaking, the content of preaching is biblical truth—the unchanging truth revealed by God in his Word, the Bible. First, the preacher listens to what the selected passage is saying. Second, the preacher must have a concrete interpretation of the central meaning, message, or idea of the passage. Third, the preacher must find ways to relate his or her interpretation of the central meaning or idea to contemporary life situations. Truth is timeless but the situation of the hearer changes.

Traditional homiletical theory has been challenged by new voices in American homiletics. Many contemporary American theorists challenge the assumption that the Bible's message can be formulated into timeless truths. Advocating what Lucy Rose calls "transformational truth," instead of timeless, biblical truths, they pursue "a shift from epistemology to hermeneutics" (1997, 65). As Rose states, many scholars who embrace transformational preaching, a preaching that seeks to lead the worshipers to a transformational experience, "reflect a diminishing confidence in epistemological methods for discerning

objective truth…. Instead, the focus shifts to the interpretation of texts or, more specifically, to the power that texts have for shaping meaning in the interpreter" (1997, 65).

This shift to hermeneutics—to interpretations of particular biblical texts—reflects new understandings of how language functions. One of the distinctive convictions of the linguistic turn is that language—including biblical language—performs many functions (Rose 1997, 67-69). Language is used not only to state facts to convey truths but also to command actions and attitudes and to evoke feelings and experiences.

Preachers have traditionally understood a sermon as a presentation of the truth contained in a particular biblical text in terms of a clearly articulated, general statement of the biblical truth and few specific supporting points. Many preachers study particular biblical passages for important theological or practical truths and translate them into suitable sermon topics. The traditional sermon-making process involves formulating the biblical truth into a single proposition or sentence. This topic sentence is supposed to tell what the sermon is about. For many preachers, sermon development means turning the topic of a sermon into a series of major sections. They develop the "proposition" or "central idea" of a sermon into three or four major points that demonstrate the rhetorical qualities of clarity, coherence, and progression.

One of the critical issues regarding the predominant homiletical theory that emphasizes sermon outlines has to do with the widely held assumption that there is only one type of logical thinking. An outline divides the sermon into

major divisions and then divides these divisions into subdivisions and sub-subdivisions. As Thomas Long points out, "an outline conveys the inner logic of a main proposition broken down into its component parts" (1989b, 95). Such an atomistic or analytical thinking, however, cannot be applied to all sermons. Long writes

> If every sermon were presented this way, the underlying message, presented over time, would be that the gospel is only a set of major concepts with rationally divisible parts. To be sure, every sermon should be logical, but there are many different kinds of logical structure—narrative, inductive, and metaphorical, just to name a few. Outlines—at least in the way we have been trained to construct them—reduce our logical options to a single choice. (1989b, 96)

In traditional homiletical theory and practice narration and induction typically have assumed subordinate roles. "Induction," Rose writes, "is a subcategory under argument. Narration is a subcategory chiefly under explanation, although it may also help a preacher apply or illustrate a truth or idea" (1997, 19). Many contemporary American homileticians, however, have variously challenged the traditional understanding of the sermonic form and some, most notably Craddock and Lowry, have developed the inductive and narrative approaches to the form of sermon.

For Craddock the inductive method enables the congregation to retrace the steps the preacher had actually taken in his or her search for the text's message. For Lowry the narrative method unfolds, in view of the audience and following the sequential elements of a plot, what the preacher had actually experienced as he or she struggled with the text.

3.3 The Emergence of New Homiletical Theories

The new movement in American homiletics has been influenced by many factors. To mention some of the important ones: new understandings of language and meaning, which have challenged the dominance of historical criticism in biblical interpretation; the rediscovery of the necessity and power of narrative in theology; and the emergence in our time of a pluralistic world. We will deal with each of these larger developments.

3.3.1 Hermeneutical Changes

New developments in biblical interpretation have significantly influenced the theory and practice of preaching. For many years historical-critical methods have dominated biblical scholarship. Historical criticism approaches the Bible as a human record and engages in "objective" and "critical" inquiry to determine whether biblical accounts are in fact "historically reliable." Biblical texts are discussed and explained mainly for the purpose of determining historical facts. In our generation many biblical scholars have questioned the adequacy of the historical-critical method. They believe that meaning of a biblical text cannot be equated with or reduced to the historicity of the text.

New, diverse understandings of biblical interpretation have been advanced in recent decades. Literary criticism, which challenges biblical scholars to carefully attend not only to the various literary forms and structures of the biblical texts but also to the texts' larger literary contexts, has had a significant impact on

homiletics. Literary criticism challenges preachers to pay attention to literary devices, such as plot, character, setting, and point of view, in studying biblical passages. It, moreover, encourages preachers to shape sermons in story or narrative form.

The new hermeneutic, which is most closely associated with Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling, has enabled homileticians to understand both text and sermon in a new way (1997, 68). One of the most fundamental ideas of the new hermeneutic is that event and word are so closely interwoven that we cannot speak of an event without words and, conversely, we cannot use words without conceiving of some event. Words represent a fundamental way of relating to events. The unity between linguistic and extra-linguistic realities, which is represented by the expression "word-event," is central to the new hermeneutic.

As Lucy Rose points out, the notion of a word-event is of critical importance to new homiletical approaches. Biblical texts, consisting of words, are "word-events." So the preacher's first task is to encounter the particular word-event embodied in the text. The preacher's next task is "to recreate in the sermon the word-event present in the text so that the sermon becomes a similar word-event for the congregation" (Rose 1997, 68).

3.3.2 Theological Changes

Appeals to narrative and story in contemporary theology also have influenced the development of the new American homiletics (Ellingsen 1990, 9). Discussions in contemporary theology and ethics concerning the significance of

narrative have been initiated in part by H. Richard Niebuhr. Since the Enlightenment liberal theologians have tried to explain the gospel in terms of common human experience. Niebuhr claims, however, that the Christian church embodies a particular history. "When we speak of revelation in the Christian church we refer to *our* history, to the history of selves or to history as it is lived and apprehended from within" (1989, 29-30).

Narrative theology has emphasized the "realistic narrative" form of the Gospels, arguing that the particularity of the Christian message can be grasped when we pay a close attention to their narrative structures. Stephen Crites, who accepts Niebuhr's emphasis on "lived history," argues that "the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative" (1989, 66).

Narrative approaches to theology and preaching presuppose the "idea that the Bible presents us with a 'world' of its own. Thus by implication the task of theology is to describe the character and identity of the world. And the task of preaching is to tell the Bible's stories about that world" (Ellingsen 1990, 19).

3.3.3 Cultural Shifts

The new homiletics can be viewed as a response to a "cultural breakdown" in the United States. This dynamic shift is part of the cultural transition in Western societies. The Christian church has been significantly affected by it new cultural environment. As David Buttrick says, "what we have called the Protestant Era, a synthesis of faith and Enlightenment, is over" (1994, 72). As a result of the fragmentation of the Protestant synthesis, "we Protestants are

defensive; we are desperately trying to hold onto our social position. American churches are pathologically into self-preservation, even though such survival strategies will be ineffective."

Buttrick believes that the task of homiletics in this new environment is to offer a critique of cultural assumptions that have shaped the church. Further, preachers must be involved in a "new evangelical enterprise," a dialogue with countercultural movements and "countercultural peoples who will be the force of the future, the consensus of a new world age" (1994, 73).

To engage culture evangelically, it is necessary to present Christian faith in new ways and in new idioms. "People are thinking, understanding, and speaking in ways that belie the homiletic textbooks we have inherited from the past. So we need to think out the rhetorical ways and means appropriate to contemporary consciousness" (Buttrick 1994, 112).

3.4 Characteristics of New Homiletical Theories

Eugene Lowry credits the publication in 1971 of Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority* as initiating a revolution in American homiletics (1993, 93-112). Providing an overview of the new dramatic development, Lowry tries to capture its many diverse expressions as follows.

> The result, as we peer back over twenty years, *appears* as a paradigmatic shift involving moves from deductive to inductive, from rhetoric to poetic, from space to time, from literality to orality, from prose to poetry, from hot to cool, from creed to hymn, from science to art, from left brain to right brain, from proposition to parable, from direct to indirect, from construction to development, from discursive to aesthetic, from theme to event, from description to image, from point to evocation,

from authoritarian to democratic, from truth to meaning, from account to experience. But note that I said *appears* "from … to …." The matter is not quite as simple as that. (1993, 95-96)

Lowry employs the term *appears* as a reminder that "more often than not the paradigm shift is more an alteration of emphasis, with one aspect becoming dominant in concern while another aspect becomes subordinate" (1993, 100). He explores the diverse moves in preaching theory and practice under the categories of the shape, content, and goal of preaching.

3.4.1 Form

One of the distinguishing features of the new homiletic is a movement away from the deductive to the inductive process in preaching (Lowry 1993, 101-102). The traditional sermon is typically deductive: it first unpacks a thesis or general principle and then tries to support it by means of explication and illustration. However, the inductive sermon reverses the movement: it moves from particular to general.

Another distinguishing feature of new preaching is that it is democratic rather than authoritarian (Lowry 1993, 102). Since the traditional sermon depends on detailed explanation, the preacher assumes an authoritarian stance with the congregation assuming the passive role of a receiver. The new homiletic, by maximizing the sense of shared exploration, encourages the preacher to stand with the congregation.

New preaching, on the one hand, uses the temporal imagery of movement in describing sermon preparation. That is, a sermon is developed as a sequence

of moves. Traditional preaching, on the other hand, uses the spatial imagery of construction. That is, sermon is constructed by putting together related ideas (Lowry 1993, 104-105).

3.4.2 Content

New preaching is reshaping not only the shape but also the content of the sermon. Whereas traditional preaching focuses on discursive knowing, new preaching places more emphasis on aesthetic knowing (Lowry 1993, 105-107). As Lowry stresses, to view aesthetic discourse in preaching as merely "ornamental" is to undermine its communicative value. It is as effective as discursive discourse in the proclamation of the gospel.

New preaching rejects the dichotomy between "story" and "argument," recognizing that "sometimes a story is the more economical, precise, and powerful means *of* argument" (Lowry 1993, 106). New forms of preaching take the responsibility of communicating the gospel seriously while recognizing that the gospel does not easily fit into "the tight packaging of prepositional thought" (Lowry 1993, 108).

3.4.3 Purpose

The central issue in the New Homiletic movement is the goal of sermonic event. Traditional preaching invariably aims to get something said, but new understandings of preaching aim at "evocation of the experience of the Word" (Lowry 1993, 110). "Deductive preaching by its structure tends toward rational

conviction. Inductive preaching attempts evocation." Lowry points out that deductive preaching can become mere reporting while inductive preaching can become mere event.

Lowry concludes his sketch of the new developments in homiletical theory and practice by saying that the transformation is "indeed a radical one, but not involving mutually exclusive entities or goals." Rhetoric and poetics are not mutually exclusive. New preaching incorporates rhetorical devises, just as traditional preaching incorporates poetic elements. Lowry's concluding words are instructive.

> Suppose we imagine that *instead of the sermonic envelope being governed by rhetorical principles with poetics inside, that the reverse be true—a narratively shaped envelope with rhetorical ingredients inside.* Inside the narrative flow one may find reason at work, discursive rationality in all its strength, with the process *including* the use of metaphoric image, story, and so on. One should no more label a narrative sermon as *mere story* than one would name a traditional sermon *mere logic*. Both story and logic are proper. The question is: *What specifics are to be included inside which overall shape?* Which are the eggs; which is the basket? The changing answer to that question is the revolution of preaching in our time. (1993, 111-112)

3.5 Variety of Preaching Styles

The influential New Homiletic movement has produced such diverse ideas and strategies as: Fred Craddock's inductive movement, Eugene Lowry's homiletical plot, Charles Rice's story, David Buttrick's sermonic moves, and Lucy Rose's conversation.

3.5.1 Inductive Preaching

It is generally recognized that Fred Craddock's work *As One Without Authority* opened a new era in American preaching. He introduced and articulated inductive methodology as a genuine alternative to the traditional deductive approach to preaching. The foundation of Craddock's inductive method is the presence and priority of the hearer and her experience in the entire process of preparing and preaching a sermon. The preacher should engage in an imaginative conversation with the congregation throughout the process of preparing and shaping the sermon.

Deductive movement has long been accepted as normative for sermon. Simply stated, it is a movement of reasoning and communication from a general truth to some particular application (2001, 54). Craddock asserts that deductive preaching is "a most unnatural mode of communication, unless, of course, one presupposes passive listeners who accept the right or authority of the speaker to state conclusions which he then applies to their faith and life" (2001, 54). Deductive preaching assumes, therefore, the authority of the preacher and the passivity of the congregation.

A major weakness of deductive preaching is that it fails to achieve unity and persuasion. Attempting to explain its main idea in terms of supporting points, a deductive sermon turns into a series of disconnected discourses. "There may have been some movement within each point," Craddock remarks, "and there may have been some general kinship among the points, but there was not one movement from beginning to end" (2001, 56).

Craddock understands the sermon basically as movement. The traditional *deductive* sermon invariably moves from the general truth to the particular application or experience. In the *inductive* sermon, however, the movement is reversed. It starts from the particular experiences of the hearers and arrives at the hearers' individual decisions or experiences. Inductive preaching relies upon a movement "from the present experience of the hearers to the point at which the sermon will leave [the congregation] to their own decisions and conclusions" (2001, 146).

The whole movement, meanwhile, is sustained by a sense of anticipation, which requires a thematic unity and rich imagination. The primary challenge to preacher is to evoke and sustain anticipation, since the whole point of the sermon is disclosed at the very end (2001, 151). In order for the listeners to grasp the central idea when the sermon comes to an end, the entire sermon should focus on delivering a single idea. Every material, including illustrations, must serve the governing theme.

Images are essential because they are simply the best means of relating to the hearers' concrete experiences and of effecting changes in their attitudes, values, and life directions (2001, 92). To be effective, images must be concrete, taken from real life. The language must be as concrete, precise and specific as possible to evoke immediate response. Effective sermonic portraits draw the hearers into the bonds of identification; and they are characterized by such qualities as genuine insight, particularity, naturalness, restraint and an economy of words.

For Fred Craddock there is no one universal form that fits all sermons. Generally preachers need to shape their sermons in terms of the performative functions or rhetorical purposes of the biblical texts. They need to understand what kinds of communicative acts—praise, exhortation, apology, explanation, narration— their selected passages are intended to perform. It is also appropriate to shape the forms of sermons in terms of the hearers' present life situations or circumstances.

3.5.2 Story Preaching

In his work *Thinking in Story* (1993) Richard A. Jensen proposes that preachers practice "thinking in story" alongside "thinking in ideas." He argues that "thinking in story" is an effective frame of sermon design in our post-literate age (1993, 60-64). He explains that it is a valid way of communicating the Bible because most biblical texts contain stories.

Stories invite participation and allow the Christian tradition to take root in the imagination of those who hear. Moreover, "stories are in sync with the way the electronic media work" and "have a chance to break through the cultural filters that work in the heads of those who listen to preaching."

Charles Rice states in *Interpretation and Imagination* that the primary task of the preacher is to bridge the "world of the Bible" and the world of contemporary human experience (1970, 16-17). The preacher must take the Bible and the Christian tradition seriously, seeking to shape our stories within the biblical narrative. In *Preaching the Story* Rice states, "Preaching is the event in which

our particular stories are caught up into The Story to be judged, redeemed, and enlarged in purpose" (Rice, Steimle & Niedenthal 1980, 35).

In addition, Rice holds that the preacher must try to communicate the particular Christian tradition in the idioms that are meaningful to contemporary hearers: "the preacher's vocation is translation, the apt and artful presentation of the gospel in contemporary idiom" (1970, xi). Rice sees the narrative form as the crucial vehicle for translating the Christian story in contemporary idiom (1979, 6).

3.5.3 Narrative Preaching

No one has focused on the narrative method in preaching more explicitly and consistently than Eugene Lowry. He has advocated shifting the focus of preaching from dissecting a central theme into three points to guiding through a story. He is committed to the idea that a sermon is a plot, an event-in-time and to the centrality of the hearer's experience in that event. Lowry has chosen narrative as the most suitable medium for preaching, because he believes that human experience, both personal and social, is best expressed through stories.

The power of story in communicating our experience stem from five ingredients: setting, character, action, tone, and narrative time (1985). The most important function of setting is to express the limitedness or boundedness of human experience by locating human situation in a specific time and a specific place (1985, 44). A vital function of character is to illuminate, through the

qualities of the character or characters, new images or new vision of human potential (1985, 48).

The narrative unfolds a series of events or actions involving the main character. The tone of a story discloses a particular point of view, which can be that of the character, the author, or audience. The factor of time provides the framework for the story. A story unfolds within and bounded by its temporal framework. A sermon as a narrative is a temporal ordering of some particular human experience (1985, 77). Narrative time is intertwined with a plot. So preaching must incorporate principles of plot.

Lowry, in fact, defines a sermon as a plot. Plot is the central characteristic of the sermon. The source of the plot is the point of interaction between need or problem and theme. The plot itself consists in a movement from a felt discrepancy to its resolution. What is central to the sermon is not the theological or ethical content, but the plot that moves or unfolds in a set time in the predetermined stages.

The most critical (and lengthy) stage in the sermon involves unfolding the fundamental or central discrepancy, because it basically determines how the gospel message is to be presented. The role of the gospel in the sermon is to resolve or address the central discrepancy or problem of the sermon. Since the gospel's role is therapeutic, it must perfectly match the central discrepancy to be effective.

In his *The Homiletical Plot* (2001) Lowry identifies and elaborates five essential stages of the sermon plot: (1) upsetting the equilibrium, (2) analyzing

the discrepancy, (3) disclosing the clue to resolution, (4) experiencing the gospel, and (5) anticipating the consequences. In his *The Sermon* (1997) Lowry modifies the plot into four stages: conflict, complication, sudden shift, and unfolding.

3.5.4 Phenomenological Preaching

David Buttrick sees the method of distillation, which encourages preachers to "distill" single topics from some selected biblical passages, as one of the dominant homiletic practices of modernity. He explains that it is a product of rationalism of the Enlightenment (1994, 80-81). Trapped in a rationalist 'bind' for three hundred years, preaching has been equated with "careful understanding, explication, and application" of the Bible (1981, 46).

The most serious flaw of the method is that it encourages preachers to see biblical passages as isolated "still-life pictures," waiting to be looked at and talk about objectively (1994, 82). Buttrick believes that we have to explore the Bible in a new way and invites us to treat biblical passages as "motion-picture film clips," moving like stories or conversations (1994, 83).

Further, Buttrick asserts that the language of the Bible is "language designed to function in consciousness" (1981, 54). In other words, almost all biblical language is trying to *do* something to the consciousness of the reader. Ancient writers "grasped language like a tool, choosing form and style and structure to shape purpose." One important implication for preaching is that the intent of a biblical text must be reflected in the intent of a sermon based on the

text (1981, 58). Preachers must attend to how biblical texts function in the readers' consciousness as well as to what these texts say.

Such a view of the Bible and its language requires a new homiletic method. Buttrick believes that sermons should incorporate the idea of movement. Preachers should think not in terms of sermonic points but of sermonic scenarios or movements. "So how to design a sermon? The sermon will need an Introduction and a Conclusion and in between a series of moves" (1994, 95). The motion of a sermon is achieved through a series of episodes plotted according to some intention. According to Buttrick, sermon design "ought to travel through congregational consciousness as a series of immediate thoughts, sequentially designed and imaged with technical skill so as to assemble in form faith" (1981, 55-56).

Like a camera lens, the introduction aims to bring the selected subject into focus against a cultural-linguistic backdrop (1987, 85). The function of an introduction is to orient the listeners to a particular point of view with respect to the text. So the consciousness of the listeners becomes aware of one focus. The function of a sermon conclusion likewise involves a phenomenology of human consciousness. A conclusion must not aim to provide a sense of closure so that the mind can come to a rest. Rather, it must aim to evoke a strong sense of awareness so as to make the mind to be open and restless.

3.5.5 Conversational Preaching

In *Sharing the Word* (1997) Lucy Rose offers a "conversational" understanding of preaching. Conversational preaching is a way to refocus the local congregation's conversations around the Word. In this form of preaching, "the preacher and the congregation are colleagues, exploring together the mystery of the Word for their own lives." The preacher submits his interpretation of a biblical passage to the community of faith through the sermon for their "additions, corrections, or counterproposals" (1997, 5).

The preacher's interpretation of a biblical text initiates conversations. The preacher's interpretation funds multiple interpretations, "one proposed articulation of the gospel funds multiple articulations of the gospel, through the Spirit that prods and prompts the hearts and minds of the congregation" (Rose 1997, 6).

For Rose two sermonic forms can be used effectively in conversational preaching: story and an inductive-narrative form that expresses the preacher's journey toward meaning (1997 113-117). These two forms of preaching develop a "community of interpreters who value their own experiences and faith commitments, wrestle with the Holy Spirit and texts, and make their own decisions" and at the same time "encourage the search for communal meanings" (1997, 117).

3.6 Hermeneutic Understanding of Preaching

One of the major issues with new understandings of preaching is that they do not sufficiently account for the hermeneutic nature of the practice of

preaching. Homiletical tasks, both the interpreting of the biblical texts and the shaping of sermons, are essentially a hermeneutic act. That is, they aim at making the ancient biblical texts meaningful to the present situations. What this means is that the present situation at least partly determines the meaning of the text.

Preaching as a hermeneutic or interpretative act has to recognize both the multiplicity of meanings and the presence of self-interests. Rose has articulated these two critical concerns of interpretation. She asserts that "every reading of every text and every voice interpreted as belonging to God or Scripture is colored and textured by the personality, conditioned by the socialization and vested with the interests of the interpreter" (1997, 80).

If every interpretation is at least partly determined by personal experiences, then every text engenders multiple interpretations. Rose is convinced that the aim of preaching is begetting multiple interpretations. "The preacher searches for meaning that makes life livable and, by the secret workings of the Spirit, grace-filled. This meaning is then submitted to the community of faith through the sermon for their answering meanings" (1997, 5).

The hermeneutic nature of preaching may be understood within the framework of philosophical or theoretical hermeneutics. H. J. C. Pieterse has discussed Gadamer's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics from a homiletic perspective (2001, chap 3). Pieterse is convinced that their notions of application are relevant to the homiletical-hermeneutic process, as they allow the process to start in the life situation of the preacher and the congregation (2001, 79).

3.6.1 Gadamer: Understanding as Application

Gadamer's masterpiece *Truth and Method* has made an outstanding contribution to philosophical discussion of hermeneutics. His account of hermeneutic understanding offers a new way of viewing application. In modern thought understanding always happens before application. In modern theology, for instance, practical theology is viewed as application of theological understanding to the concrete situations of life. "The theologian moves," Don Browning observes, "from revelation to the human, from theory to practice, and from revealed knowledge to application" (1996, 5).

According to Gadamer, however, understanding always involves application. That is to say, "application is part of the process of understanding from the very outset." Jean Grondin explains Gadamer's account of the relationship between understanding and application.

> He follows Heidegger's intuition that understanding always includes self-understanding—indeed, self-encounter. Understanding, then, involves something like applying a meaning to our situation, to the questions we want answered. It is not the case that there is first a pure, objective understanding of meaning, to which special significance accrues when it is subsequently applied to our questions. We always take ourselves along whenever we understand, so much so that for Gadamer understanding and application are indivisibly fused. This can best be seen by means of a negative example, non-understanding. Whenever we cannot understand a text, the reason is that it says nothing to *us* or has nothing to say. (1994, 115)

Gadamer's view of hermeneutic understanding is reflected in Browning's view of theology. According to Browning, "theology should be seen as practical

through and through and at its very heart" (1996, 7). He believes that this is a

result of taking seriously the claim made by Gadamer and others that "practical

thinking is the center of human thinking" (1996, 8). Browning's proposal is that

our pursuit of theological understanding should begin with questions shaped by

our communal practices.

> When a religious community hits a crisis in its practices, it then begins reflecting (asking questions) about its meaningful or theory-laden practices. It may take time to describe these practices so it can better understand the questions precipitated by the crisis. Eventually, if it is serious, the community must reexamine the sacred texts and events that constitute the source of the norms and ideals that guide its practices. It brings its questions to these normative texts and has a conversation between its questions and these texts. This community of interpreters will see its inherited normative sources in light of the questions engendered by its crisis. As its practices change its questions change, and the community will invariably see different meanings in its normative texts as its situation and questions change. (1996, 6)

Gadamer's ideas about understanding the meaning of a text have been

translated homiletically by Pieterse. Within the practice of preaching,

understanding or interpreting biblical texts always aims at their application to the

present situations. "We interpret a biblical text," Pieterse writes, "for the purpose

of composing next Sunday's sermon. Consequently application (or

appropriation) enters it immediately" (2001, 76).

Pieterse emphasizes that "application must be directed to a specific context

in the present." If understanding involves a particular application, then

understanding must occur differently from one interpreter to another. It is

Gadamer's major insight that meaning changes. "The altered context of every

new reader affects his or her interpretation of the text, and hence the meaning attached to it. In principle, therefore, a text has an infinite number of meanings" (Pieterse 2001, 74-75).

Homiletically speaking, we understand the same biblical text differently. Every reading of the same biblical text is motivated by a different situation or interest and consequently produces a different interpretation. On the basis of this, Rose proposes conversational preaching, in which a sermon is offered as a tentative interpretation that invites other interpretations. The preacher and his or her congregation have to learn to encourage different understandings and articulations of the gospel.

3.6.2 Ricoeur: Understanding and Objectivity

Ricoeur's theory of interpretation both extends and amends Gadamer's. Following Pieterse, we will mainly focus on Ricoeur's notion of application or appropriation. Because of his emphasis on the involvement of the interpreter in the achievement of understanding, Gadamer's hermeneutics is often viewed as a version of relativism. Ricoeur believes that the hermeneutic process requires critical procedures in order to validate interpretations and to achieve mature understanding. Hermeneutics must incorporate a critical element to avoid relativism or subjectivism.

Ricoeur agrees with Gadamer when he says in *Interpretation Theory* (1976) that the existential concept of appropriation or application "remains the ultimate aim of all hermeneutics…. This goal is achieved insofar as interpretation

actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader" (91-92). Pieterse's explanation of Ricoeur's account of appropriation and understanding is quite helpful.

> Appropriation of the text is in fact a condition for discovering its meaning. Unless it is applied to the reader's own situation, the text has no meaning for that particular person. Applying a text to one's own circumstances does not mean 'adapting' it. On the contrary, application means letting go, as readers open themselves to the world presented by the text …. Understanding happens when readers receive the other, foreign 'self' of the text from its world which is presented to them. Application entails receiving and appropriating this new 'self' or property of the text, which makes you perceive your situation afresh, moves you to action, or makes you construct a new story in your own context from the story presented in the context of the text. (2001, 79)

Ricoeur says that one of the misconceptions of the existential appropriation has to do with the suspicion of a total mastery of the text by the reader (1976, 94). Gadamer's notion of application does in fact invite the objection that it places the meaning of the text under the power of the interpreter. Ricoeur tries to remove the suspicion by stressing "the disclosing power of the text."

> Far from saying that a subject already mastering his own way of being in the world projects the *a priori* of his self-understanding on the text and reads it into the text, I say that interpretation is the process by which disclosure of new modes of being—or if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, of new forms of life—gives to the subject a new capacity for knowing himself. If the reference of the text is the project of a world, then it is not the reader who primarily projects himself. The reader rather is enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself. (1976, 94)

According to Ricoeur, appropriation is linked to critical evaluation. The interpreter, who confronts the proposed world disclosed in front of the text, may

achieve mature understanding if he is prepared to give a critically explanatory account of himself. In other words, the subject, wanting to transform self-understanding by exposing his own self to the text, must engage in an "internal critique." An objective critique of the self, or a "critique of the illusions of the subject," or the "critique of ideology is the necessary detour that self-understanding must take if the latter is to be formed by the matter of the text and not by the prejudices of the reader" (1991, 88).

It can be said that the critical evaluation of the self is a necessary condition for attaining mature understanding. Another condition is validation of interpretations. Following Gadamer, Ricoeur contends that the hermeneutic process allows multiple interpretations. However, unlike Gadamer, Ricoeur stresses the need to critically evaluate competing interpretations. He sees the need for some critical, evaluative procedures in the hermeneutic process. Ricoeur wants to incorporate some manner of objectivity in hermeneutics.

Ricoeur maintains that a text may produce multiple interpretations. However, "it is not true that all interpretations are equal," he contends. By incorporating the "logic of validation," a theory of interpretation may "move between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism" (1976, 79). Ricoeur underscores the possibility of a rational procedure.

> It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach. (1976, 79)

The kind of rationality required by the hermeneutic process in resolving the conflict between rival interpretations is different from scientific rationality. It consists in "subjective probability." Ricoeur states:

> An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation. There are criteria of relative superiority for resolving this conflict, which can easily be derived from the logic of subjective probability. (1976, 79)

3.6.3 Homiletical Reflection

We turn now to Pieterse's account of theological hermeneutics that draws on philosophical discussions of hermeneutics. Pieterse deals with hermeneutical themes from the perspective of preaching to the poor (2001, 81-92). His four major points, however, are pivotal in any context of preaching.

First, the preacher as interpreter confronts the Bible from a particular standpoint. In other words, interpretation is application. So those preachers who are preaching to poor congregations must adopt the perspective of the poor. As Pieterse states, preachers "go to the Bible with a particular prejudice or bias—the prejudice or bias arising from one's own situation" and "will always approach the biblical text from the angle of their own situation" (2001, 81).

Pieterse shows that the poor can find a special, meaningful place in the text of the Bible (2001, 82-85). The whole text—from the divine deliverance of an enslaved people in Egypt to the prophetic tradition of proclaiming God's judgment on the powerful who oppress the poor, a tradition that culminates in the mission of Jesus—reveals that "God champions and cares for the poor in a very

special way." Hence it befits the followers of Jesus "to heed the clear message of God's special concern for the poor in the biblical witness."

Second, the preacher must inhabit the world of his or her congregation. To paraphrase Pieterse's words, the preacher must experience the situation of his or her congregation existentially. As the preacher stands in front of a text and engages in a dialogue with it, he must voice the concerns and questions of his congregation. For when the preacher is interpreting a text for a sermon, he is doing it for the sake of his community and not for his own personal purposes.

Pieterse contends that "the listeners to the sermon, the congregation, have a say in how the biblical word is interpreted for their existential situation" (2001, 85). In order to achieve "a better understanding of their Lord's message for their specific circumstances" the listeners need to find various ways to communicate their questions and concerns with the preacher. Preachers must encourage and practice "a dialogical approach, with all the participants in the local congregation and the participants in the sermon joining in on an equal footing. Each contributes equally; no-one dominates anybody" (2001, 86).

Third, as the preacher engages in interpretation he or she must seek what God is communicating to a particular situation by means of the text. Exegesis constitutes this stage of interpretation. Exegetical methods are pertinent in discovering the world of the Bible. Translation, the last stage in the interpretative process, is "a creative response to the meaning of the text that exegesis has produced" (2001, 90).

It is important to note that exegesis does not constitute a means of mastering the text. For the biblical texts are "pre-eminently open" and possess a "dynamic power which constantly seeks to speak a new, relevant and liberating word" (2001, 91). So the preacher must respect the dialectic of understanding (the meaning of a text) and scientific analysis (of the text).

Fourth, the preacher has to translate what God has said in the text in terms of the concrete situation of the congregation. Translation requires critical, creative thinking. The inscribed words of a biblical text must be reinterpreted imaginatively so that the text may "speak anew in a relevant, dynamic manner in the situation of the congregation" (2001, 89). Pieterse continues:

> But this translating activity, when the message of the text is preached in a novel way in the present situation, should adhere faithfully to what the text is saying…. Imaginative, relevant translation of a text for a sermon means inquiring hermeneutically into the intention of the text and then allowing it to progress dynamically to a new, liberating message in the present-day context in order to open up new existential possibilities: the scripturally fixed words of the text become a Word event all over again, a speech act with new, relevant meaning for the congregation's situation.